<LRH>Rejecting Competence

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<AT>Rejecting Competence – Essentialist Constructs Reproduce Ableism and White Supremacy in Linguistic Theory: A Commentary on "Undoing Competence: Coloniality, Homogeneity, and the Overrepresentation of Whiteness in Applied Linguistics"

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As scholars who seek to decenter normative modes of language learning and use in (applied) linguistic theory and practice, and as individuals whose own language practices have been labeled as disordered and atypical, we read Flores and Rosa's undoing of competence in applied linguistics as a call for the rejection of competence and related essentialist constructs in linguistics.

We begin with Flores and Rosa's argument that language boundaries (e.g., what makes "English" perceived and labeled as different from "Spanish") are colonial constructs; in other words, myths disguised as social facts. In a world where language boundaries are established politically, "unbounded language" centers the individual's ability to navigate various discourses in multilingual and multimodal contexts. While rejections of boundedness have often been only considered relevant in exoticized contexts (i.e., prefixed as *multi–*), this theoretical move is more transformative and more widely applicable than some linguists might expect. For example, treating boundaries as socially constructed—as opposed to natural analytic objects—allows linguists to stop wallowing in false dichotomies such as gesture versus sign (Lepic & Occhino, 2018), to stop worrying about drawing boundaries between linguistic and nonlinguistic communication (Moriarty Harrelson, 2019), and even to stop categorizing language as disordered or not (Henner & Robinson, 2021).

Flores and Rosa have pointed out that consistency across languagers does not exist even in languages that are presumed to be bounded (cf. Kidd et al., 2018). Relatedly, Cheng et al. (2022) found that "nativeness" is inadequate when it comes to predicting consistent language experience and behavior in experimental contexts. Alongside contending with the white supremacist origins of these terms, this requires scholars to reject the notion that monolingual, native speaker/signer, and possibly even modality can be useful analytic

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objects. Rather, these are better thought of as language ideologies or language-ideological assemblages (Birkeland et al., 2022) that are (re)produced by the sociohistorical contexts in which these terms and associated thinking emerged.

Recognizing that variation is the norm and that idealized languaging is theoretical is just the first step. The crucial next step is for all work on language to meaningfully address its alignment with an idealized version of a language. Because no one uses the idealized language, scholars must also recognize that typical development is not typical. Language development is highly variable, and people who do not align with these very specific and politicized parameters are quickly labeled deviant, disordered, disabled, or not competent. Indeed, the rejections of competence, boundedness, and homogeneity advocated by Flores and Rosa provide even more fertile theoretical ground for rejecting "disordered" as a valid description of language practices because the relevant structures of oppression have similar sources.

Flores and Rosa's perspective from educational linguistics is critical for all of linguistics. Schools are sites of state violence that reproduce and reinforce racist, sexist, ableist, classist, and other oppressive ideologies via curriculum and assessment planning. Attempts to reduce frictions between identity borders like racial desegregation often reproduce the violence that necessitated desegregation in the first place. For example, the desegregation policies enacted after *Brown v. Board of Education* destroyed the schools that were the center of various Black communities. These schools had centered Black cultures and ways of languaging and created a Black middle class of teachers, principals, and superintendents. Desegregation removed these schools, the associated jobs, and affirmatory spaces (Horsford, 2010). In white schools, Black ways of languaging and behavior are

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heavily policed. Black students are overrepresented in specialized education and underrepresented in gifted programs. As Flores and Rosa point out, competence as it is applied in schooling is a function of these institutions being rooted in white supremacist policies. By virtue of being nonwhite, racialized students are presumed incompetent (Love & Beneke, 2021). This is where racialization intersects disability because, when competence is a byproduct of ability, and both are seen as essential characteristics, lack of competence is labeled "disability."

Flores and Rosa have made an additional argument, which we read to be directed at the field of linguistics: Because the constructs underpinning most approaches to (socio)linguistics in the United States share an ideological basis with institutional discrimination, linguists who are invested in social justice and decoloniality must also commit to interrogating theoretical assumptions such as competence, innateness, nativeness, and boundedness—along with recognizing that a topic such as "typical" language development is a construct at all. By virtue of being tied to these constructs, either explicitly or implicitly, recruiting participants for a study on sentential focus in American English, tracking the acquisition of verbal morphology in British Sign Language, or determining subgroupings for South Dravidian are all contexts where social justice is relevant. The burden of proof is on those linguists who are invested in the theoretical status of these constructs to argue for their utility in the face of their ableist colonialist origins. Because the root of Flores and Rosa's work is also educational linguistics, we extend these arguments to education broadly, especially in the genre of intervention-based research.

All this rejecting—of competence, boundedness, typicality—may leave some readers in dismay: Labels are useful, as is delineating the scope of a particular field of inquiry. We

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see this not as a call to throw up our hands in postmodern despair but rather as an opportunity to expand our empirical scope and make precise our research practices, in a way that epistemological dustbins such as nonnative speaker, nonlinguistic, or disordered might have discouraged. Flores and Rosa have invited all scholars to interrogate and redefine the central questions and constructs of their field—to expand, as Charity Hudley et al. (2020) have encouraged, their notion of what linguistics is and can be.

A final point: Much of Flores and Rosa's argument on competence requires a reading of Hymes. For us, this brings up the question of whether or not abusers need to be pointed out as abusers during the citation process (Ennser-Kananen, 2019). Hymes may be a father of sociolinguistics, but we believe scholars do the field a disservice if, alongside citing his work, we do not memorialize the lost potential of the generations of women sociolinguists of whom Hymes may have deprived the field.

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