



## Sinhala-English Code-Switching in Text Messaging: A Study Based on Undergraduates of Two State Universities in Sri Lanka

S. T. A. Wickramasinghe

*University of Sri Jayewardenepura*

Email address of the corresponding author - sajniwsh@gmail.com

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### Abstract

This research investigates Sinhala-English code-switching in text messaging among undergraduates from two state universities in Sri Lanka. Despite the widespread occurrence of code-switching in spoken and written communication, there is a significant gap in research addressing this phenomenon in written forms, particularly within text messaging. This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring the functions of code-switching for effective communication in a bilingual context. A sample of 40 undergraduates from the University of Colombo and the University of Kelaniya was selected using stratified random sampling. The primary data comprised 1500 text messages. Qualitative content analysis was employed to examine the messages, focusing on identifying the functions of code-switching and its role in facilitating communication. The analysis was guided by Myers-Scotton's Matrix Language Frame (MLF) model, which differentiates between the matrix language and the embedded language in bilingual utterances. The findings revealed seven key functions of code-switching: socio-cultural and religious functions, greetings, academic, scientific and technical terms, idioms and expressions, affective functions, quotatives and politeness markers. The results indicate that participants switch between the two languages to meet their communicative needs effectively. Code-switching to English mostly serves functions related to academic and technical terms, greetings, socio-cultural contexts and politeness markers, while code-switching to Sinhala is mostly used for affective functions, expressions and

quotatives. This study contributes to the relatively unexplored area of written code-switching, offering insights into how bilingual undergraduates in Sri Lanka use code-switching in text messaging.

**Keywords:** code-switching; text messaging; undergraduates; bilingualism; functions

### Introduction

Being a multicultural country, mainly three languages Sinhala, Tamil and English are spoken in Sri Lanka giving prominence to Sinhala as one of the legislated official national languages whereas English is legislated as the link language. As a result of English being taught as a second language in state schools from third grade onwards, students tend to code-switch because of their ability to use more than one language during the conversation. As occurring in every bilingual community, in Sri Lanka too, code-switching in speech, has become a common phenomenon, specially, among the Sri Lankan Sinhala speakers (Karnalasuriya, 2008). Grosjean (1994) observes that code-switching is an extremely common characteristic of bilingual speech and defines it as 'the alternate use of two or more languages in the same utterance or conversation'. Halliday (1975) views code-switching as fulfilling the interpersonal function of communication. As suggested by Hoffmann (2014), the ultimate reason for code-switching is to achieve effective communication between the writer and reader, or the speaker and receiver. While extensive studies have been done to explain this linguistic

phenomenon in verbal communication, there is a dearth of literature on written code-switched discourses, especially Sinhala-English written discourses (Jayathilake, 2021). Furthermore, only a limited number of studies have specifically delved into bilingual texting (Montes-Alcalá, 2024). Thus, there exists no adequate research conducted specifically focusing on the Sinhala-English code-switching in text messaging among university undergraduates. Further, this study is expected to add to the area of written code-switching that “remains relatively unexplored and under-researched” regardless of the “variety of data” (Sebba, 2012). Therefore, the main rationale behind this study is the research gap which currently exists connected to the absence of sufficient empirical research covering similar areas in the Sri Lankan context. Therefore, this research aims to address the problem of understanding how and why bilingual undergraduates engage in code-switching in text-based communication. It seeks to explore the insights these language-switching behaviors provide into their language use patterns and sociolinguistic behavior, with a particular focus on examining the functions of code-switching in text messaging among university undergraduates in Sri Lanka, which forms the basis of the study’s research question. Accordingly, the key objectives of this study are to identify the empirical idea of code-switching and bilingualism and to identify how functions of code-switching can be used for effective communication.

## **Methodology**

Focusing on the study’s research question, ‘What functions are performed by code-switching in text messaging?’, the sample of the current study included 40 male and female undergraduates from two state universities in Sri Lanka: University of Colombo and University of Kelaniya. Stratified random sampling was used. The first language of all the university students taken into consideration is Sinhala and their second language is English. The medium of instruction of majority of the selected sample is English. The universities were chosen to represent an urban and

a suburban setting which may have an impact on the students’ language. The study’s corpus consisted of 1500 mobile text messages from the undergraduates, with five text message exchanges per participant. One text message exchange is equivalent to one mobile phone screenshot which includes roughly 7 - 10 text messages. After eliminating over 500 messages due to various reasons such as being single-word texts, lacking code-switching, or being too short. Finally, 400 messages were randomly selected for the analysis of the study. The corpus obtained from the subjects is described and analyzed through qualitative content analysis. It was aimed at identifying the functions of code-switching and how it can be used for effective communication through the analysis of the content of text messages. The theoretical framework which was based on the analysis of the collected qualitative data of the text message collection was Myers-Scotton’s matrix language frame model (MLF). According to Senaratne (2009), the MLF model suggests that there is a dominant language that provides the morpho-syntactic frame for the bilingual utterance and this dominant language is named the ‘matrix’ language (ML). The other language that acts as a guest in the utterance is the ‘embedded’ language (EL). The model presumes that the code-switching utterance contains matrix language islands and embedded language islands. In this study for the content analysis of the text messages it is vital to identify the matrix language and the embedded language in order to determine whether the switching takes place from Sinhala to English or vice versa in each text message. The study determined the dominant language of each text message by assessing the “bulkiness,” or the percentage of words from each language, to identify the direction of code-switching between Sinhala and English.

## **Results and Discussion**

Through the content analysis conducted on the collected text messages, functions in which undergraduates code-switch in text messaging were evident as follows.

## Socio-cultural and religious functions

The subjects of this study tend to switch to either code of Sinhala or English when using culturally, socially and religiously relevant words and phrases. For instance, they are found to employ in their texts a great deal of words and phrases that reflect socio, cultural and religious functions such as bana / බනා /, kiribath / කිරිබත් /, perahara / පෙරහැර /, budu saranai / බුදුසරානා /, devi pihitai / දෙවි පිහිතා /, geta gevadeema / ගෙතා ජෙවදේමා /, funeral, party, Christmas, night club. After analyzing the collected data it was found that the undergraduates tend to code switch when using culturally, socially and religiously relevant words and phrases.

**Table 1.** English to Sinhala code-switching related to socio-cultural and religious functions in text messages

English to Sinhala	Meaning
Im going to <i>thunmase dane</i> today	<i>three months alms giving</i>
Get home safe and lemme know. <i>Budu saranai</i>	<i>May Lord Buddha bless you</i>

**Table 2.** Sinhala to English code switching related to socio-cultural and religious functions text messages

Sinhala to English	Meaning
<i>api funeral</i> ekta yanwa. oya enawada	We are going to the funeral. Are you coming?
<i>mage birthday party</i> ekata enawada	Are you coming to my birthday party?

## Greetings

As far as this study is concerned, there was evidence through text messages that undergraduates tend to code-switch upon greeting each other. Moreover, it is observed that the function of a greeting is ultimately derived from a certain communicative intent or the purpose for which the two parties are engaged in interaction. A closer examination of the text messages revealed that a huge number of greetings are exchanged by the subjects. Among the many greetings that were used are kohomada / kōhōmədə

/, suba gaman / සුභගෑමන /, waasana wewa / වා:සනා:වේවා: /, ayubowan / ආ:ජුභභූවන /, hi, hey, what's up, good morning, happy birthday, Happy New Year, Merry Christmas. Furthermore, it is noted that majority of the greetings were code-switched from Sinhala to English than English to Sinhala in text messaging by the undergraduates. The following examples are noted in relation to greetings through the text message collection.

**Table 3.** English to Sinhala code switching related to greetings in text messages

English to Sinhala	Meaning
after a loooong time <i>kohomada ithin</i>	After a long time, <i>so how are you?</i>
bring me choclates then! <i>Suba gaman!</i>	Bring me chocolates then. <i>Happy journey!</i>

**Table 4.** Sinhala to English code switching related to greetings in text messages

Sinhala to English	Meaning
<i>gedara hamotama</i> <i>Happy New Year</i> kiyanna honde.	Tell everyone that I said <i>Happy New Year</i> .
Dan 24i ne? <i>Happy b'day</i> nangi.	Now you are 24. Aren't you? <i>Happy Birthday</i> sister.

## Academic, scientific and technical terms

Another common use of English words and phrases that emerged from our analysis in relation to code-switching is those pertaining to the field of science and technology or academic issues. The following are some of the many technical, academic and scientific terms which were used by the students: introduction, exams, chapter, software, report, questions, papers, faculty, department, lecturer, research, practical, assignment, library, survey, thesis, professor, deadline, presentation, journal, meeting, physical, medicine, biology, first class, dissertation, batch, academic staff. The following examples bear witness to the wide use of academic and technical terms in the collected texts. It emerged from the analysis that

code-switching was done from Sinhala to English as far as the academic, scientific and technical terms are taken into consideration. It was further noted that even the undergraduates whose medium of instruction is Sinhala also had code-switched to English when using technical and scientific terms.

**Table 5.** Sinhala to English code-switching related to academic, scientific and technical terms in text messages

Sinhala to English	Meaning
me dawasa wala <i>presentation</i> eke wada	These days busy with the presentation.
<i>science faculty</i> ekata enna ikmanta	Come soon to the Science Faculty.
oyalage <i>deadline</i> eka kawadda <i>thesis</i> ekata?	What's your deadline for the thesis?

#### Idioms and expressions

Sinhala and English both languages are rich in idioms and colloquial expressions that are widely used to communicate figuratively. It is observed through the collected text messages that undergraduates have code-switched using such idioms and expressions such as *inguru deela miris gaththa wage* / *inguru ði:l miris galθa: wagei* /, *kala kala de pala pala de* / *kələ kələ ðei rələ rələ ðei* /, *pandithaya* / *rəndiθəja:* /, *chandiya* / *ʧʌndija:* /, *he will reap what he sow*, *a friend in need is a friend indeed*, *a blessing in disguise*.

**Table 6.** English to Sinhala code switching related to idioms and expressions in text messages

English to Sinhala	Meaning
U know he is a <i>chandiya</i> ne be careful	Thug
Ur sistr is soooooo butiful <i>moona handa wage</i>	Your sister is so beautiful. Her face is just like the moon.

**Table 7.** Sinhala to English code switching related to idioms and expressions in text messages

Sinhala to English	Meaning
eka gana thawath hithanna epa.. <i>blessing in disguise</i> kiyala hithamu	Don't think about it too much. Think it as a blessing in disguise.
ane eyaanan aththatama <i>friend in need</i> kiyala oppu kala neda?	She really proved that she is 'a friend in need is a friend indeed.' Didn't she?

#### Affective functions

The brain functions concerned with emotions such as endearment, affection, pleasure, sorrow, anger, happiness, fear, gratification of all kinds, sexuality and jealousy are known as affective functions. It could be noted how the undergraduates had code-switched on affective functions which serve expression of emotions for reasons which interrelate to the emotional state. Bilingual/multilingual speakers also use code-switching as a form emotional regulation, using their home language to express intense emotions and their secondary language for less intense emotions (Pavlenko, 2012). This was evident through the collected text message analysis. Bilingual/ multilingual speakers may code-switch so that their emotions will not be lost in translation as well.

**Table 8.** English to Sinhala code switching related to affective functions in text messages

English to Sinhala	Meaning
he really pissed me off! <i>Pissek.</i>	A mad person
Ill do wateva u want! u r my <i>pana ne</i>	You are my life. Aren't you?

**Table 9.** Sinhala to English code switching related to affective functions in text messages

Sinhala to English	Meaning
ane tharaha wenna epa Sweetie aadaretane kiwwe	Don't be angry sweetie, said it out of love.
Uuuu nan maha hedek ekak! Shit!	He is really a headache.

### Quotatives

It is observed that the undergraduates had code-switched to either language in the instances of quoting utterances made by someone. It is further noted that the undergraduates had code-switched to English using the quotative particle 'kiyala' /kijəɫ/ when quoting utterances. In addition, using quotative verbs such as 'like' and 'say', undergraduates had code-switched to Sinhala in instances of quoting utterances.

**Table 10.** Sinhala to English code switching related to quotatives in text messages

Sinhala to English	Meaning
oya dannawada eya kiwwa 'you look gorgeous' kiyala	Do you know he said that I am gorgeous?
meke 'msgs cnt be displayed' kiyala watenawa. mokada karanne	It is shown here that 'messages can't be displayed'. What should I do?

**Table 11.** English to Sinhala code switching related to quotatives in text messages

English to Sinhala	Meaning
she keeps on saying 'matanam epa welaa'	She always says 'I am fed up with.'
my mom alwys say 'Theruw saranai' when I come to the hostel	My mom always says 'May Triple Gem bless you' when I come to the hostel.

### Politeness markers

Politeness markers/structures are 'linguistic expressions' employed to show politeness (Watts, 2003. p182). Through the analysis of the collected text messages, it could be seen that female undergraduates had used politeness markers on a significantly higher level than male undergraduates.

**Table 12.** Sinhala to English code switching related to politeness markers in text messages

Sinhala to English	Meaning
sorry akka mata amthka wuna. heta gennam.	sorry sister, I forgot it. I will bring it tomorrow.
padam krnna eeye awata thnx	Thanks a lot for coming to study with me.

### Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrated seven functions performed by code-switch that are responsible for the wide use of Sinhala-English code-switching among undergraduates in text messaging. The results reveal that some participants exhibit the ability to move back and forth between their two codes depending on the suitability of their communicative needs. Moreover, the functions which often trigger code-switching in both directions are evident through the study. Switching to English as an embedded language, for instance, was found to serve the functions of academic and technical terms, greetings, socio-religious and cultural functions, politeness markers. Furthermore, switching to Sinhala as an embedded language was mostly found to serve functions in relation to socio-cultural instances, affective functions, expressions, idioms and quotatives. Accordingly, this research study examined the functions of code-switching as well as how Sinhala-English code-switching is used overwhelmingly by undergraduates in mobile text messaging. However, certain limitations were encountered when this study was conducted as the data collection was limited to 1500 text messages as

well as only forty undergraduates were chosen from both state universities. The results of this research represent an essential step toward understanding the functions of Sinhala-English code-switching in computer-mediated communication. This study can serve as a foundation for future research on Sinhala-English code-switching, with potential areas of focus including the typology, morphological and syntactic structures of code-switching, as well as its occurrence in other contexts such as social media, digital media and printed media. The results of this study can be significant, particularly in the context of bilingual education and language teaching in Sri Lanka. As the results demonstrate that code-switching serves important communicative and cognitive functions for bilingual students, this could encourage educators to recognize code-switching not as a deficiency but as a tool for facilitating comprehension and expression in the classroom. Incorporating code-switching in teaching strategies may support students' understanding of complex concepts, especially when transitioning between languages. This research also highlights the need to teach students pragmatic competence in understanding when and how to switch languages in different communicative contexts. Therefore, by recognizing code-switching as a valuable communicative tool, this research could help transform how bilingualism is approached in educational settings, ultimately enhancing student learning outcomes and engagement.

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