

Undoing raciolinguistics

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Abstract

In this commentary, we discuss common pitfalls associated with the study of race and language, focusing specifically on the recent emergence of raciolinguistics as a frame for these efforts. We examine how raciolinguistics can be taken up in ways that silo discussions of race from the rest of linguistics—as something that the “raciolinguists” do—such that careful study of issues including colonialism, power, and societal hierarchies is perpetually pushed to the margins of the field. We also consider how the nominalization of raciolinguistics can suggest that race and language are agreed upon objects in ways that reproduce troublesome essentializations. We show how a raciolinguistic perspective can resist such tendencies by continually interrogating the colonial reproduction and transformation of modern knowledge projects and lifeways across societal contexts, as well as by continually examining the fundamental nature of language, race, and power. We end with what we see as the implications of a raciolinguistic perspective for all of linguistics.

KEYWORDS

colonialism, language ideologies, raciolinguistic perspective, racism

Across academic contexts, attention to race has often been dismissively positioned as a niche concern, as a sign of the inability or unwillingness to focus on issues that are purportedly of more universal importance, or even as reproductive of racism based on the notion that paths toward racially egalitarian futures are paved by moving beyond race as an object of discourse and study. In response, many scholars—especially Black scholars—have powerfully shown how racism is in fact fundamental to mainstream intellectual projects that deny or suppress its relevance (Baker, 2021; Mills, 1997; Morrison, 1992). It might be tempting to assume that such critiques do not pertain to sociolinguistics since

research focused on African American language practices has been foundational to the development of core concepts in the field (Labov, 1972). Yet, this research has characteristically approached race in terms of self-evident demographic categories, and racialized language practices as straightforward products of these categories. While such identitarian approaches spotlight racialized language practices and demographics, they often treat race and language as transparent and transhistorical classifications rather than as situated productions and enactments within specific histories of European colonialism and various reconfigurations thereof (Makoni & Pennycook, 2006). These approaches also characteristically frame racism in terms of ill-formed individual beliefs and anti-racism in terms of documenting and transforming racially stigmatizing language attitudes rather than dismantling structural barriers confronting racialized communities (Lewis, 2018; Rickford, 1999).

Our collaborative work has sought to speak back to these tendencies in the field. We introduced the concept of raciolinguistic ideologies in an effort toward undoing appropriateness (Flores & Rosa, 2015). We argued that appropriateness-based approaches to language education presuppose language practices as disembodied and fail to account for ideologies that frame racialized populations and persons as communicatively deviant and deficient in advance of their linguistic production. This effort toward undoing entails rethinking concepts treated as universal by locating their emergence within specific geopolitical contexts. From this perspective, modern colonialism universalizes situated modes of being and knowing, and frames other lifeways and knowledges as less than fully human. Undoing attempts to deuniversalize these modes of being and knowing by interrogating their sociohistorical roots. In our study of race and language, we have sought to critically interrogate modes of being and knowing that emerged in conjunction with the globalization of European colonialism as well as their delinking from this history through frameworks that position them as universal (Rosa & Flores, 2017). This has informed our analysis of attempts to describe supposed (socio)linguistic universals, which took shape jointly with longstanding European colonial logics that link Europeanness to orderly homogeneity and non-Europeanness to unruly heterogeneity (Flores & Rosa, 2022). Thus, while (socio)linguistics is often positioned as a progressive intervention that seeks to promote racial justice, it is built on an ideological foundation of colonialism.

Our independent and collaborative work joins colleagues who have sought to critically interrogate how racism and colonialism constitute the often unacknowledged sociopolitical and intellectual grounds for much (socio)linguistic scholarship (Bauman & Briggs, 2003; Heller & McElhinny, 2017; Makoni & Pennycook, 2006). These efforts have emerged in conjunction with a broader shift in the field towards discussions of raciolinguistics (Alim et al., 2016). We understand raciolinguistics as an overarching term that seeks to name and synthesize conceptually and methodologically diverse approaches to the study of the relationship between race and language. Both our collaborative and individual research is in dialogue with and informed by a great deal of scholarship that has adopted this term or has been characterized as falling under this broad umbrella of inquiry. Indeed, while we have not framed our work in terms of raciolinguistics, we are often described as participating in raciolinguistics by others in the field. We welcome the increased attention that the use of the term has brought to the relationship between race and language in (socio)linguistics and are proud to have been part of broader efforts toward reconceptualizing the significance of race in the field. Yet, in light of the colonial foundations of the field of (socio)linguistics in which this work is most often situated, it is crucial for those of us committed to reconceptualizing the significance of race in (socio)linguistics to undo raciolinguistics. This undoing is not primarily focused on debating whether people should use the term raciolinguistics. Instead, we are interested in thinking through the potential pitfalls associated with raciolinguistics becoming a recognizable subfield of (socio)linguistics that inherits its colonial logics.

One potential danger of raciolinguistics becoming a recognizable subfield of (socio)linguistics is the potential siloing of discussions of race into work done by those identified as raciolinguists such that

the careful study of issues including colonialism, power, and societal hierarchies is perpetually pushed to the margins of the field. Recall that Labov (1973) initially resisted the term sociolinguistics for similar reasons, noting that “it implies that there can be a successful linguistic theory or practice which is not social” (p. xiii). If social issues are exclusively the domain of sociolinguistics, then the rest of the field can treat these issues as irrelevant to their areas of inquiry. In a similar vein, raciolinguistics might become a new disciplinary silo, implying that there can be a successful linguistic theory or practice that does not grapple with the colonial logics constituting the discipline’s foundations and subsequent practices. We have noticed this tendency in the suggestion that our focus on race is US-centric and irrelevant to broader debates in the very fields that continue to rely on (socio)linguistic frameworks developed by US-based straight White men to make broad and universalizing claims about humanity without any critical reflection on the geopolitical origins of these approaches. The siloing of raciolinguistics may further reinforce the idea that work focused on race is a niche topic with little relevance outside the US and with little consequence for the field overall.

That said, as US-based scholars, we are sensitive to our geopolitical position in relation to global networks and hierarchies of knowledge production, and we understand the importance of critically reflecting on and resisting the universalization of US racial logics. The US has its own specific histories of race and racialization that differ from these processes in other contexts. At the same time, it is important not to exceptionalize US racial logics. Instead, we must understand how the trans-Atlantic slave trade, White settler colonialism, and migrant labor exploitation and disposability that produced and continue to sustain the US emerged within a broader global reconfiguration of the world that framed Europeaness as fully human and non-Europeaness as less than fully human (Lowe, 2015; Wynter, 2003). Many scholars are incisively tracing these connections throughout the world, including Africa (Ndhlovu, 2019; Oostendorp, 2022), Europe (Cushing & Snell, 2023; Khan & Gallego-Balsà, 2021), Latin America (Grammon, 2022; Nascimiento Dos Santos & Windle, 2021), and Asia (Henry, 2020; Pak, 2023; Park, 2022). These efforts to understand racial governance across global contexts are linked to Goldberg’s (2002) point that we must not restrict careful study of race to “seemingly exceptional cases like Nazi Germany or South Africa or the segregationist South in the USA” (p. 233), but rather understand race as “integral to the emergence, development, and transformations (conceptually, philosophically, materially) of the modern nation-state” (p. 234). Goldberg underscores the importance of attending to the ways in which the modern nation-state “assumes varied racially conceived characters in different sociospecific milieus,” such that “there is no singular totalized phenomenon we can name the racial state” (233). These insights emphasize the importance of attention to the dehumanization of Blackness and Indigeneity foundational to modern colonial onto-epistemologies on the one hand, and the contested and contextually contingent shape of distinctions between Europeaness and non-Europeaness on the other (Wolfe, 2016).

For example, across the Americas, questions emerged as to the Europeaness of Creoles, descendants of European colonizers born in the colonies, with Creole elites hoping to claim Europeaness and, by extension, their full humanity, through their self-representation as “Latin” people with direct ties to Europe (Mignolo, 2005). These claims were contested by US colonizers of the American Southwest and Puerto Rico, who, while recognizing the legal whiteness of “Latin” people, saw them as miscegenated and thus as racially, culturally, and linguistically inferior (Cabán, 2002; Martinez, 1997). This ascribed inferiority left the very populations that organized, enacted, or were complicit in racial terror inflicted on Black and Indigenous populations subject to racial subordination and violence themselves. From sociolinguistic perspectives, these dynamics require careful attention to various hegemonies of race and language that produce deeply contested, contradictory, and consequential boundaries and hierarchies (Lozano, 2018; Vélez-Ibáñez, 2017).

Indeed, it is dangerous to presume that racial categories name the same populations and function in the same ways across contexts. Dowling (2014) shows how the US classified Mexicans as White to justify the acquisition of half of Mexico's territory in the mid-nineteenth century while subjecting newly constituted Mexican American populations to systematic racial exclusion and discrimination. Dowling (2017) also demonstrates how, in the contemporary moment, legal authorities have classified US Latinxs as White to avoid accusations of racial profiling in some circumstances, while in other cases classifying them as non-White in support of claims of reverse racism. Shifting attributions of European-ness have also been present in East Asian contexts, where Japanese colonizers seeking to modernize their society adapted European practices to differentiate themselves from their Korean colonial subjects, whom they framed as less proximate to European-ness and, therefore, inferior (Nishiyama, 2015). While Japan enacted colonial violence throughout Asia, Orientalist racism legitimated US enactments of existential violence in Japan and mass incarceration of Japanese Americans during the Second World War (Hayashi, 2004; Lary, 2006). These contexts differ in many ways, yet they are connected in part through struggles over who is able to claim European-ness and who is denied these claims as part of their racialization. Our concern is that raciolinguistics research might continue the sociolinguistic tendency to treat race as a static, primordial object that takes the same shape across contexts rather than as a dynamic process of Othering that is continuously reconfigured in relation to broader geopolitical shifts and enacted in specific ways within local contexts.

Approaches to raciolinguistics can perpetuate the tendency toward (socio)linguistic essentializations not only of racial identity but also of "real," "authentic," and "distinctive" language (Bucholtz, 2003; Lo and Reyes, 2009). Central to the raciolinguistic perspective we have proposed is an analysis of the emergence of named language varieties in conjunction with labels for modern polities and populations (Rosa & Flores, 2017). This is not to say that the labeling of language varieties only began in the modern colonial era, but rather that these labels have taken on fundamentally different meanings and functions in this particular historical, political, and economic context. In efforts to conceptualize this dynamic, we have drawn on theorizations of enregisterment as processes whereby "diverse behavioral signs (whether linguistic, non-linguistic, or both) are functionally reanalyzed as cultural models of action, as behaviors capable of indexing stereotypic characteristics of incumbents of particular interactional roles, and of relations among them" (Agha, 2007, p. 55). Put differently, enregisterment provides a framework for understanding how communicative forms become endowed with coherent value as cultural sets in relation to constructed, projected, and enacted models of personhood. A focus on enregisterment can lend insight into the (re)production and transformation of linguistic and racial borders that might otherwise be positioned as self-evident and static.

In our conceptualization of raciolinguistic enregisterment (Rosa & Flores, 2017), we are especially interested in the modern colonial dynamics through which named languages, varieties, and features take shape in conjunction with models and formations of racialized personhood. Attention to raciolinguistic enregisterment involves examining the conditions under which particular linguistic forms become emblematic of particular racial categories rather than presuming that such forms and categories naturally emanate from one another. These presumptions are evident in "work that seeks to classify and document the features of varieties associated with racialized subjects, which has at times positioned such ethnolcts as free-standing varieties, where 'distinctive features' are understood as a property of a named racialized variety, rather than a projection of difference from the perspective of the hegemonic standard" (Lo, 2020, p. 297). This emphasis on the role of historically, politically, and economically situated perceiving subjects rather than individualized speaking subjects in the production of racialized language varieties is crucial. While efforts toward naming and legitimating racially stigmatized language varieties in some cases coarticulate with broader political struggles for systemic change, such efforts can also reproduce stereotypical representations of linguistic Otherness and focus narrowly on

linguistic structures rather than political and economic structures. For example, categories such as “Spanglish” and “African American English” can function as part of counter-hegemonic struggles on the one hand, and as euphemisms for nonstandard language that exceptionalize racialized linguistic heterogeneity on the other. Whereas the raciolinguistic perspective we have developed seeks to interrogate the fraught ideological production of racialized language categories and practices, we want to caution against the ways in which raciolinguistics can function as a euphemism for the study of always already racialized communicative phenomena.

By moving beyond narrow codecentric accounts that take named languages and varieties for granted, we can challenge theories of change focused on modifying the linguistic behaviors of racialized subjects. Accumulation-based theories of linguistic change suggest that, for racialized populations, the acquisition of standardized language skills is key to overcoming systemic forms of structural marginalization and exclusion across societal domains. However, racialized populations face ascribed deficiency and continued marginalization, regardless of the extent to which their language practices might seem to correspond to standardized norms. Thus, linguistic distinctions, including those between “standard” and “nonstandard” or “academic” and “social” varieties, correspond to racialized perceptions and ascriptions rather than discrete empirical patterns. A raciolinguistic perspective can interrogate how language classifications do not simply reflect self-evident patterns and proficiencies, but rather take shape in conjunction with modes of governance and population management (Cabral, 2023; Flores, 2019). Similar to the ways in which some scholars have adopted the term “translanguaging” while reinscribing linguistic boundaries that contradict this framework’s emphasis on a unified linguistic repertoire (MacSwan, 2022), we worry that raciolinguistics can be taken up in ways that naturalize the very essentializing assumptions about language that a raciolinguistic perspective has sought to challenge.

Without careful attention to the complex interplay between the dynamic global geopolitical structuring of race and language and locally situated enactments of these global processes, raciolinguistics might simply become a new name for existing approaches rather than an indication of a significant shift in theory or practice. Efforts toward “racing language” and “linguaging race” (Alim, 2016) can open up space for reconceptualizing race and language. Yet, such approaches also run the risk of becoming additive analyses that reproduce stereotypical assumptions about populations and linguistic practices. Black feminist scholars advocating interlocking approaches have long warned against the limitations of attempting to overcome narrow analyses of race, class, and gender by relying on “additive analyses of oppression [which] rest squarely on the twin pillars of either/or thinking and the necessity to quantify and rank all relationships in order to know where one stands” (Hill Collins, 1993). More recently, Snorton has extended interlocking approaches by theorizing Black trans scholarship that asks, “what pasts have been submerged and discarded to solidify—or, more precisely, indemnify—a set of procedures that would render blackness and transness as distinct categories of social valuation?” (2017, p. 7). In line with these analytical approaches, we are less interested in adding race to language or language to race than in interrogating fundamental conceptions of race and language that have rendered them separable. This is reflected in our emphasis on the colonial co-naturalization of race and language, which seeks to examine the specific historical, political, and economic processes that shape the joint emergence of racial and linguistic categories and hierarchies (Rosa & Flores, 2017).

These differing foci signal what is at stake in distinguishing between raciolinguistics and a raciolinguistic perspective. On the one hand, we understand a raciolinguistic perspective as a theoretical and methodological approach to de-universalizing Eurocentric ways of being and knowing, and situating local instantiations of the co-naturalization of race and language within broader global geopolitical processes. On the other hand, we are concerned that raciolinguistics, as a broad umbrella term that seeks to encompass all research focused on language within racialized communities, risks universalizing

the very categories that a raciolinguistic perspective was developed to undo. Beyond this terminological distinction, undoing raciolinguistics is an invitation to interrogate the racializing implications of the universalizing liberal humanist thinking that informs the broader discipline of linguistics as well as the liberal progress narratives that shaped the emergence of sociolinguistics. Following Rickford's suggestion that we must "take the 'socio' part of sociolinguistics seriously" (1999, p. 272), undoing raciolinguistics involves careful attention to colonial histories and hierarchies that structure contemporary demographic and communicative phenomena globally, and reconsideration of the structural transformations necessary to uproot racial and linguistic stigmatization.

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How to cite this article: Flores, N., & Rosa, J. (2023). Undoing raciolinguistics. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12643>