

CODE SWITCHING

SWITCHED ON

We talk to each other differently, and for different reasons. Exploring the cultural, linguistic and biological reasons why we code switch

LAUREN GERNALE AND ARESEMA AGDIE Staff Writers

by Lauren Gernale, Aresema Agdie and Ryan Walters

In 2012, a clip of then-President Barack Obama entering the men's Olympic basketball team locker room went viral. There was a clear distinction between his interaction with the white assistant coach — a nod, a brief handshake — and the way he embraced black NBA player Kevin Durant — a personal greeting and chest bump — followed with smiles and nods.

Code switching to be accepted

A 2019 Pew Research study showed that Black and Hispanic people are more likely than their white counterparts to say they feel the need to change the way they express themselves when they are around people with different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Changing appearances

Code-switching can also be about altering your appearance to fit the norm of the environment you're in.

People of color, in particular Black women, are 80% more likely to change their natural hair to meet societal norms.

In recent years, Black teens have been sent home for wearing dreads, head wraps and even wearing their hair naturally, due to their potential violation of school dress codes.

Many of these rules have come under scrutiny by the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and have been rescinded.

'Sounding white'

The 2018 movie by Boots Riley tells the story of a Black man working at a call center who changes his voice to sound 'more white' at work in order to overcome the bias that African American Vernacular English (AAVE) faces in professional environments.

When he code-switches from AAVE to standard American English, he finds that he is able to sell a lot more.

The film sends a powerful message about the reality of code-switching and how some people feel the need to code-switch to be taken seriously, often because of their race.

Obama, just like everyone else, alternates between the way he talks and the gestures he makes depending on who he is interacting with. This occurs on a nearly daily basis.

Consider how you speak to your friends. You might greet them with a "Hey, what's good?" You might not use the same expression when talking to teachers, or speaking to customers on the job. It might be more appropriate to approach them with a smile and say, "Hello! How are you doing today?"

You may not even use these colloquialisms to respond to your parents when they ask you how your day was. More formal English might not be fitting when you're at home, especially if you speak a different language or vernacular. If you speak both Spanish and English, you might

Everyone code switches on a daily basis, depending on whether they speak multiple languages, and who they interact with. The practice can be divided into two different switches: dialectical and linguistic.

Linguistic code switching usually occurs with individuals who speak multiple languages. They switch between them in the same sentence or conversation. School psychologist Candice Golden says that this switch can happen subconsciously, whether intentional or not.

"There's not a firm divide between different languages (for bilingual speakers), sometimes it's necessary and sometimes it's unintentional," she said. "...it's just the first phrase that comes to mind."

For example, when a Filipino-American speaks with a relative that also speaks both languages, they may switch between the two languages unconsciously throughout the conversation. One part may be in Tagalog, and the other might be in English. In the conversation, they could say, "Ano ang kinain mo for dinner?" (What did you eat for dinner?).

On the other hand, dialectical code switching occurs when an individual switches between different vernaculars, behaviors and expressions.

Some may explicitly use terms around a certain group of people or express themselves in a different way than with another group. It fluctuates depending on the individual's surrounding environment, geography and peers.

Freshman Julissa Reyes-Mohassel said they are less filtered with their friends, but more formal with their teachers. When they are with their teachers, they describe themselves as more filtered and guarded. They also code switch with their family and change their mannerisms to align with their culture.

When they are with their relatives, they use Filipino titles like "Lolo/Lola," which means grandpa/grandma, and "Tita/Tito," meaning aunt/uncle. Even if they are speaking English with them, these honorifics stay constant.

Fitting in as a survival method

Code switching can help groups build a larger sense of community and belonging. AP English Language teacher Chelsea Follett said that it can help an individual gain acceptance from a group or express themselves in a more genuine way.

"Code switching helps you connect with people," Follett said. "If you speak like they speak, there's a connection, and there's a camaraderie."

However, for minority groups that have historically been stereotyped in society as less professional for their vernaculars and expressions — Black and Latinx communities in particular — dialectical code switching can be used as a "survival" method.

When special education teacher La Toya Brown talks to her students, she uses casual, trendy language, yet switches to more academic language with his co-workers or in IEP meetings.

However, when she is with her Black family and friends, she says that she speaks a different language. She compares the way he talks to hip hop and rap videos. She uses Ebonics, which is regarded as its own language rather than a dialect of American English.

self and your culture is not seen as professional or desirable in some situations." Golden said. "Sometimes it's necessary and sometimes just unintentional."

Limitations to code switching

Two aspects play into code switching for these minorities. Raciolinguistics, which is how language is used to construct race and how the concept of race affects language and language use, as well as linguistic racism, which is the use of language resources for discrimination.

The Society for Applied Linguistics discusses linguistic racism and its effects on people of color. "Linguistic racism shapes the psychological antecedents of code switching and its consequences for Black people and other people of color," The Society of Applied Linguistics said.

Black Student Union co-president Jeda Awuzie frequently code switches. When she is around her friends and family, she uses more African American Vernacular English, or AAVE, and her phrasing is more free. In class, however, she tones down her facial expressions, hand movements, and even changes her voice to become higher to present herself as more professional.

She said that as an African American, code switching is a survival method that is a necessity for life in this world, and a big reason why people of color code switch is to assimilate into their environments.

"It's a good skill for the most part, but we should feel comfortable to speak more comfortably," Awuzie said. "But obviously, the world isn't made for everyone to be comfortable, it should be, but it's not."

Linguistic code switching can stagnate an individual's identity as well. AP Literature teacher Jeannine Black says that learning, practicing, and speaking a foreign language can inhibit someone's more personal feelings. "It has tremendous power that keeps you from really accessing the more intimate thoughts and feelings that you might like to share," said Black.

English teacher and Latinx Student Union adviser Lily Johnson code switches between Spanish and English all the time. Because English was not her first language, she feels the pressure from her job to always be on top of her English speaking skills. She prepares her lessons beforehand, to ensure that her students understand her message.

Johnson's code switching happens unconsciously, and she has adapted to code switching in several scenarios with different people in her life. She often fluctuates between the two languages with her siblings, who are also bilingual. However, her mother does not speak English, so she must speak fluent Spanish to interact with her. Even with her husband, she may fluctuate between Spanish and English.

In her classroom, there are times that she will say something in Spanish and shortly realize that she has to speak in English. The pressure to present herself in an academic setting has made her question her use of colloquialisms and expressions.

"Sometimes I get nervous about whether I am choosing the right words," Johnson said. "Am I saying this correctly? Am I expressing myself the way I should be? I also get nervous around my students before a lesson, but I always try to be as prepared as possible."

A form of bias

A survey conducted by Pew Research in 2019 showed that 4 in 10 Hispanic and Black adults feel the need to change the way they talk around different races and ethnicities compared to a third of white adults.

In order to be successful in a world that senior Nina Ruiz-Garcia considers to be Eurocentric and patriarchal, people of color have to put in extra effort to be seen as equals. She says that society values the agenda that the closer a person aligns themselves to these standards, the more successful they will be.

"If we go to a place that's predominantly white or that's predominantly male, we have to change how we speak and how we act in order to be seen as successful or intelligent in those spaces," Ruiz-Garcia said.

Jennifer Johnson, a special education teacher, said that there should be set standards that meet a certain level of professionalism, but being sensitive to people's

It's biological The most common examples of code-switching were completely inadvertent; folks would slip into a different language or accent without even realizing it or intending to do it.

REASONS WHY WE CODE SWITCH

To hide in plain sight Some interviewed say they switch to a different language or dialect to share thoughts — disparaging or otherwise — about someone within earshot.

We want to fit in Very often, people code-switch — both consciously and unconsciously — to act or talk more like those around them, whether it's with friends, family or with our classmates.

To get something Whether it's a politely worded email to a teacher or to a customer, we code switch because we assume, often correctly, that changing how we write or talk will get us a desired outcome.

When we try to find the right word Many people use switch languages to express certain ideas, where one language may have the exact expression or phrase that we're looking for.

"If we go to a place that's predominantly white or that's predominantly male, we speak and how we act in order to be seen as successful." Nina Ruiz-Garcia, senior



Courtesy Nina Ruiz-Garcia

CODE SWITCH CONTINUED NEXT PAGE

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Finding my confidence

Though I don't remember the little boy who covered underneath a chair in the corner of a preschool Halloween party almost 15 years ago, my parents do, and they recognized that moment as one of several signs noted by one of my preschool teachers to get me tested for Asperger's.

Like Olivia, I have Asperger's syndrome, just six months before I was about to start kindergarten.

My family and I started to notice oddities about me that, when I progressed through elementary school, other kids wouldn't do.

One of the personality ties I adopted involved running back and forth in a straight line constantly for no particular reason, or using my keychain in my hand and to pretend to knock a baseball out of the park.

They're a way for me to turn any social situation, whether uncomfortable or not, into a mechanism to calm any anxieties I may have at the moment.

I remember how the kids on the playground would talk about the new Beyblades, finding common interests by being themselves in the public cluster.

I learned to act like them, picking up slang, using their mannerisms, and learning how to turn a false sense of confidence into a real sense.

My high school experiences differed from Olivia's because I was never told to stop being so fervent about my passions.

I decided to mask early to fit in and prevent any hateful comments from my peers.

But like Olivia, I've had points of noticing both myself and my peers talk so negatively about themselves and about their lives, which for me has fed my own insecurities.

Since I entered Branham's campus for the first time, my intentions to mask have more so shifted from trying to please everyone I can to pleasing those who I feel deserve affection, whether platonic or not. As a result my confidence has increased boosts and I am overall a happier person.

— Ryan Walters

"I don't feel like I have to prove myself anymore" Alumnus describes her Asperger's experience

RYAN WALTERS Staff Writer

Branham class of 2021 graduate Olivia Downey first suspected that she had Asperger's syndrome, a rare developmental disorder affecting one's ability to communicate, when she was placed in a special education class in the sixth grade. Her suspicions were confirmed when she entered high school.

"It's sad that it took until high school to understand why I acted or thought differently than others my age," Downey said.

One in every 44 children in the United States are diagnosed with one of five Autism Spectrum Disorders every year, according to a 2021 CDC report. One of those five include Asperger's, which, according to the Asperger's / Autism Network, since the late 1990s, the rate of children diagnosed has increased from 1 in every 500 to 1 in every 250 in the latter half of the 2010s.

People with this condition can be described as socially awkward and have an all-absorbing interest in specific topics.

As someone with Asperger's, Downey described her time at Branham challenging because of peers' attitudes regarding her personality.

"I stopped being so 'bubbly' about my interests," she said. "I was told [by peers] to talk softer. I wanted so desperately to not be seen as the teacher's pet or as the know-it-all that I wouldn't stand up for myself."

During that time she turned to masking, concealing certain behaviors that come with an ASD. One of these methods of masking included knitting scarves, which Downey said helped her focus better on schoolwork and in a classroom environment and disguise her twitchiness.

"Since I would be focusing on the project in my hands, I had less of a likelihood of blurting out or asking too many questions," she said. "I didn't let people get to know me better [in high school] because I overthought every situation whether that was in the classroom or not."

Downey said that the desire to fit into a high school environment both emotionally and mentally drained her. Because of the masking, she was still trying to find her true self.

"High school was one of the lowest points

of my life, as I was trying to understand who I was," she said.

She said these demeanors have also affected her current studies at West Valley college. However, the difference is that she is around more neurodivergent students, and her classmates are kinder.

"I'm able to be more myself because others are willing to accept my quirks and not look at me in an odd way," she said. "I'm not looking for anyone's attention anymore because I don't feel like I have to prove myself to my fellow students."

To counteract the possibility of students on the spectrum instinctively code switching, the approach that special education teacher La Toya Brown takes with her 10-15 students is more direct.

"I try to be a role model for [my students]. I can be professional, but I can also be silly and relatable," Brown said. "I'll joke with them. I don't believe in 'You have a disability and let me interact with you that way' — I believe you're a person first."

In the eight years Brown has taught at Branham, she has worked with students all over the autism spectrum as well as students with learning and attention disabilities. What she wants her students to embrace, however, is a care-free mentality, which she said stems from hanging out with her friend's niece, who is 20 years younger than her.

"She felt free and it made me feel free because we just didn't care," Brown said. "We could have weird thoughts and it wouldn't matter because we never judged each other."

During her year and a half at West Valley, Downey has noticed an upward trend in the ideology Brown internalizes and has said it has helped her feel more secure as a person.

"[Students] aren't scared they're going to be called names behind their backs," she said, "but they know people are more willing to listen."

Reflecting on her experience at Branham, Downey said that people, especially high schoolers, sometimes don't acknowledge that students should be treated the same, no matter the differences in the way they might act.

"We all mess up, do things we're embarrassed about, are a bit weird," she said, "but that's the beauty of it all."

SWITCH | Denied 'authentic selves'

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

cultures and vernaculars is the way to prevent linguistic racism.

"It doesn't always honor or permit flexibility with what other cultures seem to think of achieving or meeting a standard," Johnson said. "I do believe there should be a certain academic or professional standard, but I also know that there needs to be more sensitivity and understanding of the different codes."

Dozie Awuzie, the other Black Student Union co-president, said that code switching could be taking people away from their authentic selves and advises people of color to stay true to themselves. Dozie tries to keep the code switching to a minimum but he does code switch around his black friend by using AAVE.

Self-presentation, which is the way people present themselves to control the way others see them, is a route that code switching can take that alters people to fit the standards set around them.

"You should talk how you always talk with everybody, because if you code switch, it's kind

of showing a fake persona of yourself," Awuzie said. "If you do it unknowingly, then I understand, but if you do it on purpose, I can't really blame you, but just try and be yourself more often."

Specialized academic instruction and transcendental meditation teacher and Black Student Union Advisor Tobias McLeod grew up and became educated in a predominantly white environment in Carmel. The stark contrast between this group and his mom's family in Missouri led McLeod to portray different sides of himself depending on who he was around.

McLeod said that people of color are different and through code switching, they have adapted to changing themselves to assimilate into society.

"We walk into a place and we are obviously different. But when we speak one way, we can try to fit into the setting," McLeod said. "We can be chameleons to their eyes; we can change the way we look, we could change the way we act, and we could change the way we talk in certain settings."