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Abstract

In this article, I explore the connections between linguistic anthropology and education through a summer course at Bridgewater State University (BSU) framed by Laura M. Ahearn’s *Living Language: An Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology* (2021) as well as my personal experiences in courses at BSU and my 2021 summer internship at a private school focused on students with learning disabilities. The purpose of this article is to highlight some of the ways in which both education courses and educational experiences in the field unknowingly reproduce western ways of thinking and being, specifically in terms of language use and ideologies. To frame these observations, I utilize linguistic terms discussed throughout my course and Ahearn’s own observations in the field. I conclude with suggestions for both professors and educators in the field to create a decolonizing classroom focused around linguistic and racial equity and justice.

Introduction

I would like to preface this article with background on myself not only to show you as a reader where I have drawn my knowledge from and to offer credibility, but also to highlight the places in which I lack experience or in which I may still have unperceived biases regarding anthropological linguistics and its value for classroom teaching. As a recent graduate from Bridgewater State University (BSU) with a degree in cultural anthropology, a minor in special education, and a second major in early childhood education, I have plans to return to graduate school for severe special education. I aim to teach in the school system in Massachusetts in the future, particularly with young students and possibly in an inclusion classroom that accommodates children with special needs. I am a white woman who grew up in a predominantly white Catholic town, so up until my college experience at BSU, I had very little personal experience with people from cultural, religious, racial, and ethnic groups and languages that differed from my own. That being said, in my college career as well as through my work and volunteer experiences such as in the Children’s Physical Development Clinic (CPDC), I have had the privilege of working with diverse groups of people with multiple language backgrounds, though my experience is still limited to my exposure in the southeast region of Massachusetts.

During the summer session of 2021, I had the privilege of taking a directed study (an independent study course offered by the university) on linguistic anthropology under the guidance of Dr. Diana Fox framed around Laura M. Ahearn’s third edition of *Living Language: An Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology* (2021) as well as personal experiences in my previous jobs in the education field, my summer internship in a private educational school for people with learning disabilities, ages 6-21, and my educational experiences, both in college and in my earlier years. The goal of the course was to apply anthropological linguistics in classroom settings to create more inclusive classrooms focusing on diversity and equity, as discussed through the above frames of reference. There were many key anthropological linguistic concepts used throughout the course in our discussions. Three of the most used when it came to our critiques of the system were *practice*, or the ways language creates, is created by, and recreates human actions; *communities of practice*, or “aggregates of people who come together around a mutual engagement in an
endeavor… defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages” (Ahearn 2021; 132); and language ideologies, or “attitudes, opinions, beliefs, or theories that we all have about language” (Ahearn 2021: 24, 123).

In writing this article, I aim to use my personal experiences and what I have taken away from this course to examine some of the ways that my education at BSU has reproduced western biases, especially in terms of language. Best practices, however, recognize linguistic diversity and intersect with the ideals of anthropological linguistics. In analyzing my own educational experiences, I also hope to further discussions taking place both at BSU and worldwide on ways to continue decolonizing the curriculum and prepare BSU students, particularly those in education, to work with people of diverse backgrounds. In the following section I discuss what I believe to be the value of bringing an awareness of linguistic anthropological approaches into any course that pertains to language teaching and learning. I am aware from some of my anthropology courses that interdisciplinarity is increasingly valued in academia and that sharing the cross-cultural insights into linguistic relativity that come from anthropological linguistics is but one contribution toward that goal. Next, in order to provide some specific ways this interdisciplinarity can emerge, I delve into the ways in which linguistic anthropology ties directly into the education field through my work experiences, bringing to light some concerns. Finally, I conclude with ways to combat some of these concerns in both education courses and the field of practice to further the decolonizing of the discipline of education as a whole.

College Courses and Reproducing Western Language Ideologies

The two main points of discussion regarding the ties between linguistic anthropology and education came with my experiences in education courses I have taken at BSU, and in the practices in the field through my work in various school settings. At BSU, my educational focus was in early childhood and special education, and thus my experiences revolved around the classes and professors within these specific fields. In my courses, there were many ways in which Western biases were reproduced, but I would also like to highlight the ways in which some professors incorporated some linguistic ideas without recognizing the connection to anthropology. The summer course in which I made these connections was Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology, as described above, one of the four subfields of anthropology which, through Ahearn’s descriptions, can be defined as the study of the connections between language and social life, as well as the ways in which they both influence and are influenced by each other to produce, reproduce, or completely reconfigure one another (Ahearn 2021, 7-34).

Throughout this summer course, we also examined three key linguistic concepts that Ahearn discussed - namely, speech communities, communities of practice and linguistic ideologies. We examined their defining criteria as well as what these communities mean for people in the world. Ahearn offers a general definition of speech communities as groups of people who share frequent interaction, a “verbal repertoire” and an asset of social norms regarding language use (Ahearn 2021,127). However, she also observes that speech communities are difficult to define. This is because size, location, the nature and regularity of communication among members are all variables that are hard to define. Communities of practice is a more specified idea and includes mutual engagement,
a shared “enterprise” or purview, and a shared repertoire such as vocabulary, agenda, norms of engagement (Ahearn 2021, 134-5). Communities of practice are not necessarily structured by ethnicity, age, sex, or geography, which tend to be the confounding characteristics of speech communities (Ahearn 2021, 135). Communities of practice are more bounded, and can be intentionally created; hence, the term was especially useful to me thinking about my own role as a teacher in a classroom setting working with students from many different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.

Thus, when I learned about speech communities and communities of practice, I thought about one professor who emphasized to her students the importance of building a classroom community. The idea of creating a classroom community is taken for granted by teachers who end up using the same icebreaker games and community building exercises with their new students every year. However, this professor stressed to us that every student is coming from their own unique background, and that it was important not only to get to know every single one, but to build a new classroom community with the students in which every single one felt safe, welcomed, and understood. This idea of reflective teaching practices is a cornerstone of pedagogical practice (Brookfield, 2017).

While it seems like such a simple concept to take to the classroom as a teacher, what this professor was hinting at without using the terminology, and therefore possibly without being aware of the concept, was creating a new **community of practice**. By building such a community, students are able to form bonds with one another and are able to communicate in common ways. This is an opportunity to create equity in the classroom that is often not explored because it is not known.

For example, when teachers create classroom rules that every child knows and follows and expectations about how to behave when in school and during different times, a community of practice is created. Every classroom has its own unique set of rules, expectations, groupings, friendships, and communication styles, all of which create a community of practice. However, many classroom norms reflect the unexamined cultural norms of teachers and students of the dominant culture, and instructors do not recognize their cultural underpinnings, then there is inequity. Classrooms should strive for equity, which is necessary for equality. Equality refers to giving every group of people the same treatment, resources, and opportunities so that every person is treated the same exact way. Equity, by contrast, takes into consideration the unique needs of the individual and allocates resources and opportunities so that there is an equal outcome despite these differences. An explicit classroom culture that all students are required to learn; where teachers can find ways to weave in students’ cultural norms so that students are represented contributes to equity. Another professor of mine focused significantly on language, and more specifically, urged us to ask children questions- such as those that make them ponder and explain their thoughts, like, “why did you use those materials?” or “What does this mean to you?”- to spark their creativity. This directly tied to much of Ahearn’s work in the field of linguistic anthropology, again drawing connections between the fields in practice. These pedagogies, which stress deep awareness of cultural diversity in language, and therefore thought, were not typical.

Anthropological linguistics helps future and current teachers to think about the reasons we speak a certain way with, to, or about children. In her text, Ahearn mentions the ways in which separate groups of people speak to or about babies and children and how they are socialized into their language and culture through these
practices (Ahearn 2021, 72-80). In most of my education courses, especially those focusing on child development, there was significant stress placed on language socialization and the “right” way to do this. As future educators in these courses, we are told that it is important for children to be read to when they are young, for adults to speak to them often and to ask questions such as “What color is this?” However, we never truly examined the diverse ways in which children are socialized into their languages and cultures and how these may conflict with classroom norms, thus making learning more difficult for some children than others. For instance, linguistic anthropologists are aware that the same color in a light spectrum is called different words in different languages: blue and green; red, orange and pink are often the same word in many cultures, while clearly, they are different in English. The “right way” can marginalize some students by telling them they are wrong when they are simply using a different linguistic system.

While we talked about diversity and providing culturally appropriate teaching for every child, when child development and language are discussed, only the western ideologies of language acquisition and socialization were conveyed, and framed as the correct, and only, way. To combat this, professors should be encouraged to examine their courses and to promote a class that explores non-western ideologies of language development, which can help teachers to understand cross-cultural notions of literacy. Literacy for instance, means something very different to a child whose culture is rooted in oral traditions (Ahearn 2021, 156-157). Oral traditions pertain to knowledge, stories, and other facets of tradition that are passed through space and time by means of speech, whereas written traditions record these facets through text. Ahearn defines orality and literacy in opposition to one another in anthropological studies by “the ways in which the spoken word reflects and shapes social relations” versus the focus on literacy and the ways in which the written word does so (Ahearn 2021, 154). However, neither oral traditions nor literacy conform to one universal method or approach. In fact, Ahearn and other linguistic anthropologists argue that there is no such thing as one “literacy,” but rather literacies. Quoting Baynham, she argues for a “situated approach” to literacies: “…we need to understand literacy as social practice, the way it interacts with ideologies and institutions to shape and define the possibilities and life paths of individuals” (1995: 71, cited in Ahearn 2021, 158). This is critical given that classrooms are cross-cultural spaces.

Recognizing classrooms as cross-cultural spaces also means that students bring distinct thought patterns and worldviews to the classroom, and not just celebrations, food and dress—the “celebrate diversity” model of human differences. Studies have shown that greater diversity in the classroom improves learning outcomes for all students (Kubal et al. 2003, 441-455). Ahearn explains that understanding language acquisition can have a direct impact on what we consider as literacy in the school setting. She states, “Literacy is less a set of acquired skills and more an activity that affords the acquisition and negotiation of new ways of thinking and acting in the world” (Ahearn 2021, 153) and that “it is impossible for literacy skills to be acquired neutrally (Ahearn 2021, 158). Thus, ignoring specific outlooks on literacy in the classroom and different beliefs about what constitutes literacy can lead to harmful language ideologies that are reproduced by notions such as “language deficits” and “learning gaps” (Ahearn 2021, 79). When students studying to become teachers are only taught one specific concept that applies to one culture, language, region, and so on, and believe it to be the only right way, their future students will suffer from the expectations placed on them by a system that does not pertain to them. When it comes to language acquisition and literacy worldwide, there are no universals, and to combat this, we need to educate our teachers in
questions target skills for the students to learn and are taught based on their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals.

Reproduction of Western Language Ideologies in Student-Teaching Classroom Experiences

Alongside my experiences in college classes, I have also had quite a few opportunities to partake in the field of education through my jobs and volunteer work, much of which was also the focal point of some of the discussions during my summer course, as we explored the relationship between linguistic theory and my lived experiences in student classroom teaching. One example that we discussed the most throughout this course was my summer internship (and now full-time job) at a school for children with autism and developmental disabilities in the local area. The school, and the children I work with, tied in easily into our discussions on education training and the connections to linguistic anthropology, especially since many of the students are either speech limited or non-verbal, many using speech generating devices to communicate. In this population, there is a large focus placed on communication.

Since many of the children I work with are still quite young and need practice producing speeches, we work with an extremely limited vocabulary. We build skills with the help of Speech Language Pathologists and the staff who work with the students to achieve their academic as well as behavioral, social, and life skill goals. For our teaching, we use Applied Verbal Behavior (AVB) through the implementation of programs targeting different skills such as echoics (repeating sounds), matching, listener responding (doing an action that is said by a teacher), listener identification (the student identifies the picture that matches the description the teacher gives), intraverbals (where the student finishes the sentence provided by the teacher), and tacts (in which the student identifies what is in the picture, the purpose of the object, or what is being done). These various kinds of cards and
another wrong. In instances where the student is completely wrong outside the realm of possibilities (e.g., you write with a “chair”), this is an understandable route to take, but in correcting these responses that go beyond the limits of what the teachers expect, teachers are unknowingly shutting down creativity and any sense of linguistic interpretations and differences that can come from such lessons. In many cases, it is indeed necessary to make corrections for the children to learn new concepts and meet IEP goals that will later transfer into more complex goals that build on their newly acquired skills, but in instances like these, it is hard not to see where the potential was lost, and differences shut down for the sake of academic success based on the language ideologies of the teachers and other specialists.

Some of these pedagogical approaches may reflect individual teacher bias, but it is important to understand that such bias is not merely idiosyncratic but part of a larger universe of language ideologies. The discipline of Cultural Studies offers insights into the ways in which classroom instruction reflects deeper dominant ideologies that permeate classroom curricula. For example, Louis Althusser describes in depth how systems of power, and in our interest specifically, school systems, reflect, shape, and reproduce dominant ideologies in the classroom, including language ideologies. In his 1970 essay, Althusser ponders:

What do children learn at school? They go varying distances in their studies, but at any rate they learn to read, to write and to add – i.e. a number of techniques, and a number of other things as well, including elements (which may be rudimentary or on the contrary thoroughgoing) of ‘scientific’ or ‘literary culture’, which are directly useful in the different jobs in production (one instruction for manual workers, another for technicians, a third for engineers, a final one for higher management, etc.). Thus, they learn know-how.

But besides these techniques and knowledges, and in learning them, children at school also learn the ‘rules’ of good behaviour, i.e. the attitude that should be observed by every agent in the division of labour, according to the job he is ‘destined’ for: rules of morality, civic and professional conscience, which actually means rules of respect for the socio-technical division of labour and ultimately the rules of the order established by class domination. They also learn to ‘speak proper French’, to ‘handle’ the workers correctly, i.e. actually (for the future capitalists and their servants) to ‘order them about’ properly, i.e. (ideally) to ‘speak to them’ in the right way, etc.

To put this more scientifically, I shall say that the reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling
ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class ‘in words’.

In other words, the school (but also other State institutions like the Church, or other apparatuses like the Army) teaches ‘know-how’, but in forms which ensure subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its practice (Althusser 1970).

Given this in-depth analysis of the ways in which the school and other state institutions shape, reflect, and reproduce dominant ideologies, it is critical to unpack both the biases of teachers and other staff that live within this system, but also to delve into federal and state standards that shape the curriculum taught in the classroom and tend to reproduce western knowledge systems and ideologies. Challenging these assumptions and ideologies is part of a decolonizing practice because it involves unpacking assumptions about the primacy of western knowledge systems.

**Conclusion: Decolonizing the Linguistic Classroom**

Throughout this article, I have brought attention to many of the ways in which college courses and the field of education are failing to meet the needs of an ever-growing diverse linguistic world. To conclude, I would like to draw attention to some of the ways that college professors and schoolteachers alike can work toward decolonizing the classroom and overall education. At Bridgewater State University, there are already efforts in place and ideas in the works on how to create such an environment of decolonization, especially after last year’s outcry for equity and justice (Special Presidential Task Force on Racial Justice, 2021). Considering these efforts, it is relevant to discuss not only that we should continue to listen to and legitimize BIPOC experiences and ideas at the university level as well as in local schools and classrooms, but also that the work of decolonizing should be continuous.

One example that points to pathways for decolonizing the university come from Carter Remy’s 2018 ethnographic study focusing on the experiences of black immigrant male students seeking linguistic preparedness at Bridgewater State University (BSU). Remy examines the experiences of this small subgroup of students and highlights the challenges faced by this linguistically diverse group, surfacing the ways in which language ideologies shape the curriculum and therefore, their academic experiences. Remy concludes through his research that “domestic, immigrant, ESL Black men who have completed their first year of college at BSU feel that they are not being provided with enough resources to help them to acquire enough linguistic competence to be fully prepared for the college realm (Remy 2018, 122)”, and identified challenges faced by this subgroup including lack of resources, and resources such as the Academic Achievement Center (AAC) which did not help any of the interviewed students due to lack of linguistic diversity and trainings (Remy 2018, 119-122).

Remy identifies pedagogical changes that would render college classroom speech communities and writing requirements accessible to a linguistically diverse group of people. To name just a few, Remy recommends that the writing studio should “…revisit their training of their staff members to include empathy training.” He also suggests the use of a “focus correction” technique when tutoring; for BSU “to host campus tours, or family orientation programs in a student’s native tongue for both the students and their parents;” and “that faculty and tutors understand the emotional profile of many ELL/ESL students” to...
better serve the community (Remy 2018, 122-124). Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students such as Remy have a multitude of experiences displaying the need for decolonizing academics, and the voices of these students and others of minority groups, including direct recommendations for change, need to be amplified. We should never be complacent with the strides being taken, and individuals as well as communities, including those at BSU and in the surrounding areas, are obligated to continue their efforts, communicate, learn, and change for the better.

From my experiences as listed above, it is important that students studying to become teachers should be required to take a humanities course that ties racial justice to education and the classroom. College professors and licensed teachers should also be subject to professional development that expands understanding of linguistic diversity, the relationship between language, culture, and thought, and the goals of equity. This is just one suggestion of many that have already been brought to the attention of the university, many of which from students of color demanding changes be made to enforce racial justice on campus and beyond, like through the 2020 Letter of Demands from Black and Brown student alum (Lopes et al., 2018) that was sent to BSU’s President Fred Clark. While I hope my personal experiences have been helpful in adding to the ongoing conversation, I want to stress again that these experiences cannot mimic the lived experiences of BIPOC students, professors, teachers, children, and parents, and that it is imperative to amplify these voices in our mission of decolonizing the system and to promote linguistic and racial justice. Toward this end, I would like to conclude by offering some specific recommendations for professors, staff, and faculty (Ahmed, 2021):

- Develop skills to navigate cross-cultural variations of thought and practice in the classroom, especially around linguistic diversity;
- Explore the assumptions and norms that continue to shape higher education pedagogy pertaining to “literacy;”
- Create equitable opportunities by challenging practices that privilege western ways of knowing;
- Create new, inclusive norms for the classroom such as communities of practice;
- Add a requirement in the Core Curriculum for “Racial Justice and Decoloniality” instead of a vaguer “Multicultural” requirement that could too easily fall into the “celebrate diversity” approach discussed above that does not account for the depths of diverse patterns of thought shaped by culture and structural inequities.

References


Autumn Strickland completed a Bachelor of Arts in Cultural Anthropology with a minor in Special Education in August 2021 and plans on entering graduate school at BSU for Severe Special Education. Currently, Autumn works full time in a private school for children with Autism and developmental disabilities. This article was written under the mentorship of Dr. Diana J. Fox, Professor and Chairperson of the Department of Anthropology. Autumn grew up in Abington, Massachusetts, and currently lives in Bridgewater, Massachusetts as she pursues her education and career. She also loves to travel and plans to see more of the world to gain new points of view to bring back to her classroom in the future.