

Thai-English codeswitching: A Hawai'i case study

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Over the last three decades, the study of codeswitching has attracted many data-oriented and theory-oriented sociolinguists and syntacticians. It provides an avenue to understanding the relationship between social processes and linguistic forms. In this vein, the present study examines Thai/English codeswitching practiced by a group of Thai people in Hawai'i from two perspectives: sociolinguistic as well as syntactic. In this study, different theoretical models are tested against each aspect of codeswitching.

With regard to the sociolinguistic aspect of codeswitching, there has been a debate concerning two models: the markedness model (Myers-Scotton 1993a, 1998) and the conversational codeswitching approach (Auer 1995, Li 1994). These two frameworks are distinctive in their ways of analysis. The former takes societal norms as its starting point, whereas the latter takes the face-to-face interaction or the conversation as its starting point. Accordingly, one can be seen as a top-down approach, and the other a bottom-up approach. Over the last decade, the markedness model has been criticized for being categorical and static, the conversational codeswitching approach for its inattention to existing societal norms. By examining ways in which Thai/English codeswitching is used to signal social, discourse, and referential meanings, the present study is in support of the markedness model, the model that unifies macro-level and micro-level approaches to the study of codeswitching.

In terms of the syntactic aspect of codeswitching, the present study employs the Matrix Language Frame model (Myers-Scotton 1993b, 2002) to investigate the grammatical constraints on Thai/English codeswitching. Most of the findings in the present study are in corroboration with the model. However, there are some examples that seem to run counter to the System Morpheme Principle and the Morpheme Order Principle (Myers-Scotton 2002).

By considering both sociolinguistic and syntactic aspects of Thai/English codeswitching, the present study finds that social aspects of Thai/English codeswitching characterize its linguistic forms. In order to understand the social significance of codeswitching as well as its distinctive pattern in specific communities, ethnographic/sociolinguistic information regarding the participants and the community has to be taken into account.

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