

Language and Race/Ethnicity

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Linguistic anthropologists have carefully studied race and ethnicity in relation to distinctive demographic groups and nation-state contexts, connecting examinations of language patterns associated with particular populations (see Diversity, Linguistic) to endemic structures of power (see Language and Power). Whereas initial inquiries into language, race, and ethnicity sought to challenge stigmatizing assumptions about minoritized language varieties on the one hand (see Language Prejudice; Minority Languages), and track linguistic practices stereotypically associated with (im)migrant (see Immigration; Diaspora Language) and “native” populations on the other (see Nation and Nationalism; Native Speaker, Notion and Theoretical Uses of), subsequent research has extended this work to understand racialization and ethnicization as dynamic historical and ideological processes of identity formation (see Language Ideology; Language and Identity) and boundary negotiation (see Bilingualism and Multilingualism; Crossing). Forms of inequality and violence enacted through these ideological processes (see Language Prejudice) have positioned race as a fraught topic within the discipline of anthropology, due in no small part to the history of anthropologists’ perpetuation of racist assumptions about the inherent inferiority of colonized peoples throughout the modern world. Indeed, scholarly and popular accounts of language practices that are “native” to a given context often emerge as part of histories of colonial essentialization and erasure. These histories have informed US-based linguistic anthropologists’ long-standing efforts to dispute pernicious beliefs about racialized groups’ purportedly deficient language practices, going back at least as far as Boas’s late nineteenth-century writings debunking stereotypes about Native American populations and languages (see Boas, Franz). Many of these efforts have centered on attempts to reject the notion that race, language, and culture can or should be equated with one another. Linguistic anthropologists’ attempts to challenge assumptions about the ideological triad of race, language, and culture reflect a reckoning with the discipline’s historical anchoring in and perpetuation of biological racism and colonial essentialization. The following sections trace shifting of conceptualizations of race, ethnicity, and language within linguistic anthropology; explore assumptions about linguistic and ethnoracial essentialization and attempts to overcome them; link linguistic racism to interlocking structures of power including colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy; and introduce a raciolinguistic perspective that seeks to connect analyses of race, ethnicity, and language to broader political struggles.

Indeterminacy of race and ethnicity

To avoid perpetuating troublesome histories of biological racism and colonial essentialization, some anthropologists have rejected the term “race” altogether, focusing instead on the study of ethnicity as a potentially less problematic concept. This is based on a conceptualization of race as a biologized myth and ethnicity as an empirical reference point for shared cultural practices (see Culture) and national identities. For many anthropologists, the apparent cultural constructedness of ethnicity makes it more amenable to analysis than the seeming biological determinism of race. However, Reyes suggests that “efforts to define ethnicity and race by their content ... ultimately fail, revealing instead how slippery and elusive these categories are,” demonstrating “that they refer to nothing, that is, *no thing*” (Reyes 2010, 398–399). For Reyes, “[e]thnicity concerns not just boundaries and mutability, but also power relations, group hierarchies, and institutional structures” (Reyes 2010, 400). Thus, “[w]ho gets defined as ‘ethnic,’ for example, becomes a question with great consequence for how national belonging is conceived and how racial hierarchies are reproduced” (Reyes 2010, 400). In this sense, race and ethnicity must be conceptualized jointly in relation to existential, interactional, and institutional dynamics of belonging and exclusion. From this perspective, distinctions between race and ethnicity, and, by extension, classifications of populations and linguistic practices as comparatively “racial” or “ethnic,” should be the focus of rather than starting point for anthropological analyses. This approach focuses on the analysis of societal belonging and exclusion as the rearticulation of long-standing colonial distinctions and hierarchies, and seeks to understand how race, ethnicity, and language are jointly conceptualized, experienced, and expressed.

Urciuoli conceptualizes the interplay between racial and ethnic phenomena by suggesting that “race and ethnicity are both about belonging to the nation, but belonging in different ways” (Urciuoli 1996, 15). Incorporating language into this analysis, Urciuoli elaborates that “[w]hen people are talked about as an ethnic group, as Italian-American, Polish-American, African American, Hispanic-American, Asian-American, the ideological emphasis is on national origins,” which “gives them a rightful place in the United States and their claim to language is seen as a point of pride” (Urciuoli 1996, 15). In contrast, “[w]hen people are talked about as a race ... the emphasis is on natural attributes that hierarchize them and, if they are not white, make their place in the nation provisional at best” and their “language differences ... ideologically problematic” (Urciuoli 1996, 15). These ideologies systematically frame particular populations and language practices as ethnoracially marked, problematic, and in need of explanation, while positioning others as unmarked, privileged, and the default norm. In response to this problematic dynamic, Bucholtz (2011) has redirected linguistic anthropological attention to the hegemonic status of Whiteness and expressive practices associated with White populations. These US-based accounts might seem to suggest that race is a construct specifically rooted in this nation’s unique histories of settler colonialism, Indigenous genocide, forced migration, enslavement, abjection of African diasporic populations, and waves of imperially structured (im)migration and labor exploitation (see Immigration; Language, the Political Economy, and Labor). However, more recently we have seen the emergence

of research investigating the relationship between race, ethnicity, and language throughout the world (see *Language, Globalization, and Colonialism; Global Linguistic Flow, in Media*), demonstrating that race is not simply a US-based myth to disavow or problem to overcome, but rather a complex historical and contemporary antagonism on a global scale in need of careful scrutiny and conceptualization across contexts.

Colonial legacies and raciolinguistic ideologies

It is crucial to understand contemporary ideological links among race, ethnicity, and language in relation to the historical emergence of racism as a justification for the globalization of modern European colonialism (Rosa and Flores 2017). This history and its legacy have shaped constructions and contestations of national, linguistic, and ethnoracial borders on a global scale. The co-naturalization of these borders is often articulated alongside ideologies which presume an inherent relationship between a population, a geopolitical territory, and a particular language or variety thereof. Although national, linguistic, and ethnoracial borders are historically constructed and highly contested, various power structures are anchored in the assumption that they are naturally occurring, unchanging, and virtuous boundaries in need of constant protection through standardization and policing efforts. Such efforts subject minoritized populations and language practices to continued surveillance, assessments, and hierarchical orderings, rendering some groups and forms of communication as emblematic of a nation and modernity more broadly, while relegating others to an inferior or altogether abject status resulting in various forms of marginalization and violence. Linguistically, these hierarchies can be recognized in language standardization projects that stipulate communicative norms and perpetually frame minoritized populations' language practices as marked, deficient, and in need of remediation (see *Marking and Markedness; Language and Education*). Ideologies of language standardization rationalize societal hierarchies, which are often organized racially and ethnically, as legitimate reflections of populations' distinctive language abilities. Such rationalizations obscure how historical formations of power frame minoritized populations as linguistically problematic even when they engage in ostensibly standardized language practices.

Rosa and Flores (2017) characterize racialized attributions of linguistic deficiency as “raciolinguistic ideologies,” and develop a broader “raciolinguistic perspective” that frames contemporary racial, ethnic, and linguistic hierarchies as colonial legacies. Raciolinguistic ideologies are illustrated by the alternate stigmatization and legitimization of ostensibly similar linguistic structures and practices depending on the ethnoracial groups with which they are stereotypically associated. Examples include the phonological policing of metathesis in a stereotypical African American English pattern (see *African American Languages (AAV, AAEV, Ebonics)*) such as “aks” [æks], which is often understood as an incorrect (see *Correctness, Incorrectness, and Correction*) approximation “ask” [æsk]. Compare this to the legitimization of metathesis in the stereotypical mainstream English pattern of “asteriks” [æsteriks], which is often

framed as an acceptable alternate of “asterisk” [æsterisk]. Popular language ideologies suggest that African American educational underachievement and broader societal marginalization is reproduced by purported linguistic deficiencies and differences. However, the example above demonstrates that similar patterns can be perceived in strikingly distinctive ways depending on the ethnoracial groups with which they are stereotypically associated, signaling that broader forces are at play in shaping linguistic perceptions and societal hierarchies.

From this perspective, when African Americans are instructed to modify their production of “aks” to “ask,” language becomes a rationalization for the surveillance and policing of Blackness. Baugh (2018) conceptualizes the interplay between the policing of language and race as “linguistic profiling,” and suggests that efforts toward promoting racial and linguistic justice must grapple with the ways in which ideas about language often function as proxies for race. The relationship between purported linguistic problems and racial problems echoes the question W.E.B. Du Bois famously posed at the turn of the twentieth century in efforts to conceptualize the pathologization of African Americans, “How does it feel to be a problem?” Du Bois’s emphasis on feeling in this question, in conjunction with the racial and linguistic justice framework Baugh (2018) conceptualizes in response to various endemic patterns of discrimination, illustrates the importance of attending to interrelations among interpersonal, institutional, and historical scales in the study of race, ethnicity, and language.

Multi-scalar analyses linking linguistic and societal structures reframe the significance of race and ethnicity in scholarly and popular debates about distinctions between dialects and languages (see *Dialect: Introduction*), allegedly accented and unaccented speech, pidgins and creoles (see *Creole and Creolization*), high and low prestige varieties (see *Diglossia*), code-switching and code-mixing (see *Code-mixing and Code-switching*), and monolingual and multilingual communicative patterns (see *Bilingualism and Multilingualism*). Distinctions between language forms are not simply unmediated classifications of empirical phenomena or disinterested perspectives on communication, but rather powerful contributors to the reproduction and transformation of ethnoracial, linguistic, and national borders, as well as the historical formations of power in which they are rooted (see *Language and Power*).

Beyond essentialism

Chun and Lo (2016) trace historical constructions and contestations of ethnoracial, linguistic, and national borders in relation to the emergence of “the distinctive ethnoracial language perspective” in the study of race, ethnicity, and language. This perspective centers on scholarly attempts to document minoritized ethnoracial groups’ distinctive linguistic patterns (see *Style and Stylization*) and establish their systematic, rule-governed nature. For example, extensive research focused on African American language practices has continually asserted that African American English is not a failed approximation of “mainstream” or “standard” American English, but rather a distinctive language variety with its own features and structures (see also *African*

American Languages (AAV, AAEV, Ebonics)). Indeed, the stereotypical opposition between minoritized and standardized language varieties obscures complex diversities *within* minoritized varieties and reifies the notion that there is a single standard. African American English undergoes its own contested processes of standardization that must be studied with careful ethnographic attention to intergenerational language socialization to and through various communicative hierarchies (see Language Socialization). To be clear, from ingroup perspectives, there are comparatively standardized and non-standardized varieties of African American English (Morgan 2002). Moreover, so-called “mainstream” or “standard” American English is an ideological construction that does not correspond to a discrete set of linguistic forms. For this reason, it is crucial to reject stereotypical assumptions that equate Blackness with non-standard English and Whiteness with standard English. Such assumptions reify race and language rather than subjecting the ideological production of racial and linguistic categories to careful scrutiny. Standardizing institutions and ideologies that shape classifications and perceptions of language forms and practices as more or less legitimate exemplars of a given language variety are key sites for research on language, race, and ethnicity.

Morgan (2002) explores the complex diversity of African American language patterns on their own terms rather than as failed approximations of “mainstream” American English, emphasizing their creation and meaningfulness as part of broader histories of diaspora and survivance in the wake of the transatlantic slave trade and ongoing legacies of violence (see *Diaspora Language*). Crucially, Morgan’s analysis connects race, ethnicity, and language to a careful consideration of intra-group dynamics and hierarchies including those associated with class, gender, and generational cohort. This intersectional approach, combining Black feminist and linguistic anthropological insights to explore interlocking systems of oppression, presents an alternative to homogenizing accounts of race, ethnicity, and language. Morgan’s research demonstrates the importance of synthesizing historical and contemporary analyses, institutional and interactional scales, and the body and embodiment (see *Body, Embodiment; Body, in Interaction*) in examinations of race, ethnicity, and language. These various foci reframe the empirical significance of racially minoritized populations’ linguistic creativity. This is particularly the case for racialized youth whose linguistic innovation is alternately stigmatized as deviant and deficient or superficially celebrated as a display of dexterity and skillfulness in the face of presumed lack (see *Youth Language*). Morgan rejects these essentializing narratives and recontextualizes the expressivity of racialized populations, with a specific focus on African American women and youth, as long-standing survival strategies and knowledge systems developed in response to existential violence and abject marginalization.

Linking discourse, materiality, and linguistic racism

The relationship between the often essentializing “distinctive ethnoracial language perspective” (Chun and Lo 2016) and endemic societal hierarchies is illustrated in stereotypical representations of different ethnoracial groups (see *Media Representation*

of Language and Writing Systems), contested ideologies of linguistic authenticity and appropriation, and debates surrounding what constitutes racist language. While such stereotypes, ideologies, and debates might be understood as “symbolic” issues from perspectives that differentiate discourse from the “real” material world, linguistic anthropological scholarship has powerfully demonstrated that discourse and materiality are fundamentally co-constitutive across political and economic scales. As such, ideologies of language, race, and ethnicity play materially consequential roles in structuring everyday life across interpersonal, institutional, and societal contexts. This consequentiality is evident in Hill’s (2008) account of language and racism, which explores linguistic enactments of White supremacy through the appropriation and revalorization of language practices stereotypically associated with people of color. Hill shows how Whiteness involves the capacity to derive value from the very practices that marginalize people of color. In the example of practices Hill terms “Mock Spanish” (see Spanish and English Language Issues in the United States), she documents US Whites’ appropriation and reconfiguration of particular Spanish language patterns as part of the fashioning of cool, casually cosmopolitan, and desirable American identities. This stands in stark contrast to the experiences of many US Latinx persons who face monitoring and stigmatization across institutional contexts based on their public use of Spanish rather than English. Erasure of the long-standing presence of Spanish and, crucially, Indigenous languages throughout the United States is part of layered colonial histories and ideologies that allow Whiteness and the English language to be imagined as the nation’s inherent racial and communicative channels.

This layering of colonial histories and ideologies is linked to the powerful role race, racism, and racialization play in shaping discourse and materiality. The discursive meaningfulness and perceived material presence of phenomena associated with particular linguistic and ethnoracial categories is rooted in colonially conditioned modes of recognition. As demonstrated in aforementioned examples, the perceived presence and evaluation of linguistic forms and practices – as stereotypically English or Spanish, White or Black, correct or incorrect, desirable or detestable, profitable or debilitating, etc. – emerge not from the material existence or inherent qualities of such forms and practices, but rather from the reproduction of historical, political, and economic power structures. The deceptive reproduction of these power structures through ideas about language and culture is characteristic of “racializing discourses” (Dick and Wirtz 2011), underscoring the insidious ways in which racism is enacted through language ideologies and practices even when race might not seem to be explicitly invoked. For example, Dick and Wirtz (2011) point to strategic political shifts in the usage of xenophobic hate speech targeting migrant populations, including US-based discourses of “illegality” that might seem to be objective statements about adherence to or violation of law. In fact, US discourses of migrant “illegality” emerged in the mid- to late twentieth century alongside shifting (im)migration policies that placed newfound restrictions on Latin American populations and Mexicans in particular. It is not by chance, then, that discourses of migrant “illegality” in the US context become popularly synonymous with Mexico/Mexicans, “brownness”, and the Spanish language. Thus, racializing discourses comprise not only epithets, slurs, and hate speech that

are widely understood as racist language, but also messages that are often framed as racially unmotivated and yet function in highly discriminatory ways.

Tracking racializing discourses across historical, political, and economic contexts

The insidious nature of racializing discourses, as well as the hegemonic anchoring of racial, ethnic, and linguistic experiences in histories and legacies of White supremacy (see Whiteness and Language), pose significant challenges to empirical examinations of these phenomena. Ostensibly similar linguistic features, patterns, and practices can be perceived in strikingly disparate ways such that they come to be associated with distinctive languages, identities, and forms of value. The historical overdetermination of racialized linguistic practices and perceptions thereof renders narrowly empirical analyses of race, ethnicity, and language insufficient. Such analyses often begin with the assumption that languages and varieties thereof, as well as ethnoracial categories and groups, are preexisting empirical things, rather than considering how historical formations of power produce perceptions and classifications of linguistic and ethnoracial difference.

Rosa and Flores (2017) conceptualize raciolinguistic enregisterment as a tool for avoiding the presumed isomorphism of language, race, and ethnicity. Previous theorizations of linguistic enregisterment have explored historical processes through which linguistic forms are endowed with cultural value and bundled together as coherent sets in relation to imagined models of personhood. Thus, enregisterment becomes a framework for understanding the historical emergence of socially typified linguistic patterns, including language varieties associated with distinctive geographical regions, institutional roles, and demographic categories. By extension, raciolinguistic enregisterment tracks the historical production and regimentation of linguistic and ethnoracial categories. Rather than attempting to identify the language patterns that correspond to an ethnoracial group, raciolinguistic enregisterment asks how and why particular linguistic forms come to be ideologically associated with particular ethnoracial groups in particular contexts. For example, in the US context we might reconsider the overdetermination of African American English, which is often understood as a highly typified language variety, as compared to the underdetermination of Asian American English, which is the focus of far less scholarly and popular attention. From the perspective of raciolinguistic enregisterment, it is important to investigate how these language ideologies correspond to racist histories and legacies of violence, dispossession, and exploitation. On the one hand, these fraught dynamics position particular African American practices as hyper-desirable while subjecting African Americans to societal abjection; on the other, they recruit Asian Americans to inhabit shifting stereotypes as model minorities whose English language use is framed as identical to whiteness or even super-standard, or as forever foreigners who are perpetually constructed in inherent contrast to the English language. Raciolinguistic enregisterment draws attention to the ways language, race, and ethnicity come to be jointly experienced and perceived in particular historical, political, and economic circumstances.

Attention to the historical, political, and economic conditions that shape experiences and understandings of race, ethnicity, and language is central to Shankar's (2015) analysis of racial and ethnic representations in American advertising. It is precisely the confluence of a particular moment in US history, global capitalism, and communication that structures US advertising agencies' transformation of Asian Americans from "model minorities" into "model consumers," in line with efforts to establish this population's legitimacy and belonging in the nation-state (see *Language, the Internet, and Digital Communication*; *Nation and Nationalism*). Stereotypical signs of "Asian Americanness" that are used to create brand identities and consumer identification, Shankar argues, do not simply reduce to the body, linguistic features, or cultural practices (see *Body, Embodiment*; *Culture*; *Language and Identity*). Instead, the process of assembling ethnoracial and linguistic diversity relies upon naturalized histories of racialization such as transformations in US Census categories. Multicultural advertising executives presuppose and entail these transformations to shape the category of Asian American by selectively choosing languages, "ethnic" heritages, religions, and other markers to carefully calibrate the category for commercial representation (see *Media Representation of Language and Writing Systems*). Linking communication and materiality, Shankar shows how language, race, and ethnicity are organized in close relation to socioeconomic class structures and global capitalism. Shankar's analysis is a cautionary tale about the limitations of increased representation for minoritized populations as a theory of change; for Shankar, linguistic and ethnoracial representation in multicultural advertising is structured by and reproductive of racial capitalism.

Shankar's contemporary account of the commodified production of an ethnoracial category dovetails with Inoue's (2006) historical examination how, in the context of Japan's nineteenth-century political and economic modernization, Japanese masculine subjects' anxieties about women's new roles in public spheres created an ideology of Japanese "women's language" as an emblem of national tradition (see *Language and Gender*; *Nation and Nationalism*). Inoue argues that language ideologies linking Japanese women with tradition led to the emergence of Japanese men's perception of particular linguistic forms as emanating from Japanese women as gendered speaking subjects. Thus, for Inoue, Japanese women's language should not be understood as a gendered ethnolect or an empirical sociolinguistic category in the first place, but rather as an ideological perception that emerged in particular historical, political, and economic circumstances. This analytical shift, from attending to the linguistic practices of speaking subjects, to the interpretive and categorizing practices of hegemonic listening subjects, provides a dynamic account of how historical formations of power produce and often overdetermine perceived linguistic practices and modes of embodiment (see *Body, Embodiment*; *Language, the Political Economy, and Labor*). For Rosa and Flores (2017), the shift from a methodological and analytical focus on ethnoracially marked speaking subjects to hegemonically positioned perceiving subjects is central to a raciolinguistic perspective that seeks to challenge endemic patterns of racial marginalization. Collectively, this scholarship suggests that we must be attentive to the historical, political, and economic situatedness of processes that mediate immanent perceptions and experiences of race, ethnicity, and language.

Raciolinguistic futures?

The relationship between colonial and imperial histories and contemporary realities is an important area of inquiry for advancing the study of race, ethnicity, and language, with a particular focus on connecting struggles over language to broader political struggles. For some, this coheres in the interdisciplinary project of “raciolinguistics” (Alim, Rickford, and Ball 2016), which builds on the conceptualization of raciolinguistic ideologies (Rosa and Flores 2017) to promote the investigation of interrelated racial and linguistic hierarchies. Emergent work pursued under the rubric of raciolinguistics is informed by a broader body of linguistic anthropological research that seeks to link scholarly analyses of language, race, and ethnicity to various social justice struggles (Baugh 2018). In the context of widespread monolingual language ideologies that often function as forms of xenophobia, this involves not only interrogating the hegemony of the English language on a global scale (see *English as a World Language*) and championing multilingualism and migration as fundamental human rights, but also challenging the commodification of particular forms of multilingualism whose value is assessed in relation to the reproduction of racial capitalism (see *Language and Social Class*; *Language, the Political Economy, and Labor*). In the context of Indigenous language revitalization efforts (see *Endangered Languages and Language Death*), this involves reframing language learning not as an end in itself, but rather as a key component in broader projects of decolonization. In the context of new media (see *Language, the Internet, and Digital Communication*), emergent literacies (see *Literacy*), and novel forms of multimodal communication, this involves moving beyond the celebration of ethnoracially minoritized populations’ creativity and carefully studying how their engagement with these spaces and practices reproduces and disrupts communicative and broader societal structures. In the context of various intersectionalities and diversities across interlocking structures of marginalization such as racism, classism, cisheteropatriarchy, and ableism (see *Language and Gender*), this involves refusing a politics of minoritized inclusion premised on the development of a legible political “voice” and reconsidering processes of raciolinguistic enregisterment that organize stereotypes about populations’ perceived modes of and presumed capacities for expression. Collectively, such research can challenge conventional assumptions about language, inequality, and social justice (see *Language and Social Justice*) with the goal of unsettling endemic ethnoracial and linguistic hierarchies.

SEE ALSO: *African American Languages* (AAV, AAEV, Ebonics); *Bilingualism and Multilingualism*; *Boas, Franz*; *Body, Embodiment*; *Body, in Interaction*; *Code-mixing and Code-switching*; *Correctness, Incorrectness, and Correction*; *Creole and Creolization*; *Crossing*; *Culture*; *Diaspora Language*; *Diglossia*; *Diversity, Linguistic*; *Endangered Languages and Language Death*; *English as a World Language*; *Global Linguistic Flow, in Media*; *Immigration*; *Language and Creativity*; *Slang*; *Language and Education*; *Language and Gender*; *Language, Globalization, and Colonialism*; *Language and Identity*; *Language Ideology*; *Language, the Internet, and Digital Communication*; *Language, the Political Economy, and Labor*; *Language and Power*; *Language Prejudice*; *Language and Social Class*; *Language Socialization*; *Language and Social Justice*;

Linguistic Imperialism; Literacy; Marking and Markedness; Media Representation of Language and Writing Systems; Minority Languages; Nation and Nationalism; Native Speaker, Notion and Theoretical Uses of; Spanish and English Language Issues in the United States; Standard Language(s); Style and Stylization; Whiteness and Language; Youth Language

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