

Stephanie Rudwick* and Sinfree Makoni

Southernizing and decolonizing the Sociology of Language: African scholarship matters

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Abstract: In this short article we call for decolonization strategies in the Sociology of Language through a focus shift towards the global South, in particular Africa and a heightened attention to “race” as a significant category. We highlight three primary points that require critical attention in a decolonized Sociology of Language: (i) the identification of northern sociolinguistic theories which have been masked as universal and a critical shift towards theoretical frameworks emerging from the South; (ii) the acknowledgement of “white” privilege and “white fragility” in language studies and its related problem of ignoring “race” as a significant category, in scholarship as well as among authors/editors; and (iii) the underrepresentation of (especially female) scholars of colour in sociolinguistic research.

Keywords: Africa; African scholarship; decolonization; “race”; South

As scholars working on the intersectional fields of the Sociology of Language, Linguistic Anthropology and African Language Studies, we observe that boundaries between fields become increasingly blurred. The general focus has shifted from studying social, cultural and linguistic features of any bound language entity to language practices in motion, as multiple processes, and as enacting various trajectories of space, time and context. In this article we call for a focus shift towards the global South, heightened attention to “race” as a significant category in language studies and a decolonization of academic scholarship.

For us, the Global South refers to people, places, and ideas that have been left out of the grand narrative of modernity. In the colonies, the theoretical stage of science was ignored, and accordingly they became a field for the collection of raw material – scientific data – that was sent to the metropole where theory was then

*Corresponding author: **Stephanie Rudwick**, University of Hradec Králové, Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic; and University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa,

E-mail: stephanierudwick@gmail.com

Sinfree Makoni, Penn State College of Liberal Arts, University Park, USA

produced. Examples of these processes abound in the history of European sciences and their colonial relationship of knowledge production became increasingly institutionalized through universities. Hountodji (1995, 2002) shows that this structure persists powerfully in the postcolonial time. The struggle of scientists from the periphery to try and publish their work in prestigious Anglophonic academic journals is just exemplary for one such power hierarchy. Colonial scholarship was characterized by acts of “linguistic appropriation, description, and invisibilization [that] were a constitutive feature of this epistemicide” (Kerfoot and Hyltenstam 2017: 2). This epistemicide is part of the “grand erasure of experiences” of people from the South (Connell 2007) and these experiences are the *terra firma* upon which southern theories should be built. We envisage a situation in which not only linguistic and social theory comes from African countries, but we expect a different type of theory to emerge which might serve as a corrective to Northern universalist thought.

Recently, there has also been more explicit engagement with “race” as a significant and complex social construct in the study of language. A raciolinguistic lens enables us to critically engage with “the importance of conceptualizing contemporary debates about ‘racial’ and linguistic authenticity in relation to colonial logics” (Flores and Rosa 2015: 6) because “linguistics is both the parent and child of race theory” (Hutton 1998: 3). In a volume which predates raciolinguistics, Makoni et al. (2002) had already highlighted the importance of “race” as a category in sociolinguistics. The difference though between *Black Linguistics* and raciolinguistics is that Makoni et al. were stressing the impact of the “race” of the analysts on the nature of the sociolinguistics they carry out. We consider both approaches as continuously apt and timely.

All language choices are embedded in socio-economic, political, and cultural systems (Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004), and these systems trigger complex power dynamics. This is the case, in particular in the African context where language served together with ethnicity and “race” as tools of oppression and continues to be “embedded within complex ideological frameworks” (Rudwick and Bing 2019: 7). The concept of coloniality is useful in this context, as it draws attention to the fact that systemic and unequal distribution of power has its legacy in colonialism (Connell 2007; Mignolo 2007). As scholars of language we see that this coloniality has distinct linguistic and social components which demand profound scrutiny in current socio-political systems and scholarship. We are suggesting an epistemological shift aiming at *southernizing* the Sociology of Language by paying increasing attention to the ontologies and theories generated in the global South. The northern bias of language studies has been repeatedly shown (Makoni et al. 2020; Makoni and Pennycook 2020; Smakman and Heinrich 2015) and there is continuous need to recognize and focus on the “complicity between ways of

knowing embedded in the field and the incisive history of colonialism, discrimination, and unequal knowledge distribution” (Pennycook and Makoni 2020: 136). The entanglement of forms of knowledge production embedded in colonial history and perpetuated in the present links academic scholarship also to (white) privilege and we therefore call on scholars to work towards a redistribution of resources so that new forms of knowledge can reinvigorate the study of language and society.

African scholars have, for example, long argued that concepts such as multilingualism do not necessarily serve as a panacea for a society’s ills and problems (Makoni 1998). An uncritical endorsement of multilingualism is predicated on a refusal to recall that multilingualism has frequently been used as a strategy to exploit vulnerable Africans. Our argument about the “darker sides” of multilingualism calls for a third way which avoids notions such as multilingualism and monolingualism altogether and seeks to find alternative ways of describing sociolinguistic contexts. Language as such is never neutral (Duranti 2011), and in many parts of Africa, English, an ex-colonial language tends, ironically, to be conceived and constructed as more neutral than other (“ethnic”) languages. Given the complex history of English imperialism (Pennycook 2017) this is paradoxical, but from a perspective of trans- and polylingual natures of African English(es), it makes a lot of sense. The way many African language speakers use English is arguably indicative for its “naturalized African” status (Kamwangamalu 2019) and it shows the extent of ownership, linguistic and social innovation and indeed “Africanness” people communicate with the language. Increasingly also, competency in what is thought of as “standard English” might no longer provide the comprehensibility needed to participate in African metropolitan English lingua franca communication. Rather it might be a complex and skillful polylingualism, mixing, switching and trans-languaging strategies which are needed to successfully communicate in African urban spaces. African language use has long been experienced as a multilayered and connected chain (Fardon and Furniss 1985: 4) in a manner analogous to how Pennycook (2019) sees a flexible and plural English. Unfortunately, because scholarship in African Studies and English sociolinguistics have been framed as constituting rather different types of expertise, expert scholars, departments, and publishing outlets the potentially positive impact of insights and developments in African Studies into English sociolinguistics have been not fully acknowledged.

Ways of speaking are always linked to complex dynamics of ethnic, “racial”, class and gender politics which are entangled with many global injustices. There is no language that unambiguously brings justice and well-being to humankind. And there is no scholar who is free of ideology. African social science scholars have tended to focus on empirical description “of the most peculiar features of their societies, without any consistent effort to interpret, elaborate on, or theorize about these features” (Hountodji 1995: 4). Decolonialising the Sociology of Language

must incorporate a critical view on the linguistic and social privilege of “whites” and “whiteness” and it must path the way to a study of language as meaningful to the marginalized. There is also a need to interrogate in how far we as editors are complicit in entrenching linguistic (and interrelated “racial”) dominance by publishing scholarship in “Standard” language only? The colonial spread of English in Africa has resulted in the emergence of multiple varieties in their own right. An important question to be asked is in how far so-called language “errors” are allowed to influence the reviewing process as long as the content delivers a valuable scientific contribution. And then there is the problematic issue of political language activism. Posing that colonialism was a knowledge project, any analysis of data and any new knowledge construction reflects remnants of this knowledge project. Decolonization of language studies, hence, raises a number of issues, such as a critical engagement with the existing epistemological structure as a longitudinal project (Connell 2007, 2018). We highlight three primary points which, from our perspective, require critical attention in a decolonized Sociology of Language: (i) the identification of northern theories which have been masked as universal and a critical shift towards theoretical frameworks emerging from the South, bearing in mind that not all theories emerging from the South necessarily serve the epistemological interests of the South; (ii) the acknowledgement of “white” privilege in scholarship and its related problem of ignoring “race” as a significant category, both in scholarship and among authors and editors; and (iii) the underrepresentation of (especially female) scholars of colour. While the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* has already greatly diversified its editorial board, there continues to be an underrepresentation of female scholars from the Global South in authorship and this deprives sociolinguistics of an important voice in addressing issues about inequality in knowledge production.

The Sociology of Language we envisage seeks to further explore the ontological basis of language, interrogates, adjusts and merges prevailing northern conceptualisations with southern ones. Part of this undertaking must also be more North-South collaborations and co-authorship which can bridge geo-political limitations and disciplinary boundaries. Lastly, we would place heightened emphasis on (self)reflective practice among scholars, both southern and northern ones. Such a Sociology of Language can, from our perspective, reclaim its rightful place in an ethical and decolonized process of knowledge construction.

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