

## Code-switching, a Means of Identity Negotiation in Lebanon

## التبديل اللغوي، وسيلة للتعبير عن الهوية في لبنان

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## الملخص

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يتناول هذا البحث ظاهرة التبديل اللغوي كأداة للتعبير عن الهوية في لبنان، إذ تُستخدم اللغة العربية بلهجتها اللبنانية واللغتين الفرنسية والإنجليزية في المحادثات بشكل متكرر. وتسعى الدراسة إلى تجميع الأبحاث والمقالات الأكاديمية حول أنماط التبديل اللغوي وتصوراته وعلاقته بالمعاني المرتبطة بالهوية في المحادثات بين اللبنانيين. وقد اعتمدت الباحثة منهجًا بحثيًا نوعيًا من خلال مراجعة منهجية للدراسات السابقة وتشير النتائج إلى أنّ موقف اللبنانيين تجاه التبديل اللغوي متناقض، إذ يُنظر إليه من منظور إيجابي بوصفه مؤشراً على المستوى العلمي والمهني والانفتاح على العالم، ومن منظور سلبي بوصفه شكلاً من أشكال التخلي عن اللغة والهوية العربية. في الدراسات السابقة، يعدُّ التبديل اللغوي ظاهرة استراتيجية ورمزية تُسهم في إظهار الانتماء والتباعد الاجتماعي، وتجسيد الهويات الهجينة، والتكيف مع أشخاص ومحيط جديدين. تُحدد هذه الدراسة اختيار اللغة كظاهرة ذات دلالة اجتماعية، وتربطه بأيدولوجيات لغوية أوسع في لبنان، وذلك من خلال نظرية التكيف التواصلي، ونظرية التفاوض على الهوية، ونموذج التمييز لمايرز سكوتون. ويختتم البحث بتأكيد ضرورة دراسة تصورات اللبنانيين إلى جانب الأنماط النيووية، وتقترح توصيات لأبحاث مستقبلية، تشمل إجراء مقابلات وتحليل الخطاب، بهدف توثيق آراء المتحدثين اللبنانيين للتعبير عن الهوية وتفسيرها من خلال التبادل اللغوي.

**الكلمات المفاتيح:** التبديل اللغوي؛ التعبير عن الهوية؛ تعدد اللغات؛ لبنان؛ أيدولوجيات

اللغة؛ علم اللغة الاجتماعي.

## Abstract

The present paper deals with the phenomenon of code-switching as a tool of negotiating one's identity in the Lebanese multilingual context, where Lebanese

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Arabic, French, and English are used in conversations on a regular basis. The study will also seek to synthesize peer-reviewed research and academic articles on code-switching patterns and perceptions in relation to identity-associated meanings in the Lebanese discourse. The researcher adopts a qualitative research design through the use of a systematic literature review. The results indicate that the attitude of Lebanese speakers towards code-switching is ambivalent because it is both thought of positively in terms of being an indicator of education, professionalism, and global orientation and also negatively in terms of being elitist or as a form of abandoning Arabic. Throughout the literature, code-switching is considered as a strategic and symbolic phenomenon that aids in showing belonging and social distance, the implementation of hybrid identities, and adaptation to a new audience and context. The study identifies code choice as socially meaningful and linked to broader language ideologies in Lebanon through Communication Accommodation Theory, Identity Negotiation Theory, and the Markedness Model by Myers-Scotton. The paper concludes by stressing the need to look at the perceptions of speakers alongside structural patterns, and it suggests recommendations for

future empirical work that include conducting interviews and discourse analysis in order to further document the way Lebanese speakers perceive and interpret identity negotiation through code-switching.

**Keywords:** Code-switching; identity negotiation; multilingualism; Lebanon; language ideologies; sociolinguistics.

## 1. Introduction

### 0.1. Background of the Study

Language plays a central role in the construction and manifestation of identity especially in multilingual societies (Lawal et al., 2025). Code-switching, which is the alternation between two or more languages within a given interaction, has been widely observed in these contexts. In Lebanon, one's day-to-day communication often involves the dynamic usage of Arabic, French, and English to reflect the country's complicated linguistic, historical, and sociocultural situation. These choices of language are hardly ever random but are rather conditioned by social context, intentions of the speaker and identity positioning (Kassem, 2022).

Lebanon's multilingualism can be explained as the result of historical contact, colonization and globalization as well as educational policies. Lebanese speakers often

switch languages in order to convey belonging, distinction, modernity, or intimacy (Bacha & Bahous, 2011). As such, code-switching becomes not only a communicative strategy, but a strategy of negotiating social and personal identities as well.

### 0.2. Problem Statement

While code-switching in Lebanon has been written about extensively from the linguistic and structural perspectives, less attention has been given to how Lebanese speakers see their code-switching practices in relation to identity. Most existing studies are about when and how code-switching occurs, but fewer can be found on how speakers understand these choices as part of identity negotiation. Thus, there is a need to study code-switching not as a linguistic phenomenon, but as a practice that is socially meaningful and through which identities are constructed, negotiated and sometimes contested.

### 0.3. Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How is code-switching manifested in Lebanese multilingual communication?
2. What is the relationship between code-switching and identity?

3. In what ways does code-switching function as a tool for identity negotiation in Lebanon?

### 0.4. Significance of the Study

This study makes an additional contribution to existing literature in the field of sociolinguistics by providing a deeper understanding of the link between language and identity in Lebanon. It provides insight into the way multilingual speakers perceive their choice and how the choice or language selection reflects a broader social dynamic. The findings may be valuable for researchers in linguistic and cultural studies in multilingual communities.

### 0.5. Structure of the Paper

This paper is divided into six major parts. Following the introduction, the literature review introduces some of the most important concepts and theories pertinent to code-switching and identity. The methodology section explains the design of the research and how it was analyzed. The findings section introduces major themes found in the literature and links them to existing studies and theory. The paper ends with a summary and provides recommendations for future research.

## 2.Literature Review

### 1. Code-Switching

Code-switching has been a major theme in sociolinguistics, especially in research on bilingual and multilingual communities. Early work by Gumperz (1982) conceptualized code-switching in terms of the alternation of two or more languages in a single conversational exchange, but there was a focus on the fact that it is an interactional and therefore social phenomenon, rather than just a random linguistic phenomenon. From this standpoint, code-switching has been postulated by Gumperz (1982) as a communicative tool for expressing subtle social meanings, whose role is to regulate interpersonal relations and express group belonging.

Based on this interactional notion, Myers-Scotton (1993) referred to code-switching as the choice of language varieties according to the social intentions of speakers and the meanings in a particular setting. According to this approach, the language choices speakers make are strategic and are influenced by power relations, expectations and social norms. Code-switching is thus not an indicator of linguistic deficiency and a lack of language competence, but rather an indicator of high communicative competence in multilingual contexts

(Myers-Scotton, 1993; Lanvers & Auer, 2000; Gardner-Chloros, 2009).

Scholars have identified a number of forms of code-switching, differing in the linguistic structure and communicative function. Inter-sentential code-switching, in which speakers switch languages between sentences or clauses, often calls for high proficiency in both languages. Intra-sentential code-switching, code-switching within a single sentence, is regarded as more complicated as it requires the integration of different grammatical systems from different languages. Tag switching, however, is the use of discourse markers or fillers or fixed expressions from one language into the utterance structured mainly in another language (Poplack, 1980; Muysken, 2000). These forms are often found in communities that speak more than one language.

Research has shown that the choice of the type of code-switching is related to factors such as formality, the relationship between the interlocutors, the topic of the conversation, and the communicative intent. In informal contexts, more relaxed processes of intra-sentential and tag switching are likely to be employed, while that of the inter-sentential switching may be manifested in more structured or narrative contexts (Lanvers &

Auer, 2000; Gardner-Chloros, 2009). Such kinds of variances indicate the flexibility of multilingual speakers and the socializing aspect of the code-switching behaviors.

## 1.2. Code-Switching and Identity

It has been postulated that language is an essential part of identity, and Joseph (2004) says that it is not only a means of communication but also a means of identifying social positioning, cultural association, and group belonging. In multilingual communities, a speaker's choice of language has a close association with the way they perceive themselves and how they wish to be perceived by others. The concept of code-switching, especially, has also been identified as having a significant role in identity construction and negotiation since speakers are able to use a range of linguistic resources in the construction of complex and stratified social identities (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004).

Several scholars have stated that identity is not a constant and stable quality; in fact, it is a dynamic process that is in continuous change depending on the social interaction. In that sense, code-switching is a performative process in which speakers are active agents in creating and constructing their identity. Bucholtz and Hall

(2005) emphasize how identities are constructed due to the linguistic practices that index social meanings of ethnicity, class, gender, education, and cultural orientation. Thus, through code-switching between the languages, speakers can associate themselves with some social groups and, at the same time, dissociate themselves from others (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Norton, 2013).

Code-switching can also enable speakers to negotiate their identities in specific social situations. As an illustration, when a shared language is used, it can mean solidarity and intimacy, and when it is a different code, it may symbolize authority, prestige, or professionalism. In this sense, the use of code-switching is a contextual strategy that reflects the awareness of speakers regarding the social norms and expectations (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991). The decision to code-switch might therefore be imposed by the desire to accommodate an interlocutor, to meet situational requirements, or to position oneself in a given identity (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

Moreover, code-switching enables speakers to have hybrid identities that do not fit comfortably into one linguistic or cultural category. In societies that are more globalized, it is common for

one to live in a hybrid environment where one encounters several cultural influences, and code-switching offers a linguistic way of portraying this mix. Thus, such practices are an example of the ability of speakers to move with ease between cultural and linguistic boundaries (Pavlenko, 2006; Norton, 2013). Identity in this sense is negotiated on a situation-by-situation basis with the help of languages in use.

### 1.3. Code-Switching in Lebanon

Lebanon is a nation that has a highly multilingual language profile in which the Lebanese Arabic language is blended with the French and English languages in everyday verbal communication. Although the Arabic language is mostly used as the language of everyday conversation, the French and English languages are significant in the realms of education, media, business, and social interaction. Thus, many scholars consider code switching as a normal and popular process, especially among the educated speakers (Bacha & Bahous, 2011; Tohme, 2020; Bassam, 2018). The origin of this multilingual reality is the Lebanese language contact situation. The French influence originated during the French Mandate and became widespread and institutionalized through education and administration,

while the English influence developed later due to globalization and international schooling in recent decades. All these historical layers have resulted in a context of linguistic use in which multilingual competence has become widespread and speakers switching between languages easily has a social connotation (Bacha and Bahous, 2011; Wrisley, 2020).

Other studies on code-switching in Lebanon have found that the alternation between Arabic, French, and English can be used more often in diverse situations, such as in informal dialogue, in classes, advertising, and media discourse. It has been studied that in Lebanon, code-switching is usually associated with the education level, social status, and professional identity and is applied to exhibit modernity, status, or international orientation (Kassem, 2022; Tohme, 2020).

Society's attitudes towards code-switching in Lebanon are, however, ambivalent. While for many speakers, multilingualism represents a mark of cultural openness and linguistic sophistication, others do not like to overdo it because it is considered elitist or might be working against the status of Arabic. Kassem (2022) considers that these juxtaposed attitudes represent more general tensions of identity, heritage and globalization and

reinforce the role of code-switching as a locus of social and identity negotiations.

#### 1.4. Theoretical Frameworks

This research is guided by three complementary theoretical frameworks which account for the relationship between language choice, social interaction and identity. Communication Accommodation Theory argues that speakers modify their language use as they become more or less likable to their interlocutors to cope with social distance, approval or group affiliation (Giles et al., 1991). Gardner-Chloros (2009) argues also that within a multilingual context, code-switching serves as an important accommodation strategy, particularly in socially stratified and multilingual societies.

Identity Negotiation Theory, which was developed by Ting-Toomey, sees identity as a dynamic process of negotiation that is constantly changed by interaction (Ting-Toomey, 2005). Language choice has a key position in this process, as speakers use code-switching to affirm, to challenge, or to reposition their cultural or social identities.

Finally, Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model describes code-switching as a strategic decision by which speakers signal some expected or unexpected

social meaning. By choosing a specific code, speakers refer to specific positions of their identities and social relations in a given context (Myers-Scotton, 1993).

#### 1.5. Gaps in the Literature

Although code-switching in Lebanon has been studied extensively, most of the existing studies focus on structural patterns, functional classifications or contextual triggers and ignore the subjective meanings that speakers bring to their language choice and specially the function of code-switching as a mechanism for negotiating identity. This research addresses this gap by drawing together existing research with an identity-centered approach and focus on how code-switching is seen as a resource for negotiating social belonging and self-representation within the Lebanese context.

### 3. Methodology

#### 2.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design and is carried out with the use of a systematic literature review. This approach is suitable to investigate themes of identity and interpretive meanings related to code-switching because it allows analyzing current empirical and theoretical studies. The aim of the study is

synthesizing findings from several studies by searching for recurring patterns, perceptions, and identity negotiation strategies, to identify results observed in the literature on Lebanese multilingualism.

## 2.2. Sample

The sample in this study consists of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books and empirical studies that focus on code-switching practices in Lebanon or other similar multilingual contexts. Sources were chosen as they relate to code-switching, identity, and language usage.

## 2.3. Data Collection Tools

Data was collected using a systematic review of relevant literature. Relevant studies were identified through the use of scholarly databases and academic search engines, using key terms such as code-switching, identity, multilingualism and Lebanon. Only credible and relevant sources were included in order to ensure reliability and academic rigor in the analysis.

## 2.4. Instrument

In qualitative literature-based research, the analytical instrument is a structured review framework. Studies were reviewed based on predetermined criteria targeting patterns of code-

switching, perceptions of speakers and themes related to identity. This framework helped to have a consistent extraction and comparison of findings across sources.

## 2.5. Data Analysis

The data was thematically analyzed. Recurring themes in terms of language choice, social belonging and identity performance and attitudes towards code-switching were identified and synthesized. The analysis focused on the interpretive pattern, which made it possible to have a better understanding of the process of code-switching as a method of negotiating identity.

## 2.6. Ethical Considerations

As this particular study is entirely based on the published academic sources, there is no interaction with human participants. Ethical standards were observed by accurately citing all sources, avoiding the misrepresentation of the findings of authors, and respecting intellectual property rights.

## 4. Findings

This section presents the main findings resulted from the systematic review of existing literature, found on code-switching in Lebanon. The findings are grouped into three broad themes which occurred across

studies: patterns of code-switching, perceptions of code-switching, and identity negotiation processes. Together, these findings provide a clear picture of how code-switching is one of the socially meaningful and identity-driven practices in the Lebanese multilingual context.

### 3.1. Patterns of Code-Switching in Lebanon

The reviewed literature shows that code-switching is a common and normal aspect of communication in Lebanon. Lebanese speakers can alternate between Lebanese Arabic, French, and English language in a variety of social domains from informal conversation to education, media discussions to professions (Bacha & Bahous, 2011; Kassem, 2022). This linguistic behavior is part and parcel of the contact also between languages in Lebanon history, as well as the institutionalization of foreign languages in education and public life.

One of the most documented is intra-sentential code-switching, especially between Arabic and either French or English. The literature specifically devoted to spoken discourse and media interaction suggests that speakers tend to insert the words or phrases written in foreign languages into the Arabic syntax, especially when addressing

such academic, technical, or work topics (Tohme, 2020). This pattern implies a high level of bilingual or multilingual competence as well as the existence of linguistic association of certain domains of knowledge with non-Arabic codes.

Inter-sentential code-switching is also common, especially in structured discourse such as interviews, classroom discourse and on televised talk shows. Speakers may switch languages from one sentence to the next to emphasize a point, signal a change in position or to address a different audience. This type of switching has often shown evidence of conscious or semi-conscious positioning of identities, in terms of which social or cultural frames speakers identify themselves.

In addition, tag switching often occurs in informal speech of the Lebanese. Discourse markers like you know, en fait or okay are frequently inserted into Arabic utterances, which have a pragmatic, rather than a semantic function. It is hypothesized that this type of switching is habitual, which is socially unmarked, and therefore the argument that multilingual practices are ingrained in Lebanese communication is true (Tohme, 2020).

The literature also indicates that code-switching patterns vary based on different social variables. The

urban speakers and even younger generations and those who studied English or foreign languages in institutes are more prone to code-switching, which is more frequent and complicated (Bacha, Bahous, 2011; Bassam, 2018). The results suggest that education and social stratification are closely related to the language practices in Lebanon.

### 3.2. Perceptions of Code-Switching

Other than the analysis of the structural patterns, the studies reviewed show the various perceptions of code-switching among the Lebanese speakers. Tohme (2020) believes that code-switching is viewed as a logical continuation of the multilingual setting by many speakers and as a valuable tool of pragmatic communication by the Lebanese speakers and enables them to make conversations more comprehensible and expressive. Based on this point, the concept of code-switching is usually described as functional, but not stylistic.

Several studies have shown that code-switching often indicate prestige, education, and professionalism, especially when involving French or English. These languages are frequently seen as the symbol of academic success, socioeconomic mobility, and

global orientation (Bacha & Bahous, 2011). Consequently, code-switching could be perceived positively in the professional or institutional world, in which it represents competence and cultural capital.

However, the literature also reports critical attitudes towards code-switching. Some speakers see excessive switching as artificial, elitist or exclusionary, especially if it seems to distance Arabic or to draw social distance (Solimando, 2021). These negative perceptions tend to be associated with wider ideological discourses of what it means to be linguistically authentic, national, and culturally pure.

Therefore, perceptions of code-switching are shown as being context-dependent. The same language behavior can be viewed in a positive light in one context and negatively in another, depending on audience, topic and power relations (Kassem, 2022). This variability would imply that Lebanese speakers are quite conscious of the social meanings associated with language choice and vary their linguistic behavior depending on it.

### 3.3. Identity Negotiation Themes

One of the most salient findings across the reviewed literature is that code-switching in Lebanon serves as

one central mechanism for identity-negotiation. Speakers use language alternation as a way of positioning themselves socially, culturally, and professionally, which may involve balancing multiple identities throughout a single interaction (Solimando, 2021).

A prominent theme reoccurs here of code-switching in the negotiation of belonging and solidarity. The use of Lebanese Arabic is often related to intimacy, local affiliation, and cultural rootedness whereas the use of French or English can signal authority and/or global belonging (Bacha & Bahous, 2011). Alternating between these codes, speakers deal with interpersonal relations and indicate changing identity alignments.

The issue of code switching is also highlighted in literature to express hybrid identities. Many Lebanese speakers do not identify with a single exclusively linguistic or cultural identity but rather represent superimposed identities from local traditions as well as from external international influences. Tohme (2020) considers that code-switching enables speakers to linguistically capture this hybridity, and reflect identities that are fluid, contextual, and situational.

Another prominent theme is of contextual identity management.

Speakers make strategic choices in regards to language use based on the communicative situation, the linguistic expectations of the audience, and what they perceive to be normal. In educational or professional situations, code-switching might be performed to show competence and authority, while in informal situations it might be done to emphasize closeness and shared cultural background (Kassem, 2022). Even in the case where switching is unconscious; however, it has a symbolic meaning which contributes to the construction of identity.

### 3.4. Summary of the findings

The findings of this systematic literature review show that code-switching in Lebanon in particular is a structured and socially embedded phenomenon that is closely linked to the process of identity negotiation. Lebanese speakers perform multiple forms of code-switching, hold differing and context-sensitive understandings of its value, and language alternation is a strategy for managing complex and multi-layered identities. These results provide a good basis from which to interpret these results in the discussion, where established theoretical frameworks will be used to further interpret the results.

## 5. Discussion

This section discusses the findings of the study with regard to existing literature and theoretical frameworks used for the research. The discussion emphasizes how code-switching in Lebanon is a socially meaningful practice, a means for negotiation of identity, belongingness and social positioning.

### 4.1. Linking Findings to the Literature

The results of this study are highly aligned with earlier research of the code-switching in Lebanon as a communicative practice which is normalized and context sensitive. Consistent with prior studies, the findings confirm that Lebanese speakers often shift between Lebanese Arabic, French, and English depending on context and topic as well as audience (Bacha & Bahous, 2011; Kassem, 2022). Thus, this appears to substantiate the perception that code-switching in Lebanon depicts high multilingualism and not language incompetence.

The prevalence of code-switching that had taken place in the findings represents observations made by Tohme (2020). The integration of foreign lexical items into the discourse of the Arabic language implies that

certain languages are symbolically linked to certain domains of knowledge, especially that of education, professionalism and modernity. Such a pattern provides more evidence that language choice is socially motivated and ideologically driven.

Furthermore, the results regarding perceptions of code-switching are consistent with the analysis of language alternation as an identity marker, presented by Solimando (2021). The studies of this duality refer to the bigger conflicts within the Lebanese society, where multilingualism is both hailed and contested (Solimando, 2021). The fact that these attitudes vary based on venue and audience also indicates that language ideologies have a powerful influence on how code-switching is viewed and judged.

### 4.2. Implications

The findings of the study have a theoretical and practical value. In theory, they can be useful in reinforcing the claim that code-switching is a socially situated activity that is highly related to identity processes and not a linguistic phenomenon in itself. The paper has assisted in the exploration of the finer facets of multilingual communication in Lebanon through predetermining the perceptions of the speakers and the identity-negotiation process.

The results are applicable in terms of education and language policies. Learning that code-switching is a legitimate and desirable phenomenon can maybe take long enough to break down the deficit-driven perceptions of multilingualism in the school environment and within the society in general. Teachers and policymakers may be prudent to learn the contribution of code-switching to the identity-related functions and not to take a step to suppress the same thinking that monolingual norms are the best.

### 4.3. Limitations

In spite of the merits of this research, it is limited in some aspects. As a systematic literature review, it only uses previously published research and does not incorporate primary data from Lebanese speakers. Consequently, the findings are limited to the views and situations reflected in the existing studies. In addition, regional, age, and socioeconomic linkages are not necessarily captured in the reviewed literature.

### 6. Conclusion

This study aimed at examining identity negotiation through code switching in Lebanon by synthesizing existing sociolinguistic research under the framework of a qualitative

systematic literature review approach. The findings show that code-switching in the Lebanese context is not a random linguistic phenomenon in itself, but rather a deeply embedded socially-meaningful phenomenon that is deeply rooted in the processes of identity construction, social positioning, and cultural negotiation.

The review showed that Lebanese speakers use Lebanese Arabic, French, and English in different social contexts together as a result of the history of language contact in Lebanon, institutionalization of foreign languages in education and media, and globalization. The prevalence of code-switching points to the high level of multilingual competence and the ability to mobilize linguistic resources strategically on the part of speakers.

In terms of perception, the study showed that the views of code switching in Lebanon are complex and context dependent. While for many speakers code-switching is a pragmatic and expressive communicative device that is linked to education, professionalism, and modernity, it is also seen as elitist or a threat to the status of Arabic. These contradicting perceptions signal underlying ideologies in language as well as wider tensions in society in terms of identity, class and cultural authenticity.

Most importantly, this study establishes the role of code-switching as a mechanism of identity negotiation. Lebanese speakers make use of language alternation in order to handle issues of belonging and distance, in order to indicate hybrid identities, and to accommodate changing social expectations. The use of code-switching by speakers of this kind involves concurrent participation in multiple cultural affiliations based on identities which are themselves fluid, situational, and interactionally constructed. This confirms theoretical perspectives that see identity as dynamic and negotiated in the form of discourses.

Despite its contributions, this study has a limitation as it depends on secondary sources and the scope of existing literature. Future research could

further stipulate these findings through empirical methods such as interviews and ethnographic observations to further explore the concept of Lebanese speakers having the conscious abilities to experience and interpret the switch they perform during a conversation. Comparative studies between different ages, regions or social classes might also shed light on changing linguistic identities in Lebanon.

From this research, it was clear that the phenomenon of code-switching is the main feature of the Lebanese multilingual environment and an instrumental tool of identity negotiation. This research provides a stepping stone to the subsequent understanding of the issues of language and identity in the contemporary complex Lebanese linguistic situation.

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