GE2124 The World through Languages

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The Final Project Report

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Group 5

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Topic: Code-mixing among university students in Hong Kong

Introduction

Hong Kong was a British colony. It has a unique bilingual environment, where both English and Cantonese are regarded as official languages students have to learn. Code-mixing, as in combing two languages or language varieties together in speech (Muysken, 2000), is well-developed in such bilingual environment. Not to mention that many people have gotten used to it, this linguistic phenomenon has become part of our life and to a certain extent it represents some of our culture.

Cantonese University students in Hong Kong are found to code-mix and create new bilingual terms most often, such as “libar” from library; “re-u” from reunion. Code-mixing is usually found among university students as one of its functions is to facilitate communication. Despite students’ tendency to code-mix, code-mixing does somehow affect their language behavior.

In this report, we would talk about the types of code-mixing, the reasons and effects of this practice. Not only did we review the literature, we also designed an experiment (meanwhile it is also a game)---to compare and analyze the performance of students reading code-mixed and non-code-mixed texts.

Literature Review

Types of code-mixing

Theoretically, code-mixing are classified into the following three categories: (1) Tag Switching, (2) Intra-sentential Switching and (3) Inter-sentential Switching. (Li, 2000)

Tag Switching refers to the addition of words, interjections, tag phrases or idioms of another language into the sentence with the original language.

For the second one, Intra-sentential Switching, which is usually found in a clause or a sentence, refers to the addition of sentential components to the original clause or sentence.

Thirdly, Inter-sentential Switching, refers to the change of spoken languages between sentences, which means speaking the first sentence with the original language then finishing the second sentence with another language.

Reasons to code-mix

In a review published in 2000, David Li put forward a few motivations behind code-mixing in Hong Kong. For the purposes of our presentation, we have found two of these theories to be helpful in explaining why university students in Hong Kong frequently code-mix.

In the realm of linguistics, the principle of economy favours the method that uses the least amount of effort to achieve maximum result. The principle was originally studied in the areas of phonology and syntax by André Martinet. He stipulated that communication is dichotomous: it requires clarity and precision as well as a relaxed delivery (Vincentini, 2003). In this light, code-mixing achieves both facets of Marinet's ideal. It reduces effort and simultaneously removes any obstacle that prevents comprehension.

In the context of code-mixing amongst university students in Hong Kong, Li suggested that English is often mixed with Cantonese because it requires less effort to vocalize compared to its Chinese equivalent. This is most often done by opting for English words that have less syllables that their Chinese counterpart, clipping of English equivalents, or preference for expressions with a simpler phonology. Examples of each method can be found in appendix III. (Chu, 2007).

The second motivation for code-mixing suggested by Li (2000) is for the function of specificity or generality. An expression is used if its meaning is more general or specific compared to its synonymous counterparts. This may be because of grammatical complexities within the native language. The first example for the case of generality would be the English word 'fans'. In Cantonese, the equivalent of 'fans' requires the speaker to explicitly state the talent which categorizes that fan.

“fans” vs. 迷(mai4)

黎明有好多 fans(lai4 ming4 jau5 hou2 do1 Fans)

‘Leon Lai (the singer/film star) has many fans'

This is done through the use of a premodifier such that it is presented as expressions like song ‘fan’, film ‘fan’ or soccer ‘fan’. The English word ‘fans’ requires no such premodifier and is general to any talent.

歌迷(go1 mai4): “song fan”

影迷(jing2 mai4): “film fan”

球迷(kau4 mai4): “ball fan’, especially ‘football fan”

Thus, it is expected that people will opt for the word ‘fans in English as opposed to its Chinese equivalent since it has a more general meaning and is monosyllabic.

The opposite of the above case is when English code is chosen for its more specific meaning. The verb ‘book’ in English is a prime example and appears often in mixed code when making a reservation at a restaurant or booking a court at a sports complex. The closest Cantonese equivalent of ‘book’ is ‘deng6’. As a noun, ‘deng6’ means a ‘deposit’ or a ‘down-payment’. As a verb, it means ‘to order something made to measure’.

“Book” vs 訂(deng6)

唔該，我想 book 三點，一號場

m4 goi1 ngo5 soeng2 book saam1 dim2 jat1 hou6 coeng4

“Please, I want to book court no.1 at 3 o’clock,”

As can be seen from the Cantonese meaning of 訂(deng6), money is involved in the context of booking a place. Thus it is likely that the English verb 'book' is favoured when the intended meaning is more general - 'to make a reservation for which no money or deposit is required'.

Effects of code-mixing

There are both positive and negative effects of code-mixing.

For the local students, code mixing will enhance and foster the communication. For the Cantonese and English code-mixing, local students can simplify the ways of speaking and understanding. They can easily get the meaning of these code-mixing as they are sharing the same mechanisms or simplicities.

Besides, code-mixing may help to enhance human relationship. When within a group, all the members share the similar code-mixing habits, not only would they be benefited from the efficiency mentioned above, they would also benefit from the cohesion and the sense of belonging created by this mutual language behavior.

A coin has two sides, code-mixing could be a double-edged blade, since it sometimes cause inconvenience in communication. For the communication between locals and non-locals, the non-local students would misunderstand and interpret incorrect meanings as they are unfamiliar to these abnormal words.

Not to mention the inconvenience caused by misunderstanding, if there are difference in terms of the code-mixing behavior within a group, for instance, the listener barely understands the code-mixed speeches, he might feel being isolated or have a less sense of belonging to the group. More extreme scenarios would be discrimination or bullying , in which people may look down on others with different code-mixing habit to them.

Methodology

A group of L2 English advanced learners, with more than 15 years of English-learning experience, is given two paragraphs to read (see appendix I & II). One of the paragraphs is constructed with reference to how university students normally code-mix from literature (LI, 2000) and researchers' daily experience. The other paragraph contains the same code-mixing elements, which are translated into Chinese and in different order than the former one, such that the subject cannot predict what will be the next English-to-Chinese element. The factor of reading speed is considered as well when the paragraphs are articulated. A research by Sun & Feng (2010) let a significant number of Chinese-English bilinguals read some articles written in Chinese or English; and record their "words-per-minute" rate. They conclude that bilinguals read Chinese and English at a similar rate of around 384 words per minute. Notwithstanding the fact that there is not any research on how multilingualism in text can affect the reading rate, this research would assume the rates are the same. With two scripts, a comparative analysis can demonstrate how students are more opt to the code-mixing environment.

Subjects are selected from a gate-way education course about linguistic provided by City University of Hong Kong from freshman year to final year. The experiment is conducted after the course; therefore, they are expected to have acquired a basic understanding of English and linguistic system. They should be regarded as being fluent in both English and Chinese. To ensure to accuracy of the experiment, subject is confirmed to be a native Cantonese speaker, who is fluent in English, prior to commencing the experiment.

Two code-mixing elements are involved in the paragraphs, namely the principle of economy, and specificity, of a random manner. When the subject starts reading the paragraph, researcher will record the time needed to finish the paragraph, as well as the number of utterance. The purposes of this experiment are:

(1) Discovering how much more time a subject would need to finish the full-Chinese script.

(2) How many times a subject would stutter when reading the full-Chinese script; and

(3) Identifying the code-mixing elements that hinder the subject's efficiency through the place one stutter

Results

Total of 30 samples (n=30) are received. The average time (in sec) required for reading the code-mixing script is lower than that of the full-Chinese one, 26.1 seconds and 32.7 seconds respectively. The numbers of utterance show a similar pattern where people, in average, stutter 2.67 times in paragraph 2; only 0.9 times in paragraph 1. After the research, however, one realised that numbers of utterance is not a sole indicator to the elongation of the reading time; subject slows down in sentence, which has no code-mixing elements, in order to comprehend what will appear next. Nonetheless, about 25.9% more time is required by the subjects to finish reading paragraph 2. Due to the uniqueness of the paces subject speaks, it recorded a huge standard deviation of 11.4% for the percentage slowness.

N=30	Para1 (sec)	Para1 (utt)	Para2 (sec)	Para2 (utt)	% slowness
Average	26.1	0.900	32.7	2.67	25.9
S.D.	2.86	0.790	3.23	1.04	11.4
Max	32	3	38	5	50
Min	22	0	25	1	7.14

Table 1: statistics of the experiment with sample size of 30 subjects

No generalization on the types of backward switching students utter most can be identified. Researcher identified some commonly used words, such as 筆記, 圖書館, 宿舍, are having the least utterance probability; whilst for the words that are used less commonly in Chinese, such as 參考文獻, 眼神接觸, 限額, there appears a high probability in utterance or slowing down. Yet, researchers have failed to record an interpretable set of data to explain how a full-Chinese script has hindered speech fluency because:

(1) The utterance seems to be independent from the “reasons to code-mix”; but more depends on how commonly the words are used. The word “G.E.” (from gate-way education), and “libar” (from library) are from the same concept of “principle of economic” but contribute differently to the utterance.

(2) Sometimes subject utters in non-code-mixing element, such as between the subject "我" and the word "都". A pattern of where the subject utter cannot be observed due to the randomness.

Although a conclusion can be drawn that Hong Kong University English advanced learners are more fluent when code-mixed, some limitations can be found from the experiment design:

(1) Subjects were exposed to the code-mixing script first; they may need time to re-adjust their linguistic logic before reading the second paragraph;

(2) There can be some translation variations to the code-mix elements to make the script more interpretable; hence, subject may utter less; and

(3) The sample size of 30 people cannot conclude the phenomenon.

Conclusion

To sum up, we have found various types of code-mixing, as well as their effects and reasons that people code-mix. It is believed that code-mixing in some ways does serve as a communication facilitator as it makes the conversation more efficient and creates cohesion within a group.

In order to look into how students perform differently when reading out code-mixed text and non-code-mixed text, we carried out the experiment we designed and the result has shown that students generally are more fluent when they code-mix, and basically are coherent to some of the reasons, like the principle of economy.

Code-mixing is a sophisticated linguistic phenomenon which is worth investigating. It may vary and develop according to the society and its culture. It does, at the same time, affect our culture and is affected by the culture.

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Appendix

Appendix I. Code-mixed text for the game

同學 A：話咁快就 WEEK13 啦，仲有好多 DEADLINES 要搞掂呀，今個 SEM 我仲有好多 PROJECTS 要 PRESENT 呀。果啲 PROFESSORS 又要多多要求，REPORT 要加 REFERENCE，PRESENT 又要有 EYE CONTACT。我依加每日都係 LIBRA 做到天光，想行十五分鐘番 HALL 訓一陣都冇時間。我 REG 左科 GE 呀，聽日又有個 QUIZ 啦，真係人都癲。吖，我冇曬 QUOTA，你可唔可以幫我印啲 NOTES 呀?

Appendix II. Full Cantonese text

同學 B：好呀，我仲有好多限額，我幫你印筆記啦。我今個學期都好多報告要匯報。我果堂個教授要我加參考文獻入報告裡面，同埋匯報果陣要有眼神接觸。話咁快就到第十三週啦，我都好多個交功課限期。咦，我地係唔係讀同一個精進科目呀，我聽日都有一個測驗喎。我諗我都要係圖書館溫天光，我都想番宿舍訓呀！

Appendix III. Examples of the code-mixed features

i) Expressions with less syllables

e.g. English expressions with fewer syllables

Cantonese Items	Syllables	English Items	Syllables
打印機 *daa2jan3gei1*	3	Printer	2
儲物櫃 *cyu5mat6gwai6*	3	Locker	2

e.g. Cantonese expressions with fewer syllables

Cantonese Items	Syllables	English Items	Syllables
電腦 *din6nou5*	2	Computer	3
功課 *gung1fo3*	2	Assignment	3

ii) Clipping of words

Cantonese Items	Syllables	English Items	Syllables
大學 *daai6hok6*	2	University U	5 1
隱形眼鏡 *jan2jing4ngaan5geng2*	4	Contact lens Contacts Con	3 2 1

iii) Expressions with simpler phonology

Cantonese Items	Syllables	English Items	Syllables
早餐 *zou2caan1*	2	Breakfast	2
英文 *jing1man2*	2	English	2

*We agree that our project including the poster, the report, and relevant materials can be submitted as DEC evidence.