Racial Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in the Linguistics Curriculum:

Centering linguistic diversity and justice in course design

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My focus today

Ways of

(1) Debunking common harmful misconceptions
(2) Centering traditionally "peripheral" topics
(3) Marking the unmarked
(4) Broadening the scope
(5) Building community

and Resources
My focus today

Intro-y courses

Using the example of a 100-level, no pre-req language acquisition course taught at UMich

vast majority non-majors and first/second year undergrads

(not talking about accessible design here, or classes which specifically are about linguistic discrimination, though I’ll touch on the latter briefly)
What should every student who walks away from a linguistics class know?

What should every person know about language?

s/o to Ryan Lepic, who re-thought his LING 101 class using this as an organizing principle
Debunking myths and addressing harmful common misconceptions

Topics I cover in every class

1. Sign languages, American Sign Language, cultural appropriation of, language deprivation
   • Hill (2012) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7ooYqdEdUY
   • Humphries et al. (2016)
   • Henner et al. (2017)
   • Davidson et al. (2013)
   • Lund (2015)
   • Hall et al. (2019)
   • various popular press articles written by d/Deaf people about cochlear implants
   • Hill 2020 on those pestilential signing gloves
Debunking myths and addressing harmful common misconceptions

Topics I cover in *every* class

1. Sign languages, American Sign Language, cultural appropriation of, language deprivation
2. Eugenics/"race science” and the history of linguistics
   - DeGraff (2005)
   - “Indo-Aryan,” early comparative method + connections to race science (e.g., Hutton 1999)
   - Van Cleve & Crouch (1989) on ASL and eugenics
   - Braithwaite (2020)
Debunking myths and addressing harmful common misconceptions

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1. Sign languages, American Sign Language, cultural appropriation of, language deprivation
2. Eugenics/“race science” and the history of linguistics
3. Deficit models toward multilingualism, esp. towards racialized groups, raciolinguistic ideologies:
   • languagelessness (Rosa 2016)
   • “native speakers” and racism (lots of great work in ELT, e.g., Ramjattan 2019)
Debunking myths and addressing harmful common misconceptions

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3. Deficit models toward multilingualism (esp. towards racialized groups)
4. Assimilationist policies against First Nations, boarding schools, language reclamation
   • Hinton (2016)
   • Leonard (2018)
   • indigenous.engineering @indigenousAI
   • Videos produced by Natives for non-Natives
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4. Assimilationist policies against First Nations, boarding schools, language reclamation
5. African-American Language(s)
   - Lanehart (2015)
   - Holliday (2019)
   - Rickford & King (2016)
   - various podcasts (e.g., The Stoop, s/o to Kelly Wright), clips from Talking Black in America
Debunking myths and addressing harmful common misconceptions

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focus on videos, articles (of all types) in which speakers, community members share their own scholarship, stories, experiences, and ways of thinking/knowing

(not a new idea!)
Students consistently list these as the most significant things they learn in my courses.

These topics are also consistently mentioned as topics which they’ve not encountered before.
Not exhaustive list of what “should” be covered!

I prioritize topics

• that students tend to be miseducated about
• have policy implications (things that might be on a ballot or platform)
• and, especially, what will resonate with students coming from linguistically minoritized backgrounds

I include these topics in learning objectives and major assessments (e.g., along with knowing what the “two-word stage” is), to demonstrate that they are “core”
Centering topics

Think about traditionally excluded languages, communities, scholars, disciplines in conjunction with teaching core concepts

e.g., avoid sticking peripheralized topics (such as language development in multilingual contexts) on their own at the end of the term — we can teach about phonological learning in monolingual and multilingual contexts at the same time!
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*See also Kendra Calhoun’s talk at the 2nd Annual Advancing African American Linguist(ic)s conf and forthcoming paper in Language!*
I start and end with Karmiloff-Smith (1998) because

- it sets up theoretical approaches which are relevant throughout the course, the main points are accessible (with guidance)
- it’s about Williams Syndrome; by starting out the course with a paper on this topic, we’re not letting ourselves push “atypical” development to the margins
- this paper then becomes a reference point throughout the semester

credit to Farrell Ackerman’s Intro Human Development course
Multilingualism is discussed from the beginning as the norm (which we know it is!)

Examples from multilingual contexts are given wherever possible throughout the term

Some topics (MLU) are discussed in multilingual contexts before being discussed in monolingual contexts (Quick et al. 2019)
Centering topics in Intro to Language Acquisition

Acquisition of complex morphosyntax and semantics is introduced via Green (2004), Green & Roeper (2007), on child language acquisition of African American Language

Green (2004) also discusses AAL more generally, which is perfect for the context of this course
When discussing language socialization and language and schooling, I assign Meek (2018), which discusses these topics in the context of Kaska language revitalization programs in the Yukon.
Centering topics in Intro to Language Acquisition

Instead of having an “ASL acquisition” day, I weave examples from ASL throughout, to talk about

• articulatory pressures on acquisition
• types of words which are learned earlier/later crosslinguistically
• joint attention and acquisition
• acquisition of multimodal constructions, acquisition of spoken languages + gesture
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Nice to come back to a few languages as examples (I also use Malayalam a lot!), and reflects the lit I’m familiar with
Centering topics

don’t just use these languages to talk about discrimination (but I do include information about that in the context of myths/common harmful misconceptions)

try to highlight scholars (academic and non-academic) from these communities, in readings, videos, guest speakers (and compensate!)

remember to tell untenured/precariously employed folks if you use their work in your syllabi!
Broadening the scope

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think about what classes are required in your programs and which are optional. our curricula reflect our values.
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Lots of important and relevant work being done in non-linguistics departments — many of those are directly relevant to the questions here. We’re all dealing with the consequences of historical disciplinary wall-building.
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remember: over 40% of participants in our survey of linguists (Namboodiripad, Hou, & Occhino 2019) have been told they are not linguists or that their work is not linguistics
Students are given several readings, including Hart & Risley’s original paper, a 2015 invited forum in the Journal of Linguistics Anthropology on the “Language Gap”, Dudley-Maring & Lucas (2009), Flores (2013), Sperry et al. (2019), and a few popular press articles, etc. and asked to summarize and evaluate the issue in a short essay.
Final paper in Intro Language Acquisition

Debunking the “word gap”

They are not asked to “take sides”, but to summarize how the arguments are being constructed, explain what the different methods are, compare papers written in different fields, for different audiences

(lots of scaffolding for this throughout the semester, connects with weekly/daily assignments)
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Centers racial justice issues, broadens scope, addresses harmful misconceptions which have policy consequences

(and major assessments should hit several of these goals!)
Ask students to critically engage with the texts and topics of the course

• Is this based solely on “typical” development?
• What methods do they use? Can we use these methods in all languages?
• What’s the background of the author(s)?
• What theoretical approach is assumed? Does this hold up if we don’t make all of the assumptions of this approach?
• How WEIRD are the participants? How WISPy are the languages? (Written, Institutionally supported, Standardized, Prestigious; Sedarous & Namboodiripad 2020)
Many feel alone in their departments doing this type of work: Let’s find each other!

- Listserv (David will send more info!)
  - Evaluate the changes you made
  - Ask “What was the most interesting or significant thing you learned this term?”
- Keep in touch, resource-share during this especially isolating time!
Thinking about power dynamics in community building

• Are you asking someone who is precariously employed, pre-tenure, a graduate student, in a historically peripheralized field of linguistics, from marginalized backgrounds to suddenly do a lot of uncompensated work to make your course/curriculum better?
• Are your Black colleagues/students (if applicable) the only ones who are being asked to do this work in your department?
• All of this is just the beginning — we all need to do the reading ourselves!
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cite, invite, compensate!
Resources

- With Sonja Lanehart (U of AZ) & Hayley Heaton (UMich PhD 18): Social Justice Ling 101
  - Asked folks who had been teaching courses about language, discrimination, and social justice to share their materials and syllabi
  - These are difficult and necessary courses to teach, and community-building is helpful!
- Email me savithry@umich.edu — I’m happy to share materials — and receive feedback!
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also: I’m working with Hannah Gibson (Essex), Kristina Riedel (University of the Free State), and Jacqueline Luck (Nelson Mandela University) on a survey about the state of African languages and epistemologies in linguistic departments! Watch out for it on LinguistList and other listservs!