Response to Jennifer Cunningham: Code Switching has Nothing to do with Racism

Zaniah Shobe

For the Classroom

1. Shobe's piece is written in the style of a *Bad Ideas about Writing* entry. Look up the open access collection *Bad Ideas about Writing*: https://kairos.technorhetoric.net/24.2/reviews/bohney-et-al/tableofcontents.html. The editors of *Bad Ideas about Writing* describe it as "an effort to name bad ideas [about writing] and suggest better ones" (Ball and Loewe 2). As you scan the table of contents for this collection, you'll notice that the titles for each entry succinctly capture the bad idea that each writer goes on to challenge in their entry (as Shobe's title does). Look up and read Jennifer Cunningham's piece, "African American Language is not Good English," which Shobe is responding to here. What issues does Shobe take with Cunningham's argument, and why?
2. Browse the table of contents for *Bad Ideas about Writing*. Pick two other entries to read. Perhaps the titles represent ideas about writing that you have been taught before. After reading these entries, have your ideas about writing changed? Why or why not?

Response to Jennifer Cunningham: Code Switching has Nothing to do with Racism

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"Quit talking "white", it's the same comment I've heard for years, but believe Author Jennifer M. Cunningham would be proud of. According to Cunningham and her article *African American Language is Not Good English* (which is located in the first edition of *Bad Ideas About Writing)* sounding like a middle-aged white woman is something that I should be proud of and embrace instead of being the proud African American woman I am. By sounding black, I make my teachers' lives harder because they are not taught to teach African American Language (also known as "Ebonics, African American Vernacular English, black English, broken English, bad English, or slang"), they are only taught to teach standardized English and I need to leave my black English on the back burner. By sounding black, I am immediately unprofessional and uneducated. By sounding black, I am myself and my diversity is only something that looks good on paper rather than reality. This is the bad idea about Cunningham's article that deserves to have a new light shined upon it.

According to Cunningham, "Scholars like Lisa Delpit find that teachers in particular are more likely to correct errors related to African American Language...Within the classroom or in a professional setting, these so-called errors need to be addressed in terms of language difference, code-switching, and expected conventions rather than a person's misuse of English.88)". Cunningham then continues her article by arguing that the usage of Black English isn't appropriate for any other setting but my homelife or when around other black people and the only explanation for my unwillingness to "switch" to correct language is I don't understand my surroundings. In other words, being black ain't acceptable when I am in school only at home. I gotta sound white if I want my teachers to think I am smart and get somewhere in life. I gotta know when it's the right time to be me versus being my white alter ego Kelly. When I talk black I clearly do not understand where I am at and somebody needs to tell me to talk right if I want the job, scholarship, even the respect I deserve. Being a human is not enough and especially not being a black person will I get the respect I deserve unless I sound white. I cannot be the stereotypical angry and aggressive black woman because she has no right to show out when she has so much to be grateful for. This all leads back to systematic racism and oppression that minorities face on a day to day basis.

Dr. April Baker-Bell once communicated with us by saying

"If y'all [teachers] actually believe that using "standard English" will dismantle white supremacy, then you not paying attention! If we, as teachers, truly believe that code-switching will dismantle white supremacy, then we have a problem. If we honestly believe that code-switching will save Black people's lives, then we really ain't paying attention to what's happening in the world. Eric Garner was choked to death by a police officer while saying "I cannot breathe." Wouldn't you consider "I cannot breathe" "standard English" syntax (p. 5)"?

This very powerful statement holds so much truth. Being African American in the United States means getting up every day knowing the system is against you rather than for you. No matter if I am rich or poor. Dark skin or light skin. Speak properly or grammatically correct. Just because I have darker skin than others, I am considered a target. I am considered dangerous, a threat, a risk to society. The late Dr. Martin Luther King used standardized English to the T within his speeches and yet still was assassinated. Was this because of his many uses of the phrase "I have a dream" or because the melanin glow that his skin released? What is so wrong with Black English that many immediately label African Americans who use it illiterate? I became very

informed of this through the Language and Life Project which has a section dedicated to Black English. Through this section, I learned about the Ebonics Controversy of 1996. This was a battle for the recognition of Ebonics as an official language within California, but this quickly became national news. In a CNN interview called "Ebonics and Education" a white man called Ebonics bad English, while a black woman corrected him saying "it's different English" and that that is his opinion. I very much believe in everyone being able to voice their opinion, and because of this I came to the conclusion that he must believe this is "bad" english because it is not Standardized English. As Anjali Pattanayak points out, "Standard Written English is deeply rooted in whiteupper/middle-class culture (112)". Because of this/ his deep connection with his roots, it can be seen why it could possibly be difficult to accept others language, but it's also important to accept the differences found in others.

Since there is no beating a system that is against African Americans, it's time to introduce code meshing within the classroom, an idea composed by Dr. Vershawn A. Young in his article *Should Writers Use They Own English?*

> Young defines code meshing as "Code meshing is the new code switching; it's mulitdialectalism and pluralingual-ism in one speech act, in one paper...Code meshing what we all do whenever we communicate—writin, speakin, whateva. Code meshing blend dialects, international languages, local idioms, chat-room lingo, and the rhetorical styles of various ethnic and cultural groups in both formal and informal speech acts... Code meshing also be used to add flavor and style… (*Should Writers Use They Own English?* 114)".

Dr. Young then continues his article by discussing the many benefits of code switching, how it will impact our classrooms, and how it is already being used. With code meshing both standardized English and Ebonics can be used together as one. Code meshing makes the fight for Ebonics worth fighting for. Code meshing makes diversity acceptable. Code meshing makes being African American in America a privilege instead of curse. Code meshing allows me to be Zaniah and Kelly in one and it is completely acceptable. With code meshing it allows for students to be themselves and know that it is okay to mix your languages and not be penalized for it.

So what is the perfect English classroom in my opinion? Easy, accepting all students, their dialect, language, and differences. Allowing for students to incorporate Standardized English, Ebonics, any language they feel like should be corporated within their writing. I feel like within the classroom the key learning target is accepting diversity. There should be multicultural training for teachers teaching them about these different languages instead of just basic standardized english. Another idea is to have teachers teach the linguistic characteristics of Black Language, which might mitigate prejudice toward Black Language. Teachers could also revise their grading rubrics and include the usage of different languages within their assignments.

Unlike code switching, code meshing has reaped the benefits that it sews even though many believe the combination of standardized and non-standardized English is a very important life skill. Dr. Young believes that code meshing needs to be accepted within the educational and professional settings because this is where barriers of racism need to be broken down (this is seen in his article *Others People's English: Code-Meshing, Code Switching, and African American Literacy).* By eliminating the idea that Black English is "ghetto" when combined with Standardized English, African Americans will break through the barriers placed upon us in society, but also provide a clarification and understanding for those who do not see Black English as an official language. When it is officially seen and accepted by those who do not see it as a language, the racism that those encounters will be eliminated. "Code meshing will allow those native to AAVE to stay true to their native tongue, which in a way allows them to keep their sense of identity, because language has a direct correlation to a person's identity. This is important, especially in a classroom setting, where students are impressionable (Angel A.

Caldwell, English 101). My only hope for the future generation is that they don't have to hear "stop talking white" or live up to the qualities of standardized english. They are able to be free and understood. They are able to voice their opinions with no corrections. I want for my future children to come home and tell me "Mom I learned about Black English today"! We are the future and I believe it is time for a change.

Further Reading

If this was of your interest, I must recommend the original article which peaked my opinion and my response. The original is titled *African American Language is Not Good English* by Jennifer Cunningham and can be found in the first edition of Bad Ideas about Writing. Within this book you can find many article about many different beliefs when it comes to English, what is acceptable, and what isn't. For my article I was actually inspired by another article titled *There is One Correct Way of Writing and Speaking*. Within this article she discussed that what is considered correct isn't actually inclusive and that there must be change, which is something I highly believe in and was an inspiration to my essay.

Another huge influencer for this response was Dr. Vershawn A Young. He is a professor at the University of Kentucky and I was first introduced to him within my English 102 and his idea of code meshing (which I mentioned repeatedly throughout the article). This idea is something I have a very strong belief in and I am happy to have been introduced to. I actually used two of his texts including *Other People's English: Code-Meshing, Code Switching, and African American Literacy* and *Should Writers Use They Own English?* In an interview by Dr. Young (which I watched for the class), he talked about code meshing and with the importance it plays in Young's life, I feel as though it can be just as importance as other teachers, influencers, administration, but most importantly the educational system as a whole. This provides a whole new light to our diversity programs within the school system and really puts emphasis on diversity as a whole.

I also recommend looking into the Language and Life project which can easily be found with a quick search on google or going to their website https://languageandlife.org. This website covers so much history, topics, interests, etc. I specifically used this website to learn about Black English, my english, to help me create this article. The "Talking Black in America" section covered so many interesting topics that I myself actually wasn't informed about. Though at the time of my discovery of the website there were many short video clips, there's now been a full documentary released.

Keywords

African American Vernacular, Ebonics, Black English, code switching, code meshing, Standardized English, diversity, racism, oppression

Author Bio

Zaniah Shobe is finishing her first semester at the University of Louisville as a public health major. She hopes to use this degree and go to medical school, where she plans to study obstetrics and gynecology. After watching her family work in factories but continuously help each other, she knew she wanted to go into the healthcare field. In high school, Zaniah was a football trainer which is where she confirmed her love for helping others. From this experience, Zaniah learned the value of hard work, efficiency, and communication. Though this article was written for Zaniah's English 102, Zaniah felt that it was really important to share her background. She shares a strong belief for equality for all and growing up in the African American community, she's constantly breaking down barriers.