Signs, Codes, and "Code-Switching" in Poe's "The Gold-Bug"

> Code-switching is a term in linguistics referring to alternation between two or more languages, dialects, or language registers in the course of discourse between people who have more than one language in common. Sometimes the switch lasts only for a few sentences, or even for a single phrase. The switch is commonly made according to the subject of discourse, but may be for a variety of other reasons such as the mood of the speaker (for example, a person might swear only in French).
>
> - from *Wikipedia*, entry on "Code-Switching" accessed January 23, 2006

Code-switching is practiced not only by bilingual speakers, but by speakers of the same language when they shift registers because of rhetoric, dialect, slang, intelligibility (as when speech is impeded), or jargon. When, in "The Gold-Bug," Poe provides us with five different "communication" codes (animal, Jupiter, narrator, Legrand, parchment) he forces the reader to engage in code-switching throughout the story, highlighting the importance of code-breaking in solving the mystery of the hidden treasure. Though at first glance there appears to be a hierarchy in the four different registers (proceeding from animals on the bottom to the parchment at the top), all five registers play different and crucial parts in the solution of the mystery.

Animals' codes

Most animals, lacking discrete language, rely on a small register of sounds (barks, meows, neighs) and gestures (bites, kicks, strokes) to communicate. (There are some notable exceptions in which some animals, including dolphins and non-human primates, use language in a way similar to humans.) Two animals make important communications to humans in "The Gold-Bug": the **Newfoundland dog** who causes the narrator to expose the parchment to fire and guards the newly discovered treasure, and the fierce little "**goole bug**" who bites everyone who tries to touch him. While these animals' "communications" are not intended to achieve particular results, they are nonetheless crucial gestures that cause the plot to develop and the mystery to be solved.

Jupiter's codes

Most readers can "code-switch" Jupiter's speech best if they read it aloud because it is aurally (phonetically) based. The easiest of his codes to interpret are the **sound substitutions** and the **non-standard grammar**. **Phonetic word substitutions** are more difficult because the arbitrariness of the signifies is highlighted (we have trouble substituting the word "shoulders" for "soldiers" because we have preassigned the sign "soldiers" another meaning). Jupiter is literal-minded: he equates symbol and reality (as when he assumes the heavy, shiny bug is made of real gold). Some people equate literal-mindedness with lack of logical reasoning, but Jupiter's literal-minded judgments are almost always correct, and his assumptions and participation are essential to the solution of the mystery.

sound substitutions		nonstandard grammar		phonetic word substitutions	
gose	goes	ain't	aren't, isn't, etc.	soldiers	shoulders
hebby	heavy	nohow	anyway	syphon	ciphering
troof	truth	gittin' to be	becoming	dare	dare
noffin	nothing	noffin ain't	nothing is	berry	very
dat	that	ain't no	is not	den	then
massa	master			claws	cause
figgurs	figures			rap	wrap
skeered	scared				
syfe	scythe				
noovers	maneuvers				

The Unnamed Narrator's Codes
The **nameless narrator** and his discourse are both *transparent* to most readers in that they require no code-switching and are almost exclusively devoted to enabling the reader to understand the code-switching of the other characters and of the parchment itself.

Legrand's Codes
Legrand's discourse is the opposite of Jupiter's: it is reader-based and requires abstract knowledge to understand; instead of reading his language aloud, we have to look up many of the words he uses. It is most clearly highlighted in the note he writes the narrator.

Legrand's use of classically derived, abstract words (such as "chastise" instead of "beat") makes his language appear educated, controlled, and abstract (even though the letter itself refers to intense emotions). The subjunctive voice (expressing possibility) communicates his ability to imagine circumstances beyond immediate reality. The foreign words show his mastery of other languages and his assumption that the narrator shares this mastery.

classical/abstract word choice	subjunctive voice	foreign words
offence	hope you have not been	*brusquerie*
improbable	wish to see you	*solus*
endurance	whether I should tell it	
well-meant attention	would you believe it	
business of importance	I verily believe	
chastise	if you could make it convenient	

The Parchment's Codes
The **parchment** features both an abstract sign-system (at left, which has to be decoded through a series of logical substitutions) and the more concrete signs below (pictures) which also have to be decoded ("kid" standing for "Kyd") and placed in their context (buried treasure story on Sullivan's Island).
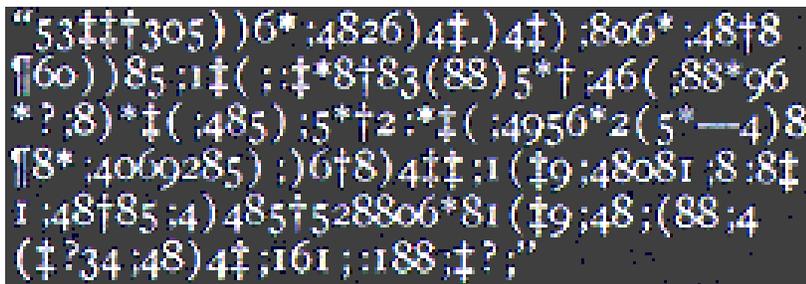
The role of coincidence in all of the story's decoding processes is VERY IMPORTANT: the bug sketch *just happens* to be on the other side of the parchment from the skull; Jupiter's equation of the bug with a piece of pure gold *just happens* to spur Legrand's imagination; the dog *just happens* to bump the narrator towards the fire; it *just happens* to be a very cold day, with fire necessary, when the incident occurs.

How would you suggest we reconcile the *randomness* of coincidence with the *rigors* of logical reasoning in this story? I would be interested in your ideas about this question.

- Dr. Jadwin, English 231, Spring 2006