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Code switching as a poetic device: Examples from rai lyrics ☆

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Abstract

This paper looks at the use of code switching between colloquial Arabic and French in a set of song lyrics belonging to the genre of rai music popular in Algeria and Morocco. The many examples discussed demonstrate that switching is skilfully exploited to add to the rhetorical and aesthetic effect of the lyrics. It is shown that switch patterns may interact with elements of lyric structure, such as rhyme, line divisions and stanzas, serving to reinforce links and divisions and enhance various types of patterning. Switching may also make a semantic contribution to the lyric's message, as when it is used for the incorporation of specific lexis or diction characteristic of the genre, or when it serves to place emphasis on certain lexical items, to highlight semantic oppositions or similarities, or to achieve parallelism, repetition or reformulation.
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1. Introduction

Code switching between two languages is usually thought of as a characteristic of casual conversation between peers, used by bilinguals when they are speaking spontaneously,

with little concern for how they sound. Indeed, in many bilingual communities, code switching is commonly stigmatised as a slovenly way of speaking, associated with careless-ness, inarticulateness and even lack of mastery of the two languages. Instances of biling-uals who express shame or regret at using code switching are, for instance, reported on by Grosjean (1982), Bentahila (1983a) and Romaine (1989).

Over the last 30 years, however, linguists have amply demonstrated that, far from being a chaotic form of expression, used as a last resort by people incapable of express-ing themselves adequately in a single language, code switching is a rule governed variety, used by members of a community in accordance with certain norms, and often function-ing as a powerful in-group marker. It has also been shown that code switching can be exploited as a valuable stylistic device which contributes to effective communication. The work of Gumperz (Blom and Gumperz, 1972; Gumperz, 1982) was instrumental in dem-onstrating that what he called 'metaphorical' code switching could serve a variety of dis-course functions, and many studies dealing with different language pairs have since yielded often similar taxonomies of these functions (see, for instance, McClure and Wentz, 1975; Valdés Fallis, 1976; Hill and Hill, 1980; Bentahila, 1983b). In this paper we would like to go a step further, in showing that code switching, in addition to being a useful resource for the bilingual in everyday interaction with other bilinguals, may also serve a poetic function, contributing to the aesthetic and rhetorical effects of discourse that is not spontaneous but carefully constructed. The use of code switching in literary texts has attracted relatively little attention in recent years, but there have been some discussions of switching in novels (N'Zengou-Tayo, 1996; Gordon and Williams, 1998) and in poetry (Keller, 1979; Flores, 1987; Tessier, 1996). Our concern here is with code switching in song lyrics, a phenomenon which is much in evidence among popular songs today, but which is by no means something new; written versions of mixed lan-guage song lyrics go back at least a thousand years. They range from the mixed Romance–Arabic kharjas attached to the muwashshaha songs in Arabic or Hebrew that were sung in al-Andalus in the 10th and 11th centuries (Stern, 1948; Armistead and Monroe, 1983), through the medieval macaronic carols exploiting Latin and various European vernaculars (Schendl, 1996, 1997) and the 14–15th century mixed Hebrew–Catalan songs reported on by Argenter (2001), to traditional folksongs such as the way-nos of Peru, described by Muysken (1990), and currently popular songs in a number of cultures, in styles ranging from rap to Latino.

We shall look here at the musical genre of rai, which originated in urban centres of Western Algeria, notably Oran, following the large-scale emigration from the countryside in the 1930s. Its roots have been traced to the repertoire of the female singers called sheik-hat, whose public performances were judged somewhat improper behaviour for women. The genre was then adopted by young male singers, who reinforced its licentious image by singing about taboo topics such as male/female relations, alcohol, drugs and social problems such as poverty and immigration. They also added the use of electric guitars and keyboards alongside traditional instruments.

By the 1980s, rai had become very popular among young North Africans. For some time the Algerian authorities banned rai songs from the state-run radio, but later they relaxed their position and some large rai festivals were organised. However, in the 1990s Islamic fundamentalists expressed vehement opposition to the genre, which culmi-nated in the assassination of the very popular figure Cheb Hasni. Other performers moved to Europe, where some became international stars. Recently, a new generation of rai sing-