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Language and Discrimination: Generating Meaning, Perceiving Identities, and Discriminating Outcomes

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Abstract

Humans are remarkably efficient at parsing basic linguistic cues and show an equally impressive ability to produce and parse socially indexed cues from the language(s) they encounter. In this review, we focus on the ways in which questions of justice and equality are linked to these two abilities. We discuss how social and linguistic cues are theorized to become correlated with each other, describe listeners' perceptual abilities regarding linguistic and social cognition, and address how, in the context of these abilities, language mediates individuals' negotiations with institutions and their agents—negotiations that often lead to discrimination or linguistic injustice. We review research that reports inequitable outcomes as a function of language use across education, employment, media, justice systems, housing markets, and health care institutions. Finally, we present paths forward for linguists to help fight against these discriminatory realities.

1. INTRODUCTION

Research into human language capacity often reflects the gaze of subdisciplines. However, language discrimination is bound to the whole of the human capacity for language, and while a degree of modularity within the discipline is essential to understanding how linguistic systems work, this approach oversimplifies the complex reality of language systems, language use, and the everyday existence of language users. Institutions are often viewed from similarly reductive stances; they are seen as isolated modules that can be understood and described without consideration of their areas of intersection or respect for the individuals and groups who move through them. However, the ways in which individuals act within and across institutions are mediated by the human capacity for language, which itself mediates imbalances in power and social mobility.

Language variation is often unrecognized as resulting from this shared capacity. Accents and other forms of linguistic variation frequently affect access to institutional services, through both overtly codified institutional systems and covertly exercised assumptions and expectations about speakers. For instance, many equal protection laws prevent overt discrimination regarding access to the services institutions guarantee, but to equitably receive or advance services once accessed, "we regularly demand of people that they suppress or deny the most effective way they have of situating themselves socially in the world"—their language (Lippi-Green 2011, p. 63). Institutional function often depends on a particular set of beliefs about how language, especially the standard language, works. Lippi-Green and others refer to this set of beliefs as the standard language ideology, defined as "a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogenous spoken language which is imposed and maintained by dominant bloc institutions and which names as its model the written language, but which is drawn primarily from the spoken language of the upper middle class" (Lippi-Green 2011, p. 64; see also Agha 2007).

Given the far-reaching realities of socially inequitable societies, there is not enough space in this article to cover all institutions in depth; however, no institution that operates in a society with a standard language variety is immune to language discrimination. As Baugh (2018, p. xiii) writes, "Linguists are rarely called upon to help balance the scales of justice; yet nearly every illustration of human-to-human injustice that history has witnessed or that one can imagine is likely—strongly likely—to have one or more linguistic dimensions worthy of analytic scrutiny." In this review, we discuss the ways in which language use warrants such scrutiny precisely because it mediates our social interpretations of language variation and affects our one-on-one and institutional interactions with one another. We take the perspective that linguistic and social information come packaged in a single complex signal. We review how language beliefs inform the ways speakers are categorized into social groupings, how linguistic and social cognition interface, and the implications these realities have for how people are institutionally evaluated. We close by suggesting paths forward for linguists to educate the public and help combat discriminatory societal outcomes.

1.1. What Is Discrimination?

Language, and the capacity that humans have to produce and interpret language, sits at the center of study within linguistics. From the field's beginning, it has been clear that language forms are not static and that language contains an abundance of inherent variation. While many areas within linguistics focus on understanding what is invariant about language, particularly as it occurs within the mind of an idealized speaker (Chomsky & Halle 1968), many other areas focus on understanding variation as structured, heterogeneous patterns within and between speakers (Weinreich et al. 1968). Yet others seek to understand how speakers and listeners create meaning from variation, particularly within the context of interaction (Goffman 1959). Approaches that highlight the structure and meaning of linguistic variability have found language variation to be consistently and

globally partitioned along culturally specific social hierarchies (Labov 1972, Milroy 1987, Eckert 1989, Drager 2009). Cultural, social, and cognitive processes collectively and reiteratively link linguistic and social variability such that social capital and resources are differentially distributed throughout human populations, thereby helping to maintain those hierarchies. These links and the processes that create and reinforce them form the foundation of what is increasingly being called linguistic injustice (see Piller 2016, Baugh 2018, Avineri et al. 2019).

The term discrimination may appear opaque for readers at the outset of this article as it traditionally has two distinct definitions. The first refers to the ability to perceive and partition the speech (or gestural) stream into meaningful elements, such as phonemes and morphemes. Traditionally, this partitioning has been discussed in terms of categorizing a continuous signal into discrete linguistic units (Stevens & Keyser 1989, Lindblom 1990); however, as we review below in Section 2, even this basic partitioning is simultaneously sensitive to both linguistic and social information. The second definition refers to the experience of inequitable societal outcomes for speakers or listeners as a function of their linguistic use and evaluation by interlocutors. We argue that the discrimination of basic linguistic units inherently engages the social experience of producing and interpreting language and that when this process results in unequal, unfair, and disadvantageous outcomes, particularly in interactions with institutions or institutional agents, linguistic injustice results both from and in discrimination.

The definitional opacity in this review is intentional; we assert that recognizing and addressing linguistic injustice requires an understanding of both of these types of discrimination and suggest that every linguist has a role to play in combating linguistic injustice. Therefore, we present evidence that illustrates the cognitive processes through which linguistic and social knowledge interact. We then illustrate some of the unjust and unfair social consequences of such modulation as they unfold in various institutional interactions. Before turning to those illustrations, however, we first provide some theoretical underpinnings for the processes through which linguistic forms become socially meaningful (indexicality) and for the various beliefs that provide the structure and rationalization for the social consequences of that meaning (language ideologies).

1.2. Indexing Variation

Indexicality is the process through which linguistic forms gain meaning from context (Peirce & Hoopes 1991). This can be in the sense that *I* points to the person speaking and *you* points to the person listening, such that pronominal meaning shifts as the context of using language shifts. It can also be in the sense that *ain't* in English means "uneducated," "poor," and/or "informal" (among other meanings). We are primarily concerned with this second sense in this review. In this second sense, indexicality is the mechanism by which speakers can use a speech variant to generate an "act of identity" (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller 1985) and by which listeners can assign speakers to relevant social categories.

Indexes in the language systems of individuals are perceptual units that drive the interaction between linguistic content and people's ability to use speech to situate themselves and others socially. In perceiving indexical meaning, listeners aid in the creation of a social meaning tied to a particular moment of language use, and this social meaning is then reproduced. This reinforcing cycle ensures that as an indexical meaning is adopted and readopted by new speakers, the conveyed social meaning comes to distinguish groups of language users or situations of language use (Drager & Kirtley 2016, Jaeger & Weatherholtz 2016). Necessarily, indexes are composed of salient patterns that listeners can identify and that occur in high statistical distributions (Jaffe 2016).

Theories of indexicality have undergone multiple innovations since Labov (1972) first proposed indicators, markers, and stereotypes. Of note, Silverstein (2003) operationalized these cues

into a system that implicitly constructs iterative levels of meaning between social evaluation and linguistic forms, and Eckert (2008) conceptualized social modulation of language as an interdependent system rather than a set of constraints. Eckert (2008) formulated cycles of evaluation, reevaluation, indexicality assignment, and ideological stance more directly as perceptual units clustered in indexical fields. In this model, beliefs about language and indexicality are considered interdependent within a semiotic field such that indexical ordering is the result of ideological moves. In this conceptualization, indexicality and the ideologies through which indexes are assigned to speakers are one and the same.

For instance, the Brazilian term *favelado* 'slum dweller' has become a positive index of in-group solidarity for soccer fans through processes of indexical ordering and relationship building among social types and stances within an indexical field (Beaton & Washington 2015). These include stances that are considered hateful, such as *violent*, *dirty*, and *dishonest*, as well as stances around being a *warrior* and a *badass* that are considered positive. When used by soccer fans as a term of self-reference, they are unequivocally positive and maintain no obvious semantic link to "slums"; therefore, they do not constitute a case of reclaiming (e.g., taking a term of negative self-reference and using it as a positive self-reference).

The indexical meanings that are associated with linguistic terms like *favelado* highlight that meaning is not stable and that the specifics of meaning can and do change through ongoing usage, particularly for terms that are connected to areas in the social landscape that are also changing (see McConnell-Ginet 2002). A good example of this type of flexibility in meaning can be found in the term *marriage*, which has undergone significant shifts as the legal and social conventions have changed regarding which types of people may be seen as the relevant actors associated with the term. Examples like *marriage* and *favelado* illustrate the social nature through which word meaning can be negotiated and the resulting potential for debates over meaning to be connected to questions of discrimination.

Similar flexibility is apparent in the relatively new use of the third-person *they* to corefer to a third-person singular antecedent with a known referent—for instance, *Jamie brought their mother to the party*, in which *their* corefers to *Jamie* (Conrod 2018). Zimman (2019) discusses many of the central issues involved in pronoun choice, in particular those relevant to inclusivity. These issues have a direct historical relationship with similar discussions concerning the form of the generic third-person singular pronoun in English and disagreement over whether *he* can or should be considered a generic. Just as more and more social settings have mandated the use of alternative generics, more people are specifying which pronouns they use as their personal pronouns and expecting that their specifications will be respected. Failure to do so consistently may be perceived and evaluated as inherently discriminatory through the same processes of indexical ordering and building of the indexical field discussed above. In this way, linguistic forms stay consistent, yet variation generates the context to construe new meaning or meaning reassignment, making variation a "meaning-making enterprise" (Eckert 2008, p. 465) and generating the prediction that "variables will be based in highly salient ideological issues" (Eckert 2008, p. 472).

1.3. Language Ideology

Ideologies about language form the metalinguistic knowledge that speakers rely on to present themselves linguistically as particular kinds of people in particular contexts and that listeners use to assign and evaluate the social characteristics of speakers. Speakers and listeners also depend on ideologies about language to construct and define contexts of speech and to make determinations about which languages and language varieties belong in what contexts. Gal (2016, p. 116) characterizes ideologies as a form of "metacommunication, participants' talk about talk,

or their reflections, signals, and presuppositions about linguistic forms and their use." Gal (2016, p. 116) further notes, "Sometimes this reflection is explicitly formulated.… More often it is simply an unspoken inference."

The analysis of ideologies about language began, in many ways, with Michael Silverstein's (1979) articulation of language ideologies as beliefs and ideas about language that justify, explain, or rationalize language structure and use (for a detailed discussion of language ideology, see Rosa & Burdick 2016). Ideologies have effects in terms of organizing linguistic variation conceptually, in particular in the service of distinguishing individuals and groups of individuals from one another (Irvine & Gal 2000) and in the service of interpreting similarities between individuals and groups of individuals (Queen 2004, Bucholtz & Hall 2005). As Rosa & Burdick (2016, p. 117) write, "This critical conception of language ideologies not only merges linguistic and social analysis in highly productive ways, but also speaks to applied concerns regarding the potential for language to participate in processes of marginalization."

Language ideologies typically serve to construct both normativity and markedness as well as, critically, a dichotomy between them, resulting in the belief that when variation in language occurs, one of the speech forms must be the correct form (Milroy & Milroy 1991, Hill 2008). Ideologies about the inherent correctness of some linguistic forms over others provide the foundation for the promotion of language standardization and standard languages. Beliefs about standard languages may be especially salient in the overall set of language ideologies within a given community and may serve as important hitching posts for language-based social discrimination. While beliefs about language do not typically capture the actual range of variation that we find even in the standard language, users of a given language that has a standard often share beliefs about that standard's inherent accuracy, clarity, and logic.

Other common ideologies about language include the beliefs that language is primarily made up of words that refer to things, that people's intentions are the source of most linguistic meaning, and that varieties other than the standard are simply poor versions of the standard rather than systematic codes in their own right. There are culturally diverse yet strong beliefs about the boundedness of linguistic systems (e.g., languages as clearly and definably different from one another) and about the well-defined connection between languages and the territories and political entities in which they are used. This latter belief interacts in interesting ways with a further belief that individuals, rather than institutionalized systems of social power, are the source of problematic social discrimination (see Hill 2008).

Ideologies about language often "represent themselves as forms of common sense, that rationalize and justify the forms and functions of text and talk" (Hill 2008, p. 34). These rationalizations inadvertently generate public gauges of perceived objectivity in which it becomes permissible to elevate or devalue the social standing and language performance of speakers according to their language choices. Because the social identity of a speaker is perceived as connected to their language patterns, it readily becomes apparent how language ideologies provide listeners with a foundation for either connecting with or othering themselves from a speaker through seemingly individualized ideological justifications.

Beyond the fact that these ideologies are invented and reinforced in communities and lead to strong cultural and historical embedding, they are self-referential, and their circular nature generates strong ideological biases that feed the social stigmas attached to nonnormative forms of language. Hill (2008) points out that advocates of standardized language forms often cite social or economic benefits that are supposedly linked with standard usage and that deviance from the standard signals some moral or social failing on the part of nonstandard speakers. This is exemplified, for instance, in media descriptions of African American athletes or African American political candidates as "well-spoken" or "articulate" (Alim & Smitherman 2012). These descriptors

exemplify the process of using "objective" language to reflect some broader socio-ideological statement about a player or candidate, in this case that the person is morally or socially acceptable. Of course, this process is not uniform, and different groups of language users bring different assessments to it, as Alim & Smitherman (2012) report in work about how *articulate* is perceived across listeners of different races.

These theoretical formulations and examples highlight how language is dynamically intertwined with social evaluation. When language and its use are positioned as somehow neutral and objective or disentangled from social stances, socially discriminatory outcomes become likely, either incipiently or explicitly. This is due to interactions between processes of indexicality and ideologies about language. In the sections below, we illustrate how these concepts are relevant for linguistic cognition, especially in speech perception, and then how linguistic injustice arises and persists as a social consequence of such perception.

2. SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERCEPTION

Understanding how linguistic variation affects the cognitive reality of language users has been a focus of sociolinguistics since its inception. Recently, research investigating how concepts like salience, expectation, and control modulate both linguistic perception and social evaluation has led to support of models that propose a cognitive interface between linguistic and social representations (Goldinger 1998, Pierrehumbert 2002, Johnson 2006, Sumner et al. 2014, Campbell-Kibler 2016, Kleinschmidt 2019). In this section, we review work that provides evidence of a link between social and linguistic knowledge; such work shows that linguistic categorization is modulated by social categorization and that social evaluations are modulated by the linguistic forms a speaker uses.

Traditional research in experimental phonetics has shown that variation in the speech stream is used by speakers to facilitate tasks like categorical perception (Beddor et al. 2013) and lexical access (McMurray et al. 2002). However, research targeting socially indexed variation has shown that these perceptual strategies also use socially indexed information and that when participants have social expectations about a stimulus, linguistic decision making is modulated. Participants often shift their perceptual strategies in a way that reveals the indexical links between language patterns and characteristics of the speaker. Sibilant perception research in English has been particularly insightful in this regard as the categorization of these sounds, primarily /s/ and /ʃ/, has been shown to be indexed to both gender and sexuality. Strand & Johnson (1996), Strand (1999), and Munson (2011) all demonstrate that visual information about the gender of a speaker influences categorical perception of ambiguous linguistic segments in ways that reflect physiological and culturally specific knowledge (Munson 2011). Moreover, Munson et al. (2006) report that ambiguous sibilant tokens indexed to lesbian and bisexual women elicit different categorization patterns than when they are indexed to heterosexual women. Munson & Babel (2007) argue that these indexes may be acquired individually and cluster together as a function of style as opposed to indexing specific categories like femininity or masculinity (see also Levon 2007, Campbell-Kibler 2011, Zimman 2017). Bouavichith (2018) shows that listeners update their perceptual strategies online when given new salient information about the social index of a speaker and that after a block in which a stimulus speaker identifies themselves as gay, highly experienced listeners shift their sibilant categorization strategies in ways that reflect that new social information (see also McGowan 2016). Visually cued expectations about a speaker have also been shown to modulate vowel categorization when vowels are indexed to different dialects (Niedzielski 1999, Hay & Drager 2010) or across generational patterns of mergers (Hay et al. 2006). In all of these studies, knowledge about linguistic features indexed to particular groups of speakers appears to inform perceptual strategies, even when the signal is held constant across social conditions. This work suggests that linguistic

and social discrimination and categorization (in the basic, perceptual sense) are tightly bound to one another.

Social evaluations of individuals also appear to shift when listeners are given multiple linguistic forms by which to evaluate a speaker. Work in this domain has consistently shown, for instance, that as language forms become less standard, their use is assigned to speakers lower in relevant social hierarchies. Campbell-Kibler (2009) shows that speakers who use alveolar English *-ing* forms are evaluated as less educated or intelligent, Heaton & Nygaard (2011) demonstrate that Southern voices are categorized as more sociable but lower-status, and Wright (2019) has shown that the same voice is assigned different character traits according to the language variety spoken by the voice. Staum-Casasanto (2008, 2010) suggests that listeners have and use knowledge of *t/d* deletion in African American Language (AAL). This knowledge not only helps participants make online decisions but also reflects offline beliefs. When rating sentences written with apostrophes to cue consonant cluster reduction (e.g., *mist* versus *mis'*), participants in Staum-Casasanto's studies were more likely to assign nonstandard orthography to African American speakers. Implicit evaluations of speaker identity have also been shown to modulate neural measures associated with semantic congruity (Van Berkum et al. 2008) and syntactic well-formedness (Hanuliková et al. 2012), and personality traits of listeners have been shown to modulate listener evaluations of written language mistakes (Boland & Queen 2016).

Squires (2013) presents evidence that nonstandard morphosyntactic agreement is often evaluated as belonging to lower-status individuals but that previous exposure to nonstandard speech, not social cues, facilitates perception of nonstandard agreement. Squires interprets this effect as showing that social cues do not necessarily constrain linguistic perception. However, Bouavichith et al. (2019) show that when participants are presented with visual linguistic information and asked to categorize the gender of the stimulus speaker's voice, sibilant identity of the visual stimulus shifts categorization of the perceived gender of the speaker's voice; this shift reflects normalization strategies across genders. According to Bouavichith et al., this bidirectional priming effect suggests not only that social information modulates linguistic categorization but also that linguistic information modulates social categorization.

All of these results provide support for arguments that indexicality and language ideologies inform listeners' evaluation of both the speaker and the speaker's language use (see Levon 2014) in addition to aiding the discrimination of basic linguistic units. However, in most of the cases described above, the results emerge from highly constrained settings in laboratories, and the connection to broader questions of linguistic discrimination in the form of social injustice remains largely theoretical. In Sections 3 and 4, we move from the individualized setting of the laboratory to the places where people bring their linguistic systems to their interactions with others—including social and cultural institutions in particular—to show how our individual abilities to discriminate are implicated in larger systems of discrimination.

3. LINGUISTIC DISCRIMINATION AND THE MEDIA

A central institutional force of discrimination can be found in the media. Media representations, both fictional and nonfictional, frequently involve language in one way or another, and this language is typically drawn from repertoires presumed to be used by target audiences (Queen 2015). While the specifics of any particular media product influence how the language appears, the language of the media is fundamentally normative. That is, regardless of the function being fulfilled, the language that appears will conform to the dominant value judgments of the relevant social domain. An example is broadcast news that airs in the early evening in many countries, in which local news, delivered in a style that is regionally specific, is broadcast first, followed by national news, which is delivered in a normative national standard.

Because the media are not seen as a site of face-to-face interaction among authentic speakers and listeners, linguists have not shown much interest in this realm as a source of linguistic data. Indeed, many linguists do not consider the language in media to represent "real" language data. However, as Queen (2015, p. 21) argues, the scripted media offer a fairly contained and edited microcosm of the linguistic ecology from which their players come. In this sense, scripted media are no more and no less real than unscripted media or indeed regular day-to-day language use. However, the scripted media's institutional position places these media among the central locations for observation of the indexical linkage of language variation and social type (Spitulnik 1996) and for the subsequent circulation of that indexicality (see Tagliamonte & Denis 2008, Baker 2010, Stuart-Smith et al. 2013, Bednarek & Caple 2017, Denis & Tagliamonte 2017, Bednarek 2018).

For instance, in an examination of animated children's films, Lippi-Green (2011) shows that characters with positive motivations (e.g., a story's hero) use mainstream American English, whereas characters with more negative motivations are more likely to use dialectal varieties of English, nonstandard dialects, or foreign-accented English. Similarly, Fought & Eisenhauer (2016) show that female characters in a Disney corpus speak proportionally less than male characters and differ in patterns of giving and receiving compliments; thus, these characters contribute to the indexical connection between language variation and expectations of gender performance. Bucholtz & Lopez (2011) show that white characters who use AAL typically use only the most exaggerated elements, thereby creating parodic representations in which the specific function of the variation is to use humor to represent a social other, often in a negative way (see also Hill 2008). Finally, Heaton (2018) demonstrates that viewing a character who uses a Southern variety of American English influences how listeners interact face-to-face with someone who uses Southern-accented English; this finding suggests that these indexical fields are capable of leaving the screen. These examples all illustrate the relationship between language ideologies and indexicality in venues that are outside the laboratory but still less rooted in everyday interactions. We turn now to the ways in which linguistic discrimination finds root in the face-to-face interactions people experience in other institutional settings; we begin with education.

4. LANGUAGE DISCRIMINATION IN INSTITUTIONS

4.1. Linguistic Discrimination and Education

It is primarily by our socialization through primary and secondary education that we learn a standard's spoken and written modalities, and few children acquire the standard variety of a language natively. The struggle to achieve fluency is marginal for the nonmarginalized, and because these individuals represent the social and political majority, their collective experience defines norms and timelines for appropriate mastery (McSwan 2018). Axioms about standardness, well-spokenness, and appropriacy are rooted in the variety of those with cultural power. This generates educational learning objectives achieved most fluidly by those in command of a standard and creates barriers for those who do not—or cannot—easily acculturate to its use (Drake 1977, quoted in Lippi-Green 2011).

As Piller (2016, p. 100) writes, "The monolingual habitus of formal education has always flown in the face of linguistic diversity and has often had the express aim of eradicating subordinate indigenous languages." In addition, migrant populations frequently face infelicitous learning conditions. For instance, Levin & Shohamy (2008) discuss how submersion pedagogies used in Israeli schools result in significant achievement gaps for immigrant students from both Russia and Ethiopia. Similarly, Takenoshita and colleagues (2014) show that the educational attainment of Brazilian migrants to Japan has a much more modest effect on their children's educational outcomes than is true for Japanese parents and children. They attribute this difference to the

social and cultural positioning of Brazilian immigrants' employment instability. Piller (2016) discusses the situation in the Northern Territory of Australia, where the language of the schools is exclusively English while the language(s) of wider communication is a variety of creoles and indigenous languages. Because creoles in these communities are often understood as "bad" English, and many people in these communities are unfamiliar with cultural concepts common in other parts of Australia (e.g., parking meters, cinemas), standardized tests are deeply problematic.

In the United States, places with large minority populations have been the epicenters of debates about bilingualism and bidialectalism, such as the Ebonics controversies of the 1990s and disagreements regarding language immersion strategies today. Perea et al. (2015) detail how Latinx second-language students have historically faced retention policies (justified by linguistic reasoning) in which linguistic competency has been assessed by hasty and inconclusive means. Latinx students remain at the forefront of debates about bilingual education, in particular where issues of public financial and infrastructural support are concerned. Today, we find "*triple segregation* in US schools, in which students are segregated by race, socioeconomic status, and language *across* schools and often by language *within* schools" (Hernandez 2017, p. 135).

Vanegas Rojas et al. (2016) note that most English-language teaching pedagogies start from a place that characterizes language as neutral, which assumes that language is used to transmit a set of fixed rules. This idea plays out in prescriptive teaching methods that erase the language indexes of real speakers and with them, the effects of language ideologies that speakers experience via nonstandard language use (Guerrero & Quintero 2009, Vanegas Rojas et al. 2016). By observing second-language English classrooms, Vanegas Rojas et al. show that lower-proficiency students are often put at a number of disadvantages due to teaching pedagogies that emphasize the idealization of native speakers and the standard language. The lowest-proficiency students are drilled to reproduce accentless speech, and insistence on perfect pronunciation in the classroom inculcates language learners with negative perceptions of accented Englishes. As a result, students internalize the negative assessments of their performance through public correction and comparison with the productions of high-proficiency speakers. Combined, these effects create a state of linguistic segregation in the classroom (Vanegas Rojas et al. 2016).

Some linguists are working within school systems to create linguistically inclusive atmospheres that are responsive to surrounding areal variation and designed to uplift rather than erase diverse perspectives and experiences. Hernandez (2017) reports on a dual language model, which incorporates bilingual students into the classroom and uses both Spanish and English as the medium of instruction for all students for different portions of the school day. This model allows students to trade positions of competency and build a culture of cooperation and respect that develops alongside their general academic acumen. However, it is clear that the white, middle- and upper-class, English L1 speakers in the program reap more benefits in terms of social mobility than do their minority peers: "The act of choosing to learn the nondominant language is not leveling the playing field but giving dominant folks the power to choose enrichment for their children" (Hernandez 2017, p. 146). This disparity persists because such programs exist within the US educational superstructure and are subject to institutional pressures that limit the implementation of entirely equitable bilingual education programs. Thus, "even in a school context that strives to value two languages, English is still the legitimate language and members of one group enter the school with an automatic legitimate competence (Bourdieu 1982) because of the language they speak" (Hernandez 2017, p. 145).

People, especially children, can only be expected to take an informed stance on language if they are informed. The absence of linguistics in mainstream curricula is damaging because building general knowledge about language variation is crucial in combating linguistic discrimination (see also Labov 1982; Cameron et al. 1992, 1993; Rickford 1997; Zentella 1997; Wolfram 1998;

Charity 2008). Mary Bucholtz has attempted to subvert such gaps in equity by leading the SKILLS program, which equips multilingual students with five key components of "sociolinguistic justice": Linguistic Valorization, Linguistic Legitimation, Linguistic Inheritance, Linguistic Access, and Linguistic Expertise (Bucholtz 2014, Bucholtz et al. 2014). The program aims to treat students as knowledge producers. Linguistic discrimination—especially race-based discrimination—is explicitly addressed in its historical detail and contemporary nuance. The modules focus directly on the students, who eventually research their own speech communities and analyze data they collect themselves. This work creates a portable sociolinguistic justice package that can be integrated into any educational model (e.g., HI-SKILLS in Hawai'i).

4.2. Linguistic Discrimination and Law

Education is of course only one critical institution in which language plays a pivotal role. The practice of law, a fundamentally linguistic endeavor, is based on the one hand on the interpretation of precedent codified in written language and on the other hand on the interpretation of the language produced by those involved in legal proceedings. As a highly ritualized institutional practice, the language of courts may be the most standardized and prestigious language of the political unit in which the court is situated. Therefore, how the language of individuals is understood, transcribed, and interpreted is of significant importance for questions of linguistic justice.

There is a subfield of linguistics, forensic linguistics, devoted to such questions (see, e.g., Shuy 1993, Coulthard et al. 2016). Forensic linguistics tends to focus primarily on the identification and interpretation of linguistic variation. Baugh (2018, pp. 27–28) provides an example of this type of discrimination. In the case Baugh describes, a defendant in a murder trial had made a phone call to a family member that was recorded and later transcribed. The defendant reportedly said, "I know I committed this shit." Given his knowledge of the grammar of AAL, Baugh was able to show that the transcription was inaccurate and that the defendant had actually said, "I know I ain't committed this shit"; the crucial evidence for the existence of "ain't" was nasalization on the vowel [ay].

There are also cases in which diversity in spoken language pragmatics has proved highly influential in legal encounters. For instance, in the case of Sandra Bland, language ideology and indexicality sit center stage in understanding how state trooper Brian Encinia escalated a traffic stop into a violent altercation. In consideration of this case, linguists have assessed Encinia's association of AAL with "noncompliance" and the public's response that the escalation between Bland and Encinia was tied to Bland's "impoliteness" (Holliday et al. 2015). A study by Voigt et al. (2017) shows evidence of racial disparities in respectful language toward the community from police as gathered from body camera footage. In their work, Voight and colleagues found that officers were equally formal with all community members but that black community members experienced greater disrespect than white community members. This finding raises questions about how formality and respect are evaluated as a function of standard and nonstandard language (Voigt et al. 2017).

Language ideologies extend from policing into the courtroom. In *State of Florida v. George Zimmerman*, testimony used to accuse Zimmerman came in large part from Rachel Jeantel, a heavily accented English speaker, who was on the phone with Trayvon Martin when he was shot by Zimmerman. Analyses of the trial have included Jeantel's utterances (Slobe 2016), discourse strategies in the trial (Sullivan 2013), and subsequent assessment of Jeantel by the public (Rickford & King 2016). Slobe's analysis of crucial sections of testimony highlights an interruption–repetition strategy by the defense that targeted the most nonstandard variants of Jeantel's speech; this strategy destroyed Jeantel's credibility and the state's case and resulted in Zimmerman's acquittal. Similarly,

Jones and colleagues (2019) report that court transcriptionists in Philadelphia are often unable to accurately depict AAL because they cannot understand what they are transcribing; this problem can result in inaccurate depictions of events that change the official record of the court. Taken together, these observations suggest a pattern that at all levels of the justice system, institutional agents are not fully capable of understanding or interpreting citizens' language equitably. The consequences of this inequality are predictably devastating.

As Stern (2018) discusses, many policies involving translation and interpretation within courts have failed to keep pace with changing social and cultural patterns of migration and linguistic superdiversity; this failure has resulted in wide disparities in the quality and accuracy of court interpretation, especially for speakers of languages that are of low diffusion. Although many countries require interpretation for speakers of migrant and/or indigenous languages, court interpreters are often more oriented to the needs of the courts and the lawyers than to the needs of defendants and witnesses. Thus, in some cases interpreters opt for word-for-word translation rather than translations that are sociolinguistically accurate (Stern 2018). Stern (2018, p. 400) describes the sociolinguistic and pragmatic considerations for court participants who do not primarily use the court's language:

> Ukrainian witnesses' reluctance to cooperate during cross-examination or literal interpretation of confirmation-seeking questions as information-seeking (Stern 1995), and misunderstanding by the unaddressed recipient of who is being addressed (Angermeyer 2005; Ng 2013), confirm that non-English-speaking participants are often left baffled about the intention of the questions, and most likely unable to follow the line of questioning by the lawyers and the very course of the trial. Gratuitous concurrence—a cultural tendency to accept any proposition by the authority figure—by Aboriginal witnesses during cross-examination has incriminated defendants (Eades 2010).

Finally, the courts have often been involved in adjudicating the use of language itself, particularly in cases involving the use of nondominant languages in workplaces. For instance, Piller (2016, p. 86) describes a case in which a woman who had been living in Germany for decades and working as a cleaner was suddenly reprimanded for not speaking better German (after 20 years of no such reprimands while doing the same job) and was required to document that she had enrolled in German language classes. When she brought an ethnic harassment case against her employer, the courts ruled against her, arguing that the needs of employers are of overriding importance. As we show in Section 4.3, these types of concerns involve employment from the interview stage on through doing the work itself.

4.3. Linguistic Discrimination in Employment

Standard language ideologies dominate the workplace. Guides for successful interview strategies or conversations with career coaches reveal a preference for standard language; this normativity is cloaked in the guise of clarity, professionalism, and unmarked communication strategies. English has become the language of the global marketplace, and in this space, speaking English with fluency theoretically gives one access to profitable, sustainable work; it has become a commodity in its own right. The ideology that a command of standard English requires unaccented English is pervasive, and it links English competence to social mobility (Angouri & Miglbauer 2014). Once individuals gain access as employees within a particular institution, institutional acculturation is often imperative. Typically, this requires shedding personal communicative strategies for professional ones, and workplace acculturation, particularly in international spaces, increasingly demands a command of English (see also Charles & Marschan-Piekkari 2002). Lønsmann (2014) describes international workplace communication strategies at a Danish pharmaceutical company

where management and blue-collar workers divide their language usage into specific registers. While most of the blue-collar workers are proficient only in Danish, they encounter English daily in their linguistic experience, though they self-report as having at most "[a] little…[o]nly spoken" knowledge of English (Lønsmann 2014, p. 99). Nevertheless, employees must engage with mandatory daily English-language emails on company computers that operate in English (Lønsmann 2014). This language environment creates undue pressure on these workers but also potentially excludes them from important communications such as company-wide social events and changes to benefits. These workers might hope to learn or practice their English in their highly immersive space, but they also perceive more powerful speakers as devaluing accented English. Their isolation increases given their awareness of how nonstandard production is perceived by their community, which they depend on to make a living and participate in at great personal stakes.

Language ideologies are also present among the white-collar workers at the company described by Lønsmann (2014). Rather than comparing their proficiency with that of other members of the company, they compare the English of Danes as a whole with that of other European learner groups. The assumed hierarchy of white-collar workers is national, not local—and it places Danish English speakers immediately beneath native English speakers. By characterizing all Danes as excellent English speakers, the white-collar workers ostensibly erase the linguistic struggles of their blue-collar counterparts. Language use among the blue-collar workers happens under a misplaced assumption about the ways in which accented English is perceived by the power brokers, and those same power brokers are disconnected from the experience of these blue-collar workers. The white-collar workers do not perceive blue-collar workers as linguistically substandard; they simply do not think of them at all.

In some professions, a command of standard English may be a component of physical and personal safety. Dávila et al. (2011) correlate English-language proficiency and workers' compensation claims for on-the-job injuries among foreign-born Latinx men in the United States. The authors report that between 1992 and 2006, occupational fatalities paralleled the increase in proportion of foreign and domestic Latinx workers. Their findings suggest that English-language proficiency is conceptually related to occupational risk because some workers may not fully understand the stated responsibilities of a job, akin to the Danish workers above, and also because some foreign-born workers may seek out more physically demanding and dangerous jobs for higher pay. The combination of these factors puts low-English-proficiency speakers in the workforce at a disproportionate risk of bodily harm in the workplace (Dávila et al. 2011). As these examples show, the social consequences of intersecting language ideologies are often subtle and subjective. Within the workplace, individual workers often devote their energies to being efficient workers rather than engaged colleagues. Furthermore, this lack of communication between colleagues of varied linguistic competencies creates ideologies that are internalized along employment hierarchies. Though personally and socially detrimental, linguistic disparities in the workplace are rarely addressed; the work still gets done (Thuesen 2017).

4.4. Linguistic Discrimination in the Housing Market

Sociolinguistic research regarding the housing market in the United States illustrates how indexical links to language variation can limit access for nonstandard speakers. The 1968 Fair Housing Act protects home buyers from discrimination; yet, to date, dialect discrimination has proved impossible to litigate because in legal terms, discrimination requires physical proximity. It is, however, clearly present even in non-face-to-face encounters. Purnell et al. (1999) found asymmetrical response rates from property managers based on what dialectal guise a multidialectal speaker used to inquire about property availability. If the tenant used standard English and sounded white, they

were more likely to get a callback in majority-white areas (Purnell et al. 1999). Wright (2019) expands on this method, asking listeners not only to assess the racial and regional characteristics of the voices they hear but also to provide attitudinal impressions. Wright shows that listeners evaluate guises differently and concludes that these differences reveal how accents help maintain covert housing segregation, which keeps traditionally disadvantaged communities indefinitely so and keeps developing communities homogeneous.

Grieser (2014) also reports on the connections of race, voice, and housing in an analysis of the phonological and morphosyntactic variation tied to stance and positioning of AAL speakers in a gentrifying neighborhood in Washington, DC. Grieser's work examines how social meanings tied to AAL features function as speakers position themselves alongside other African Americans and how these features relate to professional class identities and identities of place in light of gentrification (Grieser 2014). With the neighborhood having undergone segregation, desegregation, white flight, black upward mobility, black flight, and gentrification, the voices of those living within these cycles carry indexes that become associated with the racial and ethnic identities of the neighborhood's inhabitants. Thus, the perception of where one lives is not ostensibly separable from the perception of how one speaks. Grieser's work not only adds to our understanding of language within black American middle-class housing but also supplements the work on housing access by detailing what happens sociolinguistically after access is gained.

4.5. Linguistic Discrimination and Health Care

Linguistic interaction within the health care system is particularly sensitive given that it deals with vulnerable populations where discriminatory outcomes may directly affect the physical health outcomes of those populations. Some of the biggest barriers to equitable health care come from miscommunications. Language differences between patients and practitioners along with language concordance have been cited as some of the most critical factors for health care professionals to address to positively serve patient populations (Kanter et al. 2009). Much of the literature on language between patients and health care providers addresses linguistic strategies for patient interaction, compliance, and outcomes (see Pichler & Hesson 2016).

Language-based sensitivity is important in health care because effective communication between practitioners and patients benefits patient health (Travaline et al. 2005, Jason et al. 2013). Yet, with respect to client-centered care, evidence indicates a mismatch between the languages of populations in certain geographical areas and the languages in which health care providers are proficient. In a longitudinal study of speech pathologists in Australia, only 20% of services available across the country were offered in languages other than English, and the languages that were offered did not reflect the language needs of the population (Verdon et al. 2014).

Language-based differences are further influenced by the shared linguistic strategies used by health professionals and the community. Examples of linguistic mismatch, such as misinterpretations of the words *I don't know*, have been shown to result in imprecise diagnoses and even dissent between providers and patients (Hesson & Pichler 2017). Bloom-Pojar (2018) provides an account of American doctors providing health care in the Dominican Republic, where the standard of Spanish taught to the providers before the trip was rendered useless because it did not reflect the Spanish spoken in the community they were serving. Over time, the clinic and the providers changed to the regional variety spoken by patients, thereby improving patient outcomes but resulting in providers' adoption of stigmatized rural accents, which affected subsequent local encounters within the United States (Bloom-Pojar 2018).

Interpreting medical instructions and diagnoses frequently falls to patient populations that do not use the standard language practices of the medical community. And while the inclusion

of an interpreter is meant to enhance communication, interpretation can also become a barrier to equitable health care access. A bilingual interpreter may be expected to perform duties beyond translation, such as reinterpreting the provider's instructions or emphasizing the seriousness of the health concern (Gavioli 2015). Because patient health outcomes can vary as a function of linguistic interaction, understanding strategies for approaching bilingual settings, language variation, and modality differences can potentially mitigate discriminatory health outcomes (Nicodemus et al. 2014).

5. CONCLUSION

As we have reviewed in this article, linguistic variation carries with it a plethora of discriminable information and meaning. This can be perceptually strategic information to facilitate linguistic processing, yield a particular social evaluation, or indicate the social circulation of ideological perspectives about language. We have discussed theories about how meaning is created through a reciprocal relationship of interpretation across individuals and reviewed ethnographic and experimental evidence for how individuals navigate the realities of linguistic variation within cultural institutions. We also have demonstrated some of the unequitable outcomes that can result, within institutional arenas in particular, when linguistic variation occurs.

We might also inquire upon the institutional systems in which we (the authors) and presumably you (the reader) play a role. Many linguists see language and discrimination as the purview of sociolinguists, applied linguists, and linguistic anthropologists; however, this is inaccurate. Every linguist can make a difference when it comes to linguistic diversity and equity. And every linguist ought to see that as a moral and professional imperative provided by the privilege of being in the field. Every linguist can move outside of disciplinary and research domains to explain, from whatever their preferred theoretical starting point, that the language children come to speak is exactly the language they hear around them, that every human who produces a grammar produces a "good" grammar, and that there is a huge difference between the content of speech and the form in which that content is embedded.

Given our expertise on language, we as linguists bear the greatest responsibility to examine not only how language functions as an object of study but also how that object interfaces with the systems our societies create. We also bear responsibility to engage with those who participate within those systems about how language works. This begins with considering how we frame the analytical tools that we teach in our linguistics courses, how we frame "standard" language varieties, and how we describe geographically or regionally indexed constructions. We are all called to introspect on what it means to be an "ideal" or "native" speaker in an increasingly multilingual world, what these terms assume, and whom they implicate. This is true in the context of our research, our classrooms, our public engagements, and our own institutional navigations. Because it is not widely believed that language is a signal of who we are, where our roots lie, or who the people are that we think of as ours, it also is not common to believe that discrimination based on language is akin to discrimination based on identity, history, regionality, or community. This is one area in which linguists have a special role to play in the societies in which we live because we are the professionals who know these orientations to be inaccurate, and we have the skills and tools to explain how and why.

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