PROJECT LAUNCH: Constructions of whiteness in college students' conversations

Grace LeFevre
Northwestern University
gracelefevre2026@u.northwestern.edu

Northwestern — Department of Linguistics
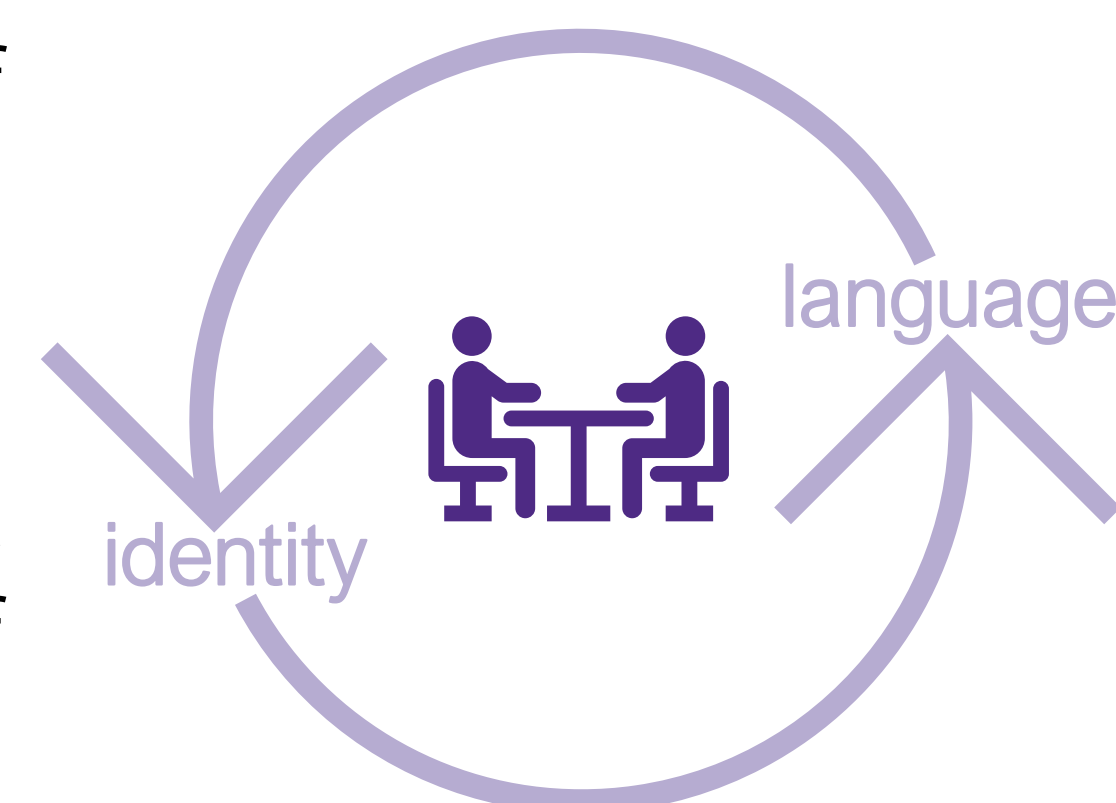
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Background

Language and whiteness

o Whiteness is a racialization process constituted through social and language variation (Alim et al. 2016; Rosa and Flores 2017; King 2020)

o Prevailing ideologies in the US context treat whiteness as the unracialized default
  - absence of defining characteristics (Trechter & Bucholtz 2001)
  - standard language varieties (Fought 2006)

o The role whiteness plays in sociolinguistic identity construction is understudied, despite many linguistic studies relying predominantly on white participants (cf. Bucholtz 2001; Kiesling 2001; Walton and Jaffe 2011)

Interactional sociolinguistics

o Identity is constituted through social interaction and can be indexed by a wide range of linguistic forms (Bucholtz & Hall 2005)

o An interactional framework enables bottom-up analysis of many communicative forms like lexical items, style choices, and bodily orientations

o Previous linguistic studies of whiteness in an interactional context have focused on contexts where whiteness was highly marked (Cutler 2007) or where participants' relationships to whiteness were unclear (Walton & Jaffe 2011)
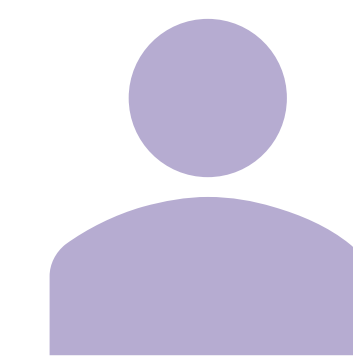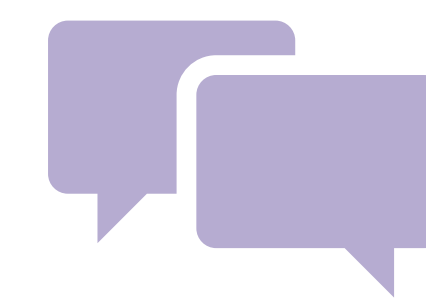
Research Question

How do monoracial white college students use linguistic resources to construct their racialized identities in semi-structured conversations about race with other monoracial white college students?
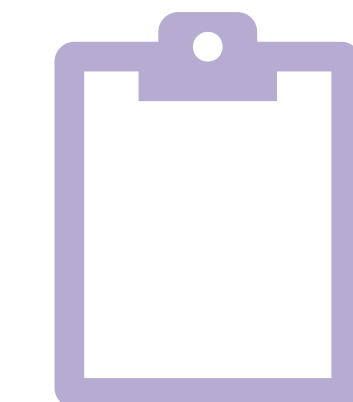
Proposed Study

Interactional design

- 20 undergraduate students
- monoracial white + American + English-speaking

- 30-minute dyadic conversations in private laboratory space
- prompted to have conversations related to race

- post-conversation questionnaire
  1. conversation ratings on Likert scales
     - conversational quality
     - connection to partner
     - similarity to partner
  2. qualitative descriptions of personal identities + any associated speech patterns

Mixed-methods approach

Qualitative discourse analysis	*Quantitative* measurements
Explicit identity labels (Bucholtz & Hall 2005)	Linguistic:
Other-marking (Kiesling 2001)	- speech rate convergence -> cooperation in face-to-face interactions (Manson et al. 2013)
Anchoring whiteness in relation to other identity categories like gender, class	- response time speed -> social connection in conversation (Templeton et al. 2022)
Reflexivity as social capital (Walton & Jaffe 2011)	Physiological:
- expressing awareness of white privilege and/or appropriation	- electrodermal activity -> emotional arousal / stress response
- (non-)alignment with white stereotypes	- pulse rate (PR and PRV)
	- skin temperature

Hypotheses

o Notion of reflexivity as social capital will be very salient for this population (more politically/socially liberal than average white American)

o Over the course of a conversation, a speaker will be more likely to use a particular identity-indexing speech act if their conversation partner has used a similar one

o Participants who index their racial identities in similar ways will provide higher conversational quality ratings and have linguistic measurements that indicate more cooperation and connection

Contributions

o Will contribute to our understanding of how speakers constitute & interpret identities in interaction

o Will give insight into racial identity construction in white college students, a population commonly relied on as participant pool for sociolinguistic research

Questions for Feedback

o What are good ways of explicitly prompting discussions about race? What are the advantages and drawbacks?

o How can I cohesively ask both how participants index whiteness in semi-structured conversation and how their conversation partners receive those indices?

o Are there other interactional whiteness studies I should know about?

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