
RETHINKING CODE-SWITCHING:
USING BAKHTINIAN SPEECH GENRES TO REVITALIZE
CLASSROOM LANGUAGE

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Liberal educators are concerned that their students become empowered, politically engaged, and successful. The means to successful and engaged students can look different: some students are encouraged to speak in whatever manner they choose and engage with literature that respects and sustains their cultures. Other students are encouraged to use patterns of language that are modeled on white, upper class, professional settings, bolstered by a focus on standardized grammatical forms of writing. In many classrooms with minority students, teachers have turned to code-switching as a way to achieve these seemingly disparate aims, encouraging the language and literacies of both vernacular and standard English.

I will argue in this paper that the theoretical groundings of code-switching are flawed, in that they rely on a flawed understanding of language. For code-switching to function as described by sociologists and educators,¹ language would have to be a skill—and particular languages and dialects to be discrete subsets of this skill—to be acquired and employed by students. However, this view of language rests on an assumption: language is merely the matching of words to reality in order to communicate about things and ideas, without acknowledging the intentions and values of the speaker, and without acknowledging an anticipation of the listener’s response.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s philosophy of language, especially the concept of speech genres, accounts for the ways that language is not dependent on correctly describing something, but is dependent on what the speaker hopes to achieve in relationship to their listener. Speech genres further illuminate the motivations behind code-switching, namely valuing a student’s home language, and, ideally, democratizing the language of power.² In addition, speech genres shine a light on the risks of code-switching, and the tenuous relationship between classroom

¹ Jennifer Morton, “Cultural Code-Switching: Straddling the Achievement Gap,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 22, no. 3 (2014): 259–81.

² Christopher Emdin, *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood... And the Rest of Y’all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), 178. “I argue for an authentic code-switching that involves *valuing oneself and one’s culture* while appreciating and understanding the codes of other cultures...in the process, *creating new codes*” (emphasis added). Democratizing involves increasing the number of people who are able to successfully communicate with the language of institutions and widening the utterances available in those languages in ways that reflect the values, experiences, and perspectives of marginalized populations.

practices that aim to value what students bring from home, while excluding those students' authentic expressions from environments that are professional or academic.

In a diverse and multicultural society, the need to cross boundaries becomes ever-present and the ability to navigate multiple cultures becomes a valuable skill. Students must be able to understand and work with both their local vernacular and Standard American English (SAE) in order to communicate with other students, their families and neighbors, and their teachers. By adopting code-switching in the classroom, educational researchers and practitioners have assumed language as a set of referential symbols, and language use as the ability to use those symbols in effective communication.

Code-switching can be an invaluable resource; there is substantial justification for attempts to teach students linguistic codes that they may not learn in any setting besides their classrooms. In the first section, I will comment on Lisa Delpit and Christopher Emdin's approach to classroom language, including Emdin's explicit descriptions of code-switching activities. Following that section, I will discuss the risks inherent to code-switching because of the assumptions that the theory makes about language. If words are considered to be mere symbols, interchangeable between languages or dialects, and schools merely teach students that the vernacular language that their families and cultural peers speak is not acceptable in academic and other institutions, then there is the implicit lesson that their language is insufficient for finding success in life.

In the final two sections, in which I describe Bakhtin's theory of speech genres and their applications to classroom practice, I argue that schools can avoid these implicit lessons with the careful teaching of explicit problems of hierarchy in language use, and activities that give students the opportunity to use language genuinely. The further conclusion that Bakhtin's theory allows is the hope that students can employ code-switching in ways that are not illiberal and that do not force them to adopt a hegemonic mode of expression. Such an outcome can allow for languages to interact, which could result ultimately in a standard language that incorporates a broader range of perspectives.

CODE SWITCHING

Code-switching is an attempt to overcome the "substandard" view of vernacular languages, through the reevaluation of students' home identities and voices. For example, Christopher Emdin's work reflects a deep commitment to ensuring the acceptance of student voice, arguing that teachers "must work purposefully to allow for disruptions in the traditional sanitized classroom by welcoming the often loud and irreverent responses indicating deep student engagement".³ Echoing Labov and others, he reinforces that vernacular languages also contain "highly complex linguistic codes and rules one must

³ Emdin, *Reality Pedagogy*, 148.

know before being able to speak it with fluency” even though teachers often view it as substandard.⁴

If minority students’ vernaculars are different from SAE, then minority students may be at a disadvantage compared to students who come from the majority culture and whose language may more closely map onto the language used in many classrooms, including the SAE taught.⁵ In light of this imbalance, it becomes crucial, especially in early grades, to correct the imbalance that results from the different languages and educations received at home.

Lisa Delpit advocates that schools correct the imbalance that results from these different methods of communication by providing minority children with the “content that other families from a different cultural orientation provide at home.”⁶ In students’ search for jobs and their attempts to go to college, society judges them on the products they create, including their writing and their ability to speak their ideas. Achieving full expression of student voices can only happen when students are taught the “culture of power” and, more specifically for this paper, the *language of power*.⁷

Delpit notes that many advocates of a “writing process” approach view teaching concrete writing skills as restrictive and repressive.⁸ By contrast, a creative and critical thinker that lacks communication skills has little hope of achieving significant financial or social status. Educators then try to enact, and at times succeed in enacting, a dual approach to student language that addresses students’ language and creativity as well as the need to teach students to communicate with the language of power. Students take the opportunity to learn the language of power through assignments that put them in real situations, where their language use has meaning—where it connects to a specific purpose.⁹

Code-switching requires a delicate balancing act: convincing students that you care about the language they bring into the classroom and the language they use at home and teaching them a different language, which they use to navigate routes to college or careers. Convincing students that you care about language is not the problematic part—many teachers genuinely care about and value their students’ languages—and so a teacher must “simply” let their students see this care. But how does a teacher teach a student the language of

⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁵ Lisa Delpit, *Multiplication is for White People* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 57.

⁶ Lisa Delpit, *Other People’s Children* (New York: The New Press, 2006), 30.

⁷ Ibid., 25. While codes of power represent a range of middle-class strategies, including “linguistic forms, communicative strategies, and presentation of self; that is, ways of talking, ways of writing, ways of dressing, and ways of interacting,” this paper focuses explicitly on linguistic forms.

⁸ A “writing process” pedagogy refers to a progressive pedagogy that attempts to give students space to explore their ideas, write creatively, and express their experiences.

⁹ Delpit, *Other People’s Children*, 45. For example, peer editing—especially of younger grades to teach meta-writing skills—and composing letters that address community issues.

power in a way that continues to demonstrate their care? It seems that teachers must point out the paradox they face and explicitly critique the power structures that they ask their students to adopt. This instructional tight rope requires that the teacher tell the students that it is not ideal, tell the students that it is unfair, but also tell students that it is necessary to follow the rules. They undertake this strategy at least, until the rules change—until, it must be hoped, the students themselves acquire the power to change them.

This juncture is where code-switching practices can be successful. For example, Emdin encourages teachers to use “discourse charts” in order to give students what is necessary for them to demonstrate their knowledge to specific audiences that do not understand their vernacular vocabulary. Discourse charts are visual aids which explicitly match words based on their meaning to aid students in switching from one mode of speaking to another. In Emdin’s example, science terms are displayed together with their English and Slang counterparts: “the words *light*, *photon*, and *lyte* (a vernacular spelling of *light*) are presented as having the same meaning.¹⁰ Students are able to grasp which words might be useful to them in a given setting. But this is also where code-switching brings in the most risk: assuming that words in languages are merely symbolic designators of objects is assuming too much. It is an assumption of neutrality and lacks acknowledgement of the hierarchical stratification that exists because of power relations in society.

Emdin describes another classroom practice that highlights this risk: deciding on dialects to be spoken as a class in imagined environments. In this activity, discussions are meant to switch between different dialects on a single subject, reinforcing students’ understanding of what code-switching represents. This practice is aided by relying on the students’ imaginations, asking them to visualize different environments where they might be speaking, for example in their neighborhood and on a college campus. The striking moment in the description of this practice is when the instructor is meant to shut down student vernacular that is “frowned upon” in the Ivy League setting.¹¹

By assuming neutrality of words and their commensurability in referencing an object, and because of the differences in social outcome and success across different cultural situations, strikingly present at Ivy League institutions, an implicit hierarchy emerges. The language a student brings into the classroom is valuable, but not in the same sense that the language spoken at Ivy League institutions is valuable. Only one leads to higher accumulation of social and cultural capital and power, and only one is acceptable language in the institutions that students must traverse in order to secure their livelihood.

The marginalization of student languages by limiting their acceptable use is pernicious—language plays a large part in the oppression of minorities by devaluing specific modes of expression, regardless of the ideas they present. Code-switching’s reliance on languages as bounded entities implies classroom

¹⁰ Emdin, *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood*, 179.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 180.

practices that bound the contexts for using language; it tells students “your home language is great, unless you want to find success.” Code-switching leaves little room for the legitimate use of home languages and precludes the interaction and subsequent transformation of home and standard languages. As I will show below, if languages are not allowed to mix, then we cut out an opportunity for actualizing the hope that students will be able to change the rules in regard to the language of power.

Language is not effective when linguistic norms dominate and everyone learns and abides by them. Too much focus on following norms stifles the creativity and change that makes language so vibrant in the first place. Separating this “correct” or “academic” or “effective” language from the nominally equally-valued vernacular or home language of the students implies that marginalized groups’ languages are always less legitimate; if the two codes that a student switches between do not seem to interact, then there can only be one privileged language and a single common and base language.

SPEECH GENRES

In contrast to the view that languages should be conceptualized primarily as bounded, discrete entities, Bakhtin emphasizes the persons in social settings who are speaking, listening, and responding. Because of this perspective, Bakhtin recognizes the ways in which we speak differently to different audiences in different contexts. In this perspective, the need for code-switching becomes less pressing, as classroom practices can instead be developed to achieve the same goals as code-switching, while more accurately reflecting the way language works in other interactions and allowing for the democratizing goals of liberal education.

LANGUAGE IN USE

In contrast to the conception of language on which code-switching relies, Bakhtin’s conception of language calls us to attend to the fundamentally social nature of language. Instead of teaching a class of kids two ways to say the same thing, we should be acknowledging that all of our language is dependent on the speaker, the listener or listeners, and the audience. Collectively, Bakhtin calls these features of language *speech genres*, and they can be thought of as any relatively constant ways of saying things. They can be everyday interactions, like those that occur in a checkout line (Hi, how are you? Good, you? Great, thank you. Just insert the chip at the bottom there). They can include professional terminology such as set legal terms or religious phrases; more particular ways of saying things, such as “yah, you betcha” or “uff da” in the Upper Midwest where I grew up; and more traditionally thought-of genres, like science fiction novels or tragic plays, each with their own vocabulary, style, and even syntax.

Most importantly for the classroom, speech genres include various types of language: interactions between students and their teacher, between students and students, and between students and their families. These genres

break down even further: a teacher in a lecture vs. a teacher in a seminar, students in small-groups vs. students in the hallways, or students with their parents vs. students with their siblings. All of these genres use different codes to signal different values: showing respect to a teacher or parent, demonstrating intelligence to fellow students, or pretending not to care in front of a group of friends.

Speech genres provide an account not only of how we use language, but also of how we learn language. As all our communication takes place in these generic forms, the speech around a child, in the home, in their neighborhood, with extended family and friends, is the child's first introduction to language. Hearing, absorbing, mimicking, repeating words, and ultimately coming to understand what they mean *in context*.¹² When children begin to speak, their language is organized in similar patterns, and responses are crafted to be understood in the same genres as those they have grown up hearing.

Just as in using language, learning language involves dialogue. No human expression is drawn from a list of universally acceptable or neutral words (as in a dictionary), nor is it created entirely new, with original words and meanings. Instead, language is a process by which humans can take others' words and give them relatively new contexts and meanings. Bakhtin refers to this middle-ground dialogism of language as an interplay between two omnipresent forces, described with the physical metaphor of centripetal and centrifugal forces.

Centripetal force represents the centralizing aspect of language. Using language affirms a sort of abstract, unified, coherent use of language. To communicate, we need to use words that are mutually understood because they follow the same rules as previous uses. Another direction language takes, centrifugally, is creative, original, new, and ever expanding. We use language to talk about a vast and ever-changing set of circumstances, aims, and beliefs; we follow the rules of language, but we also apply them in new ways. We use words that are understood because of common norms, but we connect them with other understood words in creative and artistic ways. These centrifugal forces, to follow Bakhtin's metaphor, are responsible for the rapid change that undergirds living language.

Both centripetal and centrifugal forces are present in every utterance. No utterances are entirely original, nor do they follow the same script. Although the circumstances in which something is uttered are unique, there are shared qualities among situations that allow for the understanding of language. This tension leads Bakhtin to clarify that centripetal force, while it tends towards imposing limits, is not merely about establishing a baseline for understanding, but about "guaranteeing a certain maximum of mutual understanding"¹³

¹² M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 78–79.

¹³ M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 270.

Unifying forces do not work to limit the number of speech acts to come, but to convince others of the correctness of one's own ideological position.

Through centripetal and centrifugal forces, speech genres reflect and partly constitute the ideologies of those that use them, including the ideologies of the individual speaker, through creatively using the language, and the ideologies of the group, through the use of common expressions. In speech genres, there are relatively stable norms that reflect the conditions, or meaningful contexts, goals, intentions, and aims of these areas of life. By becoming embedded within language norms, the conditions and goals constitute an ideology to which members of that area of activity identify.

Because the process of language acquisition happens at home before students begin school, student language is an integral part of a student's identity. Children learn language by hearing, repeating, and using language in real communication.¹⁴ Language is learned through association with the conditions and goals, and with the themes, styles, and compositions of a child's family, friends, and neighbors. The ongoing and extended nature of these kinds of associations also influence its acquisition. Because the genres that these children learn reflect and concretize the ideologies of the speakers, language must be thought of as a critical component of their identity.

APPLICATIONS TO CLASSROOMS

When they enter classrooms, important cultural values that help constitute a student's identity permeate and structure their language. In the classroom, students must be able to use this language so as not to deny important and irreplaceable modes of communicating their ideas. When students must employ code-switching practices in order to learn words in a different genre, these practices must also acknowledge the values embedded in different ways of speaking. For Emdin's practice of discourse charts, the use of scientific language cannot be presented as exactly equal to the vernacular or English translations; scientific language values technical accuracy, an ideal of neutrality, and reducing the importance of the researcher's perspective. All these are values that the listener picks up, even if unrecognized, in hearing the terms. Teachers should provide students explicit instruction in the competing values they must choose between when expressing their ideas.

This observation relates to the larger point: at risk in an account of language that assumes replicability and commensurability between languages and dialects is a concealment of the values of oppressive power structures. Not acknowledging that the interplay of speaker and listener actively shapes language use makes it possible to miss the actual meaning that a student is attempting to communicate. It is one that is full of socio-ideological intentions.¹⁵ As educators, we should make sure to avoid problematic situations where

¹⁴ Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 78; and Delpit, *Multiplication is for White People*, 68.

¹⁵ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 292.

students feel the need to stop using their home languages, or where they get the sense that their home languages are acceptable but inferior. Both of these situations cause students to lose their ability to express the values and perspectives that are inherent to their home languages. Of course, classroom language use is heavily dependent on the practices in which a classroom is engaged. In the following paragraphs, I suggest instructional practices that exemplify the influence of speech genres.

The theory of speech genres calls on educators to match classroom language to everyday language, to engage students in “real conversations,” and to structure classes around discussion as much as possible. Classroom discussion, itself a speech genre, can mirror ways that students use language outside of the classroom. It also reflects these genres more closely than other methods of classroom instruction, such as lectures or individual creative writing assignments. Discussion is true to the call-and-response nature of language. It neither erases the speaker’s ability to orient their language to an audience, nor does it remove the listener’s active role in responding, verbally and non-verbally. In essence, discussion is as close to a real conversation as you can get in a classroom. It involves talking to real people, orienting one’s comments to a real audience, and listening and responding to a real conversation.

It is also possible to engage students with ‘meta-discussion’ skills. These include active note-taking, especially where one student records notes in a space where all students can follow along, noting how the discussion flows from one point to another; explicit reference to speaker-listener interactions, such as how often the teacher talks, how people disagree with one another, and whether students orient their responses at particular individuals; and active journaling, where students write down their ideas and opinions at the beginning of a discussion and keep tabs on how their ideas change throughout the discussion and how interactions with other students and ideas affect them.

Discussions should also be held with wider audiences, whether that includes other teachers, principals, parents, community members, or even engaging in dialogues with texts or other media. Interrogate those who speak in different ways and attempt to understand what they want to say. Experience the importance of shaping their intentions to fit the ear of a speaker who is different from them. Focus on the audience; prompts that ask students to craft their responses for “a general audience,” or assignments in which the teacher does not identify an audience (and thus the intended listener is implicitly general) miss the point of attempts to communicate—a necessarily social experience—and students may find their voice, but cannot express themselves or any of their ideas if they have no one to express them to.

As students begin to encounter the language of schools, especially SAE, it is important to structure classes around dialogue, where students get a chance to incorporate new words and expressions into their dialogues by using them. This means that dialogues should take place with people from outside the classroom as well (teachers can only introduce so many words), so students should be able to contact, in person or through writing, people both inside and

outside their community, learning how to shape what they say to make an impact on their audience. Writing can serve the purpose of furthering discussion, and not just serve as the end product, or evaluation of student learning. Writing as an end product confines it to the time it was written and doesn't allow it to further understanding. In fact, in Bakhtin's theory, a text—no matter the length—or even an author's entire work, can become a single utterance, just one note in an ongoing conversation.

Students speaking the vernacular of their classroom are not merely speaking a less refined version of SAE, or a version of English that makes it more difficult for them to communicate with certain individuals in positions of power and authority. Rather, students' languages manifest the values and perspectives that they seek to communicate; if teachers ignore the way that students employ language, they risk ignoring the implicit values that their students are attempting to express. In a similar manner, persons with power speak in ways that manifest their values and their perspectives. If teachers ignore the fact that SAE carries with it the hegemonic weight of authority, then teachers risk perpetuating the power of that language.

Changing the values and norms of the culture of power requires incorporating new experiences in the syntax of power, new voices speaking in the language of power, and languages interacting and changing. What speech genres give us is a way to think about code-switching in classrooms that provides hope for changing the language of power to better reflect the values and experiences of marginalized groups. Because, if language changes with use, and we teach marginalized students ways of using language that both take advantage of their knowledge of SAE while at the same time adding their own vernacular, this has the potential to change what we consider standard as well. Important shifts in ideology must come from expanding the voices within those ideologies, within those speech genres. To add the voices of our minority students into the genres of power, then schools must teach students to speak within those genres and at the same time shape them with their experiences and perspectives.

CONCLUSION

For teachers that employ code-switching in their classrooms, speech genres can more clearly illuminate the goals and motivations of code-switching, while also shining a light on the risks of code-switching, especially in certain code-switching practices. Code-switching attempts to account for the differences in the ways that speakers change their language to communicate to different audiences, and does so in a way that attempts to teach students important linguistic codes that they might not otherwise receive outside of the classroom. Bakhtin's theory of speech genres helps to articulate these benefits by pointing out that language does much more than change based on the audience, but also is populated by the speaker's intentions and values.

This aspect of code-switching makes explicit that we must be wary of attempts to delegitimize the language that a student grows up speaking because

that language is part of what shapes a child's understanding of their experience, and thus their language is filled with important values and perspectives. Lastly, speech genres provide a theoretical backing to the hope that students will one day be able to have vernacular languages accepted and cherished. By teaching students how to speak in ways that allow for their success in various institutional settings, these students will have the opportunity to speak in ways that are true to their perspective.

By engaging in these conversations, students will begin to shape how "standard English" is spoken in ways that are more reflective of diverse populations. Only by adding new ideologies into the language of power is it possible to expand the ideologies expressed within the culture of power. And only by teaching those who have important but unheard values, perspectives, and experiences will we be able to change the culture of power in ways that strive towards justice.
