Code Switching in a Northern Athabaskan Community

This study explores the occurrence of and motivations for code switching between Dëne Sųłiné (Athabaskan) and English in Dillon, a small community in northern Saskatchewan. In this community, Dëne Sųłiné is spoken by most people, and on a daily basis.

Code switching in multilingual communities, or among multi- or bilingual speakers, is a topic of interest in a variety of disciplines, including, among others, linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and second language acquisition. Choosing to use more than one language within a single conversation may be motivated by a number of different factors. Chad Nilep (2006:17) describes the use of code switching as a means to contextualize communication, by signaling a change in situation, shifting relevance of social roles, or alternate ways of understanding. Code switching has been shown to play a role in bringing humour into conversational exchanges (Siegel 1995) as well as in *creating* particular social situations (Auer 1984); it is also intimately connected to the process of language shift and to cultural identity (Kulick 1992, Field 2001). John Gumperz (1958), in his work on various dialects of Hindi in northern India, suggests that language choice may be indicative of the relationship(s) between speakers. As these and other scholars have shown, the strategic use of more than one language in a single communicative exchange may reveal much about social roles, cultural values, language attitudes, and processes of language shift in multilingual communities.

The results from the current study stem from data collected during a number of short field trips to Dillon. My approach fuses both linguistic (i.e. language documentation and conversation analysis) and anthropological (i.e. participant observation) methodologies. I will present a number of examples of code switching between Dëne Sųłiné and English, both from recorded interviews and from my observations, and show that lexical items such as discourse markers (e.g. 'so'), numerals and place names are among those that are likely to be code switched. Other instances of code switching occur when one simply cannot think of the word; for example, in one story told by an elder of a winter road trip, the speaker switches from Dëne Sųłiné to English when she either cannot think of the word or does not know it (e.g. 'radio,' 'January,' 'hours'). Sociolinguistic factors (such as the age of the interlocutors) also play an important role; in a different recording, for example, the interviewer (a man in his forties) code switches into English occasionally, but the interviewee (an elder in her eighties) code switches only when repeating something that the younger man has said (e.g. a question or clarification). Thus, younger speakers seem more likely to code switch than older speakers. It is also observed that people under the age of twenty, though they speak Dëne Sųłiné less frequently than adults, will at times code switch from English to Dëne Sųłiné in order that outsiders will not understand them. I will address the implications of these and other examples, as well as give attention to the interplay of communicative patterns between these languages.

Aside from Scollon & Scollon's (1979)'s description of a community in which Dëne Sųłiné is spoken alongside three other languages (English, French and Cree), this study is the only other of its kind concerning a northern Athabaskan language. Indeed, this is largely due to the fact that Dëne Sųłiné is one of the very few of these languages that remains vital enough to conduct such an investigation. As such, its relevance, not only in the domain of linguistic anthropology, but also for second language acquisition and the preservation of an endangered First Nations' language should not be underestimated.

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