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Code-switching patterns in young Yoruba-English bilinguals

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Abstract. This study explores the code-switching patterns of young Yoruba-English bilinguals, focusing on how and why they alternate between Yoruba and English in different conversational contexts. Using naturalistic observations of children aged 5 to 8, the study identifies common linguistic structures in their code-switching, such as intra-sentential, inter-sentential, and tag-switching. The findings reveal that code-switching is not random but follows systematic linguistic and cognitive principles influenced by discourse context, social setting, and pragmatic functions. This research contributes to understanding bilingual language development and the cognitive flexibility of young bilinguals.

Keywords. Code-switching, Bilingualism, Intra-sentential code-switching, Inter-sentential code-switching, Bilingual language acquisition, Sociolinguistics, Psycholinguistics, Second language acquisition (SLA), Language processing, Bilingual education.

1. Introduction. Code-switching, the alternating use of two or more languages within a conversation, is a common feature of bilingual speech. Among Yoruba-English bilinguals in Nigeria, code-switching occurs naturally in various social settings, including homes, schools, and peer interactions. Young bilinguals, particularly those between the ages of 5 and 8, often switch languages in ways that reflect their developing linguistic competence and sociocultural environment. This study aims to analyze the patterns of code-switching in young Yoruba-English bilinguals, identifying the linguistic structures and contextual motivations behind their language alterations.

2. Literature Review. Code-switching has been widely studied in bilingual communities, with research highlighting its grammatical structures, cognitive implications, and social significance. Studies by Myers-Scotton (1993) and Muysken (2000) categorize code-switching into intra-sentential, inter-sentential, and tag-switching. In bilingual children, code-switching often serves pragmatic functions, such as emphasizing a point, signalling a change in discourse, or filling lexical gaps (Paradis et al., 2011). Research on Yoruba-English bilinguals (Bamgbose, 1971; Akindele & Adegbite, 1999) suggests that code-switching is influenced by linguistic exposure, social norms, and communicative intent. However, limited studies have focused specifically on young bilingual children, making this research significant.

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3. Methodology. This study employs a naturalistic observation method, recording and analyzing spontaneous speech from five bilingual children (ages 5-8) in informal settings. The children, whom the researcher tutors at home, engage in free conversations during play and learning activities. Data is categorized based on code-switching type, frequency, and discourse context.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1 Types of Code-Switching Observed

4.1.1 Intra-Sentential Code-Switching

Definition and Characteristics

Intra-sentential code-switching occurs when speakers switch between two languages within a single sentence or clause. This type of code-switching is often considered the most complex because it requires high linguistic competence in both languages to maintain grammatical consistency. Young Yoruba-English bilinguals frequently engage in intra-sentential switching, seamlessly incorporating words, phrases, or morphemes from both languages into their speech.

Intra-sentential code-switching among Yoruba-English bilinguals typically follows syntactic and morphological rules that prevent ungrammatical constructions. For instance, function words like prepositions, conjunctions, and pronouns often remain in one language, while content words like verbs and nouns may switch between languages.

Examples from the Study

In this study, instances of intra-sentential code-switching were recorded from young Yoruba-English bilinguals (ages 5-8) in natural conversations. Some common patterns observed include:

1. Switching Verbs and Nouns

Mo need lati go si school

(I need to go to school)

Here, the structure follows Yoruba syntax while integrating English content words. "Need" and "go" are English verbs, but "mo" (I), "lati" (to), and "si" (to) are Yoruba elements.

2. Switching Determiners and Nouns

Bring mi orange yen

(Bring me that orange)

In this example, "bring" is an English verb, while "mi" (my) and "yen" (that) are Yoruba elements.

3. Switching Prepositions and Verbs

Mama mi ti cook ounje fun wa

(My mom has cooked food for us)
"Cook" is the English verb, while "Mama mi" (my mom), "ti" (has), and "ounje fun wa" (food for us) follow Yoruba grammar.

4. Switching with Auxiliary and Modal Verbs
Mi o know kini o mean
(I don't know what it means)
"Know" and "mean" are English verbs, but the Yoruba negative auxiliary "Mi o" (I don't) is retained.

Syntactic and Morphological Constraints. The observed intra-sentential code-switching follows systematic linguistic rules, ensuring that the sentence remains grammatically acceptable. Some constraints include:
1. The Functional Head Constraint (Belazi et al., 1994). Functional elements like determiners, prepositions, and conjunctions often remain in the dominant language to maintain syntactic consistency.
Example: Mo like eleyi better (I like this one better) ′n The determiner "eleyi" remains in Yoruba.
2. The Equivalence Constraint (Poplack, 1980). Switching occurs at points where both languages share similar syntactic structures.
Example: She fe buy akara (She wants to buy akara) ′n The switch aligns with the English Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) structure, which Yoruba also follows.
3. Morpheme Order Preservation. Inflectional morphemes from Yoruba do not typically attach to English words. Instead, English words are integrated within Yoruba syntactic rules.
Example: Mama mi ti cook ounje fun wa (My mom has cooked food for us) ′n The Yoruba aspect marker "ti" (has) precedes the English verb "cook."

Functions and Motivations for Intra-Sentential Switching. Young Yoruba-English bilinguals employ intra-sentential code-switching for several communicative and cognitive reasons:

1. Lexical Gap Compensation. When a child lacks a specific word in one language, they insert an equivalent from the other language.
Example: Mi o know kini o mean (I don't know what it means) ′n "Know" is used because the child may not recall the Yoruba equivalent "mo".
2. Cognitive Ease and Processing Efficiency. Switching between languages reduces the cognitive load when retrieving words that come more naturally in one language.
Example: She fe buy akara (She wants to buy akara) ′n The English structure simplifies the sentence construction.

3. Emphasis and Expressiveness. Children switch languages to emphasize certain parts of their speech.
Example: This one ni mo fe gan gan! (This is the one I really want!) ’n The English phrase "this one" is emphasized, while Yoruba carries the emotional intensity.

4. Social Identity and Group Norms. In bilingual environments, code-switching reflects a child’s cultural and linguistic identity.
Example: Ejo, help mi carry e (Please, help me carry it) ’n Mixing languages aligns with peer group norms.

Comparison with Adult Code-Switching. Unlike adults, whose code-switching often serves discourse functions like persuasion or humour, children’s intra-sentential switching is primarily driven by lexical necessity and cognitive development. While adults may code-switch strategically to negotiate power or identity, young bilinguals tend to switch based on immediate linguistic needs and exposure.
This occurs within a single sentence, as seen in the following example:
Mo want lati go si school ("I want to go to school").
Here, the main verbs "want" and "go" are in English, while the auxiliary "lati" and preposition "si" are in Yoruba.

4.1.2 Inter-Sentential Code-Switching
Definition and Characteristics
Inter-sentential code-switching occurs when bilingual speakers switch from one language to another between sentences or clauses. Unlike intra-sentential switching, where languages mix within a single sentence, inter-sentential switching happens at sentence boundaries. This type of switching requires a high level of bilingual proficiency, as speakers must maintain grammatical correctness in both languages while switching between them seamlessly.

Among young Yoruba-English bilinguals, inter-sentential code-switching is common in conversational discourse, especially when children shift topics, express emotions, or interact with different interlocutors. The alternation often reflects cognitive processing strategies and social adaptation in a bilingual environment.
Examples from the Study. The following examples illustrate how young Yoruba-English bilinguals (ages 5-8) use inter-sentential switching in spontaneous speech:
1. Switching at Sentence Boundaries
I am tired. Mo fe sun.
(I am tired. I want to sleep.)
The first sentence is in English, while the second is in Yoruba. The switch helps

maintain fluency in communication while utilizing both languages effectively.

2. Switching Between Clauses
My brother gave me a new shirt, sugbon mi o like e.
(My brother gave me a new shirt, but I don't like it.)
The first clause is in English, while the second clause is in Yoruba. The conjunction "sugbon" (but) signals a shift in language use.

3. Switching for Emphasis
Don't eat the food! Mo ti so fun e tele!
(Don't eat the food! I already told you before!)
The Yoruba sentence reinforces the English sentence by adding emphasis and urgency.

4. Switching in Response to a Question
Child 1: What do you want for breakfast?
Child 2: Mo fe rice ati stew.
(I want rice and stew.)
The second child responds in Yoruba, even though the question is in English. The switch could be due to comfort with expressing food-related vocabulary in Yoruba.

5. Switching for Topic Change
I like playing with my toys. Se o mo wipe mummy ma n ra toys fun mi lojo Monday?
(I like playing with my toys. Do you know that my mummy buys me toys every Monday?)
The speaker uses English for the main topic but switches to Yoruba when introducing new information.

Linguistic Constraints in Inter-Sentential Switching. Unlike intra-sentential switching, which must follow grammatical rules within a single sentence, inter-sentential switching occurs at natural discourse boundaries. However, some linguistic constraints influence this switching:

1. The Free-Morpheme Constraint (Poplack, 1980). Code-switching tends to occur at points where there are no bound morphemes (i.e., prefixes or suffixes).
Example: I will play outside. Nigbati daddy ba de, a ma lo si shop.
(I will play outside. When Daddy arrives, we will go to the shop.)
The switch occurs at the clause level, avoiding disruption of word morphology.

2. The Discourse-Pragmatic Constraint. Switching aligns with discourse needs, such as topic shifts or responses to a change in conversational tone.
Example: That's my favourite cartoon. Sibe, mi o like awon character yen.
(That's my favourite cartoon. Still, I don't like those characters.)

The shift occurs when the speaker introduces a contrastive idea.

3. Syntactic Independence. The switched sentence must be grammatically complete in its respective language.
Example: She went to school. O so wipe oun fe kawe daadaa.
(She went to school. She said she wants to study well.)
The Yoruba clause remains structurally complete without depending on the preceding English sentence.
Functions and Motivations for Inter-Sentential Code-Switching
Young Yoruba-English bilinguals engage in inter-sentential switching for various linguistic, cognitive, and social reasons.

1. Cognitive Ease and Processing. Children often switch languages at sentence boundaries to accommodate their developing bilingual lexicon.
Example: I know the answer! Mo ti kọ ri!
(I know the answer! I have learned it before!)
The switch allows the speaker to use their most accessible vocabulary in each language.

2. Pragmatic Emphasis and Clarification. Switching languages helps emphasize important information or clarify meaning.
Example: I told you already. O ma wa ni problem bayi!
(I told you already. You'll be in trouble now!)
The Yoruba clause adds urgency to the statement.

3. Social Identity and Cultural Norms. In bilingual environments, switching between English and Yoruba reflects cultural belonging and linguistic identity.
Example: Daddy said I should finish my food. But me, mi o like e!
(Daddy said I should finish my food. But me, I don't like it!)
The Yoruba sentence expresses the speaker's feelings in a culturally familiar way.

4. Response to Language Input. Children often switch languages in response to the language used by others.
Example:
Adult: Se o ti se assignment e? (Have you done your assignment?)
Child: Yes, I finished it in the morning.
The child responds in English, demonstrating bilingual flexibility.

5. Topic Shift or Context Change. Switching languages often signals a transition between topics or contexts.
Example: We are going to the park. Mo ni lati pe mummy lati gba permission.
(We are going to the park. I need to call Mummy to get permission.)

The switch marks a shift from statement to action.
Comparison with Adult Inter-Sentential Switching
While both children and adults use inter-sentential code-switching, there are some key differences:
Children's switches are often motivated by lexical gaps, processing ease, or interaction with bilingual peers.
Adults' switches tend to be more deliberate, serving discourse functions such as humour, persuasion, or social positioning.
For example, an adult might say:
I don't like that idea. Mo ma so fun e ni (I will tell you later).
Here, the Yoruba sentence adds an element of secrecy or insider knowledge, which is a pragmatic function.
In contrast, a child might say:
I want to play outside. O dun mi wipe ko si electricity.
(I want to play outside. I'm sad that there's no electricity.)
The switch, in this case, reflects a natural bilingual thought process rather than strategic discourse planning.

4.1.3 Tag-Switching. This occurs when a Yoruba tag is inserted into an English sentence: That's my toy, abi? ("That's my toy, right?").

4.2 Contextual Motivations for Code-Switching

4.2.1 Lexical Gaps. Children switch languages when they lack vocabulary in one language.

4.2.2 Emphasis and Clarity. Switching is used to stress an idea or clarify meaning.

4.2.3 Social and Cultural Influence. The home environment and peer interactions encourage bilingual mixing.

5. Discussion. Findings support theories that bilingual children use code-switching strategically, not due to confusion. Their switches align with grammatical constraints and social contexts, indicating cognitive flexibility.

6. Conclusion. Inter-sentential code-switching among young Yoruba-English bilinguals is a structured and meaningful linguistic practice. It occurs at natural discourse boundaries and serves functions related to cognitive development, pragmatic communication, and cultural identity. Unlike intra-sentential switching, which requires greater syntactic integration, inter-sentential switching provides bilingual children with flexibility in navigating their two languages.

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