Language & Social Justice in the United States: An Introduction

Walt Wolfram, Anne H. Charity Hudley & Guadalupe Valdés

In recent decades, the United States has witnessed a noteworthy escalation of academic responses to long-standing social and racial inequities in its society. In this process, research, advocacy, and programs supporting diversity and inclusion initiatives have grown. A set of themes and their relevant discourses have now developed in most programs related to diversity and inclusion; for example, current models are typically designed to include a range of groups, particularly reaching people by their race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, gender, and other demographic categories. Unfortunately, one of the themes typically overlooked, dismissed, or even refuted as necessary is language. Furthermore, the role of language subordination in antiracist activities tends to be treated as a secondary factor under the rubric of culture. Many linguists, however, see language inequality as a central or even leading component related to all of the traditional themes included in diversity and inclusion strategies.[1] In fact, writer and researcher Rosina Lippi-Green observes that "Discrimination based on language variation is so commonly accepted, so widely perceived as appropriate, that it must be seen as the last back door to discrimination. And the door stands wide open."[2]

Even academics, one of the groups that should be exposed to issues of comprehensive inclusion, have seemingly decided that language is a low-priority issue. As noted in a 2015 article in *The Economist*:

> The collision of academic prejudice and accent is particularly ironic. Academics tend to the centre-left nearly everywhere, and talk endlessly about class and multiculturalism. . . . And yet accent and dialect are still barely on many people's minds as deserving respect.[3]

As such, as the editors of this collection, we have commissioned thirteen essays that address specific issues of language inequality and discrimination, both in their own right and directly related to traditional themes of diversity and inclusion.

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https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_e_02014

Recent issues of *Dædalus* have addressed immigration, climate change, access to justice, inequality, and teaching in higher education, all of which relate to language in some way.[4] The theme of the Summer 2022 issue is "The Humanities in American Life : Transforming the Relationship with the Public." As an extension of that work, the essays in this volume focus on a humanistic social science approach to transforming our relationship with language both in the academy and at large.

There is a growing inventory of research projects and written collections that consider issues of language and social justice, including dimensions such as raciolinguistics, linguistic profiling, multilingual education, gendered linguistics, and court cases that are linguistically informed. Those materials cover a comprehensive range of language issues related to social justice. The collection of essays in this *Dædalus* volume is unique in its breadth of coverage and extends from issues including linguistic profiling, raciolinguistics, and institutional linguicism to multilingualism, language teaching, migration, and climate change. The authors are experts in their respective areas of scholarship, who combine strong research records with extensive engagement in their topics of inquiry.

The initial goal of this *Dædalus* issue is to demonstrate the vast array of social and political disparity manifested in language inequality, ranging from ecological conditions such as climate change, social conditions of inter- and intralanguage variation, and institutional policies that promulgate the notion and the stated practice of official languages and homogenized, monolithic norms of standardized language based on socially dominant speakers. These norms are socialized overtly and covertly into all sectors of society and often are adopted as consensus norms, even by those who are marginalized or stigmatized by these distinctions. As linguist Norman Fairclough notes in *Language and Power*, the exercise of power is most efficiently achieved through ideology-manufacturing consent instead of coercion.[5] Practices that appear universal or common sense often originate in the dominant class, and these practices work to sustain an unequal power dynamic. Furthermore, there is power *behind* discourse because the social order of discourses is held together as a hidden effect of power, such as standardization and national/official languages, and power *in* discourse as strategies of discourse reflect asymmetrical power relations between interlocutors in sets of routines, such as address forms, interruptions, and a host of other conversational routines. In this context, the first step in addressing these linguistic inequalities is to raise awareness of their existence, since many operate as implicit bias rather than overt, explicit bias recognized by the public.

Unfortunately, and somewhat ironically, higher education has been slow in this process; in fact, several essays in this collection show that higher education has been an active agent in the reproduction of linguistic inequality at the same time that it advocates for equality in many other realms of social structure.[6] Two

essays in particular explore underlying notions of standardization and the use of language in social presentation and argumentation. The essays also address language rights as a fundamental human right. In "Language Standardization & Linguistic Subordination," Anne Curzan, Robin M. Queen, Kristin VanEyk, and Rachel Elizabeth Weissler discuss how ideologies about standardized language circulate in higher education, to the detriment of many students, and they include a range of suggestions and examples for how to center linguistic justice and equity within higher education.

Curzan and coauthors give us an important overview of language standardization:

> We have suggested some solutions to many of the issues we've highlighted in this essay; however, implementing solutions in a meaningful way first requires recognition of how important language variation is for our everyday interactions with others. Second, implementing solutions depends on recognizing how our ideas about language (standardized or not) can pose a true barrier to meaningful change. Such recognition includes the understanding that much of what we think about language often stands as a proxy for what we think about people, who we are willing to listen to and hear, and who we want to be with or distance ourselves from.[7]

In "Addressing Linguistic Inequality in Higher Education: A Proactive Model," Walt Wolfram describes a proactive "campus-infusion" program that includes activities and resources for student affairs, academic affairs, human resources, faculty affairs, and offices of institutional equity and diversity. Wolfram's essay shows directly and specifically how academics aren't always the solution but, as a whole, are complicit in linguistic exclusion. He writes:

> A casual survey of university diversity statements and programs indicates that a) there is an implicitly recognized set of diversity themes within higher education and b) it traditionally excludes language issues.[8] Topics related to race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual preference, and age are commonly included in these programs, but language is noticeably absent, either by explicit exclusion or by implicit disregard. Ironically, issues of language intersect with all of the themes in the canonical catalog of diversity issues.[9]

The absence of systemic language considerations from most diversity and inclusion programs and their limited role in antiracist initiatives is a major concern for these programs, since language is a critical component for discrimination among the central themes in the extant canon of diversity. Language is an active agent in discrimination and cannot be overlooked or minimized in the process.

Some of the essays in this volume of *Dædalus* address the sociopolitical dominance of a restricted set of languages and its impact on the lives of speakers of devalued languages. The authors of these essays consider the effects of climate,

social, educational, legal, and political dissonance confronted by speakers of nondominant languages. They also show how the metaphors of "disappearance" and "loss" obscure the colonial processes responsible for the suppression of Indigenous languages. People who speak an estimated 90 percent of the world's languages have now been linguistically and culturally harmed due to the increasing dominance of a selected number of "world languages" and changes in the physical and topographical ecology. The authors describe the implications of this extensive language subjugation and endangerment and the consequences for the speakers of these languages. Both physical and social ecology are implicated in this threat to multitudes of languages in the world.

Linguistics in general, and sociolinguistics in particular, has a significant history of engagement in issues of social inequality. From the educational controversies over the language adequacy of marginalized, racialized groups of speakers in the 1960s, as in linguist William Labov's *A Study of Non-Standard English*, to ideological challenges to multilingualism and the social and cultural impact of the devaluing of the world's languages, as described in the essays by Wesley Y. Leonard, Guadalupe Valdés, and Julia C. Fine, Jessica Love-Nichols, and Bernard C. Perley, the role of language is a prominent consideration in the actualization and dispensation of social justice.[10]

In addition, this collection addresses areas of research that are complementary to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' 2017 report by the Commission on Language Learning, *America's Languages: Investing in Language Education for the 21st Century*.[11] In spite of the long-term presence of the teaching of languages other than English in the American educational system, concern over "world language capacity" has surfaced periodically over a period of many years because of the perceived limitations in developing functional additional language proficiencies. The consensus view (as in Congressman Paul Simon's 1980 report *The Tongue-Tied American*) has been that foreign/world language study in U.S. schools is generally unsuccessful, that Americans are poor language learners, and that focused attention must be given to the national defense implications of these language limitations.[12] In the 2017 Language Commission report, foreign/world language study is presented as 1) critical to success in business, research, and international relations in the twenty-first century and 2) a contributing factor to "improved learning outcomes in other subjects, enhanced cognitive ability, and the development of empathy and effective interpretive skills."[13]

The Academy's report presents information about languages spoken at home by U.S. residents (76.7 percent English, 12.6 percent Spanish). It also includes a graphic illustrating the prevalence of thirteen other languages (including Chinese, Hindi, Filipino and Tagalog, and Vietnamese) commonly spoken by 0.13 percent to 0.2 percent of the population, as well as a category identified as *all other languages* (a small category comprising 2.2 percent of residents of the Unit-

ed States).[14] The report focuses on languages – rather than speakers – and recommends: 1) new activities that will increase the number of language teachers, 2) expanded efforts that can supplement language instruction across the education system, and 3) more opportunities for students to experience and immerse themselves in "languages as they are used in everyday interactions and across all segments of society." It also specifically mentions needed support for *heritage languages* so these languages can "persist from one generation to the next," and for targeted programming for Native American languages.[15]

While it effectively interrupted the monolingual, English-only ideologies that permeate ideas on language in the United States, the conceptualization of language undergirding the report needs to be greatly expanded. The report focuses on developing expertise in additional language acquisition as the product of deliberative study. For example, in the case of heritage languages (defined as those non-English languages spoken by residents of the United States), the report highlights efforts such as the Seal of Biliteracy. Through this effort (now endorsed by many states around the country), high school students who complete a sequence of established language classes and pass a state-approved language assessment can obtain an official Seal of Biliteracy endorsement. Unfortunately, the series of courses and the assessments required to obtain the Seal are only available in a limited number of languages. The report mentions other efforts, including dual language immersion programs, yet it does not recognize family- and community-gained bilingualism and biliteracy. Notably, the report specifically laments what are viewed as *limited literacy abilities* of heritage language speakers and recommends making available curricula specially designed for heritage language learners and Native American languages.

The view of language that the report is based on is a narrow one and does not represent the linguistic realities of the majority of bilingual and multilingual students. In her contribution to this volume, "Social Justice Challenges of 'Teaching' Languages," Guadalupe Valdés "specifically problematize[s] language instruction as it takes place in classroom settings and the impact of what I term the *curricularization* of language as it is experienced by Latinx students who 'study' language *qua* language in instructed situations."[16] Valdés shows us how these specific issues play out in what is typically viewed as the neutral "teaching" of languages. She writes that challenges to

> linguistic justice [result] from widely held negative perspectives on bi/multilingualism and from common and continuing misunderstandings of individuals who use resources from two communicative systems in their everyday lives. My goal is to highlight the effect of these misunderstandings on the direct teaching of English.[17]

In "Refusing 'Endangered Languages' Narratives," Wesley Y. Leonard draws from his experiences as a member of a Native American community whose language was wrongly labeled "extinct":

> Within this narrative, I begin with an overview of how language endangerment is described to general audiences in the United States and critique the way it is framed and shared. From there, I shift to an alternative that draws from Indigenous ways of knowing to promote social justice through language reclamation.[18]

Leonard encourages us to directly refute "dominant endangered languages narratives" and replace the focus on the actors of harm in Indigenous communities with a focus on the creativity and resolve of native scholars working to revitalize native language and culture. As he states, the "ultimate goal of this essay is to promote a praxis of social justice by showing how language shift occurs largely as a result of injustices, and by offering possible interventions."[19]

In "Climate & Language: An Entangled Crisis," Julia C. Fine, Jessica Love-Nichols, and Bernard C. Perley

> note that these academic discourses – as well as similar discourses in nonprofit and policy-making spheres – rightly acknowledge the importance of Indigenous thought to environmental and climate action. Sadly, they often fall short of acknowledging both the colonial drivers of Indigenous language "loss" and Indigenous ownership of Indigenous language and environmental knowledge. We propose alternative framings that emphasize colonial responsibility and Indigenous sovereignty.[20]

Fine, Love-Nichols, and Perley present models of how language and climate are intertwined. They write, "Scholars and activists have documented the intersections of climate change and language endangerment, with special focus paid to their compounding consequences." The authors "consider the relationship between language and environmental ideologies, synthesizing previous research on how metaphors and communicative norms in Indigenous and colonial languages influence environmental beliefs and actions."[21]

The essays in this volume profile a wide range of language issues related to social justice, from everyday hegemonic comments to legislative policies and courtroom testimony that depend on language reliability and the linguistic credibility of witnesses who do not communicate in a mainstream American English variety. In 1972, the president of the Linguistic Society of America, Dwight Bolinger, gave his presidential address titled "Truth is a Linguistic Question" as a forewarning of the linguistic accountability of public reporting of national events. In his other work, he describes language as "a loaded weapon." Through these essays, we find both concepts to be true.[22]

Over recent decades, the field of linguistics has developed a robust specialization in areas that pay primary attention to the application of a full range of legal and nonlegal verbal, digital, and document communication that is at the heart of equitable communication strategies. Language variation is also a highly politi-

cized behavior, extending from the construct of a "standardized language" considered essential for writing and speaking to the use of language in negotiating the administration of social and political justice. The essays on linguistic variation and sociopolitical ideology, by Curzan and coauthors, Jonathan Rosa and Nelson Flores, and H. Samy Alim, examine both the ideological underpinnings of consensual constructs such as "standard" versus "nonmainstream" and their use in the political process of persuasion and sociopolitical implementation.[23] The authors in this section address key issues of language variation and language discrimination that demonstrate the vitality of language in issues of social justice, both independent of and related to other attributes of social justice. This model includes standardization in media platforms, as described in Rosa and Flores's essay, demonstrating the systemic othering of those who do not speak this variety as their default dialect.

In "Rethinking Language Barriers & Social Justice from a Raciolinguistic Perspective," Rosa and Flores show how "the trope of language barriers and the toppling thereof is widely resonant as a reference point for societal progress."

> We argue that by interrogating the colonial and imperial underpinnings of widespread ideas about linguistic diversity, we can connect linguistic advocacy to broader political struggles. We suggest that language and social justice efforts must link affirmations of linguistic diversity to demands for the creation of societal structures that sustain collective well-being.[24]

Rosa and Flores present and update their raciolinguistics model in current spaces where race meets technology. With this emerging technology as a reference point, they demonstrate why "it is crucial to reconsider the logics that inform contemporary digital accent-modification platforms and the broader ways that purportedly benevolent efforts to help marked subjects modify their language practices become institutionalized as assimilationist projects masquerading as assistance." They also note that disability has always been part of the story – and needs to be brought back to light – sharing that Mabel Hubbard and Ma Bell, who were both influential on modern linguistic technology, were deaf women.[25]

In "Black Womanhood: Raciolinguistic Intersections of Gender, Sexuality & Social Status in the Aftermaths of Colonization," Aris Moreno Clemons and Jessica A. Grieser "call for an exploration of social life that considers the raciolinguistic intersections of gender, sexuality, and social class as part and parcel of overarching social formations." They center the Black woman as the prototypical Other, her condition being interpreted neither by conventions of race nor gender. As such, we take "Black womanhood as the point of departure for a description of the necessary intersecting and variable analyses of social life." Clemons and Greiser "interrogate the intersections of gender, sexuality, and social status, focusing on the experiences of Black women who fit into and lie at the margins of these categories."

They highlight the work of semiotician Krystal A. Smalls, who "reveals a model for how interdisciplinary reading across fields such as Black feminist studies, Black anthropology, Black geographies, and Black linguistics can result in expansive and inclusive worldmaking."[26]

In "Asian American Racialization & Model Minority Logics in Linguistics," Joyhanna Yoo, Cheryl Lee, Andrew Cheng, and Anusha Ànand "consider historical and contemporary racializing tactics with respect to Asians and Asian Americans." Such racializing tactics, which they call model minority logics,

> weaponize an abstract version of one group to further racialize all minoritized groups and regiment ethnoracial hierarchies. We identify three functions of model minority logics that perpetuate white supremacy in the academy, using linguistics as a case study and underscoring the ways in which the discipline is already mired in racializing logics that differentiate scholars of color based on reified hierarchies.[27]

The authors consider the often-overlooked linguistic experiences of Asian Americans in linguistics and show how "ideological positioning of Asian Americans as "honorary whites" is based on selective and heavily skewed images of Asian American economic and educational achievements that circulate across institutional and dominant media channels."[28]

In "Inventing 'the White Voice' : Racial Capitalism, Raciolinguistics & Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies," H. Samy Alim explores

> how paradigms like raciolinguistics and culturally sustaining pedagogies, among others, can offer substantive breaks from mainstream thought and provide us with new, just, and equitable ways of living together in the world. I begin with a deep engagement with Boots Riley and his critically acclaimed, anticapitalist, absurdist comedy *Sorry to Bother You* in hopes of demonstrating how artists, activists, creatives, and scholars might : 1) cotheorize the complex relationships between language and racial capitalism and 2) think through the political, economic, and pedagogical implications of this new theorizing for Communities of Color.[29]

Alim digs deep into models of aspirational whiteness in *Sorry to Bother You* and shows how it goes past the mark. In the script, Boots states, "It's not really a white voice. It's what they *wish* they sounded like. So, it's like, what they think they're *supposed* to sound like." All of the authors in this section examine varied kinds of intervention strategies and programs in institutional education and social action that can raise awareness of and help to ameliorate linguistic subordination and sociolinguistic inequality in American society.

From our perspective, it is not sufficient to raise awareness and describe linguistic inequality without attempting to confront and ameliorate that inequality. Thus, our third and final set of papers by John Baugh, Sharese King and John R. Rickford, and Norma Mendoza-Denton offer legal and policy alternatives that

implement activities and programs that directly confront issues of institutional inequality. As linguist Jan Blommaert puts it, "we need an activist attitude, one in which the battle for power-through-knowledge is engaged, in which knowledge is activated as a key instrument for the liberation of people, and as a central tool underpinning any effort to arrive at a more just and equitable society."[30] Our authors illustrate the communicative processes involved when we use our human capacity for language to work toward justice.

In "Linguistic Profiling across International Geopolitical Landscapes," Baugh "explore[s] various forms of linguistic profiling throughout the world, culminating with observations intended to promote linguistic human rights and the aspirational goal of equality among people who do not share common sociolinguistic backgrounds."[31] Baugh extends his previous work on linguistic profiling into the international geopolitical landscape and notes, in countries that have them, the role that language academies play in reinforcing narrow norms, showing how those practices relate to practices in countries where these processes are more organic and situated in the educational systems.

In "Language on Trial," King and Rickford draw on their case study of the testimony of Rachel Jeantel, a close friend of Trayvon Martin, in the 2013 trial of *George Zimmerman v. The State of Florida*.[32] They show that despite being an ear-witness (by cell phone) to all but the final minutes of Zimmerman's interaction with Trayvon, and despite testifying for nearly six hours about it, her testimony was dismissed in jury deliberations. "Through a linguistic analysis of Jeantel's speech, comments from a juror, and a broader contextualization of stigmatized speech forms and linguistic styles," they show that "lack of acknowledgment of dialectal variation has harmful social and legal consequences for speakers of stigmatized dialects."[33] Their work complements legal scholar D. James Greiner's essay on empiricism in law, from a previous volume of *Dædalus*, to show how empirical linguistic analysis should be included in such models.[34] As King and Rickford state:

> Alongside the vitriol from the general public, evidence from jury members suggested that not only was Jeantel's speech misunderstood, but it was ultimately disregarded in more than sixteen hours of deliberation. With no access to the court transcript, unless when requesting a specific playback, jurors did not have the materials to reread speech that might have been unfamiliar to most if they were not exposed to or did not speak the dialect.[35]

In "Currents of Innuendo Converge on an American Path to Political Hate," Norma Mendoza-Denton shows that politicians' "innuendo such as enthymemes, sarcasm, and dog whistles" gave us "an early warning about the type of relationship that has now obtained between Christianity and politics, and specifically the rise of Christian Nationalism as facilitated by President Donald Trump." She demonstrates that "two currents of indirectness in American politics, one reli-

gious and the other racial, have converged like tributaries leading to a larger body of water."[36]

Anne H. Charity Hudley concludes the collection with "Liberatory Linguistics," offering the model as "a productive, unifying framework for the scholarship that will advance strategies for attaining linguistic justice [. . .] [e]merging from the synthesis of various lived experiences, academic traditions, and methodological approaches." She highlights promising strategies from her work with Black undergraduates, graduate students, postdoctoral scholars, and faculty members as they endeavor to embed a justice framework throughout the study of language broadly conceived that can "improve current approaches to engaging with structural realities that impede linguistic justice."[37] Charity Hudley ends by noting how this set of essays is in conversation with the 2022 *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* on social justice in applied linguistics, and the forthcoming Oxford volumes *Decolonizing Linguistics* and *Inclusion in Linguistics*, which "set frameworks for the professional growth of those who study language and create direct roadmaps for scholars to establish innovative agendas for integrating their teaching and research and outreach in ways that will transform linguistic theory and practice for years to come."[38]

As our summaries suggest, this collection of essays is diverse and comprehensive, representing a range of situations and conditions calling for justice in language. We hope these essays, along with other publications on this topic, broaden the conversations across higher education on language and justice. We are extremely grateful to the authors who have shared their knowledge, research, advocacy, and perspectives in such lucid, accessible presentations.

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Walt Wolfram, a Fellow of the American Academy since 2019, is one of the pioneers of sociolinguistics. He is the William C. Friday Distinguished University Professor at North Carolina State University, where he also directs the Language and Life Project. He has published more than twenty books and three hundred articles on language variation, and has served as executive producer of fifteen television documentaries, winning several Emmys. His recent publications include *Fine in the World : Lumbee Language in Time and Place* (with Clare Dannenberg, Stanley Knick, and Linda Oxendine, 2021) and *African American Language : Language Development from Infancy to Adulthood* (with Mary Kohn, Charlie Farrington, Jennifer Renn, and Janneke Van Hofwegen, 2021).

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