

Generating Principles for an Anti-Racist Pronunciation Pedagogy

Vijay Ramjattan, PhD

vijay.ramjattan@mail.utoronto.ca

Twitter: [@Vijay_Ramjattan](https://twitter.com/Vijay_Ramjattan)

Land Acknowledgement

- I am using this land acknowledgement as a reminder that any discussion of speech accent cannot ignore how it is tied to various systems of oppression carried out on Indigenous lands throughout the globe
- For example, notions of “good English pronunciation” are formed by histories and structures of white settler colonialism

Some Clarifications

- This presentation is really me “thinking out loud”
- It is not interested in providing “practical tips”
- It does not prescribe one way to engage in anti-racism when teaching pronunciation (I cannot tell you what to do)

My Goal

- To promote an anti-racist pronunciation pedagogy, which, in terms of a working definition, is the following:

A type of teaching that critically interrogates and challenges how race and racism shape perceptions and the teaching of pronunciation as well as maintain material inequalities regarding accent

- It opposes the notion that pronunciation is simply an apolitical skill to master when learning English (or any other colonial language)

Agenda

1. Using Rubin (1992) as an Introduction
2. Principle # 1: Recognizing the Embodied Nature of Pronunciation
3. Principle # 2: Redefining Intelligibility
4. Principle # 3: Fighting Material Inequalities Sustained by Accent
5. Concluding Questions

Using Rubín (1992) as an Introduction

1st photo taken by Laura Chouette; 2nd photo taken by Annika Palmari; both available to use for free under unsplash.com license



- Rubin's experiment raises three important points with regard to the topic of this presentation:
 - i. Hearing accents often means "hearing race"
 - ii. Intelligibility is not a straightforward concept
 - iii. What are the social and material consequences of not being perceived as having an intelligible accent?

Principle # 1: Recognizing the Embodied Nature of Pronunciation

- An anti-racist pronunciation pedagogy recognizes that perceptions of accents cannot be divorced from perceptions of racialized bodies
- Racialized bodies do not exist beforehand, but rather, materialize through sensory encounters influenced by racist and colonial histories (e.g., Ahmed, 2000)
- For example, think about how the participants in Rubin's study were perhaps influenced by the (historical) racialization of Asians (in North America)

- In practicing anti-racism, pronunciation teachers have to remember that students do not come into the classroom “disembodied” (Dei, 1996)
- They need to reflect on how their advice, lessons, etc., might be based on hearing the ethnoracial background of students rather than their actual speech
- They also need to explicitly acknowledge how students might perceive them on the basis of *their* racial positioning in society

- Students require opportunities to learn about how race and racism can influence their perceptions of different types of accents, which can take the form of some type of content-based instruction
- This would include learning how to listen critically: when misunderstandings occur, is it always the fault of the speaker?
- Perhaps reflected through such things as learning materials, students need to combat their internalized linguistic racism (Baker-Bell, 2020)

Principle # 2: Redefining Intelligibility

- The goal of pronunciation instruction should be about achieving intelligibility rather than “nativeness” (Derwing & Munro, 2015)
- Yet, is intelligibility easily definable and, furthermore, inherently neutral?
- An anti-racist pronunciation pedagogy seeks to redefine intelligibility for the purpose of making it contextually relevant to students and resisting white linguistic hegemony

- If teachers purport to promote intelligibility yet are defining it in accordance with “native speaker” norms, then intelligibility just becomes a euphemism for “nativeness,” which often gets linked to “sounding white” (Ramjattan, 2019a)
- Instead of locating intelligibility in a particular voice or particular set of phonological features, it is important to highlight how it is created relationally, through speaker and listener working together (Subtirelu, 2017)
- Also, who gets to decide what constitutes intelligibility (Oram, 2019)?

- There is an additional need to move beyond notions of intelligibility being independent of emotions, etc.
- For example, students need opportunities to critically reflect on how their feelings about a person's ethnoracial background can influence their assessments of the person's accent

Principle # 3: Fighting Material Inequalities Sustained by Accent

- An anti-racist pronunciation pedagogy, like anti-racist education in general, is not simply about raising critical awareness, but also, fighting against the material inequalities created through linguistic racism (Baker-Bell, 2020; Dei, 1996)
- This is important as accent is linked to racism in the judicial system, employment, healthcare, and housing (e.g., Craft et al., 2020)
- Accentism is used as a proxy for racism (Lippi-Green, 2012)

- Teachers and students can engage in projects where they investigate and challenge known racist hiring practices in a local company, for example
- Activism can also take the form of warning the public about the predatory “accent reduction” industry that dismisses the existence of racism in its various forms (Ramjattan, 2019b)

Concluding Questions

- How does an anti-racist pronunciation pedagogy fight against the intersecting forms of oppression that come along with racism as well as specific types of racism?
- How can this pedagogy be delivered to the *interlocutors* of our students?
- What would anti-racist pronunciation teacher training look like?

References

- Ahmed, S. (2000). *Strange encounters: Embodied others in post-coloniality*. London: Routledge.
- Baker-Bell, A. (2020). *Linguistic justice: Black language, literacy, identity, and pedagogy*. New York: Routledge.
- Craft, J.T., Wright, K.E., Weessler, R.E., & Queen, R.M. (2020). Language and discrimination: Generating meaning, perceiving identities, and discriminating outcomes. *Annual Review of Linguistics*, 6, 389-407.
- Dei, G.J.S. (1996). *Anti-Racism education: Theory and practice*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.
- Derwing, T.M., & Munro, M.J. (2015). *Pronunciation fundamentals: Evidence-based perspectives for L2 teaching and research*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

- Lippi-Green, R. (2012). *English with an accent: Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States* (2nd ed.). London and New York: Routledge.
- Oram, D. (2019). De-colonizing listening: Toward an equitable approach to speech training for the actor. *Voice and Speech Review, 13*(3), 279-297.
- Ramjattan, V.A. (2019a). Raciolinguistics and the aesthetic labourer. *Journal of Industrial Relations, 61*(5), 726-738.
- Ramjattan, V.A. (2019b). Racializing the problem of and solution to foreign accent in business. *Applied Linguistics Review*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1515/applirev-2019-0058
- Rubin, D.L. (1992). Nonlanguage factors affecting undergraduates' judgments of nonnative English-speaking teaching assistants. *Research in Higher Education, 33*(4), 511-531.
- Subtirelu, N.C. (2017). Students' orientations to communication across linguistic difference with international teaching assistants at an internationalizing university in the United States. *Multilingua, 36*(3), 247-280.

Thank you very much!

vijay.ramjattan@mail.utoronto.ca

Twitter: @Vijay_Ramjattan