

Defining Identity

In changing how we speak, we put accent on connecting

October 28, 2007 | By Sue Ellen Christian

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As the presidential candidates crisscross the country campaigning, they change more than just planes, wardrobes and talking points. They change the way they speak.

Some might adopt a regional accent, as Hillary Clinton did during an appearance in Selma, Ala., her "I" sliding into an "Ahh." Some might clip the ends off words, as when Harvard-trained Barack Obama drops a "goin'" and a "complainin.'"

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But if a stump speech in Iowa sounds different from one in Harlem, that hardly makes a candidate disingenuous.

The candidates are merely practicing a public and high-stakes version of what many people do every day. Linguists call it "code switching," changing the way we speak -- the word choice, accent, syntax -- depending on our audience. Its more common cousin is called "style switching," which includes how we adapt our dress, our movements, even our posture to different environments.

And we all do that, every day.


But while such linguistic polymorphism can expand the ways we try to connect with others, it can get lost in translation coming from the wrong lips: Was that an innocent attempt to "relate," or was it mockery? Versatility

in one speaker can seem like fakery in another.

People code switch for any number of reasons -- to help define who they are, to signal familiarity, to intimidate, to create intimacy. In this manipulation of language to meet a need, the constituents share something with the campaigners.

"We all style shift," said H. Samy Alim, a linguistic anthropologist at the University of California, Los Angeles. "From Sunday church to Friday bar, we use different word choice, pronunciation, even ways of entering a conversation, ways of responding to people."


Bilingual speakers often code switch throughout the day, intermixing Spanish and English words within a sentence, for example. African-Americans might weave in and out of standard American English and black vernacular depending on the person they're talking to.

Yet while the 2008 presidential campaign is playing out across a country with diverse accents, dialects and languages, some in this so-called nation of immigrants still hold tight to the value  of being monolingual.

Even diversity in communication styles makes many Americans wary, and some will use a person's language style to make assumptions about identity.

"I think I've surprised some people when I meet them after I talk to them on the phone and they are expecting a white person," said Darrell White, a photographer based in west suburban River Forest. "They say to me, 'You don't sound black.' I say, 'What does black sound like?'"


Chicagoan Niquenya Fulbright faces the same expectations, and turns them to her advantage.


"I definitely code switch, and it can be a profound change depending on what situation I'm in," said Fulbright, an executive  life coach and motivational speaker. "I do have the black vernacular, but I am considered more a proper English speaker all the way around -- I've always been teased for that.

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"I use it as an asset  now," she said. "I find that I am able to relate to a lot more people than I would be if I was very closed and one-dimensional."

Yet Fulbright concedes that some people are put off by her ability to travel  across language styles: "I get the labels, like Oreo cookie."

J. Joseph Errington, professor of anthropology at Yale University and the incoming [president](#) of the Society for Linguistic Anthropology, said Americans are more open to switching between languages than to speaking in more than one style or dialect.

"Those people who say 'You're an Oreo,' they are buying into the same idea that you should only speak your language in only one way; don't have two accents, then you're a faker," Errington said. "Switching between accents or dialects, that's fishy; we don't trust people who do that."

Code and style switching work best when the speaker and the audience share an identity -- be it cultural, ethnic or something else.

"When one code switches, there are inherently these identity implications," said Karla Scott, a professor of communication and the director of the African American Studies Program at St. Louis University. "For example, it can mean that I recognize you as someone who is like me so I am trying to connect with you.

"When the two black women who are coming out of their graduate class, where they had to prove they are worthy and not mere tokens, switch to African-American vernacular, that is an instance when they are saying, 'We share this identity as black women; we know how far we've come in that identity.'"

Andrea Saenz, [executive director](#) of the Chicago-based Hispanic Alliance for Career Enhancement, ricochets between Spanish and English, sometimes in the same sentence.

"I've worked with people of all [educational](#) backgrounds and ethnic backgrounds," Saenz said. "The fact that we share Spanish is sometimes one of the few things we share.

"It creates a shared intimacy. It's a wink and a nod, like, 'I get where you're coming from.'"

When there isn't a shared identity, however, what is ideally a technique to communicate more effectively instead produces the opposite effect.

A case in point: When Hillary Clinton quoted James Cleveland's freedom hymn during her visit to a Selma church, she tried to adopt the style of speech used in the hymn -- but that style involves black dialect. The bloggers had a field day with the audio clip.

"She can't speak that dialect," Errington said. "And when she mangled it, she looked like a poser."

Sue Ellen Christian is an associate professor of journalism at Western Michigan University.

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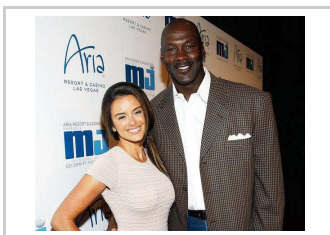
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