Adrienne Lo*

Whose hearing matters? Context and regimes of perception in sociolinguistics

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Abstract: This piece argues for the importance of centering regimes of perception and the dynamics of power in sociolinguistics, drawing upon cases where Chinese and Korean terms have been heard and enregistered as English slurs. It notes how different interlocutors mobilize phenomena at various scales in invocations of context. It calls for greater attention to the range of subject positions that are produced by speakers, perceivers, and institutions and a reconsideration of the moral certainty of our analyses. It challenges us to rethink the ontological status of the linguistic sign as a self-presenting entity and to develop frameworks of analysis that can look across scales.

Keywords: hate speech; listening subject; multilingualism; native speaker

1 Introduction

My Internet feed has been full lately with commentary about an incident in which University of Southern California (USC) Marshall School of Business Professor Gregory Patton produced an utterance that was hearable by some as the N-word in English. In the English-language media, he is described as having said the following in a video recorded clip from his class for MBA students on "Communication for Management":

> If you have a lot of "ums and errs," this is culturally specific, so based on your native language. Like in China, the common word is "that, that, that." So in China it might be nèi ge, nèi ge, nèi ge' (Bernstein 2020).[1]

1 This source, like most in the US media, uses the pinyin system of romanization, orthographically framing Patton's utterance as Chinese. I have reproduced the transcription that has circulated widely, although the standard pinyin would be "nèige", without the space. The diacritic marks falling tone. I use IPA tone diacritics and transcription for Chinese in this piece and I concentrate on US-based English-language sources, for reasons of space.

***Corresponding author: Adrienne Lo**, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Canada, E-mail: adrienne.lo@uwaterloo.ca

Professor Patton was removed from teaching the class for the rest of the term, in line with cases in which the distinction between mention and use has evaporated for slurs, resulting in employment sanctions. This is a somewhat new phenomenon, as evidenced by the number of White professionals in my orbit who have recently used terms enregistered as slurs in what they considered citational or metalinguistic frames, and then been surprised to find themselves disciplined.[2]

For many of us, this is our worst nightmare of online teaching come true. Some random comment that you make gets reentextualized and amplified, exploding in the media and preserved on YouTube for all to see. You get flattened in the public eye, associated forevermore with a singular emblem and its associated type. In a climate where students are primed to hunt for the racists among us (Hodges 2016), media surveillance is everywhere, and metapragmatic contrasts between the act of discussing something and the act of replicating it – use versus mention, or withholding condemnation versus endorsement – no longer hold for many, it is difficult to engage.

For me and other Mandarin speakers who spend time in predominantly English-speaking contexts, this incident is a familiar one. Discussion boards are replete with similar examples, dating back several decades (Mair 2016, 2019, 2020).[3] I have personal experience with overhearers being aghast at my family's use of this term. This is the word that I use when I am telling my kids to get me the, uh, whatchamallit, thingy over there. The frame that Professor Patton presented, where 那個 is repeated three times in rapid succession as if you are enacting disfluency, was a pretty good sociolinguistic description of how it is used in my social networks, and his pronunciation with what has been described by some as /ɪ/ and others as /ej/, /e/, or /ə/ for the first vowel sounded to me like the way I say that word.[4] Like "uh" or "well", this usage can be interpreted as hesitating or thinking, and taken up as an enactment of politeness or as a signal of a dispreferred action, like a rejection or disagreement. Linguists have discussed 那個 as a means of holding the floor, a euphemism, and as a way of insinuating something without

2 In summer 2020 we saw cases in Ontario involving university professors, high school teachers, and television journalists (Nasser 2020; Paul 2020; Tsekouras 2020; "Wendy Mesley disciplined" 2020).

3 Another recent example of this hearing by American consumers of popular culture involved the 2018 song 陽光彩虹白小馬 ("Sunshine Rainbow White Pony") (Eris 2020).

4 Linguists note that 那個 has several different pronunciations. /nâgə/ is associated with the Mandarin standard. Others enregistered as colloquial or regional variations include /nêjgə/, /nêgə/, /nâgə/ and /nŷgə/. Falling tone (fourth tone) on the first syllable is regarded as standard, although pronunciations with other tones have also been attested. Patton's pronunciation was enregistered by some Chinese speakers as a variant common in Shanghai and by others as characteristic of Taiwan.

coming out and saying it. The NBA star Yao Ming relates how his White American translator was heard as saying the N-word by other players when speaking in the locker room (Bensinger 2016). Comedian Russell Peters even has a well-rehearsed bit about an overhearing at a KFC in China, where it is played for laughs (Alossaimi 2012).

What are we, as sociolinguists, to make of the fact that an ordinary Chinese word can be heard by English speakers as a different word? This incident raises questions about how our models deal with *context* and *regimes of perception*.

2 Invoking context

Context is a broad term that has been applied to phenomena at different scales. For many, the key context is the political moment that we find ourselves in, where the act of exposing taken-for-granted, everyday acts of racism has become a moral imperative. For these interlocutors, the context is about who gets to decide what things mean – those in power, or those who are not. And given the long history of privileging only certain perspectives, it might be time to foreground the voices of those who have been excluded from determining appropriate language use.

For some of us, this can feel like the ground is shifting below our feet, as suddenly, things that were at one point in our lifetimes ordinary, unmarked acts of language (e.g. using a third-person singular pronoun, repeating a well-worn example in class) have become emblems of personae that are decidedly unfavorable: the rigid enforcer of normative gender binaries, the racist. I am often astonished at the speed at which particular emblematizations become institutionalized, such that my university's office of equity and diversity now spends, it seems, all of their time running workshops about which emblems to avoid and which to project.

Context is also used to bring other evidence into the frame in assignments of responsibility (Hill and Irvine 1993) and intentionality (Duranti 2015). Did Professor Patton produce his utterance knowing it could be heard as bivalent? Should he have known? Did he persist in using the term even after being made aware of alternate hearings, as some news outlets reported (Flaherty 2020), or did he address student concerns right away (Ethier 2020)? The emphasis on Patton's knowingness brings into focus the ways that determinations of what counts as a racist act often draw upon an understanding of racism as lodged in the intentions of individuals (Chun 2016; Reyes 2011).

As research on raciolinguistics (Alim et al. 2016; Rosa and Flores 2017) and language and colonialism (Heller and McElhinny 2017) has argued, the categories that we use to make sense of language and social life are imbricated in colonialist

dynamics of power. Descriptions of Patton align him in relation to two contrasting models of encounter: ethnically Chinese speakers using Mandarin with one another in a setting with no English-speaking overhearers, where 那個 is understood as acceptable use, versus White American English speakers using the N-word as unacceptable. As Babel's (2018) elaboration of the concept of *semiotic alignment* elegantly outlines, the issue then becomes how Professor Patton gets produced as a hybrid and laminated to either of these constellations of signs, as both reprise links between the figure of a native speaker/hearer and their socially acceptable linguistic variety. Metalinguistic emplacements of Patton point to understandings of culturally acceptable hybrids (e.g. outgroup users of Chinese, Chinese and American English bilinguals, mobile subjects who claim membership in multiple speech communities). Invocations of Patton's background are mobilized to place him closer to one pole than the other. Do the years that he has spent in Shanghai substantiate his claim that this was a legitimate and innocent use of the Mandarin term? Or is his status as a White male American the relevant diacritic here, overdetermining how those phonemes would be enregistered by the students around him? Here, we see how invocations of *context* are selective emblematizations, not facts about persons.

Lastly, *context* has been used to examine features at the sentential and phonological level, with more attention being paid to the fact that the matrix language of the class is English by English speakers, and to his use of falling tone by Mandarin-English bilinguals. For many Mandarin-English bilinguals, the fact that Patton produces the term with a contour that is recognizable to them as falling tone renders it able to be enregistered as Chinese. I say my cousin's name "Amy" with high level tone on the first syllable and mid-low tone when speaking Mandarin, for example, but without tones when speaking English. For English speakers who do not speak Chinese, tone is not hearable as an emblem that enregisters utterances as phonologically Chinese.

Calibrating the varied scales that get invoked through a term as loose as *context* then becomes a challenge not only for participants but for analysts. How do we justify which elements of context we invoke in our own work, when every invocation is selective? How do our models allow us to reconcile invocations of context at entirely different scales by varied perceivers?

3 The perceiving subject: regimes of perception

It seems impossible to think about this situation without considering the *listening* (aka *perceiving*) *subject* (Inoue 2006; Rosa and Flores 2017). Determinations of

what Patton said are always perspectival and political, reckoned from a particular subject position (Gal and Irvine 2019).

The idea that 那個 might not be heard as bivalent might appear absolutely ludicrous to an English speaker who does not know Chinese until you realize that there are a bazillion potential homonyms between Chinese and English. When I use the negation markers 不 /bû/ or 沒 /meì/, or the verb 'to have' 有 /joù/, I am usually not thinking about how they could be heard as "boo", "may", or "yo" by English speakers. I am not an active member of a social network in which Chinese-English bivalence (Woolard 1998) is foregrounded nor a regular consumer of such media, though these do exist.[5] My own inclination to hear Patton as speaking Chinese could be linked to the fact that everyone in my extended family speaks with an accent, bearing the traces of Shanghai-Taipei-New Jersey-Taipei-Vancouver-Rhode Island-Los Angeles, to list just one illustrative trajectory of linguistic influence. When the kind of Chinese you are most familiar with is one where everyone's vowels are a little off, and your life has been spent mostly in White-dominated English-speaking spaces where Black interlocutors have been rare, you might be predisposed to enregister utterances as Chinese words and not English ones.

The Patton incident reminded me of a situation in English-speaking K-pop circles, where the Korean second person pronouns 니가 /niga/ and 네가/nega/ and the first person pronoun 내가 /nɛga/ have been heard as the N-word by English language users.[6] However, in these cases, such uptakes have often been metapragmatically regimented as "mishearings" or "misunderstandings" by "international fans", in ways that place the onus of responsibility on hearers for not understanding Korean sufficiently (see Janine 2017; "Psy's 'Champion' called out" 2012).

4 Centering perceptions

Making situated perceptions and dynamics of power central to our models of sociolinguistics would have several implications. For one, it could compel us to broaden our lens, looking at the panoply of subject positions produced by

5 The pop song Comedian Joe Wong, for example, frequently plays up bivalency in his performances for American audiences, especially with regard to Chinese surnames, where 胡 /hǔ/ is made commensurable with "who", and 王 /wǎŋ/ with "want" (C-Span 2010; FlackeyR 2009). "那个 plz!" T-shirts are another example of Mandarin-English bivalent humor (https://teespring.com/stores/chinese-themed-designs).

6 In the panoply of ways to refer to self and other in Korean, these are considered informal and non-deferential. /네가/nega/ is 2nd p. sing INF+ TOP and 내가 /nɛga/ is 1st p. sing INF+TOP. Because the difference between /e/ and /ɛ/ is collapsed in some varieties, 내가/nɛga/ is frequently pronounced 니가 /niga/.

institutions, perceivers, and speakers. How are we to understand the institutional framing of Professor Patton as the very embodiment of the transformation that is promised by business school – becoming that globetrotting business executive, equally at home in Los Angeles and Shanghai – versus his regimentation as a perpetuator of White racism? How are those figures of personhood formulated in relation to one another and to the figures that the students are being aligned with? Are they aspirational cosmopolitans who seek the guidance of the wise expert in the field or perhaps skeptics who recognize that the whole project of "intercultural communication" presumes a certain elite and racialized subject position not available to all? Were the students or administration orienting to the fact that the dean at the Marshall School of Business was forced out in 2019 amid allegations of mishandling of sex and gender discrimination complaints, allegations that were later labeled by many as false (Byrne 2019)? How are figures and linguistic acts produced through commensuration, where calling for a professor's resignation can get likened to protesting police violence or to the excesses of McCarthyism? What emblems get mobilized in one formulation, and then discarded in another?

Second, putting power in the frame would mean rethinking our ontological commitment to signs as empirically measurable entities (Rosa and Lo n.d.). What gets made hearable as the N-word (or as NOT the N-word) is not just about the sounds that are produced. In both cases, phonemes do not have an invariant reality; what gets heard as /ɪ/ versus /ej/, a constituent of American English, Mandarin, and/or Korean, as racist utterance or ordinary word, as intentionally bivalent or evidently not, is not recoverable from the sounds themselves. Who gets to decide what Professor Patton said? It does not seem to be Professor Patton himself, since his explanations have largely been invalidated by USC and in the court of public opinion.

While the suggested remedies in Patton's case – including trigger warnings, sensitivity training, and alternative examples – have focused on speakers, in the South Korean case, it is instead the N-word hearers who should adapt. South Korean music conglomerates, who have a vested interest in promoting K-pop as a space of cool hybridity, have been able to control the metapragmatic framing. When English-speaking K-pop fans who do not live in Korean-speaking circles post about bivalent hearings to online forums, others usually explain how to hear "right" (e.g. "How do black people feel" 2015). Bivalent hearings have not become institutionally enregistered.[7] For example, the practice of changing Korean songs for English-speaking audiences by removing or substituting the terms in question,

7 The South Korean press frequently mobilizes the mishearing trope, while US-based media outlets tend to be more sympathetic to the N-word hearing. See the different takes on Kim Jaehwan's appearance on the television show *Show Champion* in Janine (2017) and Kim (2017).

as in the case of "Fake Love" (2018) by BTS or 내가 제일 잘 나가 ('I am the best') (2014) by 2NE1 (Kelly 2018; Kim 2018), does not seem to have caught on widely. In this sense, both cases reveal how sociolinguistic authority has been granted to those considered native speakers and hearers, while downplaying the perspectives of those who might be considered transcultural interlopers, such as non-ethnically Chinese users of Chinese, hearers who understand Chinese, or K-pop consumers who do not live in a Korean-speaking setting.

Third, centering perception might also mean casting a skeptical eye on the moral certainty of our own analyses. Models of sociolinguistic justice are often predicated on the idea that there are inappropriate and appropriate ways to take up signs. Teachers hear students as speaking bad English? Just teach them the right way to understand sociolinguistic diversity and all will be solved. But where is the moral clarity here? Is there a way to read Patton's performance that could not be viewed as troubling from an alternative standpoint? Some Chinese language departments in American universities have proposed that instructors should, in the current climate, only pronounce 那個 as /nâgə/. Is this evidence of the trampling of the rights of linguistic minority speakers by English-only imperialists, the latest proof that overly sensitive liberals have gone too far in their obsession with the harms of language (McIntosh 2020), or a long overdue centering of the perspectives of Black users of American English? Are Patton's supporters advocates for translingualism or enablers of racism? The question is not whether one of these is right or wrong, it is why the debate is framed in these terms at all. How do all of these regimentations ultimately profit those in power?

Lastly, turning to perception might also mean rethinking our reliance upon analyses that focus primarily on the interactional scale. The thrill of discourse analysis lies its attention to the fine details, its ability to unpack the subtle moves among interactants in the context of speaking. But can everything be located in the transcript? Our current models seem more inclined, for example, to situate evidence of boundary transgression in the details of talk than to account for how widely circulating models of figures and associated varieties set the stage. Is it possible to produce transcripts that reflect the perspectives of different interlocutors? Does the very format of the transcript reinscribe the ideology that speech consists in emanations from a speaking subject, rather than projections from a perceiving one?

The ever-unfolding nature of perception means that both of these cases will be taken up in different ways across time by interlocutors with varied relationships to American empire, language ideologies and sociolinguistic backgrounds. Concentrating on this variegated field of situated uptakes as interactions ripple out across events – a metapragmatics of mobility (Lo and Park 2017) – can give us a

better understanding of the publics and counterpublics that get produced as certain perspectives gain traction through relations of power.

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