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## The Functions of Code-switching in Facebook Interactions

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### Abstract

Studies on code-switching over the past two decades have a propensity to focus on its spoken context, few on its written production. This study contributes to the under-studied area by investigating the occurrences of code-switching in electronic writing. The goal of this study is to examine the code-switching functions performed by five Malay-English bilingual users in their Facebook interactions. The data of this study were collected within one year from status updates posted by the bilingual users on their Facebook wall. They were then coded, analysed and categorised according to the functions they served in the Facebook context. The classification of the code-switching functions was based on Gumperz's (1982) conversational code-switching and supplemented by Zentella (1997), San (2009) and Montes-Alcalá's (2007). Findings indicate that code-switching occurs in online interaction to serve quotation, addressee specification, reiteration, message qualification, clarification, emphasis, checking, indicating emotions, availability, principle of economy and free switching functions. This study hopes to provide insights on the code-switching phenomenon in asynchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). Additionally, the findings of this study will be of value for the development of code-switching studies in the CMC area.

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*Keywords:* Bilingualism; Code-switching; Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC); Facebook; Online interaction

### 1. Introduction

Code-switching has intrigued significant interest among many scholars for the past several decades. However, most studies have analysed code-switching on the basis of its oral production, with few on its written production. Therefore, the present study attempts to bridge the gap by examining the occurrences of code-switching in electronic writing. The advent of the Internet and the rapid development of electronic communication have

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revolutionised the conventional ways of communication and written expression. Social networking site (SNS) such as Facebook allows people to interact and correspond with each other in all parts of the world as well as share their feelings and thoughts in a fraction of a second. Due to this interactive feature of Facebook, 57% of people interacted online more than they do in real life (Online Schools, 2012). Facebook is chosen for this study because it is more prevalent among the online community. As of March 2012, Facebook had 526 million daily active users on average (Facebook Newsroom, 2012). In Malaysia itself, it became the most visited social networking site with 88.8% of the 10.8 million social networking audiences (comScore, 2011). Therefore, its novel forms of communication are relevant to this study.

Furthermore, the extensive use of Facebook as a means of communication has made the new type of code-switching data available in large amount. Since researches on written code-switching are rather scarce, this study is conducted to examine such practice in the asynchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) like Facebook status updates. The researchers are interested in determining the reasons that motivate bilinguals to switch from one code to another in electronic writing, although they have the time to edit the message before posting it publicly. The researchers also intend to identify why bilingual users switch codes in their Facebook interaction when they have foreign friends in their friend lists and their friends do not necessarily reply or leave comments on what has been posted. The findings will help the online community understand that code-switching does not only take place in verbal communication, but also in the written interaction. This will also make the multilingual societies accept code-switching as one of the communicative strategies, as opposed to the corruption of pure language.

## **2. Computer-mediated communication**

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) refers to a variety of systems that enable people to communicate with other individuals via means of computers and networks, such as computer conferencing, electronic mail, discussion lists, bulletin boards (Romiszowski & Mason, 2004), chat rooms, blogs and social networking sites. Researches that have been made in the area of CMC generally distinguish between two types of communication, namely synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous communication that takes place in chat rooms and IM (Instant Messaging) requires users to be simultaneously online and react immediately in order to exchange messages instantaneously in real-time, while asynchronous communication such as emails or discussion groups allows users to access them at a different occasion (Beißwenger & Storrer, 2008). The latter does not require users to be online at the same time, but they can read and respond to the message at a later time. Some types of CMC are purely synchronous, some are purely asynchronous; while others (NetMeeting, Facebook) allow the two to occur in the same occasion. This study only focuses on the asynchronous form of Facebook interaction, namely status updates.

## **3. Facebook**

Facebook, created by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004 is the most widely used social networking site to date, with 55% of the world's global audience (comScore, 2011). It has one, of many others, asynchronous messaging feature, namely status updates, which conform to the microblogging concept (Köbler et al., 2010). This feature enables users to post short messages that communicate their feelings, thoughts, whereabouts, enquiries or any information that they want to share with their friends. Users can also post photos, videos or links in the status box. When users post a status on their wall, such status will appear on their friends' news feed. This will allow friends to 'like' the status by clicking the 'Like' button or leave a comment to what has been posted. Users can also 'tag' their friends in their status and posts. Friends that are tagged will receive a notification that links to the post. This will make such post accessible to be commented on by their friends.

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