



Challenges and Theoretical and Methodological Proposals for a Sociolinguistics Committed to Social Justice

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Example 1: From Experience to Action (Mike, 2nd year)

A racialized student who had suffered racist jokes based on raciolinguistic ideologies in a U.S. school—and similar experiences as an exchange student in Spain—shared his experiences in class : **"I felt inherently ugly, with no possibility of changing it.**

- I felt I had no self-worth

- **I experienced a deep sense of loneliness and sadness"**

 **In the fourth year**, he led a workshop on conflict prevention and resolution strategies for future teachers as part of a project-based learning process within the same class.

Workshop Goals and Rationale (Mike, 4th year)

“We aim to raise teachers’ awareness of their responsibility to actively address racial discrimination and to foster safe, inclusive classroom environments.

Teachers must understand their role as mediators and take preventive and responsive steps when conflicts arise.

To achieve this, we offered a hands-on workshop with **practical tools** for creating a just and equitable school climate.”

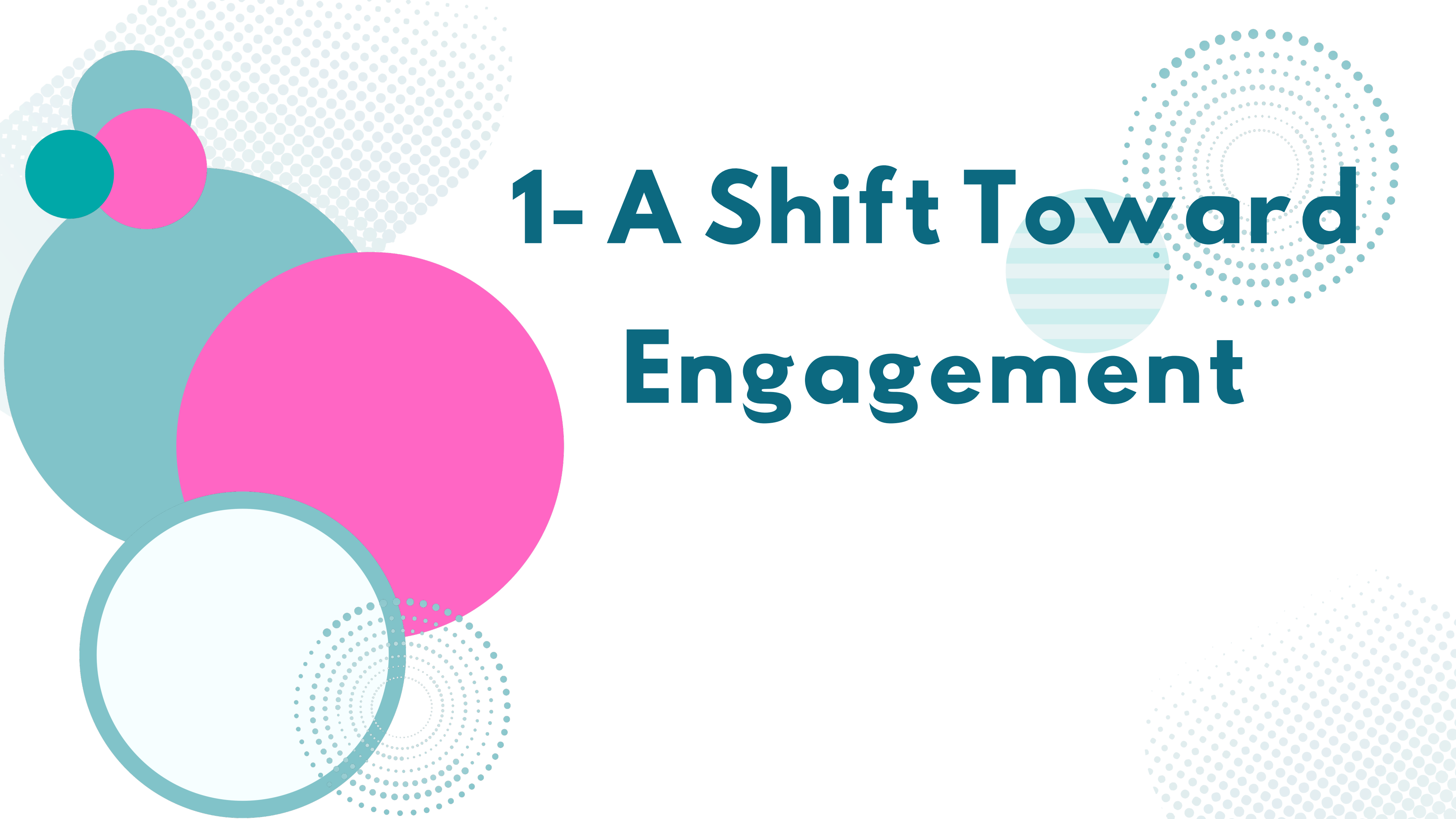
Introduction

From Experience to Conscientisation


This example reflects our five-year commitment to exploring the role of language in the production of social inequality, with students, analyzing it critically, and mobilizing their agency for change.

This participatory action research approach is part of a broader trend in sociolinguistics.

- 1- Steps in the sociolinguistic turn toward engagement
- 2- Aims in context
- 3- Ethical and epistemic challenges it brings.



1- A Shift Toward Engagement

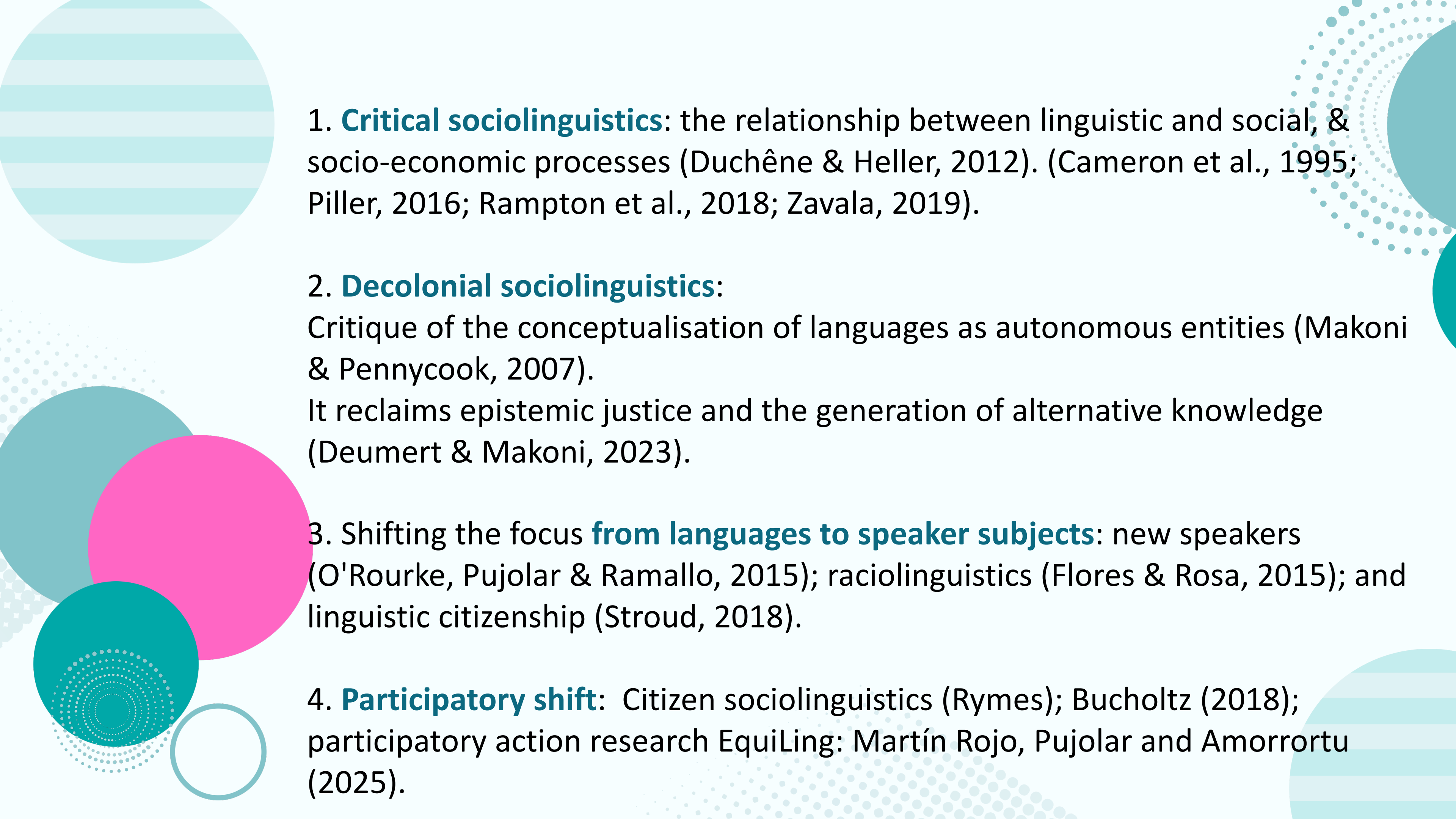


Sociolinguistics has progressively evolved from a descriptive approach to actively engaging with social injustice, in which language plays a role (Cameron et al., 1995; Martín Rojo, 2010; Piller, 2016; Rampton et al., 2018; Bucholtz, 2018; Zavala, 2019).

Early sociolinguists like Labov and Bernstein challenged deficit theories in education and society.

Later, **Gumperz** (Twitchin et al., 1979) highlighted how language mediates access and exclusion in institutions—linking language to power and gatekeeping.

From then until now, I highlight four moments in the development of this growing research interest in engaging with social issues.



1. **Critical sociolinguistics**: the relationship between linguistic and social, & socio-economic processes (Duchêne & Heller, 2012). (Cameron et al., 1995; Piller, 2016; Rampton et al., 2018; Zavala, 2019).

2. **Decolonial sociolinguistics**:

Critique of the conceptualisation of languages as autonomous entities (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007).

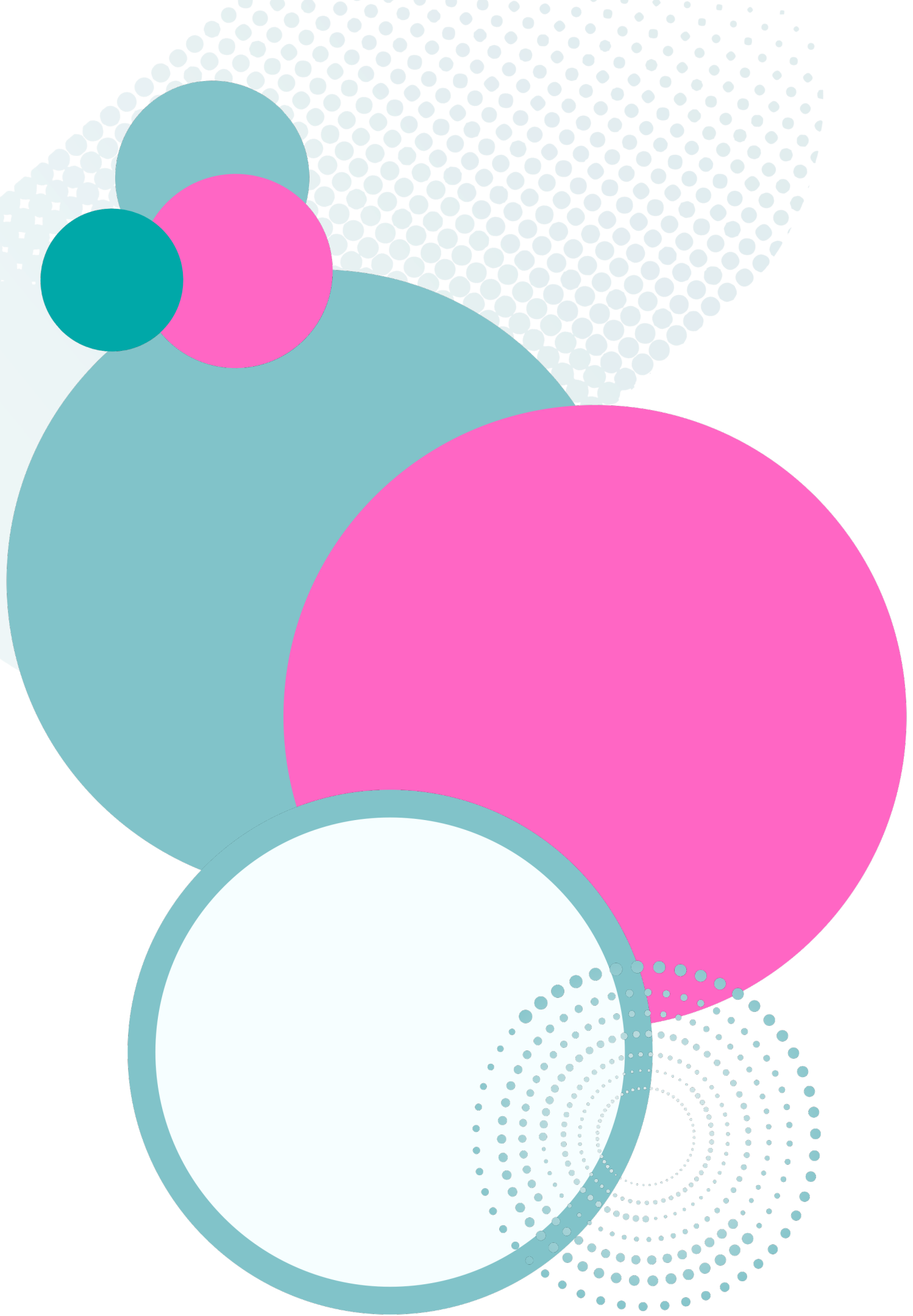
It reclaims epistemic justice and the generation of alternative knowledge (Deumert & Makoni, 2023).

3. Shifting the focus **from languages to speaker subjects**: new speakers (O'Rourke, Pujolar & Ramallo, 2015); raciolinguistics (Flores & Rosa, 2015); and linguistic citizenship (Stroud, 2018).

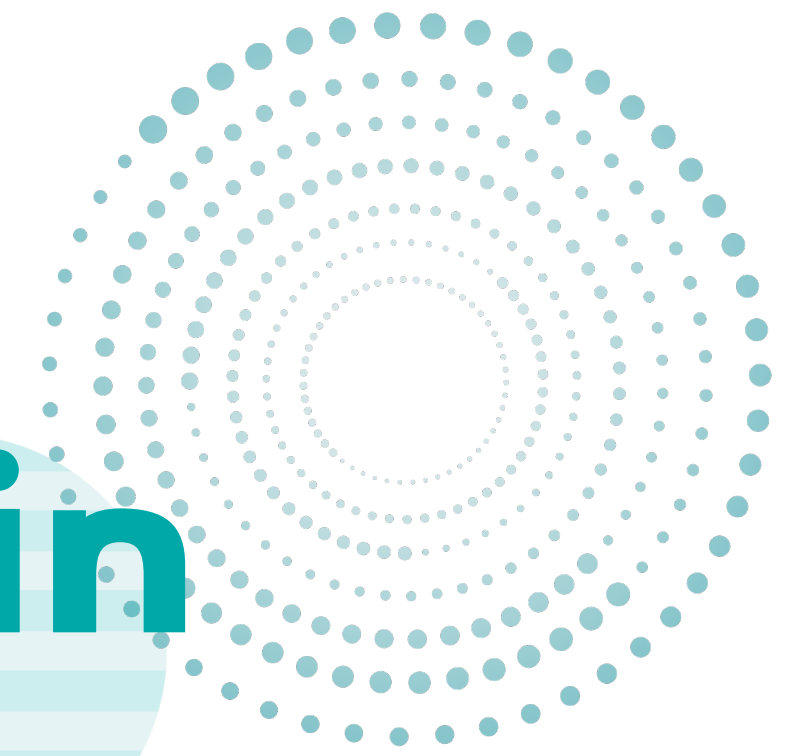
4. **Participatory shift**: Citizen sociolinguistics (Rymes); Bucholtz (2018); participatory action research EquiLing: Martín Rojo, Pujolar and Amorrortu (2025).

Other factors: Academia Transformed

- Minority scholars from the periphery are reshaping the field's questions and methods (Heller & McElhinny, 2017).
- **Example actors:** Latin American and South African scholars leading epistemic and political struggles.
- Linguistic struggles are framed as a pillar of decolonisation.
- Like indigenous anthropology, sociolinguistics moves toward **non-extractive, community-anchored** practices.
- **Active community engagement** is not optional—it's seen as central to knowledge production.



2-Aims in Context



EquiLing PAR approach

Main goal and key features:

- Problematising linguistic inequality, focusing on the role of language in creating, reproducing and reinforcing social inequality (rather than inequality among languages).

This includes:

- . constraints on access to education and politics;
 - . misrecognition as speakers and citizens;
 - . subalternization;
 - . unequal participation in society;
 - . and subjection
- Intervene in the sociolinguistic order in the education field, working with teachers, students and communities.
 - Political commitment to using education as a tool for social transformation.

Aims & Context

The educational context and subsequent challenges

Key educational factors impacting PAR:

- The asymmetrical professor–student relationship
- The meritocratic logic of the university
- The diversity of participants' social and ideological positions in relation to the sociolinguistic order
- Partial disconnect between students and researchers
- Students' expectations of education as a reproductive, non-transformative space (they assume they're expected not to dissent, but to reproduce content)



3-Challenges

Example 2: From Misrecognition to Linguistic Action

A Bolivian student shared with the class her personal story of linguistic misrecognition and identity loss. She later co-lead a workshop on language and accent diversity, aiming to raise awareness and promote inclusion.

Testimony: 2nd year

“Sixteen years ago, my parents decided to leave their country and come to Spain in search of a better future for my sister and me. They’ve kept their accent, and although they’ve incorporated some Spanish expressions, the way they speak still gives them away.

My sister and I, having arrived very young, speak Spanish like Spaniards. But I remember being in school and saying things like ‘chompa’ instead of ‘abrigo’, and not being understood. Being ‘the one who spoke differently’ made me erase every trace of my Bolivian accent to fit in. Today, I regret it. I now realise that my accent wasn’t something bad—it was something that made me unique. That realisation marked the beginning of my passion for language.”

Workshop Aim: 4th year

To foster recognition of linguistic diversity in school and encourage respect for all accents and varieties as valid forms of expression.

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Challenges

- Within the educational context, this shift is not just for show; it affects the epistemological, practical, and ethical principles of research.

Epistemic: Who analyzes these experiences, and how?

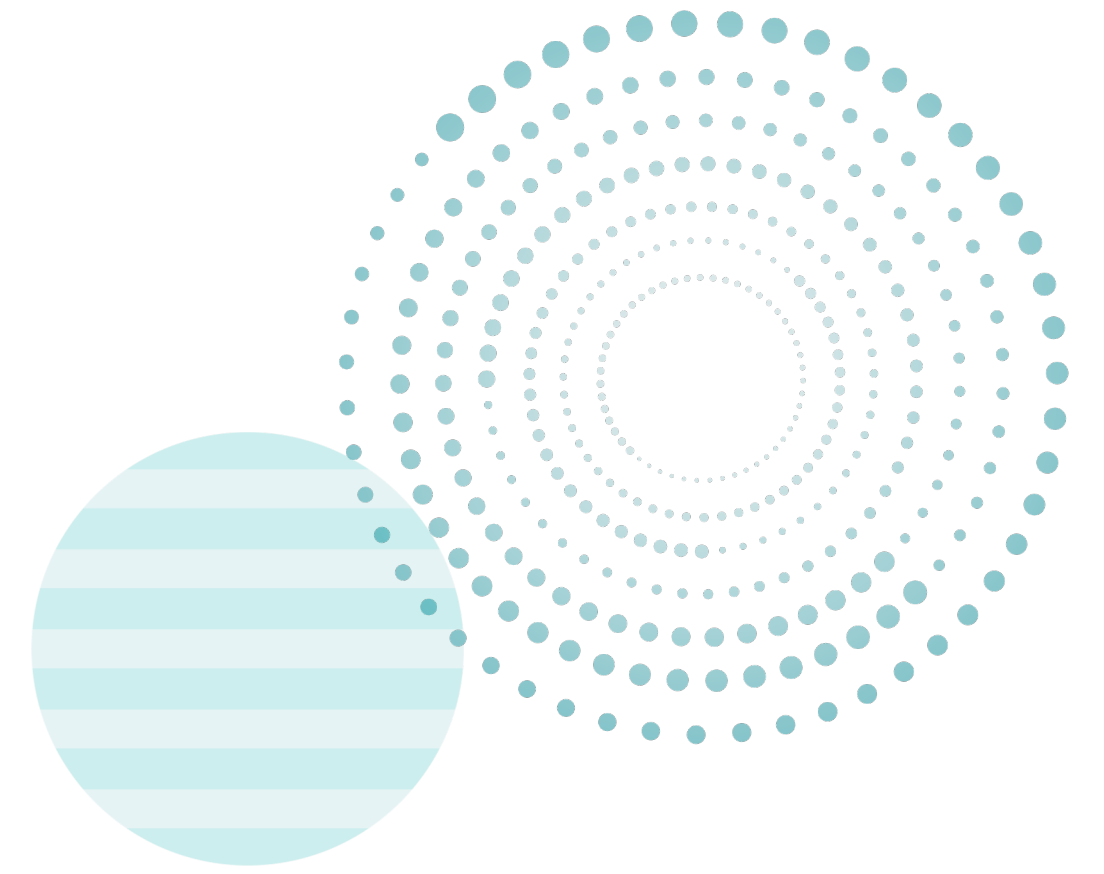
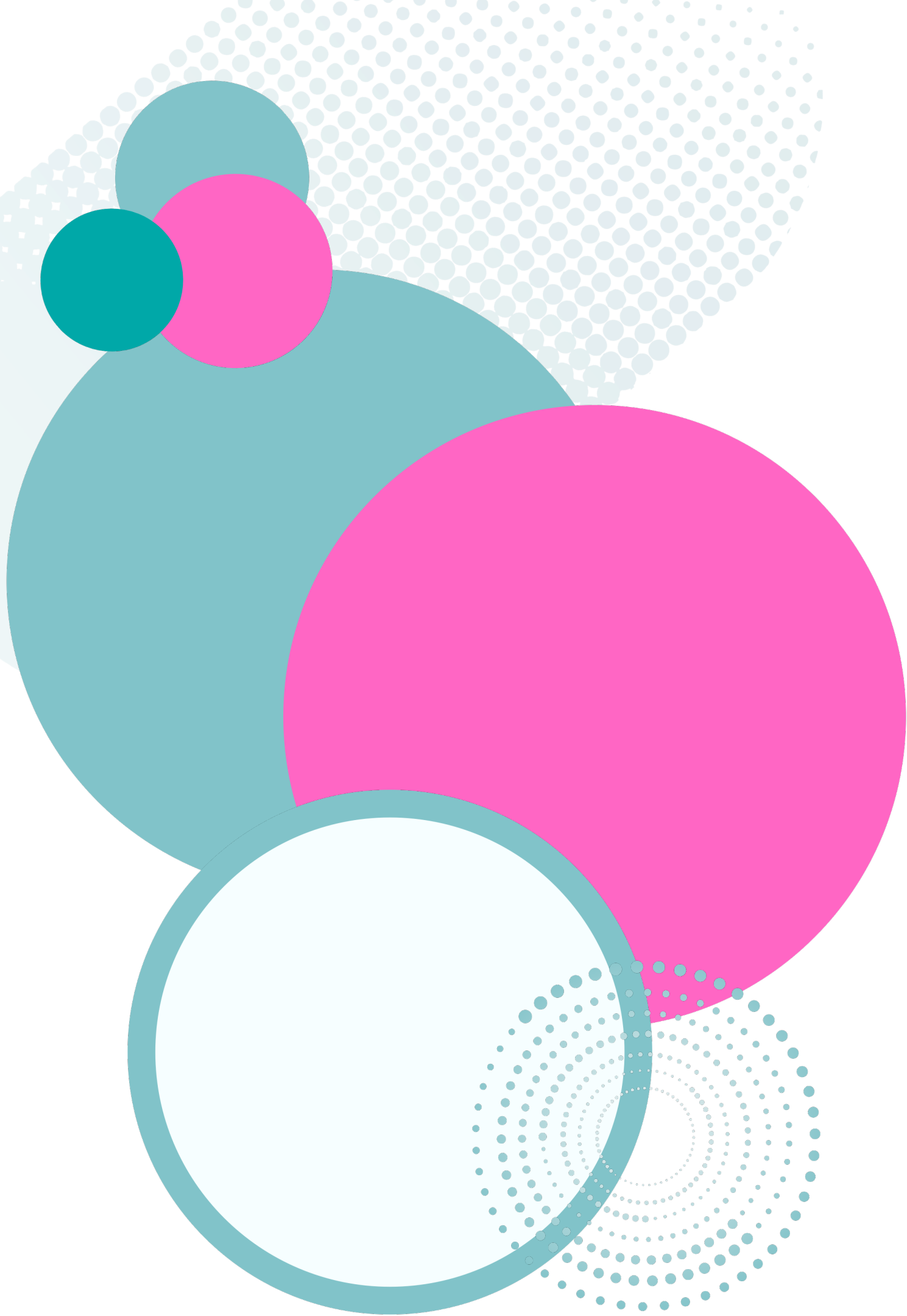
Co-constructing knowledge to critically analyze students' experiences through the formation of epistemic communities.

Methodological: How can we open spaces to voicing students and produce knowledge?

Researchers must design activities for conscientisation within the syllabus and open up spaces to share and analyze experiences of inequality. A longitudinal approach is necessary to identify, analyze, and mobilize agency.

Ethical: How can we encourage participation without making it feel compulsory? Navigating the 'voluntary' nature of student participation within structured academic settings.

Political: How can these actions transcend the boundaries of the classroom? Assessing the effectiveness of transformations and exploring how to elicit an institutional response.



3.1.Ethical challenges



Ethical Challenges

Ethical Challenges in Students' Participation in PAR

Participation:

Limited involvement in all project phases, including the design stage.

Educational asymmetry & meritocracy:

Structural hierarchies in classes and assessment practices.

Assessment & commitment:

Concerns regarding the depth of students' genuine engagement.

Agency limitations in educational practices:

Students often do not expect to mobilize agency in educational settings.

Recognition vs. anonymity:

Balancing identity protection with the acknowledgment of authorship.

Ethical Challenges

Ethical Challenges Through Students' Voices

- ◆ **Challenge: Expectation of education as reproductive, not transformative**

Second-Year Student:

"The course was designed around real-life examples of our society. It also encouraged group work on relevant and current topics, allowing us to expand our knowledge."

→ Reflects a shift from passive learning to active, socially grounded engagement.

- ◆ **Challenge: Hierarchy and meritocracy in university structures**

Fourth-Year Student:

"I believe this course should be mandatory in our degree and many others. It reminds us that before becoming professionals in any field, we must first be people. It reinforces empathy, cooperation, assertiveness, diversity, respect, and many other human values."

→ Suggests a rehumanization of academic spaces, countering meritocratic and hierarchical logic.

Ethical Challenges

Ethical Challenges Through Students' Voices

◆ Challenge: Limited agency and Hierarchy

Fourth-Year Student – Agency in Action:

"What I value most about this project is the experience of working in a group and the guidance we received from our professors, who always helped us bring out the best in this transformative action. Despite difficulties and setbacks, our teamwork paid off, and the workshop was a great success."

→ Demonstrates active agency, teamwork, and ownership of the learning process—responding directly to the challenge of students' low expectations for agency.

Ethical Challenges

How we respond to ethical challenges:

- **Key strategies implemented:**

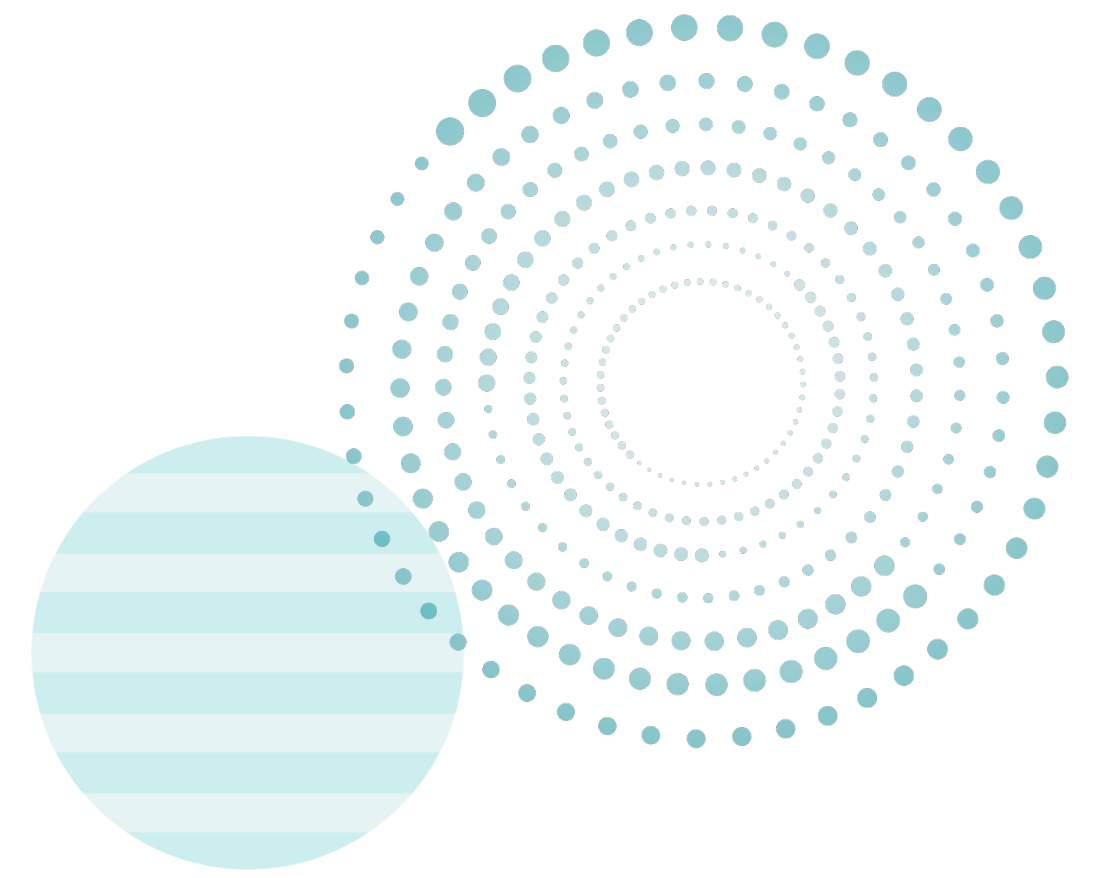
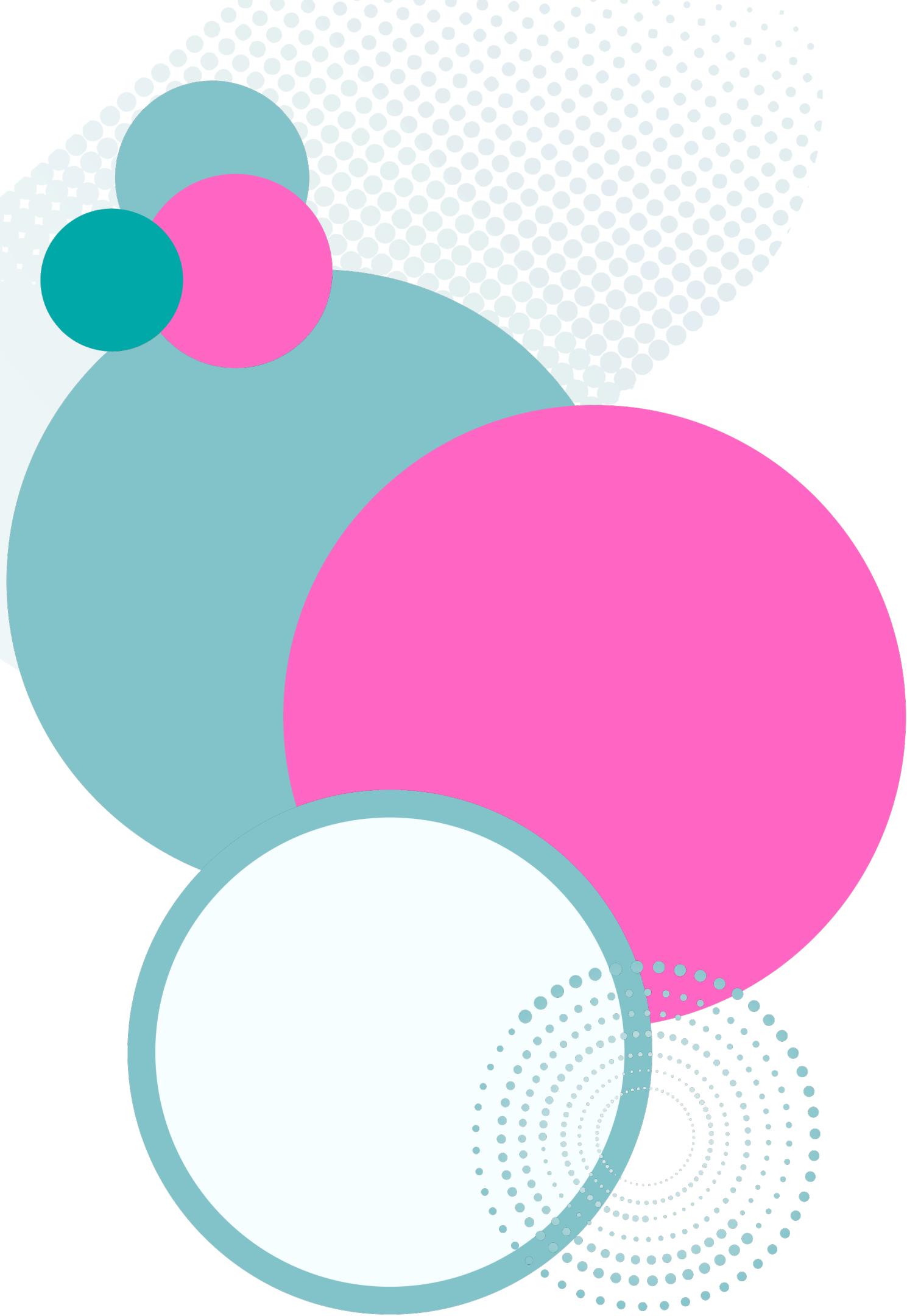
- Applying a critical approach to foster educator-learner dialogue and create spaces for study and action
- Changing educational practices through conscientization (Freire)
- Focusing on inequality based on students' experiences
- Activities that amplify participants' voices and agency in working groups
- Implementation of project-based learning with facilitators in a supporting role
- Modifying participation dynamics (Goffman) and redistributing capital and power (Rojo)

- **Transforming Assessment Practices:**

- i) A tool for critical reflection and argumentation
- ii) A mechanism for linguistic inclusion

- **Redefining roles and distributing agency:**

- A shift in role from lecturer-researchers to mobilisers and facilitators
- Students' roles are redefined as co-participants and co-researchers



3.2. Epistemic challenges



Epistemic Challenges

- In action-research projects, knowledge is co-constructed between researchers and participants

- **Diversity in group composition and diagnosis:** different backgrounds resulted in varying levels of engagement, influenced by privilege and discrimination.


- **Mismatch in diagnoses:** Students did not always share our perspective on linguistic inequalities.


”It is not uncommon to encounter a widespread assumption that, outside their own regions—or outside their countries, for international students—**Spanish should be the language spoken in Madrid, as the common language.** Attitudes toward Catalan, for instance, are often marked by a certain rejection” (Researcher ethnographic notes).

- **Navigating the sociolinguistic context:** The dominant monolingual habitus shaped students' perceptions and linguistic practices.


- **Understanding the longitudinal process of conscientisation:** Initial reluctance or curiosity gradually developed into active participation.

EXAMPLE 3: Challenge: Linguistic Ideologies and the Invisibilisation of Non-Official Varieties

 *"In a session on multilingualism in Spain, a group of Andalusian students questioned whether we would only focus on regions with official languages—Catalonia, Galicia, the Basque Country. I responded: 'We're going to study all of them.'"*

 This opened space to explore the linguistic realities of students from Extremadura, Castilla-La Mancha, Murcia, and Andalusia—**and to connect these with the economic model promoted under Francoism**, which required industrialisation to exit autarky, **portraying rural life as a symbol of social failure.**

 It revealed how **rural Spanish varieties continue to be devalued**, and the impact on speakers' subjectivities.

 What began as a classroom exchange ultimately reshaped both my teaching and research, prompting a shift toward analyzing **internal linguistic hierarchies within Spanish.**

Epistemic Challenges

Epistemological Challenges Through Students' Voices

These reflections highlight students' engagement with the epistemic dimensions of the project—challenging who has access to knowledge and who is recognized as a legitimate producer of it.

◆ Challenge: Restricted access to disciplinary knowledge

Second-Year Student:

"I had never encountered these concepts until I started my degree in Linguistics, yet I believe they should be accessible to everyone. That is what we are aiming for with our project."

→ Questions the academic gatekeeping of knowledge and advocates for **epistemic justice**—making key concepts and debates accessible beyond formal education spaces.

◆ Challenge: Limited recognition of students as knowledge producers

Fourth-Year Student:

"Our project shows that we have more agency than we realise. The most significant part was being able to present it during Language Week and share it with people outside the course."

→ Highlights the **exercise of epistemic agency**—students not only applying but **publicly sharing** knowledge, moving beyond traditional boundaries of the classroom.

Epistemic Challenges

Transformations in Students' episteme

- **1. From Monolingual Doxa to Critical Awareness**
 - By the second year, students began viewing linguistic inequalities as **social rather than personal** issues
 - Concepts like **linguistic privilege and hierarchies** helped them identify broader structural problems
- **2. Overcoming the Habitus of Resignation**
 - By the fourth year, students developed a **stronger sense of agency**.
 - The habitus of resignation **almost disappeared**, replaced by active engagement and action
- **3. Evolution of their own agency**
 - **Second Year:** Localized classroom actions (e.g., pronouncing Chinese names, Romanian workshops, modifying signage).
 - **Fourth Year:** Expanded to **institutional collaborations**, integrating multiple resources for **real-world impact**.

Epistemic Challenges

Transformations in researchers' episteme

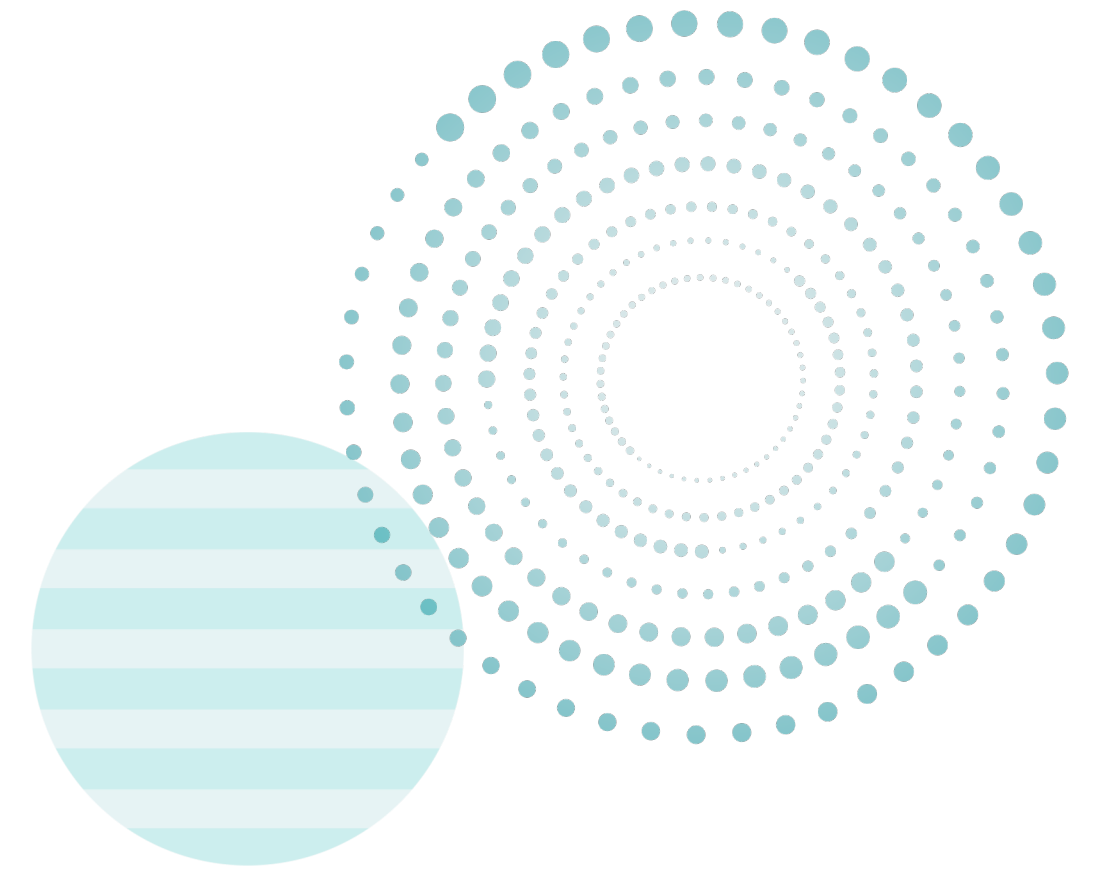
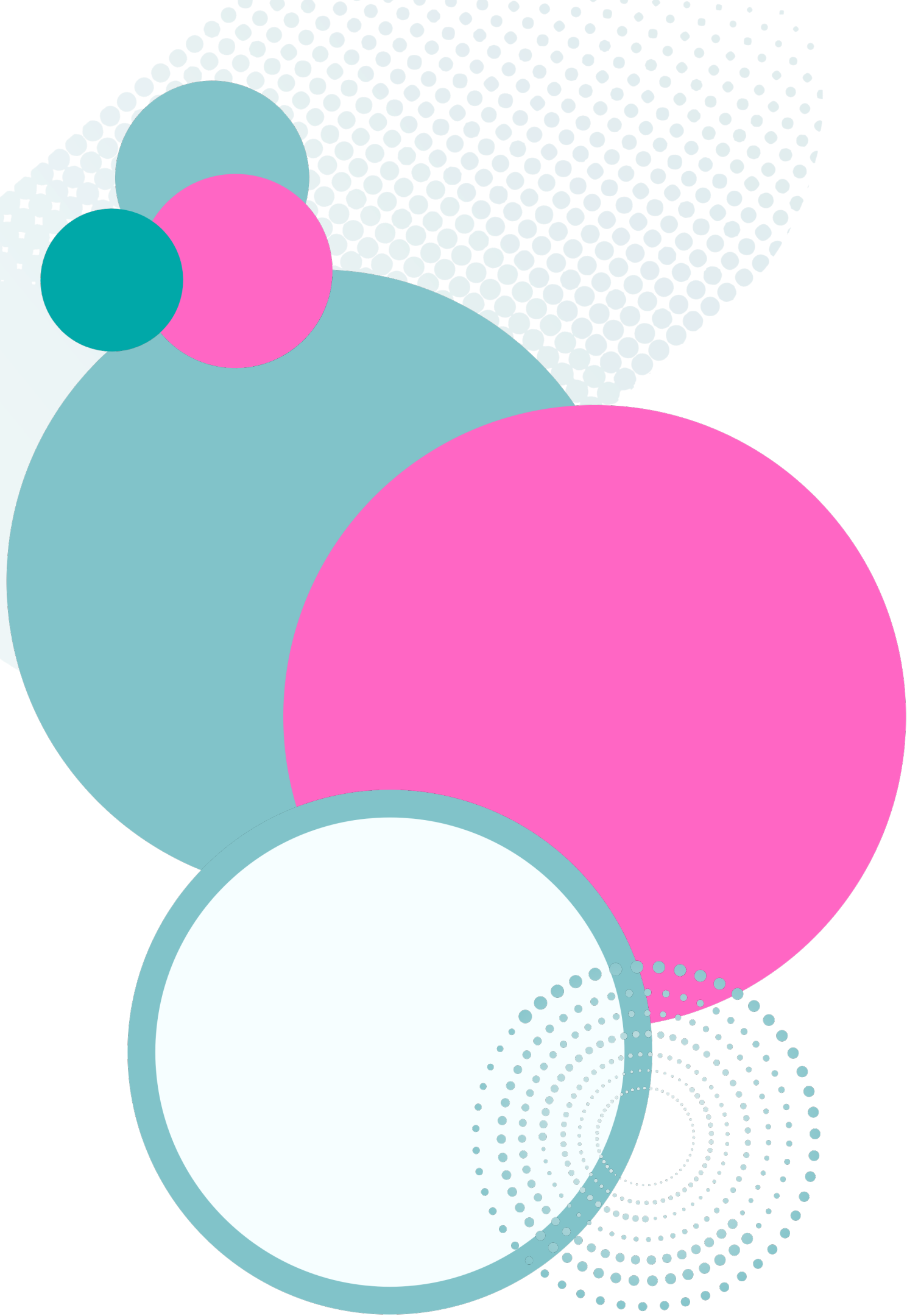
1. Changes to the course curriculum (lecturers/researchers)

- Inclusion of non-standard Spanish varieties.
- Focus on minority languages without official recognition.
- Consideration of multilingual regions without co-official languages.
- Greater emphasis on socialisation and racialisation.
- Shifting the focus of inequality analysis towards surveillance.
- Understanding agency and the role of habitus in its mobilisation.

•2. Changes to the faculty curriculum

- Creation of the course: Languages of Spain: Strategies for Learning and Intercomprehension

•3. Changes to future research



Conclusions



- ◆ **Sociolinguistics is no longer just descriptive**—it engages with inequality and promotes agency through education.
- ◆ **Conscientisation is a collective, ongoing process**—it reshapes both learners and educators, and opens new paths for sociolinguistic inquiry.

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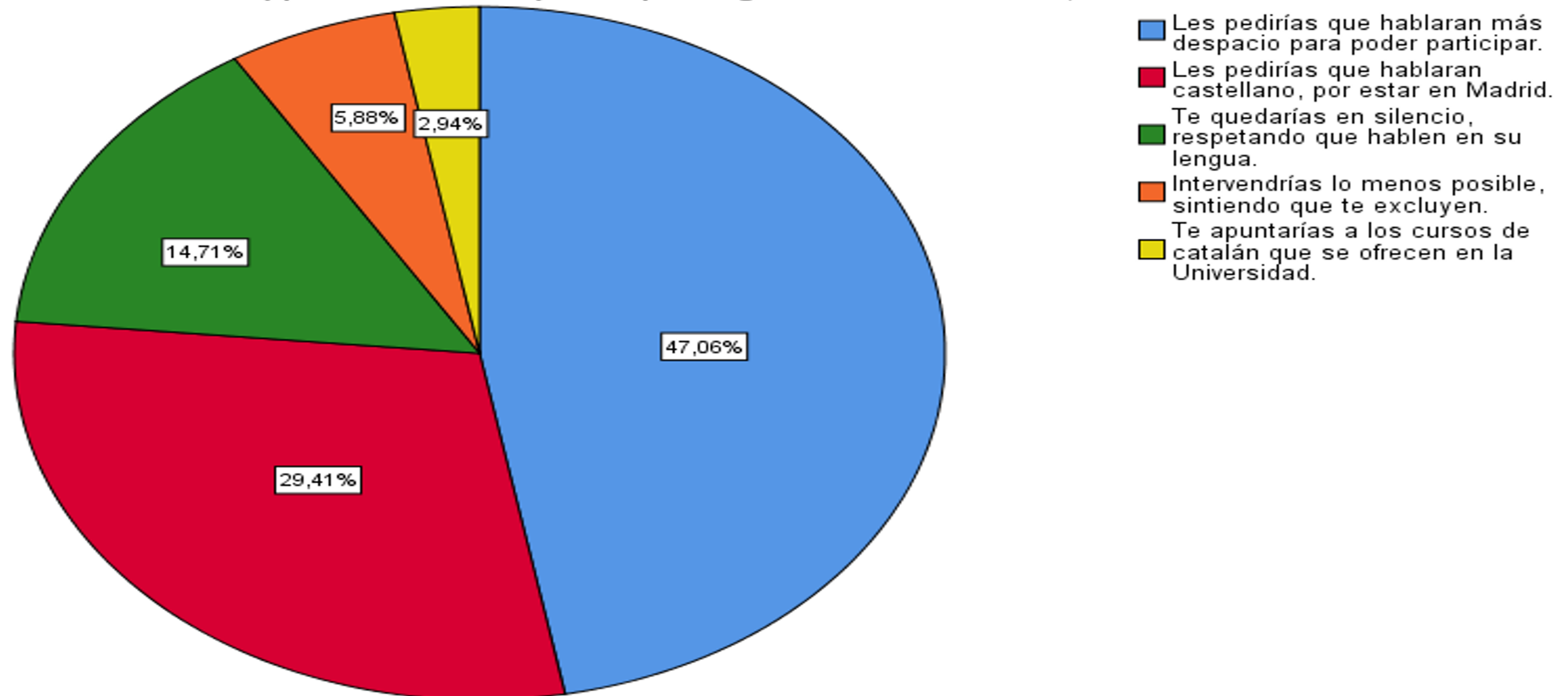
Thank

You

Gracias

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Curso 20-21: En una conversación en clase en Madrid con un compañero de Mallorca y otra de Alicante, ellos comienzan a hablar en catalán (que tú no hablas). Aunque te gusta estar con ellos, no les entiendes bien cuando hablan en esa lengua. ¿Cómo reaccionarías?



Curso 22-23 En una conversación en clase en madrid con un compañero de Mallorca y otra de Alicante, ellos comienzan a hablar en catalán (que tú no hablas). Aunque te gusta estar con ellos, no les entiendes bien cuando hablan en esa lengua. ¿Cómo reaccionarías?

