OTHER
PEOPLE'S
ENGLISH

Code-Meshing,
Code-Switching,
and African
American Literacy

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FOREWORD BY VICTOR VILLANUEVA
Other People's English

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CHAPTER 2

You Are What You Speak

Language Variation, Identity, and Education

Why is language choice important? What reasons are there for learning more than one language? Do linguists and educators agree on what terms to use for certain situations?

This Chapter Offers:
- An explanation of language choice as a part of identity.
- Some cultures' reasons for multiple language acquisition and the United States' views on monolingualism.
- A distinction between linguists' and educators' use of similar terms.

We all adjust our language to fit particular situations. We choose our words (and the ways we put them together) so that they will match our expectations of the situation at hand. Such linguistic fine-tuning provides listeners or readers with a context for understanding what is said or written. This natural language variation allows for different ways of conveying the same information. These different ways of speaking/writing carry "context meanings" that point to aspects of the context in which particular language variants occur. Thus one might come to expect that "I HAZ..." ought to be accompanied by a picture of a cat. These "context meanings" may refer to the mode in which language is transmitted. Thus the language one uses in a text message may differ from the language one uses when writing a cover letter for a job application. Linguistic choices can also make reference to the physical context in which language takes place; the language used in church sometimes varies from the language used in a courtroom (or a nightclub, or a classroom, and so forth). We can also use different forms of language to provide information about audience or addressee, including social status (Pardon me, Dr. Jones! versus Yo, Cindy!), levels of intimacy (Good morning, Mr. Smith versus Hi, honey!) or even how we feel about the person (Excuse me, sir versus Hey, asshole!).

In addition to all of these possible meanings, language variation is the primary way in which we transmit meanings related to our identity as social individuals.
CHAPTER 2

You Are What You Speak

We not only use language to tell people things, but also to tell people who we are. Knowing that others perceive us according to what we say and how we say it, we use language to shape the ways in which others see us. Consider the following Facebook status updates from two teenagers (who are brother and sister):

1. Great convo w/ L-Weezzy 😊 Noww just gonna figure out what to wear tomorrow & call it a night, but lmu while im up 😊
2. That pimp shit dude.

The updates were written by a high school senior and his younger sister, a junior in the same school. Although they say different things, the most striking difference is the style in which they are written. You probably don’t need to be told that the first one is written by the girl and the second is written by her brother. In addition to the emoticons (:D), she repeats the final letter on words (tomorroww), a feature of texting style that is used by young women as a way of conveying emotional engagement (Tannen, 2011). In contrast, the status update from the boy is comparatively short, uses underscoring grammar, and contains an obscenity. Because their writing styles contain forms of language that resonate with gender stereotypes, these teenagers are able to convey meanings about their gender identity. So, That pimp shit dude not only shows approval, but also lets the reader know that the author wants us to think he’s tough. Although one might see such gender display as extreme, these examples are not unusual for high school students. Indeed, we all make similar linguistic moves every time we speak or write.

In addition to serving as a way of expressing the gender identity of the posters, the language used in these examples fits our expectations for the context of posting one’s status on Facebook. Whenever we listen, we link meanings associated with the identity (and emotional state) of the individuals we hear with the context in which they are speaking. If someone is yelling, we decide if he or she is angry by comparing the volume of the speech with the distance between the person yelling and the person being yelled at. If the person yelling is several yards away, we would assume he or she was yelling in order to be heard. However, if the two speakers are standing face-to-face, we know that the yelling expresses anger. We make these sorts of evaluations every time we speak or listen, read or write.

The evaluations of the social meanings embedded in language are the center of human interaction; we learn how to make these evaluations very early in life. We also begin to adjust our speech according to situation before we enter school. In a study of preschoolers’ use of African American English across various situations, Wyatt and Seymour (1990) found that children adjusted their speech depending on the topic they were discussing, the person to whom they were talking, and the reason they were speaking (or “communicative intent”). The children used forms of African American English 47–53% of the time when talking with other children who spoke the dialect, but didn’t use any of the dialect’s forms when speaking with a White teacher. They used African American English forms 9%
Teaching Tip

Consider the following Facebook status updates. They are written by two teenagers: a brother and a sister. Which of the following do you think were written by the girl and which were written by the boy? What are the specific linguistic forms that lead you to decide the gender of the author of each example?

1. If you own a pair of lips, you can kiss my ass. Haha
2. Now I know why I fuckin’ hated school.
3. ‘-is trynna convince my momma to fosterrrr a dog from the fireee e ;)))))
4. You deserve it.
5. I LOVE FALL WEATHER ! -football game$ , cuddle weather , bonfires , staying outlate , jeans , hoodies &homecoming
6. ‘- Its not that I dont trust youu , I just believe in your ability to f##@* uppp’
7. Smile. Baby don’t cry.
8. Dudeeee , this fall is gonna be the best one by far if the weather can stay like this ! :)
9. I m supposed to be sleeping in cause I don’t have school , but im up doing nothing , all because I got hot under the blankets &my dog got outta the house again.. This blowss !!!!!!!! ‘___’
10. Bitch, you ain’t innocent. Lol
11. See. You fucked it up for all of us! Haha
12. That awkward moment when someone says ‘tell me about yourself’ and your mind goes blank ... O_o
13. Cold heart, Treat your feelings apart.

of the time when discussing the content of pictures, but used African American English forms 47% of the time when discussing the feelings of other children or responding to comments made by other children. In terms of communicative intent, the children used African American English forms 11% of the time when asking for clarification and used African American English forms 65% of the time when protesting or complaining. These results suggest that even before they enter school, children are able to adjust their language use to express specific meanings related to the context in which they are speaking. Given the range of context meanings associated with this sort of variation, attempts to eradicate undervalued grammar deeply constrain the means for expressing emotions, attitudes, and personal relationships.
SWITCHING, SHIFTING, AND MESHING: PATTERNS OF ALTERNATION BETWEEN LANGUAGE VARIETIES

As a linguist who studies Mayan languages, I often spend my summers in Guatemala, living with Maya families to conduct research on their languages. One summer, the family I stayed with had a 13-year-old boy named Pasqualito. Like many boys his age, Pasqualito would sneak out of bed to play online games like World of Warcraft. Usually, Pasqualito would talk to his older brother in New York on Skype while the two of them played a game together online. They would speak Maya to one another as they played because that's the language that marks their relationship as brothers. Of course, the other players in the online game did not speak Maya and Pasqualito would usually write in Spanish when chatting with other players. Sometimes, the other players would write in English and Pasqualito would ask his brother (who spoke English fluently) for help in understanding what was going on.

Eventually, Pasqualito began to learn English expressions that came up regularly in the games he played. Although he was able to recognize and even use English expressions properly, Pasqualito didn't always understand the exact meanings of the English forms he was using. Sometimes, he would ask me for clarification of forms he found confusing. One day, Pasqualito asked me if Americans thought cricket were inherently funny. He had come to this conclusion because the Maya word for cricket is *lol* (pronounced so that it rhymes with "bowl") and Pasqualito knew that English speakers tended to write *lol* whenever they thought something was funny. I tried to explain "laughing out loud" in Maya, but Pasqualito told me that he didn't really care about the details of meaning. He just wanted to make sure that it was all right to say "cricket" when something funny happened during a game. He wasn't particularly interested in actually learning any more English than he needed to properly interact online.

Even so, Pasqualito's ability to juggle three languages (Maya, Spanish, and English) simultaneously always amazed me. Each language had a specific "context" even though all three were used at the same time. He used Maya only with his brother and alternated between English and Spanish depending on the language of the other players in the game. Although Pasqualito's ability to type in Spanish and English while talking in Maya may seem extraordinary, his abilities are not at all unusual for people who grow up in a context where multiple languages are used regularly.

The dominant language ideology in the United States emphasizes monolingualism. We tend to be suspicious of people speaking languages other than English; we also tend to have negative attitudes toward people speaking undervalued varieties of English. Indeed, it is common for Americans to become suspicious when hearing people speak another language (see Lippi-Green, 2012). Are they talking about us? Are they plotting something? When Americans hear people using two languages simultaneously, they typically assume that the person can't speak either language fluently and is using one language to fill in gaps of knowledge from the
other. These sorts of reactions are not surprising, given that our understanding of language develops in a context where Standard English is privileged over all other forms of language use. However, it is important to recognize that our views of language are a part of a culturally specific view of how language works.

To recognize our own cultural bias concerning multilingualism, it might be useful to consider a case that might be the polar opposite of the American ideology: the Vaupés River basin that crosses the border between Colombia and Brazil (Stenzel, 2005). In the Vaupés basin, there are about 20 different indigenous languages spoken, and people believe that it is immoral for two people to marry if they grew up speaking the same language. Children are raised speaking their mother's native language (the maternal grandfather's language) until they are 6 years old. On a child's sixth birthday, parents begin to speak to them only in the father's native language. Thus all children grow up speaking at least two languages. Usually, children learn more than two languages. For example, cousins from the mother's family will speak different languages as well so that everyone comes to learn multiple languages. When children grow up, they must marry someone who speaks a language different from that of their mother or their father, so that every nuclear family knows at least four different languages.

The idea that you would have to marry someone who speaks a different language may seem bizarre, but for the people who live along the Vaupés, it is only natural. All cultures have some sort of prohibitions on who one can marry to prevent incest. We know that it is wrong to marry one's siblings or cousins. However, in societies with smaller populations, it is common to have relatives one might not know. The prohibition on marrying someone who speaks your parents' languages makes it highly unlikely that one would fall in love with a distant relative without realizing that they were related to one another. For the people of the Vaupés, the idea that someone would only speak one language is not only strange, but also morally questionable. If everyone spoke the same language, where would they find people to marry?

If the language ideology of the Vaupés seems strange, it is important to remember that our ideology of monolingualism is equally strange to those from cultures where everyone speaks multiple languages. The dominant view of bilingualism held in the United States has no real relationship to what linguists have found in studying how bilingual speakers learn and use multiple languages at the same time. Children exposed to two languages will learn both of those languages fluently. When people use more than one language at the same time (like Pascualito), they usually do so because they are exploiting the context meanings associated with each language (and not because they don't know one of the languages fluently). For people who speak more than one language variety on a regular basis, the range of possible context meanings that can be expressed is much broader compared to monolinguals. Each language has its own broad set of contexts and aspects of identity that a speaker may convey through variation within that language. When you add another language into the mix, the possibilities expand to include the possibilities from both languages as well as the meanings associated with being bilingual. Thus a person who uses Spanish in some contexts and English in others where they use both English and Spanish.

Because linguists are interested in how research on bilingualism tells us a lot about the way different grammars and languages in the same sentence, even the rules about how words are put together are also interested in how the overlapping research, the way that nature and nurture have progressed along different ways that researchers from different between languages. It will help us sort through the data and learn more about the ways that languages are put together.
You Are What You Speak

with being bilingual. Thus a person who speaks both Spanish and English might use Spanish in some contexts and English in others, but there will also be contexts where they use both English and Spanish in the same interaction.

Because linguists are interested in how grammar operates as a cognitive system, they are also interested in how individuals alternate between languages. Research on bilingualism tells us a lot about how individuals are able to move back and forth between different grammars. Bilinguals may go back and forth between languages in the same sentence, even though the languages may have very different rules about how words are put together into sentences. Of course, language educators are also interested in bilingualism and bidialectalism. Although there has been some overlapping research, the work done by linguists and the work done by educators have progressed along different paths. This has led to some confusion in the ways that researchers from different disciplines have talked about alternations between languages. It will help to sort out this confusion.

**A LINGUIST’S PERSPECTIVE**

For linguists, the general term for alternating between two languages (or two language varieties) is **code-switching**. In linguistics, code-switching simply refers to the process of moving from one language to another. Linguists distinguish between **intersentential code-switching** in which the alternation occurs between two sentences or utterances and **intrasentential code-switching** in which the alternation occurs within a sentence. This distinction is useful in studying grammar, but it doesn’t tell us much about the social aspects of alternating between languages. One early proposal for addressing the social aspects of code-switching introduced the distinction between **metaphorical code-switching** and **situational code-switching** (Blom & Gumperz, 1972). Situational code-switching refers to alternations associated with a change in context (situation), such as using one language in church and another language at home. Metaphorical code-switching refers to using two languages in the same context to exploit the context-meaning associated with each language. In metaphorical code-switching, one might switch into a new language to express specific emotions or to draw links between the topic of the conversation and the language typically associated with that topic. This is different from intra- and intersentential code-switching as either metaphorical or situational code-switching may occur between or within sentences. For example, if a group is using one language and someone who doesn’t speak that language walks up, the speakers may shift mid-sentence into the language that the new interlocutor will understand. However, it is often the case that situational code-switching occurs between sentences because cases where the situation changes in the middle of a sentence are comparatively rare. Because metaphorical code-switching involves more intrasentential switches, it tells us more about how speakers are able to move back and forth between two sets of grammatical rules. Since linguists are primarily interested in questions of grammar,
the term code-switching is more likely to refer to metaphorical and intrasentential code-switching. Thus, when linguists talk about code-switching, they are almost always talking about alternations between two language varieties in a single context, such as within a single conversation or in a single text.

A final term used by linguists is code-shifting (or language shift), which refers to cases in which speakers move from one language to another across time. For example, a monolingual speaker of French who lives in an English-speaking country might shift from speaking only French to speaking only English. In code-switching, the first language is left behind and may be only used rarely later in life. This is different from code-switching because speakers are making a single alternation (instead of going back and forth between languages).

AND THE EDUCATOR'S SIDE

As these terms from linguistics entered into research on language education, they were not used in the exactly the same way. For example, Wheeler and Swords (2006) use the term code-switching to refer to the use of one language variety in school and another language variety at home. This is, of course, situational code-switching rather than the metaphorical code-switching that I pointed out that linguists are most always interested in when discussing code-switching. Consequently, given their focus on situational code-switching, the traditional divisions between types of language alternation as studied by linguists are relatively unimportant in the discussion of code-switching by Wheeler and Swords. Thus, while in linguistics the default meaning of code-switching refers to metaphorical and/or intrasentential code-switching, for Wheeler and Swords the default meaning of code-switching refers to situational (and/or intersentential) code-switching.

Following Wheeler and Swords, much research in language education uses the term code-switching to refer to situational code-switching in which the home language variety is not used in school. In some ways, programs based on (this understanding of) "code-switching" could also be thought of as working toward code-switching because they work to transform speakers of undervalued varieties into speakers of Standard English (who presumably may give up their undervalued native language entirely). Thus research on "code-switching" in educational research does not account for cases of metaphorical code-switching. Indeed, reading this research might lead one to think that metaphorical code-switching doesn't even exist. Because the term code-switching in education does not regularly consider metaphorical code-switching, the term code-meshing was introduced to refer to cases of metaphorical code-switching and to pose a critique to the limitations of situational code-switching advocated by educationists (Canagarajah, 2006; Young, 2004). So, the patterns linguists refer to as "code-switching" are now called "code-meshing" in educational research.
and intrasentential shifts), which refers across time. For example, the Mexican-American code-switching style within the home. However, the basic patterns of alternation are the same regardless of whether the speaker is moving between two different languages or between two different dialects of the same language. There are, however, some important differences between language alternation and dialect alternation. Speakers often have very clear ideas about the differences between languages while the differences between dialects are often less clear. This is because the grammars of different dialects of a single language always overlap to some extent. In many cases, the overlap makes it difficult for learners of a second dialect to recognize which parts of grammar belong to which dialect, which may make teaching and employing situational code-switching confusing and difficult.
Another important difference between language alternation and dialect alternation comes from differences in attitudes toward other languages compared to attitudes toward different dialects. Because of prescriptive language ideology, undervalued dialects are often viewed as inherently inappropriate in mainstream, public settings. If we hear someone speaking Chinese in a government office, we recognize that it is a different language with its own set of grammatical rules. However, when we hear a job candidate for a Fortune 500 company speaking an undervalued dialect, such as African American English, a common reaction is to assume that he or she simply doesn't speak English properly.

Of course, speakers of undervalued varieties speak properly; they just follow a different set of rules compared to Standard English. But what makes this even more pernicious is that, given that English is a language with multiple dialects, rules of the various dialects will sometimes be hard to distinguish, even when speakers are engaged in situational code-switching. Therefore, a user of African American English who uses Standard English in a different setting may in that setting still be heard and received as an African American English speaker. So, the view of undervalued Englishes as "wrong" (or even "inappropriate") means that those speakers who come from backgrounds that use varieties other than the standard, even when they are attempting to use the standard, are often subjected to negative stereotypes associated with their native language variety.

Questions concerning alternations between different language varieties have been central in attempts to develop better approaches to teaching language and literacy. There have been numerous proposals involving methods for teaching children who don't speak Standard English. These proposals vary in terms of how they interpret and incorporate the findings of research in linguistics. In my next chapter, we will look at some of these proposals. Because every classroom is unique, knowing about different approaches can provide teachers with a range of possible pedagogies that might be useful in a given situation. In general, these approaches focus on resolving two specific problems: teaching the grammar of Standard English and challenging language prejudice that leads children to feel unwelcome in the school environment and later as adults in society.

What Are Your Thoughts?

List as many different dialects of English as you can think of off the top of your head. Then, beside each dialect, write assumptions or thoughts (dare we even say biases?) you have for each dialect. Discuss in groups why certain dialects are paired with certain stereotypes.