Code Switching and Code Mixing in Facebook Conversations in English among Thai Users

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Abstract

Nowadays, social media communication such as Facebook has gained immense attention among Internet users. Many Thais frequently communicate with each other on Facebook and many of them are able to use English to a great extent. Thus, they prefer having Facebook chats with others using English. Sometimes, they shift and mix both languages together which is in linguistic terms called code switching and code mixing. The use of code switching and code mixing on Facebook occurs due mainly to three key reasons: expressing politeness and respect, conveying clear meanings and feelings, and presenting their identities or group membership. This paper sets out to encourage researchers and English language teachers to conduct research in related fields more extensively in order to gain a deeper understanding of the English practice among Thais. Moreover, it also helps Thais realize some effects that code switching and code mixing may cause in English learning and communication.

Keywords: Code Switching and Code Mixing, Facebook Chat, English Language Practice of Thais

บทคัดย่อ

ปัจจุบันการสื่อสารผ่านสังคมออนไลน์ อย่างเช่น เฟซบุ๊ก ได้รับความสนใจเป็นอย่างมากจากผู้ใช้อินเทอร์เน็ต คนไทยจำนวนมากสื่อสารระหว่างกันผ่านเฟซบุ๊ก โดยส่วนหนึ่งสามารถสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษได้ดีและใช้ภาษาอังกฤษในการสนทนาบนเฟซบุ๊ก โดยสลับใช้ทั้งภาษาไทยและภาษาอังกฤษร่วมกันในการสนทนา ซึ่งทางภาษาศาสตร์เรียกว่า code switching และ code mixing การใช้ code switching และ code mixing บนเฟซบุ๊กเกิดขึ้นเนื่องจากเหตุผลสำคัญสามประการ ได้แก่ การแสดงความสุภาพและความเคารพ การสื่อความหมายและความรู้สึกที่ชัดเจน และความต้องการนำเสนอความเป็นเอกลักษณ์และการเป็นสมาชิกของกลุ่ม บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อกระตุ้นให้นักวิจัยและครูสอนภาษาอังกฤษศึกษาวิจัยในประเด็นนี้และประเด็นที่เกี่ยวข้องให้ครอบคลุมกว้างขวาง เพื่อจะได้รับความเข้าใจที่ลึกซึ้งเกี่ยวกับการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษของคนไทยมากยิ่งขึ้น อีกทั้งยังช่วยให้ชาวไทยได้ตระหนักถึงผลที่อาจเกิดขึ้นได้จากการใช้ code switching และ code mixing ในการเรียนและการสื่อสารด้วยภาษาอังกฤษ

คำสำคัญ: การสลับและใช้สองภาษา การสนทนาบนเฟซบุ๊ก การใช้ภาษาอังกฤษของคนไทย

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Introduction

Chatting on Facebook has gained unprecedented momentum among Thais since the number of Thais using the Internet will probably reach 52 million due to the widespread use of smartphones and an easy access of broadband nationwide (Leesa, 2013). As a consequence, they are able to access the Internet and use their smartphones for chatting, emailing, and using social network sites more conveniently. Referring to Bunloet et al. (2010) in Thailand Facebook has become the most popular social networking site and the number of the Facebook users with age of 18-24 is approximately 1,350,320. The increased use of the Internet enables many Thais to have more chances to interact in English with others in verbal and textual forms. Glass (2009) indicates that Thai graduates who possess a good command of English skills usually write in English such as writing their emails to other Thais either for practicing English, or because no Thai keyboard is available. Writing and chatting in English among Thais on the Internet may be an unusual situation since they rarely use English when speaking to each other. In addition to this, they also employ code switching and code mixing when they communicate in English on Facebook. Therefore, this paper will explore some theories which address the issues on communication via Facebook, discuss some of the possible reasons behind the use of code switching and code mixing in Facebook chats, and introduce possible effects that code switching and code mixing may cause in learning and communicating in English.

Literature Review

The Concepts of Code Switching and Code Mixing

Definitions of code switching and code mixing have been provided by many scholars. For example, Auer (1998) describes code switching as a part of verbal communication and adds that it simply refers to the "alternating use of two or more codes within one conversation episode." Besides, Auer (1998) further explains that people who participate in those conversations should be able to understand codes used. Furthermore, Myers-Scotton (1993) defines code switching as "the use of two or more languages in the same conversation." Regarding code mixing, Muysken (2000) states that code mixing which is also called "an intra sentential code" refers to "all cases where lexical items and grammatical features from two languages appear in one sentence." According to some definitions mentioned above, it appears that code switching and code mixing are different. However, Cardenas and Isharyanti (2009) argue that several researchers consider that code switching and code mixing share the same notion. Thus, this paper will use the term "code switching" and "code mixing" interchangeably to refer to the mixtures of Thai and English languages in the same conversation exchange during Facebook chats.

The Differences between Face-to-Face Communication and Internet Chat

The Internet provides a wide range of communicative channels for people from every corner of the world to communicate with each other conveniently. Hence, it plays a crucial role in modern communication. However, Internet interaction mainly comprises textual communication, which is quite different from face-to-face interaction. Nogales (2010) states that facial expressions, gestures, and emotional tone from voices that convey people's feelings and intentions may not be expressed via the texts or messages; therefore, the chatters may misunderstand and misinterpret the messages conveyed when they do not interact verbally with each other.

It can be said that communication online may lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretation easily. Thus, people should pay more attention

when interacting with others online or textual communication. Danet and Herring (2007) add that although Internet interaction mainly deals with written forms, it shares several features with face-to-face communication such as lack of accuracy, complexity, coherence and standard. Crystal (2001) further explains that several spoken language forms such as short constructions, phrasal repetitions, and looser sentence constructions are found in textual Internet interaction. It seems true that face-to-face interaction tends to help people communicate more effectively. However, many Thais prefer communicating in English for written communication via the Internet rather than engaging in verbal communication. This is due to several factors. Research on this issue tends to demonstrate the reasons for those communicating behaviors, to which the paper turns in the following section.

Related Research on Code Switching and Code Mixing on the Internet

Code switching and code mixing studies have been carried out for many years and most of them are related to verbal communication and bilingual speakers (Cardenas & Isharyanti, 2009). However, it seems that code switching and code mixing can be produced in both face-to-face communication and written forms. As a consequence, many research studies on code switching occurring on the Internet chatting have recently been conducted (e.g. Androutsopoulos 2011; Cardenas & Isharyanti 2009; Goldbarg 2009). Goldbarg's study in 2009 shows that Latin people used code switching for various reasons such as presenting identity and familiarity. Similarly, Grosjean (1982) points out some reasons for code-switching use including the lack of appropriate translation in the current language used, repeating others' words or conversations and talking about stories in the past. Nevertheless, Gumperz (1982) adds that people who do code switching may be considered as not proficient

English users.

Regarding research in Thailand, although various researchers have explored Internet English chats, it seems little attention has been paid to code switching and code mixing in online chat communication. For instance, Lengluan (2008) focuses on negotiation strategies in the chat room. Panyametheekul (2011) concentrates on controlling conversation in the chat rooms. Seargeant and Tagg (2011) have conducted research on the English language used among Thais by focusing on variations of English use from what is called standard-English with some linkages to code mixing.

Although not many studies have been undertaken on this issue, Yiamkhamnuan (2011) is the one who investigates why Thais who engage in Internet interaction in the chat rooms code switch from English to Thai. This study (Yiamkhamnuan, 2011) reveals that the lack of English ability, Thai language use culture, promoting a better understanding, and identity presentation are among the main factors leading to the language shift. It seems that the study of Yiamkhamnuan undertaken in 2011 provided a similar analysis to this paper. However, this paper additionally introduces some interesting effects on Thais who interact in English and employ code switching and code mixing. The paper also uses transcripts from authentic Facebook chats to illustrate these points.

Analyzing the Use of Code Switching and Code Mixing in Internet Chats of Thai Users of English

Generally, Thais tend to use or communicate in English only with foreigners (The Tourism Authority of Thailand, n.d.). However, some Thais who are able to interact in English may prefer using English rather than Thai when interacting with other Thais in the social networking sites such as Facebook. Therefore, many features, particularly code switching and code mixing and non-Standard English use may

occur during the Internet chats. This phenomenon may originate due to different reasons. Some key reasons will be discussed in the following parts.

- Expressing Politeness and Respect

Firstly, code switching and code mixing are used to show courteousness and respect. In Thai society, a seniority system has an influence on people's way of communication. It is important in Thai culture that younger people should express their politeness or respect their seniors (Hua Hin, 2013). They may be thought to be aggressive and rude if they do not behave politely and respectfully to people who are older. One way to express politeness and respect to older people is using sentence ending words such as "ka" by females and "krub" by males in verbal communication; moreover, ending words "ka" and "krub" are also employed to present politeness to other people too (Thai Language Lessons, 2014). This may influence the way people chat in English as they want to convey politeness and respect to the person they are chatting to by mixing the words "ka" and "krub" when they chat in English. This is because in textual communication, the body language, facial expressions, and voices presenting politeness cannot be shown (Nogales, 2010). As a result, Thais attempt to present respect to others by using "ka" and "krub" in the Internet chats (Siamsmile, 2011). Clear examples of this issue can be seen below.

Example: I = A (female) & F (male)
1.   A: Hi *P* F what are you doing *ka*?
2.   F: Nothing *krub*.

Example: II = B (female) & D (male)
1.   D: Good morning *Krub*.
2.   B: Sawasdee (Hi)
3.   D: Where are you and how are you *krub*?

According to the examples above, the two particles of "ka" and "krub" were used to show politeness to convey respect between Thai Facebook users of different and the same ages. Based on the first example above, it can be assumed that F was older than A since A addressed F with the word "P" which was similarly pronounced as "P" or "พี่" (elder sister or elder brother) in the Thai language.

Therefore, A used "ka" to convey both politeness and respect to F while F used a particle of "krub" to show his politeness to A as well. A might feel uncomfortable not to address F as 'P' or afraid to be perceived as being rude. With regard to the second example, D used the word "krub" to show his politeness toward B who might be his friend or in the same age as him. It can be noted that a combination of Thai and English language over Facebook is influenced by the culture of politeness and proper social manners.

- Conveying Clear Meanings and Feelings

Apart from showing politeness and respect, mixing Thai words into English Internet conversations occurs in order to enhance understanding and express authentic feelings. Many users may choose to use Thai words, idioms, and proverbs to present the clear and exact meaning in the Thai language when communicating nonverbally on Facebook with other Thais. This can be seen in the use of the word "kanthong" or "คานทอง" in the example below.

Example III: A (female) & F (male)
1.   F: My girlfriend lives in Lumpoon and how about your boy-friend?
2.   A: Haha no one now. Haha study study and study
3.   F: Haha
4.   A: Maybe I am on **_kanthong_** haha (Kanthong "คานทอง" is an Thai idiom. = old maid)
5.   F: Haha

The above example uses a "kanthong" (คานทอง) meaning "old maid." A might consider that the idiom of "kanthong" in the Thai language seemed to best convey her feelings and enabled F to understand her message perfectly.

Example IV = A (female) & F (male)

1. F: I know it's bad, but....B....เข็นไม่ไหวละ (I can't help anymore.) เอ็นดูเขา เอ็นเราขาด (Thai Proverb) she told me this herself.
2. A: What does it mean?
3. F: If I only worry about another people then....I'm the one who suffers.

Based on the transcript above, A and F were talking about another friend "B". F thought that she could not stand or help "B" anymore. Thus, F wanted to present this tired feeling to A by using Thai proverbs with Thai script of "เข็นไม่ไหวละ" meaning she could not help her anymore. Another proverb of "เอ็นดูเขา เอ็นเราขาด" which means caring too much about other people might put us in trouble. Using Thai proverbs in Thai script at first, according to F, might convey all nuances of meaning clearly to A as some proverbs could not exactly or equally be translated into English. Unfortunately, when A did not understand this proverb in Thai, she translated it into English. In this case, English language ability might not play its role in code switching. It is noticeable that F was able to use English to explain her feelings to A, but she chose the Thai language at first to create clear understanding or express the authentic feelings. It is obvious that the mixture of Thai and English language in textual communication via Facebook is due to a desire to deliver clear meanings and feelings.

– Expressing Identity and Group Membership

Code switching occurs as a result of expressing identity and group membership. People who come from the same region or province may use the same dialect to express their identity and solidarity when they have verbal communications (Ministry of Culture, 2013). Therefore, when they chat in English, they may also switch to use their dialect for the sake of solidarity, as in the following examples.

Example: V = A (female) & F (male)

1. A: *P lob ban pao ka pid term na* (Will you go to your hometown this summer?)
2. F: I am planning to go to Chiang Mai *krab*.

Since A and F come from the South, A might use their southern dialect to present their identity and membership as southerners. Speaking the same language enables people to feel closer as they realize that they belong to the same group or community (Ministry of Culture, 2013). It is very similar in face-to-face communication when Thais who share cultural backgrounds prefer using their own language to present their culture and identity (Ministry of Culture, 2013). In addition, A may want to use the shared dialect in order to help strengthen their relationship.

Example: VI = A (female) & F (female)

1. A: You want vegetables อิหยัง? ("อิหยัง" Northeastern dialect = what) This sentence means "What kind of vegetables do you want?"
2. F: Anything I can eat กินได้เหมิดนั่นละ 555. ("กินได้เหมิดนั่นละ" = Northeastern dialect means "I can eat everything.")

A and F may come from the Northeastern region of Thailand. Thus, they used their own dialect in English communication. While they interacted in English on Facebook, they preferred switching from English to their Northeast dialect to enhance their feeling that they belonged to the same group. It

can be said that Thais communicating in English sometimes use code switching to present their local identity or express their group membership.

The Effects of the Use Code Switching and Code Mixing on English Learning and Communication

Employing code switching and code mixing in English communication on Facebook may have positive effects on Thais who communicate in English. Thais who use English have a chance to practice English in their daily life. Using English more frequently is good for their English development. Moreover, those with low English competency seem to benefit more from the use of code switching and code mixing in communicating with highly competent users of English. This is because he/she may learn and memorize many words and sentences more easily from the context in the Facebook conversation. This also helps promote their motivation in English learning as well.

It is undeniable that Thais who want to chat on Facebook have to use some politeness markers of "ka" or "krub" because they are strongly influenced by their seniority culture. There will be no problem if they interact with other Thais in informal situations. However, when they may have to write emails or send messages to non-Thai bosses, colleagues, or customers in English, Thai words such as "ka" or "krub" in that conversation may cause confusion. Consequently, they may be considered as unprofessional and poor at English.

Conclusion

To sum up, the increasing popularity of Facebook communication may affect the way Thais communicate as many users tend to use English in Internet chats. When Thais communicate in English in Facebook chats, their important reasons for using code switching and code mixing include expressing politeness and respect, conveying clear meanings and feelings, as well as expressing their Thai identity or group membership. However, other possible reasons may come up with further research conducted using qualitative data and supplemented with interviews. This may contribute to the deep knowledge and information of English use among Thais and also help raise Thais' awareness in developing their English and communicating in English with other foreigners.

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