

Chinese code switching in modern Lhasa Tibetan

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There has been a long tradition of Tibetan studies both in the East and in the West. As a subject of research, the Tibetan language, particularly the topic of code switching in Tibetan, has however been neglected by both Western and Eastern scholars. The general aim of this paper is to do an investigation of Chinese code switching and loanwords in modern Lhasa Tibetan. More specifically I shall focus on modern Lhasa Tibetan and analyse the frequency, domains and typology of code switching and loanwords in naturally occurring conversations.

Tibetan has widened its vocabulary by borrowing words from other languages from as early as between 4,000 to 2,000 B.C (Michael Walter and Christopher I. Beckwith 1997: 1037–1044). Some of the loanwords are recorded in Tibetan written materials, while most loanwords perhaps merely existed orally and disappeared with the changes of circumstances.

The data presented in this paper were collected during my fieldwork in Lhasa between August and December 2000. These conversations possess the following characteristics:

1. There is a clear distinction of matrix language (main language) and embedded language (supplementary language). Tibetan language is always used as the matrix language while Chinese is always employed as the embedded language in the conversations.
2. These conversations occurred naturally in terms of lexicon choice.

In terms of code switching and types of code switching, many research findings have been published in the West (Li Wei 2000; Suzanne Romaine 2000; Myers-Scotton 1995, 1997; Heller 1988). The typology of code switching suggested by Myers-Scotton (1995, 1997) is employed in this paper, where code switching is employed as umbrella-term to cover intersentential code switching and intrasentential code switching. The conversations are analysed one by one. The settings of conversations and information about the speakers are given at the starting point for each conversation. The code switching and loanwords are discussed in terms of frequency, domains and types of loan processes.

Analysing the conversations, I found that occurrence of Chinese code switching amounted to 13.6% of the total words employed in the conversations, but occurrence of Chinese code switching in each individual conversation varies. The highest occurrence of Chinese code switching was to 42.1% (conversation 3), while the lowest occurrence of Chinese code switching only was 3% (conversation 1) of the words used in the concerned

conversation. Regarding the typology of Chinese code switching in the conversations, the majority of the code switching occurs in intrasentential code switching as I found only seven intersentential code switching occurring in six conversations.

In addition to the 13.6% of Chinese code switching, there were thirty-two Chinese loanwords, covering 5.7% of the total words employed in the conversations. The loanwords mainly fall under the domains of culture and modern sciences.

Based on the limited conversational sources, I found that the locations do not always determine the occurrence of Chinese code switching although Myers-Scotton suggests this. I would suggest that the location itself does not determine the occurrence of code switching, but location may determine it when the topic of a conversation related to the location. Furthermore, occurrence of Chinese code switching partially depends on the groups the speakers belong to. The occurrence of code switching is not only determined by the age of speaker, but is also connected with education level, occupation, work experience and their conversation partner with whom they talk to.

This occurrence and absence of Chinese loanwords in the concerned domains is most likely a direct result of the topics of the conversations. The conversations used in this paper mainly concentrate on the daily topics. Additionally, the occurrence of Chinese code switching in modern Lhasa Tibetan may be a result of lexicon shortage in both spoken Lhasa Tibetan and literary Tibetan in concerned domains such as modern sciences. At the same time, it might be a result of the fact that more Tibetans become efficient in Chinese through getting education in inner China or in the Chinese language in the TAR. The increasing use of Chinese originated words, particularly Chinese code switching, in modern Lhasa Tibetan may be connected with many social factors. However, due to the limited conversational sources – at least in terms of quantity and diversity of conversations – particularly conversations in marked code switching, it has to be left for another paper.