An Investigation of Code Switching from Creole to Urdu Within the Muslim Community of Mauritius

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Abstract

Although many studies in Mauritius have shown a decline in ancestral languages, it seems ironical to witness that people from the Muslim community switch code from Creole to Urdu among themselves in their daily lives. In fact, Urdu has always been identified with Muslims and nowadays it has become an icon of the Muslim identity.

Linguistic strategies more specifically code switching is central not only to the identity construction of Muslims in Mauritius, but it also maintains the fact that the Urdu language exists and is significant. Therefore, code switching to Urdu is used as a valuable sign of ethnic affiliation in the Muslim community practice of Mauritius.

Keywords: Mauritius, code switching, religious identity, Muslim community

Introduction

Identity and its construction through language has become one of the most prominent ideas in sociolinguistics in the last few decades. Its focus is more on how communities negotiate their identity through language in their daily interactions. Therefore, we cannot fail to appreciate the use of Urdu in the Muslim community of Mauritius as it only reinforces membership to a social category (religion). The social constructionist paradigm (De Fina, Schriffin & Bamberg 2006 and Hall 2000) has now become a matter of huge interest in most sociolinguistics and analytic research on language and identity. This sociolinguistic view focuses mainly on participants' use of language and their social behaviour in real context of interaction.

Founded on these reasoning, researchers have explored and explained that individuals and communities form and exhibit images of themselves in relation to the social and linguistic practices in which they are involved. The participants "perform" identity work by either aligning or

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distancing themselves from a particular group through language in their interaction. In Mauritius, the Urdu language is served as a defining aspect of religious identity. Urdu is considered to be the language of the Muslims as Murty (1996) states, "125 mosques and 250 *madrassahs* are said to be offering Urdu courses" (p.14). The Urdu speaking Mawlana Rashid Nawab has contributed much to the *islamization* of the Urdu language. In mosques and *madrassahs*, the Urdu language has been used extensively to explain the sacred scripture and Islam to the younger generation. Murty (1996) affirms that in Mauritius, people "want to identify themselves with (a language) because it is the only means which gives them an identity or a linguistic group." Researchers have even put forth that speakers can also go to the extent of forming allegiance with social groups that are not their own by adopting the language and social behaviour of the other (Bloomaert 2005; Rampton 1995, 2006). Such a case has been highlighted as some social groups have crossed the fence from a normative identity (heterosexual) to assert a non-normative (homosexual) one. Such case studies have successfully displayed that language and social behaviour cannot be ignored, as they are relevant strategies used by participants to claim identities.

In this research, I focus precisely on the linguistic strategy of code switching to look at the construction of religious identity within the Muslim community of Mauritius. Light will also be shed on how code switching to Urdu promotes group solidarity among Muslims. This research aims at answering the following questions:

1) Which Urdu words are used to emphasise the religious identity of Muslims in Mauritius?
2) In what circumstances do the Muslims in Mauritius code switch to Urdu?

Literature Review

Studies in ethnic affiliation have displayed that ethnic loyalties are not God gifted or innate. In fact, they are negotiated through social interaction and language (Bulchotz 1999; De Fina 2000, 2006; Bailey 2001; Maryns & Blommaert 2001; Rampton 1995). The Muslims of Mauritius are of no exception to this rule as for them code switching figures as the main strategy to index their affiliation to the Muslim community.

As defined code switching refers to the "alternation of two languages within a single discourse, sentence or constituent (Poplack, 1978:7). Henceforth, the term code switching will be used as an umbrella term to refer to any intra-sentential and inter-sentential switching that will occur. Using more than one language or code switching to communicate is a usual phenomenon among multilingual speakers (Bot, Lowie and Verspoor, 2005; Barnes, 2006; Gass and Selinker, 2008; Ewert, 2010). Complex and varied are the reasons behind which multilingual speakers tend to code switch. One of the reasons of switching to a particular language in the interactional context is founded upon Fishman's notion of "who uses what language with whom and for what purposes"

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(as cited in Sridhar, 1996, p. 51). Fishman offers a structure with which to analyze the language choices made by multilingual speakers and their reasons for selecting one code from among others that are available to them. Myers-Scotton (1995) enlarges the framework with her research of what bilingual speakers achieve by carrying out a dialogue in two languages, that is, through CS. The result of her study is mainly based on the idea that CS is a skilled production with a communicative purpose and not a compensating strategy utilized by deficient bilinguals. By offering an overview of the socio-psychological motivations for CS in urban Africa settings, code switching between Swahili and English in Nairobi, Myers-Scotton explains having recourse to CS refers to the "markedness" model of language choice. From her point of view, people of a multilingual speech community are conscious of the variety of codes that would be suitable for a specific kind of conventionalized exchange, and they give meanings to these choices. However, the unmarked choice is the normatively usual one, speakers who make marked (i.e., unexpected or unusual) choices in specific contexts are accountable for the consequences generated by these choices. Swerving from the unmarked choice projects symbolic social messages eliciting the speaker's unusual communicative intention. Grosjean (1982) for instance notes that by selecting a specific language or by choosing to mix different languages in a specific social context indicate group solidarity and ethnic identity markers. A speaker's identity is revealed implicitly by the marked choices that s/he makes. Myers-Scotton's and Grosjean's investigation of code choices displays that selecting one type of linguistic code over another is meaningful to the intentional nature of the message. Code choices are not merely a preference of content but are "discourse strategies" (Myers-Scotton, p. 57), by which the speaker becomes a creative actor. Linguistic code choices are used for "accomplishing" the speaker's communicative intention more than for simply conveying referential meaning. In this case, it goes on to reveal the identity of the speaker and the bond that s/he wants to establish with a particular ethnic group.

Speakers choose a language based on the person or the relationship, which they want to establish. Besides, speakers are also aware of the results of making marked or unmarked choices (Myers-Scotton, 1993b: 75). Usually, a speaker uses the unmarked choices, as it is believed to be "safer." It generates no surprises because it indexes a usual interpersonal relationship. On the contrary, speakers do not always make the unmarked choice. Speakers switch from the typical linguistic code to the unmarked one as they "know" and gain the potential costs and rewards of all the code choices they make and thus, their decisions are regarded as typically conscious ones (Myers- Scotton, 1993b:75). The Markedness Model focuses on the idea that a speaker becomes a creative actor by choosing a particular language and is fulfilling more than just the conveying of referential meaning (Myers-Scotton, 1993b: 75). Within the Markedness Model, code choice is simply deliberate in that it is done to meet specific social purpose. These choices are made by the speakers with the expectation that, the addressee will recognize the choice imbued with a specific purpose. Under this model, the aim of the speaker is to ensure the reward and to reduce the cost.

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In other words, the speaker's objective is to optimize any chances of gaining some form of reward from the interaction (Myers-Scotton, 1998:19). This means that the speakers will select one type of a language over the other as it brings more benefits rather than costs. Under the Markedness Model, the speaker might earn rewards by either adjusting to the style of the addressee in the interaction or by using politeness techniques. The speaker(s) will decide on his/her code choice by determining which strategy/ technique will be the most advantageous for him/her. In other words, the speaker needs to put a few combinations of choices together for a specific interaction to take place (Myers-Scotton, 1998:20). For example, if two speakers are involved in an argument, then both may switch to their native language so that they feel more confident and proficient in their argument to defend their stance and consequently reap the rewards (win the argument) and to reduce the costs (losing the argument).

Methodology

The selection of a research method to acquire the required data is an important stage in a research work. Semi- structured interview and tape recordings were the main research methods. The data was mainly collected through semi structured interview which allowed space for the interviewer to adapt the questions based on the answers of the participants (Fraenkel et al, 2012). The data collected was also tape recorded and transcribed accordingly. The data gathered for this research were explanations from the participants. These participants were Muslims who visit the mosque regularly for prayer. This selection was a purposive sampling as participants were considered to be able to provide relevant data (Bailey 2007; Malik & Hamied 2014). Participants were chosen on the belief that they that they use some Creole and Urdu while communicating with other Muslims as they will be able to provide the reasons behind their code switching to Urdu with other members of the community in Mauritius. The semi-structured interviews were also performed randomly to obtain an understanding of the opinions and attitudes of participants about the code-switching phenomenon.

Analysis

Code Switching from Creole to Urdu, as a Calculated Choice among Muslims in Socializing Practices

Code switching from Creole to Urdu acquires special importance in language practices related to the Muslim community – that is, in social events by members of the community. In these domains of action, Creole is expected as it is the lingua franca of the island and not all the addressees speak Urdu proficiently, so code switching emerges as a marked/deliberate choice. On the other hand, the Muslim community especially in social events becomes a significant area for the establishment of a collective image of the Muslim identity specifically because of their management of communications and their usage of many strategies to make that identity. One of

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these strategies is code switching, the fitting of complete sentences or words in Urdu within a speech in Creole.

For instance, while analyzing the discourse of participants in the recordings, most of them took the example of the preacher at the mosque. His sermons to the Muslim members are never delivered in merely Creole. In fact, he switches code from Creole to Urdu from time to time. In the context of the mosque, the preacher regularly performs intra sentential switching. Common examples cited by the participants are:

(1) "Si nu mette sa *sunnat* la en pratik, nu pu gagne buku *sawaab"*,
    If we implement the *sunnat* (Prophet's way) we will gain *sawaab* (reward*)*

(2) "Ziska *Shaytaan* pas pu content si nu fer ene travail coumsa",
   Even *shaytaan* (satan) will not be happy if we do such a work

(3) "*Namaaz* dans la vie ene *musalmaane*"
    Namaaz (prayer) in the life of a *Musalmaane* (Muslim)

(4) "Ene *gunnah* pu efface ene *neyki"*
    A *gunnah* (sin) will erase a *neyki* (good deed)

(5) "Pyare nabi finne dire"
     Our *pyare nab*i (beloved Prophet) said

(6) "La clé jannat c'est namaaz"
     The key to *jannat* (paradise) is *namaaz* (prayer)

In the sermons, all the words in Urdu are connected to Islam and good behaviour. The preacher regularly inserts Urdu words to refer to these two fields in his communications with his fellow Muslims. In fact, in the Ramadan *TV Programme on MBC 3,* the most commonly inserted Urdu words relate to these two fields: Islam and good behaviour. These switches are therefore not random, instead highly symbolic. They aim at highlighting the Muslim identity in relation with two important areas of a Muslim's life: Islam and good behaviour. By using the Urdu terms consistently for preaching about Islam and for expressions relating to the good functioning of a Muslim's life, the preacher is highlighting the 'Muslimness' of these areas and also the conventional aspect of the mosque and the TV Programme.

The same tendency is noticed in the communication exchanges of the Muslim population

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in Mauritius during funerals. Participants claimed that in social sites such as funerals, Muslims tend to do a lot of code switching. For example:

(1) "Bhai ein tel finne intekaal"
    A certain *bhai* (brother) has died.

(2) "Kiler namaaz janaazah"
At what time is the *namaaz janaazah* (funeral prayer)?

(3) "Eski finne fini donne ghusl?"
Has he been offered the *ghusl* (full body purification)?

(4) "Dans ki kabarastaan so mayaat pu aller?"
In which *kabarastaan* (graveyard) his *mayaat* (funeral) will go?

(5) "Namaaz janazah pu fer dans masjid ou bien dan kabarastaan"
Will the *namaaz janazah* (funeral prayer) be done in the *masjid* (mosque) or at the *kabarastaan* (graveyard)?

(6) "Eski finne fini aster so kafan?"
Has the *kafan* (shroud) been bought?

(7) "Ban dimoune ki finne fini retourne depi kabarastaan eski zotte ine fini boire sherbet?"
People who have come back from the *kabarastaan* (graveyard), have they already drank the *sherbet (*syrup/sorbet)?

Using the Urdu terms is a move that is motivated by a reason. Having recourse to Urdu words confirms the idea that the Muslims do not take it for granted that members of the Muslim community would not understand Urdu instead they make it a must to switch code to that language for strategic words or utterances as a symbol to stress the identity of Muslims through these words. Also, it demonstrates the status of the words as rather a switch and not a borrowing. Therefore, code switching to Urdu here is neither irregular nor insignificant. In fact, it has a highly symbolic value in forming the collective identity of the Muslims.

The importance of Urdu words in Muslim social gathering is central to the construction of a collective ethnic identity because of the nature as a community whose main objective is to be understood and bond easily with fellow members of the same community. For this reason, social practices related to the mosque, weddings, funeral and going to pilgrimage become powerful sites

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for identity work. The socialization of Muslim members into these sites has a specifically significant role, as it is in this area that underlying rules and expectations about the comportment and speech of Muslims in Mauritius are revealed and enforced.

Verbal exchanges in Urdu between Muslim fellows show how the Muslim identity of the Mauritians is highlighted and reinforced through code switching. From a general observation, language choice is flexible, and it depends highly on the speaker's capability to use a variety of languages and their preferences to use the languages. Therefore, in these socializing practices there is a selection of a particular language with the mother tongue and that language is then enforced.

Muslims display a strong link between speaking some Urdu and the mosque, so that it is implicitly understood that a Muslim visiting the mosque should at least be able to speak at least a few words in Urdu while conversing with other Muslim members. As a result, this is one of the reasons why Muslim parents have always encouraged their children to learn Urdu at school especially at least up to the primary level. Children are expected to understand the sermon of the preacher (mostly done in both creole and Urdu). The language, in which they code switch to, terms and characterizes the social sites and the future generation is expected to learn it.

Discussion

Code Switching Strategy as Reinforcing Religious Identity
The purpose of code switching differs in various cultures and communities. Kramsch (1998) states that language choices should be investigated according to culture and interactions between individuals. As such, the language choices of the speakers in this research demonstrate that the factor behind this switch is related to religious values in the interaction of Muslims. All the participants switch code from Creole to Urdu when referring to religious items. Grosjean (1982) claims that switch coding to a minority language highlights either group solidarity or ethnic identity markers. In the case of this research, code switching has served to display group solidarity among the Muslims and religious identity markers. In this regards the language choice of Muslims connects their religious identity across generations regardless of which language they communicate more comfortably in or which language they have been more exposed to.

Furthermore, the Mauritian creole dominant Muslims, whose language shift is rarely activated during interactions among non-Muslims, use Urdu when addressing other Muslims thus displaying a particular semantic feature. Muslims code switch to Urdu in terms term of kinship for calling his older female relatives as *Kala*, *Bhabh*i and older male relatives are called *Bhai Jaan,* or *Ustad* not following the Mauritian Creole manner of calling by the name. Even though, the family is a universal feature of all communities, the Muslim community has put in place more mechanisms

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to establish order in the family or with fellow members of the community. This difference in the relationships is well represented in the characteristics of the Urdu language. The younger ones are expected to display respect to the older one by switch coding to the suitable Urdu for the elders, thus showing the hierarchy in the relationships and maintaining the Muslim identity in Mauritius. By implementing Myers-Scotton's (1995) claim, the younger ones "marked" choice in code switching demonstrates that despite they are Mauritian Creole dominant linguistically, they are still able switch code to Urdu. This illustrates that the language choice of Urdu is socially relevant and is eventually linked to the religious identity of the young Muslim

Conclusion

I have demonstrated how switch coding from the base language (Mauritian Creole) to Urdu is discussed as defining the collective identity within the Muslim community of Mauritius. The linguistic act of code switching among Muslims plays a significant role to claim membership within the community. This simple act allows members of the same community to converge towards each other, to gain acceptance more readily within the group. Using some Urdu words within a sentence to gain membership within the Muslim community, which was previously labeled as a marked choice subsequently becomes a normative practice within the community and it contributes to perpetuate this linguistic practice of code switching.

In Mauritius, switching to a particular ancestral language is an important linguistic strategy that is found in significant areas of activity of the Muslim community as it only goes on to form a specific religious identity. In the example of the area of the mosque, I have demonstrated that using Urdu is impelled in interacting practices through code switching from Creole into Urdu and the acquiring of target words. Such a linguistic strategy aims at making a link between being a Muslim and the ability to speak some Urdu, impacts a Muslim by generating expectations of the defining characteristics of what should constitute a Muslim's identity in Mauritius.

However, the Muslim community is also affected, as there is an emphasis on a maintaining unity among the members through following the same traditional practice. Therefore, a collective sense of religious identity surfaces that will indeed be constantly built with regards to its characteristics to eventually become an indispensable point of reference for a Muslim to demonstrate so as to join the community. This research has also left open the space to discuss that identities are never fixed. The Muslim identity in Mauritius can emerge in several other ways as well. However, the linguistic strategy of code switching was one of the ways to show how the Urdu language has become a repertoire of most of the Muslims in Mauritius.

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