

Editorial

The public is often unaware of what linguists study or what special perspectives we bring to language and culture. More often, there is a broad misconception that we are attempting to find ways to ‘improve’, ‘regulate’ or ‘engineer’ language. And linguistic terminology doesn’t usually find its way into popular usage.

We have recently encountered the term *code-switching* (CS) used in regular online international news outlets and with a meaning that is somewhat different than the more conventional meaning used by linguists: ‘to move between languages in the course of one conversation’. Consider, for example, this use of the term from the *New Yorker* in 2017, ‘Black stars uninterested in code-switching rarely translate their massive followings to traditional platforms’.¹ Here the term is expanded, understandably, to cover more than movements between languages, but also to include ‘vernaculars’. The ‘popular definition’ of CS might be regarded as something like ‘deliberately shifting cultural traits and vernacular to suit different circumstances’, as suggested by film director Peter Howell when writing about his film *Moonlight*.² Not only are languages, accents or styles to be switched, but ‘cultural traits’, entailing traditions, values and identities are also switched. This use of CS in the news media is surprising because linguistic terminology rarely penetrates into conversations that happen in the ‘real world’; more often professional jargon from business and technology is borrowed into everyday communication with lasting impact. So, how and why has this meaning of CS found its way into popular usage?

In order to gain insight into these questions, we traced the usage of the lemma *code-switch* across the past 10 years in Brigham Young University’s (BYU) News on the Web (NOW) corpus.³ The most significant growth in use of the new meaning of CS is in US online news. CS is here strongly associated with ethnicity, especially in the context of African American English (AAE), where CS

might be associated with compromising AAE identity, or ‘selling out’. Similarly, there are a few co-occurrences with *gay*, suggesting that CS might be used to co-construct homosexual identity. The new use of CS is especially entrenched in the online media and has been appropriated as a recognisable label for the cultural phenomenon in the United States, and we note that the National Public Radio (NPR) has even created the ‘Code Switch’ blog to discuss race, identity and culture and, in the words of NPR’s Code Switch Team, ‘the different spaces we each inhabit and the tensions of trying to navigate between them’.⁴ On the contrary, the usage of CS in Canada is quite distinct to that in the US. Here, the media mainly report on the new meaning of CS, providing its suggested definitions. A similar situation is visible in the British media. The media from New Zealand and Australia hardly evidence the new use of CS.

The newspaper that uses the term *code-switching* most frequently in the NOW corpus is Singapore’s *The Straits Times*. While there are references to switching between Singlish and other Englishes, none of the Singapore examples evidence the new meaning of CS. The difference between the semantic broadening of CS in the US and Singapore’s more conservative use of the term may be indicative of different evaluations of the vernacular in these two places. Perhaps the acceptance of multiethnic code-mixing communities is more politically charged in the US where CS could be developing a pejorative meaning? One may also wonder if the spread of the evaluatively-loaded meanings of CS will affect the way we use CS in linguistics. Could this become a too stigmatised term to use in language description?

This issue of *English Today* offers a rich variety of topics related to the use of English in many different places: from neologisms that have developed after the UK’s 2016 Brexit vote to the phenomenon of vowel lowering across English varieties; from Japanese English to Ghanaian English; from

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aphasia recovery to online reactions to the Englishname *Angelbaby* in China to Korean students choice of South East Asia for English-language study abroad. Book reviews in the is issue cover themes of International pronunciation of English, regulation of English in lingua franca contexts and the use of the vernacular in written American English.

The editors

Notes

- 1 <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/cardi-b-the-female-rapper-who-ousted-taylor-swift-from-the-top-of-the-charts-bodak-yellow>
- 2 <http://time.com/4549295/coat-switching-peter-howell/>
- 3 https://www.corpusdata.org/now_corpus.asp
- 4 <https://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2013/04/05/176352338/faq>