

How Emotions Affect Code-switching

ემოციების გავლენა კოდების გადართვაზე

აისელ ისმაილოვა

თბილისის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტი

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აბსტრაქტი

სტატიის მიზანია გამოიკვლიოს თუ როგორ ზემოქმედებს ემოციები კოდების გადართვაზე ბილინგვურ და მულტილინგვურ მეტყველებაში. აღნიშნული მიზნისთვის ჩატარდა ონლაინ გამოკითხვა, შევისწავლეთ თუ რა სიხშირით და რა მიზეზების გამო გადადიან ბილინგვი და მულტილინგვი ინდივიდები ერთი ენიდან მეორეზე. 46 მონაწილის მონაცემებზე დაყრდნობით, გამოკითხვის შედეგები აჩვენებს, რომ მათგან 63% (n=29) ყოველდღიურ ცხოვრებაში იყენებს კოდების გადართვას ძირითადად სამსახურში, უნივერსიტეტში, სახლში ან მეგობრებთან ურთიერთობისას. შედეგები ასევე მიუთითებს, რომ ადამიანების უმეტესობა ბრაზის გამოხატვისას მშობლიურ ენაზე გადადის. დამატებით, მონაწილეებმა აღნიშნეს, რომ ძლიერი ემოციების გამოხატვის დროს მშობლიური ენიდან ინგლისურზე გადადიან. ეს კვლევა აჩვენებს კავშირს კოდების გადართვასა და ემოციებს შორის.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: კოდების გადართვა, ემოციები, ბილინგვური, მულტილინგვური

Keywords: code switching, emotions, bilingual, multilingual

1. Introduction

The term code-switching refers to the alternation between two or more languages during a single conversation. Bilingual and multilingual speakers systematically shift between languages in everyday situations, such as at home, work, school or in communication with friends. Code-switching entails inclusion of a single word or phrase, from one language to another, or it may extend to the switching entirely to the second language (Poplack, 1980).

Emotions are one of the factors that causes a person to code-switch, it's a relatively underexplored and important dimension. Structural models show how and where switching occurs but they do not entirely demonstrate why speakers switch from one language to another in emotionally charged situations.

In addition, code-switching is deeply connected with culture and identity. The research conducted by Neeff (1999) illustrates that bilingual speakers may switch languages when discussing sensitive or intimate topics. This behavior suggests that the native language carries stronger emotional connotations, second language on the other hand creates an emotional distance.

The aim of this study is to explore the relationship between code-switching and emotions among bilingual and multilingual speakers. More specifically, this study examines whether certain emotional states such as anger, excitement and happiness trigger code-switching processes and why this happens. By analyzing participants' self-reported experiences, this research provides a novel perspective by proving that code-switching serves as a tool for navigating emotional intensities, rather than just an automatic linguistic habit.

2. Theoretical framework

Code-switching means alternation between two or more languages in communication by bilingual or multilingual speakers, often without changing the topic. It can occur within sentences, phrases or even single words. During the code-switching process, bilingual and multilingual speakers often switch one word or phrase from one language to another while primarily speaking in one language (Poplack, 2001).

There is an example of code-switching from Poplack (1980), in which the primary language is English and the embedded language is Spanish:

- *"But I wanted to fight her con los puños, you know"* (But i wanted to fight her with my fists, you know) (p.596).

Poplack (1980) also provides an example where primary language is Spanish and the embedded language is English:

- *"siempre está promising cosas"* (He is always promising things) (p.596).

While structural approaches established an important foundation for the study of code-switching, later scholars expanded the focus to include social and pragmatic patterns. Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model (1993) demonstrates that code-switching is a socially meaningful choice made by bilingual and multilingual speakers who are aware of the norms that govern language use in each context. One language is typically the unmarked, expected option, while the second language functions as a marked choice that carries an additional social meaning.

In addition, the relationship between language, thought and emotions can be explored through the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Whorf (1956) proposed two central ideas: linguistic determinism, which claims that language determines thought and linguistic relativity, which suggests that language influences the way individuals perceive and understand the world. The weaker version of linguistic relativity remains influential, while the strong deterministic version is often criticized. From this perspective, bilingual and multilingual speakers may associate different emotional, cultural or cognitive frameworks with each language, which can influence their language choice in specific situations.

Empirical support for the emotional dimension of bilingual language use can be found in studies on bilingualism and emotion. The Bilingualism and Emotion Questionnaire (BEQ), developed by Dewaele and Pavlenko (2001–2003), examined whether bilingual speakers feel different when using different languages. Pavlenko's (2006) analysis of responses from over 1,000 participants revealed that many bilinguals perceive their first language as more "real" or emotionally authentic, while later-learned languages may feel more detached or artificial. This finding suggests that speakers may prefer their native language when expressing intense emotions such as anger, fear, or vulnerability.

Similarly, research on bilinguals' emotional language use also indicates that speakers may switch to a second language when discussing intimate or sensitive topics. Necef (1999) observed that young and middle-aged Turks living in Europe often shifted from Turkish to Danish when speaking about love, sexuality, or intimacy. In his study, which included interviews with 20 second-generation Turks and informal conversations with around 50 others, participants frequently used Danish when asked personal questions about their romantic or sexual lives, even when the conversation initially started in Turkish. According to this research, using a second language can create emotional distance, making it easier for speakers to discuss topics that might feel too intense or personal in their native language.

Cultural and lexical factors also contribute to emotionally motivated code-switching. Robinson and Altarriba (2014) argue that emotional concepts are often culture-specific, and some languages lack direct equivalents for certain emotional terms. Altarriba (2003) notes that while English contains many affective terms, other languages may have significantly fewer, which can prompt bilingual speakers to switch languages to express emotionally charged situations more precisely.

In conclusion, code-switching is a multifaceted phenomenon that expands beyond grammatical or structural restrictions. While early research emphasized syntactic and morphological rules, contemporary studies highlight the emotional factors influencing language choice. Theoretical models, such as Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model, demonstrate that bilinguals make deliberate linguistic choices to convey social meaning and navigate contextual expectations. At the same time, empirical research on bilingual emotion, including the BEQ and ethnographic studies like Necef (1999) shows that speakers deliberately use their first or second language to regulate emotional intensity. These findings collectively suggest that code-switching reflects a dynamic interplay between language, cognition, and emotion emphasizing its role as both a social and psychological strategy rather than merely a linguistic occurrence.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore the relationship between emotions and code-switching among bilingual and multilingual speakers. Qualitative responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, where recurring patterns related to emotional

triggers, language preference, and contextual usage were identified and categorized. Data were collected through an online questionnaire consisting of 19 questions.

The questionnaire included both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions gathered demographic and linguistic information, such as participants' native language, additional languages spoken, and the frequency of code-switching in everyday communication, while open-ended questions allowed participants to describe their personal experiences with language switching in emotionally charged situations.

46 of the participants, 67.4% (n=31) were aged between 20 and 22 years and were primarily students. The questionnaire was created and administered via Google Forms. Participants were selected using convenience sampling through online distribution among accessible university students. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, formal statistical reliability testing (such as Cronbach's alpha) was not conducted. The validity of the instrument relies on face validity and thematic depth of the participant narratives.

The research addresses the following questions:

1. In which situations do bilingual and multilingual speakers tend to code-switch?
2. Which language do speakers prefer when expressing emotions such as anger, excitement or humor?
3. What emotions are harder to convey in another language?
4. For what reason do bilingual and multilingual speakers usually code-switch?

4. Results

The results indicate that emotions play a crucial role in code-switching behavior among bilingual and multilingual speakers. 69,6% (n=32) of the participants reported that they tend to code-switch when experiencing strong emotions.

One of the most common patterns identified in the responses was the use of the native language when expressing anger. In closed-ended questions, 84,4% (n=38) of participants selected anger as the emotion that causes them to switch to their native language.

Another recurring pattern was the use of English in situations involving excitement, humor, or sarcasm. 57,8% (n=26) of the participants noted that they tend to switch to English in humorous or sarcastic situations, suggesting that certain expressions may sound more culturally appropriate in English. One participant specifically noted:

1. *"I switched to English because it seemed more sarcastic in English than in Georgian."*

This suggests that speakers may attempt to create psychological distance from the weight of sarcasm. This finding may be interpreted through The Bilingualism and Emotion Questionnaire (BEQ), developed by Dewaele and Pavlenko (2001–2003), which examined whether bilingual speakers feel different when using different languages. Pavlenko's (2006) analysis of responses from over 1,000 participants revealed that many bilinguals perceive their

first language as more “real” or emotionally authentic, while later-learned languages may feel more detached or artificial.

Regarding the influence of positive emotions, another respondent explained:

2. *“The emotion that makes me switch languages the most is excitement. When I feel excited, I speak faster and sometimes use English words without thinking. I do this because English helps me express my feelings more easily and naturally.”*

This pattern divides multilingual speakers’ language use: they switch to their native language when expressing strong emotions like anger, and to English when expressing humor or excitement.

The participants also reported switching languages when they could not recall a specific word in one language. In these cases, speakers often switched to another language that allowed them to express the concept more clearly.

3. *“Whenever I do not remember a word in my native language, I switch to English”*

Since some languages lack specific terms, bilinguals switch to another language to express their feelings or situations more clearly. In addition, bilingual and multilingual speakers often think in different languages, which can sometimes lead to confusion, causing them to forget one word in one language while remembering it in another.

These empirical observations are strongly supported by existing literature on bilingual emotional expression. Robinson and Altarriba (2014) argue that emotional concepts are often deeply culture-specific, meaning that direct lexical equivalents do not always exist across different languages. Similarly, Altarriba (2003) notes that while English possesses a highly dense vocabulary of affective terms, other languages may have significantly fewer.

Finally, majority of participants indicated that code-switching frequently occurs in specific social environments, particularly when interacting with friends, classmates, or in university settings. This environmental influence was summarized by one participant:

4. *“In everyday life I use my native language, when I go out I speak Georgian, at university I need to use English, and it’s also useful when searching for some online sources.”*

This response reveals a clear compartmentalization of the speaker's life, where different languages are assigned to specific social environments, the native language for the private life and English/Georgian for the public and academic lives.

5. Discussions

The findings of this study suggest that emotional context strongly influences language choice among bilingual and multilingual speakers. One of the most notable results is the preference for using the native language when expressing anger. This finding is consistent with the Bilingualism and Emotion Questionnaire (BEQ) conducted by Dewaele and Pavlenko (2001–2003), which found that bilingual speakers often perceive their native language as more

emotionally authentic, while a second language may sometimes feel less emotionally intense or more artificial.

In contrast, the results show that excitement and humor often lead participants to switch to English. Some participants specifically mentioned that sarcastic or humorous expressions can sound more natural in English than in their native language.

Another important factor identified in responses is the role of lexical gaps between languages. Participants frequently reported switching languages when they could not recall a particular word or when a concept was easier to express in another language. This observation supports the findings of Robinson and Altarriba (2014), who argue that emotional concepts are often culturally specific and may not always have exact equivalents across languages.

Research by Altarriba (2003) further demonstrates that emotional vocabulary varies significantly between languages. For example, English contains a large number of affective terms, while some languages have a more limited emotional lexicon.

Finally, the responses highlight the importance of social context in code-switching behavior. According to the questionnaire, language switching occurs most frequently when interacting with friends or classmates, suggesting that code-switching can function as a social and communicative strategy that helps speakers navigate multilingual environments.

Overall, the findings suggest that code-switching is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also an emotional and social strategy used by multilingual speakers to express feelings, adapt to different contexts, and communicate more effectively.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that code-switching among bilingual and multilingual speakers is influenced by emotional states, lexical access, and social context.

Specifically, the findings indicate that high-intensity negative emotions, such as anger, are more frequently associated with native language use, while socio-emotional states like excitement and humor are more commonly linked to second-language use, particularly English.

This finding is consistent with the Bilingualism and Emotion Questionnaire (BEQ) conducted by Dewaele and Pavlenko (2001–2003), which found that bilingual speakers often perceive their native language as more emotionally authentic, while a second language may sometimes feel less emotionally intense or more artificial.

Rather than being a purely structural breakdown, code-switching operates as a strategic tool for emotional expression and communication management among young adults.

Finally, due to the exploratory nature of this sample, future research should include larger and more demographically diverse populations to improve generalizability and further map the cultural and cognitive dimensions of bilingual language use.

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ავტორის შესახებ

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