

**Communicative functions and reasons for code switching :  
A Malaysian perspective.**

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**Abstract:**

*Though codeswitching research may vary from context to context and situation to situation, the common factors for code switching will be threefold. That is, code switching deals with languages in contact. In interactive social situations code switching will be the use of more than one language For example the interaction during various social events involving interlocutors who know more than one language. With these common factors of code switching this paper looks into the Malaysian context with special thrust to the various reasons involved for code switching during the social interactions. Data for the present paper were collected from the Tamil speaking undergraduate students of the University Putra Malaysia, Malaysia. Their interaction in different identified domains involving three languages viz. Tamil, Malay and English were looked into. Gumperz (1982) while discussing the communicative function of code switching, claims that the speaker plays upon the connection of the we-code to create conversational effect. Thus code switching is seen as fulfilling the relational and referential functions of language that amounts to effective communication and interlingual unity. Apart from this function of code switching ,this paper could identifies several other reasons for code switching in the situations under study.*

## **Communicative functions and Reasons for Codeswitching : Malaysian Perspective .**

Code switching is an everyday reality in every place where more than one language is spoken in everyday communications. Many scholars have studied extensively about the patterns of code switching and the reasons for code switching. The present paper discusses the communicative functions of code switching and also the sociolinguistic, cultural and pedagogic reasons for code switching in the Malaysian context. Data for the present study were collected from Tamil speaking University students who have enrolled as undergraduate students in the University Putra Malaysia, Malaysia. The data were collected from these students while they were interacting in different domains viz. classroom, university campus, family, market, neighborhood etc. In all these domains they have to interact with Malay and Chinese speakers apart from as well as with other Tamil speakers. It is observed that all the students from whom the data were collected are competent to a certain extent in Tamil, Malay and English.

### **Communicative Functions of Codeswitching**

Gumperz (1982) when discussing communicative functions, mentions the discourse function of codeswitching, also called the personalization function of language. A speaker plays upon the connotation of the *we-code* to create a conversational effect. Thus, code switching is seen as fulfilling the relational and referential function of language that amounts to effective communication and interlingual unity.

Halliday (1975) on the other hand, views code switching as fulfilling the *interpersonal function* of communication. Here the mixed language spoken plays the role of a mediator. In other words, it is the use of language to act as a mediator between self and participants in the communicative event.

In fulfilling the relational and referential functions, code switching is seen as the medium to convey both social and linguistic meanings. Gumperz (pg. 144, 1982) lists examples of situations created to convey meaning as given below:

- to appeal to the literate
- to appeal to the illiterate
- to convey precise meaning
- to ease communication, i.e., utilizing the shortest and the easiest route
- to negotiate with greater authority
- to capture attention, i.e. stylistic, emphatic, emotional
- to emphasize a point
- to communicate more effectively

- to identify with a particular group
- to close the status gap
- to establish goodwill and support

Karen Kow (2003) listed in her article a few possible conditions for code switching. Some of the conditions given are,

- lack of one word in either language
- Some activities have only been experienced in one of the languages
- Some concepts are easier to express in one of the languages
- A misunderstanding has to be clarified
- One wishes to create a certain communication effect
- One continues to speak the language latest used because of the trigger effect
- One wants to make a point
- One wishes to express group solidarity
- One wishes to exclude another person from the dialogue.

Kow suggests that from the list above, it may be possible to predict which conditions act on a particular sociolinguistic context for codeswitching, for example, when a person who lacks a word in English due to limited vocabulary code switches by using the lexical component from his/her first language instead of English. Therefore, the function here is to overcome the language barrier to meaning-making. Another example is a condition where the speaker, intending to express group solidarity, employs code switching. The function for the switch in this case is to establish goodwill and rapport. Similarly series of conditions can be established for the phenomenon of code switching depending on the social context.

Such communicative functions of codeswitching can also be listed according to the functions that they try to accomplish. Among these, the following ten functions have been described in the professional literature (Malik, 1994):

1. Lack of Facility
2. Lack of Register
3. Mood of the Speaker
4. To emphasize a point
5. Habitual Experience
6. Semantic significance
7. To show identity with a group
8. To address a different audience
9. Pragmatic reasons
10. To attract attention.

1. Lack of facility : According to Malik (1994), bilinguals or multilinguals often explain that they code switch when they cannot find an appropriate expression or vocabulary item or when the language of conversation does not have the particular word needed to carry on the conversation smoothly. He offers the example of “*Charan*

*Sparsh*” (touching feet) that does not convey the same meaning in the speaker’s code as it does in Hindi. The reason for switching may however be culturally conditioned and David (2003) notes that an alien concept often has a speaker switch to the language from which the concept is borrowed. For example, like the lexical item *social drinker* in English that is unacceptable in a Malay situation because of the simple fact that drinking alcohol is prohibited in Islam and the Malay-Muslim world does not have a word for it that is equivalent to its meaning in English. Hence, the phrase *social drinker* is directly borrowed and used as an instance of phrase level mixing as in the following example:

*Saya difahamkan bahawa OKS jarang minum, hanya seorang social drinker*  
[I understand that OKS seldom drinks, he is only a social drinker]

2. Lack of register: When speakers are not equally competent in two languages and when the speakers do not know the terms in two languages, then codeswitching occurs. For example, college students often code switch by moving from Hindi to English. In certain occupations code switching takes place in the speech of doctors, lawyers, engineers while they interact among themselves owing to the fact that proper terms in Hindi or in any other language other than English may not be available to them. As a result, they utilize the English terminology that they are familiar with. Thus, one can identify a great deal of lexical code mixing.

As David (2003) notes, it is vital for a courtroom setting in Malaysia that a specific terminology be used to refer correctly to an object or a character. The use of the exact terminology or vocabulary is important in this setting when the terminology plays an important role and has the potentiality to make a major impact on life and death, freedom or imprisonment. Therefore, whichever the code is that enables the speaker to get his/her exact meaning across will be the one that is acceptable to the interactants including one where language mixing occurs. The following example cited by David is to the point:

*Ujian alcohol telah dijalankan iaitu breath analyzer test.*  
[The alcohol test was conducted, i.e., a breath analyzer test]

The term *breath analyzer* is in English rather than in the matrix language, Bahasa Malaysia, simply because of its context-bound significance.

3. Mood of the speaker: Malik (1994) claims that usually when bilinguals are tired or angry, code switching takes place with a new dimension. This means, when the speaker is in the right state of mind, he/she can find the appropriate word or expression in the base language. Very often he/she knows exactly the word in both the languages (X and Y) but the language Y may be more available at the point of time when the speaker has a disturbed mind. Such circumstances may create a hurdle in getting the appropriate word or phrase in the language in which the speaker may be more proficient if he is not mentally agitated.

4. To emphasize a point: Switching is also used to emphasize a point. Gal (1979) reports several instances in which a switch at the end of an argument not only helps to end the

interaction but may serve to emphasize a point. She has taken an example from English/German code switching and stressed that switching from English to German is a means of adding more force to the statement. Meanwhile, David (2003) uses the courtroom environment to show how a defending lawyer uses dominant Bahasa Malaysia to start with and shifts to English to emphasize an important point to the judge that the accused had not committed any crime for 10 years.

*Sebelum ini OKT pernah ditangkap pada tahun 1975 dan 1986. There has been a 10 years gap since the last offence Semenjak itu OKT telah berumahtangga, mempunyai kerja tetap dan insaf”.*

[Before this, OKT was caught in 1975 and 1986.....since then OKT has married and has held a steady job]

5. Habitual experience: Malik.(1994) stresses the fact that code switching often occurs in fixed phrases of greeting and parting, commands and request, invitation, expressions of gratitude and discourse markers such as *Oyes* (listen), *you know* or *pero* (but), whereas Hoffman (1971) reports that in Puerto Rican homes, the mother gives short commands to their children in English, such as *Don't do that....* and the rest of the mother's warning will be in Spanish.

David (2003), in turn, cites an example of habitual mixed discourse in a Malaysian courtroom where the dominant or matrix language is Bahasa Malaysia:

*Kes merupakan arrest case atau kes saman?*

[Is this an arrest case or a summons case?]

6. Semantic significance: Malik (1994), Gumperz (1970, 1976, 1982), and Gumperz and Hernandez (1972) all stresses that switching at a particular moment conveys semantically significant information. It is a communicative resource that builds on participant's perception of two languages. Lexical choice conveys meaning during codeswitching. Gal (1979) reinforced this view by stating that listeners interpret codeswitching as an indicator of the speaker's attitude, or communicative intents and emotions as code switching is a tool for conveying appropriate linguistic and social information.

By the same token, David (2003) describes a range of speech acts like reprimands, directives, requests, and warnings that are conveyed by using different intricate strategies to show the semantic significance in certain specific situations. It is not only the lawyer who code switches, but also the judge. The example below shows how a judge shifts from Bahasa Malaysia, the national language and the official language at Malaysian courts, to English as a face saving gesture:

*Kenapa kamu tak setuju, panggilan pertama telah dijawab oleh BG Boy dan dah tentu Das mesti menanya di manakah BG Boy berada? Kamu tak faham soalan, saya maksudkan.....*

[Why don't you agree – Bg Boy responded to the first call and surely Dos asked where he was ? You do not understand the question, I mean....]

7. To show identity with a group: Di Pietro (1977) reports that Italian immigrants would tell a joke in English and give the punch line in Italian, not only because it was better said in Italian but also to stress the fact that they all belong to the same minority group, with shared values and experiences (cited in Malik, 1994).

8. To address a different audience: Malik (1994) states that code switching is also used when the speaker intends to address people coming from various linguistic backgrounds. For example, in India the television announcer often uses Hindi as it is the national language but also switches to English. Also, he often repeats the same in English for South Indians or Indian people who do not know Hindi.

Similar types of situations have also been reported in some other settings. Linguistic reinforcement often takes place even in courts, according to David (2003) where counsels tend to speak to a number of different interlocutors at the same time. During such occasions obviously they mix codes or switch codes according to the ethnicity of the addressee. One reason for such use of mixed languages is to address simultaneously persons from different linguistic backgrounds. Also, the speaker clearly distinguishes whom he/she addresses and what should be communicated. Hence, the speaker uses part of the sentence in one language and the other part in another language. In the example below the lawyer used a mixed discourse of English/Malay, and the part of his utterance in English is directed to the judge and the other in Malay is meant for the witness.

*Objection, ada dua fakta di sini. The facts of the chart sheet are clear; it is a clear indication of misinformation. mana satu nak jawab?*

[Objection, there are two facts here. The facts of the chart sheet are clear; it's a clear indication of misinformation. Which one do you want to answer?]

The code switch is important as the judgment is dependent on the argument of the lawyer

9. Pragmatic reasons: Sometimes the alternation between two languages is highly meaningful in terms of the conversational context (Malik, 1994). Gumperz (1970) also notes that switching may emphasize varying degrees of speaker's involvement. He reports on a conversation between E, a faculty member and M a social worker, who is talking about giving up smoking:

*An-An-an, they tell me, how did you quit, Mary. I did'n quit. I just stopped – I just stopped. I mean that it wasn't an effort that I made. Que voy a dejar de fumar porque me hace dano this or that, uh-uh.*

[...that I'm going to stop smoking because it's harmful to me, this or that, uh-uh]

10. To attract attention: Malik (1994) shows that in advertisements (in both, written as well as in spoken) in

India, codeswitching is used to attract the attention of the readers/listeners. In English newspaper when the readers come across non-English, either Hindi or any one of the other Indian languages, the reader's attention is automatically drawn to depend on the language background he/she originates from. A similar situation prevails in advertisements that involve audio and video output.

Analyzing codeswitching utterances in ESL classes in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, Canagarajah (1995) classifies the functions of codeswitching according to two broad categories, i.e., *micro functions* and the *macro functions*. Canagarajah's micro functions show how codeswitching takes place in the classroom for content transmission. On the other hand, he shows that there is an overall classroom management code switching that is better explained as macro function because it accounts for a specific set of activities, namely, classroom management. In short, macro function involves classroom management whereas micro function involves content transmission.

In view of the overlapping reasons for code switching listed by several researchers, when we investigate the Malaysian code switching context involving the languages such as, Malay, Tamil and English, the reasons for switching may be grouped into the following nine broader categories in order to avoid duplication :

- Authority
- Communication
- Conceptual
- Emphasis
- Ethnicity
- Interlocution
- Lexicon
- Psychological and
- Trigger

All the reasons can easily be accommodated in the above 9 categories and five of the following reasons among the nine represent the most frequent sources to trigger switching .They are, Communication, Conceptual, Emphasis, Interlocution and Lexicon (see Table 1.1). In turn, the other four categories may explain code switching behaviour to a lesser degree but are still notable reasons (see Table 1.2). A full reinterpretation of the sources cited earlier could then be simplified as follows.

Table 1.1. Most Frequent Motivation For codeswitching

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Communication</b></p> <p>to ease communication, i.e., utilizing the shortest and the easiest route  to communicate more effectively  to establish goodwill and support  one wishes to create a certain communication effect  one wishes to exclude another person from the dialogue</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Conceptual</b></p> <p>some experiences have only been experienced in one of the languages  a misunderstanding has to be clarified  habitual experience  semantic significance</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Emphasis</b></p> <p>to capture attention, i.e., stylistic, emphatic, emotional  to emphasize a point  one wants to make a point  to emphasize a point  to attract attention</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Interlocution</b></p> <p>to appeal to the literate  to appeal to the illiterate  to close the status gap  one wishes to express group solidarity  to show identity with a group  to address a different audience</p>

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Lexicon</b></p> <p>to convey precise meaning  to communicate more effectively  to negotiate with greater authority  some concepts are easier to express in one of the languages  lack of facility  lack of appropriate register</p>
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Table 1.2. Less Frequent Motivation For Code switching

<p><b>Authority</b> to negotiate with greater authority</p>	<p><b>Ethnicity</b> to identify with a particular group</p>
<p><b>Psychological</b> mood of the speaker</p>	<p><b>Trigger</b> one continues to speak the language latest used because of the trigger effect</p>

This reinterpretation of the sources denotes the pre-eminence of communication factors as source of code switched speech. Interlocutionary factors signal the importance of the participants for the codeswitching events with attention to literacy, status, solidarity, group membership and audience. CONCEPTUAL factors in turn show the extent to which concepts, their familiarity or lack of familiarity with them, may induce a bilingual speaker to switch; hence, conceptual experience in one or the other language, misunderstanding and semantic load do all contribute. EMPHASIS is attained by language switch in the sense that the use of the guest language or the return to the host language tend to single out what the listener should focus on or pay attention to. LEXICON, on the other hand shows the importance of words such that if a word is not available in one language it should so be in the other. The crucial features here are precision (of meaning) ease (of conceptualization), facility (of production), familiarity (with a given register [formal, informal]). COMMUNICATION is the most encompassing factor and stresses such qualities as ease, effectiveness, goodwill, communicative effect and in-/ exclusion.

Some less mentioned factors focus on the speakers in 3 instances and on the spoken word in one. The speaker may choose a switch to establish his/her authority, seek to bring his ethnicity to the foreground or merely feel like doing so for the mere pleasure of switching, as for the focus on the spoken word, it may be the last word heard that triggers the language selection of the interlocutor. Thus, keeping these reasons in mind, bilingual speakers experience strong motivations to move back and forth between their two varieties.

The following four functions of classroom management (Canarajah, 1995) have been cited in the literature for the Tamil language-based student allowing for the switching to English at some points:

1. Opening the class
2. Requesting help
3. Managing discipline
4. Teachers' encouragements, compliments

1. Tamil is used to prepare the class for the lesson by giving the necessary directions in regard to the arrangement of the room, whereas English is used for the lesson proper:

***T: piLLayaL, katirakaLai VaTTamaai pooTunkoo, sattam pooTaamal, ketiyaa pooTunkoo. Turn to page forty for today's lesson.***

[Children, arrange your chairs into a circle without making noise. Arrange quickly....]

2. Any kind of help students need in order to perform an activity are posed in Tamil, while the tasks themselves are performed in English.

**S: (reads) The red car belongs to // (to T) iteNNa, Miss, eppiTi colluratu, (spells) e-n-o-s-h-a?**

[What is this, Miss, how do I say this?]

The switch to Tamil in the utterance is different from the Tamil required in class. Thus, the class is able to keep track of what is being imparted.

3. Students switch to Tamil when they want to complain to the teacher about any problem with their classmates. Here, again, the switch to Tamil serves the purpose of framing these utterances as different from the ongoing pedagogical activities.

4. The teacher switches to Tamil to encourage a response from students. The switch performs an affective function.

***T: What is the past tense of "swim"? // come on. // enna piLLayaL, itu teriyaataa? Poona vakuppilai connaniinkal.***

[.....What, children, you don't know this? You told me that in the last class]

Meanwhile the functions of codeswitching for *content transmission* are four and have been cited (Canarajah, 1995) as below:

5. Reviewing a lesson
6. Defining a word
7. Explaining a concept

8. Negotiating cultural relevance

5. Teachers use Tamil to review the previous lesson. The switch in Tamil enables them to effect a smooth transition.

6. Teachers often use Tamil (usually a single lexical item or a borrowing) to define a new vocabulary item in English. In the example below the teacher's elaborate attempt to define the word fails in obtaining appropriate response from the students. The use of the equivalent Tamil word creates instant recognition.

**T: Reforestation. Do you know what it means? Planting trees again to make a forest. Okay? // kaataakkam. Reforestation.**

**S: Oom, atu paticcanaakal. Miss. )**

[.....Miss, yes, we have studied that.]

7. Code switching provides many different strategies for explaining and reinforcing the matters taught. In the example below: the teacher literally repeats the previous statement in Tamil. Although repetition can be considered an unnecessary redundancy, Merrit (1992) claims repetition serves a purpose similar to translation that helps to enhance clarity;

**T: When you form negative statements, you must use the word 'not' with the helping verb. niinkal etir marayilai rasanam amaikkeekkai not-ai tuNai virayooTai paavikkoonum, cariyaa?**

8. Teacher and student switch to Tamil when they discuss culturally relevant anecdotes, explanations or illustrations to clarify the class content. Here, its function is to achieve the target through interactively. An example is below:

**T: Today we are going to study about fruits. What fruits do you usually eat?// Inraikku niinkal viiTTilai enna palankaL caappiTTa niinkaL? Cila peer kaalamai coappaaTTikku paLankaL caappiTiravai ello?**

[....What fruits did you eat this morning at home? Don't some people eat fruits for breakfast?]

**S: naan maampaLam caappiTTanaan, Miss.**

[I ate mangoes,....]

**T: Good, mangoes, eh? maampalamenRaal mangoes.**

[Mangoes means .....]

It is important to note that when teacher poses a question in English, the class was silent, but when he/she reframed the question in Tamil, there was a torrent of responses. The teacher then uses this opportunity to introduce the English vocabulary items related to the lesson.

There are two additional issues worth mentioning in the context of codeswitching at the Jaffna schools, that is, socio-political conditions and socio-psychological conflicts.

As for the first, one notes that due to the intensified politico-military struggle for a separate linguistic state and the heightened Saiva-Tamil consciousness, both official as well as a popular Tamil is the common language used among the people. English is only used for official purposes. Students and teachers find it difficult to use English beyond the pedagogical requirements as this would violate the dominant attitudes of the community outside. As for the latter, codeswitching that is commonly observed in Jaffna is the only indicator to show that the society is bilingual. English is prescribed and the community realizes that the language is indispensable because of its international currency and status. By mixing the codes they are able to pretend that they are still using Tamil while claiming the symbolic rewards associated with English and codeswitching is the only means of having it both ways (Canagarajah, 1995).

A similar situation has been reported by Blanc and Hamers (1982) in their report on the English-French mixed code of *Chiac* that is motivated by the socio-psychological conflicts for Moncton (New Brunswick). Since the people there do not want to abandon their rural French-based ethnic identity nor be excluded from economic advantages of North-American English, they mix the two codes. Therefore, the pervasive codeswitching in the classroom, is motivated by the condition prevalent outside where English is used. Other Moncton functions where students learn the values behind the respective codes are how to negotiate meaning through code-choice, how to negotiate their identities and

## **Reasons for codeswitching among Tamil speakers at Universiti Putra Malaysia**

It is quite normal to encounter in any multilingual, multicultural setting various kinds of language switches, that is, changes brought about by the speakers' selection of one language over the other and for several reasons. Various respondents coming from different socioeconomic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds, when interviewed about their language use, would give different reasons for their choice of code switches and/or code mixes.

Table 1.3 below reveals the multiplicity of reasons for code mixing cited by the informants in Malaysian context. The main questions that were asked of the respondents in regard to their reasons for switching between languages had already been formulated by Lalita Malik (1994) when she identified 10 reasons in her own study. These reasons served as guide for the formulation of the researcher's questions. When asked what had motivated the respondents to switch, the researcher would quote from the recordings of previously encoded switched forms. This technique of data collection helped in retrieving the actual reasons for codeswitching from the respondents.

12 of the 13 respondents identified *habit* as the main reason for the switch. In other words, they felt that codeswitching was a normal practice in their speech as they were accustomed to this kind of language use. Habit formation is closely related to the psychological aspect of behavior. This is to say, the individual's habit formation includes the choice of language, the selection of lexical forms, and the use of grammatical structure and are idiosyncratic in nature of the person depending on the sociolinguistic environment in which he/she is brought up from early childhood. This has very clearly been reflected in the linguistic behavior of the respondents as they select a language for interaction and engage in switching codes.

Lack of topic-related vocabulary and also the lack of appropriate registers seemed to be another reason engaging in codeswitching for 10 of the respondents selected for the study. When interacting on specific topics, bilinguals seem to have difficulty in selecting appropriate words that suit the particular topical area. As a result, they tend to choose lexical items that are appropriate from the language where their repertoire is more comprehensive, that is, where the available register contains the lexemes they need in order to express themselves effectively. This results necessarily in a code switch.

Five respondents attributed the reason for codeswitching to the need of making a point, that is, to emphasize or highlight the semantic significance of a given word or a given topic in the speech event. These reasons may bear pedagogic significance because in many cases it is the use of emphasis or the intent of assigning importance to a word or a

topic that directly correlates with the extent of a respondent's knowledge about a given topic and his/her choice of language.

Two respondents stated the reasons for codeswitching as a means of identifying with a specific group, to attract the attention of the interlocutors when addressing a heterogeneous audience. All these reasons can be grouped together in the sense that the respondents have the tendency to identify themselves with the majority or with a popular linguistic group at a given point in time. This would enable the respondents to develop rapport with the group concerned. Only one person suggested mood and pragmatics as reasons for codeswitching.

In addition to all the reasons mentioned above, the researcher was able to observe a few other motivations for codeswitching during the time of the interview; during informal discussions with them or while observing in general the linguistic behavior of the respondents. Some of the reasons are: switching to the code of power in the linguistic environment just to show that the speaker has command over that language. In this context often Malay takes that role. Another reason identified was the use of the language of prestige just to show that the speaker knows this language. In this Malaysian context this language is often English. It may be noted that mostly when the speaker selects these languages with the reasons mentioned above the switching is in clause or phrase level because of their lesser importance, they are not discussed in the present section.

## **Conclusion**

Thus, it can be concluded that there are many reasons why code switching takes place in particular social contexts. The ability of the interlocutors who are able to speak more than one language fluently plays an important role during their interaction. The study has shown that the undergraduates have emphasized that habitual expression which is related to psychological aspect of behaviour as their main reason for codeswitching. Besides that, lack of register competence is also another contributing factor for code switching.

On the other hand, it can be noted that the sociopolitical and linguistic situations in Malaysia exerts pressure on the Tamil speaking community in its effort to maintain its own ethnic and linguistic identity. As a result, this emergence of intra-ethnic pressure on all members of the Tamil community forces them to use Tamil in all possible domains irrespective of their expertise in the language, whether or not they have acquired that knowledge formally. Therefore, one notes that even in a setting where English plays the dominant role, the strategy adopted by the Tamil speakers is to insert Tamil language elements whenever possible.

**Table 1.3. Reasons for Codeswitching (based on Malik, 1994)**

No	Respond	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7	R8	R9	R10	R11	R12	R13
	Reason													
1.	Lack of Facility	√				√					√			
2.	Lack of Registral Competence		√	√	√		√	√	√		√	√	√	√
3.	Mood of the Speaker			√			√						√	
4.	To Amplify and emphasize a point	√			√	√			√			√		
5.	Habitual Expression	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		√	√	√	√	√
6.	Semantic Significance													
7.	To Identify with a group		√					√						
8.	To Address Different Audience													
9.	Pragmatic Reasons													
10.	To Attract the Attension													

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