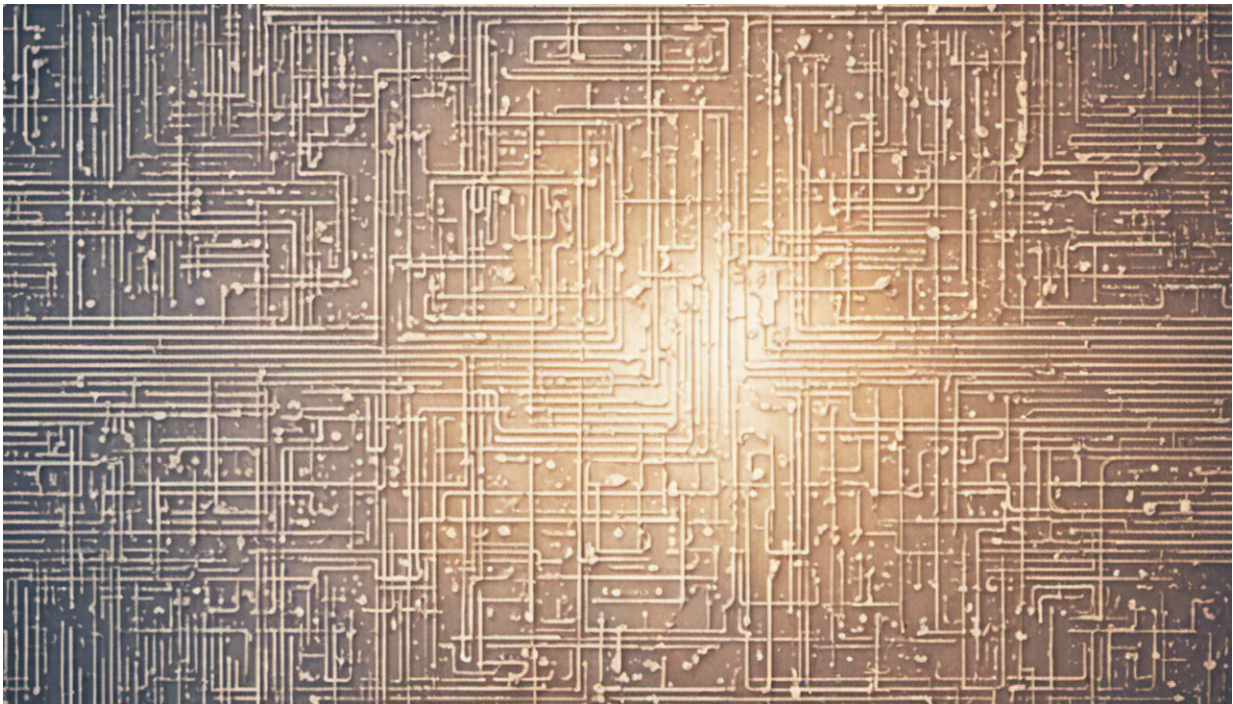


Code-switching: The pressure on people to change how they speak

December 7 2022, by Salina Cuddy



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Have you found yourself altering how you speak when you find yourself in a more formal situation? Do you tone down your accent or stay away from words that may only be known in the area you are from? If so, you may already be experienced in code-switching.

In linguistics, code switching refers to people altering their "code" in certain contexts, depending on who they are speaking to. In this sense, a code typically refers to a different language. Much of the research in this area focuses on bilingual people and how they might switch between languages, sometimes in the same interaction.

However, the concept of code-switching has branched outside linguistics and is now used in many areas of society, especially [in business](#). The term code-switching is increasingly being used to refer to something that could be better labeled as style shifting: altering many different aspects of how you communicate and even your identity more broadly.

This could mean altering your dialect or accent, how you interact with others (if you interrupt during conversation or not, for example), how you dress, the [body language](#) you use, or even what you eat and drink. Here, though, I'll focus on the spoken language aspects of code-switching.

To understand why people may shift in the ways described above, we first must understand the variability in language and the pressures to conform to a standard or a norm.

For [young people](#) growing up in England, there is institutional pressure to speak "proper" English that they learn at school. This ingrains a sense that there is a right and wrong way to speak, particularly in formal or professional settings.

The British English accent that is commonly associated with "proper" English is [Received Pronunciation](#) (RP). This accent is commonly heard in the speech of upper- and upper-middle class speakers from the south of England.

If there is an accent that is commonly perceived as the proper way to

speak, then that means that other accents tend to be viewed less favorably. There is consistent data that shows that [certain urban regional accents](#), such as those from Liverpool and Birmingham, are rated as less prestigious than other accents.

These more negative attitudes can also be seen in accents associated with minority [ethnic groups](#). Research participants [rate Multicultural London English more negatively](#) than other accents, for example.

For speakers with working-class or ethnic accents, these negative perceptions can lead to discrimination in the workplace. In 2021 the [BBC presenter Alex Scott](#) was publicly criticized for her London working-class accent. This type of criticism can pressure people to move towards a more standard accent to avoid discrimination. This is where code-switching comes in.

To be seen as more professional and advance in the workplace, people may shift away from their regular accent and adopt a speech style more similar to RP, since RP is regularly viewed as prestigious and intelligent. This shift can allow people to avoid the negative perceptions that others may hold about their accent and ensure they are judged by their work, instead of their voice alone.

Disadvantages to code-switching

This pressure to switch how you speak and behave to fit in comes at a cost. Due to the historic class background of RP, the pressure to code-switch is [disproportionately placed](#) on working class and ethnic minority speakers.

The effort of code-switching may affect how someone does their job. If they are spending their time thinking about how they need to present themselves, this [takes cognitive resources away](#) from the task at hand or

the content that they are trying to communicate.

A pressure to code switch can also eliminate diversity in the workplace. Instead of hearing many different accents and dialects, we just hear the same way of speaking. This could further enforce the idea that others need to adapt and maintain this status quo in an unending cycle.

There is good news when it comes to accent diversity, however. With the increased attention paid to code-switching, there are more and more people pushing back at this pressure to fit a single, standard way of communicating.

There has been an increase in diverse accents [being used in broadcasting](#). The more diversity we hear, the less [pressure](#) people may feel to adapt to one specific prestigious [accent](#) to be perceived as professional and competent.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Code-switching: The pressure on people to change how they speak (2022, December 7) retrieved 25 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-12-code-switching-pressure-people.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.