

Episode 21: Decades Apart- A Conversation on the Impact of Code-Switching
Released on May 6, 2020

[00:00:00.47] ANTHONY SIS: The opinions expressed by the guests and contributors of this podcast are their own, and do not necessarily reflect the views of Cornell University or its employees.

[00:00:08.31] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:00:11.28] Expressing your authentic self is something we preach about in the workplace. But what does it mean when you express yourself differently in front of your coworkers, supervisor, and faculty, all in one space? On today's episode, we'll be exploring the topic of code switching.

[00:00:27.60] Code switching is a well-documented term that highlights the common practice of switching languages and forms of expression in our everyday actions. We'll be having a conversation with a special guest, one that you're all familiar with on today's show. My name is Anthony Sis.

[00:00:44.01] TORAL PATEL: My name is Toral Patel.

[00:00:45.42] ANTHONY SIS: And you're listening to the Inclusive Excellence Podcast.

[00:00:48.48] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:00:59.11] Thank you for joining us on another episode of the Inclusive Excellence Podcast. Before we start, I want to acknowledge that my co-host, Toral, is unfortunately not able to be here for the interview portion of this episode. She sent us an audio from Dallas, Texas to tell us a little bit about how she's doing during this quarantine. Toral, how are you doing today?

[00:01:20.11] TORAL PATEL: Thank you, Anthony. I am doing well. Still in Dallas, Texas. For those of you that don't know, I have been in Texas for the past few weeks because my mom's been in the hospital. Non-COVID virus related. And so I am down here, helping my family and helping her recover. And I hope to be back in Ithaca, New York soon.

[00:01:41.66] ANTHONY SIS: Thank you, Toral, for the message. We really miss you, and we hope that your mother has a speedy recovery. I also wanted to take the time to acknowledge those who are listening, who are directly or indirectly impacted by COVID-19.

[00:01:56.23] I've seen a lot of personal messages on Facebook and other social media outlets that have really showcased the impact of COVID-19 during this particular period. And so I just want to emphasize that as a department, and as an institution, we acknowledge that this is simply just not an easy time for any of us.

[00:02:14.72] We are thinking of you in our department, and are continuing to provide resources such as this podcast, to continue to stay engaged with each other, and with

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our workforce here at Cornell. In DIWD, we're still providing virtual trainings, reviewing bias incident reports, and regularly supporting our colleague network groups.

[00:02:33.68] So if you have any questions, or would like more information on any of these services, including how to be part of a colleague network group, visit diversity.cornell.edu, or simply just send us an email at owdi@cornell.edu.

[00:02:49.33] Now, back to our regularly scheduled program. Our guest today is someone very special. I know we say that about all of our guests, because each one is truly special. But you'll know who today's guest is, if you have ever heard any of the episodes on this podcast. We always shout him out at the end, because he truly makes us sound wonderful each and every episode, but yet you don't really know much about him other than the fact that he is our sound engineer, which is why our guest today is the one, the only, Bert Odom-Reed.

[00:03:21.46] [APPLAUSE]

[00:03:28.11] Bert, thank you for being a guest on today's episode. We are in quarantine we are practicing social distancing, and so actually, we didn't really disclose this, but we're doing this remotely. I'm doing this particularly in my closet in my apartment. And so this is a pretty exciting time. But I'm super happy and thrilled that you our guest for today's show.

[00:03:51.35] BERT ODOM-REED: Oh, Anthony, I'm so excited to be here.

[00:03:53.52] ANTHONY SIS: As usual, let's start by formally introducing yourself to our listeners. Where do you work? Where did you grow up? As well as the pronouns that you use.

[00:04:03.72] BERT ODOM-REED: All right. My name, actually, the full name is Bertrand Odom-Reed. That comes from the Creole in me. So South Louisiana, woop, woop. And I go by the pronouns of he, him, his.

[00:04:19.63] And I am an audio engineer and multimedia producer at Cornell University, and have been for the last few decades. I'll just say it that way. And I really enjoy working on multiple projects and things like that, because it always enlightens me to hear other voices and other thoughts on life itself.

[00:04:44.25] ANTHONY SIS: That's awesome. And you're still our sound engineer for this episode, so you're doing two tasks right now, which I extremely thank you for.
[LAUGHS]

[00:04:51.66] BERT ODOM-REED: And you're welcome.

[00:04:54.06] ANTHONY SIS: All right. Well, as we always do with all of our guests, Bert, you know this very well, we have a question of the day. So nonetheless, I have a

question of the day for us the answer, which is very appropriate, I think, given this quarantine and everything that is going on. The question of the day, are you ready for it?

[00:05:11.01] BERT ODOM-REED: I'm ready. I am so ready.

[00:05:13.14] ANTHONY SIS: You'll finally be able to answer. This is great. So the question is, who are you checking in on or connecting with today?

[00:05:22.17] BERT ODOM-REED: Oh, that's fairly easy. Beyond my immediate family, which is my wife, my son, who's 4, my daughter who's 14, I'm checking in on my neighbor on both sides. One is a caterer, and she's, I think she's probably 80. People in the local Ithaca area know who she is, because it's soul food kind of catering.

[00:05:46.62] And my neighbor on the other side is a musician and former drummer, and his wife, and so I check in on them. And I'm checking in on my cousin Pearl. So cousin Pearl is in her 80s. She is a New Orleans transplant post Katrina. So her house was in the Ninth Ward and got flooded. And so she came up here with the family. And so I'm checking in on her. Just brought her some Sunday dinner.

[00:06:18.39] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah. That's great. That's really great. Sounds like you're checking in on a lot of people.

[00:06:21.96] BERT ODOM-REED: I donned a little surgical gloves, and my little mask, and off I go.

[00:06:27.61] ANTHONY SIS: All right. And you also got your family at home as well. So you're checking in on them, of course, you know. Not to underestimate that as well.

[00:06:34.41] BERT ODOM-REED: And then I'll ask you. Anthony, who are you checking in on?

[00:06:39.96] ANTHONY SIS: For me, so it's interesting. Because I live alone. I don't have any roommates. And I am extremely grateful, with everything going on, just not having to worry about having as much interaction with other people, and potentially being at a risk, even in my own home. So it's just nice to kind of live alone, but it's also made me really go out of my way to check in on people that I probably normally wouldn't have checked in on.

[00:07:02.28] So I've actually been having a lot of Zoom calls with friends who I haven't spoken to in about a couple of years, but you follow them via social media. So I'll reach out to those types of folks and just say, hey, I know with everything going on, I'm sure you're probably either working from home, or you're currently not working.

[00:07:19.29] I have a lot of friends who unfortunately are either furloughed or lost their jobs. So just checking in with them to make sure that they're doing OK. But in particular

with this question, how it says who are we checking in on today, in particular, I called my mom earlier this morning, just to kind of hear her voice.

[00:07:35.31] I know she's been working a lot. She's considered an essential worker and works for the post office. She also has weak lungs. And so I'm very much worried about her health. And since all of this kind of began, I made sure, I emphasized to her, I'm like, I hope you're wearing a mask and gloves. Not because you, but because of the people, and because of your lungs, and your health condition.

[00:07:54.82] So she's been practicing that, which is really great, at work. She'll wear masks. She'll wear her gloves. She's been wearing it for a few weeks now. She's not a big fan of them. Particularly, it can be a little bit uncomfortable, she says at times. But it's all about her health. And so I'm glad that she's being proactive about it.

[00:08:10.44] We pretty much check in almost every day. I mean, even before the quarantine began, we talked regularly, about two or three times a week. I think now it's gotten to at least every day, if not every other day at most.

[00:08:21.27] So she's definitely the person I'm checking in on, as well as my sister and my dad, who are also considered essential workers. My grandma, I'm checking in a lot with her, because she lives in the senior citizen home. And they're all in Chicago. So I think that's part of the challenge too. I'm out here by myself, so it's really forcing me to go out of my way. But not in a negative way, just to make sure everyone's OK, if my family's good. So that's who I'm checking in on specifically, is my mom.

[00:08:46.29] BERT ODOM-REED: All right. We do check in on my wife's family, and her mom in specific down in Pensacola.

[00:08:52.95] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah. And well, Florida right now, I used to live in Miami. So I know in Florida, it's definitely there's a lot of older folks that live there. And I'm definitely checking in a lot with my folks in Miami, people that I still know out there. And yeah, it's everywhere.

[00:09:07.11] BERT ODOM-REED: This is unprecedented. And the people who talked about the Great Depression, the people who talked about the problems in 2008, this is one the world will talk about. The optimist in me wants to say that we will come out of this a better people, a global people, I hope. Lord, I hope.

[00:09:28.93] ANTHONY SIS: Absolutely, I'm 100% in agreement with you on that. All right, Bert. So before we dive deeper into this topic of code switching, which I know is something that we've talked about a little bit in private conversations, I think it'd be nice for the listeners just to know a little bit about who you are, where you come from, in terms of what led you into this work. So I figured we can start off the conversation there, and go from there.

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[00:09:53.70] BERT ODOM-REED: Oh, sure. Who am I? Grew up early part of my life in Louisiana. My family was very active in integration, et cetera. Louisiana did what many southern states and others did, where when the Brown versus Board of Education happened, they gave a few years before integration was mandatory.

[00:10:17.88] And the main reason was to build private schools that were, of course, separate again. So that's why, when I hear private school funding, I'm not really a big fan. I know in large cities, the private schools are a little different, but it's a different thing to me.

[00:10:34.32] And I'll just jump forward to seventh grade. Moved to Ithaca, where my grandmother gave us some money. And she said, now, I've already given you money to go into your educational fund. So this money, I want you to use to do something with that you're interested in.

[00:10:52.23] I bought a Super 8 film camera, a Super 8 projector, and an editor, and I started making films. I found that I liked the art of mixing audio, so adding music tracks, adding narration, clipping this, and clipping that, beyond just the frame of the film. That started me down a road that was a little bit more audio than video. But I still do both.

[00:11:18.90] And that has followed me ever since, when I started at Cornell, after going through a career that I shouldn't have been in anyway, which was banking. It was boring me to tears, and sucking my soul, in Connecticut. I came back to doing multimedia production.

[00:11:38.32] ANTHONY SIS: And if you don't mind, if I share with our listeners too, I know you have an album as well, because you are also a musician.

[00:11:46.23] BERT ODOM-REED: Yeah, yeah.

[00:11:47.18] ANTHONY SIS: So we even have to throw that into the mix. But I think it's a very, yeah.

[00:11:51.03] BERT ODOM-REED: I went to Grambling State University in North Louisiana, which is an HBCU.

[00:11:56.46] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah, for those of you who are wondering what an HBCU is, it's a historically black college and university.

[00:12:02.37] BERT ODOM-REED: That's also the university that my parents met, and my oldest sister went. I had my brothers who went to Cornell. But I said I'm not staying in Ithaca another winter. I'm going somewhere warm.

[00:12:16.74] ANTHONY SIS: I hear you.

[00:12:18.21] BERT ODOM-REED: At Grambling, I started DJing. But all along, I would write lyrics. So I had a notebook full of lyrics, until in the '90s I said-- you know, I was working with another DJ friend of mine. And I said, well, let's go ahead and do an album. Back when albums were albums, and we had to turn it into a CD. So we got our best songs, went to the studio and recorded an album, and I will say we made a profit.

[00:12:49.44] ANTHONY SIS: That is something to be very proud of. And I've heard the album. And there are some good songs on there. So you know, it has a lot of potential. To this day.

[00:13:01.00] BERT ODOM-REED: And now that I'm back in my little studio here, I tell you, I'm seriously thinking about doing some remix on some of it. I like the lyrics to a song called Black Man, more than I like the music to it.

[00:13:16.45] ANTHONY SIS: Oh, OK.

[00:13:17.92] BERT ODOM-REED: The refrain of the chorus is four billion years and seven days have passed since the Earth and the creatures were first created. 10,000 solar circles of modern man over the beast. We fight the beast within. I may be doing a remix. But I'll keep you posted on that.

[00:13:34.87] ANTHONY SIS: Please do. I'll be the first one to listen to it and have a listening party to it. I mean, whatever. It's all virtual now. So as you talked about all of these different experiences, I know we kind of went back and then moved forward, but I do want to go back to what you mentioned about growing up in Louisiana, and having been a part of that initial process of integration within the schools there.

[00:13:55.97] I mean, you were so young. So I think as you reflect on that experience, and kind of moving forward how it's impacted you as you've navigated these different spaces, what are some of those things that you think about the most? And if you feel comfortable sharing, maybe just some experiences that might remind you of like we've moved forward in a lot of areas, but in some areas, we're still going back.

[00:14:18.07] BERT ODOM-REED: You know what's interesting, there's one part of this current COVID-19 distancing thing which I hadn't thought of for a long time, but part of the code switching being an African-American male is you have to smile and put on a gentle face.

[00:14:37.84] But with a mask on in the grocery store, that's not part of what you can do anymore. It's a little strange, because I hadn't thought about how I do that on a regular basis, where you smile gently to people that you don't know or that you're passing. And you use that as a tool to be not threatening.

[00:15:00.49] Because in many cases, African-American males are seen as threatening. So I used to do that, of course, as a child in the mixed school, because in this little town

called Greensburg, Louisiana, think of a parish in south Louisiana, where the total population was maybe 1,500 people.

[00:15:22.51] And my parents, being progressives, we were only one of three families that started the integration process before the next year, when everybody had to do it. I was in the quote unquote White school, with very few other African-Americans.

[00:15:41.50] And I used to use smiling. I used to use extra kindness. If someone were to call me the N-word, which they did, or do other things, you know, knock the books out of your hand kind of thing, you had to turn the other cheek, because if I responded in kind, I know that the punishment or the view on me would be much worse than the person who started the incident.

[00:16:07.96] ANTHONY SIS: Wow. I mean, I think that really hits the nail on the head with this topic. I don't think there was a smooth transition there. But I think it's totally appropriate, in that code switching for many people, it's really about safety. And I think sometimes there are people who code switch, right? We talk differently when we talk to our supervisor, as I mentioned, or our coworkers, versus our families.

[00:16:31.15] But depending on the identities that you carry and the experiences that you live on an everyday basis, a lot of times those code switching mechanisms, they're done intentionally, but also not as the preferred choice. A lot of times, it's done out of safety, out of security.

[00:16:48.10] And I think a lot about just, for me, especially too, as a Latino born queer person as well, the things that my parents taught me about similarly what you were saying in terms of smiling and act with kindness. I grew up with a huge fear of authority figures.

[00:17:05.41] But for my parents, authority figures was basically anybody who was older than me. So the cops, teachers, anybody. So whenever I got in trouble for something, it was never their fault. It was always my fault.

[00:17:19.36] And I remember very distinctly this one experience in first grade, where a White student, and somebody who was in the same classroom as me, accused me of having spit on them. And I went to the principal's office. My mother came in. She was upset because she had to leave work early to get me.

[00:17:36.31] And I tried to explain to her the situation. And she did not care. Like I mean, and not in a negative way. She just, in her head, because I was the one who got in trouble by the principal, therefore I must have done something wrong.

[00:17:49.82] BERT ODOM-REED: So the authority is the authority, no matter what.

[00:17:52.78] ANTHONY SIS: No matter what. Yeah. And so, I remember that experience as really shaking me a lot, because it was something so minor, but it had

such an intense and serious consequence, that that's when I began to really piece things together of like, OK, around certain people with certain identities, I need to act a certain way, because their perception of me is going to carry more weight, if I'm ever caught in a situation where I'm either apprehended, or like, I started putting things together as a result of that experience.

[00:18:24.11] And I started seeing, OK, well what's the difference between me and this person? Why didn't they listen to me? Oh, well, he's White and I'm not. OK. Like, got it. Check. So I started creating this internalized checklist of like things that I needed to do and ways that I needed to behave around certain people in order to not get in trouble, essentially.

[00:18:43.49] Forget about who was right, who was wrong. It was just making sure I didn't get in trouble, so that way, I didn't get that intense reprimand from my parents, who are also taught these things as well growing up, in terms of the value of code switching, and it really being about survival of the fittest. In a strange way, but like that's how kind of how I see it. Code switching is, sometimes it's about community, but a lot of times, and depending on the spaces, it's also just about survival.

[00:19:10.93] BERT ODOM-REED: That's a real key point. The backstory to that is in an unequal world, it's almost, as your parents will say, didn't I teach you better that, than to get yourself in trouble? You know you got to treat them different. Because the repercussions to you is going to be worse. Yeah, that's wow.

[00:19:38.14] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah.

[00:19:38.98] BERT ODOM-REED: And we are decades apart.

[00:19:41.53] ANTHONY SIS: Well. And so, you know, that brings up an interesting point that you mentioned that, Bert, is that we're generations apart, yet a lot of the teachings about where code switching comes from is because of like what you said, the inequities that exist in the world, that also places like our work are not immune to.

[00:19:58.33] BERT ODOM-REED: No.

[00:19:59.05] ANTHONY SIS: Workplaces are also part of the world that we live in. So I'm wondering if there is, similarly as well, if you feel comfortable sharing, I guess maybe any particular experience that you can think of in a work setting, where code switching for you was like a must in this situation?

[00:20:14.06] BERT ODOM-REED: If I were to share code switching in, I'll say, current environment, in many cases, I see raises, promotions go to those who might not necessarily be the best person for the job, but they are friends with. They are colleagues of. They go to the same church as those who are providing those promotions.

[00:20:41.60] And they need to say, well-- and I hate to use the word they. But they need to just say, I need this raise. I need this upgrade. And they just need to say it once. For me, you have to bring in this whole case history. And I guess you have to show that other people think it's a good idea. Not you think it's a good idea.

[00:21:09.96] ANTHONY SIS: That's really profound. And I think that also definitely highlights how biases creep up in systemic processes of things like hiring, like promotions and raises. And so I think that's such a very strong example of how that comes about. And I know for me, when it comes to just what this looks like at work. So I speak three languages overall, including English. And I speak Spanish the most with my family.

[00:21:38.26] So for me, whenever I get a phone call and I'm at work that has to do with my family, and I'm talking in Spanish, I get very like self-conscious, and I get very much like what are other people who don't speak Spanish going to think of me speaking Spanish in the workplace?

[00:21:55.44] Are they going to think I'm talking about them? If I talk really low, because usually when I talk low, it's because I don't want to disturb other people. But then it turns into this, for me, what I feel is like a whole unnecessary spiral of ideas and thoughts that, like if I'm talking to a family member, for example, that prefers Spanish, but I know they can also speak English, I'll just go to English if I'm at work.

[00:22:17.79] And those types of things are really stressful. And then I think about it in retrospect. Like I'm doing it out of convenience for other people, not for myself or the people who I'm talking to. So things like that, when it comes to language, or even different cultural practices, if I disclose it to other people, and they're looking at me like what? Like why would we do it that way?

[00:22:39.78] So then I go back to my, OK. I'm just going to keep it like in my professional voice, my professional persona, whatever, and not talk about certain things that are relevant and very important to me, either culturally or linguistically, but because I know certain people might respond in a certain way, mostly a negative way, I'm like forget it. I'm not even going to mention it.

[00:23:00.51] Or another really good example too, I think about this sometimes, is when I'm with certain people who have similar identities to me. Like I just talk differently to them. If they're at work or not, I just talk differently to them, because I know that they're, for lack of a better word, they're going to get it. For lack of a better word.

[00:23:19.15] But I can't talk in that same fashion, or even express that similar statement to people who don't have similar identities to me, because I don't want them to feel ostracized or feel like outsiders, because I as a person of color, who's also queer, know what that feeling is like. And the last place I'd want somebody to feel like that is at work.

[00:23:38.55] So this code switching thing, sometimes it's a rebel base, sometimes it's just it's not even related to that at all. But at work, it can be really challenging, especially when I think about people-- I've had some interesting interactions with people who speak Spanish I work, for example.

[00:23:53.19] Not just at Cornell. Other institutions, where I'll look at them and kind of give them that look like I heard you speak Spanish. Can I talk to you in Spanish? If I talk to you in Spanish, are people going to think we're talking about them? Because oftentimes, it's not that, but it's just a matter of-- it's a way to build community sometimes, where I'm like, oh, I heard you talk Spanish. Let's talk Spanish to each other. Where are you from?

[00:24:13.04] And then everyone else is like looking at us like we're like, you know, got a third eye, or something. I'm like, OK, I guess I'm going to go back to my English. [LAUGHS] You know, it's so challenging sometimes. It's like I said, you don't want to make people uncomfortable. But you also want to build community.

[00:24:31.38] And I feel like, as a person of color with so many other identities as well, like finding community in those spaces where I don't need to act in a certain way, like in a professional way, or whatnot, like that's so important. And I want to make those connections. It's a fine line. It's a tricky balance.

[00:24:46.97] BERT ODOM-REED: It is. I'll just tell one little short story. Finished this three-, four-day trip down in New York. It's rush hour traffic. Going across town in New York is slow. Just oh my gosh slow.

[00:25:02.27] ANTHONY SIS: Oh yeah.

[00:25:03.02] BERT ODOM-REED: Well, I see across the street a fraternity friend of mine, Stovel, who I hadn't seen in years. And in the van is me, my video producer, videographer, and an executive producer. I'm driving the van. And I pull over. And I yell across the street, Stovel!

[00:25:28.52] He sees me, and the idea of crossing Manhattan and seeing somebody you know from years ago is so wild. And [INAUDIBLE].

[00:25:37.76] ANTHONY SIS: I mean, in such a big city like New York, absolutely.

[00:25:39.51] BERT ODOM-REED: [INAUDIBLE], and this is rush hour, right? And then he yells out, Bert! And so he snakes his way across traffic. And Stovel is 6 foot 7, 300 pounds.

[00:25:53.01] ANTHONY SIS: Oh, he's a tall guy.

[00:25:54.20] BERT ODOM-REED: Very dark skin. I had the window open. And he comes up, and I'm out the window going, Stovel, how are you doing? And then all of a

sudden, I see in his eyes, as he's looking in the van, my compatriots, they're kind of, oh, what is going on here? I don't get this.

[00:26:15.87] So I switched out of office Bert to fraternity friend Bert. And I guess we shouldn't be doing this right now. And then [INAUDIBLE].

[00:26:27.68] ANTHONY SIS: You got the hint afterwards.

[00:26:28.71] BERT ODOM-REED: Yeah, right. I looked around. I said, Gary, Deb, we've known each other. You know, and then, oh, OK. Yeah. And then, of course, he started to speak a little bit more formal. I started to speak back to a little bit more formal. But we have to do that. Because otherwise, and it is the same implied danger that they see, if you are other than the office person.

[00:26:54.41] ANTHONY SIS: Right. Yeah, and I think that's such an impromptu moment that happened. And then it's like, oh. And then you realize like-- you remember where you're at. Either at work, or on a work trip. And sometimes those interactions can be a little bit challenging too.

[00:27:09.08] But I think they're very important, though, in order to make sure we can feel like we're being authentic selves too. I mean, I know personally, I know I don't thrive in a workplace that doesn't allow me to be my authentic self.

[00:27:23.70] So if I'm constantly having to code switch, and it's getting to the point that it's stressing me out, and affecting my productivity at work, that's usually my cue when I know I need to leave like an organization or a workplace. And I've definitely been in situations like that too, where, for example, like navigating politics in an organization.

[00:27:44.63] I've worked at a place-- I won't say where-- but I've worked in a place where that affected my productivity, and that affected my sense of belonging, and how I express myself in terms of code switching. I mean, I felt like I was constantly having to code switch, because any time somebody came in, I didn't know who that person knew. I didn't know what they were coming to do. And were they coming to control my behavior, or were they really just coming to check in on me?

[00:28:06.89] And so when he got to that level of stress and having to constantly code switch, and then that's not even taking into consideration my personal identities that other people might think of me as xyz, so on and so forth, I'm like, I need to transition out. Just for my own mental well-being and my own sanity.

[00:28:26.64] So yeah. That's another challenging aspect of it. And sometimes, the code switching could be things that we think and we perceive other people to think of us. But also, in terms of the experience that we share so far, I think it also actually comes from how people have treated us. That that is the reason why we code switch.

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[00:28:42.41] So it's not always made up or always based on assumptions. We base it off of our own experiences, having gone through these situations and how people treat us differently sometimes.

[00:28:51.92] BERT ODOM-REED: Should I bring up the big one, which is how do you respond when a police officer pulls you over?

[00:28:58.91] ANTHONY SIS: I think that's a great example of one. Yeah.

[00:29:01.22] BERT ODOM-REED: Yeah. You totally switch. And there is the yes sirs, the softer voice. No sudden movements kind of thing. And actually, the same guy who was in the van with me with the [INAUDIBLE] incident, we were talking about being pulled over at one of our longer trips.

[00:29:22.40] He said, you know, when the police pull you over, you don't have to do what they say. I said, uh, no, I do. Because if I don't, I'm going to end up face planted on the pavement. You can say those things in a more forceful way and not get things done to you.

[00:29:44.27] For me, I can't do that. And it does go back to that safety issue of you respond to keep yourself safe. Because you also, as you get along in life, you have more people who rely on you to be there for them. And you can't be there for them if you are locked up or beat up somewhere else.

[00:30:08.29] Cornell is actually, I think, doing fairly well. There are those that you run into who are just checking boxes. But the majority, I think, are doing what is right, and becoming a little bit more self aware of how they treat others. And the work that you do in your office, for instance, is vital to continuing that conversation, and the people being able to use the I statements of how they feel and how they perceive the world. So thank you to you and your colleagues.

[00:30:48.01] Would you say that you enjoy having the ability to code switch? And this is Bert talking out loud. Boy, I didn't think this one through. It's like the ability to be able to integrate yourself in any different situation is a definite strength. The Texan in France. Nobody can speak to him, although everybody in France speaks English.

[00:31:15.20] When you go into different situations, I think it's important for all of us to have a little bit of awareness of what that culture is. So this is Bert soapbox, take it or leave it. I don't think there's any culture that should be diminished. Everybody should be able to maintain their culture and invite others into it in a very open way, given the world I'd like to see. It's just the way I think we'll eventually survive as a species.

[00:31:50.35] ANTHONY SIS: Absolutely. And I think, for me, that definitely resonates, because I consider myself a third culture kid, in that I was born here in the US, but my dad was born in Guatemala. My mom was born in Chicago, raised in Puerto Rico. So

Puerto Rico is still part of the US. But I consider myself a third culture kid, in that this has been my whole life.

[00:32:09.43] I've code switched literally since I was little, without even knowing that I was code switching. Because I grew up at home speaking Spanish. But I went to school most of the day speaking English. Then when I went to high school, I went to a public high school in Chicago, and I would speak a mix of, for lack of a better term, Spanglish, as kind of like an informal term. A mixture of Spanish and English in school, at high school.

[00:32:33.56] And then I'd come home and speak Spanish. But yet, any time I went to a public space, I would speak English. So it's been so subconscious. And I think as I get older, yeah. I mean, I've even lived in two different countries, and I've talked about this previously. And I think the beauty of having those experiences and being taught this whole code switching from literally the moment I was born is that I'm able to pretty much adapt to any culture.

[00:32:58.46] I've code switched literally my whole life. And then even in terms of, I even think with my queer identity, code switching in terms of manners, in terms of behaviors. And when I came to terms with my own identity, like I would never act the way I would in front of my LGBTQ friends as I would in front of my parents.

[00:33:17.45] I mean, now those have kind of merged, because my parents know that I'm out and then I'm part of the community. But that was even stressful at one point, of having to-- like feeling that sense of comfort with my friends, who I knew were either part of the community or who knew I was part of the community, but then having to be a completely different person when I was at home, it was torturous at times.

[00:33:36.32] Like I'd be like, oh my goodness. Can I just-- can I just say it? Can I just be me? And that, even that whole element in terms of behaviors and manners, and the way I speak, it was challenging, even in that regard too.

[00:33:50.54] BERT ODOM-REED: One of the things I've put in my email signature is intelligence is the ability to adapt to change, by Stephen Hawking. I'm a tech nerd, and into Star Trek, and Star Wars, and all the rest of it.

[00:34:04.12] ANTHONY SIS: Star Wars, absolutely.

[00:34:05.41] BERT ODOM-REED: Yeah, Star Trek. Because that was the first time in any future space show that they actually had African-Americans.

[00:34:17.11] ANTHONY SIS: Kudos to them. Kudos to Star Trek. I will give them that.

[00:34:19.96] BERT ODOM-REED: There's even an encounter between Nichelle Nichols, who was Lieutenant Uhura and Martin Luther King. He was a big fan, because

she was thinking about quitting after the first season. And he came to meet her, and he said, you can't quit.

[00:34:37.30] He said, this is the first time in our history that we've seen somebody in the future in a place of power, in an equality situation, where you have that much control and camaraderie. So if you look it up, there's I'm sure somewhere on the interweb, you'll find it.

[00:34:58.09] But it's part of why I am into what the future looks like. What the future looks like is more about our attitudes and how we treat other people than it is about the technology.

[00:35:10.12] ANTHONY SIS: Absolutely. I love that. I love that analysis. And I think as we wrap up this conversation, one of the things, you talked about the future, but in the present, if people feel compromised by this code switching phenomenon, that I'm almost certain all of us have experienced similar to imposter syndrome, which was a topic we talked about back in November for this podcast.

[00:35:34.18] If people feel compromised, because they feel like they can't be their authentic selves, what would you recommend to them, to be able to navigate some of these challenges with code switching?

[00:35:43.69] BERT ODOM-REED: Well, if they're feeling compromised, there is probably in the background a level of power inequality going on. And I would say, you have to force yourself to take that power back, so that you're not threatened or oppressed by that power imbalance.

[00:36:06.76] But you can be smarter than it, be your authentic self, and yet move on with the goals of what you're trying to do, whether it's being a good co-worker, whether it's moving on with the presentation. Generally, humans are good. And if you find the ones that aren't, well, I think we can currently use social distancing and just go from there. It's like, OK, look, I will walk on the other side of the street, because it's not important engaging you. [LAUGHS]

[00:36:40.95] And even if you are personally transitioning to a new self, accept where you are, when you are, and to reach out to those who you do trust, because the more we know, the more we should realize that we don't know. Others may have a better idea and be open to it.

[00:37:03.71] ANTHONY SIS: Absolutely. Always be open to it. Always be open to new possibilities and new ideas, regardless of who you are, or where you work, or your positionality within an organization. Thank you so much, Bert. Really appreciate it. Please continue to practice social distancing. And I look forward to seeing you post quarantine period.

[00:37:23.47] BERT ODOM-REED: Yeah. Anthony, it's been a pleasure. I thank you very much for having me on the show. And I appreciate what I've heard. And now I appreciate what you allowed me to share. It was so good to hear Toral's voice via phone, because she's a large part of the feeling and mood and style of this program. Girl, we miss you, and really wish you were here with us, but it was good to hear your voice at the beginning. Thank you, Toral.

[00:37:50.19] ANTHONY SIS: Thank you, Toral.

[00:37:51.18] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:37:57.12] So Toral, we missed you on this episode. So I'm curious, what did you take away from the conversation?

[00:38:03.75] TORAL PATEL: So I definitely missed being on the episode, because your conversation with Bert was so interesting. And I'm glad that I'm at least going to do this recap, because code switching is something that I've also lived with my entire life. And during your conversation, there were quite a few things that really impacted me or hit me hard.

[00:38:20.91] One of the first things that you and Bert talked about was that code switching impacts multiple generations. And so you and Bert talked about how you guys are in different generations, and that one of you is younger, and one's a little bit older, but yet both of you experienced code switching. And so that was something that was very powerful to me, that it's not just the younger generation that experiences this. But it's something that multiple generations can experience at the same time.

[00:38:47.77] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah. I was kind of stunned by that comment too, when I was like, oh yeah, we are different generations. And I think for me, definitely with this concept of code switching, it's like you said, I think coming from different cultures, Toral, I know you have many different identities as well.

[00:39:04.29] It's just become so much a part of the fabric of who I am that I honestly don't even think twice about it. It just kind of flows naturally. But it looks different at work than it does in other settings. And so I think just reflecting on that, for me, especially when I talked about language, and the troubles I have of speaking Spanish in the workplace.

[00:39:23.10] Like I didn't really think about it in this context of code switching until Bert and I had this conversation. And I think a lot of people really resonate with that, in terms of speaking other languages and communicating with other folks with similar identities in those languages. I think sometimes it could be a very difficult situation to navigate, especially at work.

[00:39:42.14] TORAL PATEL: Oh, I definitely agree with you there as well. I know you and I have talked about this in multiple different settings personally as well. In my life, I

think I'm not as consciously aware when I code switch. I think it's just because it's so natural to me, especially when I'm around people that I feel comfortable with, that I can go back and forth.

[00:40:00.86] Like you and Bert mentioned, that I am more conscious of it during my working hours right and the way I present myself. One of the prime examples is that usually like if I get a call from home, and if I have to speak in Gujarati, which is the language that I speak at home, I tend to walk away from the group that I'm with.

[00:40:19.28] Even knowing that when I speak in Gujarati, none of them will understand what I'm saying. It's just because now I'm speaking a different language, and I don't want any of them to think that I'm talking about them.

[00:40:29.24] ANTHONY SIS: That's so interesting, because in I think hearing you talk about it this time, I wonder also, just in regards to particularly when it happens like inside of work, speaking different languages, I think also about this element of like safety. Does that come up for you when you think about the potentials of like what may be the backlash could be if you continue speaking in Gujarati?

[00:40:52.85] TORAL PATEL: So I did hear you and Bert talk a lot about safety during the episode. And I don't know that I've ever thought of me not speaking in a certain language as a safety concern for myself. I think it's just more of I don't want others to feel uncomfortable. And I don't think I've ever looked at it as a safety issue for me.

[00:41:11.33] That they're going to put me in a box, or they're going to think of me this way, or they're going to think of me that way. So that was a very unique concept when you guys talked about it, because I've never looked at it that way.

[00:41:21.56] I also think that as I get more and more comfortable with my work group, speaking in Gujarati, it's OK, because then afterwards, I can just explain what my conversation was about. Because I still don't want them to feel uncomfortable.

[00:41:32.66] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah. And I guess just to wrap up this recap, similar to what I had asked with Bert, of what are some suggestions if people are really struggling with code switching, it's really affecting their productivity, their sense of belonging, what would you recommend to folks out there who are struggling to really be their authentic selves?

[00:41:52.46] TORAL PATEL: Yeah. So I think for me, that goes like deep down into really truly finding out or identifying who you are as an individual. Because like what you mentioned during your conversation with Bert, that code switching for you has just been a part of your life and how you grew up, right?

[00:42:08.33] So I think it's one, step one for me is getting comfortable with myself and really knowing myself, and then sharing bits and pieces of that with my colleagues, until I get to the point where I can share all of myself with my colleagues.

Episode 21: Decades Apart- A Conversation on the Impact of Code-Switching
Released on May 6, 2020

[00:42:19.98] ANTHONY SIS: Awesome, Toral. Well, we're so glad to have you on this recap. We know you couldn't be part of the interview, but we look forward, and I especially look forward to seeing you when you're back in Ithaca.

[00:42:30.51] TORAL PATEL: I am very excited to be hopefully back in Ithaca soon, in the next few weeks. So the next episode will definitely be different. And thank you for figuring out a way to include me on this episode.

[00:42:40.98] ANTHONY SIS: Absolutely. I mean, what can't we do in this virtual environment, right? We're still doing the podcast. We're still doing trainings. And so, yeah. So thank you so much for being flexible and for being on the recap for this episode.

[00:42:52.71] TORAL PATEL: No problem. Thank you.

[00:42:54.45] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:42:57.15] That's it for this month's show. If you like what you've heard, be sure to subscribe, and submit a review on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or SoundCloud. It helps new listeners find us and the show.

[00:43:07.61] Also, if you or a fellow colleague would like to be interviewed for an upcoming episode, please email us at ie-academy@cornell.edu. My name is Toral Patel.

[00:43:18.29] ANTHONY SIS: My name is Anthony Sis. Thank you for listening to another episode of the Inclusive Excellence Podcast.

[00:43:24.08] TORAL PATEL: This podcast is a production of the Department of Inclusion and Workforce Diversity, in collaboration with Cornell Broadcast Studio.

[00:43:36.11] A special shout out and thank you to Bert Odom-Reed, our sound engineer, for making us sound wonderful each and every episode.

[00:43:42.56] ANTHONY SIS AND TORAL PATEL: Thanks, Bert.