

SOCIETY FOR LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Interview with Matt Thomson, Manager of NPR's New Blog, "Code Switch"

Aaron Ansell

On April 8, 2013, National Public Radio (NPR) launched its new blog, *Code Switch: Frontiers of Race, Culture and Ethnicity*. In his inaugural post, "How Code-Switching Explains the World," Gene Derby (Lead Blogger) opens with a hypothetical scenario:

So you're at work one day and you're talking to your colleagues in that professional, polite, kind of buttoned-up voice ... Your mom or your friend or your partner calls ... And without thinking, you start talking to them in an entirely different voice—still distinctly your voice, but a certain kind of your voice less suited to the office ... your easy Southern drawl or your sing-songy Caribbean lilt or your Spanish-inflected vowels or your New Yorker—is suddenly turned way, way up... That's what it means to code switch.

My first reaction was somewhat mixed. I get nervous about terms like "drawl" and "sing-songy," which seem to naturalize stereotypes of Southern lethargy or Caribbean carefree-ness. Yet Code Switch may have enormous potential to mainstream reflexive awareness of language diversity and transformation, and to highlight the often overlooked intersections between talk, identity and social structure. Its seven bloggers, while they may lack formal linguistics training, have clearly read up on some of our key concepts. Moreover, they have a vested interest in consulting with SLA members and other academics. Ongoing dialogue with NPR's Code Switch team could project linguistic anthropology to a broad audience.

As I read through the first set of blogs, I noticed variation in the degree to which they focused on language issues. I wondered whether the title "Code Switch" was meant more to hook an initial readership than to indicate a sustained investigation of the links between language and culture. Hoping it was the latter, I contacted NPR for an interview. Matt Thomson, manager of the Code Switch team and author of the blog "Five Reasons Why People Code Switch," graciously talked with me for a half-hour on April 26. Here are some excerpts:

Aaron Ansell (A): I was very happy to see Code Switch come online, because I think it's really important for citizens in a democracy to reflect on the way they use language. And we—some of my colleagues and I— would like to help your team in this endeavor.

Matt Thompson (M): Thank you very much. The community of sociolinguists and anthropologists has been very good to us. They helped us get this thing up and running... If you have a look at one of our launch essays, "When Our Kids Own America" ... that essay featured several bits from interviews with various sociolinguists on what language is revealing about how younger generations perceive culture, how they're using culture, how they're creating culture differently.

A: Would you talk about the basic vision of Code Switch—what it is and where you want to take it?

M: Absolutely... For NPR, it sort of represents ... an opportunity for us to both expand the comprehensiveness with which we can cover race and culture, and the depth and nuance with which we can dig into these topics... The country is going through these demographic shifts... There are disparities of wealth and incarceration and things like that, but some of these differences are quite delightful... We're just as fascinated by both of these universes.

A: Why code-switching as a key concept to help you explore these dynamic issues?

M: Code-switching, we felt, was a really nice, resonant metaphor... It is fairly universal when you broaden it out beyond just changing languages in a conversation but also registers and styles. It's an especially resonant metaphor for the subtle but ubiquitous ways that race, ethnicity and culture play out in our lives. But it also evokes the idea of a dialogue and a dialogue that spans cultures and that is exactly what we hope to foster.

A: I noticed that a number of the posts seem a little less focused on code switching as a literal activity—and perhaps less focused on language *per se*. Do you see the blog moving away from code switching and language in general?

M: Well, we started by launching a flurry of posts on code switching, but as we move forward I suspect we're going to be reporting on the full spectrum of issues involving ethnicity and culture of which language and code switching are a part. I think (code-switching) is a theme that you'll see playing out in a lot of our coverage. It's something we're attuned to. ... You'll see a thread of our interest in language and linguistics run through our stories.

A: And your commenters—Are they hooking into the language aspect of the stories?

M: Yeah. One of the funny things that happened is that we found ourselves getting two reactions even internally. One was from ethnic minorities, "Oh yeah, code-switch, I do that all the time." And then others, not minorities, "What is that?" ... (Non-minorities) didn't recognize themselves doing it... We got a lot of stories from wait staff at restaurants, saying that they code switch—throw in a "Y'all"—to get better tips. They're conscious of it.

A: Do you think that when those people—non- minorities—hear stories of conscious code switching that it breeds a new kind of empathy for what it means to experience life as a minority?

M: I think folks react to it in different ways. Linguists will recognize the prescriptivism here: One person posed something about African American Vernacular English as slang, as corrupting the English language. That was a common reaction... I think linguists would be the first to argue that the English language is not an immutable concept, nor is language generally...

A: Indeed, and that's certainly something that we hope to see your blog doing, raising awareness about the ordered character of all dialects and the socially embedded nature of language. So we appreciate that... If you like, I could email you some contacts.

M: Yeah, please do. Please do.

If you're interested in consulting with Code Switch, please contact me at aansell@vt.edu.

*Please send your comments, contributions, news and announcements to SLA contributing editors **Aaron Ansell** (aansell@vt.edu) or **Bonnie Urciuoli** (burciuol@hamilton.edu).*

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