

Chapter 34. Reckoning The Privilege of White Multilingualism

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I recently attended the 68th Commission on the Status of Women at the United Nations as an NGO delegate. Accessibility-wise, it was easy for me to attend. I took the Subway to the UN. I used my home language, English. I showed my driver's license for entry. This diverged from the Zimbabwean women I met. They traveled for 24 hours to New York. They spoke English as an additional language; Ndebele was their first. They required passports and visas. A delegation of white women tried cutting them in line but not me. Later, we all sat in the Trusteeship Council listening to Secretary-General António Guterres speak with Portuguese-accented English. I watched three tiers of translators interpret for attendees who donned earpieces to listen to his keynote in French, Korean, Russian, Spanish, and more. I observed on-screen captions and ASL interpretation. I noticed questioners assume the lingua franca while the Secretary-General received his own ear-pieced translation before answering in his second language. I encountered more non-English and non-US culture in a singular space than I ever have anywhere before.

I couldn't help but notice my linguistic, racial, and national privilege. As a white English professor, I am leery of English's role in imperialism, colonialism, and racism; I can't help but question my own complicity. The UN is designed to unite nations, but English, the US, and whiteness directed the Headquarters' norms. It forefronted how my multilingualism and multiliteracies weren't actually needed, at least not in the ways they were required for foreign delegates.

My multilingualism began in sixth grade Spanish in suburban Georgia. Instruction included children's songs to learn letters and numbers while sampling chips and salsa. My entire schooling, including most Spanish classes, was taught in English, almost exclusively by white, US-born educators. I studied Spanish because it thrilled me more than extra math or gym classes; I continued Spanish because it afforded travel and a resume line.

At the UN, my mind's ongoing hum amplified its reminder that many people are forced to learn English to access education, immigrate or seek asylum, or get hired. Whereas my multilingualism and intercultural competence is routinely praised as an incredible skill, people from marginalized communities are incessantly criticized that their other languages aren't good enough. My multilingualism has unfairly flung agape exquisite doors, but for too many, multilingualism is essential for prying open rudimentary entryways.

Reckoning literacy discrimination is complicated in systems designed to reinforce it. As a professor, I decide the boundaries of prescriptivism and assign grades. As a researcher, I determine if the potential participant using high school-level Spanish 2 counts as multilingual, especially compared to the Indian girls raised in Dubai speaking Arabic, English, Hindi, and Malayalam. As a writing program administrator, I establish linguistic requirements for placement into developmental versus mainstream courses. The inequities of literacy granted me this authority where I broker my future without having it restricted by my skin, tongue, or birthplace, and also influence others' linguistic experiences. The computer randomly assigned my first Spanish class, but literacy's weaponization has never been accidental. This knowledge holds me accountable to highlighting its injustices and disrupting its power across my work.

My teacher-scholar-activist philosophy is forever molded by my Zimbabwean friends, now among countless other sociolinguistic influencers sitting metaphorically atop my shoulder shaping my activity and reflexivity. I'm grateful for English's ability to connect us; language unites peoples in ways that monolingualism never can. I therefore continue my sociolinguistic work. Unfortunately, I can't undo centuries of language-based violence, but I can employ my sphere of influence to deconstruct the systemic privileges, pursuing linguistic justice as an act of peace.