Rethinking Domain Theory
Part II: What About Code-Mixing?

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In Part I (Black 1990, in *Ngoonjook* No. 3) I pointed out that there are alternative ways of applying domain theory in bilingual schools, and that some approaches suggested in the past may actually restrict Aboriginal languages in ways that could interfere with language maintenance. I suggested further that the best approach would define domain primarily in terms of 'person', rather than 'topic' or 'place,' so that speakers of Aboriginal languages would use their languages as much as possible among themselves, and English only for communication with others.

My discussion there did not try to deal with "code-mixing", which some take to be a violation of domain separation. One NT Department of Education document (1988, p. 56) describes code-mixing as follows:

> People who speak more than one language often make use of words from their other languages or dialects when they are talking to each other.... When people mix their languages (or codes) like this it is called CODE MIXING.

An earlier document had highlighted such code (or language) mixing as a serious problem. While outlining English and Aboriginal language core curriculum for Aboriginal schools, the NT Department of Education (1985, p. 2, 12, 26, 37, 48, 68, 90, 116) stressed the following for each grade from kindergarten to grade seven:

> It is important that Aboriginal staff become <u>conscious</u> of language mixing and use good standard Aboriginal language.

> It is important that English staff are <u>conscious</u> of using standard English and avoid language mixing.

> The teacher is the most important Aboriginal language model in the classroom.

> Children should be actively discouraged even in their earliest years at school from language (code) mixing.

At the same time, authorities elsewhere in the world have pointed out the social importance of code-mixing, which they often refer to as a type of "code-switching." For example, Saville-Troike (1976, p. 43) stressed the importance of children 'cultivating bilingualism and code-switching skills', and in reference to Spanish speaking Americans, Elías-Olivares (1979, p. 133) even suggested that

> One should also consider the possibility of using the mode of communication labelled as code-switching to teach some of the school subjects. If used, it could probably be conducive to a more relaxed atmosphere and to better learning.

What is happening here? Is code-mixing something to be avoided or encouraged? Or does it depend on the situation? The 1985 Departmental document is now eight years old, and I understand that the Department may be producing a new handbook for its bilingual education programs in the near future. It thus seems timely to review what is known about code-mixing, and in particular point out how a number of types of code-mixing and code-switching behaviour, with varying motivations and consequences, can be distinguished in classroom situations.

Some Background
The reason code-mixing has sometimes been considered a threat to language maintenance is that it seems to go against the principle of domain separation. In 1953 Weinreich (p. 73 in a 1968 reprint) summarised this view as follows:

> The ideal bilingual switches from one language to the other according to appropriate changes in the speech situation (interlocutors, topics, etc.), but not in an unchanged speech situation, and certainly not within a single sentence.

For speakers to switch languages depending on such things as who they are speaking to (the interlocutors) or what they are talking about (the topics) is what is meant by domain separation. To switch languages in 'an unchanged speech situation' (whatever that might mean) is what is generally called *code-switching,* and if it happens within a single sentence it is a type of code-switching that some people call *code-mixing* (for these terms, and for an excellent introduction to the topic in general, see Saville-Troike 1982, p. 60-71, or p. 57-70 in the 1989 edition).

It was thus not surprising that (as Harris 1990, p. 70 describes it):

> ...advisors to the Northern Territory Aboriginal bilingual
> program between 1980-1985 became concerned about language
> mixing when they observed some of the more sophisticated
> Aboriginal teachers, apparently unconsciously, using a mixture
> of their first language and English with children in class.

This made the advisors worry that 'the hard-won bilingual education program could unwittingly become a vehicle of Aboriginal language loss through language mixing' (Harris 1990, p. 71) because it represented 'the overlap of two languages in one domain, which is assumed to be a sign of unstable bilingualism' (p. 74). This seemed an especially serious threat for Aboriginal languages because of their small numbers of speakers (p. 77, 81); for further discussion see also Graham and Harris (forthcoming).

At the same time, Harris (1990, p. 70) does not consider all types of code-switching to be harmful. In fact, he uses the term *code-switching* (I'll refer to it as **conscious** *code-switching* here) to refer only to the 'conscious and deliberate switching of chunks of language', which he allows may even be desirable:

> Code-switching... involves conscious changing between two
> languages within a discourse for stylistic, humorous or
> authority-seeking purposes—these purposes are neither random
> nor of roughly equal proportions. In code-switching speakers
> are clearly conscious of the language in which they are
> speaking and the second language is brought in for controlled
> special effect. It appears that code-switching is positive,
> desirable in a stylistic sense, and can exist for long periods of
> time without harm to either language. (Harris 1990, p. 80-81)

At the same time he firmly maintained that *code-mixing*, i.e. the 'unconscious and random mixing of bits of language' (p. 70), was harmful:

> any constant and largely unconscious code-mixing is a sign of
> drift towards 'pidginisation' and the ultimate death of a
> traditional language' (Harris 1990, p. 80).

This distinction between (unconscious) code-mixing and (conscious) code-switching was also adopted by the NT Department of Education (1988, p. 56). Notice how it relates to the Department's earlier (1985) admonition

that 'It is important that Aboriginal staff become <u>conscious</u> of language mixing...' This may seem to suggest that if **conscious** code-switching is harmless, then perhaps the solution to any problem of **unconscious** code-mixing is simply to become conscious of it. However, the 1985 Departmental document itself does not say this, but instead stresses that it is important for Aboriginal teachers to 'use good standard Aboriginal language' and for English staff to be conscious of 'using standard English,' as well as for children to be discouraged from (at least unconscious) language (code) mixing.

A Different Perspective
McConvell (1988, 1991 and forthcoming) has presented a much broader and deeper analysis of code-mixing in Aboriginal societies. In addition to pointing out the social significance of code-mixing he has described alternatives to domain theory for analysing the progress of language shift.

One problem with domain theory is that the rigid sort of domain separation that Ferguson (1959) called 'diglossia' is actually quite rare, and that it depends in part on one of the two language varieties involved almost never being used in informal conversation (Scotton 1986, p. 410-412). There is probably no Aboriginal community that could satisfy the conditions for diglossia in the original sense. Fishman (1967) extended the concept of diglossia in a significant way (Timm 1981), and it is only in this broader sense that Aboriginal communities might be able to maintain domain separation. At the same time, Scotton (1986, p. 412-414) found reason to believe that code-mixing can be expected to occur with diglossia as more broadly defined, at least under conditions likely to be found in Aboriginal communities.

It thus seems unrealistic to regard code-mixing as a violation of domain separation. It is also not clear that code-mixing is necessarily harmful to language maintenance: Scotton (1982) has pointed out how it can be a motivation for maintaining bilingualism, and McConvell (1991, p. 20-21) suggests that it may sometimes be possible for code-mixing to even promote the use of the local Aboriginal language.

Even so, this does not necessarily mean that the Departmental concerns are entirely unjustified. McConvell (1991, p. 20) does not rule out the possibility that code-mixing could sometimes play a role in the demise of Aboriginal languages, and in fact outlines two different ways in which this might happen. One of these allowed for the possibility of something like the 'pidginisation' suggested by Harris (1990, p. 80), although more

general literature describes pidginisation as arising through a process that has nothing whatsoever to do with code-mixing; see e.g. Rickford (1992). Accordingly McConvell (1991, p. 21) allowed that it may not be wise to expose very young children to adult code-mixing behaviour. This seems a reasonable precaution, even though recent research has found that children as young as two can show some awareness of social constraints on code-switching (Lanza 1992).

A sensible position would be to follow Harris's (1990, p. 84) advice and keep the school 'a haven of mature or good usage in both languages,' but outside the school heed the advice he received from Fishman:

> I wouldn't worry too much about informal code-switching as long as non-interfered varieties are also mastered and have their own normatively defined and very definite functions, within school and without.

Harris seems to interpret this as a reference to conscious code-switching, but if Fishman is following the most widespread practice it should refer to code-mixing as well.

What Does This Mean in the Classroom?
To keep the school 'a haven of mature or good usage in both languages' is a very broad matter that relates to the quality of resources and instruction in general, but here I will only consider what it means in terms of code-switching. It should not mean avoiding all types of code-switching behaviour, since Harris (1990, p. 70) allows that conscious code-switching may even be desirable for some purposes. How is the teacher to decide what to do? Let's consider seven different types of classroom behaviour that might be viewed as code-switching and see what might be said about them.

1. Quoting words for educational purposes. Just for completeness let's start with something that no-one should consider a problem. This is when teachers or students mention words or expressions in a different language in order to make some educational point. For example, a science teacher might want to compare words from English and the local Aboriginal language in order to show how the languages classify plants or animals differently.

I don't think anyone would consider this a harmful use of the two languages together. Some might consider this simply 'quoting' from the

other language, but if it's switching at all it would be conscious and well motivated code-switching.

2. Switching by non-Aboriginal teachers for other purposes. Some non-Aboriginal teachers occasionally use Aboriginal words in their English as they teach Aboriginal children. Here is an example (from Folds 1987, p. 39) of a teacher in South Australia using Pitjantjatjara words in his English (the meanings of the Pitjantjatjara words are given in brackets):

> Teacher: Pitja (come) Chris, Ken. I want you to see how I fix
>   this bike. (A few moments pass.)
> Teacher: Chris ninti (smart) come on—no rides on the bikes
>   today until we fix them.

I suspect that this teacher is well aware of using the Pitjantjatjara words, and that he has a definite purpose for using them, namely to gain the students' attention, approval and cooperation. If so, this would also be well motivated conscious code-switching. (The full passage shows that his attempt to gain cooperation failed miserably, but that's beside the point.)

Like Harris, I don't think this represents much danger to the local language, especially since it involves the use of Aboriginal words in English instead of the opposite. Even so, I certainly would not encourage this practice. To the extent that teachers are the main models for English in Aboriginal schools, perhaps they would do better to keep their English free of Aboriginal words. I suspect that this is the intent of the Department's advice for 'English staff [to]... avoid language mixing,' even though this may not be what Harris would call (unconscious) code-mixing.

3. Switching by Aboriginal teachers for purpose of control or explanation. Sometimes Aboriginal teachers may switch from English into the local language in an attempt to control student behaviour, e.g. to perhaps tell one child to stop annoying another. In the school at Ngukurr, for example, teachers would sometimes switch from English to Kriol in order to discipline a student (Warren Hastings, personal communication).

This sort of switching, whether conscious or not, is certainly not what anyone would consider code-mixing. Since it uses the two languages for different purposes (instruction versus control) it can actually be taken to be in accord with domain separation. In describing domain separation (or 'diglossia'), Ferguson (1959; p. 431 in the 1964 reprint) mentions Arabic

speaking teachers switching from the official language of instruction to the local dialect simply to provide explanations, and thus apparently he did not see this as a violation of domain separation.

4. Switching by Aboriginal teachers for lack of vocabulary. When Aboriginal teachers try to teach an English-based curriculum they may end up using some English words in their teaching simply because they may find it difficult to express some of the concepts in their own language. For example, I was once told of a Aboriginal assistant teacher who was presenting a lesson on estimation and ended up using the English word "guess" to express this concept . Perhaps he or she was hoping that the students' knowledge of this English word would help them understand, although the difference between guessing and estimation would still need to be made clear.

This could again be a case of conscious code switching, although here perhaps we have a "bit" of English rather than a "chunk." If it happens only occasionally, for concepts that are particularly difficult to express in the local language, then it should not be harmful to the local language, whether or not it is the best approach educationally. The long term effects of this sort of practice would probably be to import such English words into the local language as borrowings. For example, if teachers persisted in using English 'guess' in the Aboriginal language to express the concept of 'estimate,' the English word might soon be absorbed into that language, with appropriate changes in pronunciation, as the word for this concept.

If reliance on an English-based curriculum causes teachers to mix **much** English into the local language, however, this cannot be very conducive to learning regardless of any long term effects on the local language. Certainly the practice is to be discouraged, but notice that it is **not enough** to simply tell Aboriginal staff to 'become <u>conscious</u> of language mixing and use good standard Aboriginal language.' At the very least Aboriginal teachers need to study the English-based curriculum carefully and work out the best ways of teaching the materials in their own languages. Fortunately, at Batchelor College students in the teacher education program often have opportunities to practice doing this. A better approach is to prepare curriculum guides in the local language, so that the problem of translation does not arise. This has also been happening in some Aboriginal schools.

Another possibility, of course, is to avoid teaching such topics in the local language, in accord with domain separation by topic. Unfortunately,

however, domain separation by topic may sometimes actually promote code-mixing. As Weinreich (1953; p. 81 in the 1968 reprint) put it many years ago in connection with unilingual (single language) education:

> ...if [a child] studies certain subjects in a unilingual school, it will have difficulty in discussing these "learned" topics in the other language, and in an attempt to do so, it will be prone to mix the languages.

5. Switching by Aboriginal teachers in the presence of English speakers. Years ago I heard that Aboriginal assistant teachers would sometimes switch back and forth between their languages in English while team teaching with non-Aboriginal speakers, apparently just to help the non-Aboriginal be aware of what was happening with the lesson. I suspect such behaviour tends to be conscious and to involve the switching of "chunks" of the language rather than "bits." Perhaps it is even justifiable in terms of domain separation, since the different languages are intended for different listeners.

Whether or not this practice could be harmful to language maintenance, it certainly does not seem to be useful for either this or for educating children. To overcome the problem (if it still occurs) perhaps it could be enough to advise Aboriginal teachers not to "mix" languages, as the 1985 Departmental document does. However, it would be much more effective to discuss the problem and its causes and to work toward relationships of mutual confidence and trust within teaching teams, so that assistant teachers would not feel a need to switch between languages in this way.

6. Switching by Aboriginal children while studying English. When language learners try to speak the language they are studying, sometimes they don't have all the words they need to express themselves, and thus they may mix in words or expressions from their own language.

This "mixing," if I may call it that, is probably quite conscious, but it's not clear whether it might be considered well motivated: probably Harris was simply not trying to cover this situation when he distinguished between (conscious) code switching and (unconscious) code mixing. It is probably not harmful to the local language, since it involves mixing elements of the local language into English. Even so, should it be covered by the Department's 1985 admonition that 'Children should be actively discouraged... from language (code) mixing'?

Some approaches to language teaching have indeed actively discouraged learners from using their first language in this way, but this may not be wise. Some recent approaches (e.g. Krashen & Terrell 1983, p. 37-39) stress the importance of making language learners feel comfortable and positive about attempting to understand and use the new language, and they accordingly allow students to reply in either language, or even to mix languages, in the early stages of language study (p. 58). Furthermore, as Cook (1992, p. 584) notes, it's a bit unrealistic to expect that the learners do not actually use their first language (L1) when they study a second language (L2):

> The L1 is present in the L2 learners' minds, whether the teacher wants it to be there or not. The L2 knowledge that is being created in them is connected in all sorts of ways with their L1 knowledge, as we have seen throughout.

Perhaps there is more to be gained by encouraging language students to do the best they can, even if it involves mixing in expressions from their own languages, than by "actively discouraging" them from mixing languages.

7. Switching as normal in the community. Finally, since code-switching of one sort or another occurs in some Aboriginal communities (see e.g. McConvell 1988), it may be that some Aboriginal teachers and/or students switch or mix languages in the classroom just because this is what they normally do in the wider community. To whatever extent this happens, it could well involve unconscious code-mixing.

Why do people mix languages in the community? Scotton (1986, p. 412-413) suggested that one condition required for code-mixing is a positive evaluation of dual (i.e. bilingual and bicultural) identity. That is, the reason people mix languages seemingly at random is not from laziness, but essentially in order to identify with both languages and cultures, rather than one or the other. If so, the spread of code-mixing is a symptom of a change from a society that treasures its traditions to one that values its bilingualism and biculturalism.

This need not threaten the traditional language if the change stops there, but of course this stage could turn out to simply be part of the transition to adopting the mainstream language—English, in the case of Australia—and giving up the traditional language entirely. This is an especially worrisome possibility because it may be fairly easy for a very small society to stop using its traditional language in favour of a more widely useful national

language. That the traditional language can be lost even among people who do not really identify with the mainstream culture seems obvious from the persistence of Aboriginal tradition among many Australian Aboriginal groups who have already lost their traditional languages.

For the sake of language maintenance it thus seems safest (unless there is good reason to do otherwise) for the school not to promote this type of code-mixing and the social attitude—a positive attitude towards bicultural identity—which helps produce it. It may be fair enough to advise Aboriginal staff to 'become <u>conscious</u> of language mixing and use good standard Aboriginal language.' However, to do this successfully where code-mixing is common, they may also need to become aware of the social attitudes they express by code-mixing, and to reflect on whether they really want to maintain these attitudes—as desirable as they may be for some purposes—at the possible expense of language maintenance.

At the same time one can question the 1985 Departmental advice that 'Children should be actively discouraged... from language (code) mixing.' It is possible to "actively discourage" children from code mixing in various ways, ranging from relatively positive consciousness raising sessions to such negative approaches as yelling, 'Don't use that kind of language in here!' As Saville-Troike (1976, p. 29) noted,

> any approach that stigmatizes a child's speech (or that of his family) will probably humiliate him, and certainly will create an environment which is not conducive to learning.

For small children one might wonder if the best approach might be to discourage code-mixing largely by ignoring it, with the expectation that the children will gradually come to adopt their language to the model provided by the teacher. Where teachers have decided to avoid projecting bilingual identities, at least in school, they may be able to discourage code-mixing simply by behaving as if they were monolinguals in the local language, i.e. to use only the local language to the children, which in turn would encourage the children to use only the local language in return. This would not reflect the reality of a community in which bilingualism is the norm, but it could be worth trying in the classroom. The practice would be similar to what happens in French immersion programs in Canada, where bilingual teachers speak only French to their students, although students are allowed to use English when they cannot express themselves in French (Pringle 1993).

Conclusion

In view of Scotton's (1986) work it may not really be appropriate to regard code-mixing as a violation of domain separation. It is also not clear that code-mixing is necessarily a sign that the local language is in trouble; possibly it could even contribute to language maintenance in some circumstances.

Even so, in view of what is at stake it seems best to exercise caution in the classroom by avoiding both code-mixing and other types of code-switching behaviour except for certain purposes (perhaps situations 1 and 3 above). It is hard to boil this down into simple advice; for example, it does not seem to depend on Harris' distinction between conscious code-switching and unconscious code-mixing. It also seems dangerous to advise teachers to "actively discourage" children from code-mixing—the advice may easily be misapplied, and may not really be necessary in any case. Certainly teachers are well advised to become sensitive about the way they themselves use languages in the classroom and how this may affect the language use of their students and the future of the local language.

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