Diversifying academic communication in anti-racist scholarship: The value of a translingual orientation

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Abstract
This article develops a complex orientation to linguistic domination and resistance to demonstrate how academic communication can be diversified to facilitate anti-racist scholarship. While it draws from social sciences which provide complex theories of social structuration, it demonstrates how linguists can offer fine-grained analytical tools to track these processes across diverse scales of space, time, and institutions. The objective of this article is to introduce an orientation to language which goes beyond traditional reductive and overdetermined perspectives to accommodate its generative and resistant potential. It introduces translingual practice as accommodating the theoretical developments discussed, and demonstrates how methods of indexical analyses can help scholars study texts and communication across various spatiotemporal scales in achieving structuration. This approach is applied to the writing practice of African American scholar, Geneva Smitherman, to demonstrate how her anti-racist scholarship renegotiates established structures of academic communication and generates change. While this article will help applied linguists to develop an appreciation of writers and writing in constructing diversified academic communication, it can provide linguistic tools to social scientists for tracing the workings of structuration and change at diverse spatiotemporal and social scales of consideration.

Keywords
structuration, translingual practice, indexicality, academic writing, anti-racist writing

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Introduction

While scholars in diverse disciplines have started examining epistemic racism and represented alternate epistemological traditions to develop a more inclusive academic practice, the role of the communicative conventions adopted to represent their resistant thinking has not been adequately discussed. The concern is that the protocols of academic convention are also biased and partisan. The dominant conventions are informed by modernist and Euro-centric assumptions. Notable, also, is the power of English as the academic lingua franca. To realize the biases informing them, consider the genre of research articles in scholarly journals. Though there is some disciplinary diversity, the widely held assumption that research articles should be data-driven, objective, well sourced, and carefully reasoned excludes other, diverse, ways of representing knowledge. They exclude the role of the personal, narrative, affective, and ethical in academic writing. Similarly, the dominance of English not only excludes those who are more proficient in other languages, it also prioritizes a register that favors educated native speakers of the language. Other localized Englishes, such as national varieties (Indian English), ethnic dialects (African American Vernacular English), gendered discourses (personal and affective), or social dialects (working class) are treated as inappropriate. More importantly, scholars have noted that the dominant discourse conventions have the power to mediate and shape the alternate knowledge traditions from other social groups to distort and compromise their resistant thinking. Famously, Kenyan writer Ngugi wa (1986) decided to abandon English as a medium of communication because he found that the language compromised his decolonizing thinking.

Social and applied linguists have been addressing these linguistic inequalities in academic communication. At the pedagogical level, scholars have developed theories of textual hybridity and voice to facilitate multilingual and multidialectal students to introduce their languages and rhetorics in a qualified way in their academic writing (Lovejoy, 2014; Seloni, 2014). This writing style is beginning to be theorized as code meshing, which refers to strategic mixing of alternate languages within the established conventions for rhetorical purposes (Young, 2004, 2013). This strategy disrupts the dominant communicative norms through the meshing of minoritized languages and literacies for embodying alternate identities and values. Some scholars go further. Cadman (2014) argues that minoritized students and scholars should be allowed to use their own languages without deferring to established conventions if they are to truly voice their alternate knowledge and disrupt hegemonic academic discourses. She also goes beyond classroom writing to intervene in high-stakes writing, such as dissertations and publications.

However, these proposals for creative writing practice have provoked a debate in linguistics circles on what it takes to truly challenge linguistic inequalities and develop inclusive conventions in academic communication. Some linguists consider these efforts at the level of individual writers and writing as misguided or insufficient to truly transform academic communication. Associating the efforts theorized under voice and hybridity as motivated by identity politics, Block (2018) draws from Nancy Fraser to argue that such discoursal resistance is ineffective without distributive justice. He thus draws attention to
material conditions which bolster linguistic inequalities and limit access to minoritized scholars. Others suggest that classroom, writing, and textual resistance without congenial institutionalized policies or structural changes is misguided (Flores 2013; Heng Hartse and Kubota 2014; Kubota 2016). They also point out that these linguistic changes can be appropriated by the neoliberal market conditions to compromise resistance and, in fact, marketize diversity for ulterior motivations.

This debate draws from popular conceptual distinctions between the micro and the macro, agency and structure, and base and superstructure in the social sciences. In fact, treating social domains as binary and hierarchical, with the latter term in the above constructs treated as determinative of the former, has a unique pedigree in modernist and Euro-centric epistemological traditions. Language itself is caught up in these distinctions. Though language is perceived as interacting with the material base in dynamic ways, it is still located in the secondary superstructure and consciousness in Marxist orientations. The materiality of language is underestimated, as it is treated merely as a representational medium for encoding knowledge, consciousness, and ideologies, and cementing social relationships. Sociolinguist Susan Gal (1989) observes how most linguists perceive the influence of Marxism in their scholarship: “Although the definition of language as ‘practical consciousness’ has an impeccable pedigree in Marxist thought, most classical analyses had relegated language, along with other mental phenomena such as world-view, or ideology, to the realm of mere ‘superstructure’, little more than a distorted reflection of the more important and determining political and especially economic processes of the ‘base’” (348).

However, social scientists have recently attempted to go beyond these binaries to articulate the complex ways in which activity on the local scale shapes larger social structures. Giddens’ (1984) notion of “structuration” was an attempt in this direction. We now have other forms of theorization, in light of the developing geopolitical conditions, which look at ways in which diverse scales of activity shape structures and might facilitate social transformation. Consider scalar theories from political economy and human geography (Lempert, 2012). The understanding that all communities are networked into a global system of interlocking dependencies complicates the easy separation of social domains in geopolitical relations. While scalar approaches have many implications for linguistics, a few of relevance to this study on linguistic processes are as follows. While linguists have traditionally made an analytical distinction between texts and contexts, scalar theories open up context to unveil diverse spatial, temporal, and social scales that make it up. They also alert linguists to the ways in which the micro and macro interpenetrate each other. Furthermore, what is micro or macro is relative, depending on the scale of consideration, and determined by the relevant institutions and activities that come into relations. As we can imagine, even structure and agency get complicated as moment-by-moment social interactions have significance for shaping larger structures on wider scales.

There are other scholars who are defining the materiality of language and how it participates in constructing power structures at various scales and domains. Consider how Foucault’s notion of the dispositif shapes analytical orientations. Dispositif is a machinery, device, apparatus, or “formation which has as its major function at a given
historical moment that of responding to an urgent need. The apparatus thus has a dominant strategic function” (Foucault, 1980: 194). Agamben (2009: 14) lists what might go into the dispositif:

Further expanding the already large class of Foucauldian apparatuses, I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings. Not only, therefore, prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, judicial measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident), but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and—why not—language itself, which is perhaps the most ancient of apparatuses—one in which thousands and thousands of years ago a primate inadvertently let himself be captured, probably without realizing the consequences that he was about to face.

Note that the dispositif integrates many of the binaries we considered earlier—including material and discoursal resources, and macro and micro—in the service of the power. As an object that embodies values and ideologies, language is also an apparatus for effecting control. Language cannot be left out of generative material resources in geopolitical relations.

Language as a material agent is becoming even more important in neoliberal apparatuses of governmentality. It can play a subtle but powerful role in shaping subjectivities for control. Communication media, such as digital networks, function effectively in expanding the reach and productive role of capital in our times. Raley (2004: 663) theorizes this communicative apparatus as forming an “e-empire.” She treats them as an effective contemporary apparatus: “In order to speak to the Electronic Empire, the apparatus of our time, we need the figure of the network.” In functioning like a rhizome, the e-empire is powerful in its coercive and dominating capacity. These networks do not have a central nation, institution, or person who can be traced for origin, locus, or control. Attacking one node does not bring down the network. It has the capacity to proliferate into new material forms and reaching into the deepest geographical, social, and mental spaces in the service of capital, the market, and the powerful. Raley also discusses how English as a global language enjoys hegemony through these communicative apparatuses. The e-empire both enacts power and gains power, in what Raley considers performative: “Informational capitalism mutates not as an unavoidably communicable virus, but as a nonorganic, electronic network whose operative criterion is performativity...in that its very nature and truth is constituted by its performance and efficiency” (2004: 643). The fact that the e-empire is deterritorialized and works in participation with diverse material formations accounts for its power, as in the rhizomatic definitions of empire by Hardt and Negri (2000).

When we expand our orientation to language and communication from recent developments in social sciences, we realize that earlier binaries of base/superstructure, agency/structure, and micro/macro, as well as linear and overdetermined ways of analyzing power, are inadequate. We have to identify more complex assemblages of power...
and devise more imaginative tactics for resistance. Raley critiques “the dominant articulation of capitalism within the Marxian tradition as unified, singular, and totalizing” (2004: 632). The fact that power is nonlinear, networked, open, proliferating, and distributed allows the powerful to manipulate others without visible machination. Critical linguists and social activists should also imagine more complex and intersectional forms of resistance. Therefore, Raley argues: “Reconceptualizing capitalism in terms of heterogeneity, fragmentation, and permeability, rather than organic unity, requires that we recognize noncapitalist economic practices, and it also allows for a more widely integrative notion of revolutionary praxis” (2004: 632).

There is much from such theoretical developments that linguists can learn to develop more complex orientations to linguistic domination and resistance and diversifying academic communication. However, if social sciences provide complex theories of social structuration, linguists can offer fine-grained analytical tools to track these processes across diverse scales of space, time, and institutions. The objective of this article is to introduce an orientation to language which goes beyond traditional reductive and overdetermined perspectives to accommodate its generative and resistant value. I will introduce translingual practice as accommodating the theoretical developments discussed above, and demonstrate how methods of indexical analyses can help us study texts and communication across various spatiotemporal scales in achieving structuration. I treat “structures” expansively to consider grammatical structures, textual conventions, publishing policies, as well as social and institutional structures. I apply this approach to the writing practice of African American scholar, Geneva Smitherman, to demonstrate how her anti-racist scholarship renegotiates established structures of academic communication and generates change. While this article will help social and applied linguists to develop an appreciation of writers and writing in constructing diversified academic communication, it can also provide linguistic tools for social scientists in tracing the workings of structuration and change at diverse spatiotemporal and social scales of consideration.

Theoretical orientation

I draw from the orientation of translingual practice to demonstrate how structures can be both critically unpacked and also reconstructed for change. The value of translingualism is that it does not treat languages or texts as monolithic. The “trans” in the construct invites us to go beyond language labels, autonomous grammatical structures, prescriptively defined communicative norms and conventions, and restrictive language policies and ideologies (see Canagarajah, 2013). It draws our attention to the ways language works in practice. Though monolithic structures, ideologies, and policies are sedimented through colonial history to exercise power, translingualism reminds us that practice is always messy, diverse, and resistant. In focusing on the practice side of communication, translingualism is able to bring out diverse strategies of accommodation and resistance depending on how speakers/writers position themselves variably in dominant norms. More importantly, the orientation conveys that norms, structures, or policies are not fully determinative of any communicative outcome. There’s more to communication beyond what we receive in prescriptions and rules.
The sociolinguistic side of this theoretical orientation is that translingualism encourages us to adopt a starting point for analysis beyond labeled languages, restrictive policies, and monolithic grammatical structures. It does not treat languages, grammars, or norms as ontological (i.e., having a reality outside of us). Therefore, it treats terms like “English” or “academic writing” as constructs—that is, they are socially and historically shaped and contested. In this way, it allows us to go beyond what meets the eye in guidelines, handbooks, and policy documents. Translingualism would encourage us to realize that what is called “English” actually contains words from diverse cultures and languages, diverse registers and discourses, and communicative practices informed by different ideologies. And what is called “academic writing” has variable repertoires and voices as embodied by different scholars. Monolithic language ideologies force us to misrecognize this diversity and treat “English” or “academic writing” as homogeneous, static, and normative.

However, this does not mean that translingual practice denies the reality of structures, norms, and restrictive policies. It traces how everyday communicative practices lead to the gradual sedimentation of grammatical and discourse patterns that become shared and treated as “established” for those communicative activities. Similarly, grammatical structures and discourse conventions become established for certain genres, such as academic writing. While popular understandings sometimes treat these norms as primordial, ontological, and static, translingual practice treats them as socially and historically constructed. In being reified through language ideologies, policies, and institutions, it is possible that these norms become entrenched and take on a life of their own. They are especially coercive when these norms and structures serve the interests of dominant social groups, preserve their vested social interests, and exclude other social groups. However, the materiality, creativity, and polysemic capacities of language also provide resources for resisting these unfair communicative structures. Thus, the translingual orientation allows us to go beyond the notion of a monolithic, static, or deterministic structures, and analyze language for its diverse possibilities in social transformation.

**Analytical orientation**

Methods of indexicality help analyze the strategies underlying structuration and change in language and communication as practiced. Although indexicality has a long and rich tradition in philosophy, semiotics, and linguistics, I draw from a focused tradition in sociolinguistics, emerging from the work of scholars like Michael Silverstein (2019), Jan Blommaert (2013), and Asif Agha (2005). Wortham and Reyes (2015) offer a synthetic analytical orientation that should be useful for activists outside academia and scholars outside sociolinguistics.

Indexicality simply means how words “point to” (index) meanings, values, and identities. Wortham and Reyes (2015) remind us that this is an “iterative” process that involves dynamic and ongoing interactions between words and contexts (172). While words gain their indexicality from contexts, the contexts can themselves be gradually changed through creative language use. In this way, the “indexical” (word, symbol, or
artifact) and its “typification” (what it points to) are always only “stabilized for now.” How meanings get stabilized takes a complex social and historical process. There should be social “uptake” of the meanings a speaker or writer intends or texts represent (12). That uptake depends on the indexical acquiring typification through repeated use in particular contexts for particular meanings over time. This process of typification is called “entextualization” (i.e., “the process of coming to textual formedness” (Silverstein, 2019: 56).

Indexicality studies are open to meanings, values, and identities changing over time for a variety of reasons. Dominant ideologies change, thus also changing the context for new meanings. Consider how the word “queer” has changed meanings over time, from an offensive term in the past to a neutral descriptive term or even a celebrated resistant practice in the present. But speakers/writers can also work toward changing meanings through “recontextualization” (i.e., “the process of how discourse points to (indexes) the context which seems to frame it,” Silverstein, 2019: 56) through small and gradual nudges of context. The paradox is that we are often not aware of these individual and incremental changes in variable micro scales of social interaction, as these moments are overshadowed by the sedimented typification when the meanings become already established at the institutional level. For example, it took many small-scale uses by diverse people to lead to “queer” coming to index positive meanings. However, since it takes many incremental uses for this typification to sediment, it is difficult trace the trajectory of this indexicality exhaustively or in detail. For the process of meanings, values, and identities changing across texts (or conversations), Wortham and Reyes use the term “enregisterment.” For the manner in which an indexical gains shape in the body of a single text or interaction, they use the term entextualization. Therefore, we will examine how indexicality is achieved through entextualization within single texts, and how enregisterment occurs across texts and over time/space through recontextualization.

The complex terminology I have introduced above does not mean that everyone has to know them in order to engage in creative and resistant language use. Many speakers and writers with a critical consciousness engage in recontextualizing language without conscious awareness of sociolinguistic methods or translingual theory. These tools only help analysts to trace and explain how changes take place. I can illustrate this point from the practice of Smitherman herself. When I analyzed one of her publications in detail for a previous article, I interviewed her for her feedback on her writing practice. Smitherman responded that she could not explain her indexicality strategies as she adopted them intuitively. In fact, she said that it was my duty as a detached analyst to explain to her own strategy. The fact that she did this kind of resistant writing did not mean that it was without design. She confessed that she always wrote her early drafts in “standard written English” (or SWE)1 and introduced African American Vernacular English (AAVE) expressions later in the revision process. What this suggests is that these insertions in her texts are strategic, not unplanned or careless. My job as a sociolinguist is to explain the possible strategies, identify the processes of entextualization and recontextualization, and evaluate the practices that can lead to disturbing dominant norms in favor of enregistering more inclusive meanings and values. Although I have published the earlier study of a single text in a somewhat impressionistic analysis (which does not adopt the tools mentioned here
explicitly—see Canagarajah, 2006), Smitherman has not contradicted my interpretations of her strategy. That gives me confidence that I might be generally on the right track in this analysis of a larger corpus of three articles. It is also possible that Smitherman is not contradicting my analysis as she is depending on me to unveil her strategies so that she and other anti-racist scholars can undertake this enterprise in a more informed manner.

**Analysis**

I will analyze three articles by Geneva Smitherman to demonstrate how she negotiates established norms and structures, while also working toward more inclusive and diversified academic writing. Smitherman’s (1990) lifelong mission was to challenge the deficiency attributed to African American English and engage the academic community with the logic of vernacular grammars and styles. She paid close attention to the ways of representing her resistant knowledge by adopting creative writing practices, using AAVE in her publications in academic journals. It is noteworthy that she was a member of the committee that drafted the Students’ Right to their Own Language (SRTOL), a resolution passed by the American National Council of the Teachers of English (NCTE) in November 1972. It establishes the validity of the dialects minoritized students bring to schools and urges teachers to respect them in their classrooms.

I wish to illustrate three academic articles Smitherman published in three different journals adopting different strategies for using AAVE to disturb dominant discourses and entextualize meanings that suit her anti-racist scholarship. After that, I will comment on how her strategies enregister different indexicalities for the use of AAVE in academic publications toward establishing more inclusive academic publishing practices, genres, and policies. Respecting the scope of this article, I focus only on chosen examples from each article and do not discuss every single use of AAVE in them. Rather than walking the reader through the iterative analytical methods Wortham and Reyes propose for indexicality studies, I offer the end product of my analysis. Furthermore, as one can study a limitless range of meanings, values, and identities indexed by words and texts, I limit myself to the concerns of academic writing as a genre. My analytical focus is on how the use of AAVE in academic publications gains favorable meanings and identities, rather than being stigmatized to index pejorative values such as the following: inappropriate informality, unproficiency in academic discourses, limited education, lower social class background, and the minority identity of the author. In addition to conveying such deficient values, there is also the danger that AAVE can end up unintelligible and define a failed communication or unsuccessful text for those outside the Black community. I wish to explore how Smitherman manages to entextualize positive identities for herself as a scholar and meanings that enhance her anti-racist scholarship and objectives.

An early article in my corpus of texts is a short article published in 1974 in *English Journal*. The journal is published by the National Council of Teachers of English, the leading professional organization for the teaching of English in schools and universities in the US. The organization’s website announces:
English Journal is NCTE’s award-winning journal of ideas for English language arts teachers in junior and senior high schools and middle schools. It presents information on the teaching of writing and reading, literature, and language, and includes information on how teachers are applying practices, research, and multimodal literacies in their classrooms.

Note that, while the journal is very respectable, it is targeted at secondary school teachers and it is not specialized in research orientation. While the other two journals I discuss are more research oriented and technical, this journal is relatively broader in scope. The audience is generalist, and the articles are more accessible, readable, and shorter in length. Smitherman’s article is 2½ pages long.

The article is titled “Soul ’N Style.” It is prefaced by a Doonesbury cartoon about Anglo American Bobby learning how to pronounce a Black slur for white people (“honky”) from his African American friend, Rufus. The cartoon ends with Bobby in hospital as he uses the word wrongly by calling a Black man that term. This is an example of a tragic failure of uptake as the context was wrong for the indexical. The word ended up entextualizing an unintended meaning, appearing as if Bobby was calling a Black man white. The cartoon leads to Smitherman’s argument that it is important for teachers (presumably the majority Anglo American teachers in the profession) to respect and learn the AAVE of their students to interact with them effectively. She argues that teachers have to go beyond treating English as a homogeneous language with universal rules and understand how all languages serve different identities and meanings for different communities. Illustrating through some examples where Anglo American teachers misunderstand or insult African American students because they are not aware of the meanings shared by the Black community, she argues that teachers have to go beyond grammatical norms to understand “who says what to who(m) under what conditions” (1974: 15) (a lesson that Bobby had to learn the painful way). Ironically, what Smitherman seems to be teaching secondary school teachers is the process of indexicality that is also the focus of my article!

Here’s how Smitherman starts her essay after the cartoon:

If a student has the right to his own language, then what do I teach him? (Oops! ‘scuse me, feminists.) Queries like this are often run on me when I bees gittin down tough on the legitimacy of Black communication. Underlying the question is a sense of uncertainty and confusion about the role of the English teacher who is right now going through some shonuff changes. But then, so is everybody involved in the educational enterprise as schools and teachers are being forced to take the leadership to meet the demands of our contemporary multi-cultural, transnational world. Because I believe with the late Martin Luther King that we must learn to live together or we shall all die together, we teachers should boldly and bravely accept the challenge (1974: 14).

Even the spell checker on my writing software is uncomfortable with this prose as I quote it. It has underlined in red such words as scuse, gittin, and shonuff. “Bees” is not underlined because the software recognizes a legitimate word, but fails to recognize that it is not used with that meaning in this context. Beyond just words, certain phrases,
idiomatic expressions, and sentence structures might be considered inappropriate for a formal academic publication. Consider the sentence: “Queries like this are often run on me when I bees gittin down tough on the legitimacy of Black communication.” The second phrase might be an intentional parody on the divergent uses of the copula “be” in AAVE. And “gittin down tough” is an informal idiom with a spelling change in gittin to reflect conversational usage. (Note that not all words in Smitherman’s writing I illustrate in this article belong to AAVE strictly speaking. Some are informal expressions, some are parody, and others may have migrated to wider discourse from their origins in AAVE.)

What do these deviations from SWE index? We have to situate these words in the context first. Here are a few historical contexts to keep in mind. Smitherman alludes to SRTOL right at the beginning to remind teachers that everyone faces a challenge in implementing SRTOL with a better understanding of dialects such as AAVE. Since this resolution was passed recently, it is a good reminder of the motivations for writing this article. There is an urgency for teachers to understand the dialects African American students bring to the classroom.

There is also a rhetorical or communicative context that helps entextualize Smith-erman’s vernacular usage for positive uptake. The journal she is writing for, being generalist and practitioner-focused, accommodates more readerly and essayistic genres. The intended audience has probably read other articles that were written in a more conversational and creative style. Also relevant for the rhetorical context is the fit of this language for the theme articulated. As Smitherman is writing about the importance of understanding the AAVE students bring to the classroom and illustrates the misunderstandings that result when teachers fail to understand them, it is appropriate that she uses such language in her own authorial prose to dramatize these challenges in interpretation.

The other statements that occur around these vernacular uses are also important for contextualization. Wortham and Reyes call them the “co-text”—that is, the texts that accompany the indexicals in question (2015: 16). That Smitherman starts with the Doonesbury cartoon would have prepared readers for a somewhat unconventional, creative, and less formal article. Furthermore, the title “Soul ‘N Style” (with the abbreviated “and”) also prepares readers for informality and the spoken register. When Smitherman then starts her first paragraph with some vernacular insertions, they would not have sounded jarring. Note also that she does not use the vernacular throughout the article. She starts the first two sentences in SWE. Furthermore, many other statements in the essay are in SWE. This use of SWE should cue to the readers that Smitherman is proficient in formal academic writing and that she is using AAVE intentionally for certain special purposes and specific reasons. Besides, SWE would also give them enough co-text to understand the AAVE indexicals that might be new to them. They would be able to guess the meanings of AAVE from the accompanying co-text.

How do these contextual features entextualize AAVE? We can consider both how the specific AAVE words would be interpreted and the broader question of how such use of AAVE will be treated in this genre. Consider the first case where some AAVE items appear: “Queries like this are often run on me when I bees gittin down tough on the legitimacy of Black communication. Underlying the question is a sense of uncertainty and confusion about the role of the English teacher who is right now going through some
shonuff changes.” Note that the opening statement introduces the question that motivates this article and the uncertainty and confusion Smitherman is referring to: “If a student has the right to his own language, then what do I teach him?” As these questions are mentioned as posed to Smitherman, readers might guess “when I bees gittin down tough” as her insistence on these pedagogical changes. Note also the repetition of abbreviated and clipped words which will create a pattern of expectation to fill in the missing items for readers (i.e., ‘n, ‘scuse, gittin). Repeated use is one way in which indexicality is achieved for words. These words can also be intelligible to those who sound out the words rather than looking only at the visual/spelling representation. Similarly, “shonuff” can be interpreted as “sure enough” based on the sound and abbreviation. Note, also, that failing to understand the words accurately will not harm the interpretive process. The sentence that follows these AAVE features reiterates the point she is making about the new pedagogical challenge through these words: “But then, so is everybody involved in the educational enterprise as schools and teachers are being forced to take the leadership to meet the demands of our contemporary multi-cultural, transnational world.”

Regardless of how much of the literal meaning readers work out from these AAVE features, there are other meanings behind these uses that indexicality opens us to. What are indexed are also values and identities. We might call some of them *performative meanings*—that is, meanings that are communicated through the very use, presence, or symbolism of a word, beyond its denotational meanings. The uses of informal spoken register and AAVE in this article can index many different performative meanings: that Smitherman is using these expressions to practice what she is preaching in this article; that she is introducing the type of language teachers should become used to, understand, and respect when they hear it from their students; that she feels proud to represent her proficiency with AAVE and adopt it as part of her own speech; that she is questioning the separation of AAVE from formal, written, and educated contexts by using AAVE in this case; and that she’s problematizing the dominant ideology that AAVE is illogical, meaningless, or inferior. From this perspective, an uptake of one or more of these performative meanings is sufficient for the purposes of this article. Even the cases of communicative failure can convey a performative meaning that enhances the purpose of the article. That is, if some readers struggle with making meaning and fail, they might understand what it means for others to be disadvantaged by their own language and why they have to strive to be inclusive in their own communication. Note that Smitherman does not use italics or quotation marks to flag the AAVE items as not belonging in this text. Doing so would have indexed the hierarchy of SWE as the norm and AAVE as an aberration or a comic interlude. This strategy contributes to the performative meanings of treating AAVE as sharing equal status and space with SWE as a legitimate language for academic communication.

We will now move to the second article, titled “CCCC’s Role in the Struggle for Language Rights” in a 1999 issue of *College Composition and Communication (CCC)*. This is the flagship journal of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). CCCC is the premier professional organization for the teachers of university writing in the US. Unlike the previous journal, *CCC* features readers from and research on higher educational contexts. It has become increasingly more data-driven
after beginning with more essayistic writings about 70 years ago. Articles now go through a rigorous, double-blind review process before publication. This publishing context poses new challenges for the inclusion of AAVE in articles. Mindful of this context, Smitherman has relatively less meshing of AAVE (in terms of its ratio with SWE) in her 27-page essay. She is also more cautious about where and when she introduces AAVE, as we will see later.

However, there are also rhetorical contexts that favor a positive entextualization of her AAVE items. As this journal and the discipline lean toward the humanities, readers and writers are comfortable with creative, personal, and essayistic writing. Furthermore, this article is a review-essay on the advances made in the professional organization in accommodating minority dialects in teaching writing. As this is not a data-driven empirical essay, there are more spaces for the use of alternate registers and dialects. Furthermore, as the readers are in the writing profession, they will be more willing to engage with styles and languages that are diverse. Many of them have had training in literature in English Departments. Note, also, that the other aspects of the rhetorical context, stemming from the focus on SRTOL, apply to this article as well. At the heart of the essay, is the way SRTOL has motivated composition teachers to engage with AAVE. Therefore, readers might bring a readiness to encounter AAVE by an African American scholar who led the formulation of this resolution.

However, as the context is more scholarly and research-based, compared to the teacher-focus of the previous journal, Smitherman introduces her AAVE cautiously. Her first use of AAVE is a single word in the second page, after about a couple of paragraphs and a lengthy excerpt from a publication to set the context. Mentioning how the profession has been riven with debates about proper language use for students since 1951 in this very journal, Smitherman uses the word “signifyin” for the sarcastic response of a writer against a language purist: “In his scathing critique, with its signifyin title, ‘Darkness is King’, Lloyd took Knickerbocker to task for coming to conclusions about the actual use of ‘controversial’ expressions (for example, Who did you meet?) based on an opinion survey by a lay person. . .” (1999: 350). This word is actually well known to scholars in English from notable other publications including Gates’ 1990 book Signifying Monkey. Though Gates was somewhat cautious by using the unabbreviated word, the in-group form without the “g” is also well known.

As for the co-text that facilitates the entextualization of these AAVE items, we should keep in mind a few other factors. Unlike the previous journal, which does not feature an introduction to the author, this journal introduces the stellar academic credentials of Smitherman, including her designation as a University Distinguished Professor, in the title page of the article following its publishing convention. The readers should know that Smitherman is proficient in SWE and other academic norms to have published in such a prolific way, has won many research awards, and enjoyed a distinguished career in the profession, before they start reading the article. Smitherman also adopts academic conventions such as citations, footnotes, and references in this article (following the MLA conventions adopted by the journal), unlike the previous article. This article also follows other typical academic conventions such as objectivity in considering alternate points of view in an argument and assessing the merits of diverse claims, even as she promotes
SRTOL. In fact, she opens the essay with a clear statement on the background to SRTOL and the objectives of this article. She then goes on to discuss an early debate on prescriptive uses of English in a reasoned and balanced way, before introducing features of AAVE. It is safe to infer that this kind of opening would have helped contextualize this article as clearly situated in academic communicative conventions and establish Smitherman’s credentials in these norms, establishing her authority. When we encounter AAVE features after this opening, we are prepared to look for the diverse meanings indexed by them rather than assume that they are incorrect. Note, also, the realization that the article has passed the review process to get published, and that, too, might persuade readers to look for meanings beyond the usual prejudices against minority dialects.

I will focus for close analysis on a particular set of AAVE items in the middle of the article, in a section titled “Reactions to the Students’ Right”:

The fall-out was tremendous. Stringent, vociferous objections were put forth. There were calls for the resolution to be rescinded and the background document recalled. Some blasted CCCC for abdicating its responsibility and pandering to ‘wide-eyed’ liberals in the field. Others accused CCCC of a ‘sinister plot’ to doom speakers of ‘divergent’ dialects to failure in higher education by telling them that their stigmatized language was acceptable. A few simply said that CCCC had done lost they cotton-pickin minds.

On the other hand, there were many who embraced the spirit of the resolution. They thanked CCCC for the supporting document, which many found extremely helpful, even as they acknowledged its flaws. Some complimented the organization for its ‘moral and professional courage.’ Others stepped to the challenge of developing writing assignments to ‘tap the potential’ of their marginalized students. A few simply asked CCCC why it took yall so long. (1999: 362)

The tone and approach of this section is typical of the whole article. Smitherman is looking at the reactions from opposing points of view in an objective way. Note that the AAVE items (in the final phrases of each paragraph) appear in a dramatic context where some speakers are responding to the proponents of SRTOL. This rhetorical situation also provides a suitable framing for a positive entextualization. Readers will take these utterances as “natural” since this is how passionate respondents on either side of the debate would have expressed themselves. (The conversational tone of this writing is also bolstered by other informalities of expression and expressive prose in the co-text—that is, “some blasted,” “wide eyed,” “sinister plot,” etc.). However, by not using quotation marks for the AAVE items, Smitherman is also treating these phrases as her own authorial prose, giving the language legitimacy in the article. Though readers may not realize the full rhetorical force of “had done lost they cotton-picking minds,” the fact that these two paragraphs give two opposing responses (also cued by the phrase “on the other hand” in the second paragraph) would be sufficient to index for readers that this utterance is intended as an insult. It is also possible that not all readers may understand that Smitherman is drawing from a wide range of AAVE corpus, featuring southern Black
dialects (as in the insult mentioned above) and urban street speech (as in “y'all,” “blessed out,” “heroes and she-roes,” and “whole nother level” in other places in the article).

As in the case of the previous article, even if the readers do not understand the literal meanings of all AAVE items, there are still indexicalities of values and identity that they will understand. Since this article is framed around the controversies relating to SRTOL, the performative meanings I identified earlier are relevant here too. In addition, as this is a professional group of writing teachers, the uses of AAVE in this article have added meaning. They demonstrate ways in which AAVE can be accommodated in university-level writing. They give an example to writing teachers on the ways in which diverse minoritized dialects can be meshed in formal academic writing meaningfully and effectively.

Now I move to the article with the least extent of codemeshing. This is the 1998 article in the journal TESOL Quarterly titled: “Dat teacher be hollin at us’—What Is Ebonics?” This is an invited brief contribution to a special column outside the main section where research articles from double-blind review are published. The objective of this special discussion is titled before the article as “Ebonics and TESOL.” It is occasioned by the 1996 Oakland school board’s resolution on treating AAVE as an acceptable language for use in schools and for facilitating the proficiency of African American students in academic literacies. Since the context of this publication is a bit different, there are surprising variations in Smitherman’s use of AAVE. She uses only two AAVE items in her authorial prose, and both are followed by a footnote for definition. She uses the word “homiez” and glosses it as “Friends from my neighborhood” (140); and “cap” in insult routines is defined as “win” (1998: 142). She also uses AAVE for the title of the essay, which is in quotation marks to indicate that she is reporting a student’s utterance. She does not gloss or explain that utterance in her article, as she probably treats it as a hook to attract the reader’s attention, and not crucial for the understanding of her discussion. In all other cases of AAVE, Smitherman carefully italicizes them in her article, and explains their meanings to readers.

There are many reasons for this cautious approach to entextualization. TESOL Quarterly has had the reputation of publishing empirical and quantitative research on language teaching, adopting APA style conventions and leaning toward the social sciences. As the flagship journal for the international association of the Teachers of English for Speakers for Other Languages (TESOL), this journal has a global readership. Whereas Smitherman could assume some background knowledge of AAVE from the largely American audience of the other two journals, she probably cannot assume that in this case. She probably wanted to help international readers understand the AAVE she uses sparingly in this journal. It is also possible that she thinks of the scholars associated with this journal, largely linguists with an empirical and quantitative inclination, as cautious in adopting nonnormative academic discourses and writing. Their somewhat prescriptive professional training will affect their readiness and willingness to engage in entextualizing new indexicals for meaning by drawing from the co-text and other contextual resources. As we discussed, there is an iterative relationship between the context, co-text, indexicals and readers’ capacities to engage in the process of working out meanings. If the contextual
framing is not sufficiently strong and persuasive, readers may resort to stereotypical associations for the AAVE indexicals.

However, there are still some features of the context that favor entextualizing the performative meanings of Smitherman’s AAVE uses. The topic is the recently introduced debate on the role of Ebonics in education. In fact, this is an invited article for a special section on pedagogical conversations. These pieces do not go through double-blind peer review. It is a brief (usually about four pages long) essayistic writing. These aspects of the context will dispose readers favorably for writing that is less formal and not data-driven. Therefore, even in cases of the AAVE indexicals for which they do not understand the literal meanings, they will understand the performative meanings. Many of the implications for the values and identities Smitherman seeks for the AAVE uses in this piece are the same as in the other two articles. Readers will understand that Smitherman will demonstrate her proficiency in this dialect and also enact its value in her own writing as an African American sociolinguist who understands the validity of AAVE and favoring its use for helping Black students transition to academic literacies. Therefore, even in the case of the title which is not translated, readers will understand it as a statement of the author’s identity, ideological position, and rhetorical framing to shape this textual interaction with readers.

**Enregisterment**

While achieving indexicality within the text is an important consideration for the uptake of these AAVE items, the implications for combatting epistemic racism in academia lies in the possibilities in enregisterment. That is, how do such uses of AAVE by specific writers and writing get associated with meanings, values, and identities for this genre of academic communication at a wider level? What does such use of AAVE index in academic writing as a genre? Though we need a longer time frame and bigger textual corpus to answer this question, we can safely saw that we see an enregisterment in progress. In fact, all that translingualism and the indexical analysis can comment on are meanings and conventions in flight. Though there are certain norms and conventions that can be identified as shared and established at particular points in space and time, we should keep our consideration open for diverse other future possibilities. So, while there might be resistant potential in this form of writing now, there is no guarantee that codemeshing might not be appropriated by the market to enregister conservative meanings. However, translingual scholars would argue that minoritized scholars should focus on strategic practices to renegotiate the meanings and structures always to use writing in such a way as to contest those appropriations. As translingualism focuses on practice, it encourages speakers/writers to position themselves oppositionally to established and exclusive norms in favor of diversification and inclusion on a continual basis.

To limit our analysis to the present, we can see the enregisterment of a resistant academic practice taking shape. Speaking for myself, as someone socialized outside the US and not a member of the African American community, I can see a genre of academic writing developing here. I understand the qualified and strategic uses of AAVE in an otherwise SWE text as performing effective rhetorical objectives and achieving shared
meanings. This genre of codemeshed writing emerges as a promising alternative for minoritized scholars. I consider this form of writing as currently a subgenre within academic writing, with the potential of becoming more prominent over time. As such, the AAVE items in such writing do not index for me associations that are inappropriate or uneducated. They also do not enregister the authors of such writing with identities such as unproficient or unscholarly. Rather, they enregister meanings such as the following: AAVE adds value to resistant writing; it enhances the anti-racist objectives by performing diversity in the article; it resists the dominance of a single homogeneous norm in academic communication; it facilitates knowledge, values, and meanings from marginalized and racialized scholars; and it pluralizes academic publishing practices and policies to favor resistant knowledge and diverse genres.

A sign of this enregisterment is that we do have a label for this form of writing, with scholarly articles theorizing it: that is, codemeshing. Sociolinguists would call this act of labeling and commenting on language use as metapragmatic discourse (Wortham and Reyes, 2015: 55)—that is, a form of talk about talk. The fact that we are talking about this unconventional genre suggests that there is a shared discourse, reflective awareness, and sedimented meanings evolving about this communicative activity. The label was introduced by African American scholar Vershawn Young (2004) as a more progressive reconciliation of the conflict he faced between being forced to always communicate in either SWE in academic contexts or the supposedly liberal alternative he called “code switching” (which he explained as being compelled to switch between AAVE for non-academic contexts and SWE for academic contexts). He argued for the possibility of bringing AAVE guardedly into academic writing for appropriate rhetorical purposes. Theorization of codemeshing by Young and others functions as metapragmatic resources for the enregisterment of this genre. Consider Young’s statement on his motivations for promoting this label:

…to provide a sociolinguistic framework that would help reduce, if not eliminate, both the racial prejudice against African American English and the linguistic injustice against African American people. My goal was, and remains, in regards to the focus of my work as a scholar of African American literary, language, and cultural studies, to help code-meshing become an acceptable practice for what I hear and see black people doing every day: blending, adjusting, playing, and dancing with standard English and academic discourse when they are jiving on the playground, wielding linguistic charm in the courtroom (e.g., ‘If it don’t fit, you must acquit.’), writing police reports for work, and speaking and writing anywhere and everywhere that communication takes place, whether in informal or formal settings. (Young, 2013: 139)

There is now an evolving body of scholarly and theoretical work on codemeshing in academic writing (see Lovejoy, 2014; Seloni 2014, for example). Writing that other African American scholars have been doing, sometimes before the introduction of this term and without awareness of it, are becoming part of this enregisterment. African American scholars in English studies who have codemeshed in their writing are Henry Louise Gates, Keith Gilyard, Elaine Richardson, and Jackie Jones Royster, to mention a few.
Interestingly, another sign of this enregisterment is that scholars from other minoritized groups are also adopting this communicative practice for their critical scholarship. I applied the term codemeshing for the needs of nonnative scholars from the Global South (Canagarajah, 2006). I also codemeshed Sri Lankan English in this article, following Smitherman’s example. A Hispanic scholar Villaneuva (2011) is prolific in using Spanish in his use of SWE in his academic writing. Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) meshing of the languages of Hispanic and Native American communities in her English writing would also relate to this genre. I have gone on to use Tamil together with SWE in other academic publications (see Canagarajah, 2020). In all these cases, the use of languages beyond SWE are strategic and qualified, motivated by ideological and rhetorical considerations. Through such metapragmatic scholarly theorization and publishing activity, we can see how enregisterment for this writing is getting strengthened and becoming sedimented to develop alternate academic conventions. My claim here is not that codemeshing is becoming the dominant genre. It simply opens a space for contesting and diversifying dominant academic norms. Nor is codemeshing the only alternative discourse currently circulating in academic communication. It is related to other practices such as narrative, autoethnography, performative writing, personal voice, and multi-voiced (and nonlinear) writing, which we see in current academic writing also.

The prospects of this enregisterment for the long term have to be analyzed on an ongoing basis. Would these metapragmatic and extextualization activities lead to a situation where scholars become more familiar with this genre and indexicals, and are prepared to introduce minoritized dialects and languages in greater quantity and prominence in academic writing? Could there become a context where academic writing is so pluralized that publishing policies accommodate the register that fits the scholars and their scholarship and not follow the SWE norm mechanically? Would such discoursal changes lead to wider policy and structural changes in academic communication and institutions to favor minoritized scholars? We cannot comment conclusively on changes of this nature without adequate analytical distance. Perhaps we can draw an analogy from another change in academic communication in the past. Recall that Latin was the academic lingua franca at one point in history, before the then-vernacular English took over. One can do a similar indexicality study of the challenges and practices of authors in England who initiated this shift in a guarded way in the 17th century. Isaac Newton wrote in both Latin and English (in separate monographs) marking an early stage of the shift, before English became the new norm for academic publishing. This historical precedent suggests that changes in publishing norms are not new. Since these processes of enregisterment are protracted and gradual, we do not have all the chains in this pathway of enregisterment for close analysis now. However, we can infer how the rise of English as an academic lingua franca is enmeshed in broader social processes such as the rise of nationalism in England, industrialization and colonialism led by Britain, and the eventual geopolitical dominance of Anglo-phone countries. Thus, language conventions should not be considered unchanging, or disconnected from political and material changes in society.
Conclusion
What this article demonstrates is how strategic uses of alternate codes in academic writing have the potential to be meaningful and influential despite dominant conventions favoring privileged languages and registers. Furthermore, as these instances of alternate language by individual writers and writing continue, they can sediment to challenge dominant conventions and enregister alternate genres. We have also gathered insights into the ways in which language is embodied and performative in generating social action (i.e., disturbing dominant norms, enacting alternative conventions) rather than merely serving as a medium for representation. In this way, codemeshed writing straddles the traditional divides of micro/macro and agency/structure. The task for sociolinguists is to make those interested in anti-racist and decolonizing work aware that languages go beyond monolithic norms, meanings, and values; that languages are not inexorably tied to their labels and grammars as prescribed by scholars, ideologues, and policy makers; that meanings and values are changing all the time, in tension with top-down policies and ideologies; and that critically aware and creative communicators can engage in nudging meanings and values to favor alternate communicative and institutional structures. That, in essence, is what is theorized by the orientation of translingualism. One might say that these are the processes whereby language restructuration has worked always. Translingualism is not saying anything new. People have been intuitively practicing communication in such resistant ways from time immemorial, especially in underprivileged communities in colonized conditions (see Canagarajah, 2013, ch.3 for examples). As my fellow Tamils say in postcolonial Sri Lankan English, small, small changes can make big, big differences.

Note
Smitherman prefers the term “language of wider communication” as the opposite of “vernacular.” The more popular “standard English” has become questionable for many reasons. Given the global diversity of English, “standard English” is relative. For this article, I use the term many scholars in composition adopt—that is, standard written English or SWE—as there is a recognition that the English legitimized for publishing purposes is adopted fairly similarly across geographical locations.

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