



Raw Materials: Analyzing Linguistic Codes as Methods of Expression

Janine Ruszkowski

It's difficult to imagine the concept of identity existing at all if there were no language to describe it. One's manner of speaking can be considered the packaging label used to identify their skills, class, occupation, or how, when and where they grew up. It's not necessarily the literal content of one's speech that's giving all of this information away: it's the fashion in which the content is said that is explaining to others that we are independent and 100% Organic, aggressive and Contents Flammable, or Fragile: Handle With Care. Effective analysis of someone's personal use and modification of English begins with direct questioning, but also careful discernment in order to catch nuances.

Identity, like language, is ever-changing – ironic, considering the ways in which we use language to sort our identities into such neat little boxes. Is it, though? When confronted with uncertainty, people typically default to the basics because those basics are known and comforting. Our language labels don't have to be prisons: they're simply storage containers for the many identities we take on throughout our lives (like "son," "husband," or "widower"), or perhaps even on an hour-by-hour basis (like "customer," "audience member," or "babysitter").

Jinju and I met several months ago on a whim, because on that particular day we had both just so happened to choose pool lanes that were directly next to each other. She was a foreign exchange student who attended the University of Missouri for one semester. I was very interested in learning about her adventures overseas and in communication. We sat down to discuss just this, half a week after our initial meeting. At the time of our interview, she had been in the U.S. for about three weeks. I first asked if she spoke in the same manner in every situation.

She took a thoughtful pause before answering. "Um, no." She replied, laughing softly. "Actually, with my family, usually I speak about the good things that I did because I don't want the parents worried about me. And with my friends I would tell... things about me." The family she speaks of lives in Incheon, South Korea, located a convenient 17 miles away from Seoul National University, the regular institution she attends. Evidently, the desire to appease your parents but stay "in the loop" with your friends is cross-cultural. Jinju chose her words very carefully, as it's possible she wanted to maintain a level of formality with me. We were budding friends, but still acquaintances nevertheless. "I think it is different because, um, with my family I will tell about good things I did. I



About the Author



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don't want them to worry about me. I will probably- I will be careful of speaking because there are so many people and they don't know me or know me much," she said.

Most people alter their verbal mannerisms depending on who's listening. With certain audiences, it may be more socially acceptable to use your chosen vernacular in one way than you would with another. However, when speaking a different language altogether, different linguistic choices may be done more so out of necessity than a desire to be perceived a certain way.

Jinju continued, saying, "I have- I am not good at speaking English so I want to talk many things, but I can't..."

"Articulate?" I suggested.

"Yeah, yeah. Particularly think about the words or, yeah, sentences, so it has limited..." her voice sped up and I didn't quite catch what she said next. "I think when I speak more fluently, people will like me. It is of course. Is it question right answer?"

As our conversation continued, a boy walked by. He made a cheerful remark to Jinju in Korean. Her face lit up. She chattered back to him in one or two sentences. I didn't say anything, but smiled at him as we met eyes. She told me that she had recognized the boy as a fellow exchange student, who reminded her just then that there was an event the next day that they were to attend.

If someone had ever spoken Korean within my earshot prior to this, I wouldn't have known because it would not have ever occurred to me to pay attention. What I had heard, I was surprised and delighted by. To my American ears, Korean sounded airy and musical, like wind chimes rustling in a breeze. I couldn't understand a word of it, yet the chipper intonations of a short, friendly exchange were easily recognizable, regardless of language. Jinju spoke more confidently in her native tongue, but her jovial tone carried over well into English. Her delivery of speech changed as she switched between English and Korean, but her personality was distinguishable in both.

It was around this time I became familiar with the concept of code-meshing: an approach to communication in which people combine their dialects to use regardless of circumstance, instead of switching back and forth depending on the situation. Code-meshing is spoken highly of by scholars, because it allows for people to embrace their intersectionality within different social circles. The conversation reminded me of the method because Jinju's delivery of speech changed as she switched between English and Korean, but her warm character remained constant.

"Can you tell me something about American slang?" Jinju asked me.

"Of course. What is it?"

"What is gotcha?"

"I... I'm sorry?"

"I was in a restaurant the other day, and someone say to manager, 'I gotcha.' What does that mean?"

"Oh. It's a faster way for Americans to say 'I got you.' When someone says 'I got you,' or 'gotcha,' they are really saying, 'I understand.'"

"Ah. Okay," She beamed at me. "I gotcha!"

In situations in which someone's identity belongs to the minority of the group, often they will imagine themselves



through the eyes of the majority. Using this awareness of how they are being perceived, they will modify their self expression to assimilate with the majority. They use the majority's values as a guideline for their behavior as opposed to their or their identity's own. This can create what's known in the academic community as a double consciousness. To have a double consciousness is to manage multiple linguistic identities. It can result in an urge to socially push back, to merge the double self into one identity, so that one no longer has to hide their minority status. In *Language Diversity and Academic Writing*, Dr. Vershawn Young writes, "Double consciousness shows up in one of its most pronounced... forms in both the theory and practice of teaching oral and written communication to Black students... Code-switching is a strategy whereby Black students are taught... so that they can learn to switch from one to the other in different settings." (pg. 326) Black students who make up the racial minority in predominantly White institutions often feel pressure to disingenuinely code-switch so that they may fit in with their White peers. Similarly, a foreigner in a predominantly English-speaking country may also struggle with the insecurity that stems from having a double consciousness.

My friend apologized a few times over the course of our conversation for her English-speaking skills, which she said were "not very good." She was highly aware of her own double consciousness, stemming from having to change her communication – in which her level of proficiency varied – frequently. This likely led her to wanting to compensate for any perceived linguistic flaws by apologizing. Being an English major, normally I'm a stickler for things like grammar and pronunciation. Of course, I don't follow the rules flawlessly, especially in casual settings, but I make a concerted effort to try. Despite my formalist language values, our differences didn't make me feel even the slightest bit uncomfortable: I felt only empathy and admiration. I had previously assumed that, linguistically, people always default to comfortable, easy choices because that's what's most familiar to them. Yet after speaking with Jinju, I came to recognize that many will also exert significant effort to express themselves in ways unfamiliar to them so that they may foster connections. Just how different would the world be if, instead of examining others' linguistic patterns with judgment and scrutiny, we applauded their courage? If we did, the rules of standard spoken English may become broader to accommodate them. A fitting reward it seems, as it takes a lot of bravery to step outside of your original packaging to try something new.

After the interview, I came to theorize that across languages and demographics, certain social expectations surrounding the act of speaking are nearly universal. When discussing the act of consciously changing your linguistic mannerisms in order to assimilate, one would think that the process only happens under very specific circumstances, and that those in the linguistic or demographic majority are all hyper-aware of what counts as correct English. In reality, I don't believe that the people in the majority know why they follow the rules the way they do, or who established them in the first place. Those in the minority may have to work harder for it, but members of the linguistic majority are similarly vying to fit in and impress their peers. People share much more in common than they think, linguistically and otherwise. This theory seemed plausible based on what I already knew, but there was still research to be done before it could be proven. To get a second opinion, I called David.

David is a 53-year-old emergency medical technician from Illinois. He has a Bachelor's degree in finance from the University of Illinois at Chicago. He identifies as politically independent. He needs glasses, but doesn't wear them. We share identical clefts in our chins and a taste for cold pizza. I should know: he's my dad. In a way, I knew his answers to my questions before he even said them, and I knew it was my late grandmother's blunt, fiercely loving voice shining through his when he spoke.

On the question of whether or not he spoke the same way in every situation, he replied, "Absolutely not. I mean, you would be ridiculous if you spoke the same way in every situation. A lot of that is, you need to have a sixth sense to read a room. Some situations call for different tones of voice or inflection, and [you must take into account] whoever it is you're talking to. It depends on the person, the situation, and your ability to read a room."



The way he speaks at home with family is most definitely not the way he speaks at work. “It’s almost like comparing apples to oranges,” he said. “At work, I don’t speak the same way all the time. I speak a different way to my coworkers than my boss, and a different way for patients,” he paused, then added playfully, “I speak a different way to bums who are trying to fight me.” I chuckled when he said this as I continued to jot down notes. “When you were a kid, I spoke to you in a way that would make sense to a kid. You and [your brother] are adults now, but even though you’re adults, I speak a different way to you than with Mom—” he’s a fast talker, and I only hoped my scribbling was able to keep up with his rapid speech. “—but that line is already getting blurred.”

It made sense for my father to change the way he spoke around his two adult children to reflect our changing relationship. Hearing him describe his methodology led me to consider the ways in which I could approach the evolving social dynamics in my life. A deeper grasp of linguistic codes could help me understand the social interactions in professional spaces, but it could also help me connect more effectively with my loved ones. Perhaps I could better understand where they’re coming from, and meet them halfway.

“Do you feel like one of the ways you speak is valued more highly than the others?” I asked.

“I would say yes... For example, think about someone using swear words a lot. Immediately when people hear you say that, your image is diminished. On the other hand, if you have a wide vocabulary, people look highly upon that. I know, because when I hear someone speak, I value certain forms of communication more highly than others, but this is just my own way of perceiving others.”

Where other peoples’ code-switching habits swing like a pendulum, my father’s flips like a light switch. Well-seasoned in the art of the code-switch, he keeps a distinct divide between the professional and the personal. Code-switching is less forgiving than meshing, because unlike meshing, there is a decided change between codes rather than a merging. In February 2018, student Katelynn Duggins gave a speech for TEDx Talks on the topic of code-switching. “People often define code-switching as the change in linguistics, but to me, it’s more than that. It’s the way you dress, the way you talk, the way you present yourself in certain situations,” she said.

To further emphasize her point, she gave the following example: “Businessmen and [business]women, you wouldn’t go to China with only American customs and expect people to be comfortable or want to do business with you. No, you learn some of their customs. You get comfortable with their way of doing things so that they know you care.” In its straightforward delivery, this quote of hers in particular reminded me of my dad’s typical linguistic mannerisms. Her black, female, teenaged words could have just as easily been my middle-aged white male father’s. Duggins’ sharp perception combined with my dad’s firsthand observation further solidified my theory on the urge to code-switch being present across cultures.

Duggins closed her speech on the point that “not many people know how to code-switch, let alone code-switch and be themselves... People respect you for trying to fit in, for trying to survive in that situation... you don’t change your morals... you change your demeanor.” The motive behind code-switching can arise not just from a need to fit in, but a desire to be polite and meet your peers where they are.

Through their speech and its qualities, my two interviewees let the facets of their identities flow. Thanks to their contributions, I finished up my research with the newfound knowledge that language holds two concepts in either hand: identity in one, and community in the other. The three share a symbiotic relationship that allows them to flourish together. Language itself is the raw material given to us as children by our community, that we must decide for ourselves how to craft our identities with. The way one talks is something honed over the course of one’s life, thus, we have years and years to learn how to mold this ability to our needs. To express yourself verbally involves much more than diligently following standard grammatical rules. It involves knowing when to adapt and how to stay true to your roots. The phrases, the dialect, the little mannerisms and the slight variations in everyone’s speech all serve to make



language simply one very long and interconnected game of Telephone.

As a writer, I'll keep these experiences in mind over the course of my academic and professional career. I've found that context and perception play an important role in verbal communication, a role so important it is on par with the spoken word itself. Going forth, I will be able to write with a better understanding of how real verbal conveyance works, and the best methods in which to present my writing and research alike. In my personal life, being exposed to different dialects of English has helped increase my empathy towards people who don't talk exactly the way I do. It's simply nice to know that I've found a new method to connect with my loved ones, and it's nice to know that I have full autonomy over what I say and how. You may not be able to make your writing or speaking perfect, but you can always make it yours.

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