Functions of Code-switching and People's Attitudes

--A Case Study in WeChat Communication

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Abstract: With the development of the internet and progress in communication technology, WeChat plays a more and more important role in people's life in China. In daily communication, as a common linguistic phenomenon, code-switching appears a lot in WeChat communication as well. Through analysing real data from WeChat conversations, the author examines people's attitudes towards code-switching and the functions it serves in daily communication.

Keywords: code-switching; WeChat communication; functions; attitudes

1. Introduction

Code-switching is a linguistic phenomenon that frequently occurs in bilingual and multilingual communities, referring to the systematic use of two or more languages or varieties of the same language in oral or written discourse. China, as a multiethnic and multilingual country, has a similar linguistic context. In the 1950s, China promoted Mandarin, resulting in the decline of many dialects. However, to preserve traditional culture, the government later began protecting dialects. As a result, many people in China now engage in code-switching between Mandarin and their dialects. Additionally, since the 1970s, English has been a compulsory subject in Chinese education, leading to code-switching between Chinese and English, which has become increasingly common and popular. With the development of the internet and communication technology, WeChat has become an important communication tool for people in China. It is widely used for learning about the world, sharing information, and expressing emotions. In WeChat communication, code-switching is commonly used between Chinese and English, Mandarin and dialects, and words and emoticons. Through analyzing real-life data, this paper explores the functions of code-switching in WeChat communication and discusses people's attitudes towards its usage.

2. Literature Review

The term "code-switching" was first used by Hans Vogt (1954), with Roman Jacobson helping to spread the word. Code refers to any semiotic system people use for communication. It can be a kind of language, a dialect or a register (Wardhaugh,2000). Since the 1970s, code-switching has become a significant research area in the field of sociolinguistics. This interest can be traced back to Blom and Gumperz's study of language use in Hemnesberger in 1972. The study distinguished two main types of code-switching: situational and metaphorical. Myers-Scotton (1993) developed the markedness model based on Gumperz's framework, arguing that speakers choose one language variety over the others to maximize benefits and minimize costs. Myers-Scotton formulated the negotiation principle based on Grice's cooperative principle, stating that speakers should choose the form of their conversational contribution to index the set of rights and obligations they wish to enforce. Code-switching is often seen as a way for speakers to express their social identity and to navigate complex social relationships. It can differentiate between members within a group and those outside of it (Akmajian, 1984). According to Wardhaugh (2000), the choice of language codes also involves emotional factors. He classified language codes into two types: we-type and they-type. "We-type" is commonly used for in-group and informal activities. This type of language includes certain expressions and idioms that only people with the same background can understand. Another language code is known as the "they-type", which is considered appropriate to out-group and more formal relationships. Code-switching as a linguistic phenomenon has been studied in China since the 1980s. With the emergence and development of the internet, scholars have shifted their focus towards studying code-switching in social media. Among various social apps, WeChat has become the most popular one in China. Therefore, investigating code-switching in WeChat communication could offer valuable insights into

Chinese people's attitudes and behaviors towards language use.

The term "code-mixing" often occurs together with code-switching. Some researchers have used the term "code-mixing" to refer to specifically to intra-sentential switching. However, there is no need to focus on the distinction between them when study the functions. Therefore, we will not distinguish the two terms in this paper.

3. Functions of Code-switching in WeChat Communication

Appel and Muysken (1987) cite five functions of code-switching. First, code switching may serve a referential function by compensating for the speaker's lack of knowledge in one language, perhaps on a certain subject. Second, it may serve a directive function by including or excluding the listener. Third, code switching may have an expressive function by identifying the speaker as someone having a mixed cultural identity. Fourth, it may have a phatic function indicating a change in tone in the conversation. And fifth, it may serve a metalinguistic function when code switching is used to comment on the languages involved. The following data suggests that code-switching is commonly utilized in WeChat communication for various purposes, such as filling lexical gaps, showing intimacy with friends, avoiding social taboos, and expressing implications. In the following part, examples will be provided to analyze these functions.

(1) Filling lexical gaps

Example 1:

A: wǒ men jīn tiān yào bu yào qù nǎ biān zhuàn yì zhuàn ā ?(Shall we go somewhere to hang out today?)

B: hǎo ā hǎo ā，wǒ tè bié xiǎng qù sān lǐ tún de pageone shū diàn qù kàn kan，jù shuō fēn wéi tè bié bàng！(Great! I would love to go to Page One bookstore at Sanlitun. I heard the atmosphere there is amazing!)

In this conversation, the speaker B used English name "Page One" to refer to a bookstore in Beijing. Code-switching in this case is used to fill the lexical gap that Chinese lacks a proper noun to describe this particular bookstore.

Example 2:

A: nǐ men nà er zhū ròu fǔ de"fǔ"zěn me shuō ā ？(How do you say dried pork slices in your hometown?)

B: wǒ men nà biān shuō"pǔ"。(We call it "pu".)

In this example, speaker A is asking for the word to describe the dried pork slices in B's hometown. Speaker B switches to their dialect and uses the word "pu" to fill the lexical gap in Mandarin, as the standard Chinese word for dried pork slices is "roufu" instead of "roupu".

(2) Showing intimacy

Example 3:

A: cāi zù shén ní ā ？(What are you doing?)

B: wǒ zài wài miàn chī fàn ne，guò huì ér huí qù zài hé nǐ liáo。(I'm having dinner outside. Let's chat later when I go back.)

In this conversation, the speaker A used a dialectal word "shén ní" to ask what B is doing. The term is a code that only people from the same hometown can understand. Here in this case, speaker A used their dialect to start the conversation and show intimacy with B.

Example 4:

A: nǐ gang gang gēn wǒ shuō de shén me gǎo zi ？ wǒ dōu méi tīng qīng chǔ。(What did you just say to me? I didn't hear it clearly.)

B: suàn le suàn le，wǒ hái shì dǎ zì hǎo le。(Never mind, I'll just type it out instead.)

In this conversation, speaker B used the dialectal word "gǎozè" to refer to things or items, which is not commonly used in Mandarin. By switching to dialect, speaker B tried to reduce the distance between them while simultaneously establishing a context that is exclusive to their shared experiences. By using certain language codes in different situations, individuals can assert their belonging to certain groups and establish their social identities.

(3) Avoiding social taboos

Example 5:

A: kàn nǐ pang biān de nán shēng，yǒu diǎn gaygay de。(He looks a little gay, the guy next to you.)

B: wǒ yě zhè me jué de。(I think so.)

In Chinese context, homosexuality is somehow a social taboo, people are careful with such word. In this conversation, speakers A and B used the word "gaygay" to avoid using the direct term for homosexuality. The use of code-switching allows speakers to communicate more freely while avoiding sensitive topics. Young people like to use "gaygay" as an adjective, describing a man with female characteristics or something that is perceived as flamboyant, ostentatious, or overly theatrical.

(4) Expressing implications

Example 6:

A: nǐ huà zhuāng yào duō jiǔ? (How long does it take you to put on makeup?)

B: yí gè xiǎo shí ba。 (About an hour.)

A:

In the above example, B sent an emoticon with an onomatopoeic word wanted to show a feeling of unwillingness and reluctance about waiting for an hour. With this emoticon, her feeling can be more easily expressed. The use of emoticons is a common way to convey emotions and attitudes in WeChat communication. Almost everyone who uses WeChat has communicated with others by using emoticons. Colorful emoticons, including emoji and other funny pictures or catchwords, can express users' complex feelings. When people don't know how to reply, they send some emojis to defuse awkwardness.

4. People's Attitudes Towards Usage of Code-switching in WeChat Communication

To gather more detailed information about the usage of code-switching and people's attitudes towards it in WeChat communication, the author conducted a survey among Chinese WeChat users. The survey included questions about age, English proficiency, use of dialects, and use of emoticons in WeChat communication.

The results showed that among the respondents aged 18 to 25 who frequently spoke English, the use of code-switching between Chinese and English in WeChat communication was more common. The attitude towards code-switching seemed to be linked to the speaker's English proficiency level, with those who had better English skills using code-switching more frequently. Among those who used code-switching between words and emoticons, the most common reason was to fill lexical gaps, followed by expressing emotions more freely. It is found that younger respondents tended to use emoticons more frequently in their WeChat communication. Almost 90% of respondents under the age of 25 reported using emoticons frequently, compared to only 40% of respondents over the age of 40. Interestingly, the use of this type of code-switching was found to be more common among female respondents than males. Regarding dialects, the survey found that almost all respondents reported frequent use of their dialects in WeChat communication. The most common reason for using dialects was to express local identity and show closeness with the recipient. However, the attitude towards using dialects varied significantly by age. Respondents over the age of 40 were more likely to view the use of dialects positively and as a way to preserve cultural heritage, while younger respondents tended to view them more negatively and as a barrier to communication.

5. Conclusion

Code-switching in WeChat communication is a complicated social and linguistic phenomenon. This paper mainly analyzes three types of code-switching, including switching of Chinese and English, of Mandarin and dialects, of words and emoticons. Real life data was collected and used to discuss functions of code-switching in WeChat communication. It is found that code-switching is frequently employed in WeChat conversations for multiple reasons, including bridging lexical gaps, demonstrating closeness with friends, avoiding social taboos, and conveying implications. To some degree, code-switching plays a significant role in constructing social identity, as it allows individuals to navigate between different linguistic and cultural contexts. In addition, the data indicates that people's attitudes towards code-switching are mainly related to the types of code-switching and users' ages. The survey showed that code-switching between Chinese and English was more common among younger people with better English proficiency, and that the use of dialects was widespread among all age groups, with

older people more likely to use them. Furthermore, younger people tended to use emoticons more frequently to express themselves and add emotional nuance to their messages. However, it's important to acknowledge the potential challenges associated with code-switching in WeChat communication. For instance, when a person is not proficient in both languages or dialects involved in the switch, code-switching may lead to misunderstanding. Moreover, it may contribute to language loss and erosion of linguistic diversity. Therefore, to address these challenges, more research is needed to investigate the effectiveness and limitations of code-switching in WeChat communication.

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