Will They Ever Speak with Authority?
Race, post-coloniality and the symbolic violence of language

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Abstract
Intersecting authority-language-and-symbolic power, this article tells the story of a group of continental Francophone African youth who find themselves in an urban French-language high school in southwestern Ontario, Canada. Through their narrative, one is confronted by the trauma of one’s own language being declared an illegitimate child, hence becoming a ‘deceptive fluency’ in the ‘eyes of power’ thanks to race and post-coloniality. They are fully consciousness of this situation and their ‘linguistic return’, thus gazing back at the eyes of power and declaring themselves ‘subjects’ capable of love and desire. I briefly address questions of hospitality and language ownership and conclude by addressing the need to re-think the connection between race, power and language.

Keywords: race, post-coloniality, language, authority, symbolic violence

[O]ne can testify only to the unbelievable. To what can, at any rate, only be believed; to what appeals only to belief and hence to the given word ... [here] when we ask others to take our word for it, we are already in the order of what is merely believable. (Derrida, 1996, p. 20)

Indeed the hardest thing, especially in post-coloniality, is to testify to the unbelievable, that which is symbolic in nature and which is felt but hard to ‘talk’ or ‘speak’ about. We are always almost there, but it eludes language. As soon as we ‘speak’ it, as we are dealing with emotionalty, it slips away. But we must speak it. When we do, however, we are constantly told: ‘That’s just unbelievable!’‘. We are left therefore wondering: is this an exclamation, a questioning or a reminder? Yet, this article dares to ask: Having fully mastered the colonial language, can post-colonial subjects ever speak with authority? Put otherwise, at what point do we own the language we speak? By way of an answer, the article tells the story of a group of French-speaking refugee and immigrant continental African youth who are attending an urban Franco-Ontarian high school in southwestern Ontario, Canada. They arrive at French-language schools with a highly-valued variety of French, le français Parisien or Parisian French. As Monica Heller (2006) showed, the
linguistic variety of French spoken in Ontario is both devalued and unauthorized in schools. However, Heller explains, most teachers in Franco-Ontarian schools speak this ‘devalued’ variety of French. Hence, I am arguing, we enter a ‘linguistic war’, where the struggle is no longer about language *per se*, but about power.¹ And in the context of this article, it is about race and language ownership. Because of race and legal status, I will show, this highly symbolic capital that African youth bring with them to Franco-Ontarian schools seems to become an unauthorized norm, a liability, a burden rather than an event to celebrate. Continental African students are treated, classified and streamed in either lower grades or in general levels, where their chances for advanced or university studies are limited. ‘It was unbelievable how they spoke’, one teacher exclaimed, expressing what Ben Rampton (1995), within the British context, calls deceptive fluency. For those who believe in this notion of deceptive fluency in Britain, Rampton explains, even though they may sound British and are born in Britain, South Asians cannot be native speakers of English. Therefore, the notion goes, their fluency or British accent is deceptive.² For Jacques Derrida (1996), this is an exemplary moment of ‘performative contradiction,’ an antinomy if you like, one where he would have declared: ‘Yes, I only have one language, yet it is not mine’ (p. 2).

Then, Who Owns Language?

Strongly worded, but Derrida (1996) is worth quoting at length here; after all he is my referent in intersecting authority-language-and-symbolic power. For Derrida, language is and has always been in the plural, and any claim especially by ‘the master’ to its possession can only be that: a claim.³ In fact, ‘the master himself’ [sic], Derrida declares, is no longer:

[C]ontrary to what one is often most tempted to believe, the master is nothing. Because the master does not possess exclusively, and naturally, what he calls his language, because, whatever he wants or does, he cannot maintain any relations of property or identity that are natural, national, congenital, or ontological, with it ... [And] because language is not his natural possession, he can, thanks to that very fact, pretend historically, through the rape of a cultural usurpation, which means always essentially colonial, to appropriate it in order to impose it as ‘his own’. (p. 13)

As we shall see, one has to be very careful in using the language of coloniality within the Franco-Ontarian context where I conducted my research. The discourse of coloniality does not lend itself easily here and the situation is tenuous if not confusing at best. Without entering the debate on the term’s orthography or definition,⁴ I will use interchangeably the two orthographies (postcolonial and post-colonial) more in the subaltern sense. When subalterns speak, said Spivak (1999), they are not heard. They are subaltern not because of total social immobility or for inherent reasons; they are subaltern because they are spoken for, they are authored and already talked about. Hence their silence is made possible if not expected. Spivak (1999) tells her own story as an Indian woman who is not heard (not even by other women) until recently: ‘Here is a woman who tried to be decisive *in extremis*. She “spoke”, but women did not, do not, “hear” her. Thus she can be defined as a “subaltern”—a person without lines of social mobility’ (p. 28).
So picture this: It is Canada—an officially French-English bilingual country, and one of the most prominent countries worldwide in implementing bilingualism and multiculturalism. The study’s population is French-language speakers in Ontario, an English-language speaking province that is situated next to Quebec. Quebec is the only French-language speaking province besides New Brunswick, which is the only bilingual province in Canada. As we know, the so-called *français canadien* or Canadian French is older than Canada itself as a nation, goes back to 15th century France, and has unique lexical, morphological, syntactic and phonetic characteristics (Heller, 2006, 1994; Mougeon & Beniak, 1989). Ontario has the highest French-language speaking population outside Quebec (StatCan.gc.ca, 2008). They are known as *Franco-ontariens* or Franco-Ontarians, comprising anywhere between 4.3-to-5% of Ontario’s population, and concentrated primarily in Eastern Ontario, especially Ottawa (the national capital).

Franco-Ontarians are exceptionally savvy in using the apparatus of the State and in social and political mobilization. They pride themselves on this mobilization ability and refer to themselves as *francophones de souche* (old or ‘original’ French) to distinguish themselves from other francophones (e.g. Arabic speakers, Haitians or West Africans). Thanks to activism and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom, which guarantees a prominent place for the French language as it does English in Canada, Ontario has 12 French-language school boards (both public and Catholic), a number of community colleges and four universities that offer programs in French and the University of Ottawa as fully bilingual, attracting a sizeable number of Ontario’s francophone population. *Francophone de souche* is as much a linguistic, historical and cultural reference, as it is a racial one. It is a term commonly used for White Europeans who speak French and are part of the earlier settlers in Canada. They speak varieties of French that are similar to Quebec French, but still quite distinct. Some of the distinct linguistic features of Franco-Ontarian French (FOF) include, among many others: 1) simplification (e.g. third-person plural that is cited as first-person singular: *ils veulent* [they want] turned into *ils veut* [they wants]); 2) the use of *sontaient*, a non-standard variant of *étaient* [were], the standard third person plural imperfect form of the verb *être* [to be]; 3) the common use of the possessive *à* in lieu of *de* (e.g. *la voiture à mon père* [my father’s car]; the ‘standard’ use is: *la voiture de mon père*). It is significantly important to note that these are mostly non-standard features which, as we shall see, create a very peculiar situation. On the one hand, internally, it creates a Franco-Ontarian linguistic community with its bond and intra-community recognition but, on the other, it becomes a simultaneous mechanism, a technology of exclusion.

To explain, those who speak standard French, oddly enough, would feel either excluded or highly valued. The ‘lack,’ as Édouard Glissant (1981) would have put it, is a better description for those who feel excluded. Postcolonial subjects, Glissant (1981) explains in *Le discours antillais*, are constantly identified and reminded by their lack of language possession. Here, language is locked in as a possession of a nation, a culture and a group of people. It belongs to ‘them,’ and identity (Franco-Ontarianness in this context) is no longer regarded as a being-of-the-entity [l’être de l’étant], a being-that-is-always-to-become (Derrida, 1996; Ibrahim, 2004, 2008), but as a fait accompli, an ontology whose essence and features are already known and non-changing. It may be a hyphen-identity in this context—Franco and Ontarian—but it is still purely ‘French’.
This is precisely why the real or imagined Frenchness is highly valued symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). But for it to function as such, Frenchness has to have the ‘right ingredients’ in linguistic, cultural and racial terms. French, it seems, is a convoluted term referring mostly to White Europeans belonging to or citizens of France. The rest, as Derrida (1996) put it, is the ‘Francophones belonging, as we strangely say, to several nations, cultures, and states’ (p. 10; original emphasis). They are hyphenated: Franco-Maghrebian, Franco-Antillais, Franco-Senegalese, etc. Because of this hyphen, or maybe thanks to it, they go through moments of mourning, where they speak a language—masterfully indeed—which they are told is not theirs. The source of that work of mourning (Todd, 2003) is in the psychic tension where, in many post-colonial moments, French is the only language they speak or they master it more than their mother tongues. Derrida (1996, p. 1) again:

—Picture this, imagine someone who would cultivate the French language.
What is called the French language.
Someone whom the French language would cultivate.
And who [as post-colonial subject] would be, moreover, a subject of French culture, as we say.
Now suppose, for example, that one day this subject of French culture were to tell you in good French:
‘I only have one language; it is not mine.’

Such ‘exclusions,’ Derrida continues, come to leave their marks on colonial, but as well on post-colonial subjects, and their identity formation. They create a ‘disorder of identity’, and are best captured in Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (2000). Here, despite her/his presumed superiority, the so-called possessor of language, the oppressor in Freire’s language, enters the work of mourning as much as the oppressed. That is, oppression and exclusion affect to a large extent the oppressed as they do the oppressor. Derrida pushes us further by, on the one hand, framing the work of mourning around language and, on the other, questioning the essence of language possession:

But who exactly possesses it [language]? And whom does it possess? Is language in possession, ever a possessing or possessed possession? Possessed or possessing in exclusive possession, like a piece of personal property? What of this being-at-home [être-chez-soi] in language toward which we never cease returning? (Derrida, 1996, p. 17)

Season of Migration to Canada

In Season of Migration to the North, Tayyib Salih (1991) tells the story of Mustafa Sa’eed. Sa’eed is a post-colonial subject originally from the Sudan who finds himself in Britain. He goes through identity translation and re-configuration whereby he ends up in a Third-Space, a split-subject between two cultures, languages and ways of being (Ibrahim, 2008). This is the case with my research subjects. In 2007, I conducted a small-scale research study in an urban Franco-Ontarian high school in southwestern Ontario, Canada. This research was a follow up to an earlier study conducted between January and June 1996 (Ibrahim, in press).
Both in 1996 and 2007, the research is a critical ethnography and looks at the lives of a group of continental Francophone African youth and the formation of their social identity. Besides their gendered and racialized experience, their youth and refugee status was vital in their, what I termed elsewhere, moments of identification (Ibrahim, 2008): where and how they were interpolated in the mirror of their society (cf. Althusser, 1971; Bhabha, 1994). Put otherwise, once in North America, I showed, these youth were faced with a social imaginary in which they were already Blacks. This social imaginary was directly implicated in how and with whom they identified, which in turn influenced what they linguistically and culturally learned and how they learned it. What they learned, as I showed elsewhere (Ibrahim, 1999), is Black English as a Second Language (BESL), which they accessed in and through Black popular culture. They learned by taking up and repositing the Rap linguistic and musical genre and, in different ways, acquiring and rearticulating the Hip-Hop cultural identity (Ibrahim, 1999, 2004, 2009).

Here the research participants are a group of continental Francophone African youth who find themselves in a small French-language high school in southwestern Ontario, with a school population of approximately 400 students from various ethnic, racial, cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, which I will refer to as Marie-Victorin or MV [all names in this article are pseudonyms]. Besides French, English, Arabic, Somali, and Farsi were also spoken at the school. This group of continental Francophone African youth varied, first, in their length of stay in Canada (from 1–2 to 5–6 years); second, in their legal status (some were immigrants, but the majority were refugees) and, third, in their gender, class, age, linguistic, and national background. They came from places as diverse as Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), Djibouti, Gabon, Senegal, Somalia, South Africa, and Togo. With no exception, all of the African students in MV were at least trilingual, speaking French, English and an African language, a mother tongue. Given their postcolonial educational history, significantly, most African youths in fact come to Franco-Ontarian schools already possessing the highly valued symbolic capital: le français parisien (Parisian French, also known as français standard or français international).

Ethnography and Hospitality

[I]s there anything worse, said Nietzsche, than to find oneself facing a German when one was expecting a Greek? (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 109)

As a critical ethnographic research project, I spent over six months in 1996 and three months in 2007 engaged in the research: I attended classes, talked to students, and observed curricular and extracurricular activities two or three times per week. I audio- and videotaped classes and natural conversations, visited their houses, played basketball (a game dominated by African students) and became the basketball team coach, and was invited for picnics. In short, I literally lived with the students, and because of previous involvement before 1996 in another project in the same school for almost two years, at the time of this research I was well acquainted with MV and its population, especially its African students, with whom I was able to develop a good communicative relationship.
What is more, my background as a continental African myself also helped me to decipher their narratives and experiences. Clearly, we shared a safe space of comfort that allowed us to open up, speak and engage freely.  

Of this growing continental francophone African population in Franco-Ontarian schools (Ibrahim, in press), I ended up choosing ten boys and six girls for extensive ethnographic observation inside and outside the classroom and inside and outside the school and interviewed all sixteen. Of the ten boys, six were Somali speakers (from Somalia and Djibouti), one was Ethiopian, two were Senegalese, and one was from Togo. Their ages ranged from sixteen to twenty years. The six girls were all Somali speakers (also from Somalia and Djibouti), aged from fourteen to eighteen years. Interviews were conducted either in French or English and French interviews were translated into English. Here, language was a crucial part of this comfort zone, this safe space.

This space was built against the backdrop of, first, total absence of diversity in the teaching, personnel or administration staff except for one teacher of Haitian descent and, second, the traumatic psychic experience of exclusion, discrimination and symbolic violence that students have experienced (see Ibrahim, 2009). Before the 1990s, MV had not experienced such a mass of diversity, especially the continental African presence. Teachers therefore had no experiential knowledge on how to interact with African youth in either comfortable or informed ways. Intentionally or not, students made it clear that there was a serious race-relation problem in the school. This problem is manifested in three different ways:

1) The host as hostage: Here, one is hosted, but conditionally. In Jacques Derrida’s (2000) language there are two forms or formulae of hospitality: conditional and unconditional (see Ibrahim, 2005 for full discussion). In the former, one is hosted, but under certain conditions, restrictions, choices and possibilities. Omer (M, 19, Ethiopia), who came to Canada by himself when he was 15 years old, exemplifies this situation. Omer was living in a shelter at the time of the interview, yet enthusiastically he was longing and planning to go to Laurentian University. Following an Althusserian (1971) language, Omer conceives this conditional hospitality as interpellation: ‘Hello there! You are Black you can’t do anything. Muslims, you can do nothing. This is what astonishing to me. It is already seen [what Blacks and Muslims can or cannot do]’ (individual interview, French). As Gayatri Spivak explained above, here the subalterns are already ‘talked about, authored and hence their silence is either made or expected.

2) Undemocratic decisions: This is when students feel they are not consulted on matters related to their lives. These decisions, then, are perceived as discriminatory, insensitive, if not plain racist. For instance, because all school teachers and personnel are White and Christian (except for one Jewish teacher), when the school decided that the midday Muslim prayer was no longer permissible, the decision was read in multiple ways, including as racism. Aziza (F, 18, Somalia) described it thus:

So now there is this new rule. They met, the personnel of the school that is, they met. They agreed, like we were nothing at all. They said ‘Oh, who cares!’ you see. We have to just tell them not leave the class, because our class is more
important than their pray... So, there wasn’t, I am sure, there wasn’t even one teacher who objected to that. They all agreed. (group interview, French)

Although students continued their protest, they found themselves submitting to the school decision after a few days. Their protest, they explained to me afterwards, was an expressed desire to participate in the democratic process of decision making. To soften the situation, the school brought in a Moroccan teacher from James High School, the other French-language high school in the city, who explained to students that midday prayer did not have a specific hour but an extended period of time from 12-noon to 3 p.m.

What is problematic here, however, besides the undemocratic decision taken by the school, is the way in which this Moroccan teacher was brought into the school. This outside teacher was brought in to reinterpret the students’ experience of this decision for them in a way that reinforced the White and non-Muslim teachers assessment of this decision. This is akin to the common occurrence with a White person who tells a Black person: ‘My Black friend told me that I am not racist, so [although they may have made a racist comment] what you are telling me [that I am racist] is wrong’. This is what George Dei et al. (2000) call ‘everyday racism’, which is hard to talk about and deal with (as we shall see below).

3) The minute and the trivial: This is the third and final way of racialization where non-appartenance, non-belonging or rejection is seen as an accumulative memory of small details, but when put together they tend to leave students with a clear message that they are not trusted, wanted or that they are deviant. Listen to Aziza again where she explains that even their names become a burden. The teacher’s repetition of how African students’ names should be pronounced has become a marker that sets them apart:

I am going to give you an example. A female teacher always gives the absent sheet [la feuille d’absence], always to White students. Moreover, teachers are going to know the names when they know them, for a teacher always knows the names of all the students in class. He is going to know more the names of the White students than the names of African students. ‘What’s your name again? Bûralé? How do you want me to pronounce that, Bûralé, Boralé?’ You see things like that. It’s a bit, it gives, it gives you pain here [pointing to her chest]. This is like, these things are small small, but they can be big, which can also be something catastrophic you see. And you, you have to live with this everyday, you see. (group interview, French)

Musa (M, 19, Djibouti) expands on Aziza’s example. One day he was absent the first period. Because some African students live on their own, they confront adult life earlier: they pay their own bills, cook their own food, work odd jobs, etc. In many cases, in short, they need ears to listen to them or a helping hand. They aren’t getting that at the school. Musa is worth quoting at length:

The other day, I was absent the first period. I came to school in the second period. And that day, I didn’t even see her [the principal]. I came the following
day and I told her ‘yesterday, I was absent.’ ‘All day? You were absent because you had problems.’ I had problems with Hydro, [city name] Hydro. I told her that I was going there; if not, they were going to cut off electricity … She said ‘no no, that doesn’t concern me. That is your problem. If you have to solve that, you should do it during your holiday time.’ But holiday times, they are closed. Saturday and Sunday, Hydro is not open. So, I have to go, I told her, I have to miss a class in order to go there and solve my problems. She didn’t even listen, she said ‘you were absent all day.’ ‘But Madame, how do you want me to [solve it?], and I was only absent the first period.’ I didn’t even finish, she said ‘no no, you were absent all day for Hydro, to solve this Hydro problem.’ I told her ‘Madame, try to listen, try to hear me.’ And I told her that I was only absent the first period. ‘Ah,’ she said, ‘you were only absent the first period, I am sorry. Then, I give a paper to [the secretary] this time, but don’t be late.’

But that is me, I told her straight: ‘That is your problem, you don’t try to listen to the African students. You only scream. That is your problem, and you have to change this character.’ I told her, straight up, I told her that. (group interview, French, emphasis added)

These examples are offered here as a demonstration for what Winant (2004) calls racialization or racialized experiences. They are insidious, convoluted, hard-to-pin-down, but psychically and painfully felt. As well, they are best captured as symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991).13 The beauty (and I recognize the irony of the term) of symbolic violence in this case is that it works through slippage; that is, when the doers are confronted or called up to answer to their deeds, they can escape by saying: ‘We didn’t know; indeed we had the best intentions; we wanted to treat African students like any other students’ (see also Graham & Slee, 2008 and their notion of ‘benevolent humanitarianism’). Intentions matter only in their final effect, as we know. That is, in socio-psychic terms, how one makes people feel matters as much if not more than one’s intentions. Intentional or not, African students in MV have built an experiential memory that is not so pleasant to remember, which is strongly expressed in language.

Race-in(g)-Language: Le français parisien Illegitimately Spoken

In MV, it is clear that race (read Blackness in this case) is experienced in at least three different ways, as we saw above, and with variable degrees of emotional intensity. My contention in this section is that language is central to this experience. Given their postcolonial education, by and large, African students arrive at school fluent in, and armed with, the highly valuable symbolic capital: le français parisien. Interestingly enough, as is noted many times by Heller et al. (1999), the role and the mandate of the French-language schools in Ontario is to introduce students to this variety of French as well as to the variety spoken by middle-class Franco-Ontarians. However, when African students come to school with this capital, there is an astonishment and disbelief on the part of teachers and school counselors. Their language, it seems, is deceptively fluent: they cannot be so fluent and speak the language with such mastery! This skepticism stems from the fact that, as Bourdieu (1991) would have said, the ‘legitimate’ language is spoken by an ‘illegitimate’ speaker: a refugee who is imagined to be, at least in the
dominant media representations, a source of pity and not astonishment and envy. This mistrust of the linguistic capital that African students possess has led to a patronizing attitude that is easily open to a racialized, if not blunt racist reading. Without naming it as such, students were aware of both: the process of racialization and how it illegitimizes their speech. In my group interview with them, female students reflected on this situation thus:

Amani: The teacher could not stop thanking me every time I speak and tells me ‘Here, your French, you can, it is different than the others. How that happens, where did you learn that? Are you sure that you are not in the wrong stream [this was a general level course]?’ You know, things like that. And then, she was really surprised you know. I told her ‘No, I know what I have to know for my level, my my ...’ [interrupted]

Aziza: And then she was very impressed when we said that we learn our French in our country. And then things like that, and then she said, ‘really, in your country, there is really this system?’

Samira: ‘Are there professors who speak French like that? But my God you have l’accent français!’ But of course we have l’accent français, there were teachers that taught us, no? And then this: ‘you are coming from Somalia oh, we never heard that in Somalia people speak French with ...’ [interrupted]

Aziza: ‘Really in Somalia you have this system?’ You know, they don’t accept that (group interview, French, bold added).

In my individual interview with Aziza, she expands on how teachers’ disbelief is patronizing and grossly disturbing, especially given its racial connotation:

Aziza: The first day when I wrote my [evaluation] test, of my French level, he [the counselor] was really surprised because I spoke an excellent French. The good and rich French; you know when you live in Africa? He was really surprised, you see. ‘You have an excellent French,’ you see! Because that is new you see, an African who speaks a good French, much better than they do. It is a bit [too much? unbelievable?] you see. And also there is a teacher who said to me ‘where did you learn your French? Your French is good.’ And then I said that I learned there where I came from, in Africa. And then she said, she could not believe you see. You see; she said that all the time. (individual interview, French, bold added).

In spite of their ‘good,’ ‘rich,’ and ‘excellent’ French, continental African students are disproportionately streamed in the general, non-college-bound level. This disproportionate number is noted by the students themselves. Using his ethnographic gaze, Musa (M, 19, Djibouti) observed that, ‘the majority of African students who are in Marie-Victorin take general level courses’. Although not all African students are in the general level, it is noteworthy that Musa introduced this observation to the discussion during my focus group interview with the boys without a question from me to this effect. Building on their memory of how schools functioned in Africa, African students were not fully aware of the
difference between fundamental, general, and advanced level courses. In Africa, reflected
the boys during my group interview with them, all students go to the same class to
perform the same academic task:

A male voice: When you come, when you first arrive in the school, you don’t
know what general, advanced, fundamental courses mean. It is
them [counselors and school administration] who give you your
courses. You just want to go to school to study. They force you to
take general courses [telephone rings]. You don’t know what a
general course means.

Musa: With general courses you can’t go too far. (group interview, French)

On the other hand, not surprising but exceptionally disturbing, most African students are
pushed towards sports. In their studies, Dei et al. (2000), James & Shadd (2001),
Mensah (2002), Nelson & Nelson (2004), and Yon (2000) have all observed the same
phenomenon in Canada. Thinking about their counselor, the boys continue:

Mukhi: But still, there is Monsieur Raymond [a counselor] who even if you took
five physical education [courses], he is going to give a sixth.

A male voice: Yah, I don’t know why.

Mukhi: I don’t know why like, to make you waste time or something. (group
interview, French)

The girls, on their part, seem to believe that it is the boys who are streamed more in the
lower levels; but because of lack of statistical information, I can neither confirm nor
overrule this observation. Nonetheless, I made the same ethnographic observation. Boys’
presence in general level is substantially higher than the girls’; close to 90% boys as
opposed to less than 10% girls. When asked why, the girls hypothesized that that has to
do with the exclusivity the boys make between sports and academic performance. Always
according to the girls, becoming a successful athlete for the boys is seen in opposition to
doing well academically. When one is doing one’s homework successfully, one is seen as
a ‘nerd’, a term connected to what Ogbu and Fordham (1986) call ‘acting white’. The
girls have seen these boys ‘back-home’ where they were ‘first class’ students. Something
has happened that caused them to see academics in opposition to athleticism.

Awad: I have noticed that at the school, especially there is a very very strong majority
[of the African students] who are present in the general level.

Asma: That I know why. You know why?

Awad: Why?

Asma: The majority are the boys. The majority are the boys, they want basketball.
Dream Team, I love the basketball [a girl talking], Yes, wait.

Ossi: Yah, what does that mean?

Awad: Yes, yes, what does that mean?
Asma: They really want, they really could, I know these boys. They are really good. I remember in my country, they were really intelligent students.

Aziza: First class.

Asma: Yes, they know, they know. They know their academics, they know how to do this, how to do that. The problem is that if I start doing my homework, and I am a boy, this means I am a nerd. (group interview, French)

The gendered answer was exceptionally interesting here. When I asked the boys the same questions of why they dichotomize academics and athleticism, on the one hand, and why they are disproportionately in general, non-university-bound level courses, there was an unanimous response around their racialized experience, school counseling, or being refugees and living on their own as the reasons for their streaming and sense of alienation. Mukhi (M, 18, Djibouti) sums thus: ‘Si tu allais faire un sondage, ça vient souvent de l’orientation ou des personnels’ [‘If you conduct a survey, the reason stems either from counseling or school personnel’]. Taking the role of the African elder, Musa (M, 19, Djibouti) expressed the African students’ agony concerning living on their own, working through the immigration papers and dealing with their social workers: ‘The African students, they have a lot of problems. Here, the Canadians don’t have problems, they have their parents, there is that. We, we have problems. You, you are late, she [the principal] sends you home. You go home for three or four days. We, we can’t afford that because there is the immigration that calls us: “you have to come to see me today”. You have to sign your check, things like that. There is back and forth. So, you have to go to the immigration, you have to go to, your, how do you call it, social worker?’ (group interview, French)

Expanding on Mukhi’s notion of school personnel and their role on student streaming in the general level, Musa continued his contention and elderly role: ‘But the majority of the African students who are at Marie-Victorin, every time I see them, they take general level courses. I don’t know why. “Why are you taking a general level course?” [explaining how he talks to other younger students] “It’s Madame Robert [the principal] who gave it to me”. “But, gee Madame Robert, [let her] go to hell, and take an advanced level course”, I said’ (group interview, French). In my field notes dated 5 February, 1996, I wrote, ‘Musa came up to me requesting if I can offer an English-language tutoring course because he thinks that African students have problems with English’. What is significant in all of this is the fact that, first, unselfishly Musa is looking after other younger African students and, second, Musa’s hopes are high that students can do much better. He knows they can do much better.

Consequently: Making Linkages and Conclusions

Consequently, anyone should be able to declare under oath: I have only one language and it is not mine; my ‘own’ language is, for me, a language that cannot be assimilated. My language, the only one I hear myself speak and agree to speak, is the language of the other. (Derrida, 1996, p. 25)

At this point, I am sure my ‘gentle reader’ (as W. E. Du Bois would have called you), may be wondering if the connection was made between race, language, postcoloniality and
authority of speaking. I certainly hope so. I have to admit though, tersely and specula-
ively, the paper is meant to be food for thought which sometimes is more provocative
than a French three-course meal. My intent was to show how, given students’ racialized
bodily experience, students’ speech was illegitimized despite its highly symbolic value.
This is what I am referring to as ‘symbolic violence’. This is closer to Foucault’s (1979)
notion of punishment, where the flesh is replaced with psychic experience. That is to say,
one is left questioning not only one’s speech and language but even one’s subjectivity
(not to say humanity). Derrida (1996) again—talking about himself as an Algerian-Jew
who has nothing else but French to ‘speak’: ‘In what language does one write memoirs
when there has been no authorized [language]? How does one utter a worthwhile “I
recall” when it is necessary to invent both one’s language and one’s “I”? (p. 31).
African students, it seems, are left with the same question: Can we ever speak with
authority? They are to invent both their language and their subjectivity. Here students
were conscious of what is involved in this (re)invention, this linguistic return, where one
spells one’s own name and names oneself. It involves:

1) A full mastery of the rules of the game, what Bourdieu (1991) would call the ‘market
   of exchange’. In any market, Bourdieu explains, there are currencies or capitals that
   are needed, there are rules on how to exchange these capitals, and he emphasized that
   the players along with the rules determine the value of capital. Hassan (M, 17,
   Djibouti) was fully aware of his role in the school as a ‘market of exchange’ and the
capitals he possesses:

   Hassan: So, there are all these structures and differences that you have to play with
   [jouer avec]. Such include the fact that you have to have the competency of
   playing with others, you have to know how to play with others. (individual
   interview, French)

   Clearly, we do not all enter the game the same way, nor with the same capital. None-
theless, ‘gaming the system’ or knowing how to play the game (i.e. system) is essential for
Hassan.

2) Once aware of exclusion and discrimination, or knowing how the system works and
   how it excludes people, one is under the ethical responsibility to ‘out’ it, to talk about,
   and to turn it around to one’s own benefit. To do so, however, one can work within
   the ‘system,’ from the inside. Hassan articulates it thus:

   Hassan: To begin with, there are all these stereotypes about Black people. There is
discrimination and all that, OK! The only way to combat discrimination is
outfitting (or publicizing) discrimination. Why do we have all this [discrimina-
tion]? We have to play their games to our own benefit. We don’t have to do the
impossible you know. (individual interview, French)

Since one is working with the system, the ‘game’ if you like, one does not look for
alternative markets and identities—as did the boys when they chose basketball as
opposed to volleyball and Hip-Hop as opposed to dominant identities. Instead, one
chooses to affirm one’s identity from within the particular authorized, legitimized and
dominant market and identity. Yet, Hassan is mindful of the fact that, in the case of
Blackness, there are no guarantees even when one possesses the market’s required credentials and capitals. That is why, he adds in the same interview, ‘if you come in [for an interview] with a tie, or with a suit, with your PhD, they are probably going to accept you more than before’. By ‘they,’ one may argue, Hassan is referring to the power bloc, those who have a larger control of the market, and who set themselves as the norm, the yardstick against which all is measured. Given their benefit from the dominant structure, ‘they’ have little incentive and lucrative investment in imagining others differently, especially Black people, and in decentering themselves. For to do so is to question one’s own power and in some cases give all or some of it up.\(^{15}\)

3) As educators, finally, and especially as anti-racism workers, we need to deconstruct the social structure of domination, discrimination and negation. Otherwise, some are damned to struggle all their lives and find themselves in the periphery of power with little or no resources and capitals. Thanks to these hegemonic structures, Black/African youth, by and large, find themselves putting in twice the effort to reach an average position (at least as defined by rules of the market). They carry the burden of ‘proving’ themselves, which means in some cases, they have to dichotomize, on the one hand, the school and the schooling process and, on the other, their personal desires, history, language and culture:

Hassan: But, I can prove it, I can do whatever I want to, dress\(^{16}\) however I want to, have whatever I want to, and be myself. You do what you have to do, you have 100% in your classes, and you are well-liked by everyone. It is really deceiving, it is really deceiving that despite all of these, we have to prove what we have to everyone, or who we are, and the others don’t. (individual interview, French)

One way to do so, Hassan contends, is to ‘flip the script’ as Hip-Hoppers love to say. That is, in place of failure one emphasizes pedagogies of hope, possibility and success; and talks about the unsaid, the absent, and the silenced:

Hassan: And the only way to do it [prove ourselves to others?] is not to conform or buy into stereotypical data like: ‘Oh 50% of African youth had failed, they can’t do it.’ What has to happen is to show them that 50% had passed, not only to show them the 50% that failed. But they only see the part that failed, they don’t look for the part that passed. We have to show them the part that passed, that’s what we have to do; and this is one of my objectives: to do more in this regard, to leave a dream ... (individual interview, French)

To materialize this dream Hassan is placing the onus squarely on himself. He is not Waiting for Godot, as Samuel Beckett would have put it, to do something about the social situation he sees around him. He is willing to ‘sacrifice’ and take up that burden and he knows the price he has to pay. As the old African saying goes: if the spirit is high, the body can only feel its height/weight. That is to say, the body does not have too many choices when there is a will, since we are guided by our will not our bodies.

Hassan: I am sacrificing enormous amount of time. I have been in a chain of committees for example, so there are always prices to pay. He who wants something, he is going to pay prices. You want something, you have to pay for it. You may
have to prove something, your strength or whatever. Personally, I know I sacrificed: I missed evenings and there is my mother, anxious [debordée]. ‘You come really late at night. Why do you stay after school, occupied with so much work?’ she says, you see! (individual interview, French)

Hassan’s spirit of sacrifice, personal responsibility, and vision are vital in the struggle against exclusion and discrimination. However, the institutional and systematic nature of racialization, discrimination and exclusion motivate us to think not only how discrimination takes place, but also, significantly, how it tends to reproduce privilege, especially White privilege (Graham & Slee, 2008). As Peggy McIntosh (1998) argues, for the longest time we tend to think about discrimination and racism and their effects on the victim. We need, she contends, to think about discrimination and racism as technologies of power that end up reproducing privileges, ways of thinking, being and speaking. To conclude, Hassan’s mother is absolutely right in asking, ‘Why do you personally, my son, sacrifice so much?’ What both Hassan and his mother need to ask as well is: ‘Why do we as African and Black people have to prove who we are and what we have to anyone?’ In an Obama-era, this latter question seems more than ever urgent since the silenced are yet to speak, and to speak with authority. They love but their love is yet to be heard as a creative margin for a radical pedagogy of hope, love and desire.

Notes

1. To clarify, there are two varieties of French that are talked about here: français de France and français canadien. I refer to the former as ‘français parisien’ (Parisian French) and the latter as ‘français de souche’ (original or old French; a term used both in Quebec and Ontario to refer to ‘original’ French settlers and their language). In the Franco-Ontarian context, the Parisian French is highly valued whereas français de souche, the variety spoken by most Franco-Ontarian schoolteachers, is both marginalized and discouraged. For further discussion, see the section in this article titled: ‘Then, Who Owns Language?’ For now, however, one may argue that we are dealing with ‘racialized class conflict’ where classism and racism are expressed through linguisticism, that is, in the variety spoken and valued. Interestingly enough, Franco-Ontarian teachers speak français de souche, which they in turn devalue. This is a phenomenon of cognitive dissidence, if not a schizophrenic moment; one where one devalues what one speaks. However, when continental African youth arrived to the school with their français international (which I am provocatively calling français parisien), as we shall see, they are told: ‘That’s just unbelievable!’

2. Linda Graham and Roger Slee (2008) show a similar process taking place in Australia, where White Australians do not seem to fall under the umbrella of deceptive fluency; only the Other, it seems, are placed outside what they call ‘ghostly center’ (p. 284). In his book, White by Law, Ian Haney-Lopez (2006) addresses a similar notion which he calls ‘rule of common knowledge’. Emerging in the 1930s-50s in the United States, the rule of common knowledge was used to preclude people of Asian descent from immigrating to the US, who were forced to argue in the courts that they were either ‘White’ or ‘of African descent’. All the cases heard took the former tack, Haney-Lopez explains, partly because it was during Jim Crow segregation. In attempting to argue that Asians were White (a color, not a geographic or biological origin), those who called skilled anthropologists to testify on their behalf lost their bid to immigrate because the courts applied what was called the rule of common knowledge, in stating that, even if you are scientifically White, we all know that you are not what common knowledge tells us is White, so for that reason you can not come into the country. Clearly, the so-called truth of Western science is subverted in the service of racist perception. To finish, I owe much
of this text and the notion of the rule of common knowledge to one of the reviewers of this article.

3. In reality, 'language' is and has always been plural. For Derrida (1996), the French language, for example, always had (and still has) multiple speakers, accents and daily expressions. However, it was standardized as it was written, thus attempting to eliminate its multiplicity. This standardization, Derrida argues, is part of a colonial project, where even people within France who spoke a variety of French were brought into the project of the Republic, which is assumed to have one language, one accent and one voice.

4. See Mishra, 2005 for a comprehensive recent discussion of the term 'post-colonial'.

5. Quebec, as some might know, is a monolingual French-only province; and New Brunswick is the only bilingual French-English province. The rest of Canada is English-language speaking. This may be confusing to some since Canada is a bilingual country. Here, when Canada declares itself a bilingual country, this is usually in reference to the languages used by the federal government in its formal functioning. It does not mean that every province or every Canadian is bilingual. On its part, however, the federal government spends a substantial amount of money to make Canadians bilingual or at least functional in both official languages. For the purpose of this paper, two things are noteworthy: 1) more French speakers become bilingual (which puts them at a greater advantage when it comes to federal government jobs) and 2) for Franco-Ontarians, given the omnipresence of English in Ontario, this endangers the French language because by the second or third generation they become English-dominant speakers. That is, they tend to speak and be more functional in English than French and therefore their French-language schooling is marginalised if not put off in favor of the English language.

6. The detailed analysis and discussion of these features by Mougeon and Beniak (1991) has been my reference in this area.

7. For Franco-Ontarians, the French language (not to say France itself) is still their highly prized symbolic capital. Even though they may speak it little and in many cases, not at all, that identity (along with its language) is by and large the claimed identity. Put simply, though Franco-Ontarians are largely 'hyphenated' and fluent in French and English, they will still claim French as their determining identity and language.

8. When it comes to Franco-Ontarians, notions of coloniality, postcoloniality and oppression are exceptionally complicated. Franco-Ontarians are a French-speaking minority in Ontario. They struggle as much as any minority does, and historically has been prevented from teaching their language or opening French-language schools (Heller, 2006). Yet, presently they have unearned privileges that others have to struggle either for or against: Whiteness, language, (institutionalized) power, school and social institutions, and above all the protection of the state. Because of these privileges, the population of my research (continental francophone Africans) finds itself a minority within a minority. Put simply, Franco-Ontarians do feel that their language variety is not as valued as le français parisien or français de France, but they ally themselves with this privileged symbolic capital by naming themselves: Français de souche [original or old French], hence creating complex situation where the oppressed or dispossessed can be an oppressor or a possessor, where the very notion of oppression and exclusion is no longer a unidimensional idea.

9. For Simon and Dippo (1986, p. 195), critical ethnographic research is a set of activities situated within a project that seeks and works its way towards social transformation. This project is political as well as pedagogical, and who the researcher is and what his or her racial, gender, and class embodiments are necessarily govern the research questions and findings. The project, then, according to Simon and Dippo, is ‘an activity determined both by real and present conditions, and certain conditions still to come which it is trying to bring into being’ (p. 196). The assumption underpinning my project was based on the assertion that Canadian society is ‘inequitably structured and dominated by a hegemonic culture that suppresses a consideration and understanding of why things are the way they are and what must be done for things to be otherwise’ (p. 196).
10. Sandra Harding (1987) showed that the claim to objectivity in research has taxed both the research process as well as the research outcome. She thus called for a subjective notion of research, where the researcher and the questions she asks are always subjective; that is, they mean something to the researcher. We end up reading the data we collect through a specific lens. This researcher therefore has always declared himself an organic part of his research. Though there was quite a considerable overlap between the mid-1990s and 2007 findings, for the sake of clarity, the focus for this paper will be on the 1990s findings.

11. To deal with issues of race and racism is to enter the chilling space of discomfort. Not to affect the student-teacher relationship, I decided not to speak with the teachers. But, elsewhere (Ibrahim, in press) I juxtaposed student narratives by talking to the only Black teacher at the school, who ended up leaving the school after a short time there. He expanded and confirmed student stories of racialization and exclusion. He had plenty of stories himself. It is worth noting here that, when I am referring to teachers’ ‘experiential knowledge’ (or the lack thereof), I am invoking both the need for further multicultural sensitivity, especially within teacher education programs, and real life experience. Based on my teaching experience in French-language teacher education programs, I believe real life experience would be my choice in creating a higher level of multi/cultural/lingual awareness.

12. Each student pseudonym is followed by their gender, age and country of origin. I will also indicate whether the interview is individual or group or in French or English.

13. Violence is, by definition, violent, no matter the shape or form. In Bourdieu’s (1991) language, however, ‘symbolic violence’ is no less violence or violent. It is ‘symbolic’ only in that it works at the psychic and intangible level. It is conceived in relation (not in opposition) to material and bodily violence. The two forms of violence, for Bourdieu, are complementary, go hand in hand, and can/do converge one into the other. (See also his notion of ‘symbolic’ and ‘material’ capital.)

14. In Ontario, there are two streams: general and academic. The former leads students either to vocational schools or community colleges, whereas the latter leads to university studies. Despite their language mastery, most African students find themselves in general level, as we shall see, which itself becomes part of their experience with the process of racialization.

15. Using Derrida’s notion of ‘play’, Graham and Slee (2008) offer an interesting analysis on how the center/margin work. One of their main arguments is that, ‘there is no centre but instead an absence of centre for which infinite substitutions are made, for there is no natural essence, origin or “invariable presence” ... , supporting a legitimate claim to centre’ (p. 284). We thus end up creating, what Graham and Slee call, discursive ‘ghostly centers’; ones where there is a ‘substitution of sign, substituting presence (i.e. singularity/normality/whiteness/ablebodiedness and so on) for absence (multiplicity/diversity)’ (p. 284). Here, the authors add, ‘privilege and position at centre is dependent upon the subjection and marginalisation of the Other,’ and the ‘maintenance of positions of power through discursive dividing practices as rhetorical strategies ... that (re)secure domination and privilege results in the reinstatement of the politic of the powerful’ (p. 284). I am also mindful that Hassan may have left a sense of the classic ‘internalized racism’, which goes something like this: If I can just be good enough, you will see I am like you, so embrace me! Hassan was too self-conscious and troubled this notion elsewhere (see Ibrahim, 2009).

16. Most of the time, Hassan had on elegant yet baggy clothes, bordering on Hip-Hop and dominant/‘regular’ clothes. Hassan was one of the most popular and elegant students at the school. He was the student Council President for two years and one of the most articulate students at the school. He was invited many times to school board meetings to address African youth concerns.

References
Will They Ever Speak with Authority?


Awad Ibrahim


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