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# Complicating race: Articulating race across multiple social dimensions

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## Abstract

This introduction to the special issue, 'Complicating Race: Articulating Race Across Multiple Social Dimensions', situates the collection of articles with respect to the wider body of sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological work on race in US contexts. The articles not only explode the myth of the 'postracial', but also seek to recast the relationship between language and race by demonstrating how race is inextricably bound with multiple, intersecting social dimensions and power relations.

## Keywords

colorblind, ethnicity, ethnography, ideology, indexicality, interaction, postracial, race, racism

## Exploding the postracial

The title of this special issue – complicating race – comes ironically at a time when discourses of colorblindness ('race is not seen') and postraciality ('race is not relevant') reinforce one another to lead to some rather uncomplicated logic: 'I don't see race, therefore race doesn't matter' (Markus and Moya, 2010). Of course, ideologies of colorblindness and postraciality conveniently ignore the facts that some segments of American society have become more and more segregated since integration and that practically all of America's major institutions (take educational, religious, and correctional [prisons]

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institutions, for example) remain highly segregated (Orfield and Lee, 2007; Orfield and Yun, 1999). These ideologies also ignore social scientific research of all stripes, from social psychology (Eberhardt et al., 2004; Goff et al., 2008; Steele, 2010) to, yes, linguistics (Baugh, 2003; Cross et al., 2001; Purnell et al., 1999), that demonstrates that, rather than *postracial*, American society is in fact *hyperracial* (or in process terms: *hyperracializing*). That is, as demonstrated by the articles in this special issue (which all deal with the USA, whether within its parameters or through its global reach), we are constantly discussing race while seeking ways to avoid having to do so, constantly divided by race while staking claims that it 'doesn't matter', and constantly orienting to race while at the same time denying the overwhelming evidence which demonstrates the myriad ways that American society is fundamentally structured by it.

At the same time, these colorblind and postracial ideologies separate race out from the complex matrix of social dimensions that are part of everyday lived experience. At a time when public discourses continue to ignore or simplify racial reasoning, the fields of sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology have been engaging over the last decade in a reflexive exercise of trying to understand how we have contributed to this simplification, and thus, how we have unwittingly reproduced dominant ideologies of race through our work as a collective enterprise (Alim et al., 2009; Bucholtz and Trechter, 2001; Rampton, 1999; Reyes and Lo, 2009).

## Complicating race

The articles in this special issue not only explode the myth of the postracial, but also seek to complicate race, and more specifically, to recast the relationship between language and race in sociolinguistic studies. Much previous scholarship can be characterized by two orientations, which we call the 'dialect orientation' and 'group orientation'. The 'dialect orientation' takes as its starting point the dialect (e.g. 'Chicano English'). Drawing on traditional sociolinguistic paradigms, this line of research is concerned with classifying the frequency and distinctiveness of dialect features with respect to some ethnoracial formation (e.g. Fought, 2003; Wolfram and Thomas, 2002). In contrast, the 'group orientation' takes as its starting point the group (e.g. 'Chicanos'). It begins with some ethnoracial formation, then investigates either the language practices of its group members, such as the practices of 'Asian Pacific Americans' (Reyes and Lo, 2009), or the language practices surrounding how a group is constructed or imagined, such as how 'whiteness' is discursively assembled by whites and non-whites (Bucholtz and Trechter, 2001). While the group orientation need not comply with the dialect orientation (i.e. it allows for ethnic identity to be produced without an ethnic dialect), the dialect orientation often creates an isomorphic mapping between 'dialect' and 'group', for example investigations of African American English that look only at African American speakers (see Paris, 2009 for a counter-example).

While several articles in this collection are concerned with features of certain dialects and members of specific groups, the edited collection as a whole attempts to depart from both dialect and group orientations by highlighting how processes of race and racialization are produced between groups and across multiple linguistic and social dimensions. The articles are interested in multilayered readings of how race intersects and interacts

with social categories – such as age, occupation, citizenship, class, gender, sexuality, and religion – across racial groups and in relation to local interactional contexts and widespread ideological frameworks. The collection argues for methodologies that combine the microanalytic focus of interactional analyses with sustained, ethnographic fieldwork in order to more fully understand the varied and flexible nature of indexical processes in the complex practice of 'reading race' (Chun, this issue).

Indeed, the reading of race as both an indexical and ideological process is central to all of the articles in this collection. Each contributor closely examines the details of interaction in order to trace how linguistic forms and practices directly or indirectly 'point to' individual stances, group categories, and social relationships (Ochs, 1990). These indexical readings are informed by the local sociocultural circumstances in which multiple social axes of identification coincide, emerge, or undergo 'erasure' (Gal and Irvine, 1995), such as the ideological convergences of class and race that often lead speakers to read race in terms of class, or vice versa. The special focus on how speakers articulate race across multiple social axes takes into account how ideologies of race articulate with ideologies and histories of class, gender, sexuality, etc.

As such, the articles take an interdisciplinary approach that constantly seeks new ways of understanding the link between microinteractional phenomena (how speakers articulate race across multiple social axes through discursive practices) and macrosociopolitical processes (how ideologies and histories of race articulate with those of class, gender, sexuality, or whatever category of local significance). From this perspective, the articles examine how race is produced through relations of power and how investments in identity are understood, both from the perspective of those in positions of dominance and those who are not. They look at how participants point to racial/gender/class hierarchies and also attempt to subvert them. By identifying moments of potential intervention against naturalized hierarchies, the articles seek to understand how identities can be mobilized to certain ends, and how increased interracial/transnational contact among groups appears not to presage the end of race, but rather to highlight its continued salience.

## Articulating race across multiple social dimensions

The six articles in this special issue analyze communication across various contexts and forms of interaction (from the research interview and classroom discourse to media representations and freestyle rap battles) in which linguistic resources of 'race' can alternatively index other kinds of social dimensions. This multilayered reading of race in interaction certainly foregrounds race and ethnicity, yet simultaneously underscores the need to (re)examine gender, class, sexuality, etc., in concert with race.

The articles by Bucholtz, Chun, and Reyes, for instance, discuss how discursive practices surrounding race – *race talk*, *reading race*, and *racist discourse*, respectively – can only be understood in relation to multiple social dimensions that intersect with race. For example, Bucholtz's article examines how *race talk* – everyday discourse about race and ethnicity – among white youth reproduces racial logic, binaries, and stereotypes, while simultaneously perpetuating gender ideologies. In examining boys and girls contrastively, the analysis indicates that white girls and white boys hold differing racial stakes at this racially diverse and divided high school in the San Francisco Bay Area, California.

Similarly, Chun's article examines how youth of different ethnicities and genders across a Texas high school community strategically draw on the sociocultural practice of *reading race* – the explicit labeling of people or practices with race terms – for ideological commentary. Chun argues that reading race is a strategy of gender and class commentary that measures speakers in relation to stereotypes of working-class black hypermasculinity ('ghetto') and privileged white hyperfemininity ('prep'). Reyes's article looks at *racist discourse* – discourse that is implicitly and/or explicitly regimented as racist – at an Asian American cram school in New York City. Although the US black–white binary is central to whether Korean American boys cry 'racist' in ongoing classroom talk, Reyes examines how gender and classroom roles, as well as the circulating social types of the 'nervous yet innocent white liberal' and the 'angry yet imprecise person of color', collectively inform whether and how racism becomes readable.

Focusing on how linguistic signs are performed and read, the articles by Alim et al., Mason Carris, and Lo and Kim also illustrate how race can only be understood in relation to multiple intersecting social dimensions. In Alim et al.'s examination of freestyle rap battles in Los Angeles, California, they demonstrate how participants coproduce and contest Hip Hop as a black space, one that foregrounds particular black linguistic norms and identities, especially those that favor and support working-class street affiliation and masculinist, heteronormative ideologies of gender and sexuality. Mason Carris's analysis of a Latino styling practice, which she refers to as *la voz gringa*, demonstrates how participants draw on linguistic correlates intricately tied to ideologies of whiteness, such as 'Valley Girl'-esque phonology, higher pitch, and politeness formulas, as they simultaneously create a space that privileges heteronormative 'brown' masculinities. As more implicit practices of reading race show, as in Lo and Kim's investigation of productions of citizenship in relation to mixed-race South Korean celebrities, language competence can be read in relation to changing notions of citizenship in a new 'multicultural' Korea as these men are differentially positioned between multiple raced, classed, and gendered imaginings of whiteness and Koreanness.

## Producing race through relations of power

These explorations of the 'bundling' of race with other social dimensions not only complicate our conceptions of race as a social and analytic category, but also underscore the fact that racializing practices occur in social fields of unequal power relations. As several articles illustrate, power relations are often produced through hegemonic discourses that privilege whites in the US racial hierarchy. Yet in sites where whiteness is non-normative and white speakers are in the minority or only present as a 'performed' Other – such as the Mexican restaurant and freestyle rap battles – we have very little opportunity to view white responses to their perceived marginalization. In Bucholtz's article, however, we see that one white youth response to their inhabiting the role of the numerical minority is to portray themselves as victims and blacks as powerful. They accomplish this through what Bucholtz refers to as discourses of *racial reversal* (found also in Newt Gingrich's 'new racism', cited in Reyes [this issue], which positions whites as the modern victims of racism). While these were very real perceptions among these white students, they also ignored the ethnographic facts on the ground, so to speak, which demonstrated that black

students experienced far more institutional obstacles to their academic success as well as more threats to their personal well-being.

While these articles foreground race, they do not focus on race as the sole social dimension of static and dichotomous power relations. Instead these authors examine the production of race through complex, intersecting, multilayered relations of power that are constituted in and through local arrangements of language, culture, and politics. For example, Bucholtz's examination of narratives of interracial fight stories shows that youth often ideologically constructed a gendered racial hierarchy of physical power in which African American males were ranked as superior to European American males. Similarly, in Alim et al. and Mason Carris, both groups of male speakers resist their marginalization in relation to whiteness and dominant linguistic norms and ideologies, but like the white boys in Bucholtz, they also reify problematic ideologies of gender and sexuality. Further, Lo and Kim demonstrate that productions of citizenship are not solely based on ideas of whiteness and Koreanness, but that as mixed race Korean American men experience fame in South Korea, they find themselves caught up in larger transnational and historical discourses of empire and domination.

Together, this collection indeed explodes the concept of a postracial US society through documenting the ways in which hyperracializing discourses continue to constitute our daily experiences as Americans, whether we are in New York, Los Angeles, the San Francisco Bay Area, Texas, or South Korea. The contributors demonstrate the necessity of examining language surrounding race not only for its content but also for its discursive structure, social and interactional context, and ideological effects (Bucholtz, this issue). Each article underscores the importance of attending to how racialized language is a negotiated process, how this process intersects with ideologies of locally relevant social dimensions, and how reading race often achieves more than racial classification alone. Whether we are speaking of the general practices of *race talk*, the stylized practice of *la voz gringa*, the direct racializing discourses of freestyle rap battles, the explicit practices of *reading race* or crying 'racist', or the implicit practices involved in indexical construals of race, these articles demonstrate how race is inextricably bound with multiple intersecting social dimensions and power relations that are anything but uncomplicated.

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