A Study of Code-switching from the Perspective of Adaptation Theory—A Case Study of *Born a Crime*

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Abstract: Born a Crime is the first memoir of American popular talk show host Trevor Noah. The social background of this book is South Africa on the eve of the end of apartheid. The author presents the experience rich in sentiment in life in the form of short stories from the perspective of the first-person. Since the South African nation is composed of four major races, namely, black, white, colored, and Asian, the black people are divided into nine tribes, and the language of each tribe is also differentiated accordingly. Under such an era and social background, multilingualism, code-switching, and other linguistic phenomena are inevitable. There are also many plots to be reflected in the book, which provides sufficient language materials for this study. These linguistic phenomena play an important role in reflecting the social background and the psychological motivation of the characters at that time. Therefore, based on Verschueren's "theory of linguistic adaptation", this paper analyzes the phenomenon of code-switching in the book Born a Crime and explores the motivation of code-switching mainly from the aspects of adaptation to social norms and psychological motivation.

Keywords: Adaptation Theory, Code-switching, Memoirs, South Africa

1. Introduction

The social background of the memoir Born a Crime is the eve of the abolition of racial segregation in South Africa. The author provides a personal perspective on life under the apartheid system, using humorous language and drawing insights from his own experiences. South Africa represents a rich site for sociolinguistic study, as its language policies have undergone three distinct phases: Dutch colonial rule, British colonial rule, and the white supremacist apartheid regime. After the end of apartheid in 1994, South African education entered a new era. The post-apartheid language policy promotes multilingualism with 11 official languages. This environment gives rise to sociolinguistic issues like bilingualism, multilingualism, code-switching, and the concept of speech communities. This paper aims to explore manifestations of code-switching in the memoir Born a Crime, contributing to the analysis of code-switching in literary works.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Adaptation Theory

The Adaptation Theory first emerged in 1987, but it was not until 1999 that Verschueren further developed this theory in his book Understanding Pragmatics. He believed that human language selection is guided by highly flexible principles and strategies. To achieve successful communication, code changers should mainly comply with language reality, social norms, and psychological motivations.[1]

Verschueren argues that language choice is possible in communication because natural languages exhibit variability, negotiability, and adaptability. Variability enables and constrains choice, providing the range of options; negotiability means language is flexibly employed following highly versatile principles; and adaptability refers to deliberate selection among alternatives to achieve communicative goals. Variability and negotiability form the foundation, while adaptability is the core concept. Additionally, he posits that code-switching results from language choice for adaptive purposes. To communicate successfully, code-switching speakers adapt to linguistic realities, social norms, and psychological motivations. Adapting to language norms and conventions represents passive adaptation,

while adapting to psychological motivations constitutes active adaptation.

2.2. Code-switching

Gumpers' definition is more representative. He distinguishes Code-switching into two categories: situational Code-switching and metaphorical Code-switching. Situational Code-switching is caused by changes in participants, topics, or environments.[4] Situational code-switching can be regarded as a relatively stable conceptual clue. Through code-switching, the communicator can successfully understand and grasp the situation. Metaphorical code-switching refers to the code-switching that is carried out by the communicator in order to express certain communicative intention while the situation remains unchanged.[6]

Code-switching is closely related to Language contact, language variation, and change. The motivation behind Code-switching, whether psychological, functional, or structural, stems from the user's conscious, utilitarian, and purposeful "strategy" needs. This language strategy has social functions, as it can change social scenes to establish new conversational properties; Meanwhile, during the conversation, code switching also reflects the speaker's psychology and people's attitudes towards a certain language or variant.[7]

The study of code-switching can be divided into broad and narrow senses. Broad sense refers to the choice and application of language in a bilingual or multilingual society, examining social psychology at a macro level through social variables such as Language policy and language planning. Narrow sense refers to the language selection and application of individuals or a group, focusing on the process of verbal communication and discussing the motivation, mode, process, and function of Code-switching on a microscopic level. Born a Crime does not highlight the relationship between Code-switching and social variables. This paper primarily delves into the corpus from Trevor's personal experience, making it part of the narrow sense of Code-switching research.

3. Research Background

3.1. Introduction to the Story of Born a Crime

Born a Crime is a deeply moving and profound memoir written by Trevor Noah. Born during the era of apartheid in South Africa, Noah's existence was considered a crime under the country's strict laws. Specifically, interracial relationships were illegal and those involved were punished severely. Noah's mother, Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah, was black, while his father, Robert, was white, making him a mixed-race child who was not recognized or accepted by the law.

Noah's memoirs are presented as a series of small stories that offer insight into life during this tumultuous time. Each chapter begins with a serious overview of the social and political climate in South Africa during that period, allowing readers to better understand the challenges and complexities of his upbringing.

For example, in one chapter, Noah's mother is verbally attacked for speaking Xhosa, a native language, to a Zulu driver, resulting in her being physically pushed off a bus and pursued. In another, Trevor invites a dancer named Hitler to perform at a Jewish school, only to be driven out by angry students. Maybe the specifics of what happened in these situations are confusing and insane for readers, but it becomes sensible as they understand it was a result of the deeply ingrained racism and prejudice of South Africa during that time.

Overall, Born a Crime is a powerful and thought-provoking memoir that offers a unique perspective on the impact of apartheid on the daily lives of individuals and families.

3.2. Background of the era of Born a Crime

The South African nation is composed of four major races: black, white, colored, and Asian. The black population is primarily made up of members of the African Bantu ethnic group, which is divided into nine tribes, each with its own language. The white population is mostly of Dutch and British descent, while the colored population is of mixed colonial, native, and slave descent. The Asian population is primarily composed of Indians and Chinese.

In terms of language, during the period of racial segregation, although English and Afrikaans were

both official languages, in terms of actual usage, Afrikaans were the dominant language of government departments, while English was mainly the language of industry, commerce, and education.[9] The remaining nine native black languages are all Bantu branches, with Zulu and Xhosa being the most widely used. Language is one of the most complex issues facing South Africa. Language itself, as a tool of cultural exchange, does not have special ability. However, in the complex social background of South Africa, language is highly politicized, becomes a symbol of race, and often leads to social unrest, which is a legacy of South Africa's colonial past.

4. Motivations of Code-switching

4.1. Adaptation to Linguistic Reality

The background of the apartheid era in South Africa shows that Trevor Noah was a melting pot of people from different tribes and hometowns who spoke different languages. Living in this environment for so long, Trevor and his mother have also found some wisdom.

One of the key lessons they learned was that language can do many unexpected things, like help people survive and bridge racial divides. Here are a few of the languages Trevor and his mother have learned to adapt to the realities of language.

First, though Trevor's mother was a Xhosa, she made sure Trevor's first language was English. This is because in South Africa, English is the language of money. The abolition of the censorship system in South Africa, the introduction of fiber optic television, and the advancement of international communication and the internet have further consolidated the position of English.[3] A black man born in South Africa would have a lot of help if he knew English. Because the social climate at that time was that knowing English was equal to having a high IQ, English also determined whether a person could be employed when looking for a job, and not only that, at the time of the trial, a person's future can also be affected by whether he or she spoke English - pay a fine or go to jail.

In addition to English, Trevor and his mother speak Xhosa at home. Trevor's mother spoke Xhosa, her mother tongue, when she talked to her mother and her family or when she get angry. It is normal to switch to your mother tongue when you are talking to your loved ones and triggering a physiological stress response.

Trevor also speaks Zulu and Tswana which he had to learn. Since a diversity of people lived in Soweto, there were always situations in which people of different nationalities tried to rob each other. When he encounters this situation, he will switch to the same language as them to avoid risks.

Because of Trevor's father, his mother could also speak the Afrikaans. It was very practical at that time, which allows many white people in the area to let down their guard against a black man and not call the cops on him.

As South Africa is a multilingual country, the linguistic reality is that indigenous people have to face a variety of language issues in their lives. Living in such an environment, a good command of multiple languages and proficiency in code-switching can not only promote their own development but also bridge the gap between different ethnic groups.

4.2. Adaptation to Social Convention

The adaptation to social norms mainly refers to the adaptation to social culture, such as customs and ways of behavior. The words and actions of language users are bound and constrained by social norms.[5] By choosing the appropriate language or language variant, speakers can avoid embarrassment, misunderstandings, and conflicts in social situations. This form of linguistic adaptation is an important aspect of communication in any society, as it allows individuals to navigate and interact effectively with others in their social environment. The ability to adapt to social norms through language use is a fundamental aspect of human communication and can have a significant impact on individual and collective experiences in social settings.

Example 1: Trevor and his mother took a minibus on their way to church. There was no bus and they tried to hitch a ride, but instead they got on the minibus and drove a few meters. A minibus stopped them and threatened the driver, his mother helped out and got on the minibus. Here's what happened on the bus.

"In addition to being violent gangsters, South African minibus drivers are notorious for complaining and haranguing passengers as they drive. This driver was a particularly angry one. As we rode along, he started lecturing my mother about being in a car with a man who was not her husband. My mother didn't suffer lectures from strange men. She told him to mind his own business, and when he heard her speaking in Xhosa, that really set him off. The stereotypes of Zulu and Xhosa women were as ingrained as those of the men. Zulu women were well-behaved and dutiful. Xhosa women were promiscuous and unfaithful. And here was my mother, his tribal enemy, a Xhosa woman alone with two small children—one of them a mixed child, no less. Not just a whore but a whore who sleeps with white men. "Oh, you're a Xhosa," he said. "That explains it. Climbing into strange men's cars. Disgusting woman." [2]

Social conventions in Example 1 refer to behaviors and thinking patterns that most people take for granted in a given social environment. Before apartheid, there were conflicts between tribal factions in South Africa. When the white man came, he used the hatred between the tribes to break down the Black Divide and rule. All non-white people are systematically divided into different groups and sub-groups. Then, different groups were given different degrees of power and privilege, which allowed them to continue the conflict. The rift between the Zulu and Xhosa, the country's dominant tribes, is particularly pronounced.

Language constructs the social identity of the speaker and acts as a marker, and identity identifies the group in which it is located and at the same time sets boundaries with other groups. In the example above, Trevor's mother spoke Xhosa, and the bus driver immediately thought she was Xhosa people, but the minibus driver was Zulu, and the Zulus and Xhosa had long been hostile, so an aggressive conversation ensued.

The social background is the main reason for this phenomenon.

The Inkatha Freedom Party and the African National Congress -- the African National Congress -- have been jockeying for power for a long time. The Inkatans are mainly Zulus, while the leaders of ANC were mainly Xhosa. The political dynamics between the two groups are complex, but the easiest way to understand it is to view it as a proxy war between the Zulus and Xhosa. They attacked each other and committed massive acts of barbarism. Large-scale riots broke out. Thus the Zulus and Xhosa became enemies.

Example 2: "When I was growing up we used to get American TV shows rebroadcast on our stations: Doogie Howser, M.D.; Murder, She Wrote; Rescue 911 with William Shatner. Most of them were dubbed into African languages. ALF was in Afrikaans. Transformers was in Sotho. But if you wanted to watch them in English, the original American audio would be simulcast on the radio. You could mute your TV and listen to that. Watching those shows, I realized that whenever black people were on-screen speaking in African languages, they felt familiar to me. They sounded like they were supposed to sound. Then I'd listen to them in simulcast on the radio, and they would all have black American accents. My perception of them changed. They didn't feel familiar. They felt like foreigners." [2]

In Example 2, Trevor felt very friendly towards the dubbed version of the black people, believing that they should all speak African, but upon hearing the African American accent in the original track, he felt that they were all foreigners. This also reflects the importance of language adapting to social norms. Dubbing is the reconstruction of the identity of the characters in the play. When translated into the target language, the language choice is more in line with the local people's thinking style and social culture, which can to some extent make the people of the country listening to the native language dubbing better accept it. It has a positive impact on a certain audience group and enhances people's sense of belonging to the film.

4.3. Adapting to Psychological Motivation

In addition to passive adaptation such as linguistic reality and social conventions, code-switching is defined as active adaptation to accommodate the psychological motivation of the communicator, that is, the speaker chooses a different language or language variety for some psychological motivation to express some kind of illocutionary meaning, which is a kind of active communication strategy adopted by the communicator for some purpose. Psychological strategy should be activated by the utterer and interpreter in their choice activities. Choice becomes a part of language use, and it becomes an adaptive component of selction.[8]

Example 3: "Living with my mom, I saw how she used language to cross boundaries, handle situations, navigate the world. We were in a shop once, and the shopkeeper, right in front of us, turned to

his security guard and said, in Afrikaans, 'Volg daai swartes, netnou steel hulle iets.' 'Follow those blacks in case they steal something.'

My mother turned around and said, in beautiful, fluent Afrikaans, 'Hoekom volg jy nie daai swartes sodat jy hulle kan help kry waarna hulle soek nie?' 'Why don't you follow these blacks so you can help them find what they're looking for?'

'Ag, jammer!'he said, apologizing in Afrikaans. Then—and this was the funny thing—he didn't apologize for being racist; he merely apologized for aiming his racism at us. 'Oh, I'm so sorry,' he said. 'I thought you were like the other blacks. You know how they love to steal.'" [2]

Trevor and his mother's multilingualism is a key factor in their ability to use code-switching effectively. By being fluent in multiple languages, they can choose the most appropriate language or language variety for the situation at hand, and use code-switching to express certain ideas or emotions in a more effective or appropriate way.

In Example 3, Trevor's mother uses code-switching to Afrikaans to communicate with the shopkeeper. By doing so, she could temporarily confuse the shopkeeper about her own identity and cultural background, then maintain a certain psychological distance between herself and the shopkeeper. The shopkeeper, seeing that she can speak Afrikaans, apologized that she was different from the average black person as if Mama Trevor's class status had risen.

Example 4: "One day as a young man I was walking down the street, and a group of Zulu guys was walking behind me, closing in on me, and I could hear them talking to one another about how they were going to mug me. 'Asibambe le autie yomlungu. Phuma ngapha mina ngizoqhamuka ngemuva kwakhe.' 'Let's get this white guy. You go to his left, and I'll come up behind him.' I didn't know what to do. I couldn't run, so I just spun around real quick and said, 'Kodwa bafwethu yingani singavele sibambe umuntu inkunzi? Asenzeni. Mina ngikulindele.' 'Yo, guys, why don't we just mug someone together? I'm ready. Let's do it.'

They looked shocked for a moment, and then they started laughing. 'Oh, sorry, dude. We thought you were something else. We weren't trying to take anything from you. We were trying to steal from white people. Have a good day, man.' They were ready to do me violent harm, until they felt we were part of the same tribe, and then we were cool. That, and so many other smaller incidents in my life, made me realize that language, even more than color, defines who you are to people." [2]

The conversation in Example 4 is also an adaptation to psychological motivation. Language selection is the foundation of identity formation, an important form of identity recognition, and plays an important role that cannot be ignored in the process of confirming identity.[10] Trevor discovered that the Zulus behind him were trying to rob him, so he spoke Zulu to defuse the robbery. Trevor's psychological motivation for code-switching at this point is that he knows the person is Zulu, so he wants the person to know that he speaks Zulu, that he's in cahoots with the listener, to shorten the psychological distance between them, quickly gain favor with the Zulus and help yourself out. Therefore, in a conversation switching to the listener's mother tongue is actually adapting to one's own psychological motivation.

5. Conclusion

From the perspective of linguistic adaptation theory, this paper analyzes many Code-switching phenomena in Born a Crime, explores the internal causes of their switching, and finds that individual Code-switching can be an adaptation to linguistic reality, social conventions, and psychological motivation, so as to achieve their own communicative purposes: to boost self-development, to avoid embarrassment and misunderstanding, and to narrow the psychological distance between the two sides of communication. The author selects the experience of Trevor and her mother as the main line of the book. They are multilingual speakers who can speak many languages and dialects. Their language experiences provide effective language materials for the study of Code-switching. Through the case study of Code-switching in Born a Crime, we can learn that Code-switching in literary works is closely related to the social and cultural background of South Africa at that time.

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