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## **ENGLISH- AMHARIC CODE SWITCHING IN FACEBOOK UPDATES AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: ST. MARY'S UNIVERSITY IN FOCUS**

**Samuel Dermas**  
**St. Mary's University, Ethiopia**  
**Samuel9602003@yahoo.com**

### **Abstract**

The study attempts to explore the functions of Code switching (henceforth CS) in Facebook status updates and messages by Computer Science Department Students, at St. Mary's University in Ethiopia. Data were recorded from 32 Facebook status updates and messages, posted by the Computer Science students, who were chosen based on convenience purpose. The study concluded that there are six functions of CS in Facebook status updates and messages; these are Lack of Facility, Mood of the Speaker, Habitual Expression, Pragmatic Reasons, Emphasizing a Point and Attracting Attention. Moreover, the study concluded that CS is common in an electronic discourse, and is practiced by computer science students to enhance their interaction and to communicate and construct meanings during their communication in one of the social networking websites, Facebook. Eventually, the study recommends that Facebook could be used as a platform for teaching- learning English, particularly for practicing the writing skill.

**Key Terms: Code Switching, Facebook, Status Updates, On-Line Interaction**

### **1. Introduction**

Code Switching (CS) has been a subject of heated debate and interest among scholars for decades. A few studies have been conducted on CS, and almost all of them have focused on its analysis in an oral interaction in both natural and classroom settings. Nevertheless, the current study attempts to explore the instances of CS in an electronic writing.



The advent of the internet, which created the easiest and sophisticated electronic communication, has brought dramatic change to the conventional means of communication and written expressions. Part of the dramatic change is the introduction of Facebook, which lays a conducive atmosphere for people to interact and correspond with each other across the globe within a fraction of seconds. From the Social Network Sites (SNSs), Facebook has been selected for this study because it is more commonly used among the online community (Halim and Maros, 2014). According to Statista, an online website (Statista.com), as of the first quarter of 2015, Facebook had 1.44 billion monthly active users. In the third quarter of 2012, the number of active Facebook users had been more than 1 billion. Active users are those who have logged in to Facebook during the last 30 days.

In Ethiopia, Facebook is the most frequently and visited website with about 3 million people monthly (De Birhan.com), which makes the availability of data for CS considerable. The current study attempts to describe the motivation for university students' Code Switch in the asynchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) i.e. Facebook status updates, in spite of the opportunity they have to edit their message before posting it on the updates. Ultimately, the study may be a ground breaking, as a few studies have been conducted on CS practices in an electronic written communication, unlike the verbal interaction.

## **2. Literature Review**

Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) is a means of communication where people interact via computer and networks like electronic mail, computer conferencing, bulletin boards, blogs, chat rooms etc. There are two kinds of communications, named as synchronous and asynchronous. The former refers to a communication taking place instantly where the conversants appear on-line at the same time to exchange their messages, whereas the latter refers to communications via e-mails, and interactants do not need to be on-line and can receive and respond to their messages at a later time. Therefore, some Computer Mediated Communications are categorically synchronous, while others are asynchronous or both. The



current study considers synchronous kind of CMC on Facebook status updates.

Facebook, a social networking website, came into being in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg. One of the distinct features of Facebook is status updates, which lays a ground for users to convey their thinking, emotions, or any other information that they would like to be posted. Moreover, what is posted on someone's wall appears on their friends' news feed, which leads to a reaction that the friends may like it or comment on the posted messages. The fact that status updates entertains friends' emotions seems to imply that there is an excessive use of an informal and ungrammatical language with an abundant number of abbreviations, spelling mistakes, acronyms and the use of emoticons. A study conducted by Herring (2001) encapsulates that such an informal language is used by Facebook users because they want to express themselves creatively and in a fast manner by saving the typing effort. According to Crystal (2001), the language of the internet is English, and hence there is a possibility for the bilingual or multilingual users to switch between codes in their Facebook status updates.

In addition, Facebook has also been used as a platform for English teaching-learning process across the globe, which has got its own advantages and disadvantages, as discussed below in English as a Foreign Language (henceforth EFL) environment.

## **2.1 Facebook and its positive impact in an EFL environment**

The notion of using Facebook as a means of teaching-learning English language is controversial, as there are studies that are in favor or against the proposition. The argument is presented below in the following manner.

Studies, for example, by Richardson (2010) and Wu and Hsu (2011) pinpoint the benefits of Facebooking in many ways. In the first place, Facebooking creates a friendly and fun environment for language teaching, where students may practice their English language skills while entertaining themselves. Secondly, there is a decline of students' stress levels and an invitation for further engagement and involvement in the site. For instance,



a study conducted by Yunus and Saleh (2011) shows that English students in Malaysia favored the integration of the SNSs into EFL writing class because they were able to express their thoughts and feelings with their peers without any mounting pressure. In a similar vein, White (2009) carried out a study about the role of Facebooking in improving their English language skills, and found out that students in Japan had a chance to interact with their teachers and peers. However, none of the studies above stipulated if Facebook interaction affected the their academic writing in a classroom situation.

The other benefit of Facebooking is that students may build up their confidence in interacting with their friends, as both have equal role or none of them corrects the other when mistakes happen, according to White (2009), which paves a way for less proficient students to have comfort to take part in on-line discussions in an appropriate way.

Furthermore, White's study (2009) reported that Facebooking lay a conducive atmosphere for the students to exert necessary efforts to improve their academic writing by checking the difficult words, posted by their peers, in a dictionary and by using words more carefully when posting comments because they knew someone was reading them.

Lastly, Facebooking has advantages in enhancing the critical thinking of university students, according to Yunus and Saleh (2011), in which the activities on Facebook help them to generate ideas before writing up and completing their writings. Moreover, students' knowledge could be broadened by getting engaged into academically oriented interactions, where they access various pieces of information from different disciplines (Pempek et al. 2009)

In the sphere of writing, Facebook interaction seems to be helpful in many respects. Yunus, et al (2012) argue that Facebook is a fertile ground for students to practice their writing skills. A study conducted by Shih (2011) shows that in a writing class, students were able to improve their grammar, sentence structure, content and lexis by doing activities on Facebook. Also, in a similar study by Kabilan, et al. (2010), learners learned new ways of



organizing ideas and writing structures while interacting with their friends on Facebook. Thus, as White (2009) suggests, by organizing a peer discussion on Facebook, learners may get an opportunity of minimizing their mistakes, and generating ideas for their writing in an online interaction in a Facebook site.

Moreover, Shih (2011) assessed the 'blended learning approach' which involves Facebook as a learning tool and reported that learners were beneficial of writing skills by reading their peer's paragraphs and compositions, and were able to develop their lexical skills from the readings of the comments by their peers by looking them up in a dictionary. According to Yunus, et al (2012), by accessing to Facebook, learners could easily correct their spelling mistakes by using the spell-check feature and asking their peers online for the correct spelling of the words they use.

## **2.2 Facebook and its side effect in an EFL environment**

Several studies (e.g., White, 2009) argue that Facebook interaction may affect the learners' English language skills, particularly the writing skills negatively. Wu, et al. (2011) reported that students may be frustrated when their writings are posted on the Facebook walls because they do not want others to pinpoint their weakness, which makes them feel inferior. The other disadvantage of Facebook as a learning platform is distraction; naturally learners may not focus on the educational part, as a bunch of activities are carried out in the site, which could shift their attention away and keep them busy for a great deal of time.

In writing skills, in particular, Shih (2011) argues that Facebook may not be appropriate for the formal writing practice, as no direct correction is given by the teacher, and hence they may continue their writings with wrong spellings and inappropriate words. Hooley (2009) reported the belief of the undergraduate university students about the use of Facebook as a platform for academic writing practice, and they expressed their negative attitude towards it, believing that it cannot work for academic or formal purposes. Moreover, Gonzalez (2003) disfavored Facebook for academic writing practice, arguing that it negatively impacts the students' way of using the



language, specifically in the areas of grammar, organization and spelling; the students may tend to use incomplete sentences and short phrases in a Facebook interaction, which results in producing informal conversation, rather than formal writing. She further argues that there is a huge distinction between informal writing in a Facebook interaction and academic writing, and the students may not pay attention to the distinction.

In addition, Selwyn (2009) asserted that learners may develop a habit of using short forms and abbreviations, which may affect the students' academic learning experience negatively, and may apply this habit when doing their academic writing. Thus, Facebook does not help the learners to improve their academic writing; instead they develop informal writing styles.

The inappropriate features applied in Facebook interactions, but not in academic writing, are given below:

- capitalization use: all capitals for 'shouting' such as "I SAID NO," asterisks for emphasis such as "the \*real\* answer".
- emoticons or smileys use for conveying a feeling are such as facing a hard situation - \_!-, being happy :) or :-), being sad : ( or :- ( .
- multiple punctuation marks or letters use for a prosodic affect are such as no more!!!!!, Yes!!!!!!,,aaaaahhhh, soooo.
- special abbreviations or acronyms used for saving time and making it convenient, such as b4/B4 (before), lol/LOL (laughing out loud), btw (By the way) etc.
- phonetic spelling use for transcription of standard pronunciations are such as "nite" for "night", "guyz" for "guys", "luv" for "love", "wanna" for want to,
- common shortenings used for easy use and convenience are 'u' (you), 'i' (I), 'r' (are), 'thx' (thanks), 'pls' (please), 'tmr' (tomorrow).



### **3. Code Switching and Social Networking Sites**

According to Auer (1998), CS is influenced by various extra-linguistic features such as social, political and ideological aspects. Specifically, the interlocutors' language shift could take place based on the subject they are discussing, the nature of their relationship they have and the setting, where they are for the talk.

Moreover, Gumperz (1982) propounds a situation in which CS occurs; these are situational and metaphorical switching. The former deals with change in participants and strategies, whereas the latter deals with change in topic. According to Blom and Gumperz (1972), metaphorical and situational are common terms in the area of CS, which could also work in an electronic discourse. The situational switching seems to prove that there is a strong connection between language and situation. Blom and Gumperz (1972) give an example to illustrate situational CS, where there are teachers delivering lessons in Brokmal but switch to Ranamal when there is a need to create an atmosphere of free and open discussion among the students. This demonstrates how teachers' switching to another language, based on participants, contributes to the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process. In contrast, metaphorical CS takes place without change in the social situation but is related to certain kind of topics. Thus it makes possible for the speakers to bring to mind a certain mood or to alter their relative status with other speakers.

Zentella's (1997) study also stipulates conversational CS by laying three functions of CS. These are clarification, emphasis, and checking. Interlocutors may alter language to clarify their messages and thoughts, particularly when they feel that they are misunderstood by others. This is categorized as CS for clarification purposes. In addition, language shift takes place between two conversants in order to put some emphasis on certain important points that they would like to highlight, and there is CS for checking, which takes place when an interlocutor wants the listeners' approval or hearing, which usually takes place in the form of tag question.





Furthermore, CS for availability, principle of economy and expressing emotions are propounded by San (2009). San asserted that Chinese bloggers practiced CS, as they could not find equivalent Chinese words and expressions to translate the English terms. CS for principle of economy means that the interlocutors exert minimum efforts to produce a language by leaving aside the most complex nature of the two acting languages. This function of CS is evident in CMC because bloggers employ English language in their writing as it can be easily abbreviated and shortened to reduce the typing effort. Eventually, language alternation is used to express emotions and feelings. On top of that, Montes-Alcalá (2007) has discussed the functions of CS in asynchronous CMC like Facebook status updates, where language shift takes place with no clear reason at all, but the blogger's switching indicates the different stylistic effect of the language, and shows that the interlocutors have good knowledge of the two acting languages.

#### **4. Objectives of the study**

The general objective of the study is to explore the instances of CS on Facebook status updates among university students. Specifically, the study aims to differentiate the functions for university students' switching in Facebook online interaction at St. Mary's University.

#### **5. Research Questions**

The study attempts to address the following research question:  
What are the functions for computer science students' switching in Facebook status updates and messages at St. Mary's University?

#### **6. Methodology**

The data were collected from the Facebook status updates of 32 Amharic-English bilinguals, who are studying at St. Mary's University, Ethiopia, specializing in computer science. St. Mary's University and the Department of Computer Science were selected on the basis of convenience, that the researcher can easily get access to data as a staff of the University. The status updates, where there is language alternation, from English to



Amharic or vice versa, was gathered from the Facebook profile of the users. Particularly, the statuses with an authentic English-Amharic CS instances were considered for an in-depth analysis. A total of 32 status updates with English-Amharic CS were recorded, and later the data were analyzed and classified based on the functions of CS given in the frame work. The data were given in their original form without any change to the sentence patterns; they were presented with their grammatical mistakes, spelling errors, abbreviations, asterisk and symbols in the study because it was necessary to keep the original meaning and message in the CS samples. Eventually, all Amharic words were italicized, and their translations were given in brackets.

## **7. Conceptual frame work of the study**

The study focuses on the instances of English-Amharic CS in Facebook status updates, and considers Malik's (1994) ten reasons for CS to do the analysis. It is assumed that the reasons proposed by Malik's (1994) may be applicable to the electronic discourse and suitable to account for the functions of CS in the context of CMC like Facebook, as the language features in the context of CMC are similar to both spoken and written languages. The ten reasons of Malik's (1994) are given below in the table.

Functions of Code switching	Descriptions
Lack of facility	Being unable to find an appropriate expression or words in either language, or expressing one's idea appropriately using certain terms or one of the languages lacks the needed term for the conversation to go on.
Lack of Register	Being unable to be competent in the two acting language.
Mood of the Speaker	Means CS takes place because of the speakers' emotions like anger or happiness
To emphasize a point	Switching between languages to put emphasis on important details
Habitual Experience	Altering between languages in fixed phrases



	of greeting and parting, commands and request, invitation, expressions of gratitude and discourse markers
Semantic Significance	CS taking place at a particular moment and conveys semantically important information
To show identity with a group	CS taking place to show group solidarity or identity
To address a different audience	Using CS to address people coming from various linguistic backgrounds
Pragmatic reasons	Means language alternation making meaning, and showing the degree of the speaker's part in the conversation
To attract attention	Switching to draw the attention of the speakers/readers

## 8. Functions of English-Amharic CS

Functions of English-Amharic CS in an electronic discourse are given below in 12 extracts, where the Amharic words are italicized, and presented as they are without changing the script form to keep its authenticity.

### 8.1. Lack of Facility

The two extracts given below show that CS takes place due to lack of facility, which means that the speakers seem to be satisfied for expressing their feelings and thoughts in their first language, Amharic. In Extract 1, Line 1, speaker A greets in Amharic, which appears to show how much she cares for speaker B. According to Cook (2001), first language enables one to express his/her emotions, feelings and thoughts appropriately. This is more reflected in the response given by speaker A in line 7, which would otherwise lose its flavor, if it were said in English. Furthermore, in the same line, the English word 'class' is commonly used among university students, which appears to be difficult for university students to say it in Amharic, and hence the switching to English shows that the word is said appropriately. In the second extract, a comment was given about the Ethiopian National Football Team that it would lose soon, and would not reach the World Cup. The speaker in Extract 2 was not convinced and switched to Amharic to express his real feelings that it is a lie and does not



want to listen to this kind of prediction, and consolidated his feeling by switching back to English and using the word 'never'.

#### Extract 1

1. A: *anchi enidati nshe, fikere enidati nate* (How are you? How is Fikir)
2. B: she is fine what about .....
3. A: i'm fine
4. B: is he ok, Abebe
5. A: yes he is ok
6. B: *maho enidate new* ( How is Maho)
7. A: *min yehonal belesh new ene eyalhulet; class endet new* ( Nothing would happen to him while I am here for him. How is the class?)

#### Extract 2

*Wushet wushet wushet, ansemam, begid simugn bemote, never* (Lie, lie, lie. We do listen to what you are saying. Do you want us to listen to you forcibly? Even if I die, never)

### 8.2. Mood of the speaker

In Extracts 3 and 4, there is CS to express emotions. Malik (1994) asserts that when interlocutors are in deep emotion, they are more likely to use only their native language, which contradicts with the findings of this study. Both the speakers in Extracts 3 and 4 switch to English to express their feelings by using terms like ' you know u r stupid' in Extract 3 and 'amazing' in Extract 4, though there is the use of Amharic in the two extracts.

#### Extract 3

*Ante dedeb endet endzi aynet* photo post *targale*, (Hey, you idiot, how come you post this kind of photo?) you know u r stupid.

#### Extract 4

*Seniye, betam yamral. Beselam new yamarebish.* (Seni, it looks awesome. You look wonderful! What is new?) Wow.....amazing.



### 8.3. Habitual Expression

There is CS in fixed phrases of greetings and discourse markers in Extracts 5 and 6. In the former Extract, in Line 2, speaker B switches to Amharic in discourse marker, i.e to mean very as thank you very much, he uses the Amharic term *Betam*. Also, in Extract 6, there is CS in a fixed phrase of greeting in Line 2. Thus, there is CS in order to carry out habitual expression.

#### Extract 5

1. A: *Zenabu meta antbatib Bayu zantela yezo weta hahaa* ( Here comes the rain. It is starting. Bayu has come out with an umbrella, hahaha)
2. B: Ha ha 10q *betam* (very)

#### Extract 6

1. A: hi meni how r u
2. B: i'm fine *tefashe bslame new*( You are seen. Are you ok?)

### 8.4. Pragmatic Reasons

In the study, there is CS for pragmatic reasons, which means CS for enhancing the meaning of the interaction. In Extract 7, the switching to English in Line 2, 'after exam' makes the interaction more meaningful, as the question in Line 1 was asked in English and as the interlocutors are university students, they are more likely to express their ideas in English language . In a similar vein in Extract 8, Line 2, the switching to English adds meaning to the interaction, though there is misspelling with the English terms.

#### Extract 7

1. B: how was the exam
2. A: *arif nber* (It was good) sorry *sangenagne* (we could not meet) after exam *sedwle enbi alegne silks*. ( I called you, but your phone was not working.)

#### Extract 8

1. A: *minalbet betmokri yeraseshen sera* (Maybe, if you try your own business) anyways *arif new* (It is good.)



2. B: *kopi mashene kgezasheleng* ( If you buy me a copy machine)

### 8.5. Emphasizing a point

Extracts 9 and 10 demonstrate that there is switching from Amharic to English for the purpose of emphasis. In the former Extract in Line 2, speaker B shifts to English to emphasize that her daughter is above 2 years old, though the conversation was in Amharic. In the same vein, in Extract 10, an English term is used to stress her point that her daughter needs school, even though the rest of the conversation is in Amharic. The switching to English language in Extract 10 takes place in order to emphasize her point that her daughter needs to be schooled.

#### Extract 9

1. A: *fiker enedate nate* (How is Fikir?)
2. B: *betam dehan nat* (She is doing fine.) 2years *alefat* ( She has passed)

#### Extract 10

*msekreme laye* ( In September) school *new ymiflegelate beyenga* ( You are telling me that you are looking for school to her))

### 8.6. Attracting attention

In Extracts 11 and 12, there is CS for the purpose of drawing one's attention. In the former Extract in Lines 1 and 3, there is switching to English to grasp the attention of the other interacting party. She wants to know if her husband is nice, which is however asked in English language rather than in Amharic for the sake of grasping the attention of the other party. Also, in the latter Extract, Speaker A in Line 1 tells speaker B that she has exam the next day. She does so in English to get her attention, as they are university students, and the response comes in English too, but ends in Amharic. Thus switching to English appears to have been used to get one's attention.

#### Extract 11

1. A: what about u does he deserve u ?
2. B: *malte; bmene meleku* ( means, in what way?)
3. A: is he nice person about his thought and evrything



Extract 12

1. A: tomorrow i hav mid exam
2. B: Oh so pls read. *Lela ken enawralen* ( We will talk some other time.)

## 9. Conclusion

The study has attempted to investigate the instances of CS in an electronic discourse, particularly in a social networking site, Facebook. The analysis of the phenomenon of CS was made based on the ten functions of CS propounded by Malik (1994). Lack of Facility, Mood of the Speaker, Habitual Expression, Pragmatic Reasons, Emphasizing a Point and Attracting Attention are the functions of CS identified among computer science university students in their Facebook updates and messages. Lack of Register, Semantic Significance, showing identity with a group and addressing a different audience were not the functions of CS in an electronic environment in the current study, though suggested by Malik (1994).

It may be concluded that CS is a common phenomenon not only in a classroom situation, natural setting but also in an electronic discourse. Furthermore, the study shows that CS appears to be used by computer science university students not only to boost their interaction but also to communicate and construct meanings during their communication in the social networking site, Facebook, a finding underpinned by Halim and Maros (2014). Eventually, in an electronic discourse, the study seems to prove that there is switching from Amharic to English to serve some functions of CS. Though English is believed to be the language of the internet (Crystal 2001), Amharic is the matrix language while English is the embedded language in Facebook interaction among computer science students at St. Mary's University in Ethiopia, unlike the practice of CS in an EFL classroom, where the shifting goes from English to Amharic.

Based on the findings, it may be recommended that Facebook may be used as a platform for teaching-learning English language, where Facebook page may be opened and signed by the students where assignments or activities are set by English teachers, and later the teachers may check what is done, and comment on it. Moreover, university students may freely practice their writing skills there without the teachers' pressure on them to do their work,



but rules should be set like prohibiting students from using not only abbreviations or Informal English but also posting something non-educational.

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