Language. It is central to how humans communicate. We use it constantly, from that formal email you have to write to your boss explaining that you were definitely out sick and not hanging out with your friends instead, to communicating with those friends that you were hanging out with. It’s often such an integral tool that it’s difficult to come up with a metaphor for it. What is something that everyone, universally, regardless of income, location, or age uses always, nearly every day of their lives?

As understanding others is such an essential part of living as a human, one would think that there was a uniform, consistent way that everyone could communicate. Computers need this, and they have it. It took a little time, but the now ubiquitous USB and its offshoots are standard, in one form or another, on practically any computer. It took a while for USB to earn the “U” in its name, but if you zoom out to the scale of humanity, it took no time at all. Humans have been around for so much longer than computers, so given all that extra time, one would expect that we would have some type of universal standard. Even if it isn’t complete, we should at least have some framework to let any one person get their rough ideas across.

But, we don’t have a standard, despite attempts spanning from Esperanto to English. It can be difficult to converse within the same language! This problem gets so problematic that individuals in North Korea and South Korea, while technically speaking the same language, can’t actually understand each other at times. We’ve attempted to have a standard within English, having a professional, educated syntax and diction that have become expected in certain situations. Both you as the writer and the reader can understand what’s going on, while using the English language to its fullest. While the idea was well-intended, its extremely imperfect. As James Gee points out in “Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics”, “We don’t invent our language, we inherit it from others.” (citation). If we inherit something “wrong”, something that doesn’t fit correctly into the college level “standardsomething that doesn’t follow the “rules”, then we sound ignorant. Vershawn Ashanti-Young goes even further in “Should Writer’s Use They Own English”, saying that conformity in language is similar to racial discrimination, going so far as to say “The two be intertwined” (110). Gloria Anzaldua even says in, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” that there is no way of attempting to connect differences in dialect, “they can only be cut out”(citation).

Alright then, if there is that much trouble, then why even try to communicate between the different groups? Gee seems to agree, saying that even if you say something that is grammatically correct in English, what you’re saying “is wrong nonetheless”. However, this is where Young disagrees. Young suggests that translating between your different versions of English, your “Discourse” as Gee puts it, is important. Not just important, is a useful skill to have, enough to the point that he made term for it, code-meshing. Young says that it’s used “just as frequently used by politicians and professors as it be by journalists and advertisers”. He says that its even used to make a point that “standard” English doesn’t exist, “There ain’t no one way to communicate”.

So, its alright to merge Discourses, but the academics might get a little squeamish about it. But, this means that there should still be a standard language! Appease the academics, and all is well! But, again, this assumption isn’t the right thought. Young and Anzaldua, both of have a minority background, are clearly against it. Young says that even the well paid, corporate jobs can’t successfully do this, referring to a National Commission on Writing survey that noted that in 2004 “businesses were spending as much as $3.1 billion annually on remedial training” to ensure that they speak the right English. Anzaldua goes further, saying that racial identity amplifies one‘s self identity, or it can destroy it. Her language, Chicano, isn’t considered a real language, by either English speakers or Spanish Speakers, and she can’t take pride in herself “until I can take pride in my language”. Gee, by comparison, comes from a straight, white, male history, and as such, one might expect that he would think differently, given the different background. But even he says that we change ourselves to fit our environment, and that we use our Discourses as costumes to hide ourselves, and make it seem like we belong.