

THE PREVALENCE OF INTRA-SENTENTIAL SWITCHING IN SEPET MOVIE: REFLECTING MULTILINGUALISM REALITIES IN THE SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Code-switching is a common phenomenon now and has also entered the socio-cultural environment. Nowadays, code-switching is used in everyday speech, for instance, when producing a video or giving a formal presentation. The current research discusses language switching within a single sentence, or intra-sentential switching, in Yasmin Ahmad's movie Sepet (2004), which vividly presents Malaysia's multilingual society, including Malay, English, and Cantonese, seamlessly integrated into a single statement. The most frequent type of language switching was intra-sentential, indicating a very high degree of bilingual competence among speakers and the sociocultural reality of flexible identity negotiation in multicultural interaction. This research is focused on the analysis of syntactical units such as words, phrases, clauses, and language functions-for example, referential, expressive, and directive. The data were analysed using descriptive qualitative methods. This study has two objectives:(1) to characterize the syntactic units in the Sepet movie by Yasmin Ahmed, and (2) to examine language functions and matrix language used in the Sepet movie. Data indicate that people frequently communicate in a mix of languages. From the results of this study, it was found that film characters frequently used intra-sentence changes to communicate, and the most frequent language functions applied were referential, expressive, and directive. This reflects how these changes serve as a communicative strategy in cinematic discourse for linking up linguistic theory to real-world multilingual practices.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is deeply ingrained in social and cultural life; it plays a profound role in shaping human interaction across the world. According to Spolsky (2010), language cannot exist apart from society, and the practice of using language emanates from social norms, identity, and social relations. This very fact brings the aspect of language study under sociolinguistics, a study that explains how linguistic behavior undergoes modification due to social factors. In multilingual societies, such social factors eventually give way to bilingualism or even multilingualism; Richards and Schmidt (2010) describe bilingualism as a proficiency in using two languages, while multilingualism refers to the proficiency in more than two languages. Such linguistic diversity naturally gives way to code-switching, a sociolinguistics phenomenon wherein speakers switch between languages within communication.



Code-switching has gained a great deal of attention because of its dual role: it performs both linguistic and social functions. Myers-Scotton (2006) points out that code-switching is not random but instead follows structural principles, especially in the case of mixed-language sentences. Poplack (1980) distinguishes between three types of code-switching: tag, inter-sentential, and intra-sentential switching; the latter is the most complex. Intra-sentential switching occurs within one clause or sentence and requires an advanced degree of bilingual competence since the switching needs to fit together seamlessly across the two linguistic systems involved. This kind of intra-sentential switching is often indicative of the speaker's socio-pragmatic rather than just grammatical competencies.

In contemporary media, especially films, code-switching works both as a linguistic device and as a cultural representation. Films capture authentic language use and thus have been a productive site for studying bilingual interactions. For instance, in this research used Yasmin Ahmad's *Sepet* (2004) as an example of the multilingual landscape of Malaysia. Due to the coexistence of various languages in Malaysia, such as Malay, English, Mandarin, Tamil, and Chinese dialects, code-switching naturally occurs as part of everyday communication in this multilingual environment (Wardhaugh, 2006). The movie represents this sociolinguistic reality with frequent intra-sentential switching; for instance, "Cute lah, but sepet sikit mata dia," which corresponds with Poplack's (1980) description of embedded linguistic elements within a matrix language. The MLF model Myers-Scotton (2006) explains how these mixed utterances are structured: one language provides the grammatical frame, called Matrix Language, while elements of another language, Embedded Language, are inserted. A valid framework for understanding the communicative purpose of such switching is also provided by Leech's 1974 work, which designates language functions as expressive, referential, directive, phatic, metalinguistic, and aesthetic of which may motivate speakers to switch codes in context-dependent ways. In *Sepet*, these functions are realised in interactions of emotional expression, social bonding, clarification, and stylistic creativity. This study explores intra-sentential switching in the Malaysian movie "*Sepet*", aiming to understand and explore the two objectives: (1) To characterised the syntactic units in the *Sepet* movie by Yasmin Ahmed, and (2) To examine language functions and matrix language used in the *Sepet* movie.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Poplack's 1980 seminal work provided the basic typology of code-switching: tag-switching, inter-sentential switching, and intra-sentential switching. Of these, intra-sentential switching, or switching within the same clause or sentence, is the most complex, requiring high bilingual proficiency and structural compatibility between languages. This typology has prevailed in later analyses of bilingual discourse, extending the scope to cover film dialogue, online media, and conversational speech.

Working within a structural perspective similar to that of Poplack, Myers-Scotton 1993 elaborated the theory of the Matrix Language Frame (MLF) model, describing how the bilingual speaker constructs a mixed-language sentence. Accordingly, one language provides the grammatical frame as the Matrix Language (ML), while elements from an Embedded Language (EL) are inserted. This model proves particularly helpful in cases requiring analysis of naturally



occurring bilingual speech in films, where characters most often integrate lexical items from multiple languages at their disposal while maintaining syntactic coherence. Taken together, Poplack's and Myers-Scotton's frameworks provide a clear basis for the analysis of intra-sentential code-switching in multilingual settings.

Poplack (1980) further observes that intra-sentential switching occurs in casual and personal conversations is, in situations where speakers feel comfortable enough to switch easily from one language to another. This point, in fact, ties in with Leech's (1974) formulation of the functions of language, including expressive, directive, referential, phatic, metalinguistic, and aesthetic purposes. These functions provide a reason as to why speakers change languages: for emotional expression, tightening meaning, establishing rapport, identifying oneself, or stylistic effect. Thus, combining Poplack's structural perspective with Leech's functional framework provides an integrated explanation of why and how intra-sentential switching takes place.

Empirical studies across different media confirm these theoretical claims. For example, studies dealing with Indonesian films Twivortiare and Bridezilla (Dira & Lazar, 2019; Hendryani et al., 2021) reveal that intra-sentential switching is extensively used in order to express emotions, build character identity, and maintain interpersonal communication. In their study of Turkish-English bilinguals, Koban's (2013) proficient bilingual participants preferred intra-sentential switching finding which Poplack had also argued was a characteristic of fluent speakers. These studies suggest that intra-sentential switching operates both as a linguistic and as a pragmatic resource in natural discourse.

This trend is further supported by research from digital media. For instance, Findi et al. (2021) and Nyoman and Ariyaningsih (2020) observe that intra-sentential switching is commonly used by YouTubers and travel bloggers in order to increase relatability while performing identities that cater to multicultural viewership. Similarly, Maharami and Sudarwati (2021), Kadek et al. (2024), and Wan Rusli et al. (2018) found that in music and social media updates, intra-sentential switching becomes a stylistic resource for the expression of branding, emotional nuance, or audience engagement. Though these studies originate from different contexts, the consensus they convey is that intra-sentential switching is favored over code-switching when speakers intend to mix information with either expressive or stylistic intent, which mirrors the code-switching in movie dialogue.

Film-based studies further demonstrate how code-switching reflects broader social realities. For example, Ayat-Ayat Cinta 2 and Critical Eleven use switching as a narrative tool to heighten emotional intensity and depict characters' multilingual identities (Hartono, n.d.; Andini, 2024). Most directly relevant to the current study, Yu Jin and Abd Karim's (2012) analysis of Sepet makes the case that the code-switching patterns in the film reflect Malaysia's multi-lingual society, where Malay, English, and Mandarin are naturally used together. The findings of Yu Jin and Abd Karim support the assertion that Sepet uses this code-switching not solely for stylistic expression but is rather used as an authentic expression of daily multilingual communication. Therefore, the prevalence of intra-sentential switching in Sepet corresponds to broader sociolinguistic results since it represents the fluency of bilinguals, cultural hybridity, and negotiation of identity. Indonesian educational and media studies also affirm the functional value of intra-sentential switching.



Dewi and Hartanti (2023) discovered that code-switching in Maudy Ayunda's YouTube content functions expressively and communicatively, bringing the speaker closer to bilingual viewers. Likewise, Winanta et al. (2024) and Rinda (2023) established that teachers employ intra-sentential switching as a strategic method for improving comprehension and encouraging learners. Research on Indonesian YouTubers by Sondakh et al. (2020) and Sholehah et al. (2021) has also demonstrated that switching develops conversational closeness and projects speaker identity. Even though these studies are different in medium and cultural context from *Sepet*, they collectively illustrate that intra-sentential switching is a socially meaningful strategy employed to negotiate identity, express emotion, and manage interaction-functions also evident in the multilingual conversational landscape depicted in the film.

Finally, Nasution et al. (2024) confirmed that intra-sentential switching in EFL classrooms supports clarification and engagement, further illustrating the idea that this mode of switching has both cognitive complexity and communicative purpose. These studies cumulatively suggest, through film, media, and education, that intra-sentential code-switching is not an accident but a representation of linguistic competence, sociocultural identity, and discourse intention. This literature therefore provides strong justification for the analysis of *Sepet* through the combined frameworks of Poplack (1980), Myers-Scotton (1993), and Leech (1974), and it situates the film within a broader scholarly understanding of multilingual communication.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive method assisted by qualitative descriptive method counts to investigate intra-sentential switching in the film *Sepet*. The research focuses only on intra-sentential switching as found in the characters' dialogues, as this is the dominant switching pattern in the movie. Each utterance comprising intra-sentential switching was considered the unit of analysis and thus could be manifest in any form, from a single word or phrase to a clause embedded in what is otherwise a Malay sentence. With the use of a total sampling technique, this research examined selected dialogues within the 1 hour and 40-minute screen time of the film and gathered every usage of intra-sentential code-switching between Malay, English, and Cantonese.

Data collection was performed in three steps: (1) the researcher viewed the film several times to get a feel for the storyline, the character relationships, and the contexts of conversations in which intra-sentential switching would occur naturally. (2) All the utterances with embedded foreign language elements were identified manually, transcribed, and listed on a data sheet. (3) Each intra-sentential switch was syntactically categorized using Poplack's 1980 framework and analyzed in terms of its communicative function using Leech's 1974 language functions. And Myer Myers-Scotton Matrix Language Frame model to identify the dominant language in mixed utterances, predicting permissible code-switching structures, and understanding how speakers manage identity and complex meanings by blending linguistic resources strategically.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results display the timestamp and specific dialogue alongside the corresponding language function of each intra-sentential switch in a table format. The following section elaborates on the data to highlight its linguistic and sociocultural significance within the film narrative. The research employs Poplack's theory (as referenced in Romaine, 1995) to



identify intra-sentential code-switching, which occurs when speakers switch languages within a single sentence or clause. According to Poplack, language switching within the same sentence requires proficient bilingual abilities and adheres to the grammatical structures of both languages involved. This research also analyses the syntactic units in each finding of the data. The syntactic units were analysed to categorise the number of words, phrases, and clauses that appear in intra-sentential data analysed in the movie. The study also applies Leech's (1974) theory of language functions to analyse the communicative purpose behind each intra-sentential switching instance. Leech (1974) describes six key language functions, including expressive, directive, phatic, informative, aesthetic, and metalinguistic. Meanwhile, this research examines intra-sentential switches by analysing their role in achieving Expressive, Referential and directive communication, which frequently appear in the data findings.

Table 1. Syntactic units of intra-sentential switching found in *Sepet* movie.

No	Syntactic Units	Occurrences	Percentage
1.	Word	29	39.73%
2.	Phrase	31	42.47%
3.	Clause	13	17.80%
Total		73	100%

Based on the findings in Table 1 above, the researcher observed the differences in the percentages of syntactic units or grammatical units in intra-sentential switching data that appeared in the *Sepet* movie. In language structure, words, phrases, and clauses are usually categorised by levels of grammatical units, from the smallest to the biggest. The table shows that the most dominant unit is the phrase. In the movie that has been analysed, many intra-sentential switches within a phrase, on average, (42.47%). This indicates that the speakers or the characters in the movie often switch languages, where a whole phrase from English or Cantonese conveys the intended nuance more effectively than translating into Malay. Followed by the word unit (39.73%), the switch involves a single lexical item without accompanying modifiers or dependent words and adapts to its grammatical rules, and the clause (17.80%) is less frequent but requires deeper bilingual competence, where speakers comfortably deliver full clauses from another language without breaking the syntactic flow.

Table 2. Function of language in intra-sentential findings

No	Language Function	Occurrences	Percentage
1.	Referential Function	31	42.47%
2.	Expressive Function	15	20.55%
3.	Directive Function	10	13.70%
4.	Phatic Function	8	10.96%
5.	Metalinguistic Function	5	6.85%
6.	Aesthetic Function	4	5.48%
Total		73	100%



From table 2, it shows that the language function in intra-sentential data of the *Sepet* movie has highest percentage in referential function at (42.47%) then followed by expressive (20.55%) and directive (13.70%), meanwhile the average one is phatic has (10.96%) and the least were metalinguistic function (6.85%) and (5.48%) Aesthetic Function. So, the three dominant functions are most commonly used in the intra-sentential dialogue by the speaker. These three functions appear to support the meaning of the switch that the speaker uses when they start delivering code-switching within their word, phrases, and clauses or even complete sentences.

In this result and discussion session, the researcher examines several intra-sentential example data that have been identified and categorised, while also explaining the functions based on Leech's 1974 theory, which are expressive, directive, and referential, as the most commonly identified functions in the *Sepet* movie. The following examples were presented below:

Datum 1

“I have seen his poster, **dekat** your **jamban tu**, and that was enough for me” (13:41)

(“I have seen his poster, near your toilet, and that was enough for me”)

In datum 1, intra-sentential switching involves a syntactic unit in the form of a clause at the initial position “I have seen his poster” with an inserted Malay noun phrase: “**dekat your jamban tu**.” This mixing occurs in the English matrix language and appears in the sentence: “I have seen his poster, “**dekat**” your “**jamban tu**”, and that was enough for me.” Malay's use of the word “**jamban**” is evocative. It is used to provide a more accurate and contextualised denotation of the location at hand. Unlike the English term “toilet”, which is generally neutral and often found in new public installations, “**jamban**” in Malay refers to a far more traditional, and sometimes humorous or less modern restroom. By using this word, the speaker conveys not only location information but also cultural associations and a more vivid picture. This makes the message more distinct and meaningful for the hearer, as it presents social reality more clearly. This is consistent with the Referential function, as outlined by Leech (1974). It describes the use of features in the foreign language to capture something more accurately or to convey ideas that cannot be fully represented by equivalents in the matrix language.

Datum 2

“*Buku tu susah sikit nak explain lah. Basically, it's about psychological effect, penjajahan, dan yang dijajah*” (17:52)

(“That book is kinda hard to explain, basically it is about the psychological effect the coloniser has on the colonised.”)

This data shows the intra-sentential switching in the second sentence, specifically the phrase “**basically, it's about psychological effect**,” which is inserted between Malay and English. The matrix language of this data is Malay, then it got an alteration from English within the phrase “**basically, it's about psychological effect**”. This data was categorised as a clause because it contained a complete subject and predicate. The function shown here is **referential**, which is the term “**psychological effect**” chosen in English because it is more concise, commonly



used, and easy to understand in a bilingual environment. The function aims to deliver the most straightforward way that people often use.

Datum 3

“*Bila anak Mrs Tan beranak, all the relatives gathered around her*” (20:10)

(“When Mrs Tan’s daughter had her baby, all the relatives gathered around her”)

In this finding, the English clause “all the relatives gather around her” is inserted after the first clause, which is delivered in Malay. Therefore, the matrix language in this data is English that got an insertion from Malay in the beginning which forming in clause. When looking at the literal meaning, the intra-sentential part that changes language is the English clause in the second part. However, the word “**beranak**” in the first clause of the Malay language determines the tone of the speech. In this context, the speaker could have used English equivalents such as give birth or deliver a baby to clarify the meaning, but chose to retain the word “**beranak**” after “**anak**” to create a repetition of sound (“**anak...beranak**”). This repetition has an aesthetic function for light humour, as the sound is unique and rarely used in formal situations. This make more natural when the speaker deliver it, besides the English clause still convey the information, so the aesthetic function here is not just a function but it used to maintain the connection between the culture and the style of speech among the character.

Datum 4

“So, it’s all about **balas dendam lah ya**? You dumped **Kawan baik aku** Johari **lepas 2 minggu tu, balas dendam lah kiranya**?” (39:12)

(“So, it’s all about revenge, huh? is that why you dumped my best friend Johari 2 weeks ago, for revenge?”)

The utterance shows that the speaker combines two languages, starting with English and switching into Malay. “**Balas dendam lah ya**” is a noun phrase (NP), referring to phatic function because uses the the particle “**lah ya**” to maintain the conversation with the speaker. The use of that particle, is characteristic of the Malay language, indicating that the speaker wants to build a deeper conversation with the interlocutor, who may be a fellow Malay speaker. and “**Kawan baik aku**” are used by the speaker when arguing. The literal meaning of those words is “**for revenge**” and “**my best friend**”, which shows that the speaker reveals bilingual fluency to convey his emotions when he uses English-Malay in one sentence. Therefore, the **Expressive** function appears during the conversation to express the speaker's emotional frustration and betrayal when arguing. And the function in the second sentence is inserting a Malay clause.

Datum 5

“Eh, miss... miss... **nei giu mei meng**?” (16:57)

(“Miss... Miss... What is your name, miss?”)



The Cantonese clause for “**What is your name?**” is **你叫咩名?** (*nei giu mei meng*). This translates literally to “**You called what name?**” Poplack's (1980) rationalisation The change takes place inside a single sentence rather than between two distinct, complete phrases. It may be a turning point or slang; it is not utterly silent. The question “**What is your name?**” in Cantonese is translated word-for-word as “**You called what name?**” (*nei giu mei meng?*) is extended by some points to bring it up to English standards. It shows some warmth signals to start a conversation and the strength of social connections. The address “miss” is used frequently to treat someone politely. Therefore, the **Pathic** function is served by establishing contact in a multilingual context, showing how language choice supports both interaction and cultural sensitivity.

Datum 6

“**Dia nak kahwin next week.**” (48:41)

(“She wants to get married next week”)

This data appears in Malay at the beginning, and English follows in the next sentence. As Poplack 1980 states, the switch takes place in the middle of the sentence, and then it is categorised as intra-sentential switching. The matrix language in the data is Malay “**Dia nak kahwin**”, then the insertion is English, “next week”. The use of “**dia nak kahwin**” at the beginning, followed by “**next week**”, makes this instance a noun phrase level that contains the determiner “next” and the head noun “week”. The function of this data is categorised as a **Referential** or **Informative** function. As a simple declarative sentence, it provides factual detail. Identified by Leech (1975), it refers to the use of language to convey factual, objective, or descriptive information about an upcoming event, as stated at the end of the sentence, “**next week**”, and also contains easy and fast information without losing the meaning.

Datum 7

“**Yam, tu budak China boyfriend Orkhed kah?**” (1:00:28)

(“Yam, is that Chinese boy Orkhed’s boyfriend,huh?”)

This finding shows that the speaker is curious by questioning the word “**boyfriend**”, who uses English in the middle of the sentence. Meanwhile, the beginning and the end of the sentence use Malay “**tu budak china**” and “**kah**”, which in literal translation means “**that Chinese boy**” and “**huh or right?**” to make sure or show curiosity for someone or something. The insertion of the word “**Boyfriend**” is in the same sentence and grammatical structure without breaking the sentence structure. It makes this finding a clear case of intra-sentential switching based on Poplack (1980). Therefore, this question sentence indicates the **Expressive** function according to Leech's (1974) theory because the word above gives modern and comfortable romantic relationships among them.

Datum 8



“I like it when you call me ***sayang***” (58:29)
 (“I like it when you call me darling”)

This finding in 58:29 minutes shows that this sentence is used when the speaker gives feedback in the phrase “I like it when you call me”, and it uses an English matrix with the insertion word “***sayang***”, in Malay, which refers to “darling” in English. The switch from English to Malay is grammatically complete with a single lexical item from the Malay word “***sayang***”; therefore, this is one of the intra-sentential switching based on Poplack (1980). Meanwhile, the use of the word “***sayang***” also adds emotional and cultural beauty to the sentence. The speaker chooses the Malay term, which delivers deeper cultural intimacy and sounds more poetic and affectionate to the listener, which makes this into an **Expressive** Function according to Leech's (1974), where language is used to beautify expression.

Datum 9

“*Habistu nak panic buat apa?*” (46:27)
 (“Then why are you panicking?”)

Lastly, this finding shows that the word or verb “Panic” appears in the middle of the Malay matrix language. The sentence starts using Malay with the insertion of an English verb in the middle, and blends seamlessly with no boundary between them. Even though the sentence appears to be a question, pragmatically it has the purpose of a command. The phrase “***nak panic buat apa?***” literally translates as “why panic?” but in this case, the speaker expresses that panicking is an unnecessary thing, the choice of the word “Panic” gives a direct impression, and has become a common term in bilingual conversation, which making it more effective in conveying the speaker's meaning to the listener. Therefore, it aligns with the **Directive** function that is used to influence the listener's behaviour.

5. CONCLUSION

This research concluded that nowadays, Code-Switching appears in almost all daily conversations. Code-switching occurs between the speakers and turns into conversation. The phenomenon is in most bilingual or multilingual societies. As the general result, the most commonly used in the *Sepet* movie is Intra-Sentential switching with a 74.49%, however, the intra-sentential data aligns with the syntactic units, which makes them more complex and complete. According to Table 1, the most dominant grammatical units used are phrases. This indicates that the speakers or the characters in the movie often switch languages, where a whole phrase from English or Cantonese conveys the intended nuance more effectively than translating into Malay. The use of intra-sentential switching has become a common practice, just as it has become a habit for people to express themselves or simply chat with their conversation partner. It is no surprise that this is one of the most frequently used types. Meanwhile, the six language functions of code-switching are analysed in the *Sepet* movie, especially in intra-sentential switching. There were six functions of language according to Leech's (1974) theory. However,



the Referential, Expressive, and Directive functions follow the most frequent language functions used in the movie.

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