

Race and the Language of Othering

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Key Points

- Studies of racism and racialization are foundational to linguistic anthropology.
- Linguistic anthropologists study language as an object and medium of racism and racialization.
- Linguistic forms, varieties, and practices are often key targets of racism and racialization.
- Language powerfully mediates the creation and reproduction of distinctive racial hierarchies across contexts.
- Linguistic anthropological commitments to anti-racism comprise liberal approaches focused on advocacy for cultural relativism, as well as decolonial approaches focused on challenging the hegemony of Western and Global North knowledges and lifeways.

Abstract

Analyses of racism and racialization have been integral to US-based linguistic anthropology since its emergence as a distinctive disciplinary subfield. However, it is crucial neither to exceptionalize nor to overgeneralize US perspectives on race and language. The production of European colonial modernity can be understood as a globalizing yet never totalizing racial and communicative project. Alongside scholars in sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, and related fields studying language practices in their respective local and global contexts, linguistic anthropologists have systematically examined language as both an object of racism and a powerful medium through which racial hierarchies are reproduced. Central to this research is the careful analysis of interrelations among hierarchical differentiations of language forms, varieties, and practices on the one hand, and individuals, groups, and territories on the other.

Introduction

Analyses of racism and racialization have been central to US-based linguistic anthropology since its emergence as a distinctive disciplinary subfield. However, it is crucial neither to exceptionalize nor to overgeneralize US perspectives on race and language. The production of European colonial modernity can be understood as a globalizing yet never totalizing racial and communicative project (Bauman & Briggs, 2003; Smalls & Davis, 2023). Alongside scholars in sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, and related fields studying language practices in their respective local and global contexts, linguistic anthropologists have systematically examined language as both an object of racism and a powerful medium through which racial hierarchies are reproduced. Central to this research is the careful analysis of interrelations among hierarchical differentiations of language forms, varieties, and practices on the one hand, and individuals, groups, and territories on the other.

In an early linguistic anthropological engagement with race and racism, Franz Boas (1889) challenged attributions of inferiority to Indigenous peoples of the Americas and their communicative practices based on purported inconsistencies in their phonetic production characterized as ‘alternating sounds’. Boas, widely regarded as one of the founders of Americanist linguistic anthropology and of the US-based discipline of anthropology more broadly, argued ‘that there is no such phenomenon as ... alternating sounds, and that their occurrence is in no way a sign of the primitiveness of the speech in which they are said to occur ... alternating sounds are in reality alternating apperceptions of one and the same sound’ (1889, p. 52). Boas redirected attention from Indigenous populations’ allegedly deficient linguistic production to Western researchers’ ethnocentric modes of perception.

This refutation of stigmatizing ideas about Indigenous North American language practices was connected to broader efforts toward rejecting essentializing assumptions equating race, language, and culture in explicitly colonial anthropological research and thinking (Boas, 1940). Such assumptions are often associated with biological racism and evolutionary hierarchies that anthropological research has both reproduced and contested. Longstanding racial and linguistic essentializations that emerged in conjunction with the hegemony of modern European political and economic orders continue to shape contemporary discourses and

debates about Indigeneity and broader constructions of racialized difference (Heller & McElhinny, 2017; Meek, 2020). Linguistic anthropologists have sought to interrogate and denaturalize these racist systems and stereotypes, which frame populations as more or less civilized or primitive, and, by extension, worthy of rights and resources or vulnerable to profound marginalization and violence.

However, efforts toward institutionalizing anti-racist perspectives can position race and racism as stable objects in ways that obscure various historical and contemporary forms of racialization throughout the world (Lo & Chun, 2020). This is to say, affirmations of racial and linguistic diversity can become normative neoliberal projects in their own right (Shankar, 2016; Urciuoli, 2022). Such projects direct attention to particular categories, experiences, and relations in ways that naturalize the colonial and capitalist knowledge structures and social orders in which modern processes of racialization are rooted (Shankar, 2023; Wong, 2022). Therefore, it is crucial to attend to deeply entrenched and emergent forms of linguistic racism and racialization, as well as to the distinctive shapes these phenomena and processes take across historical and contemporary global contexts.

Language as an Object of Racism and Racialization

Racism powerfully structures perceptions of and institutionalized encounters with linguistic diversity (May, 2023). In some cases, this involves the positioning of racialized linguistic practices and varieties as inherently incorrect, inferior, or unintelligible (Rosa, 2016a), while in others it makes these same practices into targets of multicultural affirmation, management, and appropriation (Flores, 2013; Haque, 2012). Racialized forms of linguistic stigmatization and valorization become profoundly consequential in shaping everyday life across institutional contexts and experiential domains, including labor (McGill, 2023; Ramjattan, 2025), legal proceedings (King & Rickford, 2023; López-Espino, 2021), housing (Baugh, 2003), education (Flores, 2024; Flores & Rosa, 2015), and health and (dis)ability (Briggs, 2024; Cioè-Peña, 2021). Racialized linguistic monitoring reproduces colonially structured borders and hierarchies demarcating languages, nation-states, and populations (Errington, 2008; Urciuoli, 1995). Linguistic, geopolitical, and ethnoracial borders are often co-constructed through various language ideologies, including ideas about (in)correctness (Motha, 2014), accents (Dryden & Dovchin, 2021; Ramjattan, 2019), and mixing/purity (Reyes, 2019). The interplay among these borders involves ‘a remapping of race from biology onto language’ (Urciuoli, 2001; Zentella, 2014, p. 631). Whereas biological racism might be widely discouraged in mainstream public discourse, framings of particular populations’ linguistic and cultural practices as pathological and deficient persist (Avineri et al., 2015).

In the US context, African American language practices have been both derided and commodified in ways that reproduce anti-Black stereotypes and stigmatization (Alim & Smitherman, 2012). Generations of linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists have refuted the alleged inferiority of Black language practices domestically and globally by demonstrating their complex systematicity and profound virtuosity (Makoni et al., 2003). This research carefully examines the heterogeneity of Black linguistic practices and language learning experiences (Nascimento Dos Santos & Windle, 2021; Sito, 2023), including attention to diasporic and transnational dimensions of race, class, and gender (Anyia, 2017; Morgan, 2002; Smalls, 2024).

Analyses of language, diaspora, and transnationalism have demonstrated the racialized ways in which populations and language practices are constructed as (il)legitimately domestic or foreign (Chávez, 2017; Rosa & Trivedi, 2017). Dominant constructions of linguistic nativeness and alienness are often closely connected to ideas about (im)migration, securitization, and citizenship (Khan, 2019). Careful attention to language and race can draw important connections between the stigmatization of (im)migrant, diasporic, and Indigenous populations and language practices, as well as normatively Western and non-Western colonial contexts (Back & Zavala, 2019; Ke-Schutte, 2023). This includes attention to racialized framings of (im)migrant, diasporic, and Indigenous language practices as matter out of place (Perrino, 2018), moribund (Perley, 2012), and unfit for contemporary use in a given context (Roche, 2021). Other scholars reconceptualize linguistic racialization by challenging dominant assumptions about language, identity, and belonging (Feliciano-Santos, 2021a; García-Sánchez, 2014).

Semiotic perspectives have demonstrated how linguistic racialization characteristically involves the contested positioning of particular populations and language practices as comparatively marked/unmarked and normative/nonnormative (Urciuoli, 2020). Research on race and language has shown how markedness and normativity are dynamic processes that involve perpetual renegotiations of racialized positions and distinctions (Bucholtz, 2011). Social actors both challenge and reproduce linguistic racialization by refashioning local language ideologies and practices in relation to broader axes of difference including gender, class, and (im)migration (Chun, 2016; Mendoza-Denton, 2008; Shankar, 2008). Thus, racializations across communicative scales, from minute linguistic features and practices to entire language families and typologies, are powerful sites for the creation and contestation of social and societal hierarchies.

Language as a Medium of Racism and Racialization

Language is not only a target of racialized Othering, but also a central medium through which racism is enacted. Racializing discourses can be denotationally explicit as well as covert (Dick & Wirtz, 2011). Scholarship focused on denotationally explicit articulations of race includes research examining how racism is made into a metapragmatic object of discourse (Hodges, 2016; Reyes, 2011), as well as how racial labels are used to identify oneself and others/Others (Bucholtz, 1995; Ibrahim, 2014; Ndhlovu, 2014).

In contrast, studies of covert racializing discourses track how racism is reproduced indirectly through ostensibly race-neutral communicative practices (Kroskrity, 2021).

Racializing societal structures and discourses can be experienced simultaneously as deeply situated and interconnected across contexts (Beliso-De Jesús & Pierre, 2020; Rosa & Díaz, 2020). While racial categories and distinctions are rooted in interconnected political and economic power structures, they are often articulated in shifting ways. In efforts to understand how individuals continually renegotiate racial identifications and recognitions (Bailey, 2002), linguistic anthropologists have developed frameworks such as transracialization (Alim, 2016) and racial malleability (Roth-Gordon, 2013). Language practices and racial embodiment dynamically mediate one another (Roth-Gordon, 2016), such that social actors can look like a language and sound like a race (Rosa, 2019a). Analyses of the interplay between visuality and aurality point to the multimodal nature of racialization and the importance of broader semiotic approaches to the study of race and language (Babcock, 2023; Smalls, 2020; Telep, 2021).

Semiotic analyses of language, racism, and racialization involve attention to minute linguistic patterns and broader discourse practices. Jane Hill's (2008) influential research has demonstrated how morphosyntactic, phonological, semantic, and lexical patterns can contribute to the reproduction of racial and linguistic hegemonies. Hill shows how stigmatized language practices stereotypically associated with racialized Others can be revalorized through communicative enactments of Whiteness. Subsequent scholars have reconceptualized White linguistic appropriation in relation to broader processes of racialized colonial dispossession (Davis & Smalls, 2021). Related scholarship has examined processes of semiotic whitening whereby White hegemony can be maintained without the immediate presence of identifiably White people (Mena, 2024).

The discursive reproduction of White public space has been central to racial and linguistic hegemony (Hill, 1998). Thus, racializing discourses can be conceptualized as chronotopes—narratives linking ideas about space, time, and models of personhood (Wirtz, 2014). Chronotopes include stereotypical framings of particular populations, language practices, and places in relation to particular pasts, presents, and futures (Koven, 2013; Rosa, 2016b). Chronotopic patterns are central to the racializing dimensions of discourses such as migrant illegality (Dick, 2011; Rosa, 2019b), terrorism (Durrani, 2019; Khan, 2020), and criminality (Feliciano-Santos, 2021b; Wortham et al., 2011). Through the analysis of racializing discourses, it becomes possible to link everyday communicative practices to the reproduction and contestation of structures of exclusion.

Conclusion: Toward Anti-racist, Decolonial, and Raciolinguistic Perspectives

Research on language ideologies has powerfully demonstrated the systematic interplay between constructions of difference in relation to language and social categories more broadly (Gal & Irvine, 2019). This research provides crucial frameworks for understanding how ideas about racial and linguistic purity, mixedness, and diversity become closely linked to one another. Just as it is important to draw critical attention to various constructions of linguistic boundaries and hierarchies, it is also necessary to attend to the distinctive shapes that racial boundaries and hierarchies take across colonial situations. Indeed, for Wolfe (2016, p. 5), 'race is colonialism speaking, in idioms whose diversity reflects the variety of unequal relationships into which Europeans have co-opted conquered populations.' Thus, ideologies of race and language must be studied in and across contexts to understand how situated patterns connect to broader scales and formations such as White supremacy (Smalls et al., 2021).

Anti-racist language scholars have sought to extend insights into racial and linguistic difference through the development of 'raciolinguistic' perspectives which examine the co-naturalization of race and language in distinctive historical, political, and economic contexts (Rosa & Flores, 2017). Raciolinguistic perspectives join efforts to move beyond 'distinctiveness paradigms' in sociolinguistics which link racial categories to discrete sets of linguistic features and practices (Lo & Reyes, 2009; Chun & Lo, 2016). While 'raciolinguistics' has emerged as an umbrella term for research on race and language (Alim et al., 2016), it is important to resist racial and linguistic essentializations and orthodoxies (Babcock & Ke-Schutte, 2023; Flores & Rosa, 2023). Such racial and linguistic orthodoxies are reflected in the institutionalization of anti-racist discourses and practices that coarticulate with the reproduction of structural racism (Delfino, 2021).

Alternative approaches to anti-racist linguistic anthropology emphasize the importance of connecting struggles over language to broader political struggles (Avineri & Baquedano-López, 2024; Avineri et al., 2019; Baugh, 2018). Thus, for Leonard (2021), anti-racism in Indigenous contexts must be realized not simply in terms of language revitalization but rather through a broader praxis of reclamation focused on relational accountability. This accountability involves moving beyond binaries and siloes which approach race and language in terms of isolated identities, practices, and contexts (Calhoun & Yoo, 2024; Ke-Schutte & Babcock, 2023; Stroud & Williams, 2017). These approaches illustrate how careful analysis of racial and linguistic Othering across global contexts requires language scholars to continually develop new strategies for relationality and accountability (Charity Hudley et al., 2024).

See Also: Code-Switching and Translanguaging; Language and Migration; Language and Social Status; Language Endangerment and Reclamation; Language Ideologies and Social Identities; Linguistic Anthropology and Sociolinguistics; Multilingual Societies.

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