Language Choice among the Youth of Kazakhstan: English as a Self-Representation of Prestige

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Abstract

Due to its popularity in the world, the scope of English functioning is changing nowadays. In Kazakhstan, English is the most taught foreign language in the educational system of Kazakhstan and the world. It is an education discipline as well as the medium of instruction both at secondary and tertiary schools which is supported at the state level. Being in the Expanding circle, English in Kazakhstan is perceived as a language of developed world and prestige. It is clearly observable among the young people. Based on sociolinguistic and discourse-analytic approach, the paper focuses on the analysis of students’ speech. By examining daily conversations and social networks of students, the present paper demonstrates that the use of English in Kazakhstan’s linguistic landscape serves as a means of constructing identity and communality. The results demonstrate that English is perceived as a language of developed countries, developed economies, therefore, prestige.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays English has become the global language. English is spoken as a native, second, foreign language, and the significance of this language as lingua franca is also growing. Due to transformation and integration processes, which cover the world space, English in Kazakhstan is acquiring a special role. Its functioning in the Republic of Kazakhstan is differentiated from its use as an additional language to a lingua franca in different institutional contexts.

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contexts. It should be noted that since independence in 1991, special attention is given to the development and spread of English at the state level, as evidenced by the legal documents (laws “On Education” and “On languages in the Republic of Kazakhstan”, the “State program of functioning and language development for 2011-2020”, the “State Program for Development of Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2011-2020”). Owing to the transformation of the educational environment, English is a compulsory subject at all levels of education. The state raised the issue of polylingual education, where emphasis is placed on learning subjects through English (CLIL). There is a great demand for professionals with knowledge of English in the professional field. In this regard, there is a positive trend in the use of English in different social spheres. English becomes a means of communication, resource, additional language among the youth, which is mixed and combined with the native language (Kazakh and Russian). The aim of our study is to analyze the speech of young people, students, peculiarities of the use of the English language in code-switching.

2. Language choice in contact situations

Bilingual speech, code-switching, in particular, has been studied by many researchers (Myers-Scotton, 1993; Milroy & Li, 1995; Auer, 1998a; Auer, 1998b; Milroy & Muysken, 1995). One of the fundamental studies on the subject are the works of Blom and Gumperz (1972), who believe that participants can change languages without changing the scope of activities in bilingual speech, while they may not be aware of this fact. From this perspective, the use of units of two or more languages in speech defines bilingual/multilingual speaker competence (Auer, 1998a; Garner-Chloros, 2009). The ability to switch from one language to the other and vice versa without breaking the rules of the host language, i.e. code switching indicates a fairly high level of bilingualism. Code switching is considered as one of the socially motivated types. In the sociolinguistic aspect most studies were conducted on microlinguistic level. Li Wei, Milroy, and Pong Sin Chang (2000) suggested “social networks” as “an alternative means of relating code-switching and the language choices of individuals to the broader social, economic and political context”. The researchers believe that the choice and use of the language of the speaker depends on its “social networks” and have social value (Myers-Scotton, 1993; Milroy & Li, 1995). Many scholars argue that it is insufficient to consider language contacts on a personal level. According to Blommaert (1992), the social processes should be taken into account in general. Some linguists on the grounds of their research showed that globalization and integration processes in the economic, social and political aspects have led to the rapid development of English around the world (Pennycook, 2010; Phillipson, 1992). In general, the choice of language is regarded as a social, cultural and linguistic “acts of identity” by means of which identity is established, maintained and transformed (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985).

3. English among the youth of Kazakhstan

English has received much attention at the political level, which in turn has led to the dynamic changes in the use of English. The emphasis here has been mostly put on the educational sphere. Nowadays English is a popular language among young Kazakhs. The younger generation seeks to study English as a foreign language. English is perceived as a language of developed Western countries. Western lifestyle, culture demonstrated via the media such as television programs, popular music, movies are one of the factors that increase the interest in the English language among Kazakhstani youth. It should be noted that social networks, e-communication with people from other countries also promote the use of English. Young people want to identify themselves with the West.

We have to focus on the fact that English is also a cost-effective language. In order to get a high-paying prestigious job, many employers require knowledge of English. Many students receive their education abroad through the “Bolashak” presidential scholarship programme, which also contributes to the spread of English among young people. Young people are one of the most active cells of society, which “can take the languages into their own possession and develop them further” (Jørgensen 2001). The selection and use of English is an important component of young people’s language in Kazakhstan as well as in many countries. In our study, we consider Kazakh-English code-switching in the speech of students.
4. Methodology

The goal of our research is a discursive analytical and sociolinguistic analysis of the speech of young people in different situations. The study material for this work is presented by oral speech of young people. We also used texts used in the social networks. Oral speech included a conversation between students in malls, cafes, hostels, and in the classroom. Social networks included Facebook and Vkontakte. Selection of the aforementioned social networks is justified by the fact that they are one of the most popular networks among the Kazakh youth. With the help of these examples we showed the extent to which English is used in the speech of young people.

The study involved students and young people in Kazakhstan and abroad.

5. Results and Discussion

We relied on the typology of P. Auer (1999) in the analysis of code-switching. Based on these results, we can classify them into the following categories: insertional code-switching, alternational code-switching, insertional language mixing.

Kazakh (Russian)-English insertional code-switching is the most frequent type in the speech of students. Here the Kazakh (Russian) language is a matrix language, insertions in English are embedded in the grammatical structure of Kazakh (Russian). These insertions can be integrated phonetically and/or morphologically. Insertions can be separate lexical items, phrases and sometimes whole expression.

The following example illustrates this type of code-switching. The action takes place in a fast-food restaurant. In the examples English is given in bold, Kazakh is highlighted in normal font, Russian is given in italics.

Example 1.
1 Aliya: Hi, man. Long time no see. How are you?
2 Almas: Hi, подруга. Уйге барып келдім. Шеф демалыс берген. Дүйсенбіға ғана шықтым жұмысқа.
3 to work on Monday.
4 Aliya: Ммм. (0.4) Кеше звондаганда busy болдыңғай.
5 Almas: (смеется) Кеше кеш келдім уйге. Уақытым болмады. Қазір хоч жұмыс slow.
6 slow.
8 Almas: Айтпа. (0.6) Жұмыс бастан асып жатыр. But I got used to it. Өзінде Yes, I am. There are a lot of work to do. But I got used to it. What about you?
9 кандай жаңалық? қандай жаңалық?
10 Aliya: Менде бөрі жақсы. Жақында семинар болады. Саган ұнайтын тақырып I am all right. There will be a seminar. It is on the topic you like. I want to tell
11 бойынша. Сол түралы айтайың [дегем it to you.
12 Almas: [Уау! Қандай тақырып, man?
13 Aliya: (laughter) business planning бойынша.
14 Almas: Ооо! Қашан? Қайда?
Oooh! When? Where?

Tomorrow at five. In our building.

The communication in the given example takes place in Kazakh. There are individual lexical and phrasal insertions in English in the speech. In Line 1 Aliya uses greeting in English «Hi, man. Long time no see». The use of slang word «man» in the speech of Aliya exhibits good relationship between the speakers. In Line 12 Almas also uses the word «man». The use of this word in the speech of participants is due to the influence of media, in particular, pop music, Hollywood movies -the speech of young people who imitate their Western peers. Using pidginized English phrase «Long time no see» illustrates casual conversation with a good friend. In general, the statement «Hi, man. Long time no see» is used to save the speech efforts. Due to the fact that both participants speak English, this expression allows to use strategies to facilitate and use the option that is more succinct. In our case, the English version is concise compared to the Kazakh equivalent. In Lines 4 and 7 there is insertion of English «busy» in Aliya's speech. There is no exact equivalent of this word in Kazakh, hence it is easier and more convenient to use «busy». In Line 8 Almas replies using the phrase «But I got used to it». In Line 13 Aliya inserts «Business planning» using standard British pronunciation. Here switching to English is approved by the fact that the use of words and phrases from a market economy is a relatively new phenomenon in Kazakhstan's society, and the majority of them are used in the original language with slight phonetic transformations, then some of these words become borrowings. Here «Business planning» is insertion. Aliya gives this phrase a certain prestige by using it in her speech. In Line 15 Aliya pronounces insertion [tumarou] with Kazakh accent.

In general, the use of insertions in English is a necessary element which determines identity of the participants. Using insertions is rational in terms of saving time. Due to the lack of equivalents in the native language a communicant uses insertion, thereby giving the exact meaning to his companion.

The following example illustrates the written text from the community on Facebook, where the author uses the Kazakh-English code-switching.

Example 2
Uljan: Kimbatti Dinara menin bilen degenm minau edi menin balam BBA cobitiredi MBA OKUGA senderde scholarship beriledi ma coni kalai biluge boladi / Eger mumkindik bolca men details jiberemin studenttin Rahmet
(Dear Dinara, I would like to know about this. My son is going to graduate BBA. Are there any scholarships for MBA? Where can I find about it? I will send you the student’s details. Thank you)

Guldana: Uljan, әртеп сағат 18:00 қателеспесем MBAға арналған ашық есік күні отеді. 8 блокта болады Назарбаев университеті
(Uljan, there will be open day on MBA at 6 pm tomorrow. It will be in building 8. Nazarbayev University)

In this example; the use of such inclusions as «BBA» and «MBA» are conditioned by the economy of speech efforts, since both concepts are very familiar to students. Full phrases of the abbreviation data are not usually used in Kazakh. Uljan also inserts «Scholarship» and «details» in her speech.

6. Conclusion

Students often seek to find new forms of expression. If they learn foreign languages they use them actively for this purpose. Usually they switch to other languages quite consciously to achieve a certain stylistic or pragmatic effect. Sometimes being in a state of extreme fatigue, stress or excitement, the students do not realize that they insert elements of another language in their speech. In addition, code switching allows to save time and speech efforts in communication with bilingual interlocutors, discussing the case study with students who are learning at English departments.

Studying student code-switching can make a contribution to the study of multilingual communication and specificity of contemporary youth speech. Students are the most active part of young people, including their attempt to improve the expressiveness of their speech. They use the tools of all languages they are familiar with. Therefore,
multi-lingual communication of students allows following a number of significant communicative processes of the contemporary society.

This paper is an attempt to investigate the language choice of student in Kazakhstan. Further research may include deep analysis of students’ bilingual speech in different institutional contexts as well as the bilingual speech of different social, professional and age groups. This will provide an opportunity to identify the processes that characterize the interaction of specific languages.

References