DIALOGUE: COMMENTARY

Theorizing trans language activism for euphoric transmutation and our collective liberation*

Tulio Bermudez Mejía[1] | **Anyel Marquinez Montaño**[2]

[1]Linguistics, The University of Chicago, Chicago, USA

[2]Economics, Universidad de Antioquia, Medellín, Colombia

Correspondence
Tulio Bermúdez Mejía, Linguistics, The University of Chicago, Chicago, USA.
Email: tulipanati@gmail.com

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In his piece, Lal Zimman tells us that while discourse is changing about trans communities, they are still killing us, so trans language activism (TLA) needs to focus on sociolinguistic justice. Sociolinguistic justice is defined as self-determination about our language and redistribution of resources (Bucholtz et al., 2014). Zimman argues that sociolinguistic justice for trans people should be more aligned with coalitional social justice for all marginalized people who suffer from interlocking systems of oppression. How does TLA play a role in the liberation for all people? Historically, TLA challenges oppressive power dynamics that are misogynistic (Cameron, 1998; Lakoff, 1973), heteronormative (Livia, 2000; Queen, 1997), and transphobic (Zimman, 2017). As Zimman suggests in this issue, we want TLA to not only challenge misogyny, heteronormativity, and transphobia. We are looking for liberation from all systems of oppression, including ableism, capitalism, colonialism, fatphobia, HIV status, (English language) imperialism, incarceration, Islamophobia, poverty, racism, sexism, Survivorship, transphobia, and xenophobia. In this paper, we argue that euphoric transmutation is a strategy for liberating us through language. Euphoric transmutation refers to practices of language play where the play/juxtaposition/inversion/innovation/resignification of lexicon functions to call attention to hegemonic power and destroy it.

TLA is dependent on a community supportive of change and willing to hold people accountable for their use of politically correct forms (Ehrlich & King, 1992). Because of this, it is necessary to work collectively within and across safe(r) communities of practice (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992) in dialogic intersubjectivity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) to identify how language relates to our political conditions and to set up shared language that challenges this. We do this through political

education. Political education involves connecting forms of oppression across geographies, identities, and identifications. For example, we connect how oppressors use stereotypes and controlling images (Collins, 1986) like "swarms of animals," both to xenophobically dehumanize people crossing the border between Mexico and United States and also to Islamophobically dehumanize Palestinians who are waiting for food aid from trucks and planes in the midst of Israel's genocide. TLA requires communities of practice to engage in discussion of these topics to collectively process systems of oppression and our reactions to them.

Collective discussion requires shared community spaces in which people can produce language play. But in order to produce more language play in our everyday lives, we need safe(r) spaces.

Spaces to hold conversations to understand each other and how we (people in powerless positions) are related. Spaces where we can freely and collaboratively engage in the self-determination of language without fear or influence of oppression. Safe(r) spaces thus need to prioritize transformative practices to redress representational and material disparities. These spaces may be physical and in-person, and they can also be digital or virtual. The International SchoolHouse of Quartz Royale (ISHoQR) in Chicago is one such example of a physical space and digital project that creates the conditions for a coalitional, transformational, and sociolinguistic justice project. At the ISHoQR, we have the following praxis.

Teaching these names and processes in a space like ISHoQR is a main goal. Our shared priorities start by naming systems like white supremacy, which dehumanize us—violently target, and as Zimman says, erase, misrecognize, and commodify us. Our shared priorities include humanization through recognition of our self-determined names and positions with respect to oppressive power—the first step of transformative accountability. We humanize each other through "[self-definition and] self-valuation [which] challenge the content of externally defined controlling images" (Collins, 1986). In other words, we process and define who we are and our conditions of shared oppression. We call this transformative process euphoric transmutation—a process of self-determination through the use of survivorship testimonies, ritual language, language play, and counterhegemonic narratives—where the goal is liberation for all people through self-realization and then shared realization through political education.

Euphoric transmutation is about humanizing all people living under oppressive systems through transformative language, which challenges the conditions of oppression. Again, this must happen from the inside out—by humanizing ourselves first. One way we can do this is to document the way we use language to name and become ourselves by constructing our identities despite oppressive conditions such as genocide. When the Tutsi call themselves Tutsi and not swarms of animals and create spaces of truth such as the testimonies in the Kigali Genocide Memorial in Rwanda, humanization and peace become possible through education. Language play, known as "speech play and verbal art" in the more specific theoretical tradition (Sherzer, 2002), is at the core of sociolinguistic justice. Through play, marginalized people describe the conditions of our oppression and rename ourselves and our futures. Euphoric transmutation carries the hypothesis that all oppressed people create transformative language to (re)define ourselves through political inversion and subversion of stereotypes like "swarms of people." This everyday language play creates a cognitive roadmap for liberation through freedom-dreaming (Kelley, 2002).

First, we name ourselves and our conditions with everyday critical language practices like language play, counternarratives and survivorship testimonies, and archive our histories. These are all critical language practices and processes we theorize as euphoric transmutation. We name ourselves, for example, with our gendered pronouns, with our own pronunciation of our names and ethnicities, and by identifying processes such as genocide, including the linguistic and political strategies that lead to genocide. TLA must aim for maximal inclusion of all language systems. When naming ourselves and each other, it is crucial to consider the power of imperial languages in understanding processes

of systemic oppression. For example, the **process** of anti-Black colorism is not the same in the Global North and in the Global South.

Second, we educate each other about how we decide to name ourselves and our conditions of living. We learn each other's names through language, including sexual assault survivor stories and comedic Native portraits of the white man (Basso, 1979). All oppressed people have experienced a disconnect between how we see ourselves and how we are seen (or erased) by others. Critical language practices destroy oppressive logics by rewiring our understanding of each other through learning each other's names, pronouns, and conditions. It is about educating each other from the inside out. By becoming ourselves first internally and then in the eyes of each other, as language is intersubjective and dialogic (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). This is a transformative process of humanization through the abolition of oppressive linguistic systems. And this brings us to the third step.

The third step requires us to keep in mind that systems of oppression are products of the forms of social interrelationships. In this step, we compare the systems of oppression that we have named and come up with a shared vocabulary and dictionary in order to build political power across these systems of oppression. We do this through linguistic justice, by creating a multilingual dictionary or database of the names (e.g., *Tutsi*; *mujerts*) and systemic conditions of our humanity (genocide; colorism), and by processes like resignification. We call it *the Intersectional Language Database* Project and envision it as a project of deep, transformative accountability. A multilingual database allows us to compare systems and the forms they take, depending on their histories, with all systems of interlocking oppression. The project could chart two types of variables: **names** (endemic names such as *mujerx* "woman" for nonbinary Spanish) and **processes** that create opposition against them, such as colorism, surveillance, xenophobia, racism, and AIDS. For example, a sample entry in such a database could include a word like *mujerts* (Spanish, Colombia):

(1) An example of **name** entry:

Word:	*mujerts* [muheɹts]
Type:	name
Processes challenged:	racism, transphobia, sexism, poverty, imperialism, and colonialism
Definition:	a real woman
Conditions of use:	when Suleimax, a poor Black trans woman in Colombia, uses the playful word *mujerts*, she does so in order to challenge the cis-centric and transphobic, gendered language of Spanish, which produces cis understandings of what it means to be a *mujer* "woman" (imperial Spanish).
Example:	"te ves mujerts, mujerts!" *you look like a real woman!*
Interpretation:	*you are breaking the cisnormative system of what it means to be a woman and human. The -ts varies with the orthographic x and is an interiority of what it means to be a trans woman who is gaslighted everyday by racist and transphobic people who don't see her as a woman.*
Entry made by:	[name of entry contributor]
Audiovisual data:	[.mp4 link to video of **name** example above in context; or link to news article which uses a **process** like racism in using "swarm of people"]

When we compare systems of oppression, we engage in a politic of linguistic materialism. Linguistic materialism is important for the project of TLA because it forces us to compare and name systems of power and liberatory terms of self-determination. The use of a word like *mujerts* comes from a social

need for self-realization and provides a brief moment of respite from oppressive conditions. We liberate ourselves when we engage in language play, including mocking. Transcendence of material truth and circumstances is a common thread across oppressed groups. We hypothesize that all oppressed people mock their oppressors with language. Indigenous people make fun of their oppressors (Bermudez 2020) for pleasure. Deaf people also make fun of hearing people (Kate Henninger, personal communication 2022). In this way, language play is sociolinguistic justice. By analyzing examples of playful euphoric transmutation such as Suleimax's use of *mujerts*, we learn the importance of unified naming processes; they build a transformative shared system (Kaba, 2021), where language is the shared system. TLA depends on projects that transcend material truth by creating self-identified definitions and systemic processes we can point to when unlearning dehumanization and fighting oppressive systems. We can achieve this through multilingual projects that tie self-identified names to counterhegemonic processes and systems of oppression. This way, we can redefine humanity based on the words of people who have survived systems of oppression through collective discussion.

In this piece, we argue that for our collective liberation, TLA ought to promote linguistic innovation and center joyful self-determination of oppressed people, including practices such as euphoric transmutation, *reading* (Ballroom culture; see Dozandri Mendoza's work), and *sighting* (miles-hercules, 2020). Our vision for TLA is to invest in the humanization and self-determination processes produced in these creative spaces, such as The ISHoQR. We envision education for all people, not just people in academic spaces. Through euphoric transmutation, we can make more accessible communities of practice in order to play with language and transform our inner worlds. We need to understand that oppressed people, like all people, still oppress ourselves and others, and we need to stop acting like there are perfect victims or perfect oppressed people. This work must happen from inside out, by naming ourselves and our conditions first to fight against systems of oppression.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no conflicts of interest to report.

ORCID

Tulio Bermudez Mejía 🔘 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1452-2112
Anyel Marquinez Montaño 🔘 https://orcid.org/0009-0004-0127-0560

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