Reviews


Codeswitching has now become an independent field of linguistic research with growing interest shown in the phenomenon, even though for a long time it was hardly recognized by linguists writing about language contact. The reasons for this include changing attitudes towards language mixing: historically viewed as a sign of linguistic incompetence, but now more frequently acknowledged as one of the most interesting aspects of bilingual speech, despite it still being stigmatized by some and considered a threat to the purity of local languages.

This book is a doctoral dissertation written by Fikre Gebrekidan Reda under the supervision of Elizabeth Lanza and Kjell Magne Yri, specialists on contact linguistics at the University of Oslo. It deals with both the grammatical and sociolinguistic aspects of codeswitching among the Tigrinya speakers living in the multilingual environment of Ethiopia. What is unique about this work is the fact that while most texts on codeswitching describe the phenomenon within language pairs, the author of this study takes into consideration three languages: two of them closely related, i.e. Tigrinya and Amharic, and one genetically and typologically distant, i.e. English. Multicultural and multilingual Ethiopia is/presents a perfect field of research into bi- or trilingualism, particularly with respect to codeswitching, as most of its inhabitants are naturally predestined to speak more than one language. There are more than 80 local languages spoken in Ethiopia, with Amharic being the working language of the country’s administration. English, which in Ethiopia is a foreign language, plays a very important role as the language of instruction on the secondary and higher education levels. Although not recognized officially, it is regarded as a prestigious language, exerting a huge impact on all of the other tongues spoken in the area.

Fikre Gebrekidan Reda’s research focuses on trilingual codeswitching involving Tigrinya, Amharic and English. As the author states in the introduction, the aim of the study is to answer two questions: firstly, how do typological differences (Tigrinya-English) and similarities (Tigrinya-Amharic) affect the frequency and structure of codeswitching? And secondly, what are the possible pragmatic and discursive functions that codeswitching or serves in conversation?

The book is comprised of eight chapters of which the two introductory ones contain a short and general account on the genesis and development of the study of codeswitching and a review of the available literature on the topic with a detailed description of the theories developed over years of research into the subject. The author presents different types of and approaches to codeswitching, selecting Myers-Scotton’s MLF Model and its supporting 4-M Model as the theoretical framework for his research. According to the MLF Model, only one of the two languages involved in codeswitching can take a predominant role (ML) in that it determines the grammatical frame of the sentence, while the other is embedded (EL) in it. Such a framework requires classic intrasentential (i.e. occurring within the boundary of a sentence) codeswitching data, and – as a result – 552 mixed Tigrinya – English/Amharic utterances have become the object of analysis in this study (quoted in Appendix A). The author concentrated on providing trilingual data rooted in informal speech, which was quite a challenging objective and required a lot of vigilance and determination. He carefully selected his informants from among university students or graduates that spoke Tigrinya as their first language and Amharic and English as their second and foreign language, respectively. Fikre Gebrekidan Reda also used a questionnaire (quoted in Appendix B) in his research, which helped him to deal with the sociolinguistic aspects of codeswitching.

Chapters five and six contain the main body of the research – a thorough analysis of instances of codeswitching starting from different grammatical categories of English/Amharic word switches (76% of all examples) to phrases (19%) and clauses (5%) inserted into a main Tigrinya sentence. Based on the analysis, one can conclude that English nouns are the most frequently occurring items, while also adjectives and adverbs are quite often inserted into Tigrinya utterances. Adjectives from both languages are often supported by a Tigrinya relativized copula form, which serves the purpose of emphasizing the utterance. As for verbs, there are no direct English verb insertions into Tigrinya
sentences due to morphosyntactic differences between the languages. English verb switches are always supported by Tigrinya helping verbs. Amharic verbs can be inserted directly into sentences and they even take on Tigrinya affixes owing to similarities in verb morphology between the two languages.

The sociolinguistic aspects of codeswitching are dealt with in chapter seven. The author observes that codeswitching performs various discursive functions, such as repetition, clarification and emphasis. He also notes that bilingual turns can serve the purpose of adding a new dimension to a conversation.

The concluding chapters summarize the findings. Out of the 552 occurrences of English/Amharic codeswitching in Tigrinya, 450 were documented for Tigrinya and English, 58 for Tigrinya and Amharic and only 45 were instances involving all three languages. English has the highest percentage of switches, despite the lack of similarity with the other two closely related languages, Tigrinya and Amharic. The author suggests more research is required regarding the reasons why Tigrinya speakers seem to codeswitch more to English than to Amharic despite the similarity of the Tigrinya language to Amharic.

The book is certainly a valuable addition based on meticulous research and extensive references, and it fills a significant gap in linguistic literature on language contact in Ethiopia.

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