LITERACY AS 
TRANSLINGUAL PRACTICE 
Between Communities and Classrooms 

ted by A. Suresh Canagarajah
CONTENTS

Acknowledgements viii

1 Introduction 1

A. Suresh Canagarajah

PART I

Premises 11

2 Global and Local Communicative Networks and Implications for Literacy 13

Charles Bazerman

3 Translingual Literacy and Matters of Agency 26

Min-Zhao Liu and Bruce Hornsby

4 Rhetorical Activities of Global Citizens 39

Swati Wilde

5 Redefining Indigenous Rhetoric: From Places of Origin to Translingual Spaces of Interdependence-in-Difference 47

Lukking Moo
13

KEEP CODE-MESHING

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Since coining the neologism "code-meshing" in my article "Your Average Nigga" (Young, 2004, 71:3:8; Young, 2007) and offering there a defining definition, the term and its applications have been just as astoundingly enlarged by others as it has been ardently debated. Perhaps linguist Suresh Canagarajah stands among the most notable advocates of code-meshing, since it is his theoretical and practical scholarship on the concept that has propelled it from an explanation I put in a footnote to a subject of primary focus in journal articles, edited volumes, dissertations, and published monographs (see, e.g., Canagarajah, 2006).

A Personal Response

I am heartened by both the disagreements and deliberations that code-meshing has sparked, and I want to offer a word or two in response to some of these discussions as it relates, or least, to what was my only goal in formulating the term: to provide a sociolinguistic framework that would help reduce, if not eliminate, both the racial prejudice against African American English and the linguistic injustice against African American people. My goal was, and remains, in regards to the focus of my work as a scholar of African American literary, language, and cultural studies, to help code-meshing become an acceptable practice for what I hear and see black people doing every day: blending, adjusting, playing, and dancings with standard English and academic discourse when they are living on the playground, wielding linguistic charm in the courtroom (e.g., "If it doesn’t fit, you must acquit."). I have written police reports for work, and speaking and writing anywhere and everywhere that communication takes place, whether in informal or formal settings. What these black folk I hear, read, and admire are doing is code-meshing, which I continue to see as the strategic, self-conscious and
un-self-conscious blending of one’s own accent, dialect, and linguistic patterns as they are influenced by a host of folks, environments, and media, including moments, family, school, community, peer groups, reading matter, academic study, whatevers.

The reason this view of code-meshing is so very important to me is because too many teachers still on one hand praise African American students for their creative voice and renderings of black rhetoric when they write poetry but then condemn those same students when they both un-self-consciously and strategically employ those same features when speaking to non-black people, particularly white people, or to professionals of any race, or when they produce critical, academic, or journalistic writing. And even though many of these teachers are very well meaning, often saying that they are preparing these students for the real world, one that doesn’t yet value black English (read: black people), they must demand that the students switch back and forth when appropriate, be black, or as they put it, speak black, when it’s safe to do so, but not when your job, your grades, or your relationships with other non-black people (and sometimes other blacks who share the same prejudice) are on the line.

For me, code-meshing is a smack in the face to logic that unevenly and unfairly places a societal and racial burden on the shoulders of students who shouldn’t have to bear the sole brunt of so thoroughly changing themselves, their language, just so other people will feel comfortable; just so they won’t offend and lose out on opportunities that would be theirs if they weren’t black. Code-meshing says to this thinking, in all the black gusto it can muster, “Honey, pull yoursel’!”

Yes, I recognize that I am challenging and attempting to change the status quo, not only regarding writing and literacy instruction but also the court of public opinion. Yes, this court includes other black people, some who even themselves use black English, yet still have it. And yes, I know that some teachers and the public might respond to what I argue with objections that seek to reaffirm that prescriptive standard English is all that students need for academic and financial success, even if it excludes other dialects and language influences. I also know, however, that there are sympathetic teachers who believe that authorizing diverse language practices, that using black standard English and black academic discourse is a good idea; but they ultimately and unfortunately would rather waffle in the debate than to rally against the world as it is (still prejudiced against blackness) and engage the world as it should be (egalitarian, truly diverse).

Therefore, I want to respond to one of the foremost arguments against code-meshing—one recently expressed by a very erudite and accomplished colleague, literary critic and writing teacher Stanley Fish. When his opinion against linguistic diversity appeared on his New York Times Opinionator blog, it received quite a bit of support. It also received some criticism, making it an appropriate response to engage, as I and others urge that people keep code-meshing.

**Responding to Debates**

The debate between teachers who wish to honor students’ native languages and dialects as they teach the English language and its various arts—listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and visually representing—and those who believe students must be taught standard English only, since other Englishes are still believed to have limited value, if any, in academic and professional sites, is presently just as intense as it was in 1974, when advocates of students’ rights to their own language published their resolution, which to me should settle the waffling of the sympathetic speech and writing teachers about valuing code-meshing when it states this:

Resolved, that NCTE [National Council of Teachers of English] promote classroom practices to expose students to the variety of dialects that comprise our multilingual, multilingual, and multicultural society, so that they too will understand the nature of American English.

(NCTE, 1974)

This excerpt is taken directly from the position statement, which argues that language arts instruction should focus on effective language rather than viewing prescriptive standards of standard language as the only key to success. What’s more, an excerpt from the background statement of the resolution asks teachers to think deeply about the consequences of what we teach as English and how we teach it:

And many of us have taught as though the function of schools and colleges were to erase differences. Should we, on the one hand, urge creativity and individuality in the arts and the sciences, take pride in the diversity of our historical development, and, on the other hand, try to obliterate all the differences in the way Americans speak and write? Our major emphasis has been on uniformity, in both speech and writing; we would accomplish more both educationally and ethically, if we shifted that emphasis to precise, effective, and appropriate communication in diverse ways, whatever the dialects.

(Committee on CCCC Language: Background statement, 1974, p. 2)

As a contemporary advocate of the best features of “Students’ Rights,” I promote the instructional shift the document urges, from prescriptive instruction to an emphasis on “precise, effective, and appropriate communication … whatever the dialect” or, as I would add, “whatever the meshing of dialects.”

However, as I shall again argue here, I am also critical of the prevailing methods that sympathetic teachers use to implement it (see Young, 2011; Young & Martinez, 2011). On one side they simply refuse to teach any effective language that comes from standard English or academic discourse, because they feel as if
such school-based language violates students’ home language. Not so! The problem is this: reprimanding students for blending dialects and asking them to give up their language in favor of another one, even for a little while, or to put it as it is often phrased, “in appropriate settings.” This commits the violation. Students in this scenario are asked to switch from their English to the standard. They are patronized, summarily told that their language shares equal prestige with standard dialect, even as teachers believe this very claim by labeling standard language as “formal” and the students’ English as “informal,” thus reinforcing a superior/inferior linguistic dichotomy (for a recent example of those who urge that teachers adopt the informal/formal formulation, see Wheeler & Swofford, 2006). Although, different approaches, i.e., refusing to teach standard English and teaching code-switching, both adhere to the monolingual ideal of standard English, the belief that other varieties of English are inherently deficient, should be confined to informal situations, used with close friends and family, and needing the narrow rules of standard English to communicate effectively in wider contexts.

Stanley Fish offered his perspective on the best way to teach writing in his widely read New York Times Opinionator blog. His opinion piece illustrates just how opposed some of the professoriate and even more of the public are to ideas and pedagogies that accommodate Englishes. Parroting one of the most tired biased arguments against “Students’ Rights,” Fish (2009, Sept. 7) writes:

> It may be true that the standard language is an instrument of power and a device for protecting the status quo, but that very truth is a reason for teaching it to students who are being prepared for entry into the world as it now is rather than the world as it might be in some utopian imagination—all dialects equal, all habit of speech and writing equally rewarded. You’re not going to be able to change the world if you are not equipped with the tools that speak to its present condition. You don’t strike a blow against a power structure by making yourself vulnerable to its prejudices ...

Fish, and others who believe as he does, couldn’t be more wrong. First, no speaker’s or writer’s language, dialect, or style makes them “vulnerable to prejudice.” Prejudice resides in the eyes and ears of the beholders, from the attitudes people have about certain groups of people, bigoted attitudes (both unintentional and intentional) which get projected onto certain groups of languages (see Lindgren, 1999). Despite his flaccid gestures to multilingualism, Fish asserts that there is an essential problem with acknowledging dialects in writing instruction, and argues that we should teach students out of them. For him, dialect prejudice is not his problem, too big to tackle; so we must accommodate to its power. And this is where he gets especially double-tongued. He says no one can change prejudice if you can’t speak using the prescriptive rules of standard English, suggesting that dialect is incapable of expressing complaint and substantial arguments in the effort of change. He is understated: the understanding that “in order to dismantle the master’s house, you have to use his tools.” I respond: “Ever heard of a bulldozer?” Bulldozers don’t build houses, but you can knock a house down with one. In my opinion, code-meshing is the bulldozer to linguistic prejudice.

However, to speak directly to Fish’s point that if students learn the standard language then they can speak against its dominance, this statement is disingenuous at best. Fish doesn’t really mean it, since he begins his article recommending the opposite:

> What would a [writing] course based on the method I urge look like? …
> First, you must clear your mind [of the following]. “We affirm the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style.”

(Fish, 2009, Sept. 7)

In other words, Fish is pushing the very people who have learned the standard and who are now teaching it to abandon their efforts to disrupt its unfair supremacy. If Fish were actually sincere about his advice to learn the standard language first and afterward pursue changing it, then the writers of the “Students’ Rights”—indeed the resolution itself—would stand as exemplary examples.

But Fish isn’t for real about seeking change. He would keep code-meshing advocates spinning their wheels, teaching the dominant standard, under the false belief that becoming a part of the system is the best way to change it—when really what happens is that we few who do make it are then used as examples by Fish and others to say, “Ain’t nothing wrong with the system; the problem is with the language of the most who don’t make it.” We few successful minorities and immigrants thus become the very cog used that keep the same old wheel of linguistic oppression turning, the very bands that keep the prejudicial butt end of a chain.

In addition, Fish encourages teachers to patronize students when it comes to issues of language difference. He writes:

> If students infected with the facile egalitarianism of soft multiculturalism declare, “I have a right to my own language,” reply, “Yes, you do, and I am not here to take that language from you. I’m here to teach you another one.” (Who could object to learning a second language?) And then get on with it.

(Fish, 2009, Sept. 7)

Besides being stiff, he’s promoting that we be hypocritical. He wants us first to discard policies such as “Students’ Rights” and then says we should tell students, “You do have a right to your language.” Fish! What’s more, it appears patently disingenuous for Fish to ask, “Who could object to learning a second

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**142 Verda Swain**
language [or dialect]" when it's only those who want to keep their language, the "multicultural," that he feels shouldn't object to learning standard language. If indeed Fish believes that no one should object to learning another dialect, then wouldn't he be a supporter of "Students' Rights" and argue for the full implementation of code-meshing? After all, the resolution itself offers the same advice. It encourages the learning of a second, third, and even fourth dialect by all students, when it says that teachers should "expose students to the variety of dialects that comprise our multilingual, multilingual, and multicultural society." So when Fish asks "Who could object to a second language?" The answer is—hmmm—he does, since he most certainly objects to students learning and using any variety of English other than the "standard."

And this is where I want to speak directly as a teacher to other teachers of oral and written English, whether you teach literature, literacy, communication, or any of its other arts. Too many of us double-speak, claiming one cheek that varieties of English are fully compatible with and sometimes more expressive than standard English as we currently narrowly conceive of it. Out the other cheek we say, "But students must master the rules of standard English usage for standardized tests, to show that they can be successful professionals at work, and at various stages of school."

"Our hands are tied," some of us say. We then close our eyes as we tie many of our students' tongues, in hopes that a few will succeed, while knowing from history, past experience, and current statistics that most don't succeed, certainly most people classified as minorities won't, not under the current limited rubric of what counts as linguistic success.

Exhortation to Teachers

Yet, English teachers are not brick and mortar lobbies. We are mediators of culture, transmitting beliefs and values about people and language in all that we do. Because of this, it's important to be aware of the ideology we spread through our instruction. Though there are more, below are three interconnected beliefs that English teachers sustain when we disregard code-meshing and teach standard language only:

1. When we operate as if it's a fact that standard English is what all professionals and academics use, we ignore the real fact that not all successful professionals and academics write in standard English. We ignore the many examples of effective formal writing composed in accents, in varieties of English other than what's considered standard (see Campbell, 2005; Smitherman, 1977; Young, 1997). Further, we ignore that standard English has been and continues to be a contested concept (see Lippa-Green, 1997; McWhorter, 1998).

2. When we say that our hands are tied because of standardized tests and public perception, we allow test makers, the commercial world, and the general public to dictate our professional responsibilities, to decide in effect what we teach, and negate our own professional training and credentials. We choose not to use our individual and collective agency to alter the prevailing linguistic prejudice.

3. When we teach standard English only, despite feeling, knowing, or thinking that it limits students and is not the only effective mode, we are asserting standard English as if it's a decree from Hitler, as if it's the official language of a dictator, of a totalitarian government, and certainly not the language of a democracy, where the voices of all peoples should matter, and where diversity is appreciated, encouraged, and accepted. When we fear backlash or that we'll lose our jobs if we follow the resolutions of our national professional organization, shouldn't that very fear indicate that best practices are not driving English education, that democracy is not in action?

In view of the foregoing, I continue to believe that the time is now to teach and learn code-meshing. It seems only right that we at least try. So, as has become any mantra and urging, keep code-meshing, keep code-meshing... 

Note

1. The six language arts, as designated by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA) (Standards for the English Language Arts, 1996), are listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and visually representing.

References


