

## DISCOURSE PATTERNS IN THE E-DISTANCE LEARNING FORUMS

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### —Abstract —

This research investigated discourse patterns in online discussion forums, a asynchronous type of computer-mediated communication. 110 messages were collected from the online discussion forums designed specifically for an English course taken by the e- distance learning program students at MARA University of Technology, Malaysia. The online forum allows students in this program to communicate with their fellow classmates, lecturers and other e-distance learning students. The content of the messages were mainly about classes, exams, documentations, assignments to be submitted and rarely about everyday life. The messages sent by the students when communicating with their classmates and lecturers were analyzed based on Muysken typology of code-mixing. It was revealed three main codes; Malay, Arabic and English were used by the participants in the online forum. This study hopes to provide useful information about language patterns and styles of writing among the students in the discussion forums which can be helpful for classroom practitioners. In addition, the result of this research will be of value for the development of studies in the area of computer-mediated communication

**Key Words:** *Code-switching, Code mixing, Computer-mediated communication*

**JEL Classification:** L63

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1. This is the sub-heading**

This paper reports a study that was undertaken with the aim of investigating the discourse patterns via online discussion forums in public higher institution in Malaysia. Malaysia is a multilingual and multicultural country and the language situation in Malaysia is extremely complex as one can find not only the presence of the national language Bahasa Malaysia or Malay and that of English but also code alternations between Malay and English, any of the Chinese vernaculars and English, an Indian vernacular, usually Tamil and English as well as scores of other code switching varieties (Jacobson, 2004). A good number of the present generation of Malaysians are bilingual of Malay-English due to the national education policy which stipulates that the main medium of instruction is Malay and English as a compulsory second language (Asmah, 1982). Therefore, code-switching has become a normal way of communicating among Malay-English bilinguals and occurs in both formal and informal contexts of communication (Jacobson, 2004; Asmah, 1982; Kamisah and Rafik-Galea, 2008). However, in the official language policy, only Malay is allowed to be used in meetings and addresses in functions organized by government or semi-government organizations and English is allowed if there are international audiences in conference. Such code-switching is permissible to show conformity with the national language policy and the inevitability of the use of English due to foreign guests (Asmah, 1982).

The online discussion forum is a platform for Universiti Teknologi MARA students who are in the e-distance learning program to discuss academic and non academic matters with their learning facilitators and classmates. The forum has no moderators, but the students are expected to abide to the ethical code published online (politeness and respect for others). The medium of instruction for all the courses in Universiti Teknologi MARA is English. Therefore it is expected that students who are taking English course to communicate in English. However, an interesting phenomenon seems to appear in the online discussion forum among the e-distance learning students; that is code-switching. It appears that these students code-switch when they write their messages online in spite of the fact that the discussion forums are designed for English courses.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Code-switching approaches: Muysken typology of code-mixing

A theoretical aspect on code-switching/code-mixing to be discussed in this paper is Pieter's Muysken typology of code-mixing. Muysken (2000) in his book *Bilingual Speech* focuses his typology of code-mixing into clause and discourse level phenomena. Overall, he differentiates between code-switching and code-mixing. According to him, code-switching is a phenomenon whereby languages tend to alternate either clause-wise or sentence-wise in the same piece of discourse. Code-mixing on the other hand is language phenomena whereby both lexical items and grammatical structures from two languages concerned appear in the same sentence. Insertion then tend to be more associated with code-mixing and alternation with code-switching (2000,p.1). Muysken then defines three different types of code-mixing.

**Insertion:** This occurs the insertion of lexical items or entire 'constituents' from one language into the syntactical structure of another language; whereby the latter language constitutes the base or matrix language and the first language is code-mixed into it. This corresponds with Myers-Scotton's (1993) notion of 'embedding'. According to Muysken, "there is a considerable variation in what is or can be inserted: in some languages this consists mostly of adverbial phrases, on others mostly single nouns, and yet in others again determiner + noun combinations" (2000:5). Muysken also notes that the longer the insertion, the more likely that the grammar of the inserted language is activated (2000:9).

**Alternation:** Muysken defines alternation as a true code-switching. In alternation, there is a change of base language or matrix language of the predominant lexicon. The structure of one language alternates with the structure of other language. "Alternation is a common strategy in which two languages present in the clause remain relatively separate" (Muysken, 2000:96). This type of switching can occur at the discourse level; between conversational turns, between sentences, or between clauses within one utterance.

**Congruent lexicalisation:** This refers to situation where two languages share grammatical structures which can be filled lexically with elements from either language (Muysken, 2000). It is difficult to decide which language is providing the structure. Muysken proposes that congruent lexicalization occurs

due to overabundance of homophonous words, dimorphs, that serves as bridges or triggers for the code-mix and general structure equivalence, both categorical and linear, making code-mixing possible, without there necessarily being any lexical correspondence (2000:123). He also classifies congruent classification involves either dialect of the same language or closely related language varieties which is also closely related to style shifting or change in language register than insertional or alternational code-mixing/switching.

## **2.2. Language pattern in computer-mediated communication**

Although the studies on language choices or language alternation online have been conducted extensively varying from Mandarin, Arabic, Greek, Tagalog, Brunei Malay (Warschauer, El Said & Zohry, 2007; Tsiplakou, 2009), yet the studies on the language alternation between Malay and English in the computer-mediated communication in Malaysia is still considered under research (Nor Azni, 2003). “Different language pairings may manifest different pattern of language usage. This difference between these two languages has nothing to do with typological considerations, but rather with the respective sociolinguistic situations of the two communities that speak the languages”(Dorleijn and Nortier, 2009: 140). Thus, there is now a growing number of research on linguistic properties of CMC and sociolinguists and ethnographers of communication have begun to address issues such as code-switching and language choice in various CMC types (Marley, 2011; Carpenter, 2011).

Research conducted by Paolilo (1996) can be considered as a milestone in the study of language choice and language pattern in computer-mediated communication. In his research, Paolilo (1996) examined factors influencing language choice on the Usenet newsgroup soc.culture.punjab, a forum designed to discuss issues on the culture of the Punjab in India and Pakistan. His research showed that there are two uses of Punjabi; fixed and creative uses. The language is used only with interlocutors who are in Punjabi community. Fixed uses involved the use of Punjabi sentences and phrases that are essentially invariant and creative uses involve the productive application of the linguistic resources of Punjabi to produce novel, situationally relevant and appropriate utterances (Paolilo, 1996:7). English on the other hand is used for political argument and insults.

The phenomenon of code-switching in computer-mediated communication has also gained popularity among researchers in Malaysia (Jayatilal, 1998; Nor Azni,

2002; Norizah & Azirah, 2009; Zaemah, Marlyna and Bahiyah, 2012). Research has been conducted on the linguistic features on the online communication especially on email messages. Nor Azni (2002) in her research on code choice and code-switching in organizational e-mail found that messages written in English were informal while Bahasa Malaysia messages were formal. According to her, superiors were more likely to converse in English than in Bahasa Malaysia, while the reverse was true of subordinates and they code-switched at any point in the written e-mail. Participants started the message in Bahasa Malaysia and eventually code-switched to English. Messages written in English were normally intended for executives while Bahasa Malaysia was for non-executive. The change of code in the split to Bahasa Malaysia seemed to make the messages more official, formal and distancing. In addition, Azni added that some technical terms in Bahasa Malaysia also appeared in messages written in English.

Research on linguistic features in the discussion forums by Zaemah, Marlyna and Bahiyah (2012) revealed that there were discourse functions of code-switching. According to them, the participants code-switched for formulaic discourse purposes. In other words, participant would rather use Arabic when greeting and ending their messages but write the content of their messages in English or Malay. In addition, participants also code-switched to mark a specific terminology and to emphasis or clarify their messages.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Participants-Students**

Participants for this research were the students of Universiti Teknologi MARA studying in the e-distance learning program in Shah Alam campus. The participants were the first semester students in Diploma in Business Management. The postings indicate that participants code-switched between Malay and English or even in adding a few words in Arabic language in the same posting or wrote complete messages in either Malay or English only.

#### **3.2 Posting collection**

This study employed content analysis on messages sent to the online discussion forum among the students. A total of 110 messages written by students of Diploma of Business Management and their learning facilitator were collected from July 16 2009 until Oct 27 2009. The content of the messages were mainly

about classes, exams, documentation, assignments to be submitted and rarely about everyday life.

The posting messages collected were then divided into 4 categories of postings; Malay posting, English posting, code-switching and others. Malay postings consisted of postings that were written in Malay language only, while English postings consisted of English language only. Code-switching posting consisted of code-switching between Malay and English, English and Arabic, Arabic and Malay and etc. The category 'others' on the hand consisted of messages posted in other languages or symbols only. The largest number of postings was from and the English language category, followed by the category of code-switching and the least number was from 'others'. The data analyzed were mainly guided by Muysken (2000) typology of code mixing.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Although 110 postings were analyzed, it was found that only 73 postings consisted of code-switching in the discussion forums. Not surprisingly, this in fact limit the number of language patterns occur for this study. The occurrences of code mixing were then counted and classified into three categories; a) insertion, b) alternation, and c) congruent lexicalization. Upon classification, the results were analyzed and compared to draw conclusions. Table 1 shows the number of occurrences of code-mixing classification.

**TABLE 1 : OCCURRENCES OF CODE MIXING CLASSIFICATION**

Types of code mixing	No. Of Occurrences
Insertion	16 (22%)
Alternation	52 (71%)
Congruent lexicalization	5 (7%)
Total	73 Postings

Results for the code mixing messages show that 73 postings were identified, 16 instances (22%) correspond to the category insertion, 5 (7%) fit into the description of congruent lexicalization and 52 (71%) were in tandem with alternation.

Participants used more alternation than insertion or congruent lexicalization. In fact, the number is significantly higher than the other two types.

#### 4.1 Insertion

##### Excerpt 1a

thanks *puan*, see u all tomorrow

##### Excerpt 1b

Thanks *pn. R*, wish all fwen gud luck in ur exam.

##### Excerpt 1c

*Puan R* and all my friends, *selamat menjalani ibadah puasa*

The thread was initiated by the learning facilitator who wished the students in her class for their exam the next day. Excerpt 1a and 1b were the replies written by the students to their facilitator and fellow classmates. In the excerpt 1a and 1b shown above, the participants started the message in English and insert the word ‘puan’ in Malay language. The word ‘Puan’ is similar to the title ‘Mrs’ or ‘Madam’. It is interesting to note that in all the messages posted students seemed to prefer to use the Malay word ‘puan’ instead of madam. All the participants in this study are Malays and in Malay culture, students are expected to respect their teachers regardless of age or gender. Excerpt 1c on the other hand were insertion of phrase ‘and all my friends’. The participant started with Malay language and inserted a phrase in English and finally ended the message in Malay. In excerpt 1c, the participant wished the learning facilitator and her friends for the fasting month of Ramadhan. Ramadhan is a holy month for the Muslim and Malay in Malaysia is automatically considered as Muslim. The above excerpts corroborate the definition of insertion as mentioned by Muysken and the insertions occur as participants shared the same cultural and specific language background that induce them to consciously or unconsciously insert Malay or English in the messages.

#### 4.2 Alternation

**Excerpt 2a** *Salam semua... saya M ingin mengambil kesempatan ini untuk mengucapkan selamat hari raya, maaf zahir batin kepada semua rakan.*  
See you at the next class.

### **Excerpt 2b**

*Salam buat semua, di kesempatan ini saya mengucapkan selamat hari raya & maaf zahir batin. 'see you all in next meeting'.*

### **Excerpt 2c**

*Selamat berpuasa* to all my friends. Have a good day.

As mentioned by Muysken, alternation occur when structures of two languages are alternated indistinctively both at the grammatical and lexical levels. In excerpt 2a and 2a, alternation occurs at sentence level and the students started their messages by giving 'salam' in arabic. However, in excerpt 2c code-switching occurs at clause level. In all the three excerpts given, participants wished their friends happy Eid Mubarak in Malay. Eid is considered a big celebration in Muslim society as it is the end of fasting month. Students seemed to prefer using Malay language instead of English when wishing their friends as they shared the same religion and cultural value. However, they ended their messages in English and sounded more formal when communicating in English.

## **4.3 Congruent Lexicalization**

### **Excerpt 3a**

*Selamat berpuasa pn R and friends hope our ibadah will be more improve this time... and ALLAH will grant us a pahala yang melimpah ruah*

### **Excerpt 3b**

*salam all friend..selamat berpuasa* from me..

The above excerpts correspond with Muysken definition of congruent lexicalization, a situation where two languages shared grammatical structured can be filled lexically with element from either languages. In excerpt 3a, the participant wished her learning facilitator for the coming Ramadhan and she also hoped that their dedication and religious practices would be increased during Ramadhan and God would grant them with good deeds. Excerpt 3b on the other hand just a short message posted wishing his friends for the Ramadhan. Both messages were consisted of mixed languages and it was rather difficult to decide the base or matrix language. However, it is interesting to note that the participants actually knew when to alternate the language in their messages and the messages

sent were clearly understood by others.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

Regarding code-mixing categories, a possible explanation for the number of alternation compared to the congruent lexicalization or insertion might be because the participants in this study were competent in both languages, Malay and English. The findings also support the study of Warschauer, El-Said & Zohry (2009) in which participants showed preference to use Malay (L1) to express highly personal content and feelings as they prefer to use Malay when expressing their apologies and wishes. They also used Malay language when writing messages related to culture and religion and English was used for messages pertained to academic matters. Arabic language on the hand was used not only for opening and closing their messages but also on issues related on religion. This finding also corroborates Jayatilal's research that online writer often switched into Arabic for opening or salutation when beginning or ending their email messages or for closing or ending. The two common expressions used for salutation or opening in Arabic are "Assalamualaikum" or "Salam " which means 'peace be upon you'. Finally, as this research was done on small scale, it is recommended that more research is conducted on code-switching or language choice used in other mode of computer-mediated communication.

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