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Is an Antiracist and Decolonizing Applied Linguistics Possible?

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Abstract

This article argues for an uncovering of the multitude of ways in which applied linguistics has functioned as an important and effective vehicle for White supremacy and empire, with its disciplinary roots embedded in assumptions about racial inequalities and racial hierarchies and, equally importantly, the concealment of these forms of racial discrimination which often manifest as innocuous language practices. In particular, the notion of objectivity has played a guiding role in reinscribing Whiteness in much applied linguistics theorizing and research within a global context of inequitable racial power and forms of knowledge production and transmission that are steeped in colonial reasoning. In this piece, the author considers what antiracism and decolonization mean within applied linguistics and asks: Is the discipline of applied linguistics irretrievably rooted in an ontology of race and empire? Or is an antiracist and decolonizing applied linguistics possible?

Soon after 9/11, at a linguistics conference, an audience member reacted rather heatedly to a presentation I gave with Shelley Wong. We were speaking about the promise offered by heritage language maintenance efforts in public schools to support language rights and antiracism and to counter xenophobia. The audience member asked: "Why are you talking about all these things? This has nothing to do with linguistics." Now, more than a dozen years later, what stands out in my memory is that he was not merely confused, he was outraged. To talk about heritage language loss's connectedness to xenophobia wasn't simply incomprehensible to him, it was threatening. At first, the lesson I took from this incident was superficial and related to the importance of making visible the political nature of language and applied linguistics, but as the years have passed, the story has come to embody something much deeper for me.

The audience member was committed to a vision of objectivity in applied linguistics, to a belief that applied linguists can stitch together an understanding of the workings of language that is somehow impervious to the effects of racism, xenophobia, and concerns about language rights. This illusory version of a detached applied linguistics relies on a race-neutrality in which Whiteness becomes protected by being framed as neutral, leading to what Flores (2016) refers to as hegemonic Whiteness. It was clear from our exchange that the audience member held a deep and emotional desire for an objective vision of applied linguistics. Pondering the moment further, I have come to interpret his

desire for objectivity to be connected to the broader field's long-standing investment in objectivity, with both drawing on desires for Whiteness.

The moment therefore represents to me a need for an uncovering of the multitude of ways in which applied linguistics has functioned as an important and effective vehicle for White supremacy and relatedly empire, with the very roots of the discipline dependent on racial inequalities and racial hierarchies and, equally importantly, of the necessary concealment of these forms of racial discrimination which often manifest as neither racial nor as discrimination but rather as innocuous language practices. Applied linguistics consequently lives in a complex and interdependent relationship with White supremacy, despite the assumption in wide circulation that an innocent and detached applied linguistics is attainable.

Our participation in White supremacy may be unintended, but the intentions of applied linguists matter less than the material effects of our practice, which are shaped by the systemic underpinnings of the discipline. A complicity between applied linguistics and White supremacy materializes in many configurations. It appears, for instance, as the ability of language to stand in as a euphemism for race, thereby taking on the appearance of racial neutrality and obscuring racism. In Ena Lee's (2015) study of a Canadian ESL classroom, language professionals made curricular and pedagogical decisions that resulted in the equating of English with Whiteness, in discourses of culture standing in for discourses of race, in students being pressed towards unavoidable performances of Asian Otherness, and in what Lee termed "common-sense racialisations" (p. 82). The same complicity appears in complex systems of ordering language prestige (Guerrettaz & Zahler, 2017), the challenges of moving away from static boundaries between languages and language varieties, and of the difficulty within our institutions of "undoing appropriateness" (Flores & Rosa, 2015, p. 149) or resisting racial normativity, so that for instance in the United States the linguistic practices of various racialized groups continue to be framed as deficient, regardless of how diligently they abide by rules of appropriateness, and to be assessed in relation to a White listening subject (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Part of our complicity with White supremacy is evident when we applied linguists spend our energies trying to understand how to successfully acquire and teach languages without attention to the broader consequences of such language learning, such as the successful acquisition of English apart from the constellation of social, political, and economic factors that produces desires for English, and relatedly for Whiteness and all it represents, and the material consequences of those desires for the English teaching industry globally (Motha & Lin, 2014). Schissel (2019) outlines consequences of testing developed or supported by applied linguists, including limited access to immigration, schools, and civic participation. The discriminatory legacy of these earlier testing systems remains. We see the TOEFL, SPEAK, Versant and similar tests, also constructed by language experts, exerting powerful effects upon the lives of international teaching assistants (ITAs), limiting access to TAships and higher education funding and helping to legitimate accent discrimination and racial aggression against racially minoritized ITAs (Kang, Rubin, & Lindemann, 2015). These are all part of applied linguistics' intimacy with White Supremacy, driving home for us that there is no applied linguistics without race and empire.

Applied linguists are therefore left with a challenge. If our discipline is tenaciously enmeshed with, and even promotes White supremacy and empire, the question facing us today is whether applied linguistics can ever be disentangled from and even actually work against White supremacy and empire. Is it possible for us to practice applied linguistics in a way that undoes racism and colonization or are these irrevocably embedded

in the discipline? Is it possible to sit within the academy as an applied linguist and teach, prepare teachers, develop policy, mentor new researchers, and participate in governance in a way that is antiracist and decolonizing (Motha, 2014)? **Is an antiracist and decolonizing applied linguistics possible?**

Perhaps it would be useful to pause and talk about these terms, *antiracist* and *decolonizing*. While I am shining a flashlight on two different entry points into the conversation, antiracism and decolonization are inseparable from each other, as we keep in mind that it is empire that produced and continues to produce formations of race, and our understandings of race that construct empire.

An Antiracist Applied Linguistics

The notion of race took hold in order to justify the capital accumulation of colonialism, a term that I use to include White settler colonialism and land seizure, the transatlantic slave trade, religious missionary efforts, forceful invasion and occupation, and additionally the epistemic violence and resulting legacy that persists today. Racism is therefore "not simply a by-product of empire but an intrinsic part of it, part of the intestines of empire" (Pieterse, 1989, p. 223). The capitalist roots of racism mean that all racism necessarily involves capitalism, and that all capitalism is racial capitalism (Melamed, 2011), with the production of capital (for example, land theft and slavery) made possible only by uneven relations of power between humans, which have historically been naturalized as racial differences. This extends to more contemporaneous versions such as prison labor, predatory lending, and language hierarchies. Oluo (2018) in fact defines race as: "a lie told to justify a crime" (p. 12).

If we are to acknowledge that our entire planet is shaped by the legacy of colonialism, and therefore racism (Kubota & Lin, 2009), we must then recognize the impossibility of any move that might be deemed racially neutral. From Ibram X. Kendi's (2019) glaringly simple but immensely helpful perspective, all actions, all ideas, and all policies are either racist or antiracist, with no in-between:

> The opposite of 'racist' isn't 'not racist.'… It is 'anti-racist.'… One either allows racial inequalities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequalities, as an antiracist. There is no in-between safe space of 'not racist.' The claim of 'not racist' neutrality is a mask for racism. (p. 9)

For applied linguists, it then follows that whenever we claim: "My research has nothing to do with race," or "That interaction I observed was not about race," the words we are speaking are (1) not anti-racist, because they do not confront racial inequality; (2) not racially neutral, because racial neutrality does not exist; which leaves only the last option: (3) racist, that is through their denial they perpetuate racial inequality. A commitment to an antiracist applied linguistics, therefore, requires us to remain always on alert for the mask of neutrality.

Within applied linguistics, the notion of race produces a great deal of profit, allowing for the conceptualization of languages that are variously racialized and with a range of proximity to Whiteness; producing a demand for language teaching, consultancy services, teacher training, research, and teacher education; and increasing the desirability of employment and publishing in nation-states associated with Whiteness. Accent hierarchies and the notion of nativeness also work to continuously recreate an unevenness,

which allows the generation of capital and supports the workings of racial capitalism within language teacher education.

A Decolonizing Applied Linguistics

What is a decolonizing applied linguistics? A long history of Indigenous resistance and Indigenous intellectual thought tradition has informed analyses emerging from Indigenous studies, critical ethnic studies, and related disciplines, helping to shift our understandings of colonialism from a focus solely on metropole and colony, or external colonialism (la paperson, 2017), to White settler colonialism. This work sheds light on the complicity of applied linguistics in maintaining relations of inequity and domination. Capital accumulation is the goal in both external and White settler colonialism, and both structure our contemporary world in painful and enduring ways. The two are not mutually exclusive and some overlap exists, but some general differences are noteworthy. In external colonialism, invaders exploit land they do not particularly want to live on by extracting resources, growing goods, extorting a labor force, or taking advantage of a strategic geography, and the ongoing perpetuation of racial and colonial hierarchies, often through language practices, becomes an important part of extending the legacy of this effort. In White settler colonialism, in contrast, land has been stolen and converted into property for capital, promoting genocide or erasure of its inhabitants and knowledge systems (Coulthard, 2014) and further ongoing efforts to conceal or legitimate the land theft. It is important, then, for us as applied linguists to be conscious of how our work helps to preserve not only extractive practices of resource accumulation but also ongoing and unrelenting settlement through contemporary capitalism by depending on economic, political, and social arrangements established and maintained through White settler colonialism, especially land dispossession. Such recognition becomes particularly pressing given the relationship between the *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* and the *American Association for Applied Linguistics* in the context of North America's history of Indigenous dispossession. How can we interrogate the ways contemporary language teaching becomes part of a White settler project? How do our language practices contribute to nationalism and nation-state formation? What practices might we embrace to move us towards a decolonial future?

Complicity with White settler colonialism takes place when we language specialists agree to work uncritically with limited systems of language-based affiliation and belonging that conceal histories of White settler appropriation for profit and that lead us towards racial exclusion and erasure. One example is language professionals' institutional classification of the Maya participants in Patricia Baquedano-López's (2019) ethnography, who moved from Yucatan, Mexico, to San Francisco, United States, and there became labelled Spanish-speaking and 'Latino,' in the process having their indigeneity eclipsed by other categories. Similarly, Haque and Patrick (2015) have explored efforts by language policy experts to support French and English bilingualism in Canada, which were shaped by racial hierarchies and language ideologies that legitimated French and English by marginalizing Indigenous groups and languages.

On an individual level, applied linguistics practice can never be extracted from the racial, gendered, linguistic and other identities of the individual enacting it. Thinking in terms of White settler colonial logic challenges my sense of myself as simply a brown immigrant woman to North America (born in Sri Lanka and raised in various White settler states) and in particular muddles my understanding of myself as colonized—which for many years was an important element of my subjectivity—and

instead highlights, to me, my role as someone who benefits from attempted genocide and land theft. A White settler colonial lens requires a much more complex analysis of relationships among racially minoritized groups (Byrd, 2011) and among languages, disrupting a simplistic White-Other dichotomy as we acknowledge that "the decolonial desires of white, nonwhite, immigrant, postcolonial, and oppressed people, can … be entangled in resettlement, reoccupation, and reinhabitation that actually further settler colonialism" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 2). Such a lens requires us to think in more complex ways about our responsibilities as we promote languages (and their associated ontologies) that may be steeped in histories complicit with dispossession. It asks us to attend explicitly to the violence of White settler colonialism in our applied linguistics work and to consider what the project of applied linguistics could look like if it did not depend on White settler colonialism.

A more complex analysis of relationships between racially minoritized groups begs the question of who should be carrying out those analyses, particularly in the context of a history of White applied linguists studying the language practices of racially minoritized people in dehumanizing and exploitative ways, which brings us to the pressing issue of the demographics of the profession. Professional organizations, including AAAL, are responding to calls that they examine the role their institutional practices have played in contributing to the underrepresentation of racially minoritized scholars within the field. Composition of leadership committees and editorial boards and recognition of scholarship and service all play a role in altering the dynamics, institutional structures, and ontologies of the field (Bhattacharya, Jiang, & Canagarajah, forthcoming).

Is an antiracist and decolonizing applied linguistics possible?

To some degree, the task before us is not only one of remembering, it is one of imagination. We are trying to imagine an applied linguistics that does not exist. On another level, however, hidden within shimmering crevices of the profession are locations of resistance, antiracist energy, work that is clear-sighted and agentive about a decolonial project, and these are evidence of an antiracist and decolonizing applied linguistics in the fissures of our institutions.

While an antiracist, decolonized applied linguistics is possible, it is not the natural progression of our profession. It is not inevitable. But it is possible. Every move we make, let us ask ourselves: *Is it racist or anti-racist?*, opening our eyes to the knowledge that there is no space of not-racist. Let us grapple with those difficult questions of what an applied linguistics would look like that didn't rely on White settler colonialism, on property law, on capitalism. Let us continue to support each other in altering our epistemological practices to actually change what comes to count as knowledge. Let us ask ourselves, can we truly be effective applied linguists if we are not willing to consider the ways in which our work is complicit with White supremacy and colonization?

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