

ARTICLE**Countering Negative Language Attitudes: Adopting a Critical Multidialectal Approach to Language Teaching**

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Language attitudes have been recognized as an important area of study in sociolinguistic research (Evans & Preston, 2023; Preston, 2013), and the consequences of prescriptive ideologies and negative attitudes toward non-privileged varieties extend to language instruction. These ideologies regard certain uses of the language as unacceptable if they diverge from what is considered the “standard” variety, established through linguistic imperialism and a colonial heritage (Benaglia & Smith, 2022) and perpetuated by linguistic authorities. Adherence to a prescriptive perspective without questioning its ideological and discriminatory function leads to the reproduction of a “deficit perspective”, in which those who use alternative varieties of a language are considered academically deficient (Quan et al., 2025). These attitudes can influence students’ feelings about themselves, their abilities, and their academic performance, especially for speakers of heritage languages (Loza, 2024). With this in mind, we propose a critical multidialectal approach to language teaching that leverages critical language awareness (CLA, see Beaudrie & Loza, 2022; Leeman, 2014, 2018) and calls on language teachers to engage students in critical reflection on the diverse reactions to and attitudes toward linguistic variation in society (Potowski & Shin, 2018; Shin & Hudgens Henderson, 2017; Train, 2020). Additionally, we make pedagogical recommendations for language teachers of four target languages (Spanish, French, Arabic, and Chinese) that focus on: 1) including input that represents linguistic diversity, 2) approaching language teaching from a descriptive perspective, 3) addressing the relationship between language and power, 4) integrating structured critical reflection, and 5) incorporating students’ diverse identities, histories, and multidialectal realities.

Introduction

The study of language attitudes— affective, behavioral, or cognitive reactions that listeners hold toward varieties or features—emerged in the 1960s out of research in social psychology. Since then, language attitudes have been recognized as an important area of study in sociolinguistic research

(Evans & Preston, 2023; Preston, 2013). Indeed, recent research has shown that negative attitudes toward varieties other than the socially-privileged dominant language can negatively impact the outcome of legal proceedings (Baugh, 2018; Jones et al., 2019; Rickford & King, 2016), leading juries to disregard the testimony of speakers of non-dominant varieties or contributing to less advantageous outcomes for defendants who speak a non-privileged dialect.

Psycholinguistic research has shown that widespread negative attitudes toward linguistic features that deviate from prescriptive standards are very deeply held. For example, Loudermilk (2012) found that the brain had a similar reaction to an incongruous use of a vernacular variant, the use of “goin” instead of “going,” as to a semantic anomaly, such as “For breakfast, I like to eat eggs and socks.” Moreover, users of a minority variety often internalize the negative views of the dominant community and sometimes view their own variety as deficient (Bayley et al., 2018).

The term dialect itself has a complicated history, with ideological implications. Minoritized (and often racialized) varieties and languages continue to be referred to as dialects by teachers and by the speakers themselves, distinguished from a/the language that is usually associated with a standard variety. In Mexico and Latin America, for example, it is common to hear indigenous languages referred to as dialects, thus de-linguaging them and positioning them and their racialized speakers as inferior in the linguistic and social hierarchies with respect to the “legitimate” languages associated with Whiteness, such as Spanish and English (see Potowski & Shin, 2018).

The consequences of prescriptive ideologies and negative attitudes toward non-privileged languages and varieties extend to language instruction. These ideologies regard certain uses of the language as unacceptable if they diverge from what is considered the “standard” variety, established through linguistic imperialism and a colonial heritage (Benaglia & Smith, 2022), and perpetuated by linguistic authorities such as language academies and educational institutions. Adherence to a prescriptive approach in the teaching of “academic” language without questioning its ideological and discriminatory function can lead to the reproduction of a “deficit perspective”, in which those who use alternative varieties of a language are considered academically deficient (Quan et al., 2025). These attitudes influence students’ feelings about themselves, their abilities, and their academic performance, and are particularly harmful for speakers of heritage languages (Loza, 2024).

With this in mind, we draw on a multidialectal approach proposed for the teaching of Arabic that “teaches students to embrace...sociolinguistic variation...and [uses] training in metalinguistic awareness to help students develop a toolkit and mindset to use when encountering new varieties” (Trentman & Shiri, 2020, p. 126). We extend this to propose a critical multidialectal approach to language teaching more broadly, in which language teachers offer examples of linguistic variation, ask students to observe the contexts in which these forms are used, and critically reflect on the diverse reactions to and attitudes toward these different uses in society (Potowski & Shin, 2018; Shin & Hudgens Henderson, 2017). By incorporating Critical Language Awareness (CLA, see Beaudrie & Loza, 2022; Leeman, 2014, 2018) in this approach, we suggest not only acknowledging the harm done by prescriptive language ideologies, but also critically examining the “native speaker construct” as it relates to multilingual, transnational communities, including indigenous communities (see Grammon & Babel, 2024), and exploring the reality of being a speaker of a multidialectal language (see Azaz & Trentman, 2024).

In the following sections, we offer pedagogical recommendations for the teaching of Spanish, French, Arabic, and Chinese, in order to highlight the similarities and differences in prescriptive language ideologies across these diverse languages. Although we have limited our discussion to four global languages, we propose that these recommendations are relevant to the teaching of any language, including less commonly-taught languages such as Hindi, Portuguese, Russian, and Turkish. Additionally, in the second half of the article, we provide specific examples of how to implement a critical multidialectal approach in the language classroom. Although the examples we provide are

tailored to adult second language learners, we acknowledge that language education often begins much earlier, as early as pre-school for many multilingual learners, and we propose that even at the early stages of language learning, a critical multidialectal approach is essential to dismantling prescriptive language ideologies. As language teachers of any language serve as “gatekeepers” (Wolfram, 2021) of those languages, they have the responsibility to change the trajectory of the formation of linguistic ideologies among future generations, problematizing the educational and social structures that harm underrepresented, minoritized, and racialized students.

The Critical Role of Language Attitudes in Language Use

Beliefs about speakers, structures, and the use of language reflect linguistic ideologies (Errington, 2020), which may be manifested as beliefs about languages in general, certain languages or varieties, or the way language is used by particular groups of speakers (Leeman & Fuller, 2021). For example, one common ideology is that of “standard” language, which maintains that there is a “correct” way of speaking, often associated with the language used by educated speakers (e.g., “academic language”), and that other ways of speaking are considered incorrect or illogical. This creates a hierarchy that reflects what Bourdieu (1991) describes as linguistic capital, where “standard” varieties function as a form of symbolic power, and consequently, social advancement. Speakers of less valued varieties remain lower on the social hierarchy, and may be systematically devalued in the process. Yet this notion does not align with the central premise of sociolinguistics, which posits that all languages and varieties are valid and systematic, and thus no language or variety is inherently better or worse than another.

While language attitudes and language ideologies are related concepts, they are distinct in important ways: language attitudes, which are observable in individuals through their affective, behavioral, or cognitive reactions to language varieties, are often shaped by and contribute to language ideologies, which represent shared, collective beliefs about language that emerge through context. Both are fundamentally cultural and historical, and therefore variable across time and place (Errington, 2000). Recognizing language as a cultural practice is essential for understanding how attitudes and ideologies operate in society, a recognition that becomes particularly critical when adopting a CLA-informed approach to teaching. Perpetuating “standard language” and “native speaker” ideologies—within or outside the realm of language pedagogy—would thus seem antithetical to sociolinguistic inquiry. Indeed, Labov (1969) called for an active contestation of these ideologies, challenging linguists to “...clear away the illusion of verbal deprivation and to provide a more adequate notion of the relations between standard and nonstandard dialects (p. 154).”

Despite the ubiquity of linguistic variation, such diversity is not always reflected in language classrooms or pedagogical materials (Shenk, 2014). Language textbooks for second language (L2) learners often focus on superficial topics that appeal to broad audiences (Benaglia & Smith, 2022 on L2 French; Li, 2014 on L2 Chinese; Padilla & Vana, 2019, 2022, 2024 on L2 Spanish; Turner, 2018 on L2 Arabic), prioritizing middle to upper class monolingual speakers, simplifying linguistic variation, and marginalizing multilingual practices characterized by linguistic innovation (Burns, 2018). In fact, heritage speakers—or people who have been exposed to a minority language, often at home or in the community, and who tend to have abilities in that language ranging from receptive to productive—have historically been considered “deficient,” since they often employ linguistic phenomena characteristic of a contact variety of that language (e.g., code switching, loan words, semantic extensions, and calques, see Quan et al., 2025). Even though these characteristics occur wherever languages are in contact, they are often referred to as inappropriate and/or incorrect in language

textbooks and formal contexts (Leeman & Martinez, 2007), and this deficit perspective can be detrimental to the self-esteem and academic performance of learners (see e.g., Loza, 2024).

This characterization of language as “appropriate” or “correct” has a long history in racialization within language pedagogy. One’s racialized body determines the appropriateness of their language, whereby majority and/or white bodies are perceived to produce “correct, formal, and appropriate” language while minority and/or black and brown bodies produce the opposite (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Meanwhile, language pedagogy often presents language from a simplified, prescriptive perspective, which considers certain uses of the language incorrect and unacceptable since they are not associated with the “standard” variety. Although it has been argued that it is impossible to teach a language in a way that is not prescriptive due to the need to teach grammatical rules, there is a difference between teaching what is comprehensible in a language and emphasizing and requiring students to use what is considered “standard,” which can lead to the propagation of negative attitudes toward other varieties (see Quan et al., 2025). One way to combat this is to teach language from a descriptive perspective, in which educators guide students to perceive and describe the way language is used by diverse speakers according to the linguistic and social context without disparaging speakers’ linguistic practices.

The use of a descriptive perspective in language pedagogy might also facilitate a move away from the racialized “native speaker construct” and toward “conceptions of speakerhood in multilingual, transnational communities that offer a contrast to discourse centered on language purism, nationalism, and standard language ideologies” (Grammon & Babel, 2024, p. 504). Such a move in language pedagogy could have important implications for changing future linguistic ideologies by altering the narrative about who “counts” as a legitimate speaker of a language. Still, adopting a descriptive approach to language teaching alone is not enough. In addition, language pedagogy must foster critical thinking about the underlying language ideologies that privilege some varieties while stigmatizing others. In this way, language pedagogy has a crucial role to play in fostering inclusive spaces that examine issues of social justice and incite change.

This paper draws heavily on CLA, a theoretical and pedagogical framework that unpacks the social meanings and power relations that underlie language and language use (Alim, 2010; Fairclough, 1992). Beginning in the early 1980s, teachers and applied linguists in the United Kingdom advocated for the incorporation of “language awareness (LA)” in school curriculum and language education in general (Hawkins, 1984). The aims of LA approaches are to teach students who speak minority languages and non-standard varieties of majority languages to acquire so-called “standard” norms of the majority language to make up for and help overcome social problems (Fairclough, 1992). While LA celebrates the diversity of other varieties and languages, the standard language is presented in comparison to them using an appropriateness-based model (Fairclough, 1992). That is, standard English is appropriate for professional, academic, and formal settings while everything else is deemed inappropriate, which we find in other language contexts like Spanish (Loza, 2022) and French (Lodge, 2001), among others. Therefore, appropriateness (and LA) models contribute to negative language attitudes that deem “non-standard” varieties as inferior, thereby reifying sociolinguistic hierarchies.

In contrast, CLA recognizes that the sociolinguistic order is naturalized, shaped, and transformed by relations of power and power struggles which we see manifest in discourse. Influenced by critical pedagogy, critical linguistics, and critical discourse analysis (e.g., Fairclough, 1989; Freire, 1970), CLA posits that it is not enough to teach learners the what and the how, but also the why. Therefore, CLA as a pedagogy aims to celebrate linguistic plurality; analyze the sociopolitical implications of language as they relate to learners’ social and racialized identities; and empower students to make linguistic decisions that (re)shape established sociolinguistic hierarchies and binaries (Loza & Beaudrie, 2022). For racialized and minoritized learners and the languages or varieties they speak, this approach is particularly vital, as it centers the recognition and contestation of the ongoing

histories and colonialities that shape language experiences as core critical practices (Train, 2020). Committed to addressing inequity within and beyond the classroom, CLA aligns with anti-racist, de/anti-colonial, translanguaging, and social justice-oriented approaches to language education (e.g., Holguín-Mendoza & Sánchez-Walker, 2024; Macedo, 2019; Wassell & Glynn, 2022).

What distinguishes CLA is its emphasis on how language and language ideologies shape social orders and processes of racialization. Prior studies show that CLA-pedagogies afford language learners greater meta and sociolinguistic knowledge about the target language (TL) and languages in general (e.g., Lado & Del Valle, 2022; Padilla et al., 2025), while heritage language (HL) learners develop greater ethnolinguistic pride (Holguín Mendoza, 2018) and a stronger sense of agency to defend their linguistic choices. In this paper, we draw on CLA to inform instructional approaches for world language teaching that counter negative language attitudes and regard multilingualism and multidialectalism as the norm.

Prescriptive Ideologies in the Teaching of Spanish, French, Arabic & Chinese

Spanish

Spanish is the third most spoken language in the world after English and Mandarin. There are several different varieties of Spanish with different vocabularies, pronunciations, and grammatical structures that vary geographically across much of the Americas, Spain, and Equatorial Guinea. In fact, there are several varieties of Spanish that are considered “standard” in distinct regions of the Spanish-speaking world, for example, that of Mexico City in Mexico and that of Buenos Aires in Argentina. Spanish historically has been and continues to be in contact with many other languages, including indigenous languages, in much of the Spanish-speaking world (e.g., Quechua in Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador, Guaraní in Paraguay, Euskara in the Basque Country, Spain). Moreover, the presence of Africans and their languages in Latin America for over 400 years has unquestionably influenced the richness of many different Spanish varieties of the region (Lipski, 2005).

In the United States, although many believe Spanish is a foreign language spoken largely by immigrants (Leeman & Fuller, 2021), it was the first of the European languages to arrive in the 16th century, prior to English (Roca, 2012). Currently, there are more than 60 million Latinxs/Hispanics in the United States (not all Latinxs are Spanish speakers and not all Latinxs who speak Spanish identify as Latinx) and the majority of those who speak the language at home were born in the country (American Community Survey, 2017). Even people who do not speak Spanish or do not have contact with Spanish speakers in the United States inevitably encounter the language in public spaces, where it is increasingly used in marketing (e.g., *Me encanta, McDonald's* (I love McDonald's)), politics (e.g., *Todos con Biden* (All with Biden)), and sports (e.g., Super Bowl 2020 with Jennifer Lopez and Shakira; Super Bowl 2026 with Bad Bunny; see Leeman & Fuller, 2021). Still, Spanish continues to be considered a minority or minoritized language in the United States, while English is considered the majority language, and efforts to make the latter the official language are alive and well, as seen most recently in President Trump's “English Only” 2025 Executive Order (Exec. Order No. 14224). As such, multilingualism is not and has not always been welcome in the United States, where there are numerous aggressions toward languages other than English, and Spanish in particular, that have been connected to fear that other languages might harm the country (Gándara et al., 2010). Thus, the Spanish language class is a rich environment to address issues related to linguistic diversity and social justice, highlighting the multilingualism and multiculturalism of the United States, Spain, Africa, and Latin America, including indigenous, Afro-Latinx, and Latinx-Asian communities, to connect students to the increasingly diverse reality of the Spanish-speaking world.

French

Linguistic prescriptivism and the accompanying ideology to protect the “purest” form of a highly-codified, modern spoken language is perhaps most strongly associated with French—a language that is regularly used as a prototype for the efficacy of institutionally-supported language standardization (see Judge, 2007). The French language is revered as an integral element of France’s national patrimony and symbol of France’s democratic ideals; however, Lodge (2001) writes that the tradition of linguistic purism in France has resulted in an extreme lack of tolerance for variation and fear of change in both the spoken and written forms of the language, as well as an acute sense of linguistic insecurity among many speakers, especially those who use non-standard varieties such as *le français populaire* (working-class speech) or *les français régionaux* (regional varieties of French).

The ideology of the standard language continues to be reinforced by institutions such as *L’Académie Française* (the French Academy) and is tied to a long tradition of elitism that promotes the “inherent clarity” and logic of French and the “purity” of the variety spoken in the pre-revolutionary French court, a tradition that still exerts influence today (Judge, 2007). Implementing CLA in the French classroom must thus address the role that the standard language ideology plays in shaping linguistic norms and in maintaining power structures within metropolitan France and the French-speaking world today, while also considering the impacts of historical events (including government intervention and language policy) on patterns of language use and minority language shift and death.

According to the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* (OIF), French is the ninth most widely-spoken language in the world and the second most common first language in the European Union (OIF, 2025). The French-speaking world includes nearly 30 countries where French has official or co-official status (Ethnologue, 2025) and over 300 million first and additional-language speakers of French on five continents (OIF, 2025). Yet, while maps and accompanying statistics of the French-speaking world are included in nearly every French language textbook, Bedecarré (2022, p. 35) argues that these textbooks fail to address the “problems with maps” and the reason why French is so widely spoken—the French colonial legacy. This is especially important given that Africa, rather than Europe, is the continent with the greatest number of French speakers today (OIF, 2025). Thus, a CLA approach to teaching students about the status and use of French outside of metropolitan France should address the historic and current impacts of French colonialism, as well as the ideological underpinnings of the “mythical standard variety” of French that is purported to be shared by all speakers within the French-speaking world.

Arabic

Arabic is an official language in 24 countries, primarily in Southwest Asia and North Africa. Arabic language pedagogy involves three broad varieties: Classical Arabic is the language of ancient texts and Islamic liturgy (Zadeh, 2012) and is often the variety used in Islamic education. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), a contemporary form of Classical Arabic, is used in formal communication. Both MSA and Classical Arabic are referred to as *fusha* (/fus^h.ħa/, فصحي), or “pure” Arabic. *Ammiyya* (/ʕa.mi.ja/, عامية), or “colloquial” Arabic (CA), encompasses various varieties used in everyday communication.

Traditionally, Arabic instruction has emphasized MSA (Ryding, 2006) owing to various factors: historically, Arabic pedagogy focused on Classical Arabic and grammar-translation (McCarus, 1987). While MSA and communicative language teaching have replaced older methods, many are reluctant to shift toward multidialectal and CLA pedagogies, which may stem from perceived differences between MSA and CA. The significant linguistic variation among CA varieties has led to the perception that they are too distant for mutual comprehension (Trentman & Shiri, 2020) and that

simultaneous exposure to both varieties would confuse learners (Parkinson, 1985), thus reinforcing MSA-only instruction (Mansoor, 1960). However, scholarship challenges these perceptions, demonstrating both L1 and L2 speakers' ability to comprehend different CA varieties (Abuemira, 2024; Trentman & Shiri, 2020).

Language attitudes may also contribute to CA's pedagogical exclusion. Studies in Arabic-majority countries consistently favor MSA, recognizing its prestige and formality, while viewing CA as functional but insufficient for formal, academic discourse (Aljarallah, 2025; Mansoor, 1960), reflecting a diglossic relationship (Ferguson, 1959) where MSA is the "high" variety and CA the "low." However, this framework has been criticized for reinforcing linguistic inequities—often a legacy of colonization (Bassiouney, 2014)—and for presenting MSA and CA as separate systems rather than complementary parts of the same linguistic whole (Younes, 2018). Moreover, this attitudinal gap appears to be narrowing due to increased global and computer-mediated communication (Shalaby, 2020). This trend, alongside growing enrollment of HL speakers in Arabic courses, creates opportunities to further legitimize CA (Ortín & Garrido, 2025; Rouchdy, 2013).

These shifting attitudes are gradually shaping Arabic curricula. An attitudinal study of U.S. Arabic instructors revealed that while 45% taught MSA exclusively, 34% reported including CA in Arabic programs (Abdalla & Al-Batal, 2011). Approaches to integrating MSA and CA vary: Huntley (2018) proposes early multidialectal instruction to prevent confusion, while Younes (1990) suggests beginning with CA for speaking/listening before introducing MSA through reading. Other models advocate for concurrent inclusion within designated contexts, such as separate class times (Shiri & Joukhader, 2018) or task-based instruction (Giolfo & Salvaggio, 2018). Azaz (2016) and Trentman (2018) focus on genre-based instruction, where different genres fulfill specific social processes, acknowledging the use of MSA and CA as functions of contextual and social elements.

Chinese

Chinese language encompasses diverse varieties, including Mandarin, Wu, Xiang, Gan, Hakka, Cantonese, and Min (Norman, 1988), yet as a field, the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL) predominantly focuses on "standard Mandarin." Mandarin's prestige stems from systematic language planning and institutional promotion, beginning with its designation as "the standard form of modern Chinese" at the 1955 National Conference on Script Reformation. Furthermore, in 1986, the Putonghua (or "standard Mandarin") promotion agenda established it as the instructional language in schools, working language in government, mass media language, and lingua franca among Chinese dialect speakers (Chen, 1999). Through decades of entrenchment, Putonghua became China's national linguistic standard (Dong, 2010).

Regional Chinese dialects remain vital in informal domains, maintaining active use in family interactions, community settings, local media, and cultural expressions (Zhang, 2018). Within Chinese diaspora communities, particularly older ones, varieties such as Cantonese, Hokkien, and Hakka serve as primary heritage languages, reflecting historical migration patterns and functioning as crucial cultural identity markers (Hall-Lew, 2010; Li & Zhu, 2010). However, globalization and China's rising political-economic power have increased Mandarin's prestige in overseas Chinese communities (Li & Zhu, 2010, 2013; Zhou, 2011). This linguistic hierarchy manifests ideologically and practically in TCFL and the monolingual ideology often constructs monocultural national identity, with textbooks emphasizing Chinese national identity elements over other countries, creating specialized sociocultural knowledge typically accessible only to native speakers (Wang, 2016). Additionally, these ideologies foreground Han ethnicity, which is closely associated with "standard Mandarin," while marginalizing ethnic minorities and underrepresenting non-Chinese nationalities (Hong & He, 2015).

For CFL students, prescriptive ideologies create difficulties in self-identity construction, learning experience integration, and material consistency. National identity-centered content limits possibilities for establishing learner identities, creating a “native” versus “foreign” dichotomy seemingly unachievable through classroom learning (Wang, 2016). CFL students’ diverse experiences—transitioning between different phonetic systems (e.g., from Bopomofo to Pinyin), writing systems (e.g., from traditional scripts to simplified scripts) and language varieties (e.g., from Taiwan Mandarin to standard Mandarin) when switching instructors—cause confusion without adequate sociolinguistic knowledge.

Chinese Heritage Language (CHL) students face additional challenges. Unlike CFL students with solid identity affiliations, CHL learners struggle to associate with either heritage cultures or mainstream ideologies (Duff et al., 2017; He, 2004, 2006; Li & Zhu, 2013; Wong & Xiao, 2010). That is, the “Chinese” umbrella encompasses abundant diversity in ethnicities, cultures, and language varieties while maintaining preference for ambiguity (He, 2001). In many cases, being Chinese may not be specific enough to prepare and position a CHL speaker for effective communication. Moreover, CHL students often encounter placement difficulties when enrolling in Chinese classes—a CHL learner who is not a native speaker may be denied enrollment in a CFL class because they are Chinese (Kelleher, 2008; Zhang, 2021).

Pedagogical Practices: A Critical Multidialectal Approach to Language Teaching

Considering the vast diversity present in Spanish, French, Arabic, and Chinese, and the potential negative ramifications of teaching from only a prescriptive approach, we turn now to suggestions for practice. This section presents five pedagogical recommendations for language teachers adopting a critical multidialectal approach: include linguistically diverse input, teach descriptively rather than prescriptively, explore the link between language and power, integrate structured critical reflection, and center students’ diverse identities, histories, and varieties. These general guidelines apply broadly across the languages featured in this manuscript and beyond and are accompanied by language-specific examples to support immediate classroom implementation.

1. Incorporate Linguistic Diversity and Varied Practices

Languages such as Spanish, French, Arabic, and Chinese are marked by rich diversity across social, geographical, and contextual lines. For this reason, we suggest that instructors provide varied input for their students that is not limited to standardized or prestigious varieties, which often dominate pedagogical materials and academic contexts. Exposure to regional slang, underrepresented varieties or structures, and code-switching, among other contact phenomena, allows students to appreciate a broader spectrum of language as it exists in the real world. We also recommend providing opportunities for students to interact with these languages in real-world contexts outside of the classroom, including community-based learning projects, which have been found to foster CLA among heritage speakers (Lowther Pereira, 2015).

Spanish

Spanish instructors can raise awareness of linguistic diversity by including often overlooked varieties such as those from Central American, Canarian, or Equatorial Guinean Spanish. They can teach regional slang from vernacular-rich varieties—for example, in Caribbean Spanish: *¿Qué bolá?* (What’s up?), *jeva* (woman), *tató* (everything’s good)—as well as vocabulary and grammar shaped by contact

with Indigenous and African languages, such as *tianguis* (market) from Nahuatl, or *ñaño* and *chuchaqui* (brother and hangover) from Kichwa. To diversify input, instructors can use resources like [Voices from the Hispanic World](#), [Radio Ambulante](#), [Nómadas](#), [El español en el mundo](#), [COERLL Spanish Proficiency Exercises](#), and films that highlight underrepresented varieties, including *Ixcanul* (Bustamante, 2015), *Palenque* (Pinzón Silva, 2017), *Conducta* (Daranas, 2014), *Cocote* (de los Santos Arias, 2017), and *Nudo mixteco* (Cruz, 2021).

French

The “standard” variety of French taught in most U.S. classrooms is that of well-educated, middle-class speakers from the Paris region (Benaglia & Smith, 2022), and language textbooks rarely address the linguistic diversity that exists across the 30 regions and countries that represent the French-speaking world. These materials generally ignore that, in most cases, French is used alongside one or more local languages and that often only an elite minority of the population speaks French fluently (see Bedecarré, 2022). Instructors can and should leverage popular media, literature, and music that reflect the local varieties of French spoken outside of France. International French news websites such as [TV5Monde](#) and [France24](#) can provide students with locally-salient vocabulary and expressions, through regionally-specific news reports (e.g., [TV5Monde Afrique](#)) and introduce them to a broad range of “French” accents. Additionally, videos featuring French speakers of various geographic and linguistic backgrounds such as those found on the [official website of the OIF](#) can launch important discussions about linguistic diversity, prestige, and stigmatization.

Arabic

Similar to the online resources available for instructors of Spanish and French, YouTube channels such as [Easy Arabic](#) feature videos of CA varieties, with a focus on Egyptian and Tunisian Arabic, while also providing videos that focus specifically on comparing dialects. [We can learn Arabic](#), an open access resource for elementary and intermediate levels, also provides multimodal exposure to several varieties, as well as explicit attention to dialectal awareness. Arab films are also rich sources of linguistically and culturally diverse input; for instance, films such as *Amreeka* (Dabis, 2009), *Captain Abu Raed* (Matalqa, 2007), and *Caramel* (Labaki, 2007) showcase Palestinian, Jordanian, and Lebanese Arabic, respectively.

Chinese

To incorporate linguistic diversity, TCFL pedagogies should integrate major regional varieties, including Cantonese, Taiwanese Mandarin, and Min, while also introducing students to other Chinese languages such as Shanghainese, Hokkien, and Hakka. Furthermore, cross-strait linguistic differences between Mainland China and Taiwan (see Cheng, 1985; Kubler, 1981, 1985) require systematic attention, particularly in lexical choices and writing systems. The sociolinguistic dimensions of Chinese language variation present additional opportunities that reflect the complex realities of global Chinese-speaking communities. [China Central Television’s documentary channel](#) and [Taiwan’s Public Television Service Foundation](#) provide professionally produced content showcasing variation across Mainland China and Taiwan. [Radio Television Hong Kong’s Cantonese programming](#) and podcast platforms such as [Ximalaya](#) feature user-generated colloquial speech that facilitates critical discussions about linguistic prestige, regional identity construction, diglossia, and the relationship between standard language ideologies and communicative authenticity in Chinese-speaking communities.

2. Approach Language Teaching from a Descriptive and Sociolinguistic Perspective

A descriptive and sociolinguistic approach to language teaching emphasizes observing how people actually use language, rather than imposing artificial standards of correctness (Potowski & Shin, 2019, p. 11). Central to this approach is the understanding that language is fundamentally a cultural practice, shaped by the specific historical and social contexts in which it is used. This perspective encourages students to analyze and describe linguistic variation instead of judging it, allowing them to appreciate the richness and diversity of language as it is spoken across different regions and communities. In practice, this can be done through real-life language samples from songs, video interviews, and podcasts that highlight regional variation and spontaneous speech. Students can explore these differences further through linguistic corpora, analyzing vocabulary, syntax, and phonetics from diverse language communities. Classroom projects can include linguistic landscape walks to document language in public spaces, sociolinguistic surveys to explore attitudes towards dialectal variation, interviews with speakers from different regions, and code-switching analyses using examples from multilingual communities in media and everyday interactions. Additionally, creating interactive dialect maps and engaging in virtual exchanges with speakers from other regions foster deeper understanding of linguistic diversity.

Spanish

In Spanish, instructors can share songs from different regions and analyze lyrics for dialectal features. Students can explore variation using tools like the [Corpus del Español](#) (BYU), searching for regional terms (e.g., *coche* vs. *carro* vs. *auto* (car)) or pragmatic markers (*pués* (then), *entonces* (so), *o sea* (I mean)). A linguistic landscape walk through Spanish-speaking neighborhoods lets students document and analyze Spanish on signs, menus, graffiti, ads, and community boards, sparking discussion about which varieties appear in public spaces and why (see Grammon, 2024: [Oregon Humanities Center](#)). Finally, instructors can use real U.S. Spanish and code-switching examples to highlight their legitimacy—for instance, Nuyorican Poets Café performances or clips from *In the Heights* (Chu, 2021) or *West Side Story* (Spielberg, 2021).

French

Because French students in the U.S. often have limited access to in-person interactions in the TL, online sources of informal language use are essential components to a multidialectal approach. For beginners, authentic sources can highlight easily accessible elements of sociostylistic variation, such as the use of the singular subject pronoun *on* (one) in place of the plural pronoun *nous* (we) and the deletion of the pre-verbal negative particle *ne* (see Regan et al., 2009), and can also provide rich examples of phonological variation (e.g., /l/ deletion and schwa deletion) for more advanced learners (see Kennedy Terry, 2022). For example, a comparison of a televised news report (e.g., France 24, [Visites Privées](#)) and interviews with the general public (e.g., [C'est quoi une grande école?](#) (What is a “big school”?)) allows students to examine how TL speakers vary their language depending on the speech context, interlocutor, and topic. Additionally, a Netflix series like *Lupin* (Dumas et al., 2021-present) or a music video by Stromae (e.g., [Santé \(Cheers\), 2021](#)) can spark discussions about inter-speaker variation related to gender identity, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, attitude and stance, among others.

Arabic

Since Arabic varieties often have distinct linguistic features, a descriptive approach to language instruction can be encouraged by raising learners' awareness of regional pronunciation and lexical variation. This helps them develop an ear for diverse speech, moving beyond a single "correct" MSA pronunciation. For example, students can use audio or video recordings from [LangMedia](#) to explore lexical variation across varieties, such as *kefak?* in Jordanian vs. *izayak?* in Egyptian (how are you?). Students can use this same resource to view short, thematic videos on culture and everyday life (e.g., family relationships) and complete a "phonetic scavenger hunt" where they watch videos from two regions on the same topic and use the transcripts/translations to observe how the same word is pronounced by different speakers (e.g., the uvular voiceless stop /q/ may be velarized as /g/ in Gulf Arabic or glottalized as /ʔ/ in Levantine Arabic).

Chinese

A descriptive approach for TCFL can start with documenting how Chinese speakers actually communicate, which means analyzing authentic language data from conversations, social media, films, and other real-world sources. Instructors can incorporate corpus examples (e.g., [BLCU Chinese Corpus](#)), to show students frequency patterns, collocation preferences, and contextual usage variations that reflect genuine speaker intuitions, or target features such as regional lexical variations (e.g., 土豆 *tǔdòu* vs. 洋芋 *yángyù* vs. 马铃薯 *mǎlíngshǔ* (potato)) across different registers and geographic contexts. Teachers can also introduce students to major dialect families for metalinguistic awareness. For example, Beijing Mandarin's retroflex sounds, Southern Mandarin's tone variations, and Taiwan Mandarin's lexical differences all represent legitimate varieties rather than "errors." Additionally, a linguistic landscape activity might involve students documenting bilingual or multilingual signage in Chinatown neighborhoods, analyzing the coexistence of simplified and traditional characters, or examining the inclusion of English or other languages and the strategic deployment of different Chinese varieties, in order to spark discussions about heritage identity, target audiences, and linguistic prestige (see Lou, 2016).

3. Address the Relationship between Language and Power

Explicitly addressing the relationship between language and power in the classroom is essential for promoting equity and dismantling linguistic biases that sustain social inequalities. Language is not neutral; it is shaped by power dynamics that determine whose voices are heard and whose are marginalized. Speakers of stigmatized varieties—such as African American English (AAE), Afro-Latinx Spanish, Appalachian English, and Indigenous languages—often face barriers in education, employment, and social mobility because their speech is labeled "incorrect" or "unprofessional" (Baugh, 2003, 2018; Grogger, 2011; Henderson, 2018; Lippi-Green, 2004; Massy & Lundy, 2001; Purnell et al., 1999). Understanding who defines "correct" language and how those definitions function as gatekeeping mechanisms is critical for students to recognize linguistic diversity as valid and to challenge discriminatory norms.

Language learners may not hold the same entrenched biases toward stigmatized varieties in their L2 as in their first language, creating an opening for reflection. For example, discussing how students perceive the use of AAE in professional or academic contexts—such as job interviews or classroom presentations—can help them uncover implicit biases they may unknowingly hold toward certain English varieties. These conversations can then shift to the L2, prompting examination of how

speakers of stigmatized varieties in that language experience discrimination across education, employment, healthcare, and legal settings. This comparative analysis sharpens sociolinguistic awareness and reveals how linguistic prejudice affects marginalized communities across contexts and borders.

Spanish

A powerful way to explore the relationship between language and power in Spanish is by examining the authority of prescriptive norms and reactions to alternative forms. Students can analyze perspectives from sources such as the [Real Academia Española \(RAE\)](#) (X: @RAEinforma), the [Academia Norteamericana de la Lengua Española \(ANLE\)](#), the [Museo de Horrores del Instituto Cervantes](#), and linguists engaged in public debates about “correct” language (e.g., Lynch & Potowski, 2014). They can also investigate contested grammatical forms—like *haiga* vs. *baya* (there is/there are) or *así* vs. *asina* (like this/that)—on Reddit, Word Reference, and social media to observe real-world attitudes. Literary excerpts such as “No Speak English” from *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1994) and “Ni te lo imagines” from *Cuando era puertorriqueña* (Santiago, 1994) allow students to examine Spanish-English contact. These reflections can culminate in classroom debates around questions like: How do we define “standard Spanish” and who decides? Is it justified to correct regionalisms in class?

French

To understand the power of an institution like *L'Académie Française* (the French Academy), students can explore some of the Academy’s recent rulings and reports, such as those condemning the use of English-origin words in place of their French equivalents in media and advertising (e.g., *le big data*, *les followers*), or the long-awaited spelling changes adopted in school curricula in 2016 (e.g., the removal of *l’accent circonflexe* from numerous words). News reports such as [The Guard Dog of the French Language](#) from France 24 or excerpts from the column on “correct” language use in the highly-regarded French newspaper [Le Figaro](#) can provide rich examples for discussion. These examples also provide concrete evidence of the strength of the ideology and prestige associated with the “mythical” form of standardized French—an ideology powerful enough to start a heated media debate about the use or non-use of an accent mark (e.g., #Je suis circonflexe ‘I am circumflex’). Additionally, analyzing recent linguistic controversies, such as the feminization of professional titles and grades (see Reaves, 2022) or non-binary pronouns (see Knisely, 2020, 2022), allows students to appreciate how language is a political, social, and economic tool that can be used to marginalize certain groups of speakers.

Arabic

Power dynamics profoundly shape language use in the Arabic-speaking world, a reality crucial to reflect on in the L2 classroom. Egyptian Arabic, for instance, historically gained “soft power” through its dominance in the film and music industries, while Gulf Arabic holds prominence due to regional economic power. In contrast, Maghrebi Arabic is frequently stigmatized. Beyond these hierarchies among varieties of Arabic, the legacy of colonialism significantly influences language use, and the ongoing marginalization of indigenous languages like Amazigh further highlights these imbalances. Students can explore language policy and popular attitudes by watching a short interview, “التعدد اللغوي، ‘في المغرب نعمه أم نقمه وأين اللغة العربية والأمازيغية في السياسة اللغوية’” ([Linguistic diversity in Morocco: a blessing or a curse? Where do Arabic and Amazigh fit into the language policy?](#)) and/or [Amazigh language recognised by Moroccan constitution](#). In both cases, students can also study the comments section, which looks into

popular attitudes towards language policy in Morocco. These interdialectal and interlanguage power dynamics are also evident through code-switching and code-mixing. As code-switching between Arabic and French is a common feature in Rai music, a popular genre in Algeria and Morocco (Davies & Bentahila, 2008), students can listen to songs that prominently feature code-switching, identify switches, and discuss the possible reasons for switching in those moments.

Chinese

Addressing the relationship between language and power in Chinese teaching requires a critical pedagogical approach that acknowledges the complex sociolinguistic hierarchies inherent in both foreign and HL contexts. For CFL learners, instructors must confront the dominant ideologies that position Mandarin as the sole “standard” variety while marginalizing dialectal differences and regional varieties. CHL learners also face additional challenges as they navigate between their home language practices and academic expectations. Teachers can address these issues by validating students’ existing linguistic repertoires, incorporating diverse Chinese varieties into curriculum design, and fostering critical discussions about language standardization processes and their sociopolitical implications.

A powerful way to explore the relationship between language and power in Chinese is to analyze perspectives from sources such as the State Language Commission of China ([国家语言文字工作委员会](#)), which oversees language standardization policies, and the Ministry of Education’s National Language Resources Monitoring and Research Center ([国家语言资源监测与研究中心](#)), which tracks language variation and change across regions and registers. Literary and media excerpts such as Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) or clips from films like *American Born Chinese* (2023) allow students to examine language contact phenomena and question assumptions about linguistic purity.

4. Integrate Structured Critical Reflection

Structured critical reflection allows students to connect theoretical concepts—such as language ideologies, language attitudes, variation, linguistic prestige and stigma, and language contact phenomena—with their own lived experiences, with the goal of challenging dominant notions of “correct” language use. Many students enter the classroom with preconceived ideas about what constitutes “good” and “bad” language based on their socialization, and structured reflection through journaling and class discussions can begin to dismantle these beliefs. Reflection questions might include:

- How did you feel after listening/reading/viewing ___?
- What assumptions do you have about people who speak ___?
- How would you feel if someone criticized the way you or your family speaks?

Structured reflection is crucial in language courses because it helps students examine their linguistic beliefs and recognize how language reflects and reinforces power structures. Reflecting on the experiences of marginalized communities fosters deeper understanding of the challenges faced by speakers of stigmatized varieties. With this awareness, students can make more informed and conscious linguistic choices in academic, professional, and everyday contexts.

Spanish

In Spanish, instructors can present students with real-world scenarios where language plays a key role in access or discrimination, for example, a job interview where an Afro-Latinx speaker is judged as

“unprofessional” due to their dialect, a school setting where a student is told not to use Spanglish, or a courtroom case where an interpreter misrepresents the testimony of a Spanish speaker. The instructor can ask students to write a brief reflection on the power dynamics at play, who holds linguistic authority, and what could be done to promote linguistic equity. Alternatively, instructors can organize virtual meetups with students from Spanish-speaking countries or communities within the U.S. and ask students:

- What dialectal differences did you notice?
- Did you make any assumptions about the speaker based on their accent or word choice?
- How did this exchange impact your understanding of linguistic diversity?

French

An exploration of the far-reaching impacts of French colonialism provides a rich source of critical reflection for students of French on the relationship between language and power. For example, Bedecarré (2022) recommends using excerpts and images from colonial-era texts, as well as maps of the French-speaking world, to examine the propaganda around France’s “civilizing mission” during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Bedecarré argues that maps are not simply neutral descriptions of places, peoples, and languages, but serve to “reinforce the colonial-era expansionist discourse of *francophonie*” (2022, p. 35), or the idea that the varied countries and peoples of the “French-speaking world” form a cohesive community of speakers who share a single language. Students can critically reflect on the meaning of words like “education” and “literacy,” especially in a multilingual, post-colonial context, and they can examine the political and social implications of campaigns aimed at diffusing a foreign language beyond its original borders.

Arabic

Within the Arabic context, it is critical that structured reflection addresses the social impacts of diglossia and the hierarchical positioning of varieties. Because many learners are initially taught that only Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is “correct” while dialects are secondary, they may inadvertently adopt a deficit mindset toward the linguistic reality of many Arabic speakers. By engaging with the previously cited resources, students can reflect on why certain varieties such as Maghrebi Arabic are often marginalized in favor of Levantine or Egyptian dialects, a practice that is particularly salient in media as well as in language learning resources themselves. This process empowers students to see themselves not just as learners of a fixed language, but as active participants in a multilingual landscape.

Chinese

The application of structured critical reflection in Chinese language teaching presents unique opportunities to address the complex language ideologies surrounding Putonghua and regional Chinese varieties. In the U.S., both CFL and CHL learners often enter Chinese classrooms with preconceived notions about linguistic prestige that privilege Standard Mandarin over regional or heritage varieties. Although the Chinese public shares a relatively positive attitude toward dialects with significant variation across different provinces (Li et al., 2023), heritage learners frequently experience linguistic insecurity. Critical reflection prompts can help students examine how their assumptions about “correct” Chinese have been shaped by institutional practices and dominant language ideologies, particularly as ethnic identity development intersects with HL ideologies in ways that can either validate or marginalize students’ linguistic resources (Yang, 2024).

5. Incorporate Students' Diverse Identities, Histories, and Multidialectal Realities

Language programs are often designed with a narrow view of the student body, assuming learners come from middle- or upper-class backgrounds, speak the dominant societal language, and have limited exposure to linguistic or cultural diversity (Quan et al., 2025). This overlooks the fact that everyone has a linguistic history shaped by ancestral languages. Questions of language maintenance, assimilation, and identity—often associated with immigrant communities—also apply to so-called “monolingual” students who may have lost touch with their linguistic roots.

In the 21st century, migration and global connectivity are reshaping linguistic landscapes, with technology enabling cross-border communication like never before. Many now grow up navigating multiple dialects or languages, forming hybrid identities that challenge traditional notions of linguistic purity. Potowski's (2016) work on Mexican-Puerto Rican communities, Smith's (2019) work on Senegalese diaspora abroad, Finlay's (2016) work on Moroccan diaspora in Spain, and Li and Zhu's (2013) work on Chinese students' translanguaging identities and ideologies in the UK highlight the richness of multidialectalism. Language classrooms, therefore, offer a powerful space to explore these complexities and reflect on students' linguistic identities.

To foster this awareness, instructors can assign oral history projects in which students document family migration stories, explore generational language use, and interview community members about their linguistic experiences. Narrative assignments that invite personal and collective storytelling deepen understanding of how movement and cultural blending shape language and identity. In this way, language education moves beyond grammar to empower students to engage critically with language, power, and inclusion in a globalized world.

Spanish

One way to achieve this in Spanish classes is by ensuring that students feel represented in classroom materials. Instructors can address inclusive language in Spanish, presenting how different communities across the Spanish-speaking world are approaching it. Together, the class can decide how pronouns and grammatical gender will be used in their space. Instructors should also incorporate the voices and images of Latinxs from diverse identities (e.g., Afro-Latinxs, Indigenous people, Asian-Latinxs, “white-passing” Latinxs, non-Spanish-speaking Latinxs, multiracial Latinxs, etc.). Discussions can further explore the legitimacy of the U.S. as a Spanish-speaking culture, challenging the idea of Spanish as merely a “foreign language.” To examine the impact of migration and linguistic diversity on identity, students can interview family or community members—or Spanish-speaking immigrants—about their language journeys: how they learned Spanish, the varieties they speak, and any challenges they have faced. Students then create a narrative or podcast sharing the interviewee's story, highlighting themes of language maintenance, assimilation, and identity.

French

An examination of the eradication of France's regional languages in the 19th and 20th centuries (see Judge, 2007) or an exploration of how French co-exists with indigenous and/or creole languages in former French colonies facilitates discussions about language contact and linguistic prestige, as well as how language attitudes can lead to linguistic insecurity, language shift, and language death. For example, Rose (2020) and Galloway & Rose (2014) propose that language learners find and watch videos of TL speakers from different countries and record their reactions in “listening logs” to facilitate in-class discussions about language variation and speaker attitudes. Similarly, recent media

discussions surrounding linguistic changes in progress, such as the use of non-binary pronouns in French (see Knisely, 2020, 2022), can initiate critical reflection on the interconnectedness of language and power and foster important sociolinguistic comparisons with the learner's home language(s).

Arabic

Holding space for diverse identities in an Arabic language program necessitates moving beyond a singular focus on MSA or a dominant variety, emphasizing Arabic as a continuum of varieties coexisting with other languages. Additionally, in North American or European contexts it is particularly crucial to challenge popular prejudices portraying Arabs and Arabic speakers as monolithic, stereotyped, or “foreign.” Instructors can achieve this by encouraging students to challenge Ameri-/Eurocentric standards for analyzing language and culture, which may involve critically examining instructional materials, such as Arabic textbooks that lack diverse representation in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, and religion.

Chinese

Instructors can acknowledge and celebrate the linguistic diversity within Chinese-speaking communities by integrating materials that represent different regional and heritage varieties that students may bring to the classroom. This involves creating space for discussions about language variation, where heritage learners can share their family's linguistic practices without stigmatization and where foreign language learners can develop appreciation for the complexity of Chinese linguistic ecology. Instructors can also facilitate collaborative decision-making about classroom language policies, such as whether to incorporate regional expressions, acknowledge different pronunciation patterns, or discuss how identity markers like regional accent or code-switching practices reflect cultural heritage.

Future Directions: Overcoming Challenges and Misconceptions in the L2 Classroom

There are several challenges and misconceptions that often emerge in response to the previously mentioned pedagogical recommendations. First, language educators may read these examples and raise the concern that they have limited time in their syllabi to address additional content; however, integrating linguistic variation and CLA should not be seen as an add-on to traditional, existing language curricula. CLA, along with other social justice-oriented approaches, requires a philosophical shift in our view toward language and language instruction, so that we view the outcomes of world language education as one in which we prioritize learners' unique backgrounds, recognize the diversity within the TL(s) and culture(s) that we teach, and deem the understanding of the relationship between language and power as integral outcomes. There is ample evidence that learners acquire much of their language socialization from instructors and classrooms (Grammon, 2025)—therefore, it is crucial that we continue to re-conceptualize the goals of language teaching. In fact, in response to the omnipresence of artificial intelligence, emphasizing grammar memorization or simple writing tasks may be futile; however, engaging learners in critical inquiry about language and society may have a more lasting impact on students' personal, professional, and academic trajectories.

Second, language educators may worry that students at the novice- or intermediate-level may not have the linguistic proficiency to engage in profound conversations about critical and sociolinguistic topics and that such discussions will lead to excessive English use in the TL classroom. According to Lado and Del Valle (2022), beginner-level Spanish students who engaged in several CLA

units in English achieved similar linguistic outcomes on a grammar test compared to a control group of peers, suggesting that using English to engage in CLA content is not limiting their TL proficiency. Meanwhile, Padilla et al. (2025) demonstrated that CLA modules on Afro-Latinxs can be effectively introduced to intermediate-level students of Spanish alongside TL forms.

Third, language educators may mistakenly interpret CLA and a multidialectal approach as avoiding the teaching of so-called standard or academic varieties of a TL. Instead, a descriptive perspective aims for students to examine, without judgment, the distinct ways in which language is used among different interlocutors in diverse contexts. This approach involves recognizing characteristics of both the so-called “standard” and “non-standard” varieties with the goal of broadening students’ sociolinguistic and sociopragmatic repertoires. A CLA approach, meanwhile, explicitly and critically discusses the ramifications of using different varieties, features, and practices in light of power dynamics. In doing so, students increase their metalinguistic awareness and come to understand how their linguistic decisions shape and are shaped by local and global language ecologies. Moreover, educators can identify students’ goals and modify their teaching to best support them, such that if the goal is to pass a language exam that requires standardized language (e.g., ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview, OPI), students learn and practice what the expectations are and why. That is, the goals of learners, a standardized curriculum, and a critical multidialectal approach to language teaching—that attempts to address the omnipresence and consequences of prescriptive ideologies and negative language attitudes—can be at once compatible and beneficial to all.

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