

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Towards a just and equitable applied psycholinguistics

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Abstract

We introduce the pair of special issues of *Applied Psycholinguistics* (this issue, next issue) titled “Towards a just and equitable applied psycholinguistics.” This paper motivates the need for this project, details the editorial process, and provides a brief summary of each article appearing in the special issues.

Keywords: bilingualism; adult second language acquisition; literacy; neurodevelopmental language disorders; phonetics and phonology; sentence processing; equity and justice

Applied psycholinguistics as a field has historically depended on a distinction between “normal” and “deviant” human languaging. This approach has reinforced monolingualism, native-speakerism, accentism, and ableism, all of which ultimately essentialize the bodies of language users to arbitrary normative categories (see scholars who have written about these issues: Auer, 2007; Namboodiripad & Henner, 2022; Cheng et al., 2021; Tiv et al., 2021; Kutlu et al., 2022; Goldrick, 2022; Majid, 2023; Castro et al., 2022; Craft et al., 2020; Hayes-Harb et al., 2023; Casillas, 2023). But, who is a monolingual? How well can we actually measure an individual’s language experience? To what degree are language users’ experiences stable? Whose languaging should be studied? Does our practice of research perpetuate antiquated assumptions that center the so-called “normal” language user? How does our own positionality impact our research? By ignoring or avoiding these kinds of questions, we have spent several decades in pursuit of a “unicorn language” (see Leivada et al., 2023, this issue) – a mythical language dissociated from the complexity, diversity, and humanity of actual language. Ultimately, our “insincere intersectionality” has failed us (Tripp, 2023, this issue).

We proposed this special issue with the aim of challenging all applied psycholinguists to (1) recognize that our inherited practices may perpetuate the marginalization of vast communities of people and to (2) imagine, propose, and pursue

alternate modes of research. Our intention was to amplify scholars who center variation in their research – as the signal and not as noise – as well as scholars who, by virtue of the questions they ask, challenge our theories and methodologies. In keeping with our commitment to an expansive *Applied Psycholinguistics* community, we opted for an open call for one-page proposals, which we distributed via social media and listservs. We distributed the following call in late 2021:

Applied psycholinguistics emerged in the latter half of the 20th century, with a focus on so-called “normality”–reinforcing monolingualism, native-speakerism, accentism, ableism, etc.–and the characterization of any deviation as noise or abnormality. Scholars have developed many tools and theories that have sacrificed insightful understanding of human diversity, instead elevating ideologies of stigma and prejudice based on identity and background (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, nationality, and disabilities). Applied psycholinguists must acknowledge the ways our field has been complicit in the ongoing marginalization of vast communities of people. We must change the questions we ask, the methods we use, and the ways we interpret findings, breaking away from the corruptive ideal of “normality” and towards a wholistic understanding of human diversity.

Process and approach

Readers may access many of the materials associated with the administration of this special issue at <https://osf.io/rzhtv>. *Applied Psycholinguistics* normally publishes original research manuscripts; for this project, we additionally welcomed proposals for position pieces, and by February 2022, we received 42 proposals. Due to the high quality of the proposals and the urgency of the topic, we elected to expand to a two-issue project, allowing us to invite 22 full manuscript submissions. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, some authors were ultimately not able to submit their final manuscripts; we thank them for sharing their work with us and for engaging in this process. Three of the manuscripts invited for submission were (co-)authored by current associate editors at *Applied Psycholinguistics*, and we thus invited independent external scholars to manage the peer review process and to make editorial decisions. We are deeply grateful to Kevin McManus, Emily Myers, and Jamie Thomas for their expert handling of these manuscripts.

An essential step in the direction of a more just and equitable field is for researchers to interrogate the biases and motivations that influence our work. For this reason, we asked authors to include positionality statements with their contributions. Some may argue that positionality statements decrease objectivity in science. We believe that objectivity is neither possible nor desirable (see Abo-Zena et al., 2022), and that a just and equitable field is only achieved through interrogating and transparently communicating the perspectives, experiences, and biases that influence our work. To address this and other common misconceptions of positionality statements as “lists of demographic characteristics” or the “forced disclosure of private information,” and to encourage a meaningful engagement with the process, we asked Crystal Steltenpohl, a researcher at the Dartmouth Center for Program

Design and Evaluation, to develop videos and to hold virtual workshops for special issue authors. The series of three videos provides the rationale for reflexivity and how to get started with a positionality statement ([Part One: Getting Started](#)), walks authors through the drafting of a statement ([Part Two: Writing your Statement](#)), and guides authors in editing and reflecting on their statements ([Part Three: Wrapping Up](#)). We hope that these publicly available videos will serve as an enduring resource for researchers looking to lead with more transparency in science and are so grateful to Dr. Steltenpohl for supporting our field in this way.

In engaging with this pair of special issues, we hope that applied psycholinguists around the world will recognize the need for inclusive theories and methods, and that they find among the articles in these pages inspiration and tools to support their commitment to a more just and equitable field. We are filled with gratitude for the authors and reviewers whose expertise, labor, and courage have made this project possible. We discuss each of their contributions in turn in the next section.

What we've learned

The majority of the articles in this pair of issues reflected on bilingualism research and its intersection with native speakerism as a driving ideology in applied psycholinguistics research. Authors investigated various shortcomings in our theories and methodologies that perpetuate stigma. In “Justice and equity for whom? Reframing research on the ‘bilingual (dis)advantage,’” Luk (2023, this issue) criticizes polarized research on the cognitive and linguistic effects of bilingualism, arguing that the sole focus on behavioral (dis)advantages distracts from understanding the complexity of bilingual experiences. Luk suggests that researchers need to recognize the nuances of bilingualism and move beyond a binary categorization to advance knowledge about bilingualism and its consequences and recommends reflecting on the limitations of “bilingual (dis)advantage” in order to avoid unjust misattribution of behavioral outcomes to people’s life experiences.

Problematic mischaracterizations of bilinguals are centralized in several more articles. Similar to Luk’s perspective, in “Monolingual comparative normativity in bilingualism research is out of ‘control’: Arguments and alternatives,” Rothman et al. (2023, this issue) argue that the practice of comparing bilinguals to monolinguals in psycholinguistics research on bilingualism is problematic and has historically contributed to inequalities in the field. The authors propose alternative methods and epistemological considerations to improve empirical rigor and promote diversity, inclusivity, and equity in the field. Higby et al. (2023; next issue), in “Challenging deficit frameworks in research on heritage language bilingualism,” point out that research on heritage language bilingualism often uses deficit framing, which positions heritage speakers as research subjects and reinforces ideologies that center monolingualism and whiteness. The authors advocate for the use of frameworks such as usage-based linguistics and multicompetence that center the multidimensional experiences of bilinguals and embrace complexity and call for the research community to examine their designs and theories in order to dismantle the systems that marginalize heritage bilingualism in bilingualism research. Leivada et al. (2023, this issue) discuss problematic scientific practices in psycholinguistic research when working

with minority languages in their contribution titled “Bilingualism with minority languages: Why searching for unicorn language users does not move us forward.” The paper covers issues such as the notion of monolingual/monocultural normality and its historical origins, native-speakerism, the quest for testing people who fit specific profiles, the policy that urges scholars to match bilingual groups to monolingual comparison groups, and the use of theoretical narratives that may evoke problematic labels and ableist terminology. These issues contribute to the marginalization of groups that do not fit in the standard normative “boxes,” leading to the exclusion of certain groups from scientific literature and having negative consequences for the visibility and representation of minoritized languages. Importantly, Leivada et al. share how impactful the arbitrary lines of language borders are: Many dialects that could be labeled as different languages are not actually able to be labeled as such due to geographical borders, which complicates the study of those individuals who do speak these varieties. In a piece titled “The danger of bilingual–monolingual comparisons in applied psycholinguistic research” De Houwer (2023, this issue) summarizes years of research on how pursuing monolingualism in bilinguals has direct impacts on the well-being of bilinguals.

Kirk (2023, this issue), in “MIND your language(s): Recognizing Minority, Indigenous, Non-standard(ized), and Dialect variety usage in ‘monolinguals,’” points out the lack of research on dialect differences in psycholinguistics research. They highlight the need for more inclusive ways of capturing the linguistic experiences of speakers of Minority, Indigenous, Non-standard(ized), and Dialect (MIND) varieties, using the example of Scots, a Germanic variety spoken in Scotland, to show that its speakers display cognitive characteristics of bilingualism despite often regarding themselves as monolingual due to sociolinguistic factors. The article proposes the MIND acronym as a way to encourage researchers to recognize the cognitive diversity of speakers of nonstandardized varieties and to move away from binary distinctions of “bilingual” and “monolingual.” Kirk also argues against the pervasive monolingual bias in psycholinguistic research and calls for more equitable approaches to investigating the impact of different kinds of environments for language learning, use, and processing within bilingual populations.

In “Exploring individual variation in Turkish heritage speakers’ complex linguistic productions: Evidence from discourse markers,” Özsoy and Blum (2023, next issue) provide an example of how the methods we use reveal different aspects of the language experience. They demonstrate that individual variation provides a better characterization of Turkish heritage speakers’ use of discourse and fluency markers than does grouping all heritage speakers into one category. The authors achieve this by integrating a Bayesian linear regression, which shows the importance of different statistical tools on understanding diverse experiences.

Baese-Berk et al. (2023, next issue), in “Performance pay and non-native-language comprehension: Can we learn to communicate better when we’re paid to listen?” demonstrate that participants are financially rewarded for task performance demonstrate an improved ability to comprehend unfamiliar accents relative to participants who receive a flat rate compensation. This finding emphasizes the crucial role of listeners – and their motivations – in determining the intelligibility of unfamiliar accents, further challenging the growing body of research problematizing

the assumption that responsibility for speech intelligibility rests with the speaker alone.

In “Understanding language processing in variable populations on their own terms: towards a functionalist psycholinguistics of individual differences, development and disorders,” McMurray et al. (2023, next issue) discuss the importance of value-neutral psychometric measures and the significance of variation across different populations on understanding fundamental principles of language processing. The authors emphasize the importance of theory building with variation in mind. They do so by providing a review of multiple word recognition studies that focused on cochlear implant users, children and adults across different ages, as well as individuals with developmental language disorders.

Tripp and Munson (2023, next issue) provide an extensive review of how person perception, or how individuals perceive others, influences language perception. In their piece titled “Acknowledging language variation and its power: Keys to justice and equity in applied psycholinguistics,” the authors make the case for the need to explicitly consider the role of power in language, including how power shapes our research questions, data collection, analysis, and dissemination. This is addressed by first acknowledging the role of social ideologies in shaping linguistic processing. Importantly, they challenge the traditional values of scientific detachment and objectivity, as the very nature of studying language involves human perception and thus the potential distortion of sensory input. Tripp and Munson underline the importance of critical consciousness in the construction of research.

In Weissler et al.’s (2023, next issue) piece titled “Examining linguistic and experimenter biases through “non-native” versus “native” speech,” the authors explore the problems with using the construct of “non-native” in psycholinguistic research and questions whether it is useful. They examine factors that affect perceptions of “non-native” talkers, including cognitive and social factors, and ask what our psycholinguistic measurements are capturing. The authors demonstrate how unexamined biases affect the methodological assumptions that researchers make and propose research programs that focus on teaching listeners to better understand talkers more generally.

Brown et al. (2023, next issue), in an article titled “Searching for the ‘native’ speaker: A preregistered conceptual replication and extension of Reid, Trofimovich, and O’Brien (2019),” report a preregistered replication and extension study. They did not replicate the original study’s findings, attributing the difference in results to methodological discrepancies as well as the diversity of participants, with one-third identifying as proficient in other languages and residing in different English-speaking countries. The authors conclude that the concept of “nativeness” is tied to culture-specific perspectives surrounding language use and can serve as both an aid and a limitation to psycholinguistics research.

In the MacLeod and Demers (2023, next issue) contribution, “Transmitting white monolingual Anglo-American norms: A concept analysis of ‘quality of language’ in parent-child interactions,” we see the impact of a combination of both monolingual/native speakerism ideologies and a failure of methodological considerations in understanding intersectionality of identities. The authors discuss how the concept of “quality of language” in parent-child interactions is used to explain language development weaknesses in children who are racialized, experiencing

poverty, or bilingual. They argue that so-called “language quality” is based on white monolingual Anglo-American values and is poorly defined and diminishes culturally sustaining language transmission practices. Based on the findings of a systematic concept analysis of articles published from 2010 to 2022, they recommend refraining from using “quality of language” in favor of more culturally appropriate and equitable characterizations.

Byrd et al. (2023, next issue), in “The impact of dialect differences on spoken language comprehension,” provide further evidence for the importance of careful research design in language development research. African American English (AAE) and Mainstream American English (MAE, also known as White American English) differ in terms of their use of auxiliary verbs. They found that AAE-speaking children were less likely to use auxiliary verbs to interpret sentences in MAE compared to MAE-speaking children, showing children’s awareness and sensitivity to their own dialect. This is particularly important to highlight as researchers often characterize features of marginalized dialects, accents, or other variations as indicative of deficiency in language or processing differences. Here, the authors provide evidence that children learn the language that surrounds them and, as researchers, we need to focus on their learning of that language in characterizing their language development.

A number of articles challenge ableist ideologies in research. Englebretson, Holbrook, and Fisher-Baum’s (2023, this issue) manuscript titled “A position paper on researching braille in the cognitive sciences: decentering the sighted norm,” we see the implications of ableist views in research that studies braille as a writing system. Here, the authors argue for the importance of studying braille as a writing system in its own right, and not just as an adaptation of print. They provide an overview of the history and development of braille, highlighting its formal characteristics as a writing system. They also address the potential negative consequences of print-centric assumptions and sight-centric motivations in braille research. The authors conclude with recommendations for conducting responsible and informed research on braille, emphasizing the need to center the perspectives and literacy of those who read and write braille. In Marocchini’s (2023, this issue) manuscript titled “Impairment or difference? The case of Theory of Mind abilities and pragmatic competence in the Autism Spectrum,” we see a discussion of how research has often framed pragmatic abilities as impaired in the Autism Spectrum due to theoretical shortcomings in the larger Theory of Mind literature. However, recent contributions from autistic academics and participatory research promote a shift toward focusing on differences rather than impairments and communication difficulties between neurotypes. Marocchini argues for a higher level of citation of autistic-led research and a shift in perspective within the academic community. Another article challenging ableist ideologies in applied psycholinguistics research comes from Hodgins, O’Driscoll, and Titone (2023, this issue) in their manuscript titled “The impact of neurotypical cognition on communication deficits attributed to pathologized people: schizophrenia as a case study.” The authors discuss the social communication deficits observed in individuals with schizophrenia spectrum disorders, which have historically been attributed to their own behaviors and cognition. Importantly, they propose that the role of the neurotypical interlocutor is crucial in communication breakdown.

In a powerful commentary, Tripp (2023, next issue) lays out the problem of “inauthentic intersectionality” in applied psycholinguistics research. Tripp not only provides questions that researchers should keep in mind in their pursuit of a more just and equitable field but also illustrates the consequences of acknowledging issues related to insincere intersectionality without addressing the underlying systemic problems. This necessitates that all researchers consider the connections between marginalization and their use of essential categories by emphasizing the role of historical power dynamics in our research.

We hope that this pair of special issues helps to usher in a new era of applied psycholinguistics. An era where we intentionally include the bodies who have been historically excluded from our discourse. An era where we move away from aligning with capitalizing identities and move toward acknowledging the existence of all identities. Only then can we maintain the true rigor of carefully contextualized research and relegate to history the false objectivity of cognitive imperialism.

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