

Language & Social Justice in the United States: An Introduction

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Recent issues of *Daedalus* 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 *Daedalus* 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 *Daedalus* 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 *Discourse 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 *in* 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 VanEyck, 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 *Journal of Linguistics* 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,

ed States).¹⁴

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

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 top-

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*.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 *Journal of Law, Language & Theory*, 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 Linguis-

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Guadalupe Valdés

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