

---

# A Raciolinguistic Perspective on the Structure of Language Programs and Departments

GABRIELLA LICATA

University of California – Berkeley

Email: [glicata@berkeley.edu](mailto:glicata@berkeley.edu)

---

## INTRODUCTION

Appropriateness-based models of language learning and teaching are rooted in a pervasive neocolonial agenda informed by Eurocentric epistemologies of “standard” or “academic” language (Flores & Rosa, 2015). In examining the normalized limitations of a language program through a raciolinguistic lens, we can better comprehend how program design is fostered by the structure of language departments themselves. Language departments have a high percentage of tenured/tenure-track faculty specialized in Literary or Cultural Studies, and few experts in language, i.e., Applied Linguists; thus, critical language pedagogy is usually divorced from department research. Accordingly, language departments do little to acknowledge and rectify how their design is based on a hegemonic model of language. In this paper, I will briefly describe the role of standardized language in the maintenance of the status quo in language programs and departments. Thereafter, I will provide some concrete steps to begin the process of decolonizing language programs and denaturalizing “academic” language.

## THE MONOLITHIC LANGUAGE PROGRAM AND DEPARTMENT

Language programs in the United States are housed within broader departments named for a language or broadly-defined culture (i.e., German) or geographical area (i.e., East Asian Languages) and prepare students for high-level coursework in the target language. Accordingly, upon entering these courses, students should be able to utilize ‘academic’ language to express complex ideas. Flores and Rosa (2015) explain how *white gaze* (p. 150) aids in the creation and maintenance of hegemonic [academic] institutions by using standardized language as a proxy for race or ethnicity, deeming all other ‘dialects’ that differ from the ‘default’ standard inappropriate for formal use. In this vision, second-language learners (L2 learners) are expected to master a pseudo-native, hyperstandardized language variety that ignores variation and innovation, two aspects of real language production that create meaning and have long been validated by empirical sociolinguistic research (see Coupland, 2007 for an overview). Accordingly, heritage learners are expected to relearn their native variety as an elevated ‘academic’ hyperstandard, invalidating their native variety or that of their predecessors (see Train, 2003, 2007). L2 and heritage learners alike are taught that they must learn an ‘academic’ repertoire if they are to use the target language professionally. Textbooks sustain the hyperstandardization of language, following a routine scope-and-sequence that aims to test the mastery of ‘academic’ language, not necessarily communicative ability (VanPatten, 2015, p. 11).

Relatedly, VanPatten (2015) examined several R1 institutions (i.e., universities with very high research activity) that offer Spanish and French doctoral programs, counting the number of tenured/tenure-track faculty—who have the most influence on graduate students and department identity—that specialize in Literary/Cultural Studies and Linguistics. In contrast, language program directors are usually experts on language acquisition who rarely enjoy a tenure-line, may inherit a program or ascribe to department expectations, and do not advise graduate students. Additionally, Applied Linguistics may not be seen as a rigorous field, as textbook publication on language learning often does not count towards tenure requirements (Macedo, 2019, p. 11).

Thus, the field of Applied Linguistics has not historically been merited the prestige it deserves. Below, Table 1 shows VanPatten's data from six West-coast institutions, including four public universities (University of California at: Berkeley; Los Angeles; Santa Barbara; and Davis) and two private (University of Southern California and Stanford).

Table 1

*Number and percentage of faculty in Spanish and French programs in six West-coast research universities with expertise in literary studies, linguistics, and language acquisition (VanPatten, 2015) (author's bold emphasis)*

	Spanish	French
Literary/Cultural Studies	<b>57 (90%)</b>	<b>53 (95%)</b>
Linguistics	<b>6 (10%)</b>	<b>2 (4%)</b>
Language Acquisition	0 (0%)	1 (1%)
Other (e.g., methodology, translation)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>63 (100%)</b>	<b>56 (100%)</b>

As noted, Literary/Cultural Studies experts dominate tenured/tenure-track positions in Spanish and French, at 90% and 95% (respectively). Linguists constitute a low percentage in these departments and notable is the lack of Language Acquisitionists in either Spanish or French.

Table 2

*Updated (2021) number and percentage of faculty in Spanish and French programs in six West-coast research universities with expertise in Literary Studies and Linguistics (additionally Language Acquisition, Sociolinguistics, and Linguistic Anthropology)<sup>1</sup>*

	Spanish	French
Literary/Cultural Studies	<b>57 (86%)</b>	<b>46 (94%)</b>
Linguistics	<b>9 (14%)</b>	<b>3 (6%)</b>
Language Acquisition	- 7	- 1
Sociolinguistics	- 5	- 1
Linguistic Anthropology (identified or leaning)	- 0	- 1
<b>Total</b>	<b>66 (100%)</b>	<b>49 (100%)</b>

Table 2 updates VanPatten's data<sup>2</sup> of West-coast institutions with the inclusion of Sociolinguists and Linguistic Anthropologists as of 2021. While we do see a slight increase of Language Acquisitionists in Spanish Programs, four are at UC Davis, and of these, several also work in some subfield of Sociolinguistics. Thus, the remaining numbers across institutions are still alarming. There is no change in French departments, and the increased proportion is simply due to what seems to be a reduction of tenured/tenure-track professorships in French departments. Both language programs across the board lack Linguistic Anthropologists, or those working in similar fields, though French does have one that carries out research and teaches related courses, and hence was included for this specialization. Below, I explore how the status quo of these R1 language programs and departments can be modified in favor of their decolonization.

## DEPARTMENT STRUCTURE IN DECOLONIZING LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

As mentioned, a raciolinguistic perspective (Flores & Rosa, 2015) helps us understand how pervasive academic “appropriateness” is normalized and reiterated in the design of language programs, and how academic ‘appropriateness’ essentially designates ‘nonstandard’ forms as ‘inappropriate’, much to the detriment of speech communities and our own students. In this vein, we (in)directly teach our L2 students that minoritized language forms are inappropriate in formal contexts and we invalidate the native varieties of our heritage speakers. The acknowledgement that language programs are designed as a neocolonial tool is the first step in decolonizing. As they stand, language programs frame language learning as social capital and its ideologization requires the marginalization and erasure (see Gal & Irvine, 2019) of those language practices that are not considered “academic” (Train, 2007, p. 209). L2 learners reproduce this ideology in their work and their conversation, as do heritage learners, who often also experience public shaming, as their linguistic identities are frequently invalidated via the reduction of their expression to an academic variety, which cultivates linguistic insecurity and possibly diminishes language maintenance (Zentella, 1996). We must also acknowledge the role of textbooks as futile, another elitist tool in the neocolonial agenda. The next step is a shift in the faculty composition of departments. One “token” Linguist for a department is inadequate. Language departments need to hire more tenure-track Language Acquisitionists *as well as* Sociolinguists and Linguistic Anthropologists, and their exclusion, however intentional or not, can be seen as a blatant refusal to decolonize. Complacency with the status quo—increasing the number of Literary/Cultural experts—continues to utilize white gaze in curricula while ignoring critical perspectives that denaturalize ‘academic’ and standardized language while normalizing variation as inherent to both spoken *and* written language, which can foster the development of empathy in multilingual (Blyth, 1995) and intercultural communicators (Michael Byram & Zarate, 1997; Kramsch, 1998).

In understanding how minoritized language varieties constantly undergo reiterated processes of minoritization as a sacrifice to the hegemonic dialect, we as educators must collectively acknowledge the suppression of language varieties as a synecdoche of the *people* that systemically suffer as a result. We must denaturalize the notion of standardized language in order to “disrupt appropriateness-based approaches to language education in ways that might link to a larger social movement that challenges the racial status quo” (Flores & Rosa, 2015, p. 169).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Since some linguists work in more than one field, the Spanish totals in linguistic subfields (12) exceeds the total in linguistics (9) and therefore percentages are not given for subfields.

<sup>2</sup> The manners in which this data was extrapolated may differ ever so slightly from VanPatten (2015), as our interpretations and goals for our respective papers also differ. However, the small changes in data from 2015 to 2021 nonetheless serve to demonstrate the lack of [Applied] Linguistics from Spanish and French language departments.

## REFERENCES

- Blyth, Carl. (1995). Redefining the boundaries of language use: The foreign language classroom as a multilingual speech community. In C. Kramsch (Ed.), *Redefining the boundaries of language use* (pp. 92-111). Heinle.
- Byram, Michael, & Zarate, G. (1997). *The sociocultural and intercultural dimension of language learning and teaching* (Vol. 2). Council of Europe.
- Coupland, N. (2007). *Style: Language variation and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Flores, N., & Rosa, J. (2015). Undoing appropriateness: Raciolinguistic ideologies and language diversity in education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 85(2), 149–171.
- Gal, S., & Irvine, J. T. (2019). *Signs of difference: Language and ideology in social life*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kramsch, C. (1998). The privilege of the intercultural speaker. In M. Byram & M. Fleming (Eds.) *Language learning in intercultural perspective: Approaches through drama and ethnography* (pp. 16–31) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Macedo, D. (2019). Rupturing the yoke of colonialism in foreign language education. In D. Macedo (Ed.), *Decolonizing Foreign Language Education: The Misteaching of English and Other Imperial Languages* (pp. 1–49). New York: Routledge.
- Ortega, L. (2019). SLA for the 21st Century: Disciplinary Progress, Transdisciplinary Relevance, and the Bi/multilingual Turn. In D. Macedo (Ed.), *Decolonizing Foreign Language Education: The Misteaching of English and Other Colonial Languages* (pp. 111–130). New York: Routledge.
- Train, R. (2007). “Real Spanish:” Historical perspectives on the ideological construction of a (foreign) language. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 4(2–3), 207–235.
- Train, R. W. (2003). The (Non) Native Standard Language in Foreign Language Education: A Critical Perspective. In C. Blyth (Ed.), *The sociolinguistics of foreign language classrooms: Contributions of the native, the near-native and the non-native speaker* (pp. 3–39). Boston: Thomson Heinle.
- VanPatten, B. (2015). “Hispania” White Paper: Where are the Experts? *Hispania*, 98(1), 2–13.
- Zentella, A. C. (1996). The “Chiquitaification” of U.S. Latinos and their languages, or: Why we need an anthropological linguistics. In R. Ide, R. Parker, & Y. Sunaoshi (Eds.), *SALSA III: The proceedings of the third annual Symposium about Language and Society—Austin* (pp. 1–18). Austin, TX: University of Texas Department of Linguistics.