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John Baugh’s Linguistics in the Pursuit of Justice serves as a critical call to action for linguists, legal scholars and practitioners, educators, social justice advocates, and others who are committed to the global fight for justice. In this important and timely work, Baugh examines how linguistic science, and the range of analytical toolkits contained therein, can be used to advance this cause.

Baugh begins the preface and chapter one by narrating his own personal awakening to racial injustice. As a young African American child growing up in the White, affluent San Fernando Valley of the 1960s, linguistic manifestations of racism were front and center in Baugh’s memory. Insults and racist epithets from white classmates made Baugh painfully aware of the ways that injustice operates in the world around him and drove him to take up a literal fight for justice in his daily encounters. Chapter 1 builds on this narrative as the author illustrates his growing personal and professional interests in linguistics and the pursuit of justice.

After returning to Philadelphia to attend Temple University in the 1970s, the author takes the
readers on a rich and detailed journey that illustrates the complex racial and social layering of North Philadelphia at that time. Personal accounts of the ways that residents sought justice through informal community networks and organizations like the Nation of Islam and the Black Panthers contrast sharply with the aggressive raids on the Black Panthers by the Philadelphia police department and the negative portrayals of the Black Panthers in the media. Through this personal and historical account, Baugh illustrates the connections between language and social inequality as well as the foundational scholarly works that reinforced his awareness of the unfair treatment of racial minorities and speakers of nonstandard English. Ultimately, chapter one provides important grounding that allows readers to visualize how linguistic injustice functions in communities around the world and it also sets the stage for how tools from linguistics can be brought to bear on these issues.

In chapter two, the Baugh gives readers a sketch of the birth of forensic linguistics with riveting accounts of linguist Roger Shuy’s testimony in the Cullen Davis murder trial as well as accounts of his own contributions to the analysis of linguistic data for cases involving speakers of AAVE. In each case, Baugh provides compelling evidence that “linguistic research has lethal relevance” (p. 26) particularly when the linguistic nuances that can determine guilt or innocence are overlooked due to lack of technical expertise or, in some cases, willful obfuscation on the part of investigators or prosecutors. This important chapter highlights with shocking clarity the importance of tools of linguistic analysis including conversation analysis transcription methods and phonological and morphological analysis in the fight for justice.

While the previous chapters focus heavily on personal accounts and legal proceedings in the United States, chapter three draws from research and historical examples from around the globe to give a broader accounting of the ways that language, injustice, and inequality intersect on a global scale. Here, readers receive a brief overview of the ways that linguistic injustice is imbedded in taunts and verbal abuse of children, the ways that framing and structuring of political speech can be used to lay the groundwork for aggressive and hostile political actions, the ways that language can be strategically employed to mobilize political resistance movements, the ways that linguistic bias operates in educational contexts, and the ways that linguistic subordination and domination can curtail linguistic human rights. These examples are coupled with an overview of analytical tools including speech act theory, audience design, conversation analysis, and ethnography of speaking which may be mobilized to highlight linguistic injustice.
Bringing the global back into the US context, Baugh presents readers with a framework in chapter four for a more precise and thoughtful accounting of the linguistic legacy of slavery in the United States. Most importantly, Baugh gives much needed evidence that readers should not view African Americans from a monolithic, one-dimensional lens. Here, Baugh deftly illustrates the ways that the legal system in the United States systematically dehumanized those who were enslaved and how US descendants of slaves were denied access to the rights and privileges of full citizenship. With this in mind, Baugh presents a critique of the less precise Census categories of Black or African American, which include individuals with vastly different lived experiences depending on their ties to US slavery and whether their ancestors were voluntary immigrants to the United States. This distinction is critical, particularly given renewed calls for reparations that address the legacy of slavery. Here, a shift from a purely race-based focus to a more precise historical analysis like the one that Baugh advocates will allow readers to evaluate how to direct resources to those most in need.

Next, Baugh articulates the consequences of linguistic profiling in chapter five, beginning with a sketch of foundational research and ending with examples of the legal, educational, and social implications of linguistic profiling and discrimination. Insights from early work on housing discrimination in the United States, combined with insights from dialectology and modern sociolinguistic research allow Baugh to make a strong case for the ways that people use language to “make inferences about the speech they hear” (p. 65) and then use these inferences in discriminatory ways. Furthermore Baugh makes clear the interplay between linguistics research, judicial proceedings, and the broader political landscape in which the fight for linguistic justice occurs.

In chapter six, Baugh shifts modes by presenting readers with a wealth of data from his own research on the reliability of earwitness testimony and whether voices can be reliably identified in recordings. This data, which suggests that listeners can “draw reasonably reliable demographic inferences about a speaker whom they do not know and hear for the first time” (p. 95), along with the rigorous methodological approach used to gather it, will be of great interest to those interested in developing procedures for reliably evaluating earwitness testimony. Similarly, chapter seven provides compelling evidence of the ways that native speakers of American English reliably identify a speaker’s race. In particular, the experimental methodology and results in this chapter make a clear case for the ways that, even in the absence of visual cues,
listeners can continue to deny opportunities to individuals based on inferences drawn from language.

Following the line of reasoning outlined in chapter four, Baugh presents in chapter eight a nuanced approach to unpacking “the ways in which people become the objects of discrimination” (p. 121) that moves beyond considerations of race alone. As Baugh points out, we must add greater precision to our exploration of the historical circumstances that shape present realities, particularly as we work to address injustices faced by descendants of slaves in the United States. One tool that is used to add precision to this analysis is the Historical Hardship Index (HHI) presented in this chapter. Readers will find a detailed presentation of the questions and considerations that shape this tool, and they will find insightful questions to consider as they think of ways to adapt this tool to their particular circumstances.

Similarly, Baugh presents readers with a detailed and nuanced rubric for the assessment of linguistic harassment in chapter nine. This chapter begins with operational definitions of the kinds of behaviors that fall under a broad spectrum of harassment and Baugh takes readers through an analysis of how insights from ethnography of speaking, speech act theory, discourse analysis, and conversation analysis can be used to diagnose the presence and severity of linguistic harassment in specific cases.

Chapter ten gives readers an overview of a range of research methodologies and insights from linguistics that can serve as an entry point for deeper exploration of the theme of language and injustice. Through this discussion, it is clear that linguists research is clearly aligned with the cause of justice and that this fight for justice has global implications. Chapter eleven concludes with Baugh advocating that linguists further expand their role in this domain. At the same time, Baugh makes the critical observation that readers must be vigilant and persistent in the fight for justice, understanding that “the quest for true justice can remain incomplete if it is not sustained” (p. 198) and that the gains of the past can be easily eroded.

Ultimately, the call to action that Baugh makes is one that must continue to be heard by linguists, legal scholars and practitioners, educators, and social justice advocates alike. The insights presented in this text will no doubt contribute to more precise and rigorous analyses of the ways that language and inequality intersect, and the historical, theoretical, and methodological overviews provide an important entry point for scholars and practitioners.
interested in expanding their theoretical and methodological toolkits as they seek to contribute to the global fight for justice.