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### **The intersectional voices of feminism: Understanding how language prejudice can affect minority women**

I chose to write this piece in English, as I felt there was something utterly colonizing, somewhat alienating about expressing my ideas in French. I inherited French as a native language, just as I inherited part of my historical background as an African woman.

The black, the white, the grey, and every other existing shade of colonialism.

The beautiful, but also the ugly.

The racial stigma, the distorted self and the generational wounds I am expected to remain silent about.

In silence, we often find resilience.

My resilience stems from speaking the truth. The very fact that I must think and verbalize my ideas in a language connected with the colonial past of my ancestors carries deep significance. It is the footprint of a continued alienation. In fact, part of my thought process – including my underlying mechanism for making sense of the world around me through words – was taught and transmitted to me by the imperial culture. Language was a soft but powerful weapon used by the old master to achieve his cultural domination over my predecessors. From that perspective, it cannot provide a safe and neutral ground for me to discuss unequal power dynamics in feminism. As Audre Lorde mentioned in one of her pieces, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”<sup>1</sup>. To put it simply, oppression will hardly be overcome using the primary oppressive tools it has created for itself. As beautiful as it is, French used to be an oppressive tool serving to reinforce supremacy on my foremothers. It was the officially imposed language.

For what I am about to discuss here, beautiful words and complex structures are uncalled for. I desire to communicate in a language I chose to learn, one that enables me to reach a broad audience without enduring any legacy of oppression. This is my way of reclaiming part of my identity lost

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<sup>1</sup> Lorde, A. (1984). The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house, in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 1st ed. California: Crossing Press, 110–113.

in the colonial dust. I am writing to depict the experiences of some marginalized women in North America. Some, not all. I insist on representing only a small percentage of this group, as I believe women's experiences are too diverse to be blended. Feminism itself is eclectic, but not necessarily fragmented where it intersects with other perspectives. Intersectional feminism is the fundamental reality through which our unique journeys can be narrated. Our respective conditions as women overlap with many different categories – race, education, sexuality, social status, disability, language and others – that shape our personal or group experiences.

My focus within this framework will be on language as a separate category. When thinking of linguistic inequality, we tend to focus on gender-discriminatory language and how it reinforces patriarchal structures. Our basic understanding is that men are used as the default in everyday vocabulary, and their perspectives are normalized in most societies. We challenge the male-dominated discourse and advocate for gender-inclusive language. The pursuit of these goals is commendable, but it does not seem to provide enough space to examine the flip side of the topic. As argued by the advocates of postcolonial feminism, the very language used by mainstream feminism to deconstruct patriarchy can also reflect colonial power structures and foster new forms of dominance within feminist spaces. The strong tendency to normalize Western-centric views while overlooking the complex narratives of minority women is not new in feminist studies. Prominent thinkers such as Audre Lorde and Chandra Mohanty have investigated how powerful groups of women colonize the feminist discourse through language, leading to marginalization and loss of cultural identity for others. But little attention has so far been given to language biases against women originating from linguistic minorities in America.

I posit that linguistic prejudice requires more attention in feminist theory because it often carries a colonial legacy, reinforces unequal power relations, and creates exclusion among women. It is a largely unexplored topic in the writings of female thinkers, although it shapes the individual consciousness of some women across the broad spectrum of identities. In a society where there is a dominant language, silence is often imposed on women who don't know how to speak it. In America, for example, immigrant women are likely to face exclusion or experience some unfair treatment because of their accent, limited proficiency, and other linguistic limitations associated

with the use of English<sup>2</sup>. Such limitations can significantly affect their ability to access good jobs, healthcare services, higher education, and similar opportunities<sup>3</sup>. This phenomenon is known as linguicism. It shows that language isn't neutral, as it provides solid ground for unequal power among women in our liberal societies. I deliberately emphasize that we live in liberal societies because, in liberal ideology, language is considered a powerful instrument of freedom. It allows for women's self-expression and empowerment, shaping our inner world.

As suggested above, some women hold more privileges as native English speakers, while others struggle to adapt. For female English learners who are struggling, linguistic barriers may take precedence over gender-related issues. It is essential to underline that these barriers may overlap with other biases (racism, social status) and lead to a decreased sense of agency within the group. We should also be reminded that there is immense power in communicating with confidence and clearly expressing our thoughts in a language that does not limit our capacity to connect with the world around us. The above statement leads me to the issue of colonization and language theft.

We are all aware that long before immigration became a hot topic, colonization occurred in the cradle of mankind. During that era, indigenous languages were forbidden in formal settings and replaced by colonial ones to assert control over the locals. This language theft had a long-lasting impact on the self-perception and cultural identity of the colonized. For some women of African descent who were also dealing with racial prejudice and the strong influence of patriarchy, it led to a fractured sense of belonging. Where does an immigrant Black woman with limited proficiency in a dominant language belong in America? Where does an immigrant woman facing socio-economic challenges and struggling to have her voice heard belong in America? Where does an immigrant woman experiencing racism, sexism, linguicism, classism, and perhaps other types of prejudice belong on the feminist spectrum?

Feminism comes in many shades, and we must acknowledge all of them to build from our differences. This reflection does not claim to offer an in-depth analysis of the issue at hand, but rather to draw attention to it. In essence, language provides the framework for how we approach

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<sup>2</sup> Aning, R. (2023). Language Barriers Among Immigrant Communities. *WWU Honors College Senior Projects*. 638. [https://cedar.wvu.edu/wwu\\_honors/638](https://cedar.wvu.edu/wwu_honors/638)

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

the world, acting as a “map of culture” that colors our understanding of everything<sup>4</sup>. We speak, therefore we are. But who are “we”?

*We are immigrant women learning to speak another language.*

*We are daughters of the once colonized, stripped of our mother tongue.*

*We are among those who do not find our unique linguistic identity in your constructed homogeneity.*

*Your language reality is not ours, but we, too, are women, and we understand you.*

*Do you understand us?*

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (or Linguistic relativity).