

Review

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Review

An Analysis of Three Episodes in my Life from the Sociolinguistics Perspective

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Introduction

In sociolinguistics, considering language from the perspective of race has a long history (Grieser, 2021). From this perspective, one of the challenges that language teachers from diverse backgrounds face is the racialization of their language. This refers to the tendency to be judged based on race, ethnicity, and accents rather than linguistic abilities. This can lead to stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination towards English teachers who speak differently from the perceived 'standard' English. Moreover, the dichotomy between standard and non-standard English is also controversial in this context. The concept of standard English has been a topic of debate for many years, with different perspectives and arguments. On the one hand, some scholars argue that unmarked standard English spoken by a certain group of white, privileged, and affluent people should be taught. On the other hand, others argue that there is no such thing as standard English and that students should be exposed to the different varieties of English spoken worldwide, known as World Englishes. Promoting linguistic and cultural diversity and recognizing the value of non-standard varieties of English is considered necessary by some sociolinguists.

This paper aims to explore the issue of racialization that language teachers from diverse backgrounds face and to answer the questions : (1) Is there a standard English that should be taught and (2) Should students be exposed to World Englishes? The paper will examine the various perspectives and arguments surrounding this issue, drawing on sociolinguistic research and theory and three episodes in my life to comprehensively understand the topic and its implications for sociolinguistics.

Literature Review

The racialization of language teachers from diverse backgrounds has been a topic of research, observation, and discussion in sociolinguistics for many years. I would like to bring in the three articles of Aneja (2016), Pham (2014) and Park (2012) which question the dichotomy of Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) and Non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) that originated from the racialization. Firstly, Aneja (2016) adopts a poststructuralist approach to analyze four 'narrative portraits' of language teachers in their respective teaching degrees. Two teachers, April, an American Caucasian, and Oliver from China and they seem to fit neatly in the traditional categories of 'NEST' and 'NNEST' respectively. This means April is broadly considered speaking 'standard English' but Oliver is not. The following two participants, Mark - a first-generation college African American and Neha - an Indian, grew up speaking broadly considered 'nonstandard' American English varieties. Through the poststructuralist lens, Aneja (2016) shows that none of the participants fall neatly into the dichotomized nativeness and nonnativeness created for them. Instead, all individuals are speakers with various characteristics who continuously negotiate, construct and resist their (non)nativeness across contexts. Similarly, Pham (2014) also draws on the poststructuralist theory of Norton's (2000) to understand the constant 'site of struggle' of identity and language ideology transformation. She studies Asian international postgraduate students from Vietnam, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, and China in an MEd in TESOL program at an Australian university to depict how NNESTs struggle and transform their language ideology so they proudly consider themselves legitimate speakers and teachers of English (Miller, 2007). Pham reveals that the knowledge from a

course unit about 'an awareness of the right to speak' (Norton Pierce, 1995, p.18), the discussion of accents (Rampton, 1997), and bilingual and multilingual speakers (Cook, 1999) informs and helps participants contest racist stereotypes (e.g., the native speaker fallacy (Phillipson, 1992); the NEST/NNEST dichotomy) which are firmly embedded in the TESOL field. Thirdly, Park (2012) reveals a remarkable language ideology transformation through snapshots of a Chinese woman before and during a TESOL program in the U.S. Park (2012) depicts the participant's initial powerless feeling and lack of confidence in her English proficiency when she compares her linguistic capability with that of NESTs because of her initial ideologies about 'legitimate owner and user of English' (Canagarajah, 1999). She then embraces and celebrates her multicompetent bilingual identity thanks to an inspiring teacher mentor in her teaching practicum. In the article, Park discourages the NEST/NNEST dichotomy and the so-called standard English because it overlooks multiple strengths and uniqueness of NNESTs (e.g., the ability to explain English grammar from their experience as English language learners (ELLs; Medgyes, 1999).

The cross-cutting theme across the three articles is the commonality in all participants' language ideology transformation process. They come from marginalized or racialized backgrounds, so they experience an inferior complex and lack of confidence in their language proficiency mainly because of (a) The NEST/NNEST dichotomy; (b) The native speaker fallacy; and (c) stereotypes about accent and race. Thanks to their teaching experience and education, they acknowledge that NESTs and NNESTs have unique strengths and challenges (Park, 2012; Medgyes, 1999). Scholars then abolish the above-marginalized notions, the so-called standard English and draw on their strengths to claim their legitimacy and help their students believe that they are also legitimate speakers of English (Pham, 2014). For instance, Lam and Sunny, changed the way they feel about themselves from being inferior to equal to NEST (Pham, 2014). They used to be desperate for an American accent because their Asian society values American and British English. Fortunately, the course unit helps them realize that English is a global language (Lam's writing) and Korean accent is part of her identity (Sunny's writing). Therefore, they become confident in their speech and no longer want to imitate any accent. They pay it forward by instilling the same confidence in their future students. Lam wrote, 'The first thing I will do when I come back to teach is to make my students think about their own standpoint, their position. If students view themselves as legitimate speakers of English, they will develop their competence in a positively natural way.' (Pham, 2014, p.17). Sunny would advocate that 'accent is not important, it is part of your identity and that whatever accent you have, you are a legitimate speaker of English (Pham, 2014, p.17). Likewise, Neha grew up in Mumbai and spoke an English variety (Aneja, 2016). She became accustomed to the marginalization of her English and race when pursuing her graduate degree in the U.S. She considered her college students' perspective 'It's bad enough that your teacher's Brown... and to top it, she doesn't sound like you expect her to sound.' (Aneja, 2016, p.586). These insecurities forced her to mimic an American accent and use her last name 'Soni' to sound more American. Despite the stressful process of shifting identities, Neha still took her multifaceted background as a resource. She spoke Bengali to build relationships with her Bangladeshi students. She also incorporated her students' home languages and cultures into lessons through translanguaging (García, 2009) and discussion about holidays and customs. Next, teachers should be aware of multiple identities they can explore and enact, including NNESTs, bilingual, multilingual, or speakers of World Englishes (Aneja, 2016; Park, 2012). Identities could be 'contradictory and ambivalent' (Pham, 2014, p.18), 'a site of struggle', and 'changing over time' (Norton, 2000, p.125-128).

Analysis of 3 Episodes in my Life

I will use a language teacher's lens to continue the discussion on racialization, on whether unmarked standardized English exists and whether students should be exposed to language varieties. My experience as a language teacher of color using English as a second language aligns with the language teachers' experience in the above research. I also experienced discrimination and injustice in pay rates from the first day I entered this TESOL field. I gradually felt incompetent and inferior to White language teachers from inner-circle countries such as the U.S., England, South

Africa, Australia, New Zealand, etc. I used to believe there was a standard English that students should learn and practice and that White teachers deserve higher pay rates even for no rationale. However, after I came to Philadelphia, a cosmopolitan city that values language diversity, and after I took the Sociolinguistics course at Penn GSE, I completely changed my mind. I now believe there is no standardized unmarked English (Grieser, 2021). All English vernaculars are equal. Race and accents should not be judged but embraced because they are associated with one's identity and background. I believe in the beauty of English diversity and that all students should be exposed to World Englishes for better communicative competence in an international environment. This language ideology comes from the fundamental belief in the sociolinguistics field. Moreover, according to the third wave of variationists, language learners could benefit from exposure to language variety to gain agency over their language. This means they can code-switch between different vernaculars to gain advantage and power in a particular context (Zhang, 2005). In other words, one of my most important teaching principles is cultivating communicative competence and awareness of language diversity. This concept refers to the ability to use language effectively in various social contexts, considering the linguistic features of different communities.

I will now discuss the evolution of my language ideology regarding the dichotomy between standard English and World Englishes from the beginning of my language teaching career in 2019 until now.

In May 2019, during a job search for a teaching position, I encountered several interviewers and recruiters. Among them, a recruiter from a local English language teaching school in Vietnam stood out for his discriminatory behavior. After a brief 5-minute conversation and without observing my teaching demo, he offered me a full-time teaching position solely based on my apparent close proximity to "standard" American English. Despite my limited knowledge of sociolinguistics at the time, I declined the offer because I instinctively believed that recruiters should prioritize teachers' language competency and pedagogical skills over their accents. The recruiter's approach and language ideology were problematic. This experience was my first exposure to the significance of sounding "standard" in the language teaching field, leading me to question the implications of such standards and the role of accent in language education.

In July 2019, I successfully secured a teaching position at one of Vietnam's highly esteemed English language teaching institutions. They recruited English teachers from 14 countries around the world. Most of them were white and came from inner-circle countries. I felt outraged when I learned they got paid three times higher than me for doing the same workload. I also noticed that many English language teaching schools used the image of a White teacher to advertise their schools. I was shocked to realize that race and accent are essential in this language teaching field. I doubted my decision to step into this field out of pure passion. I felt like I chose a career that excluded my race and accent right from the beginning. I felt inferior for being who I was despite how hard I tried. Therefore, I decided to pursue a master's degree to compensate for my 'weakness' of not being white and not being born in an inner circle country.

Fortunately, my time in the U.S. and my education at Penn GSE completely changed my perception about standard English and about myself. I first came to the U.S. in Fall 2022 to attend Penn GSE. This is my first time being exposed to such a wide variety of Englishes. I hear accents from Thailand, India, China, Korea, Russia. Even American English has many vernaculars. The metropolitan city of Philadelphia seems to value all language varieties. Moreover, the reading and discussion in the Critical Issues in Applied Linguistics and Sociolinguistics courses in Fall 2022 and Spring 2023 significantly shifted my perspective. While Benor (2010) thinks there is an unmarked standardized language that all language varieties vary from, I believe that all languages are equal and that there is no standard English. I agree with Grieser (2021) that maybe it is not the language that is marked or unmarked, but it's the people who are marked and unmarked because we cannot separate language from the race and ethnicity of the speakers. Therefore, I learned that I might be racialized because of my marked race and background, regardless of how good my English is. Language school recruiters used my skin color to index me as an inferior language user and teacher, so they decided on a lower pay rate for me. What English language schools do in my home country

creates and exacerbates the injustices between marked and unmarked people. Therefore, those practices should be discouraged. My skin color, accent and background are not my weaknesses but my strengths and assets. For example, as a teacher of English as a second language, I can draw on my own experience of learning a second language to understand and connect with my students who are also navigating second language learning challenges. Additionally, my background and accent enable me to expose my students to a language variety and help them develop the skills to adapt their language use to different contexts and audiences. By embracing my identity and the diversity it brings, I can better connect with my students and help them develop the communicative competence they need to succeed in an increasingly globalized world.

Moreover, I learned from the third wave of variationists to reconstruct my social identity by using certain linguistic features as symbolic resources to assume better positionality within a particular linguistic market. For example, most Black Americans could speak two or three vernaculars and intentionally choose one of them depending on the context to assume privileges and avoid racialization. According to Zhang (2015), professionals in Beijing choose between marked local dialects or unmarked standard Mandarin in different contexts to be a competitive commodity on the job market. In other words, the more symbolic resources I build, the more linguistic capital and advantages I can access. As a result, I could gain power in a certain marketplace (e.g. international/multinational/intercultural working environment) by increasing my agency over language choices.

As a language teacher, I will focus on helping students develop the ability to use language effectively in various social contexts rather than simply teaching a prescribed set of grammatical rules, vocabulary or pronunciation. This means I will expose students to a variety of different dialects and language varieties, such as African American vernacular English (AAVE), Asian English, Indian English, Singlish, etc. and help them develop the skills to adapt their language use to different situations and audiences to gain symbolic resources and agency over their language and linguistic competence (Professor Mallory Fiz-Lopez). This teaching philosophy incorporates sociolinguistic topics and materials into language instruction, such as readings or discussions about language variation and diversity. It also involves providing opportunities for students to use language in authentic communicative contexts, such as group discussions or debates, that reflect the diversity of language use in the real world. My sociolinguistic teaching philosophy emphasizing communicative competence and the value of linguistic diversity can help create a more inclusive and effective language learning environment. More importantly, I will encourage my students to believe that their race and accents are valuable and should be embraced as an asset.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the sociolinguistic research and my personal experience as a language teacher of color have led me to align with the perspective of Grieser (2021), who argues that there is no marked language but marked people, as language is inextricably linked to one's identity, race, and culture. This perspective highlights the injustice that language teachers from diverse backgrounds can face in a field that upholds a native speaker's ideal and a rigid standard of English. As a language educator and a sociolinguist, I advocate for the equality of all languages and promote linguistic and cultural diversity in language teaching and learning. It is essential to recognize and embrace the linguistic and cultural diversity of English spoken worldwide, rather than enforcing a rigid standard that may exclude and marginalize certain students and teachers. The implications for sociolinguistics are significant and multifaceted. Firstly, sociolinguistics can provide a framework for understanding the complex interplay between language, identity, and culture, as well as how language diversity can be celebrated and embraced in educational settings. Secondly, the recognition of World Englishes and their validity challenges traditional ideology of what constitutes correct or appropriate language use. Sociolinguistics can provide insights into how language ideologies shape language attitudes and use and how these ideologies can influence language policy decisions. Finally, sociolinguistics can guide how to incorporate linguistic and cultural diversity into language curricula and how to empower students to use language effectively in a range of social contexts. By incorporating sociolinguistic

insights into language education, it is possible to promote linguistic and cultural diversity and to create more inclusive and equitable learning environments for all students.

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