

1 Introduction

Perspectives on Language Activism

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1.1 Introduction

Language Activism: The Role of Scholars in Linguistic Reform and Social Change brings forward state-of-the-art theoretical elaborations of language activism and presents depictions and discussions of personal in-field research and teaching experiences involving some form of social engagement and activism. The authors are language scholars with broad and diverse research experiences who offer an array of different perspectives on language activism. Their reflections are based on work carried out in different subfields of linguistics (sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, language endangerment, language policy, and philosophy of language), on a range of topics and in diverse research contexts, from the Arctic to the south of Africa, and from the Middle East and Europe to Latin and North America.

The volume's authors reflect upon intertwining themes such as scholarly positionality, social responsibility, research ethics, and scholarly social engagement and activism. These issues have been actively considered in sociolinguistics and related subdisciplines of linguistics in the last few decades but were first introduced into the field of (socio)linguistics by preeminent scholars of language, such as William Labov, in the 1960s.

This collection of chapters is the result of an inspirational week of presentations and extended discussions in a thought-provoking seminar organized by the editors – “Language Activism and the Role of the Scholar” – at the Inter-University Centre (IUC) in Dubrovnik in September of 2019, as well as in a panel at the Sociolinguistics Symposium 24 in Ghent in July 2022.

The IUC was established in 1972 by Professor Ivan Supek, a physicist and former Rector of the University of Zagreb, Croatia, to foster a much-needed scholarly exchange and cooperation across borders and to address essential questions at the intersection of science and society. Inter-University Centre members come from more than 170 academic institutions and universities

around the world. In 2019, linguistics joined the long list of fields represented at the IUC with a course series entitled “Language in Society,” aimed to investigate language in its social settings from the perspective of sociolinguistics and other related disciplines. The series was envisioned by Professor Dunja Jutronić, who invited this volume’s editors to serve as the course directors in charge of the new series. The “Language Activism and the Role of the Scholar” seminar inaugurated the newly established course series.

The IUC is an eminent Croatian institution with an important fifty-year-long history that spans many political and cultural changes in the area. Today, the IUC continues to provide a sheltered and uniquely beautiful space for gathering, reflection, discussion, and debate among international scholars and students. Over the past half-century, these participants have been coming to the IUC from all corners of the world to connect in discussions during extended meetings that go beyond busy scholarly conference schedules in order to bridge the differences that separate the global East and West, as well as the North and South.

When deciding on the topic for our first seminar for the IUC Language in Society series in 2019, we wished to choose from hotly debated topics of the highest importance for linguistics. Language activism has been at the core of sociolinguistic investigations for a long time but is still an issue about which scholars, activist or not, have many questions and serious concerns. What is language activism and what does it mean to be engaged in language activism as a scholar? This is a question that cuts across all the chapters in this volume, which showcase diverse personal experiences and possibilities for activist work. Although many language scholars have a deep concern for social issues, many also experience a tension between the requirement for scientific rigor and the commitment to social action and social justice. How do scholars get beyond the apparent dichotomy between rigorous research and the pull of an activist agenda? What should the expert’s role be, and what does it mean for a scholar to get politically involved? And, finally, what language ideologies and attitudes are propagated by language scholars, sometimes to the potential detriment of both their research and the people and communities they research?

What scholars mean by language activism is contingent upon how they conceive of language and how they understand activism. As reflected in the volume’s title, we use the term language activism broadly, as an overarching concept that includes advocacy and is defined as seeking social change through a focus on language. But, as illustrated in the volume’s chapters, language activism takes many forms, ranging from bottom-up grassroots activism to top-down advocacy. Authors introduce more specific distinctions between types of social engagement depending on the contexts in which they do their work. Some scholars’ work is deliberately activist while others do not intend for their work to be so even when they are deeply concerned about both scholarly ethics

and social justice. Through the many common points and intersections and the multiplicity of perspectives and issues raised by its authors, this volume demonstrates that scholarly social engagement and language activism have become a fundamental aspect of (socio)linguistics and language scholarship.

1.2 Organization of the Volume

The volume is divided into four parts: Part I, What Counts as Activism in Linguistics: Theoretical Perspectives; Part II, Activism in the Lecture Hall and the School System; Part III, Activism in Minoritized and Endangered Language Communities; and Part IV, Activism in the Public Space. Each of the parts consists of three or four chapters addressing overarching themes. Taken together, these chapters provide insight into researchers' individual and often quite personal experiences with language activism and the many successes and challenges they have faced in engaging in this work across a wide range of settings. The chapters also provide a useful set of reference points for other scholars to contemplate their own work within an activist frame. In the following overview of the four parts, we discuss the main questions, common threads and issues, and the contrasting perspectives and social contexts that shape the kinds of language-activist work we do.

1.3 Overview of Chapters in Part I: What Counts as Activism in Linguistics – Theoretical Perspectives

The authors in Part I (Pennycook, Ramberg and Røyneland, and Cornips) start by tackling the epistemological grounding essential for answering questions such as what counts as activism, how to define social justice, and what are the different ways to think of language by challenging us to be aware of the assumptions that lie behind these concepts. In his chapter, Pennycook describes language activism in a broad manner, spanning from language education to critical language awareness and involving struggles over forms of social inequality that directly involve language. Ramberg and Røyneland write that language activism points beyond the linguistic domain and entails engagement with or through language with the aim of furthering some particular human good. Cornips defines activism as a capacity to affect and contribute to social production with the aim of creating social justice and political change for those who are severely marginalized.

As a starting point, these three perspectives seem uncontroversial. Yet when we look a bit deeper, we see that activism, social justice, and notably language itself can take many forms and be viewed in quite distinct ways. As Pennycook writes, activism may have quite reactionary goals, for example, the antimasking movement during the Covid-19 pandemic. Another set of issues

arises with respect to the concept of social justice, which at least in the Western tradition is often conceived of in individualistic terms. Pennycook contends that liberal democratic conceptions of social justice typically lack reflection on their own positionality and hence are inadequate for framing projects aimed at progressive social change. Ramberg and Røyneland agree with aspects of Pennycook's critique of individualistic conceptions of social justice. However, they align themselves with a Rawlsian view of social justice that places greater emphasis on the equitable distribution of resources, respect for human rights, and equitable access to opportunities, political representation, cultural respect, and social recognition. The authors also put forward their perspective on linguistic justice, which entails maintaining and supporting linguistically structured diversity. In sum, engaging in language activism requires a clear understanding of what we mean by social justice and its specific aims.

A further challenge for scholars engaging in language activism is defining what we mean by language(s). Pennycook urges us to think about language in ways that are closer to how languages are used and understood in communities. Responding to recent sociolinguistic arguments that renounce the labeling of sets of linguistic practices as named languages, Ramberg and Røyneland challenge the claim that such naming practices always work against social justice. Doing away with languages also does away with a level of linguistically structured social organization that is needed to advocate on behalf of or alongside speakers of minoritized languages. Cornips, on the other hand, argues for expanding the purview of sociolinguistic research to include nonhuman animals and human interactions, embracing the post-humanist turn in sociolinguistics and the humanities. Indeed, as Cornips argues, such sociolinguistic research may expand our view of what can count as language beyond grammar and words. In sum, scholars engaging in language activism also need to clarify for themselves how they conceive of language in order to enact meaningful change.

Each author in Part I describes sustained activist efforts to understand and confront inequality, draw attention to animal welfare, and strengthen the legal foundation for multilingualism and minoritized language varieties. Pennycook highlights his critical applied linguistics approach that seeks to understand how language is used to construct and maintain social inequalities and develops strategies for using language to challenge and subvert these inequalities. Cornips pushes for an inclusive sociolinguistics that includes nonhuman animals. Ramberg and Røyneland describe Røyneland's long-term involvement in (minoritized) language revision processes and expert committee work dealing with the legal status and continued use of (minoritized) languages and recognition of multilingualism.

In large part, the authors in Part I and others throughout the volume reject the idea that activism is in tension with a commitment to scientific rigor. Indeed, some would say they are inseparable, and that activism should be included along with pedagogy and research as an integral part of our work. As Pennycook writes, applied linguists cannot be effective when studying topics such as language and the law, second-language education, or language revival without having some kind of activist agenda.

Another way of challenging the tension between scientific rigor and a commitment to social action is to ask whether our work has any effect on people's lives. Who is it for and what is its purpose? One approach to confronting the view that activist work is incompatible with good science is to redefine what counts as scientific knowledge to include, among other things, researchers' experiences with emotion, as Cornips describes, recognizing and valuing folk knowledge and expert knowledge, and allowing our research to transform us as scholars. Once we overcome the fear that activism will always compromise the integrity of our work, we can ask what it means to get politically involved and what our role should be in pushing for change.

The authors in Part I report on different ways in which language experts can engage in political activity by, for example, doing more than standing by as "neutral scientific observers". They also address the ideologies and false assumptions that characterize the field, such as the assumed human superiority over animals, the extractivist tradition in linguistics, and a view of languages as literate systems rather than embodied cultural practices. Yet, as Ramberg and Røyneland argue in their chapter, we should also be wary of new epistemological orthodoxies.

1.4 Overview of Chapters in Part II: Activism in the Lecture Hall and the School System

The authors in Part II (Mabandla and Deumert, Shohamy and Tannenbaum, and Cutler) tackle questions of language activism at the language policy level, and in post-secondary and teacher education. Shohamy and Tannenbaum describe their interactions with government ministries, while Mabandla and Deumert talk about activism in the lecture hall and the university. Cutler examines the idea that correcting false assumptions about language alone is useful in teacher education. Among other themes, these chapters explore the effects of monolingual language policies and efforts to implement multilingual language policy in Israel, the challenges of working in the neoliberal university and in the production of knowledge in South Africa, and the effectiveness of efforts to change attitudes towards African American English in the US.

Although all the authors in Part II describe activism as inseparable from their work as scholars, whether this work takes place in the classroom, the wider

university, or in the political sphere, there are also differences between them. Shohamy and Tannenbaum define advocacy as goal-oriented, ideologically driven efforts to influence and make changes, and the implementation of these ideas leading to social change. In contrast, Mabandla and Deumert write that activism does not need to be pragmatic. It can be imaginary, changing the terms of the debate, and bringing new ideas and thoughts into the discussion. Being an activist scholar means being prepared to engage in what they call “necessary conversations” with other scholars, but also with students and the wider community or, as Cutler writes, becoming aware of our own assumptions as scholars and the point of view from which we see.

The authors in Part II sketch out the various contexts that motivate their activist work. Shohamy and Tannenbaum focus on the historical emergence of Israel’s monolingual policy and the process of instituting Hebrew as the language of the nascent state of Israel. Their activist work involved an interface with government ministers, organizing conferences, generating research, and sharing this knowledge with the public in order to achieve change. Both Mabandla and Deumert’s and Cutler’s chapters focus on activism in the university and in teaching. Activism in the neoliberal university takes place in the classroom but also in the “cracks and fissures” of our academic lives, as Mabandla and Deumert write. But, as Cutler discusses in her chapter, activism is also present in questioning the assumptions and practices of the field in which we were trained and by listening carefully to our students’ critiques of these assumptions.

Bridging the tension between scientific rigor and the commitment to social action for Mabandla and Deumert involves at a very minimum recognizing the privileging of expert over folk knowledge in the academy. Cutler’s chapter suggests that scientific rigor begins by questioning our ontological assumptions, such as the advantages and drawbacks of using ethnolinguistic labels (e.g., African American English) in the context of teacher education. Shohamy and Tannenbaum describe the sustained research and development required to change language policy in Israel along with decades of advocacy and engagement with the needs of local actors.

For Mabandla and Deumert, political involvement pervades all aspects of scholarship, particularly teaching. They embrace a radical pedagogy that challenges (*inter alia*) traditional conceptions of language and the individualistic ethos that dominates Western educational institutions. For Shohamy and Tannenbaum, the expert’s role is in being able to produce the kind of data-driven results that will convince lawmakers and others in positions of power to adopt a new policy and support it financially. In some cases, however, scholars come to question their adherence to specific political agendas and constructs (e.g., race, African American English). This is the case for Cutler, who questions the effectiveness of correcting misassumptions about language as a way

for linguists to dismantle racist beliefs about speakers who use nonstandard features.

Scholars of language grapple with how to think of language and what the proper object of study should be, usually recognizing that languages themselves are convenient constructs that facilitate our work. However, for the sake of expediency we may not always provide such framing when sharing our knowledge with others. Cutler outlines the challenges of talking about African American English in a teacher education class and her students' claim that the term is racist. In their chapter, Shohamy and Tannenbaum question the ideology that multilingualism is beneficial to all. In fact, in a small country like Israel, such a policy may be highly problematic.

In sum, the chapters in Part II illustrate the authors' attempts to make meaningful change by challenging monolingual policies, decolonizing the classroom, and questioning assumptions and practices in the field of sociolinguistics. The activism the authors describe is incremental and imperfect, consisting of small steps and a long-game view but envisioning a different world.

1.5 Overview of Chapters in Part III: Activism in Minoritized and Endangered Language Communities

The authors in Part III (De Korne, Grenoble, Lane, and Vrzić) examine approaches to language activism in the context of research carried out in minoritized and endangered language communities. The language activism and language work discussed takes place in varied geographic and cultural contexts – North America, Latin America, the Arctic, Norway, and Croatia. Topics addressed range from socially engaged and activist research involving language documentation, (re)vitalization and reclamation to standardization of minority languages and Indigenous language education. Authors in this section also contemplate at some length the issue of their scholarly positionality and elaborate on the scholars' life history as a factor in research and activist activities.

Grenoble has been engaged in language documentation and language policy in the Arctic with endangered Indigenous language communities, mainly in Russia and Greenland. De Korne has worked on different aspects of endangered language education in Indigenous communities in North and Latin America, mainly Mexico. Lane has been involved with ethnographic research and standardization of an endangered language of a minoritized community in northern Norway, and Vrzić with the documentation and language preservation activities in a Croatian endangered language community. De Korne and Grenoble have worked in Indigenous communities coming to terms with the devastating consequences of colonization and racialization, while Vrzić and

Lane have dealt with ethnic minoritized communities struggling to have their identities and their languages accepted as deserving of recognition and status.

The authors in this section contend that research on language in this social context cannot be a neutral endeavor and is intrinsically activist and political. Moreover, they argue that researchers and their research should attempt to bring about some positive social change and more social justice for stigmatized varieties and members of minoritized communities. However, they have different takes on how primary they consider language activism to be with respect to linguistic research, how explicitly they formulate and plan their activist aims and how focused on and concerned they are about the possible pitfalls of scholarly activism.

Grenoble claims that “acts of activism” in endangered language communities come in many forms. She finds it useful to differentiate between inward-looking and outward-looking activism. According to her, linguistic work in a minoritized community is by itself an act of activism because it typically stands up to enduring colonialist and assimilationist policies. Grenoble suggests that she feels less at ease with outward-looking activism, because of the challenges of representing the community and acting on its behalf.

Vrzić, like Grenoble, maintains that linguistic work in endangered and minoritized language communities is inherently activist. However, she focuses on and warns of possible pitfalls of language activism, such as the issue of scholarly legitimacy to define and represent the community.

Lane and De Korne approach and define language activism from an ethnographic perspective. Both authors see activism as a complex and gradual social project, involving multiple social actors, including scholars. Lane focuses on minoritized language standardization while De Korne engages in Indigenous language education. Like Grenoble and Vrzić, Lane warns scholars to be careful about acting from a position of authority and adds that the results of language activism are ultimately unpredictable in terms of the exact outcomes.

As they work in research contexts where social inequalities based on language cannot be overlooked, authors in this section agree that research and language work is necessarily political, in as much as language researchers come to the field with their personal and scholarly beliefs and ideologies. Even if they are not working with a distinct political agenda, their presence and work will effectuate a degree of social change. In that sense, these researchers accept that research cannot avoid being affected by social reality and affecting that reality in some way in turn. Yet, this fact of life about research doesn't free researchers from the responsibility to aim for scientific rigor and the careful consideration of their roles as experts.

1.6 Overview of Chapters in Part IV: Activism in the Public Space

Countering the constellation of racial discrimination, prescriptivism, and nationalism in their respective social contexts, the authors in Part IV (Williams, Nilsen, and Starčević, Kapović, and Sarić) focus their discussions on their roles as self-identified public scholars and activists, and their efforts to share expert knowledge with the public and work towards social change. Williams has been doing work on the highly stigmatized variety Afrikaaps spoken in South Africa, Nilsen has devoted her activist efforts to fighting hate speech in the public discourse in Norway, and Starčević, Kapović, and Sarić have been struggling to inform the Croatian public about harmful prescriptivist and nationalist ideologies related to standard Croatian.

The authors in Part IV are all actively involved in various forms of public activism including media appearances and other forms of public-facing engagement. Williams, as a self-described public linguist, transformed his academic role as a researcher into working to promote the Afrikaaps language movement. Similarly, Nilsen describes writing newspaper articles and appearing on television talk shows in her efforts to raise critical linguistic awareness of hate speech in the public. Along the same lines, Starčević, Kapović, and Sarić describe their engagement with the media and write that the expert's role in public debates about language matters should be to clarify the distinction between facts and opinions about language. In sum, the authors see their expert role as sharing scientific knowledge with the public with an aim of enacting attitudinal change and social justice for nonstandard and stigmatized language varieties and lects.

Finally, authors in Part IV address how sociolinguists engaged in language activist work can recognize and overcome the ideologies and false assumptions that characterize the field. The authors describe interventions that go beyond the descriptive tradition by actively confronting racist, nationalist, and prescriptivist views of language in the public sphere. Williams' project is to retool Afrikaans into Afrikaaps through ongoing engagement with the local Cape Flats hip-hop community. Nilsen challenges the criticism she has received that her methods are not scholarly because of their overtly political stance. These critiques hinge on the assumed objectivity of linguistics as a science and the ability of researchers to suppress their own subjective biases. In the case of Croatia, Starčević, Kapović, and Sarić confront the inherent and quite extreme prescriptivism of many of their linguist compatriots, who see their role as upholding and enforcing the use of standard Croatian and who reject the idea that there is any relationship between language and social justice. In sum, the authors in Part IV confront ideologies that are at the heart of how the field of sociolinguistics is conceived of both ontologically and epistemologically.

1.7 **Modeling Language Activism: Tensions and Scholarly Strategies**

The scholars represented in the volume grapple with comparable problems and tensions in their respective fields of research and overlapping dilemmas about the nature of socially situated and socially engaged research. The intersecting issues and strategies explored by the different authors can be usefully visualized in Figure 1.1. The model proposed represents an attempt to synthesize the discussions and solutions presented in the volume. However, we acknowledge the complexity of the dilemmas encountered and find it impossible to offer a complete list of the ways to resolve them.

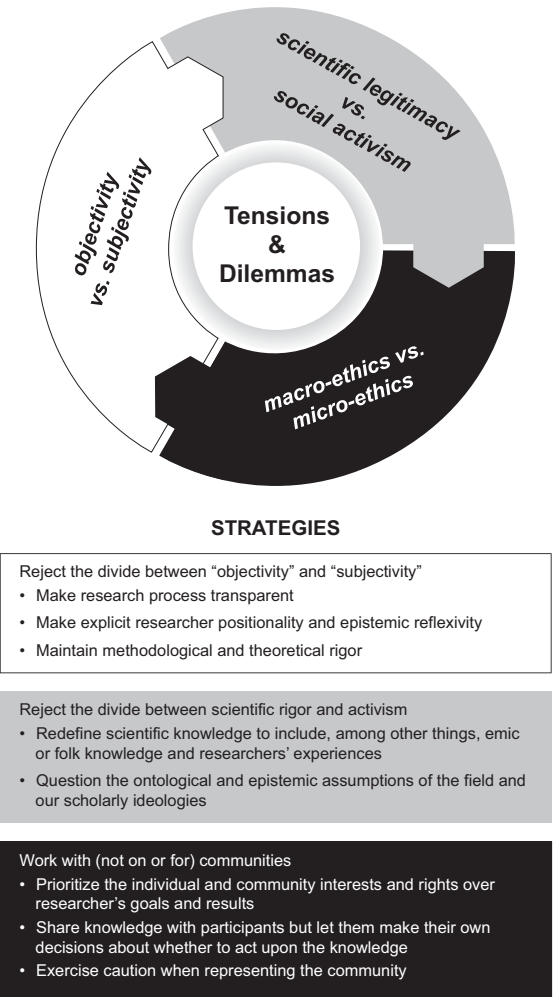


Figure 1.1 Modeling language activism: tensions and scholarly strategies

The first group of scholarly tensions and dilemmas has to do with the often perceived tension between “objectivity” and “subjectivity” in research in general and in (socio)linguistics and related fields in particular. This tension has to do with the nature of knowledge and, ultimately, with the question of what is “true.” Scholars struggle with the still commonly assumed need for “scholarly objectivity” and confront it with the recognition of how problematic the notion of a researcher as an “objective and neutral observer” is within social sciences (cf. the often cited, but also criticized “observer’s paradox”). To resolve the tension, most reject the divide between “objectivity” and “subjectivity” in their own work and propose to aim for scholarly rigor by making the research process transparent, rendering explicit one’s positionality as a researcher, engaging in epistemic reflexivity, and maintaining methodological and theoretical precision.

The second group of tensions and dilemmas authors encountered and discussed in the volume has to do with the perceived danger that their scientific legitimacy may be undermined by social activism. The questions scholars pose interrogate whether being socially engaged and even a self-identified activist will compromise the integrity of scholarly work and the presumed need to act as a neutral and impartial observer. Most authors reject the possibility of a sharp divide between scientific rigor and activism. Instead, they emphasize the need to redefine what scientific knowledge is and explore the ways to expand its limits to include, among other things, emic or folk knowledge and researchers’ experiences and emotions. They also propose that we routinely question the ontological and epistemic assumptions of our field and our scholarly ideologies.

Finally, the third group of tensions and dilemmas the authors draw attention to in their chapters has to do with researcher ethics. Many recognize the contrast between, on the one hand, the macro-ethics of general ethical principles, to be satisfied by institutionalized consent procedures and the taken-for-granted beneficence of science and, on the other hand, the micro-ethics or the ethics of care for individuals and communities in concrete social situations that scholars encounter in the field and grapple with in their academic writing. Some of the strategies explored by the authors include the well-established need in (socio)linguistics and related fields to work *with* communities, not *on* or *for* them, prioritize the individual and community interests and rights over the researcher’s goals and results, share knowledge with participants but allow them to make their own decisions about whether to act upon the knowledge, and exercise great caution when representing the community as experts.

Socially engaged research is often faulted for having a political bias. Against this, we suggest that being political is not a matter of siding with a particular

political party or even a specific ideology, but rather a matter of gaining a better understanding of language-based inequalities, and of working deliberately towards social change focused on social justice. The chapters amply demonstrate that socially engaged research provides important and relevant knowledge that should be made available to individuals, communities, stakeholders, and policy makers when making decisions related to language. Collectively, the volume offers compelling accounts of how such socially engaged research contributes to the promotion of greater linguistic equality and social change.