Accent Modification as a Raciolinguistic Ideology: A Commentary in Response to Burda et al. (2022)

Vishnu Nair[*]
University of Reading

Reem Khamis
Adelphi University

Sharia Ali
Alberta College of Language Pathologists and Audiologists

Fraibet Aveledo
University of Reading

Britta Biedermann
Curtin University

Olivia Blake
New York University

Maria Rosa Brea
New York University

Lilly Cheng
San Diego State University

Hsinhuei Sheen Chiou
Minnesota State University, Mankato

Denise Cruz
New York University

Ian Cushing
Edge Hill University

Beatriz de Diego-Lázaro
University of Valladolid

Amanda Eads
New York University

Mariam El Amin
University of Georgia

Leah Fabiano-Smith
University of Pittsburgh

Alicia Morrison Fagbemi
New York University

Alisha Brown Gandhi
New York University

Erica Saldívar García
New York University

Abigail Hackett
Sheffield Hallam University

Jon Henner
University of North Carolina, Greensboro

Li Hsieh
Wayne State University

Timothy Huang
West Chester University of Pennsylvania

Farha Najah Hussain
New York University

Yvette D. Hyter
Western Michigan University

Rowland Anthony Imperial
University of Oxford

Nadhiya Ito
Los Angeles Speech & Language Therapy Center

Holly Joseph
University of Reading

Draško Kašćelan
University of Essex

Gabriella Licata
University of California, Berkeley

Ching-Ching Lin
Adelphi University

Andrea A.N. MacLeod
University of Alberta

Mariam Malik
University of Essex

Marie Adrienne Robles Manalili
Autistic Collaboration Trust; Philippine Association of Speech Language Pathologists

Felix Antonio Matias
Gannon University

Stephanie McMillen
Syracuse University

Maria Modayil
Ohio University

Naashia Mohamed
University of Auckland

Fatemeh Mollaei
University of Reading

Darlene Monda
New York University

Gemma Moya-Galé
Long Island University-Brooklyn

Benjamin Munson
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

[*] Correspondence: v.nair@reading.ac.uk

Chloe Nkomo
University of Reading

Lilly Padia
Erikson Institute

Cecilia Perez
University of California, Irvine

Chelsea Privette
University of Texas at Austin

R.J. Risueño
Arizona State University

Lucy Rodgers
City University of London

Míriam Rodríguez-Guerra
Lawrence University

Ludovica Serratrice
University of Reading

David Ben Shannon
Manchester Metropolitan University

Xigrid Soto-Boykin
Arizona State University

Greta Tan
Speech Language Pathologist, California

Lei Sun
California State University, Long Beach

Karen Wylie
Curtin University

Betty Yu
San Francisco State University

Vickie Yu
California State University, Northridge

Alyssa Hillary Zisk
AssistiveWare; University of Rhode Island

Article Information

Abstract

In this commentary, we collectively examine a recent article titled "Effectiveness of Intense Accent Modification Training with Refugees from Burma" by Burda et al. (2022). Whilst our response is aimed at revealing the theoretical and methodological shortcomings of Burda et al., it will also expose the raciolinguistic ideologies in accent modification and highlight the need for careful ethical considerations on vulnerable populations, such as refugees and asylum seekers.

Keywords

Accent modification; raciolinguistic ideology; refugees; native speakerism; culturally sustaining approaches; accent advocacy

Positionality Statement

The authors of this article collectively demonstrate a commitment to disrupting and decentering raciolinguistic ideologies and emphasize the importance of co-envisioning linguistic liberatory praxis focusing on sustaining racialized accents. This is crucial to withstanding the risk of linguistic endangerment posed by the spread of English monolingualism globally (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

Imagine one needs to suddenly leave one's beloved country due to unimaginable atrocities including war, famine, or other major crises. One is far away from the familiar, anguished, and weary about the future. But instead of receiving human-centered, trauma-informed care, you are told you need to fix the way you speak—not because you need to, but to make White ears more comfortable with your tongue.

In their article on "Effectiveness of Intense Accent Modification Training With Refugees From Burma," Burda et al. (2022) argued that intense accent modification has resulted in beneficial gains for articulation and prosody. Their findings support evidence for multimodal accent modification and suggest replicating these findings in future studies including with other refugees from The Democratic Republic of Congo. In this commentary, we argue the evidence Burda et al. present and the suggestions they make are associated with a set of ideologies based on power, ability, and race rather than accent. Burda et al.'s construction of "accent" and presentations of findings are based on raciolinguistic ideologies, methodologically flawed, lack interrogation of accent modification practices through critical and culturally sustaining approaches and have ethical concerns. We briefly outline our arguments and assert that speech-language scholars and clinicians working on accent modification should move away from practices that force people to deviate from self-identities to approximate abled whiteness by changing their accent. Instead, we seek to promote a praxis that centers accent-affirming advocacy, listener education and linguistic justice.

Raciolinguistic Ideologies

Burda et al. (2022) argue that accent modification results in effective communication for non-native speakers of English. This statement underscores two ideologies: a) speakers who are "non-native English speakers" do not communicate effectively; and b) the ideal standard is to emulate "accent norms" to the one of a mythical "native speaker." Burda et al.'s rationale for accent modification upholds raciolinguistic ideologies. Raciolinguistic ideologies perpetuate an idealized view of English monolingualism. The language of speakers of color who deviate from the idealized version is racialized and labelled as deviant although these individuals are engaging in linguistic practices normative to their community (Flores & Rosa, 2015). By associating effective communication with an idealized view of monolingualism, Burda et al. assume that their participants' linguistic practices require remediation and assimilation to the White English monolingual standards. Furthermore, the article problematically utilizes dichotomous categories of native vs non-native speakers.

Native speakerism is an ideology which upholds the belief that American or British (or other White "Western" forms of English such as Australian or Canadian) is the best variety for speaking, language learning and education (e.g., Holliday, 2017). Holliday (2017) argued that native speakerism is a racist myth that was perpetuated by the American and British agencies which provided global aid with an intention to ascertain the superiority of the English as a global language. The dichotomous categories of "native vs non-native speaker' are outdated because globalization gave rise to heterogeneous World Englishes with different grammatical, pragmatic systems and accents

(Canagarajah, 2006). This contradicts the idea of singularity in linguistic competence perpetuated through a standard norm or an idealized native speaker. The ideologies of a uniform accent or grammatical forms are decentered to a more complex view of languaging as speakers utilizing their heterogenous language ability in accordance with their local values, expression and being (see Canagarajah, 2006, for a detail on this). Furthermore, the concept of a native speaker has been heavily critiqued for its harmful ideologies (e.g., Cheng et al., 2021). It is harmful because it is traditionally used to exclude participants from research studies and has cascading effects for communities who are linguistically minoritized. It is dangerous in its underlying assumption of the ideal native speaker as a linguistically objective category and oppresses people who are deemed non-ideal (Lippi-Green, 2012). Critically, it erases the linguistic resources and diversity of racialized speakers by suggesting that effective and intelligible English sounds are produced by the monolingual White speaking subject (Flores & Rosa, 2015). The White listening/speaking subject is an ideological position that reinforces language ideologies that are rooted in White supremacy and may be occupied by any person or technology that pathologizes the languaging practices of racialized others. In the US, for example, native speakerism is enacted through anti-black linguistic racism i.e., invisibilizing and erasing the vast linguistic diversity such as Black language and through ableism by specifying that there is a specific, correct way to articulate and language (e.g., Baker-Bell, 2020; Henner & Robinson, 2023). It is unclear why Burda et al. (2022) ignored this critical literature as well as literature focusing on the relationship between raciolinguistic ideologies and accent modification for immigrants in the context of labor migration in the Global North (e.g., Ramjattan, 2019; 2022).

It is reported that the participants in the study were noted as community leaders that needed to improve their communication. Once again, a problematic assumption of conflating accent with communication is used as a logic to justify accent modification. Moreover, these community leaders used English exclusively in their professional/academic contexts and interpreted/translated regularly for other community members. Their roles indicate they are already extremely effective in their communication. Thus, their perceived proficiency (or lack thereof) is more likely a result of their status as racialized refugees rather than their actual communicative practices.

Communication is bidirectional and power-coded. The "racialized refugee other" occupies a subordinate status in society. With such discrepancy in power, it is critical to ask to what extent the White listening subject pays attention to the languaging of the racialized speaker? When viewed through a White and abled lens, the linguistically and racially marginalized "refugee other" is problematized, assessed, and remediated because their languaging is denied of having the perception, clarity, intelligibility, power, and the status of the White, heteronormative, able-bodied languaging subject. Accent modification places the burden of communication on the racialized subject who is forced to meet the arbitrary, and ableist expectations of the imaginary White languaging subject. This is in conflict with our perspective that communication is a shared and collaborative effort between the speaking and the listening subject.

Methodological Flaws

The biggest methodological issue in the article is using articulation and prosody as a proxy for examining accent. Attempts to delink accent from power and ideological origins to a few phonetic drills measuring articulation,

prosody, or intelligibility needs to be critiqued and rejected. Such methodological approaches are further flawed by constituting imaginary accents (e.g., Burmese accent), whilst the speech patterns of those communities are in fact highly heterogeneous due to several socio-cultural factors such as class, religion, geographical location, and their forced movements due to the socio-political situation. There are other methodological issues that are too large to discuss in a commentary, however, Burda et al. (2022) preface their arguments by stating accent is not a speech disorder but a difference. The idea of "difference" is problematic because it assumes that accents of "White languaging subject" is the standard. Racialized speakers who deviate from it are positioned as "different."

However, if accent is not a disorder, it is unclear why Assessment of Intelligibility of Dysarthric Speech (Yorkston & Beukelman, 1984) was utilized to measure participants' intelligibility. Their rationale appears to be weak. For example, the test has phonetically balanced stimuli, or target sentences were developed based on items that had high probability. Based on the citation, the study on which the stimuli were based was published almost 80 years ago (i.e., in 1944). These stimuli are not suitable for "monolingual English speakers" of current times. Tripp and Munson (2021) argued that sentences measuring intelligibility are not objective even though they are phonetically balanced. It is not valid because they could reveal social information (e.g., race and gender) which would ultimately influence the intelligibility judgements of the participants. They cautioned against the use of stimuli measuring intelligibility without accounting for linguistic variation across different communities. It is unclear why this stimuli set was injudiciously applied to participants from another racial and cultural group. Critically, it also begs the question of

why an intelligibility scale developed for dysarthric individuals who have neurological impairments is applied to the current participants. Although Burda et al. (2022) assert that accent is not a disorder, their methodology reveals a contradictory notion where differences in accent are treated as disorders.

Lack of Critical and Culturally Sustaining Approaches

Yu et al. (2022) recently published a commentary discussing the importance of critical and culturally sustaining approaches with minoritized individuals in relation to accent modification. We will not reiterate Yu et al.'s (2022) arguments here but rather emphasize that the linguistic practices of minoritized speakers must be sustained instead of replacing them with the linguistic competencies of privileged populations. By suggesting that approximation of accents to White standards should be extended to other refugee groups (e.g., refugees from The Democratic Republic of Congo), the linguistic practices of the minoritized are devalued. It is unknown how this affects long-term mental health and wellbeing of the racialized subjects (e.g., Bhatia, 2018). It is especially concerning when such practices are carried out on vulnerable people, such as a 60-year-old refugee woman. It is important to understand that any repair in "communication breakdown" is a collective responsibility rather than an individual attempt to accomplish goal-oriented behavior (Fairclough, 2013). This perspective would recognize that accents are not primarily responsible for breakdown in communication. Instead, power, or social relationships built on power (e.g., refugee vs. a White state official) have a greater explanatory potential in revealing the reasons for any given breakdown. A socially and linguistically just approach would center accent advocacy by synthesizing

information based on critical theories of language and educating individuals and organizations regarding the dynamic, fluid, multidimensional and socially constructed nature of the accent.

Ethical Concerns

Burda et al. (2022) indicate that they were contacted by a "statewide refugee advocacy program" to implement an accent modification training. However, there is no discussion of the consent process. Due to the power of the state agency in governing the refugees' access to resources, the assumption of informed consent - that their participation was voluntary rather than compulsory - must be questioned. That the intensive accent modification training was implemented in tandem with a health care interpreting course severely constrains the refugees' agency - it becomes a forced choice. Further, the data collected does not include the refugees' qualitative response to the training. Their voices are absent from the evaluation of the training overall. Thus, the impact of the training on the participants' interpersonal communication and the affective consequence of the training is unknown. Given the enormous potential for harm in implementing an intensive accent modification training on an especially vulnerable population, these omissions are ethically significant.

In light of the growing colonized research engagement of speech language therapists with refugees and asylum seekers (see examples of such work with Arab refugees in Khamis-Dakwar & Marzouqa, 2023), there is

a need for ethical guidelines and oversight of professional engagement with refugees and asylum seekers that are based on human rights, dignity, and trauma-informed practice. This is especially critical given the history of trauma among refugees and asylum seekers (e.g., Im & Swan, 2021) and the reported spike in the number of refugees (since 117.2 million people are reported to be forcibly displaced or stateless in 2023, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2023). In the presence of such guidelines, this work with elderly female refugees from Burma on accent modification would be categorically excluded based on ethics alone. Maldonado-Torres (2010) in his seminal paper "on the coloniality of being" argues that ethics was only regulated in interactions between Christian Europeans as part of the colonization system, in which it was normalized to exclude ethical considerations in interactions with Indigenous and Black people. He argues that this pattern was rooted in the assumption of "exceptionality" of the White man that underlined the treatment of Indigenous and Black enslaved people based on non-ethical guidelines of war engagement. As such, he suggested that "coloniality can be understood as a radicalization and naturalization of the non-ethics of war" (p. 247). We as professionals in the speech and language therapy discipline need to interrogate whether some of our work with refugees and asylum seekers is mainly guided by the reminiscence of this non-ethical war-like engagement, and whether there should be a mechanism to exclude such harmful studies from being implemented in this modern day.

References

Baker-Bell, A. (2020). Dismantling anti-black linguistic racism in English language arts classrooms: Toward an anti-racist black language pedagogy. *Theory Into Practice*, *59*(1), 8-21.

Burda, A., Squires, L., Krupke, D., Arthur, A., Bahia, M., Bernard, K., Easley, M., English, M., Hicks, J., Johnson, V., Lancaster, M., O'Loughlin, E., & Skaar, S. (2022). Effectiveness of intense

accent modification training with refugees from Burma. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, *31*(6), 2688-2706. https://doi.org/10.1044/2022_AJSLP-21-00280

Canagarajah, A. S. (2006). Negotiating the local in English as a lingua franca. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, *26*, 197-218. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190506000109

Cheng, L. S. P., Burgess, D., Vernooij, N., Solís-Barroso, C., McDermott, A., & Namboodiripad, S. (2021). The problematic concept of native speaker in psycholinguistics: Replacing vague and harmful terminology with inclusive and accurate measures. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12.* https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.715843

Fairclough, N. (2013). *Language and power.* New York: Routledge.

Flores, N., & Rosa, J. (2015). Undoing appropriateness: Raciolingustic ideologies and language diversity in education. *Harvard Educational Review, 85*(2), 149-171.

Henner, J., & Robinson, O. (2023). Unsettling languages, unruly bodyminds: A crip linguistics manifesto. *Journal of Critical Study of Communication and Disability, 1*(1), 7-37. https://doi.org/10.48516/jcscd_2023vol1iss1.4

Holliday, A. (2017). Native speakerism. *TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching.* Bognor Regis: Wiley.

Im, H., & Swan, L. E. T. (2021). Working towards culturally responsive trauma-informed care in the refugee resettlement process: Qualitative inquiry with refugee-serving professionals in the United States. Behavioral Sciences, (11), 155. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8614655/

Khamis-Dakwar & Marzouqa, R. (2023). Issues related to serving the Arabic-speaking population in diaspora space with a focus on North America. *Arab Journal of Applied Linguistics, 7 (1),* 129-198. https://arjals.com/ajal/article/view/354

Lippi-Green, R. (2012). *English with an accent: Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States.* New York: Routledge.

Maldonado-Torres, N. (2010). On the coloniality of being: Contributions to the development of a concept. In Walter, M. & Escobar, A. (Eds*.). Globalization and the decolonial Option*. London:Rotledge.

Ramjattan, V. A. (2019). The white native speaker and inequality regimes in the private English language school. *Intercultural Education*, *30*(2), 126-140. https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2018.1538043

Ramjattan, V. A. (2022). Accenting racism in labour migration. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 42, 87-92. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190521000143

Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (2000). *Linguistic genocide in education – or worldwide diversity and human rights?* Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum

Tripp, A., & Munson, B. (2021). Written standard sentence materials convey social information. *JASA Express Letters*, *1*(12), 125202. https://doi.org/10.1121/10.0007466

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2023). Global Appeal, 2023. [online] Relief Web. Retrieved 17 February 2023. https://reporting.unhcr.org/globalappeal2023#planning

Yorkston, K. M., Beukelman, D. R., & Traynor, C. (1984). *Assessment of intelligibility of dysarthric speech.* Austin, Texas: Pro-ed.

Yu, B., Nair, V. K., Brea, M. R., Soto-Boykin, X., Privette, C., Sun, L., Khamis, R., Chiou, H.S, Fabiano Smith, L., Epstein, L., & Hyter, Y. D. (2022). Gaps in framing and naming: Commentary to "A Viewpoint on Accent Services". *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, *31*(4), 1913-1918. https://doi.org/10.1044/2022_AJSLP-22-00060

Citation