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Linguistic racism took centre stage this past week in newspapers across the country, sparked by a unique and disturbing set of house rules posted at a Christchurch Airbnb. The particular points of note were “rules” 1 and 4, which stated:

(1) No Maori language to be spoken on these premises

(4) We live in NEW ZEALAND. Please don't refer to our country as 'Aotearoa'

Linguistic racism is when people discriminate based upon people's language(s), dialects, how they pronounce words, etc. In particular, this is a racist practice when it targets a group of people with connections to those aspects of language that are being singled out.

While overt forms of linguistic racism are easily found, it is much more common to encounter covert linguistic racism, such as in not genuinely attempting to correctly pronounce someone's name, in dismissing someone's name as “too hard to say”, and/or in asking a person to take an English name.

All of these examples are micro-aggressions that carry small pieces of linguistic racism. As they add up over



Linguistic racism

Language Matters

time, they become extremely damaging to the people against whom they are wielded. Both overt and covert forms of linguistic racism negatively impact upon communities for generations.

While moments of linguistic racism might seem fleeting or “no big deal” to the people causing them, the ideologies carried in these moments damage individuals' and communities' wellbeing and lead to long-term language trauma.

If linguistic racism is so damaging, then why does it happen? It is connected to a long history of colonisation that is

embedded within the social structures and languages themselves. As a result, the powerful get complacent with such ideologies, while those most impacted are already in a lesser position of social power, fighting uphill every day through social structures already stacked against them.

As critical scholars of language and race such as Peter de Costa and Jane Hill have pointed out, the tools of the powerful and the status quo go “unmarked”, while any attempts to resist them are the things that get noticed and challenged.

So why is linguistic racism being used by those already in power? What do they gain? The way groups stay in power are

by disadvantaging the less powerful. By utilising the weapon of linguistic racism, powerful groups (such as English speakers) are able to maintain their position with little to no effort, while causing generations of damage to the recipients in the process.

Additionally, those in positions of social power are often afraid to lose their positions, often calling upon myths such as “English is in danger” to further fuel the fire (note – English is not in any sort of danger anywhere in the world).

What can you do to help combat linguistic racism?

First and foremost, speak up! Like those who publicly called out the Christchurch Airbnb's house rules, dissenting voices are powerful, especially when joined together. Those in the socially powerful groups also need to lend their voices and speak up as allies.

Second, note that “jokes” invoking linguistic racism and mocking languages are not OK; they are again a form of covert racism.

Third, pronounce people's names how they ask for them to be pronounced, and use the referential language and terms that people prefer. It's a small thing to do and a big thing for the person with whom you're talking.

Finally, consider who is benefiting most from any language practices or policies. If the answer does not speak to inclusivity, then it's time for a revisit.

We have a beautiful, multilingual, multi-diverse country in Aotearoa. Do your best to support it.

Contact us

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The Washington Post

Justice is served with Arbery verdicts

Views from around the world. These opinions are not necessarily shared by Stuff newspapers.

As the guilty verdicts were being read for the three men accused of killing Ahmaud Arbery, the mother of the murdered man bowed her head, his father shouted out a eulthous and a crowd outside the Georgia courthouse erupted in cheers. “Thank God,” said one of Arbery's aunts. No doubt that relief was felt by many who feared that – as too often has been the case in this country's history when a Black man is killed – no-one would be held accountable.

The killing of the 25-year-old who was out jogging came perilously close to being papered over by Georgia officials. The three accused walked free for several weeks, and prosecutors

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initially argued the shooting did not constitute an actual crime. Only when a video of the fatal encounter was leaked was the case reassigned and arrests finally made.

That Arbery's killers almost walked away underscores inequities that exist in law enforcement and the judicial system. Evidence presented by the prosecution was strong and compelling. But juries can be unpredictable, and there was worry that this Southern, mostly White jury, would opt for acquittal. The jurors looked at and considered the facts. Justice was done. That won't bring Arbery back to his family, but hopefully it will bring them some comfort and will help to restore confidence in the justice system.