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Negotiating sociolinguistic justice: turning spaces of inequality into spaces of conscientization

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Abstract: This introduction to the special issue *Negotiating Sociolinguistic Justice: Turning Spaces of Inequality into Spaces of Conscientization* focuses on how sociolinguistic research can be reimagined as a tool for activism and social intervention. The authors advocate for research that not only describes language-based inequalities but actively intervenes to address them by engaging communities in participatory processes. Inspired by Paulo Freire's concept of conscientization, this special issue explores ho w spaces can be created for researchers and participants to engage in critical reflection on linguistic injustices, investigate their socio-political roots, and mobilize for collective change. Grounded in the action-research project *EquiLing*, conducted across various sociolinguistic contexts in Spain – including Madrid, Galicia, Catalonia, and the Basque Country – this special issue examines the role of language in the (re) production of social inequalities, manifesting differently across regions. These inequalities include the exclusion of immigrant languages, non-standardized language varieties, and minoritized languages such as Basque, Galician, and Catalan, as well as the misrecognition of their speakers, resulting in their limited participation in social institutions. In four articles, the authors illustrate how conscientization spaces integrate participants' voice and agency – from university students to youth in sports clubs – to critically reflect on the roots of language-based inequality and mobilize toward counteraction. Each article explores a different stage of the conscientization process, from raising awareness of inequalities to exploring structural causes to mobilizing for action. The issue also examines how research committed to sociopolitical transformation extends beyond academic boundaries, requiring partnerships with social collectives and activists at all stages of the research. This involvement poses significant challenges to epistemological, methodological and policy frameworks,

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which in turn raise ethical concerns. Addressing these challenges requires rethinking who has the right to produce knowledge and developing approaches that foster collaborative engagement with co-participants and stakeholders. This approach adds a political dimension to research, which in turn poses new challenges, particularly with regard to the impact of transformative action, and requires critical reflection on the social responsibilities of researchers and the power dynamics inherent in research practices. Ultimately, it requires navigating ethical complexities related to participants' agency and authorship. This special issue highlights the potential of participatory action research to promote sociolinguistic justice and aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on how to effectively address these challenges. Together, these contributions provide a roadmap for future research that seeks not only to understand linguistic inequalities but also to transform them through collective action.

Keywords: sociolinguistic justice; conscientization; language activism; critical sociolinguistics; participatory action research; epistemic communities

Resumen: Esta introducción al número especial *Negociando la justicia sociolingüística: Transformando espacios de desigualdad en espacios de concientización* plantea cómo la investigación sociolingüística puede ser rediseñada o reinventada como una herramienta de activismo e intervención social. Las autoras promueven una investigación que, además de describir las desigualdades lingüísticas, intervenga activamente en revertirlas, implicando a las comunidades en procesos participativos. Inspirado en el concepto de concientización de Paulo Freire, este número especial explora cómo en la investigación se pueden crear espacios donde las participantes reflexionen críticamente sobre las injusticias lingüísticas, examinen sus raíces sociopolíticas y se movilicen para lograr un cambio colectivo. A partir del proyecto de investigación-acción *EquiLing*, desarrollado en diversos contextos sociolingüísticos de España – incluyendo Madrid, Galicia, Cataluña y el País Vasco – el número examina el papel del lenguaje en la (re)producción de desigualdades sociales, que se manifiestan de formas diversas en estas regiones. Entre estos factores se encuentran la exclusión de las lenguas de inmigrantes, las variedades lingüísticas no estandarizadas y las lenguas minorizadas, como el euskera, el gallego y el catalán, así como la falta de reconocimiento hacia sus hablantes, lo cual restringe su participación en las instituciones sociales. A lo largo de los cuatro artículos, las autoras ilustran cómo los espacios de concientización integran la voz y la agencia de las participantes – desde estudiantes universitarias hasta jóvenes en clubes deportivos – para reflexionar críticamente sobre las raíces de las desigualdades lingüísticas y movilizar su capacidad de acción para enfrentarlas. Cada artículo explora una etapa distinta del proceso de concientización, desde la sensibilización frente a las desigualdades, pasando por la exploración de sus causas estructurales, hasta la movilización para la acción. El número también

analiza cómo la investigación orientada a la transformación sociopolítica trasciende los límites académicos, exigiendo la implicación de colectivos sociales y activistas en todas las fases de la investigación. Esta implicación presenta importantes desafíos para los marcos epistemológicos, metodológicos y políticos, que a su vez plantean desafíos éticos. Afrontar estos retos requiere repensar quién tiene el derecho a producir conocimiento, desarrollar enfoques que promuevan el compromiso colaborativo con las co-participantes y las partes interesadas. Este enfoque otorga a la investigación una dimensión política que plantea a su vez nuevos desafíos, particularmente en cuanto a los efectos de la acción transformadora, y requiere una reflexión crítica sobre las responsabilidades sociales de las investigadoras y las dinámicas de poder inherentes a las prácticas de investigación. Todo ello, obliga, finalmente, a navegar por las complejidades éticas relacionadas con la agencia y la autoría de las participantes. De este modo, este número especial destaca el potencial de la investigación-acción participativa para promover la justicia sociolingüística y contribuye al debate sobre cómo enfrentar estos desafíos de manera efectiva. En conjunto, estas contribuciones ofrecen una hoja de ruta para futuras investigaciones que buscan no solo comprender las desigualdades lingüísticas, sino también transformarlas mediante la acción colectiva.

1 Activism or citizen sociolinguistics? How research can address sociolinguistic injustices

In the spirit of liberation work, we want to create *spaces of conscientization*

(*Freire,* 1970)

In recent years, the field of sociolinguistics has increasingly emphasized the need for researchers to move beyond merely describing or critiquing the sociolinguistic status quo. Scholars are now urged to actively work toward achieving sociolinguistic justice, a concept developed by Bucholtz et al. (2014) and expanded by Zavala (2019) within education and beyond. This concept calls on sociolinguists to engage in linguistic education that empowers individuals and subordinated groups in sociopolitical struggles surrounding language (see also Bucholtz, 2016; Cameron et al. ,1992; Piller, 2016; Rampton et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2022).

To understand the evolution that has led sociolinguistics to this focus on activism and justice, we can first consider that sociolinguistics, from its early works, such as those by Labov and Bernstein, has always aimed at making a meaningful impact on the societies and communities it studied. However, the degree of involvement and the forms of intervention in different contexts have evolved significantly since those

early days, with critical and decolonial sociolinguistics playing particularly important roles in this transformation.

Thus, critical sociolinguistics, heavily influenced by the approach of John Gumperz and his collaborators (in Twitchin et al., 1979), made an important step forward by focusing on the interrelationship between linguistic processes, such as the commodification of languages, and socioeconomic processes, such as the expansion of the global service economy (Duchêne and Heller 2012). This line of research has highlighted how linguistic phenomena, including language standardization and language hierarchies, are intricately linked to social conflicts and processes of inequality, as demonstrated in the work of scholars such as Heller, Duchêne, Roberts, Rampton, and Martin-Jones (see, among others, Duchêne, 2011; Duchêne et al., 2013; Heller and Martin-Jones, 2001; Rampton, 2015; Roberts et al., 2014).

Decolonial sociolinguistics further advanced the field by calling for epistemic justice and alternative knowledge frameworks that move beyond Western-dominant models or colonial hierarchies (Deumert and Makoni, 2023; Heller and McElhinny, 2017). This approach has strengthened the critical perspective by questioning how traditional linguistics, by treating languages as autonomous entities, has separated them from their speakers, social practices, and power dynamics (Makoni and Pennycook, 2007; Pennycook, 2023). Together, these fields have shifted the focus from languages themselves to speakers, underscoring how language policies affect power dynamics and reproduce social inequalities. Building on these critical and decolonial perspectives, other approaches within sociolinguistics have continued to increase social and political involvement by focusing on speaker agency and the transformative power of voices. Studies on new speakers (O'Rourke et al., 2015), raciolinguistics (Flores and Rosa, 2015), and linguistic citizenship emphasize the power of speakers' voices to transform linguistic and social orders (Stroud, 2018; Williams et al., 2022). These recent works already show a clear interaction and engagement between academia and activism. A further step in this trajectory is taken by Citizen Sociolinguistics, which argues that speakers understand the linguistic world around them often better than trained sociolinguists, and it actively involves them as researchers in the process, integrating the lived experiences of speakers to co-create linguistic knowledge (Rymes and Leone-Pizzighella, 2021).

This shift in sociolinguistics toward greater social engagement has also been reinforced by the transformation of the academy, among other sociocultural and economic processes. First, as Heller and McElhinny (2017) note, researchers from minority groups, who have traditionally been the subjects of sociolinguistic research, have become scholars themselves. This shift has created, as they put it, "a broader base for understanding how language plays a role in shaping social difference and inequality" (Heller and McElhinny, 2017: 219). These scholars have shown a greater willingness to engage in ongoing political-epistemic struggles, particularly in Latin

America, where such struggles have been led by organized indigenous women, community-appointed rural teachers, urban indigenous youth artists, community communicators, and indigenous university academics, along with activists, feminists, and militants from anti-patriarchal, anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist movements. Together, these actors are part of the "multifaceted resistance to the new Pan-American order" that has slowed down privatization processes since the 1990s through mass protests, the overthrow of presidents, and the dismantling of corrupt regimes (Leyva, 2015: 26). In terms of language, this resistance has underscored how the transformation of the sociolinguistic order – particularly the legitimization of indigenous languages – is essential to political and epistemic decolonization.

Following a trajectory similar to that of postcolonial anthropology, in which indigenous anthropologists have integrated alternative epistemologies into the academic arena –albeit still on unequal terms (Bertely, 2015; Ramos, 2017) – a non-extractive sociolinguistics has emerged in Latin America. Beyond the mere inclusion of alternative epistemologies, this shift has promoted active engagement in the sociopolitical projects of these communities (see, among others, Ballena et al., 2020; Bucholtz, 2018; Córdova-Hernández, 2024; Flores-Farfán, 2015; Severo and Makoni, 2021; Makoni et al., 2021; Unamuno et al., forthcoming).

The authors in this special issue share the belief that sociolinguistic research should not only analyze social injustices related to the management of languages in communities, but also actively address them by incorporating some form of activism. From our 'positionality' within the academy and from the Southern part of Europe (Deumert and Makoni, 2023), we are all striving to transform our practices: the way we teach, the way we integrate reflexivity and criticality into the different stages of research, and the way we consult or engage in linguistic conflicts. In this case, we have decided to go one step further. One way to do this is to integrate "action" into the design and development of a collaborative research project, *EquiLing* (www.equiling.eu/en).

In this context, the authors of this special issue sought to achieve their goals by drawing inspiration from the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Cammarota and Fine, 2018; Greenwood and Levin, 2007; Kesby, 2005; Lawson, 2015). And within this approach, we have initiated a dialogue that we will need to deepen with the decolonial perspective (Ayala et al., 2018; Bertely, 2015; Lenette, 2022; Leyva, 2015; Leyva et al., 2015; Rivera et al., 2018). At this point, it is worth recalling that much of the linguistic knowledge that explains the unequal distribution of resources, the lack of recognition of speakers, and the limitation of participation in our sociolinguistic context is rooted in the coloniality of knowledge, with the hierarchies it entails, and the construction of the "other" as subaltern. Thus, these works have served as our inspiration, particularly as many of them delve into the dilemmas inherent in these approaches, which we will address later. For instance, in P*rácticas otras*, Leyva et al. illustrate how concrete experiences – primarily in recent decades

(1980–2014) across Ecuador, Guatemala, Colombia, Mapuche territory, and Mexico – have compelled us to rethink and adapt our academic practices, contrasting them with Indigenous approaches to knowledge production. In this spirit, Rivera et al. (2018) describe PAR as "a philosophy of knowledge creation, a radical social movement, and a practice of collective questioning, seeing, doing, being, and knowing." Furthermore, *PAR EntreMundos* by Ayala et al. (2018) provides a transformative framework grounded in theoretical lineages, guiding principles, and narratives of collective social action within and beyond Latinx communities, positioning it as a practice of liberation and freedom (see Alonso and Le, 2020, for a comprehensive review of these works). Similarly, Lenette (2022), whose work has been key in shaping our approach, links PAR to a decolonial perspective, addressing the challenges of engaging participants, the various levels of participation, and the risk of superficial or symbolic engagement ("faux-PAR"), drawing on specific examples from Indigenous and Afro-descendant PAR research.

The key features we emphasize in our application of the PAR approach are as follows. First, in our case, this approach builds on the aforementioned critical tradition in sociolinguistics, and focuses on language issues. Second, because we share the transformative goals and participatory dimensions with the research committed to working alongside a community of participants, we seek to transform their sociolinguistic contexts in line with approaches such as those of Alonso and Le (2020); Bucholtz et al. (2016); Ballena and Unamuno (2017); Gandulfo and Unamuno (2020); Kerfoot and Bello-Nonjengele (2023), and Leyva and Speed (2015). In this sense, our work is closely related to collaborative research (*colabor*, in Spanish), as developed by Ballena and Unamuno (2017). In *colabor,* knowledge is constructed through collaborative deep reflection on the sociolinguistic situation and placed at the service of the community in a political-scientific project aimed at the struggle against inequalities. For example, teachers and researchers in a Wichí community in Argentine Chaco jointly constructed knowledge about the obstacles faced by the Wichí-Spanish bilingual program. On the basis of this knowledge, the researchers became involved in a political project of the community, in which bilingual education became a key part of a decolonization effort that now promotes the preservation of indigenous knowledge, values, and ways of life (Ballena and Unamuno, 2017). In this way, the bilingual project opposes (neo)colonial extractivist and capitalist socioeconomic models in the community's territory, such as deforestation and extensive monoculture agriculture and farming. Third, our approach is fundamentally inspired by critical pedagogy and, specifically, by the foundational work of Paulo Freire (1970, 1997), recognizing not only the role of education in social reproduction but also in the transformation of societies, groups and individuals. Finally, our approach strengthens its participatory dimension by engaging a diversity of participants in both formal and informal educational communities, amplifying their voices and agency. For example, as we will see, in some educational

contexts, this collaboration primarily involves teachers – as is often the case in PAR applications – such as in secondary schools in Galicia and a cultural association in Catalonia. In other contexts, such as the universities of Madrid and Bilbao, students themselves act as co-participants, involved at different stages of the research, including the process of negotiation of the transformative actions in their efforts to transform the educational community. This diversity in co-participants has had implications for the ethical dimension, which we will examine in this article.

What we want to emphasize in this special issue is that this shift toward transformative research is not merely a reformulation of research goals, but a profound reconceptualization of research in all its dimensions. As we will see in this article, this shift has raised important epistemological, methodological, ethical, and political questions that need to be critically addressed. Epistemologically, beyond the usual questions about the validity of evidence and arguments, this approach forces us to reconsider who has the right to produce knowledge, whose voices are heard, how we should communicate this research, and what purposes research ultimately serves. In doing so, it challenges the very nature of research – how it is socially and institutionally situated. Methodologically, it has meant adopting a logic of engagement and negotiation within the research process by involving co-participants (university students, secondary school teachers and students, volunteers) and stakeholders (cultural associations, student associations, university offices and administrators, government agencies) who did not always share the view that language plays an important role in reproducing social inequalities, exclusion or subalternity. Ethical concerns also become crucial when research explicitly integrates social action, as participants are meant to act as agents of change and may face the sociopolitical consequences of the project. Ensuring their agency and authorship throughout the research process, as discussed later, demands transforming and diversifying traditional academic formats for research dissemination and knowledge transfer. Finally, the commitment to sociopolitical transformation pushed us beyond the traditional boundaries of academia, requiring collaboration, as we have seen, with social collectives and activists, and prompting reflection on the social responsibilities of researchers and the power dynamics embedded in research practices. We believe that contributing to the debate about this epistemological, methodological, ethical and sociopolitical commitments of our field is not only necessary, but urgent. Critical and open engagement with these issues is essential for anyone involved in this work. Therefore, we invite our readers to share their thoughts, critiques, and suggestions, as we believe that collaboration and dialogue are essential to advancing this transformative project together.

The journey we have taken in developing this project has not been an easy one. In addition to addressing these fundamental challenges, we have had to explore new approaches, adopt innovative concepts, and, at times, break with conventions and

expectations about our role in research and scholarship. This has required a willingness to venture into uncharted territory. Because we had to do research differently, we also had to find new ways of communicating this research by highlighting the context in which it was produced and exploring alternative formats. This task was relatively straightforward when targeting stakeholders and less academic audiences, using formats such as documentaries, podcasts, educational guides, and organizing events (see the website for an overview of these outputs). However, this task of communicating the research proved more complex in the case of our intended academic audiences. The exercise of collaboratively reporting our experience and the lessons learned in the shape of conventional articles has been strenuous. The authors have struggled across many redraftings to address contradictions such as their double role as actors and analysts, as researchers and activists, or the need to develop an analysis that was relevant to different sites but also context-sensitive.

2 The production of inequality through language: the problem we wanted to confront

The *EquiLing* research project (2020), which gave rise to the articles in this special issue, emerged as a convergence point for researchers concerned with different aspects of sociolinguistic inequality who had previously worked in separate fields such as the revitalization of minoritized languages, critical discourse analysis, anthropology, and critical sociolinguistics. They had also been working in different regions of Spain, namely Madrid, Galicia, Catalonia and the Basque Country. The Madrid and Galician teams had focussed on issues of language and migration and had been attentive to how multilingual practices and ideologies in education informed the production of inequalities in terms of class and race (Martín Rojo, 2010). The Catalan and Basque teams were largely associated with the study of the subordination of the corresponding territorial languages, although they had addressed migration in some cases (Ortega et al., 2015; Puigdevall et al., 2021).

To understand the structure of the whole project, as well as the authorship framework of the articles in this special issue, it is important to appreciate that the motivations behind this convergence were partly derived from the very reasons that had led us to focus on political action in the first place. First, the members of *EquiLing* considered that good communication begins at home, i. e. within sociolinguistics. If different sections of our own field (i. e. focusing on minoritization and migration) were ignoring each other, it was doubtful that we could expect outsiders to be responsive to our work. This specific concern was informed by discussions that

had taken place within the COST network *New Speakers in a Multilingual Europe: Opportunities and Challenges* (2013–2017) (see Pujolar and O'Rourke, 2019).

So *EquiLing* was set up on the basis of an integrative strategy that encompassed the project's design, the data analysis, and a methodology inspired on Freire's "conscientization." With this basis, project participants took up the work of adapting the common framework and transformative agenda to their own different contexts. The conceptual design drew upon Fraser's general model to conceptualize social inequalities on the basis of three axes: distribution, recognition and participation (Fraser, 2000; Fraser and Honneth, 2003). This model was also useful in so far as it made it easy to incorporate an intersectional perspective where language in each context might present different entanglements with race, social class, ethnicity or gender. All the sociolinguistic inequalities addressed by the different teams were characterized by drawing on these concepts in different ways. These two axes of distribution and recognition, in turn, helped address how language shaped speakers' participation in particular social contexts and defined who had the right to speak, be heard, and exert influence. In some articles, the impact of linguistic inequality on individuals is explored in greater depth, requiring the incorporation of additional concepts and analytical tools. In particular, Michel Foucault's concept of power (Foucault, 1980; 1983) helps to examine how individuals are influenced by the linguistic norms and models they feel compelled to adopt. At the same time, Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and symbolic capital shed light on the challenges of challenging established linguistic hierarchies and the internalized norms and speaker models acquired through socialization (Bourdieu, 2000).

Thus, in the Madrid site the main concern was the imposition of standardized Spanish and the invisibilization of linguistic diversity, which limited the equitable access and participation of misrecognized speakers who deviated from dominant linguistic and cultural models by using different languages or varieties of Spanish in community life, thereby finding that their full citizenship was questioned. In Galicia, the focus was on the lack of recognition and spaces for the use of multilingual repertoires by immigrant-origin students in schools, and its consequences for their participation in class, ultimately affecting their access to educational capital. In the Basque Country, the continued hegemony of Spanish in various institutional and everyday spaces, along with the differing value placed on standardized and non-standardized varieties of Basque, also led to different levels of recognition for its speakers, which affected their social participation in public settings. In Catalonia, the focus was on distribution from the perspective of immigrants who had difficulties learning the local language in contexts characterized by racial difference and socioeconomic segregation. In all the cases, the concern was that issues of symbolic recognition and distribution affected the ability of speakers to fully participate in

specific settings and activities that were important to access economic and symbolic resources.

In order to develop a comprehensive and inclusive approach to understanding the role of language in the construction of inequality, we collectively decided that all the articles in this special issue should integrate research from different sites with different sociolinguistic contexts. Each article was written by a team of three authors from at least two sites, who collaborated to develop ways to conceptualize linguistic inequality and strategies of contestation that were relevant in their corresponding sites. In doing so, they were able to show whether the axes of inequality, such as the unequal distribution of linguistic resources, recognition, and participation, were similar in each context. In addition, the strategies used to implement the process of conscientization in each site were analyzed using Freire's pedagogical principles. By analyzing these different contexts simultaneously, the authors sought to identify both the commonalities and specificities of sociolinguistic dynamics, as well as the ways in which participatory action was used to facilitate social transformation.

3 Building 'conscientization spaces' across the *EquiLing* project

As already mentioned in the previous section, all the articles drew on Paulo Freire's educational philosophy, and adopted the concept of 'conscientization' (*conscientização* in Portuguese) (Freire, 1970, 1997; Watkins and Shulman, 2008). Conscientization refers to the dialectic relationship between reflection and action, enabling participants to move from naive or passive understandings of themselves, others, and the world – particularly, in our approach, regarding social inequalities related to language – to a will and desire to engage in transforming their reality. In all of the different sites, we created "conscientization spaces" to facilitate the conditions of participation, voice and agency for our co-participants.

Freire's proposal of critical education includes three aspects or phases: 1) reflection on the sociolinguistic order that underpins our society; this should lead participants to become aware of the unequal distribution of linguistic resources and of the ways in which their status as legitimate speakers is misrecognized, as well as to problematize existing norms, cultural and linguistic patterns which underpin social and linguistic inequality (Fraser, 2000; Fraser and Honneth, 2003; Foucault, 1983); 2) exploration of the socio-economic causes that explain these inequalities: forms of governance, political economy, social and ethnic stratification, as well as the identification of the power dynamics through which they are enforced; 3) mobilization of the determination to transform this situation of inequality and its causes.

Each article in this special issue primarily analyzes and discusses one of these phases of the conscientization process, although they also touch on the other aspects. These phases are further illustrated within the context of each site, as explained below.

The participatory nature of the *EquiLing* research project has mobilized over 24 researchers (at various stages of their academic careers), a large number of co-participants, and multiple allied stakeholders from 2020 to 2024. This work spans five distinct sites: two university sites in Madrid and Bilbao (Basque Country), sports clubs in the Basque Country, secondary education institutions in Galicia, and a cultural association in Catalonia. These sites represent different sociolinguistic contexts within the Spanish State. Madrid is the only site where there is only one official language recognized, while the other regions feature co-official minoritized languages alongside Spanish: Galician in Galicia, Catalan in Catalonia, and Basque in the Basque Country.

Despite efforts to promote diversity and decentralization since the dictatorship, a monolingual order still dominates both at the state level and within much of the population in Spain. Native-speaker ideologies and Spanish nationalism continue to influence institutional policies and community practices, marginalizing speakers of languages other than Spanish, those who speak non-standard varieties, and migrant communities. This dynamic creates exclusionary practices, even in regions where multilingualism is legally recognized.

Each of the five sites focuses on different dimensions of sociolinguistic inequalities: the marginalization of minoritized territorial languages is a common theme across all five sites, while misrecognition of immigrant languages is particularly significant in Madrid, Galicia, and Catalonia. Non-standard language varieties are also central in Madrid and Bilbao, although in quite different ways due to the contrasting status of the respective standards. As the articles in this special issue demonstrate, a combination of different forms of linguistic inequality is the norm in all sites. This convergence of diverse experiences has allowed us to develop a framework for studying linguistic inequality that could be applied to other sociolinguistic contexts.

Furthermore, the various sites work with different types of co-participants. In Madrid and Bilbao, conscientization spaces were created for university students to share and reflect on their experiences. The sports clubs in the Basque Country and the schools in Galicia engaged with teenagers, sports trainers, and secondary school teachers, respectively. In Catalonia, the focus was on adult immigrants and volunteers from a cultural association. Further details on each site are provided in the individual articles.

This combination of diverse contexts and participants has made it possible to create a more comprehensive understanding of how linguistic inequalities function and the strategies that can be used to challenge and transform them. At the same time, all the articles focus on how each process of conscientization was carried out within

the framework of participatory action research. Since each article concentrates on a specific phase of this process, together they provide a reconstruction of how these processes were implemented, the strategies employed, the results obtained, and, as we will explore in the next section, the challenges encountered.

In Article 2, *Talking about sociolinguistic injustice: Critical ethnographies towards speaker conscientization*, Prego-Vázquez, Molina, and Puigdevall explore the conditions necessary for the process of conscientization. They examine how researchers and participants in the Galicia and Madrid sites interactively negotiate and co-construct spaces to discuss forms of sociolinguistic injustice, stemming from the unequal valuation of linguistic repertoires. Focusing on the first phase of conscientization, raising awareness, the authors identify key "socio-discursive elements" that enable the expression of linguistic injustices, as well as "eureka moments," when participants come to understand the reasons behind past situations or realize that change may be possible. While acknowledging that the researchers' sociolinguistic expertise was useful in initiating this process, they emphasize that success depended on creating spaces for dialogue where participants' experiences were acknowledged and valued. The "epistemic conditions of possibility" were closely tied to the 'dialogic conditions of possibility,' which required emotional investment from all parties, open dialogue, sharing, reflection, and a suspension of judgment.

Articles 3 and 4 focus on the second phase of the conscientization process, exploring the causes of inequalities, although the other phases are also present. In Article 3, *Spaces of conscientization as a bridge between inequality and contestation*, Amorrortu, Otxotorena-Aranguren and Zas emphasize the pivotal role of space as both a tool for identifying inequalities and a platform for transforming these inequalities through the conscientization process. Researchers and co-participants (i. e. university students in Bilbao and Madrid) progressively shaped the conscientization space into a safer environment for reflection and action. By focusing on spaces of conscientization and aligning them with concepts like "safe spaces," the authors argue for a strong methodological and epistemological engagement with the notion of space. Drawing on Lefebvre's dimensions of space (1991) – "conceived space," "perceived space," and "lived space" – they demonstrate how these elements are dialectically interrelated and critically examined by both researchers and participants. Furthermore, they show how some participants actively create counter-spaces aimed at building a more just sociolinguistic order.

In article 4, *Voicing Experiences of language surveillance to challenge social inequality*, Martín Rojo, Moustaoui, and Ortega also focus on the second phase of the conscientization process: analyzing the causes of linguistic inequalities. They show how the voicing of participants' experiences in conscientization spaces reveals the mechanisms through which inequality is reproduced not only by institutions but also

by individuals in their everyday lives, with linguistic surveillance playing a central role in perpetuating these inequalities (for this concept, see also Martín Rojo and Márquez-Reiter, 2019). The authors emphasize the theoretical productivity of conscientization by identifying linguistic surveillance as a pervasive technique of power that is independently recognized by participants across sites. This form of surveillance is not only enforced by traditional disciplinary apparatuses, but also operates as a dispersed, persistent pressure to conform to dominant models of speakerhood that are deeply embedded in the social fabric. Participants' analyses show that these models, linked to criteria for linguistic citizenship, allow speakers who conform to native or standard models to perceive their social position as superior, while those who deviate face challenges to their community membership. Moreover, by positioning themselves not only as observers but as active critics and producers of their own realities, participants critically engage with the social structures that perpetuate these inequalities.

Finally, Article 5, *Agency as doing-together: Learning from fieldwork experiences* focuses on the third phase of the conscientization process: mobilization of the determination to transform the situation. Hernández, Pujolar and Fernández González argue that participatory research necessarily entails that researchers must partly relinquish their authoritative voice (and the academic perspectives they carry along) in the process of working out what forms of grassroots mobilization are relevant to participants. The literature on agency, resistance and similar notions found in the social scientific traditions cannot conceivably provide a ready-made template in which participants can fill in what they consider to be inequalities, which of them are unjust, how do they affect them, and what should be done about it. The existing literature on agency must be decentered from the discussion and treated as one more dialogical resource so that participants can locally and collectively "grow" their own sense of agency and jointly work out what strategies can be made to lead them towards new realities.

Table 1 is meant to provide a general visual overview of the worksites of the whole project and how this special issue is inserted into the whole picture:

In the conscientization spaces we have created, we have facilitated situations that amplify participants' voices and enable them to exercise their agency. To achieve this, we have developed what we call leveling dynamics to promote inclusion. These dynamics allow us to navigate different stages of conscientization while addressing the three axes of inequality in which we believe language plays a key role, thereby levelling existing hierarchies between researchers and participants.

First, there was a concerted effort in the respective research sites to create a dynamic in which participants' voices were at the center and the distribution of linguistic resources was reconfigured – for example, by changing the framework of

Table 1: Overview of EquiLing's research sites.

Sites	Participants and activity	Most relevant sociolinguistic aspects	Articles
1. Undergraduate linguistic courses in Madrid	Researchers change the content of the curricular modules to make it possible for young college students to discuss sociolinguistic inequalities in class and design and implement forms of intervention.	Only speakers of standard peninsular Spanish are treated as normal or "neutral." Speakers of other varieties get invisibilized, excluded, devalued or stigmatized.	2, 3, 4, 5
2. Undergraduate students in Bilbao, Basque Country	*Ad hoc* group of young college students discuss ordinary obstacles to speak Basque and develop challenges and strategies to overcome them.	Basque speakers often feel unwelcome in the public space and speakers of the standard variety do not feel recognized by speakers of local dialects.	3, 4
3. Sports clubs in the Basque Country	Basque youth created spaces for using Basque in sports clubs and activities, resisting the inclination to default to the more dominant Spanish language.	The majority of young Basque speakers are new speakers. Educational settings are their principal -if not the only- site in which they stay in contact with Basque. Young people tend to identify the Basque language with school tasks, lacking opportunities to link the language with youth culture's practices and resist the tendency to resort to the more dominant Spanish language.	5
4. Secondary school classrooms in Galicia	Researchers and teachers collaborate to change the educational curriculum, addressing sociolinguistic inequalities. Students actively participate in this process, engaging in exercises that highlight these inequalities and acting to oppose them.	Predominant speakers of Spanish marginalize divergent language practices by immigrants and speakers of Galician.	2
5. *Acquaint* campaign in Catalonia	A cultural association designs a campaign of language tuition as part of a strategy to address different forms of subordination of migrants and Catalan speakers.	Speakers of Spanish and Catalan enforce the use of Spanish as a lingua franca in a way that reinforces segregation between local and immigrant communities.	5

participation, as explored by Prego-Vázquez, Molina and Puigdevall. In these spaces, participants had the agency to analyze and share instances of social inequality in which language is central. These spaces were designed as safe environments that mirrored those that were not and offered participants a space to critically reflect on how to transform them, as demonstrated by Amorrortu, Otxotorena-Aranguren and Zas. As Martín Rojo, Moustaoui and Ortega show, participants also identified the social pressures to conform to specific models of speakers and explored how these models could be reshaped to promote a form of linguistic citizenship, thereby opening up new avenues for meaningful participation. This is how the process of conscientization culminates and the desire of participants to transform the social and sociolinguistic context becomes evident, as Hernández, Pujolar and Fernández González explore.

In order to strengthen voice and agency in each site, research activities were designed, such as linguistic biographies and other techniques for sharing linguistic experiences, challenges to perform changes in participants' language practices, and project-based learning, which enabled participants to engage voluntarily in ways that embodied their desire for transformation.

As we outline in the final section, all of these aspects have raised epistemological, methodological, ethical, and political challenges that we examine and discuss in this special issue.

4 Challenges of the transformative shift

As we have already mentioned, participatory action research aims to go beyond a traditional scientific approach that merely describes and analyzes the research context and the processes observed within it. However, applying this approach from a sociolinguistic perspective immediately proved to be complex. While other fields, such as psychology or education, have a long tradition of social intervention, in the case of sociolinguistics – our field of work – it was necessary to break new ground at every stage of the research process. This includes the design, the development of research, as well as the communication and dissemination of results. The development of this special issue has been shaped by these difficulties. The academic community, the journal audience, is likely to share this transformative commitment to research that seeks to improve lives and promote a more open and democratic science. However, there may also be some uncertainty about how to proceed in this context. We have had to overcome the inertia of reproducing traditional ways of doing and presenting research, exploring previously unknown paths, sharing our doubts, and searching for solutions. We believe it is important to

share these doubts and solutions and, above all, to face some of the challenges that we present below.

4.1 Epistemological challenges

The transformative nature of our research required us to redefine what constitutes valid knowledge and the objects of inquiry. Key questions we faced included: What kinds of knowledge are valid for understanding the sociolinguistic situation; How can we incorporate these diverse forms of knowledge; How can we ensure that this is done without imposing predetermined views of sociolinguistic inequality; How can we maintain group cohesion and foster consensus without tearing apart different perspectives; To what extent do participants need to perceive the situation as unjust for there to be a genuine desire for change?

A critical part of this process was the need to legitimize divergent understandings of the problem. While traditional scientific approaches often seek an authorized version of the problem, our transformative approach requires openness to multiple perspectives, since a participatory and transformative approach requires listening to these forms of knowledge and attitudes, problematizing them, but never imposing alternative views.

In this way, *epistemic communities* (Estalella and Criado, 2018) were formed by re-examining and incorporating the knowledge and understanding of participants. Examples of this can be found in all the articles in this special issue. While the tasks are varied, they are perhaps most evident in articles by Amorrortu, Otxotorena-Aranguren, and Zas, and Martín Rojo, Moustaoui, and Ortega, where collaborative analyses in the spaces created by the participants reveal language-mediated inequality. In the specific case of the article by Amorrortu, Otxotorena-Aranguren, and Zas co-participants co-constructed knowledge by bringing their own experiences of other lived spaces into the conscientization space. This way space was collaboratively brought to be the object of critical reflection and the epistemic community not only created a safe space to allow this reflection but also theorized together on the conditions necessary to make the space of conscientization safer. A similar dynamic can be observed in the article by Martín Rojo, Moustaoui, and Ortega. It becomes clear that the sociolinguistic knowledge introduced throughout the conscientization process was intertwined with the participants' analyses of their own experiences. Co-participants co-constructed concepts such as "linguistic variety" or "privilege", which are part of the sociolinguistic discourse, and were combined with terms more commonly used in folk linguistics, such as accent or "neutral Spanish". The result is that in these analyses, participants pointed to key issues such as the embodiment of language, the pervasive nature of linguistic surveillance, "bordering," and the question of citizenship (for a more detailed analysis, see Martín Rojo, 2022).

4.2 Methodological challenges

The Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach raised key methodological challenges about how to design and develop participatory and transformative research, build strategic alliances, and ensure participants' commitment to the collaborative development of research. In contrast to traditional ethnography, where researchers adapt to participants' conditions for field access but often retain decision-making power over research questions, participatory action research (PAR) requires joint negotiation of decisions. In PAR, even the analytical perspective – traditionally under the control of the researcher – is shared with participants. The main challenges were therefore to involve participants in all stages of the research and to manage the often conflicting demands of the research sites – mainly educational institutions such as secondary schools, universities and volunteer programmes within cultural associations – while still meeting the requirements of action research.

This involvement needed to be voluntary, which, in educational contexts where power asymmetries are present, posed distinct challenges. The first challenge was addressed through a longitudinal approach, as linguistic inequality is not commonly a focal point in public debates about social inequality. Participants required time to analyze experiences of inequality and take a position on them. Furthermore, as Gandulfo and Unamuno (2020) point out, time is also needed to build trust among all research participants and to negotiate the objectives, procedures, and scope. Thus, the articles in this special issue illustrate different stages of this longitudinal process, showing how participant involvement evolved over time. In the initial stages, as presented by Prego-Vázquez, Molina, and Puigdevall, participants did not yet identify or problematize linguistic inequalities. However, in articles by Amorrortu, Otxotorena-Aranguren, and Zas, as well as by Martín Rojo, Moustaoui, and Ortega, participants are shown after gradually engaging more deeply, contributing substantively to the analysis. The highest level of involvement is demonstrated in the article by Hernández, Pujolar, and Fernández González, where participants actively consider how and where to implement transformative actions. This longitudinal dimension closely aligns with Freire's stages of *conscientization*, moving from identifying inequalities to engaging in critical reflection and ultimately exercising agency, as illustrated by the four articles in this issue.

Another methodological challenge noted in these articles is the evolving role of researchers. Initially, researchers took a proactive role in designing activities to foster critical reflection and motivate change. As the process advanced, however, they adopted a less interventionist and more supportive role, empowering participants' agency by shifting to an accompanying stance – providing support for small expenses or facilitating institutional contacts. This transition is documented in the

first three articles, while the final article showcases researchers as facilitators, helping participants design their own initiatives. Examples from the three sites in the article by Hernández, Pujolar, and Fernández González illustrate how researchers gradually reduced their active involvement. A notable instance is presented in the Basque Country, where participants were given full autonomy to decide on actions and strategies, with researchers choosing an "active absence" from key moments, only returning later to discuss the outcomes and gather feedback.

4.3 Political challenges

Regarding the extent to which this approach, and our project in particular, succeeds in transforming society, we are fully aware of its limitations. In order to have an impact, it was necessary to create a shift in public opinion regarding the role of the linguistic dimension in the construction of inequality and to mobilize a significant number of participants committed to these changes. As noted in the literature on activism, for this mobilization to occur, individuals must perceive the situation as both undesirable and inherently unjust, and therefore develop a genuine desire for change. This involves interpreting circumstances through the lens of injustice and recognizing the need for change. Only when people perceive the situation as unjust and develop a desire for change can they engage in meaningful action to achieve sociolinguistic transformation, which is inherently social and political in nature (Gamson, 1992; Freire, 1997). One significant aspect of this was that the problematization of the sociolinguistic situation by participants presented sensitive differences between sites. In Madrid and Galicia, a significant number of participants were encountering the language questions for the first time after having naturalized existing linguistic hierarchies. In the Basque Country and Catalonia, many participants were already connected with the traditions of struggles for territorial language rights; but not necessarily sensitive to the racial and class inflections of language. This is what made it possible in Catalonia for the collaboration to be a clear partnership with an institutional organization who was already mobilized and where the key discussion affected what was taken in or out of the conversation. Somewhat simplistically explained, a key internal debate was whether the campaign analyzed had to focus on language first or on helping people in need (see Hernández, Pujolar and Fernández for details). This contention was not just a localized issue; but was connected in ambivalent ways with the conventional contentions of the political arena involving parties, institutions and civil society.

In Gramscian terms, class consciousness involves an awareness among marginalized groups of the social and political structures that sustain their oppression. The articles in this special issue highlight how language management plays a pivotal role in the reproduction of inequality. Through the process of conscientization, participants

gradually came to understand how linguistic hierarchies reinforce social exclusion, particularly for non-native speakers and users of minoritized or non-standard languages. This realization marked a turning point as participants began to see how their everyday linguistic practices were tied to broader structures of inequality. As their class consciousness evolved, participants started to challenge the legitimacy of these linguistic hierarchies, recognizing language management as a central instrument in the perpetuation of inequality. In Gramsci's view, this shift weakens consent to the dominant order, leading to changes in participants' perceptions and actions. No longer accepting their subaltern status or internalizing the dominant ideologies, they began to question and challenge the social structures that marginalized them.

What the articles show us is that once this connection is made, both researchers and participants can direct their activism toward creating a more inclusive form of linguistic citizenship, which can result in socially transformative outcomes. Ultimately, all of the papers emphasize the importance of amplifying voice and agency by focusing on participation within institutions and communities. These actions can, and often do, provoke discomfort and resistance. In educational settings, for example, conservative responses to some of the proposed changes, as described in the third and final articles, were observed in the initial stages among university officials, when students at a university in Madrid changed the language of signage or suggested new ways to welcome international and bilingual students from other Spanish communities, challenging existing practices and the sociolinguistic order. By the end of the project, however, the university funded some of these initiatives to ensure their sustainability over time and began exploring the development of linguistic policies, although nothing concrete has been implemented yet. In Catalonia, the *Acquaint* campaign of language classes given by volunteers shows how a conventional nationalist agenda of language promotion can be hybridized with that of social movements that struggle against class and racial segregation. While it is not possible at present to evaluate the overall impact of the campaign, in the current climate of rising anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe, this does not appear anecdotal.

4.4 Ethical challenges

When research explicitly involves social action, ethical considerations become paramount, linking to the epistemic, methodological, and political challenges examined earlier. As we discussed in the epistemic challenges, knowledge must be constructed collaboratively, with participants' perspectives playing a crucial role. This poses an ethical challenge: the contributions of participants must be publicly recognised. Given that these participants are often not academics but activists, associations or young people in training, this recognition requires, as discussed in this section, the

transformation and diversification of traditional academic formats for research dissemination and knowledge transfer, channeled through negotiation in the design and development of research (Deumert and Makoni, 2023; Gandulfo and Unamuno, 2020). Other ethical challenges arise from methodological issues. If, as we have seen, participants' voice and agency are to be valued at every stage of research, this raises the ethical dilemma of avoiding a faux pas by ensuring that participation remains free and horizontal. Actions should never be imposed, but rather co-designed or at least co-developed with participants (co-participants); and researchers must ensure that research initiatives remain aligned with the values of genuine partnership and mutual benefit. Finally, it is the responsibility of researchers to assess the socio-political consequences of the project, both for the participants and for the wider communities involved. This requires a commitment to ongoing reflexivity and responsiveness to consider carefully how the outcomes and processes of the project might impact on both the participants and the wider communities involved.

This space for choice and freedom is more difficult to ensure in hierarchical contexts such as education. In some cases, such as the universities in Madrid or the secondary schools in Galicia, the researchers were also teachers or lecturers, which meant that both critical reflection and participation in transformative proposals could be perceived and/or experienced as involuntary. In contrast, the dynamic was more balanced in the universities of Bilbao, where activities were organized outside the classroom, and in the sports clubs, where young athletes were encouraged to take up challenges to change their linguistic practices, but could leave the field if they wished. As we have already noted, in these settings the researchers did not attend the training sessions to observe youngsters' interactions, thus ensuring that the participants had more freedom to engage or disengage.

With regard to the first challenge – recognising participants' contributions – this can sometimes conflict with the principle of confidentiality that researchers must uphold, as transformative projects often involve the sharing of personal experiences. This places increased ethical responsibilities on researchers to, on one hand, ensure the confidentiality of participants' experiences of linguistic inequality when they deem it necessary, and on the other, recognise their epistemological contributions (for a detailed analysis of these responsibilities and vulnerabilities in participatory action research, see Ayala, 2009). Thus, in order to protect the confidentiality and autonomy of participants, it is crucial to allow them to withdraw from the project at any time, and to ensure that they always retain full autonomy to do so. While public recognition of participants' contributions can only be achieved through co-authorship. In this vein, co-authorship has been achieved in the case of the Galicia team (see, for example, Prego-Vázquez et al. 2025; Pereiro et al., 2017), which works with teachers, as is common in research in *colabor* (Gandulfo and Unamuno, 2020). For other teams, however, this remains an outstanding goal, especially in cases where, unlike typical PAR

projects, the teams work with adolescents or university students. As Gandulfo and Unamuno (2020) point out, diversifying research participants also necessitates diversifying publication formats. New formats explored by the team include project outputs such as didactic guides, student projects, and podcasts produced collaboratively by researchers and participants or by participants themselves. All of these resources, which recognize participants' authorship and document transformative actions and replicable tools for other contexts, are not addressed in these articles but are a cornerstone of the work being done (available at https://www.equiling.eu/en/blog/resources/). However, the collaborative production of knowledge should also be reflected in the scholarly output. As part of this scholarly recognition and its impact on the academic careers of the participants, this research has led to several undergraduate and master's theses written by university students, and is further highlighted in other dissemination efforts, such as the project website and related outputs. However, what we consider most important in terms of recognizing the voice and agency of participants is the transformation and validation of their roles, as evidenced by the impact of research participation on their academic careers. This is especially true for undergraduate students who began as participants and later contributed as graduate students or research assistants. One example is the article *Spaces of conscientization as a bridge between inequality and contestation*, co-authored with Miren Otxotorena-Aranguren, who first joined the project as a participant in 2019 and became a researcher in 2021. In any case, it is true that this response to the challenge of recognising epistemic contributions is not fully achieved in this monograph, partly because of the difficulty of representing multiple sites in each article, and partly because this aspect requires further development on our part.

Methodological issues also pose ethical challenges. As participants need to be involved in all phases of research – setting objectives, designing methodology, conducting analysis and disseminating results – it is essential that this involvement is full and genuine. To achieve this, it is necessary to create spaces for negotiation that allow for the reformulation of these research phases (Gandulfo and Unamuno, 2020). Although this challenge is not explicitly reflected in the articles included in this special issue, as we have chosen to focus on the process of conscientization in its different stages and in different sociolinguistic contexts, it has been a subject of reflection within the research project. In terms of negotiating the aims and objectives of the research, the decisions of the co-participants played a central role. Indeed, the importance of space as an element where the role of language in the construction of inequality is activated has been incorporated into the research and transformative actions, based on the critical reflections of the participants (see Amorrortu, Otxotorena-Aranguren, and Zas, this issue). Similarly, the importance of non-standardised varieties has been recognised, particularly in the case of universities in Madrid and the Basque Country (see Martín Rojo, Moustaoui, and Ortega, this

issue). In both cases, these contexts are asymmetrical. Similarly, in the case of transformative actions, both in sports clubs and in the university, the proposals freely chosen by the participants were supported, even though they were aware of the research and its objectives.

Finally, the political dimension also raises ethical challenges. In all the cases examined, it is the responsibility of researchers to ensure that the discomfort entailed by political strife does not negatively affect the participants, especially the younger or less established researchers involved in the project. This challenge underscores the political dimensions of our work, where pushing for change can lead to friction with entrenched systems and practices. Overcoming this challenge is difficult, as once participants continue with their lives, some of them have transitioned into activism, embarking on their own paths in advocating for social causes.

5 A final glimpse into the complexity of the problem

The path we have taken in developing this project has not been an easy one, and we hope that our experience will be useful to others who are embarking on a similar journey. As the articles in this special issue show, throughout the *EquiLing* project we encountered numerous challenges that required us to rethink our approach to sociolinguistic research and its broader implications. Epistemologically, the articles demonstrate how the creation of 'epistemic communities', where knowledge is co-constructed, provides the means through which the lived experiences and perspectives of participants can be potentially legitimized and integrated into a deeper understanding of sociolinguistic inequalities. Methodologically, the longitudinal approach allowed all those involved to negotiate a balance between researcher-driven goals and participant autonomy, with researchers gradually reducing their intervention and encouraging participants to take ownership of the transformative process. This strengthened their agency and their role in promoting meaningful change. Ethically, the articles highlighted the sensitivity required when sharing experiences of inequality, especially in hierarchical settings such as education, and emphasized the importance of protecting participants' privacy, confidentiality, and autonomy. Politically, we learned that real change goes beyond analysis – it requires direct collaboration with those affected by inequality. While the proposed changes may not have completely transformed the social order, they have shifted participants' perceptions of their own agency and challenged dominant discourses. These changes may eventually enable the creation of new hegemonies in which the role of language in social injustice is recognized. We also acknowledged the discomfort and

resistance that activism can provoke, and the critical responsibility that researchers have to support and protect participants through this type of projects. Ultimately, these reflections underscore that sociolinguistic justice is not merely an academic pursuit, but a social collaborative one.

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