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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Transformative justice as a method in applied linguistics

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Abstract

Transformative justice is a vision, a framework, and a theory of change which pushes for radical abolition and reimagining of entire systems. It is a community-led strategy which centers on and seeks to uproot structural determinants of oppression. In this article, I outline how applied linguistics can and should draw on transformative justice principles as a methodology for doing applied linguistics and as an underpinning theory of change for the discipline itself. I explore how transformative justice in applied linguistics involves addressing the colonial roots of the discipline and its complicity in perpetuating raciolinguistic ideologies and co-constituted discourses of linguistic deficiency. I argue for new conceptualizations of impact which prioritize community solidarity. I argue for applied linguists to end collaborations with the police, the military, and the prison industrial complex, showing how these collaborations rely on systems of punitive accountability and modest reforms. I argue that transformative justice is a life-affirming theory of change for the discipline of applied linguistics and for the marginalized communities we work with.

Keywords: social justice; transformative methodology; transformative justice; abolition; raciolinguistic ideologies; linguistic justice; state violence

Transformative justice begins from the perspective that the intersectional and systemic oppression which organizes the modern world does not mean that the system is broken; it means that the system is working exactly as it was designed to. It rejects theories of change which rely on modest reforms and instead pushes for radical abolition and the reimagining of entire systems. In this article, I argue that applied linguistics can and should be guided by the principles and practices of transformative justice as a vision, a methodology, and an underpinning theory of change for the discipline. This methodology looks both outward and inward in terms of the communities and organizations that applied linguists work with, as well as within the discipline itself. In doing so, applied linguists can open themselves up to an infinite world of possibilities beyond what is typically counted as legible, appropriate, and normative in what it means to use

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language. Justice can only be achieved when inherently unjust systems are transformed, and language is central to such transformational efforts.

Conceptualizing transformative justice

Transformative justice is a structural analysis of oppression, a practical organizing strategy for change, and a political vision for what we can build (Kaba, 2021). It gets to the root of where injustices are designed and seeks to generate solutions and healing (Morris, 1989, 2000). It is an abolitionist movement which draws inspiration from long histories of community organization and activism which push for the defunding and abolition of the police and the military, the dismantling of the prison industrial complex, and the elimination of geopolitical borders in the belief that they represent punitive, violent, and repressive forms of social control and discipline which are designed to hurt rather than heal (Davis, 2003; Kaba & Ritchie, 2022; Purnell, 2021; Vitale, 2017). Developed primarily by low-income, Black, Indigenous, LGBTQ+, migrant, and disabled communities, transformative justice is slow work which builds support and safety for communities who experience harm at the hands of punitive systems. It seeks to understand the broader sociopolitical and economic contexts which allowed that harm to happen in the first place, creating new realities which protect against future harm. It rejects theories of justice which rely on retributive responses to harm, and instead prioritizes healing, repair, and nonpunitive accountability, which focus on social relationships built on solidarity and care. It seeks to improve conditions and relations so that harm and trauma are less likely to occur, targeting the root causes and structural determinants of injustices such as poverty, unemployment, housing, and access to education. It is a long-term project which rejects overly pragmatic, instrumentalist visions for justice. Ultimately, it is a rehearsal for a possible world (Acheson, 2022; Gilmore, 2022).

Language and structural injustice

Linguistic injustice is a structural design feature which is hardwired into all aspects of society. Given this, the only path to linguistic justice is through a radical dismantling, reimagining, and rebuilding of entire structures. There is no linguistic justice within inherently unjust structures. Undoing linguistic injustice and sowing the seeds for transformational change requires getting to the root of sociolinguistic and biological classifications and hierarchies. At this root lies European colonialism and its durable legacies.

Language was a central concern to European colonizers and, therefore, must be a central concern in transformative efforts toward justice. Beginning in the 1400s, European colonizers framed Indigenous and Black African populations as linguistically and biologically subhuman, representing their language as chronically deficient, brutish, animal-like, devilish, gibberish, and incapable of representing complex thoughts (Smith, 2009). As they continue to do today, racist and anti-Indigenous ideologies intersect closely with ableism – such as the vilification of signed languages, where non-spoken modes of communication are deemed to be crude and inferior, and once led to efforts to eradicate them as a form of imperial control (Baynton, 1996;

Henner & Robinson, 2023). European colonizers arrived in Africa and encountered bodies, clothing, and relationships which transcended their rigid worldview of binary gender conformity. They imported homophobic and transphobic ideologies, which continue to be used to justify stigma, criminalization, and medical intervention (Tamale, 2013). Much of contemporary applied linguistics clings fast to cisheteronormativity and perpetuates ideologies rooted in rigid ideas about language, which do not reflect the fluid realities of everyday language practices (Knisely, 2023) and thus have the potential to cause miscategorization and harm. The disciplining and criminalization of literacy practices was a central part of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, actively designed to prevent enslaved Africans from reading and writing while maintaining undereducated sources of labor in the service of white supremacy (Willis, 2023). Put another way, hierarchies of language were co-constructed with hierarchies of race, class, bodies, and ability, producing taxonomies of il/legitimate personhood, which continue to be used to justify oppression and control (Trouillot, 2015). As Errington's (2007) history shows us, European linguists and missionaries (who would often be one and the same as colonizers) played a central part in the arrangement of non-European speakers and their languages into hierarchies – such that “colonial subjects could be recognized as human, yet deficiently so” (Errington, 2007, p. 5).

The prevailing approach in US and European applied linguistics has been to separate the study of languages from the people who use those languages. Rejecting this separation, a *raciolinguistic perspective* (Rosa & Flores, 2017) seeks to untangle the colonial co-construction of linguistic and racial classifications and thus puts struggles for linguistic justice in dialogue with broader political struggles (see also Wei & García, 2022). A raciolinguistic perspective also shows us how mainstream approaches to applied and sociolinguistics have focused on celebrating linguistic diversity in a way which fails to locate it as part of broader colonial histories – and in doing so, fails to challenge the broader power structures which shape contemporary society. Taking caution from this, a transformative justice approach to applied linguistics sees language as central to all justice efforts and contexts, including prison–police–military abolition, education, dis/ability, healthcare, decolonization, housing, work, race, class, the climate crisis, gender, and sexuality. It represents a radical theory of change which rejects calls for marginalized communities to modify their language practices and instead challenges colonial and capitalist matrices of power which legitimize dehumanization, disposability, and dispossession.

Transformative justice as a methodology in applied linguistics

At its very core, transformative justice in applied linguistics is about creating conditions that support the safety and well-being of marginalized communities while sharpening our critical understanding of how the state enacts, funds, and legitimizes violence against them in the service of white supremacy, anti-Blackness, racial capitalism, and cisheteronormativity. As Paris and Winn (2014) show us, transformative justice is a humanizing methodology which works with communities that have endured centuries of linguistic and biological denigration, underscored by processes of dialogue, respect, healing, and care. It involves standing in solidarity with communities who have long been framed as deficient because of perceptions about how they use language and

their perceived deviations from idealized linguistic whiteness – including by applied linguists themselves (see Avineri & Martinez, 2021 and Bucholtz et al., 2023 for discussions). But this goes beyond inadequate methods of “inclusion” and “diversity,” emphasizing the need for methodologies which prioritize the lifeworlds, experiences, and linguistic realities of those most affected by colonial regimes of linguistic normativity. This must reject assimilationist, reformist, and accommodation-based theories of change, which focus primarily on modifying how marginalized communities use language and which locate the root of social injustice as about language and language alone. In line with Charity Hudley’s notion of *liberatory linguistics*, transformative justice methodologies center work that is valued, endorsed, and needed by marginalized communities in “recognising the material and intellectual profit from the linguistic value of community knowledge” (Charity Hudley, 2023, p. 214). The discipline of applied linguistics can suppress and stigmatize, but it can also liberate and honor.

Given the colonial foundations of applied linguistics and the overrepresentation of whiteness within it (Deumert et al., 2020; Flores & Rosa, 2023), transformative justice is anticolonial work. As such, it is crucial to interrogate how concepts and methods in applied linguistics, which are often claimed to be universalist, often rely on and reproduce dominant relations of power which assume that reformist approaches to language can produce justice and progress. One such example in England is the concept of *oracy*, referring to speaking and listening skills as integrated into a school curriculum. Oracy is increasingly framed by charities, educational consultants, and policymakers from across the political spectrum as a tool to enable social justice, packaged into a theory of change which assumes that the modification of spoken language toward normative patterns is an effective means to achieve equality for marginalized children. As well as representing a flawed theory of justice, oracy also represents a flawed theory of language – for its original conception by white applied linguists in the 1960s relied on deficit framings which dichotomized the “language-poor” homes of racialized, disabled, and working-class children with the “language-rich” homes of white, able-bodied, middle-class children (Wilkinson, 1965). This flawed theory of change for social justice is readily reproduced by UK-based educational consultants and academics under the guises of societal progressivism and charitable benevolence (see Cushing, 2024). Yet these claims to the affirmation of marginalized children rely on them making changes to themselves and thus function as deceptive forms of stigmatization. These same logics underscore discourses and interventions concerning the so-called word gap, in which the language practices of marginalized families (particularly those racialized as Black) are deemed to be deficient, that this purported shortcoming is the root cause of their struggles in society, and thus the path to justice lies in them modifying their own linguistic behaviors (see, e.g., Aggarwal, 2016; Cushing, 2023; Figueroa, 2024 and Johnson & Johnson, 2021). While many applied linguists have rejected language gap narratives and the anti-Black methodologies and ideologies they are built on, some applied and educational linguists continue to engage in gap-based interventions and technologies which pathologize marginalized families and locate supposed vocabulary deficiencies as the root cause of social injustice (e.g., Golinkoff et al., 2019).

Transformative justice rejects such mainstream theories of change, choosing instead to center rather than overlook the structural determinants of oppression. Working with

this theory of change, applied linguists can seek to disrupt normative assumptions about language by shifting their endeavors toward linguistic justice within broader anticolonial, antiracist, and abolitionist efforts. This methodological shift away from stigmatized populations and toward oppressive structures puts transformative justice into dialogue with a raciolinguistic perspective, committing to an approach which is less concerned with the documentation, description, and categorization of empirical language practices and more concerned with institutionalized power structures and their colonial legacies. In their own vision for transformative justice to literacy education, Maisha Winn echoes these sentiments in terms of “whether we will listen with filters of correctness and appropriateness or embody stances that support their goals for articulating their dreams, ideas, and intentions” (Winn, 2018, p. 221). Winn’s work pushes us all to address the intersections of race, history, language, and justice to imagine and enable a world where marginalized populations can draw on their own linguistic resources without fear of correction, shame, and punishment.

Transformative justice in applied linguistics rejects *extractive* methodologies, which are reliant on collecting, cleansing, organizing, sorting, and ranking data. It centers relationships by doing research *with* communities as opposed to on and about them, designing questions, methodologies, and forms of dissemination in which they play an active rather than peripheral or secondary role. Black community activists in 1960s Britain provide us with a model for what community-led organization in applied linguistics can look like – specifically the Black supplementary schools and their efforts to reclaim Black knowledge, culture, and language as a response to the racist systems of mainstream schooling which Black elders found that their children were being subjected to. Black supplementary schools were pivotal in campaigning against the racist structures of mainstream schools while simultaneously creating spaces where Black children were liberated to realize their full creative and linguistic potential. These spaces existed in necessary contrast to so-called Schools for the Educationally Subnormal, in which Black children were disproportionately placed based on racist perceptions about their linguistic and cognitive capacities (see Coard, 1971 and Gerrard, 2013 for critical overviews). As such, the Black supplementary schools movement is a prime example of how grassroots activist organizers rejected the racism in mainstream schooling and looked instead to local community expertise and knowledge in order to build systems which affirmed and centered Black lives as opposed to othering them (Andrews, 2016). Drawing inspiration from historical struggles such as the Black supplementary schools movement, transformative justice in applied linguistics combines a structural critique of unjust systems with a practical vision for radical and alternative worlds.

These principles for collective transformation must inform how applied linguists conceptualize so-called impact and knowledge exchange work, especially in light of universities driven by metrics, economic power, league tables, pressures to produce rapid labor within short temporal cycles, and an increased impetus for academics to evidence a material change in local communities. From a transformative justice perspective, impact and knowledge exchange are not always innocent forms of benevolent work but have the potential to reify colonial logics that the modification of stigmatized language practices is a viable theory of social justice. I have witnessed first-hand hastily assembled impact and knowledge exchange projects by senior academics deployed

under a narrative of empowering teachers and marginalized children to cope with new curriculum demands, but at their core lies a subscription to prescriptive and colonial ideologies of curriculum and so-called standardized academic language. The result of this is that academics' own interests are served, rewarded, and applauded while reproducing language-as-accommodation logics which suggest that marginalized children are best helped when they shift toward dominant societal language practices in school. But as scholars aligning with the goals of transformative justice have long told us, the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house (Lorde, 1984/2003; see also Baker-Bell, 2020 and Cioè-Peña, 2022). Furthermore, impact and knowledge exchange projects too often rely on transmissive modes of knowledge dissemination, which reproduce power imbalances in which academic linguists are positioned as all-knowing and authoritative. A transformative justice approach to impact and knowledge exchange in applied linguistics seeks to foster solidarity and collaboration with communities in ways which prioritize their needs and lived experiences, rejecting missionary logics which rely on hierarchical models of power and knowledge. It questions the viability of university-designed tools to conceptualize and measure impact, instead seeing impact as something defined by transformation rather than accommodation and assimilation. It questions the ethics of short-term measurements of impact and change, instead engaging in slow work which pushes for radical redesign. Meaningful impact work in applied linguistics is not about helping others to navigate normative ideologies about language within curricula, tests, and policies but is about joining forces with community partners to collaboratively reject and dismantle such ideologies all together.

Ending collaborations with punitive organizations

Who we partner with, who funds, and who benefits from our work should be the focus of critical interrogation. Applied linguists committed to transformative justice would end all collaborations with the police, the military, and the prison industrial complex and join others in calling for their abolition, given how these institutions were, and continue to be, designed to protect systems of colonial domination, whiteness, and the ruling classes (Elliot-Cooper, 2021; Neocleous, 2021; Nijjar, 2018).

There is a long history of linguistics research being funded by and done in collaboration with the police and the military. As the Second World War unfolded, the US military increasingly saw language as a weapon (Martin-Nielsen, 2010), with significant military funding into machine translation projects, where "language emerged as essential for advancing the American cause" (p. 142). The subsequent and rapid expansion of university linguistics departments in the 1960s continued to receive major military investment, with Chomsky's field-shaping work on transformational grammar subsidized by the US military and NASA (see Barsky, 1997 and Heller & McElhinny, 2017). Earlier than this, the first linguistics department in the United Kingdom was founded in 1932 at the School of Oriental and African Studies, receiving government funds to train colonial administrators and military translators, some of whom were posted to the UK Government Communication Headquarters (GCHQ). GCHQ is a cryptography and secret intelligence agency whose activities include the

mass surveillance of activist organizations and the private lives of millions of citizens. Many applied linguists in the United Kingdom continue to accept funding from GCHQ, and it routinely positions itself as a benevolent force for good which has language awareness and intercultural harmony as its principal mission, such as in its annual competition of language analysis for school children. At the core of GCHQ's work, however, is a discourse and practice which ties together language in/competency, border control, and state securitization, producing narratives of fear in which racialized others who lack competence in English – particularly Muslims – are constructed as threats to the stability and purity of the nation (see Khan, 2020).

Advised by applied linguists, the British Army recently responded to a decline in language learning in schools by implementing a new language policy of their own which sought to train soldiers in languages classified as important to maintaining British national security. Applied linguists in the United Kingdom have commended this initiative (e.g., Ayres-Bennett, 2016), despite linguist–military collaborations producing raciolinguistic profiling under the guises of security and protection. The field of forensic linguistics is particularly complicit in police–military collaborations, with its work often seeking to advise, guide, and train police officers in their law enforcement work in the belief that making modest modifications to individual minds and language choices will produce more equitable police–suspect interactions (e.g., O'Mahony et al., 2012). Transformative justice rejects that such work represents an adequate theory of change and instead pushes for the abolition of inherently violent and unjust systems rather than simply attempting to repair them.

Applied linguists committed to transformative justice would end all collaborations with the police and join the global call for complete police abolition. The police represent an arm of state violence which has long been modeled on military power, military technologies, and military language (Neocleous, 2021). The police do not keep marginalized communities safe and are designed to maintain the safety of the ruling classes. Yet applied linguists have long advised police departments, including on databases and tools used to covertly surveil and criminalize language practices deemed to be attributed to gangs – particularly when produced by Black communities (e.g., Grant, 2017). There is a widespread assumption that linguists have an important role to play in delivering courtroom justice (e.g., Tiersma & Solan, 2002) rather than questioning the very legitimacy of the criminal punishment system itself. Some of this work has been critical of the police, such as analyzing body camera footage to document how police officers speak in more hostile ways to Black people than white people (e.g., Voigt et al., 2017). Yet this same work concludes that linguists must work with the police and offer them training, in the belief that this will somehow improve police–community interactions and relations. Such conclusions are rooted in reformist logics, which assume that small-scale tweaks to individual attitudes can fix inherently racist institutions. Transformative justice in applied linguistics rejects any collaborations with the police, given that collaborations of this nature always take place with an institutionally racist and patriarchal organization.

The colonial logics of prisons and policing extend to schools. These logics entail that racialized children are routinely criminalized and pushed out of school for their perceived failures to perform, including in how they use language (Morris, 2016). Teachers here become the eyes and the ears of the police, watching and listening for behavior

and language which is discursively constructed as symbolic of criminal involvement. As Cabral's (2023) work on linguistic confinement and Rudolph's (2023) work on racialized discipline shows us, *language policing* is not a metaphor but is intimately entangled with carceral logics and statecraft efforts to dispossess marginalized communities. Carceral logics point to how schools are racialized and classed spaces of containment, control, and exclusion – where the perceived failure to produce language reflective of idealized whiteness is part of a broader ideology which frames racialized children as threatening, dangerous, disruptive, and criminals. The language of warfare permeates policing, and the language of policing and crime permeates many schools, especially when used to contain nonstandardized language practices deemed to be in breach of institutionalized norms (Cushing, 2020). Abolitionists have long argued that the police have no place in our society and our schools (e.g., Hall et al., 1978; Joseph-Salisbury, 2021) and a transformational justice perspective also argues they have no place in applied linguistics. Instead, applied linguists should look to foster dialogue with organizations whose work is underpinned by transformative principles, cross movement solidarity, and community empowerment, which resists systemic violence as characterized by the police, the criminal punishment system, and disciplinary mechanisms in schools. Organizations in the United Kingdom, such as Kids of Colour (a Manchester-based charity supporting young people to resist racism in schools and broader society) and the Northern Police Monitoring Project (an organization building community resistance to police racism), have long engaged in successful efforts to push back against the growing normalization of police presence in schools (see Connelly et al., 2020). Applied linguists seeking to engage seriously with the principles of transformative justice should look to such organizations as inspiration and guidance, and have a key role to play in exposing how normative ideologies about language contribute to the criminalization of marginalized children.

Transformative justice as a practical vision for applied linguistics

Transformative linguistic justice is not just a utopian and unrealistic vision because it is already happening. Privileged communities who never experience language discrimination and oppression are experiencing linguistic justice. That same experience is possible for marginalized communities. As applied linguists continue to grapple with the extent to which our work contributes to real-world change (Kubota, 2023), transformative justice offers a practical vision which rejects bipartisan theories of progress, justice, and change that are ultimately reliant on the modification and disposability of marginalized communities. In connecting struggles for linguistic justice with broader social justice efforts, applied linguists can begin to work with theories of change which refuse to locate language as individualized sites of remediation and equality. This stance and methodology should not be seen as particularly revolutionary but necessary, long-term, and fully practical. But this depends on whether applied linguistics is ready to do so.

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