Understanding Hindi–English Code Switching in Indian Classrooms

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Abstract

Despite the fact that code switching between Indian languages and English has emerged as a popular trend, especially among the Indian youth, it is castigated as an inappropriate form of language use by many. Popular perceptions interpret code switching as being language corruption, accepting its occurrence only in informal conversations rather than in formal. The concomitant diffusion of the trend of code switching and various perceptions associated with it has intercepted conversations that occur in Indian classrooms. Disregarding the popular notion that interprets switching between languages as lack of competence in the base language, this paper undertakes an analysis of the nature of code switching that occurs in the context of education by examining actual classroom conversations. The aim is to trace the multiplex of social and functional roles that code switching plays when it occurs within classroom transactions.

INTRODUCTION

Alternation between languages or code switching is a common phenomenon in multilingual societies such as India. Although Indian languages are often switched amongst themselves in spoken conversations, the presence of Hinglish, Taminglish, Punjinglish, Telenglish, Benglish, Maratinglish, Gujinglish, Rajinglish indicates that English has attained a special place in this regard. The increasing use of English corpus within sentences framed largely in Indian languages in

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media has augmented and endorsed such code switching to the extent that it has emerged as a trend in the youth of the country (Si, 2011). A number of research studies conducted in the field show that the trend is global in nature (Simon, 2001; Ruan, 2003; Wheeler and Swords, 2004). Such a linguistic situation in popular culture is counteracted by the fact that many consider code switching between languages to be a symbol of inadequate competence in the base language or language interference. The use of the term *khondinglish,* that can be translated as "broken-English", to refer to an alternation between Oriya and English, for instance, illustrates the connotations that are attached to such language alternation. Hence, although code switching has become an intrinsic feature of language usage in informal contexts, people generally attempt to adhere to the use of a single language in situations that are more formal.

The conflicting situation makes it imperative that scholars in the field of education undertake an in-depth analysis of code switching phenomenon in order to assist teachers to arrive at informed notions that are based on research rather than on popular views prevalent in the society.

Although a number of studies have been conducted in this regard in the West, this paper aims to examine the nature of code switching that occurs in Indian classrooms in order to unveil its social and functional role within classroom conversations. The paper concludes by arguing that code switching between the two languages is not arbitrary in nature; it has rather attained a special significance in the context of education.

In the following section, excerpts from classroom conversations have been quoted and analysed in order to further our understanding of code switching phenomenon. The data was collected in a government school situated in Delhi, India, as a part of a major research project. The data consisted of 25 hours of non-participant classroom observations and voice recordings done in Grade I, IV, VIII and XI of the school. These voice recordings were transcribed and later analysed using the method of discourse analysis. The excerpts from the data that have been quoted in this paper have been carefully selected to illustrate the arguments that are being presented in this paper most clearly. The paper has been delimited to the study of code switching occurring between Hindi and English that manifests in the speech of teachers rather than students for the sake of simplicity in the analysis. Research participants have been assigned pseudonyms due to ethical considerations.

Code Switching in Indian Classrooms

Hindi–English code switching in the context of Delhi has attained the status of what Grosjean and Li (2012) refer to as "bilingual mode" and what Myers-Scotton

(2005) identifies as "unmarked code switching" in multilingual societies. It may be rightly argued that Hindi–English code switching is the default languages that constitute a shared multilingual identity among Delhites. A number of studies have successfully traced the gradual increase in the use of a language marked by Hindi–English code switching over the past few decades in metropolis such as Delhi and Mumbai. A diachronic investigation of Hindi–English code switching using Bollywood film scripts, for instance, was undertaken by Si (2011). The study utilised quantitative analyses to show "a massive increase" in the overall use of English over a period of time, a trend which was claimed to be "particularly evident among young speakers" (Si, 2011, p. 389).

Concomitantly, the use of "the default" code switching between Hindi and English has also seeped into the context of education despite the fact that, theoretically, language education aims to equip learners with full blown proficiency in each of the languages that is being learned. The argument is illustrated in classroom conversations such as the following:

A student is reading a chapter aloud for the rest of the students in Grade 11 of the school. The teacher occasionally stops her to explicate the concept in between. Some such utterances are given here, with their English translation.

(a) Teacher: *anuvanshikta kya hoti hai?*

(b) Garima: **mam**…
    (Pause)

(c) Teacher: *anuvanshikta hota hai* **heredity**. *Likh lo. Vatavaran…* **environment**…*Paripakvta abhi isne bataya tha…***maturity**.

(d) Garima: **maturity**.

(The students write the English translations dictated by the teacher in their notebooks.)

(e) Teacher: *ab jo vridhhi or vikas hai vo in teeno par kaise nirbhar hai?*

(f) Garima: **mam** *anu…*(She tries to read the word from the textbook. The teacher interrupts.)

(g) Teacher: *anuvanshikta yaniki* **heredity**. *Aapki* **parents** *ki* **height** *jitni hogi aapki* **height** *bhi utni zyada ya utni kam hone ki sambhavna zada hai. Theek hai?…*

English Translation

(a) Teacher: What is heredity?

(b) Garima: **Mam…**
    (Pause)

(c) Teacher: Heredity is **heredity**. Write it. Environment is **environment.** Maturity, she just told it…**maturity.**

(d) Garima: **Maturity**

(The students write the English translation dictated by the teacher in their notebooks.)

(e) Teacher: Now how do growth and development depend on these three?

(f) Garima: **Mam** hered… (She tries to read the word from the textbook. The teacher interrupts.)

(g) Teacher: Heredity means **heredity.** Whatever is the **height** of your **parents**, there are chances that your **height** will be as high or as low. Alright?…

Note that the excerpt has been taken from a "Hindi medium" classroom, which implies that the textbook that is being read by the students is written in Hindi (exclusively). In contrast, the primary feature of the explanation of the text provided by the teacher is inter-language rendition. The analysis of the excerpt shows that a number of words from English have been inserted into the sentences of Hindi by the teacher under the assumption that the students are familiar with the English equivalents of these words rather than the terms of Hindi. In other words, the aim of the explanation provided by the teacher is to render familiarity to the concepts since she assumes that the concepts that are being taught to the learners are not new but the terms that have been used in the textbook are new for them. For the teacher, the process of explaining the text includes substituting unfamiliar words (of Hindi) with words (from English) that the learners are familiar with (as done in utterance c) and supplementing additional examples (as done in utterance g) to support the content provided in the textbook. Apparently,

code switched Hindi-English is being considered as the language that can be understood by all in the context of this classroom. It is the language of classroom transactions in such conversations.

Another important aspect of code switching between Hindi and English done in classroom contexts becomes apparent if one analyses examples such as the following:

Fourth Grade's Class Teacher has been talking to a parent for a while. The parent turns towards the door of the classroom to leave but the teacher stops her.

(a) Teacher: emm…ek second. Aap *kis ki mummy hai, Muskan ki?*

(The parent nods. The teacher turns to the student.)

(b) Teacher: *apne dikha diya tha* **caste certificate** *mujhe?* (Muskan does not respond.) *maine bola hai na apko* **caste certificate** *ke liye?*

(c) Muskan: **mam yes**.

(The teacher turns back towards the parent.)

(d) Teacher: *apka jati praman patr bana hua hai na?*

(e) Parent: bana hua hai…

English Translation

(a) Teacher: Emm,..just a second. Whose mother are you? Muskan's?

(The parent nods. The teacher turns to the student.)

(b) Teacher: Did you show me your

caste certificate? (Muskan does not respond.) I have told you to show me your **caste certificate.**

(c) Muskan: **Mam yes.**

(The teacher turns back towards the parent.)

(d) Teacher: Have you got a caste certificate made?

(e) Parent: We have got it made...

The switch between the languages English and Hindi done by the teacher forefronts the assumption that the teacher has made regarding her interlocutors in this conversation. Teacher's language choice in the phrase "caste certificate" in utterance (b) is a result of her assumption that her student who studies in an English medium (government) school will be able to comprehend the phrase. On the other hand, her switch into Hindi, when she addresses the illiterate parent in utterance (d) indicates that she assumes that the parent would fail to comprehend the phrase in English. (Note that the teacher does not use English exclusively with the student since the student, studying in Grade 4 of a government school in Delhi, might not be able to comprehend full blown English.) A simplistic analysis of this excerpt may interpret it as an example of linguistic accommodation. However, the excerpt shows that code switched Hindi and English has assumed "the overall social role" (Matras, 2009, p. 121) of the language of education within the conversational context, contrasting directly with the use of Hindi, that

has been assumed to be the language of illiterate parent, on the one hand, and with the use of English, since it is socially interpreted as the language of the elite and a symbol of high education, on the other (Dearden, 2014). Hence, the values that the speaker attributes to these languages as well as the assumptions about interlocutor's language use connect directly to result in code switching in such contexts.

Further, it can be stated that the switching done in this excerpt is largely participant related. Auer (1998) has distinguished participant related code switching from conversation oriented functions of code switching. Conversation oriented code switching includes functions such as highlighting of reported speech, or side comments, reiterations or quasi-translations for emphasis and change of mode (for instance, from formal teaching to informal conversations). Code switching of this kind plays an important role in organising the conversation at various levels. Such a form of code switching is exemplified in the context of education by conversations like the following.

The teacher is talking to the students of Grade 11.

(a) Teacher: **Lesson two. Lesson two** *shuru karte hai. Aj* **B section** *me ho gaya hai* **lesson** two *bhi. Kyuki unka pahla* **period** *mai padha deti hu, fir jati hu* **scholarship** *ka kam karne. Apka* **miss** *ho jata hai. Koi bat nahi, ho jaega apka bhi.*

(A student asks something from the teacher. The teacher responds but it cannot be heard clearly at the back of the classroom.)

(b) Latika: **Mam reading work** *kar lenge.*

(c) Teacher: *Aap log chhote bachche ho kya? Chalo* **books** *nikalo! Mai batati hu. Hamara jo* **second chapter** *hai vo maulik adhikaro ko samarpit hai. To pahle* **chapter** *me diya savidhan kya hai.*

(d) Garima: *Or kaise bana.*

(e) Teacher: *Hame iski avashyakta kyu hai? Kaise ye bana? Ab savidhan ne nagriko ko kuch diya hai. Savidhan ne nagriko ko kuch adhikar diye hain. Theek hai? Hamare desh ka maulik dastavez hai savidhan. Or ye jo savidhan hai, isne jo adhikar nagriko ko diye hain vo maulik adhikar kahlate hain...Maulik adhikar humara koi nahi cheen sakta, kyuki isko hame maulik dastavez ne diya hai. Or dusra, ye jo adhikar hai iska hannan hota hai, ye cheene jate hai to hum nyayalaya ki sharan me bhi ja sakte hain.*

(f) Teacher: *Kaun* **read** *karega dusra* **chapter**?...

English Translation

(a) 'Teacher: **Lesson two**. Let's start **lesson two**. I completed **lesson two** as well in **section B** today. Because I teach them in the first **period**, and then I go to do the work for **scholarships**. Yours gets **missed**. Never mind, yours will be done too.

(A student asks something from the teacher. The teacher responds but it cannot be heard clearly at the back of the classroom.)

(b) Latika: **Mam** we will do **reading work**.

(c) Teacher: Are you little children? Take out your **books**! I will tell you. Our **second chapter** has been dedicated to fundamental rights. So the first **chapter** told us what the Constitution is.

(d) Garima: How was it made?

(e) Teacher: Why do we need it, how was it made? Now the Constitution has given something to its citizens. The Constitution has given some rights to its citizens. Alright? Constitution is the fundamental document of our country. And this Constitution, the rights that it has given to the citizens, those rights are called fundamental rights... No one can seize our fundamental rights because it has been provided to us by the fundamental document. And secondly, if these rights are denied, we can approach the court for protection.

(f) Teacher: Now who will read the second chapter?'

The switching between Hindi and English in the above illustrated conversation marks out what Matras (2009) calls "turns in the

content". In this example, since she is teaching Hindi medium students, the teacher chooses Hindi as the language to deliver the main content of her narration (in utterance e). However, the informal part of the conversation held at the beginning of the conversation, as well as towards the end (in utterance f), includes a number of single word insertions from English into the base language Hindi. The English vocabulary that has been inserted (lesson, period, section, scholarship, read, chapter, etc.) is a part of common lexicon that is familiar to students in the context. Note that the constellation of participants and the languages known to the participants has not changed in this conversation; the only change that has led to a modification in the teacher's language use in utterance (e) is the change in the mode or purpose of language use, that is, from informal conversation with the students to formal content of the lecture.

Matras (2009) argues that language use in such contexts is not directly connected with the overall social roles that the languages have, or with the social values that are attributed to those languages. Rather, language alternation functions as an "instrument" used by the speaker to achieve a local goal "which is to guide the listeners to distinguish between the main content of a narration line and a departure from that line" (Matras, 2009, p. 121). Such language contrasting functions to furnish an organisation to the conversation, marking "turns" in the conversational intent.

Discussion

The excerpts quoted above illustrate the complex nature of code switching that occurs between Hindi and English in the context of education. Most commonly, code switching within teachers' lectures functions to render inter-linguistic familiarity by exploiting semantic equivalence between terms of the two languages that are being code switched between. Further, although it seems that code switched Hindi and English is the default language choice in the area of Delhi in general, which inadvertently seep into educational contexts, but the analysis of excerpt two in this paper shows that it could be education that is endorsing the use of such a form of language in reality. Although a generalisation necessitates further support from empirical data, it can be argued that code switched Hindi and English becomes the language of education in contexts such as those analysed in this paper. Lastly, the analysis depicts that code switching plays a critical role in situations wherein it functions to assist teachers to effectively organise the content of their lectures. As illustrated in excerpt three, the contrast of languages itself may be exploited for the purpose of "local management of the discourse" (Matras, 2009, p. 126). Hence, it can be concluded that the

role that code switching plays in the context of education in multilingual societies is not arbitrary but rather multi-layered and complex in nature. Code switching must, therefore, be subjected to sincere research rather that uninformed opinions based on popular perceptions.

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