Code-switching for a purpose: Focus on pre-school Malaysian children

KAREN KOW YIP CHENG

Abstract
In this study the term code-switching is defined as the use of two or more linguistic varieties in the same conversation inclusive of dialect changes and style changes. These changes can occur at any point in the sentence, and they may occur within the sentence or between sentences. The term code-switching here encompasses the strategy of transfer (O’Malley and Chamot 1990), language switch (Tarone 1977) and code-switching (Faerch and Kasper 1983). In other words, the term code-switching in this study is defined in a much wider sense of its conventional meaning. Gumperz (1982) talks of a discourse function of code-switching, that is, the personalization function. Under this function a speaker plays upon the connotations of a ‘we code’ to create conversational effect. In other words, the speaker is seen to manipulate or to create a desired meaning through code-switching. In this study, code-switching is seen as a strategy employed by the respondents for a purpose. Hence this study sets out to explore the functions fulfilled by this strategy when used by Malaysian pre-school children. A total of sixty respondents were selected for this study. Of the sixty respondents twenty-eight were Chinese and thirty-two were Malay. The breakdown in terms of sex was twenty-five females and thirty-five males, distributed in the following manner according to age, fourteen aged four, twenty-four aged five and twenty-two aged six.

Code-switching: A definition
Gumperz (1982: 97) defines code-switching as a discourse phenomenon in which speakers rely on juxtaposition of grammatically distinct subsystems to generate conversational inferences. Conversational code-switching is defined by Gumperz (1982) as a situation when a speaker may switch codes, i.e., varieties, within a single sentence, and may even do so several times. One gets the impression that the aim is simply to produce
instances of the two varieties in a somewhat equal proportion. This balance may be achieved by expressing one sentence in one variety and the next one in the other, and so on, but it is equally possible for the two varieties to be used in different parts of a single sentence. Gumperz further differentiates between situational switches and metaphoric switches where switches are basically a symbol of the relationship being acted out between the parties regardless of the situation they are in.

In this paper the term ‘code-switching’ is taken to encompass a wider definition than the traditional one. Communication strategies, e.g., transfer and literal translation, are seen as forms of code-switching. O’Malley and Chamot (1990), among their cognitive strategies, do not talk about code-switching but transfer. Transfer is defined as a strategy that helps language learning through previous knowledge. Here transfer appears to operate on a syntactic level, i.e., transfer of rules of grammar. ‘If they’re talking about something I have already learnt (in Spanish), all I have to do is remember the information and try to put it into English’ (1990: 115). This appears to be similar to a strategy that Tarone (1977) talks about under communication strategies, i.e., conscious transfer. Tarone points out that transfer helps the participants in two ways, i.e., literal translation and language switch. Tarone (1977) gives an example of literal translation when a German-speaking student says ‘make the door shut’ rather than ‘shut the door’. Language switch, on the other hand, is characterized by the example ‘That’s a nice tirtil’ (‘caterpillar’).

Likewise Faerch and Kasper (1983) talk about the non-cooperative achievement strategies of code-switching and foreignizing. Code-switching is characterized by the example ‘Do you want to have some ah Zinsen?’ (German word for ‘interest’). Foreignizing is equivalent to literal translation, e.g., ‘green things’ for ‘vegetables’, which is derived from the Danish expression grontsager.

As Kellerman (1991: 146) points out, what one has is a luxuriant jungle of names and strategies. To cut to the chase and to avoid this battle of terminology in this study the term code-switching is defined as the use of two or more linguistic varieties in the same conversation inclusive of dialect changes and style changes. These changes can occur at any point in the sentence, and they may occur within the sentence or between sentences. In other words, the term code-switching here encompasses the strategy of transfer (O’Malley and Chamot 1990), language switch (Tarone 1977) and code-switching (Faerch and Kasper 1983).

Further, under the umbrella of code-switching, the strategy of literal translation as defined by Tarone (1977), or foreignizing as defined by Faerch and Kasper (1983), is also discussed in this study. Literal translation/foreignizing may be seen as code-switching on the syntactic level, i.e., where the sentence structure and syntax of the mother language are
transferred into the L2. Myers-Scotton (1977: 5) points out that code-switching ‘may be anything from genetically unrelated languages to two styles of the same language’. An important aspect to be considered in this form of code-switching is the effectiveness of this strategy in conveying meaning.

The rationale for this ‘extended’ definition of code-switching in this study is to examine the ways in which this strategy is employed by preschool Malaysian children in the name of communication. The focus is thus on how the strategy is used and the effectiveness of use of this extended code-switching strategy.

**The functions and meaning of code-switching**

Gumperz (1982) talks of a discourse function of code-switching, i.e., the personalization function. Under this function a speaker plays upon the connotations of a ‘we-code’ to create a conversational effect. Code-switching may therefore be seen as fulfilling the relational and referential functions of language. Likewise in accordance with Halliday’s (1975) functions of language, code-switching may be seen as fulfilling the interpersonal function, i.e., language as a mediator of role. In other words, it is the use of language to act as a mediator between self and other participants in the communication situation.

In fulfilling the relational and referential functions above, code-switching is seen to convey both social and linguistic meanings. In other words, the speaker is seen to manipulate or to create a desired meaning through code-switching. Examples of the situations created to convey meaning are

- to appeal to the literate
- to appeal to the illiterate
- to convey a more exact meaning
- to ease communication, i.e., utilizing the shortest and the easiest route
- to negotiate with greater authority
- to capture attention, i.e., stylistic, emphatic, emotional
- to reiterate a point
- to communicate more effectively
- to identify with a particular group
- to close the status gap
- to establish goodwill and support

These are but a list of possible functions and meanings fulfilled by code-switching.
Much work has been done on code-switching in Malaysia, among them Morais (1991), David (1996), David (2001), Chng-Lee (1995), Lee Chen (1991) and Kuang (2002). Nevertheless, of greater importance in this study is the use of code-switching among young Malaysian children aged between four and six, on which little research has been carried out.

**Conditions favorable for code-switching**

It is possible to identify conditions which are favorable for code-switching and ten such conditions are listed below:

- lack of one word in either language;
- some activities have only been experienced in one of the languages;
- some concepts are easier to express in one of the languages;
- some words are easier, more distinguishable and easier to use in one of the languages;
- a misunderstanding has to be clarified;
- one wishes to create a certain communication effect;
- one continues to speak the language latest used because of the trigger effect;
- one wants to make a point;
- one wishes to express group solidarity;
- one wishes to exclude another person from the dialog.

From the list above, it may be deduced that the conditions which favor code-switching also determine the function that the strategy fulfills. For example, when a respondent who lacks a word in English due to limited vocabulary code-switches, the function of the strategy, then, is to overcome the language barrier to meaning-making. Likewise, in a condition where the respondent wants to express group solidarity, code-switching may be employed. The function of the switch in this case is to establish goodwill and rapport (also see Kow 2000; David 1999; Morais 1991; Zuraidah 2003). Any research on code-switching in Malaysia has to be seen in the light of the variety of English used in this country, i.e., Malaysian English.

**A brief look at Malaysian English**

A term which is also used to refer to the variety of English spoken in Malaysia is Malaysian English, i.e., a variety of English with formal features that are different from those of established varieties. Kachru (1985: 211) uses the term ‘institutionalized second language’ variety for
the variety of English employed in Malaysia. He defines this variety as one that has a long history of acculturation in new cultural and geographical contexts and has a large range of functions in the local educational, administrative, and legal systems. As a result of such uses the variety has developed nativized discourse and style types, and functionally determined sublanguages or registers, and is used as a linguistic vehicle for creating writing in various genres.

Malaysian English can thus be viewed as a variety that has distinctive phonological, syntactic, and lexical properties (see Baskaran 1987). Further, from Kachru’s point of view, it can also be seen as one that serves a large range of functions through acculturation. In this study it can be seen that the use of the code-switching strategy, e.g., the use of the particle *lah*, makes it necessary for us to consider the variety of English used in Malaysia, i.e., Malaysian English. The exploration of the functions and meanings of this switch is crucial in discovering whether the strategy serves a purpose or whether it is a hindrance to effective communication.

Profile of subjects of study

For the purpose of this study a total of thirty groups, each group comprising two respondents, was selected. Thus a total of sixty respondents were studied. The respondents, aged four to six, comprised both male and female respondents. A breakdown of the age, sex, race, and social-economic status of the respondents is presented in Table 1 below. Table 2 gives the breakdown according to gender and ethnic groups:

Table 1. Profile of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>No. of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>C</td>
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<td>ML</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>ML</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>ML</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>ML</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>ML</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Breakdown according to gender and ethnic groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>SEX</th>
<th>RACE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Responds</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key:
- M = MALE
- F = FEMALE
- C = CHINESE
- ML = MALAY

Methodology

While meaning is the most important aspect of child language, it is also the most difficult to study and describe. If one is able to see how children’s minds work in decoding words, then one will know how children learn to mean. Since this is as yet impossible, one can only present a theory of how children learn to mean through an analysis of data collected using an acceptable methodology.

In order to study the code-switching strategies employed by Malaysian children, a total of three tasks were devised. The first task was one in which the respondents were required to listen to a reading of the nursery rhyme ‘Humpty Dumpty’. Next they were required to recite the rhyme to the researcher. Later, after having recited the rhyme, they were required to answer questions based on the nursery rhyme.

The second task required the respondents to listen to a story entitled ‘The Greedy Dog’. Next the respondents were required to retell the story and finally to answer questions on the story.

The last task was one in which the respondents were given the opportunity to tell their favorite story. There were no restrictions as to the respondents’ choice of story or the style in which they chose to tell their story. This task was designed to study the respondent’s ability to tell a story without any aid. It was unlike the first two tasks where the respondents had the opportunity of first listening to the nursery rhyme (Task 1) and the story (Task 2), and then retelling it. This would mean that the respondents had free reign to utilize their creativity in telling the story and ultimately to use whatever strategies they could to convey the meaning in the story.

Code-switching: Using loan words from L1

Research has shown that the use of code-switching using loan words need not necessarily be a case of compensation for a lack of proficiency
in the language. Kow (2000) looked at word coining which involved loan words from the L1, a highly innovative strategy employed by Malaysian children to convey meaning, which involves the use of words taken from the L1. For example, a respondent used the phrase ‘nen-nen pot’ to mean ‘breast’ as in:

\[ \text{... take one girl and suck his “nen-nen pot” ...} \]

When asked what nen-nen pot was, the respondent pointed at his breast. The coining of this phrase shows the creativity of the respondent. Nen-nen in Chinese (Cantonese) means ‘milk’ and a pot is a vessel used to contain fluid. As the breast of a breast-feeding mother contains milk, it is thus a nen-nen pot. Perhaps there is an analogy made between the breast and a tea-pot or coffee-pot.

Hence in the example above a double strategy is employed, that of word coining which involves code-switching. What one sees, then, is a case of code-switching for a purpose by a Malaysian child. In this example creativity is the key word; a word is coined employing the child’s L1. The important point is that the child achieves what he has set out to do, i.e., to encode the meaning he has in his mind and to convey the message in an effective and efficient manner.

Another innovative code-switching strategy employed by the respondents is the use of loan words from their L1. This strategy points to the ability of the child to resolve the problem of meaning-making. Malaysian children are bilingual, and they exploit this ability. If there is no known word in the L2 to convey the message, the respondent reverts to the known L1 lexicon, for example:

\[ \text{datuk for ‘grandfather’} \]
\[ (‘datuk’ is from the Malay language) \]

\[ \text{tien tong for ‘heaven’} \]
\[ (‘tien tong’ is from the Cantonese language) \]

Data collected from this study revealed that in most instances the Chinese respondents using English borrowed not only from their mother tongue Chinese, but there were also instances in which they borrowed from Malay. In a study on Malaysian Sindhis by David (1996) a similar finding was recorded. This is perhaps an indication of the fact that Malaysians are bilingual.

(1) Re 17: In the pasar malam.
\[ (‘pasar malam’ in the Malay language means ‘night market’.) \]
In example (1), the respondent code-switches and uses the phrase *pasar malam* probably because there is no equivalent of the concept of *pasar malam* in the English language. It can be translated and called a night market, but unlike a market it does not only have fresh food on offer. At the Malaysian night market one can purchase anything from baby wear to traditional medicine and even play a game of cards at the same time.

In example (2) the respondent code-switches and uses the Malay word *sayang* instead of ‘love’, perhaps because he is more familiar with this word than its equivalent in English.

(2) Re 11: … then he *sayang* him …

(‘*sayang*’ is from the Malay language and means ‘love’.)

Another such instance is found in example (3) below where a respondent who is proficient in English code-switches to his mother tongue. In this example, he points out that Robin’s costume (*baju*) is colorful. This is probably dictated by the fact that Robin does not wear shirt and trousers but an unusual costume (consisting of what is popularly referred to as underwear worn on the outside). In Malay the term *baju* may be used as a general term to refer to clothing. Hence, in this case, the respondent not only employs a word that is common to Malaysians, but he also does so for a reason. The respondent made a choice when he code-switched and used the term ‘*baju*’ because it was a word that best conveyed the meaning he wanted to communicate.

(3) Re 41: *Baju* got.

Re: Robin is …

Re 41: Colorful *baju*.

Re: Colorful *baju*?

Re 41: Yah *baju* is colorful … got *baju* … black, red, … pink …

(*baju* in the Malay language means ‘clothes’.)

In example (4) below, the respondent may be said to have used the code-switching strategy of using loan words to fulfil a function. It can be seen that he was able to translate the phrase from his mother tongue into English, yet he chose to use his L1. This is perhaps because he feels the phrase in his mother tongue conveys the meaning better and more effectively.

(4) Re: What do we mean when we say the dog is greedy?

Re 15: In Chinese?

Re 16: Chinese.
The respondent may also feel that the harsh message ‘very ugly’ is softened through code-switching to his mother tongue. Finally, he may also be trying to forge solidarity with the researcher through the use of a common code. The common code here is the mother tongue, Cantonese and Mandarin, which the respondent shares with the researcher.

In example (5) below an extended excerpt from a story-telling session is included. In this excerpt there are three instances of code-switching at the lexical level (see highlighted sections):

(5) Re 13: Once upon a time there’s a little snake. The little snake … and a deer went and tackle him. A tiger went and saw him. The tiger want to make him as a belt. Tiger … the tiger … couldn’t belt … the snake … the snake … uh …

Re: What happened to the snake?
Re 13: The snake go and bite the tiger. Then the tiger faster run away to his home. Then the snake again there. Some more the … what is that … the … musang some more also come then the deer also go and tanduk lah the musang. The musang die.

Re: Then …
Re 13: Then afterwards good lah, finish.
Re: Finish. Just now you said ‘tackle’, what is the meaning of ‘tackle’?
Re 13: No response.
Re: Did you say ‘tackle’?
Re 13: Yah. (Nods his head to indicate ‘yes’)  
Re: What is the meaning of tackle?
Re 13: That means go and cekiklah the tiger.

The two loan words musang and tanduk are used to replace words which are perhaps as yet missing from this six-year-old child’s vocabulary. The use of cekik had arisen when the researcher had probed the child’s use of the word ‘tackle’. In the Oxford English dictionary ‘tackle’ is defined as to grapple with, grasp, lay hold of, overcome, etc. When the respondent
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is cornered into defining the meaning of ‘tackle’, he does so by code-switching and using a word from his mother tongue. In this instance, code-switching may be seen as a device to overcome the problem of explaining a complex term in a second language in which one has but limited proficiency.

The conclusion may be drawn that the code-switching strategy of borrowing from the L1 and the common vocabulary of Malaysians is used for the following functions:

- to compensate for a limited vocabulary;
- to express a concept that is uniquely Malaysian;
- to overcome the problem of explaining the meaning of a term in the second language;
- to add color and emphasis to the meaning of what they are trying to communicate.

It may be said the use of the loan word where one switches from the L2 to L1 is not unique to the respondents here. The use of loan words is common among Malaysian speakers (also see Morais 1991; David 2001; Kow 2000; Kuang 2002). What makes this strategy innovative is the fact that the respondents have used it to fulfil extended functions, as seen in the examples above. They have exploited their multilingual ability and have used Cantonese, Malay, and English to communicate.

**Code-switching: Particles *lah* and *loh***

This particular form of code-switching, i.e., appending a sentence in English with a particle from the L1, is a feature in Malaysian English. In Malaysian discourse it is common to append a sentence with a particle *lah* or *loh*, for example:

(6) A: What’s wrong?
   B: Nothing *lah*.
   A: You look upset.
   B: My son *loh* never listens *lah*.

In this study, it was found that this particular form of code-switching was widely employed by respondents aged from four to six. Of greater interest in this study is the role played by this form of code-switching, which is very prevalent among Malaysians.

In examples (7) and (8) below, the particle *lah* is positioned at the end of an answer:

(7) Re: Then will the children die?
    Re 3: No *lah*.
If we examine the two examples above, it is apparent that they do not fulfil similar functions. In example (7), the particle is used for emphasis. The researcher’s suggestion that the children will die is strongly negated by the respondent aged six. The context of the conversation is God’s punishment of naughty children. The child negates the fact that God’s punishment can lead to death and goes on to state:

Re 3: Just hurt their here (points to his forehead) only.

Hence the lah following ‘no’ as in nolah is emphasis of the fact that God’s punishment does not lead to death, just injury.

In example (8), the particle fulfils quite a different function. In this case it is a tool of persuasion. The researcher had just requested Re 15’s companion Re 16, both aged five, to tell a story. Re 16 is hesitant and Re 15 encourages him to carry on with the task. The strong directive ‘tell’ is cushioned by the particle lah. Hence the directive is turned into a persuasive act through the addition of a particle.

The use of particle loh, which is derived from the Chinese language, is employed by the Chinese respondents in this study. On the other hand, the particle lah, which has its origins in the Malay language, is used by both the Chinese and Malay respondents. This may be attributed to the fact that the particle lah is definitive of Malaysian English (see Kow 1995). Further, the medium of instruction in National schools in Malaysia is Malay.

In example (9) below, the particle loh is used at strategic points in the respondent’s story-telling. The story being told is ‘Goldilocks’, and the baby bear is crying because his chair is broken. Hence, the particle is used to stress important points in the story.

(9) Re: Once upon a time …
Re 15: Then the baby bear cry loh the chair also broken loh …

Just as the particle lah has extended functions, likewise the particle loh fulfils the following functions:

- adding emphasis to a message, e.g., as in ‘brokenloh’;
- creating a sense of comradeship with the listener, e.g., as in ‘You come to my houseloh’;
- softening the effect of the sentence, i.e., appealing to the listener through a soft tonal ending, e.g., as in ‘that toy … I wantloh’;
acting as a period to a phrase thus creating parcels of meaning (see example [9] above)

The use of the particles *lah* and *loh* by the respondents in this study is not merely evidence that they speak Malaysian English; beyond that, it is proof of their creativity. Just one particle appended to the end of a sentence extends the meaning of the message they are communicating.

**Stylistic code-switching: The case of ‘one’ and ‘got’**

In this type of code-switching there is no switch in terms of language. Rather the switch may be viewed as one that is stylistic. Myers-Scotton (1977: 5) points out that code-switching ‘may be anything from genetically unrelated languages to two styles of the same language’. This form of stylistic code-switching concerns the use of ‘one’ and ‘got’, which is multifunctional. The researcher notes that in this form of stylistic code-switching, meaning is extended through the innovative use of lexicon. In English ‘one’ functions as:

- a numeral as in: ‘I just need one cup of flour.’
- an indefinite pronoun as in: ‘Timothy is not one of my students.’
- as a personal pronoun as in: ‘The Venerable one …’

In this study ‘one’ and ‘got’ appear to be multifunctional. The functions ‘one’ and ‘got’ perform are seen in the examples below:

(10) Re 15: Then the one man taking the gun, the long gun, he shoot the tiger, the tiger leg got blood.

In example (10), ‘one’ is used in the conventional way, functioning as a numeral. On the other hand, the use of ‘got’ here is unconventional.

Kow (2000) viewed the use of ‘got’ as a form of creative over-extension (see examples below):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 1</th>
<th>Example 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I got see.</td>
<td>The stepmother got a hunter to kill Snow White.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(I saw.)</td>
<td>(The stepmother hired a hunter to kill Snow White.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4. ‘Got’ used as a substitute for the verb ‘to have’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 1</th>
<th>Example 2</th>
<th>Example 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>... he got nothing to do ... he got nothing to eat.</td>
<td>... he here got nose.</td>
<td>I got some back game.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(‘He had nothing to do ... he had nothing to eat.’)</td>
<td>(‘He has a nose.’)</td>
<td>(‘I have some ...’)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. ‘Got’ used as affirmation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Re: Have you seen a horse before?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re 16: Got.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(‘Yes, I have.’)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the examples above it can be seen that ‘got’ is used as a substitute for the simple past tense, the verb ‘to have’, and as the affirmation to a question. The creativity and versatility of children are seen in their ability to overcome problems in the area of language. What they lack in terms of proficiency and vocabulary, they make up for in terms of strategies. In this case meaning is conveyed through the use of stylistic code-switching that also involves the over-extension strategy.

The case of ‘one’ appears to be similar to that of ‘got’ as can be seen in the examples below:

(11) Re 28: ... then have (a) one man want to shoot the bird then he ... the ants can see ... he know he help him (b) one ... then the ants go and bite the soldier. Then the soldier (c) one shoot the bird already.

In example (11), code-switches to ‘one’ are found in three different instances fulfilling three different functions. In (a) it acts as a numeral whereas in (b) it adds emphasis to the point made. In (c) ‘one’ is a literal translation from the mother tongue as in:

*Sekali tembak.* (Malay)

‘One shoot’

*Yat hah seh* (Cantonese)

‘One shoot’

This form of code-switching, i.e., literal translation, will be explored further in the next section.

In a study by Kow (2000) some rather innovative uses of ‘one’ were noted, for example:
A horse is go like this one. (gallops)
Like thief like that one.

In the first instance ‘one’ is used to replace the word ‘gallops’, while in the second example, ‘one’ replaces the characteristics of a thief. In this capacity the particle ‘one’ appears to be a ‘dummy’ word, i.e., in itself it holds no meaning; but taken in the context in which it appears, ‘one’ replaces words or phrases which the respondent is unable to articulate in words.

This form of code-switching, i.e., appending particles and words to sentences, extends the functions of the message; in other words meaning is extended through the innovative use of lexicon. The case of ‘one’ is a clear illustration of this point. The rule is simple, ‘one’ can be used to replace a multitude of words based on its context, as can be seen from the examples above.

When faced with the need to express new meaning, the respondent stretches his limited vocabulary through over-extension. Over-extension, which is referred to by Vygotsky (1962) as ‘associative complexes’ or ‘chain-complexes’, results from the way children tend to focus on only one aspect of a situation at a time and to generalize that alone.

Lack of knowledge, mental fog and wrong analysis can all lead to over-extension. Lack of knowledge suggests that a child uses a word s/he is not familiar with because of his/her incomplete and limited vocabulary. In the second instance the child views the world through a mental fog. However, meanings become more precise as the child learns to discriminate more finely. Finally, wrong analysis applies to the state where the child uses a prototype that s/he then matches to other possible examples of a category using the characteristics of the prototype. If there is sufficient agreement, s/he assigns the new object to the same category. In other words, discrepancies between child and adult language occur because children analyze the prototype differently from adults. As they grow older, they gradually alter their analysis to fit those of other people around them.

The data here points to the fact that over-extension probably occurs as a result of the child’s limited vocabulary. Nevertheless, in the name of communication, the child tries hard to get his/her meaning across while talking about concepts s/he has as yet no words for. In other words, the child code-switches to express meaning within the limits of his/her competence in the target language. In this case, the respondents combined word stems with affixes to express new and richer meaning. This shows their creativity in utilizing a limited repertoire of words to convey a multitude of meanings. Having stated this, it should also be noted that the over-extension of ‘one’ and ‘got’ are definitive of Malaysian English. In fact it
is so much a feature of the variety used in Malaysia that a big banking enterprise has cashed in on this. This bank has a special bank account named ‘My one account’ and the advertisement for this account takes the listener through the multifaceted uses of ‘one’ in Malaysian English. Only further research in the area of discourse and code-switching by adult Malaysian speakers can determine whether the use of ‘one’ is a case of over-extension or otherwise.

**Code-switching: The use of literal translation**

Literal translation is a process whereby the learner attempts to translate word for word from the native language. In the earlier code-switching strategies the speaker uses elements from his/her L1 and L2 to communicate meaning. In this code-switching strategy, one hears only one language, i.e., the target language. However, on analysis of the sentence, it is found that the structure of the sentence mirrors that of another language, most commonly the mother tongue, as in the example below:

(12a) … then kill him die …

In standard English the sentence above would be:

(12b) Then he killed him.

What we have is a direct translation of the Chinese (Cantonese) equivalent of the same meaning:

(13) Re 8: No, not Snow White kill him die.

*sat sih huih* (Cantonese)

(‘Snow White did not kill him.’)

Likewise the same strategy can be applied using the Malay language as in the example below:

(14) … make a family …

*membina rumah tangga* (Malay)

(‘To set up a family.’)

What occurs in the examples below is that the structure of the mother tongue is employed and the equivalent words in English are transcribed onto the existing structure:

(15) You say greedy me eh don’t want you …

*lei tei wah tam sam ngoh em ngoi lei* (Cantonese)

(‘If you say I’m greedy, I won’t be your friend.’)
(16) He eat finish …
   $Huih$ $sik$ $sai$ (Cantonese)
   (‘He ate it all.’)

(17) Robin colorful color.
   $Robin$ $berwarna$ $warni.$ (Malay)
   (‘Robin is very colorful.’)

It can be seen that the literal translation strategy is one that is employed by both Malay and Chinese respondents and that both Malay and Chinese structures are used.

It can be concluded that this form of code-switching appears to be more commonly employed by the younger respondents (age 4) than by the older ones (age 6). This may arise as a result of the fact that differentiation between two languages occurs first at a lexical and only later at a structural level. McLaughlin (1978) gives the following stages of lexical differentiation in the L2:

Stage 1:
Single lexical system with mixtures of words from both the L1 and L2 as seen in cases where there is literal translation.

Stage 2:
Two lexical systems but undifferentiated, marked by mixed utterances. This would include instances where code-switching takes place.

Stage 3:
Two lexical systems but differentiated. This is the final stage where one would be looking at standard English.

In terms of syntactic development, at the initial stages a single syntactic system is applied to the lexicon of both languages. In the second stage, mixing of the syntactic structure from both L1 and L2 occurs. In the final stages the two syntactic structures are differentiated.

It may be concluded, then, that literal translation is a strategy commonly used by children in their movement from an interlanguage to a target language. Perhaps, then, literal translation is a developmental strategy and children employ it as a pathway towards the acquisition of a second language.

This form of stylistic code-switching that involves literal translation may be viewed as an interlanguage strategy (see Selinker 1974; Kow 1990 for more on interlanguage strategy). Indeed, it is an innovative strategy that confirms the creativity of children in the area of meaning-making.
In this case, the bilingual children exploit the word formation patterns available in their L1 to convey new meaning in L2. Eventually these children will acquire the stock of L2 lexical and syntactic items available to proficient speakers of the L2. For the moment it is sufficient that the meaning they want to send across is conveyed.

**Conclusion**

In this study on the code-switching strategy as it is used by Malaysian children, the definition of code-switching is taken to its limit in the sense that code-switching is seen to encompass:

- the use of loan words;
- the appending of particles from the L1 *lah* and *loh*;
- literal translation;
- stylistic changes as in the case of ‘got’ and ‘one’;

Malaysian children aged between four and six use such code-switching strategies while exploiting its various functions, and it must be emphasized that code-switching is used as an innovative strategy. In conclusion this study offers two transcripts, one where code-switching is not used (transcript 1) and another in which code-switching is present (transcript 2):

**Transcript 1 (absence of code-switching)**

**Re 23:** My story is Robinson Crusoe. One day Robinson Crusoe was small boy. (uses her hand to show someone short and small) He want to go and sit in the boat but his parents will not let him go because seas are very dangerous. So ... so when at last Robinson Crusoe was big and like a man. He went with some other friends to sit in the boat. Then a heavy storm came and washed Robinson away. With one wave Robinson swim and go into a island.

**Transcript 2 (presence of code-switching)**

**Re 4:** Once upon a time a woman and his *low Kong* ah ... make a family ah ... Then one day they born a baby. Then one day two ... two ... ah ... very naughty person ah bad guy lah ... They want to steal the baby then one night he go to their house ... then he want to steal the baby, then afterwards the baby suddenly cry then a thief want to ... they want to run away *lah* but they fall down because the ... the baby cry ah also can take the ... also can punish the bad people then the police take them and put them in the jail.
From the excerpts above, it can be seen that the code-switching strategy may be viewed as a selective strategy. It is a functional strategy that is used to convey a message in an efficient and effective manner. Hence the excerpts above highlight the fact that code-switching is an innovative strategy employed by Malaysian children to convey meaning. At the same time it is interesting to note that, while some strategies, e.g., the use of code-switching in word-coining, may be exclusive to children, the other forms of code-switching are definitive of Malaysian English. This includes the use of particles *lah* and *loh* and the peculiar use of ‘one’ and ‘got’.

In the quest of communicating meaning, children use different strategies including the code-switching strategy. What should be noted is that whatever the strategy employed, it is the innovativeness with which it is used that attests to the fact that children are creative communicators.

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**References**


