



## Antiracist applied linguistics, Marxian utopian, and infra politics

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**ABSTRACT**

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The notion of (anti) racism in applied linguistics has been feverishly accentuated and animated, making it the buzzword *du jour* in the field. Drawing upon the insights generated mainly from postcolonial studies, applied linguists have become eager to resuscitate this notion, often implicitly averring that racism has long been insidiously penetrating in the field and surreptitiously operating under the so-called *raciolinguistic ideologies*. It is these ideologies that are alleged to perpetuate, and even to further the hegemony of White supremacy and empire, eventually giving rise to racial inequalities and racial hierarchies. The antiracism movement, it has been asserted, needs to be enacted. This article will argue that the fervent pronouncement of linguistic racism, and of antiracist movement in applied linguistics may amount to both political mystification and conceptual obfuscation of racial inequalities and racial hierarchies. Moreover, professing and even providing evidence of the existence of racism without accounting for the critiques of its intellectual basis, to which the idea of antiracism is affiliated and irrevocably rooted, is such an *avant-garde* endeavor that the notion masks the very fundamentals of humans as social and political beings. In the end, the article provides examples of how the so-called “racialized subjects” subvert their identities as a manifestation of doing *infra politics*.



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**Applied** linguistics today has often been besieged by the accentuation and animation of the so-called “linguistic racism.” Heavily influenced by the postcolonial insights, applied linguists seem eager to resuscitate this notion in their publications by either implicitly or explicitly averring that racism has long been insidiously penetrating in the field under the neutral-race agenda, and surreptitiously operating under the so-called *raciolinguistic ideologies*. Additionally, it has been accused of being complicit with White supremacy and colonialization (see for example, Kubota & Lin, 2009; Kubota, 2015, 2020; Bhattacharya, Jiang & Canagarajah, 2020; Motha, 2020). It is raciolinguistic ideologies and complicity with White supremacy that have been alleged to perpetuate, and even to further the hegemony of White supremacy and empire, eventually giving rise to racial inequalities and racial hierarchies. To counter these ideologies, scholars have so far exhorted that antiracist movement is imperative to be enacted, so that “applied linguistics can ever be disentangled from and even actually work against White supremacy and empire” (Motha, 2020, p. 129).

This article will first discuss the most recent claims on linguistic racism in the field of applied linguistics (especially by those raised by Kubota (2020) and Motha (2020)), and then argue that its fervent pronouncement, along with the implicit declaration of antiracist movement, in the field may amount to both political mystification and conceptual obfuscation of racial inequalities and racial hierarchies. Additionally, professing and even providing evidence of the existence of racism without accounting for the critiques of its intellectual basis, to which the idea of antiracism is affiliated and irrevocably rooted, is such an *avant-garde* endeavor that the notion masks the very fundamentals of humans as social and political beings. The article will end with examples of how the so-called “racialized subjects” enact their quiescent capacity as social and political being in subverting identities in the perceived dominant language (i.e., English) as a way of doing *infra* politics.

### **CLAIMS ON RACISM IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS**

Admittedly, the issue of race, more specifically, racism in the field of applied linguistics has long attracted considerable attention of scholars, and therefore it is no novel topic (see Kubota, 2020 for a review). Yet, in keeping with the dynamics of the field, which some scholars see as still being entangled with the underrepresentation of scholars of color (Bhattacharya, *et.al.*, 2020), we can in recent years witness the surge of interest in resuscitating the issue of racism, with scholars being eager to elevate and animate it through their published works. Among these scholars in applied linguistics, Kubota (2020) is probably one of the leading forces who vehemently uplifts the discussion on racism occurring in applied linguistics. Focusing primarily on what she terms

“epistemological racism,” especially in knowledge production, she calls for a critical examination of this type of racism in scholarly activities, for its presence can “produce and maintain racial hierarchies and inequalities of different academic knowledges, further impacting the institutional status of racialized scholars.” Kubota goes on to alert us that in our academic practices (teaching, researching, and mentoring, amongst other) we need not be complicit with the dominant white Euro-American knowledge systems for the sake of increasing our perceived legitimacy in knowledge production. Being complicit with this knowledge system, as Kubota further contends, is tantamount to continuing to seek membership in the white Euro-American club of knowledge, and to reinforce the existing unequal system and hierarchy.

More recently, Motha (2020) further brings the issue of racism in applied linguistics to the fore, posing a rhetorical question that becomes the title of her article “Is an Antiracist and Decolonizing Applied Linguistics Possible? In it, she points out that we applied linguists tend to become complicit and intimate with White supremacy, which “materializes in many configurations” (Motha, 2020, p.129). As such, the field has become an effective conduit for the sustenance of White supremacy and empire. As she avers:

Part of our complicity with White supremacy is evident when we applied linguists spend our energies trying to understand how to successfully acquire and teach languages without attention to the broader consequences of such language learning, such as the successful acquisition of English apart from the constellation of social, political, and economic factors that produces desires for English, and relatedly for Whiteness and all it represents, and the material consequences of those desires for the English teaching industry globally (Motha, 2020, p.129)

Motha’s message is that racism has been part of applied linguistics, wittingly or otherwise. It is embedded in the field, and masquerades itself under neutral and innocuous language practices. However, she envisions that an antiracist energy to resist racism in the field is possible, though “it is not a natural progression in our profession” (Motha, 2020, p.132).

Both Kubota’s (2020) and Motha’s (2020) claims on racism in applied linguistics are indicative that racism in its various forms, including epistemological racism, has long been part of the field, and that it is not dissociable with the academic practices we applied linguists do in the profession. For both of these scholars, the challenges applied linguists are facing today is to confront White supremacy with its Euro-American centric orientation to knowledge system, as well as academic practices by enacting

antiracist practices. In essence, what these two scholars call for is clearly the enactment of antiracist applied linguistic movement.

### **ANTIRACISM AS A POSTCOLONIAL LEGACY: A CRITIQUE**

We need to bear in mind that any intellectual endeavors that attempt to challenge the Euro-American hegemony, be they in politics, ideologies, economies, cultures, races, and linguistic practices, indubitably owe their foundations to postcolonial insights and theories. The two most recent exemplary pieces discussed above are no exception. Kubota (2020) has demonstrated that applied linguistics has been besieged by racial biases that favor more Euro-American whiteness in knowledge systems and knowledge productions than any other knowledges outside the Euro-American boundaries, while Motha (2020) views applied linguistics as an effective vehicle for the sustenance of White supremacy and empire due to applied linguists' intimacy with Whiteness. Their well-intentioned efforts to unpack the insidious racism, and, in turn, to call for an antiracism movement, in the field obviously lend support to postcolonial theories. The idea of antiracism is, *ipso facto*, the long-lasting legacy of postcolonialism.

Nonetheless, the above scholars' ardent pronouncement and exhortation of antiracist enactment in applied linguistics can run the risk of politically mystifying and conceptually obfuscating essential constructs such as racial inequalities and racial hierarchies, against which the antiracist movement intends to combat. This is because they are "seeking changes in the representational realm" (i.e., how to change the status of scholars of color to attain equality in knowledge production), "without adequately addressing *the material realms* that produced such inequalities..." (Krishna, 2009, p. 109, *italic mine*), as well as ignoring the everyday politics the people are doing to resist these inequalities. In this regards, the idea of racial inequalities and hierarchies become vacuous, and aiming for equalities in knowledge production remains unattainable lofty ideals. To borrow Krishna's phrase, both Kubota (2020) and Motha (2020) have succumbed to "idealism" (in a Marxian sense), which is "the tendency to regard changes in the representational realm as real and consequential, when in actuality, they are merely epiphenomenal (or superficial) if they were not accompanied by more basic, fundamental, and consequential changes in the economic, *political* or material realms" (Krishna, 2009, p. 109, *italic added*). This is an instance of the Marxian utopian. We can therefore infer that drawing their insights from postcolonial theories, Kubota and Motha

...energetically proclaim their resistance to Eurocentrism and the importance of provincializing Europe as a step toward genuine decolonization. Yet, in their own obsession with the colonial period; in their tendency to see secularism, scientific rationality, bourgeois

freedoms, human rights, and other such values as emergent from the European Enlightenment; their continuous theoretical engagement with the latest in Western philosophical and intellectual movements; and their disinterest in ways in which Europe (and Euro-America) plays such a central role in contemporary neoliberal globalization, postcolonial theorists are themselves complicit in the continued hegemony of Eurocentrism (Krishna, 2009, pp. 114-115).

Related to the above points, Kubota's and Motha's pronouncement lay a considerable emphasis on normative deconstruction "at the expense of an engagement with the "real."" (Krishna, 2009, p. 104, quotation mark in original). In their efforts to promote the import of antiracism in applied linguistics, both Kubota and Motha are trying to "mobilize" those who are directly engaged in practicing applied linguistics (mostly scholars and language practitioners), but dismiss what I shall call the engagement of the politics of the grassroots. Also, they have less to say about the discursive effects of the hegemonic role of English over other languages. They fail to deal with "an attempt to understand how languages, cultures, knowledge and identities have been taken over, appropriated, adapted, adopted, and reused" (Pennycook, 2000, p. 116). What's more, the overarching focus on normative deconstruction might eventually repudiate the practical political contribution made by the polity, or even by lay people on their own to counter the constant presence of racism in the field of applied linguistics.

Thus, what Kubota and Motha have done in promoting antiracist applied linguistics is akin to what "elite politics" did in the idea of "elite historiography" narrated by one of influential thinkers of postcolonialism, Ranajit Guha. Guha argued that elite politics in colonizing Indian at that time "mobilized vertically, relied on colonial institutions, was legalistic and constitutionalist in its form, and largely circumspect and deferential in its demeanor, which is in a stark contrast to the grassroots politics which "mobilized horizontally through kinship, territoriality, and rumors; was more violent and thoroughly disruptive in its expression; and often spontaneous in its emergence" (as quoted in Krishna, 2009, p. 82). It is the latter that has been summarily dismissed by Kubota and Motha, the point I shall illustrate in the subsequent section.

### **DOING INFRA POLITICS: SOME EXAMPLES**

Unlike elite politics (hence, the politics of elite applied linguists as has been demonstrated by Kubota and Motha in this context), grassroots politics is often performed by lay people in their attempts to resist the dominant discourses, and to create oppositional and alternative discourses and identities. They often do this by using covert, yet creative discourses that may

not at all be congenial to the desire of the dominant discourse communities. Parodying, joking, speaking behind the back, and satirizing the dominant discourses, among others are such forms of creative oppositional discourses. In most contexts of language use, these forms are carried out on the sly, and are hidden from the public's eyes. It thus represents the "infra politics" of underlife behavior (Scott, 1990). It also constitutes a micropolitics, in that it "is not very conspicuous in the impact it has on wider social life" (Canagarajah, 2004, p. 134).

Consider, for example, the following instances of enacting this infra politics. One is the case of a classroom teacher activating their agency as a non-native English teacher hailing from the Javanese ethnicity (one of the biggest ethnicities in Indonesia). I show here how a local teacher, while teaching English imperative sentences to junior high school students, resorted to mixed linguistic practices in their attempt to create space for his own agency exploration, and the same time to deracialize English. The point here is to demonstrate that despite the imposition of the English-only-policy (as a mandated macro-centric policy) in the school contexts, the teacher as a multilingual speaker is able to surreptitiously enact his own spontaneous linguistic expressions by shutting different linguistic codes (English, Javanese dialect, and Indonesian) for the sake of making the teaching effective and efficient.

Teacher :...So students, let's finish about report text. ...Imperative sentences (writing on the board). Some of you have already known,  *mungkin ada yang sudah tahu [maybe some of you have known] about imperative sentences, atau mungkin ada yang tidak tahu? [or maybe some of you don't know?]* Please give your opinion about the imperative. Try to understand first!  *Mengerti dulu ya [understand it first, okay]. Catatanny lengkap tidak mengerti ya podo wae [If you've a complete note, but don't understand, it's just the same]... Perhatikan dulu kalimatnya [pay attention to the sentence]. Oh...ini tho namanya [I see] order or instruction. 'Leave the class!', 'Put your book on the table!' Always an order or instruction begins with verbs. Which one? Verb one, verb two, verb three?*

Student A : Verb one.

Teacher Verb one. Good! Other instruction may begin with verb one always  *verb kata dasar, kerja dasar ya [infinitive]...* (Hutami, 2016)

In the above interaction, the teacher explains imperative sentences by assuming that the students might have and have not known about them. Interestingly, he did this by shuttling from English to Indonesian and then back to English again. Yet, prior to letting students opine about the notion of imperative, the teacher gives a piece of advice by mixing both Indonesian and Javanese - *Mengerti dulu ya. Catatannya lengkap tidak mengerti ya podo wae*. Here he playfully and jokingly exhorts the students to have metalinguistic knowledge about the imperative sentence by switching to a Javanese expression *podo wae* (literally mean just the same), suggesting that the note-taking students did will be of little help unless they have a metalinguistic knowledge about imperative sentences.

Another example is an act parodying English in a playful and fun fashion by deliberately meshing the language with a local Javanese dialect (one of Indonesia's local vernaculars), hence the creative neologism "Javenglish" (the blending of Javanese-English), creating a humorous effect to the readers.



This can roughly be translated as follow:

This night, the cloud is hanging on the sky. The thunders sound like a big bang like firecrackers. The lightning strikes many times. My clothes hanging on the clothesline are flying to my window because they are blown by the wind. The swinging trees also almost fall. The rain sounds like something falling hard on the roof. It is very dangerous! Now I'm afraid alone while lying relaxed in my room. I miss you so much my lovely darling. Instead of sitting quietly alone, I heard sound of *gamelan*

(Javanese traditional music instrument). I'm getting curious. I checked it out. Damn, it was a ginger drink (a Javanese traditional beverage) seller! I'm running in a rush to the ginger drink seller, then I call him and buy a mug of it. Then I sip it until finish. Now I'm heavily full. Cheers...

This is an instance of what Maher (2010) calls "metroethnicities" where ethnic identity (in this case Javanese ethnicity) is treated as a playful and parodic form of community and identity. For Maher, "identity can be a toy. Something you play with" (Maher, 2010, p. 584). Such is a way an individual from a certain community playfully adopts alternative identities to resist the seriousness of the imposed ethnicities.

The creative meshing of a wealth of Javanese expressions with English is actually intended to satirize the English language with the purpose of indexing and elevating the writer's identity as a Javanese. This parody indicates that even such a dominant language can be appropriated through a "lamination" (Bakhtin, 1986) process of meshing English with a vernacular language to express the writer's deep feeling of being lonely and scared without losing the essence of the story. Though the story is narrated by patching simple sentences with an oral-like rhythm (for instance sentences *The gluduks sound jlegar jlegar like mercon, The trees geal-geol also almost fall, Now I'm afraid alone while turon-turon in my room, Instead of lenger-lenger alone*), its grammatical construction is overall well-formed, and more importantly, its flow can easily be understood by the Javanese, but probably not for the English-native speakers. This indicates the writer's high metalinguistic awareness in both languages. Furthermore, almost all of the sentence construction in the narration is dominated by the Javanese expressions, giving the impression that the writer wanted to create a nuance that evokes his/her identity more than that of a foreign identity. While code-meshing in the playful parody occurs mostly at the lexical level, the writer also code-mixes at the morpho-syntactic level by meshing the Indonesian prefix *ke-* and the Javanese lexeme *sebul* (blow), thus forming *kesebul* (being blown).

The two examples above are indeed a strategic horizontal mobilization of the grassroots politics conducted through territoriality (i.e. from the perspective of Javanese dialects), which is disruptive in its expression, and spontaneous in its emergence. Thus, rather than view them as "racialized subjects" who are grappling with the obscure notion of racial inequalities and hierarchies, both the classroom teacher and the writer prove themselves resourceful language users who are capable of enacting their quiescent capacity as social and political being in subverting identities in the perceived dominant language (i.e., English) as a way of doing infra politics.

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