

Languages, Identities, and Accents: Perspectives from the 2010 Linguistic Diversity Conference

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In our introduction to this special edition of *Issues in Applied Linguistics* we, the co-editors, discuss our motivations for organizing the 2010 Linguistic Diversity Conference in response to reports that the Arizona Department of Education had instructed districts to remove teachers who spoke “heavily accented” English from their ESL classrooms. We outline our objectives of civic engagement, advancement of public understanding, and promotion of sound research-based language policies, as well as our ultimate goals of advocacy, change, and social justice. We describe the article contributions to this special edition, organized under two main sections that primarily argue that 1) language is more than a system of signs and symbols; and 2) accents are co-constructed by speakers and hearers in interaction. We share our hope that this volume can serve as an informative resource for diverse stakeholders in language scholarship, education, and policymaking. Finally, we invite others to dialogue with us through new media and join our campaign against linguistic misinformation and intolerance.

Motivations for the 2010 Linguistic Diversity Conference

On April 30th 2010 *The Wall Street Journal* published an article (Jordan, 2010), which alleged that the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) had instructed school districts in their state to remove English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers who spoke “ungrammatical” and “heavily accented” English from their classrooms. According to the article, schools were directed to remove these veteran teachers who “don’t speak English well enough” to ensure that students with limited English proficiency were being taught by those who spoke the language “flawlessly.” The article also reported that the ADE had sent out evaluators to audit teachers’ “comprehensible pronunciation, correct grammar, and good writing.” However, these measures were taken without first presenting teachers with a defined set of parameters indicating how exactly they were to be evaluated, or what, according to those standards, constituted unaccented/grammatical or heavily accented/ungrammatical English.

The ADE’s efforts to identify and remove teachers they believed were hindering the progress of English language learner students perhaps indicated an attempt to

assign blame for the resounding failure of the Structured English Immersion (SEI) or “English-only” approach to ESL instruction, legally mandated in 2000 by the Arizona State Proposition 203 to prepare English learners for full integration into mainstream content classes within one year. To solve the problem of why English language learners were not meeting SEI goals, rooting out ESL teachers whose grammar and accent were deemed subpar might have appeared to be an easier course of action than, for example, addressing the accusations made in *Flores v. Arizona* (1992) of insufficient state funding and support for ESL instruction, or complying with the many federal judiciary rulings resulting from the nearly two decades that case has been in action, which demand that critical changes be made to the laws and policies governing the state’s tremendously flawed English learner programs¹.

The *Wall Street Journal* article generated an immediate response from the Department of Linguistics at the University of Arizona (UA), which in an open letter to state lawmakers² questioned the real intentions behind the ADE’s actions. The UA Department of Linguistics statement included a list of 8 linguistics and language acquisition research-based facts presented as counterevidence to the insufficient and unsound reasoning that the ADE had cited for their procedures. Among these facts were the assertions that: a) “‘Heavily accented’ speech is not the same as ‘unintelligible’ or ‘ungrammatical speech;’” b) “‘There is no such thing as ‘unaccented’ speech, and therefore policies aimed at eliminating accented speech from the classroom are paradoxical;” and most importantly, c) “‘Communicating to students that foreign accented speech is ‘bad’ or ‘harmful’ is counterproductive to learning, and affirms pre-existing patterns of linguistic bias and harmful ‘linguistic profiling.’” Along with each fact, the University of Arizona statement also included a short discussion with references to its solid grounding in research—a resource the ADE did not provide for teachers and their district evaluators.

The UA Department of Linguistics statement against the ADE policies, as well as another open letter signed by 81 members of the faculty at Stanford University³, inspired and encouraged us to stand in solidarity with ESL teachers in Arizona and to make our own public statement against the ADE’s actions. Therefore we, four graduate students of the UCLA Department of Applied Linguistics, felt compelled to hold a public meeting conference where we could share with members of our local, national, and international community the reasons why we believed the ADE’s directives were misguided and based upon unfounded pedagogical and linguistic ideas. We also wanted to help prevent similar policies unfairly targeting vulnerable groups from being enacted in other parts of the U.S.

The then Chair of our department, Olga Yokoyama, suggested we organize a conference in which scholars, community members, administrators, students, teachers, and teacher educators could dialogue about second language learning, language teaching, language assessment, and related linguistic and social issues. This inspired us to create a public forum where research could be offered as counterevidence to the ADE’s directives, within a space that encouraged constructive and collaborative dialogue on making equitable language policies based on sound

research with participants from diverse fields, interests, and professional backgrounds. The 2010 UCLA Department of Applied Linguistics Public Conference, entitled “Linguistic Diversity in American Classrooms: Perspectives on Grammar, Accent, and Fluency,” brought together a total of 14 expert presenters, 17 panelists, and 143 registered attendees from the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. Among those who made presentations at the gathering were John Baugh, on the topic of speech-based linguistic profiling and discrimination; Noma LeMoine, on negative attitudes toward language variation; Adrienne Lo, discussing linguistic racialization and marginalization; and Concepción Valadéz on the topic of language fluency and effective teaching. Since our idea was to initiate the dialogue with a discussion of the reported ADE policies, we invited the officials in charge of implementing them, as well as their supervisors, to participate in our public conference. Unfortunately, however, none accepted our invitation.

A key guiding question throughout the process of organizing the 2010 Linguistic Diversity Conference (LDC) in response to the events in Arizona was: How can academics use their research, scholarship, and action to effect positive change in broader communities? Goss, Gastwirth, and Parkash (2010) note that “for at least 20 years, American universities have drawn criticism for holding themselves aloof from public life, thereby failing to fulfill their civic mission to serve democracy and humanity (Checkoway 2001; Boyer 1994; Campus Compact and Tufts University 2005)” (p. 117). We, the LDC organizers, felt strongly that it was our duty to fulfill our ‘civic mission’ and deeply engage with events in our communities, contributing essential relevant information to an ongoing dialogue about linguistic diversity, accent, and discrimination. We also welcomed the opportunity to learn from practitioners and other members of the community who attended the conference, as well as through various forms of communication (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, Twitter) before and afterwards.

Our Commitment To Civic Engagement

As defined by the American Psychological Association, civic engagement is comprised of “individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern.” This model challenges scholars to take the lead from the communities of which we are a part to determine what to focus research attention on, as opposed to determining a research or action agenda independent from those communities. We believe that this is an essential element of effective civic engagement, the organic and seamless move from the community to academic action.

A first step is advancing public understanding and making the public aware of relevant community-based issues through the lens of well-informed research, but we do not believe this is enough. Thus, our ultimate goals are advocacy, social change and social justice, fundamentally modifying our communities so that they become more fair and just. However, one cannot seek to change something without truly knowing it. This is why mutual benefit and collaborative learning are so critical to

the civic engagement enterprise. As academics, we need to prioritize *listening* in our university engagement with the broader community. As will be discussed later in this introduction, social meaning can only be constructed through interaction between mutually interested parties. We therefore sought to use this collaboration-oriented model of interaction and purposeful listening throughout the processes of planning, experiencing, and contributing to the conference.

As applied linguists, we have been socialized into a deep appreciation for the diversity of languages and cultures in the world community. We have also been taught to be constantly learning and developing tools to help those around us. Applied linguistics as an enterprise has at its core the meaningful application of rigorous, thorough research on topics including language acquisition, language assessment, discourse/interaction analysis, language pedagogy, and language planning and policy. By definition, applied linguists seek to consistently translate research-based knowledge into practical information for teachers, practitioners, learners, and community members. This conference, therefore, was an organic expression of the applied linguistics civic engagement ethos.

Once we learned about the ADE's troubling actions, we felt it was our responsibility to contribute what we could to a dialogue frequently overtaken in the media by simplistic sound bites and misinformation. The events in Arizona touched upon issues related to linguistic diversity, the work of teachers as social agents, and the ever-changing make-up of the U.S.. In our commitment to civic engagement, it is necessary to empathize and identify with all communities—be they in Arizona, California, or across the globe. We also believe that, as academics, it is only after we truly engage with and effect positive change in our larger communities that we can begin to define the university for the twenty-first century and return to our fundamental duty to “serve democracy and humanity.”

In that spirit of service, we undertook an additional project after the LDC had ended. We decided to organize proceedings from the public conference in a special edition of our UCLA Department of Applied Linguistics graduate student-run journal with a central theme of “Social Issues in Applied Linguistics: Linguistic Diversity in Classrooms and Beyond.” Consistent with the goals of the LDC, we sought to maintain our dedication to engaging all members of the community in an open and meaningful discussion on issues pertaining to accent, grammaticality, fluency, and intelligibility. Promoting the ideals of the “public” in academic publications and “applied” in applied linguistics, we called upon contributors from different areas and levels of expertise. We hope that this special PUBLICATION—the first of its kind in applied linguistics—will be both materially and thematically accessible to a diverse readership and will serve as an informative resource for scholars, students, teachers, parents of school-aged children, administrators, policymakers, as well as the general public.

This Special Edition

We organized the articles in this special edition under two main sections, which argue that: (a) language is more than a system of signs and symbols; and (b) accents are co-constructed by hearers and speakers in interaction. Following the lead of philosophers John Dewey and Humberto Maturana, Becker (1995) differentiates between *language*—a structured, rule-based system of signs, sounds, and meanings—and *linguaging*, which he describes as the way we remold memory into present, unique contexts. Becker's distinction between language and linguaging, a concept also promoted by Yngve (1996), Shohamy (2006), and García (2010), illustrates an important difference between the structuralist idea of language as a fixed and preordained sign-signifier system that is simply appropriated by its users (Saussure, 1966) and the poststructuralist notion of language as an interactive practice of meaning-making and negotiation of this sign system, which cannot be separated from the individuals and social contexts in action (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991; Weedon, 1987).

Language is more than just a system of signs and symbols because, as we collectively and individually do language through social, meaning making, and signifying practices, we are constantly struggling over truth and power. This is because it is through language that we construct our sense of self while also defining and positioning ourselves in relation to other people. It is through language practices that we learn how to name, think about, understand, and treat ourselves and others. Human identity, therefore, does not just come from our personal sense of belonging or actual membership in groups, as suggested by social psychologists (Tajfel, 1981, 1982; Hogg & Abrams, 1988). It is also deeply connected to language, since without language we would not be able to voice our life experiences. Also, without language, we would be unable to understand, think in line with, and act upon our life experiences within the localized, meaning-making terms (e.g., ideologies, discourse practices) of our social worlds, which all existed even before we acquired and learned to use language (Weedon, 1987). In short, we can define identity as a phenomenon of sociocultural relations that springs forth and circulates within and through interaction, not a fixed sense of being in one's individual mind or social group (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

With this understanding of language and identity, let us think about how we perceive the way others speak the languages we speak. These perceptions are collaboratively constructed, or in other words, they depend as much on the experiences, thoughts, and attitudes of those who hear language as they do on those who produce it. How do our experiences and what we have learned about others in our social world influence the way we hear and judge a speaker's accent, or the particular way he or she does language? Quillian's (2006) research shows that the positive or negative views we typically hold about other people's accents are influenced by our attitudes toward their place of origin and or their ethno-racial group. Padilla and Borsato (2010) take this finding farther still by demonstrating

how we make attributions about other people's status, intelligence, abilities—even trustworthiness—based upon their accents, and then treat them accordingly. This special edition of *Issues in Applied Linguistics* contributes other similar arguments and findings to the above described understanding of the active, socially grounded, and collaborative practice of language.

Language Is More Than A System Of Signs And Symbols

The articles in the first section of this volume demonstrate many different ways language operates as more than merely a system of signs and symbols. Norton (this volume) provides a conceptual framework for understanding this idea and uses poststructuralist theory to illustrate how language creates context and identity within classrooms. She contends that language teaching works best and students' investments in the language classroom are most enhanced when their multiple identities are taken into consideration as teachers develop and implement pedagogical practices. Norton also recognizes that the teacher accent controversies in Arizona are indicative of much larger power struggles over whose vision of America's future will prevail, and she shows how poststructuralist theories of language, identity, and investment help us understand these debates and the ways we can create “opportunities for productive and empowering classroom practices” (p. 179).

Following Norton's discussions on language, identity, and investment, Orellana, Lee, and Martínez shed light on the many linguistic repertoires and practices of adolescents to demonstrate how language might be conceived as a toolkit—something that people use and do, as opposed to something one has or does not have. They consider the positive impact that would result if schools recognized, celebrated, and even helped expand young people's linguistic repertoires by asking important questions such as: “What would it mean to assess [students'] language not only in terms of ‘how much’ English they ‘have,’ but in terms of their flexibility and versatility in *using* different language forms?” (p. 185). Thus, Orellana, Lee, and Martínez lead us away from a deficit or an empty vessel perspective of language learning, as was seen in the 1960s and 1970s during the deficit-difference controversy among linguists and educators (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2006), and toward that of learner affirmation and the expansion of linguistic access.

In the same way that Orellana, Lee, and Martínez encourage us to recognize and celebrate learners' toolkits of linguistic repertoires, Pellicer also promotes an inclusive model of language use that focuses on what individuals can successfully do, instead of a subtractive one that highlights their perceived linguistic deficiencies. Through an analysis of the complex and highly engaging storytelling strategies employed by indigenous Spanish as a second language speakers in Mexico, she demonstrates their myriad narrative competences typically ignored and/or derided by native Spanish speakers, who negatively assess their second language abilities due to an ideological association of these with “uneducated” or “non-standard” Spanish (p. 198).

Finally, Peer and Pérez present on-the-ground ethnographic research of Arizona's 4-hour English Language Development model of ESL instruction, inspired by the national nativist "English-only" movement. This model was born of Structured English Immersion approach mandated by Arizona State Proposition 203, which expects that English language learners become proficient enough to be transferred into mainstream content classes within one year, however, wholly depends upon individual classroom teachers for implementation and efficacy. Peer and Pérez concretize ideas from the other article contributions described above and illustrate the ways that teachers' identities are fundamental in how students experience language and power in ESL classrooms. They argue that "teachers stand at the forefront of policy delivery; therefore, they must be considered by others as well as view themselves as *policymakers*" (p. 210). Taking this view of language teachers as agents of change on the cutting edge of how attitudes and policies are enacted in the classroom, it becomes all the more important that we understand the ways in which their identities and experiences contribute to the complex social practices of language.

Accents Are Co-Constructed By Hearers And Speakers In Interaction

The articles in the second section of this special edition highlight the nature of accent as a linguistic phenomenon co-constructed in interaction by both those who produce it and those who hear it. The section begins with Yokoyama's reflections on the impact of accents on her personal and professional encounters. She gives a number of striking examples to illustrate how her spoken English while in Japan was once judged as having a Spanish accent, although at that time she had never previously interacted with any Spanish speakers; and how her son's customers during a summer job claimed not to understand him when he used his native speaker English, however, did so immediately when he faked a Japanese accent. Yokoyama provides an essential perspective on experiencing and perceiving ethnolinguistic identity in diverse contexts, thus making the case for why "we do not want to allow our linguistic stereotyping and the cognitive inertia underlying it to stigmatize [heritage languages], or to stigmatize any traces of them that may slip into the speech of speakers of English as a second or a foreign language" (p. 221).

Lindemann provides empirical evidence supporting Yokoyama's personal accounts of how stereotypes and assumptions about speakers' ethnic identities and appearance influence hearers' perceptions of their accents. She shows how judgments of accent and linguistic proficiency are by no means straightforward, such that the same pronunciations are heard to be entirely different, depending on what the listener believes about the speaker's ethnicity and language background and the expectations (s)he holds about the abilities of such individuals. In light of the tremendous potential for bias—regardless of whether it is intentional or not—Lindemann warns that "judgments of incomprehensibility or of specific pronunciations, even judgments that seem obvious, cannot be taken at face value,

nor can such superficial judgments be relied upon in formulating responsible public policy” (p. 231).

In another study on perceptions of accent and linguistic fluency, Ajioka investigates native Japanese speakers’ judgments of naturalness in the speech of foreigners learning the language. She demonstrates how native speakers can be aware of “subtle” and “clear” unnaturalness in learners’ language, yet still comprehend it perfectly. Ajioka argues that, if indeed we value communication as the ultimate goal in interaction, we should be aware that “being too sensitive to errors may impair smooth interaction or discourage a learner from communicating actively, which then deprives him/her of the opportunity to acquire subtle naturalness” (p. 247-248). Following Ajioka’s observations on hearer perceptions of language learner speech, Avineri et al. conclude this second section on the interactional co-construction of accent by providing a comprehensive perspective on the complex and coordinated systems involved in the effective assessment of language proficiency. They discuss best practices related to assessment, describe different groups of stakeholders in this process, highlight a specific example (the Test of Oral Proficiency exam for prospective international teaching assistants at UCLA), and also include valuable personal testimonials from language test takers and raters.

The diverse array of articles in this volume represents perspectives from a number of disciplines, including applied linguistics, education, linguistics, sociolinguistics, and Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). One of our primary goals in organizing both the 2010 Linguistic Diversity Conference and this special edition of *Issues in Applied Linguistics* was to value and provide a forum for diverse ideas, styles, and voices. Therefore, we welcomed and encouraged not only representatives from different fields, but also a variety of research and expository genres, such as personal testimonials, theoretical papers, empirical studies and research reports, and critical reflections. The diversity in author background and perspective thus yielded the many themes previously discussed in this introduction that all thread through the articles in the volume, in addition to illustrating the principal ideas that language is more than a system of signs and symbols and accents are co-constructed by speakers and hearers in interaction.

With regard to how we assess language proficiency—and potentially, make policies to address it—Orellana, Lee, and Martínez, Pellicer, and Ajioka propose a “glass half full” model of viewing learners’ language, instead of an excessive focus on what they do wrong. Yokoyama, Lindemann, Ajioka, and Avineri et al. highlight the fundamental importance of taking into consideration the perceptions and potential biases of hearers in any formal or informal assessment of proficiency. Pellicer, Yokoyama, and Lindemann call attention to the influence of a speaker’s ethnicity, regional origin, social status, and the hearer’s judgments of people from certain cultural backgrounds in their discussions of the assessment of second language learners within the target language community. Norton, Peer and Pérez, and Yokoyama address our role as scholars and practitioners in questioning, problematizing, and suggesting how research and academic knowledge are best

used in everyday practice. Lastly, all of the articles in this special edition allude to societal context and multiple aspects of identities within interaction, which Norton and Peer and Pérez argue must be taken into consideration when making policies that affect teachers and students in language classrooms.

At the center of this special edition is the concept of language ideology, which is defined as perceptions we hold about language and how we project those perceptions onto speakers (Schieffelin, Woolard, & Kroskrity, 1998). Language ideology is comprised of the unquestioned beliefs about the way the world is, should be, and has to be with respect to language (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2006). These include assumptions about the perceived attractiveness of certain languages, whether certain dialects or accents are seen as intelligent or unintelligent, the merits of a national language, and other ideas about the value of certain ways of speaking. As the contributors to this volume reveal, the linguistic criteria that determine “attractiveness,” “fluency,” and “proficiency” are rarely objective. In fact, these criteria are often conflated with ideological perceptions and agendas, leading, for example, to problems such as the considerable discrimination perpetrated against Spanish speakers and Spanish-accented English speakers in the U.S. (Hill, 1998, 2008). Bringing awareness to accent discrimination is at the nexus of this volume and the conference that preceded it. Unlike many other forms of discrimination, accent discrimination is commonly practiced and accepted in society. Lippi-Green (1997) notes:

Accent serves as the first point of gatekeeping because we are forbidden, by law and social custom, and perhaps by a prevailing sense of what is morally and ethnically right, from using race, ethnicity, homeland, or economics more directly. We have no such compunctions about language, however. Thus, accent becomes a litmus test for exclusion, an excuse to turn away, to refuse to recognize the other. (p. 64)

Researchers who investigate social and political injustices with respect to accent have also found discrimination in housing (Pernell, Idsardi, & Baugh, 1999), employment and the courts (Matsuda, 1991), education, and the procurement of other goods and services (Baugh, 2007). The removal of English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers who are perceived to speak “ungrammatically” or with “heavily accented” English from their classrooms reveals how those who engage in marginalized language practices experience injustice in U.S. society. To advocate on behalf of victims of such injustice and “facilitate the advancement and dissemination of knowledge and understanding regarding language-related issues in order to improve the lives of individuals and conditions in society,” the American Association of Applied Linguistics (AAAL) made a public “Resolution against Discrimination on the Basis of Accented Speech” (2011)⁴, which presented fact-based arguments and sound research to condemn language and education policies that cause harm and disenfranchisement.

As you read the article contributions of this volume, we invite you to reflect on some of the unquestioned assumptions about language and speakers that inform the way you view the world. Unlike other, more traditional editions of the journal *Issues in Applied Linguistics*, this special issue is a bricolage of shorter pieces that reflect the themes of the LDC and are intended for a general audience from diverse backgrounds and areas of expertise to be used as an informative resource for different stakeholders in language scholarship, education, and policymaking. We hope that this resource will help us better understand the policies and debates within its pages so we can more appropriately make decisions about how our children and those who interact with them address language learning and speakers of diverse languages in our globalizing society.

The Journey Continues

When he came upon one of the posters advertizing our public conference, a UCLA campus electrician of Latino heritage decided to participate in the event and brought along his wife, who was working toward her credentials in bilingual elementary education. On the last day of the conference when all participants were invited for open discussion, Mr. Rafael Novoa stood up and made the following statement:

As a non-academic, I'm totally in awe at the panel discussions and the presenters. It's incredible. All the discussion has illuminated what's going on in Arizona and what the action they're trying to do with the policies. I have had the suspicion of what that is, but without all this scholarly work presented, I could have an opinion that could be just influenced by my background and by what the sociopolitical issues going on there are. But after all these issues were presented, I have to say that my suspicions of an elephant in the room were correct, and it's confirmed. There's an elephant in the room and I think it has a name. I would call it prejudice, intolerance, and discrimination. I thank the organizers, and I applaud your efforts, and I'm also glad to see that this is called the first annual conference, which means there will be more. And I'm very happy to be here. (August 15, 2010)

We were also very pleased to have Mr. Novoa at the event, as he and all the other attendees made invaluable contributions to the gathering. Furthermore, they validated our reasons for calling attention to the occurrences in Arizona and taking action. The 2010 Linguistic Diversity Conference and this special edition of *Issues in Applied Linguistics* are only small contributions to what we hope will be much greater, international efforts toward the end of linguistic intolerance, and the beginning of an appreciation for linguistic diversity. As applied linguists and members of our academic, local, national, and global communities, we have a duty and an important stake in ensuring that linguistic difference is not misunderstood nor wielded as a weapon of prejudice and discrimination. We call upon

our colleagues in scholarship, educators, students, administrators, policymakers, community members, as well as any and all other interested parties to participate in this campaign against linguistic misinformation and intolerance.

We are fortunate to have, at this time in our history, technologies that bring the world together in unprecedented ways. Thus, we continue our campaign that began with a conference, has led to this PUBLICATION, and includes spaces for continued dialogue in new media. Rather than adopt the preferred new media lingo of “Follow us on...” we invite you to *join* us in this dialogue on linguistic diversity in our nation and the world through our Facebook page (Linguistic Diversity in American Classrooms), Twitter (@LingDiversity), and YouTube channel (<http://www.youtube.com/user/uclalingdiversity>) where we encourage you not only to add your comments, perspectives, experiences, and ideas, but also share them with others across the globe. We look forward to continuing the conversation.

Notes

1. Complete history of Flores v. Arizona available at: <http://www.arizonaea.org/politics.php?page=186>
2. Summary of the University of Arizona open letter and link to download PDF of the complete document available at: <http://linguisticanthropology.org/blog/2010/06/03/university-of-arizona-department-of-linguistics-letter-to-state-lawmakers/>
3. Summary of the Stanford University open letter and link to download PDF of the complete document available at: <http://blog.stanfordreview.org/2010/06/24/81-stanford-faculty-members-oppose-arizona-initiative/>
4. Full document of the February 2011 AAAL Resolution available at: http://www.aaal.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=15#Resolution_against_Discrimination_on_the_Basis_of_Accented_Speech

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