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Illuminating language users in the discourse of linguistic diversity: toward justice-informed language education

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Abstract: The field of language education has mobilized diversity paradigms during the last several decades. Paradigms, such as world Englishes, English as a lingua franca, and translanguaging, have illuminated how linguistic forms and practices vary across locations, contexts, and individual linguistic repertoires. Although they aim to raise teachers’ and students’ engagement with linguistic heterogeneity, they are largely founded on the postmodern/poststructuralist valorization of linguistic hybridity and fluidity, which tends to neglect language users and thus overlooks the human differences that also inform that heterogeneity. True linguistic diversity and justice can be attained by both problematizing structural obstacles and recognizing that ideologies and structures are entrenched in unequal and unjust relations of power regarding race, gender, class, and sexuality, which influence diverse language users to communicate in certain ways. This conceptual paper problematizes the conventional focus on language in the discourse of linguistic diversity within language education, especially English language teaching, and proposes that we pay greater attention to language users. While recognizing that social justice is not a universal notion, we endorse an antiracist justice-informed contextualized approach to teaching about linguistic diversity by illuminating how diversity and power among language users as well as broader structures impact the nature of communication.

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1 Introduction

During the last 40 years, the field of English language education has mobilized paradigms of linguistic diversity, including world Englishes (WE), English as a lingua franca (ELF), and translanguaging. Illuminating how linguistic forms and practices vary across locations, contexts, and individual linguistic repertoires (e.g., Matsuda 2020; Rose and Galloway 2019; Sifakis 2019), these paradigms have challenged the ideological superiority attached to standardized linguistic forms and native speakers with a pedagogical vision of raising students’ and teachers’ awareness of linguistic heterogeneity. Nowadays, scholars in the fields of applied linguistics and language education generally reject normative understandings of language and instead promote linguistic diversity.

However, in everyday contexts, standardized linguistic forms or linguistic correctness continue to be sought after. An example is a recent CNN article entitled “These former Stanford students are building an app to change your accent” (Shoichet 2021). According to the article, three Stanford University students invented Sanas, software powered by artificial intelligence that would reduce miscommunication by altering a speech in a non-standard accent into the mainstream American accent in real time. The idea was motivated by their immediate experiences – their friend had to quit his job as an operator at a call center due to speaking with an accent, and one of the inventors’ Chinese mother felt too embarrassed about her accent to go shopping by herself. Rather than “trying to erase accents, or imply that one way of speaking is better than another,” the company’s position is that it is trying to help people who are linguistically disadvantaged.

This software might be helpful in life-threatening situations, such as medical emergencies, in which miscommunication could be detrimental. However, this example resonates with the problem challenged by the slogan, “Nothing about us without us,” which originally emerged as an advocacy movement for disabled people (Charlton 1989). This slogan attempts to challenge the conceptualization of disability as a medically defined condition of impairment, which in turn legitimizes normalcy and benefits industries that produce goods and services to make the condition closer to what is normal. Instead, this slogan attempts to overcome dehumanization and redefine disability as a social, political, and economic condition of oppression that requires advocacy for human rights and self-determination. “Nothing about us without us” also questions how
majoritarian outsiders, or complicit minoritized insiders alike, reinforce a discourse of saviorism by positioning the supporter who belongs to the majority group as superior to the saved and simultaneously legitimizing the normative ideology. This parallels native speaker saviorism which Jenks and Lee (2020) critique in teaching English as a foreign language.

Furthermore, the example of Sanas raises questions about human communication: If all speakers speak in a standardized accent, will everyone be equally understood? Is non-standardized accent the only cause of linguistic prejudice or perceived linguistic disadvantage? While examples like Sanas stem from the idea that speaking with a neutral accent (i.e., mainstream English) will enable people to be understood better, this idea has been disputed by research that takes the speaker’s race into account, as we discuss later. Essentially, the problem is that even if we sanitize the linguistic forms, communication would never become universally transparent because it takes place not only through language but also between people from diverse backgrounds, intentions, emotions, and dispositions. Furthermore, even if diverse forms of language are recognized as legitimate, this does not necessarily mean that discrimination against the users of diverse linguistic forms is eliminated.

The example of Sanas also reminds us of a conceptual gap between the scholarly consensus and a commonplace discourse in the real world (Kubota 2021a). While many scholars and professionals in our field would question the underlying assumptions and potentially negative consequences of Sanas, a similar concern does not seem to be shared by others outside of our academic bubble. It is necessary for scholars and practitioners who promote pluralist paradigms of language and language users to make efforts to narrow this gap.

In this paper, we problematize the tendency to primarily focus on language in the scholarly discourse of linguistic diversity in language education and propose that we pay greater attention to relationality and power differentials of language users who shape communication within broader systems, ideologies, and material worlds. Although our discussion can be applied to language education in general, we will mainly focus on English language teaching (ELT).

2 Problematizing the primacy given to language

2.1 Paradigms of linguistic diversity

As briefly reviewed in the introduction, the loci of scholarly discourses of linguistic diversity arise from rigorous discussions on major linguistic paradigms, such as world Englishes, English as a lingua franca, and
translanguaging. Scholars’ dialectic endeavors to advance knowledge on these pluri-/trans-paradigms continue; theoretical limitations to each paradigm have been illuminated with critical lenses to approach human communication. In what follows, we will review each of these paradigms and criticisms thereof in order to unpack how the discourse of linguistic diversity has been problem- atized from critical perspectives on communication.

The WE framework, as represented by a three concentric circle model (Kachru 1985), was a construct born out of the process of decolonialization and globalization, the central project of which was to challenge the normative, monolithic assumption of English anchored on colonial linguistic epistemology. Although recent WE scholarship covers a wide range of sociolinguistic subjects, such as language creativity, cultural linguistics, linguistic landscapes, and other topics beyond the mere focus on geographic varieties of English (Bolton 2020), the contribution of Kachru’s model pluralizing English to Englishes with the aim of legitimation of each variety has still been impactful in many linguistics-related fields, especially in English language education. The conception of linguistic diversity theorized by the WE model, however, has been criticized for failing to account for linguistic diversity transcending nation-states (Bruthiaux 2003; Pennycook 2010), which may lead to the masking of the diversity of actual language users’ identity intersecting many-faceted identity categories. Furthermore, the national variety of English is theorized based on the educated model with symbolic power (Tupas 2006), which also raises a question of how educated language users are discursively and materially constructed with regard to class, gender, race, ability, and so forth. Saraceni and Jacob (2021) problematize the focus given to language per se, frequently observed in the metaphor of English as a traveler, which masks human agency. Echoing Tupas’s (2020: 229) argument that “studies on World Englishes have broadly been about the ‘Englishes’ and much less about the ‘world’,,” Saraceni and Jacob underscore the necessity of paying greater attention to people and society in the world.

The paradigm of ELF has often been discussed in juxtaposition with WE in the scholarly discourse of linguistic diversity. While WE diversifies English by using the nation-based model to reconceptualize English use and users in the globalized world, ELF aims to capture linguistic fluidity that the location-based classification tends to overlook by exploring “any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option” (Seidlhofer 2011: 7). ELF scholarship shifted the inquiry focus from traditional speech communities and a varieties-focused approach, determined by geographical and linguistic boundaries, to the fluidity and multiplicity of linguistic practices, situated in multilingualism
The focus of ELF on linguistic fluidity and flexibility thus manifests its fundamental tenet that challenges the imposition of the traditional, monolingual native-speaker model in applied linguistics and ELT, redressing the power imbalance between so-called native and non-native speakers of English. Yet, the notion of ELF is critiqued as being “neoliberal-bound,” lacking a sensitivity to the structural inequities brought by global capitalism, as seen in English users’ uneven access to linguistic features with power (O'Regan 2014: 540). The complex intersection between coloniality, race, and English needs to be further scrutinized in the ELF study as well (e.g., Rudwick 2022).

With a postmodern orientation toward linguistic diversity, trans-constructs such as translanguaging (García and Li 2014) disrupt the notion of fixed linguistic categories bounded by named languages socially and politically created. Focusing on the micro and individual perspective of language, scholars theorize translanguaging as “the deployment of a speaker’s full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages” (Otheguy et al. 2015). Research informed by translanguaging has flourished in the field of applied linguistics and language education over the last decade, and pedagogical benefits of translanguaging have been extensively explored in diverse teaching contexts. Nevertheless, research on translanguaging has faced criticisms. A postmodern approach to language deconstructing named languages is often argued to run the risk of disseminating a potentially dangerous ideology for speakers of Indigenous and minoritized languages whose livelihood has been erased by ongoing colonialism (Meighan 2022). From political economy perspectives, Block (2018) argues that although translanguaging research may address social injustices such as ethnolinguistic racism, it would keep its distance from the economic inequity of people maintained by class stratification.

2.2 Complexities surrounding human communication

As we discussed above, language users are not always placed at the center of the discourse of diversity paradigms, indicating that language-focused theories may not achieve equality of language users. We argue that advocating linguistic rights and diversity only is not sufficient to diminish human inequality, because it is people that use language to communicate, and it is human diversity – not linguistic diversity per se – that complexifies communication. Examples abound that demonstrate how communication is entangled with issues of power, race,
ethnicity, gender, sexuality, social class, and so forth, which are not always captured in the research paradigms of linguistic diversity.

For example, race significantly affects the ways in which people communicate. The role of race in language education began to be explored relatively recently through critical perspectives, including critical race theory, a framework that recognizes the entrenched and multifaceted nature of racism and aims to uncover lived experiences of racial oppression through counter-storytelling (Kubota and Lin 2006). Concurrently, research in applied linguistics has uncovered reverse linguistic stereotyping (Kang and Rubin 2009; Rubin 1992), a phenomenon in which perceived attributes of a speaker other than language, such as race, distort listeners’ judgment of the quality of the linguistic output and the perceived qualification of the speaker. Although these studies on reverse linguistic stereotyping compared perceived accents of a White English speaker and an East Asian English speaker, Gnevsheva (2018) further confirmed listener expectations of the nexus between race and language by highlighting the prejudices targeted to White L1 German (L2 English) speakers.

A very similar concept is raciolinguistic ideology. Focusing on racially minoritized speakers of English, Flores and Rosa (2015) illuminate how race prevents individuals from being perceived as “legitimate” English users, regardless of their linguistic competence. They contend that it is the white listening subject, not the speaking subject, that continues to evaluate legitimacy and reproduce raciolinguistic ideologies and inequality. Similarly, in a study by Kubota et al. (2021) that interviewed nonnative English speakers, native English speakers, and a nonnative French speaker in Canada – all racialized, the participants expressed in various ways that, despite their already high English/French proficiency, their language ability was not perceived as equal to that of White Canadian speakers. As a result, their high English/French proficiency surprised others and induced compliments, or they tried to deploy the standardized Canadian accent to distance them from other racialized immigrants to Canada.

Becoming highly proficient in a language per se, therefore, does not automatically guarantee intelligibility or legitimacy. Indeed, the notion of intelligibility has been critiqued for its abstractness as well as complicity with sustaining linguistic and human inequality. For example, Rajagopalan (2010) notes that intelligibility is not a universal notion but imbued with ideology. Becoming intelligible is not an objective benchmark everyone can equally reach, but it is a subjective notion created by the listeners. As he notes, however much researchers try to objectify intelligibility, we cannot avoid asking the question, “intelligible for who?” (p. 467). It is possible that what is intelligible to someone may be unintelligible to others, and vice versa. He contends that we need to
overcome the temptation to think that there is a common language that will guarantee mutual intelligibility.

Rajadurai (2007) also critiques that the past studies on intelligibility have fundamental methodological limitations and a clear ideological bias. They are methodologically limited because the elicitation techniques of speech samples are varied and communication is treated as context-independent. The latter problem ignores the fact that even the same speaker communicates differently in different situations (i.e., intra-speaker variation) or that the listener's perceptions may interfere with intelligibility, as reviewed above. Additionally, the past studies are ideologically biased because they are built upon the misconceptions, including ideas that only nonnative varieties are accented (cf., Lippi-Green 2012), nonnative speech lacks intelligibility (and native speech is always intelligible), and only nonnative speakers are responsible for communication problems. The last point easily leads to an uneven “communicative burden” (Lippi-Green 2012, p. 72), in which nonnative speakers are expected to adjust/assimilate to the native-speaker norm.

Human communication is not a one-way street. It is a dynamic process of negotiations and mutual collaborations among interlocutors, rather than a static flowchart to be followed by everyone. What the past studies tell us is the importance of sharing the communicative burden between the listener and speaker (cf., Lindemann and Subtirelu 2013; Subtirelu and Lindemann 2016; Subtirelu et al. 2022). Nonetheless, under the current neoliberal ideology that emphasizes the need to acquire English language skills for economic success, communication is often reduced to a skill set that can be objectively measured by conventional language tests (Kubota and Takeda 2021).

3 Explicit focus on human language users in communication

3.1 Language, race, and decoloniality

It is clear that knowledge on linguistic diversity alone cannot help us fully understand human communication. This is because human communication involves human beings who have diverse multiple identities that are never static or discrete but rather fluid and intertwined with power dynamics that are contextual and implicated in social, economic, and political structures. Put differently, language constitutes only one element of communication experienced by people in complex ways due to the intertwined workings of their
identities, including race, gender, class, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, and more. The interrelation of these identities is referred to as intersectionality (Collins 2019; Crenshaw 1989) as we discuss more fully in the next subsection. This perspective invites us to understand how language intersects with other identities to shape communicative experiences, and implies that promoting the paradigms of linguistic diversity by focusing on linguistic aspects alone cannot achieve equitable communicative experiences among diverse language users.

For instance, as we discussed in the previous section, language and race intersect with each other, affecting the listeners’ judgment of speakers’ linguistic output and qualification. This means that even if racialized people communicate using mainstream linguistic forms (being assisted by Sanas, for instance), they may be judged as illegitimate speakers because of their race, gender, or queerness in certain contexts.

While reverse linguistic stereotyping and raciolinguistic ideologies affect listeners interacting with racialized speakers, racialized speakers themselves often times endorse the normative ideologies, becoming complicit with the hegemonic structures. This parallels the ways in which non-native English-speaking teachers of English often conform to the native speakerism and Western pedagogical frameworks, leading to self-marginalization (Kumaravadivelu 2016). In this way, normative ideologies function as what Antonio Gramsci called hegemony or Pierre Bourdieu called symbolic violence, making people subjugate themselves to domination in the absence of direct imposition of power (Burawoy 2019; Kramsch 2020).

Symbolic violence conceals its power to compel people to accept existing power relations. However, a language of power (e.g., standardized language or language spoken by L1 speakers) does not emerge by itself. It is people who use language and attach certain symbolic meanings to the linguistic forms and practices. For instance, racialized people may habitually use diverse non-mainstream linguistic forms, and yet they may feel ashamed of their own language and instead desire to use the mainstream language. Some may feel proud of using their own language in a private domain, while others may take it further to advocate it in mainstream contexts as resistance and transformation. For example, Baker-Bell (2020), an African American scholar of literacy education, discusses how African American students in U.S. schools tend to devalue their Black language in academic contexts. Teachers often encourage them to code-switch in order to use appropriate language contextually. However, doing so would not dismantle raciolinguistic injustice since the linguistic hierarchy is kept intact. She suggests that justice-oriented literacy education should invite Black students to take pride in their own language and legitimize it by using it actively in academic settings.
People’s complicity with the hegemonic ideologies of normativism, stemming from both dominant and marginalized positionalities, has been challenged by decolonial thinking in language studies (Deumert et al. 2020; García et al. 2021; Kumaravadivelu 2016; Pennycook and Makoni 2019) as well as the broader intellectual work on decoloniality (e.g., Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Santos 2016; Thiong’o 1986). Decolonizing the conceptualization of language entails questioning the colonial practices of defining and describing languages as bounded categories and legitimizing a certain variety of language as standardized form in social and educational domains. As such, decolonial thinking is embedded in the paradigms of linguistic diversity (Saraceni and Jacob 2021).

However, decolonization needs to move beyond the reconceptualization of language and pay more attention to human language users. This echoes a call for a greater focus on the repatriation of Indigenous people’s life and land from an Indigenous perspective in North America. Tuck and Yang (2012) critique that the popularity of decolonization as a progressive catchall discourse ignores the real struggles of Indigenous people for protecting their lives and repatriating their land. For both Indigenous people and settlers or for both minoritized and majority groups in general, transformation can be achieved through decolonizing their mind (Thiong’o 1986) or raising critical consciousness about oppression and privilege in people’s lived experiences (Freire 1998). This critical awareness will guide people to engage in praxis or committed reflection and action for transformation (Freire 1998). This means that even if linguistic pluralism is brought to light in education, it will not lead to linguistic justice for language users unless they develop critical consciousness regarding not only linguistic difference but also human difference, and act on the pluralistic ideals in their linguistic engagement.

### 3.2 Power and intersectionality

The discussion thus far suggests that it is indeed language users that judge the (il)legitimacy of certain linguistic forms and use language in certain ways based on ideologies linked to individuals and groups as language users. The ways people engage with language, both producing and interpreting it, differ according to intersectional identities of the self or others as seen in how these identities influence what people hear and read and how they desire to speak or produce texts. In the aforementioned example of African American students (Baker-Bell 2020), they tend to self-marginalize their use of Black language but they can also transform their language use in a more positive way. Conversely, listeners can also cultivate a pluralistic consciousness for engaging in
communication. In a matched-guise experimental study by Kang and Rubin (2009), perceived race of the speaker influenced the listeners’ evaluation of the speech in English. Listeners tended to evaluate a White L1 English-speaking instructor more favorably compared to a Chinese L2 English-speaking instructor. However, listeners’ previous experience of having taken language-related courses or having taught English had a positive impact on comprehending Chinese guise’s lecture. This experiment indicates that, although race and language intersect to produce a power hierarchy of language speakers who place themselves or others in dominant/subordinate positions, this positioning is never fixed; it can be changed so that the hierarchy itself can be dismantled.

We have been focusing on intersectionality between language and race. However, other identity categories, such as gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, and religion, intersect with language to shape language users’ judgments, desires, and engagements within interpersonal and societal relations of power. In thinking about human experiences from an intersectional point of view, we should be careful not to fall into a simplistic understanding. Power dynamics inherent in intersectionality indicate that intersectionality should not simply be conceptualized with a metaphor of two or more streets intersecting each other separately in an additive manner on a two-dimensional space. Such a view leads to the understanding that racial, gender, sexual, and other identities are mutually exclusive identities (Hancock 2011) or segregated spaces with rigid boundaries (Collins 2019). This understanding results in an essentialist approach that treats categories separately, rather than relationally, overlooking power relations and their historical (trans)formation. An additive approach of different identity categories can be a powerful critique of a segregational approach to understanding social identities (Collins 2019), but it can also fall into prioritizing a certain category more than others. This causes a problematic phenomenon called oppression Olympics (H Hancock 2011) which prevents groups of people with different types of marginality (e.g., women, people of color at large, Blacks, Latinxs, Asians, Muslims) from forming solidarity to challenge broader hegemonic power, including White supremacy and patriarchy.

The following example demonstrates how intersectionality can be understood relationally with relations of power in mind. Not too long ago, a racially minoritized female student refused to take a required course that one of us – Ryuko – was going to teach. The reason was the perception that she spoke with a heavy accent (based on a very limited one-way interaction previously). Of course this incident did not happen out of context; there were many contextual and temporal factors in the background which cannot be revealed. Nonetheless, if Ryuko were a male (e.g., South Asian or even East Asian male full professor) who spoke English with similar intelligibility as she did or if the contextual backdrops
were removed, the student's reaction might have been different. Even if the perceived accent is the same, other human, contextual, and temporal factors may create a different kind of power relations and produce different outcomes. And these power relations are not only individually constructed and experienced; they are situated in larger social mechanisms of power that are historically and culturally produced as in the case of the relationship between Indigenous peoples and settlers of color in Canada (see Kubota 2015a). Furthermore, this hurtful tension between minoritized individuals could undermine coalition building necessary for them to challenge broader systems of oppression.

### 3.3 Emotions, intersectionality, and broader structural issues

The above example of a student's accent avoidance created emotional consequences on the individual level for Ryuko. The affective dimension of language use, teaching, and learning has been explored in our field (e.g., Benesch 2012, 2017; Miller and Gkonou 2019; Motha and Lin 2014; Prior 2019). Emotions are quintessentially human experiences. In the above example, the emotion aroused by the raciolinguistic discrimination signified pain, anger, and distress. However, in other instances, positive emotions can be evoked by communication across raciolinguistic differences, including a sense of accomplishment, solidarity, and peace.

The creation of Sanas was driven by the three students' empathy toward their friend or family member who experienced feelings of frustration and distress. Despite their good intention, Sanas may actually perpetuate the hegemony of linguistic norms as we have discussed. However, the advancement of technology may produce another type of application that is more attuned to raciolinguistic equity and justice. Yet, another motivation of these students is perhaps economic ambition – obtaining a profit from selling the product. When such a capitalist interest is involved, technological innovation, even if it is justice-oriented, cannot be equitably distributed to all marginalized people. Technology has a potential for establishing linguistic equity and justice for diverse individuals, but positive outcomes can only be achieved by narrowing economic gaps for accessibility. This indicates the importance of not only examining individual experiences and feelings but also economic and structural systems of power that language users are embedded in.

With regard to access to technology, socioeconomic equity is a major issue. From an intersectional perspective, individuals' class identity matters in understanding their lived experiences. In applied linguistics, some scholars draw on Marxist theory to discuss how social class intersects with linguistic
practices (e.g., Block 2014). Although Marxist framework appears to be technical with attention to such concepts as commodification; material production, distribution, and consumption; and capital accumulation, it is fundamentally concerned with human conditions and human relations in its examination of capitalist exploitation and alienation (Block 2022). Reviewing applied linguistics research on call center workers who are typically forced to speak with a mainstream accent, Block (2022) argues that such research falls short of revealing how the capitalist and neoliberal linguistic practices imposed on the workers exert positive or negative impacts on their identity and their sense of human beings. He suggests that an understanding of capitalism needs to include “an account of how the entire system sustains itself in terms of the generation and maintenance of both individuals and the institutions in which reproductive work is done” (Block 2022: 53).

Not only social class but also other social identities that intersect with language are embedded in social structures in which individuals live, study, and work. In focusing on language users in the studies on linguistic diversity, we will necessarily need to pay attention to broader social, economic, and institutional systems of power which unequally position diverse language users due to their intersecting identities.

4 Implications: toward humanizing language education and research

For a few decades now, English language education has been infused with, and improved by, paradigms of linguistic diversity that have promoted diversity discourse. Not only have such paradigms helped to increase students’ and teachers’ awareness of linguistic heterogeneity, but they have also helped to reconstitute the ways we think about language styles, structures, and the consequent statuses each of these imposes on users.

But because linguistic communication is nested within and co-occurring with users’ diverse backgrounds, intentions, dispositions, and materiality, the theoretical, pedagogical, political, and even decolonizing orientations with which paradigms of linguistic diversity align (and to which they aspire) may not always support users’ experiences, goals, or even aspirations for learning (English) language. To be sure, not all students or teachers can “equally transgress linguistic boundaries and engage in hybrid and fluid linguistic practices” (Kubota 2015b: 33). Indeed, in recent discussions of pluralistic approaches to English language teaching and teacher education across different contexts, we
see a tension between the increased questioning of teachers’ role “as standards-bearers and models of linguistic ‘correctness’” (Seltzer 2022: 2) and the persistent desire for native English-speaker norms in expanding circle countries (e.g., Aoyama 2021; Irham et al. 2021; Prabjandee and Fang 2022).

This tension demonstrates two important issues. First, centering paradigms of linguistic diversity in ELT does not often address how English language education is entangled with “everyday, simultaneous activities and material encounters” (Pennycook 2020: 232) that extend far beyond the boundaries of the classroom. Secondly, these paradigms may not recognize how student’s repertoires and languaging are inflected by “relations of power not only in economic and educational terms but also as they are tied to questions of desire, gender, sexuality, and the marketing of English and English language teachers as products” (Pennycook 2020: 228).

We have attempted to draw attention to the ways language is entangled with human perception of the other, as well as its role in mediating our biases, desires, emotions, and relationships. When thinking about these entanglements vis-à-vis English language education, Vowell’s (2022) assertion that “Human beings are not resources, we are relations” is instructive. For example, if we endorse the notion that the paradigm of linguistic diversity is “more than a pedagogic or theoretical perspective; it is a political stance, a decolonizing stance” (Li 2022: 4), the focus of this stance ought to be on language users.

In pedagogical contexts, where the aim would be for teaching to be antiracist and justice oriented, this shift would necessitate content and practices that go beyond the celebration and inclusion of diverse linguistic resources to incorporate language user diversity. Shifting the focus to the diversity of language users, which would include the teacher or instructor, could foster stronger “communicative connectivity” and “relationally-oriented understanding[s]” (Henry and Thorsen 2021: 12) among classmates, instructors, and of learners themselves. In fostering relational understandings, teachers should invite learners to critically reflect on power relations between the self and the other by recognizing how language intersects with race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, ability, and other identities. They should also be courageous and capable of creating an open space where sensitive issues as racism can be discussed (Kubota, 2021b).

In research contexts too, the category of language user would include researchers — something researchers could address by explicitly stating their positionality and power relations with their research participants. And though a prescriptive way forward for studies electing to focus on language users is impractical, possible and closely related points of departure for consideration could include: clarifying how and why language forms or practices that are
pertinent in a study intersect with identities or positionalities salient to the participating language users; attending to the ways social, economic, and geopolitical dimensions of research that centers linguistic pluralism have an impact on participating language users (e.g., Sakamoto and Furakawa 2022); considering how relationships, (inter)subjectivity, reflexivity, and methodological choices influence the way language users participate, interact, and are represented in research on the topic of linguistic diversity (e.g., Henry and Thorsen 2021; Lee 2022; Shin 2022; Vogel 2022); among others.

Centering language users and the relations that bind them is an antiracist justice-informed contextualized approach to teaching/researching linguistic diversity, and requires sustained reflexivity regarding the intersecting identities, ideologies, and epistemologies made relevant in and through (their) language education. Shifting the focus from language to language users would help to humanize language education and research, and to underscore important-but-complex questions at the heart of discourses of linguistic diversity:

- Who benefits from the promotion of homogeneous or heterogeneous paradigms in (English) language teaching and scholarship, and how (e.g., Kubota 2015a; cf., Pennycook 2020)?
- How does unsettling named languages relate to the human rights of groups or users of Indigenous, signed, or other non-dominant languages (e.g., De Meulder et al. 2019; MacSwan 2020)?
- In what ways can the appropriation of a term like decolonizing invoke very different meanings for people in different colonial settings (e.g., Phyak and De Costa 2021; Saraceni and Jacob 2021; Tuck and Yang 2012).
- Given the varied contexts in which language teaching and learning occur, how might we “prevent future harm and enable a respectful dialogue for more culturally and environmentally responsive [languaging] practice(s)” (Meighan 2022: 7; also, e.g., Motha 2020) in ways that are inclusive, epistemically principled, and non-performative?

In language classrooms, teachers are encouraged to keep these questions in mind and consider what impact certain ways of using or approaching to language through instruction, activities, or materials create on their learners. The impact may relate to not only individual students’ affective reactions or interpersonal relationships within the classroom, but also their critical, ethnical, and relational engagement with others in the real world that occurs in and through language. In order to achieve justice-informed language education with a focus on language users, students should be invited to not only embrace diversity of language forms and practices but also understand how such linguistic
diversity is indeed produced by diverse people and how respecting linguistic diversity also means affirming human difference.

A well-meaning endeavor to improve relations among diverse language users, like Sanas, could actually benefit the creator more socially and economically if it is based on the normative ideology. Conversely, even the diversity-oriented approaches, such as WE, ELF, and translanguaging, could lose sight of human diversity, power relations, and systemic inequalities if they only pay attention to linguistic differences. A sensitive praxis, focused on humanizing language users as relations (cf. Pinner and Sampson 2021; Vowel 2022), would illuminate how diversity and power, as well as privilege and marginality, are ever-present within the broader systems and material worlds where language education occurs. Lastly, applied linguists committed to this sensitive praxis must make efforts to engage in dialogs with people outside of our academic bubble about the importance of justice-oriented perspectives of language and language education.

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