How My Talk is Telling: Malleability

I do not talk of finances unless I am amongst the poor; I avoid the topic entirely in most other situations, because contribution to a financial based conversation otherwise is generally misinterpreted, and generally leads to an inability on my part to fit into the mold created by the content of the conversation. I do not have a southern twang, or a vocal Yankee mark, but amongst those who do, I use colloquialisms with ease. I am, however, never the one to throw out the initiating “y’all.” I am capable and have held slang-laden conversations, and similarly I can converse in a formal, professional register. My public social identity is best understood when it is recognized for its duality; it is best thought of in terms of simultaneous activity. My public social identity is best defined by its omniscience and its non-existence, and my talk within a public social setting best represents a culmination of these two elements. My talk is of malleability.   
 In life, one must always be keen to their sense of survival. By this token, my mother’s mantra “fake it until you make it” has seemingly struck a chord with me, and unconsciously, I believe, I have forced this concept to work within the context of the specific survival needs my life experiences have required of me. Growing up, my societal loyalties were constantly being split, and my social roles redefined and multiplied. As a result, I, at all times, though especially in public maintain a level of politeness, a pretense which, I have learned, allows for adaptation to one’s environment. It works as a filler, almost, stalling time long enough for one to understand the rules of the world in which one is participating. Upon meeting someone for the first time, my speech reveals very little, if anything, about myself on a personal level. In fact, my overt politeness, moderate speaking volume, and lack of initial dialect-specific diction create a sort of neutrality with which I can manipulate a social situation so that I can follow the linguistic lead, so to speak, of whomever I am talking to. This, I have realized, is a survival technique, one which, if analyzed, might reveal to those who look close enough, that my social identity is contingent upon the identities of those around me.

I think this technique could better be described as a sort of cultural multilingualism of dialect. While I was initially a child of the Midwest, or as much a child of the Midwest as a I could be growing up in quasi-suburban Michigan with a pair of not typically suburban-functioning parents of nomadic origins (my mother, a Texas native, and my father, a man of many states), my childhood would eventually place me in a variety of settings which would require me to adopt new dialects and speaking patterns. Toward the end of my middle school career in Michigan, my family, excepting my mother, who had returned to the lone-star state, moved to Jacksonville, Florida, where they do not, as I thought everyone did, say “pop” in reference to carbonated soft drinks.

We lived in a homeless shelter downtown in which no one really liked to use even a semi-formal register of speech for daily conversation. At school, a boy asked if he could “look at” my calculator in Algebra and laughed at me when I simply showed it to him instead of handing it over. During my stay at the shelter, and in this area of Jacksonville, I was forced to change the way I communicated. I dropped the Michigan-specific vocabulary, and intentionally forgot how the formal tone with which I had previously presented myself whenever I walked through the door of the brick Red Cross building.   
 After living at the shelter, my father, my siblings, and I moved into subsidized housing, a project, on the other side of town, where more changes were to be made. On the west side, I was told, it is frowned upon to speak, “like a cracker.” In order to feel safer in my new environment, I picked up new words, slang, that helped me to blend in with the indigenous members of my community. The language of the projects was yet another I needed to learn in order to survive.   
 Some time would pass before I moved to Texas and in with my mother, a change which would require me to add another dialect to my repertoire. The southern accent and colloquial terminology used within my maternal family, wildly dissimilar to the speech patterns with which I had become accustomed to, threw me through a hoop. The true Texas challenge, however, pertained not to familial communications, but to my peers.   
 The school I attended in Austin, Texas, was in an area where signs are typically printed in both Spanish and English. My time at William B. Travis High School solidified my urgent need to remain publically in terms of social identity. Not only did I not speak Spanish, but I was also ignorant to the customs of the Mexican-American world. In order to help me survive this environment, my speech became something I used with caution. I spoke with neutrality, politeness, and reserve, hoping to project a sense of respect for the environment. While I did not learn Spanish while I attended Travis High School, I did, when speaking to other students, learn how to approach conversation, and in social situations while I was there, I picked up the “Spanglish” slang used by students, adapting my diction to function within the world in which I was living, and its rules.

I have learned to be a linguistic chameleon. A linguistic chameleon is what I needed to be in order to successfully fulfill the requirements that have been inherent within each of the roles my life has necessitated. While my speech patterns are nearly unreadable upon first meeting, this vague presentation changes after I understand the circumstances in which I am socializing. In this way, my development of speech-related survival tools and cultural “multilingualism” stand to prove that perhaps my social identity exists within the realm of indifference. I am able to fit into several different social worlds because my public social identity and verbal presentation is not a fixed point on the grander map of myself. My approach to communication, that is to say, my talk, reflects this. I fit in nowhere, just as I fit in everywhere. Such is omniscience, and such is non-existence.