Chapter 27

Igbo-English intrasentential codeswitching and the Matrix Language Frame model

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This paper uses data from Igbo-English intrasentential codeswitching involving mixed nominal expressions to test the Matrix Language Frame (MLF) model. The MLF model is one of the most highly influential frameworks used in the study of grammatical aspects of codeswitching. Three principles associated with it, the Matrix Language Principle, the Asymmetry Principle and the Uniform Structure Principle, were tested on data collected from informal conversations by educated adult Igbo-English bilinguals resident in Port Harcourt. The results of the analyses suggest general support for the three principles and for identifying Igbo-English as a "classic" case of codeswitching.

1 Introduction

It goes without saying that codeswitching (CS) is conceivably one of the most studied and discussed outcomes of language contact. Its study has been approached from two main dimensions: (i) the sociolinguistic and (ii) the linguistic. Researchers concerned with the sociolinguistic aspects of CS tend to seek to identify patterns of occurrence of CS and the impact of social-psychological factors on this bilingual behavior. Those working from a purely linguistic dimension focus on the structural aspects of CS; their aim is to uncover the syntactic and morphological characteristics of codeswitched utterances. Here, the focus is on the purely linguistic study of CS. Several constraints have been proposed by a number of researchers interested in the linguistic study of CS.

For instance, Poplack & Meechan (1998) and their associates are interested with formulating constraints on points in a sentence where CS can take place on the grounds of surface-level linear differences between the languages concerned. These researchers view restrictions on CS along the lines of dissimilarities in word order, either across clauses (intersentential) or on phrases within clauses (intrasentential). In particular, Poplack's Equivalence Constraint (EC) is based on the premise that switching is not permitted when the syntax of two languages does not match at a potential switch point.

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