

# “Dear Amigo”: Exploring Code-switching in Personal Letters

Cecilia Montes-Alcalá  
Emory University

## 1. Introduction

Code-switching, a natural phenomenon that consists of alternating two or more languages in bilinguals’ discourse, has traditionally been examined in its oral production. For over three decades, much attention has been devoted to its form, meaning, and grammatical patterns. However, very little research focuses on code-switching in writing. This study takes a look at a series of cases of code-switching involving Spanish-English bilinguals in personal notes and letters, in an attempt to take a further step in the less-investigated area of Spanish-English written code-switching.

The research question is twofold. First, I inquire whether bilingual individuals (who would or would not normally engage in code-switching when speaking) would switch languages when writing. Subsequently, assuming that those individuals do code-switch in written correspondence, I attempt to explain why they do it. The underlying hypothesis is that their writing displays social functions similar to those found in oral code-switching research. Moreover, I intend to uncover the cultural nature of code-switching. This cultural component has often been overlooked in the search for grammatical and pragmatic constraints.

## 2. Previous studies

No studies have been found specifically on the topic of Spanish-English code-switching in personal letters. However, a couple of explorations have been done on code-switching in personal letters. One is Chen’s dissertation on Mandarin Chinese and English Code-Switching in Taiwan. The other work is a Master’s thesis on the use of code-switching among educated Filipino bilinguals. The latter study, done by Ruth Anacta Alido, illustrates how code-switching is used as a strategy in the written discourse of Filipino bilinguals to cover specific functions. Although it remains unexplained why and when the subjects switch between their native language (Tagalog, Waray or Bikol) and English, code-switching appears as a natural and acceptable style in both oral and written communication for educated Filipino bilinguals.

Anacta identifies a number of function-specific relations in the rhetorical organization of the written discourse, namely motivation (directives, offers), background (change of topic), solutionhood (problem/solution), elaboration (discussion of the topic), purpose, condition, circumstance and concession. The elaboration relation emerges as the most used and the richest of the rhetorical relations. Anacta remarks that code-switching constitutes a playful device to lighten an otherwise serious topic as well as a connotation for (bi)cultural background shared by both the writer and the addressee. Finally, the researcher concludes that code-switching in written discourse marks a strategy suggesting the competence of the letter writer in the use of two languages.

Taking Anacta’s work as a point of reference, the present paper examines personal letters and notes exchanged among educated Spanish-English bilingual individuals. While the socio-pragmatic functions considered here differ to some extent from those identified by Anacta, I expect code-switching in notes and personal letters to serve as a valid strategy to perform a wide range of pragmatic and stylistic functions as well as a suggestion for the bicultural background pointed out by Anacta.

### 3. Subjects

My analysis differs from previous work as regards the profiles of the subjects. Rather than targeting a particular ethnic or cultural group (such as Chicanos, Nuyoricans, etc.) I examine a variety of individuals whose common denominator is being bilingual as well as bicultural. Their language choices are expected to reveal how they live in between two worlds, two cultures, and two languages they can use to fully express themselves.

Thus, the selection criterion for the subjects was based solely on their Spanish-English bilingualism. There was diversity in origin and type or degree of bilingualism among the subjects but this was not considered a significant variable for the purpose of the present analysis. All of the subjects were competent bilinguals who were able to express themselves fully in either language. It is worth noting that code-switching was not customary in oral communication for either the sender or the recipient in the case of the personal letters, which were all addressed to the researcher. In the case of the personal notes, the subjects regularly engaged in code-switching when communicating orally with the recipients.<sup>1</sup>

The subjects' ages ranged from 25 to 75 years old. All of them had completed at least college education. Four of them were females and there was one male. Two of them were born in the United States and the rest were born abroad. All of them lived presently in the United States, but had been raised, for a period of their lives, in a Spanish-speaking country. Therefore, they all were bicultural up to a certain point. The table below summarizes the subject's profiles.

**Table 1: Demographics of the study**

Initials	Sex	Age	Born in	Occupation	Schooling	Oral c-s
AM	Female	75	Puerto Rico	Retired	College	No
BT	Male	25	US	Student	Master's	No
MD	Female	25	US	Student	College	No
MV	Female	33	Argentina	Administrative	College	Yes
BM	Female	28	England	Student	Master's	Yes

### 4. Methodology

One of the main problems in procuring reliable data for this type of sociolinguistic study is the high sensitivity of linguistic behavior to contextual features. Obtaining data reflective of natural bilingual performance is exceedingly difficult per se, but especially when dealing with a socially stigmatized linguistic phenomenon such as code-switching. In this case, several letters and notes exchanged between Spanish-English bilingual speakers where code-switching took place were collected between 1996 and 1999. The letters were addressed to the researcher and the notes were addressed to other bilinguals in the household, but at the point of production the subjects were not aware that their linguistic behavior would be analyzed. Therefore, none of the data presented here are either prompted or elicited in any way.

I decided to group both letters and notes together under the assumption that they constitute a similar way of written interaction between bilingual individuals, that is, the traditional pen-and-paper communication. It is worth mentioning that all of the letters were informal texts whose main purpose was to communicate or exchange ideas, rather than narrative passages where style might be a priority. In the case of the notes, they were "post-it"-like, brief, notes left for other people in the household for information purposes.

Once the data was collected, I proceeded to the analysis and classification of the different social and stylistic functions performed by the language alternation. For this aim I considered the traditional socio-pragmatic functions revealed in the literature of oral code-switching, which is briefly summarized below.

<sup>1</sup> The linguistic behavior of the subjects was substantiated by the researcher's observation rather than by self-reports or questionnaires.

## 5. Analysis of the Functions

For several decades, researchers have pointed out a number of different socio-pragmatic functions present in code-switched speech. Valdés-Fallis, Poplack, McClure, Gumperz, and others provided several classifications of these functions: direct quotations, emphasis, clarification or elaboration, focus/topic, parenthetical comments, tags, contextual switches, lexical need switches, triggered switches, linguistic routines and/or idiomatic expressions, stylistic switches, etc. Along the same lines, works such as Zentella's (1997) distinguish three main categories of communicative strategies accomplished by code-switching: footing, clarification, and crutch-like mixes. However, one must note that not each and every switch produced will always perform a specific function. As Zentella suggests, "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" (99).

Despite this, my underlying hypothesis is that most of those functions pointed out in the literature will also be present in personal letters. Here I will locate and classify the different socio-pragmatic functions typically manifested in oral code-switching within the domain of personal letters and notes. The following traditional socio-pragmatic functions were recognized in my corpus.<sup>2</sup>

### 5.1. Quotations

Examples of both direct and indirect quotations were found in the letters and notes. In all of the cases, the base language was Spanish, and the quotations were in English. However, this is most likely coincidental, and the reverse might have been possible had the quoted utterances been made in Spanish:<sup>3</sup>

- 1) PERO BUENO, EN ESTO SOY PARTIDARIO DE LA FILOSOFÍA DE LOS Dignable Planets (...) QUIENES TAN SABIAMENTE DECLARAN: "We love it where we from, but we kick it where we at!" (sic) (BT)
- 2) ES MÁS, CUANDO LAS PREOCUPACIONES MÁS ANGUSTIOSAS DE UNO SE CIÑEN A who's gonna buy the next keg or what Frat or Sorority to rush for, ¿QUÉ SE LE PUEDE PEDIR? (BT)
- 3) ELLA LE MUESTRA ESO Y LE DICE, "look, it can't be me because I haven't read these messages." (BM)

### 5.2. Emphasis

Code-switching for emphatic reasons was not widely found in these personal manuscripts. Only two examples were revealed.

- 4) We have our heads on straight and are smart and guys know that. They want someone easy. But I have standards! When, when, TENDRÉ MI OPORTUNIDAD? (MD)
- 5) I am considered "one of the guys" –great— or they don't know I even EXIST. ¡LA VERDAD ES QUE ESTOY HARTA DE LOS CHICOS! (MD)

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<sup>2</sup> To protect the anonymity of the persons mentioned in the letters or notes, personal names have been replaced by fictitious names when necessary, while initials shown between brackets correspond to the names (real or fictional) of the subjects.

<sup>3</sup> For easy visual identification, in all given examples Spanish will be represented in small capitals and English in normal, not capitalized font.

### 5.3. Clarification or elaboration

In the following examples, code-switching is used to elaborate or further explain an idea. Let us remember that the elaboration relation was the most used and the richest of the rhetorical relations in Anacta's work.

- 6) FUE EN EL 91, spring break, YO Y 5 AMIGOS (4 DE ELLOS, Napa boys!) (BT)
- 7) ESPERO QUE TE LO ESTÉS PASANDO BOMBA, I'm sure you are, YA TE CONOZCO. (BM)
- 8) AUNQUE PAREZCA MENTIRA, ME SIENTO FUERA DE LUGAR [...] COMO SI VINIESE DE OTRO PLANETA [...] ES DECIR, "I'm trippin' hard, girl!" (BT)
- 9) JOHN ESTÁ ARREGLANDO EL JARDÍN. Don't panic if you see a man around. (MV)
- 10) TOTAL, QUE EL FINDE PASADO ESTUVE CON ÉL EN LA CIUDAD, RECORDANDO LOS VIEJOS TIEMPOS .... Shaggy is truly a cool cat, mellow and chilled. (BT)

### 5.4. Parenthetical comments

This function is related to the previous one in the sense that the code-switches constitute a further explanation of what was previously said (i.e., written). The switched phrase or sentence is inserted in parentheses, and serves primarily as an elaboration of an idea without distorting the flow of the sentence in the other language.

- 11) TENGO PENSADO VOLVER A CALIFORNIA [...] Y MARCHARME A CHICAGO (a.k.a. The Windy City) LA PRIMERA SEMANA DE SETIEMBRE. (BT)
- 12) AL BAJAR AYER ME ENCONTRÉ CON TODAVÍA OTRA SORPRESA, AUNQUE ESTA CONSTITUYE UNA AGRADABLE (unlike most of the other surprises I've received in Barcelona)... (BT)
- 13) Damn (PERDÓNAME) –the fact that I've been writing this much so far about this topic disgusts me. (MD)

### 5.5. Lexical need switches

Many examples were found when code-switching was employed due to the so-called lexical need. This type is arguably the most ill-defined of all categories since the issue of a real need is a very relative one. In a broad sense, each and every lexical switch fulfills a need, although under no circumstances should this be interpreted as lack of language proficiency, but rather as the lack of an exact equivalent in the other language. Other explanations found in the literature include a momentary gap in the lexicon of the individual, a matter of language choice due to the association of an item to a particular language or culture, or simply a higher frequency of exposure of an item in a specific language. I claim that the lexical need category is closely related to biculturalism in the subjects rather than to the lack of proficiency in any of the languages involved—especially in examples 14 and 19, both of which are closely related to Anglo culture.

- 14) ALQUILAMOS UN motor home INMENSO Y RECORRIMOS BAJA CALIFORNIA. (BT)
- 15) BRIAN, QUIEN CONDUCE EL spaceship on wheels, INTENTÓ PASAR POR DEBAJO DE UN CABLE DE ELECTRICIDAD. (BT)
- 16) I hope you dig the CURIOSIDADES that I've enclosed for you. Enjoy! (BT)
- 17) CREO QUE ESTUVISTE MUY CORRECTA AL EMPLEAR EN TU ARTÍCULO ESE LENGUAJE Y TONO TAN, DIGAMOS CABREADO, CON EL FIN DE DESPERTAR A UN readership TAN DISTRAÍDO Y DESPISTADO [...] . (BT)
- 18) ELLA ESTABA EN EL computer room Y LLAMÓ A ISABEL Y LE MOSTRÓ SU inbox DE SU e-mail. (BM)
- 19) ME GUSTARÍA DEJARTE EL COCHE PARA EL SÁBADO A LA NOCHE PERO A LO MEJOR NECESITO UN ride A CASA DE ANA at 5pm. (MV)

### 5.6. *Triggered switches*

Sometimes a switched word triggers a switch in what follows or precedes it. Only two examples were found. In the first example, the trigger comes from a direct quotation in English, which is a full sentence. In both cases, I have represented the triggering word(s) in bold face:

- 20) PERO BUENO, EN ESTO SOY PARTIDARIO DE LA FILOSOFÍA DE LOS Digable Planets (...) QUE TAN SABIAMENTE DECLARAN: “**We love it where we from, but we kick it where we at!**” So true, and I’ll keep on kickin’ it, wherever I may be. (BT)
- 21) SOBRE TODO EN RELACIÓN A UN CAMPUS COMO UCSB [...], PUES NO MUCHOS **undergrads** take even the most minimal break [...] to realize what a tragic, shameful, ever so unjust world we inhabit. (BT)

### 5.7. *Linguistic routines, formulaic, and/or idiomatic expression*

This category was one of the most abundant. I found numerous examples where code-switching obeys linguistic routines or idiomatic expressions. Again, biculturalism plays an important part in this behavior. In some of the examples (such as 26, 27, or 30), finding an accurate translation for an idiomatic expression is more difficult than rendering the term in the original language. In others (such as 22, 24, or 28) it is just a formulaic expression that might be better expressed in one language than in the other one. Finally, others are just linguistic crutches (also known as sentence fillers) of which the writer might be unconscious (see 25 and 29).

- 22) QUERIDA C: Happy Birthday! [...] CON CARÍÑO Y MUCHOS ABRAZOS FUERTES. (MD)
- 23) ELLA REGRESARÁ DEFINITIVAMENTE A BUENOS AIRES EN JUNIO. Time will tell.... (BT)
- 24) LA LECTURA DE ÉSTE CONSTITUYÓ UNO DE LOS RATOS MÁS AGRADABLES QUE HE PASADO ÚLTIMAMENTE – no doubt! (BT)
- 25) Well, RESULTA QUE ISABEL [...] NECESITABA A ALGUIEN PARA SU CLASE Y LE CONTÓ TODO EL PROBLEMA. (BM)
- 26) ME SENTÍ UN POCO MAL MINTIENDO UN TANTITO, PERO ES QUE she took me by surprise 100% Y NO ESTABA MUY PREPARADA PARA DARLE EXPLICACIONES. (BM)
- 27) DESDE QUE ESTOY AQUÍ NO HE HECHO MUCHO; TAMPOCO HE TENIDO GANAS. MÁS QUE NADA, just chillin’ out with Moms. (BT)
- 28) HARÁ DE CO-PILOTO, ASÍ NO ME DORMIRÉ in the middle of [...] nowhere! (BT)
- 29) For now, TE MANDO UN BESAZO Y MUCHO CARÍÑO. (BT)
- 30) CAGADOS DE MIEDO TODOS, we tried to make a run for the border, but to no avail. (BT)

### 5.8. *Stylistic switches*

Only two examples of switches for the sake of style were found. This might be explained by the fact that, although these letters and notes are an informal way of communication (i.e. as opposed to an official letter), code-switching is used to signal a shift in the register to an even more informal style leading to a more intimate language. In other words, code-switching serves the purpose of showing further complicity or constituting an in-group code. This could arguably be true of each and every switch, but the two examples below seem especially obvious:

- 31) ¡HOLA GUAPA, GUAPITA! For the past month, the concept of time has been non-existent [...]. (MD)
- 32) ADEMÁS CREO QUE YA LE TOCA TENER UNA BUENA EXPERIENCIA CON EL “male kingdom” (sic). (BT)

### 5.9. *Free switching*

In this category, I grouped all the examples where either there was no obvious single reason to switch codes or code-switching constituted an eclectic combination of other functions. Both cases are illustrated in the examples below.

- 33) So it's been about an hour since you called. ES DOMINGO. I wonder if you will hear all this on the phone and if so – even bother to read this later. (MD)
- 34) ESTOY MUY ANIMADA PARA IRME MAÑANA, PERO TRISTE COMO SIEMPRE PORQUE EL GÜERO NUNCA VIENE on these trips. (BM)
- 35) Doddy is in the Drug Store PARA LA MEDICINA DE JOE. (AM)
- 36) LLAMÓ JUAN to say hi! (MV)
- 37) SI VAS A ESTAR EN CASA Y NO TENÉS NADA QUE HACER, PODRÍAS COPIAR LA CINTA that we talked about last night, please? (MV)

## 6. The Bicultural Element

Being bicultural means having a dual system of representation for the same reality, or for two different realities. Biculturalism is not always associated with bilingualism, but it often is. The language(s) one speaks represent(s) the culture(s) one identifies with. If those languages are valued, the cultures associated with the languages will be valued as well. Thus, code-switching represents a way of expressing one's cultures as much as one's languages. As Zentella (1997) suggested, code-switching for bilinguals is “a way of saying that they belonged to both worlds, and should not be forced to give up one for the other” (114).

As observed above, both in the cases of idiomatic expressions and linguistic routines biculturalism plays an important role in the choice of language and it also shows the degree of familiarity that the bilingual individual possesses with both Hispanic and Anglo worlds and cultures. Because these are all custom-made expressions, they would not convey the message with the same force were they translated into the other language. The same is true in the categories of lexical need and “free switching”. Rather than switching to another language for a real need or for no apparent reason, the individual is suggesting his/her competence in the use of two languages and two cultures.

The examples shown here should impact our thinking of the meaning and usefulness of this particular mode of speaking (and writing) so often underestimated and misunderstood. Even though most bilingual speakers who code-switch are not aware of it, their switching is a rather complex and meaningful strategy that authors like Zentella perceive as a larger expressive repertoire, as opposed to a sort of weakness or lack of knowledge of the language. Furthermore, as Valdés-Fallis (1988) suggests, code-switching requires that speakers be very proficient in the two languages, and “it is helpful to imagine that ... they are in fact using a twelve-string guitar rather than limiting themselves to two six-string instruments” (125).

## 7. Conclusions

Given the small scope of the present study, one can only hope that more research be carried out in this less-explored area in order to be able to extrapolate these results to the Spanish-English bilingual population. However, when analyzing personal letters and notes exchanged among bilingual individuals, there are a few evident conclusions. First, my results are consistent with those found in Anacta's work. Although the socio-pragmatic functions considered are not identical, in both studies code-switching emerges as a valid strategy among educated bilinguals to communicate in writing. Second, both of my initial hypotheses are reaffirmed. It has been revealed that those individuals who normally code-switch when speaking will do so when writing. Moreover, I have shown that even those subjects who usually do not engage in oral code-switching will shift languages when writing to another bilingual speaker. Hence, a third conclusion emerges as the speculation that while code-switching has often carried a social stigma in oral production, such stigma does not seem to obtain in informal (private) written communication. It appears that in this medium, that is by definition

supposed to be removed from society—i.e. not observable by others—code-switching serves also as an in-group, more intimate code.

Despite the different backgrounds of the subjects analyzed, and despite the variety of degrees and types of bilingualism displayed, a common feature in all of them was their ability to manipulate the two languages for both stylistic and communicative effects. Thus, another conclusion of this study is the fact that these bilingual individuals possess sufficient linguistic and cultural knowledge of the nuances of both Spanish and English, and that their writing exposes specific social and stylistic functions similar to those attested in oral code-switching. This should not come as a surprise, given the nature of this type of texts, which constitute a sort of dialogue between two bilingual individuals, much like in oral conversation. Last but not least, we have observed how biculturalism plays a central role in code-switching. Therefore, referring back to the aforementioned quote by Zentella, we can now broaden it by claiming that not only should bilinguals not be forced to give up any of their languages, but also none of their cultures.

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