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Raciolinguistic genealogy as method in the sociology of language

Abstract: This commentary proposes raciolinguistic genealogy as a methodological approach to the sociology of language. It briefly defines three components of this approach: 1) a genealogical stance; 2) a materialist framing of racism; and 3) a raciolinguistic perspective. It offers the case of bilingual education in the United States as an illustration of the affordances of raciolinguistic genealogy in moving the field forward.

Keywords: bilingual education; critical race theory; genealogy; poststructuralism; raciolinguistic perspective

The sociology of language emerged as a coherent field of study in the late 1960s within a context of global political upheaval. In the US context that I have examined in my work, this was seen primarily through the Civil Rights Movement that sought to challenge the institutionalized white supremacy that shaped the fabric of US society. Within the broader global context, this was seen primarily through anti-colonial struggles that culminated in the emergence of newly independent nations. These global political upheavals brought issues of language to the forefront, as postcolonial societies grappled with the role of colonial languages versus indigenous languages, and former colonial powers grappled with the increasing diversity and racial conflict in their own societies. Scholars in the newly emerging sociology of language quickly positioned themselves at the forefront of these debates and as defenders of the maintenance of linguistic diversity.

The core of the field's promotion of linguistic diversity was and continues to be the ethnolinguistic group, a concept that has been ill-defined at best and misleading at worse. In particular, it often takes the identification of ethnic identity as a straightforward and universalizing process that can be unambiguously ascribed to people while also obscuring the unique ways that the legacy of colonialism impacts the linguistic context of racialized communities. This conflation can be seen in US Congressional testimony related to debates surrounding the

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Bilingual Education Act in 1967 given by Joshua Fishman, who is often identified as the founder of the sociology of language and was the person responsible for establishing this flagship journal for the field. In his testimony, he raised concerns about the primary focus on Spanish arguing that "there are millions and millions of others that must feel that their recognition will come too, because they are wonderful Americans trying to contribute to America, and I am sure as the recognition to our Spanish-American citizens is long overdue, that it must come, so will the recognition for all the other creative language groups in the country" (Bilingual Education 1967). In this comment, Fishman conflated the experiences of Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans with a general immigration experience in ways that obscured the unique colonial relationship these populations have to the United States. In addition, by adopting a general immigration narrative he also obscured the settler colonialism and legacy of slavery that framed the language practices of Native Americans and African Americans as unworthy of maintenance. That is, in his desire to promote a general ethnolinguistic diversity he erased the vast differences that existed within this broad grouping thereby inadvertently reifying the colonial relations of power that shaped the experiences of racialized communities in contrast to white ethnic minority groups in the United States. This same framing of ethnolinguistic diversity can also be seen in his work in post-colonial societies, where Fishman promoted bilingual education without critically interrogating the premise that modernization entailed the creation of new nation-states and the selection of national (most often European) languages as official forms of communication in these newly developed nations (Fishman 1976). That is, while working to position the field as promoting linguistic equity, Fishman did so in ways that assumed the ethnolinguistic group as a universalizing category that worked to reify if not exacerbate longstanding racial inequities produced as part of the legacy of colonialism.

Jonathan Rosa and I have called into question this framing and have proposed an alternative raciolinguistic perspective that places questions of race at the center of any analysis of language (Rosa and Flores 2017). A raciolinguistic perspective situates contemporary language ideologies and the policies that they work to create within the broader colonial histories that have sorted populations into those deemed fully human (white) and those deemed not fully human (racialized) (Wynter 2003). Whereas conceptually an ethnolinguistic perspective was a universalizing move that presupposed that all communities could be unambiguously sorted into equivalent ethnic groupings with unique language practices, a raciolinguistic perspective is a denaturalizing move that seeks to bring attention to the ways that the construction of modernity produced through logics of colonialism has produced ideologically laden descriptions of language. These have historically marginalized racialized people around the world under the guise of scientific

objectivity, and continue to do so. While there are a range of research methods that have been developed from this perspective, one that has significant implications for the sociology of language is raciolinguistic genealogy. Building on insights from poststructuralism, critical race theory and critical applied linguistics, a raciolinguistic genealogical perspective offers a socio-historical perspective on language policy that locates contemporary debates within broader epistemological framings shaped by histories of colonialism.

The first component of a raciolinguistic genealogy is a *genealogical stance*. Foucault (1984) describes a genealogical stance as premised on the idea that "humanity does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare; humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination" (85). A genealogical stance is, therefore, not focused on developing a chronology of a particular historical period. Instead, its primary focus is on examining the *grid of intelligibility* that produces normative subject positions, or ways of being in the world, to which all are expected to aspire (Foucault 1978). Adopting a genealogical stance toward race brings attention to its discursive construction and helps to denaturalize contemporary racializing discourses by identifying the colonial relations of power that have historically made their production possible (Stoler 1995). But a genealogical stance toward race doesn't stop at bringing attention to this history. Instead, its primary goal is to identify the traces of these racializing discourses within the discursive formations that lie at the core of the contemporary grid of intelligibility.

The second component of a raciolinguistic genealogy is a *materialist framing* that connects the emergence of racializing discourses to the political and economic relations of power that they were created to justify and maintain. It starts from the premise that the rise of global capitalism would not have been possible without the exploitation and genocide of racialized communities, including through the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the white settler colonial genocide of indigenous people, and economic imperialism (Robinson 1983). White colonizers were able to pass on the wealth that they had accumulated through the exploitation and genocide of racialized communities to their children, who passed it on to their children and so on, leading to the racial inequalities that persist today (Harris 1993). In this way, a materialist framing suggests the need for redistributing resources away from white communities and toward the racialized communities whose exploitation allowed for the wealth accumulation that has maintained white dominance over the world. It also points to the possibility for solidarity across racialized communities in their work to dismantle white supremacy.

The third component of a raciolinguistic genealogy is a *raciolinguistic perspective*. A raciolinguistic perspective connects a genealogical stance and a

materialist framing of race and racism with a focus on language ideologies in order to examine the discursive formation of raciolinguistic ideologies that have historically co-constructed language and race in ways that position racialized populations as inferior to the normative white subject (Flores and Rosa 2015). Raciolinguistic ideologies were integral in producing justifications for white settler colonialism (Veronelli 2015), anti-Blackness (Fanon 1967) and imperialism (Phillipson 1992) and have continued to shape the world order in the postcolonial era (Rosa and Flores 2017). A raciolinguistic perspective seeks to denaturalize these raciolinguistic ideologies in the hope of developing spaces of resistance that produce a new grid of intelligibility. Importantly, in keeping with the materialist framing adopted by a raciolinguistic genealogy, this discursive resistance must be situated within materialist struggles that seek to dismantle the white supremacist and global capitalist relations of power that raciolinguistic ideologies are part of maintaining.

Adopting raciolinguistic genealogy can move the sociology of language in new and productive directions. For one, it can push the field to more directly engage with the legacies of colonialism that continue to shape the management of language alongside the management of populations in service of the maintenance of white supremacy and global capitalism. This framing calls into question the universalizing notion of the ethnolinguistic group and, instead, challenges the field to trace the specific histories of colonialism that shape the linguistic contexts of racialized communities worldwide. This shift can also offer the field an opportunity to reflect on the ways that its historical interventions, as well-meaning as they may have been, served to reify these colonial relations of power in ways that maintained and even exacerbated existing racial inequities. Specifically, it calls into question the general celebration of ethnolinguistic diversity that has undergirded the field since its founding, and instead challenges scholars to bring attention to and develop strategies for counteracting the different legacies of colonialism that shape the linguistic context of racialized communities around the world.

What might a sociologist of language who adopted a raciolinguistic perspective as opposed to an ethnolinguistic perspective have said in congressional testimony about the Bilingual Education Act? They might have supported the focus on Spanish-speakers as an opportunity to engage in a more substantive debate related to how to address the generations of colonialism that contributed to the linguistic marginalization of this population. But they might have also pushed even further by suggesting that the focus on Spanish-speakers didn't go far enough. They might have pointed to the need for more fundamental transformation of institutions and the broader society to dismantle white settler colonial and anti-Black logics. This might sound pie-in-the-sky, but I would like to imagine

the sociology of language to be a field that doesn't seek to simply describe the world as is, but rather work in solidarity with racialized communities to create new worlds outside of colonial logics.

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