

## **Language Choice, Code Switching and Identity Construction in Malaysian English Newspaper Advertisements**

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### **Abstract**

While identity construction and code switching in print advertising has become an area of growing interest, studies on this topic in the Malaysian context are limited. Furthermore, in the global context, most scholars investigate the occurrence of English lexical items in local language advertising. Thus, an examination of code switching in English newspaper advertisements in the Malaysian context would be significant. This study aims to explore the reasons for the construction of identity through the use of code switching in English newspaper advertisements in Malaysia.

To achieve the aim of this study, 121 food, finance, motoring, energy and telecommunication English advertisements with Malay, Tamil and Chinese code switching occurrences were selected. The advertisements were taken from the three local English newspapers with the highest circulation, namely, The Star, The New Straits Times, and The Sun, over a period of six months from 1st August, 2011 to 31st January, 2012. The data was analyzed against previous studies related to motivations behind the use of code switching as well as identity construction.

The findings reveal that advertisers construct identity through code switching mainly during festivals. The findings further reveal that the main reason for advertisers to construct these identities through code switching is to persuade multilingual consumers as a form of marketing strategy. The advertisers aim to persuade consumers through the construction of these identities to accommodate the bilingual consumers, attract consumers through affective means, and build credibility and solidarity with the consumers. The findings are consistent with previous studies on

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language choice, identity construction and advertising.

**Keywords:** identity, code switching, advertising, bilingualism



## 1. Introduction

Various studies over the years have linked code switching to identity construction (Hajar Abdul Rahim, 2006; Leung, 2010, p. 418), but few have explored identity construction through code switching in print advertisements, particularly in Malaysian context. Studies show that in multilingual Malaysia, code switching is a common feature in many communicative events (Dumanig & David, 2011, p. 215) and has been the subject of many studies. One of the critical questions in bilingualism research from a Sociolinguistic perspective is, ‘Why do bilingual speakers switch from one language to another in conversational interaction?’ (Wei, 1998, p. 156). Contemporary sociolinguistic studies on code switching have moved from the notion of deficiency driven code switching to the notion of proficiency driven code switching. Dumanig & David (2011, p.216), argue that majority of people in multilingual societies like Malaysia code switch not because they have to, but because they want to, ‘with clearly intended purposes’. This means that people code switch and they are fully aware why they switch from one language to another.

Kow (2003) identified some possible motivations for code switching, i.e., to fill a lexical gap, convey concepts or ideas which are easier to express in a particular language, clarify misunderstandings or create certain communication effects, emphasize a point, express group solidarity and even exclude someone from the dialogue. Other motivations for code switching have been found to include ensuring intelligibility, offering affective support, and express solidarity as an expression of identity (Ahmad & Jusoff, 2009; Kow, 2008). Compared to spoken discourse, fewer studies have focused on code switching in written discourse. Among the few

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that investigate code switching in written discourse are Hajar Abdul Rahim (2006), Dumanig & David (2011), and Shanmuganathan & Ramasamy (2009).

### **1.1 Code Switching in Print Advertisements**

Linguists have acknowledged the growing importance of research on the language used in advertisements (Gao, 2005, p. 827; Piller, 2001, p. 170). Advertising is particularly useful for linguistic research as copy writers have to work within space and financial constraints. Leung (2010, p.418) argued that ‘advertising language has to be carefully crafted with the intention to manipulate and persuade consumers on the lexical level’. Since copy writers tend to be very proficient in the language they are writing in, when an advertisement uses code switches, it is not only intentional, but ‘it also serves a very specific purpose – selling’ (Leung, 2010, p. 418). Many studies have noted that advertisers have increasingly used multilingual advertising to cater to bilingual consumers (Bhatia, 1992; Gao, 2005; Piller, 2001; Ruellot, 2011).

Code switching in advertisements can also be seen as a marketing strategy (Dumanig & David, 2011). It has been proven to improve brand recall as well as increase the attention grabbing capacity of the advertisement (Ruellot, 2011, p. 7). Gao (2005, p. 827) stated that code switching is used to create a positive psychological effect in the consumer. In other words, the motivations for using code switching in advertising go beyond lexical gap or lack of register to using connotations, ideologies and cultural meanings to reach the target audience (Hajar Abdul Rahim, 2006, p. 9).

There are not many studies that focus on language use in print advertising in the Malaysian context which offer an explanation as to why advertisers code switch. Dumanig and David (2011) investigated the use of code switching in English newspaper advertisements in Malaysia and they found that code switching occurrences serve as an effective marketing strategy by accommodating bilingual consumers.

Another study is by Azirah Hashim (2010, p. 378) examined ‘how advertisers seek to achieve their primary goal of persuading or influencing an audience’. Using a multimodal approach in analyzing advertisements, it was found that advertisers use code switching to encode national and cultural values in order to create rapport and for emphasis in order to persuade the consumers. Similarly, Shanmuganathan & Ramasamy (2009, pp. 47 - 50) argued that advertisers

use language to attract certain customers, give confidence to the customer, foreground celebrity influence, and assure validity of products and services. Social and cultural factors are embedded in these advertisements which, in turn, impact the consumer.

Due to the paucity of research in this area, the body of knowledge on code switching in written discourse in Malaysia seems limited. However, Hajar Abdul Rahim (2006, pp. 8 - 9) observed that code switching in written discourse may share most patterns, functions and motivations of code switching in spoken discourse, with one very important difference: code switching in written discourse tends to be pre-meditated and therefore is intentional and purposeful. Thus, one might employ some features used in the theory on code switching in spoken discourse in order to examine code switching in written discourse.

## **1.2 Code Switching and Identity Construction**

Various studies have linked code switching to identity construction (Hajar Abdul Rahim, 2006; Leung, 2010, p. 418). Thomas and Wareing (2000, p. 216) explained that ‘one of the fundamental ways of establishing our identity is through the use of language.’ In other words, language is used by people to construct various identities for themselves (Thomas & Wareing, 2000, p. 136). However, these identities are not fixed, but rather are ‘constantly being built and negotiated’ Leung (2010, p. 418).

One important domains of identity construction research is the media (Thomas & Wareing, 2000, p. 50). The media is seen to have the power to mediate how people, places and events are represented. In fact, one of the ways that media affects identity construction is through the creation and perpetuation of stereotypes (Motschenbacher, 2009). This is especially seen in advertising. Woodward (1997, p. 15) explained, ‘advertisements can only “work” in selling us things if they appeal to consumers and provide images with which they can identify’. This raises the important point of identification. For an advertisement to work, it needs to construct an identity that consumers can identify with (Woodward, 1997, p. 15). One of the ways advertising accomplishes this is through code switching.

## **1.3 Identity Construction and Multilingual Print Advertisements**

Piller (2001, p. 153), in her study on the use of English in German advertisements, found that the use of English was to construct identities which reflect global, successful and economic

oriented identities (Piller, 2001, p. 167). This identity construct is consonant with the functions of code switching into English observed in advertisements in local languages (Chen, 2006; Gao, 2005; Leung, 2010; Ruellot, 2011). For example, Gao (2005) examined the use of English in Chinese advertising, Chen (2006) examined the use of English in Chinese advertising in Taiwan, and Ruellot (2011) examined the use of English in French print advertising. All of these studies come to similar conclusions as to why English is used – because it is linked with, among others, success, modernity, global economy and progress.

It can be seen that identity construction is not only linked to the motivations and functions of code switching, but can also be used to explain and understand those motivations. However, while the motivations for using English in local language advertising is clear, the situation is quite different when it comes to using local languages in English advertising.

Hajar Abdul Rahim (2006) claimed that the existence of local lexis in Malaysian English is seen as an important ‘identity indicator of the user’ (Hajar Abdul Rahim, 2006, p. 7). Effective bilingual writers tend to code switch to convey connotations of meaning which are bound up with local culture even when there are English equivalents. In other words, effective bilingual writers code switch as an expression of their identity which is related to local culture.

Studies show that there has been mounting research on identity construction through the use code switching in advertisements, the global trend has been to examine this topic in the context of English language code switches in local language advertising. There is therefore a paucity of research in investigating local language code switches in English language advertising. Furthermore, there is limited research on the motivations behind identity construction through the use of code switching in the local context. Consequently, this study therefore explores motivations on the construction of identity through the use of code switching in English newspaper advertisements in Malaysia.

## 2. Methodology

The data for this study comprises of a corpus of 121 food, finance, motoring, motoring and energy & telecommunications advertisements published in the leading local English newspapers namely, *The Star*, *The Sun*, and *The New Straits Times*, which have the highest readership and circulation for English newspapers in the country (Nielsen Media Index, 2010).

The newspapers were scanned daily for a period of six months from 1st August, 2011 to 31st January, 2012 as a period of six months was considered sufficient in order to collect sufficient data. The 121 advertisements collected were deemed sufficient as the data was considered large enough to be analyzed for patterns, contexts and similarities and differences in the code switching occurrences. The data was also considered representative as it was gathered from four different categories of advertisements.

Only those advertisements with code switching occurrences from the food, finance, motoring and energy & telecommunications categories were selected. These categories of advertisements were chosen because previous studies (Tan, 2009, p. 14), as well as an initial cursory observation, found that these categories had high levels of code switching occurrences. Lastly, only advertisements with code switching into Malay, Tamil, and the Chinese languages (Mandarin, Hokkien and Cantonese) were selected as these are the major languages in Malaysia.



*The Star*, *The New Straits Times* and *The Sun* were scanned daily from 1st August 2011 to 31st January 2012 by manual search. This period of time was chosen as it covers most of the significant festivals and cultural events in the country such as Hari Raya (a religious and cultural festival celebrated by the Malays) in August, Merdeka Day (Independence Day) in August, Malaysia Day in September, Deepavali (a religious and cultural festival celebrated by the Hindus, who are mostly Indians) in October, Christmas in December and Chinese New Year (a cultural festival celebrated by the Chinese) in January 2012, since previous studies have found that advertisements tend to use more code switching during festivals and celebrations (Dumanig & David, 2011).



Each time an advertisement with code switching occurrences was spotted, the original was extracted. Advertisements were categorized as food, finance, motoring, telecommunications and energy advertisements. In each category, advertisements were indexed and checked for duplications and repetitions. Duplications and repetitions of advertisements were discarded. Finally, the advertisements were listed, coded, labeled and filed according to category, so that they could be retrieved as needed. A master list of all the advertisements according to their categories was drawn up to keep track of the advertisements. The data was then analysed against the findings of previous studies regarding the motivations behind code switching and identity construction in advertisements. The findings are discussed below.

# NEW STRAITS TIMES



STREETS

BUSINESS TIMES



school times



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### 3. Findings

The findings show that advertisers construct different identities for various reasons, all which relate ultimately to the main goal of persuading the consumers either to buy their product or to be positively disposed towards their brand (Azirah Hashim, 2010, p. 387; Dumanig & David, 2011; Ruellot, 2011). The reasons and motivations identified by the current study include accommodation, affective reasons, building credibility and building solidarity as a form of marketing strategy which seeks to accomplish this goal of persuading consumers. This is consistent with the findings of Dumanig and David (2011) which report similar motivations for the use of code switching in advertisements.

#### 3.1 Accommodation

The findings reveal that advertisers use code switching as a means reducing the distance with the bilingual consumers. One of the strategies used by advertisers is to accommodate the bilingual consumer through the use of familiar code switched phrases and images to construct an identity that is familiar and accessible to the consumers.

#### Extract 1

- a. *Selamat Hari Raya Aidilfitri* to all Malaysians. (Hard Rock Café, New Straits Times, 29 August, 2011)
- b. Blessing a child by feeding him a sweet treat is an old tradition in some Indian communities... Happy *Deepavali* from Nestle. (Nestle, New Straits Times, 25 October 2011)
- c. Cheers! Prost! Salut! *Yum Seng!* Enjoy your favourite beers together with good food, good friends and fun games. (Oktoberfest, *The Star*, 11 October, 2011)

Extract 1a uses a Malay greeting that is synonymous with the Hari Raya celebrations. By using a very familiar greeting, a Malay – Muslim identity which is very familiar and appealing to that community is constructed. Constructing an identity that is familiar with the consumers reduces the distance with them and makes them amenable towards the particular product or brand. Woodward (1997), observes that advertisers use images, phrases and words which are familiar to the consumers for the primary purpose of selling.



Extract 1b uses the same idea by highlighting a familiar image of a mother feeding her child a sweet treat during *Deepavali*. In highlighting this imagery, the advertisement strikes a chord with Indians who celebrate *Deepavali*. The image is not only familiar, but also arouses deep sentiment to Indian readers. The advertisement is able to connect with the Indian readers. On the other hand, Extract 1c accommodates the Chinese readers by highlighting the phrase, *Yum Seng* (Cheers!), a phrase used when drinking beer or wine in a celebration as a form of toast. The toast never happens when the person drinking is alone. This particular toast is therefore tied to a celebration or happy occasion, a notion strengthened by the English text, 'good food, good friends, and fun games.' Thus, by using *Yum Seng*, the advertisement connects with Chinese readers and converges with them.

This finding that accommodation is one reason why advertisers use code switching in advertisements is consistent with previous studies of Dumanig and David in 2011. In advertising, accommodation happens when advertisers try to reduce the distance between them and the consumers by using various convergence strategies which is seen as a marketing strategy (Dumanig & David, 2011).

### 3.2 Affective Reasons

It is found that advertisements use a variety of code switches to evoke a sense of warmth, hospitality and nostalgia, especially in the creation of various ethnic and national identities. For example, the Malay identity, Tamil identity and Chinese identity are all constructed in advertisements that occur during festive periods. The use of culturally related words, phrases and greetings such as *Selamat Hari Raya Aidilfitri* (Malay for 'Happy Celebration Day' referring to the greeting most commonly used during a major Muslim festival), *Deepavali Vazhthukkal* (Tamil for 'Deepavali Greetings'), and *Sau Gong & Loh Sang* (Cantonese for the last meal of the previous year and 'tossing' the *Yee Sang* respectively) are illustrative of the way identity construction is used to evoke affective feelings in the heart of the readers. It is significant that the terms are not explained, but advertisers assume that the target audience will readily understand and identify with the terms used. The use of such words and phrases construct identities that invoke sentimental feelings and leave the readers positively disposed toward the brands or products advertised. The use of familiar phrases is not limited to festival periods, as can be seen in Extract 2.

#### Extract 2

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- a. Your child insists on sharing your bed on date nights. *POTONG STIM!* Using dongle at home... *LAGI POTONG STIM!* (P1, *The Star*, 1 October 2011)
- b. Rain starts just as you finish waxing. *POTONG STIM!* Using dongle at home... *LAGI POTONG STIM!* (P1, *The Star*, 17 September 2011)
- c. *Diamlah* ;) P1 broadband still cheap! When everything else is expensive, save more with P1's great deals...The best outdoor and indoor broadband deal with Voice service. Shhh... *diam-diam* get it now. (P1, *The Star*, 13 January 2012)

In Extract 2a & b, the advertisement uses a familiar phrase in Malay, *Potong Stim* (killjoy or frustration) to construct an identity of a sympathetic and understanding person who knows just how frustrating life can be. Using a few different familiar scenarios, the advertisement sympathizes with people who are caught up in frustration using a dongle for their internet service at home. By linking the code switched term *Potong Stim* and *lagi Potong Stim* (even more frustration), the advertisement likens the ineffectual dongle with all of these frustrating situations in life. In doing this, the advertisement is constructed as someone who not only knows the frustration the consumer is going through, but is also able to offer something better.

This is seen in Extract 2c, where the Malay phrase *Diamlah* (shut up) is followed by an emoticon which softens the tone of *Diamlah*. Now it is rendered not so much as 'shut up' but rather 'quiet, please'. The advertisement now becomes a co-conspirator, sharing a secret with the consumers. In doing so, the advertisement is able to show that the product is better, not just in effectiveness, but in price as well. By couching it as a conspiracy, the thrust of the advertisement is not so much overt as it is covert. The ending, '*Sssh...diam-diam*' (quietly, now) further strengthens this image of a conspiracy, and the consumer is delighted to be 'in' on the secret. The use of such familiar phrases builds a friendly, accessible identity that enables the advertisement to reach the consumers at an affective level, becoming a friend, and offering some friendly advice, rather than as a company selling things.

This is consistent with previous studies such as Gao (2005), who argues about a 'favourable psychological affect' which is brought about through the use of code switching in advertisements. In addition, Azirah Hashim (2010, p. 387) observes that advertisements use code switching to create rapport with the target audience. These studies find that the use of code

switched terms brings with it certain connotations and culturally loaded meaning. As has been pointed out above, the use of code switching by Malaysians is not merely because of lexical gap, but because of the connotative meanings that they want to express (Hajar Abdul Rahim, 2006). Thus, the use of such culturally loaded terms evokes sentimental feelings in the heart of the readers. This in turn, puts the reader in a psychologically favourable attitude towards the advertised product or brand.

### 3.3 Building Credibility

Code switching is also used to establish credentials, such as the use of the word *halal* to indicate which foods could be eaten by Muslims (Azirah Hashim, 2010). To establish credentials simply means to give assurance that a particular product or label is safe or acceptable to be used. This gives confidence to the customer and ensures validity of the products and services (Shanmuganathan & Ramasamy, 2009). When it comes to a multilingual nation like Malaysia, what is acceptable or normal to one community may not be acceptable to another. Thus, advertisements use religious terms and phrases to help assure potential customers that their product is safe to use from a religious point of view. However, even this is in line with the overall goal of advertisements in persuading the reader (Azirah Hashim, 2010, p. 378).

The findings of the study affirm these previous studies as it was found that some identities were constructed in advertisements to build credibility among the consumers. This is especially true in the construction of religious identities as illustrated by Extract 3.

#### Extract 3

- |   |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Fund Transfer, Bill Payment, Loan / Financing Payment, <i>Zakat</i> Payment, <i>Tabung Haji</i> Payment. (Public Bank, <i>The Star</i>, 1 November 2011)</li><li>b. <i>Kempen Berbaloi</i>. (Agro Bank, <i>New Straits Times</i>, 5 November 2011)</li><li>c. Public <i>Ittikal</i> Sequel Fund. Grow your investments with <i>Syariah</i>-compliant Stocks and <i>Sukuk</i>. (Public Mutual, <i>New Straits Times</i>, 12 October 2011)</li></ol> |
|---|

In the banking sector, Islamic Banking principles have become increasingly important to Muslims who want to know if the particular financial service or product they are considering is actually acceptable to their religion. The use of certain Islamic terms such as *shariah*, *sukuk* and

*zakat*, builds an identity of a devout Muslim who is familiar with Islam and its requirements. Therefore, the products described by these advertisements would be acceptable from an Islamic point of view, and so would be safe for Muslims to use. In this instance, the construction of the religious identity serves to establish credibility among the Muslim readership and thus persuades them in considering the product or service favorably. Even when religious terms are not used, such as in Extract 3b, the code switched Malay phrase, *Kempen Berbaloi* (a profitable investment) serves to establish credentials. The Bank is running this campaign to inform its customers that investing with them will definitely be profitable. In this way, the bank's expertise and credentials are displayed in order that the consumers may trust and so invest with them.

### 3.4 Building Solidarity

The findings of the study show that differing identities are constructed to express solidarity with differing groups at differing times. This is especially seen in the choice of language used by the advertisements during different celebrations. Extract 4 illustrates this finding.

#### Extract 4

- a. Some say Luck. Some say Fortune. Some say *Rezeki*. However it's said, it still means prosperity. *Jom Generasiku!* (BSN, New Straits Times, 19 January 2012)
- b. Thank you for the *Ang Pow*. The *Ang Pow* has become more than just a Chinese festive gift or a traditional symbol of good luck. Today, it has been adopted by everyone. It now comes in many colors to symbolize different celebrations. Only a society that can adapt, evolve and share their individual traditions can truly be united. Happy Chinese New Year to everyone from all of us at Tenaga Nasional. (TNB, New Straits Times, 23 January 2012)
- c. (Chinese Character): Fullness. (Bernas, 16 January, 2012)

Even outside the festival period, attempts to build solidarity with different target groups can be seen. Extract 4a is an example of how an advertisement uses key words to build solidarity. In this advertisement by BSN (Bank Simpanan Nasional), the slogan is, '*Jom, Generasiku!*' The use of the colloquial Malay word, *Jom*, translates as 'come with me'. But the connotative meaning is much more. It is a stirring call to action. The call is to an entire generation who shares the same identity as the speaker. The use of the pronoun *ku* (short for *aku*,

meaning me / my) clinches it – the call is not just to anyone, but to my generation. The speaker is calling to his or her generation, whatever generation that might be. In this way, the advertisement expresses solidarity by calling the readers to be a part of the identity that is being created.

Extract 4b focuses on the *Ang Pow* (Cantonese for red packet or prosperity packet), which is synonymous with Chinese culture, particularly during Chinese New Year. The tradition is for elders to give these *Ang Pow* to the young as well as unmarried adults not merely as a celebration gift, but as a blessing or sign of prosperity. As the advertisement states, the practice has been taken up by the other cultures as well, and now it is common, for example, to see green packets or *Duit Raya* (Malay for ‘celebration money’) for *Hari Raya*. In this advertisement, the use of *Ang Pow* creates solidarity with the ethnic Chinese community, by using a cultural item that is at the very heart of the Chinese culture. The use of this phrase can heighten the sense of Chinese identity and so strike solidarity with them (Menke, 2011).

Similarly, in Extract 4c, only one word, a Chinese character, appears in the advertisement, with the meaning ‘fullness’. Again, the Chinese ethnic identity is appealed to through the use of a character which is very familiar to them. This character, translated ‘fullness’ is usually drawn on a red card and stuck onto the rice bin in the kitchen or store. The idea is that a kind of blessing, ‘May your rice bin be forever full and never run out’ is expressed with the character. It is significant, of course, that the advertiser in this case is Bernas, the national rice company. Again, through an appeal to a cultural custom, the Chinese identity is appealed to as the advertiser seeks to strike solidarity with them. Establishing a common identity to build solidarity has been acknowledged as a primary motivation for code switching in the oral domain (Kow, 2003), as well as in advertising (Menke, 2011). The current study is consistent with the findings of these studies.

#### **4. Discussion**

The findings of the study reveal that the reasons for constructing various identities in print advertisements could be explained primarily as a marketing strategy which aimed at persuading potential customers through the use of accommodation, affective reasons, building credibility and building solidarity.

It has been observed in previous studies that the advertisers' main goal in advertising is to persuade potential consumers to buy their products or favourably consider their brands. As such, using code switching in advertisements are firmly linked with this primary goal. The current study concurred with the findings of previous studies as the data reveal that the code switching in advertisements differ somewhat from those of using code switching in the oral domain or in other domains. It was found that in advertising, the code switches are used purposefully and intentionally as a marketing strategy that would persuade readers to have a positive attitude towards the brands or products advertised. Such motivations identified in this study differ from those identified in studies which focus on code switching to English in local language advertisements. In those cases, the motivations typically involved prestige, success, modernity and sophistication which are closely identified with English whereas the current study reveals different motivations such as accommodation, to create affective feelings, to construct credibility, and to build solidarity with the readership.

## 5. Conclusion

The analysis of the data reveals that code switching is used to construct various identities in the advertisements found in the local English dailies in order to accommodate, persuade, build credibility and build solidarity to the readers. Although different types of identities are constructed in these advertisements, they are all constructed for one basic reason – as a marketing strategy which aimed at persuading consumers.

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