

HIỆN TƯỢNG CHUYỂN MÃ NGÔN NGỮ TRONG CHƯƠNG TRÌNH TRUYỀN HÌNH THỰC TẾ

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TÓM TẮT

Bài viết nghiên cứu về hiện tượng chuyển mã ngôn ngữ được các nhà đầu tư sử dụng trong chương trình truyền hình thực tế. Chuyển mã là việc sử dụng luân phiên hai hoặc nhiều hơn hai ngôn ngữ trong một phát ngôn. Hiện tượng này ngày càng phổ biến trong cộng đồng song ngữ và bối cảnh truyền thông. Bằng cách kết hợp phương pháp định tính và định lượng, nghiên cứu đã phân tích năm tập của chương trình Shark Tank Việt Nam, tập trung vào tần suất, loại hình và chức năng giao tiếp của việc chuyển mã được các nhà đầu tư (Sharks) sử dụng. Kết quả cho thấy chuyển mã là một chiến lược ngôn ngữ phổ biến và có mục đích rõ ràng trong chương trình, trong đó, chuyển mã trong câu chiếm ưu thế hơn hẳn so với chuyển mã giữa các câu. Các từ tiếng Anh liên quan đến lĩnh vực kinh doanh thường xuyên được lồng ghép vào lời nói tiếng Việt, phản ánh chuyên môn và lĩnh vực hoạt động của nhà đầu tư. Ngoài ra, việc chuyển mã có hai chức năng chính: chức năng diễn ngôn và chức năng xã hội. Từ đó, nghiên cứu kết luận rằng, lựa chọn ngôn ngữ của nhà đầu tư không chỉ thể hiện năng lực song ngữ và bản sắc xã hội của họ mà còn góp phần nâng cao hiệu quả và tính chân thực trong giao tiếp truyền hình về khởi nghiệp.

Từ khóa: chuyển mã, chức năng ngôn ngữ, Shark Tank Việt Nam, song ngữ.

INVESTORS' CODE-SWITCHING IN REALITY TV SHOWS

ABSTRACT

This research investigates the phenomenon of code-switching employed by investors in Vietnamese reality television shows. Code-switching, the alternation between two or more languages within a discourse, is increasingly common in bilingual communities and media contexts. By combining both qualitative and quantitative methods, the research analyzes five episodes of Shark Tank Vietnam, focusing on the frequency, types, and communicative functions of code-switching used by investors (sharks). The findings indicate that code-switching is a frequent and strategic linguistic practice in the show, with intra-sentential switches far more prevalent than inter-sentential ones. These switches often involve business-related English terms embedded in Vietnamese speech, reflecting investors' professional expertise and the influence of the show's business context. Moreover, code-switching serves two key functions: a discourse-related function and a social function. The research concludes that investors' linguistic choices not only reflect their bilingual competence and social identity but also contribute to the effectiveness and authenticity of communication in televised entrepreneurial discourse.

Keywords: bilingualism, code-switching, language function, Shark Tank Vietnam.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, code-switching has become a flourishing research area in disciplines such as sociolinguistics, anthropology, and psycholinguistics. Code-switching occurs in both formal and informal contexts of communication. The following are some examples of Vietnamese-English code-switching:

Example 1.1. Bạn chọn cái *flow* khá là hay.

(You chose the *flow* quite well)

(King of Rap, Episode 4, 38:50)

Example 1.2. Chị cũng thích cái bản phối này của *producer*.

(I also enjoy this remix of your *producer*)

(The Heroes, Episode 10, 57:24)

Vietnamese - English code-switching occurs in every field of daily life, from daily conversations to news, interviews on television, radio, as well as newspapers, magazines and so on. Research has shown that the practice of alternating languages is not only common but also serves important communicative functions.

Despite the growing prevalence of code-switching in Vietnamese media, limited scholarly attention has been given to its use in televised entrepreneurial discourse, particularly from the perspective of investor communication. Given the highly specialized nature of the business vocabulary used in the show, along with the bilingual competence of its participants, analyzing code-switching in this context offers valuable insights into how language choices reflect identity, expertise, and communicative goals. Therefore, this research, entitled “Investors’ code-switching reality TV shows”, investigated how code-switching was used to achieve the communicative intents and serves certain functions in conversations.

This research aims to explore the linguistic and functional characteristics of English-Vietnamese code-switching in a specific media context. It investigates how investors (sharks) in the show employ code-switching to fulfill communicative intentions and convey social meanings. The research analyzes four selected episodes featuring 12 startup pitches to answer the following research questions:

(i) How frequently is code-switching used by the investors in the “Shark Tank Vietnam” show? (ii) What kinds of code-switching appeared in this show? (iii) What functions do the switches take?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.2. Bilingualism

In sociolinguistics, the concept of bilingualism has been examined from at least three distinct perspectives. One view, represented by scholars such as Mackey (1970) and Romaine (1995), considers bilingual individuals as those who have an equal command of two languages. This viewpoint highlights the importance of linguistic balance, focusing on individuals who are fully proficient in both languages. According to Romaine (1995), bilinguals are people who possess native-like fluency in two languages.

Conversely, another perspective argues that a person can be classified as bilingual even if they do not exhibit complete fluency in both languages, as long as they have the ability to communicate in both. Haugen (1953) defines bilinguals as individuals who, while proficient in one language, can still construct meaningful and coherent sentences in the other. Similarly, scholars such as Hamers & Blanc (2000) and Myers-Scotton (2001) support this view, asserting that it is uncommon for individuals to have identical proficiency levels in both languages.

2.3. Code-switching

The most general description of code-switching is that it involves the alternate use of two languages or linguistic varieties within the same utterance or during the same conversation. Code-switching has been defined by Halmari as “the mixing of two or more languages within the same conversational episode” and “it can occur at word, phrase, clause or sentence level”. From the opinions of code-switching given by many linguists, it can be defined that code-switching is the practice of alternating between two or more languages (or language varieties) within a conversation, sentence, or phrase. It is common among bilingual or multilingual speakers and can serve various social, cultural, and communicative functions.

2.4. Classification of code-switching

In her groundbreaking study, Poplack (1980) examined the speech of 20 Puerto Rican residents in the United States, whose first language is Spanish, to test a hypothesis regarding the varying degrees of bilingual proficiency in English. Poplack (1980) categorized their code-switching into three types: intra-sentential code-switching, inter-sentential code-switching, and tag switching.

Intra-sentential code-switching

Switches of many forms occur within the clause boundary, including within the word boundary, in intra-sentential code switching. There were no interruptions, hesitations, or pauses to signify a shift because it happened in the middle of a phrase. Usually, the speaker is completely unconscious of the change. Intra-sentential switching is considered the most complex type of code-switching. In Poplack's view, mainly because of the high probability of violation of syntactic rules, as well as the requirement of a great command of both languages and how they can map onto each other.

Example 2.1. Switching Spanish and English

Leo un magazine

(I read a magazine)

(Poplack, 1980, p. 583)

Inter-sentential code-switching

Inter-sentential code switching refers to switches at clause/sentence boundaries, with one clause in one language and the other in another (i.e., one independent clause/sentence in one language and the other in another). In other words, the language flip occurs at sentence boundaries, which are the words or phrases at the start or conclusion of a sentence. This form of code-switching, for example, is most commonly encountered in fluent bilingual speakers.

Example 2.2. Sometimes I'll start a sentence in Spanish y termino en Español.

(Sometimes I'll start a sentence in Spanish and finish it in Spanish.)

(Poplack, 1980)

Tag-switching

Tag switching occurs when speakers insert a tag, such as “wow”, “yeah”, “you know”, or “I mean”, from one language into an utterance in another. Because there is little risk of grammatical norms being broken, this sort of code-switching is relatively straightforward and does not require a large amount of understanding of both languages.

Example 2.3. But I wanted to fight her con los punos, you know.

(But I wanted to fight her with my fists, you know)

(Poplack, 1980, p. 596)

In example 2.3, the tag “you know” was inserted by the speaker at the end of the sentence in English.

2.5. Function of code-switching

Gumperz suggested functions of code-switching, including quotations, addressee specification, interjections, reiteration, and message qualification. (Gumperz, 1982, pp. 75–79).

Auer (1995) states that code-switching primarily serves a social purpose. Speakers employ it to modify the level of social closeness or distance between themselves and others in a conversation. This function contributes to building interpersonal relationships and reinforcing social identity.

The literature review highlights key perspectives on bilingualism and code-switching. Bilingualism is viewed either as native-like proficiency in two languages (Mackey, 1970; Romaine, 1995) or as functional communication in both languages, regardless of fluency (Haugen, 1953; Hamers & Blanc, 2000). Code-switching, defined as the alternation between languages within discourse (Halmari), is categorized by Poplack (1980) into intra-sentential, inter-sentential, and tag-switching. These types vary in complexity and proficiency demands. Functionally, code-switching serves both linguistic and social purposes. Gumperz (1982) identifies functions such as quotation and clarification, while Auer (1995) emphasizes its role in managing social relationships and expressing identity.

3. METHODS

This research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses.

Qualitative research tends to give researchers rich, detailed and emotionally driven insights based on their personal views and the views of the participants. In contrast, quantitative data provides researchers with a broader and more robust view, from hard statistics. This is why Anderson & Poole (1994) favored a combination of both approaches, as they believe that they can maximize their strengths. Moreover, in Bryman's (1992) viewpoint, combining both approaches can reduce the potential danger from an exclusive reliance on a single research approach. However, authors such as Brannen (2005) and Anderson & Poole (1994) claim that integration of both can be problematic to researchers, as this may raise issues.

Quantitative research, in Kothari's view, is based on the measurement of quantity or amount. It applies to phenomena that can be expressed in terms of quantity (Kothari, 1990). Interpretation of the information, to some extent, needs to be evaluated through numbers, in Bhattacharjee's language, statistics driven the researcher (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

Data collection

As previously indicated, I gathered data from a Vietnamese show. The show aired on Vietnamese television in 2023, and the number of episodes collected and used for analysis are summarize in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of episodes and startups

Episodes	Number of startups	Length (minutes)
1	2	56.45
2	3	59:31
3	4	59:54
4	3	57:46

(Source: Created by the author, 2025)

In the preliminary stage, the first four episodes of Shark Tank Vietnam – Season 7 were downloaded from YouTube (2024) and

carefully reviewed. Each episode, lasting approximately one hour, was watched multiple times to identify and record instances of code-switching by the investors. The data collection process posed challenges, particularly due to the time-consuming nature of video analysis and the need for sustained concentration. To minimize errors, repeated viewings and detailed note-taking were conducted, ensuring greater accuracy and reliability in identifying relevant linguistic features.

Another challenge encountered during data collection was the difficulty in fully comprehending the investors' speech. The tonal and phonological differences between Vietnamese and English affected pronunciation clarity, making some English words difficult to interpret. This occasionally led to potential misunderstandings or misidentification of code-switching instances.

Data analysis

Exclusive attention was given to the speeches of the sharks, which were analyzed for research purposes. This task required a high level of meticulousness because any missed code-switches could negatively affect the research outcome.

While observing and listening, each instance of code-switching was carefully recorded and noted in a table created in Microsoft Office Excel. The table included labels such as number, words, time, type of code-switching, and source. This allowed the frequency of the sharks' code-switching between their native language and English to be tracked.

Next, a list of investor statements containing code-switching was compiled. Based on similarities and differences, all utterances were categorized into a separate table without labels, using only numbers. These classifications were then compared with Poplack's types of code-switching.

Finally, an attempt was made to determine why the sharks switched codes and what functions their switches served, based on the categorization of switching types.

Table 2. Investors (Sharks) code-switching times in each startup

Episodes	Name of startups	Length of time per startup (minutes)	Total length of time per episodes (minutes)	Code-switching instances
1	Seichou Machi ramen	16.17	56:45	16
	T-clean	19.55		11
2	Kalotoys	24.40	59:31	38
	Leather hospital	13.45		8
	Askany	14.05		26
	Riki sports	14.35		16
3	Sachi	12.05	59:54	18
	Enfarm	12.15		12
	Chillica	11.00		9
	Agricultural co-operative	20.55		32
4	Vegetable straw – Ecos	15.10	57:46	15
	Vietnam human resources company	14.00		12
Total			233:56	207

(Source: Created by the author, 2025)

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Frequency of investors' code-switching

Table 2 shows that the lowest switching rate was in startup 3 of episode 2, with 8 code-switching instances; investors of this type of startup switched every 1,68 minutes. On the contrary, this rate is highest in the startup of Kalotoys. In this show, investors switched codes every 30 seconds.

The main reasons for investors' differences in switching frequency are the theme of the startups and the background of the people calling for funds. For instance, in presentations involving technology, finance, or business strategy, investors frequently switched from Vietnamese to English to use specialized terms. This suggests that English is often preferred for its precision and brevity in conveying complex professional concepts, especially in fields where Vietnamese equivalents may sound less natural or are rarely used.

The first is the theme of the startups. Since the show is centered on the business field, investors' comments on startups were closely related to this domain. Certain words were frequently mentioned across four episodes, including "startup" (17 times), "offer" (13 times), "marketing" (10 times), "scale" (7 times), and "e-commerce" (5 times). Additionally, in every startup pitch, investors

negotiate an investment amount in exchange for a specific percentage, making the word "deal" one of the most commonly used, appearing over 50 times. In the case of T-Clean, investors not only used basic business terms but also incorporated industry-specific words like "NextTech," "Next Commerce," and "D2C," which are associated with NextTech Group's business strategy, e-commerce, and D-commerce.

The second factor influencing the frequency of investors' switching is the background of the entrepreneurs seeking funding. As company founders, they are all proficient in English and have studied the key aspects of developing both domestic and international business strategies. Therefore, having a strong understanding of English is crucial. This is reflected in the way many entrepreneurs present their ideas using English business terms such as "target market," "business model," "growth strategy," and "user engagement", even when the main language of the pitch is Vietnamese.

Another contributing factor to investors' code-switching is their social and professional background. Many of them possess extensive knowledge of business-related terminology and have founded companies with international networks. This global exposure and familiarity with English-language

business discourse contribute to the frequent use of code-switching in their speech.

4.2. Code-switching types

Table 2. Types of code-switching

Epis odes	Name of startups	Intra-sentential	Inter-sentential
1	Seichou Machi ramen	15	1
	T-clean	11	0
2	Kalotoys	30	2
	Leather hospital	8	0
	Askany	26	0
3	Riki sports	16	0
	Sachi	17	1
	Enfarm	12	0
	Chillica	9	0
4	Agricultural cooperative	31	1
	Vegetable straw – Ecos	13	2
	Vietnam human resources company	12	0
Total		201	6

(Source: Created by the author, 2025)

Intra-sentential code-switching occurred significantly more often, nearly 35 times more than inter-sentential switching. Investors frequently integrated English words or phrases into their Vietnamese speech. As indicated in the table, intra-sentential code-switching was consistently present in every episode, while inter-sentential switching was much less common.

4.2.1. Intra-sentential code-switching

This type of code-switching is fairly balanced throughout the show. Investors appear accustomed to incorporating English words or phrases into their Vietnamese utterances. The switches mainly involve commonly used English business terms, such as “deal,” “startup,” “marketing,” “build up,” “shark,” “online,” “profit,” “offer,” and “pre-money.” In my data, investors frequently repeated these words.

Example 4.1. Tôi đưa ra cái *offer* mới là 500.000\$ cho 12,5%.

I have a new *offer* for you, \$500.000\$ for 12.5% equity.

(Episode 3, Startup 4, 55:30)

Example 4.2. Hiện nay, các bạn chưa xúc tiến mạnh các kênh bán hàng *online*.

Currently, you have not strongly promoted *online* sales channels.

(Episode 3, Startup 2, 26:17)

In instances 4.1 and 4.2, the investors were speaking in Vietnamese but inserted the English words “offer” and “online” into their sentences. These switches served a specific purpose.

4.2.2. Inter-sentential code-switching

Example 4.3. I’m sorry, tụi em đang rất mới.

I’m sorry, you are a newcomer.

(Episode 1, Startup 1, 14:47)

Example 4.4. Tôi xin nhường cơ hội cho các nhà đầu tư khác. I’m out.

I would like to give this opportunity to other investors. I’m out.

(Episode 4, Startup 2, 34:00)

Although inter-sentential code-switching is typically used by fluent bilingual speakers, the two investors, Shark Phi Vân and Shark Bình, also employed this type of switching. Having been exposed to English from an early age, they naturally used inter-sentential switches when communicating with startups.

4.3. Functions of code-switching

4.3.1. Discourse function

Qualification in this part refers to people’s ability and knowledge about business field. In some shows, the investors use some switched words that are difficult to understand. These are specialized terms used in a particular field.

Example 4.5. Bạn có thể chia sẻ về kênh *GT* (*General Trade*), cơ cấu doanh thu, chi phí, lợi nhuận của bạn là như thế nào?

(Could you share about the *General Trade* (*GT*) channel, its revenue structure, costs, and profits?)

(Episode 3, Startup 2, 27:05)

Although the words “general trade” *GT* caused unintelligibility for audiences, the sharks’ utterance seemed more professional and authoritative. They show their deep understanding of the business field.

The investors on various episodes of the show used a variety of key words or phrases from the field that anyone working in the business area could comprehend. Table 3 has a list of key terms. The words/phrases are academic in the business field, although they are

not easy for everyone to comprehend. The code-switching in these situations has a strong impact in showing off the investors' qualifications, especially their wide knowledge. However, the startups or audiences, in some cases, may find it difficult to reach the speech's purpose.

Table 3. Major words in English used in five episodes

Field	Major words		
Business	– Deal	– Marketing	– Scale
	– Offer	– Investment	– Profit
	– D2C	– DEV (developer)	– GT (general trade)
	– Sale marketing	– website	– MT (modern trade)
	– Next commerce	– Shark	– Nexttech
	– Startup	– Build up	– E-commerce
	– Master Franchise	– Commercialization	– Logistics fulfillment

(Source: Created by the author, 2025)

4.3.1. Social function

According to Auer (1995), Baker (2006), and Hoffmann (1991), the social functions of code-switching can be understood as the roles it plays in shaping social relationships between speakers and in establishing or maintaining social identity. Additionally, code-switching can signal shifts in attitudes or relationships among interlocutors. However, in the present research, the investors' use of code-switching does not appear to serve the purpose of building rapport with startups. Instead, their switches align, to some extent, with Baker's (2006) findings, as they primarily reflect the sharks' attitudes.

Example 4.6. Wow. Vậy vốn điều lệ là bao nhiêu?

Wow. So, what is the charter capital?

(Episode 3, Deal 4, 9:44)

After hearing the introduction of a startup pitched by a woman from an ethnic minority background seeking an investment of 5 billion VND for a 15% stake, Shark Hung inserted the English interjection “wow” into his response. This reaction conveyed his extreme surprise, as the startup exceeded his expectations in terms of professionalism and direction. His use of “wow” expressed both admiration and excitement. Similarly, other sharks in different episodes of the show also used the English interjection “wow” to convey

the same sentiment. This expression is also commonly used by Vietnamese speakers in everyday conversations.

Example 4.7. Chốt. You guys are amazing. You are right. Yes.

Got it. You guys are amazing. You are right. Yes.

(Episode 2, Startup 1, 20:15)

When Shark Thái used the words “amazing” and “right” in his utterance, he intended to compliment the startup on its success in raising funds. The word “yes” at the end of the sentence, spoken with a rising intonation, signified his agreement.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings reveal that variations in code-switching frequency among investors are significantly influenced by three primary factors: the thematic content of the show, the characteristics of the startups featured in each episode, and the investors' sociolinguistic backgrounds. Investors frequently engage in code-switching between their first language and English, particularly during startup presentations. The use of English lexical items is often context-dependent and closely aligned with the subject matter of the startups, especially those involving international markets or advanced technologies. In contrast, episodes featuring domestically oriented ventures, such as

“Leather Hospital,” exhibited a lower frequency of code-switching. Moreover, individual differences in habitual language use and the investors’ expertise in specific investment domains were also found to contribute to the frequency and pattern of code-switching.

Concerning structural patterns, the analysis identified two main types of code-switching employed by the investors: intra-sentential and inter-sentential code-switching. These findings are consistent with Poplack’s (1980) typology. No instances of tag-switching were observed in the dataset. Functionally, code-switching performed both discourse-related and social roles. The discourse function was evident in instances of qualification, where the speaker’s attitude or evaluative stance was conveyed through the use of English. While the social function was not the primary focus of this research, it is suggested that code-switching also served to reflect the investors’ alignment with professional norms and social identities in the context of a competitive and globally oriented entrepreneurial environment.

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