Frames

"Creative Corner" contribution by Bri Alexander, City University of New York, Graduate Center

Frozen in framing your messages convene
conveying a meaning that's not necessarily what you mean.
But intentions *don't* live here, here in the frame,
and how that affects us is not always the same.
It's not simply a symptom of "oh, you misunderstood,"
a misinterpretation, a "read it again, if you would."
The message is ***always*** there, open to all who seek it;
others just don't unpack it before they write it or speak it.
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You see, frames center worlds and draw a specific gaze
while casting aside all other perspectives, beliefs, and ways.
So when you frame something, you are obligated to think:
"what worlds will I expand, what worlds will I shrink?"
With this in mind, let us now come down from the abstract
to think through real ways in which framing can impact
BIPOC students and our experiences in a place
that often excludes us and our voices in time and space.
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I got the workshop invite in my inbox one day
with little text in the email yet novels to say.
"Will you attend 'Decentering Whiteness'? Check yes or no."
My heart sank to my feet; why would ***I*** want to go?
That title *centers whiteness* despite its intention
because whiteness is the only experience that gets mentioned.
Can all life experiences be summed up as "white" or "not"?
Are Black, Indigenous, POC voices still being cast as one joint lot?
And how can you decenter something without knowing who
you are then centering and uplifting in their stead, in their lieu?
Are we to assume that all BIPOC communities will act the same
when we are centering our perspectives and staking our claim?
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The focus on whiteness remains, undoing the workshop's purpose
and while it might not seem a big deal, it makes me, frankly, furious.
How are we still not mindful of the messages we send?
Why aren't academics thinking of how their words might offend?
Don't we realize yet that what isn't said also has a voice?
That what is silence to some manifests to others as noise?
Harmful framing isn't just a fluke, accidental, a "but we didn't know!"
It's a manifestation of embedded colonial thinking and **it has to go**.
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I demand that academia diligently widens its framing lens
to include equitably the perspectives and voices of all humxns.
Think about this tiny example of how academia continues to erase,
how *two words* in a workshop title can sum up the trials BIPOC face
as students who are still lumped together as merely "not white"
instead of wildly distinctive, important, and bright.
Give us workshops on centering Black Puerto Ricans, Shawnees,
Māoris, Shipibos, Tlicho Denes, Ashantis...
I want space for all our unique voices to be centered and heard;
I want titles where undoing is not the primary concern.
Academia needs to fight for those who it has historically overthrown
or suffer the consequences of centering colonial understandings all alone.
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Imagine what other examples, stories, perspectives, etc. exist.
Imagine how it feels to watch this anti-BIPOC pattern persist.
And then let's imagine how much better academia could be
if it made room at the table for all peoples to sit and eat.
Imagine how much more spectacular the picture could become
if BIPOC knowledge was centered, framed, and added to the sum.
And I believe that, just as framing can be a problem, it can also be a source
for including all our remarkable views and correcting academia's colonial course.

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As linguists and language workers, we know that all too often, words expressed do not necessarily reflect their intended meanings. Academic institutions in particular can exist within this linguistic contradiction where stated messages do not meet the messages' goals. This contradictory space can create unsupportive and traumatizing experiences for Indigenous and other minoritized students when the messages are meant to help and offer support but fall short in practice. As an Indigenous student in a doctoral program, I see and feel these negative impacts profoundly, and thus offer this story poem of my experiences with linguistic contradictory spaces in academia.

My poem is meant as individual catharsis and rebellion, a communal plea to outsiders and comfort to Indigenous insiders, and a signal that although these spaces hold immense challenges to us as Indigenous students, we all as academics can use language to immediately improve fraught relations between academia and minoritized students.

My poem reflects on the power of framing to show how the words we use can actually work against our primary intended meaning. It makes the case to move beyond message intentionality and towards an understanding of what our framing actively imparts to a wide variety of audiences. I provide an example of a workshop title ("Decentering Whiteness") and how it accidentally yet forcibly perpetuates colonial structures of inequality and power. For some, this workshop title will surely provoke what the workshoppers intended on a surface level: interest in learning how to shift the attention from white to non-white systems. On the surface, this workshop goal seeks to undo harmful power systems. However, hand-in-hand with this title comes a slew of unvisible subtexts*** which undermine that goal drastically and must be addressed. Some of the subtexts that were glaring to me as an Indigenous woman are as follows:

- Whiteness is a static entity or object which can be acted on but not usurped as the primary focus.
- My indigeneity exists only as a contrast to whiteness.
- My indigeneity is also combined with all other minoritized perspectives because we all passively exist together outside the white house of academia, peering in on agentive whiteness.
- My Shawnee perspective, then, if it were allowed to exist in the center of academia, is no different than a Kikuyu or a Māori one.
- There is effectively whiteness and everyone else, and all non-white communities would take the same approach to decenter whiteness because white/non-white is the dominant dichotomy.
- But none of this actually even matters because this workshop is not about anything other than whiteness.

I refuse to take the time to explain how these subtexts are harmful to BIPOC communities and students, as to do so would inevitably be an argument for why our perspectives are valid and meaningful. I should not have to convince anyone of that. In the following, I will instead focus on how the workshop title conveys these subtexts and how the title's intentionality alone fails to escape its colonial understandings.

First, the title rids minoritized BIPOC communities of their personalities, worldviews, and agencies by relegating them to a position that is only identifiable in contrast to some bounded notion of "whiteness." The title accomplishes this by marking "whiteness" as its singular focus without relation to any other categories of race or ethnicity, contrary to the title's intent. In this case, even when "whiteness" is meant to be an object or entity to be problematized and deconstructed, the agentive subject of this process (presumably, academics interested in decentering whiteness) remains unidentified. In this way, "whiteness" is inscribed as the primary focus because the intended actor is unnamed, unmarked, and unnecessary in the process of decentering. According to the workshop title, the most important step in the decentering process is identifying "whiteness" as an entity, not promoting a specific BIPOC perspective (which, in doing the latter, would not only decenter "whiteness" but would also locate a positionality other than "whiteness" on which to focus). Thus, this title deems all Othered perspectives as insignificant to decentering whiteness.

Additionally, the notion of undoing something (as intended by the prefix "de-" in "decentering") without providing something to build is not the focus that my Indigenous communities would choose. In fact, all of the Cherokee lifeways that we learn and pass down from generation to generation are on working together and helping others, not on unseating other perspectives that might differ from our own. We do not do the work of undoing others; we choose instead to do the work of making room for ourselves and for others who need space. The intention to undo a community's perspective and silence their voice is that of a colonizer's, not one that my Indigenous communities identify with nor enforce. This workshop title, then, is a reflection and continuation of the work that colonizers have done for centuries and does not honor my Indigenous ways of knowing.

To expand upon this point and provide another example of how framing is used to push a specific agenda and to exclude others, let us think on the differences between the concepts of "decolonizing" and "indigenizing." Standardly defined as the process of withdrawing from a colony, "decolonizing" is inherently linked to land and settler-Indigenous interactions; however, "decolonizing" has become a keyword for dismantling the oppressive, colonizing ways of academia and, as such, has turned into a metaphor (Tuck & Yang, 2012), obfuscating the real ways in which academic institutions have stolen and continue to occupy Indigenous land. Despite its denotation, "decolonizing" is almost never invoked as a way to rematriate the land back to Indigenous communities nor to even begin conversations with Indigenous communities on what they need from academic spaces. Instead, "decolonizing" is oftentimes a shallow call for decentering whiteness by talking about "whiteness" and how it has affected Others. "Indigenizing," however, does not work under this paradigm. It does not signal a shallow call. It does not pit Indigenous communities against white ones. It does not diminish other experiences nor focus on them unjustly. It does not proclaim to be the "end-all-be-all" solution. It does not pretend to do work that it does not actually do. Instead, it simply asks for mindful construction and valid centering of Indigenous ways of doing, thinking, and being. We all have varying perspectives, and my indigeneity is not threatened by yours (or your lack thereof). I do not need your voice to be silenced—I know what that feels like and how detrimental of a severance that is. I just need mine to be heard and merited, too.

While sometimes it feels like we have miles to go with framing, I admit I find some hope in the fact that just as framing can be used to alienate and hurt, it can also be used to unite and repair. Many BIPOC academics and activists, as well as allies, are already collaborating on solutions to framing and kicking shallow keywords to the curb. Just last week, I received an invite to a workshop titled "Centering Blackness in Hispanic Sociolinguistics." This time, I shared the event far and wide and felt gratitude towards academia for not only making space but conveying it with appropriate framing. Though the topic of this workshop is not my own, I cheer on its sheer existence, for whenever space is carved out for a minoritized, Othered voice to be heard, it opens the door for all to share the stage. And despite how these voices might or might not harmonize, the point is that they all get to speak, sing, yell, chant, cry, and whatever else they want because we are all meaningful and have the right to be heard.

*** I use "unvisible" here instead of "invisible" because I argue that (1) there is an underlying colonial process which renders the subtext out of focus, but (2) the subtext is highly visible to those who are being pushed out of focus and thus still visible, just not centered.

References

Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, *1*(1), 1-40. https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630

Hatitoh | ᏏᏲᏱ | hello. Laalo'kachitiitha niisaawaanwa wiithowe | ᏦᏁᎾ ᏓᏆᎴ ᏣᎳᎩ Ꮵ | Bri is my English name. I hold a Master of Arts in Native American Languages and Linguistics from the University of Arizona and am pursuing a doctorate in Linguistic Anthropology from the City University of New York, Graduate Center. When I am not actively doing | participating in | studying about language reclamation, I spend my time beading, dancing, learning from family and the ancestors, and being in nature.

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