

Defining “code” and “language” in code switching

This paper suggests definitions for the terms “code” and “language” for use in discussions of code switching. Although code switching has been a topic of sociolinguistic research for decades, scholars do not generally share definitions of these key terms. While some scholars have gone to considerable pains to differentiate code switching from borrowing, the lack of definition for “code” versus “language” is rarely treated as problematic. As Alvarez-Cáccamo points out, “Practically all work on ‘code-switching’ ... has been based on a strict identification between the notions of ‘code’ and ‘linguistic variety’” (2000, my translation). Neither early studies of linguistic codes nor many foundational studies of code switching seem to have intended this strict identification. More importantly, I argue that defining “code” in purely structural, especially syntactic terms limits discussions of individual variation in the use of multiple varieties.

Implicit acceptance of the non-technical definition of “code-switching” as “use of more than one language” creates two problems for sociolinguists. First, imposing analysts’ definitions of “languages” used in particular speech situations limits empirical investigation of socially constructed meaning. Studies of code switching as unmarked choice (Myers-Scotton, 1993), for example, assume that distinct languages or varieties exist and have discrete, shared meanings for all users. Second, equating “code” with “language” cuts off discussion of similar phenomena, such as style or register shift, from the study of code switching. Following recent work in sociolinguistics and pragmatics that defines code switching in terms of pragmatic function (e.g. Alvarez-Cáccamo, 1990; Auer, 1995; Li Wei, 2002; Rampton, 1995), I argue that there is no reason in principle to separate code switching from other contextualization cues (Gumperz, 1982).

I define “code switching” as a practice of parties in discourse to signal a change in context by changing some aspect of speech production, be that syntactic, lexical, prosodic, etc. Although “codes” – the specific elements that achieve this switching – must be present at some level in language users’ minds, they cannot be observed directly. Therefore, a “code” is identified by the analyst when some change in discourse form brings about a change in context. Finally, “language” is not identified by the analyst, but following speakers’ folk terms. In the data presented here, foreign language learners explicitly label the language they intend to produce.

The paper presents an analysis of talk by foreign language learners in order to describe the relationship between codes and languages. During observations in Japan, foreign-language learners announce their intention to speak *supeingo* (Spanish) versus *eigo* (English); I label third variety (unnamed the participants) *Japanese*, but in so doing, I make no broader claims about the relationship between Japanese and the varieties named by participants.

While the languages named by participants often overlap the codes identified via pragmatic function, so that code switching is often realized via language alternation, they are not entirely co-extensive. Code switching can be achieved without unambiguous language alternation, and language alternation does not always result in code switching.