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Source: *JAC*, Vol. 29, No. 1/2 (2009), pp. 49-76
Published by: JAC
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/20866886
Accessed: 10-07-2017 17:35 UTC

"Nah, We Straight":
An Argument Against Code Switching

Vershawn Ashanti Young

President Barack Obama garners as much media attention for his embodied performance of black culture as he does for being America's first national leader of African descent. Comments about his swagger, his growing affinity for Hip Hop, and especially his public use of African American English (hereafter AAE), swiftly travel the airwaves and Internet. The primary title of this essay is excerpted, in fact, from a popular YouTube video that features a dialogue between Obama and a waitress at a pre-inaugural lunchtime stop at Ben's Chili Bowl, a popular diner in Washington, D.C. In a crowded room, over the voices of people from many different races, the waitress asks Obama if he wants the change from the twenty dollar bill he'd given her. "Nah, we straight," he replies (Henderson).

I do not intend this opening example to suggest that I will conduct a sociolinguistic analysis of Obama's speech habits, nor do I wish to indicate that this essay is mostly about him. Instead I forefront Obama's undeniable use of AAE in the mainstream public to exemplify my primary argument—an argument against code switching. Code switching may be defined as the use of more than one language or language variety concurrently in conversation (Auer). Spanglish, the simultaneous linguistic production of Spanish and English in the same discourse, is an example of this kind of code switching. Spanglish, according to writer Santiago Vaquera-Vásquez, is "not that game played in that translation of the first chapter of *don Quixote*.... Spanglish is not inserting words here y there, a veces inserting certain jerga to give it that toque nice y cool"; it is a real hybrid language.

Another example of code switching as hybrid language performance

is Barack Obama's blending of AAE and so-called standard English to produce what some linguists call Black Standard English (Hoover). Like Vaquera-Vásquez's clarification of Spanglish, Princeton political scientist Melissa Harris-Lacewell observes that Obama's black speech and cultural performance are less a product of dog-whistle politics, words dropped here, mannerisms employed there, to appeal to blacks for votes. It is instead an example, as she puts it, of "'his blackness kind of squishing out of the edges. It's not the same thing as deploying [words and phrases] like Bush did'" (qtd. in Henderson).

However, Spanglish and Black Standard English do not typify, nor do they exemplify, the prevailing definition of code switching that language educators promote as the best practice for teaching speaking and writing to African Americans and other "accent- and dialect-speakers" of English. The prevailing definition, the one most educators accept, and the one I'm against, advocates language substitution, the linguistic translation of Spanglish or AAE into standard English. This unfortunate definition of code switching is not about accommodating two language varieties in one speech act. It's not about the practice of language blending. Rather it characterizes the teaching of language conversion.

In *Code Switching: Teaching Standard English in Urban Class-rooms* (2006), linguist Rebecca S. Wheeler and elementary teacher Rachel Swords encourage teachers to employ the translation model of code switching. Indeed, they represent themselves as fellow teachers, writing that the job of language educators is to "help our students *transition* from home grammar to school grammar in the classroom" (11, emphasis added). Code switching for them is acquiring the facility to transition from one language variety to a different one. They are not promoting what I see as the better alternative—code meshing: blending dos idiomas or copping enough standard English to really make yo' AAE be Da Bomb.

Wheeler and Swords also urge teachers to ignore race when teaching and discussing code switching. Even though they write, "We focus our discussion and draw our examples from African American English," in their conclusion, they advise: "We suggest that you refrain from referring to race when describing code-switching. It's not about race" (161). My first response to this blatant contradiction is: "Huh? What tha . . . ?! Code

switching is nothing if it ain't about race! How can you draw on the experiences of African Americans, then render them invisible, extract their historical and contemporary racial experience from the discussion?" My second response is this article.

The body of this essay is divided into two segments. In Part I, I seek to illustrate how code switching is all about race; how it is steeped in a segregationist, racist logic that contradicts our best efforts and hopes for our students. I do this by placing code switching within the discursive context of what sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois deemed the problem of double consciousness. In the second part, I discuss code switching within the context of the 1974 "The Students' Right to Their Own Language" resolution and further expose code switching as a strategy to negotiate, side-step and ultimately accommodate bias against the working-class, women, and the ongoing racism against the language habits of blacks and other non-white peoples. In the end, I promote code meshing, the blending and concurrent use of American English dialects in formal, discursive products, such as political speeches, student papers, and media interviews.

Part I: The Problem of Linguistic Double Consciousness

> It's a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness. . . .
> The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing . . . to merge his double self into a better and truer self.
> —W.E.B. Du Bois

> Double-consciousness has a history and should not be manufactured in the composition classroom.
> —Catherine Prendergast

> Linguistic integration is preferable to segregation.
> —Gerald Graff

Seven years after the Supreme Court legalized racial segregation (*Plessey v. Ferguson*, 1896), upholding the right of individual states to restrict and prohibit black people's public (and private) interaction with whites, sociologist W.E.B Du Bois published *Souls of Black Folks* (1903). *Souls*

is an analysis and critique of the effects of Jim Crow on blacks in America. During this period when blacks were deemed a separate and inferior race in relation to whites, Du Bois used the term "double consciousness" to describe the psychological impact this judgment had on blacks. He borrows the term from medical terminology that was used to diagnose patients suffering from split-personality disorder. Du Bois believed that legal segregation produced a similar, if metaphorical, mental disorder in blacks—racial schizophrenia.[1]

The doubling of one's racial self-consciousness is produced, he writes, from having to "always look at one's self through the eyes of others" (2), from being recognized as an American citizen while simultaneously being denied the rights of citizenship, from trying to reconcile how one's racial heritage justifies legal and social subordination not only to whites but to non-citizens residing in the United States (Thomas 58).[2] Du Bois's statement in the epigraph above illustrates blacks' "longing" to resolve double consciousness, "to merge his double self" (2), the American and black selves, into a unified identity that would be better than either could ever be alone, divided, unmerged.

Yet more than a century later blacks still contend with double consciousness, despite the fact that the Supreme Court reversed its earlier sanctioning of segregation with its 1954 decision in *Brown v. The Board of Education,* in Topeka, Kansas. What's so strange about the present circumstances of double consciousness is that it has been adopted and translated into an instructional strategy that is used, like legal segregation, to govern blacks' social interactions in public, paradoxically in an era where allegedly, as linguist John McWhorter opines, "racism is quickly receding" (266).

Double consciousness shows up in one of its most pronounced and pernicious forms in both the theory and practice of teaching oral and written communication to black students, where code switching is offered as the best strategy. Code switching is a strategy whereby black students are taught contrastive analysis—a method comparing black English to standard English so that they can learn to switch from one to the other in different settings. The description on the back of Wheeler and Sword's co-authored textbook reads: "The authors recommend teaching [black] students to recognize the grammatical differences between home speech

and school speech so that they are then able to choose the language style most appropriate to the time, place, audience, and communicative purpose."

On the surface this instructional method sounds fair because it appears to allow black students to have their racial identity and speak it too. Yet in truth, to teach students that the two language varieties cannot mix and must remain apart belies the claim of linguistic equality and replicates the same phony logic behind Jim Crow legislation—which held that the law recognized the equality of the races yet demanded their separation. Indeed, the arguments used to support code switching are startlingly and undeniably similar to those that were used to support racial separation.

Justice Billings Brown, who delivered the majority opinion in the case upholding segregation, wrote that the "assumption that the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority" was a false and mistaken view. He continues: "If this be so, it is not by reason of anything found in act, but solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it" (Thomas 33). In dispute of this notion, Justice Thurgood Marshall argued 58 years later in the case that opened the way for desegregation that "separate is inherently unequal." The badge of inferiority that was stamped upon blacks racially and that remains attached to black speech was and is not contrived by blacks. The evidence that they were considered racially inferior then as their speech is now resides in their experience in school where, as Graff writes, they are "urged to use Black English on the streets and formal English in school while keeping these languages separate" (27). Graff believes code switching is a misguided approach and argues: "Linguistic integration is better than segregation" (27).

Similarly, literacy scholar Catherine Prendergast substantiates Graff's view in her study *Literacy and Racial Justice: The Politics of Learning after Brown v. The Board of Education* (2003), which uncovers the segregationist practices that still inform the instruction of black students. As she explains, educational institutions still constitute a "site of racial injustice in America" (2), making literacy teachers accomplices, often unwittingly, in the continuation of racial inequality.

Literacy and Racial Justice is a conceptual enlargement of Prendergast's earlier essay, "Race: The Absent Presence in Composition

Studies," where she focuses on writing instruction at the college level and uses Du Bois's complaint about double consciousness to "describe the experience of domination and exclusion within a society which professes equality and integration" (39). While analyzing the writing of minority law professors (e.g. Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, and Patricia Williams), she points out how, like Du Bois, their writing reflects double consciousness because they view themselves as residing both inside and outside the legal profession. Their two-ness doesn't stem from any insecurity on their parts, nor are they uncomfortable being lawyers. To the contrary, it arises from the way that everyday legal practices reflect a segregationist ideology, which recognizes the existence of minorities but often excludes their experience from legal discourse and decisions. Prendergast cautions writing teachers against imposing a segregationist logic on students by creating models of instruction, like code switching, out of double consciousness, which, as she puts it, "has a history and should not be manufactured in the composition classroom" (51).

Yet double consciousness is continually manufactured in writing classrooms. In fact, it's commonly reproduced at all levels of literacy instruction because so many educators, including many blacks, promote it. This is so even though double consciousness stems from the legacy of racism and generates the very racial schizophrenia Du Bois condemned. To be clear, educators who support code switching are not all conscious proponents of racism. Thus I am not suggesting that self-described anti-racist advocates of code switching are really intentional racists. Nevertheless, the inherent racism of code switching cannot be denied.

Racism is the belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and abilities and that the different behaviors and capacities among distinct groups of people (e.g., blacks and whites) produce a racial taxonomy: One group's behaviors are understood to be superior while another group's abilities are perceived as inferior. Although racism is slowly being unhinged by our current understanding that race is not a naturally occurring biological fact but is rather a social construction, advocates of code switching apply old-time racial thinking to their current understanding of culture and language.

If, as linguists propose, standard English arises primarily from the speech habits of middle- and upper-class whites, and students who speak

black English are required to give up their variety and switch to standard English in public and in school, then students are simultaneously required to recognize the superiority of standard English and the people associated with it. The response that Wheeler, Swords and teachers who promote language changing provide to this perspective is that neither black English nor standard English is superior. They say both are equal; each has prestige in their respective, separate sites (standard English in school, black English at home). This reasoning reflects the false logic of equality that permitted people to support legal segregation. It's reasoning that doesn't hold up when the two varieties meet in the public domain or in "formal settings." Since black English is restricted in school and the mainstream public, it is, in effect, rendered inferior, even if it is euphemistically described by Wheeler and Swords as "appropriate for other settings, times, situations" (read: "ineffective" and "inappropriate" in formal communication[3]).

Therefore while many advocates of code switching also claim to be anti-racists who would never seek to reinstitute racial subordination, they nonetheless translate the racist logic of early twentieth century legal segregation into a linguistic logic that undergirds twenty-first century language instruction. Toni Cook, the outspoken member of the Oakland School Board who helped persuade other members "to unanimously support the nation's first education policy recognizing Ebonics as the 'primary language' of many students," personifies this paradox (Perry and Delpit 172). In an interview after the Oakland School Board's decision, Cook was asked: "Why don't children automatically know Standard English, since they hear it all the time on television and at school?" She responded:

> African Americans whose economic status and exposure is closer to that of the Huxtables have the exposure to work with the youngsters and teach them about the 'two-ness' of the world they're involved in. But some schools are located in very depressed areas, have a primary population of African Americans on a fixed income. They see very little, the young people are exposed to very little, and there isn't a whole lot of reason in the home—this is just my guess—to adopt the behavior of duality (Perry and Delpit 176).

Cook's observation of the "two-ness of the world" apparently refers to the vestiges of segregation that blacks must still negotiate. It's illegal, of course, to restrict blacks from integration based on their "color." But it's currently legal to discriminate on the basis euphemistically called "the content of their character," which in this context is manifested by whether or not they talk black in public.

In Cook's view, blacks should develop a dual personality, acting and speaking one way with whites, another with blacks in recognition of "the two-ness of the world their involved in." From this perspective, what's really wrong with code switching is that it seeks to transform double consciousness, the very product of racism, into a linguistic solution to racial discrimination. Thus the real irony of Cook's belief that black people should "adopt the behavior of duality" is that the very anti-racist, liberal-minded individuals who claim to oppose racial discrimination are the same ones who unconsciously perpetuate it. Instead of attacking racism, they attempt to teach black folks how to cope with it. As school retention rates and test scores indicate, they fail quite miserably at convincing the majority of black students to embrace double consciousness as a coping strategy, but succeed at allowing the residue of racism to remain.

Double consciousness and the related belief in the value of code switching are so widespread that both are unfortunately encouraged by even prominent black linguists John Russell Rickford and Geneva Smitherman—two admirable scholars, who tirelessly pursue racial justice and the validation of black English. *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English,* a book Rickford co-authored with his son, journalist Russell John Rickford, and for which Smitherman wrote the foreword, ends with a section titled "The Double Self." This last section has only one chapter, "The Crucible of Identity." The Rickfords begin it with the same epigraph from Du Bois' *Souls* that I use above. And they close it with four strong "suggestions": (1) Accept black English as a language. (2) Reject linguistic shame. (3) Urge black youth to "become proficient in Standard English, *especially the black Standard English*" (229, emphasis added). And, the last suggestion is worth quoting at some length:

> Don't ever shun or jeer a brother or sister because of the way he or
> she speaks. It is only when we have claimed both Spoken Soul and
> Standard English as our own, *empowering our youth to appreciate*

and articulate each in their respective forums, that we will have mastered the art of merging our double selves into a better and truer self. Remember: to become an accomplished pianist (jazz and classical), you've got to be able to work both the ebonies and the ivories. (229, emphasis added)

Although they pursue very noble work in their book, Rickford and Rickford end with a fallacious claim. They believe that code switching can help one master the art of merging linguistic double selves. But how can the meshing occur if each self is restricted to "their respective forums," each limited to its own environment? If the two languages are not used together, at the same time, in the same place, no merging will materialize. Really, how could one ever really learn to speak the "black Standard English" they say black youth must learn, the language that so many black leaders have used, the very product of code meshing, if we can't combine the dialects together?

Even their ending music metaphor is at odds with code switching and actually supports code meshing. For pianists don't use only white keys to perform classical music nor only the black ones to create jazz. Pianists use "both the ebonies and the ivories" all the time, in all cases, in classical, the blues, jazz, and hip hop to access a range a harmonic combinations and possibilities that make genres and styles of music. As the Rickfords themselves state in their introduction, to "abandon Spoken Soul and cleave only to Standard English is like proposing that we play only the white keys of a piano" (10). Their own comparison illustrates that the white keys, representing standard English, and the black keys, representing Spoken Soul, are always already co-existent. No music is created playing only white keys and none playing only black. To attempt to compose music or even speech for that matter using only one set of keys would mean consciously and strategically ignoring and avoiding the other set of keys. A sheer impossibility! Yet this is the very arduous feat that code switching depicts. Both sets of keys must be used simultaneously to compose music. Likewise, both dialects should be used to communicate in all sites.

As a matter of fact, the Rickfords' *Spoken Soul* itself is a beautiful composition using both the black and white keys. Note these examples: (1) The title of their first chapter "What's Going On?" is adapted from black cultural discourse (Marvin Gaye's musical critique of the Vietnam War in

the title song of his hit R & B album *What's Going On?* 1971); (2) In the second chapter where they discuss how various writers employ black English in literature, they write: "Charles Chesnutt and Alice Walker could have hung with [poet Stephen] Henderson" (15). Their use of "could have hung" follows the standard English grammatical formulation for the informal "hang out with," which in black English means to leisurely loiter around with a group of like-minded people. And (3) in the conclusion, they write that Spoken Soul should be embraced in order for blacks "to determine for ourselves what's good and what's bad, even what's *baaad*" (228). This use of "baaad" is a superlative expression meaning very amazing, the exact opposite of the standard English "bad." It signifies cultural triumph and strength, especially in the face of mainstream oppression (remember Melvin Van Peeble's film, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song*, 1971). These authors mix and mingle black English and standard dialect. They code mesh.

Smitherman's "Foreword" is even more exemplary in its meshing (as is most of her writing). Her two short pages are replete with meshings of black English and standard dialect, beginning with her opening statement: "It's been a long time coming, as the old song goes, but the change done come" (ix). In this sentence, like the Rickfords, she appeals to the black musical tradition to empower her rhetoric. The old song she refers to is Sam Cooke's posthumous hit single *A Change Is Gonna Come* (1964), which was a score often used to exemplify the 1960's civil rights movement. On the same page, she explains: "In writing that is rich and powerful —and funky and bold when it bees necessary—they dissect black writing and black speech . . ." (ix). Smitherman uses "bees," an emphasized version of the verb "be" from the grammar of AAE, instead of the standard verb form "is." And she later praises the Rickfords' effort to discuss language, culture, race, and American history and offers their example to others, by writing: "To get it right, you have to do what the Rickfords have done. You have to represent" (x). In AAE "represent" means to be an outstanding example. In this case, the Rickfords exemplify both careful scholarship and cultural critique, doing both while also using black English. They indeed did represent.

Supporting linguistic segregation is fundamentally at odds with the social justice work the Rickfords and Smitherman seek to accomplish and

even contradicts their very own writing. So why would such erudite intellectuals back code switching? I have argued elsewhere that the most unlikely people accept code switching because American racial logic exaggerates the differences between black and white people, which leads to exaggerations between black and white languages. Exaggerated perceptions of racial difference lead the very people who would never accept the idea that black and white people are biologically different to zealously displace that difference onto a vision of black and white language (Young, "Your Average Nigga" and Your Average Nigga). It makes sense then that code switching takes place in the mind, is essentially ideological, and that code meshing is what happens in actual practice— because in reality the languages aren't so disparate after all. The ideology of code switching eclipses the wonderful code meshing that occurs in black people's speech and writing. And it's this pervasive ideology that needs to be critiqued, as the following cases typify.

While attending a session on the relationship between black English and academic writing at the *Race and the Writing Center Conference* held at the University of Illinois at Chicago (1 March 2008), a youngish white male writing professor, who identified himself as gay, and a young black female elementary school teacher, both proclaimed code switching as best for getting black students to shuttle between black and standard languages. I listened as the woman spoke about her difficulties learning standard English, while attending the same school where she now teaches on the South Side of Chicago, and how her students must learn to do as she did. I enjoyed the wonderful ring of black English in her speech, and asked her boldly but privately later if she wanted her students to give up that which she possesses. "Yes," she said. "I want better for them." We had a lively discussion about what I see as a contradiction in her ideology. She is a teacher of language arts, who can't help but mesh identifiably black language patterns with her standardized language use, even in the academic setting of the conference. Yet she wants her students to somehow learn to turn off black language and use only standard, when she can't herself. After I highlighted this observation, she gave a final "tsk" and walked away.

Later I spotted the white male and asked if he thought our nation should more fully implement the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy for gay

people, if gays should be forced to carry out their lives as if their identities were confined to a set of habits carried out in private, in the bedroom? He looked aghast (I suppose by my seeming political incorrectness), but I pressed the issue. "What if linguists were to codify the speech habits of gay men, identifying the stereotypical lisp as a common feature, highlighting the rhetorical importance of camp, insults, and undercutting among gays," I asked. "And then what if they developed approaches for gay men to avoid speaking 'gay' in public, at school, and at work and restricted them only to speaking gay at home and among other gay people?" He walked away.

Both teachers' very own linguistic performances refute the code switching ideology and practice they choose to impose on their students. I offered to them what I will further explain below—how code meshing allows black people to play both the black and white keys on the piano at the very same time, creating beautiful linguistic performances that will hopefully help relieve double consciousness and facilitate the merging Du Bois actually hoped for.

Part II: Code Meshing, Not Code Switching

> If a student has a right to his own language, we have no right to change it at any point, and if we suggest helping him change it solely for the practical purposes of getting a job, we are advocating the cheapest form of hypocrisy and the most difficult sleight of hand act in the history of language, the development of a dual language for use at home and at work.
>
> —Allen N. Smith

The opposing stakes of the minority language debate have remained constant since 1974 when they were most notably carved out in the well-known resolution "On the Students' Right to Their Own Language" (STROL). That resolution "affirm[s] the students' right to their own language—to the dialect that expresses their family and community identity, the idiolect that expresses their unique personal identity" ("Resolution"). Thus those who support this resolution promote students' expression of their diverse dialects, while others argue that students' futures are put at risk unless they learn the accepted forms of language performance.

This debate has continued because code switching has been accepted by both sides. However, the logic of code switching contradicts the very issue that sparked this debate (the legitimate use of so called "nonstandard" dialects).

The major contradiction that code switching presents to STROL is acutely summarized by Allen N. Smith. Commenting on the inconsistency he observed among those supporting STROL at an English conference he attended, he writes: "The conference opened with an amusing and thoughtful statement by Robert Hogan, Executive Secretary of NCTE, who advocated students' right to their own language. His keynote address was followed by a panel which concerned itself with 'How and When Do We Change the Student from His Own Dialect to Standard English?'" (155-56).

"The strange thing," Smith points out, "was that no one appeared to recognize that the panel's goal was at cross purposes with the basic thrust of the opening address" (156). As noted in the epigraph, Smith finds the very goal of code switching—developing "a dual language for use at home and at work" (156)—to be hypocritical and ideologically at odds with efforts to support linguistic rights. For him, as his title imparts, "No One Has a Right to His Own Language." This does not mean what some supporters of code switching might like it to mean—that teaching standard English poses no threat to students' dialects and identities since they have no fundamental claim to them in regard to the project of schooling, which is supposed to change everybody's language. For Smith it doesn't mean a change from home dialect to standard English, since, according to him, "there is no such standard." The very concept of standard English, he says, "is mythical" (155).

What I believe he means, and what I expressly accept as true, is that American dialects of English are already building blocks of standard English. That is to say, dialects are part and parcel of standard English and standard English has strong elements in dialects. In this vein, Smith reasons that "no body of men and no computer, can survey, analyze and synthesize the speaking and writing of over 200 million delightfully varied American Citizens" (155). By way of elaboration, he adds that there is no "textbook or grammar which does in fact offer the definitive and comprehensive standard to apply in each and every individual choice of expression" (155).

Still, there are those who put stock in "definitive" instruction, and who miss the point: to require folks to parse out the parts of their dialect that are standard and attempt to codify those into a form of acceptable public expression and then to parse the parts of their speech and writing that are "nonstandard" and codify those into a form of private, informal expression is both illogical and profoundly problematic.

On this front, many teachers have found, as linguist A. Suresh Canagarajah reports, that students resist the request to fork their tongues when producing formal written and oral communication. In his essay "The Place of World Englishes in Composition" (2006), Canagarajah writes: "Though [code switching] is a pragmatic resolution that is sensitive to the competing claims in this debate . . . I have experienced certain difficulties in implementing this approach. I have found that minority students are reluctant to hold back their Englishes even for temporary reasons" (597). Unlike so many others, he abandoned code switching in his literacy instruction and now advocates code meshing.

Unlike code switching, code meshing does not require students to "hold back their Englishes" but permits them to bring them more forcefully and strategically forward. The ideology behind code meshing holds that peoples' so-called "nonstandard" dialects are already fully compatible with standard English. Code meshing secures their right to represent that meshing in all forms and venues where they communicate. This under-standing becomes all the more important if we consider that many folks may not have as big of a choice as we believe they have in choosing the ways they speak and write.

To clarify, if from a linguistic perspective, we accept that black and white Englishes are different dialects, even if complementary and compat-ible, then the familiar linguistic concept of accent helps explain why substituting one version of English for another may be impossible and why code meshing is inevitable. Some linguists theorize that around five or six years old, efforts to learn a new language becomes more difficult, although certainly attainable. Still the first, native, or home language will always impact, that is, be present and heard within, the target language. This is how someone's, say, African, Spanish, Polish, or Russian accent and heritage are identified when they are speaking English. Their native language is breaking through the target language and becomes an

inextricable feature of their communication. Although this breakthrough is undeniable in speech, some believe it also occurs just as frequently in writing (Coleman). So trying to separate the two languages for some is virtually impossible, and makes requirements to do so appear tyrannical, oppressive. Wouldn't it be better to promote integrating them?

There's enough cultural, educational, and linguistic evidence to challenge and hopefully end code switching. And, since teachers point to the world outside of school as the biggest obstacle to accepting language integration, it's important to point out how code switching is out of sync with the social, racial and politically progress our nation has achieved and is pursuing. Without a doubt, the extraordinary 2008 presidential campaign points up just how retrograde code switching is.

In that election, for the first time in history, the final candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination were a white woman, Senator Hillary Clinton, and a black man, Senator Barack Obama. The contest between the two was itself positive proof that our nation may finally really be ready to value and respect all of its citizens, regardless of how different they may be from the white, male, heterosexual, middle-class, façade often portrayed as the guardian image of American democracy. Even Senator John McCain, the Republican nominee signified hope in this regard—after all, at 72, many considered him a senior citizen. His age, Clinton's gender, and Obama's race reflect a triumph *of* Affirmative Action, or, as some might say (too swiftly I think), a triumph *over* the need for Affirmative Action. Either way, in aggregate, the candidates represent indisputable progress towards respect for diversity.

Yet despite this obvious progress neither Clinton nor Obama believe that their candidacies stand as the iconic image of racial and gender equity. In his speech on race (March 2008), Obama flat-out contradicts color-blind ideologies that suggest race is no longer a central American concern. "Race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now," he says. In an effort to convince the American people that race is important in everyday concerns not just when someone is called a spic, a chink, a nigger, or hangs a noose or sports a Swastika, he explains that "the complexities of race in this country" have "never really [been] worked through—a part of our union that we have yet to perfect. And if we walk away now, if we simply retreat into our respective corners, we will never

be able to come together and solve challenges like health care, or education."

Similarly, in her speech of concession to Obama (June 2008), Clinton addresses those she calls the "Eighteen million of you, from all walks of life . . . women and men, young and old, Latino and Asian, African-American and Caucasian . . . rich, poor, and middle-class, gay and straight." She says to them

> Senator Obama and I achieved milestones essential to our progress as a nation. . . . [However] on a personal note, when I was asked what it means to be a woman running for president, I always gave the same answer, that I was proud to be running as a woman . . . [but] like millions of women, I know there are still barriers and biases out there, often unconscious, and I want to build an America that respects and embraces the potential of every last one of us.

In the following statement, Senator Clinton asks the American people in general terms the same thing I ask of literacy teachers in specific educational terms: "Let us resolve and work toward achieving very simple propositions: There are no acceptable limits, and there are no acceptable prejudices in the 21st century in our country."

Code switching does not—neither as ideology nor pedagogy—match nor advance the achievements in diversity that are reflected in the presidential campaign. Nor does it aid us in achieving the propositions Clinton promotes or the coming together that Obama says is required in order to solve educational challenges that racism produces. Instead it reinforces notions of "acceptable limits" and "acceptable prejudices" by telling people of dialect difference that there is an acceptable way to communicate in this nation, and their way isn't it—at least not in official, graded school assignments, in public, or at work. It gives teachers permission to fail students who display linguistic difference in their speech and writing. It gives employers permission to place limitations on workers' promotional opportunities or permits them not to hire diverse speakers—certainly not for important positions. And it sanctions accent discrimination and pronunciation prejudice.

Code meshing, on the other hand, while also acknowledging standard principles for communication, encourages speakers and writers to fuse

that standard with native speech habits, to color their writing with what they bring from home. It has the potential to enlarge our national vocabulary, multiply the range of available rhetorical styles, expand our ability to understand linguistic difference and make us in the end multidialectical, as opposed to monodialectical.

"Ah," some might say, "but aren't Obama and Clinton examples of what our students can be if they learn standard English? And don't their examples offer enough proof to support teaching it?" Indeed, both Clinton and Obama are outstanding role models for young and old people. They've done something truly "remarkable," as Clinton expressed in her concession speech; they've made it now "unremarkable" for a black person or a woman to successfully run for the highest office of the Free World. Yet, perceptions of their language use illustrate the very trouble code switching presents to our students—and our nation.

For instance, Obama was often parodied in mainstream media for being too "professorial" in his rhetorical delivery and too "polysyllabic" in his usage. His linguistic performance might be compared to what Jay Semel, associate vice president for research at the University of Iowa, observes during a radio segment on black middle-class performance. Semel says he was intrigued as a Jewish college student by the verbal performance of his black professors, many of whom he knew came from urban cities, but spoke impeccable English—with a British clip! To boot, he says, they even regularly dressed to the nines—in full suits—when teaching. They stood in stark contrast to the white professors who were no match to them in dress and speech and who didn't care or need to be. The conclusions Semel draws regarding his professors might also apply to Obama—that they hyper-performed standard language mastery as a way to (over) compensate for the stigma of their race (*Know the Score*).

On the surface, code switching may seem like a good thing for Obama. Not using too much AAE in the campaign, code switching advocates would say, helped him win the presidency. But the fact that he had to code switch is the problem; the fact that AAE is still subject to racism is the issue to correct, not the people who speak it. Furthermore, code switching also restricts how expressive he could be. Perhaps his earlier, stilted, professorial style was produced by being forced in the face of racial perceptions to keep the most expressive parts of his language out of the public's ear.

Perhaps what linguist Elaine Richardson calls "stereotype threat" set it and his language become neither expressive standard nor expressive AAE but a stilted middle brow discourse (2004). He faces the same problem other African Americans face who are forced to extract AAE from their speech: If they do give up AAE, they're damned for being affected, overformal, artificial, even by those who require the extraction. But if they do use AAE, they're damned for being too black, too radical, too militant, profiled as ignorant. Being damned in both directions stems from not being able to blend the two together.

Consider, for example, that Michelle Obama's use of AAE has had an endearing effect on African Americans but an alienating effect on whites when she referred to Obama as her "babies' daddy" and her use of ain't ("Ain't no black people in Iowa") after he won the first primary caucus. Her language use adds fuel to the political fire regarding her patriotism, spurred by her use of a black rhetorical sentiment after Obama's initial primary victories: "This is the first time I'm proud of my country." While Obama may have engaged code switching, the problem is the racial disparity. Had he employed more AAE, he would not have been perceived in the same way as, say, President George W. Bush, who, although often called stupid, has not suffered major consequences for his abuse of standard English and rhetoric. Instead, if Obama spoke more black English in public, it would likely instigate already circulating insinuations that he's anti-American and unpatriotic. And no doubt Obama's speech performance forms part of the basis for the trite speculations about whether he is "too black or not black enough."

As a woman, Clinton has not been spared this linguistic catch-22. Some have said that the emotions she displayed in her concession speech should have been demonstrated much earlier, that it might have softened her, made her more feminine, and may have helped her clinch the nomination. She faces the "too feminine/not feminine enough" predicament. It was said that she tried too hard to perform a masculine rhetorical style, a style no doubt many believed she had to take on to be viable in a country that is still unaccustomed to women's ways of knowing and speaking. So while Obama is criticized for a rhetorical style that is too professional, too stiff and unemotional, Clinton is criticized for not being emotional enough. Yes, both Clinton and Obama represent progress; but

criticisms of their rhetorical styles also represent the problem: the progress we have yet to make.[4]

Code switching produces such racial and gender prejudice because it fosters linguistic confusion: What's the right way to speak/write? Code switching suggests that women speak an incompatibly different language from blacks, who are believed to utter a completely different speech from white men—and the biggest lie of all is that there is one, set, specific, appropriate, formal way to communicate in America. Code switching, in short, fortifies language barriers. Those who appeal to code switching as a way to negotiate racism and sexism actually end up supporting a linguistic basis for facilitating them. If we're to capitalize on the progress exemplified in the 2008 presidential election, then we should abandon code switching. And for this to happen requires a movement.

Indeed, concerned linguists and educational theorists have pursued efforts to make something like code meshing a national policy and an established pedagogy for some thirty years. Note the following excerpt from Geneva Smitherman's *Talkin and Testifyin*:

> An ultimate goal would be for teachers to struggle for a national public policy on language which would reassert the legitimacy of languages other than English, and American dialects other than standard. If these goals seem far-fetched, teachers have only to reflect on the tremendous power potential of their teacher unions and professional educational organizations—such structures could form the massive political units needed to extend the concept of linguistic-cultural diversity and legitimacy beyond the classroom. (240-1)

Smitherman recognized the need for "a national public policy" on language integration in 1977. The same is needed now. The fact that no such policy currently exists is not because there are no examples of code meshing or because it's unintelligible, but because it stems from and supports dominant language ideology otherwise known as standard language ideology.

Standard language ideology is, according to linguist Rosina Lippi-Green, "a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogenous spoken language which is imposed and maintained by the dominant bloc institutions and which names as its model the written language, but which is

drawn primarily from the spoken language of the upper middle class" (64). In other words, commercial, business, and educational institutions perpetuate and perpetrate the belief that there is a single dominant race (read as white), dominant culture (read as white middle/upper class), and that the way these speakers communicate forms the bases for standard modes of public expression.

The really big rub in standard language ideology is this: It doesn't mean that white middle and upper class people actually speak standard English! (Think President George W. Bush.) But dominant language ideology persuades us to imagine they do. It demands that we participate in a fantasy that white middle class folks are entitled speakers of public English. And we're asked to ignore those who regularly and glaringly muck up the standard grammar, since the consequences for their illiteracy are far less severe than for those outside of the supposed dominant culture.

Smitherman shares a revealing example of dominant language ideology:

> I was trying to solicit support for a study of attitudes of potential employers toward black speech. This white research man . . . contended that such a study would only prove the obvious since everybody knew that you had to speak the King's English to get ahead in America. With my research proposal thus dismissed, I started to leave. As I did so, the research division head turned to his assistant and said, "Listen, can you stay a few minutes? You and me have some work to do." Now, me bein me, I had to correct my man's, "bad grammar," I said, "Hey, watch yo' dialect—it's you and I have some work to do." He turned fifty shades o' red, and I split. Naturally, that siggin of mine had shonuff blowed the possibility of me gitten any grant money! (*Talkin'* 199).

The dominant language ideology behind code switching contends that minoritized dialect speakers must learn the accepted standard because it's necessary for them to communicate in the public and at work. Yet Smitherman's encounter shows that even whites, supposedly the majority of non-dialect speakers, don't communicate in the accepted standard— and acquire and maintain good jobs without doing so. To underscore this point, the matter of illiteracy and middle-class white folks has come into the public, confirming what scholars have long observed—that Americans tend to believe that whites speak and write better than others when they

really don't. Consequently, whites are often led to believe their speech is standard when really it's not.

This state of affairs is being exposed because of its negative consequences for literacy practices in the workplace. The writing ineptitude of most corporate workers has long been notorious and recently made the front page of the *New York Times*. According to one report "millions of employees must write more frequently on the job than previously. And many are making a hash of it." The report concludes "that a third of employees in the nation's blue-chip companies wrote poorly and that businesses were spending as much as $3.1 billion annually on remedial training" (Dillon 1). The tendency to exaggerate the writing competence of middle-class (or even upper-class) white people leads to the prevailing fallacy that they enjoy a higher level of literacy.[5]

Even university presidents and highly regarded English professors don't always speak and write in the dominant standard, even when they believe they are doing so. Former Duke English Department Chair and Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Stanley Fish, publicly criticized the grammar of former Harvard President Lawrence Summers in a 2002 article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Summers, who gained some notoriety for challenging the accessible nature of then Harvard professor and public intellectual Cornel West's scholarship, offered an apology when the media publicized the encounter: "I regret any faculty member leaving a conversation feeling they are not respected" (qtd. in van Der Werf A30). It's this apology Fish critiques, writing: "In a short, 13-word sentence, the chief academic officer of the highest ranked university in the country, and therefore in the entire world, has committed three grammatical crimes, failure to mark the possessive case, failure to specify the temporal and causal relationships between the conversations he has and the effects he regrets, and failure to observe noun-pronoun agreement" (Fish).

The three mistakes Fish finds in Summers' one sentence are the same kinds of mistakes that English teachers believe African American students make when they use AAE. But what's really interesting is that Fish's correction of Summers' sentence is also incorrect, according to a grammar evaluation by Professor Kyoko Inoue, a Japanese American linguist from Fish's same university. According to Inoue, Summers' usage

is acceptable, if not correct, since "what the writer/speaker says (means) often controls the form of the sentence" (Unpublished).

Although in these examples, dominant language ideology is biting (albeit mildly) its perpetrators in the butt for once, the point of including them is to show the racial disparity that's propagated by code switching. The ideology of code switching insists a minority student will never become an Ivy League English Department chair or president of Harvard University if she doesn't perfect their mastery of standard English. At the same time the ideology instructs that white men will gain such positions, even with a questionable handle on standard grammar and rhetoric. And even though this is the current state of our country, it doesn't mean we should accept it. We should combat it not only so people can become prominent political figures, but so they can just get a good job.

At the same *Race and the Writing Center Conference* where I encountered the gay man and the dialect speaking woman who supported code switching, there was a white, middle-aged, female, college professor who was distraught after my talk on code meshing. She reported that she and her colleagues were interviewing candidates to teach freshman writing. The committee was enamored with a black woman, but decided not to hire her because she conjugated one subject with the wrong verb ("he don't"). The committee doubted her ability to correct her would-be students' grammar if she couldn't follow standard conjugation in her own speech during the interview. The female professor recounting the episode admitted that her committee may have been wrong, but she then asked, "What else can I do except teach my students to avoid such mistakes?"

"You should have resisted the language prejudice (I wanted to say racism) of the committee with tooth and nail!" I said. I then asked: "Have you or any of your colleagues mismatched a subject with a verb or made a pronoun/antecedent disagreement?" She said, "Yes, I'm sure we have," then made the obvious point that she's not black. She was, of course, proving my point that race is the biggest culprit, not the woman's grammar. Still, I followed up by asking if she'd ever read Joseph Williams' essay "The Phenomenology of Error" where he shows how our ideological frameworks diminish even the most obvious errors of some writers (and I added speakers too) and makes us hyper-aware of some others' mistakes based on how we perceive them socially. When grammar and

usage are viewed too narrowly through the lens of social performance our understanding of "error" is based "less on a handbook definition," Williams writes, "than on the reader's [or listener's] response, because it is that response [most often negatively constituted] that defines the seriousness of the error and its expected amendment" (164).

Williams' essay explains what happened to the black woman, whose one verbal (natural) mishap cost the opportunity to obtain a good job. It wasn't so much the conjugation error that caused the negative response; it was the stigma of her race reeling back into play when her language usage failed to assuage that stigma for the committee. Her failure was less about linguistic aptitude and more about her racial performance. She was not hyper-conscious enough about her verbs to over-compensate for her race. Had the white female committee member resisted the actions of the other committee members, she would have sounded a wake-up call, made an effort in the struggle to show how dominant language ideology intensifies and magnifies the error of blacks but reduces or ignores those of the dominant group. So teaching code switching to avoid errors in standard grammar won't work because all writers and speakers make errors.

As a brief concession to a discussion of teaching standard English grammar, I return to the Fish/Summers example. After Summers uttered his "errors," Fish mandated that writing instructors at his university, then the University of Illinois at Chicago, where I was still a graduate student, teach more grammar. In response Inoue writes: "I believe that grammar training for academic writing is necessary, but it is not sufficient. . . . What is most important in writing is selecting the linguistic expressions that will convey exactly what the writer intends to say" ("Linguist's Perspective").

I agree with Inoue that "grammar" if it is to be taught should be done "in conjunction with semantics and rhetoric (what linguists calls pragmatics), showing how and in what ways grammatical structures convey meanings and influence the rhetorical force of written work" ("Linguist's Perspective" 2). This should not be misunderstood as a case for teaching the grammar of standard English. To the contrary, if anything, it's an appeal to literacy educators to teach how the semantics and rhetoric of AAE are compatible/combinable with features of standard English. This way the rhetorical force of students' written work and oral fluency will

come from a combination of the two—not from translating one from the other, but from allowing them both to mingle together with vim and vigor.

It's clear that my case has been to eliminate code switching as both an ideological and pedagogical feature within literacy instruction and to replace it with code meshing. Code switching spells failure for most students—and worse, it's covered in the residue of racism. Code meshing is a better resolution to the minority language debate because it allows minoritized people to become more effective communicators by doing what we all do best, what comes naturally: blending, merging, meshing dialects. Code meshing is so very important to our work with minoritized peoples, to those who can not or will not extract their dialects from their use of standard English, to folks who speak and write with accents, really, to the majority of American citizens and English speakers across the globe.

Post Script: Return to Obama

I want to end with a speculation—a little further food for thought. As we think about Obama's language practice during his campaign and accept for the sake of argument that he played the code switching game (I say for the sake of argument, because some believe that he is heard differently by whites and blacks), then what if, just what if, he played the game to end the game? Not so only he could have the luxury to use AAE more freely after the election, both in informal settings, like Ben Chili's referenced up top, and in formal settings, as he did in one interview with Diane Sawyer, where he says he "hipped" his personal aide Reggie Love to Aretha Franklin and John Coltrane, but so nobody else, no other AAE speakers would have to put on a show just to prove their worth (Sawyer). What if he played the game not to endorse the game but to show that the stigma against AAE in formal settings and academic writing is stupid? What if he played the game to end the game so that he could be free to show his black cultural and linguistic heritage and not have to worry about containing his blackness because it's, as Harris-Lacewell describes, "squishing out of the edges?" If this were so, and I believe it is, then when teachers are

asked to teach code switching and when students are urged to code switch, both groups should respond as Obama did to the waitress when she asked if he wanted his change; they too could say: "Nah, we straight."

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Notes

1. For an extended discussion of Du Bois, double-consciousness and racial schizophrenia in the context of African American English, see Chapter 6, "To Be A Problem," in my *Your Average Nigga: Performing Race, Literacy, and Masculinity*. For more on double-consciousness as a synonym for schizophrenia, see the insightful analyses of Bruce, Jr., Early, and Wells.

2. Thomas explains that in *Plessey v. Ferguson* the only justice to oppose the decision based his dissent in part on what he considered to be a legal irony: that although Chinese immigrants were ineligible for U.S. citizenship, they were not subject to separate but equal laws, while black citizens were segregated.

3. It should be noted that Wheeler and Swords' discussion of language has to do with pitting one language variety against another. When describing how they settled on using the unraced terms "informal English versus formal English," they report they considered "*nonstandard versus standard*"; "*community English versus Standard English*; *Everyday English versus Standard*" (emphasis in original, 19–20).

4. For an insightful critique of the way standard English and academic discourse perpetuate patriarchal relations, particularly the domination of women, see Bleich.

5. This discussion of standard language ideology is adapted from Chapter 5, "Casualties of Literacy," in my *Your Average Nigga: Performing Race, Literacy, and Masculinity*, 2007.

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