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Prologue: Language Challenges in the 21st Century

Abstract: As immigration and mobility increases, so do interactions between people from different linguistic backgrounds. Yet while linguistic diversity offers many benefits, it also comes with a number of challenges. In seven empirical articles and one commentary, this Special Issue addresses some of the most significant language challenges facing researchers in the 21st century: the power language has to form and perpetuate stereotypes, the contribution language makes to intersectional identities, and the role of language in shaping intergroup relations. By presenting work that aims to shed light on some of these issues, the goal of this Special Issue is to (a) highlight language as integral to social processes and (b) inspire researchers to address the challenges we face. To keep pace with the world's constantly evolving linguistic landscape, it is essential that we make progress toward harnessing language's power in ways that benefit 21st century globalized societies.

Keywords: communication, language, intergroup relations, identity, social cognition, stereotypes, linguistic diversity, intersectionality

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In his groundbreaking book, *The Nature of Prejudice*, Allport (1954) theorized that humans are predisposed toward categorizing, and then prejudging others based on social characteristics. He argued that one of the most effective ways in which these categorizations are both formed and transmitted is through language (see also Maass et al., 2014). Words serve to divide people into groups, therefore contributing in the most basic way to how humans perceive and treat each other. Or, in Allport's words, they "cut slices" through the human race (Allport, 1954, p. 178).

The power language has to create and shape social categorizations and prejudgements are multiple. In addition to the labeling of socially significant categories, the ways in which we describe others can affect perceptions of both the communicator and the target (Higgins et al., 1977), communicate our motivations to others (Douglas & Sutton, 2006), and can affect our memory of the target being described (Etcherhoff et al., 2005). Even more subtle linguistic variations in word choice can amplify and attenuate stereotypic impressions. For instance, describing someone as "a homosexual" (i.e., the noun) elicits more stereotype consistent attributions than describing the person as "homosexual" (i.e., the adjective; Carnaghi et al., 2008). How words are pronounced can further influence social categorizations and prejudgements. Indeed, a speaker's accent may be a stronger out-group cue than other markers of category membership, including visual cues to race and ethnicity (Hansen et al., 2017; Kinzler et al., 2009; Rakić et al., 2011).

Perhaps the most problematic consequence of prejudgements made from biased linguistic influences is prejudice and discrimination (Beukeboom & Burgers, 2017; Formanowicz & Suitner, 2020; Gluszek & Hansen, 2013), affecting the experience of individuals as well as relationships between groups. Since Allport's work, immigration and mobility has increased tenfold, with cultural diversity becoming the norm in many places (Apfelbaum et al., 2014; Rosenmann et al., 2016). Although the language diversity this brings offers many advantages and opportunities for enrichment, challenges arising from language-based categorizations and subsequent prejudices that can result have become increasingly pervasive. At the same time, globalization has served to exploit the power that messages have to shape people's social reality. For instance, media framing of reports in ways that perpetuate negative out-group stereotypes can result in the vilification of the group by the general public (e.g., Bickes et al., 2014). Hence, as we enter the 21st year of the 21st century, the idea that words "cut slices" is arguably more relevant today than ever before.

Although the collection of articles presented in this Special Issue can only highlight the importance of language in shaping the world we live in, our hope is that they will inspire future research into the unique challenges that linguistic diversity presents. We should be clear here that the aim of this issue is not to paint the world's changing linguistic landscape¹ in a negative light. In fact, there is much to gain from contact with those who speak differently (e.g., Hansen et al., 2014). Instead, we hope to shine the spotlight on language as being at the heart of social processes (e.g., Fiedler, 2007; Semin, 2000) and as a vital factor for understanding our social world. In this way, the work presented here should serve as a starting point for researchers for coming together and tackling these modern day language-based challenges.

Origin and Overview of the Special Issue

This Special Issue was borne out of a small conference facilitated by the European Association for Social Psychology to bring together researchers with interdisciplinary perspectives to address the unique challenges that linguistic diversity presents. The articles presented here are a sample from this meeting and span a range of topics, from language-based categorizations to the importance of language in shaping interpersonal and intergroup relations. Over this collection, data has been collected from five different countries (Croatia, Germany, Israel, Poland, and the United Kingdom), and includes perspectives from minority and majority groups. In what follows, we present an overview of the articles in this issue, dividing them into three themes that represent some of the most pressing language challenges we face.

The Power of Language to Form and Perpetuate Stereotypes

Language is critical for shaping people's social realities. With the global rise of political tensions, polarized ideologies (see Litan et al., 2019), and hateful rhetoric by politicians and on social media, the power language has to normalize hate against certain groups has been given considerable and well-deserved attention (e.g., Soral et al., 2017). Most recently, anecdotal evidence has linked the labelling of Coronavirus/COVID-19 as "Chinese flu" to increased racism against people of Asian descent and the term "foreign flu" to increased xenophobia (*The New York Times* Editorial Board, 2020). However, the way language serves to influence perceptions of individuals and groups is often so subtle that it can be nearly impossible to recognize (Barreto & Ellemers, 2015; Maass et al., 2014). For instance, research has demonstrated that something as simple as the order of target comparisons (e.g., Law students compared with Economic students vs. Economic students compared with Law students) can have implications for which groups are perceived to be normative and therefore hold power and status (Bruckmüller & Abele, 2010).

The current issue includes two articles that aim to gain insight into the power language has to shape ideas about groups. In experimental work, Burgers and Beukeboom (2020) show that when describing behaviors, subtle labeling (generic vs. specific) and choice of words (affirmative statements vs. negations about the same content) have independent effects on stereotyping and essentialism. These effects were observed using unknown and fictitious groups, demonstrating that language can contribute to the formation of stereotypes through multiple routes. Once stereotypes are formed, language can then serve to maintain and perpetuate them. In work by Bruckmüller and Braun (2020), the tendency to frame messages about gender inequality on women (rather than on men) results in a focus on changing women (rather than changing men) and as a result, can act as a barrier for addressing wider systematic change. Accordingly, the authors suggest ways to present these social inequalities more constructively.

When drawing attention to the ways that language can shape perceptions, there is a danger of evoking a sense of helplessness. After all, the subtleties in which language can perpetuate problematic notions are difficult, if not impossible, to curb. Hence, our

aim is to raise awareness about the implications that framing can have on perpetuating social inequalities. Through a deeper understanding of this link, it may be possible to take advantage of language's power in a way that benefits society, for instance, by promoting diversity and positive communication (Muñiz-Velázquez & Pulido, 2019; Pitts, 2019; Socha & Pitts, 2012).

Language as Integral to Intersectionality and Combined Identities

As one of the most essential dimensions of identity (Taylor et al., 1973) its linkage to multiple social groups means that language is by nature intersectional (see Levon, 2015). In addition to revealing clues to various social dimensions (e.g., gender, age, or social status; Giles & Marlow, 2011), language interacts with visual cues associated with these dimensions to influence impressions (Freeman & Ambady, 2011; see also Formanowicz & Suitner, 2020). As globalization continues to increase, so too does the presence of intersectionality, a development which poses significant challenges for researchers (Block & Corona, 2016; McCormick-Huhn et al., 2019). In this issue, we present two articles that consider how perceptions of targets are influenced by the intersect between language and other identity cues.

In research conducted in Germany, Rakić et al. (2020) investigated the effects of the intersectionality between ethnicity (cued by the presence or absence of an Arabic accent) and religiosity (cued by the presence or the absence of a headscarf) on categorization as a basic foundation of information processing. Whereas a matching task showed that memory of individual targets in a group setting was better when linguistic and visual cues were consistent, category subtyping emerged for targets with only one cue indicating a foreign identity (either an Arabic accent *or* a headscarf). In these less prototypical instances, participants confused targets and appeared almost blind to their individuality. Hence, in a world where combined identity cues are becoming more prevalent, people may tend to overlook the distinctiveness of others. Accordingly, the authors highlight the role language plays when intersectional identities are processed and the challenges this presents for changing stereotypes.

How intersectional identities translate into evaluations by British standard speakers was addressed by Birney et al. (2020). They found that, although weak accents have been shown to be preferred over strong accents (Nesdale & Rooney, 1996), reactions to accent strength depended on the perceived status of the speaker's nationality. For instance, when a speaker's nationality was low in status, British participants made more positive attributions in the interpersonal domain (e.g., judging the speaker as warm), but this also carried over to more negative attributions in the intergroup domain (e.g., reporting more feelings of threat from immigrants in general) when exposed to an accent that was strong rather than weak. Based on this, the authors suggest that researchers consider accents as intersectional and perceptions based on accents as both interpersonal and intergroup (on this latter point, see also Dragojevic & Giles, 2014).

In sum, these articles call for researchers to shift their focus away from investigating accents in isolation toward a perspective that accounts for the increased intermix of people's identities across real and perceived borders. While the idea that other factors

influence language perception is not new (see Giles & Marlow, 2011; Giles & Rakić, 2014), research in this area is still relatively underdeveloped. Many questions still remain: Which identities intersect when people are categorized? How do we increase the visibility of individuality? How do dynamics between communicators' multiple backgrounds influence communication and social perceptions of the self, others, and groups? These are just some of the challenges facing researchers in the 21st century.

The Role of Language in Shaping Intergroup Relations

With so many people of different language backgrounds living and/or working together in many parts of the world, it is tempting to characterize their interactions as evidence of a so-called linguistic melting pot. Although it is true that speakers have developed ways to communicate with one another (for instance, by developing English as the lingua franca; see Murata, 2016), this metaphor may give the impression that intercultural communication is seamless. However, given the importance of language for both personal and group identities (e.g., Giles & Johnson, 1987; Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2014), it seems inevitable that differences in language varieties, language identities, and the changing linguistic landscape will play a role in shaping the relationship between groups. Across three articles in this issue, the role language plays in navigating, dividing, and healing intergroup relations is considered.

In work by Klar et al. (2020) in Israel, Palestinian minority members' evaluations of in-group members for engaging in code-mixing (Arabic mixed with words in Hebrew or with words in English) was investigated. Palestinian participants evaluated code-mixers more negatively compared with speakers using pure Arabic. Apparently, mixing the in-group language with elements from majority languages evoked feelings of threat and signalled the possibility that in-group members might be deviating from group norms. Against this backdrop, the authors consider reactions to code-mixing as a social barometer for intergroup relations.

How threat shapes the relationship between groups is the focus of Jelić et al.'s (2020) research which focused on multiethnic communities in Croatia. Ethnonationalism, which glorifies and views the in-group as superior, emerged as a catalyst for perceptions of out-group threat. Intriguingly though, in-group identification (when controlled for ethnonationalism) was linked to less threat and discrimination against out-groups. The authors conclude with recommendations to counter ethnonationalism while also fostering a healthy attachment to one's ethnic group. Finally, Skrodzka et al. (2020) explore the role of using the in-group language to deal with historical trauma among the Lemko minority in Poland. These findings imply that using the minority in-group language can help groups cope with trauma-related thoughts and symptoms, for instance, by allowing group members to express their experiences and by offering a path for cultural continuity.

These contributions attest to the intricate and multifaceted role that language plays as groups struggle to improve and cement their position in changing societies. Indeed, it is a major challenge to reduce intergroup threat in contexts where linguistic diversity is present and there is a real (or perceived) loss of language identity at stake. A focus,

therefore, is for researchers to learn to harness language diversity as a means for improving intergroup relationships, rather than as a means for creating divisions.

Conclusion

As Allport (1954) noted, “word-magic [and sound-magic, as we might add!] plays an appreciable part in human thinking” (p. 187). The present collection of articles illustrates that nearly 70 years later, this continues to be true in increasingly complex ways. Even if words do not appear to cut slices on the surface, they are powerful in their ability to shape our perceptions of the social world. We also should not ignore the importance language plays in how identities are formed and protected, including those that are intersectional. Finally, we need to acknowledge language’s role in influencing interpersonal and intergroup relations—particularly as we navigate changing linguistic landscapes in globalized societies.

Although the language challenges we face might be novel, language challenges themselves are not new; language, particularly that which is spoken, is always evolving (Crystal, 2010). Therefore, it is important to stress that the goal of this issue is not to evoke fear about these challenges but to encourage them to be met with curiosity and an open mind. Hence, we are not suggesting that we seek to eliminate challenges but rather, that we recognize them as such and that we channel our energy toward overcoming them in positive ways. Fittingly, we end this Special Issue with an epilogue by Maggie Pitts (2020), which paves the way for a constructive approach to these 21st-century language challenges. This also includes an outlook on a particularly pressing language challenge that has emerged in this century, the communication surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas space and time have precluded the integration of this specific language challenge here, we anticipate the forthcoming Special Issue devoted to this topic by Regina Jucks and Friederike Hendriks to appear in the *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*.

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Note

1. Whereas we use this term quite literally here, the concept of *linguistic landscape* (Landry & Bourhis, 1997) referring to the salience and visibility of languages in the public or language-related policies has sparked much research of its own (e.g., Gorter, 2006) and is incorporated in language attitude models (e.g., Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010).

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