

English-Amharic Code-Mixing and Code-Switching on E-Mail

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1. General

The new millennium is said to be the 'information age'. In this age, the possession of information, gaining access to it, or the lack of it thereof, is said to determine the fate of nations and nationalities. Although there have been visions in which translation machines would render a world language useless (Atwell, 1999), the hard reality is that English has emerged as the language of the internet, with the question of the balance of linguistic power tagging along with it.

Related to this scenario, three main issues of the extent to which internet technology supports English, the potential of cultural and political dominance by English speaking countries, and the extent to which English is changing as a result of its use on the internet have been stressed, (Goodman and Graddol, 1996).

This short note addresses the third of these three issues by examining the features of code-mixing and code-switching occurring in the exchange of e-mail messages among Ethiopians.

2. Statement of the Problem

The dominance of the USA in the creation of the internet led to the establishment of the American Standard Committee for Information Interchange (ASCII) as the main standard at the beginning of the last century. ASCII represented the Latin alphabet as digital or binary data and thus rendered other languages using different scripts ineffective. This problem was gradually remedied in the 1990s with the development of a 16-bit method of character representation, leading to the possibility of using languages with other scripts. The development of such software as *Abegaz*, *Addis Zemen*, *Ge'ez*, *Power Ge'ez*, *Samawarfa* and *ALPAS*, alongside standards such as MIME and Unicode, which are able to support the Ge'ez syllabic script, has enabled Amharic to be transmitted by e-mail.

Nevertheless, many Ethiopians who normally communicate with each other in Amharic and other Ethiopian Languages using the Ge'ez script are forced to communicate in English via e-mail due to lack of the necessary software at all terminals. As a result, when they feel extremely limited by English, they

code-mix and code-switch by writing the words in their languages, using the Latin script. This has resulted in the relatively new phenomenon of code-switching and code-mixing on the internet, something that begs further examination.

3. Aims

The aim of this paper is to first ascertain whether the observation that speakers of languages not using the Latin script simply adopt English rather than transliterating words in their languages, using the Latin script (Goodman and Graddol, 1996) holds true for Amharic speakers. Secondly, the paper attempts to identify if transliteration, code-mixing and code-switching do occur, and if so, when and why they do.

4. Methodology

85 e-mail messages containing correspondence between an Ethiopian (X) and his friends in England and America (A-F) were examined. For the sake of confidentiality all correspondents remain anonymous. All the correspondents surveyed were fluent in both English and Amharic, but tended to use Amharic almost exclusively in their face-to-face communications. The ages of the correspondents ranged from 30 to 40, and women composed one third of the group. The correspondence was informal and was selected on the basis of accessibility rather than random selection. The correspondence took place over a year and a half, covering the period between 1998 and 1999.

All messages were printed out, and instances of code-mixing and code-switching highlighted. Following this, the phrases and sentences were grouped under three general categories. The first category (C1) deals with salutations or farewells. The second (C2) was for words or phrases that lack a suitable equivalent in English. The third (C3) was for words or phrases that have equivalents in English.

5. Findings

	Correspondent A	Correspondent X	Total	Percentage %
No of Messages	9	10	19	95
C1	0	2	2	10.5
C2	6	4	10	52.6
C3	8	7	15	78.9
	Correspondent B	Correspondent X		
No. of Messages	17	18	35	11
C1	3	0	3	8.6
C2	1	3	4	11.4
C3	1	1	2	5.7

	Correspondent C	Correspondent X		
No. of Messages	6	6	12	16.6
C1	0	1	1	8.3
C2	2	2	4	33.3
C3	0	1	1	8.3
	Correspondent D	Correspondent X		
No. of Messages	6	6	12	100
C1	3	6	9	75
C2	5	4	9	75
C3	3	6	9	75
	Correspondent E	Correspondent X		
No. of Messages	3	3	6	83
C1	1	2	3	50
C2	2	2	4	66.6
C3	1	0	1	16.6
	Correspondent F	Correspondent X		
No. of Messages	1	0	1	100
C1	1	0	1	100
C2	1	0	1	100
C3	1	0	1	100

6. Analysis

6.1. Frequency: It is interesting to note that 67.6% of all the messages had some Amharic in them. On closer examination, correspondences with four of the subjects (A,D,E & F) had more than 80%, while correspondences with two of the subjects (B & C) had less than 20%. With the insight that these two subjects both work in academic fields, one is tempted to speculate if code-switching and code-mixing tend to decrease among certain professional circles. It is also interesting to note that X also appears to vary his frequency of using Amharic depending on with whom he is corresponding.

6.2. Code-Switching or Code-Mixing?: Both code-switching and code-mixing occur in e-mail correspondences, with roughly the same chance of their occurrence throughout the messages (50%). Admittedly, some correspondents appear to either code-mix or code-switch more, but from the general body of the data gathered, there does not appear to be any marked preference for one over the other.

6.3. Category for Code Change: In general, the use of Amharic in Category 1 (salutations and farewells) tended to be limited as well as static. On the other hand, the use of Amharic words and phrases both when English equivalents did and did not exist seemed to play the vital role of setting the tone and mood of the entire message. In those messages where no code-

switching occurred, the messages tended to be highly informative and lacked the personal touch or humor that one finds in Category 1.

7. Conclusion

This paper has scrutinized 85 e-mail messages and refuted the observation that speakers of languages not using the Latin script simply adopt English rather than transliterating (Goodman and Graddol, 1996), as this apparently does not hold true for Amharic speakers. Over 68% of all messages had some Amharic in them, with an equal number of both code-switching and code-mixing. The paper has also attempted to classify instances of code-mixing and code-switching as occurring due to formulaic salutations, the lack of exact English equivalents, or simply the use of Amharic when English equivalents exist, and has stated that code changes are basically used for setting the particular mood or tone of a message.

To conclude, this paper is simply a preliminary exploration of the new and quickly developing sphere of communication through the internet in Ethiopia. It has brought up interesting issues, such as whether different professional spheres have different levels of code-changing, and if Ethiopians using the internet signal different characteristics to other foreigners speaking English. Consequently, there is definitely a need for a wider and more exhaustive research on this relatively new source of data from the internet.

References

- Atwell, E. 1999. *The Language Machine*. London: The British Council
Crystal, D. 1997. *English as a Global Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Goodman, S. and D. Graddol. 1996. *Redesigning English: New Texts, New Identities*. London: Routledge.

Appendix

Examples of Code-Switching and Code-Mixing in e-mail messages

C1

- Endaynesh Yenay Konjo?
- Xin salam belilign.
- Guragew wondimih.
- Dehina hunilign.
- Alehu alteffahuum.
- Selamta lewodage lezemed yidress.
- Agelgayih X.
- Getah X
- Attitfa.
- Bel tsaf atisnef.

C2.

- Lekso belashing malet new!
- I'm alive, sew birtu dimet kentu.
- Yemitlebsew yelatim yemitkenannewbew amarat!
- How was yesterday's mels?
- Esua amitaa bewelededchiwu ante min biet neh endatiliegn.
- Maybe I was afraid of the iseta gebas we had previously.
- My only kumnegeregna friends in this world I always count on.
- Atasgomjegn! Ataskwamtegn!
- Fikre kale 9 kita lebalina lemist yebekal.
- Betu moke wey?

C3

- Minew dimtsish teffa?
- X sihed new ezi metsaf yejemershu?
- Beterefe, take care!
- Mechaym Kearn behwala e-mail indemitabezzibign new.
- Gunfanu gedelesh wey?
- I saw X this morning fighting too get into a weyeyt.
- He did not e-mail because he is a balager.
- I've just said weydu!
- Ante hodam fitret, endiet ye habesha dabbo bichahin tibelaleh.
- kezemecha gim past mechaym saisha| ayekerim.

ስለጽሑፍ አቅራቢዎቹ መግለጫ NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS*

ስለጽሑፍ አቅራቢዎቹ መግለጫ NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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Leslau, W. 1968. "The Expression of the Future in the Ethiopian Languages." *Journal of African Languages*, 7:1, 68-72.

-----, 1982. *Gurage Folklore*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag.

Kempson, R. 1979. *Semantic Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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