An Analysis of Code-Switching in We-Chat Communication From the Perspective of Adaptation Theory

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Online communication has already become one of the most popular ways among students on campus. We-Chat language is a complex type of discourse in which code-switching can be frequently seen. The present study analyzed the features of the Chinese-German students’ code-switching in the online communication and their motivations.

Keywords: We-Chat communication, code-switching, motivation, adaptation theory

Introduction

Code is thought as a kind of symbol, language, or even language variety (Ronald, 2000). Code-switching that is a common language phenomenon exists in a single communication when speakers use two or more languages or language varieties. Code-switching also can be regarded as a process of language selection in the communication. Since there is more and more frequent international communication, scholars at home and abroad pay more attention to exploring code-switching among various languages and language varieties.

Since Internet communication develops quickly around the world, various chat tools appear in the daily life. Among them, We-Chat is the most international and popular among young people. Thus, We-Chat communication records can reflect some characteristics of international students’ communications. And nowadays few scholars turn their eyes to code-switching on the process of Internet communication. Thus, the present study will investigate the motivation of code-switching occurred in the We-Chat communication.

The Theoretical Background of Code-Switching

Numerous famous scholars at home and abroad also have provided various theories to conduct code-switching research. Blom and Gumperz (1972) pointed out the code-switching in context and metaphorical code-switching to adapt to social reality. Code-switching in context relies on the change of the social situation and often occurs in a certain social situation that speakers need to use different languages to continue their communication. But metaphorical code-switching is less influenced by the certain situation (Wang, Huang, & Lu, 2004). From the perspective of language components, Azuma (1998) pointed out that language switching is not at random, but influences by a certain language rule. Therefore, the adaptation theory was provided to explore the pragmatic functions and meanings behind code-switching (Verschueren, 1999). Language use is a process of language selection and has three features: variability, negotiability, and

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adaptability. Adaptability of language has three aspects: adapt to linguistic reality, adapt to social conventions, and adapt to psychological motivation. Therefore, the Adaptation Theory, as a dynamic perspective of observing language, has a strong explanatory power to code-switching in online communication.

Apart from the theoretical research, experimental research was also conducted. Code-switching is always combined with pragmatics, psycho-linguistics, social linguistics, and so on. Recently, code-switching adopted in the Internet communication is also a hot point in this field. But more previous researches focused on English-Chinese code-switching (Xue & Xiang, 2019). Previous research (Hao & Duan, 2019; Yuan, 2014; Yin, 2005) also laid more emphasis on pragmatic functions or roles code-switching plays rather than the motivations that push ahead.

The present study mainly explores the motivation of the code-switching among Chinese and German students based on the adaptation theory and analyzes the factors from the adaptation to linguistic reality, social conventions, and especially psychological motivation.

**Code-Switching in We-Chat Communication**

**Adaptation to Linguistic Reality**

Linguistic reality refers to language features, language structure, and also language varieties. Speakers or language users choose more accurate language to express their meanings based on the characteristics of each language to achieve better understanding. There are two aspects need to focus on: alternative and accuracy. When communicating speakers want to express his opinions clear and exact, thus he will choose the most appropriate language to make himself understood based on the linguistic reality. The concern is whether there is an alternative word or sentence to express and whether it is comprehensible mutually. Therefore, one motivation of code-switching is that speakers try to use the least words to achieve best communication.

Adaptation to linguistic reality is ubiquitous in the daily communication. For example:

*(Kevin, Joy, and Felix Kleemann are German students; Ace is Chinese student. They are talking about group tasks)*

Kevin: Kindly reminder for everyone to send two pictures of you for the video—one normal picture and one in front of some books or a laptop.

Ace: Are these OK?

Kevin: Yes, very good. Thank you.

Joy: I will send my pictures around 2pm.

Felix Kleemann: I’m working on the power point presentation. I’ll send it later this day.

Kevin: @Joy kannst du das Dokument mal als word datei schicken? das kann ich nicht öffnen weil das ein pages dokument ist.

Kevin: Ich kann sonst nicht weiter machen.

Joy: OK, moment.

Kevin: Perfect. @Joy ein ganz normales foto für die vorstellung im video fehlt noch von dir. Dann hab ich alles was ich brauche.

Joy: Ganz normales ohne Laptop usw?

Kevin: Ja genau, ganz normal.

Kevin: Danke.
In the above communication, German students and Chinese students talk about making and editing video. But obviously Kevin uses two languages to communicate in the We-Chat group. First, she uses English to remind everyone the tasks they need to do in the next and she uses English to say thanks to Ace (a Chinese student). The reality is that English can be understood by everyone in the group and is helpful for her to convey information in the communication. And Joy and Felix also use English to respond in the group at first. But when she talks to Joy and Felix, she changes her language to German quickly and Joy and Felix also respond in German. Mother tongue as the first language of everyone is much more easy and comfortable for people to use. English as a lingua franca nowadays has become a kind of communication tools for many international students.

In daily communication, not only English-German code-switching but German-Chinese code-switching is also ubiquitous. For example:

(They are talking about how to celebrating their perfect tasks. Livia is a Chinese student, but German is her second foreign language)

Kevin: So, when will we have our hotpot to celebrate?
Livia: Vielleicht eine Wochenende oder?
Livia: Do you guys like 辣条?
Kevin: Perfekt, 辣条.
Felix: Sieht klasse aus. Great.

“辣条” is a kind of food made in China and is a typical Chinese food. In foreign countries, “辣条” is also very famous. But German and English have no accurate words can replace “辣条” to convey its meaning. Thus, Livia directly uses Chinese to express her idea clearly and accurately. In the communication, there are also many similar examples to use Chinese directly to refer to special Chinese food, places, history figures, and also events. Thus, this is one of the motivations of the code-switching among German and Chinese students.

But in the above records, Livia uses German to answer the questions rather than English to show her special identity and at the same time to help herself to communicate with other German students easily and fluently. Another aspect is that using the same language can shorten the distance between German students and Chinese students to better fit in the group. This is also a common psychological motivation among students in different countries.

**Adaptation to Social Conventions**

Social conventions refer to those conventionalized social customs and cultures in the real world. Social conventions are conventionalized over a long period of time and are accepted by most people in a certain nation or culture. Thus, speakers will choose language according to local cultures or customs to show their respect and to avoid troubles and culture taboos. In international communication, adaptation to social conventions is very essential and necessary. Many international students are also very sensitive to Chinese culture and culture taboos. For example:

(Livia is a Chinese student, but German is her second foreign language)

Felix: Maybe you can write “Thanks for your attention” in the last page.
Kevin: Or in Chinese “谢谢”, danke.
Ace: 感谢大家聆听.
Livia: 感谢观看.
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In the above records, Chinese words, like “谢谢”, “感谢大家聆听”, and “感谢观看”, are used to show their respect and praise towards Chinese students and teachers. They pay more attention to Chinese tradition of showing great respect to teachers and accordingly expect much more out of the role and action of the teachers. They also will use code-switching to avoid some culture taboos in the communications. When they refer to some sensitive political topics, they will more often use German to communicate or stop to continue the topic in the front of the Chinese students. For example, when talking about NBA Morey’s speech towards China, German students will change to German to communicate rather than English.

Therefore, adaptation to social conventions is a factor to influence German students’ code-switching but is not the most important one. Most important motivations are their psychological factors.

**Adaptation to Psychological Motivation**

Yu (2004) posited code-switching adaptation model and he regarded code-switching as a language choice. Code-switching can help people to achieve many psychological motivations including flaunt, avoid, pleasing, emphasis, and so on. Speakers will adopt code-switching to achieve their purpose and to achieve mutual understanding and better communication. But different motivations exist in different period of communication and sometimes speakers will apply code-switching to achieve their multiple motivations at the same time.

There is an example:

(Marc, Simon, and Jen are German students; they are talking grades in the We-Chat group)

Marc: You can ask for your grade if you want to know it.
Marc: What did you guys get? (You don’t have to answer)
Simon: Habe A
Marc: Ich auch 96 punkte
Simon: Ich 92
Jen: Ich auch 92
Simon: Ich glaube weil ich 1 mal gefehlt habe.

In the above communication, Marc told everyone they can get their grades from teacher, and he asks other students’ grades in the group. But he realized that it may hurt others’ privacy; he just sends “You don’t have to answer” to avoid embarrassment. Then, German students send their grades in the group in German to avoid embarrassment and also keep their privacy at the same time.

Apart from avoid, flaunt is another major psychological motivation in the research.

Another example:

(Marc, Jen, and Simon are German students. They want to make video about how international students are adapt to Chinese social life in transportation aspect. Thus, they are talking about Chinese transportation in the We-Chat group.)

Simon: OK. I think interviewing foreigner’s opinion towards the price of Shanghai’s transportation is a best way.
Marc: Didi 很便宜. 一点儿都不贵. (语音消息)
Jen: Ah, subway is also a better choice.
Marc: 地铁人很多，在上海打车很好很不错. (语音消息)
Anna: Your Chinese is really good. And pronunciation has improved a lot.
Marc: Really? 我一直在练习，谢谢. (语音消息)
Flaunt is a common psychological motivation towards everyone. Especially when a person has made a grade improvement, he wants to be praised and admitted by others. Thus, in the communication, Marc uses Chinese to communicate with Chinese students rather than English or German to show off his Chinese level and to meet his psychological needs. On the one hand, he wants others to praise his hard-working and perseverance in learning Chinese. On the other hand, as a foreign student, Chinese can help him to build a bridge among other German students and Chinese students in the We-Chat group.

Individual belongs to the whole society. Everyone has the desire to be a member of the society and to make himself understood. Thus, they will use code-switching to meet their needs. All of these need become the motivation of code-switching especially among international students.

Conclusion

Nowadays, We-Chat communication has become the most popular trend among students. Thus, the present study chooses related We-Chat communication records as research data to conduct the analysis on the code-switching phenomenon. There are three findings from the analysis. First, code-switching among international students is very common and it is a double-edged sword towards their daily communication. Second, according to the adaptation theory, there are three kinds of adaptation. Apart from adaptation to language reality and social conventions, psychological motivation is a subject and the most unpredictable factor in code-switching. Thus, language users can adopt code-switching to adapt to their various psychological motivations to achieve their communication purposes. Third, German students and Chinese students use English as their Matrix language, Chinese and German as their Embedded language to achieve their communication purposes.

However, the present study also has some limitations. First, the research data sample is limited. The research sample is only selected from a certain group of German and Chinese students which is hard to reflect the whole society. Second, We-Chat communication is different from oral communication. Thus, there are also some phenomenon cannot be reflected comprehensively. Therefore, more complicated researches on code-switching still need scholars to conduct deeply and the present study will also try to provide a new perspective for the later research in the related fields.

With the development of the globalization and pluralism, language development also appears diversification. Code-switching, as a language phenomenon, should be treated critically. Language users should adopt its good points and avoid its shortcomings in the daily communication.

References

