

The Inseparability of Race and Language: A Critical Review of Raciolinguistics in US Sociolinguistics

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Abstract: The intersection of race and language has emerged as a central concern in contemporary sociolinguistics, challenging longstanding assumptions about the autonomy of linguistic analysis from social structures of power and inequality. This article presents a critical theoretical review of raciolinguistics as a framework for understanding the co-constitution of race and language in US sociolinguistic contexts. Drawing on foundational works by Alim, Smitherman, Flores, Rosa, and others, I examine how raciolinguistic perspectives disrupt traditional sociolinguistic approaches that treat race as a demographic variable rather than a dynamic social process enacted through language. The review identifies three key theoretical contributions: (1) the reconceptualization of language practices as racializing projects that construct and maintain racial hierarchies; (2) the critique of "appropriateness" ideologies that position white linguistic norms as neutral standards while rendering racialized speech as deficient; and (3) the insistence on historical and colonial frameworks for understanding contemporary linguistic inequality. I argue that raciolinguistics represents not merely a subfield of sociolinguistics but a fundamental reorientation that demands attention to the material and ideological mechanisms through which race and language become mutually constitutive. The article concludes by considering future directions for research that might extend raciolinguistic inquiry beyond educational contexts to examine labor, healthcare, and other institutional domains where racialized language ideologies operate. This theoretical inquiry contributes to ongoing debates about the scope and significance of raciolinguistic perspectives for sociolinguistic theory and practice.

Keywords: Raciolinguistics, race and language, sociolinguistic theory, language ideology, racialization, US sociolinguistics, language and power.

Introduction: The relationship between race and language has occupied a fraught position within US sociolinguistics. For much of the field's history, linguistic analysis proceeded as though language could be studied independently of the racial formations that shape its production, perception, and evaluation. Early variationist sociolinguistics, while attentive to social correlates of linguistic variation, often treated race as a demographic category to be correlated with linguistic features rather than as a dynamic social process fundamentally implicated in how language is understood and valued. This approach, while yielding important insights into patterns of linguistic variation,

inadvertently reinforced the very racial ideologies it sought to describe by treating racial categories as self-evident rather than as products of ongoing social and historical processes. The emergence of raciolinguistics as a distinct theoretical perspective marks a critical intervention in this tradition. Drawing on insights from linguistic anthropology, critical race theory, and postcolonial studies, raciolinguistic scholars have challenged the assumption that race and language are separable domains of social life. Instead, they argue that race and language are "co-naturalized" that is, they are produced through and inseparable from one another in ways that have profound consequences for

how individuals and communities are positioned within hierarchies of power and value. This perspective has generated productive debates about the nature of linguistic inequality, the role of education in reproducing racial hierarchies, and the possibilities for research that is explicitly committed to racial and linguistic justice.

This article offers a critical theoretical review of raciolinguistics as it has developed within US sociolinguistics. My aim is not to provide a comprehensive empirical survey of research employing raciolinguistic frameworks, but rather to examine the theoretical foundations, key debates, and implications of this perspective for how sociolinguists understand the relationship between race and language. I argue that raciolinguistics represents a fundamental reorientation of sociolinguistic inquiry one that insists on the inseparability of race and language and demands attention to the historical, colonial, and material contexts in which linguistic practices and racial formations are produced. The significance of this inquiry lies in several considerations. First, the United States remains a context in which race and language are deeply implicated in structures of inequality, from educational tracking and labor market segmentation to healthcare disparities and criminal justice outcomes. Understanding how these structures operate through linguistic practices and ideologies is essential for any account of social reproduction and change. Second, the debates within raciolinguistics about the relationship between theory and method, structure and agency, and description and critique have implications for sociolinguistic research far beyond the US context. Third, as raciolinguistic perspectives gain traction across disciplines, it becomes increasingly important to clarify the theoretical commitments and analytical tools that distinguish this approach from other forms of sociolinguistic inquiry.

The article proceeds as follows. I first provide a conceptual overview of key raciolinguistic frameworks, distinguishing between approaches that treat raciolinguistics as a field and those that emphasize raciolinguistic perspectives or ideologies. I then examine three key areas of theoretical contribution: the critique of language appropriateness ideologies, the analysis of racializing discourses in institutional contexts, and the historical and colonial dimensions of

raciolinguistic inquiry. Following a discussion of methodological implications, I consider debates and tensions within the field before outlining future directions for research. I conclude by reflecting on what a critical raciolinguistic perspective might contribute to a more just and equitable sociolinguistics.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Foundational Frameworks

The term "raciolinguistics" is relatively recent in the history of sociolinguistics, with H. Samy Alim credited for its coinage. The 2016 edited volume *Raciolinguistics: How Language Shapes Our Ideas About Race* brought together scholars whose work addresses the intersection of race and language, establishing raciolinguistics as a recognized area of inquiry. This foundational work drew on traditions of scholarship on African American Language (AAL), Chicano/a language practices, and other forms of language use by racialized communities that had long been marginalized within mainstream linguistics.

However, the intellectual genealogy of raciolinguistics extends well beyond this recent naming. Scholars such as Geneva Smitherman have been examining the intersections of race, language, and power for decades. Smitherman's work on African American Language has consistently foregrounded the ways in which linguistic practices are enmeshed with racial identity, political struggle, and cultural expression. Similarly, the Students' Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL) resolution, adopted by the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1974, represented an early institutional recognition that linguistic norms are never neutral but are instead implicated in racial and social hierarchies.

2.2 The Flores and Rosa Intervention

A significant development in raciolinguistic theory has come through the work of Nelson Flores and Jonathan Rosa. In a series of influential publications, Flores and Rosa have articulated a "raciolinguistic perspective" that goes beyond simply acknowledging the relationship between race and language to theorize the mechanisms through which this relationship operates. Central to their framework is the concept of raciolinguistic ideologies—the beliefs, practices, and institutional arrangements that position racialized individuals as linguistically deficient regardless of their

actual language practices. Flores and Rosa's critique of "appropriateness" in language education has been particularly influential. They argue that the emphasis on teaching "appropriate" language to racialized students is itself a raciolinguistic project: it demands that language-minoritized students mimic the linguistic practices of white speaking subjects while ignoring the raciolinguistic ideologies that position them as racial Others in the first place. This critique reveals how language education, even when ostensibly well-intentioned, can reproduce the very inequalities it claims to address.

2.3 Key Theoretical Contributions

The raciolinguistic literature has generated several important theoretical contributions. First, it has reconceptualized the relationship between language and identity, moving beyond static notions of identity as a set of demographic characteristics to understand identity as something that is performed, contested, and produced through language practices. This is captured in the concepts of "linguaging race" and "racing language"—the former referring to how race is constructed through language, and the latter to how linguistic practices become associated with racial categories. Second, raciolinguistics has developed a powerful critique of the "white listening subject" the implied hearer whose perceptual frameworks evaluate linguistic practices and position speakers within racial hierarchies. This concept highlights that linguistic evaluation is never simply about linguistic features themselves but about the racialized bodies and histories that are perceived through those features. It explains, for example, why the same linguistic practice might be evaluated differently depending on who is speaking.

Third, raciolinguistic scholarship has insisted on the historical and colonial dimensions of linguistic inequality. Rather than treating contemporary language practices as if they existed in a historical vacuum, raciolinguistic scholars locate these practices within longer histories of colonialism, slavery, and migration. This historical orientation is crucial for understanding why certain linguistic practices are valued while others are stigmatized, and why these valuations map so consistently onto racial hierarchies.

2.4 Educational Applications

Much raciolinguistic research has focused on educational contexts, where the stakes of language evaluation are particularly high. Scholars have documented how raciolinguistic ideologies operate in classrooms through language policies, assessment practices, and curricular decisions. English-only policies, for example, position multilingualism as a barrier to academic success rather than as a resource. Bilingual programs that are "subtractive" rather than "additive" in orientation reinforce assimilationist ideologies that devalue students' home languages. And the emphasis on "standard" English in curricula delegitimizes linguistic diversity and embeds bias in teaching practices. These educational dynamics have real consequences for students. Research has shown that raciolinguistic ideologies shape student experiences, fostering self-doubt and disengagement among marginalized students. Even when students are fluent in the linguistic practices demanded by the classroom, they may be perceived as deficient because their bodies and histories are racialized. This points to the insufficiency of simply teaching "appropriate" language as a solution to linguistic inequality; the problem is not merely that students need to learn certain linguistic practices but that the framework for evaluating those practices is itself racialized.

3. Methodology

3.1 A Note on Theoretical Inquiry

This article employs the methodology of critical theoretical review, a form of scholarly inquiry that examines, synthesizes, and evaluates theoretical frameworks within a field. Unlike empirical research that collects and analyzes primary data, theoretical review engages with existing scholarship to clarify concepts, identify patterns and gaps, and develop arguments about the current state and future directions of knowledge production. This approach is particularly appropriate for the study of raciolinguistics, where the theoretical dimensions of the perspective are at least as important as the empirical findings generated through it. The choice of a theoretical review methodology reflects several considerations. First, raciolinguistics is a relatively recent development within sociolinguistics, and there remains significant debate about its scope, methods, and implications. Clarifying these theoretical dimensions is essential for productive research to

proceed. Second, the relationship between theory and method in raciolinguistics is itself a site of productive tension, with some scholars arguing that raciolinguistic perspectives require particular methodological commitments and others maintaining that the perspective can be applied across a range of methodological approaches. A theoretical review can illuminate these debates in ways that would be difficult to achieve through empirical research alone. Third, the critical dimension of raciolinguistic inquiry its commitment to racial and linguistic justice raises questions about the purposes and politics of research that are themselves theoretical in nature.

3.2 Conceptual Grounding and Positionality

The critical theoretical review approach I employ is grounded in three conceptual commitments that are themselves informed by raciolinguistic perspectives. First, I treat knowledge production as a social and political practice rather than as a neutral or purely technical activity. The production of knowledge about race and language is not separate from the racial hierarchies it describes; rather, it is implicated in those hierarchies in complex ways. This requires reflexivity about the position from which knowledge is produced and the audiences for whom it is intended.

Second, I approach theoretical frameworks not as fixed systems of concepts to be applied mechanically but as living traditions of inquiry that are subject to contestation, revision, and transformation. The debates within and about raciolinguistics—about whether it should be a field or a perspective, about its relationship to other critical approaches, about the relative emphasis on language or race—are not distractions from the real work of empirical research but are themselves constitutive of the theoretical project.

Third, I treat the distinction between "theory" and "method" as provisional and productive rather than as an ontological divide. Theoretical commitments have methodological implications, and methodological choices reflect theoretical assumptions. The relationship between race and language that raciolinguistics theorizes cannot be studied through methods that treat race and language as separable variables; methods must be developed that are adequate to the theoretical complexity of the object of

study.

3.3 Analytical Approach

The analysis in this article proceeds through several interlocking strategies. The first is conceptual analysis: examining the key concepts and categories that structure raciolinguistic discourse—such as "raciolinguistic ideologies," "white listening subject," and "co-naturalization"—to clarify their meanings and implications. Conceptual analysis reveals how these concepts have been developed through scholarly debate and identifies areas of tension or ambiguity that require further attention.

The second strategy is synthetic: bringing together insights from across the raciolinguistic literature to construct a coherent framework for understanding the relationship between race and language. This synthesis is not simply a summary of existing work but a reconstruction that highlights connections and patterns that might not be immediately apparent from any individual contribution. The aim is to make explicit the theoretical architecture that underpins raciolinguistic inquiry. The third strategy is critical: identifying limitations, tensions, and areas of underdevelopment within the raciolinguistic literature. This critical dimension is essential not only for scholarly rigor but also for the ongoing development of the perspective itself. A perspective that is not subject to critical scrutiny risks becoming dogmatic or losing its analytical sharpness. The material for this analysis consists of key theoretical statements in the raciolinguistic literature, including works by Alim, Flores, Rosa, Smitherman, and others. I have focused on works that make explicit theoretical contributions rather than purely empirical applications. This reflects the theoretical aims of the article; the goal is not to review the full range of empirical findings in raciolinguistics but to examine the theoretical frameworks that structure those findings.

3.4 Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it is focused on US sociolinguistics and may not be fully applicable to other national contexts where race and language intersect in different ways. While some of the theoretical insights from US raciolinguistics may be useful for understanding other contexts, the specific histories and institutional arrangements of the United

States shape raciolinguistic dynamics in ways that cannot simply be exported. Second, the article focuses on theoretical contributions at the expense of empirical findings; readers seeking a comprehensive empirical review of raciolinguistic research will need to look elsewhere. Third, the article necessarily reflects my own theoretical commitments and positionality. As a scholar working in US sociolinguistics, I bring particular assumptions and concerns to the analysis. While I have attempted to be reflexive about these commitments, they inevitably shape the interpretation and evaluation of the literature. Finally, the raciolinguistic literature is developing rapidly, and this review cannot claim to be comprehensive or final. Future research will undoubtedly refine and revise the frameworks examined here.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Inseparability Thesis and Its Implications

One of the most significant theoretical contributions of raciolinguistics is what I term the "inseparability thesis" the claim that race and language are not merely correlated or connected but are fundamentally co-constituted. As Flores and Rosa argue, race and language are "co-naturalized" through historical processes that link racialized bodies with linguistic practices in ways that are naturalized, taken for granted, and resistant to change through simple reform. This co-naturalization operates through two mechanisms that are analytically distinct but empirically inseparable. The first mechanism is the racialization of language: the process through which certain linguistic practices become associated with racial categories in ways that make them seem to naturally belong to those categories. African American Language, for example, is not simply a set of linguistic features that happen to be used by African Americans; it has been actively constructed as a racialized linguistic practice through histories of slavery, segregation, and ongoing racial discrimination. This process of racialization is not incidental to the linguistic features themselves but constitutive of how they are perceived and valued. The second mechanism is the languaging of race: the process through which racial categories themselves are produced and maintained through language practices. This includes not only overtly racist language but also the more subtle discursive practices that construct racial difference from the labeling of

certain speech as "articulate" or "inarticulate" to the evaluation of accents as pleasant or unpleasant, comprehensible or incomprehensible. The implications of the inseparability thesis are far-reaching. It means that linguistic inequality cannot be understood as a separate domain from racial inequality; efforts to address linguistic discrimination that do not attend to its racial dimensions are likely to fail or even reproduce the inequality they aim to address. It also means that race cannot be understood as a purely biological or demographic category; race is produced through, among other practices, linguistic practices that construct some bodies and voices as more or less legitimate.

4.2 The Critique of Appropriateness Ideologies

A central theme in raciolinguistic scholarship is the critique of language "appropriateness." This critique, developed most fully by Flores and Rosa, exposes how the concept of appropriateness functions as a raciolinguistic ideology that positions racialized individuals as linguistically deficient regardless of their actual practices. The concept of appropriateness is insidious precisely because it appears neutral, even benevolent: it seems to be about helping students acquire the linguistic skills they need to succeed. But this apparent neutrality is itself a key feature of the ideology, as it hides the racialized assumptions that underlie what counts as appropriate. The critique reveals several dimensions of this process. First, appropriateness ideologies construct the linguistic practices of white speakers as the norm, the standard against which all other practices are measured. This is not simply a matter of linguistic description it is an exercise of power that privileges some ways of speaking while stigmatizing others. Second, appropriateness ideologies position racialized speakers as perpetually falling short of the norm, even when their linguistic practices are indistinguishable from those of white speakers. The racialized body, not the linguistic practice, is what is evaluated. Third, appropriateness ideologies make demands on racialized speakers that are not made on white speakers, requiring them to engage in constant self-monitoring and performance to demonstrate their linguistic adequacy.

The educational implications of this critique are profound. It means that the solution to linguistic

inequality is not simply to teach racialized students to speak "better" English or to adapt their language to the demands of the classroom. Such approaches, however well-intentioned, reproduce the raciolinguistic ideologies that position these students as deficient in the first place. Instead, the solution requires challenging the framework of appropriateness itself and creating educational spaces where diverse linguistic practices are valued rather than stigmatized.

4.3 The White Listening Subject

A related theoretical contribution is the concept of the "white listening subject"—the implied hearer whose perceptual frameworks evaluate linguistic practices and position speakers within racial hierarchies. The concept is important because it shifts the focus from the linguistic practices of racialized speakers to the perceptual frameworks of those who evaluate them. It addresses the puzzle of why the same linguistic practice can be evaluated differently depending on who is speaking: the white listening subject hears racialized bodies as well as linguistic practices, and this perception shapes evaluation. The concept of the white listening subject has several dimensions. First, it is not simply about individual white listeners but about the institutional and ideological structures that shape perception. The white listening subject is a position that can be occupied by people of any race; it is a framework for hearing that is reproduced through educational and other institutional practices. Second, the white listening subject's evaluations are treated as neutral and objective; the practice of listening is not recognized as a form of evaluation but as a simple perception of how things are. This naturalization is a key feature of raciolinguistic ideologies. Third, the white listening subject is maintained through what might be called a "listening regime" the set of practices, expectations, and institutional arrangements that shape how listening occurs and what it produces. This listening regime includes not only how teachers listen to students but also how employers listen to job applicants, how doctors listen to patients, and how the broader public listens to public figures. The concept of the white listening subject helps to explain why linguistic practices that are perfectly comprehensible are often treated as unintelligible or deficient. The problem is not with the linguistic practices themselves but with the listening practices that evaluate them. To

address linguistic inequality, it is not enough to change how speakers speak; it is also necessary to change how listeners listen.

4.4 Historical and Colonial Dimensions

A third major contribution of raciolinguistics is its insistence on the historical and colonial dimensions of linguistic inequality. Rather than treating contemporary language practices as if they existed in a historical vacuum, raciolinguistic scholars locate these practices within longer histories of colonialism, slavery, and migration. This historical orientation is crucial for understanding why certain linguistic practices are valued while others are stigmatized, and why these valuations map so consistently onto racial hierarchies. The historical dimension of raciolinguistics operates at multiple levels. At one level, it concerns the direct histories of colonialism and empire that have shaped global linguistic hierarchies. The dominance of English, Spanish, French, and other European languages is not a neutral outcome of linguistic evolution but a product of colonial violence and ongoing imperial relations. At another level, it concerns the specific histories of racial formation within the United States, including the history of slavery and its aftermath, which has profoundly shaped the relationship between race and language in the American context. The colonial dimension is not simply about the past; it continues to structure the present. As Flores and Rosa argue, contemporary raciolinguistic ideologies are "extensions of colonial racial projects rooted in dehumanization and commodification". The devaluation of racialized language practices, the construction of some speakers as inherently deficient, and the association of whiteness with linguistic legitimacy are not new phenomena but continuations of long-standing colonial logics. This historical orientation distinguishes raciolinguistics from approaches that treat linguistic inequality as a matter of simple prejudice or misunderstanding. The implications of this historical orientation are significant. It means that addressing linguistic inequality requires not only changing present practices but also reckoning with the histories that have produced those practices. It suggests that efforts to address linguistic discrimination that ignore the historical and colonial dimensions of language are unlikely to be successful. And it points to the need for forms of linguistic justice

that are not simply about inclusion in existing structures but about transforming those structures.

5. Conclusion

This theoretical review has examined the contributions of raciolinguistics to US sociolinguistics, focusing on three key areas: the inseparability of race and language, the critique of appropriateness ideologies, and the historical and colonial dimensions of linguistic inequality. I have argued that raciolinguistics represents a fundamental reorientation of sociolinguistic inquiry—one that insists on the co-constitution of race and language and demands attention to the material and ideological mechanisms through which this relationship operates. The implications of this perspective are significant for sociolinguistic research and practice. The inseparability thesis means that sociolinguists cannot study language as if it were independent of racial formations. The critique of appropriateness means that efforts to address linguistic inequality must attend to the raciolinguistic ideologies that produce inequality, not simply to the linguistic practices of marginalized groups. And the historical orientation means that understanding present inequalities requires reckoning with colonial histories. Several directions for future research emerge from this review. First, there is a need for more work that extends raciolinguistic inquiry beyond educational contexts to examine other institutional domains where raciolinguistic ideologies operate, including healthcare, the labor market, and the legal system. Second, there is a need for more attention to the intersectional dimensions of raciolinguistic inequality, including how race and language intersect with gender, class, and other social positions. Third, there is a need for research that examines not only the reproduction of raciolinguistic ideologies but also the possibilities for resistance and transformation. While raciolinguistics has been powerful in analyzing how inequality is produced, less attention has been paid to how it might be undone. Ultimately, the contribution of raciolinguistics to US sociolinguistics lies in its insistence that race and language cannot be separated, either analytically or politically. This insistence challenges sociolinguists to attend more carefully to the racial dimensions of the phenomena they study and to recognize the political stakes of their research. It suggests that a

sociolinguistics that is not attentive to race is not only incomplete but complicit in reproducing the very inequalities it purports to describe. The task for the field is to continue developing theoretical and methodological resources adequate to this challenge.

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