

Explorations in language shaming

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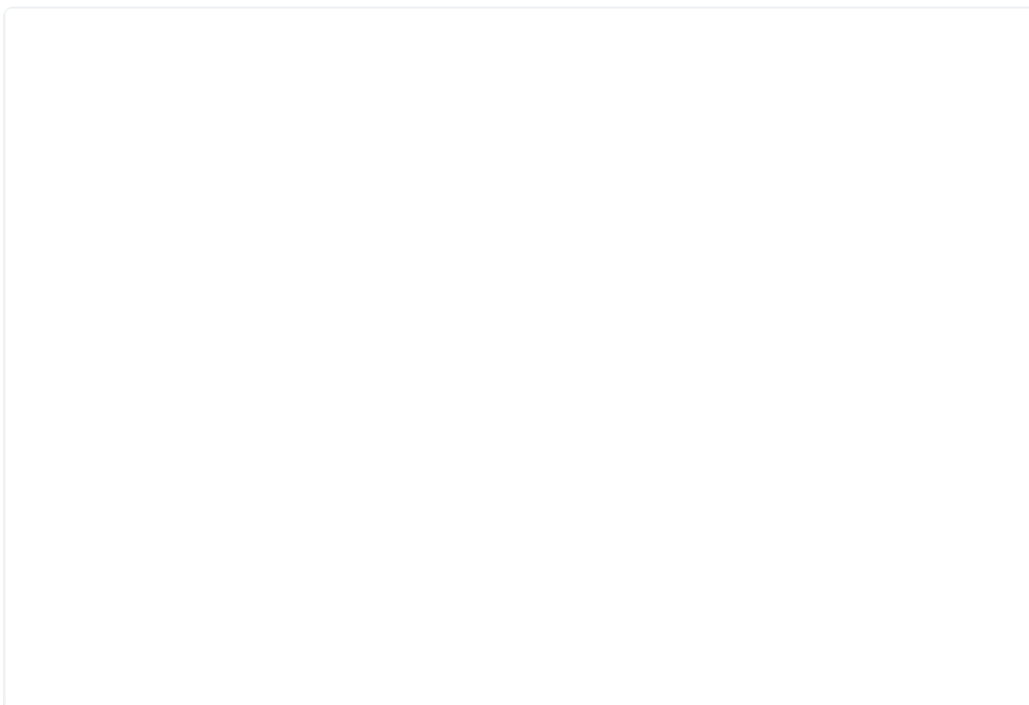
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By Ingrid Piller | September 28, 2017 | Education

At the recent [16th International Conference on Minority Languages](#) at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, I delivered a keynote lecture about “language shaming”. By “language shaming”, I mean (social) media campaigns or face-to-face interactions that deride, disparage or demean particular ways of using language. Like other forms of stigma, language shame may have deleterious effects on the groups and individuals concerned and may result in low self-esteem, a lack of self-worth and social alienation. Shame can become a self-fulfilling prophesy as it disrupts security and confidence and may constitute the principal impediment to developing human relationships, communicating with others and developing a sense of belonging, as Kaufman pointed out in his classic *Psychology of Shame*.

My call to use language shaming as a lens through which to explore processes of language subordination, domination and (de)valorization struck a chord at the conference and I have since received a number of emails asking for the write-up of my lecture. The [slides that accompanied the lecture can be downloaded here](#) and conceptually the lecture was based on Chapters 3 and 7 of *Linguistic Diversity and Social Justice*. Additionally, I've decided to start a mini-series devoted to explorations in language shaming here on [Language on the Move](#). What follows is the first entry in this series.





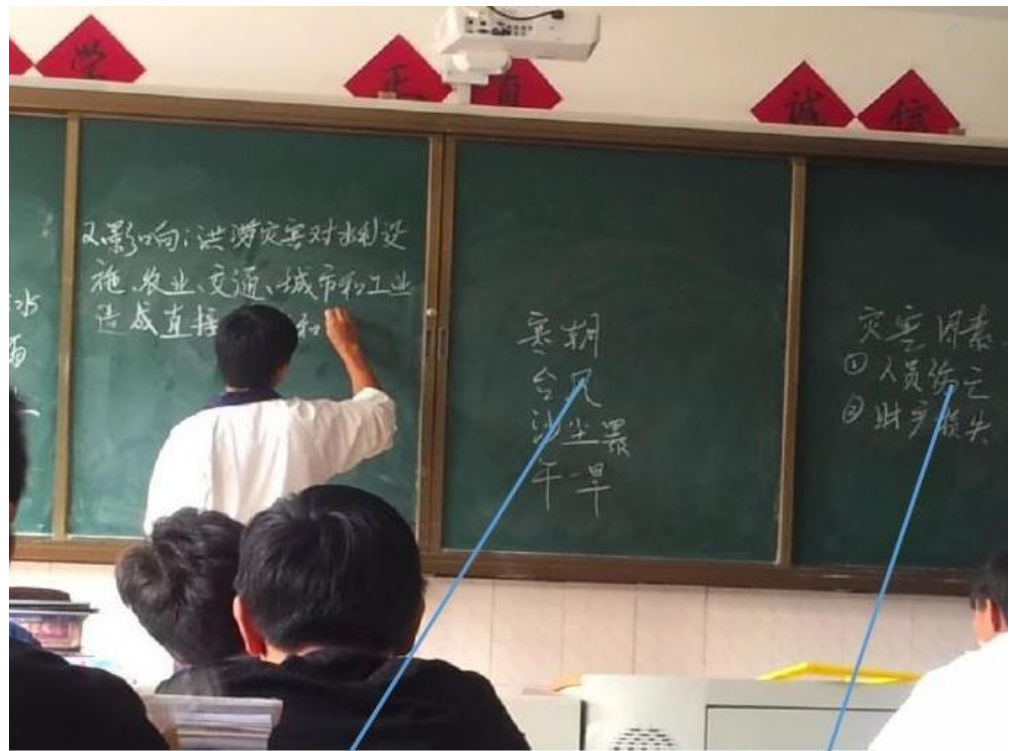
A persistent theme in linguistic diversity is that some ways of using language are heard or seen as indices of laziness, stupidity and backwardness. Speakers of non-standard varieties and particularly migrant speakers are often denigrated in this way.

Teachers may well be amongst the worst offenders when it comes to making migrant students feel inferior. For instance, a [sociolinguistic ethnography with Burmese migrant students in a high school in Southwest China](#) by Li Jia provides numerous instances of language shaming. The focus of the research was on the language learning and educational experiences of students from Myanmar who had come to China for their high school education. Many of these students had a Chinese background and most had studied Chinese as an additional language for a number of years prior to coming to China. Even so, their Chinese was different from the Chinese of local students: there were the usual accent differences and additionally there were significant differences in literacy: the Burmese students had had far less opportunities to practice Chinese literacy than the students who had been educated in China throughout their entire school career. Furthermore, they had usually been instructed in traditional Chinese characters and they had learnt to use pinyin according to a different transliteration system.

These observable linguistic differences were mostly seen in terms of deficit and often became the focus of student-teacher interactions as in the following example, where a migrant Year 11 student was required to deliver an oral presentation in his Chemistry class. The topic of the presentation was about the weather and specifically temperature fluctuations and cold spells. When the student had finished his presentation and the teacher provided feedback, the feedback had nothing to do with the content of the presentation. Instead, the chemistry teacher focused on the student's language. He pointed out some unfortunate vocabulary choices made by the students as well as spelling mistakes. The teacher summed up his assessment of the student's Chemistry presentation as follows:

你看都是高二的学生了，寒潮的潮字都不会写。

Look, you are already a Year 11 student and how come you can't even write the word "spell"? [as in "cold spell"; "tide"] (Quoted from Li, Jia. 2017, p. 234)



The comment focusses on the language of the presentation instead of the content and denigrates the student by linking the spelling mistake to his age – a typical example of language shaming.

Chemistry presentation by Year 11 student (Source: Li, 2017, p. 234)

This kind of language shaming is detrimental to the student in at least two ways: first, the student is obviously humiliated and his personal worth is being questioned in highlighting that his Chinese language proficiency is substandard for his age cohort (and ignoring that he is not a first language speaker of Chinese but a Chinese language learner). Second, the focus on language instead of content deprives the student of a learning opportunity.

That means that language shaming has the pernicious effect of not only denigrating students' language proficiency but also jeopardizing their overall educational success, including achievement in the subject area. Language shaming thus serves to instill the very "stupidity" it claims to diagnose.



Poster with the school's hair style regulations (Source: Li, 2017, p. 179)

Being scolded for the way they spoke Chinese was but one of the ways in which the students were subjected to a deficit discourse. It was also other

aspects of their bodies and behaviors that were subject to criticism: they were often seen as not conforming to the strict dress code of the school or as lazy and careless with the tasks assigned to them. During classroom observations it became obvious that teachers sometimes spent up to half the lesson "criticizing Burmese students who did not obey the school rules" (Li, 2017, p. 248).

While one isolated incidence of the kind that occurred in the Chemistry lesson may be easy to write off, for the migrant students in the study such incidences of language shaming were regular occurrences; and it was their regularity that left deep psychological scars, as another student confided in the researcher:

我8岁来中国学习汉语，一开始什么都不明白，真的很想回家，特别是老师骂，大姐姐欺负我的时候，感觉真的很无助。 [...]

I came to China to learn Chinese at the age of 8. At the beginning, I didn't understand anything, and I was missing home very much especially when I was scolded by my teachers and bullied by older students I really felt helpless. (Quoted from Li, Jia. 2017, p. 148)

Like all systems of oppression, language subordination has a psychological component, and shame is a key mechanism that leads oppressed people to accept their oppression: sociologists consider shame as a key aspect of poverty as it leads poor people to accept that their poverty is their own fault and to accept that the rich deserve to be rich. Similarly, theorists of racial and colonial oppression have long noted a psychological component where those who are subject to racism and colonialism may come to accept their oppression as justified because an inferiority complex has been instilled in them.

The examples of language shaming offered here come under the guise of teaching and must be considered a key tool in the arsenal of social reproduction. A first step in breaking their power is to call them out for what they are.

Make sure not to miss out on future installments in the series “Explorations in language shaming” and subscribe to our alerts in the bottom right corner of this page.



References

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