

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Abandoning inauthentic intersectionality

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Abstract

In the time since the term “intersectionality” was first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the term has gained a measure of widespread, even viral popularity. Increasingly, psycholinguists are citing this concept to promote work which more fully engages with the consequences of human diversity for language processing. This piece discusses the ways in which “intersectionality” has thus far been engaged by the field of psycholinguistics. I argue that the common usage of the term “intersectionality” is notably out of step with the tradition of Black feminist scholarship from which it derives. Originally defined as an analytical framework for examining the effect of interlocking oppressions in erasing the distinctive experiences of multiply marginalized people, intersectionality should not be invoked without any serious and specific discussion of oppressive systems or erasure. To achieve a more just and equitable applied psycholinguistics and authentically promote intersectional approaches to understanding language behavior, intersectionality must be taken as a framework primarily engaging with effects of structural violence. The article concludes with some guidelines for readers to assist in distinguishing “intersectional” claims which perform erasure from those which reflect the original and intended anti-misogynoir applications of the theory.

Keywords: adult typical language; bilingualism; narrative and discourse; speech perception; child typical language

Increasingly, psycholinguists are citing the concept of intersectionality to promote work as more fully engaging with human diversity. In the time since the term was first introduced into American jurisprudence by Kimberlé Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1990, 1989 [2018]), the term has gained a measure of widespread, even viral popularity (Coaston, 2019). There is nonetheless ongoing disagreement regarding how the concept should be defined, understood, and applied across numerous fields (Collins, 2015).

The nebulous definition of intersectionality has been identified as a key element of its success (Davis, 2008). The language is flexible, adaptable, and readily borrowed. However, the expansive vagueness of intersectionality is also readily implicated in the concept’s co-optation and commodification (Salem, 2018). Conversely,

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some critics of intersectionality argue that it is too inflexible, failing to fully articulate inclusive aims (Curry, 2022; Lugones, 2014; Nagel, 2019). I here attempt to put forward an interpretation of intersectionality, which is responsive to this criticism, while remaining firmly rooted in its original Black feminist tradition.

Nash (2017) terms the contentious landscape surrounding intersectionality's definition "the intersectionality wars." This paper is not intended to rescue or rehabilitate intersectionality as a project, but to make the genealogy of the term and criticism of its concepts more accessible to psycholinguists, while resisting ongoing attempts to disconnect the term from its roots (Buchanan & Wiklund, 2021).

Questions of psycholinguistic interest are uniquely positioned to benefit from intersectionality as an analytic lens, given its inception as a tool to navigate and reconcile conflicting discourses, defining perceptual forms that can be alternately read both as stable and as subject to continuous intervention and resignification. Following (Salem, 2018), I discuss "intersectionality" as a *lens*. As with the lenses in a pair of eyeglasses, we can therefore consider the intersectional analytic lens as a perceptual aid. The use of this perceptual aid is not a neutral act, nor does it guarantee clear perception, but it does allow us to begin the process of identifying that which is imperceptible without it. As Maria Lugones writes, "the interlocking of oppressions is disabling us from *perceiving* and *resisting* oppressions as intermeshed or fused [emphasis added]" (Lugones, 2014, p. 76).¹ My interpretation of intersectionality places at its center the tension between understandings of reality as articulated from different positionalities, identifying opposition to the erasure Lugones describes as central to its inception. Intersectional approaches have the capacity to promote justice because they demand attention to the central role of institutionalized discursive erasure in maintaining outcomes of social exclusion and marginalization. However, justice must be sought through intellectual humility, not the further *imposition* of institutionally defined identities onto marginalized people.

In this paper, I begin by historically situating applied psycholinguistics as a discipline, before introducing intersectionality as a term and providing some examples of its application. In examining efforts toward diversity and inclusion in the psychological sciences, I discuss the WEIRD acronym (Henrich et al., 2010) as a point of comparison, demonstrating that its race-averse logics are comparatively absent from early literature on intersectionality. In the sections that follow, I trace the genealogy of intersectionality as a Black feminist concept and then present a critique of how the concept has been engaged in linguistics. Psycholinguists are encouraged to collaboratively develop critical consciousness with respect to the omnipresent significance of social differences. Finally, I discuss some research which I consider especially foundational to contemporary intersectional psycholinguistics before offering some suggested guidelines for evaluating the application of intersectionality.

Author positionality statement

As I have moved through life, I have enjoyed both the privilege of inhabiting prestigious spaces, and the stigma of being identified as alien to them. I have had to navigate the choice to disclose or (attempt to) conceal marginalized positionalities.

However, I have never occupied a social position such that I was faced with constant threats, open derision and ridicule, unemployment, incarceration, or deportation. My home country, the USA, has been at war for my entire living memory, but I have had the freedom to hold that fact separate from the question of my own survival. I have had the freedom to pursue academic inquiries precisely because my existence is not fundamentally positioned as *outside the law*. Reflecting on this fact, as I trace intersectionality back to the publications which most famously legitimated the term in mainstream discourse, I cannot ignore that the findings presented pertain to what interpretations of language are deemed legally in keeping with the interests of the US government.

The most relevant positionalities to a discussion of intersectionality are the hypercriminalized and hypervulnerable roles assigned to poor, disabled, Indigenous, dark skinned, Black, transfeminine, and fat people. My good fortune to hold community with such individuals, and my awareness of the privilege I am awarded by their erasure, leads me to center these perspectives in my theory. I am neither dark skinned nor transfeminine, and I am generally able to present as neurotypical and able-bodied when I choose, though I would that I never had to make such choices.

Adopting intersectionality as a transformative ethic

In the context of a rapidly changing sociodiscursive landscape, intersectionality should be considered an *aspiration* of research projects to be dynamically engaged in dismantling oppressive systems. I thus define intersectionality as not only identifying but *opposing* the construction of distinctive and interlocking oppressions, positioning the framework as entailing a *transformative ethic* which aspires to improve the material conditions of oppressed communities.

Intersectionality demands that we engage the complexity of social experiences as they are simultaneously shaped and *obscured* by oppression. Defining, for example, the social significance of “fatness,” requires accounting for the social tension which produces paradoxical combinations of fat hypervisibility and fat invisibility. That is to say, to accurately characterize social dimensions of speech, we must also account for the social dimensions of *silencing*. Unfortunately, one way the term “intersectionality” has been widely popularized is as a way of simply indexing the observation that diversity bears some abstract significance, without adopting a stance on the violence inherent to the production of hypervisibility and invisibility.

In linguistics, intersectionality is largely invoked without any serious and specific discussion of oppressive systems or erasure, especially racism (Eckert, 2014, 2019; Kirkham, 2015; Levon, 2015). Intersectional analysis emphasizes the impossibility of capturing social complexity through unidimensional measures, but it must not be reduced to this singular observation that “no one category is sufficient to account for an individual’s experiences or practices” (Levon, 2011, pp. 69–70). Instead, we should understand intersectional analysis as intended to productively *leverage* this fact in opposition to injustice.

Rather than defining multiplicities of identities, we should take the term *intersections* to narrowly define *relationships of violence* between constructed social stations. For example, a violent actor can be described as applying any number of hateful rubrics (e.g., sexism, racism, and transmisogyny). But when we adopt a

position of solidarity with their victim, we are easily able to see these various -isms as mere narrative facets of a *singular* injustice—that done *to the victim*. The use of homogenizing terminology therefore can distract us from important variation. For example, equating the structure of whiteness, Blackness and Latinidad as “racialized” experiences obscures that each category is constructed in ways which *discipline* the others, especially through rhetorically dissociated but intersecting social structures such as age and sex. I therefore read the significance of “intersectionality” through a context of multiple power relations and the discursive framing required to disrupt them.

From this perspective, we may conclude intersectionality can only have the desired transformative capacity insofar as its invocation is authentically grounded in liberatory concerns of historical and material significance. A crucial skill psycholinguists must develop is the ability to differentiate invocations of intersectionality which exploit and sensationalize existing problems of exclusion, from those which affirmatively commit to racial equity, inclusion, and justice by critically interrogating how categories of class are conceived and maintained. To that end, this paper concludes with a series of questions that investigators might use to assist in interrogating definitions of social categories.

Psycholinguists can also raise our consciousness of these issues by connecting with discussions promoting the responsible use of intersectionality in other fields. In sociology, Collins (2017) broadly discusses its history and usefulness in understanding epistemic injustice. Linguistic anthropologist Jamie Thomas (2019) presents an autoethnography of language ideologies, explaining that intersectionality demands an intentional view of “race, sex, and gender as inextricably linked to the powerful language and discourse that constructs them as accomplices in discrimination, poverty, and death” (p. 172). A discussion of the responsible application of these concepts from the perspective of counseling psychology can be found in Moradi and Grzanka (2017). Cross-disciplinary collaboration is crucial to advancing intersectional studies, which definitionally conflicts with the enforcement of disciplinary boundaries created by white institutions.

In short, studies referencing intersectionality which fail to foreground inequity, fail to explicitly invoke the historical events which shape systems of social power and domination, and fail to simultaneously engage with multiple distinctive systemic oppressions are misappropriating the terminology. Regardless of intention, such work necessarily shelters, reconstitutes, and reinscribes the oppressive systems which intersectionality was created to interrogate, and undermines efforts to make our field more inclusive.

Thinking critically about inclusion

To critically approach the literature on applied psycholinguistics, we begin by acknowledging its historical political utility, defined by the outsize influence of the United States government on the development of its knowledge base. The *application* of linguistic theory to solve problems is profoundly shaped by what goals are understood to advance progress. Broadly speaking, the funding and development of linguistics has served to globally effect a white colonialist and imperialist agenda, advancing white economic and cultural domination through the systematic theft

of resources from indigenous peoples. This influence is visible both in the original creation of applied linguistics as a discipline in the years after WWII (Hutton, 2020), and in modern discourse asserting that “real” linguistic inquiry must be limited to asocial and disembodied theories of language knowledge (Charity Hudley & Flores, 2022). Charity Hudley and Flores (2022) further elucidates how this privileging of generative linguistics has served to maintain white hegemony, marginalizing linguistic projects and analyses which examine questions of power and oppression.

Among the scholars Charity Hudley and Flores cite as advancing intersectional approaches is María Cioè-Peña, who has introduced a Critical Dis/abilities Raciolinguistic (CDR) perspective for the analysis of bilingual special education (Cioè-Peña, 2021). She examines the role of race and disability in the exclusion of emergent bilingual children labeled as disabled from bilingual and multilingual education programs. Her analysis centers the experiences of mothers and children, using interviews to draw qualitative data on participants’ perception of racial and linguistic marginalization. Her analysis reveals logics of raciolinguistics and pathologization simultaneously working to construct bilingualism as racialized, and as less valuable in the context of disability. Rather than understanding race, disability and language as separately or neutrally experienced axes of inclusion, the intersectional approach attends to difficulties as articulated by multiply marginalized people, paying special attention to how they characterize their own strategies of resistance.

Given that language does not express power-neutral interactions, intersectional linguistic approaches seek to (a) identify *multiplicities* of hierarchical logics as they affect language users and (b) draw on the epistemologies of the marginalized in seeking to disrupt these logics. An epistemology comprises the unique ways of knowing about the world associated with some subjectivity. Opposing the discursive dominance of racist subjectivities requires us to accord marginalized experiences their true unique epistemic value. Whereas white supremacism facilitates the denial, debasement, and discursive erasure of marginalized experiences and desires, intersectionality insists upon making these perspectives visible. Intersectionality is therefore best understood as a tool for relating understandings of the present to visions of desirable futures.

Creating a more inclusive applied linguistics requires explicitly confronting the systems of power which have broadly shaped the study of language through history. Intersectionality should thus never be identified as avoidant of race or caste, but rather must be purposely recognized as a mandate to situate persons with respect to how the historical exercise of political power shapes their individual access to security, and intervene on the side of justice. Understanding that its applications will vary across fields, and that desirability is a malleable construct, we can nonetheless synthesize a broad understanding of Intersectional Studies as refusing outdated and covertly biased ideals of universality, objectivity, positivism, and modernity. That is to say, intersectionality troubles philosophies which hold that there is only one truth, that truth is always concretely measurable, and that societal progress is an inherent byproduct of passing time. Instead, intersectional knowledge projects emphasize the value of hermeneutic methodologies which qualitatively center rather than erase the perspectives of marginalized persons.

Intersectionality as resistance

It is well accepted that the history of psychological science has been predominated by socioculturally narrow inquiries relying on convenience samples from privileged populations (Henrich et al., 2010). Unfortunately, the enthusiastic uptake of the critique that experimental participants are too “WEIRD,” has in some ways created more confusion than it has alleviated. The acronym stands for Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic, and was coined to call attention to the difficulty of discovering generalizable psychological knowledge through studies which only recruit participants sharing a narrow range of experiences. Although it indexes the effects of white supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy and imperialism in constructing disparities between communities in psychological science, the WEIRD acronym is unspecific in its definition, inconsistent in its interpretation, and race-avoidant in its construction (Clancy & Davis, 2019).

Frost and Casillas (2021) attempt to extend study of statistical language learning to a “new, non-WEIRD linguistic population,” (2021, p. 2) examining speakers of the language indigenous to Yela, also known as Rossel Island, Papua New Guinea. The authors note numerous difficulties in adapting their study methods to be accessible in the unique cultural, linguistic, and environmental context of Yele life. However, Yele cultural knowledge bears no significance to the study’s core research question about language learning. Instead, Yele identity, as a representative of all “non-WEIRD” subjectivities, is presented as a naturally occurring *obstacle* to validating existing theories. “If current theories surrounding statistical learning are correct, researchers should be able to replicate established experimental findings in any other human population.” (2021, p. 4)

Like intersectionality, the WEIRD critique presents itself as a threat to claims of objectivity. The popular usage of both terms trades on the rhetoric of inclusion, and further ties this inclusion to a positivist demand for epistemic accuracy and completeness. The neglect of large portions of the world’s population is framed as an oversight that unfortunately hampers the generalization of WEIRD science. In other words, “inclusion” is treated as a necessary but superficial rehabilitation of existing epistemological projects and, for this reason alone, a desirable outcome for modern scientific progress. Data from diverse participants are valued for their ability to further the construction of universalist scientific theories. The effort toward inclusion represented by criticism of focus on WEIRD participants does not extend beyond the putative need for scientists to generalize their empirical findings by applying their own epistemologies to new populations of experimental participants. There is no mandate to treat Indigenous ways of knowing as valid epistemologies and no incentive to refrain from exploitative and extractive research practices. This attitude reflects the agenda of *cognitive imperialism*, defined by Marie Battiste thusly:

“Cognitive imperialism is a form of cognitive manipulation used to disclaim other knowledge bases and values. Validated through one’s knowledge base and empowered through public education, it has been the means by which whole groups of people have been denied existence and have had their wealth confiscated. Cognitive imperialism denies people their language and cultural integrity by maintaining the legitimacy of only one language, one culture, and one frame of reference.” (Battiste, 2005, p. 9)

The effect of cognitive imperialism is to discursively position the relevance of populations to scientific inquiry in terms of the extractive potential they represent. In this context, it is not difficult to understand why, although actual measures of inclusion continue to lag, terms apparently promoting diversity have often enjoyed explosive popularity.

The assertion that accounting for human diversity constitutes a valuable endeavor which increases the epistemological authority of a discipline has always been generally free of opposition. Indeed, this sentiment underlies scientific racism as a whole. Scientific racism is the name given to pseudoscientific efforts which attempt to establish racial inferiority as an empirical fact (Chatters et al., 2022). The adoption of fashionable terminology thus can be read as part of a process whereby ways of talking about diversity are superficially updated, obscuring the reality that any intentions of epistemological diversification remain stifled. The WEIRD acronym and the term “intersectional” thus both derive their shared status as buzz words from their potential to obscure the continued operation of cognitive imperialism.

The intervention I seek to make here is to demarcate uses of intersectionality which engage directly with power imbalances created by the entwining of multiple imperialist logics. In other words, the avoidance of directly naming systems such as race and caste, such as in the coinage of WEIRD, has no place in intersectionality. Rather, the intellectual genealogy of intersectionality fundamentally represents a challenge to universalism and a refusal of cognitive imperialism.

We should respond to disparities not with dispassionate rhetoric calling for more purely “objective” science, but with concern and compassion for the impact of epistemic exclusion on already vulnerable groups. Authentically embracing intersectionality will require applied psycholinguistics to directly confront the institutional mechanisms which have historically animated the field in exclusionary ways and promote scholarship which seeks to highlight the unique challenges and skills which characterize marginalized linguistic experience.

The history of intersectionality

Although Kimberlé Crenshaw is widely credited with its coinage, “intersectionality” belongs to a long tradition of Black feminism which has developed theoretical discourse about the source and nature of differences defining Black women’s experiences, including bell hooks (Hooks, 2014), Deborah King (King, 1988), and Audre Lorde (Lorde, 2012). As Roxane Gay writes of Audre Lorde, “her thinking always embodied what we now know as intersectionality and did so long before intersectionality became a defining feature of contemporary feminism in word if not in deed” (Gay, 2020).

Reaching back farther, the legacy of Sojourner Truth—a formerly enslaved woman, includes very prominently the question of how the meaning of womanhood is shaped by circumstances of class and race. She famously delivered the speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” at a Women’s Rights Convention in 1851. The speech, popularly published, was nonetheless rewritten, with the more dramatic, racially and sexually caricatured version of the speech eclipsing the original in popularity (Mandziuk & Fitch, 2001). Although Sojourner Truth was raised speaking only Dutch and had

five children, Frances Gage's widely distributed account of her speech, apparently drawing on popular conceptions of enslaved women, reports her as the mother of thirteen, and transcribes her Dutch accented English in the style of a more stereotypical slave's Southern American accent. These changes to Truth's narrative were part of a pattern of white suffragists leveraging her words and image to support their own political causes, which often included distancing white women's suffrage from abolition (Levens, 2021). The impulse to excitedly reproduce Truth's words while nonetheless caricaturing her identity and social status in the process bears resemblance to the reception intersectionality has enjoyed within the academy, often abstracting its meaning in ways which distance it from the political struggle it was coined to support.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's introduction of intersectionality into jurisprudence is cited as an early example of Critical Race Theory, a theory which holds that the law encodes the sociopolitical biases of the people who create it. Her "Black feminist criticism" (p. 139) challenged legal scholars to treat race as central in recognizing "the constitutive and ideologically contingent role law plays in creating legible and illegible juridical subjects and identities" (Carbado, 2013, p. 86).

Importantly, to understand the ethical application, as well as the caricature and cooptation of intersectionality in any scope, we must acknowledge the Black feminist tradition which has animated, yet never dominated, the discourse. In the next section, I focus on understanding intersectionality through its development as a legal analysis, before returning to contextualize the framework within psychological and language sciences.

Intersectionality as an intervention in jurisprudence

United States law was created to preserve the racist colonialist foundations of the country, and therefore implicitly furthers racist policy. Put simply, the law is itself a discursive project, an attempt to control the way that social boundaries are understood and spoken about. The case law presented in Crenshaw (1989 [2018]) is used to support an argument that American laws, which purport to protect Americans from discrimination based on either sex or race, leave Black women not only lacking equal protection, but equal *recognition* under the law.

Crenshaw famously likens the constructs of racial and sex discrimination to separate roads. She explains, "the traffic running through those roads are the policies that discriminate against people . . . if an accident happens, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions, and sometimes from all of them" (NMAAHC, 2017). A plaintiff's claim of discrimination is thus compared to a claim of having been harmed by a traffic accident, with their attempt to seek relief from the law requiring that they establish the nature of that accident. If the law requires that the offending incident be shown definitively to have happened only either on the road representing sex discrimination or on the road representing racial discrimination, then plaintiffs would be able to successfully argue their cases only if they can claim to have been hurt *without reference to the intersection*. The concept of intersectionality was advanced to reveal the way that the legal system (a) privileges those who are not affected by interlocking oppressions and (b) marginalizes the

intersection, denying persons affected by multiple oppressions the right to represent more broadly defined groups (Crenshaw, 1990).

To the first point, Crenshaw introduced a metaphor which has not traveled as widely as that of the intersecting roads. Anna Carastathis links the abandonment of this second, “basement metaphor,” to the disconnection of intersectionality from its roots in Black feminism (Carastathis, 2013). In the metaphor of the basement, the most marginalized people are conceptualized as occupying the bottom of a hierarchical space, while the least marginalized people are positioned atop them. The comparative positionality then affords the least marginalized individuals the ability to escape through a hatch in the ceiling, leaving the multiply marginalized trapped below. In this metaphor, individuals are provisionally privileged to seek redress through discrimination law insofar as they participate in the reproduction of the marginalized intersection. In this way, monistic conceptions of discrimination naturalize the self-same ideologies they purport to oppose, by reifying definitions of social divisions that preserve the vulnerability of the marginalized intersection.

Crenshaw uses case law to demonstrate that Black women have been ruled as having insufficient standing as plaintiffs to represent either women or Black people, as the “historical base” for discrimination law protecting these two groups were *white* women and Black *men* (Crenshaw, 1989 [2018], p. 148). The distinctive intersection of race and sex therefore legally renders Black women neither as women nor as Black people.

Supposing that each citizen has a race and sex, laws declared to protect “all Americans” would ostensibly be conceived and interpreted to include representation of numerous “identities” defining all possible combinations of race and sex. However, the discursive division of oppression into racial and sexual components is itself a symptom of underlying societal prejudice marking some race/sex combinations as more acceptable, legitimate, and desirable identities than others.

We must be mindful that the practice of using race/sex to define classes in need of legal protection is inseparable from the societal phenomena which mark certain race/sex classes as more vulnerable than others to violence. These identities are thus simultaneously more in need of legal protection and less able to access it. Although antidiscrimination laws have been created with the purported intention to protect the vulnerable, we must also be cognizant of how they are necessarily an extension of preexisting discursive projects seeking to invisibilize non-white identities and control non-white societies. Intersectional analysis seeks to strip invisibility from the relationship between identities, visibilizing targets of violence *as such*.

Discursive power defines the intersection

Construing the law as a public transcript of discourse regarding the rights of “all Americans,” we must attend to tension between the “big D” Discourses which represent broader social and historical definitions of social kinds, and the hyper-local discourses which exist in conversation with them (Gee, 2015). Crenshaw’s legal scholarship attempts to identify and remediate the consequences of the fact that white men have occupied positions of power in creating antidiscrimination laws which Black women have not. The discursive definition of Black women as having needs alternately equivalent to those of white women or those of Black men

effectively erases Black women and their specific needs, desires, and ways of knowing, despite ostensibly effecting a show of inclusive intentions.

Through discursive bifurcations of identity into race and sex, “Black woman” and “white man” are misrepresented to have equal discursive representation, despite the fact that these groups have historically not held equivalent power. In other words, the history of antidiscrimination law is such that those who have been least in need of protection from antidiscrimination laws have been able to dominate the discourse regarding the remediation of violence to those who do, effectively excluding them from the right to define themselves what true protection would entail.

This bifurcated identity framework focusing on race and sex has also served to construct “white men” and “white women” as having a particular relationship, such that they ostensibly share an experience of race, but not of gender. Likewise, the interpretation of “men” implies a shared experience of gender between all men, irrespective of race. The material reality is that processes of racialization and sexualization enact privileging and subordination within and between groups, in ways which ultimately benefit and reinscribe the unmarked power of dominant racially and sexually defined groups.

As Audre Lorde wrote, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” (Lorde, 2003, p. 2). Taking the definition of race and sex under the law as tools used to construct a societal house of oppressive violence, we must not confuse the redefinition and readjudication of these tools and their proper usage for a revolutionary and radically inclusive politic. Rather, while the continuous redefinition of social categories may occasionally permit disruption, the process ultimately must be understood principally as preserving social hierarchies.

Modern intersectional scholarship illuminates the way oppressions which have been commonly discussed as independent of race have historically been leveraged as moralistic and racist technologies of anti-Blackness, including antifatness (Harrison, 2021) and disability, which has historically positioned “faculty [as] the greatest virtue” and “self-sufficiency [as] the absence of Blackness” (Horvath-Williams, personal communication, February 3, 2022).

Orienting applied psycholinguistics to intersectionality

Applied psycholinguistics as a field is principally concerned with mechanisms governing differences in the experience of language, so understanding the impact of societal oppression on language processes should be a topic of urgent interest. Psycholinguistic effects in speech are sensitive to myriad aspects of person and social group perception; however, the field has yet to reckon with how systemic oppression broadly undergirds these effects (Henner & Robinson, 2021; Tripp & Munson, 2022).

The introduction of social knowledge into linguistic tasks can fundamentally alter perceptual outcomes by interacting with virtually every level of linguistic analysis, including phoneme identification (Evans et al., 2018; Strand & Johnson, 1996), lexical ambiguity resolution (Nygaard & Lunders, 2002), syntactic processing (Casasanto, 2008), discourse comprehension (Rubin, 1992), and the expression of accent preferences (Hayes-Harb et al., 2021; Kang & Rubin, 2009). To further

complicate things, engaging as psycholinguists with the multiplicity of identity requires careful attention to how definitions of social groups morph across different contexts, resulting in differing levels of scrutiny (Plaut, 2010; Settles & Buchanan, 2014).

Linguists must be conscious that the exercise of privilege in defining differences and vulnerabilities contains within it both the potential to remediate discrimination by affording more attention to the experience of marginalizations, and the potential to rhetorically re-entrench disparities. If applied psycholinguistics is to adopt the transformative ethic of intersectionality, we must conceive of social experience as constructed through a multiplicity of modalities, extending beyond the psychological, and connecting material consequences (Who is able to successfully build an antidiscrimination lawsuit? Whose speech is labeled as nonstandard?) with imposed metaphysical constraints (Who is permitted to represent the class “women” and “Black people?” Who is permitted to represent a “standard English speaker?”).

Interpreting the significance of intersectional work

Intersectionality, as with other Black feminist theory, emerged in the context of Black feminist consciousness as a matter of survival. Contrastively, in the context of Black feminist scholarship, consciousness of social inequity is no longer merely a matter of immediate survival, but an act of resistance and an attempt at redress which must further include consideration of “what is prior to and beyond” the establishment of social normativity (Puar, 2012, p. 63). Neither epistemology can be divorced from the other—it is not possible to entirely segregate discussion of liberation and oppression. As intersectionality has primarily been used to deploy discussion of the ways social differences are socially and legally *disciplined*, it must be understood to demand supplementation with modes of analysis explicitly emphasizing the role of sensory and affective engagement in commanding (dis)connections between different ways of knowing about difference (Pennycook, 2018; Puar, 2012).

Hegemonically, the Black woman is defined as the subject of simultaneous sexism and racism. Notably, this definition cannot locate any understanding of agency in Black women’s experience, neither in the context of passively experiencing nor actively resisting oppression. Further, it is not the case that any epistemology promising to include Black women in some way would improve upon the injustice represented by their conceptual exclusion: corrective inclusion must promote justice over the extraction of knowledge. Intersectional work may therefore be read as an intrinsic compromise and attempt at remediation, and for this reason is subject to any number of valid radical critiques.

Resisting Misogynoir in adapting intersectionality

Misogynoir is a term that describes the way “Black women and girls are . . . treated in a uniquely terrible way because of how societal ideas about race and gender intersect” (Bailey & Trudy, 2018, p. 763). The term describes the oppression experienced by Black women, clearly labeling their experiences as distinctive from those of white women and Black men, emphasizing their nondecomposable nature. Misogynoir in

the academy persists in pushing intersectional analysis to the margins, perpetuating the ongoing epistemic exclusion of such scholarship, even as the terminology is widely borrowed (Settles et al., 2020). Interpreting language differences from a perspective of epistemic exclusion necessarily results in a flattened understanding of relationships between constructed social identities, lived realities, and distinctive epistemologies.

Buchanan and Wiklund (2021) identifies the pattern as that of “*diluting, depoliticizing, and disconnecting*.” Rather than preserving a definition of intersectionality rooted in a moral and ethical mandate to dismantle oppressive systems, the mainstreaming of this terminology has been accompanied by the submerging of critical consciousness. This outcome is predictable in the context of institutions which marginalize Black feminists, their scholarship, and epistemologies (Settles et al., 2020). Intersectionality as an analytic lens has the power to facilitate disruption and solidarity across disparate contexts of oppression precisely because it relies on relieving tension between those disparate epistemologies belonging to those with and without power.

Racist and anti-racist epistemologies exist in conflict

In fostering *anti-racist* discourse, we seek to construct an approach to psycholinguistics that necessarily conflicts with ways of knowing that have been historically endorsed and enforced by power. Categorization systems such as race serve to aid in the construction of knowledge which contradicts the rights and realities of marginalized persons. Although historically race has been purported to be an essential and innate, unchanging quality, this discourse contrasts with the fluid and multiply determined meaning of race.

It is increasingly well accepted that social categories are mutually constructed and constantly shifting, but this newer description produces conflict with common sense notions of their stability. Chandra Mohanty writes, “postmodernism would suggest a fluidity and mobility of identities and subjects of liberation that obviate systemic critiques of oppression” (Mohanty, 2013, p. 2). Linguists must not fail to acknowledge the role of institutional power, and the various forms of violence it enables, in lending stability to otherwise fictional social categorization systems.

Penelope Eckert evinces this misunderstanding as she attempts to unite a postmodern analysis of gender with intersectionality, writing “[Judith] Butler [(2014)] argues that gender is not prediscursive, but is produced and maintained in myriad gendered acts as constrained by one’s assigned place in the gender order. This is more generally the case at the intersections of major categories such as age, class, and ethnicity (Crenshaw, 1989 [2018])” (Eckert, 2019, p. 752). Here, even as an analysis which refutes the prediscursive reality of “major categories” is presented, those categories are nonetheless referenced as conveniently stable constructs, and the attendant marginalization of persons at their “intersections” is naturalized as an outcome.

Erez Levon, reproducing another common misreading of Crenshaw’s work, writes that she “argues that in certain instances, Black women experience discrimination as Black women, not as the additive effects of discrimination based on race and gender but as a specific instantiation of an irreducible intersection of the two

categories together” (Levon, 2015, p. 297). This conception of intersectionality fails to engage with the instantiation by the law of these irreducible categories and their constituent discursive components as itself a form of violence. Crenshaw’s intervention into the law also *contested* the construction of social stations marking Black women’s experiences as distinct from those of other Black people and of other women. The marginalization of the intersection thus informs but *does not define* Black women’s experiences. Perspectives conflating identity and social station dangerously essentialize violence designed to harm marginalized people as a core characterization of their own psychological experience, rather than as a characterization of the social landscape which they must navigate.

Authentically intersectional linguistics challenges racist epistemology

Intersectionality places the juridical and sociocultural history of racism at the center of its analytical framework. The central focus on racialization must be understood as the fulcrum for expanding our understanding of psycholinguistics and addressing the present shortcomings of the literature. If we are fooled into taking linguisticism, racism, and linguistic racism to be separately defined constructs, we likewise must acquiesce to constructs which define artificial borders between races, between languages, and between language practices. Instead, we must understand that modes of discrimination and targets of discrimination are defined in mutually constitutive ways.

In growing recognition of how systemic oppression has profoundly shaped the epistemic knowledge base of the field, numerous concepts in applied psycholinguistics which were previously considered foundational to our understanding of linguistic experience are now being reevaluated as problematic in their traditional definition or application, including “native speaker” (Cheng et al., 2021), “code-switching” (Young, 2014), “named languages” (Jørgensen et al., 2015), “standardized language” (Milroy, 2001; Rosa, 2016), and “educational appropriateness” (Flores & Rosa, 2015).

In decentering hegemonic interpretations of language ability, intersectional work seeks to disrupt hegemonic narratives about marginalized language. For example, “abyssal thinking” describes a way of interpreting marginalized language users as lacking in language skills (García et al., 2021). Modern pedagogies of resistance reject this characterization, instead emphasizing the knowledge and abilities which underlie marginalized peoples’ practices of meaning making. I label contributions to linguistics as intersectional where they can be described as effortfully demarginalizing the linguistic abilities of non-white language users, rejecting epistemologies which define non-whiteness as deviant.

April Baker-Bell’s work provides an excellent example of an intersectional ethic. Through examining the experiences of Black school students in confronting linguistic violence, interrogating narratives of shame, (dis)ability, and racial othering, Baker-Bell develops anti-racist language pedagogy which de-submerges the entwined logics of racial and linguistic marginalization, seeking to support Black children in developing agency and disrupting anti-Blackness (Baker-Bell, 2013, 2020).

Li Wei’s work likewise contests hegemonic narratives about language ability, unsettling the notion of distinctive linguistic repertoires. Instead, Wei reimagines

the production of perceptible shifts in style as a process of *translanguaging* which reflects the selective use of semiotic resources to construct a unified singular linguistic repertoire (Wei, 2017). The work of Jonathan Rosa and Nelson Flores elucidates how race is recruited to construct perceptual difference between language behaviors in concert with judgments about embodiment, terming the co-naturalization of linguistic and racial marginalization as *raciolinguistic* (Rosa & Flores, 2017). Each of these scholarly works embodies the aspirational and transformative intersectional ethic, destabilizing the discursive construction of marginalizations as separate phenomena arising from separate circumstances, and insisting upon framing the marginalized linguistic subject according to its own sensibilities, affirming their agency and resisting the dispossession demanded by white subjectivities.

To achieve a more just and equitable applied psycholinguistics and authentically promote intersectional approaches to understanding language behavior, we must treat intersectionality as a framework which primarily identifies and seeks to remediate the effects of structural violence. To this end, we should adopt a position of skepticism regarding the significance of disciplinary boundaries and look to build on work from other disciplines modeling effective community engagement. In pursuing their own research questions, psycholinguists should broadly recruit insights from other fields to orient themselves to the needs of marginalized study populations.

Resisting historical discourse enforcing hierarchy

Imagining lived experience, agency and exclusion from public life to be jointly constructed, we must interpret psycholinguistic data in a context which acknowledges conflict between marginalized persons' agency and their hegemonically prescribed social stations. The (in)ability of, for example, Black women or bilingual Latine children to occupy prescribed roles cannot be truthfully separated from the construction of their linguistic identities as deviant. Even as arguments about the importance of the intersection emphasize the complexity of social inequity and the mutual constitution of oppressive violence, they nonetheless also recapitulate concepts of sexism and racism by indexing them as putatively distinct (Puar, 2012). The enduring currency of intersectionality is thus founded in both (a) its ability to empower marginalized persons in articulating the experience and resistance of imbricated oppressive systems such as sexism and racism and (b) the narrative limitations this analysis places on those articulations, demanding that novel fields of study emerge to articulate the unique experiences of the marginalized with less restricted subjectivity.

In the next section, I provide a condensed set of questions psycholinguists can ask to evaluate the way their approach to social categories work is situated with respect to the historical construction of social relationships defined by power, violence, systemic policing, and erasure. These questions should assist investigators, editors, and reviewers in reflection on how social and linguistic categories ought to be presented and characterized by linguists. I suggest that we be vigilant in opposing three kinds of disappearance: the disappearance of what Yasmine Romero calls *the decenter*, the disappearance of *the empowerment process*, and the disappearance of *marginalized agency*.

Questions for interrogating definitions of social categories

1. *Who has been included/excluded from participating in the discursive definition of this category, and how?* Rather than supposing borders between categories, we must instead locate how relative power affects the modes of expression used to (re)define and control the interpretation of such borders. “Identity, power, and experience converge in messy, unbounded ways” (Romero, 2017, p. 6). We should not be preoccupied with the conceptual intersection of distinctive social categories, as these conceptions are often themselves expressions of racist power. Instead, we should strive to concern ourselves with those material processes that create disparities in outcomes, first through rhetorical erasure. Yasmine Romero gives the name “the decenter” to experiences which are erased, emphasizing that our conception of intersections must seek to recognize and oppose their implicit discursive disappearance of marginalized sensibilities (Romero, 2017). For example, Crenshaw’s original publications on intersectionality demonstrate that legal precedents constrain Black women’s ability to use antidiscrimination laws to their own benefit. Thus, the interpretation of law works to effectively disappear affluent Black women’s experiences of discrimination from the courts. Intersectional work invests in marginalized epistemologies which trouble, but by virtue of their marginalization, cannot wholly contradict the normative narratives which create the decenter. However, it can lead us to attend to material differences in available resources.
2. *What are the material consequences for persons who are discursively assigned to or excluded from this category?* Once we have considered the erasure of marginalized experiences, we can examine how mainstream narratives work to construct groups and the consequences of membership therein. Socially defined groups are definitionally malleable and must not be essentialized. Instead, we should understand the rhetorical erasure of the decenter as functioning to consolidate unmarked power by privileged groups. For example, Crenshaw’s own work can be criticized for its inability to illuminate experiences of race/sex discrimination by persons who lack the resources required to publicize their experiences through legal action against aggressors. Actors who occupy more socially powerful stations should be recognized as implicitly more enabled to draw on historical discourses to maintain or improve their position (e.g., those who are more financially privileged, or contingently recognized as having more white-proximal and less white-supremacy threatening identities, e.g., light-skinned people of color, persons perceived to be gender and sexuality conformist). As such, although the concept of intersectionality describes the *effects* of oppression, it also necessarily demands supplementation describing the *exploitation* which *actually explains* inequality (Foley, 2019). Intersectional work must not only describe, but oppose oppression, and thus refuse the disappearance of these empowerment processes.
3. *Does the use of this category support the self-determination of marginalized persons?* The aspiration to radically deconstruct white-supremacist social constructs stands in conflict with liberal projects of resistance, which do not directly challenge the validity of constructs such as “Black women,” or

“Black male.” We must not settle for leveraging oppressive constructs to improve conditions for the most powerful members of oppressed classes, or treating such powerful people as appropriate proxies for persons who lack an equivalent experience of social power. Embedded hierarchies of class still exist among categories of marginalized persons, and projects that seek to challenge hierarchy may yet participate in re-entrenching it. For example, “Black Male Studies,” in its inception, locates Black men as experiencing a particularly raced sexism, but generally neglects the significance of gender conformity and existence of transfeminine individuals from its theorizing (Curry, 2021; Key & Brooks, 2020). Authentically intersectional projects seek to directly connect the operation of social power to outcomes impacting material needs of oppressed persons, refusing the disappearance of agency associated with essentialized categories.

Conclusion

As the terminology of intersectionality has gained enormous currency in the public discourse, the application of the term is no longer confined to legal analysis, but instead is frequently applied as a description of psychological, rather than legal modes of identification. In attempting to connect work in cognitive, psychological, and language sciences to concepts of intersectionality, we must be mindful of the ways these fields also represent knowledge projects that produce institutionalized social differences. An anti-racist discipline cannot be forged from those definitions of race/sex which are promulgated by a racist hegemony.

As authorities on language, we have the power and responsibility to shape historical discourses on language. If we are to resist the hegemonic flattening and misappropriation of intersectionality, we must principally attend to how this process turns the terminology into a vehicle for covertly advancing harmful ideologies including classism, cisheteronormativity, and misogynoir under the guise of universalist aims.

As psycholinguists, evaluating the intersectionality of projects requires that we illuminate the direct connections between marginalization and social empowerment, without appeal to essential categories. To do this, we must (a) identify *multiplicities* of hierarchical logics as they affect language users, seeking to situate persons with respect to how the historical exercise of political power shapes their individual access to security, (b) draw on the epistemologies of the marginalized in seeking to disrupt these logics, and (c) support the self-determination of marginalized people by opposing their exploitation via the erasure of their agency and experiences.

If we are to effect a more just and equitable applied psycholinguistics, we must aspire to not only document diverse ways of languaging but also to decenter hegemonic ways of understanding and characterizing the linguistic experience. We must be vigilant in identifying and critiquing the ongoing marginalization of vulnerable populations, including the ways this is done by projects claiming the transformative ethic of intersectionality.

An authentic intersectional lens seeks to improve the material conditions of marginalized persons by illuminating and *challenging* the production and exploitation

of vulnerable social positionalities through restricted access to resources, including sovereign land (Redvers et al., 2022), Indigenous languages (Bradley & Bradley, 2019; Caselli et al., 2020), and health care (Foiles Sifuentes et al., 2020; J. A. Lewis et al., 2017). The application of an intersectional lens shows promise as a strategy for identifying and disentangling the roles of multiple structural inequities in shaping disparities in health and education (Gillborn, 2015; Homan et al., 2021; Homan & Brown, 2022). Where psycholinguistic models and theories do not adequately incorporate intersectional analysis, we must contest their capacity not only to capture reality but also their capacity to *permit justice*.

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Note

1 Although I adopt core elements of Lugones' argumentation, I take her critiques to nonetheless arise in part from misreadings of the original text and its place in Black feminist tradition (Bailey Thomas, 2020; Garry, 2011).

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