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Strategic ambiguity: code-switching in the management of conflict[1]

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Code-switching has often been described as a conversational strategy. Sometimes this strategy is discussed in terms of stylistic effects, that is, in terms of its use in aggravating or mitigating such conversational acts as requests, denials, topic shifts, elaborations or comments, validations, or clarifications (Gal 1979; Gumperz and Hernandez-Chavez 1971; Gumperz 1982a, b; Zentella 1981; Valdés 1981; McClure 1981; Genishi 1981). Examples of such stylistic uses include:

1. From Gal (1979: 115–111). Here, code-switching is used to convey anger, to escalate an argument. Hungarian husband, wife and daughter in a bilingual (German-Hungarian) Austrian town. The wife usually fetches beer for her husband, but on this occasion she is drinking coffee with her daughter and refuses to go. The husband gets his beer himself. When he returns his wife asks for a sip:

H	Wife:	ide, itt tessik	'here, here please'
H	Husband:	hojne	'oh sure'
H	Wife:	ja, hát add oda	'come on, give it here'
H	Husband:	hojne, ott csek idd e kávet (laughs) niksz	'oh sure, just drink your coffee there, no'
H	Daughter:	ne addsz! ne addsz!	'don't give her any, don't give her'
H	Husband:	fë nëm hoznyi, de mëginnya, o ho, oaszt nëm	'you won't bring it up but you want to drink it, oh, no, you don't'
H	Wife:	nëm is kë mer ha kë le mënëk osztá hozok	'I don't even want it because if I wanted some I'd just go down and get some'
H	Husband:	niksz oh ho nem szabad neked	'oh no no you're not allowed'

H	Wife:	nem nem szoruktam ra	'I don't I don't have to
		hoj te adzs nekem	depend on you to give me'
H	Husband:	nekem nëm hozu fë	'if you don't bring it up
		magadnag akko nem	for me then you can't
		szabad inna	drink it yourself'
H	Wife:	in akkor iszok mikor	'I drink when I want to
*G		in akarok	
		deis vird niks	I don't even want it
		kbrak	I don't even want it'
		das vird niks	
		kbrakt	

It seems that the argument had escalated to such a point that, in order to defuse it, the daughter had to start making silly noises, to get people laughing.

2. From McClure (1981: 83). Here, code-switching is used to attract the addressee's attention, to focus. M. is a Spanish-English bilingual nine-year-old in the southwest of the United States:

E	M:	Now let me do it. Put your feets down.	
*S		¡Mira!	'look!'
E		It's Leti's turn again! Hi Leti!	

The discourse effects depend on the interlocutors' inference of anger or seriousness, humour, deference, distance, solidarity and so on. These inferences can be made solely on the basis of participants' knowledge of the social context: they need to know how they stand with respect to one another in the activity in progress, and where that set of relations fits within the wider community (cf. Gal 1979: 91, 129; Gumperz 1982b: 84[2]). A clear example of this would be the choice of specific languages in addressing interlocutors seen to prefer or to be more competent in those languages (Genishi 1981; McClure 1981; Calsamiglia and Tuson 1980; Woolard 1983): in such cases speakers clearly operate with notions of how to assign people to certain social categories which are associated with the use of specific languages, and with notions of where their relationship to those people fits into that system of social categorization. (It is interesting in this regard that even very young children are able to do this). This categorization extends to third parties (audience, indirect addressees):

3. From Genishi (1981: 147–148). Code-switching used to include a third party. A bilingual (Spanish-English) boy, Arturo, is telling on his Spanish monolingual classmate, Miguel, to teacher, Liz (in California):

S	A (to M.):	mire que hiciste	'look what you did'
S	A (to L.):	Leez!	
*E/S		Lookit que hizo M. el	'. . . what M. did he put
		rayo mi papel con la	lines on my paper
		tinta	with ink'
	(to M.):	mira M. que hizo aqui	'look M. what he did here'

Thus the association of language and social relationship is usefully exploited in the management of social relationships, often through the management of conversation. This is particularly evident when unmarked associations are violated by code-switching:

4. From Calsamiglia and Tuson (1980: 70). Monolingual Castilian teenagers are talking to bilingual Catalan speakers in informal conversation in a Barcelona neighbourhood. Code-switching here is used to mitigate the swearing:

Cs	Oye, chaval, ¡no seas pesao!	'listen, buddy, don't be a drag!
*Ct	Ves-t'en a la merda!	go to hell!
Cs	Anda ya, ¡no fastidies!	go on already, don't be a pain!'

Here, the swearing is attenuated, since the speaker has chosen the language of the interlocutor; the speaker realigns his relationship to his interlocutor as ingroup, thereby permitting him to say things only an ingroup member can get away with. By the same token, he can avoid some of the responsibility for having said it which would have been his had he spoken in his own language. Code-switching here constitutes claims on the rights of ingroup membership in the other group, and avoidance of the obligations of membership in one's own group. This inference depends on the knowledge of context that interlocutors have; they know who is who and what is expected of them. The very same code-switch can mean very different things depending on the exact context operating in an interaction. What does not change is the act of making claims about the rights and obligations the interlocutors bear to each other as a function of all of the levels of their rela-

tionship, from the most personal to the most socially constrained: Example 5 constitutes another case where code-switching achieves such a claim, directly this time, since the code-switch conveys the nature of the relationship and the feelings that flow from events that occur in a relationship of that type.

5. From Gumperz (1982b: 93). Code-switching used to comment on the nature of the relationship between the speaker and the person he is talking about. Hindi-speaking informants judged this version to indicate that the date was casual and the speaker not upset. An all-Hindi version, however, was seen to indicate that the speaker was annoyed because an important obligation was not met. Here, a Hindi-speaking man tells how a friend (a member of the same group) failed to meet him at the bus stop to accompany him on a trip to town:

H	Man:	Timarpur ki bəs samne khəri thi	'the Timarpur bus was standing before me'
*E		then I thought I might as well take it	

Thus stylistic and conversation management code-switching strategies, while they relate on one level to the accomplishment of the task at hand and to the management of interpersonal relationships in a particular activity at a precise moment (Scotton 1976; Heller 1982), derive their effect from background knowledge regarding the unmarked association of languages with social relationships. Those social relationships are formed on the basis of participation in social networks defined by overlapping and cross-cutting criteria on many levels simultaneously, including the superordinate level of linguistic group membership. Style, conversation management and social significance are intimately bound to each other.

It is, perhaps, best to reiterate that code-switching operates in a multi-levelled context, and that the analyst of code-switching must take all these levels into account. To my knowledge all the existing ethnographic descriptions of the social context of code-switching reveal a separation somewhere of domains of language use, be it the home, the public arena, rural vs. urban life, or anything else (cf., e.g., Blom and Gumperz 1972; Woolard 1983; Heller 1982; Scotton 1976; Poplack 1980; Gumperz 1982a; Eckert 1980).

Thus at least some speakers in the community operate in a context where in *some* domains, in *some* ways, the languages are separate: this renders code-switching meaningful and available. Other speakers may operate exclusively within the domain of *one* language: for them, code-switching is unavailable and meaningless (this will be further explored below). One level of meaning derives, then, from the social organization of language use in the community.

The second level of meaning derives from the interpersonal relationship between speakers in the particular context of the activity in which they are engaged. In this case, the analyst's ability to impute meaning (be it social, interpersonal, or stylistic) to code-switching resides in his or her knowledge of all the various levels of context operating during an interaction, in observation of the conversational and social consequences of code-switching, and in his or her knowledge of speakers' background knowledge regarding conventions of language use.

A third level of meaning, the semantic content of specific instances of switching, concerns us less here. At this level the semantic content of what is switched may or may not be directly connected to the association of a language and the domain of its use: this is something which may occur, but which does not have to occur for code-switching to have stylistic, interpersonal and/or social significance.

The goal of this paper is to discuss reasons why code-switching may work as a strategy in both situations of certainty and of uncertainty, that is, (a) in situations where there are clear unmarked conventions of language choice; and (b) in situations where no such conventions may exist OR where there may be competing conventions.

My hypotheses are based on the idea that code-switching creates ambiguity primarily on the first two of the three levels of meaning discussed above. By creating ambiguity, code switching offers opportunities for the interpretation of social action that would otherwise be unavailable. My first hypothesis concerns the way in which ambiguity is created by code-switching, the second concerns the social consequences of code-switching (and so the inferences regarding social organization that can be made through an analysis of the distribution of code-switching in a community).

It is my first hypothesis that code-switching creates ambiguity either by violating conventional associations (without redefining them), or by refusing to define them (where they do not exist), or by refusing to choose among them (where several frames of reference are in competition). Some reasons code-switching seems so attractive as a strategy, where it is available, are that it permits people (a) to "suggest inferences without actually putting (themselves) on record and risking loss of face" (Gumperz 1982b: 98), (b) to ". . . neutralize those potentially salient attributes of one variety which may have an unfavourable value" (Scotton 1976: 919), or (c) to ". . . gain access to roles in situations defined by (a) norm" without claiming the social identity that conventionally is associated with those roles (either because they are not really entitled to them or because the cost is too high) (Heller 1981: 11). It can allow the simultaneous accomplishment of tasks through conversation and the management of conversation and of personal relationships through the avoidance of the conflict which categorical language choice would entail. Or it can allow the avoidance of tasks and a different form of conversation management through creating conflict where categorical language choice would be the norm. By creating ambiguity at the level of unmarked language choice, ambiguity is created for all levels of interpersonal interaction embedded within the superordinate category of language group membership.

It is my second hypothesis that code-switching is attractive as a strategy in situations where unilateral choice entails claims regarding group membership (and so definitions of rights and obligations) for which a speaker does not want to be held responsible or cannot be held responsible. For different reasons code-switching may also be attractive where to speak a language other than the unmarked one implies claims on group membership (and so rights and obligations) to which one is not considered entitled. In other words, code-switching can be used both to create conflict and to neutralize it.

The actual concrete situations in which these two possibilities will be realized will depend entirely on the actual constellation of language and social groups in the community. While based on some notion of unmarked association of language and social group, the stability of group boundaries, the power relations

obtaining between groups, the arenas available for intergroup interaction, and the criteria of access to those arenas will all affect whether (and where) code-switching is to be found.

Code-switching is clearly NOT always available in multilingual communities, nor is it available to everyone even in those communities where it is used. For example, in some situations of certainty, code-switching is available as an ingroup strategy, based on the semantic associations of language and domain of language use and on the we/they ingroup/outgroup distinction. Code-switching can be used to appeal to the shared understanding characteristic of co-membership, or to create distance by associating oneself, momentarily, with the out-group. However, in others, code-switching is unavailable because group boundaries are so permeable that it is impossible to know for sure which individuals to assign to the mutually-exclusive domains. Categorical language choice may be the only way to define social identity and group membership. Similarly, in intergroup interactions, code-switching may be rejected as an option since it is seen to constitute a claim on co-membership which no participant may want. Finally, some members of multilingual communities may themselves be monolingual and so unable to code-switch or understand code-switching.

I will first consider some concrete cases where code-switching is used in ingroup and intergroup interactions, and in situations of certainty and uncertainty. The analysis of these cases will be used to elucidate the ways in which code-switching may create ambiguity and so achieve stylistic, conversation management and social effects. I will then build on these cases to hypothesize what factors might predict the presence or absence of code-switching in multilingual communities. The data which I will discuss here are drawn from two studies, one a study of the process of language shift from English to French in a large company in Montreal, the second a study of the social meaning of French and English for students enrolled in a French-language minority (i.e. NOT immersion) elementary school in Toronto.

The Montreal study is a case of breakdown of old conventions of interaction, a case of social, economic and political change producing changes in the basis of ethnic organization, in the basis of the boundary between English and French (details of the background can be found in Heller et al. 1982, Heller 1982 and Clift

and Arnopoulos 1979). Private enterprise was (and is) the frontier of change in Quebec, the arena in which change in ethnic boundaries is being carried out. The company studied here is typical of the change in that, while it used to be an English business with anglophone management and francophone labour, at the time of the study many anglophone mangers had been transferred to branches in other Canadian provinces or had retired. They were being replaced by young francophones. Further, the new language law, supporting the general social movement, had decreed that the language of work be French.

Two patterns of code-switching stand out in this company. The first is a cross-over effect of the use of code-switched routines, especially opening and closing routines. Here, it seemed that the older francophones in low management positions who had worked for the company for a long time, tended to use English routines in ingroup conversation, while anglophones used French routines in both ingroup and intergroup interaction (the base language for most intergroup interaction being English unless the anglophones were in the minority). Younger francophones never used English routines in ingroup interaction, although they sometimes used English routines as a deference strategy with structurally superior anglophones (thus the direction of asymmetry in group relations can be offset by the opposite direction in personal relations).

6. English routines used in ingroup interaction by older francophones:

F	M:	bonjour Mme Grégoire comment allez-vous?	'hello . . . how are you?'
F	G:	très bien merci et vous?	'very well thank you and you?'
F	M:	très bien merci	'very well thank you'
*E	G:	*good*	
F	M:	bonjour	'goodbye'
F	G:	bonjour	'goodbye'

7. French routines used by anglophones in intergroup interaction; openings:

*F	Bob:	bonjour ma fleur comment ça va?	'hello my flower how is it going?'

F	Denise:	bonjour monsieur MacDonald bien et vous?	'hello mister MacDonald well and you?'
F	Bob:	ça va merci	'fine thanks'
E	Denise:	*well you won't say that when I (unint) you this*	

Also: Bonjour Hélène *how's the suntan*?
Bonjour tout le monde *how's everything*?
Bonjour *good morning* tout le monde!

8. French routines used by anglophones in intergroup interaction; closings:

E:	Anne:	*you need the par number (unint)*	
E:	Bob:	*(unint) that's the par number there two eight nine eight*	
E:	Anne:	*ah okay I have no choice okay (sighs)*	
*F:	Bob:	tragique	'tragic'
E:	Anne:	tragique hein? (unint)	'tragic eh?'
F:	Bob:	quel numéro? *oh that's the work order number*	'what number? . . . '
F:	Anne:	oui okay	'yes okay'
F:	Bob:	okay mon amie?	'okay my friend?'
E:	Anne:	*thank you*	
*F:	Bob:	merci	'thank you'

9. French routines used by anglophones in ingroup interactions; closings:

E	M:	*so I'll come back at about two o'clock?*
*F	H:	parfait c'est bien

10. English routine used by young francophones with older anglophone boss; ethnic status offset by hierarchical status within the company:

*E	Denis:	*sure you don't want a seat before you look at this?*	
E	Mgr.:	*not gonna do any good to sit ah*	
*F	Denis:	hm nous sommes à un et demi icitte	'hm we're at one and a half here'
F	Mgr:	toute la bière qu'ils ont pris ils ont mis ça dans les (unint)	'all the beer that they took they put that in the (unint)'

My observations in other domains lead me to believe that there are two new phenomena here: the use of French routines by anglophones in ingroup interaction, and the absence of English routines by younger francophones, in ingroup or intergroup interaction. Why is this happening? In this company it is the use of French that now legitimates one's presence, whereas until very recently the language of power in private enterprise was English. Francophones thus have an interest in defining themselves as such. To use English is to evoke the conventions of the old regime when the English were in power. These code-switching routines seem to symbolize a claim to the right of the speaker to participate in situations defined by the use of the other language, without necessitating or entailing a claim on the part of the speaker to that identity (the reasons anglophones do not wish to pass can be attributed to the continued advantages of being English in the North American business world). By violating the expectation that a speaker will choose a language in accordance with his or her identity he or she manages to claim both identities at the same time (or neither). Since that is impossible, another interpretation is necessitated, namely, that it is not the identity that matters but rather the rights and obligations that constitute that identity. By code-switching in this way the speaker signals a claim on some of the rights and obligations attached to the roles in question, but not all of them. This enables a speaker to do things he or she would otherwise not be able to do: in the case of this company gain access to situations to which the criterion of access is ability to speak French, without actually having to be French. By the same token it is possible to avoid some of the responsibilities of categorical language choice through this kind of code-switching.

This is notably the case with a small group of anglophones who have been recently recruited. Not only did they accept their jobs in the awareness of (and in some ways desirous of) the condition that they work in French, they themselves are not part of the long-established Montreal anglophone community and so have nothing invested in the local ethnolinguistic struggle. They came from other provinces, several are married to francophones, and one was actually of francophone origin although he had lost the language. Thus they need to avoid the categorical alignment with one group or the other that categorical language choice would represent. For this reason I call them "marginals". For them code-switching represents a way of maintaining access to both networks without having to take on the responsibilities associated with full membership in one or the other (such as commitment to a career in Quebec or geographical career mobility).

11. Two marginals use code-switching with each other:

F	Charles:	bonjour Henri	'hello Henri'
F	Henry:	bonjour	'hello'
F	Charles:	comment ça va?	'how's it going?'
F	Henry:	bien toi?	'fine you?'
F	Charles:	ça va bien j'ai une question pour toi	'it's going fine I have a question for you'
F	Henry:	oui?	'yes'
*E	Charles:	*what are the specs for . . .*	

Another outstanding pattern of code-switching is that which occurs in intergroup interaction at the management level, the frontier of change. Here, such official interactions as department meetings are supposed to occur in French. However, some young newly promoted francophones find themselves presiding over meetings where there are older anglophones, who were originally in line for promotion but who were blocked because they do not speak French, and older francophones who are used to working in English. There are often also other young francophones present. What to do? If the francophones only speak French they will seem hostile to the anglophones, since they will have deliberately erected a language barrier which will prevent anglophones from participating (and everyone knows that the francophones are able to speak English). Yet the francophones like these anglophones, they are friends; furthermore, they consider themselves to be nice people who would never deliberately be nasty to somebody else. Finally, they recognize their need for the expertise and experience that the anglophones have; the anglophones are, after all, generally senior to these young francophones (and this adds the dimension of respect for elders to the picture). If the francophones speak only English, however, their legitimacy is undermined: their rapid

promotion was based not only on their technical ability but also on the principle of francophone control of private enterprise. Answer: code-switch, and thereby do neither, permitting the accomplishment of the task at hand (to take care of the order of business), the management of personal relations (maintaining good relationships with anglophones) and the maintenance of the legitimacy of one's status as a francophone manager. Similarly, the anglophones must legitimate their presence through some use of French.

12. Albert, the young new francophone manager, uses English to talk to Bob, an anglophone who is junior in rank to Albert but his senior in age and experience, and French to open the meeting:

E	Albert:	*he would have got*	
E	Bob:	*he's twenty-one years of age*	
E	Albert:	*yeah twenty-one years of age*	
*E		(pause) bon mais vous pouvez fermer la porte c'est tout ce qu'on va avoir aujourd' hui	'good but you can close the door that's all we're going to have today'

13. Claude, an older francophone used to working in English, reads his report in English, but directs comments on the report in French to Albert:

Claude: oui uh vacation staff Roland Masse George Kovacs cette seminare la semaine prochaine Roland Masse George Kovacs *again* uh uh temp Denis Blais *he's on the lubrication survey* Leo Charrette uh *working on the expense budget but he's going off for two weeks hein?* il prend deux semaines de vacances ça je l'avais donné ça y a un bout de temps
'eh? he's taking two week's vacation that I gave that a while ago'

14. Bob uses French routines or short phrases in otherwise English episodes:

a)	E	Albert:	*oh Monday afternoon we have a meeting with Daniel Vincent*	
	E	Bob:	*what time is it?*	
		Albert:	*uh*	
	E	Claude:	*right signs*	
	F	Albert:	douze heures	'twelve o'clock'
	E		*signs*	
	*F	Bob:	quelle place	'what place?'
	E	Albert:	*I think it's my office*	
b)	E	Albert:	*uh it's like passing the buck to somebody but uh (laughs) can you spend some time some time with Pierre (unint) Monday it could be a good thing*	
	*F	Bob:	avec plaisir	'with pleasure'

It is noteworthy that Bob can even use code-switching to defuse an argument between Claude and Albert:

15. Bob uses code-switching to de-escalate an argument between Claude and Albert in which he has been called in to arbitrate:

E	Bob:	*okay good but I think I'm just not sure if Claude I got the complete message clearly as I understand it Albert will look for from you in the hand-written form the one you'll pass over to him will have breakdowns as opposed to your full sheet going to him*	
E	Claude:	*no I don't need to prepare that because I already got it*	
E	Bob:	*okay good*	
E	Claude:	*I'm only summarizing*	
*F	Bob:	*mm fine* fini?	'finished?'
*F	Claude:	vendu	'sold'
(pause)			
E	Albert:	*do you see that? Gaz Naturel? increase in price?*	

In the meeting discussed here there was a fourth person present, a young francophone who had no personal ties to anyone in the group, and who occupied a position in which the use of English was largely unnecessary. He never spoke English during the meeting: there was no reason for him to do so, his position with respect to the French/English boundary being such that his distance from it rendered code-switching meaningless. Aside from this fourth person, code-switching in this situation accomplishes the ambigu-

ity of not choosing frames of reference. Once the participants use code-switching to neutralize the tension between French and English, they can all participate in the meeting. Further, code-switching becomes available as a conversation management device (Albert uses English to include Bob, Bob uses French to enter the conversation, Claude uses French to gain his boss' ear) and as a device for managing interpresonal relations (Bob uses French to make peace between Claude and Albert).

The Toronto situation is similar to that of the marginals in the Montreal company. Here are a group of students in Grades 7 and 8 in an elementary school in anglophone Toronto established for the purpose of teaching francophone children in their language, and for the purpose of maintaining French language and culture in Ontario (Choquette 1975; Mougeon and Heller 1986). The presence of students at such a school can be legitimized only by the use of French as a symbol of French ethnic identity. The school insists explicitly, regularly and vocally on the use of French on school grounds. However, for reasons too lengthy to go into detail about here (cf. Heller 1984), the school population is not exclusively francophone. Only 30% of the families have only French as a mother tongue (and in many French is not necessarily the regular language of communication). 52% claim between two and four mother tongues. Further, the students are bussed to school from all over the western half of Toronto: when they go home in the afternoon they play not with their schoolmates but with the English- or Italian-speaking children on the block. At least half of their lives is conducted in English. These students are caught at school between the English and French halves of their lives in a situation that demands the use of French. But for the students to do so would be to make a claim regarding their social identity that some of them CANNOT make and that many of them do not want to make. This is reflected in their patterns of language choice and in their use of code-switching.

There are some students who may attempt to alter their choice of language depending on the interlocutor, but who never code-switch. These are students who do not speak the other language well enough to code-switch (some are francophone and some are anglophone), and/or who are so sure of their identity that code-switching is meaningless for them (most of these are francophones

from Quebec who view their stay in Toronto, sometimes realistically and sometimes not, as temporary). The others, whether French-dominant or English-dominant, are caught between two identities. Their French identity, derived from school and sometimes from home, pulls them in one direction, while their English (and other) identity, derived from neighbourhood and sometimes from home, pull them in another. Most of the students speak English to each other at school, although they do some code-switching, and they speak French in the presence of and to their teachers. Their use of code-switching is limited to a few situations, all of them in the presence of teacher(s) AND classmates, and so usually in the classroom. For example, in formal presentations in class side comments will often be in English (e.g. "gimme a minute", "um, okay", "I'm getting there"; cf. also Valdés 1981: 84 and Zentella 1981: 123). Students speaking in French to teachers in front of other students may make side comments in English:

16. A student from another class comes to the door and asks the teacher for some sports equipment:

Student: uh monsieur je m'excuse de vous déranger *I know I better be* mais est-ce que je pourrais avoir le poids rond?
(uh sir I'm sorry to disturb you . . . but may I have the round weight?)

Students will also code-switch with teachers or to other students in the presence of teachers:

17. One student explaining to another how a science competition is being run (in the classroom):

Yes but they're not all aussi bien, *they're not all at the same* niveau *(. . . . . equally good . . . . . level)*

18. Another student makes a suggestion to the teacher regarding individual student speeches at graduation:

Student:	monsieur, elle peut dire par exemple "Eh, Marie, avez-vous entendu *the latest gossip*?"	'sir she could say for example "eh, Marie, have you heard . . ."'

It seems that code-switching here is a refusal to commit oneself to all the obligations of being French, while maintaining one's right to be at this school. It is a way of mediating the conflicting pressures felt by these students from different parts of their social network, and of maintaining access to both. It only matters, however, in the presence of representatives of conflicting groups, or in situations where access to both has to be maintained, otherwise categorical language choice is not dangerous.

In each of these cases – in the Montreal company and the Toronto school – it is possible to predict where code-switching occurs on the basis of an understanding of the nature and dynamic of the language boundary involved. There are going to be certain people structurally involved at the boundary who are likely to be bilingual and for whom the creation of ambiguity through code-switching is likely to be a useful thing. The boundary may be stable or in transition, but it is there. The exact nature and meaning of code-switching is only derivable from an understanding of the larger social context and of the exact nature of the social situation and the social relationships involved. Since these are not always clear, the meaning of a code-switch may be ambiguous itself (or rather, the meaning is always ambiguous but it is usually possible to decide on a meaning). The interpretive choice interlocutors make can then in turn serve to define the relationship and the identity of the interlocutors. If interlocutors share background knowledge then narrowing down the options of what code-switching might mean is less tricky; where interlocutors do not share this knowledge the code-switching can actually backfire, when each interlocutor chooses a different possible meaning, or when it is not clear which of many possible meanings is dominant. For example, I have participated in several such tricky situations. In one case, a francophone academic whom I have known for years, my senior in age and rank, was discussing with me (in French) in a collegial way a paper he was writing for a conference. After complaining at length about how hard it was to get it done by the deadline, he said: "C'est très très difficile" with an English accent (sej ɪɹej ɪɹej difisijʌl). I had a choice between two different interpretations. If I saw the context as ingroup, then he was probably distancing himself from his academic role, in effect, making fun of himself for taking these silly papers so seriously. If, however, I took the context as intergroup, then I could only interpret the switch as making fun of *me*, that is, teasing me that I speak French with an English accent. In another case, I found myself in a long-term working relationship with a francophone woman of about my age and status who frequently code-switched. Again the interpretation of the code-switch as solidary or distancing depending entirely on whether *I* thought *she* thought we were co-members of a group, and I had no idea which context operated.

In Barcelona (see Woolard, this volume) there is another type of tricky situation. There, two contexts always operate: the Castilian federal context and the Catalan regional/provincial context. To code-switch is to violate one or the other frame of reference, one directly contradictory to the other: the problem is that often one has no way of knowing which it is that is operating.

In all these cases code-switching cannot operate to refuse to choose: we need to know which the relevant frame is, or which the two *are* that are in competition. In Barcelona the two exist at all times, and somehow the balance must be maintained between them. The code-switching will be available at the boundary, but often there are danger zones which may block the use of code-switching. Code-switching can backfire if interlocutors do not share frames of reference, since it is only on the basis of shared background knowledge that strategies are successfully deployed. Lack of shared knowledge may arise because interlocutors are unsure of their relationship to each other (and this is important, since power relations at that level can offset power relations at higher levels, cf. example 10). Lack of shared knowledge can also arise from the constant existence of mutually contradictory frames of reference, between which it is both impossible to choose and to mediate, at least for people with clearly defined group memberships in contact with each other.

Thus code-switching works where there is ambiguity to be created or exploited in a situation where participants agree as to what the ambiguity is. It permits people to say and do, indeed to *be*, two or more things where normally a choice is expected. It allows people to take refuge in the voice of the other, in order to do or say things that normally they would not be able to get away with. Or it allows them to assert their own voice to claim new roles, new rights and obligations.

By appealing to the notions of rights and obligations and of ambiguity of frame of reference it has been possible to form a general concept of the strategic use of code-switching in which stylistic, conversation management and social significance effects can all be seen to be embedded in one another. It is necessary to situate code-switching at the level of face-to-face interaction in order to accomplish this, since that is where the many levels of social relations, the many levels of context, are defined and acted out, and so it is there that it becomes possible to exploit this strategic resource, in the hope, of course, that it doesn't blow up in one's face.

Notes

1. This paper is based on two studies. The first was conducted in Montreal in 1979–1980, and was funded by the Ministry of Cultural Development, Government of Quebec, and by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The second was conducted in Toronto in 1983, through a post-doctoral fellowship at the Modern Language Centre, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, as part of the Development of Bilingual Proficiency Project (J. P. B. Allen, J. Cummins, R. Mougeon and M. Swain, principal investigators; funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada). I gratefully acknowledge this support. The content of the paper, of course, does not necessarily reflect the views of the funding agencies or of the principal investigators of the Development of Bilingual Proficiency Project.

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2. "Choice of styles or languages is seen as a strategy on the part of speakers, trying, for instance, to present themselves as individuals with particular socially-defined qualities, or, as another example, trying to convey a particular attitude or impression concerning a topic of conversation" (Gal 1979: 91).

   "... while conversational language switching, like style-shifting, is used for expressing momentary intents in an interaction, the invariable choice of one language conveys the speaker's claim to a social identity" (Gal 1979: 129).

"The ultimate semantic effect of the message ... derives from a complex interpretive process in which the code juxtaposition is in turn evaluated in relation to the propositional content of component sentences and to speakers' background knowledge, social presuppositions and contextual constraints" (Gumperz 1982b: 87).

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