

Cardinal Compositions

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Black Language, Social Identity, and the “Gap”

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For the Classroom

- 1) Perkins points out that all of us code mesh. Think of the definition of code meshing she offers and then think about your language practices. Look at some of the writing you have done for school as well as outside of school (e.g., writing online, for social media, for work, etc.). Do you see examples of code meshing in your writing? To what extent/how has Perkins’s piece made you think differently about your writing practices?
- 2) Perkins ends her piece with calls-to-action in which she makes recommendations to a particular group of people (e.g., teachers) about how they might apply her findings. Identify the calls-to-action in Perkins’s piece. Can you find any calls-to-action in Raymer’s and Shobe’s writing? Where might it make sense to start incorporating calls-to-action in your writing?

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In U.S. society today, racism permeates every aspect. From systemic racism to microaggressive comments and everything in between, people of color deal with discrimination regularly. Language containment falls into the category of oppression for many peoples, as it perpetuates what Paul Kei Matsuda calls “the myth of linguistic homogeneity” (638). While Matsuda applies his “myth” to the assumption that all college composition students speak dominant English, language containment also perpetuates the belief in a “superior” language for academics. Code-switching is a common practice in schools intended to help students move their natural language toward academic language. While it is meant to be helpful, it actually leads to language containment. This rejection of language as “unprofessional” contributes to social identity threats and lowered school engagement, perpetuating an “achievement gap” between people of color and white people. But through the replacement of code-switching with code-meshing, this negative trend of language discrimination could be reversed, and in turn, “the gap” could be lessened.

The good intentions of code-switching are easy to understand, but the old saying of good intentions stands. Teachers are encouraged to teach code-switching to help students convert to a more acceptable language for classroom environments, effectively placing judgment on other forms of language as “incorrect.” An explanation of code-switching from a supporter of the practice is found within Peter Elbow’s “Inviting the Mother Tongue: Beyond ‘Mistakes,’ ‘Bad English,’ and ‘Wrong Language’”:

The problem is that students cannot have that crucial experience of safety for writing *inside* our classrooms unless we can also show them how to be safe *outside*—that is, unless we can also help them produce final drafts that conform to Standard Written English. It is because I care so much about making room for the mother tongue and making the classroom safe for what people call wrong that I want to insist that my students learn to produce SWE too. (361)

What Elbow is saying in this selection is that students should be allowed to use their own form of English but not when they reach the completion of an assignment. He even seems to deem it not “safe” outside the classroom unless his students learn Standard Written English (SWE). Elbow means that “sounding academic” is more important than individual language. Home language, or the language someone uses naturally, is encouraged to be replaced when it is time to be professional, especially by speakers of Black Language (BL). The advisement of code-switching comes from the discrimination people of color face when they speak their home language. BL speakers are instructed to change how they speak or write to avoid discrimination (Baker-Bell 9).

The requirement to trade BL for academic English implies that the language is inferior to white Americans’ language (Alim and Smitherman 171). Labeling one language superior to others also marks those who speak the language as ideal. The academic English that is the goal of educators is essentially the language of the dominant group: white Americans. An appropriate term for this can be found in *Articulate While Black: Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the U.S.*: “In our case, White Mainstream English (WME) and White ways of speaking become the invisible—or better, inaudible—norms of what educators and uncritical scholars like to call academic English” (Alim and Smitherman 171). This is saying that because white Americans are the dominant group with power over other groups, their language is accepted and considered normal. Languages that stray from the “norms”—Black Language—must be transitioned to WME to be correct.

The language we speak—dialects, accents, inflections—is a part of who someone is as an individual. People are surrounded by others who speak the same language, especially during adolescence, which causes that language to become natural and a part of their identity. To oppress a language is to oppress the people who speak it. As Gloria Anzaldúa eloquently stated in “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” “So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself” (39). Language identity is tied to our social identity.

Social identity can be threatened through discrimination. Verkuyten et al. identify the social identity needs threatened by discrimination as belonging, control, and esteem (273). Their article explores how school engagement, and by proxy performance, is affected by racism. They explain, “Threats to racial/ethnic identity compromise specific social identity needs which relate to important motives for academic engagement and performance” (267). This tells of the way a student’s social identity is tied to their school interest and success. The fourth section of “Discrimination and Academic (Dis)engagement” explores the different ways students of color cope with threats to their social identity. Some students may view academic success as a means to combat oppression or as motivation to do better in school. Others may disengage so they can separate themselves from the control of the dominant culture, effectively protecting themselves from social identity threats (277). Since language is tied to social identity, the practice of code-switching can be viewed as a kind of threat. BL speakers are told to convert their natural language to WME because it is the correct English to use in classrooms. So, their language is labeled wrong, and part of their identity appears incorrect too. Thus, coping strategies for social identity threats, like disengaging from school, may occur.

While there are many forms of racism and oppression that students of color encounter during their school years, language containment is less obvious. But through language’s relation to social identity, the threat of code-switching is another factor contributing to academic disengagement. The self-preservation that speakers of BL possibly take through unburdening themselves with educational goals deemed unobtainable likely plays a role in the ever-present graduation gap between students of color and their white counterparts. In the 2017-18 school year, there was a ten-point difference between the high school graduation percentages of white students (89%) and Black students (79%) (NCES). Lack of a high school diploma or general education degree (GED) limits an individual’s career choice, thus altering someone’s success and wealth possibilities. This contributes to another disparity between Black and white Americans: income inequality. There is substantial evidence showing the difference between average white income and Black income and wealth, homeownership, and graduates (Institute for Policy Studies). Removing or replacing the practice of code-switching could help close the gap, even in a small way.

Code-meshing is “the blending of concurrent use of American English dialects in formal, discursive products, such as political speeches, student papers, and media interviews” (Young 51). So, instead of trading BL for WME, students can be free to combine the two. This practice leaves all English forms on level ground. Americans already code-mesh naturally. A simple Google search will give you the definition of *idiolect*: the specific way an individual speaks. No one person speaks the same way as another, which means we all code-mesh to communicate with the people around us. Idioms, slang, and phrases vary by generation, culture, and various other defining characteristics. But these can change depending on the setting one is speaking and/or writing in. When talking to a parent, a student may be relaxed in their language choices while still be respectful. However, talking to a peer of the same age group and ethnicity frees them up to speak with particular meshed vernacular and slang. Code-meshing is almost automatic and much more comfortable than switching one language for another. Drawing from multiple language sources is a real sign of intelligence and not to be taken as inferior.

The replacement of code-switching with code-meshing would be the most effective strategy. After all, just because someone uses different grammatical structures or rhetoric when they speak or write does not make them indecipherable. Corrective language practices start early in primary school. By changing those practices and allowing students to embrace their natural language, a setting of equality would be possible in classrooms from an early developmental stage. At the college level, loosening the strict rules of academic papers in favor of diverse language forms is also possible through code-meshing. Code-meshing is practical and ethical in the way it leaves the possibility for all English forms to be considered “academic.” Without the restrictions on their language, students of color would have one less threat to their social identity, in theory. Thus, less disengagement from academic achievement, greater success in early education, and the potential to decrease income disparity. The freedom of language could help facilitate a smaller school achievement gap by validating and accepting all students.

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