

The Politics of Code Switching in Print Advertising in Sri Lanka

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This paper explores the linguistic phenomenon of code switching in print advertising, which is a consequence of the bilingual/multilingual environment in Sri Lanka. Code switching which is “the alternative use by bilinguals of two or more languages in the same conversation,” (Milroy and Muysken, 1995) is analysed primarily as a feature of speech. The occurrence of code switching in writing, however, is rare as written discourse is often formal and avoids language mixing. One of the rare instances of code switching in writing, apart from creative writing, occurs in print advertising. The field of advertising is one of the domains in linguistic communities that wields language in order to impose ideologies upon its target population, and plays an important role in the (re)construction of identity and relations of power. As such, language choice and code switching in advertisements are deliberate and conscious acts determined by social, political and commercial considerations, and therefore merit analysis.

This research paper analyses inter and intra-sentential code switching in newspaper advertisements from English and Tamil newspapers, and draws conclusions on the politics and pragmatics of code switching from English to Sinhala and/or Tamil and Tamil to English/Sinhala. The primary data for this research is obtained from two daily newspapers in Sri Lanka – The Daily Mirror and the Virakesari, collected over a period of one month. The advertisements range from commercial advertisements to advertisements for the general elections.

In analyzing code switching, this paper distinguishes between the reasons for code switching from English to Tamil/Sinhala, which are found to be chiefly ideological and political, and the reasons for code switching from Tamil to English/Sinhala, which appear as entirely pragmatic, but contains an underlying politics. The reasons for politically driven code switching in English newspapers are explored drawing from Monica Heller’s research on code switching and the politics of language which identifies inclusion, exclusion and solidarity as some of the political motives of code switching. This factor is pertinent to Sri Lanka, where rather than national identity, it is ethnic identity and language that are interconnected. Furthermore, Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory on Semiology is adopted to examine the use of symbols and the creation of new signification by the innovative use of code switching from English to symbols or logos. This research thus extends the definition of code switching to include not only language in its lexical sense, but also in its symbolic capacity.

This paper also argues that Code switching from Tamil to English/ Sinhala is mainly due to lexical gaps in Tamil, and is thus inter-sentential, lexical and morphological. It further analyses the ways in which Tamil has internalized certain English words which has led to the establishment of an “Englishized Tamil” (Canagarajah, 1995). Furthermore, the implications of the hegemony of the English and Sinhala languages over Tamil in the Sri Lankan ‘linguistic market’ and the consequential ethno-linguistic consciousness of the Tamil community, whereby code switching is avoided as a policy, is also explored in relation to the occurrence of code switching in Tamil and English advertisements.