"Don't Forget Your Language!"
Identity and Resistance as Constructed Through a Uyghur Parody

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Uyghur-Mandarin Chinese codeswitching discourse of Uyghur actors in excerpts of a comedic video sketch. Uyghurs are a Turkic ethnic group whose territory is in northwestern China. This paper adopts the theoretical assumptions of Stroud (2004) in using Butler's theory of performativity to explain the production of identities, negotiation of access to resources, and acts of resistance through codeswitching. It argues that the data from the comedic sketch provides additional support to the application of performativity to codeswitching and is best described through this framework.

1. Introduction to *Chüshenmidim*

When bilingualism is less the result of a natural process of integration between linguistic communities than of repressive measures, switching languages acquires a political dimension which is related to the effect of state policies on the speech community (Van Boeschoten, 2006).

Switching between two languages is at the very least an impressive skill. For many Uyghurs, a Turkic ethnic group whose territory is in northwestern China, codeswitching[1] in performance may in fact serve as a cautionary tale. This appears to be the case in Abdukérim Abliz's comedic sketch *Chüshenmidim 'I Don't Understand'*, in which the reaction to Uyghur-Mandarin Chinese codeswitching includes the emotionally-charged admonition:

"ئۆزۈڭنىڭ تىلىنى ئۇنتۇپ قالما!" *Özüngning tilini untup qalma!*"/ 'Don't forget your language!'

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[1] I use the term "codeswitching" to refer to all forms of language alternation regardless of intra-/inter-sententiality and other distinctions.

The data used in this paper[2] is taken from an undated video of the broadcasted theater performance, *Chüshenmidim*, which was posted on YouTube (Uyghur Telewiziyesi, 2012). It was most likely filmed in Ürümqi, the capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of China, sometime in the first decade of this century. It belongs to a genre of Uyghur sketch-comedy called *itot*, which "reinforces Uyghur cultural citizenship and the knowledge systems which are tied to fluency in Uyghur language" (Byler, 2013). This comedic sketch features three Uyghur actors and a Uyghur audience, all of whom can be assumed to be bilingual in standard Uyghur and Mandarin Chinese (hereafter "Chinese"); a few non-standard forms of Chinese are also used. Uyghurs today typically speak Uyghur at home and Chinese at school, work, and in other public domains. Uyghur-Chinese codeswitching is common in informal, everyday speech among Uyghurs; it typically involves alternation in the discourse between the two languages and Chinese insertions in areas such as technology, food, education, administration, and new concepts (Cabras, 2014, 2017). The comedy depends on this bilingualism; much of the humor is derived from the use of exaggerated codeswitching and the misunderstandings that result.

The three characters (a woman, a man, and his son) are portrayed as possessing distinctly different language capabilities. In the sketch, the man visits a company, where the woman is working and talking on the phone, to search for a job for his son. The woman's character only speaks and understands an exaggeratedly mixed Uyghur-Chinese language; the man's character speaks Uyghur and acts as if he is monolingual and can't understand Uyghur-Chinese codeswitching. To communicate, the man brings his son, a college graduate with proficiency in both languages, to speak with her. Her character cannot understand the boy's non-codeswitched Chinese so the man and his son "codeswitch" by alternating their words: the son speaks a few words in Chinese, the man continues the sentence with a few words in Uyghur, and so on. The comedic sketch concludes with the man exploding in anger at the woman's Uyghur-Chinese codeswitched language and yells, "Don't forget your language!", at her before storming off with his son.

The data that is analyzed here is taken from the beginning (0:30-2:09) and end (17:30-20:41) segments of the *Chüshenmidim* video, which I selected as most representative of the overall sketch. The data is analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. I created subtitles with interlinear glossing and translated them. I also coded the switched Chinese constituents with associated domains, excluding constituents that primarily serve grammatical functions. Considering coding validity, I received assistance from a native Uyghur speaker in subtitle creation and had an additional native Uyghur speaker[3] code the constituents to compare with my own coding. After identifying four prominent domains apparent among the Chinese constituents, (technology, space, time, and commerce), I also coded the Uyghur content morphemes for the same domains to compare the actors' individual as well as combined language use. Instances of duplicate constituents have been counted for each time they occur. This method is not intended to predict how often and in which domains Uyghurs codeswitch in everyday practice; rather, it reveals the construction of social reality in this particular performance and the negotiation of the status and use of Chinese.

[3] These two native Uyghur speakers have requested to remain anonymous.

Chinese is institutionalized in public domains in China such as in education, business, and administration, which contributes to socioeconomic discrimination against Uyghurs and determines the language that must be mastered and employed (Bewicke, 2009; Smith, 2002). *Chüshenmidim* is an exaggeration and a parody of modern linguistic practices among Uyghurs that uses Uyghur-Chinese codeswitching to produce Uyghur identity in the face of rapid assimilation to Han Chinese culture, to negotiate access to resources in China, and to resist China's ethnolinguistic policy (Bewicke, 2009; Dwyer, 2005).

2. Performativity & Humor in Codeswitching

This paper adopts the theoretical assumptions of Stroud (2004) in applying Butler's theory of performativity to codeswitching. As opposed to "identity-related explanations" of codeswitching, performativity is the notion that one creates, or performs, one's identity through the repetition of language, relationships, and structures (Stroud, 2004). Stroud's application of performativity to Mozambique and my application to the XUAR of China both recognize codeswitching and parody as tools of identity creation and resistance to state power. The linguistic variety in each context also supports arguments against the "language-reflects-society" framework and "we/they codes" to describe language alternation (Gafaranga, 2005). The data from *Chüshenmidim* provides additional support to the application of performativity to codeswitching and is best described through this framework.

I combine the theory of performativity with theory regarding humor and language. In this comedic sketch, humor and codeswitching serve as a "metapragmatic commentary on contemporary linguistic practices and policies" (Woolard, 1995) and that commentary is prescriptive in nature. The jokes are a form of "intra-group control" that emphasize the importance of Uyghur language and ethnicity. They contribute to a "symbolic victory" over state dominance (Van Boeschoten, 2006), which is primarily ethnic Han Chinese. This intra-group control is carried out by portraying Uyghur-Chinese codeswitching as a problematic linguistic practice and by elevating what many Uyghurs term "pure" Uyghur language free from Chinese (in line with previous research, see: (Cabras, 2014, 2017; Thompson, 2013).)[4]

In the two excerpts I analyze, Chinese constituents serve as marked speech in a Uyghur language frame. Because a majority of these Chinese constituents are switched in four domains related to state power, I argue that switches are semantically productive in this script. Additional data is needed to draw similar conclusions about Uyghur-Chinese codeswitching practices outside of this parody. Although I address the production of identities, negotiation of access to resources, and acts of resistance in the comedic sketch individually for the sake of clarity, these constructions are interconnected and overlapping.

3. Production of Identities

In *Chüshenmidim*, the woman's role is that of a stereotypical modern, young Uyghur woman who is absorbed in technology, commerce, and the use of Chinese. She is positioned opposite to the man's role as a stereotypical traditional Uyghur who does not understand modern technology, is fulfilling (albeit culturally exaggerated) obligations to his son, and is primarily monolingual. In the beginning, she responds with irritation to his humorously lengthy traditional greeting and quickly returns to her phone conversation. Upon conclusion of the phone conversation, which the man cannot fully understand, he makes an explicit

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[4] For more information on "pure" Uyghur language as it relates to other segments of *Chüshenmidim*, see: (Cabras, 2017).

connection between language and ethnic identity due to their different linguistic practices:

(1) Man, 1:44-1:48[5]

ikki-miz	ikki millet	bol-ghan	bilen	bezi
two-POSS.1PL	two ethnicity	be-COMPL	with	some

"Even though we belong to two different ethnic groups, some of

gep-lir-imiz	oxsha-p	qal-id=iken	biz-ning	he
word-PL-POSS.1PL	resemble-CVB	AUX-PRS.3=EVID	we-GEN	INTJ

our words are really similar, it seems!"

It is evident that the man equates different linguistic practices with separate ethnic identities. The joke highlights the perceived absurdity of being unable to recognize a member of one's own ethnic group through language and, through lighthearted humor, identifies the woman's linguistic practices as a betrayal of her Uyghur ethnicity. She even calls herself an *Urghuy*, (a metathesized form of the ethnonym *Uyghur* perceived to be an uneducated pronunciation, much like *nucular* for *nuclear* in English), and is therefore portrayed as someone uneducated about Uyghur such as a foreigner. For these reasons, the data appears to fit the "we/they code" framework with the Chinese constituents serving as "they" and the Uyghur constituents as "we". However, there are issues with this assumption.

Although they possess different linguistic abilities, all of the characters in this sketch are performing as ethnic Uyghurs, proving Gafaranga's (2005) point that linguistic differences do not necessarily equate to identity differences. The characters' inability to communicate echoes real issues that many Uyghurs have communicating with their elders due to a loss in Uyghur language proficiency (Bewicke, 2009). Young Uyghurs who have been educated in Chinese are commonly referred to as "broken voices" because of their tendency to codeswitch between Uyghur and Chinese, and this term is even employed by the man in the sketch at one point to describe the woman's speech (Cabras, 2014, 2017). However, it is incorrect to conclude that those educated in Chinese no longer identify as ethnic Uyghurs. Despite her persistent codeswitching, the woman's Uyghur ethnic identity is performed immediately for the audience through the use of a Uyghur in-group identifier *adash* meaning 'friend' while speaking on the phone:

(2) Woman, 0:30-0:41[6]

qara	adash	tünügün	*shyawu*[7]	dé-gin=e
look	friend	yesterday	afternoon	say-IMP.2SG=INTJ

"Look friend, yesterday afternoon, you know,

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[5] **Examples with interlinear glossing:** 1st line: Morpheme segmentation (actual morphemes, not potential phonological change); 2nd line: Gloss (Bickel, et al., 2008) with exceptions: EMPH: Emphatic, EVID: Evidential, VOL: Voluntative, INTJ: Interjection; 3rd line: Translation

[6] **Orthographic conventions:** Uyghur shown in Uyghur Latin y*é*ziqi (ULY) script; Chinese shown in italicized, bolded Latin script using ULY, not standard Mandarin (pinyin) orthography. (e.g. "*shyawu*", not "*xiawu*"). My intention is to avoid confusion by maintaining one orthography and achieve a better reflection of the pronunciation.

[7] I believe "*shyawu*" to be conceived as a single unit by Uyghur speakers, whereas "*shangjye*" is likely conceived as two separate morphemes in a verb+noun construction. Morphological segmentation follows this pattern based on my prediction of how Uyghur speakers conceptualize switches.

shang-jye	qil-ip	***da***-bazar-gha	***chülé***[8]	qil-ghan-t-im
go.on-street	AUX-CVB	big-market-DAT	go	AUX-COMPL-PST-1SG

I went shopping, went to the big market,

bezi	***dongshi***-lar	bar-ghu	***té pyenyi***
some	thing-PL	AUX-EMPH	so cheap

there were some things there, so cheap,

baha-si	***féychang***	erzan=ken
price-POSS.3	extraordinary	cheap=EVID

prices seemed extraordinarily cheap."

(3) Woman, 1:30-1:37

zeyjyen	adash	***goyihur***-din	kéyin	***lyawlé***	qil-ayli	adash he
bye	friend	after.awhile-ABL	after	chat	do-VOL.1PL	friend INTJ

"Bye friend, let's chat again soon, friend!

zeyjyen	***baybay***[9]	ummah	adash
bye	bye	INTJ	friend

Bye, bye-bye! *kissy noise* **friend."**

It could be argued that her codeswitching is too removed from naturalistic codeswitching to arrive at any solid conclusions. After all, her speech is a literal alternation of constituents attributed to either language, rather than a more typical flow in the discourse, and switches appear arbitrary. However, even though she is performing a more ethnically assimilated Uyghur role, she uses *adash* four times within a minute and never uses a Chinese equivalent. She is clearly performing an (exaggerated) Uyghur identity for the audience.

It is also evident theoretically that the woman's code is not functioning as two distinct languages in a "we/they code", even in this manufactured language. She is still using her code to indicate solidarity with her friend in the same manner a monolingual speaker would (Gafaranga, 2005). However, this theoretical perspective is in opposition with the message of the parody which is that these two languages are distinct and mixing them contributes to inefficiency and conflict. Although the woman's codeswitching is just as functional as the non-codeswitched languages theoretically, her speech is undermined by the man through parody due to perceptions of her linguistic code. As Stroud notes, "the essence of all language is the bringing into existence of identities, social relationships and structures… even constructions and perceptions of the linguistic code itself" (2004). The sketch constructs an "ideal Uyghur identity" for the audience by contrasting the man's primarily monolingual Uyghur with the woman's exaggerated, negatively perceived Uyghur-Chinese codeswitching. This identity construction also symbolically resolves the reality of communication issues and loss of Uyghur language proficiency among young Uyghurs.

4. Negotiation of Access to Symbolic & Material Resources

The woman's codeswitching serves an additional function: to take on the resources of the powerful. Stroud states that in his data, Portuguese, the official language of Mozambique, is used in utterances of authority and reissued as a power code through codeswitching (2004).

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[8] For prosodic conditions of the particle *le* in Uyghur-Chinese codeswitching, see: (Sugar, 2017).
[9] An English loan

Although the message of *Chüshenmidim* is to remove Chinese from Uyghur and discourage codeswitching, Chinese is still reissued as a power code by the woman. She is performing as a person connected with realms dominated by ethnic Han official control such as technology, space, time, and commerce; I identify these domains as most prominent in her Chinese switches. In addition, it can be assumed through the woman's tone and behavior that her character views herself as more advanced, civilized, and powerful than the man.

The domains of her Chinese constituents both reflect and produce the social reality in China. The Chinese government has encouraged mass Han Chinese migration to the XUAR which has resulted in the traversing of ethnic boundaries, a new Han Chinese majority in urban areas unwilling to adapt to Uyghur culture, and socioeconomic inequalities between the two ethnic groups. There is a perceived exploitation of the XUAR's natural resources and a monopoly of the urban labor market by Han Chinese (Smith, 2002). Uyghurs have also continued to be imprisoned in "re-education camps" by the government with possibly over a million Uyghurs imprisoned since 2017 (Zenz, 2018). Uyghurs are forced to learn Chinese and sing patriotic songs in Chinese in the camps (Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2018), making them instrumental in carrying out China's goal for all its citizens to speak Mandarin Chinese. The goal to popularize Mandarin Chinese throughout the country by 2020 is explicitly stated by the Ministry of Education and State Language Commission to "safeguard national unity" and "enhance national identity" among the country's many ethnicities (2017). In addition, time is a source of contention as all of China is officially run on "Beijing time". Although the local time system "Xinjiang time" is in use among Uyghurs (Dwyer, 1998), workplaces require the use of Beijing time and many Uyghurs respond by setting their watches to Xinjiang time instead (Smith, 2002).

Chinese terms are introduced in a compulsory manner in sociopolitical and scientific-technological realms (Bruchis, 1988) and even if Uyghur terms are formed later, people are more accustomed to using the Chinese terms (Abulimiti, 2013; Cabras, 2014; Xu & Chang, 2016). In comparative data of the domains of constituents, found in **Table 1**, the data attributed to the technology domain confirms this: 82% of combined constituents within the technology domain are spoken in Chinese. However, beyond the technological realm, there is not a clear division of labor between the languages in the comedic sketch.

Table 1: Comparison of language of constituents belonging to prominent domains
Data from 0:30-2:09, 17:30-20:41

	Technology		**Space**		**Time**		**Commerce**		*Language*
Woman	1	11%	1	14%	4	40%	9	47%	Uyghur
	8	**89%**	**6**	**86%**	**6**	**60%**	**10**	**53%**	**Chinese**
Man	2	13%	38	88%	10	91%	5	62%	Uyghur
	13	**87%**	**5**	**12%**	**1**	**9%**	**3**	**38%**	**Chinese**
Boy	2	50%	3	100%	2	67%	4	100%	Uyghur
	2	**50%**	**0**	**0%**	**1**	**33%**	**0**	**0%**	**Chinese**
Combined	5	18%	42	79%	16	67%	18	58%	Uyghur
	23	**82%**	**11**	**21%**	**8**	**33%**	**13**	**42%**	**Chinese**
Data Type	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	

Although the data attributed to the technology domain is persuasive and conforms to research listing it as a lexical domain for Chinese insertions (Cabras, 2014, 2017), this data is not a prediction of Uyghur-Chinese codeswitching in everyday practice but rather is

specific to this individual performance. In all identified domains, the woman speaks Chinese with the highest frequency: 89% of her references to technology, 86% of her references to space, 60% of her references to time, and 53% of her references to commerce are in Chinese.

With the exception of technology, the man and his son respond by retaining a distinctly higher frequency of Uyghur constituents within these domains. This serves as a negotiation of access to resources that puts these domains within the Uyghur linguistic sphere. This negotiation is not simply one of political/economic concern; it is also of linguistic importance. "Modernizing a language requires government and societal support for maintaining and diversifying the domains in which a language is used" (Dwyer, 2005). In order to modernize Uyghur and improve its expressive ability within different domains, Uyghur vocabulary must be used.[10] The woman reissues Chinese as a power code, but its status and use is negotiated by the man and his son by retaining Uyghur vocabulary.

5. Acts of Resistance

Mandarin Chinese currently serves as the language of social mobility and economic advancement in China in practice, but in *Chüshenmidim* this reality is reversed. The use of Uyghur terms alongside Chinese terms identical in meaning juxtaposes the choices and serves as an act of resistance rather than acceptance of assimilation to ethnolinguistic policy.

(4) Boy, 18:39-18:41
he	héliqi	nusxila-ymen	de-p
INTJ	that	copy-PRS.1SG	say-CVB

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure you said you would copy it,

él-ip	chiq-ip	ket-ken-t-ingiz-ghu
take-CVB	leave-CVB	AUX-COMPL-PST-2SG-EMPH

took it, and left."

(5) Man, 18:41-18:42
he	*fuyin*	qil-imen	de-p
INTJ	copy	do-PRS.1SG	say-CVB

"Yeah, I said I would copy it,

él-ip	chiq-ip	ket-ken
take-CVB	leave-CVB	AUX-COMPL

took it, and left."

(6) Boy, 18:42-18:43
he	nusxila-ymen	de-p
INTJ	copy-PRS.1SG	say-CVB

"Yeah, you said you would copy it."

The Uyghur verb *nusxila-* is offered in both **(4)** and **(6)** as an alternative to Chinese *fuyin* in **(5)** which enforces language boundaries and asserts Uyghur into the technological domain. This pattern is also seen in alternations between Ch. *shenfenjéng* and Uyg. *kimlik*, both meaning 'identification' and appearing nine times, and between Ch. *biyejéng* and Uyg.

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[10] Using Uyghur is easier said than done without a change in current covert language policy because "when it comes to the lexicon, practicality trumps ideology" (Dwyer, 2005).

diplom[11], both meaning 'diploma' and appearing once. These language alternations are all offered in close proximity and appear highly functional as acts of resistance to the widespread use of Chinese terms. "The resignification of speech requires opening new contexts, speaking in ways that have never been legitimated, and hence producing legitimation in new and future forms" (Butler, 1997). By providing alternatives, the alternation legitimizes the Uyghur terms for future use.

It may seem uncharacteristic that the man is switching to Chinese in (**5**), but it sets up a narrative for him to explode with anger at the end of the sketch. His son points out that his Uyghur is also not "sap Uyghur tili", or "pure" Uyghur language, and this upsets him. The intentional avoidance of Uyghur-Chinese codeswitching has been found to be especially present in male discourse (Cabras, 2014); his emotional response, along with the selection of gender roles, supports this claim. The woman sets him off by speaking in Chinese:

> **(7) Woman, 20:20**
> *zalé*
> what/how
> "What?"

> **(8) Man, 20:21-20:37**
> ***bu zalé bu za   bu za   shyenzey   jége yisi-ma***
> no what no what no what now   this meaning-INTJ
> **"Don't say 'what'! Don't say 'za'! Don't say 'za'! How about this:**
>
> derhal   ***hyey-jya***
> immediately return-home
> **immediately go home!**
>
> öy-ge   két-ip   mawu xenzu   til-i-ni-mu
> home-DAT   leave-CVB   this Chinese tongue-POSS.3-ACC-also
> **Come back (and talk with me) after you go home and thoroughly study both**
>
> uyghur   til-i-ni-mu   puxta   ögin-ip   kél-ing
> Uyghur   tongue-POSS.3-ACC-also thorough   study-CVB come-VOL.2SG
> **the Chinese language and the Uyghur language,**
>
> *de   yisi*   chüshen-d-ingiz-mu
> GEN   meaning understand-PST-2SG-Q
> **do you understand?!**
>
> öz-üng-ning   til-i-ni   untu-p   qal-ma
> self-POSS.2SG-GEN   tongue-POSS.3-ACC   forget-CVB AUX-NEG
> **Don't forget your language!**
>
> *de   yisi*   mang=e
> GEN   meaning go=INTJ
> (turns to son) **Let's go!"**

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[11] A Russian loan word

Conflict is a condition of meaning-making and language has a potentially trans/formative role as a form of resistance (Stroud, 2004). The man is clearly not happy that his language has been described as "impure", which reproduces the "pure Uyghur" language ideology for the audience. Here the man cites the woman's Chinese sarcastically and reverses its meaning, resisting its presence in the woman's code. He overtly communicates that it doesn't matter which language she speaks, so long as she speaks without mixing the two languages. However, as previously noted, he also associates language with ethnic identity. Therefore, it can be assumed that he finds it more important that her *Uyghur* not be mixed with Chinese. In Cabras' analysis of *Chüshenmidim*, she makes the excellent point that, as an actor, Abdukérim Abliz is also navigating the sensitivity of the topic in China and addresses "the Uyghur community's concerns about language change and the desire to protect the native language, while maintaining a position that respects the government's language policy" (2017). I would add that, even though he is overtly expressing compromise, the conflict in the sketch is an act of resistance against the wider context of enforced ethnolinguistic policy in the XUAR. His use of codeswitching is a refiguration of Uyghurs from subjects of assimilationist policy, Han migration, and economic inequality to empowered agents. In other words, codeswitching in *Chüshenmidim* serves as a symbolic victory over dominant forces (Van Boeschoten, 2006) and its production of Uyghur identities and construction of social reality is a source of great power.

6. A Final Word on Performativity & Codeswitching

The woman, man, and boy characters in *Chüshenmidim* all serve as representatives of differing linguistic abilities among Uyghurs today and they each perform Uyghur identities that contribute to the overall message of the parody. Although the message is prescriptivist in nature and serves to enforce linguistic boundaries between Uyghur and Chinese, the "we/they code" theoretical perspective is not appropriate. Because of the variety of linguistic abilities associated with the same Uyghur ethnic identity, Stroud's (2004) application of Butler's theory of performativity to codeswitching is best suited to describe how Uyghurs construct identities, negotiate access to resources, and resist ethnolinguistic policy. There is considerable power invested in *Chüshenmidim*'s use of codeswitching through parody and it constitutes Uyghurs as resisting, not succumbing, to the will of the Chinese state.

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