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## Exploring Communicative Adaptations of Minority Status Individuals: An Overview of Code Switching Literature

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## Exploring Communicative Adaptations of Minority Status Individuals: An Overview of Code Switching Literature

**Angelique Georges**

### ABSTRACT

*The literature review provides an overview of the development of code switches, or the event in which one changes from a non-native language to a native language, in the field of sociology. Previous sociological studies largely explored the topic of code switch, as it related to how language impacts different minority groups, such as African Americans/Blacks, Latinx, and/or Asian individuals, in terms of employment and education opportunities. In general, treatment among minority status individuals were unequal and the literature mostly focused on the listener's perspective. Thereupon, this literature review seeks to focus on the importance of studying the speaker's perspective, and in particular college students. Focusing on these perspectives are important, because the previous literature did not explore the speaker's reactions to listener bias. In addition, studying college students who code switch is key, since college is a time in which soft skills are developed for future employment. Unless a minority status individual's perceptions are included in the literature of code switching, it may be difficult to make changes in the way one acquires life skills for future education or employment.*

### INTRODUCTION

In the 1950s, the term “code switch” as coined by Sociolinguist Hans Vogt, defined situations in which people changed from a native language to a non-native language (Nilep, 2006). The main goals of the previous literature were to study how different languages interacted with one another to create a new vernacular, or language shared among different groups of people (Nilep 2006). From there, it became important for the field of Sociology to

study code switches as a means of establishing ethnic identity and social status (Nilep 2006). The first goal was important as it related to immigrants losing their language, in place of learning English. Meanwhile, the latter goal was important in terms of an individual establishing a social position (Nilep 2006). The latter can be understood as instances of one choosing when it is appropriate to use formal and informal speech (Nilep 2006). Overall, the previous literature focused on the listener's perspective, as it related to the interest in how racial and ethnic minorities acculturated into American society.

Nevertheless, the large focus on the listener's perspective means that the literature on the speaker's perspective is lacking. Studying this perspective is important because one's attachment to ethnic identity sets the tone for how one speaks. In turn, the way one speaks can impact one's life broadly in terms of obtaining an education or employment. With such broad consequences, this piece will detail key research perspectives that explore the process of code switches; the consequences of the listener's perspective; and the sociological relevance in exploring the speaker's perspective.

## KEY RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

### *Formatting for Code Switch Studies*

When it comes to studying code switches, it is important to use Anat Stavan's framework (1992), since her study helps categorize important triggers for initiating a switch. According to Anat Stavan's (1992) framework, code switches occur under one or more of the following: perception of listener's fluency in a language, setting, and topic of a conversation. When a speaker decides to speak another language, or utilize slang, they will wait to see what kind of language is utilized by the person they are addressing (Stavans 1992). From there, the setting may influence the choice of vernacular they use. In Chad Nilep's literature review (2006), John

J. Gumperz's study on dialectal differences in Hindi language, revealed that male merchants would use a more informal speech at home, and when working in another province they would adopt a standardized Hindi dialect. Put another way, it would be the equivalent of a college student reserving first names and contractions with friends, while using last names and complete sentences with professors. After that, there is the topic of the conversation.

Often topics of conversation among multilingual speakers, can be *culturally bound* or contain words that lack an English equivalent (Stavans 1992). Yet, it is also important to note that *culturally bound* topics, describe subjects such as food, holidays, dress, or other material culture which become associated with certain ethnic groups (Stavans 1992). *Culturally bound* words and topics are especially important to note, since this is what sets the stage for a speaker's assessment in language choice (Stavans 1992). Still, it should be noted that while Anat Stavan's study is good for understanding when and where a person may code switch, her study focused more on the importance of the listener's role in conversation, rather than the speaker.

### *Racialization*

Consequently, because some listener's assign meaning to cultural objects like food or speech, the racialization process serves as a basis for people to understand those that are culturally dissimilar (Gonzalez-Sorbino and Goss 2018). For example, an individual who speaks African American vernacular, may presume that because someone does not share the same physical features-for instance someone who appears Caucasian- that the individual may not understand their language. Nevertheless, Cochiara, Bell, and Casper's (2016) study on accent and employability, revealed that during a phone interview, the interviewer associated the applicant's accent with a particular minority group. Thus, one does not need to focus on appearance, nor material items to racialize someone else.

*Self-Categorization*

In contrast, the speaker can make an assessment of the speech they use, based on the speaker's perception of self. The Self-Categorization theory describes the event in which the individual will actively assign group membership to oneself (Oldmeadow et al., 2003). This can occur either at the class, or ethnic level. However, for the purpose of this paper, self-categorization will refer to ethnic group membership. For example, a Latino student, within Oikonomidou's (2015) study, said that he joined an organization dedicated to his ethnic group to avoid being "stared at." In other words, the student sought a group in which he found culturally similar others, who shared the same physical features as him. As this example relates to code switching, the Latino student could join a cultural club to feel comfortable speaking Spanish or French, without feeling alienated. Thus, the feeling of difference can reinforce the need to change one's speech.

## SOCIOLOGICAL RELEVANCE

*Listener's Influence on a Code Switch*

Studying code switching is relevant because not all minorities are treated the same way, on the basis of their speech. Again, a failure to code switch can lead to a broad spectrum of complications. Specifically, those who hold an ethnic minority status such as African American/Black and/or Latinx can lose both educational or employment opportunities (Atkins 1993; Cochiara et al., 2016; McCabe, 2009). In fact, in Atkins's study on African-American vernacular (1993), when African-American speakers utilized non-standard English such as substituting: "aufuh [for] author," or "she be there [instead] of she is there," employers thought that these individuals were "approachable and interesting, [but] disorganized and unemployable" [115]. This judgement also held true for classroom discussions, for within Rodriguez, Cargile,

and Rich's study (2004) among college students, the research reported that if a Black and/or Latinx Individual used a non-standard dialect, these minority individuals lost the appearance of competence among peers. Similarly, Carlson and McHenry's (2006) study on the effect of accents and dialect on employability, found that despite an employer having a low understanding of an "Asian influenced English...The speakers of Asian-influenced English [were] rated second-highest for employability" (78). The reason why Asian-influenced English tended to earn preferential treatment in employment, was because there tends to be a stereotype that Asian identified individuals were hard-working and intelligent (Roberts, Cha, and Kim 2014). Thereupon, previous studies revealed that listeners can influence a person of color's level of integration into culturally dissimilar social settings. Often these social settings will be predominately white, such as a college or the professional sphere (Swencionis 2017).

### *Overall*

The result of the listener's influence may cause a person of color to consciously change their speech patterns as a means of integrating into predominately white institutions (Swencionis 2017). As Jillian Swencionis's (2017) extensive review of impression management studies explained, "when interacting with racial minorities, whites had the goal of appearing likable...[therefore, whites would emphasize] warmth while down-playing [their] competence...in contrast, when interacting with Whites, [POC] minorities had the goal to appear worthy of respect" (185). The facade of competence and a white persona, in turn, may cause a rift in the individual's sense of being their "authentic self" (Lige et al. 2018). With particular attention to college students of color, some may feel as though they have no support network (Oikonomidou 2015). Without a support network, college students of color may racialize their failure to perform in school or professionally, when they feel that they cannot match the

expectations of the model group (e.g. White individuals) (Lige et al. 2019; Oikonomidou 2015; McCabe 2006). The result of these feelings, as explained by Lige and colleagues' study on the imposter phenomenon, are increased feelings of anxiety, and depression. Feelings of depression or anxiety can in turn affect the individual's performance in school (Lige et al. 2019). However, there are a lot of what ifs in regard to the effects of racialization, and self-categorization, as it relates to code switching. This is where the importance of studying the speaker's perspective comes into play.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

Again, previous studies reveal that listeners deem some persons of color as inept and of low social status when they do not speak standardized English. This, in turn, resulted in alienation from classroom discussions and missed employment opportunities (Atkins 1993; Cochiara et al., 2016; McCabe, 2009). Nevertheless, studying the perspective of the speakers may help answer the question of how important language is, as a means to establishing ethnic identity. This would be especially key since Oikonomidou's study (2013), revealed that when students participate in cultural organizations, they build lasting support networks, which help with acculturating into culturally dissimilar environments. Cultural organizations, in turn, help reinforce positive affiliation with the individual's ethnic identity, which then can mediate in feelings of alienation (Oikonomidou 2015; McCabe 2006). Still, where the previous literature is lacking is in the perspective of young adults in university settings. This is particularly crucial because college is a time in which students develop soft skills for obtaining employment. Without a support network to guide in this process, it may be difficult to advance socially. Thus, conducting research on the relationship between the development of code switching as a soft skill in university, and its relationship to ethnic identity may be beneficial. In addition, there

would be an added benefit to understanding the importance of language as it relates to employment outcomes, since a study showing how college student's transition to the professional sphere may help others in learning healthier ways to adapt to culturally dissimilar work environments. Thereupon, a study focusing on the speaker may help draw upon correlations between racialization and self-categorization theory, as well as add to the previous literature's take on code switching being a necessity for social adaptation.

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