Language and the Reproduction of White Supremacy

Friday, June 28, 2019
Announcements

• My sincere apologies for not providing a warning about the extremely offensive and violent language in some of the course readings (especially Bonilla-Silva’s)
  • We’ll try to label all such readings with a warning in future
  • If you encounter unlabeled readings, please alert us so we can add a warning label

• Now/soon on Orbund: A second autoethnographic example
  • Joseph Sung-Yul Park, “My Name: An Autoethnographic Reflection”
Posting comments during class

• You can now post comments at any point in the class period using the URL at the top of the screen
• You may post using your name or anonymously, as you prefer
• The same classroom rules apply: Be careful about the content and tone of your posts
• We’ll check in on the posts periodically throughout the class
Introductions of new class members

• Your name and pronouns
• Undergrad/grad/faculty, home institution, field(s) and subfield(s) of interest
• What is your racial and/or ethnic identity? (however you interpret these terms)
• What do you hope to get from this class?
Race, racism, and whiteness

• Race is a system for creating and classifying human groups in order to dominate them on the basis of perceived physical and/or cultural difference
  - Used to justify imperialism, chattel slavery, and settler colonialism
• Every racial classification system is a hierarchy
  - Whiteness is always positioned at the top of the hierarchy
• **white supremacy**: The perpetuation of the sociopolitical dominance of whiteness and white people through both:
  - Large-scale institutional and structural processes
  - Everyday acts (including language use)
• **hegemony**: Structural domination of one group by another primarily through ideology rather than coercion
  - Racial hegemony is often accomplished by focusing on issues other than race (such as language)
Raciolinguistic ideologies

• Ideologies that:
  • Treat race and language as natural, commonsense categories that are closely bound together
  • Link racialized groups to (stigmatized) ways of using language (Flores & Rosa 2015; Rosa & Flores 2017)
  • “Looking like a language, sounding like a race” (Rosa’s 2019 book title)
• At the structural level, they are often enacted through racist policies
• At the individual level, these are often enacted through microaggressions
Microaggressions as a tool of white supremacy

• Everyday linguistic or other communicative acts that call attention to social difference (markedness) in ways that marginalize and/or devalue the target
  • May or may not be intended as an insult
• Reproduce structural inequality
  • Even if the target doesn’t view the act as hurtful
• Often difficult to challenge because of deflective white discourse strategies
  • counterexample strategy: ”I have a Black friend who doesn’t mind if I use the N-word”
  • hypersensitivity strategy: “You’re too sensitive—it’s just a joke”
  • false equivalency strategy: “I wouldn’t be offended” if the situation were reversed
Discussion

• Introduce yourself to someone near you (if you don’t know them) and discuss the following:
• What raciolinguistic ideologies have you encountered about each of the following groups in the United States?
• In other words, how does each group supposedly use language, according to popular belief?
• Hint: Raciolinguistic policies and microaggressions are often a clue to this
  • African Americans (and other Black Americans?)
  • Asian Americans (and Pacific Islanders?)
  • Latinxs
  • Native Americans
  • white Americans
Common (and completely false) U.S. raciolinguistic ideologies

• African Americans
  • Supposedly speak in “slang” or “ungrammatically”

• Asian Americans (and also Pacific Islanders?)
  • Supposedly have an “accent” and don’t speak English well (even if they were born in the US)

• Latinx
  • Supposedly don’t speak either Spanish or English well so they “have to” switch between the two languages

• Native Americans
  • Supposedly have “lost” their languages (Meek 2011), speak “dialects,” speak in “broken English,” or don’t speak at all (!)

• white Americans
  • Supposedly always/only speak “standard” English
    • My proposed alternative term: Hegemonic American Vernacular English (HAVE)
The folk theory of racism (Hill 2008)

• the dominant way that racism is understood in the United States

• Based on two ideologies
  • the ideology of referentialism: For something to count as an instance of racism it must overtly refer to race
    • e.g., racial slurs, hate speech, openly discriminatory laws
  • the ideology of personalism: For someone to count as a racist they must have racist intent

• This folk theory enables people to engage in racist discourse while denying or sometimes not even being aware that they’re doing so
The structural theory of racism (Spears 1999)

• Racism isn’t just about individual intentions but also about cumulative effects
• Racism is primarily a problem of unjust social and political structures and processes, not a problem of individual attitudes
  • However, racism can only be perpetuated—or challenged—through individual and collective social agency, especially through discourse
The two sides of racism

• **militant racism**
  - “exceptional white supremacy” (Rosa & Bonilla 2017)
  - virulent, violent, visible, audible, proud
  - often individual (less so all the time)

• **mainstream racism**
  - “quotidian white supremacy” (Rosa & Bonilla 2017)
  - in denial about its own existence
  - often well-intentioned
  - often structural (currently)
  - often difficult (for white people) to see/hear
The mutual dependence of forms of white racism (Bucholtz ms.)

• Mainstream racism is the aspirational model for militant racism
• Militant racism provides plausible deniability for mainstream racism
• These two forms of racism currently use similar discourse strategies
  • Framing whiteness as vulnerable rather than powerful
Strategy 1: Colorblind and colormute racism

• **colorblind racism** (Bonilla-Silva 2002)
  - Until recently, the dominant form of racism in the US since the Civil Rights Era
  - The denial of the relevance and significance of race and racism: the “anything but race” strategy
  - “I don’t see color”; “It has nothing to do with race”

• **colormuteness**: The reluctance to name race (Pollock 2005, *Colormute*)
Strategy 2: Disavowal of racism

• Individual disavowals of racist intent
• May take the form of “I’m not a racist, but...” (followed by a racist statement)
• May involve a blanket denial of racist intent: “I don’t have a racist bone in my body”
Strategy 3: Appropriation of the discourse of minoritized groups

• Use of an activist lexicon designed to challenge sociopolitical oppression (see also Muwwakkil 2019)
  • “diversity,” “heritage,” “culture,” “minority,” “vulnerable,” “exclusion,” “uncomfortable,” “isolated,” “safe space” …

• The claim to be the target of “reverse racism” (Bucholtz 2011)
  • “Reverse racism” is impossible because people of color as a group don’t hold institutional power over white people as a group
Conclusion

• Race was invented and operates as a system of human oppression
• White people have developed numerous discourse strategies to uphold white supremacy and protect whiteness, especially when their hegemony is called into question
• Next week, we’ll discuss:
  • How racialized groups resist this system by using race and language for identity and self-empowerment
  • How to recognize and challenge the white supremacy of linguistics