"Your Privileges Are Not Universal": Language, Power, and Diversity in the Library Catalog and Beyond

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Over the past three decades, conversations around diversity in the field of Library and Information Sciences (LIS) have gained significant traction. However, there remains a general reluctance to meaningfully interrogate how white supremacy operates both implicitly and explicitly as an institutional reality. By critically examining the under-explored yet central topic of language as it relates to unequal power relations in LIS, we can gain a deeper understanding of how white supremacist ideals become insidiously reinforced and perpetuated at the structural level and identify opportunities for improvement.

The bulk of LIS scholarship concerning language centers around cataloguing and organizational systems at institutions. In "The Language of Cataloguing: Deconstructing and Decolonizing Systems of Organization in Libraries," Crystal Vaughan builds from arguments that challenge the concept of neutrality as a pretext of ethical librarianship to illustrate how cataloguing language contains implicit bias and effectively whitewashes library organization systems. These systems, Vaughan argues, are built upon a false pretense to universality and the belief that an informed selection of a specific set of terms are capable of being comprehensively representative (Vaughan, 2018).

Vaughan draws attention to examples from the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), a library organization system that has influence over library systems across the globe. Up until 2016, the LCSH classified "illegal aliens" as a subject heading (Vaughan, 2018). Due to its level of institutional authority, LCSH's choice to assign this dehumanizing label to undocumented populations not only disparages those populations, but legitimizes negative characterizations of them.

One possible solution to the issue of bias in LCSH and other subject heading systems, Vaughan proposes, is to frequently update subject headings in a manner that best reflects social, political, and cultural changes in society (Vaughan, 2018). Making language-based reparations in this sense requires flexibility and fluidity, and a genuine commitment to maintaining a user-oriented catalog that uses language relevant to groups at the peripheries.

As an essay that critiques language misuse and harmful language choices, however, it is ironic that the author frames the need to de-center white heteronormative perspectives in library organization systems as an act of "decolonization" (Vaughan, 2018). Such framing demonstrates a misinterpretation of the project of decolonization, which is not to be mistaken for "an approximation of [non-indigenous] experiences of oppression" or a broad metaphor for acts of social justice; decolonization, according to Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, is the act of bringing about "the repatriation of Indigenous land and life" in the specific context of settler-colonialist oppression (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p. 1). This misappropriation serves as a potent example of the ways in which language use in LIS institutional settings tend to reflect a surface level engagement with diverse cultures at the expense of genuine change, an argument posited by Anastasia M. Collins which we will return to later.

One could argue that the practice of cataloguing is really a practice of naming. In "The Power To Name: Representation in Library Catalogs," Hope A. Olson suggests that ameliorative

change to the issues raised above can be achieved through the adoption of more permeable classification systems. Focusing on the ways in which authoritative cataloguing terms acquire meaning through relativity and context, Olson draws from critical theorists like Trinh Minh Ha and Jacques Derrida to illustrate how the objectification of certain groups both pervades and informs classification decisions. For example, terms associated with the subject heading "Women" might include sub-categories such as "Women Writers" or "Women Painters," whereas terms associated with the subject heading "Men" would not include such descriptors due to the normalization of mens' positionality as default or universal.

Issues which were once confined to libraries and archives are now being compounded by the advent of data discrimination and bias in search engine algorithms, making the struggle for language justice an increasingly urgent subject in LIS (Noble, 2018). Understanding how language relates to power is a critical responsibility that, if taken seriously by LIS professionals, holds profound implications for the future of information access. Yet such change warrants a comprehensive look at the varied deployments of language in librarianship and other information positions beyond cataloguing methods. We must also consider how our use of language when talking about the topic of diversity can function as a barrier that fosters enclosure from the ability to enact meaningful change.

In "Language, Power, and Oppression in the LIS Diversity Void," Anastasia M. Collins considers how prevailing language choices among LIS professionals and institutions reflect the naturalization of whiteness and the "false universality of the white perspective" in the field (Collins, 2018, p.40) . Emphases placed on addressing the "issue" of diversity rather than the issue of white supremacy is one example of how the privileging of white normatively can have a reverse impact on efforts to improve equity (Collins, 2018, p.39-40). According to Collins, the dissonance between practical applications of equity and the abstract idea of diversity in libraries can be attributed to a lack of meaningful engagement with interrogating one's own privileged positionally and unlearning culturally privileged conditions and conventions. The "issue of diversity" is thus a revealing contradiction that points to a need for further self-reflection and humility. Context, Collins reminds us, is an indispensable aspect of meaning making; we must always be mindful of "who is using a phrase, who is receiving it, in what situation, through what shared frame of reference, and with what historical underpinnings" (Collins, 2018, p. 41). While we might prefer to avoid the discomfort that sometimes emerges from mindful consideration of pertinent contexts, confronting the source of that discomfort is oftentimes a necessary process for growth.

Rather than uncritically accept terms as neutral signifiers of universal concepts, Collins proposes that we recognize language as both meaning and action—a form of social practice that earns a "reciprocal relationship with the social structures and/or institutions in which it is used" (Collins, 2018, p. 42). Recognizing this agency empowers us with the tools necessary for combatting white supremacy at the institutional level and improving services to diverse populations.

Written on the streets of Santiago is a statement that LIS professionals everywhere should take to heart: *tus privilegios no son universales (Your privilege is not universal)* (Prashad, 2021, p.1).

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