Code-switching is everywhere. It can be organic or deliberate for those who speak one language in professional settings and another at home. It happens during moments of intense emotion, “like moments of intimacy or sharing something with someone that might feel awkward if it’s in that other language,” said linguist Caleb Everett.
You're walking to class, chatting with a friend from New Jersey, when you get a call from your grandmother. “I gotta take this,” you say, and within seconds, your steady, articulate English shifts into your native dialect.

Maybe it's letting your words run into each other, dropping the last syllable of your nouns. Or maybe it happens at the coffee cart between your first and second class, when your neutralized New Yawker orders a strong black “cawfee.”

This switch is generally unconscious, and its seamlessness characterizes code-switching. The linguistic term refers to the process of shifting from one code—be it a language variety or dialect—to another within the same sentence or during the course of a single conversation.

Linguist Einar Haugen most likely coined the term and defined it as “when a bilingual introduces a completely unassimilated word from another language into his speech.”

It violates sentence boundaries, mixing a variety of words, phrases and sentences with distinct grammatical systems during the same speech event. Code-mixing embeds a variety of linguistic units, such as affixes or clauses from different languages, so the participant must draw from what they know to infer what they hear.

The classic example of code-mixing for a Spanish-English bilingual is, “Sometimes I’ll start a sentence in English y termino en español.” The distinction between code-switching and code-mixing isn't always hardline among linguists, and many scholars use code-switching to refer to all types of combined languages.

A bilingual person has access to three systems of communication. Two languages—A and B—and a combination of A and B: C. In Miami, there are bilinguals aplenty; most speech exists in this C space.

Common Miami-isms include, “pero like” and “cógelo con take it easy.” Both expressions are fusions of English and Spanish that form part of the local Spanglish dialect.

Miami houses a community of second- and third-generation immigrants that grew up linguistically split between their native tongue at home and English at school or work. This breeds a hybrid language that borrows Spanish phrases that cannot be translated and inserts Spanish words in mostly English sentences.

Caleb Everett, linguist and chair of the Department of Anthropology at UM, said that a lot of what motivates people to code-switch or code-mix is sometimes a lack of fluency in one language.

“For example, you're struggling to come up with the word in English, so you put in the Spanish word or vice versa,” Everett said. “And then there are people who grew up fluent in both languages, but there's usually a social trigger as to why you need to switch, because it feels awkward to speak Spanish.