

Why Code Switching is a Valuable tool in One's Cultural Identity

Initially reading Young's "Should Writers Use They Own English?", I felt a raging sense of frustration engulf me as I desperately struggled to comprehend the paper. Reluctantly, I reread sentences several times over in order to decipher the main argument that Young presented throughout his paper. It was not the formatting of the paper, the authors or anecdotes that were giving me a hard time. It was the dialect that Young continuously used, and his strategy of "code-meshing" in order to get his point across. Code-meshing is the act of mixing your own dialect with the "professional" English dialect that is used today. This strategy is used in writing, and for Young, it is seen as a way to take back your own identity and culture that the encouraged American writing standard is seemingly taking away. For Young, code meshing is a way to "add flavor and style" into writing, as opposed to code switching, which encourages the separation of dialects and the banishment of personality in writing in the name of "professionalism" (Young, 114). For Young, this process of code meshing seems to come easily, as this is a dialect that he is comfortable in working with. For me, however, this dialect presented a major literacy learning curve.

While reading, I recognized Young's dialect as one that I am very comfortable in within my own lifestyle. Phrases such as "they own" or "my man" in reference to ownership or relation to a person, is a lingual habit that is used very often with my friends and close family as well. Usually with this type of dialect, I am comfortable hearing or conversing with it, but as I read Young's piece, I realized that I have little to no experience actually reading it. Realizing the limitations on my own dialect, I partially agree with Young's point of view. These educational writing limits on dialect can help emphasize the superiority of one standard dialect over another,

seemingly blurring over the cultural importance every dialect has in promoting a person's own individuality, and therefore their own identity in writing. However, the adaptable tactics that stem from these limits, such as code-switching, can also be dangerously useful in the liberation of various speakers from the societal constraints of speaking a non-standard, nor desired English dialect.

With Young's introduction of code-meshing, he contrasts the ideas of Stanley Fish, an American language critic and scholar, from his own perspectives on the standard English in writing. Young openly condemns Fish's perspective that "don't no student have a rite to they own language if that language make them 'vulnerable to prejudice'", as he states Fish is trying to "take the nation back to a time when we were less tolerant of linguistic and racial differences" (Young, 110). Young swiftly contradicts Fish's ideology with his argument that "nobody's language, dialect, or style make them 'vulnerable to prejudice'. It's ATTITUDES" (Young, 110). Young is not talking about the attitude of the writer, but rather, the attitude of the people around them. It is the idea that the societal pressure to directly tie a standard language dialect to respect in society, is also what makes people with different dialects subject to prejudice. With this statement, Young forces the reader to think about their own participation into this language hierarchy, and consequently, I begin to think of my own.

Being accustomed to code-switching for so long, it is almost hard for me to accept the racial and social reality that I have conformed myself to. Reading my family's WhatsApp texts engrossed me into a feeling of serenity, as I forgot how relaxing it is to comfortably converse in my own dialect. With greetings such as "Good morning beautiful family", I am reminded of the beauty of my family's own Caribbean background and culture. With birthday wishes comes "Much Love" and "birthday blessings", I am subtly reminded to spread familial love

unconditionally because every day is a blessing and gift that may not always be received. In these messages, I am comfortable, and reminded of my culture and all the love that surrounds it. However, this feeling of love and serenity is something that cannot and will not always be shared. Contradictory to Young, I safely guard my dialect because I see it as a delicate safekeeping of my culture. And with this cultural security, I use code-switching as my weapon to defend and shelter my own identity.

Not everyone will get the slang or AAVE that I use, and with that knowledge I take pride in it. Code-switching is a way for me to connect with others on different levels, without having to reveal every single part of myself or my culture, especially to those I may not find worthy enough to appreciate it. Only my close friends and family know of my relaxed tongue when speaking, and my flamboyant tone of voice in the duration of our valued conversations. I reveal my most authentic self through my sacred dialect, and only to those who can relate to it and understand it. I am most relieved when I do not have to explain myself, or the intentions of my words. The very act that I am guilty of and that Young claims continues the stigma around a “perfect” standard English, is the one that makes me feel the most liberated from those societal constraints of my dialect.

When such code-switching is done flawlessly enough, it leaves a distinction of various types of dialects between one person. This is something that code-meshing cannot do. Jamila Lyiscott emphasizes the unique usefulness of code-switching, especially in society today, where the social constraints put on a dialect are still increasingly present. Lyiscott demonstrates her ability to comfortably switch between dialects with different groups of people as this is what makes her “articulate” (Lyiscott, 00:21-00:23, 01:16-01:20). However, with this skill, Lyiscott also talks about the duality of her own identity. The ability to not only “switch”, but to have the

power to mix dialects in different environments makes her language and knowledge of her own identity significantly more valuable in the society that shames her for it. Lyiscott sees herself as a “tri-lingual orator” (Lyiscott, 02:33-02:35), as with her literacy in various dialects, she has the keys to access many different cultures and people that are hidden to those who do not have her ability. Without various dialects, there is no ability to reach a group of people on a deeper level, as it limits the ways of profound discourse.

This social limitation is also shown in the workplace. Curly hair styles, corn rows, and braids are seen as “unprofessional” and undesirable within the workplace. As Lyiscott describes it, “so unless you’ve seen it rob a bank stop calling my hair bad” (Lyiscott, 03:27-03:31) and “don’t call it good unless your hair is known for donating to charity” (Lyiscott, 03:35-03:37). Lyiscott chooses to call upon the danger of perceptions, as they even begin to distort the meaning and value of words in language. The word “good” and “bad” in relation to hair is used so often based on perception, that the common meaning of the word becomes transformed. These words are now used in a perceptive rather than literal sense, pushing language as a tool to define physical and verbal societal “norms”.

This linguistic trend is also seen within my own direct family. My mother cringes whenever my brothers and I use “wyd?” instead of “what are you doing?”, or “imma” in place of “I am going to” in texting. For her, using these abbreviations and slang when conversing with her through text is a sign of disrespect, as she constantly reminds us that she is not “one of our friends”. My mother prefers to write in a more “standard” English dialect, yet freely converses in her own dialects verbally when with family. As a teacher, she has been exposed multiple times to the rules of dialect, and what is seen as professional and unprofessional. This presents another type of code-switching, but rather, through mediums. My mother’s distinct separation of dialects

through mediums shows the durable, unforgettable tie of one's dialect to their identity. So, even though a standard of dialect is forced through the education system, code-switching has various types of practices that are so frequently exercised, it is unrealistic to tell people to "code-mesh" in place of these practices, as it threatens their comfort, and even ways of expression.

The ability to separate, mesh, and interchange dialects is what liberates a person from the social constraints and stigma around their dialect. For Young, he forces the idea of "code-meshing" over any of these tactics, failing to realize how many forms there can be of code-switching, and how for some people, it is a way to separate their audiences through a filter of communication, and therefore a level of connection. Lyiscott presents this with her versions of "articulate", and I present this with my way of using code-switching to limit the groups of people I connect with on a deeper level. For my mother, she does this through choosing which methods of communication she wants to practice her dialect in, regardless of the education system that forces one "standard" dialect. At first glance, the idea of code-switching may seem like a way to enforce the separation of identities, as Young hints at, but it also can be a very useful tool in the guarding of one's culture, dialect, and identity. If used naturally, code-switching can actually emphasize the uniqueness and importance of one's culture and identity, as it ultimately protects its authenticity by not being sculpted to be shared universally.

Works Cited

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Dear Reader,

This paper came a lot easier to me, especially because I could relate to the topic more. The purpose of this essay was to make the reader understand the complexity of code-switching, and how for some people, it can be more beneficial in safeguarding their identity, rather than separating and diminishing it like Young argued. I wanted to emphasize the importance of code-switching, especially for my family, and contrast that with Young's perspective on the linguistic strategy. The strengths of my essay are definitely the examples that I pulled, either from Young, Lyiscott, or my own experiences, I think I did a good job connecting my examples into my main ideas in the topic. The problems with it are probably the conceptual limits based on page requirements. I wanted to be as clear and in depth with my presented ideas, but I was also limited with the page limit, so I don't know if my essay goes as much in depth as I would like it to. The challenges I encountered and from previous advice, was organizing my thoughts well in the essay. From my previous paper, that was a problem, so I made sure to plan out my main ideas on paper first to make sure my ideas and examples in the essay were more neatly expressed. What is still nagging me about this paper is the page limit. I had a lot of ideas, and I feel like I organized them well to the best of my ability, but it nags me that I could not completely, deeply analyze every idea that I had or presented within the paper. I feel like if I came back to it, I would probably add some more examples to present the duality of code-switching, but also pull more examples to go into how unrealistic code-meshing can be. I want to make sure that you (the reader) not only understands my perspective on code-switching, but I force you to think about what strategy, if any, do you resonate most with in preserving your own identity.