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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# ENGLISH/FRENCH CODE SWITCHING AS A COUNTENANCE OF LANGUAGE INTERFERENCE IN CAMEROON

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### ABSTRACT

Code switching between two languages is a common feature of the speech of bilinguals. It reveals some degree of their competence in both languages. This paper is an attempt to investigate the similarities between the functions of code switching in the language of bilingual students. It is based on the assumption that code switching is partially a conscious strategy to achieve certain goals. The subjects of this paper are students of the Advanced School of Translators and Interpreters of the University of Buea. Based on the author's observations, a list of functions of the students' speeches is provided. The results of this study confirm the results of previous studies such as Nwoye (1993) and Camilleri (1995). Code switching serves a communicative function in the speeches of the students in this study who switch from French to English and vice-versa to communicate either with their mates, friends or other users of both languages or one of the languages.

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## INTRODUCTION

The hybridization of languages is one of the consequences of the sociolinguistic complexity of a multilingual setting as Cameroon. Like human beings, languages grow, diversify, spread and may die. In any bilingual or multilingual setting, people are open to the acquisition of one or more languages or at least they master certain phrases or words in surrounding languages that influence their speech from time to time for particular reasons and for particular purposes. These influences come to play only when there is language contact or language clash which creates an environment for changes and readjustments due to communication vacuums. Code-switching becomes the resulting phenomenon in such contact, and is evident in the day to day speech of bilinguals as will be examined in this article which surveys the treatment in the literature, linguistic and social, of intra-sentential code-switching. Code-switching is one of a number of the linguistic manifestations of language contact which variously include borrowing on the lexical and syntactic levels, language transfer, linguistic convergence, interference, language attrition, language death, pidginization and creolization.

There is little consensus in the literature over which aspects should be subsumed under the label code-switching. In this article, code-switching refers to the utterance-internal juxtaposition, in un-integrated form, of overt linguistic elements from two languages (English and French), with no necessary change of interlocutor or topic. The combination of languages within the confines of a single sentence, constituent or even word, has proven most intriguing to linguists. This is sociolinguistically referred to as intra-sentential code-switching. First dismissed as random and deviant (Weinreich, 1953), intra-sentential code switching is now known to be grammatically constrained. The basis for this is the empirical observation that bilinguals tend to switch intra-sentential at certain (morpho) syntactic boundaries and not at others (Poplack, 2004). Early efforts to describe these tendencies (e.g. Gumperz, 1976; Timm, 1975) offered taxonomies of sites in the sentence where code switching could and could not occur (e.g. between pronominal subjects and verbs or between conjunctions and their conjuncts), but these were soon met with a host of counter-examples. The first general account of the distribution of code switching stemmed from the observation that code switching is favoured at the kinds of

syntactic boundaries which occur in both languages under study. The Equivalence Constraint (Poplack 1980) states that switched sentences are made up of concatenated fragments of alternating languages, each of which is grammatical in the language of provenance. The boundary between adjacent fragments occurs between two constituents that are ordered in the same way in both languages, ensuring the linear coherence of sentence structure without omitting or duplicating lexical content.

**Definitions:** A code may be a language, a variety or style of a language. In multilingual societies like Cameroon, the alternate use of formal and informal styles of a language is combined with another sociolinguistic phenomenon which Trudgil (1974:124) terms 'language switching'. This involves related languages and varieties. According to Trudgil, 'language switching' takes place like style or dialect-switching and can be broadly defined as "the degree of convergence of two or more languages in which the said languages are alternately used". Linguists have contrary views as far as this concept is concerned. According to Hoffman (1991:109), code-switching is "potentially the most creative of bilingual speech." For other linguists, it is a sign that bilinguals are not capable of mastering the two languages adequately or keeping them apart. Hoffman (1991:110) opines that, the phenomenon is "the alternate use of two languages or linguistic varieties within the same utterance or the same conversation." To Crystal (1986), code switching occurs when an individual, who is bilingual, alternates between two languages during his/her speech with another bilingual person. The Oxford Companion to the English Language (1992) defines code-switching as "a term in sociolinguistics for language and especially speech that draws to different extents on at least two languages combined in different ways. "It is a term which emphasizes movement from one language to another and it occurs to some extent in the speech of bilinguals, adults as well as children".

In the last couple of years there have been countless of definitions of code-switching (alternating between two languages). One of the definitions that really explain it clearly is the one by François Grosjean in his book, *Bilingual: Life and Reality*. Particularly interesting is what Grosjean says in terms of debunking the beliefs that, bilinguals who code-switch do so out of laziness or because they don't know either language well enough to just stick to one language. According to him, code-switching is actually not easy to do. He goes on to quote linguist Shana Poplack who has done extensive research on code-switching and presents an entirely new definition of this behavior. He avers that:

*"Code-switching is a verbal skill requiring a large degree of linguistic competence in more than one language, rather than a defect arising from insufficient knowledge of one or the other... [R]ather than presenting deviant behavior, [it] is actually a suggestive indicator of degree of bilingual competence."*

## METHODOLOGY

The present study is carried out within the campus of the University of Buea with twelve participants. Six of the students have English as L1 and French as L2, while six others have French as L1 and English as L2. Data is collected from the twelve bilingual students using a questionnaire administered to

all the students. The methodology used is the empirical approach. Conversations between three pairs of students and that of a group of six other students are recorded while interviews are equally granted all twelve students. The data collected is analysed using Labov (1984) and Sankoff (1988) Linguistic Variation Theory.

The branch of empirical linguistics known as Variation Theory-VT involves a combination of techniques from linguistics, sociology, anthropology and statistics, among others, to scientifically investigate language use and structure as manifested in natural(istic) context. The variationist viewpoint on language may be characterized by its preoccupation with, 1) accounting for grammatical structure in connected discourse, and 2) explaining the apparent instability therein of linguistic fore-function relations (Sankoff 1988:141). In scientifically accounting for the production data contained in a speech sample, variationists seek to discover patterns of usage, which pertain to the relative frequency of occurrence or co-occurrence of structures, rather than simply to their existence or grammaticality. The primary object of description of the variationist is the speech of individuals qua members of a speech community, i.e. informants specifically chosen (through ethnographic or sociological methods) to represent the major axes of community structure. Thus, an important aspect of the variationist framework involves entrée into the speech community, where observation of language use in its socio-cultural setting is carried out.

**Social role of CS:** In many bilingual communities, speakers conventionally make use of both languages with the same interlocutors, in the same domains, and within the same conversational topics. To understand the social role of code switching in such communities, the analyst must observe, uncover and document conversations, as instantiated in everyday situations in which spontaneous code switching is a discourse norm. This requires first identifying a community in which such situations regularly arise, and characterizing its social structure in terms of language knowledge and language use. Second, samples of sustainable discourse including code switching must be obtained from community members in quantities sufficient to detect recurrent patterns of speech behaviour. It is in these steps, prior to any linguistic analysis, that social, political, historical and demographic knowledge of the community are most pertinent. These characteristics could be related to its members' linguistic production to arrive at a community profile, or 'social meaning' or code switching.

### Motivations

A number of aspects come into play as motivation for bilinguals to code-switch during conversation.

**Social motivation:** Code-switching relates to, and sometimes indexes social-group membership in bilingual and multilingual communities. Some sociolinguists describe the relationship between code-switching behavior and social class, ethnicity, and other social positions. In addition, scholars in interactional linguistics and conversation analysis have studied code-switching as a means of structuring speech in interaction. Some discourse analysts, including Peter Auer, suggest that code-switching does not simply reflect social situations, but that it is a means to create social situations.

**Markedness model:** This model developed by Carol Myers-Scotton, is one of the more complete theories of code-switching motivations. It posits that users are rational and choose to speak a language that clearly marks their rights and obligations, relative to other speakers in a conversation and its setting. When there is no clear, unmarked language choice, speakers practice code-switching to explore possible language choices. Many sociolinguists, however, object to the Markedness Model's postulation that language-choice is entirely rational.

**Sequential analysis:** Scholars of conversation analysis like Peter Auer and Li Wei argue that the social motivation behind code-switching lies in the way switching is structured and managed in conversational interaction; in other words, the question of why code-switching occurs cannot be answered without first addressing the question of how it occurs. Using the conversational analysis (CA), these scholars focus their attention on the sequential implications of code-switching. That is, whatever language a speaker chooses to use for a conversational turn, or part of a turn, impacts the subsequent choices of language by the speaker as well as the hearer. Rather than focusing on the social values inherent in the language the speaker chooses ('brought-along meaning'), the analysis concentrates on the meaning that the act of code-switching itself creates ('brought-about meaning').

**The Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT):** Developed by Howard Giles, professor of communication, CAT seeks to explain the cognitive reasons for code-switching and other changes in speech, as a person either emphasizes or minimizes the social differences between himself and the other person(s) in conversation. Giles posits that when speakers seek approval in a social situation, they are likely to converge their speech with that of the other speaker. This can include, but not limited to, the language of choice, accent and para-linguistics features used in the conversation. In contrast to convergence, speakers might also engage in divergent speech, in which an individual person emphasizes the social distance between himself and the other speakers by using speech with linguistic features characteristics of his own language group.

**Diglossia:** In a diglossic situation, some topics are better suited to the use of one language over another. Joshua Fishman proposes a domain-specific code-switching model (later refined by Blom and Gumperz) wherein bilingual speakers choose which code to speak depending on where they are and what they are discussing. For instance a child who is a bilingual English-French speaker might speak English at home and French in class, English at recess.

**Functions:** According to Zentella (1985), code-switching performs several functions. First, people may use code-switching to hide fluency or memory problems in the second language (though this applies to a very limited number of users). Second, code-switching is used to mark switching from informal situations (using native languages) to formal situations (using second language). Third, code-switching is used to exert control, especially between parents and children. Fourth, code-switching is used to align speakers with others in specific situations (e.g., defining oneself as a member of an inner group). Code-switching also "functions to announce specific identities, create certain meanings, and facilitate particular interpersonal relationships" (Johnson, 2000).

These functions are outlined in the speeches of the participants in this study as will be seen later.

**Why Code-switch?:** Bilingual speakers may use a change of language to indicate their attitude and to be identified to social group. They may switch to indicate that they are different from others. Other reasons for code-switching include humor, pride and knowledge of the out-group or dominant language. In Cameroon today, the social status is marked by introducing elements of English, Spanish, German, home languages and Pidgin English in the French or English structures as do some musicians, humorists, and theatre actors. Code-switching may be used to express emotions, personal relationship, solidarity or authenticity. Bilinguals may switch to either include the others into their conversation, or exclude the others from understanding their conversation.

It should be noted that, switching does not always occur because speakers do not know the words in one or the other language as held by some linguists. Widespread code-switching often indicates greater or less shift towards the dominant languages. This is why English language is the most widely used in Cameroon for code switching. Equally, some bilinguals code switch because of pride, that is, because they want to show that they master two or more languages. For example a student code switches from French to English and vice versa in a conversation with his friends to show that he can speak both languages.

**Code-switching Types:** In carrying out this research, the author documented the different types of code switching that were concurrent in the speeches of students, which are similar to what Hoffman (1991) distinguished. These are intra-sentential code-switching, inter-sentential code-switching and emblematic code-switching. In addition to these, we equally pointed out a fourth type which is conversational code-switching.

**Different switch types in the speech of students:** In carrying out our study, we realized that the participants make use of three principal types of switches in their conversations.

**Intra-sentential code switching:** this is the type of code switching which occurs in the middle of a sentence. The following examples were gotten from the speeches of the students:

- Bring me that *cahier de traduction* and also the text book. (*apport-moi le cahier de traduction ainsi que le livre*)
- The games started *quand le Vice-Chancellor et entre avec le prof.*

(The game started when the Vice-Chancellor came in with the lecturer). Djuide (2007) argues that inter-sentential switching occurs at the sentence or at the clause levels. She emphasizes that one part of the sentence can be in one language and the other part in another language. For instance; "Are you still in class? *Que-ce que tu as déjà vu?*"

"*Monsieur le professeur*, you asked the class delegate not to take my assignment."

**Emblematic or tag switches;** it occurs when an exclamation, tag or parenthetical element is involved in another language other than that of the rest of the sentence. For instance:

- “*merde*, listen”. “*Pas vrai*, I thought it was at nine o'clock.”
- “What a hell”. “*Il pense que quoi!*”
- “*Regard celui-la*”. “He thinks he has arrived”

**Conversational code-switching:** This is when a speaker speaks in one code but the response is given in another code.

**Student A:** Are you still in ASTI?

**Student B:** *Où pensais-tu que j'étais?* (Where do you think I am?)

**Student A:** *Je pensais que tu avais déjà traversé la méditerranée.*

**Student B:** Never mind, that will not be long.

**Student A:** Sorry that was just a joke.

**Student B:** *Je sais très bien que tu aimes les blagues*

In all the above-mentioned examples, the participants use the two official languages of the Republic of Cameroon that is, French and English. This phenomenon is observed among bilinguals. We can therefore say that code-switching emphasizes movement from one language to another so that a person is capable of using two languages, ‘A’ and ‘B’. Even though some students in the study use it to indicate their attitude or their humor which seems to be conscious, it should be noted that it is an unconscious way of using two or more codes in a single utterance which is a case of linguistic interference. This is known as metaphorical code-switching. Our study led us to realise that there are a good number of reasons why students code-switch in their speech.

**Reasons Why students code switching:** In analyzing the different reasons why students code-switch, this study realized that there are a number of purposes and aims for code-switching. This varies according to who is in the conversation, to who the speech is addressed, what the topic is, and the context in which the conversation takes place. The first of this is that a bilingual speaker may not know or may have forgotten the term to describe an aspect in the language he or she is speaking at a given moment, and so switches to another language to compensate for the deficiency. As a result, the speaker may be triggered into speaking in the other language for a while. For instance, a student who tells his classmate: “*S’il te plaît donne-moi ton handout*” instead of “*S’il te plaît donne-moi ton prospectus*” because the student does not know the equivalence of the word “handout” in French. This phenomenon may also be considered as gap-filling. Students may code-switch because they want to quote the speech of an individual in the language used by the individual. For example: “*Comme disent les américains*, ‘Time is money’”. The speaker may like to exclude others from a conversation or create solidarity. For instance two friends are conversing in English and suddenly switch to French when they are joined by a monolingual English-speaking friend, because they want to exclude the classmate from their conversation. On the other hand, the speakers may want to include the monolingual friend

in their conversation. In this case they may switch from French to English to include the English-monolingual friend in the conversation. It is the alternation that occurs when the speaker wishes to convey his/her attitude to the listener; for instance, where monolingual speakers communicate these attitudes by means of variation in the level of formality in their speech, bilingual speakers can convey the same by code-switching. Students sometimes use code-switching because the topic of discussion is best discussed in a particular language. For example, some of the bilingual students informed us that talking to another bilingual student about computer, they will normally switch to English because this topic is best discussed in English, giving that most words about the computer are in English such as ‘windows’, ‘Microsoft’ and other buzzwords. Such words are called loan or borrowing when they become established and in frequent use in language ‘B’. At this level, there is no clear cut distinction between a code-switch and a borrowing. Some students pointed out that, they code-switch for humor. This may have an effect on the mood of the listener of the interlocutor.

This linguistic technique is very common among humorists, musicians and theatre actors in Cameroon who usually code switch to make the audience laugh. It may also be used to ease tension and inject humor into a message or conversation. If communication becomes tense, the use of a second language can signal a change in the ‘tune being played’. Students equally switch from one variety of a language to another variety of the same language to show respect for someone. For example, a student who switches from Pidgin English which he uses during conversation with mates to Standard English when addressing his lecturer or a university authority. According to Hudson (1980), code-switching may be used to emphasize a particular point in a conversation. If one word needs to be stressed, the switch may be made for emphasis. For example a student may say something to his interlocutor in English and wants him to believe in it. He decides to swear in French “I shall get to the root of this matter *au nom de Dieu*”. This is bound to create a special effect. Another reason put forward by the students is that, code-switching could be used to express a concept that has no equivalent in the culture of the other language. This is commonly noticed in situations where two languages are involved, one foreign like English language and the other one a home language. For example some words have an extended signification, and a faithful translation into French or English may alter real signification. One of the students took the example of the word ‘weekend’. He held that even when the expression, “*Je vais en weekend*” makes more meaning than “*Je vais pour la fin de semaine*”. When used expressed in English, the word ‘Weekend’ carries meaning that is not expressed in “*fin de semaine*”

Four respondents held that code-switching may be used to reinforce a request. For example:

**“*Je vais manger, je vais manger s’il vous plaît: Please! I want to eat*”**

For the sake of making a point, a lecturer may explain a concept in language ‘A’ then explains the same concept in language ‘B’ as reinforcement of the learning process. In most cases, this adds understanding. Francois Grosjean outlines other reasons why bilingual code-switch. He holds that. Sometimes one language has a better word or phrase to express a particular idea.

“I do this a lot with adjectives, for example, and it really has nothing to do with not knowing the equivalent in either language. It’s rather a matter of using the better word to describe what I am trying to say”. Sometimes the words we code-switch are the only ones we have or they are more readily available in the other language. This is not to say that we don’t necessarily know the correct word in the language we’re using. This has more to do with something extremely interesting which he calls the ‘complementary principle’ which basically has to do with the notion that for bilinguals, different aspects of life such as work, family, school, sports, hobbies, etc., require different languages. He point out that:

I spent a large part of my career as a television producer and although I worked for Univision for many years surrounded with bilinguals (with different levels of proficiency), we would always switch to English whenever we were talking about technical terminology related to, say, editing video. It just made more sense to do so since in the case of editing video, for instance, the software was in English. As earlier mentioned, sometimes bilinguals use code-switching as a communicative tool, to include to exclude someone or to show expertise. Grojean concludes that I one is bilingual, he or she has surely done this: switched to the minority language so that those around you can’t understand. Sometimes it might be to say something specifically about those you’re excluding; sometimes you just don’t want others to listen to what you’re saying.

**Practical cases:** The Advanced School of Translation and Interpretation, with a high degree of English/French bilingualism, is an environment that favours smooth intra-sentential code-switching, grammatically constrained by the equivalence constraint. Characteristics of smooth code-switching include copious occurrences, smooth transition between languages, and lack of rhetorical effect. This pattern is sometimes attributed to the many typological similarities enjoyed by the French-English pair. However, the operation of the equivalence constraint has been empirically verified in communities featuring such typologically distinct language pairs as Finnish-English (Poplack, *et al.* 1988), Tamil-English (Sankoff, *et al.* 1990), Walof-French (Meechan and Poplack 1995), Igbo-English (Eze, 1998) and Ukrainian-English (Budzhak-Jones, 1998). One recurrent and perhaps overriding factor for code-switching is bilingual ability: those with greater proficiency in both languages not only switch more, they switch more intra-sentential, and at a wider variety of permissible code-switching sites (Berk-Seligson 1986; Poplack 1988, Poplack *et al.* 1988).

Those who are less proficient in one of the two languages on the other hand, do not eschew code-switching altogether, as might be the case were code-switching, not the eminently social tool that it is, but rather restrict their code-switching in number, type and/or discourse location according to their bilingual ability. The less proficient thus favour switch sites and types requiring little or even no productivity knowledge of the other language, such as tags, routines or frozen phrases. Bilingual proficiency is in no way causative of code-switching. Rather, given the appropriate discourse and social circumstances, speakers who engage in the most complex type of intra-sentential code-switching generally turn out to be the most proficient in both contact languages. Another recurrent factor is prestige, instantiated at the community level by group membership (often correlated with social class).

In contrast to language proficiency, whose effect seems to be universal, the contribution of the prestige factor varies from community to community and may act to promote or inhibit code-switching: its effect must be established on a case-by-case basis. In one community, code-switching per se may not constitute prestigious behaviour. Code-switching constitutes a habitual and often necessary part of social interaction among bilinguals, who have various forms of switches at their disposal. This occurs when multilinguals alternatively use many languages in the same utterance. In an informal situation where people are familiar with each other and share the same educational, social and economic background, code-switching could occur frequently. When bilinguals are talking about a specific topic, it causes them to code-switch in their conversation. The reason being that, certain words may have certain connotations linked to experiences in a particular language or those words may be in the relevant register (Hoffman 1991:12). From our study, we realized that most students use this in their conversations. For instance, a Francophone student will say:

**Student A:** Comment peux-tu dire qu’il ne give pa ce qu’on see en classe.

**Student B:** Kam on go see l’autre prof.

**Student A:** Allons d’about manger au restaurant.

**Sudent B:** Merci, je n’ai pas faim.

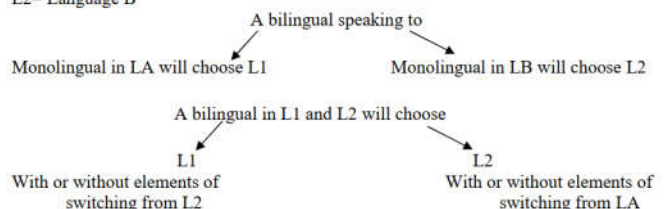
We notice that sentences 1 and 2 are Camfranglais sentences and can be translated as follows

- How can you say that he doesn’t give what he teaches in class?
- Come, let’s go and meet the other lecturer.
- After these sentences (1 and 2) the students switch completely and continue in standard French.
- This phenomenon is also observed in the speech of some Anglophone students. Some will switch from their mother tongue to French or English or from English to French for instance.
- Come on go see la muna qui vent le ndole.
- Meaning “Let’s go and see the young girl who sells vegetables”

There are French words (on, la, qui, vent, le), English words (come, go, see) and two words from indigenous language “muna” meaning “young girl” and “ndole” which is a word in Duala for vegetable. We therefore see that the sentence is lexically made up of words from many languages, which is code-switching as defined by Hoffman (1991:110). Hoffman (1991:113) referring to Carnejo *et al* points out that this phenomenon takes place when the bilingual or multilingual has become conscious of speaking different languages. He represents the choices involved in a bilingual’s speech as follows:

**A bilingual speaking to a monolingual in L1 and a monolingual in L2**

L1= Language A  
L2= Language B



It is seen from this chart that code switching is a composite of language unconsciously developed by bilinguals and it constitutes a habitual and often necessary part of social interaction among them. It is a term in sociolinguistics for language and especially speech that draws to differing extents from at least two languages combining in different ways, as when French/English bilinguals say;

“Give me that pen, *je veux mark les papiers*”.

## CONCLUSION

The assumption that bilingual syntax can be explained by general principles of monolingual grammar has not been substantiated. While such formal theories of grammar may account well for the monolingual language structure (including that of the monolingual fragments in code-switching discourse), there is no evidence that the juxtaposition of two languages can be explained in the same way. As described in ensuring sections, bilingual communities exhibit widely different patterns of adapting monolingual resources in their code-switching strategies, and these are not predictable through purely linguistic considerations. Curiously, however, although the last three or four decades of research have produced a wealth of data from a wide range of bilingual interactions world-wide, relatively little is known of the bilingual norms of the communities from which they are drawn. Nor is it clear how the social forces typically described in such detail (Backus 1996; Gardner-Chloros 1991) shaped those norms, *let alone* the structural form of the language mixes, beyond the fact that two or three languages ended up being spoken. In most bilingual communities empirical studies, one or another manifestation of language contact is (inexplicably) preferred to the detriment of others; thus the social ‘meaning’ of the languages, individually or in combination, reveals little about the differential use of linguistic resources in the social life of a given community. This is because the patterning of utterances containing elements from more than one language is not predictable from community or language typologies. It emerges only from systematic examination of how the languages are used by community members. This study set out to explore into what code-switching is, and the prompts and functions it plays in society. It has also been proven that the phenomenon is prominent only in bilingual or multilingual communities and results in the formation of new varieties or dialects as is the case with Camfranglais and Cameroon Pidgin English as they are a result of language contact.

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