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Positionality in Curriculum Design, Pedagogy, and Research

Linguistics Society of America Webinar
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Overview

❖ Initial Encouragement
❖ Who am I?
❖ Positionality
❖ Complexion of Linguistics
❖ Consequences
❖ Parting encouragement
Initial Encouragement

❖ Please be reflective
❖ For the questions posed, answer them for yourself
❖ We are discussing folks “out there,” yes, but also folks “in here”
❖ None of us what attained definitive social consciousness
Who am I?

❖ Cis-Het Black American Man
❖ Originally from Compton, CA
❖ From a working class family
❖ First-Gen College grad
❖ I initially pursued academia as a means to make conditions better for the marginalized. And for job security (lol).
Positionality

❖ One’s subject position
❖ Think deixis (Levinson, 1983: 65)
❖ Context dependent
❖ Interacts with conceptions of social normativity (Levinson, 1979)

Positionality (and You)

- Informs one’s baseline assumptions (Wittgenstein, [1953] 2009)
- Shapes what can be seen and what is marked (Piazza & Fasulo, 2014; Andrews, 1990)
- We are subject to the culture and society to which we are exposed
- No one has lived a single day outside of their own body (except Dalton)

Insidious. (2010). Blumhouse Productions
Complexion of Linguistics

❖ So, Linguistics is pretty white…
❖ Which is to say, many linguists are white
❖ Would you know that by reading a linguistics article?
  ❖ Do you take whiteness as given?
  ❖ Do you assume that they would tell you, were the author non-white?
  ❖ Under which condition would a researcher’s positionality not be relevant to the work they produce?
❖ Is linguistic context dependent?
❖ Which of us has an objective gaze?
There are not very many Black linguists, in particular. (But many Black scholars of language…) Why is that?

Instead of broadly claiming systemic racism (yes btw), what does Linguistics do to incentivize or disincentive Black participation?

What is Linguistics? Is that variable? Who is deciding?

The “not linguistics” topics can serve as an indexical proxy for race.

An example…

Indexical Proxy (Dress Codes!)

Where is this happening in Linguistics?

https://www.tmz.com/2020/07/02/baltimore-restaurant-ouza-atlas-group-shows-proof-not-racist/

What is Linguistics?

❖ Which topics that deal with language are not linguistics?
❖ Which methods of analysis of language are not linguistics?
❖ Within Linguistics, who is likely to be interested those things?
❖ What does a narrow view of linguistics afford us?
❖ What does a narrow view of linguistics deprive us?
What Is Linguistics?

❖ “No we have never had a Black linguist in our department as a professor, grad student, or colloquium speaker. But we would be super open to it! They just have to do (or be) X.”

❖ “We don’t do (or can’t do) sociolinguistics/Linguistic Anthropology…”

❖ “My social justice work is separate from my linguistic research…”

❖ “I’ve done enough diversity work…”
Consequences

- Dave
- A participant in the my MA thesis ethnographic research
- Former Pres. of Young American for Liberty
- Took a Chicana Studies class
- Heard the content as “opinion”
- Had never taken a class where whiteness was not centered
Consequences

❖ To many students, “unmarked” content sounds like objectivity
  ❖ And “marked” content sounds like opinion
❖ Whereas only scholars who have relevant identities should avow them
❖ Whereas relevant identities overlap with marginalized positionalities
❖ Therefore, those scholars who are functionally teaching/researching from nowhere may be undermining marginalized instructors/researchers who are from somewhere
❖ Students may hear a professor speaking from a subjective stance, and dismiss that content as opinion
Parting Encouragement

- Everyone has a positionality!
- Your positionality is a resource in your teaching, research, and curriculum.
- Authors who don’t avow their positionality in their work still speak from somewhere.
- Engaging your own positionality can give license to your students and peers to exist in Linguistics.
- Also enriches your research by overtly situating it in a context.
- There is room within Linguistics for this!
Thank you!

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Looking forward to your questions!