

LANGUAGE AS IDENTITY: CODE-SWITCHING AND LINGUISTIC HYBRIDITY IN ZADIE SMITH'S WORKS

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Abstract. In the present paper, I analyze the language-identity interface within the novelistic output of Zadie Smith by giving centre stage to two codependent processes—code-switching and linguistic hybridity. The tools of post-colonial theory, sociolinguistics, and Bakhtinian notions of heteroglossia serve to bring into view how the polyphonic texts of Smith engrave the daily worlds of multicultural Britain and shatter monologic assumptions of national and linguistic purity. In close reading *White Teeth* (2000), *On Beauty* (2005), *NW* (2012), *Swing Time* (2016), and select short stories within *Grand Union* (2019), the paper reveals that the experimentative languagedeployments of Smith serve not just to mirror the hybrid lifeworlds of her characters, but become themselves instruments for the purpose of socio-political commentary. The paper culminates with a reflexive on the pedagogical potentiality of the authorship of Smith for the pedagogy of linguistic diversity and cultural empathy.

Key words: code-switching, heteroglossia, hybridity, linguistic hybridity, identity, multiculturalism.

Introduction. Language can never be neutral; it is the premier vehicle through which social agents act, negotiate, and often contest identity. In novels such as those by Zadie Smith—herself the mixed-race daughter of a Jamaican mother and English father grown up in the multicultural Willesden of the 1980s—language becomes creative resource and ideological arena. In novels and short fictions which chronicle the intersections and contradictions between class, race, migration, and belonging, Smith employs multi-register speech, Caribbean creole, Multicultural London English (MLE), and literary Standard English to bring into focus what Homi K. Bhabha famously elaborates as the “Third Space” of enunciation. This article makes every effort to trace the manner in which code-switching and linguistic hybridity work throughout the writing of Smith as indexes of individual autobiographical fashioning and collective cultural recall.

History and Theoretical Background.

Post-Imperial London and Linguistic Diversity The HMT Empire Windrush's docking in 1948 inaugurated a new multicultural Britain where the linguistic texture was tinted with Jamaican creole, Hindi-Urdu, Punjabi, and afterwards with Somali and Kurdish, etc. Kerswill's (2013) analyses of the sociolinguistic kind uncover the way the children of the post-war generations established a contact variety—now self-styled

MLE—with the mixture of Cockney phonology and Afro-Caribbean creoles and South Asian languages' lexical and syntactic patterns. That's where the fiction of Smith precisely situates itself, reproducing the North-West London street vernacular and unveiling the way speech performs solidarity and exclusion.

Code-Switching and Heteroglossia. Code-switching, for John J. Gumperz, refers to shifting within a single speech event between segments invoked on behalf of two different grammars. In literary practice, it puts the spotlight on Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia: the co-presence within a text of various discrete social voices and languages. Heteroglossic potential here plays a big part on which Smith depends, letting clashing ideologies—colonial sentimentalism, immigrant aspirations, neoliberal individualism—collide on the plane of dialogue.

Linguistic Hybridity and the "Third Space". Hybridity, for Bhabha, disturbs hierarchies since it is "neither the One ... nor the Other," thus shattering colonial binarisms. Linguistic hybridity, in the writing of Smith, resides precisely in the same interstitial place: it re-centralizes the subjectivities of the migrants and reveals the construct-ness of 'proper' English as a hegemonic norm.

Close Readings.

White Teeth: Tensions between Generations and Colonial Reminders Smith's initial novel makes code-switching most explicitly through Samad Iqbal and his twin sons, Magid and Millat. Samad switches between formal, indeed antiquated English—"my oldest and dearest friend"—and sometimes Bengali when puzzling his brains over questions of principle. The switching here announces a chronic post-colonial quandary: how to reconcile the legacy of colonial domination with cosmopolitan responsibilities. In the process, Millat employs Jamaican-tinged MLE ("Nuff respect, blud") as a performative indicator of rebel virility, illustrating what Alim & Pennycook (2007) term "global hip-hop nation language."

Such literary commentators as James Procter have noted that *White Teeth* positively refuses narrative resolution, just as its textural material, as a manner of reflecting a hybrid, open-ended process of constructing a self. The unresolved cultural loyalties of the second generation reflect the larger problems for the postcolonial subject of fashioning a cohesive self under the tug of competing models for values.

On Beauty: Transatlantic Voices and Academic Elitism. Whilst primarily set within imagined Wellington, Massachusetts, *On Beauty* contains the London-bred Levi Belsey, the character explicitly reproducing the rhythm and colloquialism of the Haitian street vendors as a commodified form of otherness. The novel thus addresses the fetishisation sought after by liberal academia when it shows a demonstration that language, when deliberate and performative, can grant or withhold symbolic capital.

Furthermore, the prose style in *On Beauty* oscillates between lyrical philosophical meditation and colloquialism, a form of rhetorical prose which echoes the Forster novel

Howards End but equally disrupts its bourgeois coherence of tone. The mingling of registers becomes a kind of literary dissidence, arguing for complexity within individual and linguistic identity.

NW: Fragmentation as Form. *NW* is the most formally experimental novel by Smith. Section 2, “Guest,” presents Felix Cooper’s stream-of-consciousness in a spare, close third-person that mixes MLE lexicon (“peng ting,” “ends”) and free-indirect discourse. The result is a lexical collage that mirrors the geographical patchwork of the *NW* postal code. The sections on Leah Hanwell are written in short staccato sentences—“Fat sun in the sky”—and mime oral tale-telling modes and breach patriarchal narrative authority. The novel provocatively invites comparison with high-modernist fictions such as Joyce’s *Ulysses*. As with Joyce, a stream-of-consciousness technique operates to enact identity on the syntactic level. The novel recapitulates the jagged, multiple consciousness of her subjects existing on the peripheries of race, class, and nation.

Swing Time: Diasporic Echoes and Musical Registers. The novel problematizes code-switching through overlaying transnational Englishes. The untitled biracial narrator moving back and forth between London and West Africa registers subtle changes as she code-switches between corporate Standard English in Manhattan boardrooms and pragmatic particles (“abi?”)-speaking West African English in Dakar market stalls. Lyrics from jazz standards giving voice to dance introduce the prose with African-American vernacular culture, supporting Paul Gilroy’s Black Atlantic paradigm.

In addition, *Swing Time* employs the rhythm of discursive music—pauses, beats, and repeats—also as a metaphor for negotiating identity. In the eyes of critics such as Christina Sharpe, the music within Black Atlantic novels becomes a warehouse for memory and identity, and the narrator of Smith stages her cultural allegiance through word and body movement.

Grand Union: Short-Form Experiments The narrative “Miss Adele Among the Corsets” captures a Black drag queen in New York City moving between theatrical camp, the colloquialism of the Caribbean, and African-American Vernacular English. The code-switching enacts race-oriented surveillance and sexualized surveillance (à la Butler) under a post-Trump America.

Smith’s use of the short-story format for *Grand Union* enables immediate shifting between linguistic and narrative registers for a compact hybrid space within each story. Her spare style optimizes the visibility of code-switching as a performance of identity and a response to the constraints of society.

Language, Power, and Ideology

Standard English as a Gatekeeper. In Smith’s novels, Standard English frequently assumes the form of institutional authority—look at the examination rooms, the

university seminar rooms, and the desks on immigration which impose verbal behavior. And the entry into those rooms of MLE and of patois exposes the fragility of that power. In *White Teeth*, Clara Bowden's Jamaican mother, Hortense, invokes biblical cadences ("Behold, the Lord cometh") when she opposes secular authority, and therefore makes the colonial language the language of resistance prophetic.

Gendered Elements of Code-Switching. Women characters, especially Irie Jones and Tracey in *Swing Time*, are frequently subjected to a double bind: they have to conform to patriarchal norms and still operate within racialised norms on speech. Tracey's competence with the vocabulary for West African dance provides the community on stage with prestige, but away from that space, her English-accented voice evokes classist contempt. Choice on language becomes, thus, armour and target.

Humour and Subversion. Smith frequently employs code-switching for the sake of humor. Samad's code breakdowns or Howard Belsey's failed attempts at street talk ("I'm down with that"), parody liberal pretensions and reveal linguistic incompetence as a sort of cultural deafness. In carnivalistic leveling of linguistic hierarchies that such humor embodies, it finds a kindred theory in Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque.

Reader Reception and Pedagogical Implications. Empirical studies on the classroom (Johnson 2021) indicate that subjecting students to passages code-switched by Smith raises linguistic prejudice awareness and fosters greater inclusionary language policies. Through a foregrounding of heteroglossia, the novels of Smith become compelling resources for the teaching of sociolinguistics, post-colonialism, and creative writing texts which place voice diversity central.

Conclusion. Smith's extended concern with code-switching and linguistic hybridity ratifies the daily experience of diasporic groups and disrupts essentialising language ideologies. Her multi-voiced texts demonstrate that identity, too, resides forever "in process," as Stuart Hall once phrased it. In reading Smith, then, we are invited to take linguistic difference as a source for social criticism and poetic invention rather than deviation.

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