

CODE SWITCHING IN STAND-UP VERBAL HUMOUR

HASSAINE NADIA

Department of English, Faculty of Letters and Foreign Languages, Tlemcen University, Tlemcen, Algeria

ABSTRACT

Being a common trait of human language behaviour, verbal humour has ultimately been a recognized field of research in various disciplines. Such matter of study is basically a linguistic construct which penetrates into different forms of distractions such as stand-up comedy where laughter proliferates. The sort of humoristic discourse inspected in this theatrical setting is replete with Arabic/French switches, a commonplace phenomenon in Algeria, which a well-known Algerian comedian artfully exploits to entertain his audience. On the basis of such premise, the present paper aims to provide a novel insight to the analysis of the socio-pragmatic motivations for code switching (CS) in stand-up comedy. In order to make the investigation reliable, the choice falls upon Abdel-kader Secteur's five short performances.

KEYWORDS: Verbal Humour, Code Switching, Stand-Up Comedy, Markdness Theory

INTRODUCTION

The creative and artful use of language can be spotted in individuals' ability to produce verbal humour, a universal peculiarity of human language behaviour. Despite this fact, verbal humour seems to be rather trivial and unimportant, as Oring (2003: x) says "humor is often considered to be trivial, and it seems that serious talk about humor is regarded as participating in that triviality".

Yet, this view of humour has changed towards new standpoints vis-à-vis its extensive occurrence in ones' lives. Hence, it has become a prolific field of research and a significant subject to be probed by diverse scholars. It gains various definitions due to the expansion of its terminology. Previously, it was used as a component of the term comic (a hybrid medium of provoking laugh and amusement) to express sympathy and benevolence as a response to the perception of incongruity; as stated by Ruch (1998:6).

Humour is simply one element of the comic – as are wit, fun, nonsense, sarcasm, ridicule, satire, or irony – and basically denotes a smiling attitude toward life and its imperfections: an understanding of the incongruities of existence.

Actually, with the recent work of the Anglo- American researchers, humour has been used as an umbrella term to designate a range of nomenclatures such as joke, mockery, ridicule, satire, fun, etc. Thus, it carries both positive and negative connotations. In this respect, Rush adds (1998:6) "Humour replaced the comic and was treated as a neutral term; i.e. not restricted to positive meanings".

By and large, "the definition of what humour is ultimately depends on the purpose for which it is used" (Attrado, 1994:4). Therefore, humour can be defined in terms of its effect and response. In other words, humour can be deduced from its effect, i.e., intended (laugh) or unintended (no reaction), as Vandaele (2002:155) says "humour is whatever has a humorous effect". But in many cases, humour does not necessarily result laughter, and thus, the response is unintended.

Verbal humour permeates each aspect of everyone's life. For instance, it has become a widespread feature in many types of interaction and discourse, and it has pervaded in several forms of entertainments such as television shows, comic strips, sitcoms and stand-up comedy.

STAND –UP COMEDY

It is an offshoot of the comedic and theatrical genres described by Attardo (2001: 162) as “a highly artificial, scripted genre”. It refers to "a particular kind of performance, often given while standing on a stage in front of a microphone, during which a performer tells a scripted series of fictitious accounts in such a way as to suggest that they are unscripted, in an attempt to make audience laugh" Sankey (1998:3). To put it differently, stand-up comedy is a spontaneous performance held by a comedian in which s/he presents a humorous discourse in front of a live audience. It comedy has become a popular form of entertainment all around the world during the last few decades, and thus, it intrigues large masses of viewers. It also surpasses such level since it becomes the fieldwork of study among scholars in many disciplines with differing aims.

STATEMENT OF THE PURPOSE

On the basis of such discursive site, i.e., stand-up comedy, this present paper aims to provide a novel insight to the analysis of verbal humour of an Algerian stand-up comedian, who is considered as a new figure in the globe of Algerian stand-up comedy called Abdelkader Secteur. Thus, the subject of analysis will focus on performance data of the humorist's language in use, through which he triggers humour and unveils the Algerian identity.

Such matters are drawn from the correlation between language and society. Socio-linguistically speaking, language is a complex dynamic phenomenon, strongly associated with the socio-cultural structure of society. It can serve as an instrument of cultural and social transmission, and it can also be a means of negotiating meaning. Indeed, it is undoubtedly recognized that language exhibits systematic variation within any speech community and in individual's speech behaviour. Taking into account such views, the objective of the dissertation is an attempt to analyse the orator-comedian's language in use which constructs his discourse to function humorously and to fulfil intentional meanings. Questionably, the conceptual framework of this research is based on the view that stand-up comedy could be a locus of socio-linguistic investigation by giving credit to the analysis of the stand-up comedian's humoristic discourse.

Thus, to make the research reliable, the relevant question “Is the comedian's code switching socially motivated?” lead to the assumption of the hypothesis which tries to suggest that code choice in his humoristic discourse is unmarked pursuing the norms of the Algerian society he belongs to, a community characterized with a number of competing codes (Arabic, in its two forms, the standard ‘SA’ and the dialect called Algerian Arabic AA', and French as a second language).

In effect, it is undeniable that the issue of 'language' in Algeria has always been controversial, and the debate about which language should be used is still confusing mainly among authors, journalists, playwrights, comedians, etc. This fact is a consequence of different factors such as historical events, political issues and socio-cultural reasons which outcome a peculiar linguistic diversity, noticed in an intricate multilingual, diglossic situations resulting in the noticeable use of CS. Yet, the question which that the one is prompted to ask is: how to exemplify these linguistic phenomena in Algerian's commonplace context? .

A GLANCE AT THE LINGUISTIC PROFILE IN ALGERIA

Arguably, the Algerian linguistic situation called bilingualism refers to the use of both SA and French languages which plays a significant function in written and spoken structures as well. At the micro level, bilingualism in Algeria is attested in many types and degrees, depending on the individuals' competences in both languages. For instance, they could be classified as balanced, imbalanced, active or passive. In effect, the level of education has a great impact on the bilinguals' experience, providing them with a sufficient competence in both languages.

At the macro level, societal bilingualism can be seen horizontally according to the geographical distribution of the population. This linguistic phenomenon is more practiced in urban areas where literacy is high and the contact with the French language is strong, in addition to the existence of administrative and educational institutions operating in French. By and large, bilingualism in Algeria is subtractive since Arabic is replacing French progressively in many domains such as politics and administration leading to a diglossic situation.

Hence, Algerian speakers are classified as being diglossic, reserving the high form (SA) of the language for formal usage as in religious domains, education, literature and formal situations, and using the low variety (AA) or the local one in casual and domestic settings. The two forms are genetically related. This phenomenon was the gist scrutiny of Ferguson (1959: 232) who states that: "Diglossia characterises a situation where two varieties of a language exist side by side throughout a community with each having a definite role to play" .

This view stirred much controversy among researchers, who believes that Ferguson's diglossia is restricted only to two varieties of the same language. Hence, in 1967, Fishman introduced the concept that diglossia could be extended to situations found in many societies where forms of two genetically unrelated languages occupy the H and L niches. An interesting Example to illustrate this type of diglossia is that of Paraguay where Spanish and Guarani, two genetically unrelated languages are respectively considered as H and L.

Yet, Extended diglossia can be applied in the Algerian context, where French and AA, genetically unrelated languages have different statuses. French is highly valued and more prestigious than AA; it is used in written form and formal discourse. In contrast, AA is less valued and considered as the L variety due to the lack of these properties.

Moreover, Algerians are often involved in switching or mixing between the codes as the prevalent and common mode of communication. According to Hoffmann (1991:10) code switching is "the alternate use of two languages or linguistic varieties within the same utterance or during the same conversation" (Quoted in Zéphir, 1996: 134).

At the macro level, bilinguals use AA as an informal way of interaction, however, when the topic is about technology; the speaker often uses French, for example, the computer mouse is always referred to as 'la souris' instead of /ελφαρα/, but if the conversation is about Islam, s/he uses SA. At the micro level, CS is used according to the aforementioned motivations that are under some socio-pragmatic nature. For example, some Algerian parents may use French in order not to make their kids understand.

These examples taken from ordinary Algerian context illustrate that speakers are often involved to choose, from their verbal repertoires, the appropriate code in order to attain their communicative goals. This denotes that there are no single-code speakers, as Bell (1976:110) confirms "no language user is monolingual, in the strict sense of possessing a single code". Hence, each individual is subject to switch or mix between the codes, at least two, during a communicative

episode according to specific circumstances. Thus, the question which raised the curiosity of various researchers is 'why do speakers code switch?' To put it differently, the inquisitiveness of speakers' code choice is regarded as a critical issue among researchers in different disciplines in order to determine the factors and the motives behind such choice, as will be tried to attain in the present paper within the comedian's linguistic variation in his verbal humour.

METHODOLOGY

The humorist's verbal humour is a basically a linguistic construct characterized by a complex heterogeneity of codes, clearly noticed by the alternation of two languages (AA/French) or linguistic varieties (SA/AA), as occurs in any virtual Algerian verbal communication. Hence, in order to inspect such micro-linguistic variation, the present paper is accorded a sociolinguistic analysis of the comedian's stand-up five performances, which are the quintessence data. It derives from the downloaded videos of the humorist's shows in live stand-up comedy. Although the humorist's sketches are available in the commercially produced videotapes and digital video discs (DVD), we have chosen to extract the comedian's shows from YouTube's recordings using Real Player software, which contains a cutting tool that helps trim the video according to our needs.

The show's duration is about eleven to forty five minutes; it consists of a chunk of coherent jokes displayed by the artist, either in solo, or duo performances with another comedian. But in this research project, just five excerpts dating recently, i.e., 2011- 2012- 2013, and ranging from one to five minutes from his solo performances are taken into consideration to be transcribed and analysed.

Moreover, for the sake of further feedbacks for an accurate interpretation of the database, the selected comedian's stand-ups will be given to a sample of thirty-two Algerian participants. They are family members and friends, from different gender and having different age and educational level. They are Algerians who possess mutual background knowledge of the norms and expectations concerning the use of language in the humorist's discourse.

In fact, this background knowledge is governed by the Algerian cultural values, its religion and heritage, which consequently leads to a lucid understanding and interpretation of the humorist's stand-ups. They will be required to (i) watch and listen to the selected sketches and (ii) fill in the the open question: why does the stand-up comedian switch between different languages in his sketches? for the aim to assess their views concerning the reasons behind the humorist's CS.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATIO OF FINDINGS

Among 32 Participants, regardless their age, gender or educational level, 27 said that the comedian switches between the languages because CS is the norm of Algerian speech, 3 claimed that he switches to converge with his Algerian audience, and 2 asserted that CS is used to show his language competence in foreign languages, especially French. These answers are displayed in the graph below:

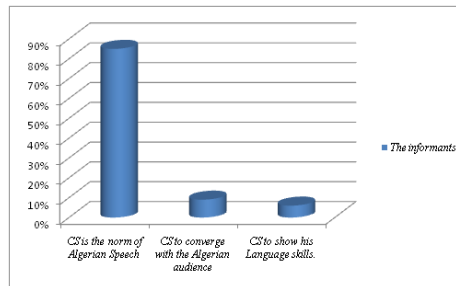


Figure1: Participants' View about the Humorist's CS

Such participants' view is general due to the broad question given to them. However, a strict analysis of the comedian's CS is not yet full-fledged. In an attempt to do so, we will focus on the pragmatic functions of CS in each joke, which occurs inside or outside sentences, but not within morphemes boundaries, because the analysis is abstracted from grammatical/syntactic scrutiny, borrowed items or any kind of possible interference from other linguistic systems. The examples are substantiated from the humorist's interaction with his audience (extra-textual interaction) and the characters incarnated in his discourse (intra-textual interaction).

Analysis of the Comedian's Code Switching

A deep scrutiny at the five video-excerpts is worth recalling that the humorist's discourse functions in response to his audience, i.e., the chosen codes prefigure the spectators' linguistic identity, which is in essence heterogeneous, to attain a maximum perception and interpretation of his discourse. As previously noted, none of his shows is conducted within a single code. The humorist is often involved in switching between the codes (AA, SA, French, Spanish, and English) in his discourse in a strategic way under some socio-pragmatic factors.

With the intention of determining the factors which trigger the humorist's codes alternation, a deep attention will be given to each video excerpt to pick up the embedded codes and attempt to analyse them in the light of various theories, often with a reference to the markedness model which seems the most rational approach that attempts to reveal the real socio-psychological motivation behind CS. To put it very briefly, Myers Scotton (1993a) assumes that speakers are aware about the Rights and Obligations (RO) set as components of their communicative competence when acquired intuitively. Thus, they know which languages are unmarked or marked choices in a community. Generally, the unmarked choice is a marker of a speaker's social identity determined by his use of the matrix language which signals his/her in-group membership. In the four video-excerpts, the humorist uses AA as the matrix language, recognized by his audience for the obvious aims to (i) converge with an Algerian audience, (ii) demonstrate his solidarity with them and (iii) reveal his Algerian identity.

Hence, AA is the unmarked means of the humorist's discourse, in which CS per se is commonly expected, especially switches between Arabic and French due to the country historical background. This is why it seems obvious to hear French words in the humorist's video-excerpts as in /Mais, vσι|τς? [...]]εηδαρ l'anglais/ (first joke), /ανα normalement kader, ηγυλεκ quarante secondes, ηυλτλυ imaginez, la voix τα μρα parce que ηραμ, φηη deux options, il faut, βεβ ςα y est, vεrifiez, les nerfs, la radio, poste/ (second joke), /le pont, trente metres de hauteur, parce que/ (third joke), /loto, la ville, mais non, parce que, trois points/(Forth joke). Such unmarked choice is reinforced by 27 of participants who believe that CS in the comedian's sketches reflects the norm of the Algerian speech.

However, if switching between Arabic and French in his humoristic discourse is regarded as unmarked, then, the question that one is prompted to ask is: what codes might be regarded as marked, and for what reason? Does the humorist mix between marked and unmarked codes in his jokes? This issue seems very interesting, and in order to find out the answer, one should recall that CS is a purposeful activity, in the sense that it expresses several functions within a discourse to achieve a communicative intent, although it is structured by external factors such as situation, participants, norms of the community, topic, etc. Hence, a speaker selects an appropriate choice with the expectation that his addressee will recognize that this choice is a potent carrier of a particular intention. On the basis of such premise, Meyers- Scotton (1998 :19) writes "the MM, [...] assume that speakers are rational in the sense that, at some level of consciousness, they are making choices that do not simply reflect their social group membership or the type of speech event in which they are participating". Hence, the humorist's CS is not always conceived as unmarked but could be regarded as marked depending on his intentions and the functions of his switches.

Indeed, it should be pointed out that in many instances, there are some switches in the selected jokes which arouse from extra-linguistic factors affected by change of the social situation which involves a change in the setting, interlocutors, and the context. Such switching is claimed to be of the situational type according to Gumperz (1982). Another switch referred to as metaphorical CS is triggered by change of the topic involving the alternation between the codes in the same discourse. One must note that although the interference of these social factors, the functions of CS remain several, since each switch constitutes an eclectic combination of functions. Thus, "pinpointing the purpose of each code switch is a task as fraught with difficulty as imputing the reasons for a monolingual's choice of one synonym over another, and no complete accounting may ever be possible"(Zentella, 1997:99)

For example, switches where the setting is the cause of linguistic alternation is substantiated from the following examples: in the first joke, the humorist says / μαρικανι δkheλ λελ port, costa ηακδα, ηηαδυκ les dockers.../. This example entails a shift from the use of AA (the base language) to French terms (port, dockers) and Spanish terms (costa), may be for the reason that these lexical items are regarded as technical words used particularly in the port (a jargon). Hence the setting of the joke provokes such switching. Another possibility which has led the humorist to such lexical insertion is the lack of their exact equivalent in AA, perhaps due to the humorist's higher frequency of exposure to these items, as he belongs to a coastal town (Ghazaouet), linguistically characterized by a great amount of Spanish words due to the town historical background, for example, the term 'costa' is borrowed from the Spanish word 'acostar'. In such cases, CS is unmarked.

In the fourth joke, the situation (the city) triggers the characters' switching (unmarked choice since the terms are commonly used). It is spotted first, in the policeman switches from AA to French, with the aim of clarifying to prevent misunderstanding (unmarked choice). Despite this, the message is not attained by 'Icha', and hence, such terms have a humorous impact (maybe they are used as a marked choice for humorous effect).

Indeed, change of participants also plays a great role in code choice. For instance, the comedian uses English expressions in the first joke illustrated in the docker's conversation with the American sailor, while he used AA with his colleagues. Hence, switching in this case is triggered by change of interlocutors, in which the docker attunes his speech in response to the American man in order to converse with him (speech accommodation theory, Giles and Coupland) and thus, achieve the function of displaying his language skills in English (unmarked choice). This switching may also have a

phatic function because the humorist does it purposefully to change the tone of the joke creating a humorous effect; especially as it is done in the second script which holds the punch line (marked choice).

Another vivid example in which the interlocutor is the subject of the humorist's switching is found in the fifth joke, in which the comedian accommodates his speech in response to his French addressee to make it more intelligible and converge with her (speech accommodation theory), but also to demonstrate his language skills in the French language. Indeed, he could do it deliberately because he knows that he is addressing a bilingual audience who understands French (unmarked choice).

The topic of conversation has a large impact on the humorist's code selection with various functions; for example, the second joke holds switches from AA to French lexis spotted at the following words like: l'ordinateur de bord, la ceinture de sécurité, le volant, la radio, poste, obviously for the reason that the humorist is familiar with them, and thus are unmarked words. In the fifth joke, in which French could be considered as the base language, because the comedian is reporting his conversation with the French lady, the switching into AA is considered as marked, especially if it is done for a humorous effect (phatic function). Yet, switching in this case does not serve this sole function, since the humorist is using AA to accommodate with his Algerian audience in order to re-iterate for clarification or translation. In such case, CS is unmarked choice.

The dichotomy marked/unmarked is also spotted in the second joke, in which switching between AA, SA or AA and French are obviously noticed. For example, when addressing his audience, the humorist says some expressions like "إن شاء الله, أقسم بالله, والله". Such expressions are considered as a reference to his religion, in order to accommodate with his Arabic-Islamic audience; in this case, switching between these SA terms and AA is unmarked. But such SA insertion may have alternative function marked by its humorous effect, thus, such switch could be seen as marked.

Even the fifth question of the second joke elucidates that the French term 'asphyxié' is used in a similar way with other French terms which pervade AA to become the norm of Algerian speech. In this case, CS is unmarked, but it could be a marked choice if the comedian does it deliberately to change the tone of speech for a humorous effect (phatic function), while he could have used the term /μje↔jjeφ/ instead of 'Asphixié'.

Moreover, switching between AA and French lexis transcends the above functions, it is used sometimes to report other speeches like quoting the female's recorded speech of the onboard computer /Porte arrière droite, mal fermée/, or when reporting the man's utterance /après vous/ (second joke)

CONCLUSIONS

That verbal communication is replete with CS is nothing new. Such code choice is relevant upon speakers' degree of awareness and adequate use of "communically recognized norms" (Meyer Scotton, 1983a: 123), which structures speakers' speech according to different intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Therefore, CS is not a merely idiosyncratic behaviour but is governed by components of speech events like topic, setting, and participants in order to assign specific functions and pragmatic meanings. Yet, The common way to deliver his humorous discourse is to address the audience in an ostensible and lucid code understood by them, obviously spotted at the use of AA as his dominant language, for the apparent aims to converge and demonstrate his solidarity with them as well as to reveal his Algerian identity. But as Abdelkader Secteur knows that his audience is linguistically heterogeneous, he often switches between AA and

other codes merely spotted in French lexis, some standard forms of Arabic and Spanish words or English ones. Such mixture of languages which frames the scripts of his humoristic discourse does not occur haphazardly; it is rather prepared thoughtfully in accordance with the audience which is linguistically heterogeneous, and depending on a number of factors.

According to Billie (1998: 127), CS in the public sphere, is basically written. Hence, it is not done beyond the control of their creators, or caused by deficiencies in the dominant code. It is rather thoughtful and deliberately displayed as a marker of identity due to the orator's awareness of his/her audience's language. Yet, such switches (merely AA and French) are most of the time considered as the common and prevalent means of communication in the Algerian society, including his humoristic discourse, in which they are governed by external factors like the setting of the story, its topic or depending on the participants incarnated in the joke. Despite this, his code selection still remains a deliberate activity in the sense that it expresses several functions such as quoting, reiterating for emphasis, or purposefully to have a humorous impact. This finding supplements the proposed hypothesis.

Ultimately, when according a sociolinguistic analysis of Abdelkader Secteur' stand-ups through an aid of the sampling partaking, the answer of the principle captivating issue of this paper has been fairly identified.

REFERENCES

1. Attardo A. (1994). *Linguistic Theories of Humor*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
2. Bell R. T. (1976). *Sociolinguistics: Goals, Approaches and Problems*. London: Batsford.
3. Ferguson C. A (1959a). Diglossia. In Giglioli.
4. Fishman J. A (1972). *Language in Sociocultural Change*. California: Stanford University Press.
5. Gumperz John J. 1995. Mutual Inferencing in Conversation. In: Marková, I. Graumann, C.F. /Foppa, K. (eds.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
6. Scotton C. M. (1983 a). Comment. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*. 39: 119-28.
7. Scotton C. M. (1998). *Codes and Consequences: Choosing Linguistic Varieties*. Oxford University Press: New York.
8. Oring E (2003). *Engaging Humor*. USA: Board of trustees.
9. Rush W. (1998). *The Sense of Humor Exploration of a Personality Characteristic*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
10. Sankey J. (1998). *Zen and the Art of Stand-up Comedy*. New York: Routledge.
11. Vandaele J. (2002). *Translating Humour*. UK, ST: Jerome Publishing.
12. Zentella A.C. (1997). *Growing up Bilingual*. New York: Blackwell Publishers.
13. Zéphir F. (1996). *Haitian Immigrants in Black America. A Sociological and a Sociolinguistic Portrait*. US: Library of congress.