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Sonic Surveillance in the School: Visual Representations of Language Policing

Wendy Wong

Freelance Artist, UK
hello@wendywong.co.uk

Ian Cushing

Manchester Metropolitan University, UK
i.cushing@mmu.ac.uk

Introduction

In this article, we theorise and discuss artwork produced by the British artist Wendy Wong that emerged from a research project led by Ian Cushing on language, race and surveillance in schools. Wendy's images were designed in response to a series of workshops that Ian held with racially marginalised children in which they discussed their lived experiences of institutional language-based discrimination and various forms of language policing. The images capture what we conceptualise as *sonic surveillance*, representing a structure in which certain ways of using language are heard as deviant, non-normative, and illegitimate. The images were later displayed in schools around the UK and used in teaching sessions designed to bring critical attention to the intersections of language, race, class, and surveillance in schools and broader society.

Sonic Surveillance

For decades, educational linguists around the world have shown how racialised children from working-class backgrounds face hostile acts of language policing in schools. These acts and structures of language policing frame the language practices of marginalised speakers as deficient and thus in need of correction and remediation if they are to achieve success in school (Rosa and Flores 2017). Language policing is never just about language but is intricately connected to intersectional structures of racial and class prejudice that are normalised in society and anchored to European colonial logics. In schools especially, language policing must be seen as part of a broader policy architecture rooted in the routine surveillance and disciplining of young people and teachers. Recent scholarship highlights how such practices are part of a broader process of criminalisation and stigmatisation that racialised communities face (e.g., Cabral 2023; Cushing 2022; Cushing and Snell 2023).

Surveillance is a normalised part of life in contemporary schools (Monahan and Torres 2010; Taylor 2013), particularly for those that are negatively racialised (Browne 2015; Rudolph 2023). From the moment children and teachers enter the school gates, their movement, voices, and bodies are subjected to tight forms of control, discipline, monitoring, policing, and assessing. This includes Ofsted inspections, metal detectors, teaching observations, book scrutiny, data collection, uniform and hair checks, CCTV, and transparent glass classroom walls and offices (Page 2017). Despite surveillance being a ubiquitous part of schooling, there exists very little work that has explored how spoken language, and sound more broadly, fits into this structure (see Gallagher 2010 for an exception). Speech represents one of the most audible modalities to be policed in schools, conceptualised here as *sonic surveillance*—where either entire languages or varieties of

languages are monitored. These systems of surveillance are designed and maintained by what Rosa and Flores (2017) refer to as the "white listening subject," referring not simply to individuals but to a racialised mode of perception that materialises in systems, structures, and assessments that rely on colonial, anti-Black, and white supremacist logics.

Lived Experiences of Sonic Surveillance

Very little scholarship has centred the voices of those who are subjected to sonic surveillance in schools. In a UK Literacy Association funded study (see Cushing and Carter 2022), we worked closely with a group of racialised bilingual children in an English secondary school to interrogate their experiences of sonic surveillance. We found that sonic surveillance is normalised and ubiquitous, that children had come to internalise the raciolinguistic ideology that their own ways of using language were deficient and inadequate, and that it was their own responsibility to modify their voice. For example, Hamza, a thirteen-year-old British student with Pakistani heritage talked repeatedly about how his accent was marked out as improper and needed self-modification. He told us that, "For me, sometimes I've been made to feel like my way of talking is not right, like it does not sound right, the way I speak English you know, like it's wrong" (Cushing and Carter 2022: 106)

Similarly, Sanjiv, an eleven-year-old student originally from Bangladesh, described how white teachers had banned the use of his home language in classrooms, saying that "there is only one way of talking allowed here, and if you don't talk like that, you'll be punished for it." Whilst these are of course disturbing examples of explicit and racist sonic surveillance, we want to be clear that this kind of language policing is a structural phenomenon that must be thought of as part of the ongoing logics of European colonialism that perceived deviations from "pure," standard English as illegitimate (Smith 2009). As per a raciolinguistic perspective, our project sought to divert critical attention away from the surveilled speaker and towards the systems of surveillance themselves, as was articulated so clearly by Ana, an eleven-year-old student originally from Romania:

> Who gets to say what type of English is broken? I mean we all have different ways of speaking; we all have different ways of saying what we want to say so who gets to decide, "Oh, that English is broken. This English is fine. This English is good." Who decides that? No-one. […] Honestly, I don't think anyone should decide which way you speak. No-one. Not even if it's someone high ranking. You decide how you speak, that's fine. (Cushing and Carter 2022: 106)

Representing Sonic Surveillance through Art

Rather than rely solely on traditional forms of academic knowledge production and outputs, our UK Literacy Association project named the UK-based illustrator Wendy Wong as a partner. We commissioned Wendy to produce a series of images that captured the lived experiences of sonic surveillance as described above. The artwork would then be used in schools to facilitate conversations with teachers about language, race, power, and surveillance. Wendy's style is characterised by bold lines and bright colours, interpreting complex themes in stylistically simplified ways. Her drawings are inspired by her own life experiences.

Many of the students we spoke to described how their language was made to feel "rubbish" and "not worth much" in school. These metaphors of waste and low-value were used by Wendy in some of her images. In Figure 1, Wendy depicts the hand of a white teacher placing unwanted language in the bin because it fails to meet the benchmarks set by the regimes of sonic surveillance that permeate the school.
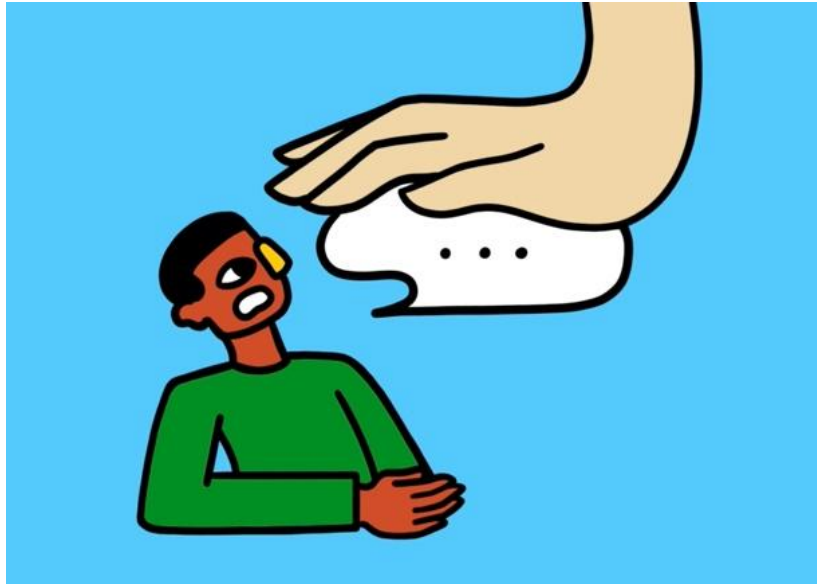
Figure 1: *Wendy Wong, Linguistic waste, 2021 (digital media)*

The same idea was captured in two further images (Figure 2 and 3), where a white hand is seen to burst and suppress the speech of a racialised student and punish them for producing their own language:


**Figure 2:** *Wendy Wong, Bursting unwanted speech, 2021 (digital media)*

Figure 3: *Wendy Wong, 'It kind of crushed me', 2021 (digital media)*

Figure 3 drew direct inspiration from a student, Ana, who talked about how her experiences of language policing had "kind of crushed me, it really crushed me because I never thought that a teacher would say that to me or would ever do that to a student" (Cushing and Carter 2022: 115).

From a raciolinguistic perspective, the most important actor in these images is not the contorted, grimacing faces of the suppressed speakers who have been placed under sonic surveillance, but the white hands (Rosa and Flores 2017). These hands should not simply be seen as individuals but as representative of an oppressive system that encodes the language produced by racialised speakers as deficient and illustrative of how powerful white listeners force racialised speakers to abandon their own, natural language practices. Figure 4 captures how racialised speakers might come to internalise this ideology, where they are positioned into acts of self-surveillance where they monitor and police their own language.
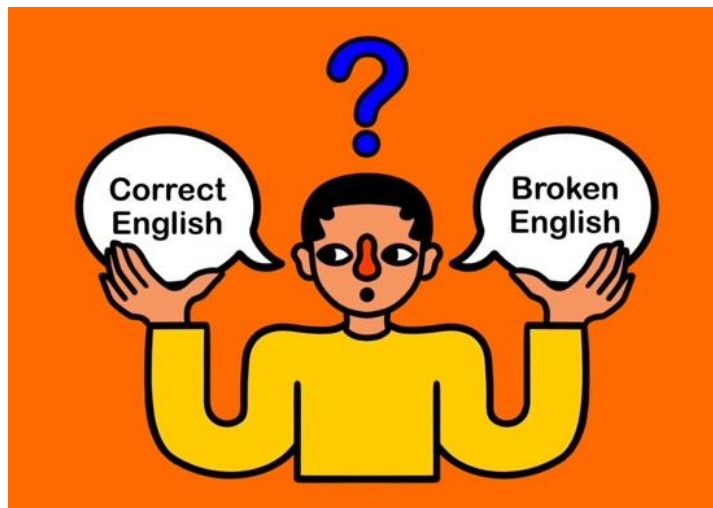
Figure 4: *Wendy Wong, Self surveillance and the 'correct/broken English' dichotomy, 2021 (digital media)*
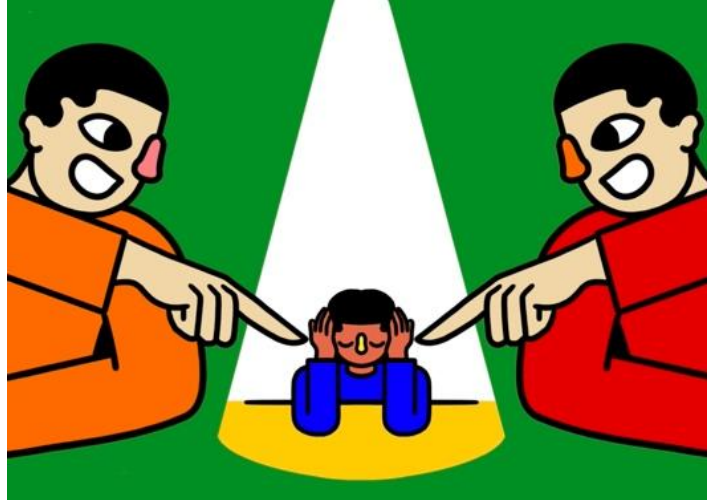
Figure 5: *Wendy Wong, Sonic surveillance and public shaming, 2021 (digital media)*

Finally, the last image we want to present is Figure 5, which we feel captures the aims of the project in its entirety. Here a racialised speaker is placed under a spotlight that is crafted and maintained by the surveillant practices of the white listening subject. The mocking and laughing expressions on the faces of the white teachers are representative of the ways in which young people in the project talked about being made to feel embarrassed, ashamed, and publicly humiliated due to their ways of using language being ridiculed by teachers and the broader systems of racial injustice in schools. As one student, Hamza, put it: "you're just made to feel stupid, like you don't belong, like you're being laughed at, just because people think you can't talk properly."

Raciolinguistic Resistance

Wendy's powerful images are now being used in schools and teacher education programmes across the UK as starting points to facilitate critical conversations with teachers, managers, and students about the realities and complexities of language-based racism and sonic surveillance. However, whilst we encourage all teachers to reflect on their own internalised ideologies and attitudes about language, we want to stress that that the ultimate aim of our work is to locate discussions of sonic surveillance as part of broader, anti-racist efforts, and as part of a long-established narrative in surveillance studies that insists on the racialised nature of being surveilled.

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