Code-Switching and Code-Meshing

**Code-Switching**

Code-switching can be defined as the practice of changing “one’s style of speech, appearance, behavior, and expression in ways that will optimize the comfort of others in exchange for fair treatment, quality service, and employment opportunities” (McCluney et al.). This handout focuses on code-switching as it applies to language in an academic setting. The UWC affirms students’ right to their own language, so we promote student agency. We advocate for students’ right to make their own choices about whether to code-switch.

Sometimes the choice of what language to use in academic writing is not one that is freely undertaken. Multilingual and BIPOC writers are often prompted to alter the language in their writing to conform to instructor expectations that they use Academic Edited English. Laura Greenfield observes that educators who require their students to code-switch often do so because they see themselves as helping those students by giving them the linguistic tools to avoid other people’s racist reactions to their language (39). Greenfield criticizes this thinking, and indeed, the logic behind coerced code-switching shifts the onus away from those who perpetrate linguistic racism and onto those who suffer from it. Still, as Endiya Griffin and Tatiana Howell explain in this [TED Talk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtINpW1j-m4), in a racist society code-switching is a survival tool for multilingual and BIPOC writers.

However, many scholars have also documented the ways in which code-switching harms students. Focusing on the experience of African American students, April Baker-Bell defines code-switching as “a color-evasiveness approach that teaches students to use language to fit the time, place, audience, and communicative purpose, which is usually only with friends and at home in the case of Black Language” (23). When instructors require students to code-switch, they implicitly teach students that their language, and ultimately their identities, are not welcome in an academic setting. Required code-switching promotes internalized racism and prevents students from bringing their authentic selves to the classroom.

**Code-Meshing**

Code-meshing, in contrast to code-switching, encourages students to draw from all their linguistic resources. It prompts students to mesh, or bring together, multiple language traditions. These language traditions can be drawn from different varieties of the same language, as would be the case with an academic text that combines African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Academic Edited English. Code-meshed writing can also combine two distinct languages, as is the case with Spanglish. Instructors who promote code-meshing often do so because they acknowledge the value of different forms of spoken English and regard as assets the resources that multilingual writers bring to an academic setting.

Vershawn Ashanti Young champions this approach, as he explains in this [interview](https://www.pbs.org/video/connections-dr-vershawn-young/). He makes the point that given the appropriation of AAVE by white English speakers in the mainstream, we are holding students back when we don’t allow them to capitalize on their deep lived familiarity with AAVE. Furthermore, as the example of Gloria Anzaldúa’s “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* demonstrates, code-meshed texts can achieve an elevated status in academia: this essay is regularly taught in American literature classrooms by instructors who recognize that its meshing of Spanish and English makes the text highly rhetorically effective.

Instructors who teach code-meshing prompt students to consider the rhetorical effect of drawing from different language traditions. Therefore, in spite of concerns that abandoning a code-switching approach would amount to lowering the standards of academic writing, code-meshing actually requires greater sophistication on the part of students as they “must learn strategies for negotiation” between different linguistic traditions (Laverick). Code-meshing also has the advantage of changing the status quo by expanding the language and, by extension, the identities that have privileged status in academia.

**How to Code-Mesh**

As Jennifer Polish points out, “there is no one way to effectively code-mesh.” Code-meshing commonly takes place in writing through syntactic and lexical choices, so students could consider ways to incorporate sentence structures and word choices from marginalized language traditions into their academic writing. For example, students who are speakers of AAVE could incorporate syntactic elements of Black Language such as what linguists Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman describe as the “invariant *be* for habitual aspect (‘He *be* talkin a lot in class,’ meaning ‘He usually/regularly/sometimes talks a lot in class’)” (170). Another example, this time meshing Spanish word choices with English ones, comes from Anzaldúa’s “How to Tame a Wild Tongue”: “Even our own people, other Spanish speakers *nos quieren poner candados en la boca.* They would hold us back with their bag of *reglas de academia*” (35). Brenda Hutchison and Angela Morris recommend that students study code-meshed texts as models so they can grasp the rhetorical power of code-meshing. The following reading list could be helpful for students seeking either models of code-meshed texts or more information on code-switching and code-meshing more broadly.

**Future Reading and Handout Sources**

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