



Weaponizing and De-weaponizing Antiracist Discourse: Some Things for Language Educators to Consider

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and Trump's branding of the virus as the "China" or "Wuhan" virus, anti-Asian sentiment has swept through the United States, resulting in developments involving antiracist discourse. Our commentary draws upon these events and other recent incidents in the United States to demonstrate the power that words have when weaponized for particular ideologies or groups. Adopting McConnell-Ginet's (2020) notions of semantic authority and semantic mastery, the commentary further delves into how racist discourse, when successfully weaponized through social media and political groups, creates tensions for teachers and administrators in the language classroom. Next, we highlight two examples of anti-Asian racism to show not only the psychological but also the physical harm that comes from weaponized language. Our commentary concludes with a call for students to be more critically aware of prevalent discourse through antiracist pedagogical resources (Anya, 2021; Baker-Bell, 2020; Flores & Rosa, 2019) in language and literacy education, and the role professional organizations have in supporting antiracist ideologies through their own form of countermeasures via statements of support.

Keywords: anti-Asian racism, language weaponization, organizational guidelines

Introduction

But words matter and we must be cognizant of the impact our words have.

The above statement was made by the ABC News president, Kim Godwin, on February 1, 2022, shortly after the news station suspended African American host of *The View*, Whoopi Goldberg, for two weeks (Darcy, 2022). The day before, Goldberg had insisted that the Holocaust was "not about race," but rather "man's inhumanity to man." The backlash following Goldberg's controversial comment came swift and thick, prompting her to backpedal the next day, where in her written apology on Twitter, she quoted Johnathan Greenblatt from the Anti-Defamation League and said that the Holocaust "was about the Nazi's systematic annihilation of the Jewish people—who they deemed to

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be an inferior race,” contritely adding on an episode of *The View* the following day that “now, words matter and mine are no exception.”

We start this commentary with a conspicuous example of how language can be weaponized to diminish the grievous crime of humanity against Jewish people who were persecuted in the Second World War and for centuries preceding it. Goldberg’s comment takes on added weight because it came from a woman who herself belongs to a race that has historically and systematically been minoritized and punished. Crucially, the above example is also a firm reminder that a racist stance negates the enduring hardships encountered by Jewish people. At the same time, the Goldberg debacle illustrates how racism can take on multiple dimensions and cuts across all racial groups. And while we will certainly discuss anti-Black racism—possibly the most prominent and entrenched form of racism in US society—in this commentary, we would also like to establish from the outset that our primary focus on racism will be anti-Asian racism. As educational linguists who are committed to social justice, we would like to spotlight such a form of racism in addition to other related forms of racism experienced by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities. Author 1 (Peter De Costa) is originally from Singapore and is of mixed Portuguese-Chinese heritage. As a veteran language teacher educator who has worked with preservice teachers in Singapore and the US, he has an enduring commitment to social justice issues (e.g., De Costa, 2018; Peña-Pincheira & De Costa, 2021) and has investigated race-based politics of identity recognition (e.g., De Costa et al., 2021; Gordon et al., 2021). Author 2 (Lee Her) is originally from Thailand and is of Hmong heritage. As a novice language teacher educator and researcher, she is committed to exploring and learning more about the lived experiences of language-minoritized peoples and communities in the United States. Author 3 (Vashti Lee) is from Hong Kong and is of Chinese heritage. As a former teacher of English as a Second Language (ESL), Mandarin, and Cantonese to a variety of student populations, and now a novice researcher based in the US, she is particularly invested in developing a greater understanding of the stories of language-minoritized peoples, especially regarding issues involving the intersections of language, race, and identity. Despite our different life histories, our antiracist stance stems from the fact that each of us is Asian and has experienced racism firsthand in this country.

Delegitimizing Victimhood: Mobilizing Semantic Mastery and Semantic Authority

As exemplified in the episode described earlier, by removing race from the Holocaust equation and relating the massacre of six million Jews in the Second World War to simply “man’s inhumanity to man,” Goldberg overlooked—whether it was her original intention or not—how Jews have, over long stretches of history, been victims of systemic racism.¹ Her blithe remark calls to mind overt attempts to dilute the anti-Black racism that constitutes another significant cause in our time: Black Lives Matter (BLM). Opponents to BLM have suggested countermovements such as All Lives Matter or Blue Lives Matter.² While the latter dictum is drawn along professional lines, the former dictum—All Lives Matter—elicits disturbing comparison to Goldberg’s pronouncement that the Holocaust was essentially about generic inhumanity. In both instances, race and racism are erased, and the racialized victims are placed on par with other victims. In her recent book, *Words Matter: Meaning and Power*, the sociolinguist Sally McConnell-Ginet (2020) invokes the notion of *semantic mastery* and explains that:

¹ Admittedly, the racial identification of Jews has undergone significant shifts over time. On the one hand, most Jews were always considered White in the US, as they were permitted to become naturalized citizens. On the other hand, they have also often been classified as not quite White, or racially “other.” In other words, they have been constructed as being ambiguously White (<https://jwa.org/teach/livingthelegacy/american-jews-race-identity-and-civil-rights-movement>).

² Blue Lives refers to fallen police professionals who have fallen prey to fatalities.

[i]n principle, semantic mastery could potentially always be at issue, arising simply from tugs-of-war between similarly placed individuals with divergent interests. Although we do see localized disagreements, struggles for semantic mastery are typically more global, sometimes within a community of practice and often between communities. (p. 216)

What we find with respect to the Black Lives Matter/All Lives Matter divide is that divergent interests between two communities conspicuously do exist. Lest we run the risk of oversimplifying things, one can broadly classify the two movements as stemming from opposing communities, namely those that are against anti-Black racism and those who align themselves with a race-blind stance. Such a stance has emerged and intensified in response to an energized BLM movement over the last few years. In the wake of George Floyd's death on May 25, 2020 at the hands of a White police officer, Derek Chauvin, one could further argue that All Lives Matter calls at the very least were tone-deaf but more significantly seemed to lose their salience and truth. The hypocrisy of overlooking race in what was clearly a racially-oriented murder in George Floyd's case is aptly captured in Bryan and Gerald's (2020) astute observation:

Black protesters are often referred to as rioters. Even when protests organized by Black and Brown people are peaceful, they are often labeled as riots. The term riot evokes *feelings of fear and an anticipation of destruction*. Similarly, there is hardly an instance when a group of White men are labeled thugs. Instead of being described as thuggish, they are often described as rowdy and mischievous. (para. 5; emphasis added)

At this juncture, we would like to highlight the affective approach adopted by those against the BLM movement; they choose to trade on people's "fear and anticipation of destruction." Also jarring is the contrast between protestors of color (who are "often referred to as rioters") and White thugs, who are constructed as being only "rowdy and mischievous."

Also of particular relevance is how McConnell-Ginet (2020) links her notion of *semantic mastery* (discussed earlier) with *semantic authority*, which she describes as entailing:

[s]tructured relations and institutions within a community of language users, social practices of authorizing (or de-authorizing) various linguistic practices, what words mean and which words to use. Some semantic authority is institutionalized, some is less formally claimed, and there are often contests. (p. 216)

Returning to the aforementioned communities that have propelled the Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter movements, the latter community appears to sanction viewing protestors of color as rioters. The question to ask, then, and drawing on McConnell-Ginet's observation immediately above, is how is such semantic authority institutionalized and others less formally claimed?

Mundane Discourse, Social Media, and Organized Grassroots Networks

As we write this commentary, we do so from a distinct place in time and space; the three of us, who are based in Michigan, have been grappling with a new bill introduced to the Michigan Legislature. This bill, if approved, would decidedly curtail Michigan classroom discussions of how race and racism have shaped US history. In addition, under the proposed legislation, K–12 school districts would lose 5% of their funding if educators teach critical race theory (CRT), which has been deemed 'anti-American.' Momentum to outlaw CRT, a framework developed in the 1970s by legal scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado which argues racism is systemic and institutional (Ladson-Billings, 2013), has grown over the past year in reaction to the Black Lives Matter movement that has swept the globe. As of mid-May 2021, legislation purporting to prohibit CRT in schools had passed in Idaho, Iowa, Oklahoma, and Tennessee (Flaherty, 2021; Sawchuck, 2021), thus

strongly suggesting that several states view antiracist education as a clear and present danger. This evolving political development became a flashpoint in the Virginia gubernatorial election in November 2021 as the GOP candidate, Glenn Youngkin, invoked CRT instruction in schools as a rallying election cry among conservatives. Crucially, Youngkin succeeded masterfully, and was subsequently swept into state office. Furthermore, this continuing attempt to sanction what is deemed acceptable literature has gained momentum in recent months, as increasingly more school districts—aided by conservative groups on social media—have sought to ban books about race, gender, and sexuality. Such books include George M. Johnson’s *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, Jonathan Evison’s *Lawn Boy*, Maia Kobabe’s *Gender Queer*, and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (Harris & Alter, 2022).

One might ask why the Far Right in the US has been so effective in marshaling support to advance their conservative agenda. As noted, they have succeeded in part by establishing themselves through a sophisticated set of ideological apparatuses. Central to this propaganda machinery has been the skillful use of mundane discourse, an idea that dovetails with the notions of semantic mastery and semantic authority discussed earlier. In her 2019 article “The Weaponization of Language: Discourses of Rising Right-Wing Authoritarianism,” the sociologist Celine-Marie Pascale emphasizes that “mundane discourse might be best understood as the linguistic delivery device through which weaponized language enters the mainstream” (p. 908), adding that, “mundane discourse’s weaponized language normalizes hate and hate groups through purportedly ordinary language” (p. 909). In other words, the discourse is not highfalutin in nature; rather, it speaks to the essence of things and avoids flowery oratory. More often than not, such language weaponization takes on an everyday, catchy dimension, along the lines of pithy slogans like *All Lives Matter*, *Build the Wall* (with Mexico), and *Lock Her* (Hillary Clinton) *Up*.

As observed by Pascale (2019), far-right political groups have successfully weaponized language—and correspondingly, semantic mastery and semantic authority, in our opinion—to sow hatred, suspicion, and discord. The court of Twitter, often the site and source of much misinformation, then becomes the platform through which ideas and ideologies are reinforced and prejudices solidified. A case in point is the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been framed by the Far Right as the *Wuhan* or *China virus*. Words matter. And when they are circulated in social media, their ability to demean, demoralize, and confuse (Pascale, 2019) assumes a whole new level of potency as they are able to (re)shape public perception. Notably, a crucial part of this public perception is the perception of teachers and students in our classrooms, because language cuts across the curriculum, and schools are a microcosm of society. And we, teachers, find ourselves in a precarious situation where politics in society intrudes upon school politics. One example is the tug-of-war we described earlier, with respect to what type of literature our students should be exposed to. Librarians also become implicated in this war, as do parents, and the two groups may find themselves at opposite tugging ends.

But let us be clear. Language weaponization is always a deliberate and politically motivated enterprise. Within the higher education landscape, the political minefield is further complicated by organizational structures that aim to undermine freedom of speech. One example of such a grassroots organization is Campus Reform, though it bills itself as a project of the Leadership Institute, which is a training ground for conservatives that “strives to produce a new generation of public policy leaders unwavering in their commitment to free enterprise, limited government, strong national defense, and traditional values” (<https://leadershipinstitute.org/>). Specifically, Campus Reform, which we briefly address in the next section, seeks to “expose liberal bias and abuse on the nation’s college campuses,” through their team of professional journalists who purportedly work “alongside student activists and

student journalists to report on the conduct and misconduct of campus administrators, faculty, and students” (<https://campusreform.org/>).

Two examples of Anti-Asian Racism: Language Weaponization in Action

We have broadly sketched how language weaponization is aided and abetted through a complex machinery of curated social media and well-organized political groups. At this juncture, we turn to two examples. The first is a personal example from Author 1 (Peter) to illustrate the depth and impact of such weaponization. In 2020, and as part of a special journal issue on linguistic racism that was published in the *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, Peter argued that linguistic racism occurs when minoritized individuals are Othered through various means, such as by highlighting how their accent might diverge from the accent of members of the dominant (often White) social group (see De Costa, 2020). Peter also went on to show in his article the damaging effects of linguistic racism; to exemplify this phenomenon, he described how Asians (in particular overseas Chinese) in several countries had been verbally, physically, and emotionally harmed by having been associated with COVID-19, and hence framed as spreaders of the ‘China’ or ‘Wuhan’ virus.

Thus, the virus had taken on a racialized dimension as it had become associated with Asians, and in particular, Chinese people. In her critical discourse analysis of Twitter posts and comments following a spike in Asian-American hate crimes (more on that shortly) following President Trump’s reference to the coronavirus as the China virus, the sociolinguist Carmen Lee (2021) asserted that COVID-19 affords us “a way to understand how the idea of hate speech is discursively constructed” (p. 62). In January 2021, Peter found himself the target of online aggression (for a fuller picture of the context, see De Costa, 2021). This online aggression arose because his university had featured his aforementioned 2020 article in their university newspaper (<https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2021/linguistic-racism>). Coincidentally, that university story dropped on January 6, 2021, the same day that the US Capitol was stormed and attacked by angry mobs from the Far Right. Shortly after his university’s press release, Peter realized that he was being trolled online—instigated in part by Campus Reform hostile attacks—and being subjected to hateful Tweets such as, “Stinking Chinese set off a panic to overthrow the USA,” and Facebook comments such as, “How about communist virus. It caused the mail in ballots that fraudulently turned the [2020 US] election to a communist victory. That is all this virus [is] about. Mail in ballots to coup the president [Trump].” Undeniably, the language in these posts was highly charged as their comments took aim at the Chinese government and, by extension, seemingly all Chinese people.

But it is equally important to situate this anti-Chinese (in particular) and anti-Asian (in general) racist sentiment within a larger ongoing anti-Asian backlash that has occurred over an extended period of time in US history. This pushback has been described as the ‘Yellow Peril’ (e.g., Reyes & Lo, 2008; Tchen & Yeats, 2014). Sadly, to counter this perceived peril (i.e., Asians are plotting to take over the US), an increasing number of attacks has been mounted against Asians. Specific to COVID-19, Yang et al. (2021), who analyzed 84 news media articles published between December 31, 2019 and June 30, 2020 on COVID-related anti-Asian incidents, reported a dramatic rise in race-based stress and trauma experienced by Asian individuals. But such harm has not only been psychological in nature.

In our second example, we turn to a series of violent attacks on Asians in the US, which culminated in the shooting deaths of six women of Asian descent in Atlanta on March 16, 2021 (Fausset & Vigdor, 2021). Despite this horrendous tragedy, the deadly rampage of the White gunman, Robert Aaron Long, was minimized and described as being a ‘really bad day’ by a sheriff’s spokesperson. This description was inarguably loaded, and one needs to understand the weaponizing strength of the spokesperson’s semantic choices. In attributing the killer’s mass murders to ‘a bad day,’

and through selecting these simple words, the spokesperson ended up trivializing the deaths of the female victims. We are also reminded of how White perpetrators appear to be viewed more favorably. Recall how White protestors are framed as being mischievous and rowdy while Black protestors are viewed as rioters. Equally interesting was how in many of the news stories the Asian victims remained anonymous (their names were only disclosed much later after their deaths). In other words, while we recognize that words matter, their absence—in this case, the initial anonymity of the victims—can also have profound dehumanizing effects. As we know, it is hard to attach much sympathy to nameless victims.

Countering Anti-Asian Racism: What Can We Do in Language and Literacy Education?

At first blush, you might wonder in what ways is analyzing language in the media relevant to language and literacy development. Given the abundance of misinformation that exists in the media and society, students need to become more critically aware of the shape and complexion of racism in society, and how that might extend into classrooms. In particular, students need to be aware that they are not being misled by claims that cannot be supported by facts.

Writing about language and the military, the linguistic anthropologist Janet McIntosh (2021) highlights how national discourse is often deployed to justify military maneuvers by stoking affective anxiety. To illustrate her point, she examined how the George W. Bush administration often projected terrifying futures while suppressing alternative views, thus sanctioning their preemptive military posture in Iraq. By the same token, we argue that it is vitally important that students be able to unpack weaponized language and the ideologies (and possibly inherent biases) embedded within such language that circulate within school and society. At the same time, they also need to be critically aware that discourses do not emerge out of thin air. Rather, they need to learn that discourses have histories and need to be situated. For example, students ought to be educated about the historicity of Blackness and anti-Blackness, how these social phenomena emerged over time and space, and how coloniality has played a vitally important role in sustaining social inequities that exist today (Davis & Smalls, 2021; Motha, 2020). In his recent book, *Antiracist Discourse: Theory and History of a Macromovement*, the linguist Teun A. van Dijk (2021) exhorts us to view antiracism as a historical and global social (macro)movement consisting of more specific and local social movements in many countries and at different moments of history. In keeping with this observation, students need to be alerted to how antiracist movements are expedited in the rest of the world so that they can compare and contrast similar social justice efforts.

To our benefit, we have made encouraging progress in language and literacy education. Within second language learning classrooms, for example, by advancing the notion of *raciolinguistics* and centering race in second language acquisition (SLA), sociolinguists Nelson Flores and Jonathan Rosa (2019) have urged us to not view racialized linguistic minorities in deficit terms. Instead, they have called for a problematization of the listening subject (generally White and monolingual individuals), who often constructs second language learners in a negative, deficient light. Flores and Rosa (2019) argue that it is ideological biases of listening subjects that need to be questioned. Within World Languages classrooms, Anya (2021) has called for more inclusive classrooms that recognize endemic racism and reject race neutrality and color evasiveness. In a similar vein, literacy scholar April Baker-Bell (2020) has suggested that one way to dismantle anti-Black linguistic racism in English language arts classrooms is to interrogate the notion of academic language, which, she argues, does not fully recognize the rich linguistic repertoires of Black students. In sum, language and literacy education is not short of constructive recommendations on how to design antiracist pedagogies.

To date, and as noted, there is no paucity of antiracist pedagogical resources. The three exemplar publications—Anya (2021), Baker-Bell (2020), and Flores and Rosa (2019)—will, in turn, provide you with additional helpful resources that we encourage you to look up. But as we wrap up this commentary, we would like to pivot in a slightly different direction while not losing sight of the anti-Asian racism theme that has permeated much of this piece. Returning to McConnell-Ginet (2020), we focus on organizational guidelines, which she characterizes as being “emblematic of the values and interests of [an] organization: they reify the values of an organization by establishing not what is or what will be but what is expected” (p. 231).

Indeed, organizational guidelines do warrant analysis, and they should represent the values and interests of the organization. With specific reference to organizations countering anti-Blackness, Bryan and Gerald (2020) are less sanguine, however. Following their analysis of position statements from organizations and evaluating how effective these statements were at dismantling White supremacy by centering anti-Blackness, they surmised that “professional organizations with language scholars were unable to adequately ‘find the right words’” (para. 5). Ideally, they posit that such statements should “be a combination of both linguistic specificity about anti-Blackness and an action-based institutional commitment, be it past, present, or future, to dismantling oppressive systems that exist and impact their memberships” (para. 11). We are in complete agreement with Bryan and Gerald in this regard. However, as educational linguists who affiliate closely with and are members of the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL), we are delighted with how quickly AAAL put out a statement against anti-Asian and anti-AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islander) violence (<https://www.aaal.org/statement-against-anti-asian-and-anti-aapi-violence>) on May 17, 2021; that is, not long after the spate of anti-Asian hate crimes that we described earlier took place. We reproduce the core of the statement below to underline the main ideas (e.g., the historicity and specificity of antiracism, antiracism as a macromovement, the symbolic and physical violence associated with antiracism, the significance of embracing an antiracist stance) we have addressed in this commentary.

i. The clearly stated purpose and rationale

The American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL) strongly denounces the growth in violence against members of Asian and Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities across the United States, as well as in other countries. Asians and Asian Americans are now more likely to encounter race-based verbal or physical attacks, and one in every four Asian Americans is experiencing fear of race-based threats or violence in the US (Pew Research Center, 2020). Simultaneously, AAPI communities continue to struggle for visibility and audibility, as the vast majority (72%) of Asian Americans feel little support from others in society (ibid). Our fight against anti-AAPI discrimination should be a part of larger efforts to dismantle the undercurrents of racism and xenophobia that fuel symbolic and physical violence.

ii. The issue’s importance to the field as a whole

AAAL is a professional organization built upon the goal of bettering the lives of individuals and conditions in society through an improved understanding of language-related issues. We, as applied linguists, affirm diversity and promote equity and justice through our individual and collective work. AAAL has previously voiced its support for Asian and AAPI scholars; in 2020 it endorsed the U.S. House Resolution 908 to condemn all forms of anti-Asian sentiment as related to COVID-19. However, anti-Asian sentiment has since continued to grow. The languages, knowledge, and experiences of Asian and AAPI communities have greatly

contributed to the field of applied linguistics. AAAL must speak out against anti-Asian and anti-AAPI racism.

iii. The issue's importance to the general public

Asian and AAPI communities are no strangers to anti-Asian sentiment; they have endured discriminatory events such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Japanese internment during WWII. The dehumanizing rhetoric prevalent in recent years has reignited the historically rooted anti-Asian sentiment (Lyman, 2000; McIntosh & Mendoza-Denton, 2020). As an organization that understands the power of speech and language, AAAL reaffirms its strong opposition to all forms of racial and gender-based discrimination, xenophobia, and violence.

iv. Where relevant, a brief summary of related representative research findings

Statistics show a deeply concerning trend of anti-AAPI violence in the U.S. The advocacy group Stop AAPI Hate (2021) received reports of 3,292 incidents that occurred in 2020, and 503 incidents that occurred in 2021 as of February 28, 2021. Incident reports come from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Women report hate incidents 2.3 times more than men; and Chinese are the largest ethnic group (42.2%) that report experiencing hate, followed by Koreans (14.8%), Vietnamese (8.5%), and Filipinos (7.9%). The number of hate incidents reported represent only a fraction of the number of hate incidents that actually occur, and yet it shows the extent to which anti-Asian violence has grown across the U.S. over the past year. We should note as well that, although this statement focuses on recent U.S.-centered violence, such incidents are not limited to the U.S.

In closing, rather than analyze the above organizational statement for you, we invite you to think about the values and interests that a professional organization like AAAL upholds. Next, we urge you to engage in reflection and think about ways to translate the values and interests embodied in AAAL (or any professional organization to which you might belong) into your professional practice. Just as racism is a systemic problem, the solution to countering it and the language weaponization that often accompanies racism needs to be systemic and systematic in approach. The counterpoint to language weaponization should not have to be an escalation through a war of words and/or more physical and symbolic violence. We think a better solution is antiracist education that would take the form of critical language awareness development and solidarity-building among individuals and organizations. Working in concert with each other, we are confident that we will be better positioned to engage the disturbingly fraught times that have beset us.

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