



## Linguistic Alternation in Libyan Arabic: A Sociolinguistic Examination of Code-switching

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v6i4.1904>

**APA Citation:** Abdulhady, S. E. S. (2024). Code-switching: A Sociolinguistic Investigation of Libyan Dialect: A Case Study. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*. 6(4).509-522. <https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v6i4.1904>

**Received:**

24/10/2024

**Accepted:**

07/12/2024

**Keywords:**

Code-switching, sociolinguistic phenomenon, non-Arabic speakers, English teaching, communication, interpersonal skills, Libyan context .

**Abstract**

This study investigates the prevalence and functions of code-switching (CS) among non-Arabic-speaking educators at the University of Benghazi, with particular emphasis on how CS impacts identity formation and fosters a sense of belonging within the community. A sociolinguistic approach was adopted in the study, utilizing qualitative semi-structured interviews with a purposively selected sample to elicit in-depth insights into the types and functions of CS. Findings reveal that tag-switching is significantly more prevalent than inter-sentential code-switching, which improves social cohesiveness and interaction in bilingual settings. Participants strategically employed code-switching to create an inclusive learning environment, aligning with existing literature on the role of language choice in fostering student engagement. Furthermore, CS facilitates pragmatic functions, such as reducing tension and clarifying requests, while bridging language barriers with individuals of varying English proficiency. This article simply highlights CS as a significant social strategy that improves the educational process and fortifies cultural identification, suggesting its potential to be promoted inclusively in bilingual settings. The long-term impacts of code-switching on social integration and academic performance should be investigated in future research.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Learning foreign and/or second languages empowers us to communicate with individuals from different cultures. It is a type of knowledge that enables us to express ourselves and communicate with speakers of other languages. In terms of naming, second language and foreign language are terms that refer to additional languages other than the mother tongue of the speaker. The main distinction between the two is that a second language refers to the language that a person learns after his or her native language whereas a foreign Language is a language that is used in a country other than one's native country (Collins Dictionary 2023). For instance, English in India, and French in Algeria are second languages. Similarly, Spanish in India and English in Libya are foreign languages.

The official language of Libya is Modern Standard Arabic. Various Barber languages are also spoken. Yet, the majority of Libyans speak the Libyan dialect of Arabic, as their first language.

**Code-switching: A Sociolinguistic Investigation of Libyan Dialect: A Case Study**

Modern Standard Arabic is the language of instruction, TV news channels and formal speeches. Other foreign languages such as English, French and Italian are also taught at Libyan universities and international schools of languages. Compared to other foreign languages, English is a part of the National Curriculum in Libya. It is taught as a compulsory subject from the early years foundation stage. Learning English as a foreign language has a high priority and social demand. This can be seen in the widespread Libyan private language centres, schools and universities.

At the university level, teachers were recruited from Arab and non-Arab countries such as Egypt, Iraq, Sudan, England, Italy, Australia, the US, the Republic of the Philippines and India. The non-Arab teachers go about their daily lives; however, the majority of them live in monolingual communities. These teachers can be viewed as bilingual minority groups, as they sometimes have to use Arabic to facilitate a wide range of communicative and cultural functions. In addition to these two functions, Arabic is also used by the foreign communities in Libya to fulfil social purposes. Foreign teachers, at times, switch to Arabic when communicating with Libyans who speak two languages. Moreover, bilinguals alternate between two languages to fill a lexical gap. It occurs when a specific lexical item cannot be recalled, or for another specific purpose (Bassiouney, 2009). This process may extend beyond a word level or even a sentence level to achieve a social communication purpose. Accordingly, code-switching is a result of speaker activity in social situations. In other words, it is a language alternation that occurs when a speaker alternates between two or more languages. However, it is worth mentioning that not every bilingual person is assumed to have equivalent written and oral skills in both languages. Investigating the proficiency of the two languages of the participants, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. The current study aims to see if, like other bilinguals, non-Arab speakers in Libya use code-switching, and what their main reasons are.

Numerous studies have been undertaken regarding CS, focusing on language Arab learners and teachers' attitudes towards code-switching are of importance since there is limited literature on non-Arab university teachers' attitudes towards code-switching. In a previous study, the researcher investigated the use of code-switching among the department of English language and linguistics students, university of Benghazi (Abdulhady and AL-Darraj, 2019). This investigation analyzes code-switching from the standpoint of non-Arabic-speaking senior lecturers at Benghazi University. Although being one of the most significant social phenomena, code-switching can, therefore, be studied from a sociolinguistic lens. Sociolinguistics has frequently dealt with studying speech communities where more than one language is spoken.

Such a situation is called language in contrast, 'two or more languages will be said to be in contact if they are used alternatively by the same persons.' (Weinreich, 1954: 1). The sociolinguistic approach is adopted in the study, as code-switching can be better understood through socio-cultural analysis. Findings are expected to effectively contribute to the existing literature on code-switching, in particular, on a natural setting conversation in a monolingual society. This article has important implications on how psycho-social factors, background, and religious orientation shape the perceptions of those non-Arab speaking teachers, interacting with Arab colleagues, students, friends, and family members in Libya.

## **2. THE CONCEPT OF CODE-SWITCHING**

Code-switching (CS) is a linguistic term coined by the sociolinguist Gumperz (1982). It is the use of two or more codes within a conversation or even within the same utterance. The word 'code' originally originated from the communication technology field, in which the term code-switching refers to a "mechanism for the ambiguous transduction of signals between systems" (Gardner-Chloros, 2009, p.11). The term is also used outside the field of linguistics. Some scholars of literature utilise the term 'code switching' to describe literary styles that contain elements from more than one language, especially in narrative works.

Over the years, the term 'code switching' has been defined and interpreted variously by different scholars from the fields of linguistics, sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics. The original definition is from Gumperz (1982, p.59), who defined code-switching as "the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems". Similarly, Poplack (1980, p.583) pointed it out as the "alternation of two languages within a single discourse, sentence, or constituent". The term 'code switching' is also viewed as "an alternating use of more than one language" (Auer, 1984, p.1).

Like Poplack, Myers-Scotton (2006, p. 239), amongst others, defined code-switching as the alternative use by bilinguals of two or more languages or varieties of the same language in their conversation. She stated that code-switching is "the selection by bilinguals or multilingual of forms from an embedded language (or languages) in utterances of a matrix language during the same conversation" (1993a, p.4). Contone (2007, p.55) rephrased Grosjean's (1998) definition as follows "Code-switching is a complete shift from one language to the other, either from a word, a phrase or a whole sentence". He viewed code-switching as a sociolinguistic phenomenon that refers to the alternating use of two or more languages or dialects, and pragmatic and stylistic alterations at word, phrase, or sentence levels.

It is fair to say that most scholars shared the idea of the alternation of two or more languages when it comes to setting a definition for the concept of 'code switching'. However, this language alternation does not only occur when a speaker alternates between two or more languages, but it also happens between language varieties or two registers or dialects of the same language, in the context of a single conversation or situation (Hudson 1980, p. 56). Since code-switching is the method of shifting a linguistic item from one spoken language (L1) to another (L2). It may take place within a bilingual or multilingual setting in which speakers share more than one linguistic code. It occurs far more often in conversation than in writing. Code-switching and bilingualism are overlapped concepts, as Wei (2000, p. 16) states "when a bilingual talks to another bilingual with the same linguistic background and changes from one language to another in the course of conversation".

Despite having different perspectives, all definitions agree that a monolingual, bilingual or multilingual context must include a speaker, group, country, or activity/environment where two or more languages or varieties are used for communication. Code-switching has more or less become a universal phenomenon among bilingual and multilingual speakers from different language backgrounds or monolingual speakers from a variety of the same language in their conversations, as stated by some Arab researchers such as Abalhassan and Alshalawi (2000), Alhazmi (2016), Akeel (2016), Abdulmalik and Alsabri (2018) Abdulhady and AL-Darraj (2019). They also identified numerous linguistic and social factors for code-switching: filling a lexical gap, conveying emphasis, elaboration purposes, technical and socio-cultural authenticity, specifying or excluding one or more addressee from a conversation, or the lack of proficiency in L1, the easiest and most convenient way of saying something with the least effort and resources. Thus, the current study's primary focus is not only on identifying the types and purposes of code-switching (an issue that has already been covered in many studies) but also on uncovering the most frequent types of code-switching employed by the study participants.

### **3. TYPES OF CODE-SWITCHING**

Scholars such as Gumperz (1982) divide code-switching into situational code-switching and conversational code-switching. Situational switching occurs when participants redefine each other's rights and obligations. For example, teachers deliver formal lectures in the standard dialect but if they want to encourage open discussion, they will shift to the local dialect. It assumes a direct relationship between the social situation and code choice. Conversational code-switching, on the other hand, is the juxtaposition of speech fragments from two distinct grammar systems or subsystems during the same speech exchange. The alternation most

frequently appears as two subsequent sentences, as when a speaker utilizes a second language to either reinforce his/her messages or to reply to someone else's statement.

Poplack (1980, p. 581-618), on his side, gives division of code-switching into three types, namely intra-sentential switching, inter-sentential and tag-switching, which Milroy and Muysken (1995) call extra-sentential switching. Inter-sentential switching is the changes between sentences, one sentence is in one language but the next sentence is in another language. Intra-sentential switching is changing the language of one sentence or phrase. Tag switching is inserting a tag from one language to another one. Code-switching, in a sociolinguistic context, is also categorised as: competency-related code-switching, culturally related code-switching and communicative-related code-switching (Sauza 1991).

There is considerable debate about whether Sauza thought all three types belonged to Poplack and Gumperz's code-switching types, and if he did, why he thought they were all needed for the work to be a unified whole. There is nonetheless widespread agreement that at the very heart of the Categories are two systems of classification, one given in the Pre-Predicamenta, and the other in the Predicamenta.

The current study does not intend to dig deep into the theoretical base of the enquiries above to provide answers. It is confined to investigating the conversational functions of code-switching performed by bilingual speakers in their daily oral interactions from a sociolinguistic perspective. Furthermore, this investigation adopts Poplack's typology of code-switching as a foundational framework.

#### **4. REASONS FOR CODE-SWITCHING**

There must have been certain communication purposes associated which caused code-switching to occur. This study aims to uncover the attitudes of non-Arab university teachers towards the code-switching used with relatives, friends, university students and colleagues.

There are several reasons why people use code-switching in a conversation. The use of code-switching makes the conversation look more alive and interesting, especially when people use uncommon words and it will give the perception that someone who uses code-switching is an educated person. Sometimes, someone performs code-switching because they do not know either language completely. So, they tend to code-switching to make the information or the message understandable. Crystal (1987) cited in (Skiba, 2016, p. 1) states three reasons for switching from one language to another language. (1) To compensate for the deficiency: the speaker may not be able to express himself or herself in one language so he or she switches to another language or variety to compensate for the lack of proficiency in that language. As a

result, the speakers may be triggered into speaking in another language for a while. He suggests that this particular type of function occurs when the speaker experiences emotional distress, fatigue or confusion. (2) To show solidarity: code-switching is used to show solidarity with a particular social group, and a degree of comfort would exist amongst the speakers in the knowledge that not all present are listening to their conversation. (3) Expressive: code-switching occurs when the bilingual speaker wishes to convey his or her attitude to the listener while the monolingual speakers can communicate these attitudes utilizing variation in the level of formality in their speech. Baker (2001, p. 102-104) summarises twelve overlapping purposes of code-switching. (1) Code Switches may be used to emphasise a particular point in a conversation. If one word needs stressing or is central in a sentence, a switch may be made. (2) If a person does not know a word or a phrase in a language, that person may substitute a word in another language. (3) Words or phrases in two languages may not correspond exactly and the bilingual may switch to one language to express a concept that has no equivalent in the culture of the other language. (4) Code Switching may be used to reinforce a request. For example, a teacher may repeat a command in another language to accent and underline it. (5) Repetition of a phrase or passage in another language may also be used to clarify a point. (6) Code Switching may be used to communicate friendship or family bonding. For example, moving from the common majority language to the home language or minority language, both the listener and speaker may well communicate friendship and common identity. (7) In relating a conversation held previously, the person may report the conversation in the language or languages used. For example, two people may be speaking Spanish together. When one reports a previous conversation with an English monolingual, that conversation is reported authentically – for example, in English – as it occurred. (8) Code Switching is sometimes used as a way of interjecting into a conversation. A person attempting to break into a conversation may introduce a different language. (9) Code Switching may be used to ease tension and inject humour into a conversation. (10) Code Switching often relates to a change of attitude or relationship. For example, when two people meet, they may use the common majority language. (11) Code Switching can also be used to exclude people from a conversation. For example, when travelling on the metro (subway, underground), two people speaking English may switch to their minority language to talk about private matters. (12) In some bilingual situations, code-switching occurs regularly when certain topics are introduced (e.g. money). Spanish–English bilinguals in the South West United States often switch to English to discuss money. To sum up and not be limited, many factors affect code-switching, including solidarity, social status, topic, affection, and persuasion.

There are, no doubt, some drawbacks involved in the active usage of more than two languages, including negative language contact phenomena like code-switching, which has sparked the interest of sociolinguists in investigating the phenomena and its causes. However, this paper focuses on the sociolinguistic approach because it views CS primarily as a discourse phenomenon and emphasizes how social meaning is created in CS and what specific discourse functions it serves. It seeks to know the extent to which non-Arabic speaking teachers at the University of Benghazi use code-switching to ease communication and to fulfil other educational purposes during the teaching process. Also, it explores the reasons behind their need to code switch as classified by Baker (2001).

## **5. RESEARCH DESIGN AND PARTICIPANTS**

A qualitative research design was employed to gain a comprehensive understanding of CS practices. Semi-structured interviews were used with a purposively selected sample of non-Arabic speakers who teach English at the University of Benghazi and reside in Libyan society. This technique enabled the selection of individuals who possessed relevant experiences and perspectives related to the research topic (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Case study data is used to describe a case in-depth in real life comprehensively (Yin, 2012). Hence, qualitative content analysis was adopted, as it provided an appropriate and flexible method for analysing the text data of this research.

To minimise potential fragmentation and maximise contextual richness in the study, the inclusion of two senior lecturers, whose first language is not Arabic, was deemed necessary. These individuals were specifically invited to participate in the study to examine the extent to which code-switching is prevalent in their daily lives and to identify the most frequently used types of code-switching that contribute to successful communication. It is noteworthy that the participants have resided in Libya for over two decades, indicating that code-switching is more OR LESS TAKING PLACE.

## **6. CONTENT ANALYSIS**

The purpose of an interview is to explore, probe, and ask questions. In the case of this study, it is to elucidate the types and purposes of code-switching by non-Arabic speakers who have lived in Libya for a long time. To analyse the interviews for this study, thematic content analysis was chosen. Thematic content analysis is probably the most common method used in qualitative research. It aims to find common patterns across a data set. It is a “method where the researcher systematically works through each transcript to specify characteristics within the text” (Dawson, 2009:122).

**Code-switching: A Sociolinguistic Investigation of Libyan Dialect: A Case Study**

Code-switching is the practice of moving backwards and forwards between two languages or between two dialects or registers of the same language at one time. Linguists believe that people code-switch for many reasons, either consciously or unconsciously. The current study, therefore, adopts Baker's (2001) twelve overlapping purposes of code-switching, looking at the social and cultural functions of reverse switches from English and Italian (L1) to Arabic (L2) within Libyan society. These purposes encompass: (1) emphasising a particular point in a conversation. Participant B stated that she alternates between English and Arabic when she emphasizes important words in a conversation. (2) When a person does not know a word or a phrase in a language, that person may substitute a word in another language, as that often occurs in the work environment in which bilinguals use two languages to ease communication. Participants A & B agree that they switch from English into Arabic at work to make themselves better understood. (3) Words or phrases in two languages may not correspond exactly and the bilingual may switch to one language to express a concept that has no equivalent in the culture of the other language. There are many wonderful words that exist in the Libyan dialect which are perfect for everyday situations, but unfortunately, they just do not translate to English. Participants assert that some culturally-bound Arabic words such as 'Henna', 'Aseeda', 'Shermola', 'Tabikha', etc. do not have English equivalents. (4) To reinforce a request, participant A illustrates this point with an example drawn from her English literature class at the University, where she noticed several students were reluctant to share during a discussion on a novel. "ارغب سماع آرائكم" (*Arghab sama'a araykum*, translating "I really want to hear your opinions!") she replied, encouraging them. Her request became more relatable after she switched to Arabic, which made the students feel at ease and promoted a more inclusive atmosphere for conversation. (5) Repetition of a phrase or passage in another language may also be used to clarify a point. Both interviewees agree that they use code-switching in classrooms to ease communication, to become better understood and to express themselves as fully as they can. (6) to communicate friendship or family bonding. Participant B said that she switches between English and Arabic on social occasions such as weddings, Eid and when eating out. (7) In relating a conversation held previously, the person may report the conversation in the language or languages used. Participant B suggests the importance of this reason as she explained: "When reporting a conversation I happened to witness. I have to be accurate. Therefore, I try to repeat the words as I heard in that conversation". (8) To ease tension and inject humour into a conversation. Both participants have the same opinion about using code-switching to release tension among students during lectures. (9) To change an attitude or a relationship, the two participants stated that they start their classes by greeting



students in Arabic "صباح الخير, كيف حالكم؟" (Sabah al-khayr, kayfa halukum? which translates Good morning, how are you?). This helps create a relaxed and inclusive environment. They then switch to English to engage the entire class, recognizing students' cultural identities and fostering connections that lower barriers. This strategy not only puts Arabic-speaking students at ease but also encourages them to appreciate the cultural context, creating a more open atmosphere that boosts participation and collaboration. In response to question (10), the interviewers shared that by switching from Arabic (the majority language) to English (the minority language) during private discussions, they felt more comfortable addressing sensitive topics. For instance, Participant A remarked, When we discuss personal issues, using English helps us express feelings that are harder to articulate in Arabic. Pointed out that this practice not only strengthens their professional relationship but also enhances overall communication, illustrating how bilingual speakers employ code-switching to negotiate intimate conversations more effectively.

Code-switching can occur at various linguistic levels, including within individual words and sentences. These phenomena fall into two categories: insertion and alternation. This investigation uncovers a significant predominance of tag-switching over inter-sentential code-switching. Tag switching involves the insertion of language tags, such as "عرفتي كيف؟" (*Arefiti keif?*, meaning "you know") or "قصدي" (*Qasdi*, meaning "I mean,") from English language into Arabic, along with the inclusion of discourse markers like "تمام" (*Tamaam*, meaning "well, " "okay, " and "all right and religious expressions such as "الحمد لله" (*Alhamdulillah* which means "praise be to God"), for expressing gratitude and joy into a conversational context as articulated by both participants. The social purpose of this type of code-switching is expected to be fulfilled, and it might not strictly follow the grammatical rules that regulate the use of either language separately (Woolard, 2004). The two university instructors deliver lectures in the English language; however, when they intend to promote open discussion, they shift to the student's native language (Arabic). This practice implies a direct correlation between the social context and the choice of language code. In this case, the teachers' everyday communicative practices and social interactions within Libyan society serve as observable manifestations of this phenomenon. Consequently, the linguistic choices they make are shaped by their geographical location and the ethnic composition of the community in which they reside.

Code-switching, however, facilitates communication amongst non-Arabic speakers teaching English at the University of Benghazi and in the environment of northern Libya. Participants used CS to overcome the language barrier that separated them from their friends, colleagues,

family, students, and relatives—all of whom frequently had different degrees of English competence. This improves their entire academic experience by enabling their students to utilize their native language to explain concepts and participate more actively in the learning process (Genesee, 2008). Both participants were also better able to communicate difficult ideas and concepts because of CS, which guaranteed understanding and encouraged active participation both inside and outside of the university. Furthermore, it was discovered that CS improved interpersonal skills by encouraging rapport, cultural sensitivity, and sensitivity among study participants and bilingual speakers in Libyan

## **7. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS**

The analysis of interview data indicates that tag-switching occurs substantially more frequently than inter-sentential code-switching among non-Arabic speaking educators at the University of Benghazi. Tag-switching, referred to as the utilisation of language tags or discourse markers, fulfils various social functions that may not necessarily conform to established grammatical norms (Woolard, 2004). These findings correspond with studies suggesting that tag-switching often enhances social cohesion and facilitates more fluid conversational transitions in bilingual interactions (Auer, 1998; Poplack, 1980). Participants in this study articulated utilising code-switching as a strategic mechanism to cultivate an inclusive classroom environment. This is consistent with prior research that has highlighted the relevance of language choice in promoting student engagement and participation. For example, Garcia and Wei (2014) note that bilingual educators frequently switch languages to enable students to express themselves more freely, fostering a sense of belonging and community in a variety of educational contexts. The current research data confirm this view since participants reported that switching to Arabic during class discussions reduced students' fear and encouraged more open sharing of their thoughts.

The teachers' ability to switch between Arabic and English is a prime example of Libya's language diversity, which is shaped by a wide range of historical, social, and cultural factors. This dynamic mirrors the findings of Canagarajah (2011), who argues that code-switching is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a reflection of the intricate identities and social interactions within bilingual or multilingual communities to represent their complex identities and social interactions. CS plays a crucial role in overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers in the context of Libya, where Arabic is the dominant language and English plays a major part in academic discourse.

Moreover, the role of CS in enhancing interpersonal skills and cultural sensitivity among participants is particularly significant. Using Arabic phrases not only promotes clearer

communication but also shows respect for students' cultural heritages. This complements the findings of Wei (2011), who found that code-switching can improve relational dynamics by acknowledging interlocutors' cultural identities. Participants expressed that their use of Arabic during sensitive discussions or social events contributed to the development of trust and rapport, corroborating the notion that language is a key component of social identity. Additionally, the findings elucidate how code-switching serves various pragmatic functions, such as reinforcing requests, reducing tension, and incorporating humour into conversations. These purposes go with Grosjean's (1982) assertion that bilingual individuals frequently alternate languages to achieve certain communication goals. For example, one participant noted that switching to Arabic when requesting student input created a more relatable and comfortable environment, aligning with research that emphasises the emotional consequences of language choice in educational settings (Hernandez, 2009).

The study further shows that CS helps people communicate with friends, family, and coworkers who speak varied levels of English. This result supports the findings of Genesee (2008), who highlights how CS enhance people's comprehension and interaction in a variety of language contexts. Participants reported that permitting students to employ their mother tongue enabled them to grasp complex concepts more effectively, thereby enriching their overall academic experience. In conclusion, the results of this study highlight the multifaceted role of code-switching among non-Arabic-speaking instructors at the University of Benghazi. By contextualizing these findings within existing body literature, it can be viewed that code-switching is not only a linguistic phenomenon but as a crucial social tactic that reflects and strengthens cultural identity, builds community ties, and enhances the educational experience. The implications of this study extend beyond the classroom, indicating that code-switching can be an effective strategy for fostering tolerance and understanding in a mixed community. Consequently, more investigation is necessary to examine the long-term impacts of CS on social integration and academic performance in similar settings.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

Code-switching is an absolutely natural phenomenon. It gives someone the feeling of being more proficient on certain topics in one language or another. As a result, though, there can be some negative side effects. If you find yourself losing your ability in your native language because you have become unaccustomed to talking about certain things in it, that might be something you need to address. Also, it must be taken into account that for some people, code-switching is not just a fun side effect of being bilingual or multilingual. People might do it on purpose to hide their social identity, religion, or class. Whether that is good or bad in itself,

### Code-switching: A Sociolinguistic Investigation of Libyan Dialect: A Case Study

code-switching is a grey area and dependent on the circumstances. People, therefore, code-switch for a variety of reasons and motivations. But mainly, they do it for whatever reason; it just feels right at the time! The primary goal of this paper is not to present a specific method for resolving the problem at hand. Rather, it explores the underlying reasons for this issue within a specific contextual setting and highlights the pressing importance of collaborative endeavours to safeguard the integrity of this message. The investigation's findings are consistent with previous research on CS and emphasise its function as a communication strategy in bilingual settings. The fact that participants used code-switching emphasises how important it is to adjust to different languages in Libyan culture and classrooms. By effectively bridging language barriers and enhancing understanding, CS improves interpersonal skills and creates a supportive learning environment. It is suggested that code-switching functions similarly to other contextual cues found in the literature, making it an invaluable tool for bilingual speakers to use in their discourse.

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**Code-switching: A Sociolinguistic Investigation of Libyan Dialect: A Case Study**

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