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Code-Switching and Language Ideologies: Exploring Identity, Power, and Society in Dialectally Diverse Literature

The authors present detailed lessons for engaging students in contrastive analysis and exploring code-switching in works by Zora Neale Hurston, Lorraine Hansberry, Harper Lee, and others.

The English classroom's work is words: words we write, words we read, and words we ask students to understand. From Zora Neale Hurston's powerful use of vernacular in *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* to the flowery romantic language of Wordsworth, to the everyday language of the Blueford High series, secondary English teachers are charged with helping all students to read, write, and understand English in its many forms and functions. However, our students' language can be as diverse as the literature we bring to the classroom. Not all students come to the classroom with the skills to write standardized English; even fewer students come with the skills to read vernacular texts. Nevertheless, what almost all of us come equipped with are beliefs about language, how it is and should be.

Students Stumble When Reading Dialectally Diverse Literature

Often, students will push back from reading dialectally diverse texts, or struggle through them in silence. Texts such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* challenge students to see (and read) English language in new ways. When teaching texts that use different varieties of English, we must assume students are unfamiliar with *reading* that variety, even if you hear them speak it (and even write it) on a regular basis.

For example, in a ninth-grade English classroom, Michelle used Langston Hughes's "Lament Over Love" to teach the effectiveness of vernacular language in poetry. When the class read the line "I hope my chile'll never love a man," Ashonti, a young lady fluent in both African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and standardized English, stumbled and looked at Michelle for help. After Michelle said "child," Ashonti understood: "Oh yeah! I know that word! My grandma says 'chile.'"

But for teachers to translate each unfamiliar word or grammatical structure doesn't lead to independent, linguistically savvy readers. Instead, we would like students themselves to become more sure-footed readers of dialectally diverse literature. That's what this article offers: the *what, how,* and *why* of teaching vernacular-rich texts. We will show that linguistically based approaches—contrastive analysis and code-switching—can give students a handle on the unfamiliar language of dialectally diverse texts. Then, we'll explore how students can use language to interrogate issues of identity, power, prestige, and prejudice in society.
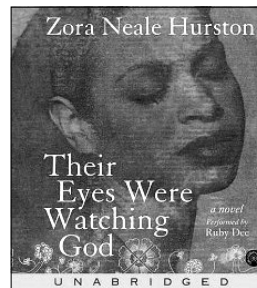
A Linguistically Informed Approach to Dialectally Diverse Literature

Let's explore *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to understand *what* language comprises this text. From the outset, language in Hurston's great work can nearly swamp the student reader. Once past the fairly rarified sections written in elevated standardized English—"Ships at a

distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon" (Hurston 1)—students may find themselves caught in a whirlwind of unfamiliar written dialect: "What she doin coming back here in dem overhalls? . . . Where all dat money her husband took and died and left her?" (2) or "Pheoby, if youse ready to go, Ah could walk over dere wid you" (4).

A cluster of insights from linguistics will anchor our work with students and foster their understanding of dialectally diverse texts:

- Language comes in varieties (sometimes called dialects).

- All language varieties are structured.

- Language varieties are linguistically equal (Adger, Wolfram, and Christian; Wolfram and Schilling-Estes).

Before we even begin reading any dialectally diverse text, we prepare students to expect a range of linguistic patterns across the major levels of dialect structure: sound (phonology), grammar (morphology or syntax), and vocabulary. Some of these patterns students already know, even if the printed dialogue appears unfamiliar. For example, Hurston uses spelling to evoke regional or ethnic accent. In the North, the vowels in the words *I* and *my* are pronounced with a gliding movement of the tongue (i.e., "ahii," "mahii"). By contrast, in the South and in African American Vernacular English, the vowel in these words is simplex—the tongue stays in one place in the mouth (i.e., "ah," "mah"). Hurston used spelling to evoke this real pronunciation difference, writing *I* as "ah" and *my* as "mah" (e.g., "**Ah**'m goin' tuh de draggin'-out **mah**self" (56; emphasis added); "You done hurt **mah** heart, now you come wid uh lie tuh bruise **mah** ears!" (131; emphasis added).

As a prereading exercise, show students a few samples of how dialects can contrast in sound and grammar. For example, collect examples of a familiar sound contrast: *dat* vs. *that, dem* vs. *them,* etc. Contrastive analysis, a strategy by which we compare and contrast the grammar patterns of one dialect to those of another, will help students unpack this and other dialect contrasts (Wheeler and Swords).

The core tool in contrastive analysis is a T-chart (see fig. 1).

A T-chart contains two columns, one for each language variety being contrasted. To build a T-chart, label the left column with a name for the variety you're exploring. When teaching *Their Eyes,* you might label the column "Community Variety," or "Vernacular" or "African American Vernacular English (AAVE)" and the right column, "Standardized" or "Academic English." You can use these terms interchangeably as you talk with students about language in literature and life. Fill the left column with examples of the grammatical pattern you have collected from the literary text. Each example should appear in a full sentence or at least a full phrase. Then, translate each example into the standardized English equivalent for the right column. This chart will enable you to lead students in comparing and contrasting a vernacular pattern with the standardized English equivalent.

Tell students "We're going to compare and contrast ways of speaking in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* with ways of speaking in Academic English. For now, let's focus on sound patterns in how different speakers say words like *dis* and *that* or *dese* and *those*." Then, invite students to read together the examples on the left side of the chart, looking for patterns.

Ask students, "What do all the highlighted words have in common?" Students will reply that

FIGURE 1. *Dat* vs. *That* T-Chart for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

dat vs. that	
Vernacular English	**Academic English**
Dat's where Ah wuz s'posed to be (9)	**That's** where Ah was s'posed to be (9)
Ah ain't gointuh pay fuh **dese** drinks (93)	Ah ain't gointuh pay fuh **these** drinks (93)
If **dey** tried hard enough (63)	If **they** tried hard enough (63)
The Pattern	**The Pattern**
Use a "d" sound (as in *dog*)	Use a voiced "th" sound (as in *that*)

FIGURE 2. T-Chart for Subject-Verb Agreement

Subject-Verb Agreement	
Vernacular English	**Academic English**
I never would spend on *no* woman whut Tony spend_ on her (70)	I never would spend on no woman whut Tony spends on her (70)
He say_ he can't bear tuh leave her (70).	He says he can't bear tuh leave her (70).
A woman stay_ round uh store till she get old (74)	A woman stays round uh store till she gets old (74)
If it blow_ up, Ah'll still be on land (97)	If it blows up, Ah'll still be on land (97)
The Pattern	**The Pattern**
He/she/it subjects + bare verb	*He/she/it* subjects + verb + *-s*

all the words start with a "d" sound as in *dog* or *dig.* The next step is to state students' observations as a grammar pattern. "Use a 'd' sound as in *dog.*" Write this under the heading *The Pattern* for the left-hand column.

Next, turn to the column for Academic English, inviting students see how the examples differ from those they just explored. As students track through the examples, seeking pattern, they will discover that the "d" sound in Vernacular English corresponds to the voiced "th" sound in Academic English (e.g., *that* and *these*).

In this way, not only have students discovered a systematic correspondence between language forms in *Their Eyes* and the more familiar standardized English, but they have discovered Hurston's characters are not being sloppy or failing to pronounce the "th" sound—they are intentionally hitting a different target—the sound linguists call a voiced, alveolar stop—"d."

Now that students have discovered that sound patterns contrast across dialects, we move to grammar. A common grammar pattern found in *Their Eyes* is unmarked subject-verb agreement (see fig. 2).

With subject-verb agreement, start with the Academic English side. Ask students, "What ending do you see on verbs that go with subjects like *Tony, he,* or *a woman*?" After students discover that third-person singular subjects usually require an *-s,* write the pattern under the standardized English column. Then, turn to the vernacular examples. Just as you did with the *dat* vs. *that* chart, invite the students to read the examples and look for a pattern. Ask them, "How are the verbs here different from those in the Academic English column?" Students discover that characters speaking in the

vernacular regularly use bare verbs with third-person singular subjects. Write the pattern under the Vernacular English column.

From the relatively familiar contrasts in Figures 1 and 2, students realize that characters use language in a consistent way, following rules of sound and grammar. Students can then use the tool of Contrastive Analysis to help them decipher more unfamiliar patterns as needed. For example, perhaps students encounter a new use of *they* as in "Ah reckon if colored folks got **they** own town they kin have post offices and whatsoever they please" (Hurston 37) or "they tickles me wid **they** talk" (134). Provide the class with blank contrastive analysis charts (see fig. 3).

Then invite students to use the charts to figure out a new pattern. Instruct students to fill in the left-hand column with examples showing a single language pattern. Here, students would fill in *If colored folks got they own town* and *They tickles me with*

FIGURE 3. Blank T-Chart

Title:

Vernacular English	Academic English
The Pattern	**The Pattern**

they talk on the vernacular side. The next step is for students to provide the standardized English equivalent: *If colored folks got their own town* and *They tickle me with their talk.* From this dataset, student groups can discover that AAVE often uses *they* when standardized English would use *their.*

Through creating T-charts of their own, students recognize that while the language may be initially unfamiliar, they are witnessing a rule-governed dialect from a particular social group and region of the country. The point is *not* for students to build T-charts for every new pattern they read; that would interfere with the flow and comprehension of the overall text. Instead, the experience of doing T-charts helps students in specific and general ways: Specifically, Contrastive Analysis charts offer students and teachers a tool for figuring out unfamiliar language patterns. But more generally and perhaps more importantly, students learn that characters are not sloppy, making mistakes in the standardized English words. Instead, they are following the patterns of their own dialect.

Once we scaffold students into recognizing pattern in diverse dialects, they are more prepared to understand the dialogue as they read texts such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God.*

Code-Switching

If contrastive analysis helps us identify *what* aspects of language contrast in dialectally diverse texts, code-switching reveals *how* characters' language reflects context. Here, we deepen students' understanding of character by teaching them to examine a text for how the author or characters *code-switch.* Questions such as "How does the character's language change throughout the text?" and "How does the author's narrative writing or the character's language vary by time, place and purpose?" usher students to a deeper level of understanding dialectally diverse literature.

Hurston does a masterful job of changing her language to reflect setting. She uses standardized English when writing the narrative and vernacular when writing dialogue:

> "*If* they wants to see and know, why they don't come kiss and be kissed. Ah could then sit down and tell 'em things. . . . A been a delegate to de big 'ssociation of life. Yessuh! De Grand Lodge, de big

convention of livin' is just where Ah been dis year and a half y'all ain't seen me."

> They sat there in the fresh young darkness close together. Pheoby eager to feel and do through Janie, but hating to show her zest for fear it might be thought mere curiosity. (6)

To focus students' attention on language in literature, ask your class "What is the effect of using standardized English in the narrative but vernacular in the dialogue?" and "What is the effect of using two distinct varieties in the same book?" Such questions encourage students to consider the effects of Hurston's language use.

Although Hurston's characters may not code-switch, literary characters often do. For example, in *To Kill a Mockingbird,* Calpurnia speaks mainly standardized English: "I can't wrap up any dog's food now. There's some gauze in the bathroom, go get it and do it yourself" (Lee 106). However, while taking Scout and Jem to her community church, Calpurnia code-switches to the community language variety: "What you want, Lula. . . . They's my comp'ny" (135). Scout notes the change: "Again I thought her voice was strange: she was talking like the rest of them" (135). Later, Calpurnia explains why she changes her language:

> Suppose you and Scout talked colored-folks' talk at home it'd be out of place, wouldn't it? Now what if I talked white-folks' talk at church, and with my neighbors. They'd think I was puttin' on airs to beat Moses. (126)

This scene offers students an excellent opportunity to critically question (Godley and Minnici) how Calpurnia changes her language and why the change catches Scout by surprise. Calpurnia clearly understands her own language choices. Her explanation can help students explore how audience affects their language in their own lives.

In fact code-switching offers a perfect bridge to discuss language ideologies. Thus, exploring Calpurnia's language shift means we explore how the setting prompts her shift: we can see that the place differs (Calpurnia's church vs. the Finch's house), the people differ (Calpurnia's community vs. the Finches), and the purpose changes (language in community vs. on the job). These aspects—place, people, and purpose—all affect Calpurnia's choice to speak one or another variety of English. The ac-

FIGURE 4. Role Play: Exploring How Language Varies by Setting

Directions: In pairs, you will write two different skits. Your two skits will show you telling the same story to two different people. For example, you may decide that you want to tell your best friend and your teacher about your weekend. What would those stories sound like? Your first skit would be you telling the story to your best friend. Your second skit would be telling your story to your teacher.

Possible Story: The basketball game you played yesterday

Possible Audiences:
1. Someone who knows how to play basketball
2. Someone who knows nothing about basketball

Possible Story: What happened in the cafeteria at lunch

Possible Audiences:
1. Your principal
2. Your friend

Possible Story: When you lost your cell phone

Possible Audiences:
1. Your mom (or whoever pays the bill)
2. Your cousin (or someone you are close to)

Follow-up Discussion Questions:
- Did our language change? Why did it change?
- Do we all talk the same all of the time?
- What are some of the things that affect the way we talk?
- Do you think the same things that affect our language affect characters' language? (Connect to current readings if applicable)

tivity found in Figure 4 can help students understand that they shift their language like Calpurnia does. In this way we help students critically consider how context affects our language choices.

Students may be hesitant to recognize that they code-switch. Michelle has often heard students say to change their language is to be "fake." However, the activity in Figure 4 offers students an opportunity to explore language change without labels, and the follow-up discussion questions help students realize on their own that language does change according to place, audience, and purpose.

Language Ideologies

While contrastive analysis and code-switching help students understand what language comprises vernacular texts and how context influences language use, the critical lens of language ideologies (Wassink and Curzan) encourages students to probe even more deeply *why* characters use the language they do. Language ideologies pertain to our beliefs about language, those "ingrained, unquestioned beliefs about the way the world is, the way it should be, and the way it has to be with respect to language" (Rickford and Wolfram 14). By considering language ideologies, students explore outside forces affecting language choices, and how the character and those outside forces interact. Interrogating language ideologies encourages close readings and an understanding of how characters function in their world.

Three lenses of language ideologies support literary analysis in the secondary English classroom: (1) language and power, (2) language and society, and (3) language and identity (Kirkland and Jackson). Below we tease out these three lenses, beginning with a "big picture" critical question for each, and then offering specific examples of these concepts in commonly taught texts in the secondary classroom.

Language and Power

Critical Question: Which character has power and what variety of English does he or she speak?

By asking students to consider language and power, we offer an opportunity to analyze how characters' language reflects or is affected by structures of power. In the United States, standardized English is the variety used by businesses, education, and the government. However, at times, other varieties convey power within a community. For example, Joe, Janie's second husband in *Their Eyes,* is a powerful figure: He is the mayor, the owner of the general store, a man with money and respect, and the husband of the town's most beautiful woman. Throughout, Joe speaks in the vernacular: "Lemme speak to mah wife a minute and Ah'm goin' see de man" (Hurston 37). In this way, Joe signals in-group status by using his speech mirroring the language of those he leads.

However, sometimes standardized English does correlate with power in dialectally diverse literature. In *A Raisin in the Sun,* Walter mainly speaks in vernacular: "'Bout what me and Willy Harris was talking about last night" (Hansberry 32). Walter

wants money, a symbol of power. At one point, suspecting that he will never have the money to make his dream a reality, Walter comes home drunk and jumps up on the table, pretending to be an African war chief: "Do you hear the singing of the women, singing the war songs of our fathers to the babies in the great houses?" (79). Here, Walter changes into standardized English, an index of power.

Interrogating which character has power and which variety of English this character uses is relevant to almost any text, encouraging students to move beyond the words themselves to critically assessing character, language, and power in context.

Language and Society

Critical Questions: What societies does the text present? How do characters' language choices reflect the societies they occupy? Do different societies use different language varieties? Do these language differences signal dissonance or affiliation between the characters?

Code-switching helps us understand how and when we (and literary characters) change language varieties according to situation, audience, and purpose. In contrast, considering language and society allows us to critically analyze (1) how our membership (or desire for membership) in certain societies affects our language, (2) what stereotypes are associated with certain language varieties and why these stereotypes exist, and (3) how to critically analyze the "cultural differences [that] are both reflected and perpetuated by languages and dialects" (Banks 75).

To explore how language links to various groups or societies in a text, let's return to *A Raisin in the Sun.* Within the family, no two characters use language the same way; Mama, Beneatha, and Walter offer the most startling contrasts. Hansberry goes to great lengths to describe her characters' language. Mama, from the South, "is inclined to slur everything" (Hansberry 39). In contrast, her daughter Beneatha's speech "is different from the rest of the family's insofar as education has permeated her sense of English" (35). Beneatha's world of education has encouraged her standardized English usage. Finally, Walter, the son striving to achieve his dream, has a "quality of indictment" in his voice (25). Hansberry evokes her characters' lives through their language use. Although in the same family, their societies differ; therefore, their language differs.

Maxine Hong Kingston; photo by David Shankbone.

The lens of language and society can also help students critically explore conflict in literary texts. The essay "Girlhood among Ghosts" by Maxine Hong Kingston is a great example. The narrator describes the difference between her voice at American school during the day and Chinese school at night. In American school, she "read aloud in the first grade . . . the barest whisper with little squeaks" (Kingston 40). In Chinese school, a world and a voice away, she recounts, "We chanted together, voices rising and falling, loud and soft . . . everybody reading together, reciting together and not alone with one voice" (41). Through such examples, students may explore the diverse societies represented in literary texts. Students can critically question how language represents the inter-societal conflict the characters may experience.

The activities in Figure 5 can help students explore how language and society interrelate in their own lives.

Students need to understand how issues of language and society relate to their own life before they can explore language and society in literature. The activity in Figure 5, done for years by Michelle in her classroom, helps students understand (1)

Step 1:

As a class, think of all the different societies found in your school (e.g., students in band, drama, sports players, skaters, cheerleaders, etc.). List these on the board.

Step 2:

Let students choose their own group (students are more likely to group themselves with those in their own society). Have each group write down characteristics of a chosen society from the board (encourage students to chose a society they belong to so stereotypes are avoided). For example, people in band know language associated with music and marching. People in drama know terms like *stage right* and *stage left.*

Step 3:

Have students either write about their "language society" on a piece of poster board or present it orally. Then invite students to explore their classmates' presentations.

Step 4:

Lead a discussion with the following prompts:

- Do these societies use language in the same way?
- Why or why not?
- Which society or societies do you belong to? Would you have "group membership" in your societies if you used language differently or you didn't know the language specific to your society or societies? Explain.
- Do you think sometimes the language used in these different societies can cause issues between them? Why is this so? (Connect to readings if applicable.)

that we all live in distinct social groups that use their own varieties or styles of language and (2) that these varieties and styles can complement or be in conflict with one another (see also Banks).

Language and Identity

Critical Question: How does a character's language intertwine with his or her identity?

Beneatha in *A Raisin in the Sun* uses her language, standardized English, to self-identify as a woman with formal education seeking a professional career: "But first I'm going to be a doctor. . . . I am going to be a doctor and everybody around here better understand that!" (Hansberry 50). Through close reading of Beneatha's language, students can more fully understand her character;

struggling against society's image of women in post–World War II Chicago, Beneatha chooses her language to match the group she seeks to join. The lens of language and identity offers students a way to critically understand *why* characters make the language choices they do.

We also explore connections between characters' names and identity in the literature of the secondary classroom, thus continuing the classroom discussion of language and identity. For example, in *A House on Mango Street,* the narrator Esperanza muses on the real meaning of her name. When recalling stories of her namesake, Esperanza says, "I have inherited [my grandmother's] name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window" (Cisneros 11). Esperanza may bear her grandmother's name, but she does not want her grandmother's history to determine her identity.

By asking students to consider their own names and the ways their names connect to their sense of self, students can begin to understand how language reflects who they are and where they come from (see fig. 6).

Considering issues of language and identity allows us to explore how characters self-identify by the language they use and encourages students to question how their own identity is shaped by their language choices.

Deeper Engagement with Language and Literature

While dialectally diverse literature challenges secondary learners, the linguistic strategies of contrastive analysis and code-switching enable students to unpack and understand characters' dialogue. As we lead discussions interrogating language ideologies underlying a text, not only do students better understand dialogue and characters' choices more deeply but students also learn to critically question language, power, society, and identity on the path to deeper engagement in dialectally diverse literature. *EJ*

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION   Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Great Expectations is rich in dialogue and is written in the dialect of the working class and poor of Victorian England. The things characters say and how they speak is one of the ways in which readers get to know them. What does Dickens reveal about his characters using dialect? The ReadWriteThink.org lesson "Dialect Detectives: Exploring Dialect in *Great Expectations*" is based on the different words that appear in the first book of the novel. The lesson helps students develop a comfort level and confidence in dealing with unfamiliar dialect words and phrases.

This lesson uses *Great Expectations* as an example, but the activity is effective with any work of literature in which dialect is important. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/dialect-detectives-exploring-dialect-30869.html