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Race, language, and representations

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Abstract: In her contribution, Adrienne Lo reflects on how scholars of language use have engaged with issues of race and racialization in the United States since the 1970s. She traces how scholars' emphases have shifted between a focus on the "real" and authentic productions of language varieties by racialized groups and the ways political, economic and cultural forces shape how that language use is represented and (de)legitimized. Lo concludes with a discussion of the stakes of sociolinguistic study of race given the contestations around "race" as a concept, and argues that research in this space should seek to engage broader publics.

Keywords: racialization, representations, authenticity

What is the research field of race and language, and how does it relate to other subfields of the study of language? While there are special issues, edited volumes, and a book series that examine race and language, the field itself is not necessarily self-contained, in the sense of an arena of scholarship in which a well-defined group of scholars are conjoined by a shared understanding of their assumptions and goals. The field of "language and race," as it is reflexively defined here, engages only a small sliver of work that relates race to language – often bracketed out is research that examines how racializing ideas have permeated linguistics on a historical scale; work on colonialism and language; or scholarship in dialectology in which the concept of a "regional dialect" is racialized, to name just a few. Many definitions of the field also look primarily to US-based scholarship.

The term "race" itself is, of course, a difficult one. In some contexts to simply name this term at all is to be seen as colluding with a history of racism, of biological difference as innate inferiority, of Nazi eugenics and the like. In other venues, in contrast, to describe things in racial terms, rather than in the language of cultural or ethnic difference, is to speak truth to power. There is thus a certain wariness of using the term itself – a wariness that does not seem to extend to other terms that conjoin with "language," such as "religion," "gender," "class," "power," "migration," "neoliberalism," "colonialism," and the like.

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As someone who has spent most of my life in the United States, and whose scholarly ties are primarily with those trained in the United States, I understand race as a legacy of European colonialism, a rather inescapable aspect of the constitution of our lives today. It seems impossible to talk about the dynamics of multilingualism, contemporary migration and language, capitalism and language, or power and language without considering racialization, given the ways that coloniality has seeped into the history of our field, the terms and categories that we use to think about language, the structures of power and knowledge in academia, and ideologies of nation, people, and language, not to mention the sites many of us work in (Heller and McElhinny 2017).

Here, I concentrate on one of the primary divides in the field – the ways scholars of race and language engage representations and "the real." I look first briefly at the origins of the field as it is practiced in the United States, and the ways the work of the scholars affiliated with the SSRC's Committee on Sociolinguistics (1963–1979) set its agenda. I then trace how different researchers in this area have engaged this issue and offer some thoughts as to future trajectories.

1 Bringing race to the fore

Histories of the field of language and race as it is practiced in the US often locate its origins to the 1960s and the work of the SSRC-organized Committee on Sociolinguistics. Much of the groundbreaking research of these scholars examined racialized populations, such as mixed-race Japanese American families, South Asian immigrants in the United Kingdom, or those who had been understood previously in the United States in racial terms, like Jewish Americans and immigrants from Eastern Europe. However, race was not necessarily focal, either as a lens that participants used to make sense of their world or as an economic and cultural formation. Most of this research framed the issue in other terms – through ways of inferring difference or in relation to multilingualism, which did not necessarily take into account the historical workings of power.

The seminal work of William Labov was central in calling attention to racialization as a process that was anchored in institutions, showing in fine detail how linguistic judgments impacted the access of children to schooling. At the same time, racialized populations were often left out of studies that looked at class or regional dialects in this time period, both of which were studied primarily within white populations (for example, see Brice Heath 1983; Eckert 1990). The focus on legitimating the linguistic production of named racialized

groups (then called "Chicanos" and "Blacks," for example) – who were associated with linguistic varieties that shared those names (e. g. "Black English Vernacular") – was an important political move (Bucholtz 2003). And yet this concept of the *ethnolect* also narrowed the focus of the field; if there were no named variety to associate with a group, racialization went under the radar (Chun and Lo 2016). Indeed, assuming that essentialized groups used distinctively different linguistic forms (called distinctive features), which could be inventoried, made race seem like a property of language produced by speakers. As researchers turned to measuring and specifying features, primarily in the area of syntax and phonology, they relied upon an ideology that understood such features as more real and substantial, learned in childhood and thus essential components of one's self, in contrast with discursive practices or lexical items, which seemed more tractable to "outgroup" use.

2 Race and the "real"

This attempt to catalogue the components of racialized ethnolects is also driven by an understanding of what is "real" language and what is not. Following Labov, many scholars of race and language have located ethnolects as real and authentic, as opposed to varieties that might be learned later in life or in settings like schools (Lo and Chun 2020). Such a conception aligns with standard language ideology, in its division of linguistic varieties into those linked to authenticity, community, and identity, and those that are not. Grappling with the idea that ethnolects are perhaps as much produced by external observers, or "listening subjects," (Inoue 2006) as they are by speaking ones, is one of the key lines of division in the field.

Rather than asking, "What are the features that characterize this variety or those used by these speakers?" a focus on encounters asks how and why the language practices associated with some kinds of figures came to be heard as distinct varieties (and by who). That is, how one is heard may have little to do with the phonological qualities of signs that speaking subjects produce and more to do with the ways that listening subjects think some other people talk. These frameworks of listening are embedded within historically and institutionally situated practices of making and legitimizing difference and inequality that are grounded in relations of power and politics (Rosa and Flores 2017). This turn to the notion of figures, or person-types, and the processes through which such figures are circulated by those in power as they get linked to enregistered varieties, was key (Agha 2006). Rather than understand these figurations as

stereotypes that should be cast aside, researchers who draw from linguistic anthropological work understood them as models, important resources that people use to make sense of the world (Reyes 2007).

However, not all scholars in language and race have necessarily aligned with this shift. For many, there is a sharp divide between real, authentic ingroup producers of racialized varieties vs. outgroup users or mediatized depictions of language use; the proper subject of sociolinguistic research is the actual authentic language user, not the representations. Under this framework, what is at stake is the perpetuation of racism – examining the mechanisms of racism, analyzing the role of institutions in perpetuating inequalities, and educating the public about the right ways to think about race and language are compelling arenas for scholarship; looking at fictional representations of language use, such as in film or literature, is a somewhat pointless intellectual exercise. These perspectives are shaped by departmental affiliations – for example, those in schools of education or departments of linguistics are often urged to produce research that aims toward transforming systemic practices of discrimination, whether through curriculum development, research on pedagogy, outreach to the public via educational media, or transforming colonialist structures of knowledge. Indeed, work that engages representations is framed from this perspective as harmful, because it reinforces rather than challenges stereotypes.

While I admire and respect this work, I was trained in an anthropology department – reading, among other work, research on the anthropology of development, the state, the history of anthropology, and colonialism. This body of scholarship tends to make those of us on this side of the fence quite wary of "schemes to improve the human condition" (Scott 1999). Framing racialization as an issue of attitudes amenable to change through education can obscure how it works as a deep-seated economic and cultural formation that extends beyond individual beliefs (Lewis 2018). From this perspective, the impulse to document is not a vital form of political empowerment, but rather a technique of power and knowledge that aligns with modernist ideologies of progress and development, as though vernaculars could somehow be made to seem just as good as standards (Heller and McElhinny 2017).

The slippage between ideas about varieties vs. the linguistic production of those who share a name with the variety has been most fruitfully acknowledged in the robust analyses of Mock Spanish and Mock Asian (Chun 2009; Hill 2008). It is breathtakingly apparent here that racialization is about conjoining images of language and images of people – whatever forms of language are commonly associated with "Asians" in the United States in widely circulating representations bear little, if any resemblance at all, to the linguistic productions of the vast array of people who are understood as "Asian American." Rather than

attempting to reconcile these two into some kind of coherent descriptive whole, research has instead sought to understand the means through which speakers voice, comment upon, and take up such models. How did it come to be that Asian Americans are imagined in the United States as both speakers of an unbearably grating nonstandard variety, and also as people who can speak no variety of English besides the standard? What role do these images of Asian Americans play in the larger field of subject positions through which the linguistic productions of immigrants, settlers, and Indigenous are related to one another? How do these imaginings of language and citizenship benefit the perspective of those in power? If race is but one of the many social axes through which figures are specified, how does it come to be seen as the sole one that matters?

3 Future trajectories

The field of language and race is often criticized from the outside as being both "too American" and also too invested in the notion of race itself, as though taking the representations of racialization as a serious matter for study is the same as supporting racialization itself. To this end, scholars in this area are constantly called upon to acknowledge that race is a fiction, locally specific, and variable across time and space. I note that we do not seem to hold scholars of other fields to the same standard – I do not read monographs about religious conversion or gender expecting the author to declare that religion or gender are socially constructed. We need to take race seriously because of the impact that it has had on linguistic and anthropological scholarship, suffusing how we think about what language is and how it is related to things like nation, political economy, or gender. Like everything else, race is variegated in its meanings, historically contingent, utterly real or definitively not, depending on one's perspective. But I question here why scholars of religion are not made to repeatedly account for why religion matters and whether its variability makes it a suitable object of study, in the way that scholars of race are.

As a field that was born in the spirit of "responsiveness, critical awareness, ethical concern, human relevance, a clear connection between what is to be done and the interests of mankind," (Hymes 1972: 7). research in race and language has made engagement one of its key goals. Work in this area has also managed to reach a wide audience, partly because of the political commitment of scholars to write in nonelite registers and partly because researchers in this area often work in departments that are different than the ones they trained

in, with institutional affiliations in anthropology, applied linguistics, education, English, ethnic studies, historical and political studies, and linguistics. I hope this productive dialogue can continue in the future, as we think through how to relate language and representations.

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