

Raciolinguistics: How Language Shapes Our Ideas About Race

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reviewed by [Jennifer Dauphinais](#) — January 22, 2018

Title: Raciolinguistics: How Language Shapes Our Ideas About Race

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Raciolinguistics: How Language Shapes Our Ideas

About Race brings together work from across several subfields of linguistics and offers a complex, global examination of the connections between race and language. As a whole, this anthology seeks to make sense of our historical moment, a unique time in which “we are constantly orienting to race while at the same time denying the evidence that shows the myriad ways that American society is fundamentally structured by it” (p. 3). This historical moment was concretized in the national consciousness with the election and presidency of Barack Obama. For Smitheran and Alim, Obama’s linguistic choices as he developed a social and racial public identity served as a starting point for their theorizing of race and language, which they began in their first book, *Articulate While Being Black: Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the US* (2012). In *Raciolinguistics*, an expanded line of inquiry goes beyond the case of Obama to ask, “what does it mean to speak as a racialized subject?” This question became a topic for several conferences and scholarly movements at UCLA and Stanford, incorporating theoretical threads from race and ethnic studies as well as anthropology. In this text, however, the authors embrace a unique analytical approach, studying race as a sociolinguistic construction on an international scale.

The volume offers a thought-provoking collection of chapters on the forefront of the linguistics field that positions language as playing a central role in a sociopolitical process of racialization. In addition to moving beyond the compartmentalization of race, ethnicity, and linguistics as separate fields of study, this collection of essays brings together national and international scholarship that illustrates the relationship between language, race, and culture in complex intersectional contexts. The volume’s 18 chapters are organized into three thematic sections: *Racing Language*, *Language Racing*, and *Language, Race, and Education in Changing Communities*. The first two sections reinforce the twin projects of raciolinguistics: demonstrating how social constructions of race are inextricably bound to language and analyzing the ways in which language (re)configures marked race identities. The third section emphasizes how raciolinguistics can help us gain new insights into sociocultural experiences by examining education and demographic shifts on a global scale. Across the chapters, each author explores the sociopolitical entanglements of culture, politics, and identity as produced by language in different geographic and historical contexts. The authors analyze race and language together through a variety of linguistic methods, providing an intersectional and



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interdisciplinary breadth of theoretical critique and linguistic analyses. The innovative discussions generated by these authors are relevant to a variety of disciplines, including sociology, critical race studies, anthropology, identity studies, education, policy, culture, and media.

Part One, *Language Racing*, brings together a collection of research that theorizes race “through a lens of language” (p. 7). They are prefaced by an essay from editor H. Samy Alim, who describes the overarching theoretical frame of raciolinguistics as “a political project of transracialization” (p. 33). Alim’s essay functions as a watermark for the remainder of the book, staking claim to an emerging field that intends to redefine the way in which race and language are studied. Authors included in this section frame race as a social process remade by speakers who must continuously reconcile ideology and interactions outside of fixed positions of race. Through detailed examinations of lexical and stylistic data specific to their particular cases, the contributors demonstrate the ways in which linguistics functions to produce a fluid conceptualization of race and ethnicity that is subversive to mainstream discourse. As such, much of the scholarship in this section contests racial categorization and seeks to destabilize the “idea of race” (p. 8).

In Part Two, Alim, Rickford, and Ball gather scholarly works under the theme of “racing language.” Unlike the first section, which looks at raciolinguistics using linguistic data, this section highlights sociolinguistic methods. Rather than word-based lexical and contextual analysis, the authors look more broadly at discourse and language as historically and geographically bound to social constructs of race. Through this approach, they present the argument that linguistic variation is an integral part of cultural choice-making and social identity construction. Building on the first section, the authors here seek to “better understand the social and political process of sociolinguistic variation” (p. 12), and in doing so also contest the traditional “dominant national ideologies of race” (p. 13). Similarly, performative identities of ethnicity and race are highlighted as central to social and political struggle. Language is traced as a means for moving through overlapping and, at times, conflicting identities and communities. Both sections demonstrate the value of the concept of raciolinguistics by complicating normative and institutional designations of language and race. At the same time, each employs their field’s particular theoretical and analytical tools to do so.

In the third section, *Language, Race, and Education in Changing Communities*, the scholarship addresses various intersectional youth identities and educational contexts from across the globe. Alim, Rickford, and Ball emphasize the significance of taking up race studies with consideration for the “rapidly changing racial demographics and politics” (p. 21) of the United States. The discussion is similar to the investigative modes of the first two sections, pulling together social language research steeped in an analysis of classroom and social network discourse. The researchers frame the consequences of racial and linguistic ideologies and categorizations in each context alongside students’ various linguistic means of resistance. These instances move away from the traditional (often decontextualized) analysis of race and ethnicity in light of demographic and linguistic shifts in American culture, language, politics, and education. Ultimately, this concluding section establishes that researchers must “necessitate new approaches” (p. 22) to raciolinguistic analysis, and this volume is offered as a roadmap that could “help guide new scholars of race and ethnicity to move forward” (p. 22) in conceptualizing a new America.

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 JENNIFER DAUPHINAIS is a doctoral candidate in the department of Curriculum & Teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University and a faculty instructor at the Quinipiac University School of Education. Her research focuses on white teacher identity studies and its relation to classroom curriculum and discourse. She is a practitioner and facilitator for several teacher self-care and student-centered social-emotional learning programs. She is committed to issues of diversity, equity, and justice in education.

Because the book was compiled before the current administration took office, it was primarily aimed at tackling many of the colorblind ideologies concerning the “postracial” Obama era. However, the research contained here seems more relevant now than ever. Both nationally and globally, we have rapidly moved from a race-evasive culture and political climate to a hyper-racial period of identity politics. In laying out a theoretical framework for transracialization, the authors challenge the cultural norms of language that structure and marginalize racial identities in society and demonstrate how language choices can subvert the dominant colonial paradigm. It will be interesting to see how this expanding field will continue to contest and deconstruct racial categories, language labels, and political ideologies in the near future.