

**UNSETTLING RACE AND LANGUAGE: THE INTERPLAY OF
IDENTITY, POWER, AND DISCRIMINATION**

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Abstract: *Language and race shape identity, power, and social hierarchies. While language can empower, it also fuels discrimination through linguistic profiling and accent bias. This paper explores the politics of language in racial discourse, the role of euphemisms, and the impact of language policies on racialized communities, highlighting language as both a tool of inclusion and exclusion.*

Аннотация: *Язык и раса формируют идентичность, власть и социальные иерархии. Хотя язык может быть инструментом самоутверждения, он также способствует дискриминации через лингвистическое профилирование и акцентный предвзятый подход. В статье рассматривается роль языка в расовом дискурсе, эвфемизмы и влияние языковой политики на расовые сообщества, подчеркивая его двойственную природу — как средства включения, так и исключения.*

Keywords : *Race, language, linguistic discrimination, identity, euphemism, power, sociolinguistics, linguistic profiling, accent bias, racial discourse.*

Language is one of the most powerful social tools humans possess, serving not only as a medium for communication but also as a marker of identity and belonging. However, language is not neutral; it carries historical, political, and racial connotations that influence how individuals and groups are perceived and treated. The way a person speaks—their accent, dialect, or language choice—often affects their social standing, opportunities, and access to power. This phenomenon, known as



linguistic discrimination, is deeply connected to racial biases, as language has historically been used to define and marginalize racialized groups. From the criminalization of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in educational and professional settings to the policing of indigenous languages, language has long been a site of struggle for racial justice. Governments and institutions have used language policies to suppress minority languages, while social attitudes toward accents and dialects continue to reinforce racial hierarchies. This paper examines the unsettling relationship between race and language, focusing on how language is used as both a tool of inclusion and exclusion.

Linguistic profiling refers to the practice of making judgments about a person's race, intelligence, or social status based on the way they speak. This concept was first explored by sociolinguist John Baugh (2003), who demonstrated that people face discrimination based on their voice alone. For example, in housing markets, studies have shown that landlords are less likely to offer rental opportunities to individuals who speak with African American, Latino, or other non-standard English accents over the phone. Accent bias plays a crucial role in racial discrimination. In many societies, a "standard" accent—often modeled after the speech of the dominant racial or ethnic group—is perceived as more educated, professional, and trustworthy. Meanwhile, accents associated with racial minorities are often stigmatized. African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is frequently deemed "unprofessional" or "improper," despite being a rule-governed and systematic variety of English. Chicano English and other Latinx dialects are often linked to negative stereotypes about intelligence and work ethic. Asian English accents are sometimes mocked or used as comedic material, reinforcing racial stereotypes about foreignness and lack of fluency. Such biases have real-world consequences, affecting employment opportunities, legal outcomes, and educational access. Job applicants with non-standard accents are often perceived as less competent, and students who speak in non-standard dialects are frequently discouraged from using their natural linguistic varieties.



Language also plays a crucial role in how race is discussed in public discourse. Euphemisms are often used to obscure or soften discussions about race, making racism seem less direct or aggressive. While some euphemisms may be intended to promote political correctness, others serve to maintain systemic racism by deflecting attention from deeper inequalities.

Examples of Racial Euphemisms

“Inner city” – Often used as a coded term for predominantly Black or Latino neighborhoods, implying poverty and crime without directly mentioning race.

“Urban” culture – Used as a substitute for Black culture in mainstream media, sometimes erasing the specific racial identity tied to certain cultural contributions.

“Illegal immigrant” vs. “Undocumented worker” – The former criminalizes individuals, while the latter focuses on their legal status without dehumanization.

“Ethnic” – Frequently applied to non-white groups, as if whiteness were the default identity.

Euphemisms in racial discourse shape public perception and policy. The language used to describe racial issues can either amplify systemic inequalities or obscure them under neutral or misleading terminology. Governments have historically used language policies to marginalize racial and ethnic minorities. The forced assimilation of indigenous communities through language bans, the privileging of certain dialects over others in education, and the criminalization of non-dominant languages all demonstrate how language has been wielded as a tool of oppression.

1. The Erasure of Indigenous Languages – In North America and Australia, indigenous children were forcibly placed in residential schools where they were punished for speaking their native languages. This led to language loss and cultural disconnection.

2. Apartheid-Era Language Policies in South Africa – The imposition of Afrikaans in Black schools sparked the 1976 Soweto Uprising, highlighting how language policy was used to reinforce racial hierarchies.



3. The English-Only Movement in the United States – Efforts to make English the official language have been criticized for targeting immigrant communities and restricting bilingual education.

Despite these challenges, racialized communities continue to fight for linguistic justice by reclaiming their languages, challenging linguistic discrimination, and advocating for more inclusive language policies. The Black Lives Matter Movement, which has highlighted the racialized nature of language policing, particularly in schools and workplaces. Indigenous language revitalization efforts, which aim to reclaim and restore languages that have been suppressed for generations. The push for linguistic diversity in media and entertainment, advocating for accurate and respectful representation of different dialects and languages. Recognizing linguistic discrimination as a racial justice issue is essential in dismantling systemic inequality. Education, policy reform, and increased awareness can help challenge the biases that link language and race, fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

Conclusion

The relationship between race and language is deeply rooted in power dynamics, discrimination, and identity politics. Linguistic profiling, accent bias, euphemisms in racial discourse, and language suppression policies all demonstrate how language is used to maintain racial hierarchies. However, language is also a site of resistance, as racialized communities continue to fight for their linguistic rights and challenge discriminatory norms. Understanding the unsettling interplay between race and language is essential for fostering more inclusive societies where language is recognized as a right rather than a tool of exclusion.

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