Conversational Roles and Social Functions of Code-Switching among Igbo Bilinguals

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Code-switching, a linguistic phenomenon whereby bilinguals switch elements belonging to two or more distinct languages, or two styles of one language in conversational exchanges, is common among the Igbo of Nigeria. In this study, we attempt to see how social roles, societal norms and setting interact in code-switching exchanges. Bearing in mind that particular language/style choice is intended to achieve particular goals and functions, or enact particular social roles, we assume that information gleaned from real-life conversational samples may provide clues as to the strategic use of code-switching by bilinguals.

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1. Background

The Igbo, a closely knit ethnic group, with a population of over fifteen million speakers of Igbo which comprises more than five dialects and several sub-dialects, rank next to the Hausa and the Yoruba as one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria. The Igbo language is the primary language of communication in four States (Anambra, Abia, Ebonyi and Imo), but appreciable number of speakers spill over into other States (such as Delta, Edo, Benue, Cross-River, Rivers and Akwa Ibom).

Virtually all residents within the major Igbo enclave, which covers an area of about 15,800 square miles, are speakers of the Igbo language. The Language is acquired in the homes and also in the sphere of domestic friendship and cultural relations. As a result, it has acquired the flavour of these locally based relationships. As elsewhere in Nigeria, where local independence and distinctness are highly valued, the language enjoys great prestige.

Probably the earliest contact of the Igbo with the Western Europe started at about the

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middle of fifteenth century when the Portuguese bumped into the West African coast in search of raw materials and slaves. From the beginning of the seventeenth century onwards, European visitors (especially the British) ventured inland, and the missionaries seized the opportunity to sell their wares. By 1900, Onitsha, the largest business town in Igboland, had become, not only a religious and educational centre, but also a base for British entrenchment in Igbo territory.

The colonization of Nigeria brought with it the English language. English was the language of British colonial administration, and consequently became an acceptable choice as Nigeria's official language (in face of numerous ethnic languages) when independence came in 1960. Today, it enjoys and enviable status at both local and national levels. Apart from being the medium of instruction in schools from first grade onwards, there are usually many advantages associated with proficiency in English. As an academic utility, English is the language of position and therefore of power. Its link with colonialism adds to its authoritative connotations. Being the language of administration, and the press (and to a certain extent, the media), it has also become an instrument of national unity. Also, apart from signalling socio-economic status, it is often the transactional language (alongside Pidgin) for use in multi-ethnic situations, particularly of commerce. Thus, the part played by the English language in everyday life of Nigerians is of central importance. The ability to speak (and write) English competently is of primary concern, not only to individuals, but also to the government which has intensified English language literacy campaigns. This is why most Nigerians are bilinguals (in a loose sense): in English and at least in one local language.

With the increasing awareness of the need to develop the local languages, formal education in Igbo-speaking areas is now carried on in Igbo and English. Furthermore, the Federal government's legislation makes it mandatory for 'three major' languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) to be taught even in areas where they are not spoken. The laws of the four major states where Igbo is spoken sanction the use of Igbo and English as official languages. Therefore, the languages in general use among the Igbo, in descending frequency, are Igbo, English and Pidgin. Allowing for individual fluency, the educated Igbo can communicate satisfactorily in Igbo, English and Pidgin, and these languages form what Gumperz (1964) refers to as their 'linguistic repertoires' - the totality of linguistic resources which the speakers may employ in their everyday social, cultural, political and economic transactions. In their daily discourses, they select from these as situation demands.

2. Code-Switching and Bilingualism

For the purposes of this study, we shall adopt Di Pietro's (1977, p.3) definition of code-switching as "the use of more than one language by communicants in the execution of speech act". In doing so, we are not claiming any comprehensiveness because code-switching can be approached from many theoretical viewpoints (cf. Weinreich 1953,
Gumperz 1982).

In code-switching, bilinguals switch elements belonging to two or more distinct languages, or two styles of one language in conversational exchanges. The switched material could be anything from one word to several words inserted at various points by participants in course of an interaction.

The term ‘bilingualism’ is not new in linguistic and socio-linguistic literatures. Spolsky (1976) states that “a bilingual person is popularly believed to be someone who can function with equal skill in two or more languages” (p.165). Going by this definition, one wonders whether there are, in fact, balanced bilinguals. The fact that a person can use two languages does not mean that he can use them equally well or that he uses them equally often. Therefore, we can best regard bilingualism as a relative trait or as Gaarder (1969) prefers, “a theoretical construct” since there are actually very few speakers who are completely bilingual in line with the above definition. It is either that one is more proficient in one language than the other, or that there is a ‘division of labour’ (Kachru 1983) between the languages such that certain functions are relegated to one language and other functions to the other.

However, for the purposes of this study, we shall assume that speakers who can use two languages fairly well are bilinguals. It should be noted, however, that there are cases where bilingual speakers are literate in neither language and others where speakers are literate in either or both (Lewis 1972). We shall concern ourselves with bilinguals who can speak both languages that are in contact. We shall also agree with Hymes (1972, p.60) that “all languages are in some way unsatisfactory to their speakers: every language is an instrument shaped by its history and patterns of use, such that for a given speaker and setting, it can do some things well, some clumsily and others not intelligently at all”. As a result, speakers who have access to two languages can interchangeably use them as situation demands.

Lambert (1977) identifies two types of bilinguals. Coordinate bilinguals are supposed to have learnt the two distinct languages separately, and consequently, store distinct semantic referents of the two languages from which they draw as occasion arises. Compound bilinguals, on the other hand, learn the two languages about the same time and use them interchangeably in the same situations to express the same semantic realities. In other words, they do not store separate semantic referents of the two languages (Cormack 1977, Ahukanna 1990). Although Keller (1979, p.284) believes that a compound bilingual “is a person whose code-switching is beyond conscious or voluntary control”, or as Ahukanna (1990, p.178) puts it, “a person who switches language constantly without external motivation”, we don’t share this view. It is true that code-switching can go unnoticed by the speakers themselves, but most of the time, speakers deliberately shift from one language to another in order to achieve some desired goal or effect. The intentional shifting of languages for strategic purposes in conversations is my major concern here.

Considering the circumstances and contexts in which Igbo and English are acquired and used in Nigeria, one may not be wrong in referring to most Igbo speakers of English as
coordinate bilinguals. However, since the use of any of the languages in conversational exchanges does not necessarily signal different setting or situation, and the fact that interactions in which both languages are code-switched remain a unitary whole as vocabularies from them interact in expressing the same semantic intent, Igbo bilinguals also qualify as compound bilinguals. Because nothing prevents bilinguals from carrying on conversations wholly in either of the languages (code-switched materials most of the time have their equivalents in the other language), we are inclined to believe that Igbo-English bilinguals exhibit characteristics of both coordinate and compound types.

Igbo-English bilinguals fall into three major groups: the ‘fairly stable bilinguals’ comprising the educated and literate population, the ‘aspiring bilinguals’ made up of users who have acquired a smattering of English in the primary schools, comprising the artisans, traders, drivers, and so on, and the ‘chance bilinguals’ who are only competent in the local language and have never had a formal education, but are forced by social and economic pressures to pick up English words and phrases through association with the educated. Members of this last group not only mispronounce the picked-up words and phrases, but also use them out of context. Here, we shall limit our discussions to interactions involving ‘fairly stable bilinguals’.

This study is an attempt to identify conversational roles and social functions of code-switching among Igbo bilinguals. Social and psychological factors that underlie code-switching as well as situations that generate personal language choices open to bilinguals have not been given adequate attention. We realize that it might be too ambitious to generalize on why bilinguals code-switch, but bearing in mind that a particular language/style choice is intended to achieve particular goals and functions, or enact particular social roles, we assume that information gleaned form real-life interactional samples may provide clues as to how participants’ social roles interact with conversational norms in determining the functions of code-switching.

3. Data

Conversational excerpts used in this study make up two probability samples, one drawn from urban areas and the other from rural areas of Igbo communities. These samples represent different educational and professional backgrounds as well as socio-economic statuses of participants. Tape-recorded and reconstructed conversational samples of indeterminate number of Igbo-English bilinguals, collected over the years, were used. Collection was done either in formal or informal settings (such as ‘gossips’ in offices, recontacting of friends, family/village meetings, problematic encounter resolutions, etc.). Particular settings allowed the use of concealed pocket tape-recorder while in others faithful reconstruction and transcription of exchanges became the only option. In some of the samples I was a participant and in others I merely eavesdropped. In general, the assumption is that spontaneous speech utterances provide the most objective insight into the code-switching attitudes and possible intentions of bilinguals who engage in it.
4. Discussion

Informal interactions among Igbo-English bilinguals most frequently involve mixtures of lexical items from the two languages, intruded into the language of utterance at any point without any signal as exemplified below:

Speaker 1: Oke mmiri ozuko a na-ewe m iwe. O digo too much.
(These frequent heavy rains annoy me. It has become too much.)

Speaker 2: Nke na-ewe m iwe bụ nke ụzọ ụtụtụ, especially the day m ji enwe 8 o’clock class.
(The one that annoys me is the early morning one, especially on the days I have 8 o’clock classes.)

Speaker 3: O bụ oge ya ruru.
(It is time for it.)

Speaker 1: Test a ọ sị na a ga-enwe na 322 a-support ọ kwa m ya.
Ike test agwugo m.
(This test he said we shall have in 322 I don’t support it. I am tired of tests.)

Speaker 2: O kwa ọ sị na nke a bụ nke ikpe azu?
(I think he said that this is the last one?)

Speaker 3: Ọ-ọ ihe o kwuru.
(That was what he said.)

This sample was tape-recorded in my office, (Okolo 1987). Three Igbo native speakers, all undergraduates in the University of Benin, were involved. I had invited them to my office for a special assignment. I left the tape-recorder on without their knowledge before I left the office to collect some materials. The above represents part of their conversation in my absence.

The italicized words and phrases are English inserted into Igbo conversation. Since the participants are all Igbo, nothing prevents them from carrying on the conversation entirely in Igbo because the inserted words and phrases have their equivalents in Igbo which should be readily available to any fluent speaker (only the numeral 322 may pose some problem to some speakers). Yet some of the interactants still chose to code-switch, and in spite of topic-changes characteristic of such interactions, an even flow of conversation is maintained as if only one linguistic variety is involved.

In relation to the sample, one can invoke the assumption that college students code-switch because English, being the medium of instruction, is more readily accessible and cannot be completely avoided in conversations within such social and academic settings. Furthermore, we can assume that the other participants will code-switch in response to the first speaker’s pattern who, through his contribution, will define the social setting into which the interaction falls. In other words, if the first speaker’s code-switching is meaningful only in reference to the other participants in the interaction, the other participants will reciprocate as an acceptance of the social definition within which the
interaction falls as provided by the first speaker. Because a speaker’s contribution provides a feedback to the other participants, it has to be taken into account in explaining reasons for code-switching.

However, as could be observed in the above sample, Speaker 3, who took the next turn, did not code-switch in his contribution. We can simply infer that Speaker 3 did not accept the first speaker’s definition of social setting, hence the non-reciprocity of his code choice. That this may be the case is further strengthened by his insistence on utterance code in his next contribution when a new topic was introduced.

On the other hand, we find that Speaker 2 code-switched in his first contribution, probably because he accepted the first speaker’s definition of the social setting and therefore reciprocated accordingly. But in his next contribution when a new topic was introduced, he did not code-switch. A possible explanation for this inconsistency could be that Speaker 2 initially accepted the first speaker’s definition but later rejected it in favour of Speaker 3’s definition. It is likely that Speaker 3 used ‘identity relationship’ (existing relationships between participants) in enacting the conversational setting. Since relationships (which could be defined in terms of occupation, familiarity, ethnic group, status, etc.) could affect conversational register, it becomes reasonable to suspect that this setting influenced Speaker 3’s maintenance of utterance language code, and Speaker 2 perceiving it as a better alternative, reverted to its use. It is therefore possible that incidences of code-switching could be reduced in interactions involving participants who share particular identity relationships. This is particularly true of conversations among family members.

In any conversation, participants assume particular roles (selected from several possible others), depending on the direction and topic of conversation, and the statuses of the other participants vis-a-vis theirs. For example, the status of a teacher can generate such roles as information-giver, advisor, disciplinarian, assessor, and so on. Whichever role is selected necessarily determines the language choice appropriate, not only to the statuses of the interactants, but also conforms to the societal norms that apply within the context of the exchange. Therefore, the status of a partner and the existing societal norms governing verbal behaviour all contribute in determining a participant’s code choice that is commensurate with a particular role.

The following example is a segment of an exchange between a postal worker in my village and myself. I had sent a Christmas card to my uncle about two weeks before Christmas. When I got home on the 23rd of December, my uncle had not received the card. I confronted the postal worker (a high school graduate) on the issue, and the following exchange took place (B stands for my name):

B: Dianyị, kedu ihe mere na card m zipuru n’izu ụka abụọ gara aga erutebeghi?
(Regulator, why is it that the card I sent two weeks ago has not arrived)

Postal Worker: Anyị nwere problem na mail delivery these days.
O karıgo *one week now* anyị anatąbeghị *mails*.
Enwęghị m ike ịkọwa *what is wrong*.
(We have a problem in mail delivery these days.
For over a week now, we have not received any mails.
I can't explain what is wrong).

Here, as in the previous example, words and phrases from two distinct languages are merged in an interaction. On my own part, I intentionally tried to avoid mixtures from both languages, but was, however, forced to intrude *card* which is an acceptable loan. On the other hand, the postal worker used more English words and phrases in his explanation even when the equivalents of the code-switched items are available in Igbo.

One can advance possible explanations for my partner's code-switches. First, there is the possibility that we disagreed over the social setting within which the interaction fell. The postal worker probably preferred 'status setting' to my 'identity setting'. As the initiator of the exchange, I had expected that my partner would have accepted my setting definition by continuing with the same code choice, but he didn't. If this goal was to project his ego and academic status, then his code choice was appropriate. Being fully aware of my educational standing, he may have felt that throwing in English words and phrases may enhance my estimation of him. Secondly, his role as information-provider may have contributed to his code choice as most information-givers use language in ways that reflect their positions. The postal worker apparently capitalized on this role to demonstrate knowledgeability of the goings-on in his vocation. Code-switching in this instance could be seen as a status symbol and an ego-projection device.

That this might be the case is reinforced by the fact that when another partner, who had no formal education, joined us, the postal worker almost did not code-switch. As I was standing with him, imagining what the problems of the postal service were, an elderly man (whom we shall refer to here as T) walked up to us. The following is a faithful reconstruction of the verbal exchange that took place:

**T:**  Gị ka m chọlu ịhụ (pointing at the postal worker).
M choro izigara nwa m leta di mkpa. Kedu ihe a ga-emene o wee nweta ya ọsọso?
(It is you I want to see (pointing at the postal worker).
I want to send an important letter to my son.
What is to be done so that he gets it quickly?).

**Postal Worker:** Ị ga-ẹji *express* posu ya. Kama ọgaghị abụ taa.
Ọ-ọ ihe ịọ na dọkịta na-akpa. Nza ofu ịzu ụka
ha ebutebeghi leta. M nału gị ya, ọ ga-adị n'ebi a mgbe ha butere leta
ha eburu ya pụwa.
Ya bụ, bja echị ka anyị mara na ha ga-abịa.
(You should post it by express. But it will
not be today. That is what I was discussing with doctor. For one week now, they have not brought letters. If I take it from you, it will lie here until they bring in letters and pick it up. So, come tomorrow so that we know whether they will come).

In this exchange, apart from the use of established loan-words (e.g. leta ‘letter’ posu ‘post’ and dokita ‘doctor’), the only English word used by the postal worker is express. Even in this case, he does not have any other alternative since no Igbo word or phrase can accurately translate ‘express mail delivery’. It should be noted that even at the points where he code-switched in his interaction with me, he substituted equivalent Igbo words and phrases in communicating with T. For example, he used one week now and mail while interacting with me, but changed them to ofu izu uka ‘one week’ and leta ‘letter’ in talking to T. This further shows that switching from one linguistic variety to another is not necessarily as a result of lack of equivalent terms in the other variety, but most often, a deliberate strategy employed by users to achieve a particular social objective.

From the above, we make the following observations. First, ego or status projection affects code choice among bilinguals irrespective of existing relationships between them. Secondly, interactants are conscious of their partner’s ‘bilingual’ status as it is this realization that produces code-switching arousal and determines the extent to which one can code-switch without creating conversational problems. Finally, a participant’s role in an interaction places him/her in a vantage position to select a code choice commensurate with the assumed role, social setting and societal norms.

In spite of my belief in the strategic use of code-switching, we are ready to admit that not all instances of code-switching are for verbal maneuvering. The use of an element from another language may be totally unintentional, especially when communicants are sharing experiences. Since identity and topic of discussion are capable of reducing social distance in a given setting, code-switching in such situations might contribute in making the interaction more relaxing. In the following sample, a friend of mine was narrating his miraculous escape from armed robbers, and Igbo words and phrases were freely used in an English conversation:

A: Do you know na m anwusigo last night?
   that I almost died
B: What happened?
A: These armed robbers attacked me on my way from home.
   Remember I told you na m ga-eje ulo last week-end.
   (that I will go home)
   I had all sorts of things to take care of at home,
   so, enweghi m ike i-take off on time.
   (I could not)
In fact, *arapulu m* home at about 7.15 p.m.
(I left)

B: Oh-no. You should have spent the night because one

*adighi* safe in the day much more at night.
(is not)

A: But I couldn’t *maka* meeting *m ga-e* host in Benin
(because of (the) (I will))

next day. So I was driving like crazy.

B: *I take-ili* *ajo* risk

(You) (past-suffix) (bad)

A: *Ihe diká* two miles after Agbor town, *m wee* notice-e
(Something like) (I then) (suffix)

people crossing the road in front of me. By the
time *m ji wee* suspect-e na o *ga-abu ndi ori*, a log
(I then) (suffix) that it might be thieves

of wood had been pushed across the road. The next
thing *m huru by* two men pointing their guns at me.
(I saw was)

The language of the above conversation is English with Igbo words and phrases interspersed at different points in the exchange. Although the interaction remains a unitary whole in spite of the mixtures, there is really no apparent reason why the exchange wouldn’t have been wholly in either language since the interactants are competent in both. However, as mentioned earlier, A, being the initiator of the exchange, made the utterance language choice and B reciprocated, which signifies acceptance of the initiator’s setting definition.

One significant point brought out by the above example is that one linguistic variety is not restricted to a particular topic, setting, role, or function. The fact that English is the language of utterance in the sample does not imply that given a different set of conditions, Igbo could not have been used in conducting the interaction. This differs from diglossic situations where switching from one variety to another depends on the situation, and even when one variety follows another in a conversation, it is always possible to separate each variety structurally, and identify them in relation to their functions. In code-switching, the lexical items and morphological elements from the two languages are glued together in such a way that the syntactic and semantic relations become inseparable, as if they belong to one language variety.

Code-switching occurs in the expression of anger or aggression especially where power differential is pertinent. An interaction going on in one variety may be challenged by a contrary switch to another variety as an enactment of anger or aggression. In a superior-subordinate encounter, only the superior utilizes code-switching strategy since a reciprocal switch by the subordinate might be labelled as disrespectful, thus aggravating the situation.
Consider this exchange between a friend and his younger brother:

F: Chùnù m akwa ahù m si gi deere m.
   (Give me the clothes I asked you to iron for me)
B: Èdebèhì m ya.
   (I have not ironed it)
F: What do you mean na ìdebèhì ya?
   (that you have not ironed it?)
   Since when ka m gwalù gi dee ya?
   (did I tell you to iron it?)
   Come-on jee chùnù m ya oṣọọṣọ. Silly.
B: Ka m je dee ya.
   (Let me go and iron it)
F: I say chùnù m ya!
   (give it to me!)
B: (Walks away quietly).

Here, it seems that F’s switch to English was not only generated by anger over the brother’s non-compliance with his earlier instructions, but was also intended to assert his authority. Thus, an interaction which began in an identity setting now moved to a power setting. The change in setting made it difficult for the brother to respond in the same fashion as this would be regarded as an equal-status claim. In spite of the brother’s attempt to redirect the interaction to the original setting as a reconciliatory or appeasement gesture, F kept it where it had moved, thereby signalling that it was authority, not identity, that was salient. The brother got the message and walked away quietly.

Another example of the use of code-switching to assert authority is evident in business settings. Although the roles of participants in business settings are different depending on the nature of the transaction, it is often the case that in buying and selling, the seller may sometimes shift to a subordinate role in an attempt to attract customers and increase sales. This role-shift in some cases, places the buyer in a position of authority. In the sample below, a customer, after the usual exchange of pleasantries, asked for the price of a kilogram of beef in Igbo, and pays for it. The attendant, rather than attend to the customer, continued to chat with other colleagues. This angered the customer and the following exchange ensued:

Customer: Bia, ìgagbì ebenye m anù m kwùryì ìgwọ ya?
   (Come, wouldn’t you measure for me the beef I have paid for?)
Attendant: Ana m abja.
   (I am coming)
Customer: I na-abja when you are discussing.
   (You are coming)
Attendant:  Asị m na m na-abịa.
(I say I am coming)
Customer:  Do you think na m ga-alarụ ebe a?
(that I will sleep here)
Please, I have more important things to do.
Attendant:  Please, don’t be annoyed (goes to measure the beef).

Here, as in the previous example, an interaction which started off in one setting ended up in another. Prior to the above segment, the participants’ exchange of pleasantries in Igbo seem to demonstrate familiarity. However, signs of setting-derailment became noticeable in the customer’s interrogative reprimand in a high tone. The attendant, whose role is to please rather than displease customers, responded in a way commensurate with this role stance. But the customer, still displeased with the attendant’s behaviour, immediately changed to an authoritative or power setting by code-switching to another language variety. Although the attendant tried to negotiate a return to the initial setting definition, the customer stuck to the new definition. As expected, the attendant yielded to the new definition by reciprocating the code choice while at the same time maintaining his role through appeasement gestures. Thus, we find that transactional settings sometimes generate code-switching.

Among peers, code-switching features prominently in argumentative encounters. Even when such exchanges do not imply anger, participants employ code-switching strategy in making their line of reasoning more emphatic and convincing. Consider the following sample. The non-academic staff of Nigerian Universities went on strike over non-corresponding increase in their salaries as approved for academic staff by the government. Below is an encounter between a non-academic and an academic staff on the issue of salary disparity:

Academic:  Ụnụ sị na ụnụ agaghị aluzi olụ?
(Do you people say you will not work again?)
Non-Academic:  What do you mean? Kedu ihe anyị ga-eji na-ala?
(Why should we be working?)
Academic:  Because ụnụ ma na olụ anyị na ụnụ abụghị otu.
(you know that our jobs are not the same).
Non-Academic:  So ụnụ dị mkpa karịa anyị?
(You are more important than us?)
Academic:  Sure, and you know that!
Non-Academic:  In what ways are you more important?
Ụnụ che na egwu ka anyị na-egwu in the offices?
(Do you think that we all play)
Ị maghị na without us the University system will collapse?
(Don’t you know that)
Academic: Look at you. But it hasn't since Ṽnu nọ na strike.
(you went on)
Ο bụrụ na anyị anọghị ya, it means na ụnụ ga-adị jobless, and...
(If we are not here (that you people will be)
Non-Academic: It is a lie! Onye ga a-type exam question papers?
(who will affix)
Onye ga a-prepare salary ụnụ? Onye...
(who will affix) (your who...)
Academic: Chere, ka m gwa gi.
(Wait, let me tell you
These things i na e-mention can be taken care of
(you are (affix)
ma government choọ.
(if) (wants)
Non-Academic: How?

As is common in argumentative and self-justificatory encounters, question-asking and opinionated emphatic statements are common. As exemplified above, participants resort to code-switching in achieving these, thereby strengthening their stances. Since the overall aim is to gain an upper-hand in the issue under discussion, participants generally down-play the usual coincidence of language difference associated with social or status difference. Thus, topic of discussion and setting render social role, status and power differential irrelevant.

A common assumption is that bilinguals code-switch either to make up for lapse in memory, or for ease of exposition especially when an appropriate lexical item is unavailable in the utterance language, or even when available, cannot be economically used to express what is intended. In such a situation, code-switching becomes a necessity rather than an interactional strategy to achieve particular goals because the user has no choice but to make the switch. This is particularly the case in interactions involving specialised registers.

Although this assumption may be true especially where technological and professional jargons are involved, it is not always the case that the intrusion of lexical items from another language code in an interaction necessarily implies unavailability of appropriate or equivalent items in the utterance language. In the first place, languages can borrow most of these vocabularies and align them to fit into their phonological and structural patterns. Where this is the case, such borrowings should no longer be regarded as switched materials as they now become part of the borrowing language. Secondly, with the awareness of the need to develop our local languages, language experts have been engaged in metalanguage development of their various local languages. In consonance with these efforts, all that will be required of speakers is to update their vocabularies to accommodate the new items, thereby minimising excuses of unavailability.
5. Negative Attitudes Towards Code-Switching

In line with the desired objective to institutionalize Igbo language, the Society for the Promotion of Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC), with the support of the governments of the four wholly Igbo States, over a decade ago, embarked on the production of Igbo metalinguage. With the success of this, coupled with other efforts whose aims are to undercut the dominance and popularity of English language, it is not surprising that code-switching is treated with contempt by ‘purists’ who consider such usage as an indirect way of hastening the demise of Igbo language.

A number of these negative attitudes are discussed by A. Hukanna (1990). For example, Ogbonna (1985, p.5) considers code-switching among the Igbo as a “linguistic sabotage”; Nwadike (1981) regards it as an apathy of the Igbo towards their own mother tongue; Afligbo (1979) refers to Igbo-English code-switchers as people who recklessly abandon their indigenous culture for European culture; Gbanite (1975, p.4) laments that “a people can be dead culturally and linguistically when their language and cultural values are subordinated – Igbo language and culture fall under this category unfortunately”, while Obasi (1975, p.4) attributes the falling standard in education to code-switching among Igbo pupils.

All these imply that code-switchers are people who need to be helped rather than produced. But as stated by Haugen (1973, p.56), bilingualism “is not so much a problem as it is a solution. Bilinguals have problems: they are suspected of divided loyalties; they are sometimes labelled as mentally-handicapped, they find it hard often to keep their languages apart. But bilingualism is the only human and only hopeful way to deal with the situation created by the natural diversification of languages”.

Therefore, in spite of the above discouraging negative pronouncements, code-switching among the educated Igbo has persisted and is, in fact, becoming customary in their everyday interactions. It is, therefore, necessary to re-examine this interactional mode to determine the extent to which participants’ social roles and intended goal of users contribute to its increase among Igbo-English bilinguals.

6. Conclusion

In this preliminary study, we have tried to identify the social roles and social functions of code-switching, a performance variety of language use among Igbo bilinguals. We assume that an interaction is primarily an ongoing negotiation between participants about the nature and form of the interaction, which, in most cases, are explicitly revealed by conversational cues – social roles and norms, setting, topic of discussion, perceived statuses of the interactants, and so on. Participants activate these cues and manipulate them in accordance with their notion of the nature and direction of the interaction for the achievement of particular functions and objectives. Code-switching, we observe, is a discourse strategy employed by bilinguals in achieving these functions and objectives.
Code-switching is also a response to social roles and behaviours in course of an interaction. To code-switch, therefore, is either to dissociate the interaction from a particular setting, or to attempt to negotiate a new definition of the interaction within a new setting. If this view is correct, we find that bilinguals code-switch to enact particular social roles and functions which may not be satisfactorily achieved in one language variety.

REFERENCES