

Discussion Note

Does Finland Need Raciolinguistics?

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Prompt

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A growing number of applied linguists and language educators in the US/North American context advocate for and from a scholarly perspective which views language issues in relation to racial issues and vice versa. The emergent field of raciolinguistics highlights the relationships between language and race/racism and has brought about research that investigates their intersections. One of the key figures in the US American raciolinguistics community, Nelson Flores, explains...

[r]aciolinguistic scholarship begins with the premise that it is, in fact, impossible to discuss one without the other and seeks to examine the co-construction of language and race—or the ways that both language and race are inextricably interrelated with one another. It seeks to examine the complex role that language ideologies play in the production of racial difference and the role of racialization in the production of linguistic difference (Flores, 2015, *Why we need raciolinguistics*, para 8).

Further exploring the emerging field in their 2017 article in *Language in Society*, Rosa and Flores identify five themes of raciolinguistic work: (1) “historical and contemporary colonial co-naturalizations of race and language”, (2) “perceptions of racial and linguistic difference”, (3) “regimentations of racial and linguistic categories”, (4) “racial and linguistic intersections and assemblages”, and (5) “contestations of racial and linguistic power formations” (Rosa & Flores, 2017, p. 1). Much of this work has come out of Stanford University’s *Center of Race, Ethnicity and Language* (CREAL), a hub of raciolinguistics. Since its inception in 2010, it has brought together scholars and educators across humanities, social sciences, and policy studies like Jonathan Rosa, H. Samy Alim, and Arnetha F. Ball, to advance research and engage in public debates that examine and shape the constructions and interactions of

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language and race. In addition, Stanford’s graduate program *Race, Inequality and Language in Education (RILE)* invites students to explore, apply, and develop raciolinguistic theories within their lived realities. Of course, the movement extends beyond and precedes Stanford (e.g. the 2006 *TESOL Quarterly* issue on “Race and TESOL”, edited by Ryuko Kubota and Angel M. Y. Lin), but although scholarship about language and race has been around for a while, race-focused and intersectional work has recently gained momentum and attracted attention (Bhattacharyya & Murji, 2014), especially in domains that have historically been dominated by white knowledges and epistemologies, such as applied language and discourse studies. In the US, the renewed interest in race might have been amplified by perceived changes in the sociopolitical landscape that legitimize racist and xenophobic discourses and have sensitized the white community to issues that were previously outside of their radar.

In Finland, although race has not been at the center of language and discourse studies, work exists that empowers hip hop and youth languages and cultures, and also includes considerations of ethnicity and/or race (e.g., Kytölä & Westinen, 2015; Leppänen, 2007; Leppänen, Westinen, Kytölä, 2017; Lähteenmäki & Pöyhönen, 2014; Pöyhönen, 2013; Westinen, 2007). In addition, applied linguists and discourse scholars can build on and tap a growing body of anti-racist, partly intersectional, work that spans several disciplines (e.g., Alemanji, 2016; Alemanji & Dervin, 2016; Alemanji & Mafi, 2016; Keskinen, 2013; Keskinen, Tuori, Inri, & Mulinari, 2009; Koivulaakso, 2008; Rastas, 2009). Of many issues that await raciolinguists in Finland, I emphasize two in the hope that they will spark thought and discussion. First, in Finland, discussions around race and racism often occur as at debates around immigration or integration of migrants. While there is no doubt about the importance of understanding and improving the experience of migrants of color, this debate ignores, among other things, the realities of Finnish citizens of color and problematically associates being of color with being a stranger to Finland, thus perpetuating the ideological marriage of Finnishness and whiteness. Raciolinguists could add much-needed nuance to this debate, for example by uncovering and, importantly, legitimizing the multiple ways in which language and race are discursively and agentively constructed, ever-changing, and blurring the boundaries of traditional linguistic and racial categories, while also being subject to prejudice, exclusion, and oppression. Second, while Finland has structures in place to educate and support migrants and victims of racism on local and national levels, migrant education and services seem to aim at socializing their recipients, many of whom are people of color, into so-called “Finnish” ways of being, rather than understanding their needs and building on their assets (e.g., Kananen, forthcoming). For example, while newcomers to Finland receive ample information about how to speak, behave, and organize their daily lives, research that works to establish non-white ways of being Finnish and speaking Finnish is largely absent from academic and public discourses. In all, while there is certainly growing interest in the scholarship around race, language scholars in Finland have not fully embraced this opportunity.

From this vantage point of existing scholarship in Finland, I believe a more explicit focus on language and race would not be an impossible stretch, and an effort we might be willing to make, especially considering the demographic, linguistic, and epistemological shifts that are perceived and cited by many in Finland (“changing society”). The perception of change alone warrants new scholarly

endeavors and stances. It is against this backdrop that I pose the following questions: Does Finland need a field of raciolinguistics? What could this emerging field (not) contribute/to the advancement of Finnish society, especially in terms of policy making and education? What unique perspectives would a Finnish school of raciolinguistics (not) offer to the field as a whole? Finally, if a Finnish strand of raciolinguistics were desirable, what would its researchers and educators need in order to produce high-quality and impactful scholarship and instruction?

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Response 1

Saara Jäntti

Let me start with two anecdotes.

In the late 1990s, a man arrives in Finland and is stopped at the customs. He is enquired about his reasons to come and stay in the country. He replies, and the customs officer compliments him on his “almost perfect” Finnish. “I’m a native Finnish speaker. I was born and raised here”, he replies.

In 2016, when Finland started receiving large numbers of asylum seekers, a friend of mine was buying a subway ticket at the railway station of Helsinki. An older woman tapped her on the shoulder, pointed at two boys standing behind my friend and said: “Watch out!” The two boys she was pointing at were my friend’s fourteen and twelve-year-old sons.

Both the two boys and the man arriving in Finland were Finns-of-colour. In both cases, they were identified as other to Finnishness, and in both cases Finnishness was thus constructed as white and equaled with whiteness. The fact that they were all native Finns and Finnish-speakers was downplayed by the fact that their skin colour was markedly darker than that of the majority of Finnish speakers. The first example – like many other almost identical accounts by Finns-of-colour – suggests that visually perceived difference and the assumptions the custom officer made about it affected the way he *heard* the other man speak. In the second incident, the bystander’s warning suggested that the boys presented a threat. She interpreted the fact that they were standing rather close to their mother as a potential danger to her. The fact that they differed from their mother due to the colour of their skin prevented her from reading their proximity as a sign of kin-relation. Both examples point to the fact that interpretation is a multi-faceted, multisemiotic process where skin-colour can play a crucial role. They also point to the intrinsic connection between race, nationality and citizenship. The processes of racialization they reveal are linked to wider social and cultural structures and tendencies that have recently been tackled by scholars in, for example, cultural and gender studies. These include analyses of the colonial legacies in the Nordic region (Keskinen, Tuori, Irni & Mulinari, 2009; Tuori, 2007) in the context of increasing multiculturalism (Löytty, 2005, 2008) and migration (Lähdesmäki & Saresma, 2016), right-wing populism (Saresma, forthcoming) and anti-immigration movement (Mäkinen, 2016), and the intersections of class, race, gender and sexuality in media representations (Rossi, 2012, 2015).

These recent openings draw largely on previous European and British studies in cultural and gender studies, e.g. Sara Ahmed’s (2005, 2012) work. In cultural studies racial matters and racialization have been an important source of scholarship since Franz Fanon, Stuart Hall, and Homi Bhabha’s explorations of colonial legacies. In feminist studies, the interconnectedness of race with gender is the starting point of intersectional analysis (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) that – together with the theory of performativity (Butler, 1990) – presents a major critical contribution to theory and analysis. Intersectionality refers to the fact that all identity positions such as gender, race, class, nationality, ethnicity, age, and ablebodiedness are at play in the construction of any of these positions.

What contemporary language studies, for example in sociolinguistics and discourse studies, but also the more traditional fields of linguistic inquiry such as phonetics, can offer to these fields, is further analytic rigour and an

understanding of the ways in which language and linguistic features function in the construction of difference in multimodal semiotic practices. As, for example, Dufva and Halonen (2016) show, ethnic differences can be performed through phonetic features. The anecdote above, on the other hand, shows that visual markers such as skin-colour can produce perception of such difference even where it doesn't exist. Linguistic analysis provides means for detailed analysis of the ways in which race plays into language, how language is racialized and race languaged in the levels of interpretation, production and interaction, and provide in-depth analysis and hard-core data on how this works on phonetic, syntactic, lexical, discursive and interactional levels. By combining multisemiotic analysis with detailed linguistic analysis, we can reveal – and correct – misconceptions and the complexities of the processes where difference is produced. By drawing on the experiences and understanding of marginalized groups in research, we can understand how society works – and feels – from the perspective of those who – due to skin colour – do not automatically “belong” to a society that is repeatedly constructed as “white” – as it is in the increasingly loud right-wing populist discourses (Saresma, 2014, 2016, forthcoming).

As racialization has now become the focus of cultural analysis and products, and the voices of those who have experienced racism are increasingly recognized (e.g. Hubara, 2017) and the legacies of Finnish colonial politics in relation to the Sami are being recognized (Kuortti, Lehtonen & Löytty, 2007), whiteness now appears as a racial discourse. Historically, however, “white” in Finland has referred to political ideology rather than skin-colour. Interestingly, in Finland and elsewhere, political ideologies have colours. In Finland, whiteness is associated with nationalist, right-wing ideology, as opposed to red, left-wing politics. Here, whiteness bears the legacy of civil war, fear of the Soviet Union, and death of thousands of Finns in concentration camps in the name of red threat and nationalism. In today's discourse, it has been adopted by populist right-wing politics that construct as the primary threat not only immigrants but also liberal green-reds, left wing and environmental parties' discourses of equal opportunities, tolerance, shared opportunities and rights for all and strong welfare state with strong public services for all, i.e. values that, rather ironically have been at the core of building the Finnish nation state.

In today's Finland, however, whiteness is, again, taking on broad racial and racializing meanings. In an increasingly multicultural, -ethnic and -racial context it is discursively constructed as a sign of belonging and not-belonging, inclusion and exclusion that marks and shapes the lived realities of all. This is not to say that it has not been so before, but as the numbers of Finns-of-colour increase, it affects larger numbers of people than before. And as hate-speech spreads through social media, traditional media creates oppositions of “extremes” and informal “street patrols” seek to take over the streets, anxiety and fear spread and can easily become political weapons (Ahmed, 2005; Saresma, forthcoming; Wodak, 2015). The celebratory reactions by some right-wing groups to the recent suicide attempts of asylum seekers point to the depth of dehumanizing effects of racial(ized) hatred.

In such a climate it is fundamental to bring forth the experiences of those who, regardless, seek to belong here. As the anecdotes above seek to point out, belonging and not-belonging, inclusion and exclusion are produced at the minimal level of phonetics. As language researchers, our task is to show how this, and similar phenomena, take place. On the other hand, in the context of

recent migration, language can be an axis of difference, and the researcher and research participants may not share one at all. In such contexts, e.g. ethnography and arts-based methods may offer tools for communication. In both situations, methods that rely on the co-production of knowledge through participatory methods can be efficiently used. However, at the time of hardship – e.g. as an asylum seeker – engaging in such activities can be a further burden in an already consuming situation. Engaging people in vulnerable situations in arts-based research can bring joy and energy through creative activity and can thus provide means of enduring and sharing difficulties together, in ways that are, at the same time, empowering.

In taking an identity position as a point of criticism and departure for deconstructive analysis, there is always the danger that this very undertaking that seeks to deconstruct this identity, ironically, ends up reinforcing it. Therefore, just as important as it is to bring forth ideas and voices of those who in our society are marginalized due to skin colour and analyse constructions of the speaking positions of Finns-of-colour, it is to examine the ways in which racial assumptions are constructed in positions of power and to deconstruct whiteness. Furthermore, we need to link the analysis of racial hierarchies to simultaneous and interlinked processes that contribute to the growth of economic differences in Finland – and e.g. media-representations that not only demonize racial others but also e.g. the white poor (cf. Dlaske & Jäntti, 2016; Kolehmainen, 2017).

Rigorous research in the field of raciolinguistics can offer invaluable data on the problems – and needs, dreams and desires – of those faced with linguistic, social and structural racism, and thereby offer very practical means and assets to solve these problems. Applied to hegemonic positions and language varieties, raciolinguistics can help to make visible and deconstruct racialized power relations and mechanism that maintain and support them. I warmly welcome Johanna's call for the study of raciolinguistics, i.e. linguistic analysis of how language and racialization are connected in today's Finland, and call for interdisciplinary collaborations to contextualize these processes in the on-going societal and cultural change.

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Response 2

Sirpa Leppänen

Thank you, Johanna, for introducing an important and timely topic. There are two main points I want to make in my response. Firstly, to respond to the question whether raciolinguistics, i.e. investigations of how race shapes language and vice versa, is needed in Finland, my answer is an unambiguous 'yes'. We definitely need a focus on race/racism in Finland-based language studies. Such a focus now should have its place among the key questions for those applied linguists, sociolinguists and discourse scholars who strive to investigate ways in which the society is changing, and who wish to invest in the dissemination of the outcomes of their work in ways that can impact the societal, cultural and educational policy and practice in this country. For example, along the lines suggested by Flores and Rosa (2015), it could be anticipated that now – or very soon – Finnish as a second language education will need to reframe the language diversity among their students, not on the basis of discourses of correctness and appropriateness, but on the basis of a denaturalization of the standardized linguistic categories. Such a reframing clearly is a task that falls on language scholars.

A focus on race, and the ways in which language and race are discursively and agentively constructed should feature as one of our tasks also because it is politically important to highlight and deconstruct the ways in which whiteness has long been oriented to as the normative centre of Finnishness, while at the same time taking it as an invisible and 'natural' category (Bucholtz, 2011; Halonen & Leppänen, 2017). In this sense, as also Johanna argued, it is necessary to give room for the distinctive linguistic experiences, practices and voices of people of colour on their own terms. As an argument, however, this is not a new one. Even before the emergence of raciolinguistics, also multi-racial and post-colonial feminist linguists have voiced similar concerns (see e.g. Jacobs-Huey, 2006; Lanehart, 2009; Mendoza-Denton, 2008). They have emphasized the importance of paying attention to linguistic practices and gendered language ideologies in contexts of racial inequity for the purpose of foregrounding those who have been long ignored or marginalized in both society and research (see e.g. Bucholtz, 2014).

In the Finnish context, a position like this means that investigations of the intersection of language and race should specifically target the experiences, practices and voices of people of colour. As indicated by emergent work in this area, it seems that people of colour are often perceived as and forced into the position of exotic exceptions. For example, Westinen (see e.g. 2014, 2017) has shown how migrant rappers, many of whom have been born and raised in Finland, are made to feel that they simply don't belong to Finnish society. Such a stance is reflected, for example, in a young Somali-background's rapper's, Bizzyiam's, rap in which he interrogates the impossibility of belonging – how he cannot find his home in Finland – in its history or present day, in its discourses, landscapes or the labour market (for more, see Leppänen & Westinen, forthcoming).

The second point I want to make is that, despite the importance of race and racism in socially oriented language studies, I do think that in the current socio-historical situation in Finland they should not constitute the only or even the primary focus for our analyses. There is no doubt that in the U.S. and in many

other countries and contexts in the world with long and painful histories of struggle and inequalities related to race, raciolinguistics is both academically and politically long overdue. In the Finnish context, in contrast, a broader focus on diversity and difference is in my view now more acutely called for. This is because in the current historical situation in which the society is dramatically diversifying, our primary challenge is to understand and explain the nature of the emergent diversity and to develop ways in which to deal with it in different societal domains and settings. In this challenge, the relation between language and race/ racism is certainly an important one, but equally important are a range of other issues – a complex set of interrelated questions of ethnicity, class, education, gender, sexuality, religion and origins.

Let me explain a bit more why I think diversity is really our biggest challenge at the moment. Part of the explanation derives from the fact that, historically, the Finnish nationalist project has always emphasized unity and homogeneity. Miikka Tervonen (2014), a historian and a sociologist, has recently argued that this project is not only a myth, but that it is now an increasingly harmful myth that draws its strength from discourses about race that date back to the early 20th century. In the middle of an increased populist uproar about and hostility towards migrants and diversity, these discourses are now demagogically revived and used to legitimate xenophobia and racism. Importantly, this hostility is not reserved to migrants or refugees only, but it is also extended to people who are in some way categorized as different and antithetical to the ethno-nationalist position. It is thus targeted at a variety of others – not only at newly arrived migrants and refugees, but also at people with a migrant background, many of whom have lived in Finland for generations, as well as at national minorities, such as Swedish-speaking Finns, Finnish-speaking Ingrians, the Sami, and the Romani, for example.

From the point of view of language, such discourses are an extension of the *ethnolinguistic assumption* – the assumption that aligns language use and ethnic or cultural group identity in a linear and one-on-one relationship, and in which the modern subject is defined as monolingual and monocultural. In linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics, the ethnolinguistic assumption has been repeatedly and extensively critiqued (for a more detailed discussion, see Blommaert et al., 2012), but in the lives of modern nation states and nations it still has a great deal of leverage, mainly because it resonates in a politically advantageous way with the classic Herderian language ideologies of the nation-state (Bauman & Briggs, 2003). This is the case with contemporary Finland, too: the ethnolinguistic assumption has long been an integral part of an ideological project in which national minorities, immigrants and colonial subjects have been oriented to as the perennial others of the nation. Full membership in the nation has been seen as based on in the full (and exclusive) membership of the Finnish ethnolinguistic community: a community defined by one language and one culture.

However, the validity and relevance of the ethnolinguistic assumption is now vigorously shaken by the escalating diversity in the many parts of the world, including Finland, and our sociolinguistic lives are changing in ways that highlight the unpredictability and mobility of the correlations between places, identities, language and language behaviour. As a result, in Finland, too, we are now facing the situation in which we need to learn to deal with diversity and difference as an increasingly significant part of contemporary life.

For these reasons, I thus think that conceptualizing and empirically investigating the complexity emanating from increased diversities and differences – or from superdiversity (see e.g. Arnaut, 2016) is thus one of the big challenges of current Finland-based language studies (for an excellent example of such work in Finland, see Lehtonen, 2015). In other words, Johanna’s plea for research that strives to understand and improve the experience of people of colour should be seen as part of a larger project that makes a serious effort in addressing, theoretically, empirically and politically, diversities and differences as fundamental parameters of contemporary life in Finland. Thus, while it is important to investigate language ideologies and linguistic practices in contexts of racialized inequity, it is equally important, especially in Finland right now, to tackle both societally powerful and mundane everyday practices and discourses and diagnose the ways in which they engage with diversity and difference as an intersectional assemblage (Crenshaw, 1991) of the social categories of race, class, nation, gender, and sexuality, and the ways in which these are played out and policed in language use.

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