

PERSPECTIVES

Insights from Native American Studies for theorizing race and racism in linguistics (Response to Charity Hudley, Mallinson, and Bucholtz)

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Drawing from Native American Studies, I explore how the LSA Statement on Race (2019) applies to Native Americans, who are unique among racial groups in the United States since ‘Native American’ is also a political status and tribes are nations. Focusing on the fundamental tenet of tribal critical race theory that colonization is endemic to society (Brayboy 2005), I argue that the ways in which Native American languages are represented in linguistic scholarship reflects colonial norms, which also guide the severe underrepresentation of Native Americans in the discipline. Integrating these ideas into antiracist frameworks facilitates social justice in linguistic science.*

Keywords: Native American Studies, Native American languages, history of Linguistics, linguistics education, race, colonialism, social justice

1. INTRODUCTION: NATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES, RACE, AND LINGUISTICS. The Linguistic Society of America’s (LSA) Statement on Race (2019) and further discussion in their target article by Charity Hudley, Mallinson, and Bucholtz (2020) about the statement provide a much-needed baseline for theorizing race in linguistic science by outlining a series of racial injustices around two major themes. First is that the discipline of Linguistics,¹ which emerged in a context of colonialism and racism (Errington 2008, Leonard 2017), continues to further racism in its professional structures and research norms. Second, it does not have to be this way, and many tools developed within and outside of Linguistics can assist linguists working toward racial justice. This paper builds upon both points through a focus on Native Americans² in Linguistics and how ideas from Native American Studies (NAS), the interdisciplinary academic field that investigates and responds to the historical and contemporary cultural and political experiences of Native Americans, provides insights for theorizing race and achieving racial justice in Linguistics. Although NAS is increasingly framed hemispherically (i.e. focusing on all original peoples of the Western hemisphere), I follow Charity Hudley, Mallinson, and Bucholtz in focusing this discussion on the United States, which has particular patterns of racism and of disciplinary practices in Linguistics.

The intersection of racial injustice and Native American experiences arises in Linguistics in several ways, examples of which are discussed throughout this paper. One major intersection is that Native American language shift is itself intertwined with racism, which is manifested in the many pressures that brought about this shift such as genocide (Cameron & Phan 2018), boarding schools that as a matter of policy aimed to

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¹ I adopt the convention of capitalizing Linguistics to refer to the named discipline, which has a particular history and focus, and writing linguistics with a lowercase *l* to refer to the scientific study of language in its broadest possible sense. This distinction is important for identifying and responding to racism, which is manifested in disciplinary norms of Linguistics but is not inherent to linguistics.

² There is significant debate about the most appropriate term for original peoples of the Americas. This paper focuses on original nations located within what has become the United States and adopts NATIVE AMERICAN and NATIVE to discuss these populations, and INDIGENOUS to refer to original peoples globally.

destroy Native American cultures and languages (Adams 1995), and land theft and desecration, among other types of colonial violence. Less recognized is that linguistic research on Native American languages, while often aimed to work against racism by debunking myths or by supporting community language needs, can also reinforce racial hierarchies and injustices by rendering languages as objects framed around dominant society's interests and ways of knowing. Contemporary work that involves Native American languages, whether through documentation projects, reclamation support, education, advocacy, or theoretical research, inherently engages with both patterns of racism and must be examined accordingly.

Another major theme, which also applies to other groups that are marginalized within the racial hierarchies of the United States, involves the relative absence of Native American linguists with the academic credentials normally needed to serve as university faculty or to hold leadership positions within disciplinary organizations. Of the 1,331 total US citizen and permanent resident Linguistics Ph.D. recipients at US institutions between 2006 and 2016, only ten were 'American Indian or Alaska Native' (National Science Foundation 2019, table 7-4).³ This dearth is especially revealing because of its misalignment with the comparatively strong representation of Native American LANGUAGES in Linguistics, which even has areas of specialization demarcated around language families in the Americas (e.g. Athabaskanist and Algonquianist).

The LSA Statement on Race provides a starting point for interrogating these patterns, many of which are so embedded in the field that they become invisible except to those who directly experience them or make the effort to understand them. Also important for achieving the social justice objectives of the LSA Statement is an understanding of the complexities surrounding Native Americans and race. In recognition that Native American issues are not widely known or taught, itself a manifestation of racism, I begin in §2 with a primer on concepts and histories that I argue are especially important for theorizing the intersection of Native Americans with race and racism in Linguistics. I follow this in §3 with discussion of how linguistic work with Native Americans and Native American languages, even when the objective is to help Native American communities, can work against social justice by elevating dominant categories and epistemologies over those of Native Americans. I conclude in §4 with suggestions on how linguists can respond to these issues. My commentary is informed by my lived experiences as one of the ten 'American Indian or Alaska Native' recipients of a Linguistics Ph.D. between 2006 and 2016, and by nine years as a faculty member in Native American Studies.

2. A PRIMER: 'NATIVE AMERICAN' AS A RACIAL CATEGORY. A paradox arises in discussions of Native Americans and race due to two contradictory themes, both of which must be considered when theorizing race from an NAS perspective. The first is that 'Native American' reflects the political status of particular original peoples whose governments maintain a direct relationship with the US government and others. This is partly why *Native American* and related names such as *First Nations* and *Indigenous*, when referring to original peoples and languages, are capitalized (McCarty & Nicholas 2012:145–46). Second, the nationhood of tribes notwithstanding, Native American has also become a

³ Although there were 2,579 Linguistics Ph.D. recipients total, race/ethnicity data are reported only for US citizens and permanent residents, of which there were 1,476, but unknown race/ethnicity data for 145. 'More than one race' became a possible choice in 2011, and while it is possible that some of the eighteen individuals in this category were American Indian or Alaska Native, this would not change the clear pattern of underrepresentation.

racial construct due to dominant powers in the United States having created this socially subordinate category. Lumbee scholar Bryan Brayboy (2005:429) captures this paradox by noting that Native Americans occupy 'a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racial natures of [Native American] identities'.

This unique raciopolitical status of Native Americans complicates key issues surrounding racism because racial structures operate in conjunction with political nationhood. In the United States, tribes are sovereign nations whose members are citizens that can identify and be identified through any racial category, despite a general (though not absolute) norm of ancestry to original peoples. A tenet of NAS is that although many ideas from broader antiracist movements are relevant to understanding and addressing the marginalization experienced by Native Americans, they often overlook the political status of tribes as nations whose associated sovereignty includes rights and responsibilities such as overseeing research through tribal Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), crafting and enforcing laws, and determining citizenship.

The United States officially recognizes the inherent sovereignty of Native American nations but through its recognition practices imposes significant legal and ideological control over Native nations. As described by Lenape scholar Joanne Barker (2011:40), 'the "Indian tribe" is fundamentally a racialized construct of [US] narrations that continually rearticulate Native cultures and territorial rights in the service of U.S. colonial and imperial efforts that maintain federal power over the terms of Native governance and territories'. One major mechanism for this is the racialization of Native peoples into a collective racial unit, which in turn facilitates the erasure of their respective nations and each nation's internal diversity.⁴ The US Census Bureau, for example, provides 'American Indian or Alaska Native' within the possible choices to select as an answer for its 'What is this person's race?' question.

A racialized definition of Nateness is further supported by the creation and use of BLOOD QUANTUM, which is a number, generally stated as a fraction, that expresses a person's degree of genetic relationship to Native ancestors who were documented as members of specific tribes in rolls made by US government officials.⁵ This history of racialization informs the ensuing practice whereby individuals become 'part Native American', even though citizenship in a tribe is associated with whole persons. Blood quantum is sanctioned through legal instruments such as the US-issued Certificate of Degree of Indian or Alaska Native Blood (CDIB), the use of which institutionalizes a biological definition of Nateness that does not consider tribal adoption, cultural affiliation, or language usage, and also indirectly serves to support other racist notions such as the idea that the Native American population is inferior to the white population.⁶

Biological definitions of Nateness have recently been bolstered by genetic ancestry testing and the idea that one's DNA can be assigned a 'Native American' percentage. In fact, the deep ancestry determinations of such tests at best show the overlap of a small portion of a given person's genetic code with that of other individuals whose genetic

⁴ As of the time of writing, there are 574 tribes that are recognized by and maintain a government-to-government relationship with the United States, among many more without this recognition. There are also diasporic Indigenous communities in the United States, especially from elsewhere in the Americas, which do not have the same political structure as tribes but whose members nevertheless may self-identify as 'American Indian or Alaska Native' and certainly experience racism.

⁵ For instance, a person with one officially designated Native American great-grandparent and seven non-Native great-grandparents would be assigned an 'Indian blood' degree of one-eighth.

⁶ See Williams 2005 for recent legal examples and Meek 2011 for examples specific to Native American language communities.

codes have been measured, in this case members of Indigenous populations that DNA testing companies deem to be ‘pure’ and thus use as a baseline (TallBear 2013). Such practices contribute to an already widespread conflict between the principle that Native nations determine their own members, a fundamental tenet of tribal sovereignty, versus the belief that individuals have the prerogative to claim Native American affiliation through self-identification—and many do despite a lack of community recognition. It is thus common for the Nateness of individuals to be contested (see Hamill 2003, Pewewardy 2004, Sturm 2010), and in some cases, entire groups are deemed fraudulent (Garrouette 2003:61–98, Quinn 1990). It is likewise common for such claims to be made about Native-identifying individuals working as or with university-based researchers.

Beyond their use by the US government, biological definitions have also been institutionalized by tribal nations, almost all of which base tribal citizenship on biological connection to documented tribal ancestors, and approximately two-thirds of which further specify a minimum blood quantum as one of their citizenship criteria (Garrouette 2003:57). The use of blood quantum is controversial, both the very notion itself (which is likened to dog breeding) and the way in which its use prevents even some individuals whose biological and cultural affiliation to a tribe is unquestioned from being legal citizens of those nations because they do not meet a politically determined minimum. The latter effect can have significant practical outcomes such as preventing a person from living on a reservation, attending a tribal school, or—of special relevance to linguists—accessing or contributing to language programs created for tribal members.⁷ That is to say, tribal governments can and unfortunately do enact policies that many scholars oriented toward social justice will find unjust. There is no straightforward way to deal with these complexities, on which NAS scholars take a variety of positions, but a shared theme of NAS scholarship, which I extend for linguists, is the importance of maintaining a critical awareness of such issues at all times. In particular, linguists must keep in mind the central tenet of NAS that Native American nations are political units, a point easily missed by work that is framed around RACIAL justice. This can occur, for example, when research products identify a given language scholar or consultant as a member of a particular tribe—a practice that is normally viewed positively—but the tribe in question does not recognize the person in this way, and the researcher is thus seen as having violated a tribe’s sovereignty.

From the racialization that has privileged biological definitions of ‘Native American’ ensue expectations of how Native people should appear. Colorism has become common both within and outside of Native American communities, with skin color that meets ‘the brown paper bag test’ (Garrouette 2003:48) adopted as a proxy for authentic Nateness. However, many tribal citizens phenotypically present as members of other racial groups, most commonly as white or black. Donald Trump’s rally against the tribally based economic rights of the Mashantucket Pequots, many of whom have significant African ancestry, in a 1993 Congressional hearing in which he claimed ‘they don’t look like Indians to me’ (Washington Post 2016), exemplifies how racialization supports a related pattern of erasing the legitimacy of Indigenous nations. This is most often discussed within NAS scholarship in terms of sovereignty; economic, land, and cultural rights (claims to which require that a tribe first be deemed ‘real’); and identity; but it also applies to language.

⁷ Recent practices of disenrollment (stripping of individuals’ tribal citizenship by tribal governments) in some tribes have yielded situations where even first-language speakers, speakers’ direct descendants, and tribal language activists are no longer legally citizens.

The issues discussed above are major topics within NAS. Core to all of them, and important for the current discussion, is that while Native Americans have been racialized and thus experience racism, a deeper issue underlying the issues summarized above and a foundational tenet of tribal critical race theory is that COLONIZATION is endemic in wider society and its institutions (Brayboy 2005), which include academic disciplines. For Linguistics to truly capture Native American and other Indigenous peoples' experiences in theories and policies about race, it ensues that the discipline's history and contemporary norms warrant critical examination through the frame of (de)colonization. As discussed next, Linguistics has several colonial structures—but again, it does not have to be this way.

3. COLONIAL STRUCTURES IN LINGUISTICS AND NATIVE AMERICAN LANGUAGE WORK. Intertwined with the underrepresentation of Native American linguists is the marginalization of the community needs and perspectives that Native American scholars can bring. A challenge among professional Native American linguists thus involves remaining true to community ways of knowing and the associated responsibilities—what Lakota anthropologist Beatrice Medicine, in reference to her own field of Anthropology, termed 'learning to be an anthropologist and remaining "Native"' (Medicine & Jacobs 2001). In framing this issue, Medicine captured a wider theme among scholars who are members of underrepresented groups and are pressured to mask their own identities, experiences, community responsibilities, and epistemologies to function in the academy. Not surprisingly, many of these scholars choose to leave the fields in which they were trained or to leave academia altogether. Of course in some cases, they are forced out by not being hired or tenured. A common response within the academy to the latter issue is mentoring on how to navigate academic norms, as might occur when a Native American linguist is advised not to spend too much time on community work or to 'be sure to publish in [*Prestigious Journal X*]'. However, dismantling disciplinary colonial and/or racist structures does not occur by socializing scholars to colonial and/or racist disciplinary practices. Rather, it lies in identifying and changing those practices. Key to accomplishing this in Linguistics, as recognized in the LSA Statement on Race and by Charity Hudley et al., is that linguists must be reflexive and critically analyze our discipline.

Linguistics' norms of Native American language research represent an important starting point for such critical analysis. While it is widely recognized, and I wholeheartedly agree, that this research is generally valuable, it is less recognized that its norms can reinforce colonial power structures. Sometimes this occurs overtly, for example, when Native American ideas about language and/or research are not accepted as valid frameworks for academic inquiry, as might occur in a linguistics class or in a negative response to an essay submitted for publication consideration. This is seemingly ironic given that linguistic fieldwork with Native American communities by definition relies on community-held knowledge, but part of colonialism entails socially dominant groups asserting the right to determine what counts as valid knowledge, or to deem it valid only after it has been processed through dominant society's institutions. As summarized by higher-education scholar Brenda Leibowitz (2017:102):

The hegemony of Western knowledge is problematic in five respects: it is embedded in relations of violence and imposition; it is embedded in relations of social inequality; it is interwoven with dynamics of alienation; it lacks a foil to counter its own excesses and show up its weaknesses; and it is inadequate on its own to solve questions that require attention.

In other contexts, colonialism is comparatively covert. In particular, even unintentionally overlooking Native American intellectual tools and protocols reinforces domi-

nant hierarchies by maintaining the colonial status quo: as noted by Cherokee scholar Jeanette Haynes Writer (2008:6), '[w]ithin cultural imperialism, the dominating group's experience is elevated, sanctioned, and universalized; it becomes the norm that all others are obligated to accommodate'. Although Linguistics is often described as THE scientific study of language, it actually covers only a subset of topics in language and privileges a subset of ways (based largely on dominant epistemologies) to describe and analyze language—for example, through a focus on structure. This trend emerges in linguists' analyses of Native American languages, which collectively cover 'enormously different languages, yet a quick perusal shows that they also resemble each other in obvious ways ... that can be traced to the fact that each describes an object which falls under a single, common category' (Errington 2008:8).

Following the finding of linguistic science that beliefs about groups of people get applied to the languages of those people, what counts as an authentic Native American language not surprisingly gets policed by scholars who hold the colonial ideologies discussed above about what counts as an authentic Native American person (Leonard 2011). This is evidenced by many examples of linguists searching for 'authentic' speakers (Bucholtz 2003)—in the case of Native American languages, the prototype often being a first-language speaker who ideally is rural and deemed not to have had much influence from socially dominant languages. Similarly motivated are complaints (of which I have heard many) by linguists about language consultants who do not speak a Native American language in a way that conforms to colonial expectations, despite Linguistics' alleged status as a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, discipline. Both patterns align with the idea of the 'vanishing Indian' and its related 'last speaker' narratives (Davis 2017, Evans 2001, Leonard 2011, Muehlmann 2012, Perley 2012) that support the colonial discourse that Native Americans are disappearing, and by extension perpetuate the erasure that underlies much of the racism that Native Americans experience. Linguistics' recent focus on documenting Indigenous languages 'before they are gone' also furthers this idea (Leonard 2018).

Important to recognize is that linguistic scholarship has been foundational to debunking racist ideas about languages and language varieties (e.g. by countering the idea of Native American languages being primitive) and that an increasing number of linguists actively strive to privilege the needs of language communities and otherwise avoid colonial approaches to research, teaching, and service. These scholars' efforts include employing Indigenous research methods and citing Indigenous scholars in recognition of their perspectives and lived experiences, engaging in truly collaborative research where all stakeholders' expertise and needs are valued (Leonard & Haynes 2010), and working to change problematic disciplinary structures. Still, there remains much room for expansion.

Beyond structuring research in ways that counteract racism, Linguistics as a discipline must also critically examine its norms of education and training, which establish the foundation for its future. It is useful for linguists to actively include in our teaching examples that challenge stereotypes of Native Americans and Native American languages. It is crucial that we avoid decontextualized examples that exoticize Native American languages by highlighting grammatical features WITHOUT MENTIONING ANYTHING ELSE about the languages or the people who claim them. Also important to examine are undergraduate curricula, for which many Linguistics departments offer a course (or unit within a course) called something like 'Native American Languages'. One could correctly argue that this is a geographic demarcation, but it is linguistically odd since this grouping fails to capture a language family, structural pattern, or cultural

region. It can make sense socially because of the shared effects of colonization on these languages and language communities, but under this logic, such courses would be framed around this sociopolitical issue. Do these courses actually have this focus? I note that my intent in posing this question (for which my answer is ‘very rarely’) is not to diminish the value of what ‘Native American Languages’ courses currently contain, but instead to draw attention to the implications of how university curricula are culturally constructed. Similarly, while education about Native American language shift has become a point of focus in Linguistics and to the wider public through broader initiatives such as the United Nations’ declaration of 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages, only rarely is there emphasis on addressing the colonial structures and practices that underlie language shift (Grounds 2019, Leonard 2019).

Linguistic pedagogical resources on Native American languages can similarly reinforce colonial logics, and thus must be crafted and utilized with care. Particularly important is that even when Native American languages are highlighted to call attention to their value, the associated descriptions and analyses often isolate, fragment, and dissect language in ways that can be alienating to Native Americans for whom language is not an object that can be conceptualized separately from nationhood, power, or spirituality, among other areas (Hermes et al. 2012, Leonard 2017, 2018, Mellow 2015). Contemporary linguistic science privileges certain ways of examining language, particularly with a focus on structural features that often are described and analyzed separately not only from each other, but also from the people who use the languages in question. As argued by Chickasaw linguist Jenny L. Davis (2017:40), this represents *LINGUISTIC EXTRACTION*, ‘defining, analysing, and representing languages and the people connected to them separately from the complex socio-historical, political, and deeply personal contexts in which they actually occur’. Davis further asserts that ‘linguistic extraction is not solely the collection of endangered and Indigenous languages in ways that often render them inaccessible to their communities, but also the presentation of languages as objects, or data, without their complex and varied human contexts’. My experience is that aside from sociolinguistic research, linguistic extraction is the norm in Linguistics, and this is problematic for scientific and social justice concerns alike:

a [L]inguistics that focuses on forms while ignoring what people are saying about their languages and lives, as well as dismissing the socio-political context in which they speak, promotes bad science and also alienates the members of those groups who are attracted by the study of language, and its emancipatory possibilities. (Zentella 2018:190)

Aligning with the practices discussed above is the underlying issue of how *LANGUAGE* is commonly defined in Linguistics as a cognitive or lexicogrammatical object. While there is value in a field having conventions, which may include disciplinary definitions, I argue that the uncritical imposition of what constitutes language is a tremendously colonial act. Inclusivity of Native Americans in Linguistics requires disciplinary structures that respect tribal intellectual sovereignty, ‘the right to create, interpret, evaluate, and conceive, without the willful assault of Euro American languages, values, and social norms’ (Tatsch 2004:258). This includes, for example, recognizing Native American definitions of language such as ‘how a community connects to each other and how they express ... themselves and their culture to each other’ (Leonard 2017:29) as valid ways to frame linguistic research, while also respecting Native American ideas about language’s appropriate functions, such as Anishinaabe scholar Melissa Nelson’s (2002) observation that language is integral to Indigenous laws of reciprocity.

Because I have been misconstrued in the past as having claimed that Western approaches to Linguistics should not be used, I emphasize here that this is not my posi-

tion, nor do I believe that employing tools from one population to investigate the language(s) of another is itself colonial or racist. Rather, my intent is to call for a critical approach in which linguists recognize diverse epistemologies and research methodologies, and thoughtfully select their approach for a given research need from this larger pool. Of course, the consideration of Native American intellectual traditions and research protocols cannot easily be done by linguists who are unaware of what these entail, but there is fortunately a large literature to consult on Indigenous research methodologies (e.g. Garrouste 2003:Chs. 5–6, Kovach 2009, Peltier 2018, Smith 2012, Wilson 2008) and on Indigenous approaches to language work (e.g. many articles in *Language Documentation & Conservation*) and associated issues geared specifically for professional linguists.

Related to the observations above is the othering of Native Americans that occurs in Linguistics. This trend emerges in questions such as ‘What can we learn from Native American languages?’, where the pronoun *we* contextually is understood to refer only to linguists, and Native American languages are reduced to objects. Worse is ‘What can we learn from Native Americans?’, particularly when the audience includes Native Americans whose presence is erased by the question. Similarly problematic are statements of ‘discovery’ about an Indigenous language’s features, which are arguably already known by its speakers (though not necessarily consciously), as evidenced by their linguistic competence. Through a critical lens that recognizes how colonization is endemic, such patterns become clear. Also useful to consider is Jane Hill’s (2002) observation that the rhetoric of experts, such as individuals with advanced, credentialed training in Linguistics—a group currently with very few Indigenous scholars—can promote, elevate, and impose worldviews that align with those specialists’ categories and value systems. When linguists fail to be reflexive about their own positionalities and disciplinary norms, racist structures are easily perpetuated (Leonard 2018:61). Conversely, when linguists are reflexive about their social positions and about why ‘the scientific study of language’ has the particular norms that it does—none of which are inherent—racial justice is more achievable because the structures that guide racism become apparent and can thus be addressed.

4. CONCLUSION. A focus on race in Linguistics can highlight ideologies that relegate Native American and other Indigenous ways of knowing, along with Indigenous scholars themselves, to lesser status compared to dominant populations. The LSA Statement on Race provides Native American and other Indigenous scholars, as well as non-Indigenous allies, with a framework to respond to racist acts so that people of all backgrounds can not only survive in Linguistics, but also thrive in it and have the opportunity to expand the discipline in positive ways. Emerging from the issues discussed in this paper are the following summary points:

- Native Americans experience significant racism, which along with colonization and settler colonialism informs the status of Native American nations and languages.
- In addition to engaging with antiracist and decolonial scholarship by linguists (e.g. Charity Hudley & Mallinson 2018, Leonard 2018, Rosa & Flores 2017, Zentella 2018), linguists can draw from work developed in other fields on racism, colonialism, and other *-isms*. This includes insights of general critical race theory (e.g. Crenshaw et al. 1995, Delgado & Stefancic 2017), as well as more specific NAS tools, such as tribal critical race theory (Brayboy 2005, Haynes Writer 2008).
- Linguistics organizations such as the LSA must respect Indigenous nationhood and the associated sovereignty, which includes a firm recognition of ‘Native American’

as a political category. This does not, however, entail ignoring that tribal governments can themselves enact racist structures or that ideologies of racism and exclusion have become common in Native American nations.

- The Nativeness of people and groups is often challenged when a given person or group does not fully align with (often colonial) biological, cultural, and/or legal definitions of Nativeness. Linguistic research that names and describes groups and their languages, or that occurs ‘with Native communities’ (who is included in the community?) or tribal governments affects the ways in which individuals and groups are seen as Native, so such research must engage with this issue.
- Linguistics has colonial origins and structures, which will continue to be reproduced without intervention. Education about the history of Linguistics and about decolonial scholarship, which includes consideration of Indigenous research methods (but also welcomes thoughtful use of non-Indigenous methods), represents an initial response.

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