Gathering everyday metacommentary: A methodology to counteract institutional erasure

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on preliminary research investigating linguistic diversity on a college campus by analyzing individuals' everyday comments about their own language. We developed a three-phase method to gather metacommentary from members of the university community, then analyzed these comments by attending to distinctions participants themselves made about their own repertoire variation across contexts. We illustrate how individuals' fine-grained distinctions about their own language use can be a highly socially relevant tool for disaggregating broad, institutionally generated labels for linguistically, nationally, and culturally diverse groups. Our findings suggests that further research that accounts for the fine distinctions within everyday metacommentary may counter processes of homogenization—discussed herein in terms of erasure (Gal, 1998) and 'lumping'—coming from both within and outside of institutionally labeled groups.

1. Introduction

The topic of diversity on college campuses may bring to mind a stock photo of five twenty-somethings of apparently different ethnic and/or racial backgrounds, all talking, smiling, and wearing backpacks. At best, such a photo conveys that students of all backgrounds are part of the university community. At worst, it commoditizes diversity and conveys a tokenistic understanding of it as categorically racial and visible. The word *diversity* itself, in the United States, often functions as a stand-in for broad, categorical racial terms: a Google search for 'diverse college campuses', for example, directs the user to graphics and statistics that illustrate the percentage of students at various colleges who are White, Black, Hispanic/Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, and Other. However, other forms of 'diversity', such as *linguistic diversity*, are not typically encompassed within the connotations of diversity when it is used to describe college campuses in the United States. In this article, we problematize broad and essentializing discourses about campus diversity by exploring the less-visible (and possibly therefore less marketable) linguistic diversity at a large urban university in the northeastern United States (henceforth, *The University*), as well as circulating ideologies about what constitutes it. Specifically, we discuss 1) the question of what counts as, or what emerges as, diversity on college campuses; 2) how a focus on institutional diversity discourses obscures linguistic diversity and erases particular voices and perspectives; and 3) how standardized ways of defining linguistic diversity differ from everyday accounts of language use.

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2. Theoretical framework

2.1. The emergence of 'diversity' on college campuses

As Urciuoli (2016b, p. 202) states, 'Since the mid-1990s, the use of the term *diversity* has become so routinized in US higher education and corporate life that it has become taken for granted as an obvious referring expression.' However, 'diversity' may be framed variously as a quantitative measure (i.e. student demographics and percentages), a qualitative measure (i.e. as part of a workplace improvement strategy), an individual possession (i.e. students themselves are labeled 'diverse' or not), or a characteristic of an institution (Urciuoli, 2010). Further, the definition of diversity—what is 'marked' and therefore what counts as diverse—changes with the times (see Pew Research Center, 2015). In this discussion, we recognize the slippery nature of diversity discourses led in part by institutional aims to, as Urciuoli (2016a; 2016b) points out about *The College* in her work, 'bring,' 'promote,' and 'take pride in' diversity, especially when they do not specify either the referential or connotative qualities of the term *diversity* itself. In addition, we recognize the array of identity features (e.g. gender, race, ethnicity, language, and sexual orientation, just to name a few) involved in everyday interaction and performance of self in a university setting and the fact that not all of them contribute to defining an individual as diverse or not (only those characteristics that are institutionally salient appear to count).

With this in mind, we suggest deploying a communicative repertoire approach to understanding campus diversity in general, and specifically, how we might consider the definition and role of *linguistic* diversity in particular (Rymes, 2010). A communicative repertoire approach acknowledges the flexible, mobile, context-specific nature of group affiliation, the agentive moves that individuals may make in order to negotiate different affiliations and ways of identifying, and it relies on everyday metacommentary about language and social life (Rymes, 2014) to counter the erasure of particular voices (Gal, 1998), as we describe below. In taking a communicative repertoire approach, which takes into consideration gestures, dress, posture, accessories, knowledge of languages and registers, communicative routines, familiarity with various customs, and beyond (Rymes, 2014), we consider it impossible to fully account for the variability of communicative practices of individuals at *The University*: at most, we can aim to describe a very thin slice (Jackson, 2013) of this campus community. While this approach does not allow us to draw boundaries around demographic categories, and may be methodologically messy for that reason, it offers a method for guarding against erasure by seeking to bring into the analysis any sociolinguistic phenomena and/or knowledge that is socially relevant. 'Erasure' is defined by Susan Gal as

> the process by which ideology, in simplifying the sociolinguistic field, renders some persons or activities (or sociolinguistic phenomena) invisible. Facts that are inconsistent with the ideological scheme go unnoticed, or are explained away. For example, a social group or language may be imagined as homogeneous, *its internal variation disregarded*. (1998, p. 328, emphasis added)

In other words, erasure is the result of the *decision to* rank some language varieties above others in terms of importance or relevance—to label some as subcategories of another. Erasure is not an inevitable process of language forms and varieties becoming irrelevant of their own accord, but of the intentional ignoring of particular phenomena by both linguists and non-linguists: in language research, erasure is achieved by the joint actions of both the researcher and the participant. While is it true that participants might talk about only a limited range of their linguistic knowledge when asked about their linguistic autobiography, researchers must also ask themselves what types of questions they are asking to elicit such a response. By failing to allow laypeople (whom the authors prefer to think of as *citizen sociolinguists* [Rymes and Leone, 2014]) to drive the research, analysts may fail to notice all of the textured variation in the linguistic category that they have defined, as well as its social significance.

We use the term 'lumping' throughout this article to describe the phenomenon of grouping individuals according to one institutionally salient characteristic (such as race, ethnicity, language, or nationality), either for (etic) administrative purposes or for (emic) solidarity, despite the fact that these institutional designations may not be experienced as permanently salient personal characteristics. Such 'lumped' categories might include 'international student,' 'native English speaker,' or 'student of color'. However, the overarching category of 'international student' – a common referring expression at *The University*—comprises individuals whose only shared experience might be the fact of being on a student visa, and it says little else about this group's commonalities. Similarly, systematicization of language types and their speakers may also be imposed in this type of category-making. This may be done by an institution (as when the Admissions Office requires standardized test scores to be submitted as part of an application, or when students are asked to check a box indicating their race or gender), by the emergent effects of markedness and self-lumping, or even by workshops intended to de-stigmatize marked categories (Urciuoli, 2010, 2016b); we ask what more adequate ways there may be to account for linguistic diversity.

As Gumperz (1996) pointed out over twenty years ago, we need to move away from presupposing individuals' categories and affiliations in the study of communication. As we demonstrate in our data collection section, this is of course easier said than done. Coupland and Jaworski (2004), drawing on linguistic anthropological work on language ideology (Lucy, 1993), further argue that 'language is necessarily used against background sets of assumptions…which vary from one time and place to others…That is to say they are part of specific socio-cultural frames, with particular histories, tied in to particular power struggles and patterns of dominance' (pp. 36–37). To presuppose that a given language variety indexes the same bundle of social characteristics for all people who use it is of course problematic, but to disregard entirely that many people make this association and base their communicative endeavors and personal relationships on it is equally problematic. Further, it is