ПЛОВДИВСКИ УНИВЕРСИТЕТ „ПАИСИЙ ХИЛЕНДАРСКИ“ – БЪЛГАРИЯ
НАУЧНИ ТРУДОВЕ, ТОМ 63, КН. 1, СБ. Б, 2025 – ФИЛОЛОГИЯ,
PAISII HILENDARSKI UNIVERSITY OF PLOVDIV – BULGARIA
RESEARCH PAPERS, VOL. 63, BOOK 1, PART B, 2025 – LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE

DOI 10.69085/ntf2026b157

# STICK WITH ENGLISH OR CHANGE LANGUAGES? THE ROLE OF CODE-SWITCHING IN THE AMERICAN DRAMA TV MINISERIES *POLITICAL ANIMALS* (2012)

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This article draws attention to two scenes from the American TV miniseries *Political Animals* (2012). The first scene is taken from Episode 1 “The Pilot” in which the main character, Secretary of State Elaine Barrish code-switches from English into Russian while conversing with the Russian Foreign Minister. The second scene comes from Episode 6 “Resignation Day”, wherein the Secretary of State code-switches from English into French during a brief conversation with the President of France. In view of this, I intend to explore the role of the two languages and their impact. My research shows that they both make an important contribution to the interactions that take place within the scenes.

***Key words:*** *Political Animals* (2012), code-switching, Russian, French

## 1. Introduction

In their (2001) article “Calculating speakers: Code-switching in a rational choice model”, Carol Myers-Scotton and Agnes Bolonyai pose the question “What is the engine that drives speakers to select one linguistic variety over another?” (Myers-Scotton, Bolonyai 2001: 1). Indeed, if speakers can express themselves in a language that is understood and used by others, why should they select a different one (ibid.)? According to Blom and Gumperz (1986: 424ff), for example, external factors such as a new surrounding may impact people’s language choices (as cited in Bleichenbacher 2008: 13). However, just as extralinguistic forces can give people a reason to code-switch, so too can internal influences, more precisely, people’s intentions (Bullock, Toribio, eds. 2009: 2; Myers-Scotton, Bolonyai 2001: 2). From this, we could deduce that speakers make the choice to code-switch into another language, as it can serve a particular purpose (ibid.). The aim of this article, therefore, is to analyze the use of

code-switching and the role of Russian and French in two scenes from the American TV miniseries *Political Animals* (2012).

## 2. *Political Animals* (2012): Plot

*Political Animals* (2012) is an American TV miniseries created by Greg Berlanti. The series stars Sigourney Weaver who plays Elaine Barrish Hammond, a former First Lady of the United States. Upon losing the election to her opponent, Paul Garcetti, played by Adrian Pasdar, Elaine Barrish becomes Secretary of State. Throughout the series, we see her handle delicate political matters while simultaneously trying to be a good mother and keep her family together and whole.

## 3. Methodology

As mentioned, this article delves into the role of code-switching in two important scenes from the TV series *Political Animals* (2012). The term "code-switching" has been discussed by a number of authors that are included in this paper (Saville-Troike 2003; Stockwell, ed. 2007; Bleichenbacher 2008; Spolsky, ed. 1998; Panhwar, Buriro 2020; Auer 1984). In addition to code-switching, the article also devotes attention to both politeness and impoliteness. For this reason, Brown and Levinson's *Politeness: Some universals in language usage* (1987) is particularly useful in clarifying important terminology. What is more, Jonathan Culpeper's *Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence* (2011) and his article "Towards an anatomy of impoliteness" (1996) offer detailed insight into face attacks and impoliteness strategies.

## 4. Code-switching

As a diplomat, Secretary Elaine Barrish speaks several languages. This article discusses only two, more precisely, Russian and French, which the former uses effortlessly when conversing with her political colleagues and counterparts. However, would her words have the same impact had she stuck with English instead of changing languages? In order to answer this question, we first need to focus our attention on an important term, namely *code-switching.* Put simply, code-switching entails the change from one language to another "within a single speech event" (Saville-Troike 2003: 48). A distinction also needs to be made between *situational* and *metaphorical code-switching*. The former takes place when speakers change domains or situations (Stockwell, ed. 2007: 12). This is further explained in

Saville-Troike (2003: 49), who states that situational code-switching is generally accompanied by a change of topics or participants.

Conversely, metaphorical code-switching takes place when speakers change their language in order to "add a special social meaning" (Blom and Gumperz 1986: 425, as cited in Bleichenbacher 2008: 13). We could, therefore, say that metaphorical code-switching highlights a speaker's agency, since by opting to switch from one language into another people can indicate social attitudes or claim group membership or solidarity (Spolsky, ed. 1998: 50). This is further reinforced by Gumperz (1982) who posits that metaphorical code-switching is deliberate because it communicates a symbolic message (as cited in Panhwar, Buriro 2020: 267).

## 5. Politeness: terms and strategies

Part of this research also focuses on politeness or rather its counterpart, namely impoliteness. For this reason, I have decided to look closely at each one of these notions in more detail.

Politeness, according to Brown and Levinson (1987), is a way for speakers to protect each other's *face* in communicative situations (Brown, Levinson 1987: 61). They posit that *face* is "something […] that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced" (Brown, Levinson 1987: 61), and that each one of us has both a positive and a negative face (ibid.). Our positive face refers to our desire to be liked and admired while our negative face signals our desire to do as we wish without having our actions restricted or impeded (Brown, Levinson 1987: 62). Unfortunately, our face wants are constantly threatened in day-to-day conversations because even a simple request or a piece of advice can be considered a *face-threatening act* (Brown, Levinson 1987: 66). Nevertheless, there is a list of strategies which we can use to counter such threats (ibid.). For example, if a speaker wishes to address their addressee's positive face, they may do so by using a positive politeness strategy such as seeking agreement with them or taking notice of their interests (Brown, Levinson 1987: 102). This, in turn, serves to create a sense of rapport and solidarity between the speaker and the addressee (Brown, Levinson 1987).

Alternatively, a speaker may choose to use a negative politeness strategy to avoid direct confrontation (Brown, Levinson 1987). In order for this to happen, the former can hedge their requests (Brown, Levinson 1987: 145). A way to do this, for instance, would be to use a modal verb (Brown, Levinson 1987).

While these strategies are meant to create and uphold a sense of thoughtfulness and discretion, there are times when speakers may choose to

be as direct as they wish (Brown, Levinson 1987). In such cases, they can do the face-threatening act *bald on record* (ibid.). This usually happens when there is a major difference in terms of power between the speaker and the addressee (Brown, Levinson 1987: 97).

Finally, *off record politeness strategies* are realized through indirect language use such as hinting or giving association clues (Brown, Levinson 1987).

## 6. Impoliteness

Even though politeness is an intrinsic part of our everyday conversations, the same appears to be equally true of its counterpart, more precisely, impoliteness. Unlike politeness, which conveys the speaker's wish to protect and maintain face, impoliteness occurs when a speaker attacks their addressee's face intentionally (Culpeper 2005a: 38, as cited in Culpeper 2011: 19). This may happen if the former enjoys a higher social status than the latter (Culpeper 1996: 354). However, impoliteness can also be used to restore *face loss* (Culpeper 2011: 205). For example, if a speaker offends their addressee purposefully, the latter could respond with an offence as well so as to counter the attack (ibid.). In "Towards an anatomy of impoliteness" (1996), Culpeper discusses his own impoliteness strategies which, unlike their counterparts, are meant to attack and damage the addressee's face (Culpeper 1996: 356). On the one hand, by making their addressee feel uncomfortable, or by using taboo words and profane language, the speaker damages the former's positive face (Culpeper 1996: 358). On the other hand, invading people's personal space, or condescending and demeaning them is considered an attack on their negative face (ibid.).

## 7. Analysis

### 7.1. Secretary Elaine Barrish vs. Russian Foreign Minister Viktor Porchov

**(Season 1, Episode 1 "Pilot")**

**Plot:**

In this scene, Secretary Elaine Barrish appears to be addressing a group of reporters while Viktor Porchov, the Russian Foreign Minister is standing behind her with his colleagues. Unbeknownst to the reporters, however, the latter sexually assaults Elaine, who is momentarily caught off guard. Nevertheless, she manages to keep her composure until the meeting is over. Afterwards, she confronts her Russian colleague and retaliates with a verbal threat.

**Elaine Barrish:** Did you enjoy the ass grab, Viktor? Good. Because the next time you touch me, I'm gonna rip off your tiny, shriveled balls and serve them to you in a cold borscht soup.

*(code-switches into Russian and says "I will f- your shit up. Do you hear me?")*

**Viktor Porchov:** Da.

(Berlanti, Berlanti 2012: 11:36)

Elaine Barrish's switch to Russian in this scene takes place immediately after the sexual assault which happens earlier. She opens the conversation and proceeds to issue a verbal threat against her Russian colleague in English when she suddenly code-switches into Russian. Her switch does not seem to have been triggered by any external situational factors such as the arrival of a new participant or a change from one topic to another. Instead, Elaine deliberately code-switches in the middle of the conversation. Even though she uses English for the initial part of her threat, the culmination appears to take place in Russian, Viktor Porchov's first language. This sudden switch renders the message even more effective and palpable. Thus, we could say that this is an example of metaphorical code-switching.

Elaine's switch into Russian can also be analyzed in terms of impoliteness. Indeed, the sexual assault which Viktor Porchov carries out at the onset of the scene can be considered an attack on Elaine Barrish's negative face, since the former not only invaded her personal space, but he also aimed to humiliate and degrade her. The Secretary of State chooses to counter this attack on her negative face with a verbal one targeting the Foreign Minister's positive face. As stated, the initial part of her attack takes place in English, but the last few "blows" are in Russian. By making the switch into her colleague's first language, Elaine manages to not only make the message more effective, but she also restores the face loss in a way that would not have been as successful had she chosen to retaliate solely in English.

### 7.1.1. Secretary of State Elaine Barrish and the President of France (Season 1, Episode 6 "Resignation Day")

**Plot:**

Earlier in this episode, the President of the US, Paul Garcetti, approaches Secretary Elaine Barrish and invites her to run with him as his Vice President in the next election. Unfortunately, the President's plane crashes on route to France. In this scene, we find Secretary Elaine Barrish conversing with President Harbin of France.

**President Harbin:** Madam Secretary.

**Secretary Elaine Barrish:** Madam President. Your country has mounted a heroic rescue effort and moved so swiftly. We're deeply grateful.

**President Harbin:** If my plane were down off Miami Beach, you would do every bit as much.

**Secretary Elaine Barrish:** With your permission, we have a team on the tarmac here, comprised of NTSB, Secret Service, FBI and Air Force.

**President Harbin:** Of course.

*(code-switches into French and asks "His poor widow … and the boy. How old is he?")*

**Secretary Elaine Barrish:** *(code-switches into French and says "Trevor … he's six.")*

**President Harbin:** The nation of France grieves tonight, with all Americans.

**Secretary Elaine Barrish:** Thank you.

(Newman, Weed, Petrarca 2012: 31:23)

The topic of the conversation in the scene above is about the rescue effort which France has attempted. Towards the end of their exchange, President Harbin code-switches into French and shifts the topic to Paul Garcetti's family, more precisely, his wife and son. Consequently, we could view this as an example of situational code-switching due to the change of topic, but it seems insufficient to do so. It appears that the switch from English to French also provides an air of privacy in which the two political figures could devote their attention to the late President's family and by extension, to the profound impact his death could have on them. Thus, this example of code-switching could also serve what Saville-Troike (2003: 57) refers to as an "exclusionary function". In addition, it also renders both President Harbin and Secretary Elaine Barrish more relatable and approachable. Hence, while the change of topic in the exchange above does give us a valid reason to see this as an instance of situational code-switching, the air of privacy it provides, and the way it portrays the two politicians makes it also metaphorical. This supports the notion that "the two types of code-switching [situational and metaphorical] […] are inseparable and support each other" (Auer 1984: 91).

## 8. Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to explore the role of code-switching in two scenes from the TV miniseries *Political Animals* (2012). The analysis above reinforces the prominent role that code-switching plays in both cases.

In the first scene, while Secretary Elaine Barrish uses English for the first part of her verbal attack towards Viktor Porchov, she selects the Russian Foreign Minister's first language for the last part. In so doing, she not only manages to make her attack and message more definite and memorable, but she also restores the inflicted face loss more successfully.

In the second scene, even though it is not the Secretary of State who is the first to code-switch, the use of French makes a strong contribution to the two characters' exchange. Indeed, it provides an air of privacy in which both the President of France and the Secretary of State can turn their attention to a matter which appears not to be discussed as much, more precisely, the late President's wife and son. Additionally, the air of privacy prompted by the switch to French also allows us to connect with the two characters more.

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