



Communicative Functions of Code-switching among Yoruba-English Bilinguals on WhatsApp

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1. Abstract

This paper is a comprehensive analysis of code alternation by Yoruba-English bilinguals on the Internet. Specifically, the study investigates the communicative functions of computer-mediated code-switching among Yoruba-English bilinguals on WhatsApp (A chatting application owned by Facebook Incorporated). Code is a 'neutral' (as against language, dialect, sociolect and idiolect) term that can be used to refer to any kind of system that two or more people employ for communication. Therefore, code alternation is one of the sociolinguistic approaches to language change in any bilingual community (either the physical/real life community or the cyberspace). Consequently, code-switching is a by-product of code alternation. Code-switching is an important aspect of bilingual discourse and it is seen as performing five communicative functions as evident in the data collected for this study. The functions include the following: a referential function, a directive function, an expressive function, a phatic function and a metalinguistic function. Our findings revealed that the interlocutors on WhatsApp exhibit through their use of language to perform these communicative functions that human interaction takes place within a cooperative activity which is the domain of 'Systemic Functional Theory'.

Keywords: Code, code choice, code-switching, computer-mediated communication

2. Introduction

Language is basically the means employed by human beings to communicate. It distinguishes man from other animals. It is true that other animals do communicate with one another by means of cries and bodily posture but the cries basically lack structure which distinguishes human language. According to this description of language, it is obvious to say that language is specie-specific to man; that is, it is a special characteristic of human beings.

Therefore, language is seen as an important tool available to man to communicate his thoughts and ideas. The most important features that differentiate human language from the vocal noise made by animals are its infinite productivity and creativity (Crystal and Robin, 2017). Akindele and Adegbite (1992:2) capture this when

they describe language as “a system of sounds or vocal symbols by which human beings communicate experience”.

Tomasello (2008) agrees that human language productivity is crucial to the understanding of human language acquisition that we are not limited to a finite set of words, rather, we must be able to understand and utilize a complex system that allows for an infinite number of possible messages. So, while many forms of animal communication exist, they differ from human languages, in that they have a limited range of non-syntactically structured vocabulary tokens that lack cross cultural variation between groups.

3. Aim and Objectives

The study attempts to survey language alternation in relation to society of people on the Internet.

Specifically, the study examines the various communicative functions of code-switching in **WhatsApp** conversations, and identifies the changes taking place in the structures of Yoruba and English as a result of their contact.

4. A Review of Related Concepts

Such related concepts as social media, WhatsApp, code and code choice, code-switching, etc shall be reviewed.

Social Media

Social Media is simply referred to as ‘a group of internet-based applications’ (Obar and Wildman, 2015). Internet is a home to different websites, and one of these is a Social Network Site (SNS). Social Network Sites (SNS) are increasingly attracting the attention of academics and researchers from other endeavours because of their affordances and reach. Social Media are Computer-mediated tools that allow people to create, share or exchange information, ideas, pictures and videos. The websites do not just give information, but interact while giving the information.

Since their emergence, SNS such as facebook and **WhatsApp** have attracted millions of users, many of whom have integrated these sites into their daily practices. There are hundreds of SNS with various technological affordances, supporting a wide range of interests and practices while their key technological features are fairly consistent.

Obar and Wildman (2015) say that social media facilitate the development of online social networks by connecting a user’s profile with those of other individuals or groups. Social media tools operate in a dialogic transmission system in contrast to traditional media which operate in a monologic transmission model. Social media have a range of positive and negative impacts on the users.

WhatsApp

WhatsApp is a Social Network Site. It is a cross-platform instant messaging application that allows Smartphone users to exchange text, images, videos and audio messages. In addition to messaging, **WhatsApp** can be used to chat with individuals or groups. **WhatsApp** is quite different from the regular Short Message System (SMS).

Technically speaking, **WhatsApp** employs a customized version of the open standard Extensible Messaging Presence Protocol (XMPP). **WhatsApp** Inc. was founded in 2009 by Brian Acton and Jan Koum, both veterans of Yahoo! (Wikipedia; 2018)

WhatsApp also provides additional social information to its users, e.g. contacts can see when their friends are online, when they are typing and when they last accessed the application. Also, it provides delivery notifications, highlighting when a message is sent (with one tick), delivered (with two ticks) and read (the colour of the ticks changes to sky-blue).

WhatsApp software automatically compares all the phone numbers from the device's address book with its central data base of **WhatsApp** users to automatically add contacts to the user's **WhatsApp** contact list. It relies on data to send messages like Black Berry Message (BBM).

In **WhatsApp** messenger you can also create groups where you can chat with several people at once. You can create a group with your teammates, project groups, or just friends and talk to everyone at once. It allows everyone to have access to the information in the conversation without having to send it individually to each person. The conversation is in one place and you only submit your message once in the group and multiple people can have access to it. This is a new application and because of this it is continuing to explore new technologies that would enhance the application. **WhatsApp** Messenger is the up and coming way to communicate on mobile devices.

Code

Bernstein (1964) makes a significant contribution to the study of communication with his sociolinguistic theory of language codes. The theory postulates that classes within a society are marked by different types of social relations and this accounts for different codes. Sequel to this, code refers to a system of signs or symbols used to record some messages or to give a message and this can be through speech or writing.

Wardhaugh (2006:96) in his own word puts code as a 'neutral' (as against language, dialect, sociolect and idiolect) term that can be used to refer to any kind of system that two or more people employ for communication. However, he states further that code can actually be used for a system used by a single person, as when he devises a private code to protect certain secrets.

Littlejohn (2002:178) defines code as a set of organizing principles behind the language employed by members of a social group. He suggests that Bernstein's code theory shows how the language people use in everyday conversation both reflects and shapes the assumptions of a certain social group. He states further that the relationships established within such group affect the way the group uses language, and the type of speech that is used.

Bernstein did not divide the society into only social class but also used language to classify society into what he termed an 'elaborate' code and a 'restricted' code. Atherton (2002) posits that restricted code is economical and rich, conveying a vast amount of meaning with a few words, where the speakers infer or draw meanings on background knowledge and shared understanding. Restricted code allows the speakers to have a sense of belonging to a particular social group. It is commonly used amongst family members, acquaintances, etc.

However, elaborated code bares it all without concealing anything, because it is necessary for everyone to have clear understanding of the situation (Atherton: 2002). Elaborated code is more effective in a situation where people share no fore knowledge or understanding. For instance, when an explanation is given to a stranger, it is most certain that elaborated code would be employed.

In drawing the line of distinction between restricted and elaborated codes, Atherton noted that elaborated code can 'stand on it own', it is complete and full of detail. Even when one eavesdrops, he can still understand the conversation, while such person will be completely lost in eavesdropping restricted codes. Restricted code is

shorter, condensed, and requires background knowledge and information to make a meaning out of the conversation.

Code Choice

In choosing which type of code to be employed in conversation, Hymes (1972:21) sees 'Component of Speech' as determining factor. He says the choice of code is influenced by these components. The code choice is understood to be the use of a language or a variety of a language for specific purposes. Often, it shows one's interest towards a specific language and the speakers of such a language. It is basically an attitudinal phenomenon. The component is classified into an acronym best known as SPEAKING.

In the component, 'S' stands for setting/scene. Setting refers to the time and the place in which a communicative event takes place. For instance, 'I am going to the theatre' could mean different things to different people at different places. To a doctor in a hospital, it could mean going to a place where surgical operation is carried out but to people in entertainment industry, the statement could mean a place where drama is being staged. The effect of the statement at the two scenarios above on the listeners is to tell them where they are heading to.

The 'P' in the acronym means participants. This refers to the interlocutors who are involved in the speech event e.g. encoder and decoder. Osuola (2005:185) says this reflects the reality of the life experiences of the participants. Another interesting angle to this is when there is a third party listening or eavesdropping, this adds value to the communicative event or contributes to the participatory roles in the communicative event in respect of the context of situation (Osuola 2005:185) and (Osisanwo 2008:78).

'E' stands for ends. This refers to the goals or outcome of a speech event. When a question such as 'who will hear of the day of his death and will not be shaken?' is used rhetorically or for the purpose of showing some brave people who will not give in at the face of adversity.

The 'A' represents act. This is the order, sequence, form and content of the subject of communication. The 'k' in the grid means key. This refers to the tone, manner or spirit in which a particular message is passed across to the receiver. This could show how serious, light-hearted, humorous, etc the matter is.

'I' stands for instrumentation. This refers to the kind of channel, form and style employed in the speech act. It could be verbal or non-verbal, signs or body language. For instance, a colloquial, slang or a formal code could be used depending on the occasion.

'N' means norms. Norms are the set of social rules that govern the event, actions and reaction of the participants. The rules vary from one socio-cultural group to another.

Finally, 'G' in the acronym represents genre. Genre refers to the type of utterances or events such as stories, sermons, lectures, riddles and jokes, etc. Different disciplines have their own different registers that would determine the choice of words to be used in speech event.

Therefore, efforts will be made to discover what **WhatsApp** users use between the restricted code and the elaborated code in their day-to-day conversation. Also, we shall endeavour to discover how their choices are influenced and determined by Hymes' 'Component of Speech'.

Code-Switching

Code-switching is also known as language alternation. Code-switching occurs when a speaker alternates between two or more languages, or language varieties in a single conversation. Therefore, code-switching as simply put is the use of more than one linguistic variety in a context. Code-switching is the by-product of language contact. As a result, Montes-Alcalá (2012) opines that code-switching is the alternating use of two (or more) languages which is a natural occurrence in the speech of bilingual individuals.

In as much as there is language contact, code alternation cannot be eliminated. It can occur consciously or unconsciously when speakers engage in conversation because of two or more languages that exist in their repertoire. As a matter of fact, the interlocutors on **WhatsApp** use code-switching regularly. Even, close acquaintances initiate conversation in English, then, gradually switch to Yoruba, there and then back and forth. Our findings hope to reveal the reasons behind this usage. Taiwo (2018) lends credence to this by asserting that English is the predominant language of digital communication in Nigeria.

Types of Code Switching

There are three categories of code switching according to Poplack (1980). These are tag switching, inter-sentential switching and intra-sentential switching.

Tag switching occurs when there is an insertion of a tag phrase from one language into an utterance from another language. It involves attaching a tag from one language to an utterance entirely in the other language (Hamers and Blanc 2000: 259). Tag-like switches are at the bottom of the scale. These include interjections, fillers, tags and idiomatic expressions. Tags are isolated words or phrases which are not related syntactically to the rest of the utterance. The occurrence of a tag does not break any grammatical rule either. For example:

She is beautiful, **gbà bẹẹ**.

(She is beautiful accept that)

You should accept that she is beautiful.

Inter-sentential code switching involves switching at sentential boundaries (MacSwan 2005:1), where one clause or sentence is in one language and the next clause or sentence is in the other. This type of CS requires its speakers to be fluent in both codes. Hence, the switched units are larger segments where more knowledge is required to produce this kind of switches. For example:

Bola: **Şé o ò lọ s'ílé mọ ní?** Please tell me when you are ready.

(Are you not going home again?)

Allen: Definitely, I will.

Intra-sentential switching occurs within a sentence or clause. This type of code-switching is the highest on the scale. It combines the grammar of each language. The speaker knows how these two languages interact and thus, is able to avoid ungrammatical utterances. For example:

Allen: You are a beautiful **omoge**.

girl

Bola: Stop flattering me **jàre**.

please

Notably, all three types of code-switching are employed by various interlocutors on WhatsApp.

Computer-Mediated Communication

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) or Computer-Mediated Discourse (CMD) is defined as any human communication that occurs through the use of two or more electronic devices. Hale (1996) claims that Computer-Mediated Communication is incoherent in various ways, and this is due to limitations imposed by computer messaging systems on turn-taking. He posits that sentences are fragmented, there is the question of grammaticality and the conversations are internally disjointed. In furtherance of this, Du Bartell (1995) describes the language of Computer-Mediated Communication as exhibiting the grammatical constructions of spontaneous and colloquial language in verbal interaction.

Language as used in **WhatsApp** conversations is mild. Due to the mild and unrestricted nature of computer-mediated communication, the study reveals that **WhatsApp** interlocutors are at liberty to employ language the way it pleases them in order to place more emphasis on acceptability rather than grammaticality in their conversations. The **WhatsApp** interlocutors place premium on mutual intelligibility.

5. Methodology

Data Collection

Since code-switching is a consequence of language contact, then, we explore all options opened to the Yoruba-English bilinguals on **WhatsApp**. The data for this paper were selected from the **WhatsApp** platform without the knowledge of the **WhatsApp** users in order to avoid what Labov (1972:209) called 'observer's paradox'. This is as a result of problematic nature of data gathering in Africa. The **WhatsApp** interlocutors are at their natural best when they don't notice anybody taking account of their conversations.

The data are obtained from a survey on the social media platform with a view to achieving an adequate understanding of some aspects of code-switching in **WhatsApp** conversations among Yoruba-English bilinguals. Different interactions on **WhatsApp** are chosen. The researchers gathered a fairly large data for wider coverage, objectivity and reliability.

Qualitative method of data analysis is utilized in this work. This is where discussion and observation are of great importance. Therefore, this becomes necessary as a result of the data and the nature of the data itself which are series of interactions.

Theoretical Framework

A sociolinguistic model is employed as our guide in analyzing the data. This model is Halliday's Systemic Functional Theory of Language or Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG). In employing SFG, we want to see how SFG highlights the functions of language, and how language is used to express meaning and how the syntactic structure of the 'communicative imports' impact the meaning of such sentences or the 'third legitimate code'.

Language is very essential to human survival. It is used in communication either verbally or non-verbally to express feelings, to influence people's behaviours, to solve problem e.g. crisis/conflict resolution, to relate with others through request, questions, instructions or directives, to impart knowledge, and to serve as a means of entertainment.

Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) originated by M. A. K. Halliday, simply means language is functional and systemic. It is part of a social semiotic approach to language called systemic-functional Linguistics (SFL). SFL is a theory of language which centres around the notion of language function. It places emphasis on what language does, and how it does it in preference to more structural approaches that place importance on

language form. SFG emphasizes how language is used to express meaning. Therefore, SFG is semantic and functional.

Halliday's aim was to develop a model of grammar which would provide a clear relationship between functions and grammatical systems. Halliday sees grammar to be a network of interrelated contrasts with particular attention paid to semantics and pragmatics in the expression of meaning (Lamidi, 2008). In other words, it deals with meaning and how language is used (Bloor and Bloor, 1995:2). This makes SFG a popular tool to investigate how linguistic items and grammatical patterns are used to express different semantic values (White, 2000). However, this is not to say that systemic functional grammar allows ungrammatical sentences. It is only that its emphasis is not on complete grammaticality but it is on the context of speaking.

Finally, SFG is very relevant to this study because it highlights various functions of language as employed by interlocutors on **WhatsApp** platform. Also, it exhibits how interlocutors on **WhatsApp** code-switch to show their communicative intentions.

6. Findings

This section discusses how **WhatsApp** users employ code-switching to perform various communicative functions in the context of computer-mediated communication. Pieter Muysken and Edward Arnold (1988) cited in Adebola (2011), say switching should not be seen as an isolated phenomenon, but an important aspect of bilingual discourse. They see switching performing five social functions. The social functions of code-switching are to be classified as referential, directive and expressive functions while other functions to be discussed under social functions are phatic and metalinguistic functions.

Referential Function

The referential function is the one that most bilingual speakers are most conscious of. It involves what Dada (2011) calls 'lack of facility' in a language on a certain topic, while Grosjean (1982:125) calls it 'the phenomenon of the most available word' that saves the speaker time and efforts to find the exact word in the current language. That is, a specific word from the language involved may be semantically more appropriate for a given concept. This function is necessitated by lexical gap.

Accordingly, this confirms Muthusamy (2009) finding which says that bilinguals or multilinguals explain they code switch when they cannot find an appropriate expression or vocabulary item or when the language of conversation does not have the particular word needed to continue the dialogue without hitch.

Also, a specific word from the language involved may be semantically more appropriate for a given new concept. This function seems to be the one that bilingual speakers are most conscious of. Probably, when they are asked the reason for the switch, they say it is because they do not know the word for it in the other language and the word is readily recalled in the switched language.

So, many words were used by interlocutors on this platform that do not have exact equivalents either in English or Yoruba. Therefore, the interlocutors resort to code-switching in order to retain the meaning and significance of such words or expressions. This is illustrated as thus:

Chat 1

Yesterday

Tólá

Ègbón “brother”

Fine

È sè sir “thank you sir”
for a living now?”

Make-over artist ni mí sir

“I am a make-over artist, sir”

Uncle Adé

Yes àbúrò, how far? “Yes
younger sister, how far?”

ó tójó mēta “quite a while”

kí lò n ʒe now? “What do you do

In the conversation above, the base-language is Yoruba. It is evidently clear that Tólá has no access to the direct Yoruba equivalent of ‘make-over artist’, even if she has it, there is no time to think about it since she is having live chat online. Therefore, due to the lexical gap that exists in the base-language, hence, the need to borrow from English in order to maintain a smooth speech flow.

Chat 2

17 October, 2017

Dr. Omóyá

Na wa o. wot do we eat then?

“This is serious. Then, what do we eat?”

Oláyemí

Our own delicacies like èbà,
Púpúrú, àmàlà, etc.

Here, it is clearly shown that Olayemi does not know the English equivalents of ‘púpúrú’, ‘èbà’ and ‘àmàlà’ because they are all by-products of cassava, thereby, could not label all of them ‘cassava flour’. Therefore, he resorted to his mother tongue to provide an answer to the question. The most important thing here is that he has answered the question in the two languages his interlocutor understands.

Furthermore, he switched to Yoruba language in order to show that these foods are local foods that primarily belong to the Yoruba. Trying to describe them in English will not carry the weight he would have loved.

Directive Function

This involves a level of confidentiality and this is done by exempting some people out of the scene of conversation. It is a situation in which a speaker either wants to associate with or dissociate from other interlocutor(s) (glottopedia, 2010). While Dada (2011) refers to this as the process of adjustment between speakers in order to accommodate each other.

Chat 3

02 August, 2016

Titus

Good morning.

Are you going to the stadium to
watch Sunshine today?

Dayò

tanks “thanks”

Eèmi, noo ọlọṣẹ l’àwọn yẹn

“No, I can’t watch those amateurs”

Ọlọṣẹ kẹ, jẹ ká encourage wọn and
not as bad as that. “Amateurs? Let us
encourage them and they are not as bad
as being portrayed”

Ok, mo ti gbọ ẹ “Ok, I’ve heard
you”

The interlocutors above are presumed to be supporters of Sunshine Football Club, and one could deduce from their conversation that their darling team is not performing well of late (ọlọṣẹ i.e. amateurs despite being called professionals). The data showed how the process of adjustment to the ideas is employed to level inequalities between the interlocutors.

Expressivefunction

The speakers emphasize a mixed identity through the use of two languages in the same discourse. Speakers may switch codes for group identification, affiliation and to indicate solidarity to a particular linguistic group or a listener(s); in this case the speaker shifts from his own code to the listener’s code. (Gal 1978; Milroy 1987). This role is important as a discourse enhancing strategy. It is used for habitual expressions to connote different meanings (Muhammad, 2015:30).

Chat 4

07 July, 2017

Alex

Hi

ṣé u see ur bro Fáyòsé picking

his deputy as his successor “Hi, do you see

your brother Fáyòsé...”

Flaky

Hellooo

who? Ṣ’elêká? Ó wẹ

“Who? You mean Elêká? He is a
novice”

In the conversation above, Flaky reiterates Ẹlẹká is a novice or an inexperienced person (i.e. wẹ) while discussing the Ekiti politics. It could also mean that Ẹlẹká is taken as a little boy who could not differentiate his right hand from the left as per Ekiti politics. Flaky uses the word ‘wẹ’ which is a slang in Yoruba to describe Ẹlẹká as no-match in order to clear the air about the chances of his party’s candidate in the election. Here is another data to illustrate this:

Chat 5

11 August, 2017

-nobody will ever vote for this gbẹwùdání

“Nobody will ever vote for this stooge”

-yeah, d best name for mr, deputy governor

-he is mr. Governor’s gbẹwùdání, true-true

“he is truly mr. Governor’s stooge”

In face-to-face conversation, no one can refer to the deputy governor of a state as ‘gbẹwùdání’ without being arrested and subsequently prosecuted, but these people take the advantage of computer to call him such name here because there is no way to get to them to effect any arrest. Moreover, this is informal interpersonal conversation between friends, and not something accessible to the public.

Phatic function

This type of switching indicates the tone of the conversation. For any communication to be effective and purposeful, so many factors must be involved, such as, tone, etc. It is observed that in certain situations, one may try to keep communication channel open by softening the tone of words or sentences in order to avoid sharp and harsh words in conversation.

Chat 6
07 July, 2017

Alex

Flaky

Haaa, u said ur next Governor wẹ

“Ha! You said that your next governor

is a novice”

ok eh oh! ‘next governor’

moti gba ti ẹ “okay! I have heard you, he is the ‘next governor’ indeed”



In chat 6, it is clearly shown that Flaky does not want to engage in an avoidable argument that would lead to nothing or change anything with Alex. Then, he decides to be diplomatic about who becomes the next governor by inserting the words in inverted commas. ‘mo ti gba ti ẹ’ does not necessarily mean he accepts that the subject of discussion will become the next governor but, he is just being mild, i.e., not seriously intended. The thumb down emoji is used to show rejection and disagreement. He is being sarcastic about ‘mo ti gba ti ẹ’ but deep down in his heart, he does not agree, hence, the use of this thump down emoji.

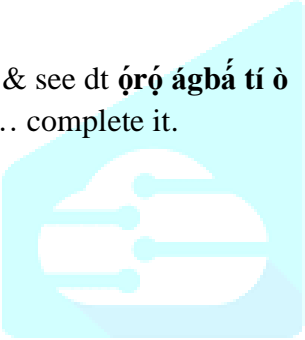
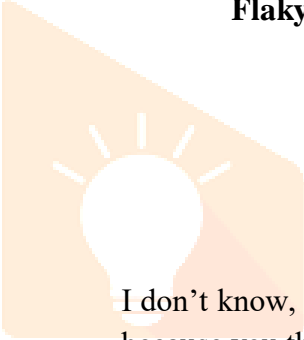
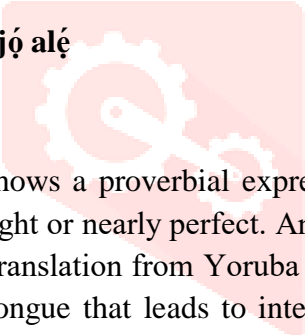
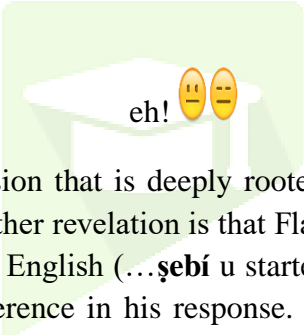
Metalinguistic function

This is another function of code-switching that is explicitly used in switching from one language to another to make references or provide quotations. It is employed when speakers want to impress others with a show of linguistic skills (Muhammad, 2015). This come into play when it is used to comment directly or indirectly on the languages involved. One example noted by them is “when speakers switch between different codes to impress the other parts with a show of linguistic skill. Many of this can be found in the public domain e.g. performers, directors, market sales people, etc.

In most cases, **WhatsApp** users make English language the base language while the quotations or references are made in Yoruba language.

Chat 7

08 July, 2017

<p>Alex</p> <p>Just wait & see dt óró ágbá tí ò şẹ laárò... complete it.</p> 	<p>Flaky</p> <p>I don't know, şebí u started it. Complete it now. “I wouldn't know because you that started it ought to have completed it”</p> 
<p>...á şẹ lójó alé</p> 	<p>eh! 🙄🙄</p> 

Chat 7 shows a proverbial expression that is deeply rooted in the culture of the interlocutors that the elderly is always right or nearly perfect. Another revelation is that Flaky's response to the Yoruba proverb uttered by Alex is a direct translation from Yoruba to English (...şebí u started it), this is made possible because of his access to his mother tongue that leads to interference in his response. Also, the blank face emojis show a deliberate lack of emotion which means he is unimpressed and indifferent.

Therefore, Halliday (1975) views code switching as fulfilling the inter-personal function of communication. He states further that the alternated codes function as a mediator between itself and participants in the communicative event. Code switching fulfill these communicative functions in conversations among Yoruba-English bilinguals on **WhatsApp**.

7. Conclusion

The study details the dynamics of language alternation, therefore, reveals among other things that conversation on **WhatsApp** platform is always a dialogue where interlocutors take turn to chat unlike an SMS which its responses are not immediate. Also, the study reveals that the interlocutors exhibited great skills in using the two codes discussed in this study, i.e. Yoruba and English. They exhibited great dexterity by using the two languages together in a sentence without its meaning being distorted. It is evident in most cases that the interlocutors initiate conversation in English language irrespective of their relationship, thereby, making English language the matrix-

language on **WhatsApp** platform by Yoruba-English bilinguals. More importantly, this study establishes that the Yoruba-English bilinguals on **WhatsApp** employ code-switching to perform various communicative functions on **WhatsApp** platform.

From the data analysed, the interlocutors switched at will between Yoruba and English. This showed flexibility in the way the interlocutors employed the two languages viz-a-viz Yoruba and English to leave people who do not understand either Yoruba or English out of their conversations. However, students especially should be warned against the danger inherent in switching if they turn it to a habit.

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