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**We Teach Languages Episode 136: Speaking Blackness in Brazil, Identity, and Investment with Uju Anya**

**Stacey Johnson**:  [00:00] This is "We Teach Languages," a podcast...

[00:04] [background music]

**Stacey**:  [00:04] about language teaching from the diverse perspectives of teachers.

[00:13] I'm Stacey Johnson. Today on episode 136, Dorie Conlon Perugini is back on the podcast to interview Dr. Uju Anya on a range of topics related to the experiences of African American language learners both in the class room and in study abroad contexts, bias and inclusion in language education, and why the concept of investment is a more useful framework for teachers than motivation.

[00:47] I know this episode is going to generate a lot of useful discussion among listeners. Let's turn things over to Dorie.

[00:57] [music]

**Dorie Conlon Perugini**:  [00:57] Thank you so much for agreeing to be on the podcast today. I'm really excited.

**Dr. Uju Anya**:  [01:06] Thank you. I appreciate it.

**Dorie**:  [01:09] Why don't we get started, if you wouldn't mind, maybe just introducing yourself to the listeners? So they can know who you are and what you do.

**Dr. Anya**:  [01:17] My name is Uju Anya. I am a scholar in applied linguistics and second language acquisition. I consider myself a critical applied linguist, sociolinguist, and SLL. I specialize in basically questions of identity in language learning. I look at language learning as this process of transformative socialization.

[01:49] As somebody who's emerging in expertise in a new or additional language, you're going through this process of profound change. Learning, in general, entails change. It changes who you are because as you're learning what you can do changes. Your perspectives, what you're capable of, how you see things, how you move in the world, and problems you're able to solve. This entails change.

[02:19] Language learning changes you because you're able to move in these new worlds, do these new things, and have these new understandings. Especially since, as you're learning new languages, you're not just learning new words, grammar, or vocabulary. Also learning new ways of thinking, viewing the world, new ideas, and ideologies.

[02:41] Even right down to how you frame things in another language entails different trains of perspective. Language learning is this exercise in transformation.

[02:53] It's also in socialization, being socialized into these ways. You're not just passively receiving socialization, you're actively engaging in this transformation and being socialized into this new language. I look at that and I look at how identities or different multiplicities work out in this process.

[03:14] The specific sort of social identities I tend to focus in on in language learning would be race, gender, ethnicity, sexual identities, nationality, social class, social status, and I am most concerned with African Americans engaged in this process of transformative socialization.

[03:39] My most recent project looked at how African Americans learn to speak blackness in a new language. I followed four black students on a college‑level study abroad program to Brazil and not just anywhere in Brazil. Brazil has about 60 percent Afro‑Brazilian, those who identify as Afro‑descendants.

[04:04] This particular city where the study abroad program happened was a city that was about 80 percent in terms of population of black people, the city of Salvador, Bahia up in the north. It wasn't just a demographically black city, it was also a city that was impregnated thoroughly with black culture. The Portuguese that they speak up in that region is the most Africanized.

[04:29] These black Americans went to learn Portuguese in a very black Brazilian context. Learning the Portuguese language entailed how to figure out how to speak blackness in Brazil, how to speak your black womanhood, how to speak your ethnic identity, how to speak black manhood, how to figure out social class positioning.

[04:56] There were incidences where vocabulary issues were [laughs] definitely a case. Do you say you're a negra, which literally means black, which you would say in America? But, you go over there, the word black or negra has all kinds of meanings over there that have to do with the profound racism of the country and that blackness is not something that everybody sees as this positive thing.

[05:25] For example, we would have these Americans comes to Brazil and say, "I am negra," and Brazilians are like, "Wait a minute."

[05:32] [laughter]

**Dorie**:  [05:34] Totally different meaning.

**Dr. Anya**:  [05:36] Exactly. "You're attractive, you look like you got money. Let's not go so far with Negra thing. You're [non‑English speech] . You're dark. But Negra is ugly. It's poor. We can't call you that."

[05:42] Then the Americans will be like, "This is offensive. This is horrible. Don't y'all realize it's a race?" They're like, "Poor American, you don't understand how things work."

[06:02] [laughter]

**Dr. Anya**:  [06:04] It's trying to figure out, "What am I here and how am I going to be in my own understanding of what these things all mean and then try to adapt to and come into these new lingual‑cultural realizations?"

[06:21] Then there were other Americans in my group that were limited in the past by just being called black when they identified with other aspects of their identities.

[06:33] They felt they had white backgrounds, they had different ethnicities, they weren't just African American, and the word black was limited to them and they felt freedom in Brazil that acknowledged multiplicities and said, "We have all these intermediate categories. You don't have to be either black or white. You can be something in the middle."

[06:55] Now, that's usually an exercise in anti‑blackness thing. It's like saying, "You don't have to be black. We got other things for you." [laughs] But there were Americans that felt more at ease in Brazil and more liberated in the Portuguese language and that they were able to speak themselves more authentically in terms of their particular definitions of their blackness.

[07:14] These are all things that were worked out for the students we're trying to work out in this experience. They also had profound experiences of self‑discovery in the Portuguese‑learning exercise. They would see images or be introduced to social contacts that they were never familiar with before, that heightened their sense of pride in their blackness.

[07:44] Then they would chase after these experiences and these black Brazilian images and they would chase after in the Portuguese language because you only have access to those experiences if you're speaking Portuguese and interacting with Portuguese speakers while you're trying to be super black and proud as the black movement people you met.

[08:06] They're super‑hot and you want to hang out with them and then you will...

[08:10] [crosstalk]

**Dr. Anya**:  [08:10] all these language‑learning experiences that are deeply and profoundly intertwined with blackness and being black and speaking black. I looked at that in this project.

**Dorie**:  [08:26] Your book won an award from the American Association for Applied Linguist, the First Book Award, right, from this project?

**Dr. Anya**:  [08:33] Yeah.

**Dorie**:  [08:33] Congratulations.

**Dr. Anya**:  [08:35] Thank you. I was very, very happy about it, about that award. Because to be acknowledged in this particular contribution was significant in the field. I was very proud to win it. I was also proud because of the people behind this award.

[08:57] So far, there have been two winners of this First Book Award. Both of us received mentorship from Celeste Kinginger, who is an authority in applied linguistics, especially in the field of study abroad, the learning experiences if you study abroad. She is a warrior.

[09:17] She does a really good job in mentoring young scholars. She's one of those scholars that perhaps doesn't get the acclaim as the big rockstar. However, she does rockstar work. I want to acknowledge that the two winners of the award for First Book came through her.

**Dorie**:  [09:43] That's wonderful.

**Dr. Anya**:  [09:43] She definitely has had an impact on this field in terms of, she found me, found my work, encouraged me to submit the book proposal, mentored me through the process of writing the book. The previous winner was her advisee, doctoral advisee. She mentored him for four years. There are women behind these works and are definitely kicking ass.

**Dorie**:  [10:18] That's great. I think a lot of what you mentioned about identity and how language courses can be the space where students explore their identity while learning a new language but figuring out who they are and things, that's what drew me to your work.

[10:34] That's something that I'm really interested in language learning as well. I do see it as a place for students to explore who they are and have these experiences.

[10:43] At the same time, I see a lot of language classrooms and programs that don't give students the space to do that or students don't necessarily see themselves reflected in the curriculum. They're talking about things that maybe don't necessarily apply to the students.

[10:58] That's always something that I've been really interested in, so I do appreciate what you're doing, with particular, that lens and emphasis on allowing students to explore themselves and build their identity through language learning. Because language still is an important part of it, right?

**Dr. Anya**:  [11:13] Of course. Language is everything. [laughs] I think language is how we make sense of the world, language is how we understand things. It's really hard to figure out how language can be divorced, or exercised somehow or separated from the human condition itself or the way that we work out everything, literally.

[11:37] In the past, we've done that by just conceptualizing language as merely verbalizations or units of words, let's say. That's why you can have linguist studies, sentences that don't make sense at all. What is this green color, sleep, sleepless...? I have no idea.

**Dorie**:  [11:58] Some of those Duolingo sentences, you're like, "What does this even mean?"

**Dr. Anya**:  [12:01] What does this even mean?

[12:03] [laughter]

**Dr. Anya**:  [12:03] That only exists with people who can somehow conceptualize words and not related to the people that are speaking the words or the experiences that the words would come out of. I believe that we were moving past that and definitely making a bigger effort in understanding languaging practices.

[12:26] I also think it's fantastic that you're part of the movement to make language classes, or language teaching, language learning, more relevant and significant to the identities, and the lives, and the histories, and the backgrounds of the people who are engaging in it.

[12:45] Because that is a way that we can get closer to righting the wrongs that have been happening in language classes. It's a way that we can, first of all, understand what's going on in language classes. Understand that we haven't been teaching language classes in a neutral way.

[13:06] For example, when I want to talk about, we should explicitly address race in language class, or we should address sexism, we should address, heteronormativity, people are like, "Wait a minute. Whoa, whoa, whoa. What does this have to do with language class?" [laughs]

[13:28] I'm like, "Well, this has to do with people, and people are the people who are languagers, and language class has always addressed all of these things but they've done so promoting the vision and the agenda and the identities of dominant groups."

[13:43] Like with regard to Spanish as a world language in the United States, Spanish is the language that most African Americans will take just because of the ubiquity of the offerings. Spanish classes, traditionally, in the curriculum in the instruction, the materials, all that, have not really engaged the Afro‑descendant population of Spanish speakers, for example, as principals and significant cultural agents.

[14:16] African Americans have in what little research there is out there in African American language learners, they have been clamoring for this and saying that these classes are so boring because they have nothing to do with me. They want to talk about Don Quixote in Spain or they want to talk about Mexico, but not Afro Mexicans.

[14:39] It's not that race, for example, has not been addressed in language classes. It's that it's usually the European races that we're talking about. Or it's not that sexuality has not been addressed in language classes, it gets addressed every day. For example when we...

[15:00] [crosstalk]

[15:00] [laughter]

**Dorie**:  [15:00] Exactly.

**Dr. Anya**:  [15:02] The day we're learning family vocabulary and we bust out those pictures, whose family are we talking about? When we have mama, and papa, and children, and dog, whoever we show these pictures is like, "We are definitely talking about sexuality.

"[15:26] We're talking about heterosexuality and we're definitely talking about sex. We're showing the children that are the products of all the sexing that the heterosexuals are having."

[15:37] [laughter]

**Dorie**:  [15:37] Exactly.

**Dr. Anya**:  [15:38] These topics exist. We're talking about social class because the pictures that we see of the homes or the representatives of cultural units of the target language populations are usually white middle class or elite subjects.

[15:54] It is not that we don't engage these topics. It's that we do so from positions of dominance and privileges that reflect the status quo and also reflect the identities of the people in dominance and the people who hold the most privilege, and the people who tend to get the most irritated when the most marginalized voices want to say, can we talk about us for a second?

[16:19] That's what we're working through. These are not new topics. What's new is that we're asking not to prioritize so much the voice of certain identities, because identities have always been present.

**Dorie**:  [16:36] I do think that's one of the biggest myths of our profession. That we can teach it in a neutral way. They say, "I don't even talk about culture." I've heard teachers say, "I'm not a history teacher. I don't even address culture. I just focus on language."

[16:51] They don't realize that every decision you make, every picture you bring in, every vocabulary word you teach has all this bias to it. I'll say that when you think that something is bias‑free, it's just because it's aligning with your own bias.

[17:05] You don't see the bias in that family unit because that family might look like your own family. But they just say, "It's a neutral family," and it's like, "It's neutral because it looks like you."

[17:15] [laughter]

**Dr. Anya**:  [17:15] Or it's neutral because it looks like the most powerful type of family unit or the family unit that's considered the most normal or regular.

**Dorie**:  [17:26] I've seen that word quite a bit in language materials, and I know it's a cognate, people use it that way. They say normal a lot. Like, "Dorie lives in a normal family. Dorie has a mom, a dad, brothers, and sisters. It's a normal family." Every time I read that word, normal, I have to pause and say, "Let's unpack that."

[17:45] I have a question for you because I think you bring up a really good point. We know that our profession is largely white teachers, largely nonnative speakers of the languages they teach largely heterosexual, largely able‑bodied.

[18:02] If there's a teacher listening along, saying, "Hey, that sounds like me." How can these teachers start to maybe include more identity in their classrooms?

[18:12] Or like you said, you specifically look at the experiences of black language learners, given that our profession is so far away from what their student body might look like, where can these teachers start? What's a good first step?

**Dr. Anya**:  [18:24] They are definitely not starting including identities. They've already included identities. Their identities are the majority. They're starting, hopefully, to include voices that have been marginalized or identities that have been marginalized.

[18:41] The first step would be to diversify their own network, and to diversify their own interactions. Virtually, let's start with social networks who we engage with who we follow. Interactions with the literature, who do we read? Who do we consider authorities or experts in guiding us in the works that we do? Diversify that.

[19:09] Also, understand that we are not knowledge providers in classes or as teachers in general. We don't give knowledge. We facilitate the discovery of information, facilitate the process of socialization into new understandings and new identities.

[19:30] When we come from the perspective that we hold knowledge and we have to provide and share this knowledge, that's a lot of responsibility because we don't hold all the knowledge and we don't have all the experiences.

[19:42] I would like to invite teachers to liberate themselves from this feeling that they have to give everything to the students and think, instead, how do we support students in contributing their backgrounds and their identities?

[20:02] How do we support students in discovering along with us new things, new people, new understandings, for example? How do we collaborate with others, colleagues, friends, or administrators? How do we work along? We are not in this all by ourselves.

[20:22] How do we work with others both in person, in the interaction in the classrooms, and also virtually, and in our interactions with literature and sources, etc.?

[20:34] I'll give you an example. I was recently doing a workshop with language instructors. One question that came up was, one instructor had a trans‑student in the classroom who was trying to figure out, how am I going to do pronouns in this language? How do I identify myself as non‑binary, for example, or what are the neutral...? Can we get a middle ground here?

[21:05] The teacher was stuck. Like, "I don't know. This language that I'm teaching you requires that you either say he or she for everything. Every single possible noun has to have a he or she. How do we work through this?"

[21:25] I said, "If you don't know, look. Maybe not in the traditional places that we look. Not the Royal Academy, for example. They tend to be three decades behind everything..."

[21:39] [laughter]

**Dr. Anya**:  [21:43] Find out, what are people calling themselves online? How are trans‑folks languaging their pronouns when they're referring to themselves, or their friends, or movements, etc.? This might entail you having to follow somebody that you ordinarily wouldn't. This entails some discovery."

[22:05] She was convinced that, no this doesn't exist and nobody ‑‑ I believe that the language is Arabic ‑‑ and nobody talks like this. Like, "Hmm, nobody you know."

**Dorie**:  [22:16] Yeah, nobody you know.

[22:18] [laughter]

**Dr. Anya**:  [22:19] You cannot tell me that in the whole human experience of those who speak Arabic, nobody has grappled with a non‑binary or trans‑question. That is absolutely not true.

[22:33] She felt that this whole weight of responsibility of being the one that was the only connection to the Arabic that the students had and she has to provide this information, and she didn't personally have it, the information was somehow inexistent.

[22:46] I tried to encourage her to, number one, liberate herself from that kind of responsibility, and number two, collaborate with the students a little bit in trying to make these discoveries.

**Dorie**:  [23:02] That's really freeing. [laughs] It really is. Just knowing that we don't have to have the answers and going out and saying, "Who are the people in the communities the languages that I'm teaching, there are the community of speakers, and how are they grappling with these issues?"

[23:16] Because to a certain extent there are a lot of people within those communities who are also having these conversations. Like you said, you might not personally know who these people are, but it doesn't mean they're not out there. Diversifying your own circle and your own connections, that's really important.

[23:35] I'll shout out another thing that you wrote. I tweeted out recently that I think it should be required reading, for all language teachers, the article that you wrote with LJ Randolph for the language educator. Anyone who's listening to this podcast, if you're looking for some more suggestions, and we'll put it up on the website, I think that's a really great article.

[23:54] I think you and LJ put some really good, concrete steps together for teachers to just try out, make some depth and to hold themselves accountable.

**Dr. Anya**:  [24:04] Sure. I appreciate the shout out. We work really hard in making the suggestions and the strategies. We tried to make it as practical as possible.

[24:16] Anyone related to this work that we do in the world language education should look at that article. I also make recommendations on behalf of black students who are struggling in world language classes, very, very clearly. The little research that's out there, specifically on black students in world language study, consistently report struggling.

[24:42] Struggling in the sense that, not that they're incapable or somehow unable to cut it in these classes, but they are not in any way...most of are not even interested, remotely, in doing more than just the required bit. Because it is very clear to them that these classes are not interested in them.

[25:05] On behalf of the students who are eager to learn new languages and do things in language study and perhaps major in world languages at the college level, or minor in it, or find ways in which multilingualism can contribute to their preparation for the job market.

[25:23] All kinds of opportunities in language learning that African Americans could be taking advantage of where they're not so excluded and marginalized from the field, especially immersion, dual language etc.

[25:37] You'll have schools where 40 percent or the majority of the school population will be African American, but then in the immersion track, which tends to be the smaller groups or the groups that have the best teachers, and basically the prestige class track of the school, you'll have 5 percent African American.

[25:58] A lot of it has to do with the gatekeeping of teachers and counselors who have really done black kids wrong. I am asking, and I write about this ‑‑ I'm about to publish a literature review in the "Annual Review of Applied Linguistics" ‑‑ on the history, the more than 100‑year history, of African Americans in world language study in the United States.

[26:25] A big recommendation is to include in these language classes, explicit coveraging of Afro‑descendant population in the materials and also acknowledge the learners themselves and depictions of, who are the students, etc., in the language.

[26:45] I make this recommendation all the time, "Put more black people and black things in your classes." I routinely get accused of belittling black students or something, or offending them.

[26:58] Saying, "Why do black students have to see their face in everything, even in a foreign language or culture that has nothing even to do with them, and then we must put their face? It's as if you're saying that they need to see their face in everything in order for them to learn. That's offensive."

[27:20] I'm like, "I thank you for your concern on behalf of black students. Maybe you would do better giving some of that concern to the generations of white students. You've put their face in everything as if they're not capable of learning without their face being in everything."

[27:42] Once again, it's a lack of recognition that messages have already been put out there. That there is no neutral position. There has been an active exclusion. Whether intentional or not, that is not even my business.

[28:01] What I look at are the results and the results have meant that there has been a woeful underrepresentation of black students in our classes. Especially at the upper levels because they're very well represented in the introductory and minimum requirement levels and they walk off.

[28:25] Please, let's do a lot more in keeping them in and engaged, and the students themselves and those who have bothered to research them have reported that one way to do that, one very successful way ‑‑ and my book showed it ‑‑ is to make a significant consideration in the material.

[28:45] Be the identities and affinities that African Americans have with Afro‑descendants in the target language speaking population.

**Dorie**:  [28:57] It's so important. I think one of the things you just said that really stuck out is when you said that the world language classrooms haven't been interested in these students. I think it's important for us to recognize that that's on us. There's a lot we've been doing, like you said, to systematically exclude these students and marginalize them further from the curriculum.

[29:15] Then we wonder, why aren't they doing so? [laughs] We throw our hands up in the air and we say, "That must be on them." I think having that critical self‑reflection and saying, "What are we doing as a profession to include these students and to give them the pathways to success that we know they are capable of achieving?"

[29:36] I want to be respectful of your time, but I also want to give you an opportunity to, if there's anything else that you want to share with any of the listeners or anything that you think is important before we say goodbye here.

**Dr. Anya**:  [29:47] Of course. A big thing that I want to share is this notion of motivation. We use that word, motivation, a lot. Sometimes, teachers who don't want to take responsibility or some share of the responsibility for what's happening in the classroom and what's not working in the classroom will say that the students aren't driven or not motivated in the classroom.

[30:14] Bonny Norton contributed an absolute treasure to our concept of how language learners work through experiences and interactions in our classrooms and also outside. In addition to this concept of motivation, which is psycholinguistic, motivation has to do with an individual, whether they are either driven or not driven to do whatever.

[30:42] Bonny Norton asks us to think about investment, in addition to motivation, because motivation just treats a language learner as if they're ahistorical ‑‑ doesn't really consider that much their background or the forces around them.

[30:57] Bonnie asks us to think about investment, because somebody can be motivated, highly motivated, to want to learn a language and to do well in that language, but then at the same time not invested in the practices of the language learning environment, which can be racist or elitist or homophobic or sexist, or...

[31:21] They're not engaged somehow in what's going on, or they may not have a voice or be regarded as significant or meaningful contributors to the environment, or things that might be happening in their identities, in their backgrounds. There are just so many other things that could work out in this language learning enterprise.

[31:44] We tend to just place it squarely on the language learner to say, "Are you motivated or not?" Somebody can really, really want to learn a language and desperately need to learn that language, but then not connecting with what's going on in your classroom. It's not that they're not motivated. They're not invested.

[32:07] Somebody who is showing signs that they're not invested would eventually get positioned as the bad learner. [laughs] Which absolves us of the responsibility of having to figure out where we went wrong, where our role is. My parting words would be, read more Bonnie Norton... [laughs]

**Dorie**:  [32:34] For sure.

**Dr. Anya**:  [32:35] and learn about this concept of investment to help us understand more about the identities and backgrounds ‑‑ the issues of power, issues that have to do with the experiences of those in our classroom. Use that more as the frame with which we try to understand these experiences, as opposed to just leaving it to this idea of "Are they motivated or not?"

**Dorie**:  [33:06] I will second your recommendation to read more Bonnie Norton. I know when I was first reading it and saying, "Oh," seeing that difference between motivation and investment, and really, I think like you said before too, how a lot of times when we put it on motivation, it's just, "Oh, well, that's not on me. That's on the learner."

[33:24] Saying investment ‑‑ "What am I doing to help my students really become invested in this?" It helped me see things in a different way too.

[33:32] We can definitely put some recommended reading from Bonnie Norton in the show notes to guide people on where they can start with her work too.

**Dr. Anya**:  [33:39] Awesome.

**Dorie**:  [33:40] That's great recommendation. Thank you so, so much for taking the time out of your schedule to talk with everybody about your work. I really thank you for everything that you've written. I know it helps me personally as a teacher, and I think that your work is really important.

**Dr. Anya**:  [33:59] Thank you so much, and I appreciate this invitation to have this conversation. I hope to continue engaging with you and those in your network moving forward.

[34:09] [background music]

**Stacey**:  [34:09] If you have questions or comments related to today's episode, we would love to hear from you. You can reach out to us multiple ways. All of them are available at our website, weteachlang.com/contact. You can also find us on Facebook and Twitter at @weteachlang.

[34:32] We would like to say a very special thank you to the Pearll Foreign Language Resource Center for partnering with us to provide transcripts and other professional development resources related to the episodes. You can learn more about Pearll by going to pearll.nflc.umd.edu.

[34:52] Thanks so much for listening. Bub‑bye.

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