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Code Switching Study

As a linguistics major, I consider myself to be rather meta-linguistically aware. Though I try to be intentional in my everyday language use and make note of my own linguistic repertoire, I found that this assignment enabled me to be even more aware of these conventions and where and when I employ the registers that I do. In particular, I noticed that my ability to code-switch (or code-mesh) might be more diverse than I initially thought. Before this activity, I considered myself to have two major registers: casual and academic. However, I realized that these two categories are not descriptive enough to account for just how much I switch around my everyday language. For example, within my academic register, I observed my language use both during a job interview and while teaching an online class of children. The language I used in these two environments, which I would argue are both academic, differed drastically. This made me rethink the modes of speaking that I employ and to give more merit to just how many codes I make use of. Each context has its own particular set of rules and expectations, which I adapted my speech to meet to the best of my ability. I will explore a variety of settings that I operated in and observed my language in over the past week and a half.

The first environment in which I observed my own speech, as mentioned earlier, was during a job interview that I had via phone call. I noticed that I drew up bigger vocabulary words than I usually would, and that many of the words I used were academic and/or professional. For example, I used words like “purview,” “valuable,” and “effective,” which I might not use in

casual conversation. I found that my tone was more even and that I tried to avoid pauses and the word “like” if I could. I also went out of my way to not repeat words that I had already used, if possible, and to use complete sentences rather than sentence fragments. The job I was interviewing for was as a college coach for high school students, so I wanted to seem well-educated and confident in speaking. This was my reason for employing the words and phrases that I did, and for omitting words and phrases that might not be suitable for the environment at hand. A phrase that I used was “in order to pursue my selected career...” when discussing my post-graduation plans. If I were to use that phrase in a more casual conversation, I might say “so I can get the job I want...” instead. I used more elevated language here in order to come across a certain way to the interviewers (educated, competent, excited about the position). In this context, I was extremely aware of my language use, especially because I had not heard the questions before and had to come up with verbal answers on the spot. I tried to enunciate as clearly as possible, especially since the interview was conducted over the phone. All in all, my aim was to use the most sophisticated, polished, and impressive language I could in order to impress the interviewers. The academic and formal language I employed during this interview must have paid off, as I was offered the job!

The second environment that I observed was during a Zoom class that I teach once a week for children. Though it is a Norwegian class, the children are young enough (ages 8-12) that I mainly use English to explain the vocabulary and concepts to them. I would consider this an academic mode like the interview was, but the type of language I used here was quite different from how I spoke during my job interview. This is mainly because I made use of child-directed speech during my class so that I could ensure my students were following along. What this meant in that environment was that I tended to speak more slowly, to repeat myself

more often, and to address many of my statements as questions. I often showed my students pictures with Norwegian vocabulary beneath them, and then asked “what could ____ mean?” about one of the words. Phrasing the information as a question allows for better engagement from students, as they are asked to answer it. I also ended many of my phrases with a questioning “...okay?” so I could better gauge student understanding. If they seemed confused, I could then repeat the information to ensure they understood. I employed an instructional tone, but also tried to give positive feedback and let children know when they were doing well. I used short phrases and sentence fragments like “good job” and “thank you” quite often. My instructional phrase was often along the lines of “what I want you guys to do is...”. If I were teaching adults (which I have done in the past), I would not repeat myself as often and speak at a quicker rate. I might also ask fewer “what” questions and more “how” or “why” questions, since adults have higher language competence and might be able to make inferences about the material at hand. For children, it is important to constantly be taking the temperature of the classroom and to make sure that nobody feels left behind or does not comprehend, and that students are actively engaged and interested in what is going on. I was not quite as conscious of my language use as I was during the job interview since this was more prepared speech and rather simple, but I did pay attention and make sure to use easier language structures to enhance comprehension.

Finally, I observed my language use among friends, which was the most casual environment I observed. Immediately I noticed, as anticipated, that this was the most different register of the three. This was also the environment that I am probably least aware of and pay the least attention to because it has the most casual nature. This may be my “default” that I fall into when I am not making a conscious effort to switch to any other register. I certainly noted that this environment felt the most authentic to my personality. Most of the kind of talking that I do

around friends is very fast-paced and of a humorous tone, and is often done to elicit reactions from or to entertain other people. There is less “refined” language in this environment: I found I was more likely to use slang, curse words, and other “taboo” language. In this context, that would likely be considered humorous rather than offensive. One thing I noticed was that I began a lot of my sentences with “girl...” for effect and as a term of endearment. If I used any big vocabulary words, it was often for a humorous effect rather than a professional one: this was an example of code-meshing. In the job interview, “purview” would be taken seriously, but among friends, it would be humorously formal.

Additionally, this context was the most “give-and-take” of them all: the job interview was primarily me talking, and while teaching I tried to have my students talk more, but when having a conversation with friends, it was more back and forth throughout the interaction. If a friend shared a piece of information with me, I took that information and asked a follow-up question about it. This interaction felt the most “default” of them all, likely because it was the most casual and natural to me. However, there are even different registers within this casual conversation register. For example, if I were talking to my parents, I would be casual, but would likely avoid “taboo” language, as they dislike it. It is even different to talk to friends I know very well versus friends I am just getting to know. I would be the most casual and comfortable around friends I know well, while I might monitor my speech more with people I am just getting to know.

Overall, what I noticed most was that my speech changed based on what my goals were. In the case of my job interview, I was hoping to come across as professional and well-spoken. While I was teaching, I was looking to convey information and ensure that my students understood the Norwegian vocabulary I was teaching them. Finally, with my friends, my goal was to tell a story or have a laugh with them. The more pressing the goal, the more I monitored

my speech. The goal depended heavily on the audience and who was listening to what I had to say. Within each of these environments, there is an appropriate way to speak that conforms to that situation. For example, I would not use child directed speech towards my friends, or they might think I was being patronizing, and I would not use slang in my job interview, because I want to seem formal. Each register served a specific purpose in the context in which it was used. Paying attention to these differences deepened my understanding of what it means to code-switch, or, indeed, to code-mesh.