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# The truth about codeswitching in insular Acadian

# The Truth about Codeswitching in Insular Acadian<sup>1</sup>

Ruth King and Terry Nadasdi

## 1. Introduction

Most recent research on codeswitching is conducted from one of two perspectives. The search for grammatical constraints on intra-sentential codeswitching exemplifies the grammatical perspective (e.g. DiSciullo *et al* 1986; Poplack 1989; Belazi, Rubin & Toribio 1994; Mahootian & Santorini 1996; Myers-Scotton 1993) while the study of the social meaning of particular codeswitches exemplifies the interactional perspective (e.g. Gumperz 1982; Heller 1982, 1994). The present article concentrates instead on the role of codeswitching in the organization of discourse, specifically, with how codeswitching figures in the expression of evidentiality in French-English bilingual discourse. Following Auer (1995), we would argue that codeswitching can be analyzed at the level of discourse relatively independently of any grammatical properties of codeswitching and the immediate social context in which it is embedded. We do turn to consideration of the sociolinguistic situation in order to explain inter- and intracommunity variation.

## 2. Speech Corpus

Our study is concerned with codeswitching in three Atlantic Canada Acadian communities, two in Prince Edward Island, Abram-Village and Saint-Louis, and one in Newfoundland, L'Anse-à-Canards. All three are small fishing villages with fewer than five hundred residents. A sociolinguistic interview corpus for 24 Abram-Village residents and 20 Saint-Louis residents comprising a total of just over 800,000 words provides the main data for the study; a subsample of our L'Anse-à-Canards corpus, interview data for 8 residents, consisting of just over 100,000 words, was used for

<sup>1</sup> We wish to thank Gary Butler for discussing some of the data with us and Susan Ehrlich and Monica Heller for suggesting some important references.

comparative purposes. All of the speakers we looked at are fluently bilingual. While the grammars of the three varieties are the same for those linguistic features relevant for the study, the relative prestige of French differs in the three communities, as does the degree of contact with English. L'Anse-à-Canards is located in an isolated area of Newfoundland where there was little contact with English before the second world war.<sup>2</sup> Until quite recently, education in French has been negligible and consequently the standard variety has exerted little influence on the local dialect. Elsewhere we have shown that it is one of the most conservative Acadian varieties, from the perspective of influence from English and influence from the standard (cf. King & Nadasdi, 1996). The two Prince Edward Island varieties have been in closer contact with English, for a longer period, but there are striking differences between the two communities. Abram-Village is located in a small enclave in Prince Edward Island where French is the majority language locally, although it is in a minority position in the province as a whole. There is strong institutional support for French and our sample here includes speakers with some control of the standard as well as of the local variety. Saint-Louis, on the other hand, is surrounded by English villages, there is little institutional support for French, and lack of transmission of the language to the young is a serious problem faced by the community. Speakers of Saint-Louis French have had more exposure to English but less exposure to Standard French than have their counterparts in Abram-Village. We will return to intercommunity variation below.

## 3. Switched Forms

We were initially struck by codeswitches such as those found in (1)-(3). Note that the matrix language is French.

- (1) I guess qu'on est pas mal tout pareil. (19.2A.255, Abram-Village)  
 "I guess that we are just about all equal."

<sup>2</sup> See King (1989, 1994) and King and Nadasdi (1996) for more detailed discussion of the sociolinguistic situation in the three communities.

- (2) I think j'ai plus peur des chenilles qu'une serpent. (30.2A.47, Saint-Louis)  
"I think (that) I'm more afraid of caterpillars than a snake."
- (3) I don't know quoi ce-qu'a arrivé, moi. (29.1B.269, Saint-Louis)  
"I don't know what happened."

In the Prince Edward Island corpora one finds codeswitches such as *I guess*, *I imagine*, *I think*, *I bet*, and *I'm sure* with French *that*-clause complements. One only finds tokens with the first person singular pronoun: that is, one does not find examples such as (4), with a first person plural pronoun, or (5), with a lexical NP as subject.

- (4) \* We guess qu'on est pas mal tout pareil.  
"We guess that we are just about all equal."
- (5) \* Marie doesn't know quoi ce-qu'a arrivé.  
"Marie doesn't know what happened."

In addition to the matrix clause use of English codeswitches, we find widespread use of *I think*, *I guess*, *I imagine*, etc. at the "edges" of sentences. Examples of such bracketing are given in (6)-(8):

- (6) Ils avont pas mal de la misère, I guess.  
"They are having a hard time, I guess." (01.1B.407, Abram-Village)
- (7) J'étions une quarantaine, I suppose, une quarantaine.  
"There were about forty of us, I suppose, about forty." (30.1A.108, Saint-Louis)
- (8) C'est sept ou huit heures, je sais pas, huit heures, I imagine.  
"It's seven or eight hours, I don't know, eight hours, I imagine." (33.1B.810, Saint-Louis)

Furthermore, we also find intersentential codeswitching, as illustrated in (9) and (10):

- (9) Speaker A: Les Français alentour d'icitte s'accordent bien?  
Speaker B: Bien, I guess so.  
Speaker A: Ils travaillent ti ensemble?  
Speaker B: Oui, oui. (27.1B.208, Saint-Louis)
- (Speaker A: (Do) the French around here get along well?  
Speaker B: Well, I guess so.  
Speaker A: Do they work together?  
Speaker B: Yes, yes.)
- (10) Speaker A: Les traditions de la communauté comme la râpure puis les fricots puis toute ça, c'est ti de quoi qui va rester avec les jeunes?  
Speaker B: Ah oui! Je crois quasiment, je crois quasiment que oui. I think so. Je sais pas. (19.2B.273, Abram-Village)
- (Speaker A: Community traditions like "râpure" and "fricot" and all that, is that something that is going to stay with young people?  
Speaker B: Oh yes! I believe pretty much so, I believe pretty much so, yes. I think so. I don't know (for sure).)

While our primary focus will be on matrix clause and edge-type codeswitches, it is worth noting that there are no striking differences in verb choice in single-clause utterances.

Sentence (11) gives a list of English verbs used, in order of frequency:

- (11) *English verbs employed in codeswitches:*  
guess, think, don't know, don't think, imagine, hope, believe, suppose, be sure, bet, can't see, wish

The verbs in (12) are examples of high-frequency English verbs not found in codeswitches:

- (12) *Examples of high-frequency English verbs not employed in codeswitches:*  
say, tell, ask, remember, show, explain

#### 4. The Expression of Evidentiality

Regardless of the syntactic position occupied, we found that the choice of verb is semantically constrained: codeswitches occur with a particular class of evidentials, verbs of opinion or belief. We did not find such codeswitches with other classes of verbs which take *that*-clause complements in English (cf. Partee 1973), such as verbs of communication (*say, tell, explain, etc.*), verbs of inference (*prove, show, discover, etc.*) or emotives (*be sad, be glad, hate, etc.*) Thus we do not find examples like *I said que, I showed que, etc.*

We do find what might appear to be exceptions to the general semantic pattern. There are several tokens with *I hope* and one with *I wish*, exemplified in (13) and (14). These would not normally be classed as verbs of opinion or belief, but they are opinion-related: in both cases the verb expresses a desire for the proposition in the embedded clause to be realized. In other words, they give an opinion about unrealized virtual events.

- (13) Il va venter de soir. I hope qu'il vente pas trop à cause les pêcheurs sont là. (10.1B.498, Abram-Village)  
 "It's going to be windy this evening. I hope that it's not too windy because the fishermen are (out) there."

- (14) I wish ça serait trois heures. (14.2B.822, Abram-Village)  
 "I wish (that) it were three o'clock."

Close analysis of the surrounding text leads us to suggest that in many cases the codeswitches serve to mitigate the speaker's relationship to the proposition expressed in the embedded clause. In (15) the local interviewer asks the informant, a middle-aged Saint-Louis male, about his father's seeing the ghost of his first wife:

- (15) Speaker A: Ç'a ti ienque arrivé une fois ou - ?  
 Speaker B: Bien... as far as I know, oui.  
 Speaker A: Mmhmm. Il était ti marié là dans ce temps là... à sa deuxième femme?  
 Speaker B: I guess qu'il était marié avec la deuxième femme. I think qu'il était marié then. (39.1B.532-534, Saint-Louis)

- (Speaker A: Did that happen only once or - ?  
 Speaker B: Well...as far as I know, yes.  
 Speaker A: Mmhmm. Was he married then...to his second wife?  
 Speaker B: I guess he was married to the second wife. I think he was married then.)

The interviewer asks if it happened just once. The informant responds, in English, "as far as I know". The interviewer then asks whether the informant's father was married to his second wife at the time. The informant responds that he *guesses* his father was, that he *thinks* he was remarried then. Here, uncertainty as to the truth of the proposition is highlighted by the switch to English.

In (16), on the other hand, the informant's belief in the truth of the proposition expressed in the embedded clause is emphasized by the codeswitch:

- (16) Speaker A: Moi, je sais qu'on peut avoir de la fun pareil parce que j'en ai l'expérience parce que, je disais, comment j'avais fait ma folle puis chanté puis toute ça, puis je prends pas une drink! Ça fait, toujours trois ans, at least. Bien avant, c'est pas à cause j'en prenais beaucoup, j'en prenais justement une petite social drink. Bien je m'ai, je m'ai juste décidé, ça, pour, des certaines raisons, oui, que j'allais juste jamais en toucher back de ma vie.

Speaker B: Mmhmm.

Speaker A: Puis, je touche pas à un petit wine, rien, rien.

Speaker B: Non.

Speaker A: Puis des fois, bien j'ai assez folle, ah, tu sais, je m'enjoye assez, je vas à une danse, je danse assez, bien I'm sure qu'il y en a qui disont <<tu bois en cachette>>. Ils veulent pas me croire, bien, c'est pas vrai. (06.2B.186-190, Abram-Village)

(Speaker A: Me, I know you can have fun anyway because I've had the experience, because, like I was saying, how I played the fool and sang and all that, and I don't have a drink!

That's three years, at least. Well before, it wasn't that I drank a lot, I used to have a little social drink. Well, I just decided, that, for, certain reasons, yes, I was never going to touch any again for the rest of my life.

Speaker B: Mmhmm.

Speaker A: And, I don't (even) have a little wine, nothing, nothing.

Speaker B: No.

Speaker A: And sometimes, when I'm acting the fool, ah, you know, I'm really enjoying myself, I go to a dance, I dance a lot, well I'm sure that some say "you drink in secret". They don't want to believe me, well, it's not true.)

In this case, the informant, a middle-aged Abram-Village woman well-known in the community as the life of the party, declares that she no longer takes a drink, ever. But, she says, she's *sure* there are some who think she drinks in secret, although she has no evidence to that effect. The two cases are linked, then, because opinions or beliefs are involved, as is uncertainty.

We took into consideration the various meanings which could be conveyed by the English verbs in question. For instance, we found no examples where *guess* might be paraphrased as "predict", as in (17), or where *think* might be paraphrased as "reflect", as in (18).

- (17) \*I guessed que ça serait un problème.  
"I guessed that it would be a problem."  
(18) \*I think about ça souvent.  
"I think about that often."

These lacunae lend support to our analysis of the discursive function of the codeswitches, i.e., they are used to underscore a speaker's personal opinion about something or indicate their uncertainty as to the veracity of a statement. But is codeswitching the only means for indicating this kind of uncertainty? To explore this question, we turn to data for five heavy codeswitchers and compare their use of *I guess* and *I think* with what might be considered French-language equivalents. In the course of doing so, we hope

to answer the question of whether or not these forms really are equivalents.

## 5. French-language Equivalents

We begin with potential equivalents for *I guess* as used in (19) and (20) which, at least among the heavy switchers of our corpora, is the indicator *par excellence* of uncertainty:

- (19) I guess la tide était trop haute. (30.2B.119, Saint-Louis)  
"I guess the tide was too high."  
(20) I guess je devrais parler en français. (29.1B.376, Saint-Louis)  
"I guess I should speak French."

In these sentences, and indeed in the vast majority of sentences of this type, *I guess* indicates to the listener that the speaker is taking a stance on the veracity of the following proposition; however, she is extremely uncertain. Can this same degree of uncertainty be rendered by a French equivalent? Potential candidates for equivalents of *I guess* include the forms in (21):

- (21) Potential French-language equivalents for *I guess*:  
*je crois (que), je pense (que), me semble (que), à moi, j'imagine (que), peut-être (que)*

The first four forms certainly allow the speaker to take a stance on the veracity of a statement or event. However, the degree of certainty indicated by these forms is quite strong. They are used when the speaker wants to indicate that she is fairly certain that a proposition is or is not true and they indicate a degree of certainty greater than that indicated by *I guess*. One might be able to argue that *j'imagine* indicates a high degree of uncertainty, similar to that indicated by *I guess*; however, it is not used by our heavy code-switchers. As for *peut-être* (generally translated as "maybe"), it succeeds in letting the listener know that the speaker is uncertain, but it involves pure conjecture and entirely releases the speaker from taking a stance on the veracity of the statement. It would appear, then, that *I guess* fulfills an intermediate role: it indicates that the speaker does in fact take a stance as to the veracity of a

proposition; however, the stance is extremely weak, much weaker than any potential French language equivalent. As such, switching to *I guess* enables the speaker to indicate a degree of uncertainty previously unnuanced in the language.

What about forms such as *I think*? Close examination of the data indicates that, unlike the case for *I guess*, there is no strong evidence that a switch to *I think* indicates a greater degree of uncertainty than the equivalent forms in (22):

- (22) **Potential French-language equivalents for *I think*:**  
*je pense que, je crois (que), je trouve (que), je dirais (que), me semble (que), à moi*

Note first of all that *je pense que* seems to be absent from the heavy codeswitchers' inventory of terms used to indicate uncertainty. However, the other forms do occur and seem to be interchangeable with *I think*. So, for example, the meaning of the main clause of the sentence in (23)a seems the same as that of (23)b:

- (23) a. **I think que c'est ça qu'arrive.** (30, Saint-Louis)  
 "I think that's what happens."  
 b. **Je crois que c'est ça qu'arrive.** (30, Saint-Louis)  
 "I believe that's what happens."

There may, however, still be reason to believe that they are not absolute equivalents. Consider now the data in Table 1 which compares propositions which follow *I think* and the French equivalents and which involves cases where a speaker takes a stance on the veracity of a statement. The kinds of propositions we are interested in fall into two basic categories: a) events/facts accomplished in the past and b) unaccomplished events which are hypothetical or ongoing. Examples of these two categories are presented in (24) and (25).

- (24) **Accomplished events/facts:**  
 a. **Je crois qu'elle avait sixty-five.** (30, Saint-Louis)  
 "I believe she was sixty-five."  
 b. **Elle m'avait demandé pour un hanger une journée puis I think que j'ai été lui quérir des clothes pins.** (29.1B.245, Saint-Louis)  
 "She had asked me for a hanger one day and I think I went to look for some clothes pins for her."

Table 1: Distribution of *I think* and French-language equivalents, selected speakers

Verb	Accomplished Events	Unaccomplished Events
<i>I think (que)</i>	12 (20%)	48 (80%)
<i>je crois (que)</i>	82 (54%)	66 (46%)
<i>me semble (que)</i>	51 (51%)	49 (49%)
<i>je pense (que)</i>	0	0

- (25) **Unaccomplished, current or hypothetical events/facts:**  
 a. **I don't think que je pourrais vivre comme une femme qui serait amarrée à la maison.** (30.3B.134-135, Saint-Louis)  
 "I don't think that I could live as a woman who would be tied to the house."  
 b. **Me semble ça devrait être un homme qui serait un prêtre à cause le bon Dieu était un homme.** (31, Saint-Louis)  
 "It seems to me (that) it should be a man who should be a priest since God was a man."

Table 1 provides results for how often a speaker's degree of uncertainty is indicated by codeswitches with *I think*, and how often it is indicated by French-language equivalents for both categories of information. These numbers include all types of codeswitches, i.e., matrix clauses, edges, and single-clause utterances.

What these results reveal is that while all forms can be used to indicate a speaker's opinion relative to the veracity of both accomplished events and unaccomplished events, *I think* is used primarily for this latter category of information. The French equivalent forms are evenly distributed across accomplished and unaccomplished events. In other words, the English form is used first and foremost to take a stance on information the veracity of which, by its very nature, is relatively uncertain. What we would like to argue, then, is that when one uses a French-language equivalent, confidence in the veracity of a statement is still appreciably greater than when a stance on information is introduced by an English codeswitch.

So while *I think* and its French equivalents can be used in the same context, it is not obvious that they are absolute equivalents. A codeswitch to *I think* underscores a speaker's uncertainty vis-a-vis a proposition: it indicates to the listener that the uncertainty is greater. In other words, whenever a French equivalent is used, the speaker could have used an English codeswitch to underscore the uncertainty. Example (10) above, repeated here as (26), is a nice example of this.

- (26) Speaker A: Les traditions de la communauté comme la râpure puis les fricots puis toute ça, c'est ti de quoi qui va rester avec les jeunes?
- Speaker B: Ah oui! Je crois quasiment, je crois quasiment que oui. I think so. Je sais pas. (19.2B.273, Abram-Village)
- (Speaker A: Community traditions like "râpure" and "fricot" and all that, is that something that is going to stay with young people?
- Speaker B: Oh yes! I believe pretty much so, I believe pretty much so, yes. I think so. I don't know (for sure).)

Here we see that the informant comments on whether the old traditions, in this case traditional Acadian dishes, will be retained by the young. He comments in French that "he believes, pretty much so". Then he says, "I think so. Je sais pas". We interpret this as a decrescendo from fairly certain (*je crois*) to relative uncertainty (*I think so*), to absolute uncertainty (*je sais pas*).

## 6. Why Codeswitch?

We now consider the process of "infiltration" of the switches to English. Table 2 presents the full set of English opinion-related verbs which occurred in matrix clauses and in other contexts; we have combined our "edge" category with our "single-clause utterance" category here.

We found a total of around 600 tokens with switches to English. The low frequency of the structure might at first appear surprising: indeed, if we had not done quantitative analysis of

large corpora we would not have identified the data as constituting a pattern. However, it must be kept in mind that the linguistic expression of attitudes arising through opinion or belief is not as frequent as one might expect in discourse: Chafe (1986:266) reports just 3.6 occurrences per 1000 words in conversational written English. Given that our corpus is approximately 900,000 words, our English data amount to, relatively speaking, about a fifth of the proportion found by Chafe. When one considers that our informants vary in terms of the degree with which they employ English switches, and that almost everyone has *some* examples of *je crois*, *me semble*, etc. that can be characterized as opinion-giving, our results are not out of line.

Looking at all three corpora, we find that the most frequently-occurring English verb is *guess*, which, as we have mentioned, is the indicator of uncertainty about information *par excellence*. Of those informants whose speech exhibited the phenomenon, more than 85% had *guess* (as their only English verb or as one of their verbs) in matrix clauses. The pervasiveness of *I guess* suggests that in communities where its use is widespread, it was the first form used to underscore a speaker's uncertainty. As previously suggested, we believe that the switch to *I guess* came on the scene to allow the speaker to indicate a nuance of uncertainty that was previously not distinguished. Developments of this type certainly have a precedence in language contact situations, though documented cases involve borrowed forms rather than codeswitches. For example, Poplack, Sankoff and Miller (1988) suggest that the borrowing of *cute* in Quebecois French originated from a desire to nuance between different registers; Nadasdi (1991) also gives examples of this type. However, the case we have presented is unique in as much as it is not only the English form that allows the speaker to indicate a greater nuance in meaning, but the actual codeswitch itself, especially with codeswitches involving forms other than *I guess*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Maschler (1994) also makes this second point regarding the use of English discourse markers (e.g., *so*, *but*, *you know*) in English-Hebrew codeswitching, i.e. "[a] verbal activity is marked not only by the presence of a discourse marker, but also by moving to another language."



Table 2: English verbs used in codeswitches

Verb	Saint-Louis		Abram-Village		L'Anse-à-Canards	
	Matrix	Elsewhere	Matrix	Elsewhere	Matrix	Elsewhere
am sure	3	0	1	0	0	0
believe	4	2	0	0	0	0
bet	2	2	0	0	0	0
can't see	1	0	0	0	0	0
doubt	0	0	0	1	0	0
guess	98	85	23	97	17	69
imagine	8	8	0	0	0	0
know (don't know)	1(0)	3 (47)	0	2 (4)	0	0
suppose	0	6	0	0	0	0
think (don't think)	43 (5)	47 (19)	0	5 (3)	0	0
hope	3	0	4	6	0	0
wish	1	0	0	0	0	0

We believe that the greater degree of uncertainty which initially accompanied the switch to *I guess* was then associated with all switches to English involving stances on veracity. Also, our data suggest that the English codeswitches began (on the edges) with speakers wanting to take a weak stance vis-a-vis the veracity of a statement or occurrence. It started with *I guess*, then came *I think* and others, but only to indicate uncertainty, not personal opinion like "I think que l'église est mortellement belle", in (27). This latter, we would argue, is a more recent development.

- (27) **I think** que l'église est mortellement belle. (27.1A.255, Saint-Louis)  
 "I think that the church is really beautiful."

Intensive language contact would seem to be a prerequisite to the kind of discursive behaviour described here: not surprisingly, then, it is not reported for Quebecois French. Elsewhere in Canada, where French is a minority language, we do find evidence of use of English-language discourse markers. Mougéon and Hébrard (1975), for instance, report that English *anyway*, *well*, *you know*, etc. are associated with working-class Ontario French, in particular with speakers who speak both English and French on a regular basis; Roy (1979) makes a similar observation for use of *but* and *so* by working-class speakers of Acadian French in Moncton, New Brunswick.

The data in Table 2 show striking intercommunity differences, which are related to intensity of contact with English, mentioned earlier. As we have reported elsewhere (cf. King & Nadasdi, 1996), L'Anse-à-Canards French, spoken in Newfoundland, has had the least contact with English, followed by the French of Abram-Village, Prince Edward Island. In Saint-Louis, the other Prince Edward Island community, contact with English is most intense. While all three varieties clearly are partial to *guess*, we note the lack of occurrence of other English verbs in the L'Anse-à-Canards corpus. Abram-Village appears more "advanced" than L'Anse-à-Canards in this regard, but less so than Saint-Louis. The table masks considerable variation, though, in that it is *particular* Saint-Louis speakers who are the heaviest codeswitchers, both in terms of number of switches and variety of English verbs used. In our corpus, the Saint-Louis women (married with children) stand out as star codeswitchers and as most advanced in the use of this particular type of switches. The data for Table 1, for instance,

come from five of these women. These Saint-Louis women's use of English is greater than that of other members of the sample. Most do not work outside the home, and, if they do, work at jobs which are conducted in English. Male Saint-Louis residents, on the other hand, have a far greater tendency to work at unskilled labour with other French-speaking men. Women bear the primary responsibility for child-rearing, and are largely raising English-speaking children. Both participant observation and self-report data indicate that, while the Saint-Louis women are clearly fluent speakers of the Acadian variety, a higher proportion of their lives is led in English than is that of any other speakers in the three corpora. Seen in this light, their status as star codeswitchers is not surprising.

## 7. Conclusion

The present study has attempted to shed light on the discursive function of codeswitching in several varieties of Acadian French. Our approach has allowed us to identify the role of codeswitching in indicating a bilingual's uncertainty vis-a-vis the veracity of statements, beginning with a particular class of evidentials, verbs of opinion or belief. We have argued that the English form first used with this in this manner was *guess*, suggesting that the nuance in meaning it provided was a motivating force for its initial use in the varieties of French spoken in Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland. We have also suggested that the degree of uncertainty which accompanied switching to this form became associated with all codeswitches to English. Further research on code-switching conducted from a discourse perspective should help determine how widespread such developments are.

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