

Code-Switching as a Strategy in Conducting Public Affairs: A Case Study of Rural Namibians

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Abstract- Outapi is a rural town in the northern part of Namibia. Its residents are exposed to a variety of languages. Speakers whose English proficiency is limited, but who are able to communicate in Oshiwambo, use Oshiwambo to communicate. The problem arises when communication is in English, as the majority are English second or third language speakers and thus unable to express themselves very well. This study sought to understand the role of code switching between English and Oshiwambo by Outapi residents and public officials when conducting public affairs in the bank, the clinic and the post office. A qualitative research approach based on a case study research design was applied to determine the prevalence of code switching in the multilingual community. Findings from observations and interviews revealed that code switching facilitated communication for speakers in Outapi to attain their communication goals. Although the study indicated how code switching enriches Oshiwambo in terms of vocabulary, it also indicates a possible contribution to the language death of local languages.

General Terms- Code switching; multilingualism.

Keywords- Matrix language; embedded language; hegemony; multilingualism; local languages; speech community

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is seen as a vehicle of communication. Speakers transmit their news and messages to reach the targeted individuals through any language they are comfortable with. In a multilingual and multicultural society, speakers are at liberty to use more than one language to accomplish their communicative goals. According to Crystal (2008, p. 119)[6], multilingualism is the “ability of an individual speaker or a speech community to utilise multiple languages when they interact with one another. In some cases, speakers may manipulate languages by switching from one language to another in the same utterance in the conversation”. Finnegan (2014, p. 117)[9] states that “speakers in a multilingual society employ several languages by switching over to language(s) of their preference for communication purposes”. As a result, speakers may switch from one language into another to make their conversation effective.

Code switching is a communicative strategy has been defined by various scholars. Nguyen (2009)[26], for example, defines code switching as an alternative use of two languages within the same conversation. Wei (2007, p. 337)[33] sees code switching as “an ability to select the language of preference according to the interlocutor, the situational context, the topic of conversation, alternations

of linguistic varieties within the same conversation, and to change languages within an interactional sequence in accordance with sociolinguistic rules and without violating specific grammatical constraints”. Gluth (2008, p. 6)[11] defines code switching as the mixing of elements of two linguistic varieties within a single utterance or text. For the purposes of this article, code switching will thus be understood as a process where an individual uses more than one language in the same utterance without violating the rules of the languages utilised, but still maintains the topic of discussion.

Previous studies (Das, 2012[7]; Rose & Dulm, 2006[30]) refer to code switching as a communicative strategy in a multilingual society. Das (2012)[7] regards code switching as a ‘tricky strategy’ in communication discourse. He further reveals eight varying purposes which are usually behind the application of code switching among speakers: signalling relationships and language preferences; obviating difficulties; framing discourse; contrasting personalisation and objection; conveying cultural-expressive messages; giving special effect to some key words of the utterance; lowering language barriers; maintaining the appropriateness of context reiterating messages.

Based on the above-mentioned purposes, Das (2012, p. 16)[7] argues that the application of code switching is not

always “a sign of linguistic deficiency or inadequacy” but rather a compromise between the languages utilised and the interlocutors. Therefore, he regards code switching as “an effective tool” which facilitates interlocutors to express their messages freely, and helps them to convey their messages so that these could reach the targeted individuals.

Conversely, Mouton (2007, p. 71)[23] believes that code switching does not only serve as a strategic device for communication, but can also contribute to language interference in a multilingual society. From these discussions, it is evident that the prevalence of code switching can serve as a benefit to many speakers in multilingual societies but can be a detriment to others as well.

2. BACKGROUND

Namibia is one of the richest countries in the African continent in terms of multilingual structure (Mouton, 2007, p.1)[23]. In the same vein, Frydman (2011)[10] indicates that because Namibia is blessed with many different ethnic groups, it sometimes becomes difficult to distinguish a language from a dialect (2011, p. 181). As Maho (1998)[18] reveals, the total number of languages spoken in Namibia are estimated, and range from 10 - 30. It is thus clear that Namibians are exposed to many different languages spoken in the country, and most of Namibians are consequently bi- or multilingual. By interacting with people from different languages, most Namibians become proficient in a variety of the local languages. Consequently, they can opt to switch between languages they are exposed to in order to make their communication as easy and effective as possible. As indicated in a previous study, Finnegan (2014)[9] finds that speakers in a multilingual society employ several languages simultaneously by switching over to languages of preference to attain their communication goals. This leads to the practice of code switching.

Historically, Outapi, where the study was conducted, has been a rural centre led by informal trade activities. Outapi town was estimated to have a population of 6600 in 2012 (Outapi Town Council, 2012)[27]. Today, Outapi is the administrative centre of the Omusati region. Many opportunities such as jobs, commercial and housing, amongst others, are opened up in Outapi. These opportunities invite many people to migrate to Outapi from all corners of the country and beyond to look for better living standards, greener pastures and business opportunities, amongst others (National Planning Commission, 2003)[24].

Although the majority of the Outapi residents are Oshiwambo speakers, there are also people from different language backgrounds. They converse often in more than one language to make communication possible. Some of the spoken languages in Outapi are English, Khoekhoe-ghoewab, Otjiherero, Portuguese and Silozi, amongst others. Among the spoken languages in Outapi, English

functions as a lingua franca, while Oshiwambo functions as a mutually intelligible language among residents.

Owing to the historical circumstances, not all of the Outapi residents have the same level of competence in English. They are expected, however, to express themselves very well when they have to attend to their civil duties. It needs to be noted that although English functions as an official language in independent Namibia, it still remains a hindrance to the majority of specifically rural Namibians when it comes to daily communication. Iiping (2013)[14] confirms that low levels of proficiency in English create communication barriers for many Namibians.

Outapi, in which the study was conducted, is a rural town and its people have little contact with English in their daily communication. They are expected to use and understand English very well when they have to attend to their public affairs. It appears that, in order to facilitate communication in the public spheres, code switching between English and Oshiwambo by both residents and public officials in Outapi is necessary. Due to the hegemonic position English occupies globally and its status of being an official language in Namibia, English is used as means of business communication; therefore, code switching from Oshiwambo to English and vice versa, seems to dominate the interactions among the Oshiwambo speakers in Outapi because they find it difficult to communicate only in English, due to their limited proficiency (Guo & Becket, 2007)[12].

3. METHODOLOGY

This research study followed a qualitative research approach with a case study design as the researchers were investigating the reasons for code switching between the Outapi residents and public officials while conducting public affairs. The adult bilinguals in Outapi formed the population as the selected group shared the characteristics that the study was interested in. The targeted population for this research covered the employees in various institutions such as banks, clinics and the post office who work directly with the public, as well as the public who conduct their day-to-day business in these institutions.

A sample of 45 participants was drawn from the population. According to Litchman (2010, p. 142) [18], the size of a sample in qualitative research is determined by the number of participants a researcher intends to work with. Therefore, the sample of this study was determined by the judgement of the researcher and the common behaviour of code switching among the speech community of Outapi.

The researchers became central data collection instruments. The researchers played the role of observers, interviewers and recorders. As many observation sessions as deemed necessary were conducted to collect sufficient data for the study.

Open-ended and closed-ended questions were designed for this study. For closed questions, respondents selected responses from a predetermined grid. Open-ended

questions sought information on the reasons for code switching. A Likert-type scale was used to seek the participants' opinion on the reasons for code-switching between the residents and the public when conducting day-to-day public affairs.

Data for this study were audio recorded. First of all, interviewees were identified. The purpose of the interviews was then briefly explained to them. Participants were also informed that the present study was not set to consider participants' English proficiency as such, but rather to investigate the reasons for employing code switching in their daily communication.

The data analysis of this study began with field notes, continued when the researchers were no longer in the field, and ended with a transcription and subsequent discussion of the data. Data analysis of the present study was done, following discourse analysis and descriptive analyses where emerging themes were extracted.

4. ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the procedures to be followed. According to Klenke (2008)[16], the participation of the participants in the study is not compulsory. This means that they have the full right to withdraw from participation at any time during the research if they do not feel comfortable with the situation. However, in this study, the researchers did not experience withdrawal by any participant after the overall purpose of the study was briefly explained to them.

Confidentiality and privacy were the central issues taken into consideration. The researchers applied a coding system to avoid personal bias. Every participant was given an alphabetical letter which was linked to individual responses.

5. FINDINGS

The purpose was to hear from the respondents about the reasons for code switching in general. Respondents were expected to match provided opinions or reasons by using a Likert-type scale as proposed by Kothari (2011)[17]. Table 1 presents reasons the respondents could tick, according to the Likert-type scale, presenting the "strongly agree", "agree", "strongly disagree" or "disagree" options. It appears that the majority of the respondents agreed with statements numbered 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 11, 12 and 14. Scores to these numbers are ranging from the highest percentage of 44% and the lowest as 22%. Some of the respondents (44%) indicated that they strongly agreed with reasons numbered 2, 3, 7 and 8. A number of respondents (35%) indicated that they strongly disagreed with the statements numbered 5, 6. Some respondents (33%) disagreed with statements numbered 4, 9, 10, 13 and 14.

The findings revealed that code switching occurred when the respondents wanted to use some of the words which were not available in the target language.

Table 1: Reasons for code switching

Reasons	Strongly agree	Agree	Strongly disagree	Disagree
I feel more comfortable with my second language than my first language.	12	15	6	11
Code switching helps me make my message come across more clearly.	20	20	3	2
Some of the terms are not available in my first language, so I switch from one language to another in order to fill a gap in the communication.	18	20	2	5
I can use code switching if I want to exclude others from the conversation.	8	16	9	12
Code switching leads to language development of my first language.	8	16	16	5
Code switching can be used to show that I can speak other languages.	8	13	15	9
In my culture, code switching is a platform of showing respect to elders.	16	10	10	9
In the world of technology, code switching is the best communication strategy which can enrich other languages.	15	16	8	6
Code switching can be used if one would like to emphasise a point.	8	19	8	10
Code switching can be used as a way of showing off.	4	16	14	11
I use code switching to replace some words/terms from my first language which do not sound well when said in public.	12	24	5	4
Code switching helps speakers with little exposure of English to communicate effectively.	10	19	7	8
Code switching can be used to strengthen the culture norms and values of my first language.	6	13	11	15
It is good to use code switching when you are afraid/happy/in trouble.	7	18	8	12

The findings further revealed that when the respondents wanted to have a smooth conversation, they were often forced to borrow words from other languages. The respondents also indicated that borrowed words from other languages made their communication possible because Oshiwambo, for example, lacked vocabulary/terms available in other languages, especially medical and commercial terms. Some of the respondents indicated that they switched or mixed languages if they wanted to save time because it took time to translate or explain specific terms, for example, from a local language with the purpose of conveying the correct meaning.

Opinions from respondents regarding the usage of code switching and their reasons as to why they thought code switching was employed can be grouped into the following themes:

a. When speaking with nurses and doctors at the clinic
Under this group, respondents indicated that code switching was always a solution when they wanted to communicate effectively, receive better treatment or when they did not know the medical terms. They further indicated that code switching could be employed when they wanted to prevent communication barriers.

Some of their verbatim quotes were recorded as follows:

"Most of the medical practitioners are foreigners and try to learn local languages."

"If I need a quick service, is when I can mix languages."

"Some of the medical terms are not available in my first language"

b. When speaking with officials at the bank

The main reasons for employing code switching at the bank appear to be a lack of knowledge of some of the words, the desire to communicate effectively and to save time. Below are some of the verbatim quotes from the respondents which were recorded:

"To avoid misunderstanding in the communication."

"Some of the words are known in other languages rather than in another."

"For quick service."

c. When speaking with officials at the post office

The data indicate that the respondents responded differently regarding the effects of code switching when conducting their business at the post office. The main reasons for code switching in this case appear to be to create a good approach to communication and because of a poor knowledge of specific vocabulary and terms used.

Some of the verbatim statements are:

"English is a technical language."

"I am more comfortable in speaking my first language than other languages."

"Officials are speaking both languages, then I imitate too."

"Some words are understood better when you switch to another language"

Regarding poor vocabulary, the respondents were recorded saying the following:

"Some of the words such as fax, telegram, and Nampost courier are not available in my first language."

The respondents indicated that if they needed to use these terms, they definitely had to take expressions from other languages and employ those. The situation forced speakers to borrow words from other languages and modify them to correlate with the syntactic structure of their first languages to facilitate the communication.

d. The best approach regarding code switching when talking to officials

Figure 1 below presents the data from all the sampled institutions relating to each of four different opinions.

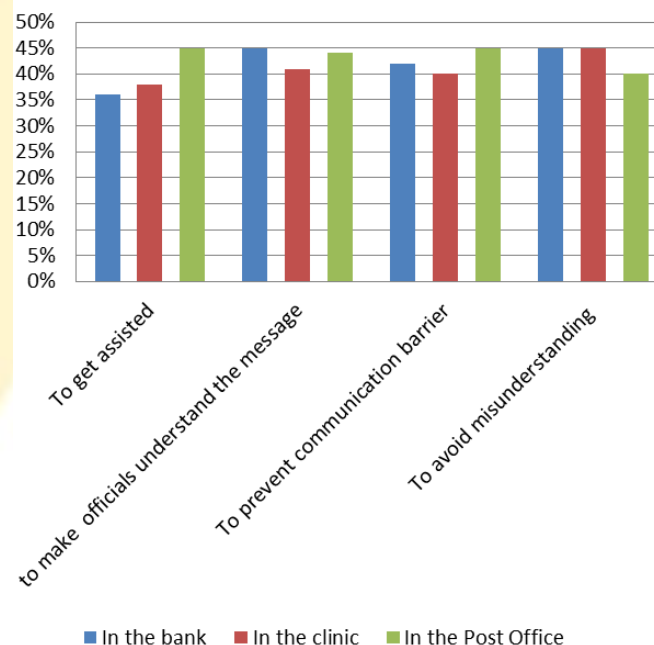


Figure 1: Approaches when talking to officials in all sampled institutions

The figure shows different opinions regarding code switching in the sampled institutions. Out of the respondents, the highest percentage (45%) was scored by respondents who indicated that they code switched when they wanted to be assisted by the officials in the post office. When the need arose, 37% of the respondents indicated that they employed code switching in the clinic to get assistance from the officials. Other respondents (35%) revealed that they employed code switching in the bank for officials to assist them.

It was also noted from the figure that 45% stated that they code switched between languages when they wanted officials in the bank to understand with what they wanted to be assisted. The figure further indicates that 40% of the respondents employed code switching when they visited the clinic and wanted to make officials understand them so that they could be helped, while 43% indicated that they employed code switching when they want to be understood by bank officials. At the post office, the figure shows that code switching could be used to bring about effective communication between public officials and the

respondents when they conducted their day-to-day business.

The majority of the respondents (45%) indicated that when they visited the post office, they often employed code switching to prevent communication barriers, as well as to convey their messages clearly. The figure also indicates that the majority (43%) employed code switching when they needed help in the bank. Other respondents (40%) revealed that they employed code switching when they talked to officials in the clinic.

The data show that 45% of the respondents at the bank and the clinic indicated that they employed code switching to avoid misunderstanding between themselves and public.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that code switching was usually used when the speaker did not know a certain word in the target language. When the data were analysed, it was found that the majority of respondents (60%) generally used Oshiwambo to express themselves more clearly; others indicated that they were switching between languages to make their communication possible. The findings in the present study support that of a previous study (Bassiouny, 2009)[3] that bilinguals switch between languages when they do not know a specific word from one of the languages. They take a word from another language which they have mastered to convey their message more correctly.

There appear to be various reasons why speakers in bi- and multilingual communities switch between languages. Fourteen reasons were proposed to the respondents to match with a Likert-rating scale. Findings present evidence that the majority of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed with the usage of code switching in their day-to-day communication. The findings also indicate that the two rating scales (agree and strongly agree) scored the highest percentages (44%) each, in comparison with the other two rating scale (strongly disagree and disagree) which obtained 35% and 4% of the responses respectively. It was also found that respondents had no problem with code switching and its strategies.

In the light of this, one can suggest that code switching could be used at any time to help people to reach their communication targets because not all the people in Outapi specifically and in Namibia, in general, seem to have acquired the basic skills in English as a second language. Speakers are switching between languages to make their communication easier. The present study supports Baker's study (2011) which reports that code switching may take place because of a variety of reasons which aim to help speakers reach their communication goals.

With regard to the strongly disagree and disagree rating scales, 35% and 6% of respondents were not in favour of code switching. These findings support the findings of previous studies (Helot & O Laoire, 2004[13]; Nevalainen & Traugott, 2012[25]; Ritchie & Bhatia, 2004[28]; Shin,

2005[32]) who all express some negativity towards the implementation of code switching.

The findings, furthermore, reveal that code switching occurred more frequently when the public encountered communication barriers in the sampled institutions. Most of the respondents indicated that when conversations with officials in the bank, clinic and post office were being conducted, there were some terms they did not know either in Oshiwambo or in English. The data of the present study support the findings reported by other scholars, such as Dumanig (2010)[8] who believes that code switching takes place when a single word or a phrase from a matrix language or an embedded language is substituted with one from other languages for accomplishing communication goals. In many cases, the prevalence of code switching was observed as a "gateway" to solving communication barriers.

Other scholars (Romaine, 2000[29]; Shin, 2005[32]; Kamati, 2011[15]) are not in favour of the use of code switching as it impedes learners in schools to learn through the medium of instruction; however, code switching does seem to contribute to the passing rate of learners in their national examinations. The present study supports the prevalence of code switching because it avoids communication barriers in bi- and multilingual communities. In real life, not all people in different communities have acquired proper education. As a result, many people cannot express themselves very well in languages other than their first languages. Code switching plays a major role between the Outapi residents and the public officials when conducting their day-to-day business affairs. This practice is influenced by factors such as low English proficiency, lack of knowledge of some terms, first language and social influence, technological influence and disrespect for indigenous languages by the young people.

The study intended to investigate the factors which influenced code switching on a daily basis in Outapi. Findings that emanated from the interviews, observations and questionnaires were triangulated and they revealed that the most influential factors for switching between languages were driven by linguistic and social factors. The findings indicate that the majority of the respondents switched between languages they knew, to make their communication easier. Reasons given by all respondents revealed that it was always a challenge when speakers lacked some words in the language of communication and they were forced to speak another language. The respondents indicated that switching between languages saved time and could speed up conversation. Others indicated that some of the words were not available in another language, while others indicated that some of the words could not be translated from one language to another. Instead, speakers used code switching to convey their intended messages. In accordance to other scholars' views on code switching, such as Baker (2006, 2011)[1][2] and Das (2012)[7], the present study has found code

switching a benefit to many people in a multilingual society.

In all of the sampled institutions, a high prevalence of code switching was observed. This is clear that the residents of Outapi applied code switching knowingly or unknowingly because they intended to reach their communication targets. In this light, the present study supports the practice of code switching because it helps speakers whose proficiency of English is very low and who are not able to express themselves very well in English as an official language. Bassiouney (2006, 2009)[3][4] and Marak-Hanak (2009)[20] argue that code switching of this nature helps speakers to fill the lexical gap by switching into an embedded language from a matrix language.

Furthermore, the present study established that language attitude played a significant role in the practice of code switching in Outapi. The findings revealed that both the public officials and the public when conversing switched often between languages they knew. However, it appears that Oshiwambo is undermined by English as a second language. Of the respondents, 6.6% were not in favour of using Oshiwambo. The present study lends support to the findings as reported in Romaine (2000)[29] that code switching is one of the factors cited as contributing to language death in bilingualism. The findings also indicate that the younger generation were not supporting Oshiwambo as an indigenous language. They have negative attitudes towards the language. Brock-Utne (2000, p. 185)[5] indicates that many young people do not want to be associated with Oshiwambo as their first language because they believe that people who can speak English are considered to be educated and rich, while those who cannot speak English are considered to be illiterate and underdeveloped.

The findings of the present study provide evidence that a social network contributes much to the prevalence of code switching. When data were analysed, the findings indicated that social network devices, such as cell phones, internet and media make life easier for the respondents to do their banking and being updated with the new changes in the society. Findings also indicate that some of the terms such as “e-wallet”, “e-mail”, “internet”, and “e-banking” are some of the new terms which were brought into the English language by technology. The present study lends support Miritello (2013)[22] who argues reports that social network contributes to language development. In relation to code switching, the respondents indicated that these terms and others are adapted to Oshiwambo and are mostly used in their communication. One can easily pick up that code switching enriches other languages. In this case, Oshiwambo embraces language development as some of the words are adapted and become part of the language.

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