# Experts highlight link between language and race in new book

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Anthropologist Samy Alim argues that the relationship between race, language and racism plays such a key role in reflecting and defining the way human societies are structured that it deserves study as a separate field, which he calls "raciolinguistics."

Alim examines the connection between language, race and power in a new book, co-edited with John Rickford and Arnetha Ball. The book, Raciolinguistics: How Language Shapes Our Ideas About Race, compiles recent scholarly research on different societies around the world.

Stanford News Service interviewed Alim, the book's lead editor and director of the Center for Race, Ethnicity and Language, about the emerging field of raciolinguistics and his research.

## You say that today more than ever, American society is hyperracial and hyperracializing. What do you mean by that and why do you think that is so?

When the U.S. elected its first black president eight years ago, some proclaimed the U.S. to be a "postracial" society, where race doesn't matter. But every social indicator, from the income gap to incarceration rates and medical statistics on infant mortality, among others, paints a picture of a nation deeply structured and divided by race.

It is now nearly impossible to ignore social scientific research of all

stripes, which demonstrates that, rather than postracial, American society is in fact hyperracial or hyperracializing. That is, we are constantly orienting to race while at the same time denying the overwhelming evidence that shows the myriad ways that American society is fundamentally structured by it.

When racist speech is prevalent in mainstream U.S. political arenas – such as the racializing words of President-elect Donald Trump and other Republicans in the 2016 presidential primary – the possibility for violence increases, as we've seen with the recent attacks on U.S. Muslims and Mexicans.

This type of language has breathed new life into white supremacist movements like the so-called "alt-right," the term itself being a perfect example of how language can be used to obscure and sanitize what are overtly racist movements.

## Can you give specific examples from your research that highlight this connection between language and identity?

I studied Barack Obama's speech patterns and I've found that his speech changed depending on his audience. Because of prevailing racist, xenophobic and Islamophobic ideas about who he was, he had to speak in such a way that made as many people comfortable with him as possible.

Obama used a "black preacher style" to appeal to the African American community, linking himself to familiar black figures like Martin Luther King Jr. At the same time, he used "standard" English when he talked to more general audiences. But his "black preacher style" was not only important for the black electorate; he also alleviated some white

American fears that he was "not American" and "not Christian." He was caught between discriminatory discourses of race, language, citizenship and religion, and he needed to navigate between them in order to not be seen as "the African, Muslim boogeyman" that the far right made him out to be. Language and race work together here in very important ways.

I argue that Obama's ability to switch between different linguistic varieties has been an advantage in his political career. His speech can be seen as an example of transgressive, transracial politics.

## What do you believe is the biggest takeaway from the research compiled in this book?

As leading scholars argue in the book, language is often overlooked as one of the most important cultural means that we have for distinguishing ourselves from others. But rather than being fixed and predetermined, we argue that racial identities can shift across contexts and even in moment-to-moment interactions.

We use the knowledge gained from our studies to argue for a new kind of politics – a transgressive, transracial politics – that considers both the powerful ways that race is taken up by people of color in contexts of racial inequality and the ways that we challenge the very process of racial categorization itself. Race is both a social construct and an important social reality. So how do we develop a new politics around that in this current moment?

## What is raciolinguistics and why was it important to establish this field?

Raciolinguistics examines how language shapes race and how race shapes language. It's a field that grew out of a need to understand that

there is a close relationship between race, racism and language and how these processes impact our lives across domains like politics and education.

Some linguists study language in a vacuum without theorizing race at all. On the other hand, race scholars that do think a lot about race oftentimes neglect the central role that language plays in processes of racialization.

So, in this book, we bring together cutting-edge, innovative scholars interested in explicating the increasingly vexed relationships between race, language and power in our rapidly changing world – from the U.S.-Mexico border to Brazil, Spain, South Africa, Israel and the United Kingdom.

## What are your next steps for establishing raciolinguistics as a new field?

I founded the Stanford Center for Race, Ethnicity and Language (CREAL) in 2010 to help grow the field. It was the first and only center of its kind in the world. From there, in 2012, I served as founding director of the program in Race, Inequality and Language in Education (RILE), which now receives the most applications of any program in the Graduate School of Education.

There are several next steps, but the biggest two, for me, are these: I am now editing The Oxford Handbook of Language and Race with other leaders in the field, Jonathan Rosa, Angela Reyes and Mary Bucholtz. This is an explicit effort to build the field. Further, I have just begun editing a book series for Oxford University Press, Oxford Studies in Language and Race. Raciolinguistics is a collective effort, and scholars all over the country and the world are building it with us.

Provided by Stanford University

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