

Assignment: As a bilingual person, observe the conditions when code-switching occurs. Report your experiences, i.e., the occasions when you and family members or friends use one language as opposed to a second or third language.

Code Switching—Spontaneous Occurrence

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Although the term “bilingual” is generously granted all individuals who speak two languages, in fact, for most there is always one of those languages that they feel more comfortable using. The native language, the tongue of comfort, is the one that they grew up with and acquired during their childhood and adolescence.

While social situations demand that bilinguals choose a particular language in the presence of a person who is monolingual, often the absence of that foreigner does not necessarily signal a conversion to the native language between bilingual speakers. Among bilingual individuals, code switching happens automatically, depending mainly on speech circumstances and the topic of communication. The players of the scene remain the same, yet regardless of their ability to communicate in both languages, bilingual speakers go back and forth from one tongue to another to convey different messages. These statements are very general and perhaps cannot be applied to all individuals who consider themselves bilingual. Code switching often depends on the extent of their command of the second language.

My observations are based on the behavior of a typical immigrant family, my own. The parents, that is, my husband and I, came to the United States with no knowledge of English. Through work and social experiences, we slowly learned some “Pidgin English,” but more embarrassed by it than satisfied with that minimal progress, we took English classes. Unfortunately, we were both in our late twenties when first exposed to our second language, and even though English is the language that we speak exclusively during daily routines, Polish will always be the language we “feel.” That does not mean that we both automatically switch to Polish when we get home. It all depends on our emotional attachment to the topic. When my husband talks about his work, he speaks English to report his daily tasks. However, if there was a problem with a client or something unusual happened, he immediately switches to Polish. The same code switching occurs when, after discussing a TV program that we saw, we begin talking about our family. We both automatically convert from English to Polish because we are emotionally attached to that topic, not for lack of knowledge of English words.

There are, however, some words that did not exist or we had never heard when we were acquiring our first language. For example, the entire computer-related vocabulary or expressions pertaining to the stock market, we learned in English first, and we always use this language whenever we talk about computers or finances. In fact, even when a whole sentence is spoken in Polish, those words are said in English. The same expressions translated to Polish sound very strange, as if they were spoken in some foreign language. We became so used to the way we speak that we started to believe that those words are actually Polish. It took a great deal of explanation before my mother, a bookkeeper, who came for a visit, was able to convince us that there is no such word in our native language as “transfer.” We had not used the Polish “przelew” very often, erased it from our memory and replaced it with the English equivalent “transfer” that we accepted as the “comfortable” one. Another example of mixing two languages in one conversation is the simple word “screen.” We use this word to talk about computers even when we speak Polish because we were first introduced to that topic in English. However, the TV screen, in the same conversation, remains the Polish word “ekran” because we knew television before we came to the United States.

We want all of our children to be bilingual. However, they were born while we were at different stages of learning English. When our oldest son was a child, Polish was the only language he heard at home. Whenever he wanted to communicate with us, he had to speak Polish because we did not understand English. As a result, he is fluent in Polish, even though when we have a conversation now, it is usually in English only. There is an exception, however. When we want to enforce a rule that our oldest is

not too thrilled about, we speak Polish. There are two reasons for such language conversion. Obviously, both my husband and I feel more comfortable using our native tongue in stressful situations. In addition, we are fully aware of the flaws in our pronunciation and English grammar. To maintain whatever authority we still possess, we have to sound knowledgeable. Unfortunately, no matter how wise the message is, the way we convey it in English, our accent and other imperfections make us sound ignorant. To avoid mistakes and have our son respect our opinions, we switch to Polish. Ultimately, my son jokes about the whole experience, saying, "I know I am in trouble as soon as my mom starts talking Polish to me."

There is a substantial age difference between our oldest son and our two younger children. They were born, respectively, twelve and fourteen years later. At that time both my husband and I spoke fairly good English. Even though Polish was the language of their early childhood, English became their first language as soon as they were introduced to the outside world of neighborhood, playground, preschool, and television. Nowadays, when we talk to them, we instinctively speak English because that is the only language we know that they understand. Sometimes it is a challenging task, especially when I have to help my daughter with her homework. I know the problem, I know the solution, I can do it for her; however, to make her arrive at her own answer, I have to explain it in the same manner and use the same words as her teacher did. That is difficult enough to do even in your own language. To explain a math problem in a second language is twice as hard, so I mix English and Polish words, hoping that she will somehow understand the idea. As a result, my daughter looks at me in disbelief when I tell her that I really know arithmetic and that it is my English deficiency that makes me sound uneducated.

One example will validate the results of my observations. My upbringing was very traditional. Topics such as male and female body parts of their sexual functions were taboo in my parents' home. These subjects are still embedded in my mind as something too embarrassing to talk about. Even when I am forced by circumstances to say anything pertaining to human sexual behavior, I cannot utter those words without a great deal of resistance and blushing. All this happens when I speak Polish. The same subject when I speak English does not make me blush at all. I do not feel embarrassed talking about sex in English because I do not "feel" the words or their consequences.

In my experience, code switching happens spontaneously, depending on the speakers' unconscious reaction to a subject of their speech. There is always one language, the first one, that they sense; the second one is reserved for official or unimportant topics.

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