

Not Separate and Not Equal: Linguistic Justice in Academic Libraries

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[Script](#)

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Sources

This list collects sources referenced in my talk and/or the abstract below--some talking about language in general, and some about specific languages--as well as some popular sources I've run across in the last while.

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Abstract

Many authors in library and information studies have interrogated the role of language with respect to topics such as information literacy (Pawley, 2003; Dandar & Lacey, 2021), intellectual freedom (Popowich, 2021), and oppression (Collins, 2018). In addition to language generally, it is also important to address the existence and use of specific languages, or the fact of multilingualism in libraries.

While individual languages may be portrayed as theoretically equal, the material reality is that people must often know a particular language (often English) as a prerequisite for participating in formal social, educational, economic, and political processes, making proximity to that language immediately relevant to access and inclusion. Thus, to dictate use of a specific language is to dictate both the kinds of relations that can be had and the extent to which they can even be had in the first place. The most salient example of this reality in academic libraries is the codification of a language of instruction, and by extension a language for collections, scholarly communications, and the library as a whole. Such processes make the power of the dominant language appear natural and neutral, while other languages are commodified, dichotomized, and subordinated in ways that may be invisible to speakers of the dominant language. Henninger (2020) has explored the commodification of languages in libraries at length and describes how stripping languages of their connections to culture and identity results in their treatment as something that can be managed through policy or technology alone. Meanwhile, the inadequate dichotomies outlined by Popowich (2020) can be extended to the linguistic realm via binaries, such as English/non-English, monolingual/bilingual, and native speaker/non-native speaker, which center certain ways of being and reduce the complexity inherent to multilingualism.

As these examples reveal, linguistic diversity, equity, and inclusion has the potential to permeate every part of the academic library. However, even when language is made visible as a form of difference, it is often with reference to more formal processes, such as classroom instruction, technological infrastructure, and collection development, neglecting roles for multilingualism in informal means of learning, sharing, and labour. Examples of these less formal activities include students and staff alike being socialized into language ideologies through passive modeling in library spaces, use of additional languages with other students to support comprehension, or performing extra work compared to others in the same job category due to speaking multiple languages.

Accordingly, the goals of this presentation are to highlight the social and power dynamics involved in both formal and informal multilingualism, to discuss the roles of specific languages in upholding colonialism, capitalism, white supremacy, and other systems of oppression, and to offer the framework of linguistic justice as one response to these systems in academic libraries. Such a framework would involve giving more power to languages--Indigenous languages, non-official languages, and others--and the people who speak them, recognizing how languages connect to ideologies of race, gender, nationality, and more, and acting to improve access on the basis of language.