

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction to the Study

Language is a system of traditional spoken or written representation used by people in a shared culture to communicate with each other. Language plays an important role in communication. Communication can also be explained as an activity by which we specify and relay meaning to create a common understanding. The capability to alternate dialects or codes rapidly from one discourse to the other depending on the setting or other speaker is also referred to as code switching. In Linguistics terms, code switching occurs when a speaker alternates between two or more codes in the span of a discussion.

Amuda (1989), Atoye (1994) and Bell (1976) are among the many who have attempted to define code mixing and code switching. Gumperz (1982 : 59) in his definition of code switching, sees verbal code switching as “a juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical system or subsystems”.

Liu (2006) quotes Hymes who defines code switching as “a common term for alternative use of two or more language, varieties of a language or even speech styles.”

Bokamba (1989) sees code mixing and code switching differently :

“Code-switching is the mixing of words, phrases and sentences from two distinct grammatical (sub)systems across sentence boundaries within the same speech event... code mixing is the embedding of various linguistic units such as affixes (bound morphemes), words (unbound morphemes), phrases and clauses from a cooperative activity where the participants, in order to infer what is intended, must reconcile what they hear with what they understand.” (cited in Liu, 2006 : 4)

Code switching needs to be distinguished from borrowing. The simplest way to identify whether a word or phrase is a borrowing is by determining if the word is used by monolinguals of that particular language. Only bilinguals code switch. On the other

hand, monolinguals of a given language constantly utilise borrowings and these borrowings have been accepted by the phonological structure of the recipient language. In this research, code-switching is employed as a generic expression to include code mixing and borrowing.

Societies must be at least bilingual for code switching to exist. Kuo (1985), states that :

“societies which are at least bilingual must be linguistically, if not ethnically, heterogeneous and the members of these societies multilingual in variety of languages or dialects that are functionally differentiated. Due to historical and economic reasons, most South – East Asian countries fit this description. Malaysia for example has a sole national language, Bahasa Malaysia, with a second language, English, and a multitude of ethnic languages.” (cited in Soon, 1987 : 1)

In Malaysia the main language is Malay. Cantonese, Hokkien and Hakka are popular with the Chinese, while Indians are comfortable using Tamil, Telegu, Hindi and Urdu. Many indigenous languages are spoken in Sabah and Sarawak. As such most Malaysians are bilinguals, if not multilinguals. In multilingual societies, code switching is a wide spread occurrence that covers the various aspects of life, from offices to classrooms (Ting, 2002 ; 2007). Hence, it is not a surprise that most Malaysians code switch, both in formal and informal settings. David (1997) affirms that code switching is a normal occurrence among Malaysians. In Malaysia, it is quite normal for interlocutors to use Malay words even when most of the discussion takes place in English and likewise to use English in a predominantly Malay conversation.

It is quite common to note that those who can speak more than one language tend to code switch or combine their languages during discussions. When bilinguals replace a phrase or word from one language with that from another language code switching takes place. Although code switching is common in such situations, traditionally, code switching is seen as a set of tactics to neutralize language incompetency. The basis underlying this view is that bilinguals code switch because they do not know either language completely. Even a leading researcher on bilingualism

has claimed that the ideal bilingual is someone who is able to switch between languages when required to do so by changes in the situation but who does not switch when the speech situation is unchanged and “certainly not within a single sentence” (Weinreich, 1953 : 73). In spite of such arguments, code switching is becoming more prominent and accepted. Linguists like Gumperz (1982) saw code switching in a favourable way. He contended that code-switching is not the outcome of attaining the conversational requirements of the speakers. Muthusamy (2009) states that Gumperz (1982) when discussing communicative functions, also mentions discourse function of code switching, also called the “personalization” function of language. A speaker plays upon the connotation of the “*we-code*” to create a conversational effect. Thus, code switching is seen as fulfilling the relational and referential function of language that amounts to effective communication and interlingual unity. Halliday (1975), views code switching as fulfilling the *interpersonal function* of communication. Here the mixed language spoken plays the role of a mediator. In other words, it is the use of language to act as a mediator between self and participants in the communicative event.

Research has indicated that code switching is an arbitrary process even though bilingual speakers maintain that code switching is an involuntary behaviour. According to Li Wei (1998:156) :

“Sociolinguistics who have studied code switching draw attention to extra linguistic factors such as topic, setting, relationships between participants, community norms and values, and societal, political and ideological developments’ influencing speakers’ choice of language in conversation.”

A common view has been that code switching only takes place when speakers are very much at ease with one another and the situation is informal. However code-switching is an occurrence that is quite common in formal as well as informal situations (Pascasio 1978, Corder 1981, Stevens 1983, Belazi 1992, Sridhar 1996, Zentella 1997, Morais 1998, David 2003 and Kow 2003). Recent studies reveal that code switching also occurs in formal settings such as in seminar presentations and training (Nair-

Venugopal, 1997), departmental meetings (Jariah, 2003), business (Morais,1990), courtrooms (David, 2003), and schools (Kow, 2003).

This research will investigate the code switching functions in a formal setting, that is, during meetings in a company. While many studies have been undertaken on code-switching in formal settings such as those mentioned above as well as in other settings such as university campus (Blommaert, 1987 and Muthusamy, 2009) , workplace (Morais, 1998), the choice of language in electronic mail (email) in Malaysian companies (Habil and Rafik-Galea, 2002), interviews (Ong, 2008), and negotiations (Donohue, 2004), to the best of this researcher's knowledge no study has been carried out on code-switching during formal meetings. Thus this research will concentrate on conversational code switching during meetings and investigate the frequency and reasons for this kind of linguistic behaviour as well as study whether code switching occurs deliberately or involuntarily.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

In order to examine code switching, one has to understand the linguistic setting of the country and the roles of the various languages, in this case the most frequently used languages, Bahasa Malaysia and English. Bahasa Malaysia plays a key function as the communal language of Malaysians as it is the official and national language of Malaysia (Asmah 2002; Rafik-Galea and Mohd Salleh, 2002). English is extensively utilised in the private sector and is given due importance as the second most important language after Bahasa Malaysia in the country. English has also been acknowledged as the language of international trade, commerce and industry as well as the language of business (Nair-Venugopal, 2001; Rafik-Galea and Mohd Salleh, 2002). With globalization and the advent of technology on various fronts, English has been accepted as an important international language of communication.

This study attempts to study the code switching functions at meetings in a professional setting. The researcher is interested in studying the phenomenon of code

switching among professionals in a company setting using Company X as a sample. Company X was set up as a national company and employed only Malaysians. After 20 years it was felt that Company X had developed its capabilities and networks to pursue international ventures and as such strategies were developed for international expansion. Initially the company was set up as a global company, meaning Malaysians being posted at various countries and working with the locals in that particular country. After harvesting success and learning from other multinational companies, Company X became a multinational company. As a multinational company it employed people of various nationalities and posted them all over the globe. Thus a Malaysian might be working in India but might have a Nigerian supervisor. Thus being a multinational company, English has to be the medium of communication, be it written or verbal.

The meetings are attended by professionals from various departments who are bilinguals or multilinguals. The subjects of this study are Malaysian professionals working in Company X. This group is conversant in at least two languages and they tend to code switch when they communicate verbally. As stated earlier, Company X being a multinational organization is staffed by multinational staff. So it is not surprising to find employees of other countries such as UK, USA, Canada, India, Ireland, Argentina, etc attending meetings. As a multinational organization, it is the practice that English is used in official written and verbal communications.

This research is carried out to identify instances of the sociolinguistic phenomenon of language choice known as code switching between English and Malay. The research attempts to identify whether code switching is prevalent during formal meetings among Malaysian professionals from different ethnic backgrounds working in Company X. The frequency of code switching, functions fulfilled when code switching occurs and their frequency of occurrence will also be determined. The study also attempts to analyse whether code switching occurs deliberately or involuntarily during meetings.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this research are to identify :

- The frequency of code switching by Malaysian professionals during meetings.
- The functions of code switching during meetings and their frequency of occurrence.
- Whether code switching occurs deliberately or involuntarily.

1.3 Research Questions

These objectives can be expressed in terms of the following research questions :

- i. What is the frequency of code switching by Malaysian professionals during meetings?
- ii. What functions are fulfilled when code switching occurs during meetings and their frequency of occurrence?
- iii. Does code switching occur deliberately or involuntarily?

1.4 Significance of the Study

Nair-Venugopal (2000), quoted by Nor Azni (2004), states that code switching appears to be prevalent among Malaysian professionals. It appears to have different functions and may involve different motives on the part of the speaker. Therefore by understanding the strategies and reasons for code switching , some insight into the verbal communicative strategies may be deduced.

The study may also contribute further insight into the code switching habits of Malaysian professionals who are bilinguals or multilinguals.

1.5 Scope and Limitation of the Study

The participants of the study are all bilingual or multilingual Malaysian professionals working in Company X. All of them are based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. As Malaysians of all races and background, both educational and social, as well as foreigners work in Company X, it is felt that the executives of Company X are excellent representative subjects. This study will only account for the frequency and

code switching functions of bilingual or multilingual Malaysian professionals working in the above mentioned company during meetings. This study does not look at other subsidiaries within Company X or at other organizations. In addition, this study is undertaken in Kuala Lumpur and no attempt has been made to study whether code switching occurs during meetings at other locations in Malaysia or at overseas offices of Company X.