

Author's Statement: For this essay, I was asked to engage in a conversation about the relationship between language and power. I was asked to make an argument about the relationship and use both class readings and my personal experience as evidence. The assignment's exact prompt was as follows: "In this project, you will need to engage with at least two other course materials in addition to your own personal experiences. So, too, will your audience change. Rather than write to someone outside of our class, you will write to your classmates, and put forth an idea about the relationship between language, power, and writing. In doing so, you will get us all to rethink our course readings and class discussions by answering the following: What do you think the relationship between language and power is? How does this approach to language and power influence your thoughts on writing?"

Gissel Not Giselle: Language as an Identity

DID YOU MEAN GISELLE?

I've never been a good speller, and if it wasn't for these modern times in which we've become so dependent on technology and, thankfully, spell check, I don't think I would be considering becoming a writer someday. Spelling, in the English language especially, is a troubling process for me. I never understood why we could sound out certain words but we couldn't sound out all of them. I never understood why the letter y was sometimes a vowel and other times it wasn't. I never understood what sound the letter x made. I never understood why *ph* can make an *f* sound, and don't even get me started on my hatred towards homonyms. Still, there was always one word in particular that I never understood why I always spelled it "wrong."

I remember one day in the first grade when my six-year-old self was finally learning how to use a computer. Mr. Kempf had us all log on to the school's new MacBooks and we began our journey of learning how to type up sentences on Microsoft word. As I typed up some lines about myself, a red dotted line stared back at me.

"What does the red line mean?" I asked.

"That means the word you typed out is spelled incorrectly," Mr. Kempf said without really looking directly at me. He was too busy watching over thirty eager first graders who had never used a computer before.

I looked back at my words. The very first one stared back at me and I felt intimidated. I knew I was a bad speller and dreaded the weekly spelling exams every week, but why was the screen telling me: "*Did you mean Giselle?*"

My first name is spelled G-I-S-S-E-L. It is considered "wrong" because it didn't have an e at the end. Back then I thought everything online was true, and my younger self began to wonder if my

parents were stupid. How could they possibly spell their own child's name incorrectly? As I lost my Spanish tongue over the years, I also found myself forgetting that my name was never really Giselle. Not because the spelling was "incorrect," but because my parents named me with the intent that my name was to be pronounced in Spanish. In Spanish, most of the words are spelled the way they sound. Just like how in grade school they tell you that you can "sound out" words, most words are like that in Spanish. I wonder when it was that I stopped introducing myself with my Spanish tongue. I wondered when it was that I was okay with "fixing" my name so that it was easier for someone else to pronounce. I wonder when I thought speaking English was a bigger priority than keeping my Spanish alive. Finally, I wonder who is responsible for this.

US-VERSUS-THEM

Asking other people if you can call them something else because you find their name too hard to pronounce is a means of oppression. Someone's name is a big part of their identity, especially if it's a name that has a special meaning in their native language and/or culture. Just like names, language, in general, is important when discussing someone's identity. When I say language, I mean something more than just verbal or written communication. Language is more than just something you can learn on an app like Duolingo, and it's also more than just talking to your waiter at the Mexican restaurant in Spanish. A language is a form of expression, an act with a consequence, and, again, an identity.

A conversation about language cannot be valid if race is not discussed. This is especially the case within the United States. Although the United States has built itself a reputation that suggests it is welcoming of all cultures and languages, it has also developed a reputation where it is seen as a monolingual nation. Because those who have power (white people, U.S. citizens, and native English speakers) speak English and experience privilege because of it, to speak English is an act that allows one to slowly move up on the social hierarchy. However, because those who struggle to speak English are associated with negative stereotypes, the shaping of their identity can also suffer a negative toll because the way that others see you can affect the way you see yourself.

Although racial categories are ever-changing and are ultimately built by social facts versus biological facts, it is important to understand these categories and the effect they have on people. We cannot choose to be color blinded in a world where so many people have already benefited and suffered from the system. In her essay, *Racializing the Nonnative English Speaker*, Gail Shuck makes it clear that oftentimes "language and race are closely linked as means of distinguishing Self from Other" (Shuck, 259). Language usually induces notions about "racial categories in ways that confirm or challenge" (Shuck, 259) the social structure that exists.

Within the United States, there exists "Ideological models [that] are projected onto each other, recursively reproducing a hierarchical social order in which US-born citizens, native English speakers, and Caucasians retain a privilege widely perceived to be a natural outcome of certain characteristics thought to be intrinsic to Americanness, nativeness (In English), or Whiteness" (Shuck, 259). As a result, those who do not have power are seen differently, thus developing an

“Us-versus-Them division in the linguistic world in which native and nonnative speakers of a language are thought to be mutually exclusive, uncontested, identifiable groups” (Shuck, 260). Shuck uses a table to further elaborate on the idea that those who speak English seem to have more power and authority than those who do not (and those who are assumed to be “Unamerican.”) On a table titled, “some components of the Native/Non-native Dichotomy” Shuck is able to describe the associations and assumptions between native English speakers and nonnative speakers. Whereas native speakers are seen to be “ahead/faster,” “up to speed,” and are able to “take normal classes” for they “are perfectly comprehensible,” those who are not native English speakers are seen to be the complete opposite. They are assumed to be “behind/slower,” “hold everyone else back,” and are “incomprehensible” and therefore “take easy classes that cater to them” (Shuck, 262). Because those in power are white and speak English in the United States, everyone else is an “other.” By associating whiteness with intelligence, we are telling kids who are labeled as ESL learners that they do not stand a chance in the white man’s world, and this ultimately affects the way they see themselves. Interestingly enough, white people also have the privilege to decide what is proper and improper. For example, Shuck uses a case study that shows how white students complain about those who do not speak “proper English.” Instead of being understanding of their situation and instead of using their power to empower others, they complain about their lack of English knowledge. While some may argue that they can do that since they are native speakers of the language, those in power also feel as if non-English speakers are the problem even when they talk in their native language. For example, Shuck highlights how white people tend to complain about accents people use when communicating (Shuck, 266). In one study, she reveals that a student went on a trip to Mexico and complained that the people there were unable to communicate with her because of their accents. Rather than recognizing her position as a traveler and an American, she was frustrated with them not being able to accommodate her and failed to acknowledge the fact that she was the one that didn’t know their Spanish. White people tend to want people to make space for them in places where they are a self-invited guest. Their sense of power then creates the “Us versus them” mindset because they feel as though they are separate from those that are different when really, they are the reason why nonnative English speakers seem different. By maltreating those who are different and then painting their identity with stereotypes can be a dehumanizing experience for nonnative’s identities.

When I first say that language is someone’s identity, I want to highlight how much their identity is expressed through the way they communicate. Part of who they are is reflected in their accent, dialect, what they choose to say, and how they say it. Still, experiences also shape up who people are. If part of that experience is oppression or judgment for how they speak, their identity will be affected.

CODE-SWITCHING: An Act with Consequence

I am from a low-income neighborhood in Queens, New York. I am from bodegas on every corner, florists on every block, and reggaeton blasting from every barbershop. I am from yelling “back door” on the bus, from “ladies and gentlemen, it’s showtime” on the subway, and

“cocomangocherry one dollar, one dollar,” on a hot summer’s day.

I grew up with people who were just like me. I found my story in others at school. Everyone in my middle school had immigrant parents and most of us were first-generation Americans. Still, despite how much I love my neighborhood, I knew that there were more opportunities elsewhere. For high school, I went to a school an hour away in a higher income area where I found myself in a completely different world. I was surrounded by wealthier students and a dominantly White population. Even though there were people with a similar background to mine, I found myself for the first time having white friends. I didn’t grow aware of the fact that I was keeping part of my identity to myself until one of them cut me off during a conversation to say, “Wow, I’ve never heard you sound so ghetto before.”

There are many things wrong with calling people ghetto. For one, I would highlight the fact that it’s a noun rather than an adjective. Still, it’s important to recognize how language does evolve and not all words continue to hold the same meaning/definition over time. People have taken the word *ghetto* and used it to stereotypically label minority groups. Being called ghetto confused me. I felt that my friends saw me differently. I felt like I belonged to the streets. But the thing is, I never thought of myself not being “ghetto,” whatever that meant. I didn’t think I was ever code-switching; I always felt like I was talking like myself. After that encounter, though, I found myself being more conscious of the way I spoke. I didn’t try to sound a certain way, I was just observing how I was presenting myself. I didn’t find anything noteworthy, but a game-changer happened one day during summer break when I reunited with my middle school friends and they said: “Since when are you a white girl?” One moment I was ghetto, the other I was white. What did it mean to be ghetto? What did it mean to be a white girl? Did I always have to be one over the other?

Code-switching is the act of alternating between different kinds of languages to accommodate in a certain situation. Anyone can code-switch. Still, there are differences between the types of code-switching people in power do versus the people without power. Code-switching can be as simple as acting professional in an academic setting and then switching to being more casual with friends. It can also mean being respectful towards your parents, and then reckless with your siblings. Different situations for different people. However, white folk do not carry the same weight as nonwhite people do when code-switching.

In this day and age, the worst thing you can do to a white person is probably calling them or accuse them of being racist. It is interesting that sometimes white people “code switch” so that they aren’t seen as a racist. In Shuck’s study, she spends a lot of time focusing on the relationship between language and monolingual students. In one of the examples she shares, students speak with each other with care to make sure they aren’t being offensive. For instance, a student named Jen explains that she felt uncomfortable with expressing the fact that she couldn’t tell the TA that she couldn’t understand her because she didn’t “want to like... hurt her feelings or whatever” (Shuck 265), and the discussion between her and the other student seems

to only get “deep” when the two students felt safe enough with each other to straight-up admit that they “had no clue what they were [the TA] saying” (Shuck 267). White people tend to feel as if they are being criticized if they share a “racist” view or when there is a conversation regarding politics. Code-switching in their case is a means of being seen as a decent human being.

Code-switching for non-white folk is different. Whatever they say or do can be related to their entire racial or ethnic group. If nonwhite people dare to speak the same way they speak with people like them in front of those in power, they are seen as “ghetto,” “ratchet,” and “inarticulate.” They are seen as representatives of their racial or ethnic group so they sometimes grow extremely cautious of what they do. The problem with this originates from the fact that professionalism and intelligence are associated with whiteness. Sometimes code-switching is more of a means of assimilating. In my case, I was trying not to be seen as a stereotypical person from a low-income neighborhood. When I was with my white friends, I tried to sound like them. I tried to sound smart. For some reason, to be white is to be proper with language. Those who have power are not considered an outsider because of the way they speak. Those who have power do not have to worry if what they are saying will be related or associated with their race. A language is an act with a consequence. In a class discussion, Chase brought up the point that when people of color talk, they are usually holding the weight of representing their entire race or ethnic background. One mispronunciation and people may think, “Oh it’s because they don’t speak English.” Use of a certain tone and boom — “*they’re all like that.*” To call a student of color white instead of intelligent is suggesting that the only people who can be smart are white. This then makes someone who isn’t white feel as though they do not belong because of the way they speak. As Gloria Anzaldua points out in her text *How to Tame a Wild Tongue*, “We use our language differences against each other” (Anzaldua, 38).

White people benefit from code-switching. Nine times out of ten, nonwhite people are doing it to make themselves fit in or to make white people comfortable. At the same time, people who code-switch are just trying to gain approval from those in power. It is easy to want to seem “smart” or to be accepted by those in power. There are times where speaking like you’re in the streets of your neighborhood is unacceptable. Code-switching, for nonwhite folk, becomes a skill that is able to tell “when to speak a certain language could be dangerous, even fatal” (Baldwin, 1). However, nonwhite folk becomes torn between being accepted by those in power and not becoming sell-outs in the eyes of the oppressed.

I WISH MY NAME WAS GUADALUPE OR MARIA

Code-switching isn’t just seen in everyday life. To a certain extent, nonnative English speakers are forced to code-switch the second they enroll in a school in the United States where they’re told to learn English. They are told to switch out of the identity they’re so used to living to become an American student. This process has become a demeaning experience for those especially labeled to be ESL. In Shuck’s piece, a student named Kelli admits that she “can’t imagine anyone... living here who would be intentionally trying NOT to learn the language, ‘cause then... why are [they] here” (Shuck, 272). As unfortunate as it may seem, sometimes I

think this ideology aligns with the way schools approach teaching English to non-native speakers.

The education system in the United States asks students of all backgrounds to learn white English. This English is solely academic. Students are asked to write using sentence structures and grammar rules that may be completely different from the way they are used to speaking. While there is a fine line between professionalism and casual language, telling students to follow certain rules that abandon their identity can be toxic. In his text, *If Black English Isn't A Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?* James Baldwin makes the point that "A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiates his experience and all that gives him sustenance and enter a limbo in which he will no longer be black, and in which he knows that he can never become white" (Baldwin, 4). Though students learn white English, they will never be seen to have the same power as white students. Baldwin admits that "The brutal truth is that the bulk of the white people in America never had any interest in educating black people, except that this could serve white purposes" (Baldwin, 4). The system is built to keep white people at the top.

Learning English for nonnative speakers looks different for everyone. For me, I was enrolled in my school's English Second Language program. My school's ESL program has made me forget my Spanish tongue. I was told to only speak English as "practice made perfect." I think for that reason I just stopped introducing myself with the Spanish pronunciation of my name. Still, I will never be "white" enough in the sense that my language will allow me to conform (especially since my English name is literally incorrect). Sometimes I wish my name was Guadalupe or Maria. Sometimes I wish my name was more Mexican, so I could feel a stronger connection to my language and to my culture. I think about those times when I was only in the first grade and stood at the post office translating for my dad without hesitation and compare that to now, where I have to say "oh it's nothing important" when I read his emails hoping that I can escape moments of awkwardness where my translation is literally just repeating the whole thing in English. I wonder if I can ever bring back my inner Maria or if it's too late to have the power to make my language mine again.

Works Cited

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