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Published online: 30 Jun 2020.

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# Linguistic racism: its negative effects and why we need to contest it

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**ABSTRACT**

Linguistic racism is magnified when a speaker is multilingual and shuttles between different languages and language varieties. This reality is underscored in this commentary that reviews four empirical studies that comprise this special issue on linguistic racism. We see linguistic racism enacted in different forms and contexts: through racial microaggressions experienced by students who negotiate the Catalan/Spanish bilingual educational context; instances of racial prejudice encountered by international students at Australian universities; and sociolinguistics pressures placed upon members of an Australian Aboriginal community as they negotiate ratified and denigrated languages and language varieties. My commentary also highlights the need to consider the affective turn in sociolinguistics, in particular, the emotional fallout that often accompanies linguistic racism. Several suggestions on how to combat linguistic racism are also discussed.

"Doesn't seem to be speaking too eloquently here, thank god we can't hear her!" Herren wrote, according to the *Post*. "Monkey face and poor ebonic English!!! There! I feel better and am still not racist!!! Just calling it like it is!"

These cringe-worthy and racist diatribe was leveled against former U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama, a Princeton- and Harvard-educated attorney, in 2016 (Libnan 2016, para. 2; see also Cooney 2016). Perhaps even more startling was that it originated from a highly educated member of society, Dr. Michelle Herren, a pediatric anesthesiologist and a faculty member of the School of Medicine at the University of Colorado. Herren's unhinged comment was in response to a post describing the First Lady as eloquent. Crucially, Herren chose to conflate how Obama looked ('monkey face', a direct affront on her African American ethnicity) and the way she spoke (what Herren deemed as 'poor ebonic English'). Such a conflation is representative of the linguistic racism that people of color have to wrestle with in their daily lives as their wide linguistic repertoires (e.g. Obama's ability to style shift between African American English and standard American English) are overlooked, while their use of 'non-standard' English pilloried.

Indeed, linguistic racism is amplified when a speaker is multilingual and shuttles between different languages and language varieties because more often than not, her ability to translanguage (Wei 2018) is seen as a liability instead of an asset. Relatedly, in this special issue, linguistic racism, as exemplified in this collection of papers may take an explicit and overt form, as illustrated in the full frontal attack described above. However, linguistic racism can also assume an implicit and covert dimension, through paying left-handed compliments to individuals. The other (Barack) Obama, for instance, has been described as being 'articulate while black' (Alim and Smitherman

2012). Thus, as we read this significant and timely set of papers, we need to keep in mind that linguistic racism:

(1) refers to the ideologies and practices that are utilized to conform, normalize and reformulate an unequal and uneven linguistic power between language users (Dovchin 2019a, 2019b);
(2) needs to be historicized and examined in relation to the sociopolitical contexts in which multilingual speakers are embedded (Kubota in press); and
(3) has to be examined in conjunction with vitally important and adjacent work on linguicism (Skutnabb-Kangas 2015), native-speakerism (Cook 1999; Phillipson 1992) and raciolinguistics (Flores and Rosa 2015; Alim, Rickford, and Ball 2016).

In other words, we need to problematize the ideological underpinnings of linguistic racism and not turn a blind eye to committed to the challenges facing indigenous peoples. immigrant communities and international students. Also, as I write this commentary, I want to make clear from the outset that I do so from a specific place and time in that I offer the perspective of a post-colonial subject, originally from Singapore, who has made the US – a country whose checkered history is tainted by race-inspired hatred towards ethnolinguistic minorities – his home.

As noted, linguistic racism can be, and in fact often is, enacted implicitly. And this reality is communicated in Corona and Block's (2020) discussion of the racial microaggressions experienced by student story tellers who negotiate the Catalan/Spanish bilingual educational context in this issue. In their article, we learn about how a university student's attempts to position herself as a Catalan speaker are thwarted by her tutor, who insisted instead on using Spanish when interacting with Fatia because the latter was of Moroccan descent. Fatia thus comes to represent a group of foreigners of color who are denied the opportunity to learn and use Catalan. By extension, she is also denied the opportunity to mobilize a Catalan identity because students like her look different from 'native' Catalonians. While the racial microaggressions experienced by Fatia were relatively subtle in nature, those encountered by Oscar and Pedro, who were originally from Bolivia, were conspicuous. We are informed about how Oscar was openly called a 'monkey' by their Math teacher who sought to silence him by throwing some peanuts to Oscar. This image of being reduced to a monkey by their racist teacher is deplorable, to say the least, and is reminiscent of how people of color (cf. the Michele Obama episode related earlier), are dehumanized simply because of their skin color. As explained by Corona and Block (2020), these young men are denigrated by their teacher who fits them into a widely circulating cultural frame that generally positions Latin American youth as problematic and violent. The teacher's attempt to devoice Oscar and Pedro is thus a marked attempt to erase their ethnolinguistic identity and smacks of linguistic racism.

We are privy to a different of form of coercive and exclusionary measures in Dobinson and Mercieca's (2020) investigation of linguistic racism on an Australian university campus. In their article, Dobinson and Mercieca report on how linguistic racism can take two expanded forms: *linguistic invisibility* and *linguistic privilege*. With regard to the former construct, we learn about how Chinese students were invisibilized because a dogmatic English-only rule was enforced on campus. These students were therefore deprived of the option to convey and discuss complex ideas. Put differently, in the linguistic market of the Australian university in which their study was situated, Chinese was not valued; by contrast, only English was valued, and this monolingual English ideology resulted in an appreciation of the English, the home language of domestic Australian students who thus profited from linguistic privilege. This study is illuminating in that reminds us of how structural inequalities are reproduced within educational institutions which, ironically, should be social levelers. One unfortunate fallout, as Dobinson and Mercieca (2020) point out, of such linguistic racism is the loss of self-confidence and sense of identity experienced by international students.

International students are also the focus of Dovchin's (2020) paper in this issue on the psychological damage of linguistic racism inflicted on such students in Australia. In her study, the emotional aspects of being an international student are foregrounded through her discussion of *ethnic*

*accent bullying* and *linguistic stereotyping*. Disconcertingly, we learn about Van, an undergraduate student originally from Vietnam, who harbored suicidal tendencies because of the chronic ethnic accent bullying she experienced at school. Such bullying occurred in spite of Van's English proficiency. More importantly, the bullying fueled her development of an inferiority complex with regard to what she perceived to be her inadequate Australian accented English. Relatedly, we are introduced to the linguistic stereotyping of Wang and Ilhan, who hailed from China (by way of Canada) and New Zealand, respectively. A Perth transplant, Wang's confidence was eroded to the point where he contemplated suicide. Less severe, but certainly no less disturbing, is the ill treatment of Ilhan, a Somali student who spoke English as her first language. Dovchin (2020) describes how Ilhan received a left-handed and rather compliment on her 'good English'. Such a compliment constitutes another example of an implicit and covert racial microagression and invites comparison to the 'articulate while black' description of Barack Obama discussed earlier. Ilhan was thus infantilized and patronized by Australians, who mentally wrote her off as being a non-proficient English speaker because she was Muslim and attired in a hijab and abaya.

Emotions also take centerstage in Oliver and Exell's (2020) examination of the linguicism and racism experienced by Australian Aboriginal people living in a remote community. In this study, Oliver and Exell (2020) explore how Aboriginal identity was inextricably linked to place, culture and language. Their participants report on how they vacillated between (1) shame about not being able to speak standard Australian English proficiently, and (2) their general comfort and pride in communicating in Aboriginal English and Kriol. Prominent in this study are the translanguaging repertoires of Oliver and Exell's Aboriginal participants who moved quite effortlessly between these aforementioned languages and language varieties. What also stands out in this paper is the sad and stark reality that sometimes the harshest critics of individuals are members within their own community.

By focusing on the emotional consequences of linguistic racism, the latter three papers (Dobinson and Mercieca 2020; Dovchin, 2020; Oliver and Exell, 2020) underscore the importance of examining the detrimental effects of such racism on individuals. This focus on emotions is part of a larger affective turn in sociolinguistics (De Costa 2019; Wee 2016), language policy (De Costa, Park, and Wee 2019), linguistic anthropology (McElhinny 2010) and second language acquisition (Wolff and De Costa 2017) that warrants investigation. This affective turn will, however, need to be investigated in relation to enduring concerns surrounding identity and ideology (De Costa 2016) because linguistic racism is pervasive in many societies and can rear its ugly head in multiple forms. Particular attention needs to be dedicated to ideological as multilingual learners attempt to have their identities and, correspondingly, their linguistic repertoires ratified by dominant groups who may continue to cling on to elitist monolingual ideologies. Unfortunately, the linguistic practices of such minoritized multilingual learners continue to be determined by the *white listening subject* (Flores and Rosa 2015) who expects those speaking to her to conform the use of a singular and standard language. As a consequence, the actual practices (e.g. the use of translanguaging) of such learners are evaluated against a monolingual benchmark.

Additionally, as demonstrated by Corona and Block (2020) and Dovchin (2020) in this issue, linguistic minorities from immigrant groups continue to be vulnerable because of their lack of access to resources in school and society. However, we are also reminded that Aboriginal people (Oliver and Exell 2020) and international students (Dobinson and Mercieca 2020) are not immune to linguistic and social injustice. If anything, such injustice has become amplified in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic that has engulfed the world, as I pen this commentary. Chinese international students, in particular, have borne the brunt of racially motivated physical attacks (Duff 2020). Sadly, such attacks stem from nationalist and hate mongering efforts to label the virus as the 'China virus' or the 'Wuhan virus'. In Hong Kong, for example, fears among mainland Chinese students as a result of drastic language police-ing resulted in these students electing to stop speaking Putonghua in public, lest they be attacked by angry mobs because of their first language. Simply put, we witnessed a modern-day Shibboleth, gatekeeping practice being implemented in Hong Kong as locals sought to sort and sieve individuals on the basis of their languages. Perhaps even more disheartening, as one is

reminded by the Oliver and Exell (2020) paper, is how the most severe linguistic racism can sometimes originate from one's own ethnic community.

Within the US, where I currently reside, the pandemic has also magnified race and class inequities as students of color (especially Blacks and Hispanics) have seen their access to instruction curtailed because their families do not own computers or tablets to support remote learning. The situation for Spanish-speaking students, in particular, is even more dire because many have trouble catching up with English-dominant online instruction. My rationale in spotlighting COVID-19 is to underscore how linguistic racism manifests itself in these troubling and turbulent times and, in so doing, exposes structural inequalities in society. This leads us to wonder: Is there a silver bullet to combat linguistic racism? Admittedly, dismantling linguistic racism will be a Herculean effort. But one good way to start this endeavor is to design anti-racist pedagogy that (1) addresses the intertwined nature of race and language teaching, and (2) supports both students and teachers in recognizing and making visible the racialized nature of language (De Costa et al. in press).

The papers in this special issue also offer some encouraging possibilities that are worthy of further consideration. In Dobinson and Mercieca's (2020) article, for example, we learn of the potential of harnessing social media to validate the linguistic resources of students. Fiona, the international Malawian student in their study, discussed the value of the university Facebook platform for students being able to use their own languages and feel they have a digital presence and visibility. In addition, Oliver and Exell's (2020) celebration of the translanguaging practices of the Aboriginal people in their study speaks to the possibility of incorporating translanguaging-oriented pedagogical practices in schools (see García, Johnson, and Seltzer 2016, for further details) in order to arrest linguistic racism in the long term. Ultimately, we need to introduce a culture of care that attends to the socioemotional needs of students into schools. Such a culture is imperative in order to preserve the mental health of students (Dovchin 2020) and to avert instances such as the one described in Corona and Block's (2020) paper in this issue, where teachers end up treating ethnolinguistic minority students like monkeys.

## Disclosure statement

## Notes on Contributor

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