The Missing Piece: The Rhetoric of Code Switching

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It is not easy to speak a second language fluently, is it? From my personal perspective, I started learning my ABC's when I was nine years old but stayed at that entry level for several years, and then began to catch up when I was thirteen. I came to the United States at age twenty, and people were asking: "Since you have been learning English for such a long time, do you still have trouble with your English?" Pondering the question for a little bit; I feel awful but have to admit that after ten years of learning English, I still have trouble with it in a native English environment. There always seems to be a gap between the native speaker and me.
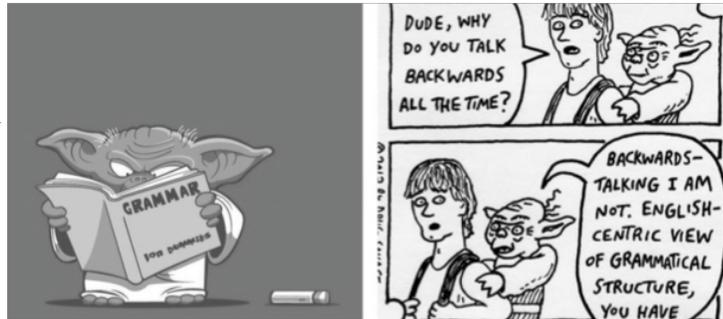

Figure 1. Yoda's code switching

According to a French scholar, Francois Grosjean, it is estimated that half of the world's population lives with two or more languages. Those people are called bilinguals. Among all the bilinguals, one could be put into many different categories. For example, one could become bilingual in childhood, in adolescence or in adulthood. Scholars found that it is a common phenomenon for bilinguals to change back and forth with their languages in conversations. "The alternate use of two or more languages in the same utterance or conversation" can be briefly defined as code switching (Grosjean, 1982; Milroy & Muysken, 1995). What is interesting is that with the language being changed, there are also related behaviors and psychology changes of bilinguals as well. I first noticed the differences by coincidently observing a talk by a Japanese teacher in my Chinese university. He could speak both languages, Chinese and Japanese freely, and he could code switch when he talked in either of the languages. I noticed that when he spoke Japanese, he adopted Japanese behaviors such as nodding and bowing while he spoke the language. When he spoke Chinese, he would be back to "normal".

The Struggle of Bilinguals

Since I have arrived in the United States, the struggle of improving my English and trying to fit into the culture, along with my practice of code switching, has confused and discouraged but also strengthened me. I used to mark a milestone and be very happy if an American I talked to commented to me, "your English is good." Then after awhile, I thought wait a second, when native speakers talk with each other, they don't compliment each other by saying, "your English is good." I started to realize that my English is not native enough so when I opened my mouth they knew I am foreign. Trying not to get a comment of "your English is good" is my new goal.

In Chang-rae Lee's "Mute in an English-only World", he described his mom's experience of a poor English-speaking immigrant living in an English speaking country. Lee wrote,

> Staying mostly at home to care for us, she didn't have many chances to try out sundry words and phrases. When she did, say, at the window of the post office, her readied speech would stall, freeze, sometimes altogether collapse.

> In the following years, my mother grew steadily more comfortable with English. In Korean, she could be fiery, stern, deeply funny and ironic; in English, just slightly less so.

Lee's mom acts very different when she speaks English and speaks Korean. The difficulty of code switching between two languages also revealed " the great divide between her private human personality and the expression of it in public".

I realize bilinguals act differently when code switching by noticing my friends' behavior. I found one of my ex-roommates always kept smiling when she didn't follow what her American friends were talking about. I never realized I would do the same until one time I was helping my supervisor carry some stuff to the SIS office in J building. It was the first time for me to meet the administrative assistant lady at the SIS office. Everything was fine at first; I unpacked boxes from the handcart and organized the file that my supervisor wanted to give to her. At the time we were about to leave, my supervisor reintroduced me and said I would probably come to the office regularly to get mail for him and other situations that the administrative assistant and I would probably encounter with each other. I remembered she said to me, "No problem, keep me posted."

After she said that "keep me posted", I was stunned and totally didn't know what to reply back. Every new idiom that I don't know gets on my nerves. All my brain cells seemed to work on figuring out what does the phrase

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mean. I directly related "post" to "post office". I thought could it be possible that she wanted me to go to the post office? What did this have to do with post office? I instinctively smiled at her. I didn't know if she could tell the changes of my facial expression. I thought I must be very awkward I bet but at that time, I felt my brain disconnected from my mouth and all I could do was smile. Later on, like many of my friends, I installed dictionary on my phone, ipad, and computer to look up new idioms that I don't know whenever possible.

What is Missing?

I focused on Bilinguals who acquire their second language in adolescence and whose first language is Chinese and second language is English to conduct my research. I interviewed five Chinese international students who are now studying at SPSU. Four of them came in the fall this year. I asked them the same questions at the following:

1) " What do you think are the psychological and behavioral differences when you talk with Americans and Chinese?"
2) "What would you do if you encounter confusion while you talk with Americans?"
3) "What would you do if you encounter confusion while you talk with Chinese?"
4) "While you speak two languages have you realized the differences before?"

Interestingly, everyone told me that when they were speaking English, they were not as relaxed nor pleased as speaking Chinese. They could not help making hand gestures, extra facial expressions such as frown or smile, and sometimes rubbing their hands while speaking English. One guy told me he would flutter his hands affectedly. Zuo, one of the interviewee said, "from a psychological perspective, I always want to pretend I am Asian American not Chinese but after I speak the first sentence, I know I gave myself away. I tried to find a psychological balance and security but in fact it turned out bad." When encountered confusion or something they didn't understand talking with Americans, if it is not important such as a joke, all of them would choose to ignore it and guess the general meanings from the conversation context and either reply "yes, right", "OK" or smile back. They would not do that to their Chinese peers, however. "I choose to ask directly if I don't understand." Why do bilinguals change their behavior while code switching? For bilinguals who are struggle with not so fluent language and unfamiliar cultural environment, their code switching is subconscious. Because of the psychological nervousness, they can't help adopting some non-verbal gestures and expressions.

Bilingual does not mean bicultural. Not every bilingual person can code switch freely, especially for those who adopted their second language in adolescence or in adulthood. They formed and inhabited their native culture with their native language while based on their own culture learning a different language. It is hard for them to change cultures while doing code switching. In addition, take away the cultural background while learning a language, it is more like walking in the forest without a guide, one can be lost in their language and behavior. However, like piecing together a jigsaw, piecing the cultural gaps among the cultural background is time consuming. It could also be frustrating, embarrassing and even hurting. Some bilinguals

Figure 2. The missing piece

use the rest of their life figuring out how to piece the cultural jigsaw to let themselves fit into the new culture like Lee's mom, however, even though they did the best they could, there always seems to be one piece missing.

Therefore, it led native speakers to an interesting situation. What would them do to improve communication and minimize misunderstanding with non-native speakers? Since the beginning, I believe America is a very diverse country. A country that is willing to absorb various cultures. What diversity brings to people should be an open and tolerant mind to observe, think, and resolve the differences around them even though it is a long and winding process. Lee posed an interesting question at the end of his article to the reader. He wrote, "I wonder what these same people [who complain about the Korean-only signs] would have done if they had seen my mother studying her English workbook-or lost in a store. Would they have nodded gently at her? Would they have lent a kind word?" I am curious to ask my readers for this paper that how willingly would you continue to explain to a non-native speaker that he/she still doesn't understand you when you thought they should be?

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The Missing Jigsaw. 2007. Photograph. nipic.com

Yoda's Code Switching. 2013. Photograph. N.p. By Joelein.