Linguistic Constraints on Tamil-English Code-Mixing

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In situations of language contact, the point of contact is the bilingual individual, and there are usually at least two interacting language groups, each representing different cultural and linguistic groups. When languages or speakers come in contact, a variety of phenomena are observed, and these include bilingualism, linguistic convergence, borrowing, pidgins and creoles, language switching and language mixing. In recent years, research has increasingly pointed toward the universality of three linguistic constraints on code-mixing: (i) an equivalence of structure constraint, (2) a size-of-constituent constraint, and (3) a free morpheme constraint. The term constraint is here used to refer to restrictions that govern or determine the types of linguistic units that the bilingual can or cannot code-mix in his or her speech.

It is proposed that code-mixing is governed by a host code/guest code principle. This principle says that in a code-mixed discourse involving languages L1 and L2, where L1 is the host code and L2 is the guest code, the morphosyntactic rules of L2 must conform to the morphosyntactic rules of L1, the language of the discourse. In order to determine the rules that govern code-mixing, the researcher involves the combination of qualitative and quantitative method of analysis. The present study draws upon data collected from an interview and a spontaneous conversation between bilinguals in a language contact situation in which the two languages are syntactically very different from each other, namely, Tamil and English. The study addresses the question whether there are structural constraints on code-mixing. The researcher has examined this aspect of code-mixing and found that code-mixing is indeed a ruled governed phenomenon, that is, there are constraints that govern where in a sentence a code-mix can occur and where it cannot occur.

 Ke word - (Code-mixing, bilingualism, linguistic units, Linguistic constraints, bilinguals, morphosyntactic rules)