

Syntactic Constraints in Chichewa/English Code-Switching

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1 Introduction

I have been receiving email from a Yahoo group named Ntchezi, which includes many young, elite, and educated Malawians. An important aspect of this group involves the incredible amount of English that is used in conjunction with Chichewa. The data that I use come from basic emails that are exchanged among the Ntchezi group. I believe that Chichewa and English code-switching, although seemingly sporadic, is syntactically constrained. I will discuss the various types of code-switching that is utilized. There are five main categories that I will divide these constraints into, which include: borrowings (or English spelling), head switches, phrasal switches, wh-phrase switches, and English syntactically structured sentences.

2 Borrowing

Borrowing tends to be specific words that appear in Chichewa sentences that are translated into English. Many of these words have been translated into English, because there are no equivalent words in Chichewa for the English gloss. They tend to borrow at the head level as opposed to the phrasal level (but not always). An example of this kind of borrowing is: *Tachitani download Picasa2 kuti muzichitira edit zithunzi zanuzyi.*

- (1A) Ta-chitani download Picasa2 kuti mu-zi-chitira edit zithunzi zanuzyi
1PL.PST-do download Picasa2 that 2SG-must-do edit pictures news
'We have downloaded Picasa2 so that you must edit the news pictures.'

An example of a head-switch for an adverb involves the sentence: *Ine ndili busy kuwelenga pano...*

- (4A) Ine ndi-li busy ku-werelenga pano
 I 1SG-be busy INF-reading now
 ‘I am busy reading now.’

- (4B) [CP[IPIne ndi[VPli[AP[Abusy]][CP[IPku[VPwerelenga[APpano]]]]]]]]

Another borrowing, although rare, appears to be a conjunction. The example:

- (5) Plus kodi ...
 Plus denotes question
 ‘Plus...?’

‘Plus’ appears to be functioning as a conjunction like ‘and’ or ‘but’.

Verbs, on the other hand, do not appear to be borrowed or switched at all. Chichewa speakers tend to turn the verbs into nouns in order to properly switch them into a Chichewa syntactic construction. This might be due to the affixation present on all verbs and the lack of inflection on nouns. The verbs tend to be agglutinating while the nouns, adjectives, and adverbs tend to isolate. For example: *Tangopanga check apa.*

- (6) T-ango-panga check apa.
 1PL-have.just-make check there
 ‘We have just made a check there.’

The subject, the tense, and aspect markers, are all prefixed to the verb, for this example. Another example, *sunandipeze*:

- (7) S-u-na-ndi-peze
 NEG-2SG-PST-1SG-find-SUBJ
 ‘You could not find me.’

The verb is very much embedded in this example and the utterance, **sunandifinde*, would never surface. The affixation of the agglutinating verbs appears to disallow any V head switches or VP switches in general from occurring.

Nouns, on the other hand, isolate themselves from affixation. For example:

- (8) System ya-thu
 System POSS-1PL
 ‘Our system’

The NP contains the possessive ‘*yathu*’ (ours). The noun is borrowed from English, but the possessive does not need to be switched into English.

3 Head-switches

Borrowed words from English into Chichewa syntactic structure seem to switch most frequently for head positions, as opposed to phrasal categories. There are a few examples where Chichewa words are translated directly into English words, which have equivalent meanings. One example involves the sentence fragment: *Fridaytu lero,....*

- (9) Friday-tu lero
 Friday-EMPH today
 ‘Friday(with emphasis) today.’

This example here involves an English noun being affixed with a Chichewa enclitic that reinforces the statement. Although there is the equivalent word in Chichewa, *lachisanu*, for Friday, it seems like it has been borrowed and adopted fully into the language. Many Chichewa speakers would not hesitate to use ‘Friday’ as opposed to ‘lachisanu’, which could explain the affixation of ‘Friday’ by a Chichewa enclitic. This is more evidence that borrowings or near-borrowings change frequently at the head level.

Another possible head switch involves prepositions. The sentence:

- (10) Panopa ndi-ku-ngo-dikila Yankho from Lucy osati...
 Now 1SG-HAB-just-wait answer from Lucy and not
 ‘Now I’m just waiting for an answer from Lucy and not...’

The difficulty here involves the use of the proper name ‘Lucy’. ‘Lucy’ is ‘Lucy’ and it should not matter whether it is an ‘English’ proper name or not, but the ‘from’ preposition might have been influenced by ‘Lucy’ to switch into English. One can construe this construction to switch either at the head level or at the phrasal level, due to the complicated nature of this specific proper name.

4 Phrasal-switches

More of the code-switching occurs at the phrasal level. This usually indicates Chichewa speakers who are very educated in English and choose to switch back and forth between the two languages. When code-switching occurs at the phrasal level, more freedom is allowed for switching. The only phrasal category, which definitely does not switch for Chichewa constructions, is the VP. The heavily affixed verbs in Chichewa reveal much difficulty for the switches to occur.

Here is a simple example of two conjoined CPs: *Chabwino mwawina. Koma what a stinker!!!!*

- (11) Chabwino mwa-wina Koma what a stinker
Good 2SG.PST-win but what a stinker
'Good, you've won, but what a stinker.'

This shows that a Chichewa structured CP can be conjoined with an English structured CP. Another example shows the switch occurring at the IP. Here is an example: ...*kuti your winning the knock out stage...*

- (12A) kuti your winning the knock out stage
that your winning the knock out stage'
'that you are winning the knock out stage.'

- (12B) [CPkuti[IPYour[VPwinning[NPthe knock out stage]]]]

The NP/DP can also switch to English quite easily. Here is an example of this: ...*amapezeka mu the last 8...*

- (13A) A-ma-pezeka mu the last 8
3PL-HAB-be.found in the last 8
'They are found in the last 8.'

- (13B) [CP[IPama[VPpezeka[PPmu[NPthe last 8]]]]]

For this example the entire NP clearly switches to English from a Chichewa sentence structure. The determiner and the adjective switch from Chichewa into English along with the noun. This shows that the entire NP switched and not just the head noun.

Another category, which may switch to English from Chichewa, is the AP. An example of an AP switch involves the sentence: ...*ndilipo full time*.

- (14A) ...ndi-lipo full time.
 1SG-be.around full time
 ‘...I am around always.’

(14B) [CP[IPTa[VPimbatu[APlero]][CP[IPndi[VPlipo[APfull time]]]]]]]

‘Full time’ means that they will be around always. It works as a noun in English, but functions like an adverb in Chichewa.

The PP, as stated above, can be construed as either a head switch from Chichewa to English or a phrasal switch. The evidence for either case is not particularly strong, because proper names could be considered English or Chichewa.

Besides the VP, most phrasal categories seem to be able switch from Chichewa to English. What about wh-phrases?

4 Wh-phrase switching

Another interesting aspect of code-switching between Chichewa and English involves wh-phrases. For Chichewa syntactic sentences, there is no movement for wh-phrases. Here is a Chichewa sentence: *Kodi Felix Chidotheyu bwanji?*

- (15) Kodi Felix Chidotheyu bwanji?
 denotes question Felix Chidotheyu how
 ‘Felix Chidotheyu...How?!’

The tendency for code-switching for a Chichewa based structure involves no movement of the wh-phrase. For example, the sentence: *Nanga kumangotumiza mdima wokhawokha, how?*

- (16A) Nanga ku-mango-tumiza mdima wokhawokha how?
 well.then INF-just-send darkness alone how
 ‘Well, then, why is one just sending someone alone in the dark?!’

(16B) [CPnanga[IPkumango[VPtumiza[[NPFmdima[AP[wokhawokha]]][APHOW]]]]]]]

An approximate translation of this sentence into English would be: ‘Well, then, why send someone by themselves at night?’ The above example shows that movement does not need to occur for a Chichewa construct even if the wh-phrase is changed into English.

When the syntactic structure is based in English, movement does occur. For example, the sentence:

logical to assume that it is an English sentence. Another interesting part of English based sentence code-switching involves the switch of complementizers into Chichewa. For example the sentence: *Ask yourself kuti in the past 10 years...*

(19A) Ask yourself kuti in the past 10 years...
 Ask yourself that in the past 10 years
 ‘Ask yourself that in the past 10 years...’

(19B) [CP[IP[VPask yourself[CP[C’kuti]][IPin the past 10 years...]

There is a complementizer head switch from English to Chichewa for this example. This does affect the entire embedded clause.

6 Conclusions

Code-switching of Chichewa and English have certain constraints. There seems to be switching from Chichewa to English at the head level especially for borrowed words. Chichewa speakers tend to avoid borrowing English VPs or V heads, but manage to transform them into nouns if needed. The inflection on the PPs following many borrowed words are absent, especially when an English verb is used as a Chichewa noun. Most all phrasal category switches are definitely possible, and easier to prove. Evidence is definitely lacking for VPs due to agglutinating verbs with many affixes. The only possible verbal switch involves an English based structure switching to Chichewa, then back to English for another layer of VP. This is shown in example (17). I have never seen a Chichewa based structure switch a VP phrase or V head into English. Wh-phrases are very interesting especially in regards to movement. Wh-phrases tend to move if the sentence is syntactically English, but do not move if the structure is Chichewa based. Sometimes the English sentence does not move the wh-phrase. More research on code-switching between Chichewa and English is necessary, but I believe that much of this evidence should hold true with other data. It would be interesting to hear an English-speaker code-switch to Chichewa.

References

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