1 Introduction

A significant segment of sociolinguistic research since the mid-twentieth century has been devoted to understanding how bilingual and multilingual communities organize their multiple linguistic resources. Such research generally falls under the rubrics of language choice or code alternation. Different principles of language choice have been found to predominate in different bilingual communities. Some attend to the linguistic or social identity of the addressee, others to the setting in which an interaction takes place or the topic under discussion; most depend on some combination of these factors.

Communities also vary in the degree to which they mix their languages together or, in contrast, keep them strictly compartmentalized (as in diglossia; see Garrett, this volume). Theoretical debates continue about the power of any possible inventory of principles to account adequately for actual language choice. These debates are most acute when it comes to language mixing within the same conversation and even within a single sentence, as in the following examples of Catalan–Spanish (example 1) and English–German (2) bilingualism:

(1) Ara, em va sapiguer greu, porque la verdad, eh, i ara t’ho dic una altra vegada, Toni: Hay que ver, Toni, cómo te has envejecido, eh? (Now, I felt bad, because the truth is, eh, and now I’m going to tell you again, Toni: You ought to see, Toni, how old you’ve gotten, eh?) (Woolard 1995: 236)

(2) Go and get my coat aus dem Schrank da (out of the closet there). (Gumperz 1982: 60)

Such intimate language mixing is referred to as conversational codeswitching or more commonly simply as codeswitching (often abbreviated as CS in the research literature), and it is the focus of this chapter. Codeswitching can be defined as an individual’s use of two or more language varieties in the same speech event or
exchange. Although I have introduced this phenomenon in the context of bilingualism, I deliberately use the broad term “language varieties” in this definition. The topic of codeswitching is relevant to all speech communities that have linguistic repertoires comprising more than one “way of speaking” (i.e., all, as far as we know). Codeswitching can occur between forms recognized as distinct languages, or between dialects, registers, “levels” such as politeness in Javanese, or styles of a single language. Some of the most enduringly influential work on codeswitching does not address bilingualism but rather standard–vernacular dialect alternation, such as the case of Norwegian villagers discussed by Blom and Gumperz (1972).

Codeswitching has nonetheless most often been investigated in bilingual and multilingual settings, and such a focus has not necessarily been mistaken. The more distinct the varieties between which speakers switch, the more available for inspection and reflection codeswitching may be, to both analysts and speakers. Work on such salient cases can then facilitate our recognition of related but less apparent phenomena. However, as with many aspects of research associated with minority-language communities, codeswitching has often been viewed as irrelevant to those who don’t work in bilingual societies or who choose not to focus on the bilingualism in the societies they do study. Such an exclusive identification of codeswitching with bilingualism is counterproductive. Not only is the extent of the phenomenon overlooked, but also the analysis of codeswitching is too often marginalized from broader theoretical enterprises that should both inform and be informed by such work. (Some notable exceptions to this problem will be discussed below.)

Linguists (mostly sociolinguists and psycholinguists) as well as linguistic anthropologists have studied codeswitching, and different research questions dominate in the different disciplines. Linguistic inquiry is most concerned with establishing the grammatical constraints on codeswitching and understanding how its grammar should be characterized in relation to those of the bilingual’s distinct languages. Linguistic anthropologists, in contrast, have been most concerned with the question of its “social meaning”: not constraints that work against but rather motivations for and functions of codeswitching. This chapter will focus on this second set of questions. I will consider three of the most influential social approaches to explaining codeswitching and then turn to ongoing debates over them. In the final sections of this chapter, I will discuss the need to encompass codeswitching analysis within more general sociolinguistic theory and consider some of the most promising frames for this.

2 Codeswitching as Systematic and Meaningful

Since the early 1970s, linguistic anthropologists have accepted the view that codeswitching is systematic, skilled, and socially meaningful. This is something of a defensive stance, responding to (earlier) beliefs that the use of more than one linguistic variety in an exchange is neither grammatical nor meaningful, but rather is indicative of a speaker’s incomplete control of the language(s). Codeswitches were generally seen from that perspective as lapses of language ability, memory, effort, or attention. Even the sociolinguists most responsible for stimulating research on bilingualism held the opinion that extensive language switching was somehow defective. For example,


