

Understanding the Race-Language Nexus: A Critical Review of Jonathan Rosa's *Looking like a Language, Sounding like a Race*

Abdullah Al-Mamun

Lecturer, Institute of Education and Research, University of Dhaka
Email: mamun.ier@du.ac.bd | ORCID: 0009-0006-8265-7904

Book: Looking like a Language, Sounding like a Race: Raciolinguistic Ideologies and the Learning of Latinidad
Author: Jonathan Rosa, Associate Professor, Stanford University
Publisher: Oxford University Press, Oxford, United Kingdom
Publication Date: January 22, 2019
Language: English
Page: 312

Article History

Received: 18/08/2026

Accepted: 28/09/2026

Published: 08/10/2026

Introduction

Jonathan Rosa's *Looking like a Language, Sounding like a Race* (2019) is recognized for being one of the most impactful works in linguistic anthropology, critical race studies, and educational studies. In the book, Rosa examines the relationship between language and race in a Chicago public high school. Instead of distinguishing between language discrimination and racial discrimination, he argues that the evaluation of racialized individuals is done by applying raciolinguistic ideology, which allows people to view individuals as persons who "look like a language" and "sound like a race."

The importance of the book resides in both empirical examination of Latinx youth and theoretical contribution. Rosa challenges the prevailing view in sociolinguistics that proficiency in language possesses nothing to do with the view about one's race. Therefore, he builds upon the ideas of Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Edward Said, Paulo Freire, Bonny Norton, and Cornel West. Thus, the book should not be viewed as merely discussing the issue of bilingualism but also serving as a critique of modern institutions that contribute to racial differences via language.

Overview of the Book

In this book, Rosa presents the findings from qualitative research conducted at New Northwest High School (NNHS) to understand how Latinx students navigate through educational spaces that are modified by the use of the racialized way of language. The book examines how students negotiate multiple and contradictory identities and thus challenges the dualistic nature of the distinction of students into "school-oriented" and "street-oriented" youth.

The author first introduces the concept of languagelessness, which means that bilingual Latinx students are viewed as incapable in both Spanish and English languages, even if the students are efficient communicators in both languages. The ineptitude of the students is a result of social ideology rather than inaccuracies in linguistic realities. A distinctive feature of the book is that it focuses on two interrelated issues. The first one concerns the construction of ethnoracial identities within the institutions of education. The second issue deals with implications that these identities have on language, literacy, and education.

Part I — Looking Like a Language: Latinx Ethnoracial Category-Making

In the first chapter, the author deals with the events and processes by which schools try to turn stigmatized Latino students into good citizens. The author shows that educational institutions in some way help and discipline students as they aim at education and progress at the same time. The contradiction of educational inclusion is described in the chapter as it shows how students have worth only when they correspond to the accepted version of *Latinidad*.

The second chapter investigates the processes of confusion and negotiation that are connected with ethnoracial labels. The author points out that the terms, like “Latino” and Hispanic or national names, are not natural categories. According to Rosa, the ethnoracial categories appear through institutional background, migration experiences, and personal understanding of identity.

The third chapter analyzes the way of expression of *Latinidad* as a result of signs and symbols. The author believes that signs are cultural markers symbolizing a specific ethnicity, but they are often too simple and do not represent the whole diversity of experiences.

Part II — Sounding Like a Race: Latinx Raciolinguistic Enregisterment

In the fourth chapter, the notion of languagelessness is again covered. In this chapter, the author demonstrates that positive judgments are rarely made about the bilingual abilities of Latinx students. Because of the prejudices, these students' skills never get taken into consideration. This chapter serves as one of the major contributions to sociolinguistics.

The fifth chapter presents the analysis of various playful bilingual language practices, including such forms of inverted Spanglish as language mixing. Rosa illustrates the point that language mixing is more than a just language phenomenon; it is also a social practice that helps youth realize their identity and resistance against authorities. This chapter makes an argument against the view that bilingualism is deficit.

The sixth chapter deals with literacy practices that are regarded as illegitimate by schools. The author discusses the ways of street literacies, popular culture, and various community-based forms of reading and writing. Rosa argues that certain kinds of literacy are criminalized because they are associated with the representation of ethnic groups.

Theoretical Integration and Alignment

Raciolinguistic Ideology and Critical Race Theory

The central idea of the book is based on the raciolinguistic ideology, which is proposed by Rosa to show how human assessment concerning languages is influenced by race. This idea is in line with West (1993) that prejudice exists not only among individuals but also within social institutions. According to West, structures of racism are sustained through institutional activity that appears to be neutral. Rosa expands upon this idea to the area of linguistics and points out those language judgments are one of the instruments of such structural racism. In addition, as the educational system claims that language assessment is objective, Rosa claims that racialized people are subject to racial bias before their language performance is even judged.

Rosa's main contribution is that the language becomes the medium through which structural racism manifests itself. *Looking like a Language, Sounding like a Race* reveals the raciolinguistic continuation of West's thoughts in regard to the systemic inequality.

Discipline, and the Racialization of Surveillance

Moreover, Rosa indeed relies heavily on Michel Foucault's ideas concerning authority and institutional administration. With schools being understood as instruments of discipline, they normalize and normalize people's behavior, identity, and language with reference to observing, classifying, and normalizing.

There are many parallels between Rosa's ideas and those expressed in Foucault (1977). According to Foucault, modern institutions are capable of shaping and controlling "docile bodies" with the help of various forms of control. Rosa, similarly, provides many examples of how schools control their students' language in order to lead them to the norm of "acceptable" speech. Those students who speak differently from students who conform to the norms of adequate speech are subject to punishment and correction.

Yet Rosa significantly expands Foucault's theories. Foucault concentrates mainly on the process of discipline in the generic and general sense, while Rosa shows how such disciplinary policies of educational institutions are dominated by racial motives. The monopoly of the authority is evident in the fact that the process of language control does not take place evenly, with authority being used against particular social and racial groups.

Race and Linguistic Capital

With an engagement with the influential work of Bourdieu (1991), Rosa makes a significant theoretical contribution. Bourdieu argues that language functions as a type of symbolic capital, whereby some varieties of language are considered to have higher social value than others. Standardized language can therefore serve as a resource providing access to educational and economic opportunities.

Rosa recognizes the significance of linguistic capital while also pointing out that Bourdieu's framework does not adequately address the issue of race. The book shows that even though bilingual students have acquired linguistic skills and can communicate effectively, they are still viewed as linguistically deficient. This point is one of the most critical ones made by Rosa. In particular, as has been shown, it does not guarantee recognition for people from different races, even if they obtain the linguistic forms that institutions value.

Orientalism and the Construction of Linguistic Otherness

Similar to that of Said (1978), Rosa's work relates to the idea of "other." According to Said, it was through colonial engagement and discourse that the Orient was represented as knowledge through Europe's perceptions.

In the same way, Rosa portrays the ways in which Latinx people are represented in society by language ideologies, rather than the analysis of how they actually speak. Educational institutions and larger social discourses set up racial groups as experiencing linguistic deficiency, no matter what evidence shows otherwise.

Like Said, Rosa considers not only representation but also power. Both scholars discussed the creation of knowledge systems by dominant social groups that support subordination and oppression of other social groups. Rosa's main contribution here is the demonstration of the role of language in the process of representation. The "linguistic other" is represented as a racialized person whose supposed lack of knowledge is justified in terms of exclusion and marginalization.

Thus, the book offers another view on how language as a domain is being used in the light of post-colonial view.

Educational Oppression

The book can be compared to Freire (1970). Freire, in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, maintains that educational institutions have the potential to either perpetuate oppression or create liberation conditions. In his book, he challenges different forms of education that silence people in marginalized positions while enforcing the dominant ideologies on them.

Rosa's study shows how language acts as one of the forms of ideology. Schools often advocate standard forms of language while stigmatizing language of people affected by racism. Consequently, racialized students live in conditions that place their identities and forms of communication in negative light. At the same time, Rosa broadens Freire's ideas and points out that oppression happens not only through the curriculum or educational methods but also through assessments of language itself. Schools claim to support students' development, but they also reinforce the existing hierarchy in terms of races, which makes language an effective tool of domination in education.

Politics of Identity

Rosa's work matches well with the scholarship of Norton (2013). Norton's *Identity and Language Learning* points out that language acquisition cannot be separated from the concept of identity, investment, and power relations. Language learners navigate several identities when participating in language communities.

Though Rosa is on the same page with Norton regarding identity construction, she develops the idea further. Norton focuses on identity negotiation, while Rosa argues that identity is often defined by racialized perception. Students are making an effort to master dominant language forms, but people in institutions tend to interpret what they say based on racial prejudices. Rosa's idea adds a lot to sociolinguistic discussion of identity. It means that the ideas of agency and investment cannot fully explain learning because perceivers of language are the ultimate judges about which speech is legitimate.

Methodological Approach

The methodology used in the book can be termed as ethnographic engagement. The fieldwork conducted by Rosa produces an in-depth analysis of the day-to-day practices that help understand how identity negotiation happens in everyday life without the use of quantitative approaches. Ethnography allows Rosa to illustrate the way that raciolinguistic ideologies function in everyday educational practices and instead of making theoretical presumptions, he backs up his arguments with the actual stories of students.

Nevertheless, there are certain limitations, such as focusing on a single institutional context, which limits its generalizability. Also, the book does not provide a lot of recommendations for educators and policy-makers to fight against raciolinguistic inequalities.

Strengths of the Book

The theoretical contribution of Rosa's scholarly publication in the area of language and race is commendable. By propounding the notion of raciolinguistic ideology, he presents a method that establishes the close connection between language evaluation and race. Rosa's approach differs from the traditional sociolinguistic models that regard language and race separately and stresses the influence of raciolinguistic ideology on the process of assessment of language behaviors. Hence, the work provides an impetus for further discussions in linguistics, linguistic anthropology, and critical race studies.

The other merit of this book is its thorough ethnographic research and critical analysis of educational environment. Rosa's system of observations allows obtaining a profound perspective into the daily lives of students and the way the concepts of language, identity, and social belonging are connected. It also allows for scrutinizing the negative role of education in maintaining the stratifying practices. The idea of 'languagelessness' reflects the discriminatory practices regarding students who do not have their skills recognized.

Rosa's framework plays a pivotal role in present-day educational settings by prompting educators to reconsider their beliefs on the adequacy of language teaching and learning in terms of resolving inequality-related issues. The concept of raciolinguistic ideology reveals that the mastering of a language by a student does not exclude the possibility of being regarded as less competent linguistically. Rosa's framework gives educators a chance to formulate questions concerning assessment practices, language policy, teacher expectations, and practices used by institutions that help sustain inequalities. Considering the multilingual and heterogeneity of the present-day educational context, Rosa's work is invaluable since it clarifies issues connected to language assessment with respect to power, identity, and equity.

Criticisms

Even though the book has made important contributions, there are a number of drawbacks related to it as well. One limitation concerns the extensive reliance on theoretical concepts that very few people outside academia are able to comprehend such as semiotic indeterminacy or co-naturalization. These ideas are surely valuable on an intellectual level; however, for the vast majority of readers who do not have a firm grounding in some fields such as sociolinguistics or critical race theory these terms are daunting and not easily understandable. The other downside of the research is narrowness of the research used by Rosa, since he only examined one single school, which raises doubts as to how widely the conclusions made in the book can be applied to other settings.

The book is also limited by being focused not much on practical recommendations. While it is true that Rosa sheds light on how education is responsible for linguistic and racial discrimination, the author offers little direction to people looking for possible solutions to those problems. This does not contribute to making the readership satisfied with the material covered. In addition to that, Rosa heavily concentrates on language ideologies and identity construction overlooking economic inequalities and resource disparities that also shape educational experiences.

A further theoretical question concerns the explanatory scope of raciolinguistic ideology. Rosa effectively demonstrates how race construct their language perception. Nevertheless, not every type of language discrimination can be related to race. Indeed, differences in language hierarchy arise as a result of social class, dialectical differences, nationalism, language normalization, colonialism, and socioeconomic discrimination. For instance, people speaking non-standard regional dialects can be discriminated against in situations in which race is not the main organizing factor. Thus, while raciolinguistic ideology can explain various types of language-related marginalization, it is used most effectively when studied in combination with class, ethnicity, nationalism, and other aspects of power relations.

Conclusion

"Looking like a Language, Sounding like a Race" by Jonathan Rosa is unique and ambitious book that allows us to rethink how we understand the association between race, language and power. Rosa introduces the notion of racializing linguistic ideology, establishing that language evaluations cannot be considered apart from judgments based on race. It represents a significant milestone because it combines insights from different intellectual traditions and lays an original framework for analysis.

However, the most remarkable thing about the work is that it convincingly shows that language can never be studied separately from race. This finding creates serious problems for traditional beliefs in the field of sociolinguistics and education. Rosa argues that linguistic discrimination is often a reflection of racial rather than an independent phenomenon.

Though the work suffers from the presence of theoretical density at times, it offers loop-sided arguments, yet the conceptual advancement of the book is somewhat larger than its deficiencies. The work is a key contribution. Having been read in conjunction with Cornel West's *Race Matters*, Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, Pierre Bourdieu's *Language and Symbolic Power*, Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and Bonny Norton's *Identity and Language Learning*, Rosa's book is not just devoted to bilingualism but also provides theoretical contributions to the modern discussions of race, language, and education. The book serves as an important resource for scholars who are interested in understanding how inequality is reproduced through seemingly habitual activities such as speaking, listening, teaching and studying.

While the empirical analysis by Rosa is centered on the Latinx community in the U.S., the framework can certainly apply in different contexts. The notion of raciolinguistic ideology can be employed to analyze different immigrant, Indigenous, refugee, and minoritized language communities in different countries. For instance, in South Asia, language-related judgments can intersect with ethnicity, social class, regional identity, and colonial history. The same applies to multilingual educational systems where speakers of nonstandard languages are evaluated on assumptions rather than communication ability. Thus, the main significance of Rosa's framework lies in its ability to demonstrate how social perceptions and institutional practices lead to the emergence of language inequality.

References

- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Norton, B. (2013). *Identity and language learning: Extending the conversation*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Rosa, J. (2019). *Looking like a language, sounding like a race: Raciolinguistic ideologies and the learning of Latinidad*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- West, C. (1993). *Race matters*. Boston: Beacon Press.