

## CHAPTER 5: CODE SWITCHING (17:09-20:24)

*This section examines code switching and how signers of Black ASL navigate communication among not only the Black Deaf community but also the broader Deaf community in the United States.*



### KEY CONCEPTS

#### **Code switching**

Linguists use the term “code switching” to refer to the alternating use of two or more languages or language varieties by one individual. Signers of Black ASL often code switch in different settings and around different people in order to minimize negative consequences and maximize positive outcomes. To learn more, check out this link to a segment about code switching from *Talking Black in America*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VpLQmyS7-jw>

#### **Signing space**

Signing space refers to the space surrounding the signer where most of the signs are produced. Signers use this area, which is often an imagined square space in front of the body, to physically position signs in space and time.

#### **Language as access**

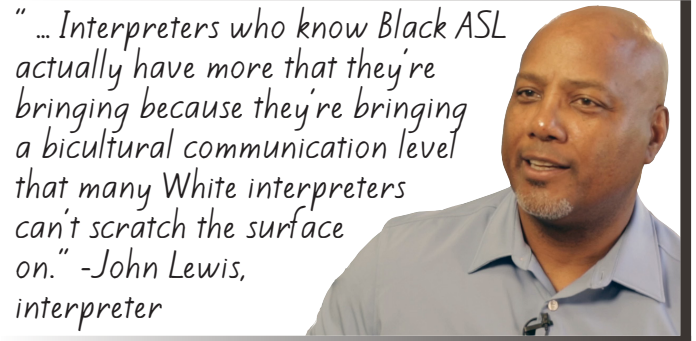
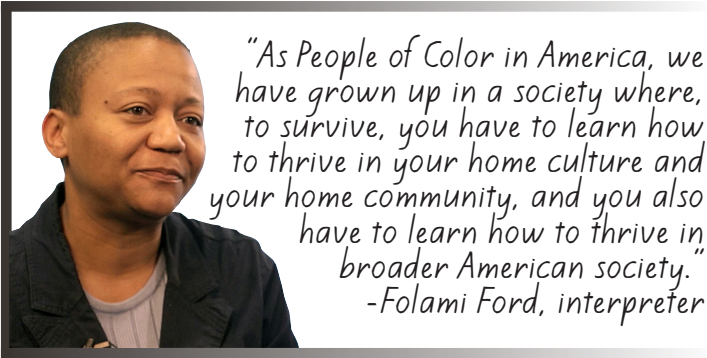
In some contexts, language can provide access and foster inclusion. Black ASL can, for example, build solidarity among its signers because it signals shared aspects of identity and marks them as in-group members. To put it differently, hearing or seeing someone use a familiar language can often produce feelings of comfort, acceptance, and solidarity.

#### **Language as a barrier**

In some contexts, language can be a hindrance, specifically when society stigmatizes and rejects the language variety. This stigmatization restricts access by building barriers. These barriers can range from hurt feelings to serious consequences related to inclusion and exclusion. Systemic barriers related to language include limitations on opportunities for education, jobs, and housing.

#### **Linguistic discrimination**

Linguistic discrimination is the unfair treatment of an individual based on the individual’s language use. People often justify discrimination against a language variety and its speakers with the false belief that the language variety is “bad English” or is reflective of some sort of deficiency (e.g. educational, intellectual, moral, etc). A common theme of many stigmatized varieties is that they are spoken by marginalized groups (e.g. working-class people, racial minorities, women, etc). Racism and classism are often hidden beneath a false linguistic justification.

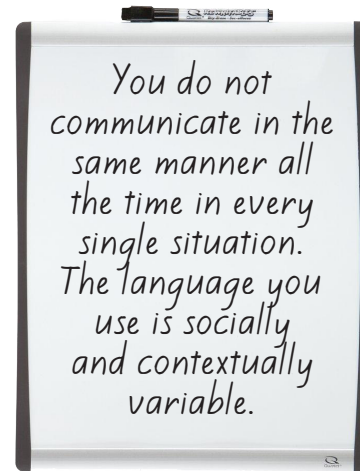


## COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

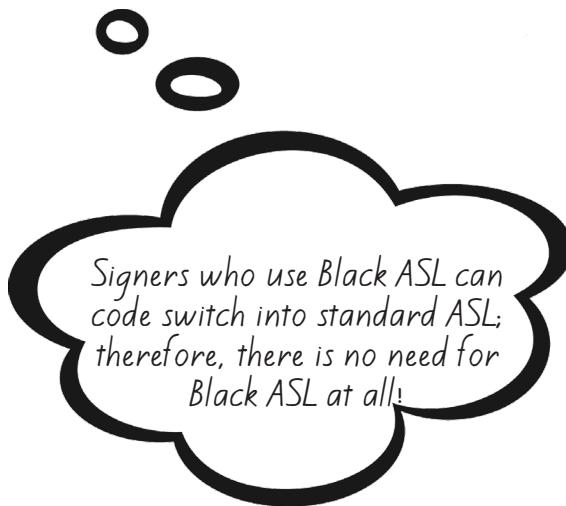
people may think



the truth is



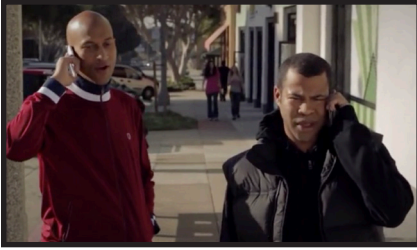
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**LINGUISTIC CONCENSUS:** People utilize a variety of languages, language varieties, and styles to gain access and build solidarity in different settings and communities.



## FUN STUFF

Watch this Key & Peele skit about [CODESWITCHING](#) and then examine code switching through a [SPOKEN WORD](#) by Jamila Lyiscott. Additionally, watch this video clip about [LINGUISTIC DISCRIMINATION](#) as it applies to fair housing.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### PRE-VIEWING

1. Have you ever felt an immediate sense of camaraderie with a person just from hearing or watching them communicate? Why? Was it, perhaps, that they reminded you of home or made you feel like you both shared a similar background or had some shared aspects of identity?
2. Have you ever been in a specific situation or around specific individuals and suddenly felt self-conscious about the way that you communicate? What happened? Where were you, and who was with you? Why do you think that you felt self-conscious?
3. Do you think that you communicate the same way all the time? For example, do you communicate with your friends in the exact same way that you communicate with your parents? What about if you were to conduct a national press conference? Would you communicate the same way in that situation that you would if, say, you were communicating with your best friend?

### ACTIVE VIEWING

1. Why do signers of Black ASL (and, more broadly, individuals who use a language variety other than the "standard" or "mainstream" language of their society) feel the need to code-switch?
2. What is "academic ASL"?

### POST-VIEWING

1. Do you think that there will ever come a time when code switching is not necessary? A time when all languages and language varieties are valued equally? Why or why not?
2. Why are certain varieties of language praised while others are denounced? Why do we associate language varieties with character traits? How do the characterizations of certain languages or language varieties relate to the social and historical situations of the people who use them? **TEACHER TIP:** How do different traits become associated with different languages? For example, think about Disney movies. Why does the villain often have a British accent? Why are Latinx characters often portrayed as either sensual or silly? Why are Southern characters often given deep Southern accents and silly roles?

3. Just as you can have racial or gender discrimination, you can have linguistic discrimination against people for the way that they communicate. What are some ways that linguistic discrimination affects people? Why do you think it is so difficult to combat linguistic discrimination? How do you think people feel when they are repeatedly told that their language or language variety is inferior?
4. Do you think it would be appropriate for Deaf students to study Black ASL (or, more broadly, for students to study any other non-standard language variety) in a scholastic setting? Why or why not?

## Additional Resources

For more information about code-switching, watch this [Tedx Talk](#) and this [video](#) by Professor Renée Blake from New York University, who also serves as an associate producer for *Talking Black in America*. This [video](#) and this [video](#) also discuss and demonstrate code-switching.

For more information about language as a barrier and language as access, we suggest watching [Talking Black in America](#), a feature length film by the Language & Life Project that discusses African American Language.

