

# SOME EXAMPLES OF SERBIAN/ENGLISH BILINGUAL CODE- SWITCHING

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Code-switching is commonly approached in terms of two or more languages or language varieties used alternately in the course of a conversation. As a phenomenon which operates mainly against the background of full bilingualism, code-switching has inspired studies of both syntactic and sociolinguistic aspects of bilingual speech. Recently, there have been calls for filling the gap which these two traditions have left by insisting on the conversational dimension of code-switching (Auer 1998: 3). However, a common goal in all these approaches has been to determine whether code-switching is a language universal widely comparable, even for the most diverse combinations of languages.

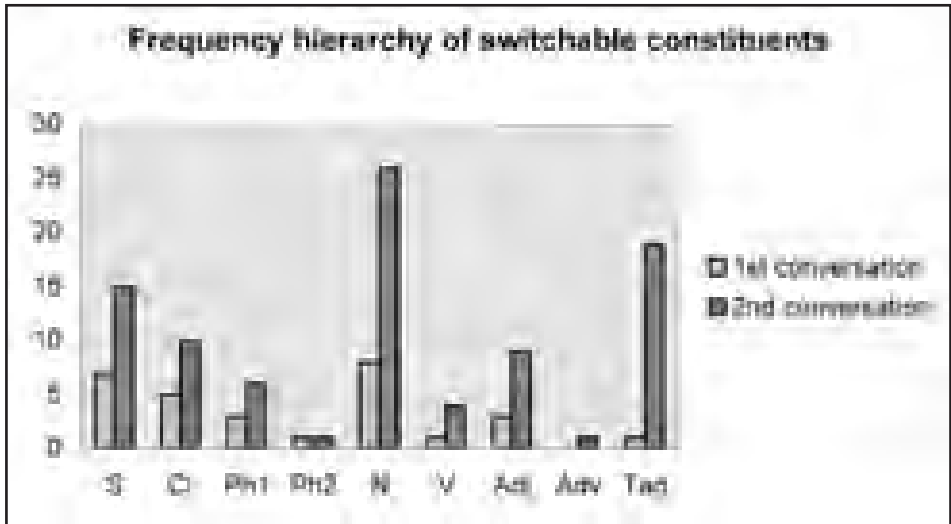
As a modest contribution to the ongoing discussion, this investigation looks into the language shifts occurring in two recorded 60-minute conversations involving bilingual speakers of English and Serbian, namely a brother (V.) and sister (K.) born in Serbia to an American mother and Serbian father (1<sup>st</sup> conversation), and a middle-aged woman (I.) born in Australia to Serbian parents who all moved to Serbia 16 years ago (2<sup>nd</sup> conversation). The participants were told that the aim of the recording was to collect metalinguistic data on bilingualism, that is, to learn *about* the phenomenon itself, rather than analyse its manifestation in their speech. Recorded in the informal settings of a Belgrade café (V. and K.) and a living room of the informant I's home, the conversations, therefore, started off as interviews in which the participants were asked about their use of the two languages and their attitudes towards them. However, these soon grew into relaxed chats about the informants' childhood memories, relationship with their parents, their friends and future plans, while much of the speech event in the second recording centred on the informant's daughter (the author's friend) currently living in Australia.

Instead of imposing external linguistic categories on the recorded material, the corpus was analysed with view to juxtaposing the findings with those reported in the examined literature. Following the example of Romaine (1995), the analysis of code-switching was dealt with from both grammatical/syntactic and discourse/pragmatic (conversational) perspectives.

## 2. SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS

Grammatical approach to code-switching addresses the question of where in discourse code-switching is most likely to occur and deals with syntactic and morphosyntactic constraints on intrasentential code-switching.

The analysis of the junctures at which shifts occurred in the two conversations revealed the following results:



S = Sentence; Cl = Clauses; Ph1 = Between phrases; Ph2 = Within phrases; N = Nouns; V = Verbs; Adj = Adjectives; Adv = Adverbs; Tag = Discourse markers

As can be seen in the chart, in both conversations nouns accounted for the largest proportion of switches.<sup>1</sup> According to Romaine (1995), one of the reasons why nouns are so frequently borrowed or code-switched is that they are relatively free of syntactic restrictions. In Serbian, however, they operate within a system of seven cases and make a distinction in gender and number. Being conditioned by the relationship to other words in a sentence, the choice of a noun form is far more complex in Serbian than in English, which may account for the fact that in 91.18% of cases, nouns were uttered in English as a shift from Serbian. Only in three instances Serbian nouns were used in otherwise English utterances:

- (1) K: We went to plac and the majstor came.  
(house lot) – acc. (handyman) – nom.<sup>2</sup>
- (2) I: I'm going to the pijac.  
(market)-accusative
- (3) I. (to her son): Is baba there?  
(grandmother)-nominative

It is indicative to note that the switches occurred only at places where, according to Serbian grammar, nouns are either in their basic (nominative) form, or in accusative, which is in these cases, the same as the nominative form. In other words, Serbian nouns, which appear here without any inflectional morphemes, would take the same form if employed in the same positions in Serbian sentences of the same meaning and comparable structure.

Seen from the semantic perspective, the switches can be justified either by the non-existence of corresponding lexical equivalents in English (in 1), or by the practice of associating certain concepts with a particular contextual environment (in 2 and 3). For example, informant I. with English as a dominant language uses Serbian words to denote a concept which constitutes a part of her everyday life in Serbia (in 2). It can also be argued that the very notion of 'pijac' (market) has its different realisations depending on the culture within which it exists, which may account for the choice of the Serbian version in this particular case. This could lead us to identify the informant as "a co-ordinate bilingual, in whom the two language systems are kept distinct" (Bell 1976: 118). Finally, in (3) I. is talking to her son, who normally addresses his grandmother by using the Serbian word ('baba'), which triggers the switch in the informant's speech as well.

The following utterance is a good example of switches taking place in the opposite direction (Serbian to English) and involving single lexical items all belonging to different parts of speech (adjective, noun and verb):

I: Ona je...voli da je independent, a ne voli control...ona da nas contact.  
(She is) (she likes being) (and she doesn't like) (she [likes] to contact us)

A closer look at the chart reveals that the number of switches between (1) sentences, (2) clauses, (3) phrases and (4) within phrases, decreases respectively in both cases which, if nouns are regarded as an exception, corresponds to the pattern which proposes that the higher the syntactic level of the constituent, the more likely it is to serve as a potential site for a switch.

It is also believed that idiomatic expressions cannot be broken because that would violate the speaker's feelings for what on syntactic or semantic grounds must be regarded as a single unit. However, the informant's utterance involving a fixed phrase:

I: On je stalno na call. (talking about her American cousin)  
(He is always on)

runs counter to such a belief and could be put down to the dominant character of English in the informant who uses Serbian lexical items in the essentially English structures (on call).

Another syntactic restriction proposed as a universal says that an auxiliary and a main verb must be in the same language. In the following example, however, the rule is not applied.

I: Ona je počela jedan pre-school...ja sam bila *teaching*...  
(She started one) (I had been)

Moving from the syntactic to morphological level, a good example of mixing *within* word boundaries is a word `čiketina` created by the informant K. Serbian makes lexical distinction between `chicken as an animal` (pile) and `chicken as a type of meat` (piletina = pile + derivational morpheme ` - etina` ). This case of `over-differentiation` in Serbian leads the informant to combine the English word with the Serbian derivational suffix ` -etina` to mark the distinction in meaning. The word `chicken`, which serves as a root morpheme (`čike`), is in terms of phonology easily transferred to the Serbian language as its phonemes constitute a part of Serbian phonemic inventory as well. The practice, therefore, complies with the so-called `free morpheme constraint` which predicts that a switch may not occur between a bound morpheme and a lexical form unless the lexical form can be phonologically integrated into the language of the morpheme.

According to Hoffmann (1991: 103), such "idiosyncratic linguistic creations are not the result of either interference or borrowing".

### 3. CONVERSATION ANALYSIS

Another approach to analysing shifts occurring in the speech of bilinguals is to look at code-switching as a discourse mode – a communicative option which is available to a bilingual member of a speech community on much the same basis as switching between styles or dialects is an option for the monolingual speaker. The analysis in this section, therefore, deals with the questions of why and in what contexts cases of code-switching arise.

Shifts noted in the two recorded conversations are treated as `conversational, non-situational code-switching` (Wei 1998: 156), since in each case the setting and interlocutors remained the same. In other words, switches were motivated by factors within the conversation itself. This also includes `metaphorical` code-switching (Gardner-Chloros 1997: 361) where a shift carries a particular evocative purpose such as speaking about a place in the language which is used there.

In both conversations Serbian was dominantly used, although it could be contended that the informants had different reasons for such a choice. For the bilingual brother and sister who, having lived in Serbia all their lives, use English mainly when talking to their American mother and mainly Serbian when talking to each other, this was a logical option. Most switches from Serbian to English (especially on an inter-sentential level) were instances of the above-mentioned metaphorical code-switching occasioned by the introduction of topics such as their mother, America (e.g. their trips to America, their American relatives) and their foreign friends. According to Hoffmann (1991: 115), talking about a particular topic may cause a switch, because "certain items trigger off various connotations which are linked to experiences in a particular language".

On the other hand, informant I., who lived in a Serbian family in Australia mainly as a `receptive bilingual` (Baetens Beardsmore 1986: 16) (she mentions how her father talked to her in Serbian and she responded in English) and then moved to Serbia 16 years ago, but still predominantly uses English (at home, at work), probably chooses Serbian as a frame for the conversation out of consideration for

her interlocutor (the author of the paper), who, although a 'secondary' Serbian-English bilingual (Hoffmann 1991: 19), is a Serbian native speaker.

The following examples will be analysed in an attempt to identify various functions of language alternation:

- (1) K: I ja ovako pogledam i kažem: 'But I think I know you, either I looked at the  
(And I look at her like this and say)
- (2) pictures very much ili '...baš neke slike smo...sam gledala odakle su se oni upoznali  
(or...We...I looked at some pictures of where they had met
- (3) \*u neki kamp 'or I met you in person'...I ja ovako...I posle nekoliko minuta ukapiram  
(in a [some] camp) And then I...And after several minutes I realise

Talking about the conversation she had with a friend from England the previous night, informant K. shifts to English in quoting her own words. It is generally agreed that one of the most common discourse functions of code-switching is to make a distinction between direct and reported speech. In this case the switch is somewhat expected since K. repeats verbatim what she actually said to her friend in English. The next example, however, is different in that respect:

K.: ...and I say to her 'Alisa, bre...'  
(hey, Alice)...

Having previously claimed that both her brothers and she speak English when talking to their mother, she, nevertheless, switches to Serbian when quoting how she addressed her on one occasion by using the Serbian version of her mother's name (Alice → Alisa) and a typical Serbian interjection 'bre' which serves to emphasise the message. This is in keeping with Romaine's view that it is often "the switch itself which is significant, rather than the accuracy of the representation of the reported speech with respect to its linguistic form" (1995: 162). Rather than serving to preserve the original language, in some cases of quoting it represents a marked choice used to achieve an aesthetic effect, or in our case possibly, a humorous one.

A confirmation for this can also be found in line (2) when K. uses the Serbian conjunction 'ili' (or) although still quoting the English girl's words. Appearing at a clause boundary, it is also a good example of inter-sentential switching. The direct quotation is then interrupted by a brief digression in Serbian in which the informant first reiterates what she has previously said in English and then offers additional information, so that the function of the switch is both to clarify and further qualify the message.

It is also of interest to note the informant's use of the ungrammatical form \*`u neki kamp` as opposed to `u nekom kampu` (in a/some camp) as an illustration of interference reinforced by the presence of a loanword `kamp` adapted from English and orthographically and phonologically assimilated into Serbian. Namely, a pronoun `neki` (which has a function of the English indefinite article) and a noun `kamp` (camp) take a locative form in Serbian (`nekom

kampu') when preceded by a preposition 'u' (in). Clearly influenced by the English equivalent, the informant uses the incorrect accusative/ (nominative) form of the noun ('kamp') which triggers the use of the same incorrect case-form of the preceding pronoun.

A similar example follows:

I: I sad je ono svaki dan...trči, ide jogging, ide kickboxing, šta jos radi...  
pliva...  
(And now, like, every day she) (goes) (goes) (what else...[she] swims...)

The loanwords 'džoging' (jogging) and 'kikboksing' (kickboxing) are used in Serbian within the structure:

verb 'to go' (ići) + preposition 'on' (na) + jogging/ kickboxing (džoging, kikboksing)

The informant, nevertheless, applies English syntactic rules in forming these verb phrases (to go jogging; to go kickboxing).

Discussing the current situation in Serbia's higher education and the students' attitude to their studies, I. says:

(1) Ali ako oni njima kažu: 'Look, ako je four year degree, imaš five, six years  
(But if they tell them) (if (it) is) (you have)

(2) maximum', neće više.  
(they' ll stop [behaving like that])

Again, the switch occurs to mark a quotation which, contrary to expectations (Serbian context), starts off in English. However, if we accept the criteria proposed by various researchers that the language of the verb must be the base (Romaine 1995: 145), (Serbian in this case), we can then attribute the shift to the use of a discourse marker 'look' and to the informant's general inclination to use English tags and exclamations as discourse markers (See the chart).

I: Goodness, što je doterana i muscly!  
(how smart-[looking] and muscly she is!)

I: I know, zato što je moj rođak u Australiji...  
(because my cousin in Australia...)

Other discourse markers used by the informant include: 'Yeah' and 'Okay' (agreement), 'Oh' (realising new information), 'Oh, my god/ goodness!', 'Crazy!' and 'Gee!' (surprise, astonishment). Serbian markers were rare, but it was noted that when they *were* used ('tako da' (~and so) – twice; 'kao' (like) – twice and 'ono' (like) – once)

the surrounding discourse also took place in Serbian, so that, unlike the English ones, these were not used to highlight the contrast between the discourse and its frame of markers.

At the macro-level, the informants' Serbian/English bilingualism is a rather rare phenomenon in a predominantly monolingual Serbian society, which was, moreover, isolated from the rest of the world for more than a decade. In such circumstances, it is usually only in their family circles that their repertoires can be fully exploited and that they can call on resources from each of the available codes and on strategies for switching between them. On the other hand, forced to stay within a single code in contacts with other members of the monolingual community, their communicative competence seems less rich than it actually is.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the investigation into the nature of code-switching based on two bilingual conversations and undertaken in relation to different levels of grammatical and discourse approaches, showed a varying degree of agreement with the results reported in the examined literature, particularly in the field of linguistic analysis. Numerous variables which have to be taken into consideration when studying bilingual speech (type of bilingualism, setting, interlocutor, topic, attitudes to bilingualism, to name some), an enormous number of possible language combinations and various degrees of disparity between their grammatical structures, all render the formulation of general rules a daunting task. These, however, serve as a helpful frame for further studies and it is the exceptions that should be identified, interpreted and looked into with special care.

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1 A distinction is sometimes made between mixing and switching by referring to code-switches as language changes occurring across phrase or sentence boundaries, whereas code-mixes take place within sentences and usually involve single lexical items. The term 'switch' will be used here in both cases, following the example of Romaine (1995), Hoffmann (1991) and Baetens Beardsmore (1986).

2 A morpheme-by-morpheme translation was considered unnecessary for the examples chosen, so that only glosses (translations) into conversational English are provided throughout the paper.

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## SUMMARY

### SOME EXAMPLES OF SERBIAN/ENGLISH BILINGUAL CODE-SWITCHING

The aim of this paper is to analyse bilingual code-switching from a corpus of two recorded 60-minute conversations involving Serbian/English bilingual speakers. In order to determine a level of agreement with the findings of various authors who propose universally applicable `rules` of code-switching, the paper starts off with a syntactic analysis of the material with occasional notes on semantic and morphological aspects of switchable constituents, and moves to a more conversational approach to examine the functions of code-switching. Although established general rules prove to be a helpful framework for the investigation, deviations from these are identified and interpreted throughout the paper.

**KEYWORDS:** code-switching, bilingualism, syntactic restrictions, conversation analysis.