



Linguistic Society of America

Statement on Race

Approved by the LSA Executive Committee, May 2019

Preamble

The Linguistic Society of America recognizes the essential intellectual contributions of people with various racial identities to the study of language. Furthermore, given our distinct insights into communication and culture, linguists are well positioned to contribute to social justice and equality in ways that benefit the discipline, speakers, communities, and academia. Following statements and resources on race issued by the flagship organizations of neighboring disciplines, including the American Anthropological Association, the American Psychological Association, and the American Sociological Association, this living statement aims to foster dialogue and encourage linguists to critically reflect on the changing nature of academic, social, cultural, and linguistic understandings of race.

It is a fundamental insight of sociolinguistics that the ideologies that frame the language practices of racialized communities as inherently deficient play a key role in reproducing White racial supremacy. A consideration of race, racialization, and racial implications of linguistic scholarship is important for linguists who study the relationship of social factors to language as well as those for whom social factors are not the primary focus of linguistic research, as all linguistic research has the potential to reproduce or challenge racial notions.

In addition, there is a greater need for racial inclusion in linguistics. The critical knowledge and knowledge systems of scholars from backgrounds underrepresented in higher education are invaluable to the study of language. The work of White scholars has historically been privileged in linguistics, including in the LSA, while the work of scholars from other racial backgrounds has not been at the forefront of the field. This inequality both results from and leads to a lack of diversity among students and faculty in linguistics departments.

Accordingly, this statement has several, interrelated aims: to address inequality in linguistics, to inform research on language and race and its intersections, to help empower and welcome people from various racial backgrounds into linguistics, and to broaden the conversation on race so that future work can best promote diversity and inclusion. The end of this statement sets forth goals and

strategies for linguists to work toward greater inclusion on individual, programmatic, and institutional levels.

Advances in the Study of Language and Race in Linguistic Scholarship

While definitions of race have changed over time, race is widely viewed by scholars in numerous disciplines as a social construct, rather than a biological fact. Racial identities, ideologies, and practices are expressed locally and vary widely, with models of race differing throughout history and across the world. At the same time, issues of race, color, gender, class, education, and disability, among other categories, are often interrelated in historical and contemporary ways that extend across national lines due to forces of colonialism and capitalism. Social constructs of race additionally intersect with other forms of social identification and grouping, in ways that also intersect with language.

Historically, definitions of language and race have been inextricably linked. Language has been central to how race has been theorized and expressed in linguistics, and the concept of race has been integral to how languages have been defined and studied. Taxonomic approaches to language classification that developed as part of processes of colonialism were reliant on racial categorizations, which have served to racialize human groups and have informed the construction of race in linguistics.

The study of linguistics has also contributed to cultural description, understanding, and empowerment of people from various racial groups. Language is a social resource through which culture and identity are expressed. The study of language has allowed individuals and communities to describe, pass on, and share their rich social and cultural legacies with a mind toward cultural preservation, transmission, agency, and sovereignty. Scholars from various racial backgrounds have contributed to linguistics in ways that shape a comprehensive understanding of race and how language plays a role in racial identification and racialized processes.

Areas of Linguistic Research and Advocacy in Relation to Race

In the United States in particular, racial classification has been central to government and social policy. Linguistics has examined and addressed the linguistic consequences of racist policies and practices on an institutional level, including the systematic eradication of Native American languages, Deaf schools operating under the approach of Oralism, the xenophobic English Only Movement, and educational classifications that derive from damaging beliefs about the relationship between race and intelligence. Linguists have also worked assiduously to dismantle deficit notions that surround the languages and language varieties spoken by members of racial groups, including African-Americans, Latinx populations, Native Americans, and Asian-Americans, though more work remains to be done.

Linguistic research has also investigated the relationship between language and personally mediated racism, which concerns prejudicial attitudes about abilities, motives, and intentions of others according to race. Such racism can manifest as linguicism or linguistic prejudice—for instance, devaluing and marginalizing certain languages in public and institutional spheres, or suggesting that members of racial or ethnic groups who do not communicate in dominant ways are deviant or deficient. Personally mediated racism may therefore contribute to internalized racism,

which is the acceptance by members of stigmatized races of negative ideologies and messages about their own abilities and intrinsic value. Linguistic research shows that internalized racism has generally manifested through the concept of linguistic insecurity; it also can relate to the refusal to speak or value one's own stigmatized language or language variety due to assumptions of cultural or intellectual inferiority.

Future Directions: Needed Research on Race and Language in Linguistics

More research in linguistics is needed to explore how race intersects with other social categories and forms of social identification and grouping, particularly in ways that are not presented in a binary frame. Such work must also be triangulated with evidence deriving from rich, detailed social and cultural information, to ensure that speakers of languages and language varieties can express their own ideas about their own racial identities and that those ideas are represented in linguistic research. Such an approach is especially important with speakers who do not fit easily within the closed set of racial categories often used in sociolinguistic research. This insight is particularly relevant when working with speakers who identify as more than one race, as academic awareness and inclusion of this population has lagged behind rapidly changing demographic patterns. Thus, not only is it the ethical responsibility of linguists to accurately reflect speakers' identities in research, but monoracial classifications also may obscure important aspects of identity that prove important to how linguists interpret and describe ethnolinguistic variation.

It is also important for linguists to explicitly examine the connection between racism and capitalism as well as racism and colorism, both within and outside communities of color. At present, scholarship and inclusion efforts in linguistics have focused primarily on personally mediated and internalized versions of racism but have not fully addressed institutional racism or the nature of linguists' relationship to it, as scholars and as a discipline. Finally, it is important for future work to integrate qualitative and quantitative examinations of race in ways that aim for social justice. Rather than having a focus on linguistic features or merely counting speakers, there is a need for models that more explicitly aim to empower, rather than simply describing or valuing, the voices of underrepresented speakers.

Goals and Strategies for Supporting Anti-Racist Efforts within Linguistics

There is no linguistic justice without racial justice. To include those within the discipline of linguistics and to extend these efforts outward requires that linguists actively work to promote equity and social justice in ways that benefit underrepresented scholars and communities of color. This section offers a blueprint for greater inclusion on individual, programmatic, and institutional levels.

Creating a racially inclusive community:

Linguists must be active participants in creating an intellectually inclusive community. For linguists seeking to mentor and support students of color, listening to and respecting their experiences is crucial, as is acknowledging and addressing rather than overlooking or denying the role of the discipline of linguistics in the reproduction of racism. To ensure equity and inclusion in the theory, practice, and teaching of linguistics, framing efforts with a linguistic empowerment approach can help ensure that the institutional racism that leads to linguistic injustice is disrupted.

Building community and engaging in constructive conversations:

Linguists must reject the marginalization of the intellectual interests of those who are traditionally underrepresented in the discipline and the profession. Linguists must continue to scrutinize and dismantle privilege within linguistics, particularly resisting within-discipline exclusionary practices and rhetoric that position some scholars, sub-disciplines, institutions, research areas and so forth as worthier than others and that thereby make racially restorative work more challenging. Linguists must embrace an inclusive cross-disciplinary approach, one that avoids reifying exclusionary boundaries and instead draws underrepresented scholars and those who work with underrepresented communities into conversations and takes seriously what they have to say, even when it departs from the taken-for-granted assumptions of the field of linguistics.

Carrying out research that furthers these lines of inquiry:

Some of the questions that can guide future, fruitful research on issues related to race and linguistics include:

- How are theories of race and previous work on race operationalized in linguistics and linguistic research? What methods or forms of analysis should linguists use to best capture the contemporary realities of how race and language intersect?
- What racial questions are currently being asked in linguistics and does devaluation of certain questions lie along racial lines?
- How might linguistic research itself, in its questions, methods, assumptions, and norms of dissemination, reproduce or work against racism?
- What existing racial theories is linguistics drawing from and which ones should linguists work to further include?
- What can linguistics contribute to the understanding of race in other disciplines? What can linguists learn from other disciplines to contribute to linguists' understanding of race?
- How can people from underrepresented racial groups be empowered in linguistics?

Conclusion

Any effort such as this statement is never complete. Notions of race, and discussions about it, are constantly expanding, changing, and even in dispute. As this is a living statement, comments from LSA members, other linguists, and readers of all academic and personal backgrounds are welcome and invited.

References:

Charity Hudley, Anne H., Christine Mallinson, Mary Bucholtz, Nelson Flores, Nicole Holliday, Elaine Chun, and Arthur Spears. (2018). "Linguistics and Race: An Interdisciplinary Approach Towards an LSA Statement on Race." *Proceedings of the Linguistic Society of America* volume 3, p. 8:1-14. <https://journals.linguisticsociety.org/proceedings/index.php/PLSA/article/view/4303> doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.3765/plsa.v3i1.4303>.

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Timeline:

3/10/2018: First draft submitted for review online at <http://charityhudleymallinson.com/> and to LSA 2018 "Towards an LSA Symposium on Race" Panelists; feedback incorporated

5/5/2018: Second draft submitted for review to the LSA Executive Committee

8/6/2018: Revision submitted to LSA Executive Committee with LSA EC feedback incorporated

8/25/2018: Revision submitted to LSA Executive Committee with further LSA EC feedback incorporated

9/1/2018: Revised draft hosted on LSA website for open comment

1/5/2019: Feedback from open comments incorporated

1/23/2019: Submitted to LSA Secretariat

5/4/2019: Approved by LSA Executive Committee

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