

EDITORIAL

# Whose Power, Whose Language? Exploring Issues of Power and Language in Music Therapy

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This special issue explores the topic of power and language in music therapy in the various ways it manifests within and beyond music therapy. We, the guest editors, are a group of four people at different points of their academic career, some have English as their primary languages and others don't, we are neurodivergent and neurotypical, living in Norway, Japan, and the US. Our group consists of two music therapists, a musicologist, and an AAC (augmentative and alternative communication) researcher.



**Special Issue Editors.** From the left: Maren Metell, Hiroko Miyake, Andrew Dell'Antonio, and Alyssa Hillary Zisk.

We have different relationships with the themes of power and language:

**Maren:** I have a multilingual everyday life, talking German to my children, Brazilian Portuguese with my partner, Norwegian at work (and all three languages mixed up at home). I write mostly in English. I experience joy of having access to different ways of thinking through different languages, but also frustration when using second languages in professional contexts. Privileged being born and living in Western/Northern Europe identifying as a white, heterosexual, non-disabled, cisgender woman. I use drawings in my research to document and represent music therapy scenes.

**Hiroko:** I use Japanese exclusively in daily life and in daily music therapy sessions. I struggle with writing, presenting, and communicating in English in an international context. I am happy to exchange experiences and ideas with colleagues from different contexts, but have difficulty participating in discussions and expressing my thoughts. On the other hand, music therapy practice and research with people with limited language communication, including intellectually disabled people, make me aware of the privileged nature of my own language use.

**Andrew:** native speaker of Italian, learned French and English as a young child because of family travels, shifted mostly to English after emigrating to US at age 9, continued using Italian with family and for research. Have become more conscious of language privilege as parent and friend to Autistic folk, and in my university pedagogy access work; also increasingly interested in the ways communication always involves “translation” and the need for me to be humble in order to understand others.

**Alyssa:** English is my first language. I studied Mandarin Chinese with simplified characters in school and college. I can do daily life and academic things in Mandarin, but in my daily life I mostly use English. I can usually communicate effectively with speech. But usually is not always – I sometimes need to write or in contexts where spoken language is expected (dominant?). I am working on writing or typing when it would work better for me, rather than waiting until speaking just doesn’t work. I am an autistic part-time AAC (augmentative and alternative communication) user. I am a neuroscientist whose research is usually about AAC, neurodiversity, or both. I think a lot about the words we use to talk about lived experiences, about my research areas, and especially the places where my lived experiences and research areas overlap. Who came up with the words? Who uses them now? Has their meaning changed? Do any of the words we have fit people living in edge cases? Do any of the words fit me?

## The Topic of Power and Language

There are different recurring themes linked to power and language in music therapy. These themes include the language that is used to describe people, persons and processes involved in music therapy; the hegemony of English; and the dominance of spoken language over other ways of communication. We have an article in this issue discussing nonspeaking people and the power of their “no”, but all the authors and editors in this special issue have at least some access to spoken language. We have discussed nonspeaking clients (or people who decided not to be clients), but where are the nonspeaking music therapists?

The language that is used to describe and represent people, music and processes in music therapy and the power related has been challenged from different perspectives. Examples are challenging the position of the “client” within resource-oriented music therapy (Rolvsjord, 2010), discussing identity-first vs. person-first language through the lens of disability studies (see the special issue edited by Hadley, 2014), using queer theory to challenge normative ways people are categorized (see the special issue edited by Bain & Gumble 2019), adopting a posthumanist perspective to question how goals and practices

are typically conceptualized (Shaw, 2022), and confronting the White gaze through Black aesthetics (Norris et al., 2020). Music therapy is constructed in and through language (Ansdell, 2003). For Norris (2020) music therapy exists on a continuum of harm and help. The language that music therapists use influences where we locate ourselves on this continuum and where we are located by others.

The links between language and power are complex as both are dynamic notions with different meanings for different people in different contexts. On the one hand, people can appropriate terms without understanding their meaning and/or changing their attitudes, contributing to further oppression. On the other hand, people might, for instance, have disability-affirmative attitudes, but not a corresponding epistemological framework and use terms based in an individual model of disability. Language constructs music therapy reality and merely changing terminology does not change power relations.

Discussions around terms are both local and international and differ depending on context. The cultural categories of music, health, and therapy mean different things to people in different contexts. Western contexts have been far more influential for developing music therapy as a discipline in the second half of the 20th century, being built on Western concepts of music, health, illness and therapy. The Western academic tradition in music therapy privileges those who either speak and write English as their first language or have access to learn English and to knowledge about Western academic traditions. Consequently, approaches to music therapy that build on other traditions and have not been translated into English, and published in the Western academic tradition, receive little attention. There is therefore a need for Western/Global North music therapists to question and challenge the power structures of eurocentrism and Western concepts.

When writing and talking about music therapy, music therapists often face what Ansdell (1999) has called the music therapist's dilemma when using words to represent complex musical processes. Music therapy research still predominantly consists of verbal or written accounts, which limit the ability to represent music therapy as complex embodied processes. Arts-based research, practices, and ways of communication can challenge power structures and help to expand how music therapy is represented. Challenging power structures is also about making publications accessible not only to other researchers, but to a wider public. Plain language and alternative means of communication can be tools to reduce power imbalances in accessibility.

The accessibility of music therapy as a practice depends on the acceptance of different forms of communication. There is a tendency to privilege spoken language above other ways of communication in society and non-speaking people do experience that they are presumed incompetent (Sequenza & Grace, 2015). Music therapists often meet non-speaking people and will claim that they have music as a way of communication, but how do music therapists value different forms of alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) in their practice? Do they use AAC to promote spoken language or do they treat it as a valid form of communication? Do they understand and act on the communication they claim their non-speaking clients are making? Or any other non-speech modes of communication?

All these different aspects point to the necessity of reflection about our own privilege and power and the need to consciously challenge the ways language is used to maintain oppressive power structures.

## **Power and Language in The Editorial Processes**

In this issue and this editorial, we have chosen to keep the linguistic tension that has manifested between various people (editors, authors, reviewers, readers...) who have the privilege of global-north Anglo-hegemonic linguistic fluency. We could have chosen to

erase this tension by having one of us editors who is (or appears to be) “natively” fluent in English revise the final draft of the English version of this editorial to ensure grammatical correctness and idiomatic appropriateness according to their standards. Instead, we decided to stay with the entirely appropriate academic English which we have collectively crafted, which we believe conveys meaning clearly and/but occasionally contains linguistic formulations that “native readers” — or perhaps better those with hegemonically Anglo-USian normate expectations — may consider “incorrect” or “non-idiomatic”. By having our thoughtful and competent voices remain unstandardized, we hope to add to our authors’ fruitful questioning of how power/privilege is embedded in idiomatic normate expectations.

We have in this special issue contributions from (in alphabetical order) England, Finland, Germany, Indonesia, Israel, Norway, Scotland, South Africa, and US. While we encouraged authors to write in their preferred language and to provide us with an automatic translation and wanted to publish multiple languages, there are only a few articles available in more than one language. There are quite a few native English speaking and writing authors, but also authors who are very used to writing in English. Allowing another option once does not change the structural reasons authors have grown accustomed to working in English.

The special issue itself therefore illustrates the dominance of English and Global North/Western World publications. The lack of more diversity points not only to our limited success in reaching music therapists in different countries, but also to the fact that people that have time to write an article need to be in the privileged positions, being able to spend time with unpaid work. The same structural issue applies to the search for reviewers. While looking for reviewers from different countries and different backgrounds, we experienced that we succeed to reach out to people that would be able to review outside academia, but not so much to get in contact with potential reviewers from the Global South.

The review process did also illustrate different topics of power and language. For one of the guest editors, reading English through a translation software, the process of communicating with editors, reviewers and authors with often quick deadlines was challenging. Some reviewers were concerned with authors’ language not being academic enough, or the authors being insufficiently familiar with published scholarship in music therapy. This is not surprising, given the self-definition of the academic review process as a guarantor of academic integrity — or from a different perspective, as a gatekeeping device to keep out perspectives or individuals perceived as academically unworthy. Especially in situations in which the author combined non-standard-academic language with challenges to disciplinary assumptions, we editors had to walk a fine line between acknowledging the reality that this is a disciplinary journal likely to be read primarily by those who identify as music therapists and honoring the voices and perspectives of authors who don’t share that identity.

We also found ourselves as editors unsure how to react to the use of terminology by people with lived experience and how to sensitively use the power that comes with the responsibility of creating a special issue. We realized that we initially didn’t use two reviewers for all research articles (as common in *Voices*), but in a few cases for other types of contributions as we wanted different perspectives. The hierarchy of research articles and essays, perspectives on practice and other formats also reflects a power dimension. Who decides on the format and its value? In the call for papers, we invited submissions using various forms of communication, including poems, drawings, photos, videos, and written academic accounts. We did however mostly receive conventional looking written accounts which might point to the established structure of music therapy publications and the experienced need to adhere to traditional scholarship.

How knowledge is communicated also links to the question of to whom knowledge is

communicated, and of who gets to have the knowledge they communicate recognized as knowledge. By encouraging authors to create easy-read/plain language summaries we hope to contribute to making the content of this special issue accessible to a wider audience.

### **Introducing the Contributions**

This special issue consists of fifteen contributions. Roia Rafieyan explores the power of nonspeaking autistic adults saying “no” to music therapy. Stella Hadjineophytou explores how the language around disability affects perception and power through literature and their work with Kirsty. Tamar Hadar reflects based on their work with one family on lingual plurality in a multicultural context in music therapy. Efrat Roginsky shares the perspective of being a Hebrew speaking music therapist, challenging the idea that there can be a universal language. Kezia Putri questions the dominance of English in Indonesian music therapy education. Steph Ban shares their experience with occupational therapy with musical elements, contrasting music as therapy with music as an access tool. Tony Gee’s contribution consists of two parts. The first part is a conversation with their co-author Mike about submitting an abstract to the special issue, while the second part shares the communication about the contribution between authors, reviewer, and guest editors. Heather Strohschein, Mags Smith, and Linda Yates video document a conversation on language and jargon. Nsamu Moonga explores the emotional labour of translating. Gisle Fuhr and Karette Stensæth reflect on the notion of therapy in the context of child welfare. Russ Palmer and Stina Ojala describe practice with deafblind music therapy participants. Jo Parsons reflects on aspects of power and language in music therapy practice within a mainstream school context. Julia Fent shares an analysis of German music therapy textbooks, focusing on discrimination. Vern Miller reviews Ted Ficken’s book on hate music. Nicki Power, Catherine Carr, Emma Millard, and the artists and activists at The Lawnmowers Independent Theatre Company share their participatory research on jargon, power and labels.

Together these contributions highlight the various ways in which power and language manifest in practice, theory, and research processes. They point to the need of being continuously reflexive about language choices, to listen and to learn from those with lived experience, to question the dominance of the English language in education, research and practice and to develop terminology together with music therapy participants.

### **Towards Diversifying Power and Languages**

We want to thank all authors for their commitment to engage with the topic of this special issue in their various ways. We also want to thank all reviewers, copy-editors and the whole Voices team for all their support for us partly very inexperienced editors and facilitating both the inclusion of easy-read summaries and the publication of articles in multiple languages.

Diversifying power and languages involves recognizing how much music therapy is constructed in and through Western academic traditions, the burden English language puts on non-English speaking music therapists, the consequences and possibilities language choices mean for the field and to question the power structures within music therapy knowledge production.

We hope that this special issue contributes to discussions about language and power that attend to the continuous need for reflection, listening, learning and action.

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