

IN PERSPECTIVE

Premises, Pitfalls, and Possibilities of Undoing Competence: A Response to Open Peer Commentaries

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We want to thank all of the commentators for their thoughtful engagement with our ideas and their efforts to move them in new directions that we had not considered. We are encouraged by growing interest in critical examinations of the origins of applied linguistics as a point of entry for reconsidering some of its key frameworks. This commitment to interrogating intellectual origins is central to Heller and McElhinny's (2017) expansive analysis of how modern paradigms and fields of language study have taken shape in conjunction with capitalist, colonial, and imperial expansion. Central to this line of investigation is critical engagement with progress narratives connected to discourses of linguistic and communicative competence. Specifically, Heller and McElhinny noted the shift from a deficit to difference paradigm that coincided with Hymes's (1966) initial articulation of communicative competence as well as how subsequent paradigms focused on dominance have questioned the analysis of power and theory of change that informed both deficit and difference approaches. In our attention to how conceptualizations of communicative competence reconfigure the racist exclusions of universalizing liberal humanism and pathologizations associated with culture of poverty frameworks, we sought to build on this attention to dominance, including work by colleagues who have critically engaged with neoliberal discourses of competence across

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global contexts and communicative modalities (Kubota & Takeda, 2020; Norton, 1995; Park, 2010).

We are tempted to assert that this is an exciting sign for the future of our field. Yet, we are wary of narratives of societal progress that suggest a historical trajectory of increasing equality, justice, and opportunity despite rampant austerity, precarity, and disposability, and we caution against adopting similarly optimistic narratives to characterize the historical and contemporary state of applied linguistics. Narratives of societal progress and hope for meritocratically earned access to it (Berlant, 2011), which have been central to the reproduction of contemporary political and economic power structures in the United States and across global capitalist orders, obscure the myriad inequities jointly perpetuated by liberal governance and legitimated by liberal humanist thought. Our attention to the interplay between dominant power structures and scholarly frameworks leaves us reluctant to make claims about the future of applied linguistics, whose practitioners have historically and contemporarily been positioned as defenders of diversity and facilitators of inclusion even as the field was built on and has perpetually reproduced a genre of the human overrepresented as white (Wynter, 2003). However, the critical perspectives on which we have built in our article, as well as those articulated in these responses to it, offer counternarratives that have always existed in various scholarly and broader societal contexts yet have either been systematically excluded or perhaps more insidiously strategically appropriated in ways that contribute to the reproduction of marginalization and exclusion under the auspices of affirmation and representation (Ahmed, 2012; Ferguson, 2012).

Khan takes up this cautionary note about appropriation in the service of maintaining colonial logics in his reflections as an applied linguist studying race in Europe. In this context, new buzzwords are developed for examining racialized communities alongside a continued refusal to grapple with the historical and contemporary significance of colonialism both in the construction of Europe and the experiences of racialized communities across European nations. We also recognize that these concerns extend far beyond Europe. Indeed, the invitation to contribute an article and share a platform with other critical applied linguists throughout the United States and various global contexts in such a highly regarded journal for its jubilee issue is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it illustrates growing momentum in the field toward a focus on power that critical applied linguists have been developing for decades. On the other hand, it could also signal the appropriation of “raciolinguistics” in ways that position this term as a new buzzword and reincorporate it into the very colonial logics that we developed our framework to interrogate. Therefore, as

we engage in these conversations, we must be vigilant against depoliticizing tendencies that, while not unique to applied linguistics, have a specific history within our field to which those of us working to disrupt these troublesome patterns must attend.

Keeping these cautionary notes in mind, we would like to address some of the themes that emerged from the commentaries that further extend our thinking in our efforts to undo competence. These include complex global arrangements of race that connect to the broader theme of false universalism as well as attention to societal hierarchies and potentialities associated with broader communicative modalities. In this rejoinder, we address these themes in turn, with the goal of underscoring our commitment to undoing competence as a strategy for challenging superficial progress narratives and moving beyond narrowly linguistic theories of change. We join our colleagues in seeking to develop new modes of attunement to the worldmaking possibilities associated with decolonial orientations to linguistic skills, knowledges, and lifeways.

In efforts to further articulate such decolonial orientations, we thought it would be helpful to reiterate the theory of race with which we are working in the article. From our perspective, a primary function of race is to rationalize and legitimate global European colonial expansion and imperial rule by sorting the world's populations into those who are deemed human and less than fully human. We interpret Wynter's (1994) discussion of the overrepresentation of the modern genre of the human as white in relation to the structural association of whiteness with full humanity and racialization as a way of denying populations this fully human status in various ways or at the most extreme abjecting populations into a nonhuman status. Therefore, when we discuss racialized people, we are focusing on how the denial of particular populations' humanity is rationalized and legitimated in conjunction with the globalization of European colonial and imperial rule. This framing is also in line with work in linguistic anthropology that conceptualizes racialization in relation to "markedness... operating against an unmarked background of what social actors perceive as normative" (Urciuoli, 2011, p. E113). While we appreciate Croom's note about the dangers of leaving whiteness unmarked, we suggest that framing whiteness as the structural position in relation to which other positions become racialized does, in fact, mark whiteness by emphasizing its projection as a dominant universal norm as compared to the positioning of racial Others as subordinate and provincial. Indeed, we have found this framing productive when faced with the question that Croom asks about the racialization of whiteness, in that it allows us to emphasize the structural framing of race in our argument.

We draw on this theory of race as an entry point for challenging the universalizing projections at the core of communicative competence. For us, communicative competence emerged within a specific and highly racialized geopolitical context that was erased through its characterization as a universalizing framework for describing the nature of human communication. This universalization of whiteness is central to Anya's discussion of her experiences as a Black woman in applied linguistics who was told that her interest in pursuing research focused on Blackness lacked universal relevance. While Anya was able to persevere despite this resistance, it is crucial to consider the many other emerging or aspiring applied linguists who were pushed out of the field or were never even able to enter it because of the dismissal of research interests informed by their lived experiences as lacking universal relevance. Thus, the lack of diversity in applied linguistics is not simply a matter of recruitment but also the onto-epistemological foundations of the field that universalize whiteness under the guise of scientific objectivity. A similar dynamic is at play in Oostendorp's exploration of the lack of perspectives from the Global South in applied linguistics. Once more, the marginalization of Global South scholars necessitates careful attention to recruitment and the dominance of onto-epistemological approaches that universalize the Global North such that Global South perspectives are framed as lacking universal relevance. As scholars geopolitically located in the Global North whose families experienced colonially structured displacement from the Global South as part of ongoing imperial projects of the United States, we appreciate the push to think more critically about whom we cite and how we cite them.

By interrogating assumptions about racializing processes as transhistorically continuous and racial categories as essential or universal, the onto-epistemological framing of race that we adopt seeks to contribute to broader efforts toward de-universalization that many of the commentators describe and conceptualize. More specifically, this framing can contribute to understandings of the varied dynamics of race, racism, and racialization within specific contexts. Park examines one such context through an analysis of elite Koreans' access to education in western English-speaking countries and their perceived approximation of whiteness in their communicative practices. This stands in contrast to lower-income Koreans whose highly limited or altogether foreclosed access to these educational opportunities is rationalized through dominant discourses suggesting that socioeconomic status is related to competence rather than perceived proximity to whiteness. This is an example of "racism without race" (Nishiyama, 2015, p. 341), with Korean society often represented as racially homogeneous while universalizing stereotypes

equating competence with proximity to whiteness have become naturalized within this society's mainstream institutional structures.

This onto-epistemological framing of race that focuses on the historical and contemporary (re)production of racial logics and categories also provides a point of entry for making sense of multiple layers of colonialism that are often mapped onto one another. The example of *Latinidad* in the United States can be understood in terms of imperially structured migrations from settler colonial societies throughout Latin America and the Caribbean to the settler colonial United States, each of which was built by enslaved people. That is, *Latinidad* emerged within specific colonial histories and contemporary realities that are often obscured in popular narratives surrounding (im)migration. Efforts toward developing educational opportunities that critically engage with diasporic knowledges and practices, such as those *de los Ríos* describes, are important strategies for challenging the coloniality of language teaching and learning. Yet, as Barillas Chón and Mejía show, it is important to reexamine generalizing accounts of *Latinidad* within the United States settler colonial context that erase Indigenous Latinx experiences. By attending to racial and colonial hierarchies across Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States, it becomes possible to understand how the discursive construction of various *Latinidades* has maintained a genre of the human that disavows Indigeneity and Blackness. This framing highlights how languages such as Spanish can be simultaneously stigmatized and hegemonic depending on the context, and underscores the significance of accounting for the colonial histories and contemporary realities of different linguistic varieties and their users in the design of language learning opportunities.

The interrogation of colonially constituted racial and linguistic boundaries can also lend insight into the conaturalization of raciolinguistic categories with related axes of difference (Gal & Irvine, 2019). Indeed, it was this insight that originally inspired the raciolinguistic perspective that we further developed in this article. We appreciate how some of the commentators have conceptualized disability as part of this analytic framework. Communicative competence was conceptualized in conjunction with culture of poverty discourses that characterized racialized and disabled communities in similarly stigmatizing ways. Indeed, as Hill describes in his commentary, these discourses even explicitly intersect with one another in the case of Black Deaf people who must navigate an American Sign Language overrepresented as white. We also appreciate Namboodiripad and Henner's efforts to understand race and disability jointly in their argument that undoing competence necessitates reconceptualizing

language development as highly variable in ways that reject “disordered” as the valid description of anyone’s language practices.

Thus, undoing competence requires rejecting a narrow focus on normative spoken and written language practices apart from various multimodal forms of communication as well as resisting the erasure of broader learning ecologies within which language learning occurs. While we perceive elements of this undoing of language across the commentaries, Venegas and Leonard draw particular attention to it in their discussion of relationality rooted in Indigenous linguistic onto-epistemologies. Venegas and Leonard show how universalizing claims about Indigenous communities’ supposed lack of linguistic competence, often advanced by linguists who understand themselves to be in solidarity with these communities, parallel stigmatizing historical linguistic descriptions of White Thunder. Collectively, the commentators point to language learning possibilities that emerge from refusing universalizing theories such as communicative competence and reconceptualizing meaning-making practices of racialized communities as enactments of alternative worlds rather than merely as remedial starting points.

We want to end by reflecting on Hymes’s legacy in the field. We appreciate Namboodiripad and Henner’s attention to the abuse Hymes inflicted on women in the field of applied linguistics and their critical question about the importance of explicitly naming this harm in deciding to cite him. This is something with which we have both grappled, in particular Nelson, who is a tenured professor in the educational linguistics program that Hymes founded and where students advocated for the removal of Hymes’s portrait based on his legacy of abuse (Elegant, 2018). We seek to examine a different dimension of this legacy through our reading of Hymes’s work showing that the very genre of the human that informed his analysis was and continues to be fundamentally harmful. While we can and must condemn Hymes’s abusive behavior, we must be cautious not to do so in ways that individualize the issue while leaving unexamined a broader field that continues to reproduce related onto-epistemological harm in its frameworks. To do so will ensure that abuse and exclusion continue both interpersonally and structurally.

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