

Applied Linguistic Anthropology: Balancing Social Science with Social Change

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Introduction

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This chapter features four applied linguistic anthropology case studies, highlighting how interdisciplinary scholars of language can acknowledge their positionalities, engage in in-depth examination of particular language-related issues, and mobilize to advocate for social change. We will discuss the inherent dilemmas involved in applied linguistic anthropology, including asking who our publics are, what “change” we seek to effect, how identifying the nature of “change” may help us determine if we are “successful” in moving toward social justice, and recognizing that language-related issues are never only about language—they are about ideologies, perceptions, experiences, practices, and histories of both powerful and marginalized groups.

These four case studies stem from collaborative work of the American Anthropological Association’s Society for Linguistic Anthropology Task Group on Language and Social Justice, an interdisciplinary group of publicly engaged scholars who collaboratively tackle language and social justice issues. As an applied linguistic anthropologist interested in mobilizing our fields for positive change, I have collaborated with this chapter’s coauthors in meaningful ways. The chapter will first provide a critical analysis of the use of linguistically demeaning categories in the US Census to classify groups that speak languages other than English. Second, the use of the word “illegal” immigrant in public discourse is described within the campaign to stop the “I-word” in major media outlets, as an example of broader advocacy focused on language-related

issues. Next, the use of Native American symbols and representations in sports team mascot names is critiqued and linked to the ongoing erasure of indigenous communities and their histories. Last, the misguided notion of a “language gap” between economically privileged families and those living in poverty is outlined in terms of how it has been used to justify disadvantages that academically derail students from linguistically diverse backgrounds. The role of institutions (government, education, media, sports) is central to these case studies, and to the lives of marginalized and minoritized¹ groups in the US and beyond.

Highlighting language ideologies around counting, referring, and words as evidence of language, the case studies foreground the notion that simply finding new labels does not address systemic, and the systematic nature of, marginalization. The authors demonstrate how everyday manifestations of socially divisive language cater to culturally unmarked audiences and reify norms of linguistic hierarchies and racial divides. They highlight the role that language plays in structuring social relationships within and between communities, and how hegemonic epistemologies impact those with the least advantage. These examples also demonstrate how language is implicated and can be mobilized in creating more just worlds, therefore unpacking both processes and collective impact. Overall, the chapter interrogates what is “known” and seen as “matter of fact” and emphasizes the role of collaboration and criticality in counteracting ideologies and practices that dismiss and erase the experiences of marginalized communities.

Foregrounding a critical, pragmatic, and social change-oriented approach to research in language and society, the authors counteract a positivist view of science anchored in notions of empiricism and truth. This methodological framing balances empiricism with positionality, and in-depth description with advocacy for social change. We recognize the complexity of undertaking an applied linguistic anthropology, since it involves value judgments and particular worldviews in the service of social justice. In each case study, the author discusses how they navigated a multilayered 5-step applied linguistic anthropological process of:

1. Methods of noticing, in-depth observation, longitudinal reflection, and thoughtful critique.
2. Centering the role of language in social justice efforts.
3. Recognition of one’s positionalities and roles in relation to the topic/issue at hand.

4. Processes of collaboration, coalition-building, audience coalescence (Avineri and Perley 2019).
5. Efforts to raise awareness for social change and liberation.

These five steps demonstrate a “critical ethnographer’s dilemma”: the notion that understanding issues and contexts in depth can uncover problems and tensions—which necessitates both collaboration and empathy. As these authors illustrate, one must mobilize the tools and perspectives of various disciplines in order to move meaningfully toward social change.

Who is “linguistically isolated”? Challenging a damaging US census category

Ana Celia Zentella

As the daughter of a Mexican father and Puerto Rican mother and a self-proclaimed anthro-political linguist concerned about the negative impact of misinformation about immigrant family language skills and practices, I was appalled to learn the Census Bureau (CB) classified all members of households where no adult spoke English “Very well” as “linguistically isolated.” A bar graph² based on the 1990 data—accompanied by troubling drawings of children crouching in shadows—claimed that 6 percent of New York State’s children “lived in linguistic isolation,” and that 20 percent of them did not speak English at home. If all the adults in a family reported that they spoke English “Well,” “Not well,” or “Not at all,” the entire household was considered “linguistically isolated.” This damaging categorization began in 1980. The CB spoke in 2000 of “11.9 million Americans living in 4.4 million linguistically isolated households in the United States” (Soifer 2009). Frantic news stories deplored the threat to the nation and the non-assimilation of immigrants, particularly Spanish speakers. Yet the same report indicated that 78 percent of Hispanics either spoke only English (24%) or spoke English “Very well” (40%) or “Well” (14%); only 8 percent of Hispanics did not speak English at all (Dockterman 2011). But because those who spoke it “Well” were classified as “linguistically isolated” together with those who did not speak English well or at all, the resulting 36 percent heightened unwarranted fears, sometimes leading to verbal and/or physical attacks against speakers of other languages, often Spanish speakers (Zentella 2019). Between 2005 and 2010, “anti-Latino hate crimes rose disproportionately to other hate crimes” (Van Zeller 2011).

It does not require linguistic expertise to see that placing those who speak English “Well” in the same category as those who do not speak English well, or at all, results in unreliable data that impedes adequate educational, medical, legal, and social services. There are only three questions regarding language in the Census:

1. Do you speak a language other than English at home?
2. IF SO—which language?
3. Do you speak English: Very well, Well, Not well, or Not at all.

The answers to these questions determine which families and communities may be provided medical, legal, and social services support in languages other than English. The answers also determine “bilingual election requirements,” as well as the “allocation of educational funds to . . . teach students with lower levels of English proficiency” (Census Bureau 2010). But there is no question about children’s English ability, or their use of English at school and with friends. Nor does the Census ask about every resident’s ability to read and/or write English. Limited questions, problematic categories, and a disparaging label result in a distorted picture of immigrant homes, encouraging hostility against speakers of other languages. The situation called for an anthro-political linguistic approach (Zentella 1995) that reached out not only to language scholars but to educators and the broader public to unmask the ways in which power—that of the government in this case—uses language to support the dominant group’s language (e.g., Why weren’t those who spoke only English considered linguistically isolated?), and misrepresents the linguistic abilities of minoritized groups (e.g., Why was there no question about their knowledge of and ability in languages other than English?).

In 2005, I turned to the newly formed Language and Social Justice (LSJ) Task Group of the Society for Linguistic Anthropology (SLA), and together we met challenges, enjoyed some success, and endured major disappointments. In articles, papers, panels, and resolutions over the next six years, we questioned the accuracy and reliability of data resulting from the Census language questions, highlighting their limitations and the implications for social justice of its categorizations (Zentella et al. 2007). Of particular concern was the reliance on assessments of one’s own linguistic ability, the lumping together of those who said they spoke English “Well” with those who did not speak it well or at all, and the damaging “isolated” label. In 2008, the members of our parent organization, the American Anthropological Association (AAA), passed a resolution to “urge the Census Bureau to include a question about proficiency in

languages other than English, and to stop classifying those who speak English less than ‘Very well’—and all members of their households—as ‘linguistically isolated’ because the term is inaccurate and discriminatory, and the classification promotes an ideology of linguistic superiority that foments linguistic intolerance and conflict” (American Anthropological Association 2008).

We then reached out to language-related national organizations, to the Latinu³ community in the US, and to the CB directly. The AAA resolution won the support of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the American Association for Applied Linguistics. Latinu organizations included the National Institute for Latino Policy (NILP) and its extensive Latino Census Network, which lobbied the CB’s Advisory Committee on the Hispanic Population, and the National Hispanic Leadership Committee. My bilingual editorials in New York’s leading Spanish daily and in online newsletters reached the broader public (Zentella 2009: 2011).

Convincing the CB was more difficult; we parried with its directors and their congressional overseers, the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, for three years in letters, meetings, and conference calls, challenging the limits of the questions, the categorization of proficiency levels, and the labeling of households and individuals. The CB insisted there was no federal mandate to ask about languages other than English, and that “irrespective of its label,” the category that separated “Very well” from the other levels was useful, based on 1980s research, and “used routinely by researchers, policy makers and practitioners” (David Johnson letter to AAA President Setha Low, 2008). The three alternative proficiency categorizations we suggested—including “emergent bilinguals”—were all rebuffed, and we were told that changing “linguistically isolated” would involve a long legislative process. We were disheartened, given the imminent release of the 2010 data, until our efforts convinced a new CB director to change the title of the category beginning in 2011; he acknowledged it would be “less stigmatizing” to replace “linguistically isolated” with “Households in which no one 14 and over speaks English only or speaks a language other than English at home and speaks English ‘Very well.’” The AAA press release (2011) that welcomed this substitution nevertheless continued “to urge the CB to expand its language questions, and to acknowledge that those who speak English ‘Well’ should not be grouped with those who speak it ‘Not well’ or ‘Not at all.’” Celebration over the elimination of the “linguistically isolated” label was short-lived; the cumbersome “Households in which . . .” was soon replaced by “Limited English speakers,” a discredited label from the early days of bilingual education.⁴

Moreover, the category illogically continues to join many monolingual English-speaking children and adults who speak English “Well” with those who do not know much English.

Obviously, we cannot claim that “we won”; we continue to challenge the CB’s policies and statistics. Although a second study by the CB in 2015 reaffirmed the “Very well” cut-off point by comparing self-reports to comprehension of literacy tasks, only adults were tested (Leeman 2018a); households with English monolingual children continue to be categorized as limited English proficient (LEP) if no adults speak English “Very well”. As Leeman argues, the problematic language questions and categories of the Census reflect and reinforce English-only ideologies and policies that view other languages as problems and deficiencies to be overcome (Leeman 2018b). What should our next steps be, given the numerous language-related problems facing the nation?

Efforts to make English the official language are on the rise, as are verbal and physical attacks on those who speak other languages. This aggression continues despite the fact that 80 percent of people living in the US speak only English at home, and 15 percent of those who speak another language also speak English “Very well.” The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated fears of perceived “foreigners,” as the proposed House Resolution 908 “Condemning all forms of anti-Asian sentiment as related to COVID-19” makes clear. Clearly, as language scholars, we must dispel misconceptions about the linguistic strengths of immigrants, challenge the failures in government data collection methods, and address the monolingual ideologies pervasive in an English-only-speaking society. Such formidable tasks are perhaps best tackled by focusing on a target that is highly visible, concrete, and with significant implications, like the CB labels and policies. This requires matching our goals and expertise to pursue research that disproves the usefulness of one category for those who speak English well and those who do not, and a multipronged approach that builds supportive coalitions with groups of educators, health officials, and social justice activists, while raising awareness in the broader public. There is a lot more work to do; on inauguration day in 2016, former president Donald Trump’s administration removed the Spanish links to the whitehouse.gov page, eliminating critical access to information about government programs. Our petition drive to “Reinstate the Spanish Links on WhiteHouse.gov” was ignored by the White House, but our (limited) success in eliminating “linguistically isolated” encourages us to challenge this erasure by reaching out to language scholars and the general public. In addition, we denounce recent attempts to exclude immigrants from the Census and/or from the apportionment of

congressional seats as part of our defense of speakers of other languages, in the interest of greater justice in the nation.

Debating the language of migrant lllegality”: Connecting linguistic advocacy to broader struggles

Jonathan Rosa

As horrifying images of migrant families separated and detained at the southern US border have been projected globally across digital screens and newspaper pages over the last several years, many people might wonder how we arrived at this moment in which it has become legally possible for children to be ripped out of the arms of their parents and toddlers to appear in court unaccompanied for their deportation proceedings. However, these scenes are not simply atrocities particular to the Trump administration, but rather rearticulations of long-standing histories of Indigenous genocide and African enslavement that founded the US and have been violently enacted and reproduced in colonies and metropolises throughout the world. That is, the separation, containment, exploitation, criminalization, and eradication of families is an all-American practice—with an emphasis on the plural Americas as a politically and economically intertwined territorial expanse superseding and subtending US borders, with historical and contemporary ties to various colonial powers and colonized peoples.

This fraught context is part of the backdrop against which debates about discourses of migrant “illegality” have taken shape. From some perspectives, “illegality” is a straightforward fact of laws stipulating which persons can cross which borders in which times and places. In this view, “illegality” is a politically neutral designation for migrants who enter or remain in a nation’s borders without authorization. In contrast, scholars of US immigration history have carefully traced the nation’s shifting borders and policies, pointing out that, within the US, the widespread circulation of the concept of “illegality” is in fact a relatively recent phenomenon that corresponds to the nation’s efforts to strategically facilitate particular populations’ migration and labor participation while maintaining them in a perpetual status of deportability (De Genova 2004). Thus, historically, representations of various populations’ migration, particularly the framing of their presence within the US as legitimate or illegitimate, is characteristically less a reflection of migrants’ efforts to obtain authorization than of the extent to which they correspond to racially coded models of idealized citizen-subjects.

In solidarity with migrant communities and pro-immigration reform activists, critical language scholars have offered analyses of how discourses of migrant “illegality” erase political and economic structures that produce and depend on migration while subjecting migrants and the broader racialized communities of which they are a part to continued forms of surveillance, containment, and marginalization (Santa Ana 2000). This work has included both conventional academic research, as well as public-facing scholarship that seeks to reframe popular debates about language and immigration (Santa Ana and González de Bustamante 2012). As a linguistic anthropologist who studies language and the racialization of US Latinx populations with a commitment to bridging theory and practice to advocate for racial and linguistic justice, I took particular interest in this issue. It is within this context that I worked with members of the LSJ committee of the SLA to advocate in support of the “Drop the I-Word Campaign,”⁵ an effort to challenge the use of the term “illegal” and variations thereof in mainstream media representations of immigration. The campaign sought to appeal to humanist sentiments by galvanizing broader publics around the notion that no human is illegal (Ngai 2006). Drawing on frameworks within linguistic anthropology, I drafted and circulated a statement in support of this effort.⁶ In the statement, I sought to challenge the notion that “illegal” is somehow an unbiased or neutral term, as had been claimed by influential US media outlets including the *Associated Press*⁷ and the *New York Times*.⁸ Inspired by the key linguistic anthropological insight that language is not simply a passive way of representing already existing objects in the world but rather a powerful form of social action, I pointed to the stigmatizing functions of discourses of migrant “illegality.” This stigmatization includes heightened forms of violence that have increasingly positioned US Latinxs, and others considered “illegal”, as targets of hate crimes.

The statement circulated widely, accumulated endorsements from dozens of fellow linguistic anthropologists, and was mentioned in prominent US and international media outlets including *ABC News/Univision*,⁹ *CNN*,¹⁰ *NPR*,¹¹ and the *Guardian*.¹² We were encouraged by the reception of these efforts, which contributed to the decision by outlets such as the *Associated Press*,¹³ *USA Today*,¹⁴ and *LA Times*¹⁵ to change their style guidelines regarding the use of the term “illegal” in reference to (im)migrants. Specifically, the influential *Associated Press* decided to amend its Stylebook, which serves as a guide for media outlets throughout the nation. The Stylebook now recommends to drop the use of the phrase “illegal immigrant,” as well as the term “illegal” in reference to a person. However, as linguistic anthropologists, we were also sensitive to the importance

of emphasizing that this was more than simply a struggle over terminology. In many of the media interviews I gave in conjunction with the public statement, I was often asked for alternative terms that could be substituted for “illegal.” While I discussed the politics of terms such as “undocumented” and “unauthorized” (Plascencia 2009), and emphasized the importance of respecting many targeted community members’ preference for “undocumented”, I also challenged the notion that we could resolve the (im)migration debate by merely identifying a new word. Indeed, as discussed above, contemporary violence at the southern US border is tied to histories that preceded use of the term “illegal” and will continue in its aftermath without a critical interrogation and reimagination of migration as a fundamental human right in the US and across the world. This speaks to a broader challenge for applied linguists who might understandably focus their efforts primarily on language issues. Apparent language-related problems are often rooted in societal structures that cannot be unsettled simply by modifying language policies and practices. Therefore, we must work in critical interdisciplinary solidarity with marginalized communities and social movements to lend our expertise when relevant while also recognizing the importance of linking struggles over language to wider efforts toward envisioning and enacting worlds beyond narrow intellectual, sociolinguistic, and geopolitical borders. In the context of debates surrounding the language of migrant “illegality,” this involves shifting from advocacy for discourses that affirm access to citizenship and inclusion into the nation as end goals, to conceptualizing and enacting abolition and decolonization as pathways toward more just and sustainable worlds.

Mascot names and the naturalization of public racism

Bernard C. Perley

The first signs of autumn often include cooler temperatures, shorter days, the leaves changing color, and apple harvests. Fall is also football season. In September 2019, residents in Cincinnati, Ohio saw another sign of autumn: someone had sprayed graffiti on Anderson High School’s athletic facilities. The school mascot is the “Redskins” and someone was not happy about the racist moniker and decided to display disaffection (Bogage 2019). Among the graffiti expressions considered *vandalism* was the word “Racists” which was sprayed on the running track and on the back wall of the baseball dugout, the expression

“Redskins? More like Whiteskins” sprayed on the right side of the Indian head logo, and the phrase “Change the name!” sprayed on the left side.

The vandalism that took place in Cincinnati puts on full display the hypocrisy of the school superintendent and the law enforcement agency. According to the *Washington Post* article the officer who discovered the graffiti described it as “profane” with “racial overtones.” Yet, the officer does not regard “redskins” as either profane or racist. Again, according to the *Post* article, the school superintendent is quoted as saying, “The graffiti at Anderson High School is deeply disturbing and does not reflect the beliefs of our students nor staff.” Yet, the superintendent did not denounce the use of the racist moniker nor the naturalized racism that celebrates the racist mascot. Anderson High School perpetuates one of the most insidious and longest-running practices of social injustice here in the US; namely, White public racism against Native Americans. The reason the school official and law enforcement do not see their actions as hate speech and racist actions against Native Americans is because it has become naturalized, “in which individuals do not consciously realize that these seemingly innocent yet harmful representations of others are socially constructed and learned” (Avineri and Perley 2019: 148). The year-round display of sports mascots that stereotype Native Americans (Cleveland Indians; Atlanta Braves; Kansas City Chiefs; Chicago Blackhawks) is hate speech that inflicts harm to young Native Americans. These displays continue despite over four decades of Native American activism to change racist monikers and logos (King 2016). The push to retire mascots led to the courtroom strategies to further push for the retirement of both racist mascots and racist monikers. Meanwhile, researchers explored the negative psychological impact of these displays (Gambine 2015).¹⁶ The American Psychological Association issued a statement citing a “growing body of social science literature that shows the harmful effects of racial stereotyping and inaccurate racial portrayals, including the particularly damaging effects of American Indian sports mascots on the social identity development and self-esteem of American Indian young people” (American Psychological Association 2018). Scholars from multiple disciplines have drawn upon one another’s work to demonstrate in various ways how the harm is real and the need for healing is immediate.

What are the prospects for healing? In any remediation of victim abuse it is not enough for the victim to be treated for the trauma suffered. Comprehensive remediation must also address the pathology of the abuser. In the case of White racism against Native Americans, through the everyday use of mascots and monikers, we must acknowledge that it is not only Native American youth who

need healing, but those who perpetuate the hate speech with impunity must also learn that they will suffer from the pathology of bullying. The school superintendent and the law enforcement officer in the Anderson High School case must realize that they are bullying invisible communities of Native American youth. Such naturalized racism continues to be exercised because the victim is invisible. Is there social justice for communities that suffer erasure from public consciousness? Yes. It requires a coalescence of academics across diverse disciplines, educators at all levels, students at all levels, and public and elected officials and representatives to address the harm done to young Native Americans. We propose an active and engaged strategy of public coalition-building through *audience coalescence* (Avineri and Perley 2019) that highlights the hidden racism indexed by ideologies of historical denigration of Native Americans. Each time a mascot is celebrated and a racist moniker is used it perpetuates the semiotics of hate derived from colonial histories and reified in contemporary displays of willful ignorance. Audience coalescence is “an emergent coalition building process that identifies and promotes predispositions and stances toward redressing social injustices” (Avineri and Perley 2019: 149). The process seeks to reveal the naturalized racism toward Native Americans as the insidious normalization of centuries of hatred toward Native Americans. In doing so, unwitting perpetrators like the Anderson High School staff will not only realize that their condemnation of the graffiti reifies White hate, but also goes against the best ideals of American society: “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” as well as “justice for all.” American society must coalesce around those lofty ideals and put an end to using egregious Native American stereotyping in mascots and sports names.

We are hopeful audience coalescence can move American society toward social justice, and their advocacy and activism have produced some promising results. Through our activities in the AAA and SLA's LSJ Task Group we were able to put forward an initiative for the AAA to issue a public statement condemning the use of sports mascots and racist monikers. The AAA Executive Committee approved the statement on March 20, 2015 and can be found on the Association website (americananthro.org). We have presented at conferences as coauthors, as well as independently, to diverse audiences and venues. Each presentation was a new opportunity to expose the hypocrisy behind the use of Native American mascots and names, as well as to build a coalition that would distribute the work across disciplines, audiences, and communities. In each case, audience members realized that their own lack of awareness of the harm the stereotypes and racist monikers caused for Native American youth was an aspect

of naturalized racism. This realization prompted understanding and alignment toward redressing the harmful practices and public displays.

One of the critical components for audience coalescence is the dual intention of identifying the problem as well as providing a means to remedy the problem. It was clear to us that promoting knowledge of the injustice behind White racism toward Native Americans is only the first step. We know we have to also continue to empower allies and advocates to take their own advocacy to their audiences and communities. That is why we continue to address this issue in our classes, in our writing, and in our professional public presentations. The key message for potential allies is to go from “making a difference” to “being the difference.” We believe that “to combat centuries of colonialism and racism, it is essential to turn audiences into networks of social justice . . . [becoming] active participants in envisioning a socially just present and future” (Avineri and Perley 2019: 154–5).

There are hopeful signs that those coalitions are taking root and that change is happening. Such changes include retiring mascots and changing mascot names as tangible remediation efforts, but also include changes in intangible properties such as ideational awareness as genuine respect and honor for America’s first peoples. The summer of 2020 highlights the significance of audience coalescence through the current social justice movement Black Lives Matter. The call to address police violence against Black men was expanded to include systemic racism against all minoritized populations. This widening of focus brought new coalitions of activists together condemning the use of the racist moniker of the Washington professional football team. Resultant public and economic pressure on Dan Snyder, owner of the Washington professional football team, compelled him to retire the racist moniker despite his earlier “NEVER” stance. While this is a significant accomplishment for social justice there is still much to do. During this past Super Bowl, fans witnessed ongoing displays of racist behavior on the part of Kansas City Chiefs fans. There was outrage from Native American activists, but also from other Kansas City Chiefs fans. One account from a chef in a Kansas City restaurant witnessed the “tomahawk chop” in his restaurant and commented “It doesn’t show Kansas City pride . . . it makes us look stupid.”¹⁷ The challenge before us is to address the stupidity that naturalized racism continues to succor and reveal the pathology of bullying that is perpetuated by these racist activities. Our contribution to this chapter is our latest example of coalition-building and healing for both Native Americans, as well as all Americans. It is our hope the readers of this chapter become aware of the harm mascots and monikers inflict on Native American youth and join our coalition to remediate the injustice these displays of naturalized racism perpetuate.

(Mis)Understanding the “30 million word gap”

Eric J. Johnson

In a promotional video for his Early Learning Initiative, former president Barack Obama makes the following claim: “We know that right now, during the first three years of life, a child born into a low-income family hears 30 million fewer words than a child born into a well-off family” (Obama 2014). The fact that a president of the United States highlighted this statistic about language and socioeconomic status as taken-for-granted knowledge (i.e., “We know that . . .”) is significant and merits interrogation. Although few would argue against the president’s use of research to back his vision for enhancing educational opportunities for underprivileged families, his use of the “30 million words” statistic reflects an underlying ethnocentric and classist view of language that: 1) is not grounded in the science of linguistics; and 2) continues to perpetuate, rather than mitigate, social inequities. This topic resonates deeply with my previous experiences as a high school teacher in a low-income school district, my current role as a faculty member in a teacher preparation program, and my commitment to language and social justice-oriented research.

What is the “language gap”?

The notion of the 30 million “word gap” stems from Hart and Risley’s (1995) research on communication patterns in families from different socioeconomic levels, and claims that by age 3, children from more affluent households are exposed to approximately 30 million more words than children from low-income backgrounds. They concluded that this “word gap” is responsible for inferior cognitive development and eventual lower academic achievement (Hart and Risley 1995). I argue that the “language gap” is a misleading, and dangerous, concept because it is founded on a deficit perspective of low-income and linguistically diverse communities and prioritizes language patterns in school settings as inherently superior. Their conclusions consider the quantity of words to which children are exposed as the principal factor in cognitive development, which eventually manifests in their (in)capacity for learning in school settings. This view of language does not take into consideration the sociocultural influences involved in language development and communicative competence, nor is it based on describing features of language from a linguistic perspective. Scrutinizing the “language gap” through an anthropological lens brings these

types of issues to the foreground and counters them with an asset-based narrative of language use and communication.

Despite serious theoretical and methodological weaknesses in Hart and Risley's study, the "word gap" concept has been widely embraced by policymakers and educators across the US. Moreover, current research premised on the "word gap" has extended across multiple linguistic dimensions, including quality of communication (Hoff 2003), language processing (Fernald et al. 2013), and health-related issues stemming from language use (Crow and O'Leary 2015). This expanded genealogy of the "word gap" is commonly described as "language gap" research. Unfortunately, the "language gap" literature generally omits research in fields such as linguistic anthropology, applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, and educational linguistics that have demonstrated how to view language based on communicative competence within, and across, different sociocultural contexts. In response to these areas of "language gap" research, there has been a growing body of literature that explicitly calls out this concept in terms of its sociolinguistic inaccuracies (Sperry et al. 2019), underlying deficit orientations (Avineri et al. 2015), theoretical and methodological deficiencies (Johnson 2017, Paugh and Riley 2019), influence on educators' perspectives of their students (Adair et al. 2017), and its prevalence across broader social discourses in the media, academia, and policy spheres (Johnson et al. 2017).

The swell of "language gap" scholarship over the past twenty years has incited a spike in programs and policies aimed at mitigating linguistic "deficiencies" of families from low-income backgrounds. Large-scale initiatives like *Providence Talks*, the *Thirty Million Words Initiative*, and *Too Small to Fail* are examples of programs designed to "help" children by changing how their parents talk. Moreover, the increase of "language gap" programs and research has received widespread publicity in the public media (Pondiscio 2019), further reinforcing deficit orientations toward culturally and linguistically diverse communities while also promoting dominant group norms of language use (Johnson et al. 2017). Even though a few media articles that problematize the "language gap" do exist (Rothschild 2016), the vast majority are based on the misguided assumption that language patterns found in school contexts are inherently superior to those of low-income communities.

Counternarratives to the "language gap"

Highlighting educational disparities across different socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural groups is also a major concern in anthropological research; though,

in fields like linguistic anthropology, it is common for researchers to look at a variety of sociocultural factors (e.g., educator demographics, teacher preparation, policy development, standardized testing, etc.) as contributing to academic challenges. It is important to acknowledge and applaud “language gap” researchers’ efforts to point out socioeconomic inequities and to draw attention to the importance of language in academic development. That said, I am critical of the way the “language gap” assumes the linguistic superiority of a certain variety of language—school-based English in this case—without recognizing the ideological influences that feed into that perspective. During the 2014 meeting of the SLA’s LSJ Task Group, this topic was brought up as a significant point of concern. Since then, I have engaged in collaborations with others to promote dialogue surrounding the “language gap,” including:

1. university teaching and guest lecturing;
2. formal academic publishing and conference presentations;
3. media exposure;
4. professional development workshops; and
5. community outreach presentations.

As an instructor in a teacher preparation program, my lessons involving the “language gap” focus on how to equip students with the strategies to build on their culturally and linguistically diverse students’ language abilities within academic contexts—instead of eschewing them as deficits. I have found Arnold and Faudree’s (2019) cogent examples of how to critically teach this topic in university settings especially useful. Additionally, to support instructors who are interested in integrating the “language gap” topic into their courses, the SLA provides a repository of teaching materials and resources on their website, linguisticanthrology.org (Society for Linguistic Anthropology 2017). Nevertheless, the overall scarcity of scholarship and instructional materials on how to teach counterperspectives of the “language gap” exposes the need for more pedagogical examples and guidance.

As a researcher, I have contributed to a variety of publications focused on critiquing the language gap—most notable are collaborations with colleagues in academic journals (Avineri et al. 2015; Johnson 2017) and association newsletters (Avineri et al. 2016; Blum et al. 2015). I have participated in AAA and AAAL conference panel presentations, with a primary audience of academic researchers. Scholarship is considered to be the standard through which research is validated; however, its scope may be limited in terms of broader social impact. While the “language gap” spans research disciplines in academia, few scholars commit to

turning academic advocacy into action. The LSJ Task Group is an example of how academic researchers collaborate to extend research into the public realm through teaching, writing in public outlets, offering trainings, and holding community gatherings. Considering the prevalence of pro “language-gap” research in academic literature and how it has been embraced in the media (Johnson et al. 2017), more academic scholarship that counters the “language gap” is needed.

We have also collaborated to stimulate dialogue in other contexts. One such collaboration was with LSJ colleagues to write an op-ed article in 2014, which we submitted to the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *LA Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *San Francisco Chronicle*—all of which rejected our critical take on the “language gap.” Determining the exact reasons for not being accepted for publication in these media outlets is difficult considering the volume of op-ed submissions and rejection rates for those newspapers. That said, it is disconcerting, and dubious, that none of the newspapers were open to this type of discussion at the time, especially considering the widespread media attention that “language gap” remediation programs have received. However, the *Atlantic* reached out to me and LSJ colleague Netta Avineri about an interview for an article highlighting counterperspectives to the “language gap” (Rothschild 2016). Although the article in the *Atlantic* was not published explicitly as an LSJ effort, it does demonstrate that our effort to advance this issue into the broader public view is being acknowledged. Since then, additional counterperspectives have been voiced in the media and online (Kamenetz 2018).

Finally, I have facilitated multiple workshops for educators in school districts across the state of Washington to illustrate misperceptions surrounding the “language gap” as well as strategies for rethinking classroom instruction and family engagement. For example, I have been able to deliver three professional development trainings based on countering the “language gap” at the Washington Association for Bilingual Education annual conference for educators from around the state. Although it is difficult to know how all of the participants in these workshops ultimately applied the information presented in these trainings, I have had conversations with teachers about rethinking their views toward students’ home-language skills and applying this perspective in academic settings. I have taken a similar approach during presentations for community organizations, family engagement workshops with parents, meetings with Washington’s department of education, and even at an administrative training event with a local library system. I contend that any social justice effort that engages people to consider positions of advocacy is worthwhile and should be supported, regardless of direct evidence of widespread social impact.

My emphasis has consistently involved challenging individuals to rethink commonsense notions of communication and language so that linguistic diversity is not seen as a deficit. Whereas heightening a broader awareness of linguistic strengths can propel our understanding of language diversity forward, truly moving beyond a “language gap” orientation involves reframing the conversation about the academic achievement disparities that emerge across different socioeconomic status groups. Addressing the root causes of the persistent educational inequities confronting individuals from culturally, linguistically, and economically marginalized communities merits a deeper examination of how teachers are prepared and professionally mentored to effectively engage students and families from all backgrounds. While anthropological research demonstrates that language gaps do not exist, we must recognize that the ideologically (re)produced “language gap” *concept* does very much exist. Creating safe environments to flesh out this concept’s shortcomings and allow people to reconsider their own biases is a positive step toward moving past “gaps” and forging more linguistically supportive platforms for educational reform.

Conclusion

Netta Avineri

Applied linguistic anthropology necessitates a sensitivity to time, scale, audience, positionality, modality, and impact. As these case studies demonstrate, this approach involves long-term, in-depth understanding of issues, contexts, and communities alongside active engagement in collaboration with others. It becomes evident that systemic change takes time and is an ongoing battle, with successes, challenges, and disappointments. The authors highlight how critical it is to have a supportive community of practice, such as the LSJ Task Group, with whom to collaborate when combating problematic ideologies and practices. Through an email list of committed professionals, the LSJ Task Group provides a forum for exploring complex issues and a means to mobilize and raise critical awareness toward collective action in a dynamic and responsive way. Each member of the inclusive group can become exposed to issues, approaches, and initiatives through observation and direct engagement. LSJ discussion members can see how others have engaged similar issues while they may address issues more locally (e.g., through teaching or other professional activities). In this way,

the listserv and conference meetings become fertile spaces for peer socialization into a more social justice-oriented community of practice.

This approach involves a recognition that frequently issues related to language and social justice operate at multiple scales. For example, when looking at sports team mascot names at the level of both national sports teams and local sports teams, one can see the iconization and rhematization of the stereotypes associated with the mascot's symbolic practices mapped onto indigeneity in general and vice versa. Or when Obama talks on a national stage about the "language gap" one can feel those reverberations in what happens at individual schools and with individual students. Therefore, an applied linguistic anthropology must recognize how the micro, meso, and macro levels are all connected in terms of media (e.g., I-word), policies (e.g., Census Bureau), and institutions (e.g., national sports teams, schooling).

As each of the authors discuss, their positionalities, both personal and professional, shape their interests in the issues as well as their collaborative approach to addressing them. Academics can offer these positionalities and expertise toward broader activist efforts. Their firsthand experiences provide important lessons in how to recognize one's own positionality and how to build upon that in coalition with others. As Zentella and Johnson highlight, it is essential for academics to model responsible research design and analysis to counteract pervasive, misleading arguments based on faulty assumptions. As Rosa and Perley demonstrate, racist representations of both indigenous and migrant groups take on a life of their own. These are examples of the many social issues that applied linguistic anthropologists can uniquely address through engagement in multiple venues.

In addition, this approach entails a broadening of audiences, activities, and modalities. The case studies each highlight how the authors, in collaboration with others, engage with diverse publics through presentations and conferences, op-eds and media engagement, teaching, mentorship, and beyond. Applied linguistic anthropologists are uniquely positioned to broaden their range of language practices and genres in the service of mobilizing toward social change.

Lastly, this approach highlights the importance of considering various forms of "success" and "impact." For example, some might consider the re-examination of assumptions or awareness raising as sufficient impact, whereas others may believe that policy change is a better metric of success. Activism and advocacy involve collaboration at multiple levels, and therefore an exploration of impact is central to effective social change. Reconceptualizing what impact involves within both academic and institutional structures is key to this endeavor as well (cf.,

Lawson and Sayers 2017). Overall, the authors have demonstrated how in-depth observation, reflection, and critique; recognition of one's own positionalities; processes of collaboration; and actions for social change are central to an applied linguistic anthropological approach. One must also recognize the inherent tensions involved in both exploring issues in depth while seeking to redress the societal inequities that become evident during that exploration. Through observation, critique, reflection, and collaboration, scholars of language can use these tools and dispositions to move meaningfully toward social change, justice, and liberation.

Notes

- 1 Here and throughout the chapter we have used the word “minoritized” to encapsulate both the numerical minority situation of many groups as well as the status of being positioned as marginal/subordinate regardless of numbers. For some groups, numerical minority status has particular salience (e.g., Native Americans being only 3% of the US population). “Minoritization” may also be a problematic conceptualization (e.g., Native Americans being “minoritized” rather than seen as sovereign peoples). See this chapter for “audience coalescence” as a strategy to overcome such numerical odds and reframe minoritizing ideologies.
- 2 “PULSE | English as a Second Language,” *The New York Times*, December 7, 1992: B1.
- 3 Latinu, Zentella’s alternative to Latinx, is gender non-binary and respects Spanish phonology. The authors of this chapter vary in their preference for an inclusive term.
- 4 Limited English proficient children were problematically referred to as “LEP-ers.”
- 5 Drop the I-Word. *RaceForward.org*. Available online: <https://www.raceforward.org/practice/tools/drop-i-word>
- 6 Jonathan Rosa, “Contesting Representations of Immigration,” *Anthropology News*, October 2013. Available online: <http://linguisticanthropology.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Jonathan-Rosa-Contesting-Representations-of-Immigration.pdf>
- 7 Mónica Novoa, “The Associated Press Updates Its Stylebook, Still Clings to I-Word,” *Colorlines*, November 10, 2011. Available online: www.colorlines.com/articles/associated-press-updates-its-stylebook-still-clings-i-word
- 8 Margaret Sullivan, “Readers Won’t Benefit if Times Bans the Term ‘Illegal Immigrant,’” *The New York Times*, October 2, 2012. Available online: https://publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/10/02/readers-wont-benefit-if-times-bans-the-term-illegal-immigrant/?_r=0
- 9 Cristina Costantini, “Linguistics Tell New York Times that ‘Illegal’ is Neither ‘Neutral’ nor ‘Accurate,’” *ABC News/Univision*, October 1, 2012. Available online: <http://>

- abcnews.go.com/ABC_Univision/linguists-york-times-illegal-neutral-%20accurate/story?id=17366512
- 10 Cindy Y. Rodriguez, "Language like 'Illegal Immigrant' Seen as a Challenge During Immigration Debate," *CNN*, April 4, 2013. Available online: <http://www.cnn.com/2013/04/04/us/illegal-immigrant-term-still-a-challenge>
 - 11 Gene Demby, "In Immigration Debate, 'Undocumented' Vs. 'Illegal' is More than Just Semantics," *NPR*, January 30, 2013. Available online: <https://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2013/01/30/170677880/in-immigration-debate-undocumented-vs-illegal-is-more-than-just-semantics>
 - 12 Lauren Gambino, "'No Human Being is Illegal': Linguists Argue Against Mislabeled of Immigrants," *The Guardian*, December 6, 2015. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/06/illegal-immigrant-label-offensive-wrong-activists-say>
 - 13 Cristina Costantini, "Associated Press Drops 'Illegal Immigrant' from Stylebook," *ABC News/Univision*, April 2, 2013. Available online: https://abcnews.go.com/ABC_Univision/press-drops-illegal-immigrant-standards-book/story?id=18862824
 - 14 Roque Planas, "USA Today Drops 'Illegal Immigrant,'" *The Huffington Post*, April 11, 2013. Available online: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/11/usa-today-illegal-immigrant_n_3062479.html
 - 15 Jamilah King, "Los Angeles Times Drops 'Illegal Immigrant,'" *Colorlines*, May 2, 2013. Available online: <https://www.colorlines.com/articles/los-angeles-times-drops-illegal-immigrant>
 - 16 Bert Gambini, "Research shows Native American imagery hurts all ethnic groups, says UB psychologist," The University of Buffalo news website, March 11, 2015. Available online: <http://www.buffalo.edu/research/research-services/click-implementation/announcements.host.html/content/shared/university/news/news-center-releases/2015/03/021.detail.html>
 - 17 John Eligon, "Celebrating the Kansas City Chiefs, the Chop Divides," *The New York Times*, January 29, 2020. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/29/sports/football/chiefs-tomahawk-chop.html>

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