

**Mixing Mother Tongue and English: Exploring the Reasons and Functions of Code Mixing**

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## MIXING MOTHER TONGUE AND ENGLISH: EXPLORING THE REASONS AND FUNCTIONS OF CODE MIXING

### ABSTRACT

India is a multilingual country where code mixing is a strategy used by speakers of different indigenous languages. Mixing of the mother tongue and English is a common speech behaviour that occurs in the discourse of educated bilinguals. There are various factors that influence the use of English in a mother tongue discourse. This paper explores the various reasons for code-mixing, and the domains where a mixed code is preferred by Tamil speakers. The research design combines quantitative and qualitative approaches. The data for this study was collected by means of a questionnaire. The participants were students from different colleges in Tamil Nadu. The students were required to self-report their awareness of the frequency and purposes of using code mixing in different situations in their daily lives. This study was conducted on college students among whom code mixing is a practice. The results showed that the degree of code mixing depends on various factors such as amount of exposure to English, the medium of instruction in school and the frequency of language used in different domains, contexts and topics of discussion. This paper throws light on the fact that mixing the mother tongue and English facilitates communication and is performed for certain practical reasons.

*"The world is richer than it is possible to express in any single language."*

– Ilya Prigogone, Nobel Laureate

### INTRODUCTION

India has been a multilingual country right from the earliest times. And now English bilingualism has become an integral part of modern Indian consciousness. English is a part of most bilinguals' verbal repertoire. Indian speakers of English are primarily bi- or multilingual Indians who use English as a second language. It is used among Indians as a "link" or an "official" language. The last foreign language to hold sway in India is English, which to this day continues to play a prominent role in Indian life. English also became the language of the intellectual elite, a situation which has been replicated in many parts of the post-colonial world. Today, English is spoken by approximately three to four percent of the Indian population. In India, all of the speakers bar a lakh or so, have learned English as a second language. English has special regional status in India, and is an important unifying linguistic medium between the Indo-European north and the Dravidian south.

Code mixing is the intrasentential mixing of two languages (Kachru, 1978; Kamwangamalu, 1989). In India, switching involving linguistic units above the clause level is rare, hence the preference for the term "code mixing" in many studies. It is a more preferable term to describe the typical language behaviour of the average Indian bilingual. Code mixing between the mother tongue and English is a common practice both in speech and in writing, where the mother tongue is usually the matrix language, while English is the embedded language that is often used to better describe meanings, feelings and phenomena. In a bilingual or a multilingual society code mixing has become an important strategy for communication. Code mixing is done to achieve the communicative goal and to make conversation smooth among people.

The mixing of English words in the mother tongue is a pan-Indian feature. It is characterized by the use of a large number of English words in the mother tongue speech. These words may be nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives and even some structural items (Annamalai, 2001). The educated speaker of any Indian language uses English words abundantly when he speaks to another educated person of his own speech community. All the Indian languages seem to share the same range of conditions of the mixing. The mixed language is a product of language contact (Annamalai, 2001). But it has been observed that even the less educated or uneducated use a good amount of English words in their conversations these days. It is being noticed that there are many "borrowed" English words used in the Television and Radio in local Tamil media. What is the reason for this? 100% pure Tamil is not to be heard anywhere these days. There could be some English words that are difficult to translate exactly into Tamil but what about words for which equivalents exist. Why do we use English terms when the translations or equivalents are available? This paper will look at the various reasons of code mixing with English in a mother tongue speech and the functions that are served by code mixing. This paper will also discuss the role of exposure to English in propagating code mixing.

### **CODE MIXING: BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW**

Code mixing is a widely used communicative strategy. Code mixing is when lexical items and grammatical features from two languages appear in one sentence (Muysken, 2000; Bhatia and Ritchie, 2004). The sociolinguistic approach and the structural approach of code mixing have been dealt with extensively by several scholars. There are several factors that affect code mixing: linguistic, sociolinguistic and psychological factors. In the Indian context studies on the structural approaches to code mixing are more than the functional aspects of code mixing. The psychological aspect of code mixing has also been sparsely studied.

Kachru (1983), commenting on code mixing with English in India, said that it has been socially accepted as a mark of education or influence of westernization. This type of mixing ranks highest attitudinally and functionally and cuts across language barriers. It is a marker of modernization, socio-economic position and membership in an elite group. Annamalai (2001) re-emphasizes Kachru's view by saying that in India mixed language has prestige, since the amount of mixing corresponds with the level of education and is an indicator of membership in an elite group.

As stated in the literature, code mixing has several positive points about it. It has a role, reasons, functions, facets and characteristics. It is a linguistic tool and is an effective strategy for

communication. It makes utterances clear and understandable. Fishman (2000) emphasizes that the choice of language is determined by factors, such as participants, situation, or topic.

When bilinguals mix languages, there are several reasons and functions for which they do so. According to Bhatia and Ritchie (2004) there are several factors for code mixing such as with whom, about what and when and where the speech act occurs. They also remark that the participant roles and relationships play a very critical role in bilingual's unconscious agreement and disagreement on language choice. That is, whether bilinguals code mix or not depends on whom they talk to. Some languages are viewed as more suited to particular participant/social groups, settings or topics than others. They also postulate that social variables such as class, religion, gender, and age can influence the pattern of language mixing both qualitatively and quantitatively. Bhatia and Ritchie (2004) state that code mixing can also be done because of the topic of discussion. There are some factors that generate code mixing such as quotations, reiteration, topic comment, idioms and clauses. Quotation and reported speech also triggers language mixing. Language attitudes, dominance, and security determine the qualitative and quantitative properties of language mixing (Bhatia and Ritchie, 2004). As for the attitudes, the frequency of code mixing depends on whether a society considers code mixing positively or negatively.

Speakers may consciously or unconsciously use more than one language in a conversation. The use of code mixing in a multi-lingual setting is usually linked to factors such as age/generation, education, social class, the urban/rural divide and gender. Apart from all other aspects, social status appears to be the most prominent motif. Hence among professionals and particularly among the urban youth, it is a habit – whether consciously or unconsciously – to impress other people through a high level of sophistication, being “hip”, by switching from mother tongue to English or sprinkling English words in a mother tongue conversation.

## **METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS**

For the purpose of this study, 130 college students were selected randomly as subjects from various colleges from two districts in Tamilnadu. The data for this study was collected by means of a questionnaire, follow up interviews and observation. The participants were graduate and postgraduate students from different colleges in Chennai district and Tirunelveli district. The students were required to self-report their awareness of the frequency and purposes of using mixed code in their daily life. The questionnaire had 25 questions. Other than demographical details the questionnaire consisted of questions asking the informants to state their language choice, language use, medium of instruction in school, exposure to English from different sources and the use of Tamil, English or mixed language in different settings, with different people. The questionnaire also consisted of questions where they had to tick the reasons for which they code mixed. The speakers were between the ages of 17 and 22. The subjects came from two localities that is the student from Chennai district came under the urban category and the students from Tirunelveli district came from the villages and were categorized as rural.

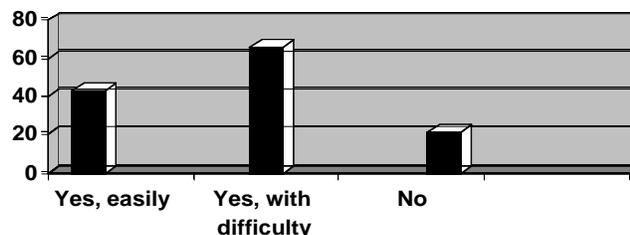
## A Note on Tamil language and Education in Tamilnadu

Tamil is a classical language and has a culture of antiquity. Tamil is indeed one of the world's great languages and that in it is expressed one of the world's great and ancient literatures. There are several attempts taken to preserve the purity of its language and culture. In Tamilnadu since the two language system is followed people are more exposed only to these two languages. The use of English language in administration, and as an educational medium in an English type school system quickly underscores the essential nature of Tamil language. Presently the vast majority of schools under the jurisdiction of the Tamil Nadu State Government use Tamil as the medium of instruction. English is also taught as a subject. A considerable percentage of schools have English as the medium of instruction.

Students were chosen from two different districts to check whether the level of exposure to English and its use differs based on the area of residence. These two districts were chosen because Chennai district is an urban locale whereas Tirunelveli district comprises mainly of rural surroundings. Chennai locality is a city district. This district is listed as the most advanced district in Tamilnadu. It is 100% urbanized as per Census 2001. Tirunelveli district is 48.03% urbanized and is referred to as South Indian Oxford. All the respondents had learnt English at different times: starting from LKG (nursery), 3<sup>rd</sup> standard or from 6<sup>th</sup> standard onwards. Some had studied in Tamil medium schools and some came from English medium schools. The English medium students had studied all their subjects in English except Language paper which was Tamil. The Tamil medium students, on the other hand, had learnt English as a subject and all the other subjects in Tamil. There were 53 students from Tamil medium and 77 from English medium schools.

The responses were fed in the excel sheet and analysed with the SPSS software. Correlations were established between the respondents' code mixing and his/her exposure and use of English in different contexts. The students were asked to state whether they can speak without mixing Tamil and English. The following is the response.

- Yes, easily=43%
- Yes, with slight difficulty=66%
- No, I cannot=21%



The students were asked to respond to the question - Do you mix English while speaking in Tamil? The response was as follows

- Most of the time-51%
- Sometimes-79%
- Never-0

This shows clearly that speaking without mixing is a difficult task. Another observation is that there is an increased use of English in more contexts, including personal domains. The students' responses show that there is a language preference for certain activities. To think and pray the language preferred is mostly the mother tongue. Mixed language is more preferred for an argument.

	Tamil	English	Mixed
Think	75	10	45
Pray	92	15	23
Argue	49	18	63
Joke	66	9	55
Count	22	71	37

Table 1: Language preferred for different **activities** (in %)

The topic of discourse also motivates code mixing. Other than technical discussion where there ought to be umpteen number of English words there are some other topics where the respondents stated their speech would be rife with English words.

	Tamil	English	Mixed
<b>Music</b>	54	12	64
<b>Fashion</b>	27	38	65
<b>Politics</b>	77	12	41
<b>Religion</b>	78	20	32
<b>Movies</b>	40	18	72
<b>Nature</b>	40	26	64
<b>Academic matters</b>	25	36	69
<b>Class activity</b>	12	30	88

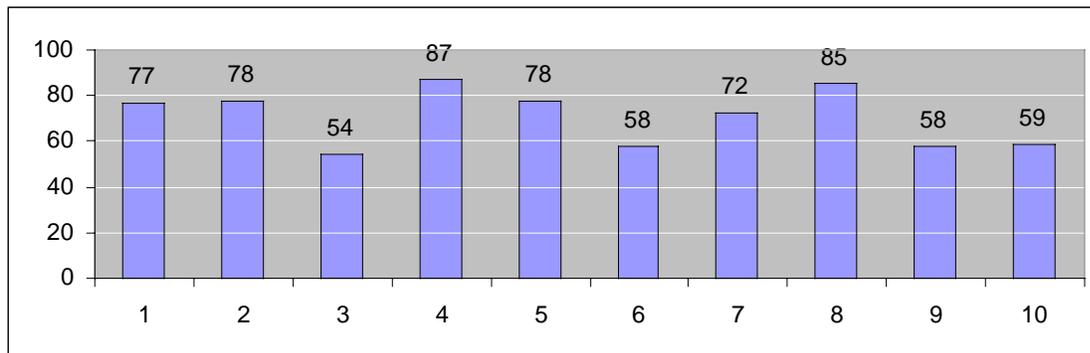
Table 2: Language use according to **topic**

### Reasons for code mixing

There are several reasons for which students resort to code mixing. Code mixing with English is due to the fact that English has more prestige says the literature. The study reveals that other than the prestige or status of English there are the following reasons stated by the respondents for which they code mix.

1. Don't know Tamil equivalents
2. Easy to express in English than in Tamil
3. Lexical inadequacy in Tamil
4. Some English words are easy to pronounce
5. Easily understandable in English
6. Prestigious to use English words
7. Habitual use of English lexical items

8. To gain fluency in English
9. Modern way to speak
10. Use of English is involuntary



The above chart shows that the ease of articulation is the highest ranked. It could be because some Tamil words are long and cumbersome to pronounce. In such a case the English equivalent of the Tamil word is preferred. For e.g.: One would prefer to say 'cycle' in place of *Mithivandi* and 'repair' in place of *Pazhuthupaarthal*. Similarly the responses show that English is preferred to explain some feelings and expressions as they are best understood in English than in Tamil. It is found in the study that students use mixing as a strategy to learn English. The process evolves from code mixing to code switching to fluency in English. The fourth highest ranked reason for code mixing is 'don't know Tamil equivalents'. This is because of the respondents' English medium education and high exposure to English. Even at home there is very little of mother tongue used, hence, the children don't get to know the mother tongue equivalent for lots of English words. 72% responses stated that code mixing was favoured because of the habitual use of English. For e.g. though many know the equivalent for 'bus' is '*perunthu*', they are used to saying bus than its Tamil equivalent.

Respondents also said that code mixing was involuntarily done that is without their being aware of it. That could be because of the recency and fluency of use of the terms so that their chance of popping up in the mind was more than their Tamil equivalents that are seldom used (Kanthimathi and Reddy, 2005). Prestige and fashionable way to speak are next in the order. It is trendy and stylish to speak a mixed language. It symbolises group solidarity. Lack of terms in Tamil is also an important reason for which respondents say they code mix with English. Tamil language will have to update its vocabulary to avoid the infiltration of English in its purity. Tamil seems to lack some expressions for modern scientific and technological items. The lexicon of the Tamil language is updated with the use of loan words or loan translations which are difficult to pronounce and remember. For E.g.: One would prefer to say train rather than *minthodarvandi*, which is too long, laborious to pronounce and difficult to remember.

### Functions performed by code mixing

The following is the list of functions performed by code mixing as cited by the students and also confirmed through observation and the questionnaire.

**Attitudinal functions:** The students consider mixing of English with Tamil a matter of prestige, a mark of education, urbaneness and sophistication. The speaker perceives that if he uses a smattering of English he can show himself as educated and broad minded.

**Register Identification functions:** In Tamilnadu, English is to an extent associated with the registers of science and technology, administration, education etc. for e.g.: *suddena transfer order vanthanaala yennal certificates vaanga mudiyala*.

**Expressive functions:** Code mixing is performed to express emotions, particularly for tension relief. English swear words are inserted, particularly for some Tamil words that are considered taboo. Similarly, English words of affection such as love are preferred more than their Tamil equivalents. The use of code mixing skirts the negative connotation associated with certain Tamil words.

**Directive functions:** The students said they engaged in code mixing also to direct their interlocutor's attention. The speakers want to direct his/her interlocutors' impression of him and want to show off his learning.

**Repetitive functions:** This function includes providing definitions of terms and expressions, quoting others, paraphrasing ones own words in another language. This kind of repetitive function was also observed in the language behaviour of the students under study.

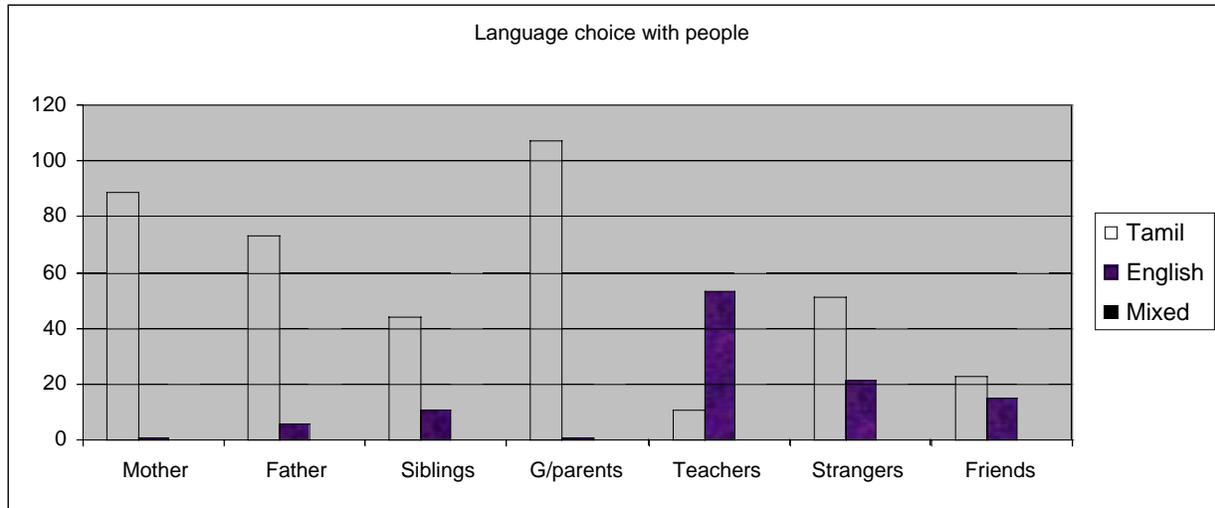
**Socializing functions:** When the speaker wants to signal friendship or solidarity to a group. A common reason for code mixing among people who speak one standard language along with another language in a more vernacular style is to use one of the languages for affective functions. The mixed language is emerging as a college lingo.

**Referential functions:** Code mixing is used to express referential functions in the following categories: lack of readily available Tamil equivalents, terms with which the speakers are more familiar in English than in Tamil. It also helps the speaker communicate effectively when the speaker cannot find appropriate expressions in the base language.

**Instrumental functions:** Mixing English with Tamil is also done for instrumental reasons. The youngsters as a matter of aspiration for a good living and of promotion of good education want to improve their English speaking skills. Teenagers tend to code mix to achieve proficiency in English. Now new opportunities overseas have helped to fuel the sense that English is a passport to success. And it is essential to have sound knowledge and fluency in this language.

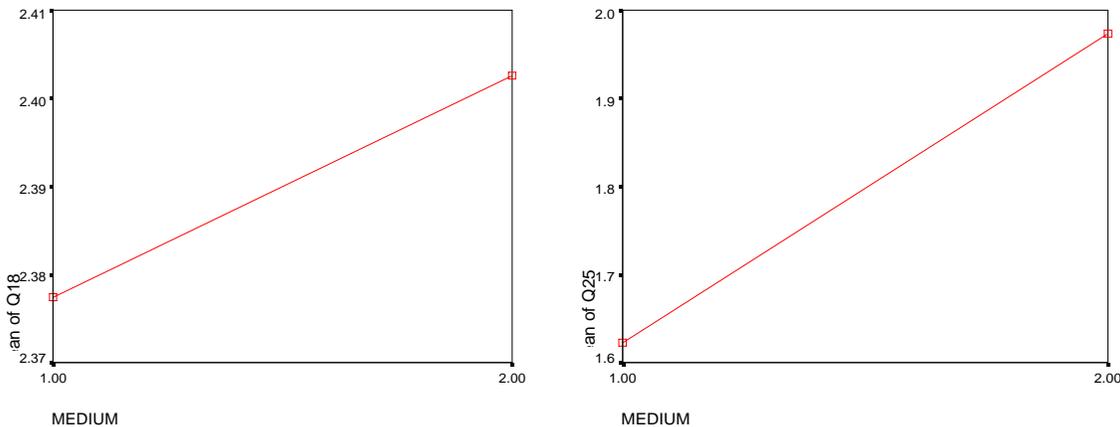
### **Role of Exposure to English**

There are some situational factors related to a society such as interlocutors, physical setting, that affect people's utterance considerably. It was found that the respondents preferred Tamil with their parents and grandparents mostly. But with their friends, siblings, teachers and strangers a mixed language was highly preferred.

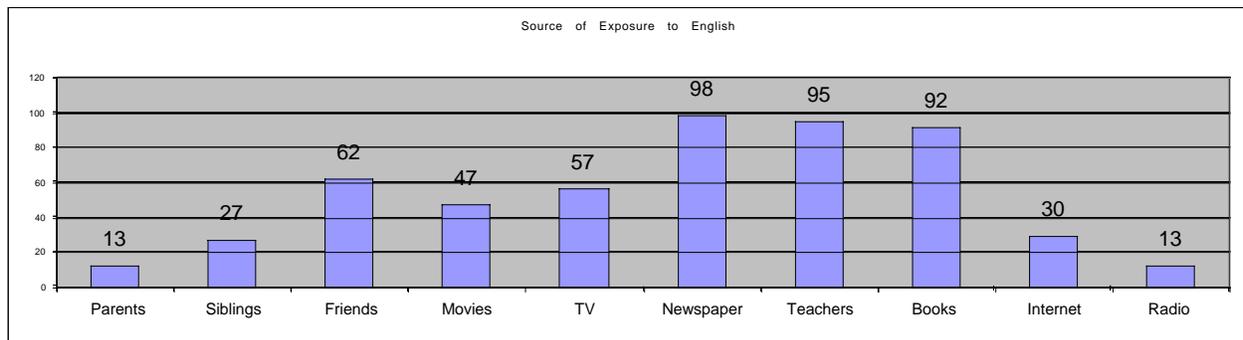


It is observed that students coming from English medium schools tend to code mix more with Tamil than the Tamil medium schools. Similarly it was observed that students from English medium schools in rural areas mixed English in a Tamil conversation comparatively lesser than their urban counterparts. Other than education in English students are exposed to English through various other sources such as media and family members. The reading of English newspaper was found to be more among urban students as compared to the rural students. Likewise students from urban localities claimed to watch more English movies and serials which was comparatively less noticed in the case of rural students. The language use at home also had slight disparities. Parents in the urban district were mostly educated and encouraged their children to speak in English even at home. So these students had more exposure and had the opportunity to use more English in many domains compared to their rural friends who had very limited exposure to English and very less opportunity to speak in English.

At the same time the setting where the respondent has lived for a long time, the medium of education received also influences the amount of code mixing. It has been observed that there is a strong correlation between the extent of code mixing, area of residence, amount of exposure to English and medium of education. It was found that students from rural background seldom code mixed than their counterparts who resided in the city. The results showed that students who studied in English medium schools code mixed more than those who came from Tamil medium schools. Similarly, the level of exposure to English through different and more media sources also showed significant correspondence to the amount of code mixing. An ANOVA was performed to check the correlation between code mixing and the medium of instruction. And there was observed to be a strong correlation between the two. The degree of code mixing was high in students from English medium school (coded as 2) than from those from Tamil medium schools (coded as 1). Question 18 and 25 of the questionnaire asked the informants to tick the frequency and degree of code mixing.



There are several sources through which the students were exposed to English and were strongly influenced by it. The chart below shows that the print media plays a vital role in providing exposure to the students. The use of English by various other sources and the students’ frequency of coming in contact with these sources determined the degree of code mixing. Exposure to English through different sources (like media) is also one reason for motivating the speakers to use English words more while speaking in Tamil. People are exposed to English lexical items through television or radio news, newspapers, books, television shows etc. Some English words that are simpler, easy to remember, oft repeated tend to stay ‘uppermost in the minds’ (Mackey, 1970:206) and get easily retrieved while speaking than their Tamil equivalents that are difficult to remember.



The study also confirmed that the more one is exposed to English through different sources the more it tends to get incorporated in a mother tongue speech.

### DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

In India, English has acquired socially and administratively the most dominant roles. The power and prestige of language is defined by the domains of language use. The legal system, the national media and important professions are conducted in English (Kachru 1986). The role of English is not replacive: it overlaps with local languages in certain domains (Sridhar, 1985; Sridhar and Sridhar, 1986; 1991). The Indian linguistic situation recognizes an exaggerated importance of English language. This embellished status is one among other factors that influences the choice of English code in a mother tongue speech event. Several factors are

responsible for code mixing. People sometimes code mix as a strategy in order to be better understood and to enhance the listeners' comprehension.

English has been making inroads into Asia as more and more people latch on to the language as a passport to a better future (Goh, 2004). English has even invaded the personal domains either in pure or in mixed form. The more frequently a language is used or heard the more it occurs in conversation. In India, the strong motivation to learn English has made it obligatory to use English in normal day-to-day conversation. The youth feel that if they speak the foreign language they can show that they are modern, western, sophisticated or civilized. Moreover, the attitude towards the English language has a strong role to play in the choice of mixing English in their conversation. The more often they are exposed to English the more it gets used when they speak in Tamil as they are uppermost in the minds.

Code mixing is inextricably related to factors such as exposure to language, area of residence, medium of instruction, amount of exposure through different sources, topic of discussion, interlocutor, prestige of the language, and the frequency and recency of use of a language. The results of the study seem to reveal these facts about code mixing among Tamil English bilinguals: (1) code mixing makes for easy communication because it is speech accommodating; (2) it is done sometimes for the prestige associated with it (3) Mixing of English in Tamil is happening because of the high level of exposure to English through various sources. This study has thrown light on the functions and the various reasons for mixing English in a Tamil discourse. This study reemphasizes, confirms and adds on to the functions of code mixing stated in literature by Fishman (2000) and Bhatia and Ritchie (2004) in the Tamilnadu context which are also applicable to most of the Indian languages.

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