

# Code-alternation to Arabic Among Arabic-English Bilinguals

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Received: March 7, 2023

Accepted: April 3, 2023

Published: April 28, 2023

doi:10.5296/ijl.v15i2.20786

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5296/ijl.v15i2.20786>

## Abstract

This study aims to analyze the alternation from English, viz. a foreign language, to Arabic, viz. the subjects' first language, in interviews conducted with Arabic-English bilinguals. The subjects are twenty graduate students in the Department of English Language and literature at the University of Jordan. Based on their bilingual profiles, the subjects are identified as being coordinate, i.e. school, bilinguals. The results of the study reveal that code-alternation to Arabic is not frequently used in the interviews. The analysis further indicates that the most common form of code-alternation is codeswitching and that most of the instances of codeswitching are classified as tag switches that serve the function of marking interjections.

**Keywords:** Bilinguals, Borrowing, Codeswitching, Arabic-to-English, Sociolinguistics

## 1. Introduction

Bilingualism is a phenomenon of language use that is present in almost every country of the world. One of the typical consequences of this phenomenon is code-alternation. Code-alternation can be identified as the alternate use of two languages in a single discourse or within the same conversation. The alternation between two languages commonly takes three forms, namely, codeswitching, borrowing and codemixing. Different features are posited by linguists to distinguish between these forms of code-alternation.

For instance, a distinction between borrowing and codeswitching is proposed by Haugen (1953) who argues that a borrowed word is the word for which the borrowing language does not have an equivalent. Codeswitching, on the other hand, targets words for which the borrowing language has equivalents. Moreover, Gumperz (1976:8) defines borrowing as "the introduction of single words or short, frozen, idiomatic phrases from one language into the other." Code-switching, on the other hand, can either occur at the word, phrase, or sentence level. Another distinction made between the two terms is based on the required language

competence. Accordingly, borrowing is identified as requiring monolingual competence, whereas codeswitching is identified as requiring some degree of competence in the two languages (Romaine 1994: 59).

In addition to the distinction made between codeswitching and borrowing, another distinction is suggested between the former term and codemixing. In this regard, Hoffman (1991:23) states that codemixing refers to making use of linguistic items from one language when speaking another, whereas codeswitching refers to mixing elements from one language with elements from another to attain the best communication effect. Likewise, Hudson (1996: 53) suggested that codemixing refers to the mixture between two different codes in an utterance which reflects the language user's uncertainty upon which code that best serves the communication purpose and this ultimately produces utterances made up of mixtures of two languages. Holmes (2013) proposed that language users mix up codes indiscriminately and incompetently in codemixing, while codeswitching is generally linked to the social meanings that are represented by the targeted codes. Codemixing is also frequently viewed as bordering on a specific type of codeswitching, namely intrasentential codeswitching, which occurs within an utterance boundary (cf. Clyne 1987).

Codeswitching is used as a cover term for both codeswitching and codemixing in this study for three reasons. The first is that the distinction between codeswitching and codemixing is very fuzzy and controversial and as such some researchers do not distinguish between these two terms (cf. Alkhaldeh 2019). One can add to this the fact that due to the restricted context of the study, there are no instances of codemixing that fit the definition of this phenomenon as the act of constantly mixing elements of two codes in single utterances. Moreover, it is particularly difficult to differentiate between codemixing and intrasentential codeswitching because of their occurrences in the boundary of single utterances.

As for the types of codeswitching, various types of it have been proposed by researchers. For instance, Blom and Gumperz (1972) distinguish two types of codeswitching, namely, situational and metaphorical switching. The first type is ascribed to a change in the social situation, participants or settings, whereas the second is primarily triggered by a change in the "topical emphasis" (ibid: 409). In other words, situational switching involves redefining a situation, while metaphorical switching implies enriching the existing situation.

Three types of codeswitching are distinguished by Poplack (1980). The first type occurs within an utterance boundary and it is referred to as intrasentential codeswitching. Intrasentential codeswitching might be further identified as inserting linguistic items from the embedded language within clauses or sentences from the matrix language. It is argued that intrasentential codeswitching is usually associated with the most proficient bilinguals. This might be attributed to the fact that the grammars of two languages are in play which indicates that the bilingual has to know the two grammars in order to be able to produce grammatical sentences.

Intersentential codeswitching is the second type of codeswitching distinguished by Poplack (1980). This type occurs between sentences or utterances. That is, it occurs at the boundaries of such linguistic constituents, with each utterance or sentence is fully in one language. In

addition to occurring at the boundaries of utterance or sentences, this type of codeswitching can also take place between turns. Intersentential codeswitching is assumed to require less bilingual proficiency than its intrasentential counterpart because it does not involve mixing the grammars of the two languages.

The third type of codeswitching is tag switching. This type of codeswitching involves inserting a tag in the embedded language to an utterance in the matrix language. The tags might be gap fillers, discourse markers or short fixed expressions. Poplack (1980:589) maintains that tag switching requires a lower degree of language proficiency in the grammar of the embedded language than the former types of codeswitching. This might be ascribed to the fact that tags can be inserted freely almost everywhere in the matrix sentences or clauses and thus can be done easily without violating the grammar of the matrix language.

Different categories of codeswitching functions are observed to be posited by linguistics. For example, Gumperz (1982) suggests that codeswitching generally serves one of six functions. The first function is quoting people or reporting indirect speech. The second refers to specifying one of the addressees as the recipient of the message. The addressee specification function involves including or excluding particular interlocutors. Marking interjection is the third function suggested to be fulfilled by codeswitching. This function is mainly associated with a particular type of codeswitching identified as tag switching. Codeswitching can be also employed to reiterate a message to clarify or emphasize its content.

The fifth function is related to the qualification of a message. This involves expressing the main message in one language and explaining it in another. The last function of codeswitching is marking personalization versus objectivization. Positing this function is based on the assumption that some varieties are more likely to be used by speakers to state objective facts while others are frequently utilized to express personal opinions.

Appel and Muysken (1987) distinguish referential, directive, expressive, phatic, metalinguistic and poetic functions of codeswitching. The referential function is associated with employing one of the languages to fill out the communication gaps in the other. The directive function is related to the exclusion or inclusion of specific interlocutors. Thirdly, the expressive function is principally correlated with bilingual status and thus it expresses no significant meaning. The phatic function is associated with changing the tone of the conversation, whereas the metalinguistic function is hypothesized to express knowledge of attitudes towards the languages. Finally, the poetic function serves aesthetic purposes and thus it is mainly found in literary works.

## **2. Literature Review**

Many studies were conducted to analyze the use and functions of different forms of code-alternation by bilinguals. One such study is carried out by Abu Mathkour (2004) who examined the conversational functions served by codeswitching from Arabic to English in tape-recorded speech of 33 speakers of Jordanian Arabic on Jordan Television. The results of the study revealed that all the six functions of codeswitching proposed by Gumperz (1982) were found in the subjects' recoded speech. It was also observed that marking interjections is

the most frequently fulfilled functions by the analyzed instances of codeswitching.

Based on Poplack's (1980) classification of the types of codeswitching, Al Masaeed (2013) analyzed the types of Arabic to English codeswitching in conversations between students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs in different Universities in the United States. All the subjects were native speakers of English and they had varied degrees of competence in Arabic. The analysis showed that the most frequent type of codeswitching is tag switching, followed by intersentential and then intrasentential codeswitching. This pattern of frequency reveals that the subjects showed a tendency to separate the grammars of the two languages which might point to a relatively low degree of competence in one of the targeted languages.

Alkhalwaldeh (2019) analyzed the responses of 70 female students at Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University to a questionnaire on their reasons, forms, and attitudes towards codeswitching. The analysis revealed that solidarity, distinguishing one's self from others and belonging to a prestigious community and to the modern world are among the frequent reasons behind codeswitching. The types of code-switching that the participants are found to utilize include intrasentential, intersentential and tag switching. The participants attributed holding positive attitudes towards codeswitching to the assumption that codeswitching makes them appear more educated, whereas those who showed negative attitudes towards codeswitching considered it a kind of showing off.

Novianti and Said (2021) attempted to study the types and functions of codeswitching in the English teaching-learning process. The language production of English teachers and students in teaching English as a foreign language classes served as the source of data in this study. The results indicated that the teachers and students frequently used codeswitching in the process of communication in the classroom. The three types of codeswitching that are used by the subjects included intersentential, intrasentential and tag switching. The researchers further found that the most occurred type of codeswitching is the intersentential type (65%), followed by the intrasentential type (25%) and finally tag switching (10%). Moreover, message qualification (50%), reiteration (20%), personalization (10%), referential (10%) and poetic (10%) are the five functions that the detected instances of codeswitching performed in analyzed data.

As can be noticed, the reviewed studies explored the types and functions of code-alternation from Arabic to English, i.e. from the subjects' native language to a foreign language. There is no single corpus-based study that targets the alternations of codes from English as a foreign language to Arabic as a first language. Such type of analysis can shed light on the functions performed by different types of alternations to first language. Furthermore, conducting this type of analysis in a restricted context, i.e. a context in which the subjects are required to use English, might shed light on the motivation of resorting to this linguistic phenomenon in controlled contexts. Accordingly, this study aims at filling this gap in the literature by examining the occurrence of code-alternation from Arabic, i.e. the subjects' first language to English, i.e. a foreign language, in interviews conducted in English.

### 3. Objectives of the Study

The present study aims at analyzing the occurrence of code-alternation instances in interviews with Arabic-English bilinguals. The interviews are conducted in English. Hence, the matrix language is English and the embedded language is Arabic. In other words, this study targets the instances of alternation from English (a foreign language) to Arabic (the mother tongue). The three forms of alternation between languages are examined. These forms are codeswitching, codemixing and borrowing. As mentioned previously, codeswitching is used as a cover term for both codeswitching and codemixing. Borrowing is distinguished from codeswitching in terms of having/lacking an equivalent for the linguistic item in the borrowing language (Haugen 1953). That is, if there is an equivalent for the word in English, then it is identified as an instance of codeswitching and if there is no equivalent for the word in English, then the word is considered borrowed. One of the objectives of the current study is finding out the overall frequency of the occurrences of code-alternation to Arabic in the interviews with the Arabic-English bilinguals. The frequency of each form of code-alternation is also to be examined in the study as well as the main types of these forms and the major functions performed by them.

### 4. Methodology

The subjects of the study are twenty female Arabic-English bilinguals. These bilinguals are enrolled in the graduate programs of the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Jordan. In order to establish their bilingual profiles, all the subjects were generally asked the following questions:

How old are you? Have you lived in an English-speaking country before? Does one of your parents speak English as his or her native language? Is English your primary means of communication with your friends or your family members? Where did you mainly learn English from?

The subjects are found to be between the ages of twenty-three to thirty-six. None of them has ever lived in an English-speaking country before. Arabic, rather than English, is their parents' mother tongue. Their primary means of communication is Arabic and they all learned English mainly through formal instruction and improved their English language proficiency through relaying on various sources such as the media and reading books for pleasure. Consequently, the subjects cannot be classified as true or balanced bilinguals; rather they are typically considered coordinate school bilinguals.

The subjects were interviewed by the researcher who has the same bilingual profile as theirs. They were interviewed and prompted with English and thus the matrix language of the interviews is English. The topic of the interviews mainly revolves around childhood stories, adventures, and memories and favorite books. The interviews are transcribed by the researcher. Symbols that indicate unit unfilled pauses (pause), short unfilled pauses (-), prolonged syllables (::), unfinished words (=), beginning of overlapping utterances ([ ) and unintelligible speech ( ) are added to the transcripts. The transliteration symbols for Arabic vowels and some consonants (the consonants that are not found in English) are listed in

Appendix A.

## 5. Results and Discussion

Out of the total number of words uttered by the interviewees (8470), there are (91) instances of alternating to Arabic. The overall frequency of the occurrences of code-alternation instances in the interviews is (1, 07%). As can be noticed, this percentage of frequency is very low. This might stem from the fact that the language choices made by the subjects are restricted and guided by the controlled context of the experiment. In other words, the fact that the data are not collected through observing the subjects' uncontrolled language behavior in natural settings might have called for their tendency to keep the conversation going with minimal use of code-alternation. The analyzed code-alternation instances are divided into two main forms, namely, codeswitching and borrowing.

### 5.1 Borrowing

Borrowed words constituted a ratio of (4.39 %) of the entire set of the code- alternation instances, whereas codeswitching constituted a ratio of (95.60%). As can be noted, the ratio of borrowing in the analyzed data is very low and the instances of borrowed words include cultural words for which English have no equivalents. Examples of these are **ilhata wil šga:l** 'the traditional Arabian headdress for men' and **difda:je** 'the traditional Arabian clothing for men.'

1. RA: Ok- I have remembered- when I was in the second grade- I was acting- I was acting as il-šam ya:fil 'TV character' - so I wore the **difda:je** 'the traditional Arabian clothing for men' -this long dress- and I have bought like- **ilhata wil šga:l** 'the traditional Arabian headdress for men' – that's what they are called- I don't know what they are called- and I was- I was- twisting my lips- I was talking like il-šam ya:fil 'TV character'- I was jumping and dancing- so I think that all the audience were laughing-

### 5.2 Codeswitching

As for codeswitching, the first thing to be indicated is that all the instances of codeswitching used in the interviews are identified as being metaphorical rather than situational switches. Accordingly, all these instances involve no change in the participants or settings but they denote a change in the topical emphasis and thus serve to enrich the existing setting (cf. Blom and Gumperz 1972).

The types of codeswitching that are employed in the analyzed data are tag codeswitching, intrasentential codeswitching and intersentential codeswitching (cf. Poplack 1980). Tag switching accounted for (73.5%) of the instances of codeswitching and involved mainly inserting discourse markers as tags. Employing a high frequency of tag switching, as compared to the other types of codeswitching, is line with Abu Mathkour (2004) and Al Masaeed (2013) and it might indicate that the subjects are trying to keep their language choice restricted to one language (English) by minimizing the use of codeswitching.

There are 44 instances of inserted Arabic discourse markers in the current study. The most frequently inserted one is **jašni** 'means'. This discourse marker was utilized 41 times by the

participants and it constitutes 93% of the Arabic discourse markers that are employed in the analyzed data. An English equivalent for **jaʕni** is the English discourse marker *I mean*. Below are some examples of the use of this discourse marker by the participants.

2. BA: Well- um- of course with friends- I have lots of adventures- as- you know- a child growing up- and- and- things related to travel- because I used to- **jaʕni**: *'I mean'* – we use to leave the country often- **jaʕni**: *'I mean'* I lived in different places- so in every place- there is adventure-
3. OH: *Yeah*- but- **jaʕni**: *'I mean'* I'm not sure about- **jaʕni** *'I mean'* the whole details of the story- in Arabic
4. OH: Ok- and he started to play with that book- and when he opened that book – there's a huge s=**jaʕni**: *'I mean'* - storm that come out of the book- and- he is taken away-

In addition to **jaʕni**: *'I mean'*, other instances of the Arabic discourse markers that serve as instances of tag switching are **fa** 'so', **maʕalan** 'for example' and **hallaʔ** 'now'. Each of these three discourse markers is used once in this study and their uses are presented, respectively, in the three examples below:

5. EA: Ok – now back to stories- who was the most talented story teller in your family? –  
LA: *Yeah*- u::m- I think I'm no different in term of this question- I would say my grandmother- usually grandmothers are good story tellers **fa** 'so' yes my grandmother-
6. AA: Well- that we don't have a place where we can set our problems- we don't have a major person- **maʕalan** *'for example'* or a major office- or a major area to put our problems in-
7. AA: Yes- we read novels and drama **hallaʔ** *'now'*- now most often modern novels- they are social novels such as Terrorist and Operation (pause)- they talk about-um- social issues- in the modern world-

Discourse markers are not the only type of tag switching used by the participants. A participant used a fixed term, viz. **?in ja:? ?allah** 'God's willing', as an instance of tag switching as shown below:

8. EA: Now as an MA student - tell me a bit about-uh- your experience here-  
BA: Ok- this is my first semester- and for to graduate next- next semester **?in ja:? ?allah** *'God's willing'* –

As opposed to tag switching, intrasentential switches accounted for a relatively low percentage, viz. (19.5%), of the overall occurrences of codeswitching. Intrasentential switching involves inserting Arabic linguistic items that have equivalents in English within English matrix utterances. The inserted items in the targeted interviews are either nouns (53%) or noun phrases (47%). Two main functions are found to be performed by this type of codeswitching. The first is to fill out the gap that results from not being able to retrieve or find equivalents for the targeted words in the matrix language by using equivalent forms for the words in the first language. This function is identified by Appel and Muysken (1987) as

the referential function of codeswitching and it accounts for (11.7%) of the functions fulfilled by intrasentential codeswitching. Examples of intrasentential codeswitching instances that perform the referential function are shown below:

9. OH: Well::- I have read *jaʕni* 'I mean' lots of stories- it is a kind of (pause) **ʔalya:z** 'mysteries'

EA: Yeah mysteries you mean

10. AA: Actually- I am interested in writing- not reading- in writing some ideas which is called (pause) in Arabic **xawa:tir** 'reflections'

11. SA: Yeah- and- I think- uh- her father- her mother- was died- uh- was dead- and- u::m- it is a – it is a- magical story- a magic story like- *jaʕni*: 'I mean' - it is – there is (pause) **aqza:m** in Arabic

EA: Dwarves- you mean

SA: Yeah- dwarves- well- she lived with them- uh- u::h- only that-

As can be noticed from the examples above, the participants paused before resorting to intrasentential codeswitching. This indicates that they were trying to remember the targeted English words and that they provided the equivalence of these words in their mother tongue when they failed to remember their meanings in English.

The second function that intrasentential codeswitches are observed to perform in the study is indicating language choice preferences (88.3%). This involves utilizing Arabic equivalent forms for English words for the purpose of attaching to the past experiences and emotional values associated with the connotations of these forms. This use of intrasentential codeswitching corresponds to Appel and Muysken's (1987) phatic function of codeswitching and to the function of marking personalization versus objectivization which is proposed by Gumperz (1982).

This might be exemplified by employing the participants' first language to refer to the titles of the stories that they were told when they were children (e.g. **hasan ifa:tir** 'The Good Boy Hasan' and **lajla wa alʔb** 'Little Red Riding Hood'). Other manifestations of the codeswitches that serve this phatic function are found when the subjects refer to the protagonists of their childhood stories (e.g. **fulla** 'Snow-white') and cities that were Muslim--ruled (**alʔandalus** 'Spain'). As presented below.

12. AM: Yeah- **hasan iffa:tir** 'the title of a story' is my mother told us- he loves- *jaʕni*: 'means' - he was a big man who travelled in the area- where he hide himself- and works as u:m- let's say- as - a worker- and he loves a high class lady- her name is *ʕams*-

13. SA: About a little girl- called- uh- I remember her name in Arabic- **fulla** 'name'-

14. 14. IA: Actually- the values - of this- this novel- is that - you find- your- treasure- on your doorstep- and you- after looking for it in far places- because it talks about a shepherd in **alʔandalus** 'city' which we unfortunately lost and it is called now Spain.



The third types of codeswitching employed by the subjects is intersentential codeswitching. This type of codeswitching refers to the switches that occur at the boundaries between sentences or between turns (see Poplack 1980). As mentioned previously, this type of switching requires lower levels of language proficiency than intrasentential switching and higher language proficiency levels than tag switching. Intersentential codeswitching had the lowest of percentage, viz. 6.9%, of the three types of codeswitching. It mainly involved noun phrases that occurred between turns (66.7%) or full clauses or sentences that were uttered in Arabic (33.3%). All the intersentential instances of codeswitching performed the phatic function of indicating language choice preferences and they can be exemplified by the following utterances:

15. R: **ilsala bidu:n ?ima:n** 'the title of a book' – li 'by' **ilduktu:r** 'doctor'

**na:sir ildi:n ilnafajibi** 'name' EA: Yeah-

R: **il ?alam bidu:n ?ima:n** 'the title of a book'

16. EA: Stories that your parents used to tell you- stories like fantasies- DM: **lajla wa al ?ib** 'the title of a story' (laughter)

17. EA: Yeah- you told me that your favorite is

AM: **hasan iffa:tir** 'the title of a story'

EA: Yeah- what is it about? –

## 6. Conclusion

This study analyzes the use of code alternation in interviews with Arabic-English bilinguals. The targeted alternations of codes are from English, viz. a foreign language, to Arabic, viz. the subjects' first language. One of the conclusions that can be deduced from the study is that coordinate bilinguals tend to employ different types of alternation to their mother tongue to serve different functions. Examples of these functions include denoting words that have no equivalences in the foreign language, filling out the gap that results from not being able to retrieve the targeted words in the foreign language and indicating language choice preferences.

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### Appendix A. Transliteration Symbols for Arabic Vowels and Some Consonants

Arabic Alphabet	Symbols
voiceless glottal stop	ʔ
voiceless dental fricative	θ
voiced palatal affricate	ɟʒ
voiceless pharyngeal fricative	ħ
voiceless velar fricative	x
voiced dental fricative	ð
voiced alveolar fricative	z

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voiceless palatal fricative	ʃ
voiceless emphatic fricative	s
voiced emphatic stop	d
voiceless emphatic stop	t
voiced pharyngeal fricative	ʕ
voiced velar fricative	ɣ
voiceless uvular stop	q
voiced labiovelar glide	w
voiced palatal glide	j
low back vowel	a
high back vowel	u
high front vowel	i
mid front vowel	e
Diphthongs	aw
	ei
	aj

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