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CODE-SWITCHING IN A BILINGUAL ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract. Living in bilingual or multilingual societies in the context of mobility and globalization, bilingual interaction is a norm instead of an exception. English plays an essential role in the lives of many young people all around the world, which frequently is not a result of direct language contact, but rather due to the widespread use of the Internet and the influence of the media. The present ethnographic research on code-switching involves questioning undergraduate students at a university in Latvia about their engagement with code-switching in their lives. It has been concluded that students are engaged in different communicative modes, and code-switching from Latvian or Russian to English is an important meaning-making resource and a tool to enhance their online and offline interaction when communicating on social media, conversing with friends, or gaming. The main reasons of code-switching are students' temporal transitional state of language proficiency, the absence of terms and concepts that describe or originate from the other culture, students' wish for self-presentation, instances of showing off, and a means of expressing sudden emotional experience or 'verbal habits'.

Key words: bilingualism, factors causing code-switching, ethnographic study, undergraduate students

INTRODUCTION

Multilingualism is today's reality. In Latvia, most people are competent in several languages – Latvian as an official language, Russian and English as the most common foreign languages, as well as French, German and other foreign languages, which are less spoken and taught. The knowledge of Russian can be explained by Latvia's history, quite a high percentage of Russian-speaking population, and Russia's geographical proximity to Latvia, while English has recently become a new means of communication, which has occurred with the advent of social media interaction. Online platforms and messaging apps allow multiple people to communicate worldwide, share and acquire information, enjoy gaming, entertaining and sports content online, in such a way often being in contact with more than one language. However, most online communication is English-centred due to the global use of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). For example, English, constituting 52.1%, was the key language used for web content in January 2024 (Online 1). Myers-Scotton mentions that the rise of ELF has influenced

'the degree to which people become new bilinguals' (2006: 5), emphasizing that non-native English speakers' appreciation of the advantages of knowing English has been already present since the 1950s, as English has been increasingly used as a medium of instruction in academia in the context of internationalization of universities and as the main language for research publications.

Since the 1990s, English has replaced Russian as the most common foreign language to learn at schools in Latvia. This has resulted in a situation that the younger generation of ethnic Latvians usually speak English with differing degrees of language proficiency but often much better than Russian. Also, ethnic Russians have quite a fluent command of English. According to the National Educational Content Center, the best average results for Year 12 centralized examinations in the academic year 2022/2023 were in English: at the optimal level in English, the average score was 63%, while for the highest-level exams, the average rating in English was 65% (Online 2). Likewise, Year 9 centralized examination results showed the best results in English, with an average score of 67% (Online 3). Importantly, many young people identify themselves as Latvian or Russian-English bilinguals (also Latvian-Russian bilinguals), which may explain why some of them frequently code-switch to English from integrating single words to larger utterances in various social situations.

Code-switching (CS) or the use of several languages in the same communicative event by bilinguals has attracted an intense interest in Latvia among the general public over the past years. It is often believed that CS is an indication of poor linguistic proficiency or that CS violates a strong expectation that the Latvian language will be used to communicate in all contexts by the population, maintaining Latvian language integrity according to prescribed norms. This ideology of linguistic purism resonates with Bullock and Toribio's observation that CS 'is more commonly perceived by the general public as indicative of language degeneration' (2009: 1). However, CS has also been seen as an evidence of advanced control of languages, whereby the code switcher justifies his or her language choice with necessity to manage the communicative demand. Grosjean (2013) contends that the language mode or 'the state of activation of the bilingual's languages or language-processing mechanisms at a given point in time' (ibid.: 13) will affect how much the other language is employed.

To promote our understanding of code-switching in Latvia, the current study brings together insights from both fields – linguistics and sociolinguistics. Firstly, it establishes a theoretical framework by exploring bilingualism as a prerequisite for CS. Secondly, the empirical part reports on an ethnographic study which offers code-switching instances and thus aims at answering the research question: Which conditioning factors have contributed to CS from Latvian or Russian to English and vice versa by bilinguals? It also examines the language-mode continuum (based on Grosjean, 2008, 2013) in order to elucidate the likely

effect of the language mode on the bilinguals' language use and their engagement with CS.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: BILINGUALISM AND CODE-SWITCHING

It is hardly possible to cover all code-switching-related phenomena in one article; therefore, in order to offer a theoretical framework, the theoretical discussion here must be mostly limited to bilingualism, largely because it gives rise to CS, which, in turn, draws much attention from the general public in Latvia. Hence, is the paper provides a selective review of the vast literature on bilingualism and code-switching.

The phenomenon of bilingualism has been widely discussed in theoretical literature (e.g., Baker, 2001; Romaine, 2001; Myers-Scotton, 2006; Grosjean, 2008, Druviete, 2010, Pluszczyk, 2023). In this study, the authors adhere to the definition by Grosjean (2008:10) that 'bilingualism is the regular use of two or more languages (or dialects)' since here the concept is used in its broadest sense, and language use is emphasized over language knowledge. Although this definition might seem straightforward enough, it raises several questions, for example, what level of competence defines an individual as a bilingual (competence may vary from a competent language user across listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills in two languages to an individual having some conversational fluency in one language); what are the functions of the languages (in what situations, for what reasons, and with whom they are used) and whether bilingualism leads to code-switching, and to what extent.

It may be inferred that a bilingual displays communicative competence in two languages. In this regard, Baker argues that 'balanced bilingualism is sometimes used as an idealized concept' (2001: 7), since it is quite a rare phenomenon and refers to those bilinguals whose proficiency in both languages can be characterised as 'well developed or approximately equally fluent in two languages across various contexts' (ibid.). Thus, Baker rejects the idea of 'equal competency', emphasizing that a situation when an individual demonstrates the same competency level in both of the languages spoken by him/her is not so common. The idea is supported by Myers-Scotton, who argues that bilingualism does not imply full or native-like proficiency in two languages (2006), but bilinguals must be completely proficient in the 'language that provides the grammatical frame of a clause' (Myers-Scotton, 2002: 25). Grosjean (2008: 14) concurs with this idea and suggests that the 'levels of fluency in a language will depend on the need for that language and will be extremely domain specific.'

Most bilinguals in Latvia are rarely equally competent across all situations or contexts, since they use languages (Latvian, Russian and English) for different purposes (e.g., studying, networking, socializing) in different

domains (e.g., at work, home, university) and with various interlocutors (e.g., colleagues, friends, family members, professors). As a result, their level of skills in each language may depend on their employment, educational or everyday needs.

Grosjean's (2008: 17-18) monolingual-bilingual language mode continuum explains how bilinguals activate their languages along the continuum. According to the model, when bilinguals converse with monolinguals of one of the languages, they are engaged in a totally monolingual speech mode at one end of the continuum, activating only one language. On the other hand, when bilinguals hold a conversation with interlocutors who know both languages and with whom they bring in the conversation using the other language, for example, by code-switching, bilinguals are in a bilingual speech mode at the other end of the continuum. In this situation, both languages are active. One of the languages is the base language in a conversation, and it is used more frequently than the other. Dewaele (2001) discovered that one of the factors that may influence the choice of the position on the language-mode continuum is the formality of the context. Some other factors could be bilinguals' language proficiency, their attitude towards CS, the content and the situation of the interaction. Thus, bilinguals can choose between the languages, and CS is not a consequence of insufficient knowledge of a language. It should be mentioned that some bilinguals (e.g., language teachers or purists) will use only one language with other bilinguals and that bilinguals may also be at an intermediary point along the continuum. For example, 'when a bilingual is speaking to another bilingual who does not wish to use the other language […] or when a bilingual is interacting with a person who has limited knowledge of the other language […]' (Grosjean, 2008: 17-18).

Thus, it can be assumed that the communicative competence a person has developed in Latvian (or Russian) and English is sufficient to meet his/her various needs, and depending on the setting, participants, purposes, genre and other factors, this competence will enable the person to use one of the languages or both languages together, using code switches, for example.

In Latvia, the concept 'elective bilingualism' is applicable because of the status of English as a foreign language, which implies that people add a foreign language to their repertoire without losing their first language. Thus, theoretically, their first language is not endangered by English. In case of circumstantial bilingualism, that is when people acquire another language to communicate in occupational, public and educational domains of the society in which they live, their first language may be in danger.

Code-switching has long been a subject of research (e.g. Myers-Scotton, 1993; 2006; Bullock and Toribio, 2009; Poplack, 2001; 2021), as it 'is apparently a hallmark of bilingual communities world-wide' (Poplack, 2021: n.d.). However, there is still a debate in the theoretical literature regarding the definition, characteristics, and classification of CS (see e.g. Bullock and Toribio, 2009). Generally, it is

agreed that CS is a phenomenon which occurs among bilinguals when the speaker alternates between languages within a single communicative act. In this article, the authors adhere to the following definition of CS: 'code-switching includes elements from two (or more) languages varieties in the same clause, but only one of these varieties is the source of the morphosyntactic frame for the clause' (Myers-Scotton, 2006: 240).

To understand CS, it is important to study its functions. Several scholars have proposed conditioning factors causing code-switching (e.g. Malik, 1994), which often overlap. Therefore, the authors will refer only to two studies. Hoffman (1991) mentions that bilinguals switch their languages to discuss a topic of mutual interest, to quote somebody, to express solidarity and group identity, to exclude some people from a conversation, to fill in a lexical gap, to repeat an utterance or the speech content for clarification, to use interjections and discourse markers, and to make a request and a command softer or stricter in tone (quoted in Chandra and Wati, 2021). According to Pluszczyk's study (2023), English philology students' reasons for switching to English are, as follows: 'expressing oneself better or more precisely, expressing one's feelings, emotions and thoughts more accurately and effectively, stressing solidarity, bringing forth humour or swearwords or raising taboo topics.' Pluszczyk's study reveals that students do not code-switch to express 'unity, group membership, solidarity or belonging to a group'(ibid.).

EMPIRICAL STUDY: FACTORS INFLUENCING CODE-SWITCHING BY BILINGUALS. METHODOLOGY AND CONTEXT

This study draws on an ethnographic method, which allows undertaking a reconstruction 'of the culture or groups being studied' in their naturalistic setting (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993, in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2005: 138) and involves descriptive data collection and interpretation. According to Burns, 'in ethnography, people are not subjects; they are experts on what the ethnographer wants to find out about' (Burns, 2000: 393). In concord with this statement, an ethnographic method is used to study research participants in their own naturalistic environment through the application of such research tools as participant observation and face-to-face interviewing. Participant-observation, in which one of the authors of this article, whose identity as a researcher was known to the students, acted as a participant-observer to gain access to data, allowed the authors to understand the real-life setting, for example, the language proficiency of the participant group being observed; the bilinguals' world view of CS and their engagement with CS reflected in its use across formal and informal contexts from the group's perspective. For the purposes of this study, the students – research participants were posed questions, which, for example, concerned naming the languages they switched to, dealt with characterizing

the situations the students code-switched deliberately or non-deliberately. To support this activity, a home assignment was set where the students were asked to suggest their own examples of code-switching or offer examples from social media. Consequently, this study also offers students' own examples of code-switching or the ones selected by them from the Internet.

The sampling technique employed in this study is characterized by elements of convenience sampling, as the authors selected as a target group the students to whom they had easy access, namely, sixty-six 1st year undergraduate students majoring in English at a university in Latvia. In order to establish a linguistic profile of the sampled students, their self-reported language use, as well as the authors' observation in the classroom were used.

The study was conducted at the time when they were attending the course *Introduction to Linguistics and English Language Studies* for one semester in the academic year 2023/2024. The course aims at offering preliminary knowledge of general linguistics and facilitating a systemic understanding of the English language by presenting a broad but basic scope of theoretical and practical issues tackled by various branches of linguistics, including sociolinguistics. One of the themes covered deals with bilingualism and code-switching.

The research questions posed at the outset of the study attempted to gain an understanding of the various factors which influence code-switching by bilinguals. First of all, the study was aimed at finding out to what extent the students were bilingual. Although it was not important to establish exact numbers for the gender and ethnic categories, as the authors did not intend to generalize the results, applying them to the wider population, it can be noted that a large majority of students sampled for the purposes of this research comprised females with Latvian and Russian as their first languages. All the participants had been in contact with English since their childhood (e.g., watching cartoons in English, learning English in the kindergarten), but their language situation cannot be referred to as simultaneous bilingualism, which occurs within the first year of life (Druviete, 2010), rather – they could be classified as sequential bilinguals (ibid.), since their first language had been acquired before English language acquisition. The students claimed that they used both – their first language and English – daily, depending on the setting.

The linguistic characteristics of the students revealed full proficiency in Latvian or Russian as their first languages, and English, Russian, Spanish, German, French and/or other foreign languages of various proficiency levels. The students' English language knowledge was self-evaluated at level B2 and C1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, which was also confirmed by the authors' observation. As to the other foreign languages, their knowledge varied – for instance, from the beginner's level in Spanish to level B2 in Russian.

PRACTICE AND REASONS FOR CODE-SWITCHING

To ascertain the students' practice of CS, first of all, the concept code-switching was defined as 'utterance-internal juxtaposition, in unintegrated form, of overt linguistic elements from two or more languages, with no necessary change of interlocutor or topic' (Poplack, 2004: 589) and explained with the examples of the types of code-switches: (1) inter-utterance code-switches between utterances at utterance boundaries, that is when a sentence is in English and the remaining part of the sentence – in Latvian or vice versa. *Bildi ir jāizdzēš. You are embarrassing yourself [The photo must be deleted. You are embarrassing yourself].* A case has been observed where the utterance in English *What are you doing?* is followed by the one translated into Latvian *Ko tu dari?*; (2) intra-utterance code-switches are English language words or phrases used in a sentence of Latvian: *Es saku savu fake vārdu [I say my fake name];* (3) tag-switches or extra-sentential switches refer to discourse markers *I mean, you know,* and *like* used in the utterance in the Latvian language. *Bet ok varbūt [But OK maybe]* (the classification based on Romaine, 1989; examples from youtube.com: Online 4).

Next, the students were asked to hold a group discussion on the following: (1) Which languages do you switch to? (2) In what situations do you code switch and what are your reasons? (3) Do you code-switch deliberately? As a home assignment, they were asked to suggest their own examples of code-switching or offer examples from the Internet.

The students' discussion highlighted several typical situations in which the monolingual language mode was activated. First, the bilingual students used either Latvian (or Russian) when communicating with monolinguals – their family members, friends, or colleagues. They adopted the language of monolingual interlocutors (or native language users) and usually deactivated their other language(s) in the monolingual language mode to avoid any breakdown in communication. Second, the Latvian language was used in official communication, as Latvian is the only language of government and state administration. Third, the students used the English language in formal university settings inside the classroom while communicating with their professors and fellow students during lectures, seminars and tutorials, when writing assignments and emails. They claimed that there was very little, if any, fusion between English and their first language because English was used for academic purposes, which demands consistently strict sole use of formal English.

A different situation set in when they started learning a second foreign language at university, as they had a limited knowledge of German, French, Spanish, or Norwegian. The purpose of this situation required that the students first adopted a base language (the one providing 'the morphosyntactic frame for the bilingual clause' (Myers-Scotton, 2006: 240) to communicate, which was usually Latvian or English if there were international students in the group.

The base language was still the most active one, but the language to be acquired was also partly activated, setting in the bilingual language mode.

Although in informal situations during breaks between lectures as well as outside the classroom, including communication via the use of instant messaging apps, such as *WhatsApp*, the students continued using the English language, the bilingual language mode also set in at times, as the students brought in other languages, if necessary.

Accomplishing game tasks in online multiplayer games is another situation which mostly required a monolingual language mode (the use of the English language). To collaborate, gaming requires the use of digital semiotic communication modes such as voice-chat and text-chat and other types of in-game signalling. Players also engage in socializing with other networked individuals; for example, they greet, joke, and give references to popular memes or films. Sometimes, a bilingual language mode sets in when the bilinguals hold a conversation with the bilinguals who share two languages, for example, by code-switching.

The second research question aimed at finding out reasons for CS from Latvian or Russian to English and vice versa in typical situations. As a result of the students' discussion, several conditioning personal and social factors causing CS were identified.

Despite their quite a thorough English language knowledge, the students' transitional state of English language proficiency was one of the personal factors for CS from English to their first language – Latvian or Russian. If the students were unable to find an appropriate word or phrase in English to carry on the conversation smoothly, they substituted it with a word or phrase from their first language. For instance: the following examples *Diezgan decent vakara joks [Quite a decent evening joke]; Es domāju, ka esmu drama queen [I thought I was drama queen]* (youtube.com: Online 4) demonstrate intra-sentential switching from Latvian to English. In this case, it seems that the English phrase 'drama queen' might add an additional effect to the sentence.

As an exogenous factor, terminological needs were observed. This can be characterized with an example of intra-sentential switching: during the lectures, some students were unable to recall some linguistic terms in English. For instance, when explaining syntax, a student reverted to his first language, inserting a term in the Latvian language in the English language utterance *It is salikts sakārtots teikums [It is a compound sentence]*.

The absence of concepts (or the speaker was unaware of the concept) that describe or originate from the other culture was mentioned as another reason for CS. To express a concept, the bilingual switched languages, for instance, *Kā es gribētu nebūt redzējis 'Breaking Bad' un 'Better Call Saul', lai varētu skatīties pirmo reizi. [I wish I had not seen 'Breaking Bad' and 'Better Call Saul' so that I could watch them for the first time]* (Online 5). In the example, the American television drama series and its episode are translated into Latvian, but the person uses

the titles in the English language. When speaking in their first language, sometimes the bilinguals found it more appropriate to use utterances or idioms from anglophone social media, videogames, or anime because they corresponded more authentically to the particular communicative event.

The students agreed on CS as an important resource for self-presentation. It is used to communicate a shared identity, as the students often deliberately switched from Latvian or Russian to English to establish and signal their belonging to a peer group of students majoring in English or an online social group as well as help identify others who share the same background. The students also mentioned that sometimes they inserted some words or expressions of a second foreign language they are acquiring from the beginner's level to indicate a wish to associate with the group. The students admitted that CS was sometimes, though rarely, used to keep out some people from a conversation. For example, siblings switched from Latvian or Russian to English to discuss some private issues, excluding, for example, grandparents from their conversation.

In the case of some sudden emotional experience, some students found it more appropriate to express surprise, anger, happiness or sadness using words or expressions from their first language. Interestingly, some students claimed that it was easier for them and their bilingual friends to express their emotions in English rather than in their first language. Determining which language bilinguals prefer when they express emotions is beyond the scope of this paper; nevertheless, it is possible to offer several examples demonstrating the use of adjectives expressing emotions in English inserted in Latvian language utterances: *Jūtos tik frustrated. [I feel so frustrated]* or *Pirmās stundas bija amazing [First hours were amazing]* (youtube.com: Online 4). Likewise, some students mentioned that swear words in English are used to 'show off' in some social groups in informal contexts such as gaming. The use of swear words and emotion words correlates with Pluszczyk's study (2023) of Polish students majoring in English.

The students reported that they often code-switched when greeting, leave-taking, apologizing, and thanking: *Sorry es esmu aizņemts [Sorry, I am busy]* and that they frequently used discourse markers *OK, you know, I mean*, or *like* in Latvian or Russian utterances subconsciously. For instance, the discourse marker *you know* in the following utterance may signal a shared knowledge of the interlocutors: *You know, tā ir laba doma [You know, that is a good idea]* (youtube.com: Online 4). However, the subconscious use of discourse markers might indicate their use as sentence fillers without any lexical meaning, which might pertain to 'verbal habits' as discourse markers may be part of their 'automatized' utterances. Moreover, in everyday situations, the insertion of English discourse markers in Latvian or Russian can manifest young people's wish to 'show off' for social consideration.

Finally, code-switches were used to stress an important word in a conversation: *Saņēmu feedback no jums [I have received feedback from you], Viņai uzrakstīja tā brīža boyfriends [Her boyfriend at the time wrote to her]* (youtube.com: Online 4).

Generally, it appeared that CS was made use of within intra-group relations, namely, within the same ethnic (Latvians or Russian) or social group (an offline group of students majoring in English, an online social group, online gaming community), which allowed the interlocutors to use their first language (Latvian or Russian) or, in case of inter-group relations, namely relations between different groups of people, the official language of the country – Latvian or some other foreign language shared by the speakers.

Largely, the students' reasons for code-switching are similar to those mentioned in other studies (e.g. Hoffman,1991; Pluszczyk, 2023).

CONCLUSIONS

English has become the lingua franca in online communication, and it can be assumed that it is online English language contact that has facilitated the proliferation of code-switching in Latvia. Affected by various social factors, including the subject matter and the formal or informal situation of the interaction, the age and relationship with the interlocutor, CS has become part of young bilinguals' everyday means of interaction, especially with their peers.

The bilingual target group engages in different modes of communication: they try to use only one language with monolinguals, change over to another language completely when they converse with bilinguals who share their languages or code-switch to the other language(s).

For bilingual students majoring in English language studies, their first language – Latvian or Russian is not always the first one chosen in the processes under analysis; sometimes their second language – English is selected first in specific situations; for example, it is prominent in formal academic contexts at university and informal contexts when communicating with their interlocutors to maintain in-group identity. Latvian or Russian is reserved for other situations when communicating with monolinguals and those who do not share common languages, and solely Latvian is used in official communication.

Several personal and social factors causing CS in particular social contexts have been identified: students' transitional state of language proficiency, absence of terms or concepts that describe or originate from the other culture, CS as a resource for self-expression and a means of expressing sudden emotional experience, emphasizing some issue in a conversation, or greeting, leave-taking, and apologizing.

The bilinguals' use of both English and Latvian or Russian serves them well to achieve their communicative objectives. Therefore, when they switch due to any of the aforementioned reasons, they are suggesting their competence in using both

English and Latvian or Russian. Therefore, it can be argued that CS is a natural phenomenon and a functional communicative tool in online and offline contexts.

To conclude, it is hoped that the study has contrbuted to enhancing our understanding of CS in Latvia. Further study needs to be conducted to obtain data from students' real conversations using CS. It would be interesting to involve informants from other university faculties and identify possible differences in the attitudes to CS considering bilinguals' age and language proficiency, for instance, which would contribute to further understanding of CS in Latvia.

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