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Toward a raciolinguistic perspective on translation and interpretation

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A few years ago, I was asked to consult on a project focused on identifying best practices for translation and interpretation for immigrant families in US public schools participating in the development of an individual educational plan (IEP) for their child who had been identified as having a disability. I was asked to consider two questions: (i) the necessary qualifications for an interpreter providing support during IEP meetings, and (ii) whether it was sufficient to have an interpreter present or whether all the legal documents that were being discussed should also be translated into the home language. After an extensive review of the literature, I wrote a report that recommended that interpreters should have expertise in special education and that all documents should be translated into the home language of the families. While I believe that this is an accurate reflection of the existing literature, I was left with a few nagging concerns. For one, the literature defined expertise in special education primarily through a medical model that treated disabilities as biological abnormalities that needed to be fixed or accommodated in order for students to become more 'normal'—an ideology rooted in colonial logics and with strong

connections to racializing discourses (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri 2013). In addition, rigid and bounded notions of languages provided the foundation for much of this literature in ways that conflicted with the translanguaging perspective that I have adopted in much of my work (Flores 2019). While I tried to bring translanguaging into follow up conversations with the advocacy group that had hired me to complete the report, many of these advocates worried that such an approach would undermine their goal of expanding quality translation and interpretation for immigrant parents as they navigate such a complicated process. For example, one question that emerged during these conversations that was not directly addressed in the literature was what to do in cases where there wasn't currently a widely known existing equivalent to a technical term in an IEP in the home language of the family. When I suggested that a translanguaging perspective might suggest that the English term could be used with appropriate elaboration in the home language as opposed to inventing a technical term that would be unfamiliar and perhaps even less accessible to both the interpreter and the families, some worried that to recommend such an approach might be a slippery slope that leads to the conclusion that English-Only documents might be most effective for users of certain languages. That is, in order to adhere to my shared political commitments with members of this organization to advocate for high quality translation and interpretation support, I felt pressured to frame the issue in a way that was antithetical to my political orientation toward language.

Angermeyer's framing of translation and interpretation services helps put words to some of the tensions I was feeling between my decolonial view of knowledge and linguistic boundaries and the best practices I was reporting on. Of particular relevance was Angermeyer's discussion of the ways that interpreter practices framed as 'just translating' are actually reflective of a quite ideological 'institutional register practice that does not serve the communicative needs of the lay recipient' (p. 844). This connects with his observation that while these recipients engage in translanguaging to make meaning in these interactions, these efforts are often rejected by interpreters who 'emphasize boundaries between the languages, speaking in a formal, legal register of the subordinated language, that may differ substantially from the vernacular of lay participants' (p. 845). Pointing to the power relations involved in producing seemingly objective institutional registers as well as in policing the translanguaging of racialized communities has strong synergies with the raciolinguistic perspective that I have developed in collaboration with others (Rosa & Flores 2017). These synergies are evident in Angermeyer's concluding remarks that describe the institutional processes of translation and interpretation as 'mechanisms for producing governable subjects in support of the raciolinguistic status quo' (p. 854). In this short commentary, I hope to further delve into the ways that I think we can continue to move forward together in this important conversation.

One question that a raciolinguistic perspective might further delve into is how modern racial logics have shaped the contemporary institutional registers Angermeyer associates with translation and interpretation. Wynter (2003) connects the

emergence of these racial logics with the construction of a genre of the human over-represented as white that framed Indigenous populations as subhuman and enslaved African populations as nonhuman. One instantiation of the institutional registers associated with this genre of the human can be found in the now infamous Dred Scott decision made by the US Supreme Court in 1857 that argued that enslaved Africans 'were not intended to be included under the word 'citizen' in the Constitution and can therefore claim none of the rights and privileges which that instrument provides for and secures to citizens of the United States' (Taney 1860:7). The Court decision contrasted this non-human status bestowed on enslaved Africans with the subhuman status of Native Americans, who were described as in need of 'subjection to the white race' with an acknowledgment that 'if an individual should leave his nation or tribe, and take up his abode among the white population, he would be entitled to all the rights and privileges which would belong to an emigrant from any other foreign people' (Taney 1860:7). In short, US liberal democracy was founded on the premise that Black people were property with no legal rights and that Native Americans were only entitled to legal rights if they adopted white behaviors and, one would imagine, white language practices.

It might be tempting for some to dismiss these racial logics as purely a US invention or at the very least something unique to the Americas. Yet, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade was a global system that was integral to the formation of modern global capitalism with representations of Blackness as non-human, consequentially, becoming a global phenomenon alongside the spread of capitalism (Mbembe 2017). In addition, as European colonialism expanded beyond the Americas, Indigenous populations in other parts of the world were also only provided with contingent legal rights in relation to their willingness to approximate whiteness (Moreton-Robinson 2006). It might also be tempting to dismiss these racial logics as products of a different era that have no bearing on contemporary societies. Yet, we can still see Blackness as relegated to nonhuman status in extreme forms such as in the high mass incarceration rates of African Americans where they are still denied basic legal rights like those denied to them in the Dred Scott decision (Alexander 2010) and in everyday media representations of Africans as animal-like even in societies that do not have formal histories of slavery or African colonialism (Kompatsiaris 2017). We also still see continued representations of Indigeneity as uncivilized with these communities needing to move toward whiteness in order to modernize such as by shifting from use of their supposedly primitive Indigenous languages toward a supposedly modern European language (Marr 2011). These racial logics have also informed the racialization of other groups and even became a model for non-Western societies such as Japan. Japanese leaders sought to modernize in ways that were defined within a European colonial epistemology, seeking to approximate whiteness by positioning themselves as racially superior to the rest of Asia, with racializing discourses applied in the justification of their colonial rule over Korea (Nishiyama 2015). In this way, while racialization is always produced in relation to the anti-Black and white settler colonial logics that

produced modern race, it is also not wedded to these categories. It can be mobilized as part of the dehumanization of any populations framed as a threat to the integrity of a supposed modern society, with modern being defined through a genre of the human overrepresented as white and any efforts at modernization defined through efforts to approximate whiteness. This means that racialized people must accept their dehumanization as part of making themselves intelligible to modern institutions.

This insight has important implications for translation and interpretation which is ultimately about making things intelligible to all relevant stakeholders. We can see this process at play from the early days of European colonialism where Christian missionaries constructed boundaries around Indigenous languages that they used to translate the Bible as part of efforts to convert Indigenous populations (Durston 2007). That is, the role of Indigenous languages was to make the Bible intelligible to Indigenous populations thereby converting them to Christianity, which would make them intelligible to modern institutions. In this way, the only legitimate use of translation into Indigenous languages was for more effective colonization with the eventual goal to effectively assimilate Indigenous populations so that they could gain the legal rights associated with whiteness. This would eventually be placed seemingly into tension with efforts to preserve Indigenous languages and cultures as repositories of exotic worldviews that should be preserved as a way of maintaining humanity's connection to its past (Cameron 2007). Yet, these are two sides of the same coin in that both frame Indigenous communities and their languages through a colonial lens that denies agency to these communities.

In contrast, Black diasporic language practices were not even framed in this way, with the nonhuman status of enslaved Africans manifested in debates about whether they even had the capacity to become Christian and if so, a baptism was simply imposed on them since they were property with no legal rights of their own (Gerbner 2018). That is, the language practices of enslaved Africans were framed as nonhuman and, therefore, irrelevant to converting them to Christianity. This framing of Black diasporic language practices would continue post-emancipation with no legal rights afforded to them and continued efforts to eradicate them across the Americas (Sung & Allen-Handy 2019; Nero 2022). In this way, the origins of translation and interpretation are rooted in racial logics that framed Indigenous populations as uncivilized and needing translation and interpretation to become civilized Christians and enslaved African populations framed as not even having languages worthy of translation and interpretation in their conversion to Christianity.

Again, it might be tempting to dismiss this colonial history as being irrelevant to contemporary translation and interpretation, which has been professionalized and, therefore, disconnected from these colonial roots. Yet, as Angermeyer alludes to in his analysis, this professionalization of translation and interpretation has not actually addressed these colonial roots but has rather obscured them under the guise of seemingly objective institutional registers that, while positioned as intending to help racialized communities, serves to further reify their systematic marginalization. He describes the ways that 'professionalization of interpreting tends to be

available only for certain standardized languages, leading to inequality between different subordinated varieties and their speakers' (p. 841). He adds that professional interpreters tend 'prioritize the needs of the institution that employs them' (p. 839) leading the primary purpose for the interpreter to be 'to convey institutional instructions to the lay participant' (p. 844). In this way, the professionalization of interpretation, while designed to prevent inexperienced people from being put into the role of an interpreter in high-stakes situation, also serves to further wed interpreters to the very institutions that have been built around the dehumanization of the communities that they are serving and often come from.

This insight helps me to better understand the tensions I was feeling when writing and presenting on the report focused on best practices for translation and interpretation mentioned above. The entire institutional apparatus of special education has roots in the same colonial logics that framed Black populations as nonhuman and entitled to no legal rights and Indigenous populations as subhuman and in need of white salvation (Cioè-Peña 2022). This means that what is even translatable within the context of an IEP meeting is already premised on the dehumanization of entire populations and the only way for families from these populations to be heard within these institutional registers is to accept their dehumanization as a point of entry into the conversation. While ostensibly framed around parental involvement in decision-making, the fact of the matter is that before an IEP meeting has happened decisions have often been made that immigrant parents are essentially just expected to sign off on, with the interpreter's job being to ensure that this occurs (Jung 2011). Any pushback from parents that might occur must adhere to the underlying epistemological orientation of the medical model of disability in order to be intelligible in ways that can be translated to the institutional authorities. Any pushback that does not conform to these expectations is likely to be dismissed as lack of appropriate competence in institutional registers rather than as legitimate pushback that must be considered (Lalvani 2014).

The reification of these institutional registers has been exacerbated by the move toward machine translation, which moves even further away from culturally situated translation and interpretation practices toward a universalization of meaning. Angermeyer does a compelling job of examining the dangers of this increasing reliance on machine translation where results are often at best awkwardly worded and at worst incomprehensible to the intended audience. A raciolinguistic perspective might delve further into the racialized aspect of the algorithms that inform artificial intelligence and the ways that this has exacerbated existing racial hierarchies (Noble 2018). Based on this research, the improvements in AI that inform resources such as Google Translate that might lead to seemingly more accurate translation will not necessarily promote racial equity. On the contrary, more improved technology might lead to more refined policing and pathologization of racialized communities whose language practices may be rendered further into unintelligibility by this increasing technology.

A notable recent example is an app designed to modify the English accent of call center workers from the Global South to sound like they come from the Global

North (Shoichet 2021). Rosa & Flores (2023) describe the ways that the seeming utopian impulse of creating an app premised on facilitating communication across seemingly fundamental linguistic divides and the dystopia impulse it also reproduces of eliminating linguistic diversity are united in their orientation to language varieties as discrete and disembodied sets of forms and structures. In this way, there is a further reification of the institutional registers rooted in colonial logics. One could imagine that increasing reliance on such apps for translation and interpretation in IEP meetings would further entrench the medical model of disability that further subjugated alternative epistemologies while also reinforcing bounded notions of language.

Considering this doubling down on colonial logics, it is no surprise that efforts that racialized communities make to reject this dehumanization in their navigating of modern institutions are policed and pathologized. One example that Angermeyer points to are the ways that the translanguaging practices of recipients of interpretation are often framed as a problem as opposed to a resource that might better facilitate the interpretation process. The pathologization of the ways that racialized communities cross socially constructed linguistic borders connects to the early days of European colonialism where the contact zones that emerged for Indigenous populations in relation to European colonial discourses were rendered unintelligible to the ideologically produced homogeneity of modern institutional practices (Pratt 1991). It can also be seen in the ways that the heterogeneity that characterized the experiences of enslaved Africans were depicted by European colonizers as Creoles that were uniquely and often pathologically heterogenous, suggesting that they were not languages that could cope with the realities of a modern society (Degraff 2005). In many ways, Angermeyer's description of the ways that translanguaging is framed within translation and interpretation can be understood to be a continuation of these colonial logics via what García, Flores, Seltzer, Li, Otheguy, & Rosa (2021), building on the work Boaventura de Sousa Santos, have termed *abyssal thinking*—the framing of racialized communities as having no legitimate knowledges or practices that modern institutions need to recognize.

Yet, translanguaging also puts a name to the counter-hegemonic linguistic practices that have always existed within racialized communities. Indeed, despite European colonial efforts to construct rigid boundaries around languages that they named without any input from colonized people, the reality is that these communities have always engaged in acts of resistance by refusing to conform to these rigid boundaries (Makoni & Pennycook 2007). Some scholars have critiqued what they term the deconstructionist stance of some of us who have adopted a translanguaging stance suggesting that our argument is that languages do not exist (Macswan 2022). Yet, that has certainly never been our argument. Instead, our argument has been that the language naming practices and linguistic border-making of European colonialism has been universalized such that it is now framed as natural and coming from nowhere (García et al. 2022; Flores & Rosa 2023). Denaturalizing these naming practices and border-making processes opens the possibility for legitimizing

naming practices and reconfiguring linguistic borders in ways that tap into the alternative worlds that racialized communities have always constructed for themselves in opposition to colonial logics.

I see glimpses of these alternative worlds in Angermeyer's description of the ways that interpretation recipients engage in the strategic use of their entire linguistic repertoire despite efforts to police and pathologize these practices by interpreters and other institutional agents. Pushing this even further to account for the historical and contemporary framing of Blackness as nonhuman, we could begin to think through the ways that Black diasporic practices, such as African American English (AAE), also need to be accounted for when thinking through decolonizing translation and interpretation in ways that that do not reify geopolitically situated language naming and border constructing. Such a move will challenge universalizing conceptions of translation and interpretation by bringing attention to the ways that it is always situated, embodied, and contingent. Such a move might also allow for subjugated epistemologies to become recognized in ways that begin to decolonize translation and interpretation practices.

Engaging with Angermeyer's provocative argument has given me a deeper appreciation for how deeply colonial translation and interpretation, as currently practiced, are. So, this begs the question: with this new insight would I now change the recommendations that I made related to translation and interpretation for IEP meetings? Perhaps surprisingly I would say, based on what I was asked to do, which was to provide a review of the existing literature to determine best practices within existing institutions, that the answer is no. I think I did accurately answer that question. What engaging with Angermeyer's argument has helped me to better understand is that this is not the only question we should be asking. Instead, we should also be critically interrogating the assumptions that go into this framing of the issue. This critical interrogation should be much more than a 'loving critique' of translation and interpretation (Paris & Alim 2014). Loving critiques are intended for frameworks that have explicit goals of challenging colonial logics but that may need to be adapted for new times. In contrast, translation and interpretation were founded upon and continue to reproduce these colonial logics. You can't love a system that is premised on the dehumanization of entire populations and claim that you are in favor of racial equity. Therefore, any critique should not be coming from a place of love but rather from a recognition that the fundamental problem is an onto-epistemological one and that to address it requires a fundamental restructuring of the world (Flores & Rosa 2023).

Yet, I am also cognizant of the desire for applied linguists to address practical challenges of language in ways that promote equity and minimize harm. Angermeyer balances this tension well in his commitment to raising fundamental, and some might say, existential, questions about contemporary translation and interpretation practices while providing concrete recommendations for improving current practices in ways that reduce harm to marginalized communities. If we think of translation and interpretation as a human right, then it behooves us to follow the

path of Butler (2004:37–38) in their call for a double path in politics that uses dominant discourses to make intelligible political claims even as we critically interrogate 'the limits of their inclusivity and translatability, the presuppositions they include, the ways in which they must be expanded, destroyed, or reworked both to encompass and open up what it is to be human'. By doing so, we can work to simultaneously help to make the current world a better place while also working to imagine and create a new decolonial world.

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AUTHOR RESPONSE

From punitive multilingualism and forensic translation towards linguistic justice

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I wrote my article to critique the widespread assumption that translation between languages necessarily advances social justice, and to argue that it may instead