

Bengali-English Code-Switching in Commercial Signboards in Bangladesh

Afroza Akhter Tina

IBAIS University, Bangladesh
tinaju4@gmail.com

KEYWORDS: Code switching, code mixing

ABSTRACT

Like many other countries, Bangladesh also accepts English language as an international means of communication. As English is not officially recognized as a second language so bilingualism is not really the norm here, rather a consequence of bilingualism is obviously present in various forms of language use as code-switching. One such form is the inflection of English words and phrases in commercial signboards and business naming found in the big metropolitan cities of the country. This visual representation of code-switching, an important and interesting sociolinguistic phenomenon as it is, can be very useful to discover the socio economical perspectives of language contact, and how it is intertwined with the linguistic behaviors of the language users who go through the process. Closely related with this is the symbolic association of power and development with the language in question, namely English. Thus the demonstration of code-switching into English in the commercial signboards simultaneously shades a light on the social strata that shows a lucid tendency to this switching, how they take it as a vehicle to cope with the widening domain of English and how it affects the authenticity of the native language. This paper investigates the cause, pattern and sociolinguistic dynamics of the process.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Theoretically, Bangladesh cannot be termed either a monolingual or a bilingual country in the sense that majority of the people do not speak two separate languages, having equal competence in both. Without entering in this confusing linguistic debate, we can easily trace an important bilingual phenomenon, namely ‘code-switching’ in many aspects in the language use in the country. This paper focuses in a particular area where interesting demonstration of code-switching is found in a rather different way. The inflection of English words and phrases in the signboards, and billboards scattered all over the country is what the paper is concerned about.

1.2 Objectives of the study

The study focuses on the following issues:

- a) Stores in the upper middle class area use English alongside Bengali in the signboards.
- b) The English word inflections in the signboards are typical examples of code switching in written language.
- c) The code switching to English is closely related to the overall attitude towards the language by the particular community and the related shop-owners.

1.3 Linguistic aspects

To define ‘code-switching’, we must start from the concept of ‘bilingualism’. In its simplest definition, bilingualism is the ability to use more than one language. As Wardhaugh (1986) puts it, “In many parts of the world it is just a normal requirement of daily living that people speak several languages: perhaps one or more at home, another in the village, still another for purposes of trade and yet another for contact with the outside world of wider social or political organisation.” Crystal (2005) explains that a language becomes a world language for one reason only- the power of the people who speak it. Here, obviously, power means political, economical, technological and cultural power.

In this context, code-switching from Bengali to English has become a familiar aspect of language use in our country. While code-switching is often related with speech, Banu and Sussex (2001) have shown this process active in the mixed language of commercial signs in their survey study.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The present study is broadly based on Banu and Sussex's (2001) survey of hybridization in proper names and commercial signs. The study is one among the elementary sociolinguistic study conducted in Bangladesh. Another study by Gardner (Coupland & Jaworski: 1997) is also found helpful for this paper, which is based on Labov's (1972) well-known survey in three New York departmental stores.

Taking some busy areas of Dhaka city like Kataban; as samples, Banu and Sussex categorize, analyze, and discuss such type of code-switching in their essay. In Bangladesh there is extensive use of such type of code-switching with English names and even phrases often transcribed into Bengali script in business names and commercial signs. This extension involves graphology where such hybrid varieties are now in a complex situation with our national language policy. (Banu and Sussex, 2001)

Two other papers published in the journal *English Today* have described the penetration of international commercial English in Poland (Griffin 1997) and Italy (Ross 1997), where English is a foreign rather second language. These data involve advertisements, (Griffin) and shop signboards name (Ross).

3.0 THEORETICAL ASPECTS

3.1 Bilingualism and Multilingualism

As is often believed, bilinguals could be defined as individuals who have “native like control of two languages” (Bloomfield, 1933, p. 56). However, this strict view of bilingualism limits the number of individuals and groups that could be classified as bilingual, not to mention the fact that such a definition makes it difficult to operationalize “native-like fluencies”. There is a tremendous variety of linguistic codes in use in South Asia-not only in standard languages with well-developed literatures, but in sub-varieties also that are only spoken and never written. Referring to multilingualism, Sridhar (1996, p.50) says, “Multilingualism involving balanced, native like command of all the languages in the repertoire is rather uncommon. Typically, multilingual’s have varying degrees of command of the different repertoires. The difference in competence in the various languages might range from command of a few lexical items, formulaic expressions such as greetings and rudimentary conversational skills all the way to excellent command of the grammar and vocabulary and specialized register and styles.”

3.2 Code-Switching: Definition

Code-switching is an inevitable consequence of bilingualism (or, more generally, multilingualism). Romaine (1989) has defined code-switching in terms of Gumperz's (1982) definition which sees code-switching as “the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems”.

3.2.1 Types of Code-Switching

‘Situational code-switching’ is the switches between languages that are related with changes from one external situation to another, whereas, ‘metaphorical code-switching’ has an affective dimension to it: one change the code to redefine the situation- formal to informal, official to personal, serious to humorous, and politeness to solidarity.

One of the earliest examples of categorising code-switching would be the distinction between ‘situational’ and ‘conversational code-switching’ as discussed by Gumperz (1982). Conversational code-switching, which is more popularly termed as code switching proper at present, does not necessarily coincide with any changes related with the topic, situation or interlocutor. Rather, it is motivated by factors within the conversation itself.

However, code-switching can be classified in relation to other aspects also. According to Poplack (1980), the following types can be identified: ‘tag-switching’, ‘inter-sentential’ and ‘intra-sentential’. Tag-switching involves the insertion of a tag in one language into an utterance which is otherwise entirely in the other language, whereas, inter-sentential switching involves a switch at a clause or sentence boundary, where each clause or sentence is in one language or another. Intra-sentential switching involves, arguably, the greatest syntactic risk, and may be avoided by all but the most fluent bilingual. Here switching of different types occurs within the clause or sentence boundary.

3.2.2 Code Borrowing

Code-borrowing involves mixing the language system themselves because an item is ‘borrowed’ from one language to become part of the other language. There are lots of examples of borrowed words from English used frequently in Bengali; especially to give the term a more or less a foreign flavor. The popular use of the phrase ‘fast food’ is such an example of code-borrowing.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

For this study, 135 signboards situated in the Mirpur road of Dhaka city were randomly selected as a stratified random sample. The 135 stores are on the same side of the street and they are serialized according to their exact location. The names are then categorized into three different groups. The first group includes names written only in Bengali. Next is the group that takes into concern those names that are completely in English. The last group belongs to those names that show a switch, that is, they are in both English and Bengali.

5.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

From the survey, it is found that only 13 out of 135 signboards have used pure Bengali names written in Bengali text. Most of these are names for fashion houses (see Table 1)

Table 1: Pure Bengali names with no use of English

	Names of the Shop/Store	Types of products it sells
1.	Banglar Shova	Bangladeshi clothing/Fashion house
2.	Grehinee	Do
3.	Kohinoor	Departmental store
4.	Nabarupa	Clothing
5.	RuperHaat	Do
6.	Chhoaan	Do
7.	Annyomela	Do
8.	Bikrampur Mishtanno Bhandar	Sweetmeats
9.	Pushpo	Kid’s Clothing
10.	Abartan	Fashion House
11.	BidyaBitan	Books and Stationeries
12.	Molla Bichitra Bipanee	Departmental store

In Table 2 we see that the names are Bengali words but they are written in English.

Table 2: Bengali names written in English

Name of the shop/store	Types of products it sells
Aarong (both English and Bengali)	Fashion House and Gift shop
Laal Sobuj(transcribed in English)	Clothing
Bhushan (both English And Bengali)	Do
Naree Mela (do)	Do
Labanga (do)	Restaurant
Panam (do)	Gift Shop
Yasmin’s (English)	Clothing
Banglar Karu Sharees (Both)	Do
GyanKosh (both)	Books and Stationeries

Sonargaon (English)	Fast foods
Anjan's (Both)	Clothing
Labonnyo (do)	Do
Shatranji (do)	Handicrafts and Gift shop
Gyan Bichitra (do)	Books and Stationeries
Bichitra (do)	Do
Bishyo Bichitra (do)	Do

Table 3: Names follow the exact spelling written on the signboards

Names of the shop/store		Products they sell
1.	Rhythm-Jewellery and Varieties (written both in English and Bengali)	Variety shop
2.	Muslim Sweetmeats (do)	Sweetmeats
3.	Studio Paradise (do)	Photoshop
4.	Kamal Bakery (do)	Confectionary
5.	Friend Fastfood&Kabab (Bengali)	Fast food
6.	Muslim Bakery& Fast food (both)	Do
7.	Muslim Sweets (do)	Sweetmeats
8.	Sayed Store (Bengali)	Groceries
9.	Kasturi Orchid (do)	Fast food
10.	Efa Fashion (Bengali)	Clothing
11.	Book Choice (both)	Books and Stationeries
12.	Book Center (Bengali)	Do
13.	Al-Amin Enterprise (do)	Do
14.	Mishu General Store (do)	Departmental store
15.	New Peuli General store (do)	Do
16.	Suma Motors (do)	Hardware
17.	Anika Enterprise (do)	Departmental store
18.	Khan General store (do)	Do
19.	Kazi Kraft (do)	Clothing
20.	Monu General Store (do)	Departmental store
21.	Hong Kong Restaurant (do)	Restaurant
22.	Bikrampur Hardware & Painting (both)	Hard ware and paint
23.	Sheuli Pharmacy (Bengali)	Pharmacy
24.	Ruba Pharmacy (do)	Do
25.	Nwabganj General store (do)	Departmental store
26.	Motherland Book shop & stationery (do)	Books and Stationeries
27.	Rubel Enterprise (do)	Hardware
28.	Jahangir Water Tank (do)	Water Tank
29.	Life Pharma (do)	Pharmacy
30.	Tazreen Pharmacy (do)	Do
31.	Laaz Pharmacy (do)	Do
32.	Asian Pharmacy (do)	Do
33.	Kashem Drugs (do)	Do
34.	New Tazreen Pharmacy (both)	Do
35.	International Electronics and Refrigerator (Bengali)	Electronics

36.	Republic Refrigerator (do)		Serving centre
37.	Shameem Workshop (do)		Do
38.	Plus Care (Bengali)		Medicine Store
39.	Moon Hair Dresser (both)		Men's Parlour
40.	Zakir Sanitary (Bengali)		Sanitary Products
41.	Bichitra Library (do)		Books and Stationery

The last table (Table 4) groups those names that bear English words or phrases written in English. The name of stores bearing a person's name is also included in this group if written in English. The names are usually Bengali names or accepted foreign names for a person (mostly Arabic).

Table 4 Names in English

Names of the store/shop			Types of the store/shop
1.	Colour World		Photo Studio
2.	One Stop Photoshop		Do
3.	Tarek's Zone		Kid's clothing
4.	Subaru Car Showroom and Dealer		Car Showroom
5.	Yummy Yummy		Fast Food
6.	Q's Electronics		Electronics and Hardware
7.	Shaanxi Garden		Chinese Restaurant
8.	Cold Spot Engineering Workshop		Hardware workshop
9.	Ohiba General Store		Departmental store
10.	Power optics		Spectacles and Eyeglass seller
11.	Party Shop		Gift shop
12.	Toy Plus		Toy store
13.	Pacific Stationary		Stationary
14.	BFC (Best Fried Chicken)		Fast Food
15.	Sheetal Hair Dresser		Hair Dresser
16.	Asian Sky Shop		Electronic/Household goods
17.	Sausly's Fast Food and Restaurant		Restaurant
18.	Fashion Optics		Spectacles and Eyeglass seller
19.	Portraits		Photoshop
20.	Riz biz		Fast Food
21.	Yasmin's		Clothing
22.	Raisa Fashion		do
23.	Sports Style		Sports Apparatus
24.	Minarva		Gift and Book shop
25.	Film Fair Video and Gift shop		Video and Gift shop
26.	Cinderella		Pastry shop
27.	Memory		Bakery
28.	Hot Cake		Fast Food and Pastry shop
29.	Kay Kraft		Fashion House
30.	Kay Kraft (another show room)		do
31.	Seven Eleven Saihan Sweets		Sweetmeats
32.	New Aluddin Bakery and Fast Food		Bakery and Fast Food
33.	Chili's		Thai Restaurant
34.	Daffodil Computers		Computer Training Institute

35.	Shameem and Company		Hardware
36.	Pool Park		Queue Ball Playing Centre
37.	Anudip Electronics		Electronics
38.	Mobbi Departmental Store		Departmental Store
39.	Pizza Fast Food		Fast Food
40.	New Colour Balance		Photo Studio
41.	Books International		Bookshop

In the study, the last two groups contain clearly more signboards than the previous two groups. This study shows the preference for switching the code into English.

6.0 DISCUSSION

It is a well-established business practice in certain areas of commerce to use phrases from the language of a prestige culture, especially where the words or phrases are associated with any stylish, exotic connotation from a particular culture. The practice of commercial business naming in Bangladesh shows a diversified and extensive code switching. Some types of innovative hybrid names are found in the study too, such as *Needle Fight* (a tailors), *Busy Bee* (a corner store), *You asked for it* (a corner store named after a popular English TV programme). “There is an obvious stylishness in the names, once they are recognized, but the original English pronunciation is sometimes so distorted that even local educated Bengalee’s may not immediately recognize the original English phrases.” (Banu & Sussex, 2001).

However, this treatment to Bengali is surely not what the language deserves. What makes people to ignore the importance and value is the sheer attitude that English is the symbol of status. This attitude is very much present in the educated people who emerged as the neo-upper middle class during the three decades after independence. This attitude is what that is criticised in a report published in *The Daily Prothom Alo* (a popular Bangla daily) by Sharifuzzaman Pintu (2006) in his write-up titled *Bangla Akhon Goriber Bhasha* (Bangla is now the language of the poor). He used the data gathered by the students of NIMCO (National Institute of Mass Communication) on 500 signboards in Dhaka City in his write-up which shows a clear indulgence for English names. However, Pintu mentioned an exception found in Baily Road where the maximum stores known for quality Bangladeshi clothing (saree, salwar kamiz) showed beautiful and creative Bengali names.

7.0 CONCLUSION

While it is inevitable that all language is always in a continuous process of change through time, it is also important for the speakers of a particular language to make some effort to control this change to preserve the authenticity of that language. As code-switching become very common in the commercial naming and the signboards bearing English phrases or words and also a mixed language of English and Bengali which is often termed as ‘Banglish’ (Banu and Sussex, 2001), it obviously has it’s negative impacts on the language. English is seen as an index of development, but the context would alter if Bangladesh becomes a self-dependent country ensuring all its inhabitants a better living condition using its own economical resources. A study of English code-switching in different domains of language use in the country can be then, quite useful to understand the dimensions of language use, status of Bengali and to notice the increasing internationalization of English (Crystal, 1997) in Bangladesh. As for the study of signboards, there is scope to cover a wider range of areas to find out more particulars that would help understanding the nature of code-switching and the socio-cultural reasons behind it.

REFERENCES

- Agnihotri, R. K. & Khanna, K. L. (1995) (Eds) *English Language Teaching in India: Issues and Innovation*, Delhi, Sage Publication
- Banu, R. & Sussex R. (2001) Code Switching of Bangladesh. *English Today*, 2001, 51-61.
- Blom, J.P. & Gumperz, J. (1971). (Eds) Social Meaning in Linguistic Structure: Code-switching in Norway. *Language in Social Groups*, Stanford University Press.
- Crystal, D. (1991). *English as a Global Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holmes, J.(1992). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. London: Longman.
- Hudson, R.A. (1980). *Sociolinguistics*. Cambridge: Press syndicate of the University of Cambridge.
- Mansur M. (2007). *Spelling: Introduction to Bengali scripts and Transliteration*. Dhaka: Adorn Publication.
- Pintu, S. (2006) *Bangla Akhon Goriber Bhasha*. The Daily Star. Dhaka.
- Rahman, S. (2005) "Orientation and Motivation in English Language Learning: A study on the Bangladeshi Students at Undergraduate Level". *Asian EFL Journal*, 2005.
- Shahed, F.H. & Rahman, S. (2007). *Bilingualism in Bangladesh: Dysfunctional Reality, or Functional Myth?* AIUB Journal of Business and Economics, 6(1), 75-103.
- Sridhar, K.K. (1996). *Societal Multilingualism*. In Mackay and Hornberger.
- Trudgil, P. (1984). *Sociolinguistics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Wardhaugh, R.(1986). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Blackwell