Language Weaponization in Society and Education: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract

In this article, we introduce the special issue *Language Weaponization in Society and Education*. We begin the manuscript with a preface, sharing an event that transpired during the dissemination of the Call for Proposals. We then situate the special issue in the literature by providing a brief overview of the term *language weaponization* and by providing a clear definition to frame the special issue. We end the article by introducing all the articles in the special issue.

Keywords: Language weaponization, language in society, language in education

Preface

During the beginning stage of the Special Issue, we disseminated a Call for Proposals through different media and social media outlets to expand the reach of our work and welcome a diversity of voices from around the world. In one of our social media posts, we received a response from someone unknown to us that surprised us. The person shared:

> The topics requested and the references supplied are very clearly titled to a specific perspective. Having encountered more than enough Imperialist English and anti-white rhetoric in the past decade, which has been in its excess made me blase [sic] towards its arguments, I am far more interested in what opposing arguments could be made. The use of the word weaponisation implies clearly that intent to harm forms the backbone of education and social policy—a position I'm sure all educators and policy makers of western nations would find absurd. The content and positions are mostly specific to the USA, and while there may arguably be analogous instances in other cultures, this display [sic] a remarkable lack of global awareness.

This individual took the Call for Proposal as an opportunity to express their discontent with the growing number of publications and academic works shedding light on the realities of racism and colonialism in societies. Certainly, as a person with a gender, race, and native language that has been historically assigned privileges, they are given social and political advantages that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), nonnative English speakers, women, and queer individuals do not. Of

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particular importance is the word this individual used in their rhetoric—the word *blasé*—to describe how their privilege grants them a reality where they can exist without worrying about how language use in societies will affect them or those they care about. We, BIPOC, women, queer, and minoritized individuals do not have the luxury to be blasé about how language has been—and continues to be— weaponized against us. For us and the communities where we dwell, language weaponization can and has resulted in negation, subjugation, mistreatment, slavery, segregation, physical and emotional harm, violence, and death.

Another point we would like to bring forth from this person's response is the assumption that language weaponization is exclusive to or related to Western societies only. This position is inaccurate and ignores recorded human history. The use of language to benefit some and offend, marginalize, or dehumanize others based on skin color, race and ethnicity, gender(s), sexuality(ies), nationality(ies), languages spoken, religion, and/or (dis)abilities can be found in every culture, as we will see in the articles of this special issue. The response we received from this person in social media reminds us, as coeditors, that the work we are doing is important and that the message we present in this special issue is becoming uncomfortably visible to those who have been historically in positions of privilege based solely on their condition of being born with the race, gender, sexual preference, and native language that is given more advantages in their societies.

Situating the Special Issue

Language—as a human-created social and political object—is used to (dis)empower individuals, cultures, and communities from all over the world (Eifert, 1987; McConnell-Ginet, 2020). Throughout history, language has been systematically used as a weapon to assert control, delegitimize, negate membership and opportunities, and disassociate groups of people who look and act differently from those in power. From barbaric representations of Indigenous Peoples from the Caribbean islands and the Americas in the 15th century to the most recent events of anti-Black (linguistic) racism and anti-Asian waves of discrimination and physical assaults in the 21st century, language continues to be used against selected groups to cause harm, affecting their livelihood and wellbeing. Minoritized languages and people struggle with the residual effects of colonization, discrimination, and globalization, which results in self-devaluating practices and in limited opportunities for global participation. Inspired by the challenges and opportunities language poses in societies, especially in issues related to language use and social justice, we introduce this special issue.

Language Weaponization: A Brief Overview

The term *language weaponization* emerged in military studies and political sciences in the early 1900s to refer to how language was controlled or manipulated. One of the first available publications referring to the weaponization of language is the document titled *Language as a Communist Weapon* by the Committee on Un-American Activities and Dr. Stefan T. Possony (1959). In this document, language weaponization, although not explicitly defined, is understood as communists' language manipulation to propagate their doctrine and dominate the world. After this initial publication, the construct of language as a weapon was propagated in the social sciences with publications such as *Language: Mirror, Tool, and Weapon* (Kelling, 1975) and *La manipulación del hombre a través del lenguaje* [The manipulation of men through language] (López Quintás, 1987), which approached language weaponization from the purview that language use (i.e., speech, media, etc.) controls thought and behavior. In 1980, the book *Language, the Loaded Weapon: The Use and Abuse of Language Today* (Dwight, 1980) became one of the first texts analyzing the construct of language as a weapon in the field of linguistics.

In the 2000s, the construct of language weaponization has continued to gain momentum in scholarly publications in the fields of military studies (e.g., Lupion, 2018; Rafael, 2012), social sciences (e.g., Pascale, 2019; Stahl, 2016), and linguistics (e.g., Fairclough, 2015; McConnell-Ginet, 2020). However, it is important to note that the construct of language weaponization remains explicitly undefined in those and other emerging publications. This special issue uses as a foundation the previously mentioned literature exploring the use of language as a weapon from different viewpoints (see also the special issue by Dovchin, 2020), and positions itself at the margins of these conversations. Our vision with this special issue is to bring a different perspective to bear on this construct in applied linguistics and sister fields (i.e., second language acquisition [SLA], TESOL, etc.) to provide a new lens through which language use can be analyzed. We hope this special issue serves as a starting point for future conversations in the field of applied linguistics that explore the use of language as a weapon with the power to affect the wellbeing of individuals and groups.

What Do We Mean by Language Weaponization?

In this special issue, we use the term language weaponization—or the *weaponization of language*—to describe the process by which words, discourse, and language in any form have been used or are being used to inflict harm on others, and how language education practices, policies, programs, and curricula are weaponized (Bryan & Gerald, 2020; Pascale, 2019; Rafael, 2016). In this definition, the term *harm* is of vital importance because it refers to how minoritized individuals, as well as their cultures and languages, are affected by ideologies and practices that normalize inequity and injustice in their environment. The contributions in this special issue advance ongoing conversations in the field of applied linguistics about the relationship of language and social justice (e.g., Baumgarten & Du Bois, 2019; Dovchin, 2020). This issue is, to our knowledge, the first special issue devoted to approaching this conversation from the lens of language weaponization.

Introduction to the Special Issue

This special issue includes eight manuscripts that approach the topic of language weaponization in society and education from different frames of reference. In the first article, "Problematizing Fluent Speakers' Unintentional Exclusion of Emergent Bilinguals: A Case Study of an English-Medium Instruction Classroom in Japan," Akiko Kiyota explores how marginalization is co-constructed in English-medium instruction (EMI) classrooms in Japan. The findings of this case study invite further dialogues on how language can be used to exclude, even if unintentionally, emergent bilinguals in EMI. The second article, titled "'A Hard Time Seeing the Relevance': Race and Discourse Identity in Language Teacher Preparation," Tasha Austin investigates the conceptual and linguistic weaponization of race evasiveness among language teacher educators (LTEs). Findings indicate that participants understood culture as racialized, which shaped the conceptions of self in accounting for various class markers including phenotype, language, gender identity, citizenship, ethnicity, and nationality. In the third article, "The Weaponization of French and Rejection of Maghrebi Arabic in a French High School: Effects on Franco-Maghrebi Students," Sandrine Pell reports on a four-month ethnographic study in a rural French high school. The results in Pell's study indicate that the school policies enacted at the high school alongside national policies and discourses promoted a culture of colonial monolingualism, delegitimizing the cultures and languages of Franco-Maghrebi students.

In the fourth article, titled "Is the Language You Teach Racist? Reflections and Considerations for English and Spanish (Teacher) Educators," Luis Javier Pentón Herrera advocates for the necessity of decolonizing language education, taking a primary interest in the English and Spanish languages and in the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas and the Caribbean islands. This author ends the

manuscript with an invitation for language teachers, language teacher educators (LTEs), and those in the field of applied linguistics to continue this difficult but necessary dialogue about decolonizing language education and the way they teach. In the fifth article, "Unpacking Language Weaponization in Spanish(es): Supporting Transnational Antiracist Relationality," Cristina Sánchez-Martín and Laura Gonzales argue for a need to center Black Latinx and Indigenous experiences in discussions and definitions of Spanish and Spanish-speaking communities in the US. The authors end the essay with an invitation for further reflection and conversation on how to develop networks of solidarity and collaborative antiracist work. In the sixth article, "(Re)constructing Gay: A Classroom,and a Journey to Rhetorical Listening," Gabriel T. Acevedo Velázquez proposes using rhetorical listening pedagogy in classrooms and illustrates a series of arbitrations that show rhetorical listening as an applicable tool for discussing issues of queer identity in the classroom. The author ends with suggestions on how to expand the usage of rhetorical listening pedagogy, including rhetorical silence.

In the seventh article, titled "Weaponizing and De-weaponizing Antiracist Discourse: Some Things for Language Educators to Consider," Peter De Costa, Lee Her, and Vashti Lee explore the close relationship between the effects of language use and weaponization in society and in education. Further, the authors reflect on two examples of anti-Asian racism and end their commentary by proposing antiracist education in the form of critical language awareness development and solidarity building among individuals and organizations. The eighth and final article, "The Weaponization of Mandarin Chinese," looks at how language is weaponized in China from a macro perspective, making a case for how the Chinese Communist Party possesses the power to manipulate language as well as to shape public discourse, public perception, opinion, and behavior. Xu Bian ends the article by stating that the weaponization of Mandarin Chinese demonstrates how authoritarian and totalitarian governments can use—and have used—language to assert control and spread fear and inequity in society.

The articles, while authored by different scholars, introduce in unison the topic of language weaponization in society and education by exploring different events where language is used to affect (either positively or negatively) the wellbeing of oneself, an individual, or group of people. The different voices and perspectives carried in these essays invite us, as a field, to continue exploring how language is weaponized in society and educational spaces, assigning or denying privilege and opportunities to individuals at different levels. We hope colleagues and scholars will use this special issue as a point of reference to continue the conversation of language weaponization in society and education in other academic spaces.

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