

“Language switching” a case study

By Murray J Lawn*¹
and Etsuko O Lawn*²

*¹ 長崎純心大学、現代福祉学部
*² 人間環境学部

Abstract: In the field of understanding why switching between languages may occur between even two bilingual or multilingual persons in the course of a single conversation many aspects require consideration. This paper provides a case study of a 6 year old boy living in Japan, whose father is a New Zealander and whose mother is Japanese. The paper focuses an analysis of language switching that occurred within a given day while conversing with the boy's parents. The analysis includes consideration of age, language development and sociolinguistic factors.

Keywords: Language switching, bilingual, sociolinguistics

1. INTRODUCTION

By way of introduction and a prerequisite to Language switching is the subject of bilingualism or multilingualism. To be “bilingual” is typically thought of as being equally fluent in two languages. This ideal is rarely ever achieved in reality as each facet of each language is considered (reading, writing, spoken.. etc) [Crystal, D. 1997]. The balance of fluency as it relates to each of these facets tends to vary for each language based on the individual's needs at any given time and with regard to any given situation or environment. Thus for the purpose of this paper the term bilingual is used simply to indicate two languages are available or more specifically usable for the purpose of communication.

The subject of this paper is to look at the subject of “language switching”, that is when a bilingual person changes or “switches” to another language, when speaking to another bilingual person. This phenomenon is certainly by no means new, by simply looking at statistical data for each country (approx 200 countries) regarding the number of languages (approx 5000 languages) and speakers (approx 3 billion people) of the various languages the occurrence of language switching can be safely assumed to

be very common [Crystal, D. 1997]. The question then focuses on why or how language switching occurs. For the purpose of analysis a 6 year old boy has been chosen as the subject for a case study. A selected number of occurrences of language switching are outlined along with situational data. The findings of writings and research to date is then compared and discussed thereafter.



Photo by Simon Woolf (Wellington, New Zealand)

Figure 1. Subject of study Joshua Lawn (Center) with parents

2 METHODS

2.1 Data collection subject background

The subject chosen for the case study was a 6 year old boy (Joshua Jeremy Lawn) who will be referred to as “Joshua”. His father is a New Zealander and a native speaker of English, and his mother is Japanese and a native speaker of Japanese, the family is depicted in Figure 1. Language usage by the boy and his parents can be approximated and is shown in Figures 2 and 3. Figure 3 is relatively self explanatory in that the language usage roughly follows the country of residence, this correlation was not passive though, in that it was supplemented by considerable “active” study on the parents' behalf. Joshua's approximated language usage is not however self explanatory, his parents both primarily speak to him in English at home. Thus till the age of 3 most language used was English,

at 3 1/2 he entered a Japanese kindergarten. This resulted in the gradual reversal of English and Japanese usage as shown. Actual usage varies significantly on a daily basis however only general trends have been shown, based on the average day.

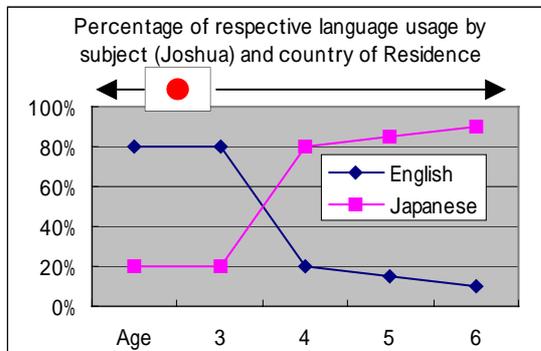


Figure 2. Approximation of language usage by subject (Joshua) and country of residence

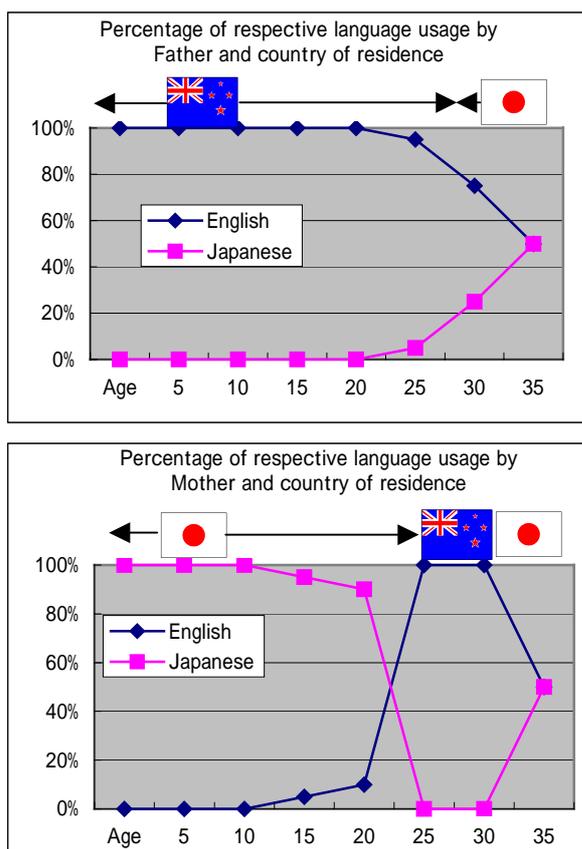


Figure 3. Approximation of language usage by parents and countries of residence (Father top, Mother bottom)

2.2 Data collection methods

For the purpose of observing when language

switching occurred, under what circumstances and in what context etc, the following three means of data collection were employed. Firstly by attaching a good quality cassette recorder to Joshua's belt and associated microphone. The reason for such being explained simply "for the purpose of Research" (研究のため). The first 10 minutes were disregarded until the novelty of wearing the equipment wore off. Approximately one day of spoken data was thus gathered. A second means of data collection was direct documentation of language switching taken during periods that facilitated such. This occurred during a long trip in the car whereby Joshua was unaware of the documentation process (sitting in the back seat, mother in front passenger seat). Finally general observations are made relating the recorded or documented data to context etc.

2.3 Language switching sample excerpts from recording

The following is a transcript of sections of Joshua's recorded speech where "language switching" was observed. After Japanese an English translation is provided in round () parenthesis, while situational detail, speech by parents or comments are noted in square [] parenthesis.

Situation 1a – playing the part of a news broadcaster in the kitchen

"Daddy これは(this?)... Thank you. Mummy, today I got news to do. Ah 明日(tomorrow) news か (question marker?). Mummy now I need to go to しちじ(7o'clock) news."

Notes: [tomorrow in Japanese is perhaps more familiar, he had seen the 7 o'clock news the night before in Japanese – he usually refers to time in Japanese]

Situation 1b – (Later) playing with planes on the kitchen floor

"してね(do you know?) Mummy. Ah Daddy, give five planes, five 壊れた(broken) planes, Phantom, Concorde this plane and something plane... I like this. 取れないの(it won't come off) これね、二つね、くっついてて、これを(this, should part into two parts, its' connected) apart にしたいんだけど(I want to take it "apart"). すごく(very) hard だ(it is/was).. [assistance is provided] .. Thank you"

Notes: [broken in Japanese is perhaps more familiar, as frustration builds switching occurs Refer section 3.3, the Japanese term for "apart" is unfamiliar]

Situation 1c – (Later) Joshua being requested to stop “annoying” his parents and the ensuing discussion with father

それは今はね(regarding that, now you know..) いつも annoy してるの (someone always “annoys” me) 今は peace time の時 (presently during “peace time” [extended period staying at kindergarten]), じゃない時は(when its’ not on) かおりちゃん(Kaori [girl’s name], 一番 annoy するのはかおりちゃんだ(the most “annoying” person is Kaori)...かおりちゃんはそれより意地悪そうな (Kaori was more of a bully than him) [did she use to annoy Joshua?- question by father] Yes all day だったらかおりちゃん (Kaori..) every day [did Joshua like it, did Joshua appreciate it? – question by father]. No, and かおりちゃん (Kaori) all day いつもいつも (always, always)...

Notes:[annoy does not have a direct translation in Japanese for the intended usage and is a term commonly used by his parents, peace time is used as is in the Japanese alphabet (katakana), as frustration builds switching occurs Refer section 3.3]

Situation 1d – (Later) heated discussion with father regarding a biscuit

Mummy が言ったもの(what “mummy” said) mummy は一個クッキーはいいと言ったのに (despite mummy saying I could have a cookie)[you can have biscuits when mummy’s at home – comment by father]. No, mummy said! Mummy said, mummy はクッキーは一個ぐらい食べてもいいからねってって(“mummy” said it would be OK to eat about one) daddy don’t believe me. Anything just don’t believe me!. Every time don’t believe me, 信じられない(I can’t believe it)...

Notes:[what “mummy said” is said in Japanese, repeated in English twice then repeated in Japanese assumably for emphasis, again as frustration builds switching occurs Refer section 3.3]

2.3 Language switching sample excerpts documented

The following shorter excerpts were directly documented by the mother (from the front passenger seat) while on a long drive in the car, Joshua being unaware of the documentation process.

Situation 2a. Mummy が dishes して (while mummy is/was doing the dishes) [doing the dishes in Japanese is perhaps a less familiar phrase]

Situation 2b. [How many balloons can you see-question by mother] I don’t know, trees とか邪魔 (“trees” or such are in the way) seven of them, six やっぱり(as I thought) [“trees” or such are in the way and as I thought Ref. Sect. 3.3 very compact terms in Japanese]

Situation 2c. I buy two books なんこかおもちゃ (and.. some toys) [Joshua likes books but has a passion like many children for toys]

Situation 2d. [passing a life size model of the space shuttle] Space shuttle, last time 見たんだよ(I saw it “last time” you know) [“I saw it” is often used in English – but the Japanese phrase more often used?]

Situation 2e.ほんとに(actually)moving で hotel で (at a “hotel”) a piece of paper で(with a piece of “paper”) [mainly English words used with Japanese particles – meaning unclear]

Situation 2f. bicycle! が取られた (was stolen) [stolen is perhaps less familiar in English]

3 DISCUSSION

3.1 Semi-lingual concerns

Firstly concerns regarding children growing up lacking mastery in any language. “There is a widespread popular impression that the children of bilingual parents are linguistically at risk. It is said that their brains will not be able to cope, and that they will grow up ‘semilingual’, confused or retarded. There is no justification for this pessimism, as is indicated from the confident fluency displayed by millions of bilingual or trilingual children all over the world. By the time these children arrive in school, the vast majority have reached the same stage of linguistic development as have their monolingual peers” [Volterra, V. & Taeschner, T. 1978]. This is certainly a matter in which to be cautious of though, particularly children of parents that are transferred between countries of differing languages during critical phases of language acquisition [Ono, H. 1994], whereby study of the mother language is not continued while overseas and the child simply attends school along with local residents, some children lack the ability to make up for this deficit.

Regarding the subject of this case study, Joshua, his English does appear to be a little behind monolingual speakers of the same age as has been noted during periods in New Zealand, however his Japanese is comparable with similar aged children in Japan.

3.2 Age related switching

The aspect of linguistic development in regard to language switching has been documented in three main stages [Volterra, V. & Taeschner, T. 1978]. Firstly building up a list of words as a monolingual child except the list contains words from both languages, as to which words are learnt in which language is based on the child's personal learning experiences. Secondly when sentences are first formed they initially contain words from both languages, (as noted in almost all transcribed data in the previous section) but this trend is noted to reduce with time. Finally "As vocabulary grows in each language, translation equivalents develop. But the acquisition of separate sets of grammatical rules take longer. For a while a single set of grammatical rules seems to be used for both languages, until finally the two grammars diverge"[Volterra, V. & Taeschner, T. 1978]. Situation 2e. provides an example of all English words used with Japanese grammar.

Instances of the above mentioned stages are noted in nearly all the transcribed sections to varying degrees.

3.3 Sociolinguistic factors in switching

A range of linguistic or social factors have been documented [Crystal, D. 1997]. Firstly when the speaker lacks the ability to express themselves in one language they switch to the other to "fill in the blanks", as discussed in the previous section 3.2. This is noted to occur more frequently when the speaker is tired, upset or distracted. Much of the switching that was noted falls into this category, frustration with someone (Situations 1c. regarding the subject of "annoying", 1d. regarding not being permitted to have a biscuit) or frustration with something (Situation 1b. toy that wouldn't come apart). When frustrated with his mother however no or little language switching was noted, simply Japanese was used, despite the mother speaking English.

Switching to another language has also been noted as a means to "expressing solidarity" with a group, or to deliberately exclude persons [Crystal, D. 1997]. This is not noted in the recorded or documented sections covered by this paper as Joshua's conversations are only with his parents. However incidents of this have been observed. Particularly at Sunday School where he interacts with a number of other bilingual children of similar age group. An often observed pattern is that when first meeting English is used, while playing happily altogether with other non-bilingual Japanese children Japanese is used, but should a problem occur

English is used between the bilingual children as an apparent means to exclude the Japanese child/ children.

Switching is also noted as a means of expressing the speakers attitude toward the listener [Crystal, D. 1997]. Monolingual persons to some degree do this by varying the level of formality. Between bilingual persons however, this may include language switching to achieve the desired "special effects". This often occurs for emphasis or simply being certain meaning is fully expressed or understood, both of these points been clearly seen in Situation 1d. (regarding not being permitted to have a biscuit).

Language switching is occasionally viewed in a negative light, and labeled such, in the case of Nagasaki Japan the term Champon (長崎ちゃんぽん) is used. "Nagasaki Champon" is a famous dish consisting of a mixture of foods, Champon is usually used in a jocular sense with reference to the use of both Japanese and English together, just as Tex-Mex, Franglais, Spanglish are used to label the mixture of the respective languages. Often the bilingual speakers are totally unaware of switching and cannot remember what language they used or listened on given occasions [Crystal, D. 1997], the authors' personal experiences in this regard confer with this observation.

Convenience is another common reason for language switching, each language tends to lend itself to better express given sentiments. This is certainly true with regard to English and Japanese, many words or phrases do not have direct translations or even close equivalents, other phrases are available in both languages but simply are more convenient to use in one language due to simplicity of expression. Some simple examples of this are Situation 2b. the trees were (邪魔(jama)) in the way/ obstructing the view, the term jama in Japanese is very compact in this case compared to English equivalent. Thus when both languages are available switching to the language that best expresses that which one desires to express is a natural means to enhance communication between bilingual persons.

4 CONCLUSION

In conclusion the phenomenon of language switching is both subtle and complex. In this case study the subject a six year old boy appears to be in the process of separating the two languages (Japanese and English) in some respects but in other respects using language switching intentionally for sociolinguistic

purposes, that is for emphasis, or to indicate solidarity with a given group and/ or to exclude others. Language switching occurred most when speaking with bilingual persons whose mother tongue differed from his mother tongue, and increased when expressing pleasure or frustration.

Future study needs to focus on obtaining data from a much wider range of situations. Also ideally increasing the number of subjects studied.

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