

- **Netta Avineri**  
TESOL/TFL Program  
Middlebury Institute of International  
Studies at Monterey  
navineri@gmail.com
- **Eric Johnson**  
College of Education  
Washington State University Tri-Cities  
ejj@tricity.wsu.edu
- **Shirley Brice-Heath**  
Departments of English and Linguistics  
Stanford University  
sbheath@stanford.edu
- **Teresa McCarty**  
Education and Information Studies  
University of California, Los Angeles  
teresa.mccarty@ucla.edu
- **Elinor Ochs**  
Department of Anthropology  
University of California, Los Angeles  
eochs@anthro.ucla.edu
- **Tamar Kremer-Sadlik**  
Department of Anthropology  
University of California, Los Angeles  
tksadlik@ucla.edu
- **Susan Blum**  
Department of Anthropology  
The University of Notre Dame  
Susan.Blum.24@nd.edu
- **Ana Celia Zentella**  
Department of Ethnic Studies/Emerita  
University of California, San Diego  
azentella@ucsd.edu
- **Jonathan Rosa**  
Department of Anthropology  
University of Massachusetts, Amherst  
jdrosa@anthro.umass.edu
- **Nelson Flores**  
Graduate School of Education  
University of Pennsylvania  
nflores@gse.upenn.edu
- **H. Samy Alim**  
Graduate School of Education and, by  
courtesy, Anthropology and Linguistics  
Stanford University  
h.samy.alim@gmail.com
- **Django Paris**  
Teacher Education  
Michigan State University  
djangoparis@yahoo.com

## Invited Forum: Bridging the “Language Gap”

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*This Forum provides a range of voices on the Language Gap, as our aim is to shed light on the need for more critical dialogue to accompany the proliferation of political initiatives, policymaking, educational programs, and media coverage. We highlight some relevant background on the Language Gap and describe some of the research used to support the concept. The diverse slate of Forum contributions that we have assembled approach the Language Gap topic from a range of linguistic anthropological perspectives—theoretical, empirical, political, ethnographic, personal, and experiential. Based on an acknowledgment of the need to improve educational access for economically and culturally diverse students, the subsequent discussions provide a range of perspectives designed to move away from denouncing and altering home language skills as a panacea for academic woes and social inequity. Linguistic anthropology’s focus on language learning ecologies, and the sophistication therein, provides a novel perspective on the Language Gap. The contributions included below problematize existing ideologies, demonstrate the wealth of resources within various communities, and propose new directions for school practices and policymaking in an effort to bridge the “language gap” toward a more inclusive and discerning view of linguistic practices across diverse groups. [Language Gap, poverty, education, language socialization]*

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## Introduction

*Netta Avineri and Eric J. Johnson*

It is undeniable that individuals who live in poverty face distinct challenges in academic contexts (NCES 2011). Debates over the relationships among language, socioeconomic class, and education have been circulating in academic and popular discourse since the 1960s. One popular stance in this debate views the difference in linguistic environments between wealthier families and those who live in poverty as producing a “language gap” (aka, “word gap”) that contributes to children’s trajectory of educational success or failure (Hart and Risley 1995). Others counter this perspective and encourage a language socialization lens for viewing educational disparities across socioeconomic status groups (cf. Miller and Sperry 2012). While this fervent debate is based on attempts to better understand the role that language plays in academic challenges (Erard 2014; Talbot 2015), placing blame on parents for not speaking to their children “correctly” or “sufficiently” is unfortunately rooted in the same dominant group norms that in fact continue to perpetuate educational inequities (Blum 2014; Blum and Riley 2014). Moreover, considering the disproportionate number of ethnic minorities (especially Native Americans, African Americans, and Latinos) who live in poverty and have a record of lower academic achievement (Aud et al. 2010; DeNavas-Walt et al. 2013), it is imperative to explore how cultural diversity intersects with discussions of language and educational environments (Ladson-Billings 2014; Paris and Alim 2014).

In this introduction, we provide some relevant background on the Language Gap and describe some of the research used to support the concept. The diverse slate of Forum contributions that we have assembled approach the Language Gap topic from a range of linguistic anthropological perspectives—theoretical, empirical, political, ethnographic, personal, and experiential. By including a range of voices on this issue, our aim is to shed light on the need for more critical dialogue to accompany the proliferation of political initiatives, policymaking, educational programs, and media coverage.

Current educational initiatives like *Providence Talks* ([www.providencetalks.org](http://www.providencetalks.org)), the *Thirty Million Words Initiative* ([tmw.org](http://tmw.org)), and *Too Small to Fail* ([toosmall.org](http://toosmall.org)) have spurred on a surge in media exposure on the Language Gap (e.g., Bellafante 2012; Guernsey 2013; Loope 2011; Ludden 2014; NPR (National Public Radio) 2013; Rosenberg 2013; Talbot 2015; Unmuth 2014). Programs like these are aimed at leveling academic disparities by remediating the language patterns found in lower socioeconomic status households—essentially training parents to modify the way they use language with their children to reflect the linguistic environments found in school settings. Although the objective of improving educational access for traditionally marginalized communities is well intentioned, implicating home language patterns in academic struggles further entrenches the broader deficit perspective toward minoritized groups—including the view that members of the groups targeted for remediation have of themselves. Moreover, expecting parents to change their language habits to support their children’s academic progress attenuates the responsibility that schools have to build on their students’ home experiences and skills as a way to scaffold classroom learning (Gonzalez et al. 2005; Johnson 2014; Zentella 2005).

The credibility of the Language Gap in the political and media realms is largely based on research studies in child development and psychology. The most commonly cited study in Language Gap research is Hart and Risley’s (1995) book that reports that by the age of three, children from affluent households are exposed to approximately 30 million more words than children from families on welfare. The authors claim that this “word gap” is largely responsible for the low academic achievement of students from economically impoverished backgrounds. Although Hart and Risley’s

study has been critiqued for its methodological flaws and its deficit orientation theoretical framework, it continues to be widely cited to support “evidence-based” programs (Dudley-Marling and Lucas 2009). In addition to examining the quantity of words produced in low socioeconomic status households, the Language Gap concept has manifested in a variety of other lines of inquiry, including a focus on the quality language environments in impoverished homes (Hoff 2003, 2006), parenting practices in poverty communities (Evens 2004), differences in language processing skills between economically advantaged and disadvantaged families (Fernald et al. 2013), and the negative repercussions of home language on classroom settings (Jensen 2009). Given that research like this is used to support programs that push for enhancing educational equity, espousing a perspective that highlights and honors the linguistic complexity and sophistication of all language groups is often eschewed in the popular media.

The set of commentaries presented in this Forum contributes unique linguistic anthropological perspectives to this debate. While swaying the opinion of those emotionally and financially engaged in Language Gap research and programs is probably out of reach, our goal is to illustrate alternative perspectives to those that focus on what minoritized communities do not have—instead, recognizing the richness of these communities’ everyday realities. The impetus here is to advance the debate by offering ethnographically informed descriptions of language socialization processes within micro- and macrolevel contexts, not to discredit the intentions of research or programs designed to explore the nature of educational inequities. To accomplish this, we have assembled seven distinct contributions that explore the underlying ideological assumptions bolstering the Language Gap as well as the circulating discourses (and resulting policies) that position minority groups as linguistically inferior to majority groups.

Based on an acknowledgment of the need to improve educational access for economically and culturally diverse students, the subsequent discussions provide a range of perspectives designed to move away from denouncing and altering home language skills as a panacea for academic woes and social inequity. Linguistic anthropology’s focus on language learning ecologies, and the sophistication therein, provides a novel perspective on the Language Gap. The contributions included below problematize existing ideologies, demonstrate the wealth of resources within various communities, and propose new directions for school practices and policymaking in an effort to bridge the “language gap” toward a more inclusive and discerning view of linguistic practices across diverse groups.

### **The Simple and Direct? Almost Never the Solution**

*Shirley Brice Heath*

Hope for a simple way to help children in poverty in the United States has been around more than half a century. Single-approach programs to mitigate the effects of poverty continue to be implemented in spite of evidence-based research showing that positive long-term outcomes only result from systemic and sustained wraparound programs (Karoly, Kilburn, and Canon 2005). Even though a quarter of children living in the United States today grow up in poverty with little or no access to sustained medical care, preschools, or stimulating primary schools, programs such as “Too Small to Fail” (a philanthropic initiative started in 2014 in conjunction with the Clinton Foundation) direct their efforts to eliminating the “word gap” of children living in poverty ([www.clintonfoundation.org/our-work/too-small-fail](http://www.clintonfoundation.org/our-work/too-small-fail)). Scholars familiar with child development reapproach such programs by pointing out that an increase in direct talk to infants and toddlers must work alongside economic and healthcare changes if impoverished children are to gain academic success and future employment with a living wage.

Today's poverty in modern economies is unlike that of earlier years. Children growing up in poverty now live within complex networks of strangulation created by economic and health policies that force well-meaning parents into unhealthy spaces and harmful practices of nutrition, time expenditure, and material acquisition. Holistic programs created for impoverished families in the 1970s provide models of effective systemic change for parents and children. For example, the Carolina Abecedarian program ([abc.fpg.unc.edu](http://abc.fpg.unc.edu)) initiated just after the civil rights era folded parents and children into a comprehensive full-day preschool program. Children received health and dental care, academic support during the elementary years, and follow-up through secondary school and into early adulthood by staff of the Frank Porter Graham Center of the University of North Carolina. Compared to control groups, those who had been in the program as young children exhibited stronger academic achievement evidenced in cognitive testing from their toddler years into young adulthood. Both reading and mathematics achievement held through secondary school and into early employment opportunities. As young adults, Abecedarian intervention children showed positive aspects of physical health, property ownership, and employment, as well as avoided the criminal system and were more likely to attend a four-year college than individuals in the control group.

So where are language measures in results like these? Perhaps as a result of the immersion of the nation in talk during the civil rights era of the complexities of change for those living in poverty, effective intervention programs that remained well into the 1980s did not emphasize change on any single behavioral feature, like talk with children or word counts. Instead, these programs took into consideration health, high levels of parental involvement, sustained involvement in reading, engaging in sociodramatic play, and experiencing events and locales beyond communities of parents. Families were surrounded with broad experiential learning opportunities that generated talk with children, to be sure, but also comparative reflection and question-asking in relation to expanding horizons of children and parents. Is the wide embrace of this interventionist approach "enhanced language development?" Yes, but enhancement within and around much more than words.

Simultaneously with these inclusive intervention programs came the research of linguistic anthropologists on language socialization in cultures around the world. Accounts from Japan, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, as well as white, black, and Mexicano families in the United States, analyzed language development within the context of family structures, group belief systems, and ecological factors (Heath 1983/1996; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986; Tudge 2008; Zentella 1997). These findings challenged long-standing claims by child language specialists regarding the universality of specific characteristics of language input from mothers to babies and young children. Such features included simplified talk ("baby talk"), varying intonation, direct-face-to-face talk from mothers to their infants, and specific games such as "peek-a-boo" (Snow and Ferguson 1977). Yet today, programs in the United States directed toward language and literacy development within impoverished families still promote these types of features as normative and developmentally appropriate for all children (cf. Snow et al. 1991).

Following the economic boom of the 1990s came 9/11 and the recession sparked by the financial crashes of 2008. Subsequent employment shifts and economic changes affected family life across the United States. Some linguistic anthropologists turned their attention to how these changes affected language socialization and academic trajectories for children across social classes. Ochs and colleagues at UCLA and Heath at Stanford University documented the impact of changing work patterns for males and females, along with the growing influence of technologies on family life, commercial entertainment forms, and altered peer socialization habits of not only lower-class youth but also middle- and upper-income youth (Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik 2013).

All of this research portrayed households in which adults and children had less and less joint time in creative interactional pursuits. Two working-parent households

relied on heat-and-serve foods and outsourced labor for house-cleaning and gardening. When blocks of family time came about, parents and children turned to passive spectatorship of sports, films, and concerts either live or via technology. During such entertainment times in homes, family members often made individual choices, going to different rooms or technologies. Extended talk and coparticipation in both work and play faded from the lives of many families, as did socializing of the young toward taking on responsibilities within the household (Heath 2012; Ochs and Izquierdo 2009). Everyday vocabulary of schoolchildren, particularly adolescents, also declined (Flynn 2012).

Multiple regions in the United States hit hard by the decline in manufacturing after 2000 remained locked out of educational and employment opportunities that would bring individuals into the salaried class or stability in small business development. The ramifications of low property taxes on poor schools and transportation cut deeply into education options, and the divide between the very rich and most of the rest of the population grew, leaving an increasing number of children and families struggling for much more than simply vocabulary growth.

So how might anthropology help change the social, economic, and academic inequities facing children in poverty? In general, unfortunately, research of linguistic anthropologists showing the high variation found in language input behaviors around the world has had little or no effect on either teacher education programs or reading curricula, even as school populations have increasingly diversified from the 1990s forward. Academic research alone cannot alter economic realities or political will. What scholars in linguistic anthropology and other fields willing to take up a long-term perspective *can* do is insistently push against searches for simple solutions. For example, more researchers in psychology and linguistics need to carry out their studies within groups of same-class families in order to show the variability within these families. The few such studies done in recent years demonstrate that families living within the same poverty level manage their time for talk with their children in highly variable ways (Fernald et al. 2013; Weisleder and Fernald 2013).

The history of the sciences, including social sciences, unrelentingly affirms a truism especially relevant for scholars who straddle basic and applied science. The most effective intervention is likely to be both complex and indirect. Alas, we are also likely, more often than not, to get it wrong before we learn to make it right, and to try the simple solution before we undertake the complex (Holmes 2008; Schul 2010).

### **How the Logic of Gap Discourse Perpetuates Education Inequality: A View from the Ethnography of Language Policy**

*Teresa L. McCarty*

In *The Culture of Education Policy*, Sandra Stein argues that the narrative elements of government policies—"the scenarios and argumentation on which policies are based" (2004:5)—construct taken-for-granted logics about those whose behavior the policies seek to regulate. These policy narratives constitute discourses, "ways of thinking which may overlap and reinforce each other and close off other possible ways of thinking" (Shore and Wright 1997:18). The important point, says Stein (2004:1), is that these systems of meaning "promote ways of seeing individuals and provide tools for organizing their lives." Policy discourses have material consequences for their subjects.

One of the most pervasive discursive tropes in U.S. education policy is the gap metaphor. Indeed, the premise of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—the most massive piece of federal education legislation in the nation's history—is that ESEA-funded programs will close the so-called achievement gap between students of color, poor students, English learners (ELs) and their more affluent dominant-English-speaking peers. In this essay, I draw on insights from the anthropology of policy (Shore and Wright 1997, 2011) and related work in the eth-

nography of language policy (Hornberger and Johnson 2011; Johnson 2013; McCarty 2011) to critically examine gap discourse in U.S. education policy as it constructs a logic about minoritized language learners. How does this discourse frame language problems and solutions? How does it construct ways of thinking about what counts as language and "proper" language use (Hymes 1996)? Who gets to do the counting, and by what measures?

Gap discourse can be traced to the 1957 Sputnik launch, which propelled not only the space race between the United States and the Soviet Union, but also unprecedented federal spending on public education. Here, the perceived gap was in science education, in which U.S. students were deemed lacking (Wax 2002). Embedded in this discourse was a military metaphor, used to great effect in the Johnson administration's War on Poverty, the centerpiece of which was the 1965 ESEA. Policy discourses surrounding the ESEA's passage constructed poverty as individual failure induced by deficient parents unable to provide their children with the intellectual, moral, and financial resources to succeed academically. The ESEA's intended subjects were children "shackled by the 'chains of disadvantage which bind them to a life of hopelessness and misery'" (Stein 2004:xiv).

This policy narrative was abetted by a powerful scholarly discourse—the culture of poverty—popularized in Oscar Lewis's (1959) ethnographic study of five Mexican families. Culture of poverty theory fit hand in glove with prevailing notions in education scholarship of race- and class-based deficit (see, e.g., the Chicago Conference on Compensatory Education for Cultural Deprivation, in Bloom et al. 1965). "Policymakers embraced the culture of poverty theory as evidence that the poor required government intervention to break free of the individual habits . . . understood to perpetuate their conditions" (Stein 2004:15). This logic at once diverted attention from race- and class-based social, economic, and educational inequities and encouraged "a condemning, paternalistic" policy stance (Stein 2004:15).

Intertwined discourses of the culture of poverty and the achievement gap have percolated throughout each ensuing ESEA reauthorization. One version of this portrays poor and minoritized children and families as illiterate, placing the very nation at risk, as exemplified by the 1983 *Nation at Risk* report (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983). A parallel narrative is the permeant portrayal of children who enter school speaking a language other than English as limited and lacking. The 1968 Bilingual Education Act (Title VII of the ESEA) targeted children who were both poor and "educationally disadvantaged" by their home language. Renamed the English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement Act in the 2001 ESEA reauthorization known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the current legislation (in which the word bilingual has been purged), laminates immigration, race, poverty, and language deficit. In the first nine paragraphs of the policy, the word "limited" appears 11 times, more than half alongside the word "immigrant." As Villenas (2007) points out, the term "immigrant" conveys a gap between those who belong and those who do not, symbolically distancing children deemed limited by home language and culture from their U.S.-born, white, middle-class, dominant-English-speaking peers.

A key mechanism through which gap discourse regulates its subjects is a government-mandated system of achievement measurement that relies almost exclusively on English standardized tests. Portrayed as objective, neutral, and universally valid, the tests are not, and they are particularly disadvantageous to ELs. Any test that uses language is in part a test of linguistic skill (Solano-Flores 2008). Disadvantage is also conferred by the fact that ELs comprise a tiny fraction of the sample used to establish testing norms (Solórzano 2008). It is therefore not surprising that race-, class-, and language-based test performance disparities have not changed significantly under NCLB; in some cases, the disparities have widened (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 2004).

An especially damaging entailment of this policy is the curricular remedy for learners disenfranchised by the tests, which prescribes reductive, decontextualized

English reading regimes comprised of scripted vocabulary drills. In a recent large-scale study of language learning and teaching in Indigenous-serving schools, my colleagues and I documented widespread, federally imposed use of such approaches, described by participating educators as “not *real* teaching” (Romero-Little et al. 2007). Meanwhile, learners in more affluent, high test-performing schools have the benefit of rich, contextualized language and literacy instruction that privileges the linguistic, cognitive, and cultural capital these students bring to school. Cummins (2007:566) describes such differentiated instruction as “the pedagogical divide.”

Thus, gap discourse ineluctably reproduces the very social, linguistic, and educational disparities it calls into question. Cloaked in well-intentions—“giving children the competencies they need to succeed in school” (Hart and Risley 1995:2)—gap discourse simultaneously constructs a logic of individual dysfunction, limitation, and failure while masking the systemic power inequities through which the logic is normalized.

There are clear alternatives to this logic. Paris, for example, calls for pedagogies that actively sustain the cultural and linguistic competence of nondominant students’ families and communities, while offering “access to dominant cultural competence” (2012:15). McCarty and Lee (2014) offer examples of critical pedagogies for Indigenous learners that are culturally sustaining, revitalizing, and decolonizing. Ladson-Billings (2006a) argues that the focus on the achievement gap elides the historically accumulated “education debt” that continues to exclude communities of color. She calls for culturally sustaining/revitalizing/decolonizing pedagogies that also enable mainstream learners to “critique the very basis of their privilege” (Ladson-Billings 2014:83). In the context of such pedagogies, the gap metaphor is reframed as a multipath bridge—a logic that embraces critique and social transformation, and promotes diverse ways of speaking, knowing, and being for all.

## How Language Became Knowledge

### *Elinor Ochs and Tamar Kremer-Sadlik*

The Language Gap debate focuses on socioeconomic variation in the number of caregivers’ words addressed to or in vicinity of children—including words co-occurring with a caregiver’s gesture or a child’s gaze, and words related to the immediate context—as a predictor of a child’s expressive vocabulary and academic achievement at school. A wide swath of studies links higher SES, word-rich input, and children’s expansive vocabulary to academic success (e.g., Fernald et al. 2013; Hart and Risley 1995; Hoff 2003; Rowe and Goldin-Meadow 2009). This commentary proposes that Language Gap studies underscore a pervasive cultural ideology that equates language, especially language that signals reflexive thinking, with knowledge. A language socialization practice that maps on to this ideology transpires whenever caregivers heighten infants’ awareness of words for objects or elicit infants’ verbal representations of their understandings or feelings about objects, including themselves (Duranti 2009). The Language Gap focus on number of words, we argue, is a proxy for this modernist celebration of highly reflexive communication as the signpost of intelligence. Caregivers who direct word-rich talk about objects to infants do so not simply to communicate but also to stimulate their infant’s reflexive capacity.

Although verbal displays of reflexive thinking are ubiquitous across speech communities, reflexive communication is pivotal to late modernity’s agentic focus on transformation of objects, self, and others (Giddens 1990; Habermas 1984; Husserl 1989). Reflexive objectification is viewed as fundamental to the possibility of choice, redefinition, and modification at the individual and societal level. Relatedly, reflexive communication lies at the heart of late-capitalism (wherein one acts as rational agent to reflexively and creatively develop the economy) and the modern self (wherein one acts as moral agent to reflexively and creatively develop one’s inner self). Hayek

(1945), for example, placed entrepreneurs' ability to reflexively synthesize and represent information coming from diverse sources as central to economic decision-making. In the contemporary knowledge economy, the bar for creative reflexive communication is set even higher: the information sources are themselves textual representations of knowledge, information changes rapidly, and social networks and sources are global (Castells 1996). The successful new knowledge worker is a language virtuoso, applying communicative prowess to continually generate, develop, problem-solve, and package new ideas through teamwork (Farrell 2001; Gee et al. 1996).

When caregivers (re)introduce a word for an object for an infant as intended addressee, they model reflexive communication for the infant. Unlike words exchanged between competent interlocutors that an infant might overhear, the caregiver's proffered word to the infant constitutes more than a symbol. It is a metacognitive, reflexive act of labeling that signals to the infant that the world is discrete and categorizable. Reflexive communication entails critical detachment from and meta-awareness of thinking, feeling, and/or communicating about a state of affairs (Lucy 1993). From a phenomenological perspective, the caregiver's heightened attention to a word-object relation modifies the infant's taken-for-granted experience of the world of objects. Such solicitations of phenomenological modifications encourage infants to reflect upon and reconceptualize their relation to the world. In other words, the caregiver and the infant enter into what Husserl (1989) calls "the theoretical attitude." Communication of this sort that draws infants and other novices into the theoretical attitude lies at the heart of language socialization (Duranti 2009).

Language Gap studies indicate that talk *addressed to the child* is more efficacious in developing children's expressive vocabulary than talk overheard by the child. This finding makes sense when we consider that the former condition co-engages caregiver and infant in the highly reflexive theoretical attitude. Such hyper-reflexive caregiver-child communication can also involve infants in reflexive talk about objects paradigmatically, logically, sentimentally, imaginatively, or otherwise. Caregivers the world over draw infants into the theoretical attitude, but the sheer proliferation of metacognitive talk dedicated to this end may set apart certain communities.

What distinguishes the Language Gap as an issue in the United States is that it rests upon a class-based and anxiety-filled vernacular notion of the child as a communicative (cognitive developmental) project (Kremer-Sadlik and Fatigante 2015). In this habitus, families have become entrepreneurial hives of activity. Caregivers look for signs of infants' and toddlers' expressive language competence not just to promote emotional bonding and sense-making and not just as a sign of normal development but also as a sign of precocity that will translate into symbolic capital and academic advantage. Middle-class U.S. parents are bombarded with advice about how to enhance their infants' vocabulary as the gateway to intellectual achievement. No child is too young to be a communicative partner: middle-class parents-to-be are encouraged to read stories and talk to their baby in utero; websites advise teaching sign language to infants in their first year of life to generate larger vocabularies, enhance the onset of spoken language, and even raise their IQs.

All infants have the right to language socialization that prepares them to be successful in their environments, including the globalized knowledge economy. Our UCLA Sloan multidisciplinary study of middle-class U.S. family life, however, reveals the cost of childrearing practices that privilege highly reflexive communication (Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik 2013). For a start, "the everyday" becomes intellectualized. Tasks and routines are not taken for granted as the natural order but instead are open to comment and exhausting negotiation. Explanations are ubiquitous for minute actions. Practical knowledge entails "lessons" rather than informal apprenticeship. Family relationships are subject to continuous examination, as family members talk about their needs and feelings. Under these conditions, the ideology of language as a signpost of knowledge is a burden, even as it is a catalyst for success.



## “Wordism”: Is There a Teacher in the House?

Susan D. Blum

–“What is that?”

–“Horsie!”

–“Good job!”

By means of this exemplary exchange, parents are supposed to turn their infants and toddlers into Ivy League college students and successful Americans. Parents are expected to quiz their children, asking for names of items, in a way that matches the *wordism*—the language ideology, or, as I might prefer, the *ethno-ontology of language*, that regards language as made principally of units the size of *words*—that underlies most commonsense Euro-American understanding of language. This ideology suggests that

- language is principally about units the size of words;
- the more words the better;
- naming objects in the world—the referential function of language—is its main purpose;
- parents’ “job” is to ask such questions, the *school question*, where the answer is known by the asker, unlike most questions in real life, where the point of a question is to find something out.

Linguistic anthropologists have spent decades illustrating the converse of all these ideological presuppositions. We have shown the importance of analyzing *discourse*, units larger than sentences and far larger than words, with *interaction* the key component. We have shown that for cognition and sophistication of thought (whatever that means), the *number* of words—if they can even be counted—is irrelevant. We have strenuously demonstrated the limits of the referential view of language. From J. L. Austin (1962) through Michael Silverstein (1993), this has been one of the primary research tasks of the field, showing that language *does things* in addition to reporting about things. And we have shown the many goals accomplished by the asking of questions, from implying ignorance to serving as a request or hint; only rarely is a question asked when the answer is known in advance. But that is the *testing function* of formal, Western education, where there is an answer key and students are supposed to match their answers to those prefigured. So if parents want their children to succeed in school, they have to act just like teachers, from day one: “Talk to Your Child” like a teacher.

Americans generally regard the “word” as the primary unit of analysis for this and many other educational efforts—indeed as the principal aspect of language in general. From eliciting names of things (“What is that?” “Elephant!”) to spelling tests to the SAT to the misuse of Boas’s example of “Eskimo” “words” for snow (causing the misunderstanding of the linguistic relativity hypothesis; Martin 1986), to Google Translate, to Words with Friends, crossword puzzles, and Urban Dictionary, the dominant Euro-American way of grasping language is to focus on words. Everywhere we turn we can see evidence of this *ethno-ontology of language*. Yet linguistic anthropologists and linguists have shown that the primary unit of analysis is *interaction*, within which one can identify sounds, sound patterns, signs, grammatical patterns, and the many intended and unintended effects of the linguistic encounter. Word play, politeness, language as identity—all these are constitutive of human meaning and social interaction.

Children raised in multilingual households, for instance, may develop subtle understanding of the contextual nature of linguistic codes. In settings where joking is the common key of interaction, children may develop sophisticated tools for punning and storytelling—traits highly valued in higher education, the arts, and even business. Yet the focus on the number of words appeals to the brute positivism that enables observers to identify one group that has *more* in contrast to which we may pity (or denigrate) another group that has *less*.

The Language Gap literature measures the number of words directed by the principal caregiver—usually assumed to be a mother—at the child. Specialists in (language) socialization have shown the many different forms of social interaction within which a child may be raised, from being cared for by child nannies (Lancy 2015) to being strapped to a grandparent's back to being hung on a wall in a cradleboard to being passed from adult to adult (Hewlett and Lamb 2005). Even within the United States, in some settings the very youngest children are held by adults most of the day even if they are not regarded as conversational partners (Heath 1983; Ochs and Schieffelin 1984). Anthropological research shows, in fact, that addressing the youngest children as conversational partners is extremely unusual in the world. But the Language Gap programs such as Providence Talks or Talk to Your Baby naturalize the middle-class Euro-American language socialization model as though it were biologically and evolutionarily required. This is because the principal caregiver is supposed to act as the child's in-home teacher from before birth.

In the now-familiar Euro-American middle-class model, parents' primary role is as teachers, with middle-class parents already having imbibed the pedagogical and didactic role of asking questions to which the answer is known, while in other households questions are asked because the answer is not known (as Heath showed so well, so long ago). Questions may have many effects—as hints getting people to act (*Is it cold in here?*), finding out information (*Where are my keys?*), as encouraging agreement (*Shouldn't we all wish Bruno a happy birthday?*). But asking children to demonstrate their knowledge out of context (*What color is that? What does a dog say?*) is a peculiar speech act that demonstrates performance for a judging audience. This is the principal didactic activity within schools—leading to learning-for-testing, passivity, and many other things that are problematic in the ways children are schooled.

The Providence Talks effort is to teach parents to act as teachers, rehearsing and pointing out school-rewarded aspects of the environment. (There are billboards exhorting parents to teach their children about shapes and colors.) These linguistic exchanges have no communicative function except to reward children with parents' approval for passing the test. They do teach children to crave adult approval; to wait passively for adults to initiate interaction; and to regard demonstration of known knowledge as one of the primary goals of children's speech. This notion of right and wrong answers and of passively pleasing caregivers is, indeed, matched by school testing, but it is problematic in school and equally problematic in homes.

Children everywhere learn their language(s) by rich involvement in the social life of their families and communities, usually without direct instruction and without testing except in the authentic environments within which language is used. Bringing the worst of the teaching function into the heart of homes is the wrong direction; far better would be bringing the multifaceted playful uses of multiple forms of language into schools. The human values are persuasive enough for anthropologists; but supposedly the 21st century requires *workers* and *citizens* who can do more than passively jump in a single language when the word "jump" is directed at them. Reducing this most human of faculties to a simplistic understanding of what language is serves no one well.

### Books as the Magic Bullet

*Ana Celia Zentella*

The author of a recent *New Yorker* article on "the word gap," Margaret Talbot (2015), recalled that she had read some picture books to her children so often that she knew them by heart. I imagine that many readers nodded their heads nostalgically, and might even have recited some stanzas of *Cat in the Hat* or another Dr. Seuss book that they had read to their children, and/or that had been read to them. I only know these books because there is a statue of the Cat in the Hat on the UCSD campus, and our

distinctive winged library, named after its author, Theodore Geisel, houses the world's largest collection of Seuss memorabilia. The first children's books I ever saw were in first grade at PS 39 in the south Bronx; they were about Dick and Jane and Spot. We had none at home, and no one ever read to me. And there were no other books or bookshelves either—no novels or histories or cookbooks. For most members of the middle class, this is the portrait of a deprived household, and even of incompetent parents. Such views are buttressed by the pronouncements of teachers, pediatricians, and psychologists who consider reading to children essential to their personal and academic development. In one pediatrician's opinion:

When I think about children growing up in homes without books, I have the same visceral reaction as I have when I think of children in homes without milk or food or heat: It cannot be, it must not be. It stunts them and deprives them before they've had a fair chance. (Klass 1995:71)

Parents who don't read to their children are accused of risking their children's well-being, and reading is portrayed as a magic bullet, a way to guarantee success.

So how did I graduate from college with a Phi Beta Kappa key, and go on to earn an MA and a PhD? This pediatrician and others who share her views, including those supporting recent efforts to count the number of words spoken to a child and train parents to read to their children, ignore the fact that in many homes where there are few or no books, adults and older children foster literacy in other ways. Many Mexican families I know in San Diego play "*lotería*" every week, and children learn to read the names of all the picture cards. In a collection of studies that documents how Latino families in diverse communities foster literacy by "building on strengths" other than books (Zentella 2005), you find Dominican families in NYC creating their own stories for children with special education needs, and preschoolers imitating older siblings doing their homework (Rodriguez 2005). Some of the most productive literacy events in other families are linked to religious activities, such as text explanations in church or Bible study at home in Central American families in Los Angeles (Ek 2005). Many Latino families pray every night, as I did, and children learn the words to those prayers and the songs they sing in church. In my study of *El Barrio* (Zentella 1997), one mother who never sat down with her children to read joined a Spanish Bible study group where texts were read and discussed aloud; she took her children twice a week. Also, everyone in that family was a Scrabble fanatic, playing with English words for hours on end. When I was a child, I thought my Puerto Rican mother invented Scrabble because she cut paper bags into squares and wrote a letter of the alphabet on each; we sat on the floor and put words together. *Mami* also had me copy and memorize long poems in Spanish and English; I recited them to visitors and at my father's Mexican society's *veladas* (cultural soirées), where I learned formal Spanish by imitating the guest speakers.

My teachers never knew that I had those abilities, and I doubt they would have judged me college material if they had heard *mami's* rants against too much reading and reliance on books. In her view, too much reading would "*volverme loca*" ("make me crazy"), and spouting book knowledge was like being a copycat; not as worthy as "common sense" or being "original." Some twenty years later, it was a book about Puerto Rican families in NYC in the 1950s, by a renown Puerto Rican anthropologist, that enlightened me; Padilla (1958:209) found that "it is held that too much studying or reading is detrimental to the child's health, because too much weakens the brain and a person may go crazy from over studying." But as I explained in the introductory chapter to *Building on Strength*, neither my teachers nor Padilla

understood the connection between the centrality of the family in working class Puerto Rican culture and parental fears of book related illness. Padilla (1958:209) noted that the East Harlem parents she studied wanted their children to read and do homework assignments, "since they keep the children busy and quiet in the home and are considered evidence that they are learning." My mother certainly insisted on only A level school work, but I now

realize that a child who continually immerses herself in the solitary act of reading distances herself from the shared activities of the family and shirks her duties towards its members. Anyone who becomes severed from the core support group risks mental illness, as psychotherapists would agree. Parents who favor "common sense" and view too much reading negatively may be carving out space for oral traditions and keeping children in the protected bosom of the family.

Collective efforts like playing games, singing songs, and reciting prayers and poems help unite the family as they encourage literacy. Ethnographies by Shirley Heath (1983) and others prove that long-term immersion in impoverished families reveals a variety of skills that are often ignored in formal academic settings, but which could prove helpful in ensuring success at school if they were incorporated.

From the anthropological linguistic perspective that I advocate, language socialization research must unmask the ways in which one or more group's ways of speaking or raising children are constructed as inferior to the benefit of the continued domination of a powerful class, and it must challenge the policies that encourage and enforce subjugation. Of particular concern is the construction of the most burdened and vulnerable members of an oppressed community—mothers in poverty—as unfit parents and consequently, unworthy citizens. Monolingual and bilingual communities are both affected because different languages as well as dialects of the same language are invested with contrasting amounts of cultural capital, reflecting the socioeconomic and racial status of their speakers; certain words count more than others.

Despite the importance of revealing the ways in which different cultural models of literacy may lead to unfair judgments about appropriate parenting, one of the pitfalls of language socialization research is that relying on home-versus-school conflict models can obscure the more powerful role played by institutional inequalities and racism. And study after study has documented the link between poverty and academic failure, regardless of cultural background. We are not against having parents speak more to their children or read books to them, but if their ways of speaking English, Spanish, or Spanglish are devalued, and their skin color and lower class background construct them as inferior, their children may still encounter insurmountable barriers unless educators confront those biases first.

### Hearing Language Gaps and Reproducing Social Inequality

*Jonathan Rosa and Nelson Flores*

During a recent professional development workshop that Nelson facilitated in a Philadelphia elementary school, one of the teachers objected to the "Spanglish" usage of her students, the majority of whom are low-income Latinas/os. She provided "rufo" as an example of the linguistic deficiencies of these students, argued that "techo" is the correct Spanish form for "roof," and insisted that they had not learned correct English or Spanish at home. Nelson explained that from a linguistic perspective neither term is more correct and suggested that as teachers we should work to build on the linguistic practices students bring to our classrooms rather than viewing them as deficient.

Nelson's response was informed by a long history of linguistic research. Indeed, in this teacher's statements, one might hear echoes of the "verbal deprivation hypothesis" that Labov (1972) debunked more than forty years ago. Focused on deficit perspectives that stigmatize African Americans, Labov (1972:201) noted that while "Black children from the ghetto area are said to receive little verbal stimulation, to hear very little well-formed language, and as a result are impoverished in their means of verbal expression," these children actually "receive a great deal of verbal stimulation and participate fully in a highly verbal culture." If linguists disproved the verbal deprivation hypothesis decades ago, then why did Nelson still have to present this teacher with an argument similar to Labov's?

One reason for this is the renewed attention from scholarly and popular audiences throughout the United States devoted to the notion that children raised in low-income homes suffer from a “language gap” or “word gap.” Millions of dollars in grant funds have been invested in supporting language gap research and the various campaigns that come out of it, which reflects widespread consensus about the linguistic deficiency of children in low-income households. Psychologists at the forefront of language gap research and public discussions thereof have emphasized that we should focus on quality over quantity in the promotion of effective communication in childrearing practices (Quenqua 2014). These efforts involve tracking the “quality” of communication in a given low-income household and tailoring a plan for improvement.

By locating these contemporary framings of the “language gap” in relation to the history of linguistic critiques of their premises, we can see how stigmatizing views of race and class have been repackaged in the category of “low income,” which nonetheless invokes similar populations. We must also note that this stigmatization persists despite decades of rich linguistic anthropological research establishing the legitimacy and dexterity of low-income racialized communities’ language socialization practices (Heath 1983; Zentella 2005). If, for many linguistic anthropologists, proposed “language gap” interventions are clearly based on questionable assumptions about linguistic “quality” and “quantity,” then how might we disrupt the communicative common sense surrounding the so-called language gap?

We suggest an approach that shifts the focus from the speaking practices of low-income racialized speaking subjects to the hearing practices of listening subjects from whose perspectives “language gaps” are perceived. We build from Inoue’s (2006) theorization of the “listening subject” as a way of apprehending how modes of linguistic perception are shaped by particular historical, political, and economic circumstances. Extending this theorization to the linked histories of class stratification and white supremacy in the United States, our approach begins from the premise that the “language gap” is not based on the empirical linguistic practices that emerge from the mouths of speaking subjects, in this case members of low-income racialized communities, but rather from the racially and socioeconomically stigmatizing language ideologies that orient the ears of listening subjects.

Redirecting attention from speaking subjects to listening subjects allows for an alternative analysis of the comment about “Spanglish” noted above. In this scenario, an institutionally sanctioned listening subject position shaped the perception of “Spanglish” as deficient based on the racial and class positions associated with low-income Latina/o language users. It is unlikely that a presumed normative monolingual English user ordering “tacos” at a restaurant or discussing “haciendas” in a history class would be marked in this way despite the fact that these forms have come into use through similar processes of language contact. The problem is not with linguistic practices but rather how racial and class positionings within our stratified society shape the perception of these practices by listening subjects.

This shift in focus from the speaking subject to the listening subject can also lead to alternative critiques of “language gap” ideologies. Rather than continually reiterating the systematicity of low-income racialized communities’ linguistic practices, we must reconsider the ways that the listening subject interpellates these communities as linguistically deficient. By analyzing the listening subject, we ask not how low-income racialized households’ language practices could be more accurately valued but rather how “language gap” ideologies connect with broader processes of racial and socioeconomic population management.

Jonathan observed a ritual among a group of low-income, U.S.-born Mexican siblings in Chicago that illustrates the consequences of these broader processes of racial and socioeconomic population management. These elementary school-aged children created a game they called “real people.” For this group of Spanish-English bilingual siblings, playing “real people” involved producing what they described as “proper” English, which primarily consisted of politeness routines, exaggerated articulation, and pretending to write in cursive. When Jonathan asked them who “real

people" are, they responded, "rich people, white people." These children had internalized not only hegemonic views of race and class in general, but also the perspectives of listening subjects who heard them to be engaging in deficient language practices that made them less than "real people." Indeed, the only way that they could imagine themselves as "real people" was by pretending to be somebody else—a phenomenon that too accurately characterizes the experiences of all low-income racialized people navigating the white supremacist, capitalist U.S. status quo.

In the context of this status quo, claims that the language practices of low-income racialized communities are just as, if not more, legitimate, complex, and valuable than those of middle- and upper-class white communities will never be embraced. In order to disrupt the linguistic reproduction of racialization and socioeconomic stratification, we must move beyond asserting the legitimacy of stigmatized language practices, focusing instead on interrogating the societal reproduction of listening subject positions that continually perceive deficiency. By changing our analytical strategy in this way, we can gain new insights into how the joint ideological construction of race, class, and language perpetuates inequality; we can also develop alternative frameworks that refuse to accept the terms of the debate proposed by "language gap" researchers. After all, as linguistic anthropologists it is our job to note the insidious nature of the suggestion that communities facing rampant inequality are simply in need of more or "better" words.

### Whose Language Gap? Critical and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies as Necessary Challenges to Racializing Hegemony

*H. Samy Alim and Django Paris*

Despite the plethora of research on cultural and linguistic diversity, researchers continue to (unwittingly?) reproduce harmful public discourses that frame the languages and cultures of children and families of color as "deficient," "less than," or "inferior" to a supposed gold standard—the norms of white, middle-class, monolingual, monocultural America. These discourses are reproduced through appeals to "science" and "data" that are often flawed from their very conception due to their tacit acceptance of white cultural and linguistic hegemony.

As linguists have been pointing out for decades, white Americans in power have long insisted on their particular varieties of English as the price of admission into America's economic mainstream (Sledd 1969; Smitherman 1977). Even many otherwise liberal and progressive whites—researchers included—remain rigid and inflexible when it comes to linguistic diversity. While some deny their complicity in this kind of linguistic hegemony, others earnestly work toward convincing racial and ethnic "minorities" that the journey toward upward mobility will be easier for them once they drop their linguistic and cultural "baggage" and acquire what they uncritically refer to as "standard" English. So, despite widely professed values of egalitarianism, equality, and equity, linguistic hegemony is framed as beneficial to linguistic "minorities" rather than harmful, and linguistic homogenization is presented as preferable to linguistic diversity.

In this specific case, the language gap approach reproduces the harmful *culture of poverty* argument that has been used over the past half-century, in various iterations and across disciplines, to frame the languages and cultures of poor students of color as needing to be fixed and replaced with "better" languages and cultures (Stein 2004). In the United States, deeply flawed research of this type not only upholds what Alim (2004) has referred to as *linguistic supremacy*—the regressive, uncritical, and sociolinguistically inaccurate language ideological system of beliefs that assumes certain language varieties (and therefore, certain groups of people) to be superior to others—but it is also sadly out of step with our new demographic reality, what many scholars are now calling "the new America" (e.g., Chang 2014; Taylor 2014).

Innovative research at the intersection of language, culture, and pedagogy rethinks demographic and social change and counters the persistent and detrimental notion of “gaps” (wherein poor folks and people of color are consistently positioned as lacking). In fact, we posit that in this “new America,” rather than children of color being framed in terms of “gaps,” the linguistic and cultural flexibility of many children of color ideally positions them for success in a diversifying, globalizing world. Researchers are encouraged to think forward, not backward, in ways that both challenge hegemonic norms and support the flexibility that students will increasingly need for access and opportunity.

Backward-thinking research, such as the “language gap” approach, is not only flawed for the many reasons pointed out in the introduction of this forum, but it also needs to be interrogated for the deeply discriminatory racial thinking that both gives rise to this research and seduces the general public into buying its arguments. From our perspective, these studies represent yet another form of the linguistic policing of poor people and people of color. When examined critically, one can draw a straight line through the covert racism of *linguistic profiling* (where poor folks, women, and people of color are denied housing and other opportunities based solely on “the sound of their voice”—see Baugh 2003), the persistent and commonly held language ideological racism aimed at linguistically diverse students of color in our schools (e.g., English only, the backlash against “Ebonics”), and the hegemonic racism associated with researchers’ consistent framing of communities of color in terms of “gaps” of all kinds, whether linguistic, cultural, cognitive, achievement, or otherwise. All of these forms of linguistic policing, no matter how well intentioned, function as forms of social control that reify *linguistic supremacy*. This regressive research, then, has grave social, political, economic, and educational implications for communities of color in the United States.

Forward-thinking research begins with a simple demographic fact: last year (2014) marked the first time that children of color comprised the majority of students in U.S. public schools (whereas in 1970, 80% of public school students were white). Unbeknownst to many well-intentioned educational researchers, including those who claim “not to see race,” the majority of our students use a rich and diverse array of cultural and linguistic resources that are currently vastly underutilized and systematically devalued in our schools. Research, then, should not begin with the all-too-often taken-for-granted premise that white, middle-to-upper-class, monocultural, and monolingual norms are to be emulated. In fact, in this “new America,” we might consider those children who bring no additional linguistic and cultural resources to school as “deficient” and framed in terms of the discriminatory discourse of “gaps.” Rather than taking white cultural and linguistic hegemony for granted, forward-thinking research asks: What do these ongoing shifts mean for the language education of the new American majority? What might it mean for the new racial minority? These are precisely the kinds of questions taken up by our ongoing projects of *critical language awareness* and *culturally sustaining pedagogies* (Alim 2004; Alim and Smitherman 2012; Paris 2011, 2012; Paris and Alim 2014). In our work, we consistently interrogate schools and researchers as agents of linguistic policing and cultural homogenization. In response to restrictive policies and practices, we envision teaching and learning as means to perpetuate and foster linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism. This vision of pluralism is seen as central to the democratic project of schooling and as a needed response to demographic and social change.

While demographic change does not necessarily mean cultural or ideological change in the short term, our work seeks to prepare both teachers and students to disrupt hegemonic norms and create new, democratic and pluralist ones in their place. Importantly, we must offer opportunities for our young people to explore and critically interrogate the links between language, discrimination, power, and change. While many have argued over the decades—and will undoubtedly continue to do so—that “Language discrimination exists; it’s just the way the world works,” we will continue to respond with, “Forcing people to speak just like you in order to gain

access to material resources is not the way the *world* works. It's the way *hegemony* works." Teachers, students, all of us, have a choice to either uphold or disrupt that hegemony.

### Forum Conclusion: Language Strengths, Not Gaps

As linguistic anthropologists, we recognize that children in poverty are more likely to face obstacles that children from more affluent backgrounds rarely experience (e.g., accessing healthcare, affording tutoring, maintaining adequate nutrition). We also acknowledge the stark academic disparities that exist between economically advantaged and disadvantaged groups. That said, we do not support concepts or research like the Language Gap that cast blame on the language patterns of parents and children who live in poverty. As the contributions to this Forum illustrate, the reason for such widespread academic challenges is historically rooted and extremely complex. The fact that the United States has the second highest child poverty rate among all industrialized countries (UNICEF 2012) obligates us to renounce traditional views toward educating children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in favor of more culturally and linguistically informed approaches.

The range of papers in this Forum illustrates the underlying ideologies that support Language Gap research, as well as the language policies that reflect and perpetuate inequalities as a result (McCarty). By focusing on contextualized understandings of community language ideologies and practices, linguistic anthropologists can call out the problematic assumptions on which the Language Gap concept is based by questioning the circulating discourses among individuals, families, and communities. As Heath notes, linguistic anthropologists need to work with a range of stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and policymakers, to provide a richer set of perspectives on these key issues. Unfortunately, many parents are appropriating a discourse of inferiority based on the culture of poverty discourse (Ladson-Billings 2006b), which then shapes attitudes and actions in the home as attempts to match the practices of unmarked families and communities.

Notions that motivate the Language Gap, like words are knowledge (Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik), parents should be teachers (Blum), and books are the magic bullet (Zentella), are in many cases unquestioned within these circulating discourses. Examining structural inequalities around power and poverty allows us to ask ourselves not only who is doing the talking but also who the listeners are, and what their range of subjectivities are (Rosa and Flores). This can reframe the conversation as a whole by not allowing diverse communities to be cast as static, deficient entities in need of help. We can then focus instead on what students have (and not what they don't), recognizing that they are ideally positioned to serve as resources that contribute to the conversation in unique ways (Alim and Paris). This forward-thinking, progressive disposition allows us to broaden the discussion with a social justice orientation. Instead of intently focusing on modifying the language patterns of children who struggle academically, we propose rethinking the way schools and other educational programs engage students and families from linguistically diverse backgrounds such that what is highlighted is not deficits but strengths.

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