# To Switch or to Mesh

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## Introduction

In a world that features numerous cultures that come with many unique and distinct qualities, one factor that is used to distinguish one from another is language. Without language, the world wouldn't be able to function the way that it does. Whether that be spoken language, written language, hand language, or body language, there is no way that the world could work if language didn't exist. Now, I want you to imagine yourself coming from a specific culture that speaks a certain language, and imagine if you go your entire life believing that what you speak is normal, only to start school and immediately be forced to switch how you talk because it is seen as "non formal" or looked at as "non-standard English." That sounds ridiculous, right? Well, unfortunately, that is the reality for so many Black people and people of color, and it has gotten so out of hand that it is done almost subconsciously nowadays. The term that is used for this concept is code-switching. Code switching is "the ways in which a member of an underrepresented group (consciously or unconsciously) adjusts their language, syntax, grammatical structure, behavior, and appearance to fit into the dominant culture" (Cooks-Campbell). Within one of the readings from class authored by Vershawn Ashanti Young, I found a concept that is the exact opposite of code switching, which is "code meshing." Young

states that "code meshing does not require students to 'hold back their Englishes' but permits them to bring them more forcefully and strategically forward" (Young 159). He delves deeper into code-meshing and states, "the ideology behind code meshing holds that peoples' so-called 'nonstandard' dialects are already fully compatible with standard English" (Young 159). Today, we are living in a time where inclusivity and acceptance are more emphasized than ever before, but an issue as deeply rooted and often subconscious as code-switching can only be solved by tracing our steps back to the roots of when and how it started in order to stop the practice of it. In *Yes!* magazine, Ida Harris states that when "sociolinguist Einar Haugen coined the term in 1954, it was to describe language alternation, or the mixing of two or more languages, or dialects. Albeit, the practice had been known since the early 20th century."

After gaining an understanding of the concepts of code switching and code meshing through three different sources, I realized that my sources had heavy bias and described code switching as a bad thing that held people back from being their true selves. While I do agree to an extent that code switching can be extremely problematic, I wondered whether or not another side of the argument could be found by doing interviews with the two people that I am closest to, my mom and my grandma. The point of these interviews was to answer these questions : Is code switching actually as harmful as these sources suggest? In addition, how much would code meshing actually help in order to make people feel more included?

## Methods

After finding two sources online alongside the class reading to deepen my understanding of code switching and code meshing, I decided to conduct two interviews with my mom and my grandma because not only do I take their opinions seriously, but they're also two people who ideally would be impacted by the concept of code switching. My grandma was born in 1959; my mom was born in 1980. They are both women of color and both grew up in the Bay Area, which means that they were surrounded by a variety of cultures and were exposed to the distinguishing features of each of these cultures, including language. I felt as though the variety of cultures would probably provide a lot of experience with the idea of code switching. If you are around a lot of people of color who feel the need to change how they act and how they appear, you will recognize this practice and to nobody's surprise, they both told me that they had lots of experience with code switching. To start the interview, I asked them both if they were familiar with the concept of code switching. They both had vague understandings of it, and as the interview went on, they were able to identify moments in their lives where they had to code switch and told me how this made them feel. Towards the middle of the interview, I introduced the idea of code meshing to them and they shared their ideas with me on how different the world would look if that was more accepted and practiced than code switching. The results of both interviews surprised me in a number of ways, and they both introduced me to perspectives that hadn't crossed my mind prior.

## Analysis

Within the first interview, my mom discussed how she only believes that code switching is a "bad thing" if you look at it in a negative connotation. In her eyes, she views code switching as a skill that Black people and people of color have mastered, and it speaks to our ability to be able to adapt to any environment that we want to be in. This ability, in her mind, can demonstrate growth and personal understanding of how to act in any given environment. An example she used is how when we see people act irrationally or obnoxiously in public, we tend to look at them and think to ourselves how they "don't know how to act" or "weren't raised right by their parents." The ability to know not to act that way in public but to also carry yourself in a respectful and admirable manner in public is an example of code-switching being a good thing in her view. But, of course, there is a negative side to it. My mom grew up hearing the term "you sound white." As she was growing up, her own family started to accuse her of "talking like a white girl" and when she questioned them about what that was supposed to mean, they said that she talked too "properly." This confused her and deeply offended her, and she started to save the "proper talk" for school and work only. When she was with the family, though, she was a completely different person. When she told me about this experience, I defined code meshing to her and she felt as though code meshing would be a good practice, but that code switching still isn't a bad concept. In her mind, we should code mesh to make sure that everybody feels accepted, but at the same time, code switching is necessary in order to have an understanding of how to act in certain situations. She felt as though certain environments require you to communicate with professionalism and respectful language, but other times you can speak with slang and talk however you want. For

example, you shouldn't curse when talking to your professor, but if you want to curse around a group of friends, then have at it.

The interview with my grandmother began with her explaining to me that as a teenager growing up, she had very little room to speak in her home. Her parents were extremely strict and always at work, and since she was the oldest of all of her siblings, she had to basically raise them up while figuring out how to live life herself. Respect was demanded in her home, so any talking back or getting out of line was met with punishment. This way of parenting forced my grandma to bottle in every single emotion, and the only release she had was when she left home and went to school everyday. By the time she reached high school, she had bottled up so much emotions and anger that she went to school for the sole purpose of getting out of her house and letting out all of her emotions. She formed a friend group and cut class to go to the beach, get into trouble, and occasionally smoke and drink. In this specific friend group, there were mostly Samoan women, Black women, and Mexican women. Interestingly, she said that after a while, she wanted to try and sound more like them because if not, they'd tell her that she "sounded white" and wasn't talking like how a normal woman of color should. Still, in her eyes, code switching was a sort of coping mechanism for her that released feelings of relief and freedom. On the flip side of that, though, once she was on the bus to go back home, she had to switch back into being obedient and having no voice, and this caused her to be depressed pretty often. When I introduced the idea of code meshing to her, she repeated the same sentiments that my mom had said. Code

switching to her was more of a personal release, but code meshing could be used to prevent people from thinking that "talking white" is actually a thing.

## Conclusions

After conducting these two interviews, I was amazed at the different perspectives that I had gotten from my mom and my grandma. Admittedly, I had planned to write this essay with the intent of talking about how code switching needs to completely be abolished and replaced by code meshing, but these interviews changed my mind. I thought of code switching and code meshing as a sort of black and white way of viewing language use. Either you are not being yourself (code switching), or you're able to be yourself (code meshing.) My mom's interview really made me think about that conclusion I made because I had not taken into account the fact that I was immediately relating code switching with a negative connotation. Now that I think of it, I'd rather code switch in instances where I actually should be respectful and not obnoxious. For example, if I were in church and started to scream and yell as if I was on a playground, people would look at me and question not only what I'm doing but also who my parents are and who raised me to think that this behavior is acceptable. They would wonder why I was allowed to be in a public environment if I couldn't be respectful, and they'd look at me with disgust and anger. I didn't expect my grandma's perspective at all. As I said, I thought of code switching as a negative concept, so the idea of it being a relief to somebody really kind of blew my mind. It made me reflect on my life. Funny enough, I found times where I code switched in moments of relief. For example, I had similar circumstances as my grandma. When I visited my dad on the weekends following my parents divorce, he would keep me

in his room and yell all day about how much he hated my mom and blamed me for all of their issues. Mind you, I was 10 years old at the time. I didn't even know what was going on most of the time, and I was already heartbroken that my parents weren't together anymore. These days on top of being stuck in that room made me crave human interaction and being outside with my cousins and friends. In the rare moments that he'd let me go out, my entire personality came out. I was enthusiastic. I was joking and playing sports with everybody, but the second that my dad called me back in the house, I had to switch back into being a kid who had no voice. I had nobody in there to comfort me, and I had to just take all these hurtful words that he said and not do anything about it. Going outside and experiencing happiness brought out my personality, brought the joy out of me, and also made me feel relieved to not be around such a toxic person anymore, but as soon as I had to leave, I had to switch back into being a mute.

After conducting these interviews, I started to believe that code switching and code meshing should be able to co-exist, and people should practice both in order to know when to properly apply them in their lives. Code switching can be harmful, especially if it is specifically used to hold people back from being who they really are. If a person feels as though they can't show their entire personality because they're being told that it is "not normal," then, yes, that is problematic. But, in some cases, people need to understand the situation and know how to switch how they are behaving. Code meshing, in my opinion, would still be a great practice that we should eventually learn more, especially to limit instances where people are told that they are "talking white" or "sounding too proper." In conclusion, these are two essential concepts of language that

should both be used in conjunction with each other. There are pros to both, and studying

both and understanding when and when not to apply these concepts to everyday

interactions will go a long way in making people feel more included in all spaces of life.

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## Author Bio

Hi, my name is Isaiah Limu. I am from San Jose, California, and I am majoring in Psychology. I developed an interest in Psychology during my high school years because my whole family worked in the caretaking field and have been taking care of adults with disabilities for several years now. I joined in 2021, the summer before I started college, and since then, I have developed an even deeper interest and desire to understand the field. My interests include listening to music and playing basketball. I plan on continuing my career in the caretaking field following college, and I may look into becoming a youth therapist in the future.