

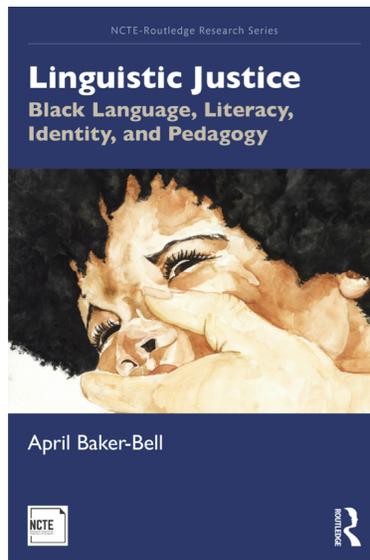
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Review of Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy

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Overview

Baker-Bell (2020)'s *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy* provides ethnographic snapshots that reveal “how Black students navigate and negotiate their linguistic and racial identities across multiple contexts” (p. i). By focusing on the counterstories of Black¹ students, Baker-Bell, a teacher-researcher-activist, describes “how traditional approaches to language education do not account for the emotional harm or consequences these approaches have on Black students’ sense of self and identity” (p. 8).

In schools and society, many Black students are “shamed because they are Black and they are doubly shamed if they are Black and speak Black Language” (p. ix). Indeed, they are faulted, punished, and belittled if they speak Black Language in classrooms. For these students, classrooms may be linguistically violent and dehumanizing spaces.

According to Baker-Bell, many studies on Black Language, however, have established that Black Language is highly developed, systematic, and functional. Like other languages and dialects in the world, Black Language is predictable and rule-governed, but continues to be stigmatized and disrespected, even within the Black Language-speaking community itself. Despite the enormous research of Black Language, linguistic discrimination and linguistic injustice do not end.

Thus, *Linguistic Justice* foregrounds Anti-Black Linguistic Racism as a framework and explicitly describes how Black Language speakers experience the linguistic violence, dehumanization, and

marginalization when they use their language in schools and in their communities. The text also introduces Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy to move toward Black linguistic liberation.

The pedagogical approach helps students challenge and interrogate white linguistic supremacy and Anti-Black Linguistic Racism by intentionally focusing on linguistic and racial issues. Specifically, seven critical inquiry-based learning artifacts comprise this pedagogy, and they provide Black students with an opportunity to, “learn Black Language, learn through Black Language, and learn about Black Language” (p. 8) while working toward rejecting Anti-Black Linguistic Racism.

Chapter 1: Black Language Is Good on Any MLK Boulevard

The first chapter begins with an explanation of the deliberate use of the terms “Black Language” and “White² Mainstream English” (p. 2). Throughout this book, the author intentionally uses these terms to highlight “the relationship between language, race, anti-Black racism, and white linguistic supremacy” (p. 2). By linking the racial classifications Black and white to language, Baker-Bell reveals how people’s language experiences are closely related to their racial experiences. Unquestionably, “the way a Black child’s language is devalued in school reflects how Black lives are devalued in the world” (p. 2). Likewise, “the way a white child’s language is privileged and deemed the norm in schools is directly connected to the invisible ways that white culture is deemed normal, neutral, and superior in the world” (p. 2).

¹ I chose to capitalize the first letter of non-white racial/ethnic groups such as Black, Brown, Indigenous, and Asian. I opt not to capitalize white out of recognition of the history of white supremacy in the United States and an effort to resist those structures. Capitalizing Black (and other racial/ethnic groups) but not white is an act of linguistic resistance.

² The author deliberately capitalizes the first letter of white only in the term “White Mainstream English” to emphasize the relationship between language and race. I also chose to follow this in order to keep the author’s intention.

However, Baker-Bell points out that “many teachers do not realize that standard English is a byproduct of white supremacy” (p. 6). She also raises concerns about some insensitive people who are saying that standard English could save Black people’s lives, or Black students should be taught to code-switch from their familiar linguistic system to White Mainstream English to dismantle white supremacy. These instances clearly show that “internalized anti-Blackness is REAL (p. 6)”, and it also strengthens a system of white supremacy and maintains Anti-Black Linguistic Racism.

When Baker-Bell was a young Black teacher in a high school, she knew that her Black students were communicating in a valid language “at home, in school, and in the hood” (p. 4), but she was under pressure from school administrators to force the students to speak the “language of school” (p. 4). She personally found this problematic. Some students also said that “using standard English made them feel like they were being forced to talk white” (p. 5) and many questioned why they had to use a language that did not reflect their cultural or linguistic backgrounds. At that time, even though she knew her students were only telling the truth, she was ill-prepared to tackle the linguistic issues that they were raising.

Now, Baker-Bell speaks back to a young version of herself through this book, *Linguistic Justice*. It covers Black Language and Black Liberation while dismantling Anti-Black Linguistic Racism and white linguistic hegemony in classrooms and in the world. Within this framework, excuses such as “that’s just the way it is” (p. 7) cannot be used as justification for linguistic injustice.

Chapter 2: What’s Anti-Blackness Got To Do Wit It?

Chapter 2 provides the rationale behind the framework of Anti-Black Linguistic Racism. This

framework helps to draw attention to the linguistic racism and oppression that is uniquely experienced by Black Language speakers. This chapter also explains how Anti-Black Linguistic Racism influences teacher attitudes, curriculum and instruction, pedagogical approaches, disciplinary discourse and how harmful these are on Black students’ language education and their racial and linguistic identities.

According to Smitherman (2006), Black Language is an Africanized style of speaking English words, which originates from the experience of U.S. enslaved descendants. Smitherman (2006) further explains that “the roots of African American speech lie in the counter language, the resistance discourse, that was created as a communication system unintelligible to speakers of the dominant master class” (p. 3). This unique experience has eventually led to their language practice in the Black community. Yet, in classrooms, Black Language is considered linguistically and intellectually inferior and is degraded and devalued without considering this historical background.

Moreover, the standard language ideology has supported and maintained the linguistic violence, dehumanization, marginalization and discrimination. This ideology is “a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogenous spoken language which is imposed and maintained by dominant bloc institutions” (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 67). It “goes unquestioned in our institutions, particularly in schools, as a result of the disinformation and misrepresentation that get distributed about dominant languages and marginalized languages and dialects” (p. 15).

Now, Anti-Black Linguistic Racism as a framework of this text accurately captures how Black Language speakers are disregarded, disdained, and marginalized when they use their language across

multiple contexts. It also questions and investigates the specific linguistic dominations and oppressions that are especially experienced by Black Language speakers.

The latter part of this chapter highlights Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy as a way forward. This pedagogy critically questions white linguistic hegemony and Anti-Black Linguistic Racism. This approach also aims to help Black students develop agency and take a critical stance by confronting Anti-Black Linguistic Racism in teacher attitudes, curriculum and instruction, pedagogical practices, disciplinary discourse, and research.

Artifact 1 : Black Language & Identity	Investigating how language, identity and culture intersect in the Black society
Artifact 2 : Language, History, & Culture	Examining the historical, cultural, and political foundations of Black Language
Artifact 3 : Study of the Grammatical and Rhetorical Features of Black Language	Studying the structural and rhetorical characters of Black Language
Artifact 4 : Language & Power	Investigating how language and power intersect
Artifact 5 : Language & Racial Positioning in Society	Examining how language and anti-blackness are interconnected
Artifact 6 : Language, Agency, & Action	Developing agency, critical perspective and political activism when using Black Language
Artifact 7	Investigating how other linguistically and racially diverse groups of people

: Imagining a Language of Solidarity	are affected by linguistic racism
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Table 1. Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy (p. 35)

Chapter 3: Killing Them Softly

This chapter expands on Black Language Artifacts (see Table 1) and provides ethnographic snapshots that illustrate how the students at Leadership Academy (LA) engage and interact with each learning experience that these Artifacts provide. During students’ engagement with the Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy, they are beginning to shift their perspectives by critically interrogating and consistently resisting white linguistic hegemony and Anti-Black Linguistic Racism.

The first Black Language Artifact engages students in a conversation about Black Language and White Mainstream English while revealing what the students’ initial language attitudes are and how the students have been impacted by Anti-Black Linguistic Racism. Before participating in a group dialogue, the students are asked to individually “(1) read two language samples, (2) draw an image, cartoon, or character that reflects each language sample, and (3) write a paragraph that expressed their thoughts about both languages and the speakers of those languages” (p. 42). Then, they participate in the group dialogue. They talk about what they wrote for both language samples.

Following the group dialogue, the researcher meets with a few of the students individually to have a more in-depth conversation regarding Black Language and White Mainstream English. Their responses suggest “a complex and nuanced relationship with Anti-Black Linguistic Racism” (p. 48). One of the students, Janel, feels compelled to embrace and advocate Black Language, but

confesses that she sometimes perpetuates Anti-Black Linguistic Racism. Allistar's counterstory indicates how he has internalized Anti-Black Linguistic Racism and unconsciously supported white linguistic hegemony. He also portrays Black Language speakers as linguistically, morally, and intellectually inferior.

The students also say, not only at school but also at home, white linguistic hegemony and Anti-Black Linguistic Racism have perpetuated. Their parents correct them when they use Black Language, which displays that Black Language is not deemed socially or intellectually proper and valuable even at home.

Their counterstories depict how Anti-Black Linguistic Racism has negatively impacted Black students in the context of schools, homes, and communities. They affirm that "eradicationist and respectability language pedagogies do not account for the internalized Anti-Black Linguistic Racism, linguistic double consciousness, or the consequences these approaches have on Black students' sense of self and identities" (p. 61). Instead, they highlight that an alternative language pedagogy is required to offer "an alternative way of looking at Black Language (p. 93)".

Chapter 4: Scoff No More

This chapter outlines the praxis of the Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy with Black Language Artifacts 2–7, specifically illustrating how Black linguistic consciousness-raising can operate to help the students at LA challenge, interrogate, and work toward dismantling Anti-Black Linguistic Racism in pursuit of linguistic and racial justice.

Black Language Artifact 2 is used to teach Black students about the history of their native language. The inquiry-based activity immerses the students in learning about the rich history of Black Language. Through discussions of "language planning" (p. 64),

the origins of Black Language, students learn how Black Language functions as a counter language that allows the communication of simultaneous double meanings. They could have an opportunity to ponder "why it was necessary for Black Language to be a linguistic survival strategy and how it was a tool for enslaved Africans and their descendants to resist, rebel, and reclaim their power in the context of domination" (p. 71).

Black Language Artifact 3 is designed to initiate a conversation about the grammatical structure and rhetorical features of the language. At first, the students' comments show that "Black Language is not acknowledged as a valid, rule-based linguistic system in their curriculum nor is it treated as a linguistic resource that is necessary for their language and literacy development" (p.62). Through this artifact, however, students learn about features and patterns of Black Language, and terminology to describe those patterns. For each feature, they discuss its function, meaning, and a speaker's intention for using it. They also have a chance to observe, explore, and discuss language based on the literacies they have of their native language in terms of syntax, semantics, and phonology.

Black Language Artifacts 4 and 5 are designed to help the students at LA to develop their critical linguistic awareness and interrogate how language, race, and power are intersected. Students are asked to work in small groups to define the notion of "Standard English" (p. 82). This activity helps students to understand the way in which "the standard language ideology" (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 67) maintain the arbitrary idea that a certain language is considered as standard. After this discussion, the students participate in challenging the language ideology and problematizing the intersections between language, power, and race.

Black Language Artifacts 6 and 7 motivate students to develop agency and participate in community activism to dismantle Anti-Black Linguistic Racism. These activities align with Alim and Smitherman (2012)'s argument that: "youth are not only thinking critically about language, but they are also putting their knowledge to work for their communities by developing consciousness-raising campaigns" (p. 188). Specifically, Artifact 6 aims to encourage the students to make political choices with a critical linguistic awareness through a social media campaign, workshops, or other external activities. Artifact 7 inspires students to explore how other linguistically and racially diverse groups have been affected by linguistic racism.

Chapter 5: Black Linguistic Consciousness

This chapter demonstrates how the students at LA are impacted by the Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy and develop a Black linguistic consciousness. Engagement with the Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy provides the students with the tools to challenge and interrogate white linguistic hegemony and Anti-Black Linguistic Racism. It also helps them to realize that Black Language represents their identity, heritage and culture.

For example, Janel says, "My feelings did change from before because I did not know that slang or Ebonics was even a language or that it had history and roots" (p. 94). Lola mentions, "My attitude changed a little too. I learned that the way I speak is not the wrong way to speak and I can choose when and where not to use it [Black Language]" (p. 94). Allistar also confesses, "I think when I first started, I thought one language was better than the other, but they are both languages people communicate in, and I should not stereotype" (p. 95).

Chapter 5 underscores the need for an Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy in the present social, political, and racial situations. Still, Baker-Bell emphasizes that an Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy alone is not enough to address Anti-Black Linguistic Racism and white linguistic hegemony. She argues that "we must continue to think about how we can work toward changing the structures, systems, and institutions that perpetuate linguistic racism and language subordination" (p. 97).

Chapter 6: "THUG LIFE": Bonus Chapter: Five Years After Leadership Academy

In this bonus chapter, Baker-Bell showcases her work with preservice English education students using seven Black Language Artifacts. She uses "The Hate U Give (THUG)" (p. 102) as her primary young adult literature text in the course and demonstrates how literature can be used to pursue linguistic and racial justice. Each Black Language Pedagogy artifact contains important information in relation to THUG. THUG helps students to explore their linguistic identity and raise a critical linguistic awareness of how the language, race and power intersect. This chapter shares implications for "how African American literature is an important vehicle to work toward dismantling Anti-Black Linguistic Racism" (p. 9).

Evaluation and Conclusion

Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy is a revolutionary and innovative twenty-first century book that sets a new standard for work on African American Language. This book is about "Black people and identities, Black literacies and languages, and Black life and liberation" (p. iv). This text is also "a love story against Anti-Blackness, generally, and against Anti-Black Linguistic Racism, specifically" (p. iv).

One of the strongest elements in this book may be the praxis of the Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy with Black Language Artifacts. The critical inquiry-based learning experiences of this pedagogy provides Black students with opportunities to learn about and use Black language as they simultaneously challenge, interrogate, and work toward dismantling Anti-Black Linguistic Racism.

This book is meaningful to the author herself, as it speaks back to her as a young Black teacher who wanted to enact “a way of thinking about pedagogy in relation to the practice of freedom” (p. 4). The principles and pedagogy that this book offers can also be a significant foundation to support all other languages and all other language speakers in the global world, and to explore how identity is conceived through the way language is expressed and respected.

In fact, in any society or country, labeling a particular language or dialect as standard, normal,

or appropriate can mean that people who do not speak that language or dialect are regarded as non-standard, abnormal, or inappropriate. Thus, we should consider “Which languages are preferred in which contexts? By whom? Which groups are included—or excluded—by these decisions? Who benefits?” (Alim & Smitherman, 2012, p. 26).

Deeply grounded in rigorous research, in tandem with theory and practice, this book shows the tragic and violent consequences of the logic of “that’s just the way it is” (p. 7). Thus, it is really worth reading not only by language researchers, classroom teachers, students, parents, educational administrators, community activists, but also by the general public, people all over the world. All should be involved in the pursuit of language liberation and linguistic justice because all languages, all speakers and all voices matter!

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