FLIng Through Voices: Racial Code-Switching & Belonging for First-Generation Students

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Abstract

The conversation on racial code-switching demonstrates how education has ingrained biases against different marginalized dialects, forcing students to adopt "professional" speaking practices. This leads me to ask how racial code-switching poses a barrier to a sense of belonging for first-generation college students. Existing work on racial code-switching primarily addresses educational pedagogy of racial code-switching and its negative impact on the self-perception of students of color. However, there is an unmet gap concerning the impacts of racial code-switching on first-generation students of color navigating new academic spaces. While first-generation students face unique challenges in belonging and adjusting to academic rigor, racial code-switching presents yet another adaptation that first-generation college students must face. In this paper, I argue that racial code-switching produces another barrier to a sense of belonging in higher education for first-generation students of color. First, I review literature on how racial code-switching practices are embedded into classrooms in order to demonstrate how students of color are forced to linguistically assimilate into white standards of English. Next, I look into presentations of racial code-switching within different minority communities and subsequent impacts on self-perception. Then, I review how first-generation college students at Stanford regard the ways they linguistically present themselves in academia. Finally, I conclude my research by proposing recommendations for professors to reframe the ways they regard different dialects and ensure equitable academic access for first-generation college students.

Introduction

For my first seven weeks at Stanford, I felt like a shell of myself. I didn't feel three-dimensional. I was constantly putting up a facade.

"Hi, my name is Rose, I'm a student at Stanford University planning to study Public Policy."

I was careful about how I expressed myself; I felt I had to put up a more professional front. Though tone can't be communicated on paper, there were nuances unique to my "professional voice" that weren't present in my normal one. Each word was carefully enunciated. The words "like" and "um" were cut out of my speech. I turned monolingual: there were no Spanish words that slipped into my vocabulary. The art of speaking became practiced in an almost unnatural way. As I shifted the consonants into careful enunciation, I felt I was losing an element of myself. The relaxed intonations that once characterized my speech were absent in favor of the constant guard I had up around my peers. My new college environment meant a new voice and, consequently, a new self.

The practice of using a "professional voice" is common amongst many marginalized communities. Typically, "professional voices" adhere to a concept of "Standard American English." "Standard American English," as described by linguist Rosina Lippi-Green, is an accentless ideal of English that is primarily spoken by "highly educated" people and is typically

considered more proper (Lippi-Green 2011). While the idea of Standard American English claims to be neutral, dialects spoken by many marginalized communities don't fit into these ideals due to their "accents." When you have to find ways to adapt to Eurocentric ideals of English, you aren't able to hold onto your cultural dialects. When you have to censor and rephrase the words that come out of your mouth, you aren't able to express yourself freely. When you can't express yourself in a classroom, you aren't allowed to be your authentic self. In turn, this results in a feeling of linguistic exclusion and inadequacy for students. Furthermore, it strips students of color of one of their most powerful tools: their voice.

Many scholars have corroborated that racial code-switching is primarily used to achieve a semblance of "whiteness" alongside being of higher socioeconomic standing (i.e., upper middle-class) in order to be respected or treated fairly (Hankerson 2023, Crumb et. al 2022, Lippi-Green 2011). The conversation on racial code-switching demonstrates how education has ingrained bias against different marginalized dialects and forced their students to adopt "professional" speaking practices which leads me to ask, how racial code-switching poses a barrier for first-generation college students and finding a sense of belonging.

Existing work has covered first-generation college students and their sense of belonging in academia, but there is an unmet gap on how racial code-switching impacts first-generation college students. As such, I've had to incorporate research regarding racial code-switching, the first-generation college student experience, and interview data to paint a picture of how first-generation college students, many of whom tend to be students of color, are affected by this phenomenon In this paper I argue that racial code-switching provides another barrier, after lack of preparation for academic work and social belonging, to a sense of belonging in higher education for first-generation college students. First, I review literature on how racial code-switching practices are embedded into classrooms in order to demonstrate how students of color are forced to linguistically assimilate into white standards of English in order to provide context as to how it is presented in classrooms. Next, I look into how racial code-switching presents itself for different minority communities and self-perception impacts. Then, I review belonging for first-generation college students regarding the way they linguistically present themselves in academia. Finally, I conclude my research by proposing ways that professors can reframe the way they regard different dialects and ensure equitable academic access for first-generation college students. Ultimately, I argue that research into racial code-switching for first-generation college students is especially urgent given the rollbacks of diversity, equity, and inclusion programs in universities across the United States. With equitable systems being rolled back, it's important to understand the necessity for accessibility and culturally relevant dialects to accommodate first-generation college students.

What is Racial Code-Switching?

Racial code-switching, or eliminating distinctive cultural linguistic features in favor of a "whiter" sounding voice, stems from assimilation into white linguistic standards. In English with an Accent, Rosina Lippi-Green, a former linguistics professor at the University of Michigan and current linguistics researcher, examines the contradictions that come with setting a "standard" English language. Many native English speakers feel the need to switch out of dialects to fit an accentless ideal of Standard American English, not wanting to be seen as "sloppy in terms of pronunciation and grammar" (Lippi-Green, 2011, pg. 6). Though many people have their own perceptions of correct English, the terms and conditions that make the concept of "Standard American English" as Lippi-Green points out, are subjective. Many of the conditions of speaking

"Standard American English" tend to revolve around the idea of "proper" enunciation of phrases. However, these conventions tend to be enforced more strictly on marginalized communities to impose a standard of linguistic perfectionism. In a study at the University of Maryland about African American language perception one student talked about how "people used to say [they] were ghetto" for speaking African American Language (Hankerson 2011). In predominantly white spaces, students speaking different English dialects will be looked at poorly. The pressure from both staff and students to conform in order to not seem "ghetto" results in students shedding their authentic selves to fit white formal ideals in the classroom. In turn, marginalized communities are trained throughout their educational journeys to fit into "Standard American English."

"I'm preparing them for the real world!" — Racial Code-Switching in Classrooms

Instructors who come from privileged backgrounds perpetuate harmful code-switching standards upon their students. When white women approach classrooms full of students of color, many of them are in fact conscious of their pedagogy enforcing racial code-switching, seeing it as an essential part of preparing their students for the future world (Daniels, 2023). The reinforcement of racial code-switching standards isn't an unconscious byproduct of education, rather many teachers are aware that they are teaching racial code-switching practices, knowingly asking their students to stop their usage of slang (much of the students of color's "slang" being dialects from their community) and to speak in a more "polished" voice. Many teachers see the dialects their students of color speak as invalid, or "unprofessional." These teachers examined are reflective of the education system's attitude towards the necessity of racial code-switching. Stripping students of color of their distinctive linguistic mannerisms is normalized; there isn't room for linguistic diversity within the classroom.

Many teachers approach teaching code-switching as a favor to their students, ignoring their positionality of privilege. In an effort to seem more relatable to their students, these white teachers draw parallels, claiming that their experiences with professionalism are one in the same to their students, ignoring their positionality as white teachers towards students of color (Daniels, 2023). Though white women may still change their voice from casual to professional conversation, this approach towards teaching code-switching overlooks the importance that many dialects have culturally. For example, African American Language holds strong ties to Black culture, art, music, and forms of media. Similarly, Spanglish, the Spanish and English hybrid Language, holds strong significance to the diasporic identity of being Latino in the United States. Both Daniels (2018) and Hankerson (2023) would argue that White standards of English are weaponsized against students of color and that instructors fail to teach students the cultural importance of marginalized dialects like African American Language, alongside limiting their students' self-expression. Furthermore, the consensus of Daniels and Hankerson illustrates the way the education system fails to linguistically uplift students of color, primarily punishing them for not meeting eurocentric standards. Overall, educators hold significant power in molding perceptions of cultural dialects for students of color and are the primary stakeholders in creating a feeling of inadequacy and causing the students to begin to code switch.

Our Voices Converge in Whiteness: Code-Switching for Different Students of Color

However, the need to racially code-switch for professionalism presents itself differently for

different marginalized groups. For example, Spanglish is a popular point of conversation for its speakers, Latino people, and linguists alike. Although it follows its own set of grammatical conventions, it has a history of being regarded as a language used when the person is deficient in one or the other (Sayer 2008). Though the linguistic consensus has deviated away from the perspective of Spanglish being used to "crutch the other language" (Sayer 2008), the popular opinion in media is that Spanglish isn't necessarily a natural feature of Latino bilingualism, but rather a quirky action meant to tokenize identity. Similarly, in series that focus on Latino protagonists, Spanglish tends to be a lot more stilted and scripted, with Spanish words being slid in awkwardly. This popular view of Spanglish results in the invalidation of the dialect itself. Even in dual language immersion schools, the focus tends to be on exclusively speaking one language or the other in a certain time frame (Sayer 2008). By prohibiting Latino students from naturally blending their languages, they learn that they have to assimilate and distinguish both identities. For bilingual students, this is especially difficult when they want to provide emphasis or a secondary meaning to a statement, and aren't able to speak both their languages freely. In this case, the focus on English inherently harms Latino students' ability to freely express themselves since they are ruled by the confines of English in many normal schools, or dedicated English-speaking times in dual immersion schools. Many Spanglish-speaking students feel out of place in predominantly white institutions due to racial code-switching and strip their voices of their natural flow between languages.

Additionally, African American Language (AAL) has been the target of media and educational scrutiny, forcing African American students to assimilate into "Standard" English in order for their academic and professional work to be seen as socially acceptable (Hankerson 2023, Crumb et. al 2023, Daniels 2018). As mentioned earlier, African American Language holds a significant history of being demeaned by the educational system. Although Spanish speakers do receive acknowledgment that their second language is valid, African American Language tends to be reduced to slang phrases or scooped up into "Gen Z slang" as a generalization. The lack of acknowledgment of African American Language as a language itself further results in the invalidation of African American students in the education system. When their language isn't treated as valid, African American students are forced back into "Standard English" even if they could more effectively communicate in African American Language. Overall, the education's lack of allowance for linguistic diversity results in the continued pressure to code switch.

Another Hoop to Jump Through: Racial Code-Switching for First-Generation College Students

First-generation students, many of whom are students of color, haven't been in a higher-education academic environment before. While navigating academic spaces is a complex task for any high school student transitioning into college, first-generation college students aren't able to call their parents for advice. Much of the college adjustment process for first-generation students is done individually, as many of these students are used to being independent in pursuing higher education. From the moment first-generation students apply to college, they chart new territory.

Among the linguistic challenges that first-generation students face, many struggle with academic adjustment. Even amongst first-generation students who went to college preparatory schools, only 12 out of 18 students interviewed felt prepared for "disciplinary literary tasks required in college" (Wahleithner, 2020, pg. 21), such as interpreting academic research alongside writing their own papers. Adjusting to linguistic rigor forces many first-generation

students out of their comfort zone. When confronted with dense academic language, it's difficult for many of us to interpret research papers and draw our own conclusions from the academic conversation. In turn, dealing with new types of unfamiliar language can become a disorienting experience.

Furthermore, many first-generation students face challenges adjusting to an environment with people from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. The differences between first-generation students, who tend to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and their richer counterparts, tend to come from "ostensibly mundane, day-to-day situations…" (Gray, B. et al. 2018) such as discussing spring break vacations or the ability to afford membership in certain clubs that require payment. Whether it be abstaining from events and social gatherings due to cost or the inability to relate to travel experiences, the subsequent reaction of being surrounded by wealth can be jarring to students who aren't familiar with that type of upbringing. In turn, this creates an isolating experience for many first-generation students as they don't find themselves having common ground with their richer counterparts. Without common ground, first-generation students are more aware of the deficits within their own lives (Gray, B. et al. 2018). Whether it be the education levels of their richer classmates or the inability to indulge in certain privileges, first-generation students become distinctly aware of differences between themselves and their classmates. Many first-generation students end up feeling that their own experiences aren't enough in order to be able to assimilate adequately into new environments.

The common thread between linguistic adjustment in the academic sense, where students get used to academic writing, and interacting with richer counterparts is that both of these factors contribute to furthering the need for first-generation students to racially code switch. Without parental figures able to provide guidance on navigating identity in higher education, many first-generation students, like me, default to racial code-switching to fit in with the general student population. Racial code-switching as a primary setting results in an odd form of dissonance; many students can't recognize themselves as fully dimensional when parts of their personalities are cut and crafted in order to try to pave their way through academia.

Within my research, I interviewed a small pilot group of three first-generation college students at Stanford University. I chose the interview format for these questions to gain anecdotal insight into the impact that racial code-switching has on first-generation college students. My three participants, one of whom was a senior, were chosen to showcase how racial code-switching affects these students throughout the trajectory of their careers at Stanford. The questions posed to these students were:

Have you ever felt the need to change your voice to speak professionally? If so, why? How has that impacted your sense of belonging in classrooms?

Do you feel that you've had to change your voice in the time that you've started college? How has this impacted your sense of self?

Although three students is a limited number of people, their insights illuminate some themes around how first-generation students regard racial code-switching.

Spoken with Caution: FLI students at Stanford & Habitual Code-Switching

The following quotes that I've highlighted from each participant shed light on common themes that were shared during the interviews.

"With Derechos, it's a lot of Hispanic people like me that talk like me, so it's kind of like, okay we're chill. With SLE, it's kind of like that… people are like… What is that? … I have to self-

regulate more." - Participant A

For context, Derechos is a pre-professional society at Stanford University that was created for Latino students interested in pursuing law school or public service careers. While this student specifically participated in Derechos, his experience reflects the importance of diverse undergraduate student organizations. Participant A is a freshman participating in a residential learning program known as Structured Liberal Education. The Structured Liberal Education program, or SLE for short, focuses on creating an "atmosphere that emphasizes critical thinking and interpretation" (Stanford Introductory Studies, 2024). Although Participant A spends the majority of his time interacting with his classmates in the SLE program, he doesn't feel fully comfortable expressing himself linguistically around his dorm. Many of the SLE participants come from a variety of different backgrounds, with many of them coming from continuing college families. Participant A's dialectal difference to his classmates causes him to racially code switch and adapt his voice, even in a space meant for exploration of different ideas. Although he is comfortable with his dorm, there's a facet of himself that he doesn't demonstrate. In order to be understood by his dormmates, Participant A isn't able to use slang since it evokes surprise or questioning looks from his dormmates. Participant A's experience illuminates a broader pattern amongst first-generation college students, including some of our other participants, of finding ways to stay connected to cultural communities in order to let their guard down linguistically. It's commonplace for many first-generation college students to call back on their own communities in order to "cognitively disengage from cross-class and/or cross-race interactions" (Gray et. al 2018). For Participant A, his community in Derechos, both cultural and pre-professional, aided his sense of finding his own place at Stanford. Participant A felt that he could speak in his authentic voice due to being surrounded by similar people. As such, he was able to be authentic in a way he couldn't in his residential space and find belonging in a university space without needing to racially code switch. Student groups like Derechos and other ethnicity-based interest groups are especially important for first-generation college students to pursue their pre-professional interests through culturally relevant lenses.

"I don't bring in that louder, more passionate side; I kind of leave it at home." - Participant B

A common thread amongst racial code-switching is the idea of time and place. Similarly to Participant A, Participant B is also a part of SLE. With Participant B leaving his passionate side at home, he sheds an element of himself as he enters the university. Participant B's acknowledgment of leaving his passionate self behind is consistent with the way many students of color are educated in the United States. For many Latino students, there's an idea of not wanting to be perceived as too "loud" or "rambunctious" due to trying to combat stereotypes The distinction between the "proper" way to speak and act at home is carefully paved by certain educators as they believe that it would help their students succeed. (Daniels 2018). Although it may prove to be beneficial for Participant B to code-switch by not demonstrating outward passion, it neglects an aspect of his true self. In his calculated efforts of racial code-switching, he may forfeit the opportunity to make connections with others on shared interests. Though he shares a sense of comfortability in affinity spaces like Participant A, he does acknowledge that being in a residential learning community results in him having to racially code-switch most times when he encounters academic authority figures.

"It's kind of like second nature, like a response trigger type of thing." - Participant C

For Participant C, a senior at Stanford University, racial code-switching became a habitual behavior. Due to the constant employment of racial code-switching, Participant C doesn't reflect upon his change in behavior when he racially code switches. Participant C's insight as a senior at Stanford reflects a similar tone as the freshman interviewees, with Participant C recognizing that he had become significantly more soft-spoken as he continued to racially code switch. As a person of Latino descent, this vocal shift stemmed from adjusting his tone in order to fit in with others at Stanford. Since his surrounding community wasn't as expressive or loud, he felt the need to shift towards speaking softly. For Participant C, the main point of realization came when he visited family and friends at home, many of them remarking on his vocal changes. As code-switching became habitual, the way Participant C expressed himself shifted even within the communities that he was comfortable with. Participant C's usage of racial code-switching stems from using it as a professional tool, similar to the findings of Crumb et. al (2023), which in turn allows him to integrate himself fully into the predominantly white atmosphere at Stanford University.

Overall, across all participants, many sought out people who shared similar characteristics as them in order to speak in their most natural voice. Due to the continued habitual usage of racial code-switching, many of them regarded racial code-switching as one of many facets of themselves. Although none of them regard racial code-switching as a full erasure of themselves, they have used it as a strategy in order to present what they believe to be a more socially acceptable version of themselves academically and socially at Stanford.

Rethinking Dialects: The Importance of Implementing Critical Language Awareness

Although habitual code-switching has proven to be useful for first-generation students, there is value in ensuring that they have a positive perspective on the dialects that they speak. In order to make academia more linguistically welcoming, critical language awareness frameworks can be used for first-generation students to have appreciation and comfortability in using their home dialects on campus. Reframing English dialects in academia has proven to be successful through employing critical language awareness, which reframes the emergence of various English dialects in their cultural contexts. To help students better understand their linguistic tendencies, students are prompted to "[conduct] ethnographic and sociolinguistic analyses of their own communicative behavior" (Alim, 2005) and understand how their dialects are treated contextually in society due to discriminatory factors against language. By having CLA implemented, there becomes a broader consensus on the concrete idea that dialectal variation is common, and the biases that tend to come with different dialects.

After a four-week course that utilized critical language awareness regarding African American language in college writing, "all of the students (100%) answered 'yes'." (Hankerson 2023) The shift towards more positive attitudes towards African American Language demonstrates that with the right type of instruction, students will feel validated in the dialects they possess. By applying the critical language awareness framework to encompass dialects that many first-generation students are familiar with, such as African American Language or Spanglish, first-generation students will feel more comfortable expressing themselves in their natural voices. Alongside minimizing the need for habitual code-switching for first-generation students, critical language ideologies could help upper-class students become tolerant of different

dialects. In turn, upper-class students build a better understanding of the significance of dialects that are unfamiliar to them. Critical language awareness implementation proves to be beneficial for all parties involved. For first-generation college students, it eliminates internalized bias against their own dialects by providing a contextual understanding of how dialects are seen. For upper-class and white students, it allows for them to become familiar and grow to appreciate the linguistic diversity of their peers. Hankerson's research demonstrates a need for further research into broadly implementing critical language awareness in university settings. By implementing CLA, first-generation college students will feel empowered to change the "dynamics of scholarly publication and promote social justice and equity in knowledge production." (Habbie et. al 2023) CLA has the potential to help college students become more culturally conscious of dialects alongside expanding the field of research toward the power of dialectal diversity in academic settings. By cultivating confidence and understanding, first-generation college students can become empowered towards the resilience that their dialects represent and belong in academia.

Reclaiming our voices; Fighting Back Against Racial Code-switching

"I'm Rose. En español, me llamo Rose América. I'm from the East Bay, and I live by the Bayfair BART station."

My dialect is a reflection of my upbringing. My Spanglish, the slang I interweave in my sentences, and the relaxed consonants in my speech all form a picture of my authentic self. As a first-generation Latina college student, regaining my voice was crucial in feeling three-dimensional on Stanford's campus. From the way I introduce myself, I select which aspects of myself I represent. Though racial code-switching proved to be a learned process in the education system, the most important part of self-development to feel real at Stanford was the process of unlearning. Instead of showcasing different facets of myself, I use my voice to paint a complete picture. I am both the student at Stanford University and the first-generation college student who grew up in the East Bay. I am both the Marguerite stop and the Bayfair BART station. Through my own research, I developed critical language awareness and began to appreciate the various inflections in my speech. In implementing critical language awareness frameworks, many other first-generation college students will be able to unlock the full dimensions of their voice. By cultivating awareness and confidence in dialects, academia can empower first-generation college students with "the silent weapons needed for the quiet, discursive wars that are waged daily" (Alim 2005) which stem from linguistic discrimination and profiling. Racial code-switching doesn't have to be a habitual practice; we hold the power to normalize our speech.

As academia steps forward in creating more inclusive environments for first-generation college students, it's imperative that professors acknowledge and stop themselves from reinforcing racial code-switching ideologies. Alongside creating more linguistically diverse social environments, professors need to allow students to express themselves in writing using their home dialects. There is value in the various dialects that first-generation students bring into the classroom. Building environments tolerant of linguistic diversity, that deconstruct bias against dialects, will allow for first-generation college students to continue trailblazing as we find our places in academia.

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