1 The pronunciation of difference

Reproducing inequality

An angry man yells at a restaurant employee for speaking Spanish; a white woman calls the police to report that her Black neighbor's child is using the neighborhood pool; a baseball player pulls his eyelids outward to mock an Asian player. Videos recording these sorts of racist acts have become so common that they may not even produce a reaction for many people. This genre of videos embarrassing racists suggests that racism is ubiquitous in American society, even if some seem to accept the idea that racial inequality was somehow "solved" with the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s or with the election of Barack Obama in 2008. How is it that people can be surrounded by evidence of racism in the United States and yet maintain the belief that racism is no longer a problem?

Attention given to racists in such videos reproduces the idea that racism only persists because there are individual racists out there who simply haven't caught up with the rest of society. These sorts of videos portray racism as a series of individual acts performed by racists who deserve to be shunned and shamed for their backward views. The people in such videos are seen as individuals trapped in some sort of time warp where they maintain prejudices that "good people" rejected many years ago. According to such a view, these individual racists are the problem. This view of racism suggests that individual "racists" are becoming rarer across time, and once they are all gone, racism will cease to be a problem.

The idea that racial inequality results from the actions of a small set of individual racists is what Jane Hill (2008) called "the folk theory of racism." This folk theory suggests that once all racists have been enlightened, racism will no longer be an issue. While individual racists certainly exist, individual neo-Nazis or Klan members are not themselves responsible for economic inequality, unequal access to education and healthcare, discriminatory patterns of incarceration, or any of the other forms of social inequality related to racial difference. Indeed, the attention given to the acts of individual racists serves to pull people's attention away from the social structures responsible for racial inequality (Hodges 2016). Racism is institutional, structural, or systemic (Feagin & McKinney 2005), meaning that racial inequality is deeply embedded in social structures. This allows for a "color-blind racism" (Bonilla-Silva 2003) where racial differences are viewed as irrelevant, and racism can be denied, even though forms of social inequality clearly fall along racial lines. Language that masquerades as fighting racist ideologies may be used to maintain racism while denying its existence. This is the case with arguments claiming that affirmative action programs are somehow "racist" because they supposedly judge people based on race when a "color-blind" approach might be thought to be "fairer." Racism persists through forms of language that are not overtly recognized as "racist" but still serve to reproduce racial inequality.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003332886-1

For many, such videos are a painful reminder of similar personal experiences. For others, videos of racists provide a boost of self-esteem – "Thank goodness I'm not backward and ignorant like that." Knowing that they are "better humans" than those racists and, following from the folk theory of racism, believing that the number of such racists is continually diminishing gives those people the impression that racism is on the decline and society is continually improving. Attention to individual racists also makes people feel like they are part of the solution to the problem of racism. They can believe they are helping improve society simply by being "better" than some man they see screaming at people for speaking Spanish at a taco truck.

Of course, most people *are* probably "better people" compared to the individuals captured in the racist rants that go viral, but that doesn't prevent them from being complicit when it comes to accepting the social structures that allow for racial inequality. Sorting out exactly who is or isn't racist does nothing to change the structures and institutions that maintain forms of social inequality. Indeed, what Adam Hodges (2016) calls the "hunt for racists language game" creates a distraction that draws attention away from the broader implications of racial inequality. Language plays a central role both in this distracting hunt for racists and in the reproduction of less obvious forms of structural racism. It is through attention to language use that one can debate questions of who is or isn't "racist." However, attitudes and biases toward different varieties of language are also central in maintaining forms of structural racism. We call varieties that get the brunt of the bad attitudes *undervalued* (see Young et al. 2014); and while it is certainly true that such varieties are not undervalued by all – indeed, many people love them – it is clear that people who use undervalued varieties are marginalized in ways that deny them equal access to education, healthcare, and employment and can even threaten their personal safety. Understanding how racism persists requires paying close attention to the language used to enable, (re)produce, resist, or prevent forms of social inequality.

Consider, for example, the place of language in the events following the killing of Trayvon Martin (see Figure 1.1), one of the cases that lead to the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. In February 2012, George Zimmerman shot and killed Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African American. Martin was returning to his father's fiancée's home after walking to a nearby convenience store. He was unarmed, only carrying a pack of Skittles and a bottle of iced tea that he purchased at the store. Zimmerman (who was 28 at the time) was part of the neighborhood watch program where Trayvon Martin's father lived. In the moments leading up to the shooting, both were on the phone; Zimmerman was speaking with 911 about a "suspicious person," and Martin was talking with a good friend, Rachel Jeantel. Zimmerman claimed self-defense, arguing that Martin had attacked him so that he had no choice other than to shoot. The recording of Zimmerman's 911 call was widely discussed in search of evidence that Zimmerman was racist. At Zimmerman's trial for murder, Jeantel testified about the conversation that she and Trayvon were having in the moments before the shooting (Rickford & King 2016). A jury accepted the claim of self-defense and acquitted Zimmerman. The trial and jury decision were quite controversial, drew a great deal of attention from journalists and on social media, and sparked protests throughout the country.

The important role language plays in various aspects of the Trayvon Martin case can be seen as an example. Although Zimmerman identified as Hispanic, journalistic reports and social media discussions regularly portrayed him as a white man. The entire case was (and continues to be) portrayed as a symbol of troubled race relations between whites and African Americans. Toni Morrison (1992) describes how the language used to discuss race in the United States has a long history of presuming a binary opposition between Black people and whiteness. Often, ideas about what it means to be "American" are constructed in opposition to Blackness. In addition to its racist positioning of Black people as some sort of dangerous

Figure 1.1 A rally seeking justice for Trayvon Martin and Byron Carter (a 20-year-old African American man killed by the police), Austin, Texas, July 2013

Source: photo by Ann Harkness

Other, this opposition erases the full range of racial identifications in society. The language that people use to talk about race has been historically shaped by this binary understanding so that it often erases the experiences of Asian, Latinx, Middle Eastern, and Native Americans, as well as people who identify with more than one racial category. Within this binary discourse, Zimmerman *had* to be understood as "white" before the discussions of the racial implications of the case could begin.

The killing of Trayvon Martin is also a prime example of the "hunt for racists" phenomenon (Hodges 2016). In television reporting on the case, reporters repeatedly focused attention on a 1.6-second segment of Zimmerman's 911 call. Some listeners believed that Zimmerman uttered a racial slur in this short audio clip. Indeed, CNN spent an entire hour-long program focused entirely on what Zimmerman was or wasn't saying on the 911 call. The possibility of Zimmerman saying a racist slur became a central issue that was never resolved. If he had said it, then he was racist, and the killing of Trayvon Martin might be explained as the act of an isolated "racist" rather than part of a larger pattern of disregard for the lives of young African American men and boys. Similar attention was given to the question of what it meant for Martin to use the word "cracker" to describe Zimmerman. If "cracker" were a slur and Martin were somehow racist, then Zimmerman's story of being attacked would become more believable. Journalists focused on the words of those involved because those words held the possibility of "explaining" the killing through the folk theory of racism. While on the surface the "hunt for racists game" serves to combat racism, it often prevents people from fully recognizing the structural bases of racism in American society.

A final way in which language played a central role in the Trayvon Martin case involves the reception of testimony from Rachel Jeantel, the friend Martin was talking to on the phone in the moments before he was killed. Linguists John Rickford and Sharese King (2016) analyzed Jeantel's testimony and the responses to her testimony from journalists and jurors and on social media. Jeantel spoke a variety of English that was unfamiliar to journalists and jurors. Rickford's and King's research (discussed in more detail in Chapter 14) demonstrated that Jeantel spoke a regular, rule-based variety of English even though her speech was not the "standard" English typically expected in courtrooms. During the trial, lawyers on both sides regularly problematized Jeantel's language, claiming to not understand her and attempting to make her seem like an uncooperative and untrustworthy witness. After Zimmerman was acquitted, one juror stated that the jury ignored Jeantel's testimony entirely because they didn't trust her based on the way she spoke. The jurors rejected Rachel Jeantel's testimony not specifically because she was Black but because they reacted negatively to the way she spoke. It would be unfair to call the jurors "racist" because their decision was not based on their view of Jeantel's Blackness. Rather, they were just following their common sense expectations for how one should speak in the context of a courtroom trial. Those expectations for language use end up having consequences that reproduce stereotypical forms of racism.

This book is about the various ways in which language serves to (re)produce, negotiate, resist, and enable forms of social inequality, as in these examples from the Trayvon Martin case. From the categories used to distinguish groups of people to the ways that people listen to those different from themselves, language is a keystone that holds racial inequality in place. It is through language that the very idea of racial differences emerged, and it is through language that beliefs about race continue to be transmitted and invoked, even though most people would agree that racism is a horrible thing. Language convinces polite society to accept forms of structural racism while ostracizing those few who openly espouse racist views. Language makes it possible for racism to exist without racists.

Race in America

While the 13th Amendment abolished slavery more than 150 years ago, the legacy of this period in American history continues to impact how Americans view race relations in this country. A 2019 Pew Research Center survey revealed that 58% of all adults see race relations as generally bad, with more pessimistic views from Black respondents. Indeed, when specifically asked if Black people are treated less fairly than whites in terms of dealing with police and the criminal justice system; hiring, pay, and promotions; applying for mortgages; voting; seeking medical treatment; and conducting everyday business in stores and restaurants, Black people consistently express the view that racial discrimination is common across these domains. In contrast, white respondents were much less likely to recognize racism as a problem in these contexts.

Discourse structural racism

Without racists to blame, how do forms of structural racism persist? Many different forms of inequality interact to uphold a broader system of racism: unequal funding for education limits opportunities for students in minority communities; voter suppression ensures that

minority voices will not be heard; unequal access to healthcare maintains poverty. However, the bulk of the work of maintaining structural racism is performed by what linguists refer to as *discourse*. The maintenance of racial inequality through language can be considered *discourse structural racism* – that is, cases where the patterns found in language serve to uphold systemic forms of racism. Here, *structural* refers both to "structural racism" (institutionalized and systemic patterns of inequality) and to "discourse structures" (observable patterns in language use). Through linguistic analysis of the structures found in instances of language in use, the intricate relationship between language and forms of social inequality can begin to be unraveled. First, it is important to understand what linguists mean when they study various discourse structures.

Linguists view discourse in two distinct ways, often referred to as *discourse* vs. *Discourse* or "little-d discourse" and "big-D Discourse" (Gee 1999, 2015). When linguists talk about Discourse (or "social discourse"), they are referring to broad social narratives and ways of speaking that serve to support social structures. Some analysts divide Discourse into individual "discourses" that serve to regulate the ways certain issues are discussed (such as *political discourse*, *colonial discourse*, or *racial discourse*). In contrast, discourse with a lower-case d (or "interactional discourse") refers to language in use, particularly in everyday conversations. A discussion of *The Green Book* as an example of the "white savior" genre in American culture would be a discussion about Discourse, while instances of racial microaggressions or conversations about racial conflict would be considered discourse. Of course, these two types of d/Discourse are not entirely independent from one another because everyday conversations are limited by the social assumptions found in the Discourses that circulate in society. Discourse structural racism relies on both types of d/Discourse. The ways people talk (or avoid talking) about race are influenced by Discourse representations and assumptions about race in the world around us. When one talks about race, the discourse tends to reproduce these assumptions in ways that enable racism to persist.

The different types of d/Discourse can be seen in the controversies surrounding the Trayvon Martin trial. There are several ways in which Discourse played a role in the Martin killing and its aftermath. The way in which the media categorized Zimmerman as "white" reflects the dominant racial Discourse in the United States where whiteness is understood primarily as an opposition toward Blackness. The Discourse of race in American culture made it extremely difficult to talk about the incident without placing Zimmerman in the category of white people. The killing itself and the motivations for the Black Lives Matter movement emerge from commonplace aspects of American racial Discourse. Racial Discourse repeatedly represents Blackness in terms that incite fear in many white people. The importance of Discourse is clear when people exploit Discourse to justify things like war, slavery, or genocide. However, Discourse is also at play in everyday occurrences such as racial profiling.

Black Lives Matter

Black Lives Matter or, more commonly, #BlackLivesMatter, was founded in 2013. The stated goal of the foundation is to "eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes." The name is linguistically interesting because of what it implies. Societies value the lives of their citizens. It should not be necessary, therefore, in an equitable society,

to point out that lives matter or that the lives of a particular subset of the population have value. This is part of why "Black Lives Matter" is so revolutionary. People saying it, writing it, or wearing it on their bodies are issuing a linguistic challenge that says: I am proclaiming this thing that should not be relevant to say; this requires you to evaluate whether you live as if it is true. When proponents speak the phrase "Black Lives Matter," they do not emphasize the word "Black." Their pronunciation implies only that someone needs to hear it. It does not imply that only Black lives matter or that Black lives matter more than other lives. It is a declaration like "Airplanes fly" or "Stars shine." Some people find this simple language threatening, and that, clearly, is the point of using it.

The seemingly unending representations of young Black men as dangerous, violent "thugs" come to be real for some people, especially for those people whose deepest experience with Black people comes from seeing them on TV. Reactions triggered by stereotypes instilled through racist representations of Black violence permeate American society. The impact of this racial Discourse is there when a salesperson follows Black people around a department store, when a white woman clutches her purse and crosses the street because a Black man is walking toward her, when a potential employer has a gut feeling that an applicant who happens to be Black might not be trustworthy, and when a parent sends their child to a charter school where they won't have to interact with minorities. And, of course, racial Discourse is at the heart of cases where white police officers shoot, choke, and kill men and boys of color.

As with the Zimmerman defense, these killings tend to be presented through a common narrative. The (white) police officer believed that the Black boy was armed with a gun. The situation caused the police officer to be so afraid that he feared for his life. In fearing for his life, his only option was to defend himself by killing the Black boy. In this narrative, the actual actions of the Black boy are irrelevant. He could be holding a bottle of tea, a toy gun, a cell phone, or nothing at all. He could be in his own yard, out jogging, or playing alone in the park. He could be a star athlete, an autistic musician, or a math prodigy. Indeed, he need not even be Black or male. The victim could just as easily be a woman or girl. The victim could be Latinx or Native American. Even as the bodies of young people of color continue to pile up, the spotlight has often focused on the white person's fear. These sorts of events play out repeatedly, and the focus is all too often on the psychological state of the person who killed the Black person. The white shooter's fear could certainly be genuine. Racial Discourse creates a mindset where a white person may genuinely believe that they are in danger simply because they are interacting with a Black person. The experience of fear follows the "common sense" assumptions found in a Discourse overflowing with representations of people of color as dangerous. Through Discourse, the focus on hypothetical white fears and insecurities comes to take precedence over the repeated killing of men and boys of color. In the face of widespread complicity in racial violence, it is no surprise that people feel that American society needs to be reminded of a fact that should be utterly uncontroversial and should go without saying – Black Lives Matter.

Little-d discourse is also central to understanding the Trayvon Martin case. Both Martin and Zimmerman were on the phone with other people right before Zimmerman killed Martin. The focus of much of the media coverage was the discourse of these conversations, particularly Zimmerman's 911 call that was central to the "hunting for racists" game. Little-d discourse was also central in the trial itself, as in interactions where lawyers framed the

testimony in ways that suggested Jeantel, the friend who was on the phone with Martin when he was killed, might not be trustworthy. Because discourse refers to any linguistic interaction or text, patterns of discourse regulated the entire situation from the first call to 911 to the jury deliberations where Zimmerman was acquitted. In addition to the discourse of the original participants, there is the discourse of media coverage, texts and memes shared on social media, and conversations between friends, relatives, or co-workers.

Finally, the Trayvon Martin case illustrates the sorts of interactions that arise between Discourse and discourse. The discourse of television hosts "hunting for racists" assumes the racial Discourse associated with Hill's folk theory of racism. The Discourse portraying racism as caused by individual racists must be accepted (and go unquestioned) before the journalists can even presume that the presence or absence of a single word could explain the entire situation. The conversations where jurors decided to disregard Jeantel's testimony (discourse) similarly presumed portrayals of Black people as inarticulate, uneducated, desperate, and untrustworthy. Within Discourses that reproduce ideas about "correct" or "proper" English, forms of Black language come to be emblematic of negative traits. In conversations commenting on how "bad" Jeantel's English might be or how difficult she was to understand, the Discourse of "standard English" allows conversational discourse to discount and reject anything she had said. Here, Discourse linking Black language with negative stereotypes produces a context in which the discourse silences Rachel Jeantel so that her voice, despite testifying for nearly 6 hours, is never actually heard.

Forms of social inequality persist through Discourses that lead members of society to accept forms of injustice. Because these social Discourses come to be second nature (or "common sense"), they influence the interactional discourse of everyday conversations in ways that cannot be easily recognized. Thus, the problem of racism is not one of educating or even eliminating individual racists, but rather one of both challenging the pervasive Discourses that make unequal treatment of minorities possible *and* working to avoid invoking these Discourses in interactions with others.

Language ideologies

Up to this point, we have talked only about race and racism, but the patterns involving d/Discourse are generally the same regardless of the type of prejudice or discrimination. It is through reactions to Discourse that people navigate social differences related not only to race or ethnicity but to a wide range of social categories. These include broad general categories like gender identity, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, national origin, or age. These may also be more local or specific, such as *people from Bakersfield*, *alcoholics*, *jugglers*, *scrapbookers*, *Beyoncé fans*, *vegans*, *students in Ms. Zbornak's third period English class*, or *members of the Kilgore College Rangerettes*.

Because these various social categories are a critical part of how members of society understand the world around them, they can use the inherent variation in language to convey and interpret the various social categories at play in any given context. All human languages involve vast amounts of variation throughout their various structures. This variation is everywhere – from the tiny differences in exactly where one's tongue lands when making a particular sound to the exact space speakers feel they need to maintain between one another while talking. This rampant variation is a basic and critical part of all human languages. We use it to interpret what is happening around us. When we hear or read an instance of language in use, we rely on our understanding of how a particular instance of language compares to different types of language (variation) we recognize from prior experiences.

Consider the volume of your voice when you speak. The volume of your speech shows massive variation across contexts. Without thinking about it, you adjust the volume of your speech to fit a given context, like when you are talking near a sleeping baby, on the phone, at the library, in a crowded bar, or at a sporting event. When language is used, people use the variation that language contains to interpret what is happening around them. If we hear someone speaking extremely loudly, the volume of speech has a broad range of possible meanings. For many speakers of American English, the interpretation might be that the person is angry, distressed, or excited. They could be trying to handle some obstacle to communication such as overcoming background noise, talking at a distance, or interacting with someone who is hard of hearing. When we hear someone speaking loudly in an unexpected context, we look for other aspects of the context around us to interpret why the volume of their speech is louder than expected. If the person is standing directly in front of someone else and flailing their arms, perhaps we interpret the high volume as conveying anger. If the person is running and covered in blood, we might interpret the high volume as a marker of distress. If the person is trying to talk while wearing earbuds, it is likely we interpret the high volume as signaling a feigned attempt to overcome the noise to avoid turning off the music. If the person they are talking to is leaning out a third story window, we could assume the higher volume is meant to overcome the distance between speakers. And so on.

Modulating speech

Volume is just one of many ways we naturally and automatically modulate the way we speak. Another is speaking rate or tempo. Sometimes we speak fast, and sometimes we speak slowly. What conditions might make us speak faster? What conditions might make us speak slower? How do you know?

This practice of comparing language variation to the context where it occurs is the basic way in which people understand experiences. Making these sorts of inferences from the language-context relationship is an automatic reaction. Most people are generally unaware that they are even doing it. The range of variables that cause listeners to react is just tremendous. In addition to things like volume, there are differences in the words individuals use: Is it an *elevator* or a *lift*? Do you drink *soda*, *pop*, or *coke*? What is a *frontage road*? There are differences in how different words are pronounced: Is the stress on the first or second syllable of the word *Thanksgiving*? Does the word *schedule* begin like the word *sheep* or like the word *skunk*? There are differences in the sounds used to create words: Do *Dawn* and *Don* sound the same? Does *tired* rhyme with *hard*? Is there an 'r' in the word *party*? There are differences in how words can be combined in sentences: Does one wait *in line* or *on line*? Do you say *used to be able to* or *used to could*? Regardless of what they are saying, these forms of variation constantly emanate from the language people hear and use. The ability to recognize and process this variation in language and context is itself an amazing achievement, but each of these different forms of variation is also associated with a set of potential social meanings. Just as with volume, people have specific ideas about what it means for individuals to speak one way instead of another. Depending on individual experiences in life, everyone can have a reaction to people who think of Mountain Dew as a type of *coke*, people who say *conversate* instead of *converse*, or people who say *something* with a "t" sound rather than a "th" sound.

Language is filled with huge amounts of variation that can be used to interpret social interactions. This variation *indexes*, or points to, a set of possible social meanings. As with volume of speech, people use these social meanings to understand what is happening around them. These social meanings, or *indexical meanings*, depend on an individual's personal experiences with language. If someone has never encountered a variable before, they won't know its indexical meaning. When talking with someone whose speech contains several variables that are new to us, we may come to wonder how to interpret the variation. Because such interpretations are not always shared across individuals, language variation becomes the nexus through which we negotiate forms of social difference. The Discourses of social difference interact with people's understandings of the indexical meanings associated with language variation in ways that reproduce forms of social inequality in everyday interactions. Just like the jurors in the Trayvon Martin case, most people interpret the social meaning of language variation without recognizing the ways in which those meanings reproduce forms of inequality. Beliefs about language variation thus become the foundation for numerous types of implicit biases.

The beliefs and attitudes toward forms of language variation cluster together in *language ideologies*. Judith Irvine has defined *language ideology* as "the cultural (or subcultural) system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests" (Irvine 1989: 255). In other words, language ideologies are the belief systems surrounding the indexical meanings associated with language variation and the forms of Discourse that connect those meanings to broader social structures. Thus, language ideologies range from broadly accepted ideas like "There is a correct way to speak English" to beliefs where the prejudice involved might be more obvious like "People who think the word *coke* includes Mountain Dew are just stupid." Indexical meanings are the core beliefs within any language ideology. Just as the individual indexical meanings that a person recognizes depends on that person's individual experiences, language ideologies vary across social groups and individuals.

As an example of the ways in which language ideologies interact with broader social structures, consider the history of beliefs about third person pronouns (it, he, she, they) in English. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, it was broadly held in the United States that "proper" grammar required that if one doesn't know the gender of the person involved, one should use *he* to refer to that person, as in example 1:

1. If a student is outside of the classroom, he must have a hall pass.

Of course, sentences like this give the impression that this might be an all-male school. However, it was argued that *he* was "generic" and could refer both to a single male or to an individual of unknown gender. This language ideology regarding *androcentric* (male-centered) *generic* is also seen in other antiquated phrases like *all men are created equal* and *we are all brothers*. The problems with such phrases are obvious, but the idea of using something inclusive like *he or she* was openly mocked as a silly idea. In 1971, the linguistics department faculty at Harvard wrote a joint letter to *The Harvard Crimson* responding to a suggestion to use more inclusive language. In their letter, the linguists wrote that the unmarked masculine seen in phrases like *Madame Chairman* was merely an issue of grammar:

> The fact that the masculine is the unmarked gender in English . . . is. . . a feature of grammar. It is unlikely to be an impediment to any change in the patterns of the sexual

> division of labor. . . . There is really no cause for anxiety or pronoun-envy on the part of those seeking such changes.
>
> (*Harvard Crimson*, November 16, 1971)

The patronizing tone of what came to be known as the "pronoun envy letter" promotes a language ideology in which the patterns of language are independent from social experiences. This language ideology is presented as if it were an obvious fact to mock and deflect the controversial (at the time) proposals of feminists.

But other linguists (Lakoff 1975) pointed out that androcentric generics allowed for sentences like the following:

2. We advise that one take vitamins during pregnancy to ensure the health of his baby.

While there are certainly trans men who experience pregnancy, sentence 2 sounds like it might be suggesting that even cisgender fathers should be taking the vitamins.

After much research, linguists and psychologists demonstrated that the use of *he* triggered associations with male referents and the use of *he or she* began to take hold, as in the following:

3. If a student is outside of the classroom, he or she must have a hall pass.

What is interesting about the use of both generic *he* and *he/she* is that both have a history of being treated as "correct" English even though colloquial English grammar also offers the option of singular *they* to refer to persons of unknown gender, as in example 4.

4. If a student is outside of the classroom, they must have a hall pass.

Grammarians often find this use singular *they* unacceptable or, at least, dispreferred. For example, the 7th (2017) edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style* advises caution when using singular *they:*

> Many people substitute the plural *they* and *their* for the singular *he* or *she*. *They* and *their* have become common in informal usage, but neither is considered fully acceptable in formal writing, though they are steadily gaining ground. For now, unless you are given guidelines to the contrary, be wary of using these forms in a singular sense.
>
> (*CMoS* 7, 5.256)

If the authors are correct that singular uses of *they* and *their* "are steadily gaining ground," singular *they* and *their* have been gaining ground for almost 500 years! The use of singular *they* has never been restricted to "informal usage" and occurs in some of the most important literature in the history of the English language. Consider the following examples, dating back to early translations of the Bible.

- Neyther Tyndale there nor thys precher . . . hath by *theyr* maner of expounyng . . . wonne *them* self mych wurshyp. (Sir Thomas More, "Apology," published in 1533)
- Then shalt thou bring forth that man, or that woman . . . unto thy gates, even that man, or that woman, and shalt stone them with stones till *they* die. (King James Bible, Deuteronomy 17:5, 1611)

- God send every one *their* heart's desire! (William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, 1623)
- A person can't help *their* birth. (Jane Austen, *Emma*, 1815)

Nevertheless, the *Chicago Manual of Style* and other purported language authorities continue to take the stance that singular *they* is a recent and unhappy development that should only be used in informal contexts. Apparently, these "informal usages" include reading from the King James Bible in church or performing a Shakespearean play. Of course, the idea that Shakespeare represents informal usage seems ridiculous, but language ideologies usually don't care about such facts.

The *Chicago Manual of Style* 7th Edition did, however, introduce a shift from treating singular *they* as universally wrong to providing a warning about the danger of using it. This shift, in large part, emerges from efforts to promote the use of singular *they* to refer to individuals whose gender is known but who do not align with the categories of *male* and *female*. For transgender people who identify as non-binary, singular *they* allows people to refer to them without having to assign them a gender category, as follows:

5. I talked to Maria and they said they weren't coming to the party.

In contrast to the singular *they* with an unknown referent, the 2017 edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style* accepts the use of singular *they* as in example 5, taking the view that one should respect an individual's preferred pronouns. For some speakers of English, sentences like the one in sentence 5 sound funny, wrong, or even impossible. These speakers tend to be older and unfamiliar with individuals who identify as non-binary. In their research, linguist Kirby Conrod (2020) has shown that this use of singular *they* is undergoing change. Compared to Boomers and Gen Xers, Millennials and members of Generations Z and Alpha are much more likely to accept, use, and understand sentences like sentence 5. Like this use of singular *they*, the use of Mx. (rather than Ms. or Mr.) and terms like *Latinx* serve to mark inclusion for those with non-binary gender identities. Of course, such changes are often controversial. Again there are competing language ideologies that clearly interact with broader social and political Discourses.

Gender-neutral pronoun success?

Like English, Swedish has pronouns for female and male referents (*hon* means *she*, and *han* means *he*). A gender-neutral pronoun, *hen*, was added to the Swedish dictionary in 2012. Researchers asked native Swedish speakers to use a pronoun for a non-gendered stick figure, and most chose the gender-neutral option, thus suggesting its successful integration into the language for non-binary uses. While English speakers can use singular *they* in non-binary situations, native English-speaking participants in another study indicated that they still associate singular *they* with the masculine gender.

Although the Harvard linguists once argued that gendered pronouns in English are "simply a feature of grammar," these pronouns show huge amounts of meaningful variation. The difference between *Maria lost their keys* and *Maria lost her keys* is certainly a trivial distinction

in terms of grammar. There is no reason for English grammar to care about Maria's gender identity. One could easily argue that arguments about the "grammar" of gendered pronouns is not actually about grammar at all. It is doubtful that people who object to Maria choosing *they* as their preferred pronoun have based their objections solely on grammar. The "grammar" of singular *they* seems unfamiliar because the *idea* of non-binary gender is unfamiliar. Indeed, research suggests that judgments of singular *they* as "bad grammar" are dependent on an individual's (lack of) experiences with people who are non-binary (Ackerman & Wallenberg 2017). Thus, it seems like such objections are less an issue of grammar and more the result of individuals being uncomfortable with transgender people and hoping to avoid having to recognize the existence of people who might challenge their "common sense" assumptions concerning gender.

This points to another important aspect of language ideologies – they aren't actually *about* language. Rather, language ideologies reflect perspectives on sociocultural and political structures. Attitudes toward language come to "stand in" for attitudes toward groups of people, so that language ideologies serve to enact forms of discrimination. This pattern is known as *symbolic revalorization of language*, meaning that language comes to take on symbolic value that serves to enable forms of discrimination that would otherwise be socially (or legally) sanctioned (Woolard & Schieffelin 1994). For example, an employer could not openly declare that they didn't hire a particular individual because the person was African American. However, if the same employer decides against hiring the person because they pronounced the word *ask* the same as *axe*, which the employer thinks suggests that the applicant has "poor English," many people would say that the employer had made a reasonable decision. The fact that this particular pronunciation is more common among speakers who are African American comes to be incidental. Discrimination against people because of the way they talk makes discrimination based on things like gender identity or race come to seem acceptable. Similarly, a statement like "I hate Mexicans" will get one caught in the "hunt for racists" game, but one might claim that statements like "I hate people who refuse to speak English" makes no direct reference to race. Thus, language ideologies come to sanction particular forms of discrimination.

When someone hears a voice that includes variables that index negative stereotypes, they may be reacting to language, but their reaction is constrained by the Discourses that regulate their understandings of social difference. While language-based discrimination may be directed toward any group, there are two broad categories of linguistic bias common among Americans. Language ideologies may convey attitudes toward native speakers of different varieties of English or attitudes toward native speakers of other languages and their use of English as a second language. In both cases, attitudes toward language serve to trigger associations with negative stereotypes in ways that often go unrecognized.

Regardless of where language-based prejudice may be directed, it is important to recognize that language ideologies never exist in isolation. Borrowing from work in ecology, Paul Kroskrity (2018) suggests that the best way to conceptualize language ideologies is as *assemblages*. The concept of language ideological assemblages draws attention to the fact that there are always multiple language ideologies competing and interacting with one another. For example, language ideologies about "proper" English may overlap with ideologies of how language indexes social class, which, in turn, intersect with ideologies about language and gender identity. Thus, when we talk about language ideologies, it is crucial to remember that language ideologies are never universally accepted or static. They are always challenged and always changing, but they persist over long periods. The influence of language ideologies on society is ever present.

In the cases of African Americans killed by the police, centuries old language ideologies are sometimes brought to bear on the situation. These ideologies involve indexical associations linking African Americans to social traits that suggest that Black people are somehow less than human. In the following section, we will investigate the history of this dehumanization Discourse.

Red Summer

The heart of discourse structural racism is the mistaken belief that race is a biological fact. The myth of biological differences between races has been repeatedly used to justify horrific acts such as the enslavement of Black people and the genocide of Native Americans. Recognition that such acts are immoral and inhumane is usually insufficient for undermining the effects of discourse structural racism. The persistence of racist ideologies allows differential (violent, destructive) treatment of people of color. Consider, for example, the summer of 1919, 54 years after the end of slavery.

The famed poet and civil rights activist James Weldon Johnson dubbed the summer of 1919 as "Red Summer" due to the widespread violence against African Americans that occurred that year. Between May 1 and August 31 of that year, there were more than 40 cases of lynching and mass murders across the United States. White mobs incited violence against Black people in New York City, Syracuse, Philadelphia, Chicago, Omaha, and Washington, D.C. Lynchings and attempted lynchings occurred throughout the country. In several instances, the victims were veterans returning from World War I, and some lynchings were planned specifically to interrupt the welcome celebrations for Black veterans. At the end of September 1919, a large massacre occurred in the rural town of Elaine, Arkansas. Sparked by sharecroppers' efforts to unionize to gain basic workers' rights, a white mob murdered around 200 Black people over the course of two days. Although no white people were ever arrested for the destruction of Elaine, 122 Black people were arrested, some of whom were wrongly convicted of murder. Although the Red Summer was more violent than many other years, it was not at all unusual. Throughout the latter 19th and early 20th century, the murder of Black and Brown people was a common occurrence.

Racial violence in Tulsa

On Memorial Day of 1921, mobs of white people decimated Greenwood, a Black neighborhood in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Greenwood was a thriving community, and due to oil revenues it was home to many of the wealthiest African Americans at the time. Dick Rowland was 19 years old and worked in a building where Black people were only given access to one restroom on the top floor of the building. By most accounts, Rowland tripped as he stepped into the elevator and grabbed the elevator operator's arm to keep from falling. The elevator operator was a young white woman, who screamed and accused Rowland of sexual assault. Rowland was arrested and placed in jail where a mob of white people gathered hoping to lynch him. After an outbreak of gunfire at the Tulsa courthouse, the mob decided to destroy the Greenwood neighborhood, eventually murdering over 300 Black men, women, and children. The mob burned down every Black business in Greenwood,

even going so far as to drop balloons full of turpentine out of planes onto the buildings to spread fire more quickly. Some 6,000 Black Tulsans were forced to move to internment camps after their homes had been destroyed. The decimation of Greenwood came after a 20-year rise in racist ideology and violence against Black and Brown people.

The period from 1900 to 1920 was marked by extreme racism. Across the United States, towns erected monuments celebrating the Confederacy at an unprecedented rate. In 1915, D. W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation* was released. The film was originally titled *The Clansman*, and the "nation" born in the film is the Ku Klux Klan, who Griffith portrayed as a patriotic group of valiant heroes protecting white people. Often praised for its supposed cinematic artistry, the film is basically a montage of racist tropes. Using white actors in blackface, the film portrayed African American men as violent, untrustworthy, and unable to control their lust for white women. The intertitles in the silent film included racist quotes from then-President Woodrow Wilson and outrageous melodramatic race-baiting like "The former enemies of North and South are united again in common defense of their Aryan birthright." *The Birth of a Nation* was the first major blockbuster, and its pro-Klan message incited a new wave of violence against African Americans. The Klan had faded out of existence in the 1870s but was reorganized in 1915. The film is particularly notorious for propagating what Angela Davis (1981) called the "myth of the Black rapist," which attempts to claim that African American men are naturally violent, hypersexual, dangerous, and uncontrollably attracted to white women. This myth was used to excuse murders of African American men as necessary for the protection of white women. Similarly, the racist portrayal of African American women as licentious and hypersexual attempted to legitimize white men raping Black women. *The Birth of a Nation* did not create this myth, but the film's success was critical in getting people to believe the lie and murder on the basis of that lie.

Between 1880 and 1950, white mobs lynched over 3,000 African Americans and over 600 Mexican Americans. Lynching was not simply a matter of mob violence or murder. Particularly in the South, lynchings were major events, often planned in advance and announced in the local newspaper, where the murder of a Black person served as entertainment for a family outing. Southerners referred to lynchings as "having a barbecue" and people would bring picnic lunches to eat as they watched an innocent person being tortured and murdered solely on the basis of their skin color. The victim was usually beaten and tortured as warm-up act for the main event of murder. Death was typically by hanging, although some victims were burned alive or butchered alive before they were hung from a tree. When the victim died (and sometimes before that), their body was often cut up into pieces and distributed among the crowd as souvenirs. For male victims, this butchering usually began with castration and (regardless of the sex of the victim) it often ended with passing out bits of fingers and toes to children as souvenirs of the event. Spectators could also pose for photos with the corpse and buy postcards commemorating the special day.

In cases of violence by angry mobs genuinely seeking some twisted form of justice, members of the mob don't typically plan in advance, print open invitations in the local newspaper, or prepare picnic lunches to consume during the murder. Lynchings were not about seeking justice, even for imagined or ridiculous crimes. Rather, lynchings were intended to inflict terror upon Black and Brown communities by making minorities aware that their lives had no value, that they were entirely expendable, and that murdering them was just another reason

to have a picnic. The acts of castration and the dissection of the hanging corpse reproduced the actions used in the slaughtering and butchering of animals, emphasizing the murderers' belief that their victims were less than human. But what could bring people to not simply sit by and watch a murder, but to go so far as to treat that murder like a family-friendly celebration worthy of souvenirs?

The Discourses that dehumanize minorities, like the sign in Figure 1.2, have deep histories filled with horrific violence including the genocides of Native Americans and Jewish people in Europe to the horrors of slavery and lynching to more recent police violence against people of color. Maintaining this dehumanizing Discourse requires the promotion of myths (lies) that would justify the belief that white people are somehow naturally superior to those of other races. The myth of the Black rapist is part of the dehumanizing Discourse, which repeatedly draws connections between Black people and characteristics associated with animals: low intelligence, an unwillingness to work or follow directions, and an inability to control one's supposedly primitive sexual and violent urges.

This is not unique to representations of African Americans. For example, in a study of metaphors used in representations of Latinx immigrants in the *Los Angeles Times*, Otto Santa Ana (1999) found that the most common metaphor was "immigrant as animal." Racist discourses require creating indexical links between minorities and such signs that carry dehumanizing meanings. Establishing these indexical bonds requires a steady flow of representations that reinforce the lie of white superiority in myriad ways. When racist Discourses persist over long periods of time, examples of racist indexical meanings multiply and become embedded in multiple discourses (such as legal discourse or medical discourse). Because these indexical meanings are incessant and reinforced in the texts and images that surround us, having these negative traits come to mind in encounters with those of other backgrounds can easily come to be an automatic response. It is not, however, a reaction that cannot be overcome.

Figure 1.2 "No Dogs, Negroes, Mexicans" Texas Restaurant Sign, circa 1940s

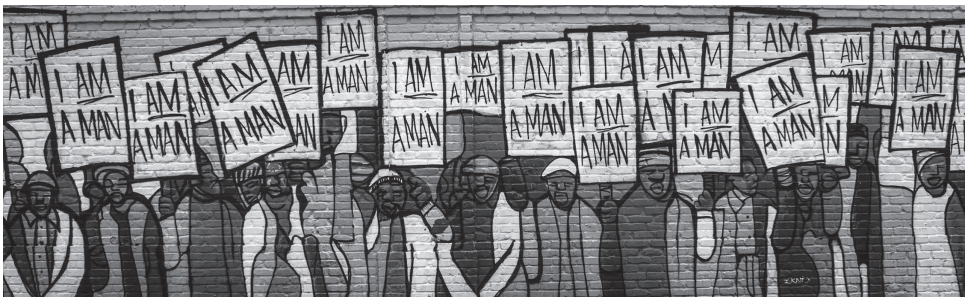

Figure 1.3 "I am a man" mural commemorating the 1968 sanitation workers protest in Memphis, designed by Marcellous Lovelace and installed by BLK75

Source: photo by Joshua J. Cohen

"I am a MAN"

Through the constant repetition of dehumanizing Discourse and terrorist acts like lynchings, discrimination and violence against African Americans came to be accepted as part of the natural order. In March of 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. marched with striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee. The striking workers wore signs bearing the slogan, "I am a man" (see Figure 1.3). The slogan purposefully altered the opening line of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* ("I am an invisible man"), taking out the "invisible" to emphasize the goal of making African American men's humanity recognized and visible. Like "Black Lives Matter," "I am a man" attempted to disrupt the dominant racial discourse that treated African American men as not being fully or equally human. Although it is obvious that the sanitation workers were "men," society had failed to recognize them as men. Shortly after this march, on April 4, 1968, Dr. King was assassinated in Memphis.

Given the constant flood of racist indexical associations throughout Discourse, it is not surprising that many white people continue to experience irrational fears when interacting with people of color. These automatic reactions can lead to unconscious irrational displays of fear, like when a white person waits for the next elevator to avoid being too close to a person of color. It also happens when a white teacher labels an African American child as "disruptive" because of the volume of the child's voice. Therefore, while it may seem "harmless" for someone to take the next elevator, when irrational fears guide how a student is treated in the educational setting, it becomes clear that the Discourse has the power to impact the lifelong trajectory of an individual.

The same discourses that foster white fears also surround people of color. Repeated imagery of Black and Brown people being killed by police reinforces an indexical association between law enforcement and violence against minorities. The constant barrage of biased representations can have detrimental effects on an individual's mental and physical

health. This is what W.E.B. DuBois (1903) called *double consciousness:* the constant awareness of the ways the dominant culture sees you. Everyone has a sense of self, an understanding of who they are and how they fit into society. When surrounded by indexical signs that associate a person with negative traits that have nothing to do with reality, an individual comes to have a clear picture of how people outside of their own race think about them. In other words, a person can come to expect others to treat them based on a stereotype that treats them as less than human. This means that members of minority groups often find themselves monitoring their behavior in response to this awareness of racism. This is at the heart of "the talk" that African American parents typically have with their children about race – teaching the need to monitor one's behavior for one's own safety, particularly in interactions with police. The same is true for language, with speakers of ethnic dialects learning to monitor their speech or even undergoing speech therapy in order to avoid unfair treatment due to the way they speak.

Segregation

It is much easier to maintain the belief that some group is naturally inferior if one never has meaningful interactions with members of that group. Once you come to know another person well, it becomes impossible to see them as anything other than equally human to yourself. Therefore, countries like the United States and South Africa long enforced forms of segregation like Jim Crow laws and apartheid. Through laws or intimidation, specific neighborhoods excluded anyone who wasn't white. In the 1920s, white people in Los Angeles fought to keep Japanese immigrants from living in their neighborhoods (see Figure 1.4).

Racist discourse paralleled and justified legal forms of racism. For example, in addition to laws prohibiting interracial marriages, racist discourse promoted the idea that members of different races could not have children (or their children would be severely disabled in some way). This idea persisted despite the many counterexamples living at the time. It wasn't until 1969 that interracial marriage became legal nationwide with the Supreme Court decision in the case of *Loving v. Virginia*.

Where we are headed

Thus, discourse structural racism (like other forms of discourse-based inequality) is enacted, reproduced, resisted, negotiated, and challenged through the language ideological assemblages at play in any given sociocultural context. If people want to understand how language enacts social inequalities, they must understand some things about how language works. Thus, this book introduces concepts from linguistics, the study of how language works. Of course, linguists are not themselves immune from language ideologies. We see this in the "pronoun envy" case, where linguists fell on both sides of the language debate over generic *he*. Although linguists may disagree on some aspects of language ideology, they agree on numerous facts about language, facts that have been empirically demonstrated time and time again.

Figure 1.4 Hollywood Protective Society sign protesting the opening of a Japanese Presbyterian Church in their neighborhood

Source: *Los Angeles Examiner*, May 18, 1923

What is linguistics?

Linguistics is the study of language, and linguists study many different facets of this uniquely human phenomenon. Here are some subfields of linguistics and what they study:

- Syntax: the study of sentence structure
- Morphology: the study of word structure
- Phonetics: the study of the sounds used in language
- Phonology: the study of sound structures and combinations
- Semantics: the study of meaning without reference to linguistic context
- Pragmatics: the study of meaning as it relates to the context of language use
- Language acquisition: the study of how people acquire and learn language
- Psycholinguistics: the study of how the brain processes language
- Sociolinguistics: the study of the two-way interaction between language and society
- Historical linguistics: the study of language change over time

In addition to introducing the ways in which linguists think about language, this book aims to demonstrate the ways in which language ideologies serve to enact discourse structural racism. The first few chapters discuss patterns of language variation as they relate to social categorization and language subordination. After discussing the ways in which language serves to create distinct social categories, we look at the ways in which social stereotypes come to be linked to patterns of linguistic variation. We compare common language ideologies with the facts that linguists know about language to demonstrate how language subordination serves to enact discourse structural racism.

We then look specifically at the ways in which language ideologies influence our perceptions of different ways of communicating. These include different regional dialects of English, forms of variation that index racial or ethnic identities, attitudes toward bilingualism and speakers of other languages, and the treatment of deaf individuals who speak signed languages. In these examples, we see how language ideologies create obstacles for speakers who communicate in different ways.

The book then turns to specific language ideological assemblages. The first of these involves the assemblage of ideologies involving Southern (US) varieties of English, where ideologies portraying those with Southern accents as backward yahoos compete with ideologies that allow Southerners to express their emotional bond with the distinct ways in which they speak. We will look at the history of language ideologies involving the "r" sound ([ɹ]) in American English. Attitudes toward different productions of this sound have undergone huge shifts across time. In examining these shifts, we can gain insight into the ways that beliefs about linguistic variation interact with Discourses of social difference. We then consider the ideology of monolingualism (and monodialectalism) in American society. We can see this ideology in efforts to promote English as the official language of the United States. Language ideologies that denigrate speakers of other languages interact with ideologies that denigrate speakers of different native varieties of English to maintain a broader pattern of social inequality.

The remainder of the book examines the impact of language ideologies in different aspects of everyday experience. We explore how language ideologies enact inequalities in the realms of education, media representations, the workplace, the judicial system, access to housing, and media. The chapters in this section are intended to illustrate the far-reaching implications of language ideologies in reproducing and reinforcing forms of social inequality.

When people think of linguistics (if they ever actually *do* think about linguistics), they probably do not immediately think of the field as a site for studying patterns of social inequality and discrimination. But language is the foundation of human sociality. Language is the tool we use to relate to one another, to form social bonds, to create social divisions, and to negotiate peace. And the beliefs we hold about language have huge social implications that typically go unnoticed. Given the centrality of language in all human endeavors, linguistics is the perfect starting point for understanding how humans come to accept and reproduce forms of social injustice.

Discussion questions

1. Look at the transcript of Rachel Jeantel's testimony linked in this QR code. How many times was Jeantel asked for clarification? How many times did the transcriber of the testimony refer to her language as "mumbling" or "unintelligible"? What amount of responsibility does the listener/transcriber have in a conversation? Do you think every party involved was holding up their end of the deal?

2. In addition to broad categories, we said that social categorization can be local and specific, like *Beyoncé fans*, *vegans,* and *scrapbookers*. Think of one of the local/specific social categories that you belong to and describe what kinds of d/Discourses that circulate within that group. How do the little-d discourses operate within the confines of the big-D Discourses of the group?
3. Gender-neutral words for professions have become common (for example, *server* rather than *waiter/waitress* or *flight attendant* rather than *stewardess*). However, gender-neutral words often maintain gendered associations. This can often be seen by adding a gendered adjective before the noun. For example, the term *male nurse* sounds fine for many people, but the term *female nurse* sounds funny (without some context where gender might be relevant). This suggests that people tend to expect nurses to be female. Which of the following words do you think maintain gendered meanings: *bodybuilder*, *nanny*, *model*, *serial killer*, *wrestler*, *stripper*, *sex offender*, *truck driver*, *prostitute*? What might these gendered associations imply about dominant beliefs about gender and sexism?
4. When someone hears a voice that has linguistic features that differ from their own or the ones expected in some circumstance, people quickly jump to conclusions about *why* those differences exist. This is a key concept in this book, and a very good place to start for exploring this content is to come face to face with your own assumptions about language and social categories. What kinds of things do you think about people who sound differently than you do? What about people who use certain "informal" language forms in formal situations? Do you have any prejudices that you can identify about language? Where do they come from? Could they actually be prejudices against groups of people?