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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The master's tools will never dismantle the master's school: Interrogating settler colonial logics in language education

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Abstract

Racialized students are overrepresented in special- and English-learner education programs in the United States. Researchers have pointed to implicit bias in evaluation tools and evaluators as a cause resulting in calls for more culturally competent/relevant practices/assessments. However, this paper argues that racial overrepresentation is reflective of larger settler colonial frameworks embedded in linguistic standards that continue to drive education and language ideologies/practices globally but especially in U.S. schools. First, through an analysis of an orthoepic test used during the Parsley Massacre of 1937 on the island of Hispaniola, I present how the evaluation of accented language has been used to racialize and pathologize people. Secondly, through a comparative analysis of bilingualism in the U.S. and Canada, I show how linguistic variation is only devalued when it emerges from marginalized communities, affirming the white normative gaze as a mechanism for maintaining inequitable power structures. Finally, the paper presents how these logics are present in current manifestations of bilingual education. By indicating how racially, physically, and/or neurodivergent people are othered, this paper calls on the decolonization of applied linguistics in order to effectively address the over- and disproportionate representation of Black, Indigenous, and/or Latinx students within special- and English-learner programs.

Spanish Abstract

En los Estados Unidos, estudiantes afrodescendientes, indígenas, y latines están sobrerrepresentados en programas de educación especial y aprendizaje de inglés. Investigadores académicos han señalado problemas en las herramientas de evaluación y los evaluadores como una causa que ha dado lugar a solicitudes de prácticas / evaluaciones más competentes / relevantes en términos de cultural. Sin embargo, este artículo sostiene que la sobrerrepresentación racial es un reflejo de marcos coloniales incrustados en los estándares lingüísticos que continúan instigando ideologías / prácticas sobre educación y lenguaje a nivel mundial, pero especialmente en las escuelas de EE.UU. Primero, a través de un análisis de una prueba ortopédica utilizada durante la Masacre de Perejil, presento cómo se ha utilizado la evaluación del lenguaje acentuado para racializar y patologizar a las personas. En segundo lugar, a través de un análisis comparativo del bilingüismo en los EE.UU. y Canadá, muestro cómo la variación lingüística solo se devalúa cuando

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surge de comunidades marginadas, afirmando la mirada Blanca y normativa como un mecanismo para mantener estructuras de poder desiguales. Finalmente, el artículo presenta cómo estas lógicas están presentes en la educación bilingüe corriente. Al indicar cómo se diferencian las personas a bases de raza, físico, y capacidad intelectual, este papel pide la descolonización de la materia de lingüística aplicada para atender de manera efectiva la representación excesiva y desproporcionada de estudiantes afrodescendientes, indígenas, y / o latine dentro de programas para educación especial y aprendizaje de inglés.

> For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those […] who still define the master's house as their only source of support.
>
> – Audre Lorde (1984/2003)

In the United States, students racialized as Black, Indigenous, and Latinx (BIL), in that order, are overrepresented in the category of Speech and Language Impairment (SLI) within special education (SpEd). English Learners (ELs) are also disproportionality represented within SpEd categories like SLI (Umansky et al., 2017), and students classified as ELs are predominantly Latinx (Kraemer & Fabiano-Smith, 2017). It is important to acknowledge that Latinx (or EL) overrepresentation at the national level has *not* been documented; the problem exists at the regional, state, or district levels due to configurations of multiple factors. Researchers have argued that (1) bias in evaluation tools or evaluators results in these discrepancies (Harry & Klingner, 2014; MacSwan, 2005; Umansky et al., 2017), and (2) inadequacies in testing measures to distinguish between the two constructs of language development and disability (Carothers & Parfitt, 2017; MacSwan & Rolstad, 2006). Traditional framings also blame students and families, reflecting deficit perspectives ascribed alongside disability and EL classifications (Cioè-Peña, 2021) and systemic factors influencing classification patterns (Artiles et al., 2010; González & Artiles, 2015). However, the history, power, and ideologies undergirding these practices and beliefs are rarely examined. Thus, in this paper, I posit that over- and disproportionate representation of racial and linguistic minorities in segregated learning settings (e.g., special education, EsL), is by design a part of the native speakerism and gatekeeping upholding a larger settler colonial framework (Tuck & Yang, 2012) continuing to drive education in the U.S. and, moreover, language ideologies/practices worldwide.

Using findings from raciolinguistic genealogies (Flores, 2021) of the Parsley Massacre and bilingual education in the U.S., I first present how linguistic fidelity has historically been used to racialize and pathologize nonwhite people and as a mechanism for domination and/or social cleansing. Next, through a qualitative comparative analysis (Berg-Schlosser et al., 2009) of perspectives of bilingualism in Canada and the U.S., I show how linguistic fidelity is used to restrict and devalue variations that originate from marginalized communities affirming the white normative gaze as a mechanism for maintaining historical, colonial power structures/dynamics. Finally, I present how current language education reifies power dynamics by extending settler colonial practices to education. Throughout, I highlight how these practices are reflective of settler colonial logics (Tuck & Yang, 2012) and how they manifest in the educational field's fixation with teaching and assessing standardized languages resulting in language policing across interpersonal and organizational settings (Phuong & Cioè-Peña, forthcoming; Torres & Barber, 2017). The ideologies embedded in linguistic fidelity, as exhibited in standard development and enforcement, permeate all aspects of education (e.g., teaching, assessments, policies). Thus, until we decolonize applied linguistics and eliminate linguistically bound, standard-driven evaluations, especially for disability *and* EL categories, we will continue to replicate the racist and ableist ideologies undergirding policy and practice.

An Intersectional Eye Towards the Past and Present

This work is rooted in an interdisciplinary stance heavily influenced by Black feminist epistemologies (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1989; Lorde, 2020), disability justice (Berne et al., 2018) and linguistic justice (Baker-Bell, 2020). Specifically, I use a Critical Dis/abilities Raciolinguistic (CDR) perspective (Cioé-Peña, 2020b; Phuong & Cioè-Peña, forthcoming) to understand how fidelity to linguistic standards perpetuates violence in schools and society, recognizing the importance of understanding how racism, linguicism, and ableism are co-constructed. Bringing together central tenets of DisCrit (Annamma et al., 2013) and a raciolinguistic perspective (Rosa & Flores, 2017), a CDR perspective addresses the needs of linguistically minoritized people of color with/out disabilities by revealing, and countering, the white normative gaze that currently drives mainstream perception. A CDR perspective argues that people are not only racialized but also pathologized on account of their linguistic practices. It acknowledges that this pathologization happens not based on individual or communal language practices but instead on others' perceptions, who, regardless of their own identity, enforce the values and perspectives under a white normative gaze. This perspective draws attention to the fact that, although grouped as one, Latinxs are not a monolith and, as such, Latinxs of varying racial phenotypes and abilities can take up, promote, and enforce the white normative gaze even within their own ethnic, yet heterogeneous, community.

The Master's Tool: The Voiced Alveolar Trill / r /

Fidelity to linguistic standards is a form of systemic violence rooted in colonialism, ableism, and racism, subsequently promoting and enforcing these ideologies through linguistic policing (Irvine et al., 2009). This form of systemic violence is evident in one tactic used to identify "enemies of the state" during the Parsley Massacre, the 1937 mass genocide of Black men and women on Hispaniola. During the Parsley Massacre, Dominican soldiers, under the command of Dictator Rafael Trujillo, asked Black people of indiscernible national affiliation to identify a common household herb: perejíl (*parsley*). This test was meant to determine/affirm the speaker's national identity (i.e., Dominican or Haitian). Those who responded with the voiced alveolar trill / r / were categorized as Dominican and those who did not, as Haitian. This was done with the belief that all Dominican nationals were "native" Spanish speakers and Haitian nationals were not, indicating how linguistic standards and native speakerism index and enforce belonging. The voiced alveolar trill / r / was set as the standard, thus granting entry to those who met the standard while subjugating those who did not.

Nearly twenty thousand people were killed through Trujillo's quest for whiteness and desire to cleanse the Dominican Republic of its immigrant "invasion" (Dash, 2018). This linguistically bound, standard-driven test spared only those who were faithful to "the standard." As this test was implemented within a racially heterogeneous population, it is possible to root this practice not only in linguicism but in racism and ableism. The test allowed soldiers to distinguish Haitians from Dominicans and helped reinforce coded messages that associated Blackness with Haitian identity and proximity to whiteness with Dominican identity (Wheeler, 2015). Additionally, the raciolinguistically bound test allowed for a deepening of the othering by also establishing norms for the *standard* Dominican. Thus, the pronunciation test also allowed the othering of any Black Dominicans who used Haitian-Creole as a byproduct of physical or social proximity to Haiti. Furthermore, the test was performative allowing for the othering of persons who, regardless of linguistic practice, could not perform the voiced alveolar trill / r /. This highlights how normative standards, privileging practices most proximal to whiteness vis-a-vis colonial power, were set for speakers *and* listeners (Romaine, 2007).

Fidelity to linguistic standards that racialize and pathologize people is deeply entrenched in education. Schools have long used language as a point of entry for assimilation and indoctrination (Brantmeier, 2007; Covello, 1939) and categorization and tracking (Kanno & Kangas, 2014; Kraemer & Fabiano-Smith, 2017). Many would protest pronunciation as a life and death determinant yet fail to recognize how it is embedded in many evaluative tools used to assess BIL students. Therefore, continued fidelity to colonially rooted linguistic standards (Gonçalves, 2017; Malkin, 2010; Zentella, 2017) has greatly contributed to the overrepresentation of BIL linguistic minorities within segregated SpEd and EL programs and to their absence within language maintenance programs (Cioè-Peña, 2017). Such educational inequity is deepened by the devaluation of linguistic practices that deviate from the standard.

The Master's Reach: Colonial Legacies as Linguistic Legitimacy

Linguistic evolution is highly contested (Progovac, 2018); linguistic fidelity is central to this. Linguistic standardization is often promoted as language protection even as standardization is rejected within revitalization movements (Couzens et al., 2020). Others view standardization and homogenization, as critical to communication (Thomas & McDonagh, 2013). If language extinction and communication concerns drive discourse around standardization and linguistic fidelity, why are some variations supported while others rejected (McWhorter, 2016; Romaine, 2007)? How people change and adapt language reflects proximity to coloniality and whiteness thereby hierarchizing linguistic variations (Haberland & Mortensen, 2012). Languages are not static (Swain, 2006); they evolve with users as evidenced historically in writing across civilizations (Hammarström, 2016). Yet, we continue using standards rooted in the linguistic practices of former colonial powers (Romaine, 2007) to determine the capacity of billions of people globally. This is apparent in the favoring of British English over Indian English (Kutlu & Wiltshire, 2020) or the promotion of Castilian-rooted Standard Spanish in U.S. schools (García, 2014), despite most students and families served originating from Spanish-using Latin America (Neo-Bustamante, 2019).

K–12 schooling curriculums are rooted in colonially derived vocabulary, grammar, *and* orthoepy (i.e., the customary pronunciation of a language). For example, in the mid-2000s, the Real Academia Española (RAE) simplified the Spanish alphabet from twenty-eight to twenty-six letters to match the English alphabet, but this decision applied to matters of language learning and the communication practices of dozens of nations and millions of people (Malkin, 2010). Even with pushback and the existence of twenty-one other Spanish language academies, the changes continued. These were likely accepted/allowed because of who made the change: the RAE, a decidedly conservative, Madrid-based institution with ties to the Spanish royal empire dating back to 1713 (Howard, 2011). According to the RAE, academia was created to ensure linguistic fidelity, one that was true to the

> consolidat[ion of Spanish] over the centuries, as well as establishing and disseminating the criteria of appropriateness and correctness, and to contribute to its majesty. […] and to try to keep alive the memory of those who, in Spain or America, have cultivated our language with glory. (translation of Fundaciòn Pro-RAE, n.d., paras. 1–2)

Taken alongside the RAE's motto, "Limpia, fija, y da esplendor [*it purifies, fixes, and shines*]" one can read a desire or, at minimum, perceived authority to protect a version of Spanish deemed purer and superior and to not only purify, fix, and shine but also to identify which, and whose, linguistic practices are in need of this kind of attention (Zentella, 2017). The influence of colonial rule on linguistic practice, like those implanted in RAE's mission and motto, continue to shape linguistic practices.

Recently, Spanish users have debated the validity of the U.S. Spanish (Otheguy & Stern, 2011) term "Latinx," a gender-inclusive moniker mirroring the use of an x to decenter gender in the English language (e.g., folx, womxn, Mx.; Neo-Bustamante et al., 2020; Onís, 2017; Reichard, 2015). Those who reject the term Latinx often conflate U.S. Spanish with Spanglish (Otheguy & Stern, 2011). Both arguments are grounded in standardization and linguistic fidelity that continue to inflict violence on people connected to former colonies by restricting linguistic evolution to those who affirm colonial histories rather than those resurrecting and affirming precolonial, indigenous, or postcolonial practices (e.g., Muxes). Concerns over standardization and communication are subject to raciolinguistic perspectives (Flores, & Rosa, 2015); this discourse is not activated when speaking of language variations among historically white communities—there are variations of colonial languages with as much capital as the originals (Chan, 2016). One could argue that recognizing varieties of U.S. Spanish does nothing to challenge coloniality due to Spanish's colonial roots (Rosa, 2016). However, linguistic evolution is only allowed when it does not disrupt existing power structures. Therefore, the status quo is maintained not in the introduction of languages but through fidelity to colonially rooted standards that reinforce elitist perceptions of who is *allowed* to change the language (Rosa 2016; Malkin, 2010). Thus, it is not just perceptions of language(s)/language users that are influenced by settler colonial logics, but also instructional models.

The Master's School: Reifying Power through Language Instruction

The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 presented the U.S. with opportunities to develop programs for marginalized ELs. The U.S. turned to other countries with established histories with bilingual education to help develop its models. Yet, "other countries have […] a different set of political and social associations with these programs.[…and] the context in which education takes place is crucial; there is no universal prescription for bilingual education" (Bialystok, 2018, p. 666). Still, the U.S. turned to its northern neighbor, Canada, primarily to language immersion programs in the Quebec region, even though the social, demographic, and political situations were different, including Canada's status as an officially bilingual country (Bialystok, 2018). As such, bilingual education in the U.S. was developed using a model not reflective of its context. Canada's bilingual identity is rooted in two colonially derived languages, English and French, because although Canada is a British commonwealth French is a very important part of national identity (Vessey, 2014). Thus, Canada's bilingualism is less reflective of heteroglossic ideals (Roy & Galiev, 2011) and more of the territory's colonial history with both French and British empires and the silencing—physically, linguistically, and systemically—of Indigenous people (Wildcat, 2015).

The bilingualism showcased in Canadian society and schools (Mukan et al., 2017) is attainable because two colonial languages can co-exist in ways that a colonial and non-colonial language cannot. Returning to the debate over Latinx illustrates that in the U.S., Spanish can co-exist with English so long as it remains faithful to its colonially derived roots. This additional caveat for acceptance, that neither language can deviate from the standard, is the same argument that undergirds most bilingual programs in the U.S., challenges unitary translanguaging (Otheguy et al., 2019), and favors cross-linguistic translanguaging (Cummins, 2021; MacSwan, 2017). At its core, cross-linguistic translanguaging is an appropriateness-based, additive bilingualism that builds on and reinforces fidelity to linguistic standards, albeit in more than one language (Cummins, 2021). Cross-linguistic translanguaging advocates defend the use of standards to determine who (1) gains access to bilingual education programs and services, (2) is allowed to remain and/or be removed from these programs and services, and (3) is capable of multilingualism as determined by their ability to perform the standard, once again centering the racialization and pathologization of BIL students in education. A failure to use, or adhere to the use of, standard Spanish and standard English is then used to make evaluations of the speaker/user (MacSwan, 2005; Flores & Rosa, 2015). These evaluations are usually deficit-oriented because they happen alongside the use of the white normative gaze (Rosa & Flores, 2017). The racialization and pathologization that happens in schools through language continues to systematically promote colonial ideals and power structures as linguistically rooted assessments and evaluations are used to determine program placement significantly impacting student outcomes and equity (Abedi & Faltis, 2015).

Redefining Language and Ourselves Without the Master

Bilingualism and bilingual education were most recently adopted in the US to advance the educational needs of marginalized learners. However, this does not make the practice any less colonial in nature because, as Tuck and Yang (2012) cautioned, "The metaphorization of decolonization makes possible a set of evasions, or 'settler moves to innocence,' that problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity" (p. 1). These evasions are embedded in our current approaches to language education and reflected in who has access to programs focused on language development and maintenance versus transitional or sheltered-English instruction alongside the growth of access for monolingual enabled students and stagnation for emergent bilinguals with disabilities. The introduction and use of standards is one way to ensure that regardless of who is meant to be served, there is always space for the colonizer.

Lorde (1984/2003) told us clearly that the master's tools could never truly serve the oppressed. They were not designed to do that. Nor will the masters' tools protect or restore languages if it does not benefit him. We must recognize that fidelity to linguistic standards will not protect culturally and linguistically diverse people nor their practices or ways of being. Historically, standards facilitate assimilation that helped empires amass land, people, and wealth. While explicit calls for linguistic assimilation have eased alongside the growth of bilingual education, the ideology has simply been repackaged and continues to filter and sort marginalized learners (Cioè-Peña, 2017, 2020a; Freire et al., 2021; Kotok & DeMatthews, 2018). Those who fail to assimilate risk categorization and alienation through segregation in schools and, eventually, society (Garver & Hopkins, 2020; Vasquez Heilig & Holme, 2013). The master's white normative gaze (Cioè-Peña, 2020b) still controls educational programs as evidenced by attempts at legitimizing and commodifying organic practices (e.g., seal of biliteracy, language proficiency testing) which are really attempts to legitimize bilingualism/biculturalism *and* strip away at centuries of deficit-based perspectives of multilingualism and home language practices promoted and codified by colonial powers.

While SpEd and EL services are presented as support, it is critical to recognize that this support is bound to promote practices enacted, and/or approved of, by the white normative gaze, thus sustaining legacies of colonialism that continue to have serious ramifications for BIL students. Until we decolonize applied linguistics and stop assessing people's fidelity to linguistic standards, we will continue to see the disproportionate representation of BIL students in disability and EL categories. This reality makes them more likely to encounter intellectually and linguistically segregated schooling (Cioè-Peña, 2020a; Phuong & Cioè-Peña, forthcoming), thereby deepening racial inequity across academic attainment and opportunities to learn for BIL students with/out disabilities limiting the advancement of all BIL people. Language is organic and derives from the people it is meant to serve. Language is for meaning making not categorizing people. Standards should be set by, and serve, language users, not dictators nor members of empirical or intellectual academies. Language is far too ethereal and dynamic to be restricted to historically set standards and values, as are people. Language should be used to build communities, not fragment them; liberate, not imprison; unite, not segregate. Fidelity to linguistic standards will not usher in social justice in schools or anywhere. Language should reflect the capacity of people; as such, we should shift fidelity to people, and we can do this by honoring expansive linguistic practices in research, classrooms, assessments, *and* applied linguistics.

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