The Everyday Language of Racism
Jane H. Hill
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*The Everyday Language of Racism* provides a rich sociolinguistic analysis of white racism in a North American context. Hill begins her important book by introducing readers to the notion of a “folk theory of racism,” a prevalent notion that problematically implies racism is related to individual beliefs and intentions, reflected by its personalist ideology. The folk theory of racism is a kind of smokescreen because it allows racists to appear and feel as though they are not in fact, being racist. Bonilla-Silva (2002) describes the resulting condition “colorblind racism” and “racism without racists.” This facet of white racism, a feature Hill labels “white virtue,” is why her sociolinguistic analysis is so highly needed.

Hill points out that many whites do not believe that they are racist because they don’t consider their actions or their speech (such as mock Spanish) to be malicious or invidious. Consequently, racist gaffes are labeled errors of the *head* rather than the *heart*, a “semantic move” (Bonilla-Silva, 2002) that Hill problematizes effectively well in her book. The misnomer of the heart and head is based on the misguided belief that it is intention that makes something or someone racist. Hill (2002) explains, “Personalist ideology insists that speaker *intention*, not the feelings of the hearer, is always most important in evaluating meaning” (p. 96, emphasis added). Personalist ideology is another reason why the topics Hill addresses are so illustrative of
how the folk theory of racism, like white privilege, by its very definition prevents whites from realizing that their language and the ideology upon which it rests are racist.

Hill’s book is remarkably timely. Much of her work could be used to analyze the Paula Deen case, which continues to receive much attention by the news media. The manner in which Deen has carried herself and presented her case—implying that her use of the word “nigger” was an innocent mistake—illustrates how white racism is believed by so many to be committed only by backward people like Klu Klux Klan members, not by public personalities like Deen who are well-respected and have large fan bases. Hill attributes this tendency of the general public to absolve public personalities and politicians of racism to the fact that if one’s favorite personalities or politicians were found to be racist, that might make oneself racist by association (by having supported and voted for them and elevating them to the positions and status they enjoy). Very few whites want to be associated with or labeled as a racist.

Unfortunately, white people who use mock language in their vocabularies are racist. According to Hill, the use of mock Spanish denigrates and marginalizes the Spanish language and its speakers by replacing or substituting phony-sounding and hyper-Spanish pronunciations of everyday words, or by mixing ubiquitous Spanish words with English words, a sort of Spanglish if you will. Mock Spanish (Tex-Mex, Spanglish, etc.) is used in the United States because it is considered humorous by white culture, but as Hill points out, humor and satire should not be hiding places for ignorance and bigotry. While reading chapter 2, “Language in White Racism: An Overview” I thought about how concealed white racist discourse truly is (a topic Hill addresses in detail in chapter 5, “Covert Racist Discourse: Metaphors, Mocking, and the Racialization of Historically Spanish-Speaking Populations in the United States”). Regrettably, it called into mind recently having to tell my 5-year old daughter that she could not repeat the “Eeny-meeny-miny-mo-catch-a-tiger-by-its-toe-if-he-hollers-let-him-go-eyeny-meeny-miny-mo” song she learned from her schoolmates since it has racist origins. The original words to that song were, “Eeny-meeny-miny-mo-catch-a-NIGGER-by-its-toe-if-he-hollers-let-him-go-eyeny-meeny-miny-mo” (Kailin, 2002). Thus, a seemingly benign children’s play song has racist roots; singers just need to know the history of the song.
In addition to mock Spanish, Hill’s book unpacks a wide range of other topics such as segregation, slurs, covert racist discourse, and embedded racism in American English. Since Hill makes sure to link the material that she covers to principles of the folk ideology of racism, the text is easy to follow, which assists readers with what they are being exposed to within the text itself. The book is 224 pages in length and consists of seven individual chapters. Endnotes and indices elaborate the text in positive ways, primarily enhancing its scholarly usefulness to those individuals in academic fields.

In addition to data obtained from newspapers and the web, *The Everyday Language of Racism* relies on three “case studies” that Hill uses as theoretical and analytical examples: (1) Senator Trent Lott’s racist comments at Strom Thurmond’s 100th birthday party, (2) the re-naming of Squaw Peak in Arizona, and (3) the racist use of Mock Spanish in Arizona and elsewhere around the globe. While the case studies that Hill chose to explore are salient, a significant limitation to Hill’s analysis is that these case studies do not capture instances of anti-Asian racism in America (Hartlep, 2013). As a Korean American, I was hoping to learn more about how whites use language to talk nasty about Asians in an American context. The book’s arguments and analyses would have been strengthened if it looked at the fact that “mock” language extends beyond Spanish in the United States. Indeed, Asian language is frequently mocked not only in the popular media but in the news media as well.

For example, after Asiana Flight 214 crash-landed in San Francisco, a news station reported that the names of the pilots were Sum Ting Wong, Wi Tu Lo, Ho Lee Fuk, and Bang Ding Ow. The news reporter added that the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) had confirmed their names as being real. These names were supposedly verified, but they were not, and they were clearly racist.

The main limitation of Hill’s book is that it focuses on narrow groups of people (Blacks, Native Americans, Hispanics/Latinos), rather than systematically synthesizing the common elements of white racism. Notwithstanding, the book offers a nuanced sociolinguistic look at white racism that previous sociologists (Bonilla-Silva, 2010) and race scholars (Feagin, 2000) who have written about white racism would be pleased by. Academics and graduate students will find this book to be as educational as it is erudite.
References


