

Why do you talk so white?

Ever since I was young I've always gotten one question:

Why do you talk so white?

Me, coming from a black family from Tottenham also has similar questions, and this is my attempt to try to find out the answer.

It has always interested me to observe the way a white mother of a partner of mine or even a friend's mother, reacts to when they hear me speak, I see them unwind their twisted lips and slip out a sigh from their mouth.

"You're very well spoken!"

Forgive me, but I find it hard to believe their surprise that a black person could ever begin to speak as eloquently as them, it's almost like they have not heard about the trades deal that we make on a daily basis:

My sister, Esther traded her curls to ease the distracted white man's gaze

My friends Chidima, Yemi and Nioma traded her names for Stacy, Annie and Grace, to get into a **good** secondary school, a **good** university, a **good** job

And I, I traded my voice. So that white people don't feel threatened when I speak.

People of colour and have been forced to make trades: our own assimilation in return for better treatment perceived as "tolerance."

When I was younger my sister and I were informally introduced to code-switching. We'd sit down crossed legged on the floor opposite my mother who, in a thick African accent, would be yelling our ears off about how we should picking up more chores around the house

"If you no go hear me today oooh!"

ring ring

"Oh hello, Sylvia dear! Yes, tomorrow brunch sounds absolutely delightful."

All in the same breath my mother had the ability to go from speaking with a Nigerian accent with its own idiosyncrasies to a heavy coated posh English accent. Code-switching didn't just stop at my mum. Later on, I'd grow up to see black uncles and aunties and family friends do it with ease.

And by the time I got to year seven, I became so good at code-switching, maybe even too good.

I didn't just codeswitch for teachers or any higher authority, I'd keep the accent on with friends and with new people I met- don't know when, but one day I never code-switched back.

I think part of that reason is because of how much positive affirmation I would receive on the subject of my voice. Synonyms for "**educated**" and "**good**" quickly became associated with my new found way of speaking.

Yes, I'd feel uncomfortable because I knew views like that stemmed from valuing people who are white and people of a higher class. And I also felt uncomfortable being distinguished from most of the women of colour students in my school for "talking white"

However if I fail to acknowledge the benefits of "speaking white" then I would be intentionally deceptive.

Apart from being surprising entertainment for people who spoke the same way as me. I was favoured more by teachers because of the way I speak and present, not the content on what I had to say, and with that came more opportunities than people who spoke in Non-Standard English. Speaking in a posh/white accent gives me a limited, sense of what privilege feels like, in a system that favours people that resemble the hegemony.

How we speak doesn't just represent what race you are, but also is associated with what class you are.

I live in the borough of Haringay, which is infamous for the highest income inequality.

So when people hear that I'm from Tottenham it's even more of a shock.

Some of the stereotypes around working class and black people is that we are uneducated and not contributing to society. I and many people like me are not those stereotypes however it becomes harder to identify as black or working class when things as small as our accents can hinder us.

So why do I talk so white?

The answer

It is easier to conform to the most dominating group in society than to go against the norm.

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