

Decolonization, Language, and Race in Applied Linguistics and Social Justice

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While applied linguistics research can serve as an important site for understanding and contributing to efforts toward challenging historical and contemporary power structures, it is also crucial to interrogate how numerous normative concepts and logics within the field of applied linguistics both reflect and reenact dominant power structures. Centering colonialism and racism in our analysis, this commentary considers how applied linguistics often focuses on modest reforms supporting affirmation and inclusion of marginalized populations and practices, rather than on fundamental institutional changes required to eradicate the forces that produce marginalization. As applied linguists grapple with questions surrounding the extent to which their work contributes in substantive ways to social justice struggles, we are inspired by collaborations that challenge us to reconsider normative assumptions about both language and justice. These collaborations demand a comprehensive reckoning that frames social justice not as a normative reality that can be achieved through modest reforms to liberal governance, but rather as an existential horizon that necessitates a fundamental reimagination of communication's role in narrating and creating decolonial worlds that sustain collective well-being.

While moments of collective reckoning present significant opportunities for redefining the nature of various societal challenges and transformations required to eradicate them, they can also set the stage for superficial gestures and modest reforms that leave fundamentally exclusionary and violent structures in place. The aftermath of Derek Chauvin's horrifyingly casual murder of George Floyd in broad daylight on a Monday afternoon in Minneapolis, Minnesota in May 2020 exemplifies this dynamic. In response to unprecedented global protests sparked by this event and its demonstration of the systematic disposability of Black life, we have observed the conviction of this individual officer and implementation of modest reforms to limit the use of particular police tactics, alongside increased resources dedicated to emergent domestic policing strategies and expansion of the already massive global US military-industrial complex. Meanwhile, many mainstream institutions and corporate actors throughout the USA and the world have strategically affirmed that Black Lives Matter, galvanizing political support for the ouster of US President Donald Trump, election of Joe Biden, and declaration of Juneteenth

as a federal holiday. Yet, we have also witnessed continued police murders of Black people in the USA and beyond, the Biden administration's perverse deportations of Haitian migrants fleeing a US-backed coup at rates far surpassing even the Trump administration, and attacks on Critical Race Theory leading to widespread moral panic based on preposterous allegations of reverse racism targeting US whiteness.

These conditions reflect the need for careful reconceptualizations of progress focused on structural transformations rather than on modifying individual behaviors, as well as collective action that draws connections among vulnerabilities and violences across institutional and societal settings. As demonstrated by the compelling papers in this special issue, language can serve as a key lens through which to track how various structures of power come to be understood and contested, as well as their deceptive reconstitution and reproduction under the auspices of progress. While applied linguistics research can serve as an important site for understanding and contributing to efforts toward challenging historical and contemporary power structures, it is also crucial to interrogate how numerous normative concepts and logics within the field of applied linguistics both reflect and reenact dominant power structures. Specifically, the benevolent helping hand of applied linguistics, in conjunction with related applied fields, often focuses on modest reforms supporting the affirmation and inclusion of marginalized populations and practices. The trouble with such approaches is that they are conventionally rooted in normative assumptions about the nature of societal problems and solutions. These assumptions include the notion that justice is the norm within purportedly liberal democratic societies such as the USA, which frames injustice as the exception rather than the rule and suggests that modest reforms can help these societies live up to their ideals.

This perspective obscures the foundational role of injustice in the USA, a society insidiously presented as a beacon of freedom and equality yet predicated on and permeated by colonial violences and capitalist exploitation. Insofar as various injustices, linguistic and otherwise, are in fact normative in societies throughout the world, we are in need of decolonial theories of change that both engage with and move beyond mainstream institutional assessments, classifications, and definitions of progress. Here, we refer to the colonial constitution of modernity through European imperial expansion that continues to structure political, economic, and social relations on a global scale. We also understand racism fundamentally as an ideological justification for the globalization of European colonialism, such that a careful analysis of racism must also be a careful analysis of colonialism and any substantive anti-racism must also be anti-colonial. We are less invested in aligning with any particular anti-colonial or decolonial approach than in centering and critically comparing global colonialisms. The goal of critically comparing global colonialisms is to understand the violent structures they require, as well as to sharpen the demand for fundamental institutional change challenging the domination of land, labor, resources, and social relations.

This decolonially-inspired effort to engage with and move beyond existing institutional arrangements has been central to the raciolinguistic perspective that we have developed together and with close colleagues over the last several years. Based on our work and research in schools and related institutions across various communities, we became dissatisfied with normative applied linguistic and broader sociolinguistic logics suggesting that we could best support stigmatized communities by affirming their nonstandardized language practices and promoting their accumulation of standardized practices to facilitate their mainstream institutional inclusion. In fact, we found that even when marginalized people within these contexts engaged in linguistic practices that seemed to correspond to mainstream standards, they continued to be perceived as deficient and in need of remediation. This insight suggested that we needed to redirect our attention away from marginalized—specifically, racialized—people's linguistic practices and toward the systematic historical and institutional processes that overdetermine these practices as deficient. This shift from a focus on language use to historically constituted institutional power structures might be especially unsettling for applied linguists who very understandably feel best equipped to study empirical language issues. However, this approach has helped us to identify patterns in linguistic discrimination across differing institutional and nation-state contexts, as well as to reconsider relationships and potential solidarities among systematically marginalized populations within these settings.

Based on colonially anchored modes of perception that we have framed as white listening or perceiving subjects, students designated as long-term English learners, heritage learners, and standard English learners come to inhabit linked institutional positions as raciolinguistic Others. These students are often stereotypically associated with distinctive ethnoracial categories and linguistic proficiencies, and yet they face related forms of linguistic stigmatization in particular institutional settings. We understand white perceiving subjects not primarily as nefarious white individuals (even if this might certainly be the case in some instances). Instead, our focus is on whiteness in relation to structural institutional positions that can take various forms, including assessments, classifications, and modes of authority. In this sense, whiteness and non-whiteness are not self-evident, individually embodied identities, but rather colonially and institutionally structured subject positions that can in fact be enacted by people normatively positioned as white and non-white. We have tracked the historical emergence of whiteness as an ideology and embodied subject position forged through colonial violences that recursively reproduce distinctions between Europe and non-Europe on a global scale. This approach to centering colonialism in our conceptualization of contemporary raciolinguistic hierarchies has helped us to overcome some of the dangers associated with social justice efforts in applied linguistics, including the tendency to presume upon straightforward alignments among language, identity, and power. Instead, we have sought to demonstrate how a refusal to accept naturalized assumptions about language, identity, and power can contribute

to the identification of newfound solidarities on the one hand, and strategies for contestation on the other.

The papers in this special issue continue to move the conversation forward by providing multiple examples for thinking through both solidarity and contestation, and push us to broaden our conceptualizations of social justice beyond normatively defined measures of progress. In terms of solidarity and contestation, these papers point to the ways that experiences of racialization can create the grounds for collaborative enactments of resistance among communities that are often conceptualized as distinct. For example, de los Ríos *et al.* illustrate how shared experiences of marginalization among African American and Latinx students allowed them to build new forms of solidarity through the adoption of a critical translangual perspective. This perspective transcends socially constructed linguistic borders associated with ideologies that produce homogeneous framings of English and Spanish, as well as essentializing ideas about which racial groups can rightfully engage in which language practices. In the context of Catalonia, Khan and Gallego Balsà examine how the naturalization of Catalán's whiteness and institutional superiority leads to the raciolinguistic surveillance and stigmatization of racialized migrants to Catalonia. As a result, racialized migrants connected race, religion, gender, migration, and language in their articulation of encounters with stigmatization within Catalonia, as well as in their participation in organizing efforts to combat migrant stigmatization. Examples of solidarity offered in both of these articles, as well as in others in this special issue, challenge us to move beyond superficial, essentializing accounts of privilege and power by attending to the historical production of raciolinguistic regimes and the creative ways in which marked subjects and communities strategically organize to contest them.

The articles in this special issue also bring attention to new and innovative forms of contestation that have emerged as part of solidarity work in our increasingly connected world. In Ortega's collaboration with English language teachers in Bogotá, Colombia, we observe how language learning and social justice intertwine through the social justice pedagogies of teachers and students focused on addressing local, national, and global struggles around violence, unemployment, and addiction. In this context, English language standards and norms were articulated in relation to efforts to communicate visions for more socially just worlds to public audiences across various scales. Examining the affordances of new technologies in contesting social injustice, Hamm-Rodríguez and Medina attend to the role of digital language practices in forging intra-Caribbean solidarities across the Dominican and Puerto Rican diasporas. Specifically, they track how social movements engage in creative digital language practices to protest local governmental corruption as well as the longstanding colonial structures that produce and sustain this corruption throughout the Caribbean and its diasporas. Together, these articles show us how language is not simply a resource for narrating immediate realities, but also a key strategy for reframing colonial histories and their legacies in ways

that reinvigorate existing solidarities while also contributing to the collective imagination of decolonial futures and the forms of solidarity required to create them.

The articles in this special issue also push us to continue to broaden our conceptualization of social justice in applied linguistics beyond a narrow focus on ostensibly linguistic issues. For Anya, world language education must be actively anti-racist to uproot deeply entrenched patterns of anti-Blackness. Thus, rather than assuming that language learning educators naturally embody and enact solidarity with racial justice efforts, we must critically promote and continuously evaluate these commitments to ensure that Black students are thriving in these learning environments. Martínez *et al.* point to the importance of adequate health care for all communities, which includes the availability of trained interpreters but must extend beyond that since even the most effective translator cannot provide access to health care that is unavailable in particular contexts and for particular populations. These articles, as well as others in the special issue, provide further evidence to support the claim that social justice work in applied linguistics cannot exist in a political vacuum. On the contrary, this work must be situated within broader efforts to dismantle structural barriers confronting racialized communities, and also within the broader epistemological terrain that frames certain populations as less than fully human and consequently less deserving of resources than those deemed fully human.

Finally, the articles in this special issue also grapple with the ethics of engaging in social justice work in applied linguistics. Specifically, they attend to the dangers of bringing academic theories and methodologies into racialized communities in ways that may actually be used to maintain their marginalization by reifying colonial logics. This is reflected in Williams' conceptualization of public applied linguistics, which he describes as not simply visible scholarship but rather as a form of language activism that works in solidarity with marginalized communities and provides theoretical, methodological, and practical tools for contesting their marginalization. These ethical concerns are also illustrated in the participatory action research undertaken by López-Gopar *et al.*, which involves the co-construction of assessments with their participants in ways that challenge dominant language ideologies. These efforts normalize the use of multiple named languages that characterizes the linguistic practices of Indigenous people living under the hegemony of Spanish as a colonial language and English as a neoliberal language. Both of these articles, along with others in this special issue, demonstrate how applied linguists interested in promoting social justice can do so in ways that resist the reification of dominant language ideologies and broader oppressive ideologies that have been used to justify the stigmatization of the communities in which their research is situated.

The articles in this special issue leave open the question of the political implications of making this work recognizable to academia, which is something that we have also not explicitly addressed in our efforts to promote social

justice in applied linguistics. Increased recognizability of marginalized communities' practices presents certain dangers with which we all must grapple. For example, by rejecting the white perceiving subject in ways that bring increased academic attention to the alternative worlds that have always existed in opposition or as alternatives to whiteness, we risk making them intelligible to dominant institutions and facilitating their political incorporation back into whiteness. Indeed, we see this trend in efforts to legitimize the language practices of racialized communities through neoliberal metaphors of 'capital', 'assets', 'affordances', 'resources', and 'funds'. In this way, these alternative worlds become recognizable to mainstream institutions through the purported financial value that they provide to individuals and broader communities. This once again reproduces white perceiving subjects that recognize value in things based on their ideological proximity to whiteness, even as this supposed 'capital' will always be framed as other to whiteness. We have witnessed this trend in relation to how people discuss the white perceiving subject with many now individualizing our structural analysis to suggest that if individual teachers would shift their perceiving practices they would recognize this 'capital' and build on it in classrooms in ways that provide students with access to the 'codes of power'. This reinforces the very narrative that we were working to disrupt in the name of recognizing and respecting these alternative worlds.

As applied linguists continue to grapple with questions surrounding the extent to which their work contributes in substantive ways to social justice struggles, we are inspired by collaborations that challenge us to reconsider normative assumptions about both language and social justice. Such collaborations push us to draw connections among the ways various forms of language use function as targets of stigmatization as well as tools for counter-hegemonic projects across institutional and broader societal contexts. These collaborations also demand a comprehensive reckoning that frames social justice not as a normative reality that can be achieved through modest reforms to liberal governance, but rather as an existential horizon that necessitates a fundamental reimagination of communication's role in narrating and creating decolonial worlds that sustain collective well-being. We hope to join the contributors to this special issue in continuing to pursue this work in ways that redefine the intellectual and ethical commitments of applied linguistics.