



Research Proposal

This study investigates how code-switching influences perceptions of credibility, authority, and fairness during legal proceedings in the United States. The focus is on bilingual and bidialectal speakers, particularly individuals who shift between African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Spanglish, or other non-standard varieties, and how these shifts are interpreted by judges, juries, and attorneys in real courtroom environments.

The idea for this project grew out of observed disparities in legal outcomes where language appears to play an unspoken role. Prior research has shown that non-standard speech patterns are often met with skepticism in formal settings, but there is limited work examining how code-switching specifically affects the courtroom dynamic. This study aims to build on that gap by exploring both the linguistic behaviors of defendants and the social judgments made in response to those behaviors.

The research will use a mixed-methods approach, combining courtroom observation with post-trial interviews and language analysis. This will allow for a closer look at how and when code-switching occurs, and how it is perceived by legal professionals and jurors. Court transcripts and audio recordings will be analyzed for language shifts, tone changes, and lexical choices, while interviews will capture attitudes and interpretations from those present during the proceedings.

By studying this interaction in real time, the project seeks to uncover whether code-switching (often a survival strategy for marginalized speakers) works against them in a setting that values



consistency, neutrality, and formality. The findings may help inform future legal training, policy reform, and language rights advocacy within the justice system.

This topic matters because language should not be a barrier to fair treatment. Understanding how courtroom communication is shaped by bias can bring attention to the hidden dynamics that influence legal outcomes, especially for communities that already face systemic disadvantages.

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