TOV, YALLA, BYE$^1$: Causes for Code-Switching Between Hebrew-English and Hebrew-Arabic in the Multilingual Society of Israel

Orit Berlinsky-Shay

(Doctoral student at the Faculty of Letters, Iași, Romania)

Abstract: Language alternation has been recognized since at least the mid-twentieth century as an important aspect of human language that should be studied. This alternation has become known as code-switching, and it demonstrates the ability of the speaker to select the language according to the interlocutor, the situational context, the topic of conversation, and more. As it was found that code-switching is a quite normal form of bilingual interaction, it is only natural that in the multilingual society of Israel, where 40-50 languages are spoken in private, code-switching is a frequent linguistic phenomenon. The study aimed at 1) examining the circumstances, factors and causes involved in code-switching between two pairs of languages: Hebrew-English and Hebrew-Arabic; 2) developing a model that can explain code-switching within a multilingual society. The research used the qualitative method and included 4 groups of bilingual participants: 2 groups of Hebrew-English speakers and 2 groups of Hebrew-Arabic speakers. 24 hours of recorded discourses, participant and non-participant observations, recording, over 200 instances of code-switching and 6 interviews were analyzed. The findings were organized into 3 types of categories – circumstances, factors and causes; however, this paper presents the causes for code-switching emerging from the analysis of 6 interviews: 3 Hebrew-English speakers and 3 Hebrew-Arabic speakers. Some of the prominent causes are: lacking the words, idleness, Hebrew makes you feel more educated, and more. Since both Hebrew and Arabic are the official languages in Israel, it is advised that both peoples learn the other language in order to create a sense of belonging and equality. In addition, linguists should view code-switching as a phenomenon which reflects standpoints, emotions, social and ethnical belonging and a means for expressing the speaker’s self-identification and definition, rather than linguistic deficiency or inferiority.

Keywords: Code-Switching; Socio-Linguistics; Bilingualism; Multilingualism.

I. INTRODUCTION

When we speak or write, we design what we have to say, so that it will fit the situation in which we are communicating. However, at the same time, how we speak or write creates that very situation. It turns out that in this magical circle we fit our language to a situation that our language, in turn, helps to create in the first place (Gee, 2005). In contrast to monolinguals, who need to choose the right words from various competing alternatives, bilinguals have translation equivalents for at least a proportion of their vocabularies. Bilinguals who function normally know how to separate their languages in speech production. In other words, they may produce monolingual or bilingual utterances, depending on the situation or the interlocutor (Finkbeiner, Gollan & Caramazza, 2006).

Code-switching is the alternative use by bilinguals of two or more languages in the same conversation, and in this dimension, there may be found different forms of bilingual behavior. Sometimes the bilinguals would switch between the turns of different speakers in the conversation, sometimes between utterances within a single utterance, and sometimes even within a single utterance (Milroy & Muysken, 1995).

The unique linguistic reality in Israel points at dozens of languages spoken by the citizens, as Israel constitutes an immigrant society. According to the Law of Return, which was established in 1950, every Jew has the right to come to Israel as an ‘OlehKhadash’ [meaning in Hebrew: a new immigrant] and to make an Aliyah [meaning in Hebrew: ascent], unless this person is engaged in an activity directed against the Jewish people or is likely to endanger public health or the security of the State of Israel. A Jew who has come to Israel and subsequent to his arrival has expressed his desire to settle in Israel, may, while still in Israel, receive an Oleh’s certificate. In order to encourage immigration of Jews to Israel, the state of Israel grants to the owners of an Oleh’s certificate a wide range of rights – financial benefits designed to help new immigrants with expenses such as health insurance, Hebrew studies, education, housing, customs tax and more.
The statistics for 2015 set a record with 31,013 new immigrants arriving in Israel that year. The figures showed that France was leading with a record number of 8,000 immigrants, a fact which is due, among others, to the rising number of anti-Semitic attacks in the country in that year; other prominent data pointed at Ukraine with 7,000 people; 6,600 new immigrants arrived from Russia and 3,768 people came from the United States and Canada. Other immigrants in 2015 arrived to Israel from North America, Africa and Asia.

The following figure is a fair representation of the Israeli multilingual reality, as it shows a sign located at the entrance of the Israeli Ministry of the Interior. The title is written in four languages: Hebrew, Arabic, English and Russian.

![Figure 1 – A sign at the Israeli Ministry of the Interior](image)

Nevertheless, the relationship between Hebrew and Arabic is the most interesting of all other languages. Article 82 of the Palestine Order in Council, 1922, under the subtitle "official languages" stated that Hebrew, Arabic and English were the official languages. However, the main change to Article 82 was enacted by the Knesset in Section 15B of the Law and Government Ordinance -1948, eliminated English as an official language, leaving two official languages - Arabic and Hebrew (Harel-Shalev, 2005). But this status is merely theoretical since Hebrew is used in all public contexts: the Israeli parliament (i.e. 'the Knesset'), the law courts, academia, government documents, commerce, and in most television and radio programs. Arabic is used mainly for local matters in Arab villages and towns (Yitzhaki, 2008); it serves as the exclusive official language of the Arab countries neighboring Israel and is granted a special status in Islamic states. In addition, Arabic is a community language among a not insignificant percentage of Mizrahi Jews, i.e. Jews who came to Israel from local Jewish communities in the Middle East. In some institutions dealing with Arab-Jewish relations, both Arabic and Hebrew are used, but at the national level, Hebrew is the most dominant language and serves as a lingua franca for both Arabs and Jews (Amara, 2006). Due to various factors, although Arabic, alongside Hebrew, is an official language of the state, it functions as such almost exclusively at the declarative level. The reasons for that fact include status, political, economic and social factors. Arabic does not enjoy a high status within the state and is accredited a low value in the Israeli language market.

Within this complex linguistic situation in Israel, the English language enjoys a special status, being the mother tongue of a negligible portion of the population. English has a strong presence in Israel, surpassed only by the presence of Hebrew. English is the language of wider communication; it is used as a default option whenever the use of Hebrew is not possible; it enjoys a prestigious status; its knowledge is shared by all graduates of the Israeli school system; the exposure to it is high, and it plays a significant role in the professional and cultural life of larger portions of the population, especially among the affluent and educated parts of society (Reshef, 2003). From the legal point of view, Arabic retained the status of an official language while English no longer enjoys such a status. Nevertheless, English is given precedence over Arabic in many contexts.

This research has two aims:
1. To examine the linguistic phenomenon of code-switching between Hebrew-English and Hebrew-Arabic among bilinguals in Israel, as a multilingual society.
2. To develop a model that can explain code-switching within a multilingual society.

The research questions include a main question: What patterns of code-switching between Hebrew-English and Hebrew-Arabic can be identified within Israeli society as a multilingual society? This main question leads to three secondary ones: 1) In what circumstances do people in Israel code-switch between Hebrew-English and Hebrew-Arabic? 2) What factors are involved in code-switching in Israel between Hebrew-English and Hebrew-
Arabic (e.g. grammatical, sociolinguistic, and psycholinguistic)? 3) What are the causes of code-switching in Israel between Hebrew-English and Hebrew-Arabic (e.g. idleness, family composition, convenience, and schooling)?

This paper presents the answer to the third research question, which was gained by the analysis of six interviews of bilinguals – 3 speakers of Hebrew and English and 3 speakers of Hebrew and Arabic.

Gap in Knowledge
As described before, the linguistic reality in Israel, as in many other multilingual countries, creates a unique environment, where code-switching is far beyond a choice of language, but a conscious act which involves social, cultural, psychological, professional and grammatical concerns on the part of the speaker. The role of each of these three languages in Israel is very significant and this study is a milestone in examining code-switching between the two pairs: Hebrew-English, Hebrew-Arabic.

II. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The research used the qualitative method, as it examines a human linguistic phenomenon from various aspects. Qualitative researchers are not interested in causal laws but in people’s belief, experience and meaning systems from their personal perspective; phenomena are viewed holistically and in their social context. Methods used in qualitative research are more subjective than in quantitative research and do not include statistical analysis and empirical calculation (Brink, 1993). In the context of the current research, this ‘subjectivity’ is expressed in the way people talked in the interviews about their habits and motives regarding code-switching and their interpretation of them. Having an interest in knowing more about one's practice and improving it, the researcher is led to asking researchable questions, some of which are best approached through a qualitative research design (Merriam, 2009).

This research espoused the qualitative method since, just like other qualitative researches, it does not concern with the number of sample used in the research, but on samples that can provide numerous answers to the research questions (Kuntjara, 2006).

Within the frame of the qualitative method, this research employed the discourse analysis. Recently, attention has been drawn to code-switching as discourse related, in that its use contributes to the interactional meaning of the utterance and organizes conversation. Consequently, the verbal interaction between bilingual speakers includes code selection and local processes of language negotiation (Lowi, 2005). When linguists and other social scientists analyze spoken discourse, their aim is to make explicit what normally gets taken for granted as we talk, and it is also to show what talking accomplishes in people's lives and in society at large (Cameron, 2001).

Research Participants
The research included 4 groups of bilinguals, who were observe and recorded during a total of 24 hours of discourses, from which over 200 instances of code-switching were collected and analyzed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Who the participants are</th>
<th>languages</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>High school English teachers</td>
<td>Hebrew-English</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>A bilingual family</td>
<td>Hebrew-English</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Construction workers</td>
<td>Hebrew-Arabic</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bilingual friends</td>
<td>Hebrew-Arabic</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, the research included six interviews. The findings emerging from the interviews were organized into categories, representing the causes for code-switching, as will be detailed in this paper.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>From Group</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Languages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rickey</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Hebrew, English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Russian, Hebrew, English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Hebrew, Arabic, English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zackery</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Arabic, Hebrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amina</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Arabic, Hebrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>English, Hebrew</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

III. RESEARCH TOOLS

The research tools were the following
1. Participant observation
2. Non-participant observation
3. Recording
The interview questions were the following

1. Personal Background: age, occupation, country of birth (if not Israel – how long have you lived in Israel?), languages.
2. What languages do you switch between in your daily talk?
3. Can you tell how often you switch between the two languages – rarely, often, very often?
4. What is the most common code-switching you tend to utter?
5. In what surrounding/circumstances do you mostly code-switch?
6. Are there people with whom you code-switch more than you do with others?
7. What is the main reason for the code-switching? Is it because of idleness, for instance? Because of family composition? Because of the particular situations in which the code-switching takes place? Because of convenience? Because of schooling?
8. Can you think of a situation in which you do not let yourself code switch, in other words, in which you struggle to stick to one language only? Why?

IV. FINDINGS EMERGING FROM THE INTERVIEWS

As mentioned before, this paper presents the findings emerging from the analysis of the six interviews, which answered the third research question: What are the causes of code-switching in Israel between Hebrew-English and Hebrew-Arabic (e.g. idleness, family composition, convenience, and schooling)?

The findings formed 14 different categories representing causes for the speakers’ choice to code-switch, and they will be described hereinafter, according to their frequency, namely, from the most common cause to the least prevailing one.

1) Living in a Multilingual Society - “We live in a reality where languages change as we go on a bus, get off in the street, go into the supermarket and enter a museum. It is a real Tower of Babel here, it’s unbelievable!” (Katherine)

Interviewees, directly or indirectly, referred to the fact that they live in a multilingual society as a cause for their switching between the languages. From what they said, it is only natural to keep code-switching when living in such an environment where various languages are spoken.

2) Lacking the Words - “When I can’t find the word in Hebrew, I say it in English” (Jennifer)

Interviewees admit that they tend to switch to the other language when they lack the lexical item they need. According to what they say, this option takes place in several cases: they do not know the requested word in the language they currently speak, they do not remember it, or it simply does not exist in that language. Participants convey that code-switching in these cases is not the preferable option, and if they could, they would stick to one language, but their personal limitations force them to code-switch.

3) Idleness - “To be honest, when I talk in Arabic, I don’t make the effort to stick to it, and whenever a little effort is needed I immediately switch to Hebrew, because firstly it is the easier choice.” (Samantha)

Interviewees – most of them bilinguals of Hebrew and English – report that they sometimes code-switch because of idleness, namely, because they do not make the effort to search for the word they need in the language they currently speak, so they find it easier to switch for this word to the other language. In this category, the switch to the other language is not due to lack of words, but because of the speaker’s lack of effort to try and pick up the word they need.

4) Family Composition - “The family composition which I have mentioned before creates many reasons for code-switching.” (Samantha)

Most of the interviewees explain that due to their family composition, they tend to code-switch, and they justify it in very individual ways. One Hebrew-Arabic speaker points out that her siblings speak Hebrew, but the parents sometimes fear of what the neighbors might say, so they switch to Arabic. For that reason, she explains, she switches more often to Arabic. Another interviewee explains that her husband and she find it important to speak Russian at home, but the children are mainly Hebrew speakers, and so on.

5) It Has Become a Habit, a Way of Talking - “I simply got used to talking like that.” (Zackery)

This category was shared by all bilinguals of Hebrew-Arabic, and one speaker of Hebrew-English. It is interesting to note that all four share the fact that Hebrew is not the language they speak at home, or at least, not exclusively; namely, they all speakers of a minority language in the multilingual society of Israel. The interviewees declare that code-switching has become a natural and normal part of their speech, to a level that they cannot imagine themselves speaking without switching between the languages. Jennifer, the
Hebrew and English speaker, even discloses that code-switching is not only a part of the way she talks, but also a part of the way she thinks.

6) **Some Words are Always Said in Hebrew** - “There are some words that I say only in Hebrew, even when I speak in Arabic.” (Zackery)

   Like the previous category, this one was also shared by the same participants - all bilinguals of Hebrew-Arabic, and one speaker of Hebrew-English. The four interviewees claim that there are words which are always uttered in Hebrew. Some of the words and phrases are: ‘good morning’, ‘a charger’, ‘a traffic light’, ‘a shift’ and more.

   The participants explain that if they said these words or phrases in any other language, one of the following might happen: a) Their interlocutor would make fun of them; b) Their interlocutor would not understand what they refer to; c) They would make the impression of belonging to a different social group than their own.

7) **Hebrew Makes You Sound More Educated** - “When I sit with my friends somewhere and we talk in Arabic, everyone tries to put in as many words in Hebrew as they can, because it is an indication of a higher level of education. If you know Hebrew well, you are a more educated person, so actually it is some kind of a hidden competition.” (Samantha)

   The same four participants of the two other categories - all bilinguals of Hebrew-Arabic, and one speaker of Hebrew-English – declare that they sometimes switch to Hebrew because speaking in Hebrew makes them sound more educated. It should be noted that all four of them are not native speakers of Hebrew, the language of the majority. The four interviewees admit that in some circumstances, they want to be heard speaking in Hebrew, since they want to create a better impression on their interlocutors or external listeners.

8) **When Getting Angry/Upset** - “Sometimes when my kids at home make me angry I switch to talk in Russian.” (Katherine)

   Interviewees mention being angry or upset as a cause for switching to another language. Katherine admits that when her children upset her, she switches to Russian, and laughs as she explains that since it is her native tongue, it is easier for her “to get angry in Russian”. The same thing happens with Zackery’s family member whom he describes in the interview. According to Zackery, when his father-in-law gets angry, he yells in Arabic, his mother tongue, even while speaking in Hebrew. In these two cases, it seems that in case of anger, the bilingual switches to the language they define as their matrix language, i.e. their more dominant one.

9) **Discretion in The Presence of My Children** - “Mostly, I code-switch when I don’t want the kids to understand me.” (Samantha)

   All bilinguals of Hebrew and Arabic note that they switch to Hebrew when they do not want their children to understand what they say, namely, they take advantage of the fact that their children do not fully understand Hebrew in order to keep discrete with their partner. The use of a different language between parents in the presence of their children is not an unusual phenomenon, and perhaps even not unique to bilinguals; parents all over the world find ways to talk privately in the presence of their children.

10) **It Is Important to Maintain the Language** - “It is important for my husband and for me to practice speaking Russian with our kids, so we try to communicate in Russian as well.” (Katherine)

   One speaker of Hebrew-English-Russian says that she and her husband find it important to speak Russian at home, because they want to preserve the language and let the children hear it and understand it. Another bilingual – a speaker of Hebrew and Arabic admits that he talks to his 5-year-old son in Hebrew because he wants the child to know Hebrew now, and not wait until he learns it in elementary school.

   In both cases, the parents alternate to another language at home because they want to expose their children to it, and they feel a need to preserve this language, as it is not spoken by their children.

11) **It Is a Special, Unique Jewish Language** - “It’s a mixed language. It's a unique language, and you can tell a New Yorker is a New Yorkers, by it. It's completely natural for them. They only understand each other.” (Rickey)

   When Rickey, a Hebrew-English speaker, talked about one of her colleagues, a Hebrew-English speaker as well, who grew up in New York, she explained that in the Jewish community in New York, as in other places, switching between Hebrew and English is no less than a special and unique language of itself, which combines the two languages by definition. Rickey claims she has never heard her friend speaks in one language alone, stating that “It's a mixed language;it's a unique language, and you can tell a New Yorker is a New Yorkers, by it. It's completely natural for them. They only understand each other”.

www.indusedu.org
12) **Hebrew Makes You Feel Belong** - “There is a saying behind my code-switching to Hebrew. I feel that this is my way to express my belonging.” (Samantha)

This statement was chosen to be discussed as a category of its own since it seems to reflect an attitude shared by bilinguals all over the world, with varying languages at the beginning of the statement, of course. In other words, a language is sometimes chosen by a speaker for being the one that makes him or her feel belong to the group of people speaking it. In this research, Samantha, an Israeli-Arab, admits that “in my heart I have always felt belonging to my Jewish friends. That is why I am telling you that there is a saying behind my code-switching to Hebrew. I feel that this is my way to express my belonging. I escape to Hebrew because it is more than a language to me. It represents the place and the status I have always wanted…”

13) **A Necessity in the FL Classroom** - “I very often have to switch to Hebrew in order to explain, to repeat or to clarify.” (Katherine)

This category emerging from the interviews involves the use of code-switching in the foreign language (FL) classroom. It should be noted that this category does not seem to be unique to a multilingual society, as it may exist in every FL classroom, even in monolinguals societies where school curriculum includes learning a foreign language.

14) **Speaking English May Be Perceived as ‘Showing Off’** - “I feel it’s sometimes perceived as showing off, and I feel that this is why I sometimes switch to Hebrew.” (Rickey)

Rickey, a Hebrew-English speaker, admits that sometimes she intentionally switches from English to Hebrew, though she does not like to do it, because she is afraid that speaking English may sound as showing off.

As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, within the complex linguistic situation in Israel, the English language enjoys a special status. English has a strong presence in Israel, surpassed only by the presence of Hebrew. It is the language of wider communication; it is used as a default option whenever the use of Hebrew is not possible; it enjoys a prestigious status; its knowledge is shared by all graduates of the Israeli school system; the exposure to it is high, and it plays a significant role in the professional and cultural life of larger portions of the population, especially among the affluent and educated parts of society (Reshef, 2003). Rickey does not want people around her to think that she is being arrogant by speaking fluent English, so she knowingly forces herself to switch to Hebrew.

**V. CONCLUSIONS**

Code switching is a sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic phenomenon which is tightly based on occupation, culture and emotions, and is constantly attributed to specific purposes of the speaker. These purposes are beyond language and communication; in fact, once speaker code-switches, it defines them, a speaker of a minority language who switches to the majority language in order to sound more educated or because it makes them feel belong, actually tries to present a desired portrait of oneself, and to define themselves as being a certain kind of person. Code-switching is more than reiteration, connecting words or tag questions; it is purposeful, culture related, integrative and holistic.

As both Hebrew and Arabic are legally the two official languages in Israel, Jewish Israelis should learn the Arabic language as a compulsory subject at school, and Israeli Arabs should learn and speak Hebrew as the language of the majority. Since language is more than just a means of verbal communication, speaking both languages may increase the sense of cultural merging between the two peoples and lessen the stress between them. Moreover, as some of the participants admit that speaking Hebrew makes them sound more educated, or makes them feel belong, sharing the two languages may bring a sense of equality and blur the differences between the people.

In addition, linguists should view code-switching as a phenomenon which reflects standpoints, emotions, social and ethnic belonging and a means for expressing the speaker’s self-identification and definition, rather than a linguistic deficiency or inferiority.

**The Significance of the Study**

This research is a stepping-stone in identifying the patterns of code-switching in the multilingual society of Israel. The reality in Israel points at two official languages – Hebrew and Arabic – and over forty additional languages spoken around the country, due to constant immigration of mostly Jews from different countries to Israel. As a country of numerous bilinguals, code-switching is a common phenomenon. However, because of political, societal, cultural and other reasons, it is much more than a linguistic tool for communication. Thus, examining code-switching between the two pairs of languages is very important for understanding the factors and causes underlying the phenomenon.

Many countries in the world are becoming multilingual due to extensive population displacements through migration, the expansion of educational provision to many more levels of society, and technical advances in large...
communities; therefore, the findings of this research may shed light on code-switching in many other places in the world, where similar circumstances and conditions exist.

**Research Limitations**

- **Research Method** – This research used the qualitative method alone, since it examined bilinguals’ use of code-switching between two pairs of languages, considering a speaker’s personal belief, experience, perspective and social context. It did not employ the mixed method, using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

- **Research Participants** - The research aimed at finding patterns of code-switching between Hebrew-English and Hebrew-Arabic in the multilingual society of Israel, and it included two groups of speakers of each pair of languages. Including a larger number of groups or a larger number of participants might have shown different findings. Yet, there was an attempt to achieve balance with two groups of Hebrew-English speakers and two groups of Hebrew-Arabic speakers.

  In addition, an extended population of interviewees might have brought up additional causes for code-switching. However, since there were other research tools in this research, six interviewees seemed sufficient.

- **Generalization** - The research included 24 hours of recorded discourses; over 200 instances of code-switching and 26 participants. Yet, these numbers are not sufficient for generalizing the findings to the entire population of bilinguals of Hebrew-English and Hebrew-Arabic in Israel.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

Based on the findings of this research, further research is recommended as follows:

1. Include as participants speakers of Hebrew and another prominent language in Israel, e.g. Russian, Amharic and French.
2. Include a higher number of participants in each group of participants.
3. Include a group of Arabic and English speakers, to complete the triangle of the three languages.
4. Add factors such as gender and schooling to examine their influence on code-switching in this society.
5. Combine the qualitative and the quantitative methods to obtain different perspectives and interpretations.
6. Include a class of FL learners, since this research does touch this aspect, both in the literature and in the findings emerging from the third research question.

**VI. REFERENCES**


---

1 TOV is a Hebrew word for “okay” and “good”; YALLA is an Arabic word for “get going”; BYE is an English word meaning “so long”.