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Exposing Gaps in/Between Discourses of Linguistic Deficits

Eric J. Johnson^a, Netta Avineri^b, and David Cassels Johnson^c

^aCollege of Education, Washington State University Tri-Cities; ^bTESOL/TFL Program, Graduate School of Translation, Interpretation, and Language Education, Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey; ^cDepartment of Foreign Language and ESL Education, University of Iowa

ABSTRACT

Hart and Risley's (1995) concept of a "word gap" (aka "language gap") is widely used to describe inferior cognitive development and lower academic achievement as by-products of the language patterns of families from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. In recent decades, this line of deficit research has proliferated and caused a surge in public exposure in the media and political realms. In this discussion, we employ critical discourse analysis to illuminate intertextual links across three essential domains of "language gap" discourse: (a) academic research literature, (b) public news media, and (c) institutional narratives. The data are analyzed in terms of interdiscursive connections within and between research articles; news and magazine stories; and institutional documents from academic, political, and philanthropic organizations. Here, we demonstrate how discourses that are generated within a socially insulated "language gap" research paradigm propagate a deficit orientation of linguistic minority communities, problematically validate behavior intervention programs among particular socioeconomic groups, and reify linguistic and cultural misperceptions of traditionally marginalized groups.

KEYWORDS

Language gap; language and poverty; critical discourse analysis

Introduction

Since the 1960s, the linguistic characteristics of children from disadvantaged socioeconomic status (SES) groups have been described in terms of verbal deprivation (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966), restricted codes (Bernstein, 1971), and word gaps (Hart & Risley, 1995). These perspectives have been used to blame community language use for low academic achievement and correlate parent-child conversational patterns with cognitive disadvantages. In recent decades, research that posits a "deficit" in the language development of lower- and working-class children has proliferated, and Hart and Risley's (1995) popular publication, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*, has enjoyed rapidly growing interest in both the public and political spheres. Furthermore, current educational initiatives like *Providence Talks*, the *Thirty Million Words Initiative*, and *Too Small to Fail* have engendered a billow in media exposure for the "word gap" (aka "language gap"), which is often portrayed as a crisis.

Increasingly, the notion that children from working-class and lower-SES families suffer from a "language gap"¹ is discussed as if it were common sense, which in turn has an impact on public policy and societal discourses. This swell of public exposure has helped garner support from organizations like the U.S. Department of Education, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the Association for Library Service to Children. The increase in popular attention has also inspired numerous research studies and the creation of the Bridging the Word Gap National Research Network (n.d.a)—comprising over 100 researchers, practitioners,

CONTACT Eric J. Johnson  ejj@tricity.wsu.edu  Washington State University Tri-Cities, 2710 Crimson Way, Richland, WA 99354.

¹We use "language gap" in quotations throughout this discussion for two reasons: (a) the research based on the original "word gap" concept is varied and includes more than just "words," and (b) to communicate that we do not support the notions underlying this concept.

policy makers, and funders who promote research “to reduce the number of children who enter school with delays in language and early literacy” (para. 1). The surging tide of support for programs aimed at leveling academic inequities through linguistic remediation necessitates an in-depth interrogation of how deficit perspectives are proliferated within and across different discursive contexts.

In this article, we employ critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine intertextual links across three essential domains of “language gap” discourse: (a) academic research literature, (b) public news media, and (c) institutional narratives. The data are analyzed in terms of interdiscursive connections within and between research articles, news and magazine stories, and institutional documents from academic, political, and philanthropic organizations. The aim of our analysis is to demonstrate how discourses that are generated within a socially insulated “language gap” research paradigm propagate a deficit orientation of linguistic minority communities, problematically validate behavior intervention programs among particular socioeconomic groups, and reify linguistic and cultural misperceptions of traditionally marginalized groups.

Discussion format

We first outline the “language gap” concept in terms of its origins and subsequent trajectories in scholarly literature. Our critique of these research studies provides a platform for the ensuing analysis of the “language gap” in public discourse. Our literature review also considers the foundational sociolinguistic and anthropological research that rejects the deficit orientation inherent in conceptualizations of a “language gap.” In our methods section, we describe the CDA approach used in our analysis and explain how the data are parsed into various categories. The analysis entails a breakdown of the thematic and metaphorical ways the “language gap” discourse manifests in the public domain through media coverage and within institutional narratives. The intention of our overall analysis, though, is to illuminate the interdiscursive connections among all three of the discursive domains mentioned previously.

Interrogating the “language gap” research

For many scholars, Betty Hart and Todd Risley’s (1995) publication is a foundational resource for describing the relationship between children’s home-language use and their subsequent academic achievement. Hart and Risley’s (1995, 2003) research claimed that by 3 years of age, children from more affluent households were exposed to approximately 30 million more words than children from lower SES backgrounds. This “language gap” is attributed to inferior cognitive development and lower academic achievement of communities from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Even though the inaccuracy of equating quantity of words to linguistic superiority has been pointed out by multiple scholars (Avineri et al., 2015; Benbow, 2006; Dudley-Marling, 2007; Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009; Johnson, 2015; Michaels, 2013; Miller & Sperry, 2012; Sperry, 2014), this ostensible language disparity is used by many researchers, educators, and politicians to rationalize low academic achievement patterns of students from economically challenged backgrounds.

Particularly problematic is how Hart and Risley (1995) conceptualize “language” and linguistic “richness” (pp. 120–134). Simply put, studies that posit cognitive deprivation and verbal deprivation in terms of counting words (and other language items) are based on the researchers’ ethnocentric definitions of linguistic complexity. Moreover, the findings in such studies are founded upon claims that are in direct opposition to decades of linguistic and anthropological research on language socialization and acquisition (as described in the following section). Here, we scrutinize how the “language gap” concept has manifested within scholarly literature in terms of language quality, language processing, and health.

Language quality

Although Hart and Risley (1995) are widely recognized for implicating *quantity* of word exposure in cognitive development, they also evaluate the “quality” of language interactions based on parenting strategies (pp. 75–92). Their definition of linguistic “richness” (p. 120) in parental language included features like number of nouns and modifiers, the usage of verb tenses, and strategies for asking and answering questions (pp. 96–134). These findings were used in the study to associate differing discourse styles with varying levels of intellectual “accomplishment” (p. 142). Stemming from these types of claims, the educational community has been misled to believe that socioeconomic status unidirectionally determines a child’s capacity for cognitive functioning and her/his level of intellectual accomplishment (Dudley-Marling, 2007; Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009; Gorski, 2011, 2012).

This perspective has resulted in multiple studies on the quality of language use across different SES levels. For example, “quality” has been judged in terms of the importance of “affirmatives (encouraging words) and prohibitions” (Hart & Risley, 2003, p. 8), amount of “interruptions to fluent and connected conversations” (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2015, p. 1081), and similarity to classroom discourse patterns (Wasik & Hindman, 2015, pp. 52–53). In other studies, language “quality” is described by relating linguistic complexity to cognitive growth (Hoff, 2013) where language and social environments are credited for either enhancing or impeding a child’s development (Hoff, 2003, 2006; Leffel & Suskind, 2013; Suskind, 2015; Suskind et al., 2013). Even when “unique skills” and “language strengths” are mentioned, it is emphasized that because those linguistic features do not map onto school-based language patterns, specifically in literacy activities, “the different skills of lower SES children constitute a deficit” (Hoff, 2013, p. 7). Although describing linguistic differences can be helpful for better understanding intergroup communication patterns, qualifying one group’s language characteristics as superior and more cognitively beneficial is flawed and culturally biased.

Language processing

Another area of research that has received significant attention involves the effect of SES on language processing and cognitive development. Language processing studies generally evaluate children’s ability to discern the meaning of spoken words by identifying objects presented on pictures (in English: Fernald, Perfors, & Marchman, 2006; Fernald, Marchman, & Weisleder, 2013; Fernald & Marchman, 2012; Marchman & Fernald, 2008; in Spanish: Weisleder & Fernald, 2013). For example, Fernald et al. (2013) frame their discussion of language processing by pointing to previous “language gap”-related studies on verbal and cognitive abilities determined by standardized assessments (e.g., Ramey & Ramey, 2004), language quality and experiential factors (e.g., Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2003, 2006), and differences in eventual academic success or failure (based on comparisons of Black and White families: e.g., Burchinal et al., 2011; Farkas & Beron, 2004). Hart and Risley’s work has also influenced studies on SES and neural processing (Hutton, Horowitz-Kraus, Mendelsohn, DeWitt, & Holland, 2015; Noble et al., 2015; Noble, Houston, Kan, & Sowell, 2012). In many of these studies, linguistic experiences are conflated with other potential social and psychological factors (e.g., stress)—which are not caused by language, per se.

Language and health

The connection between language development and health is the explicit focus of Crow and O’Leary’s (2015) report: *Word Health: Addressing the Word Gap as a Public Health Crisis*. In this discussion, language interventions for lower-SES groups are claimed to be associated with reductions in cardiovascular and metabolic diseases, lower rates of obesity, and advantages in material success later in life (Crow & O’Leary, 2015, p. 3). The authors are also strategic about conflating language environment with “adverse childhood experiences” (p. 4). Although there is a growing body of research on “adverse childhood experiences” (ACEs), the focus of that line of research is on contexts

of physical and psychological abuse and *not* everyday language patterns based on linguistic features like word count, reading, or singing (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016).

Other health-oriented claims include a “lack of words in a child’s life amounts to both a public education and a public health concern” (Crow & O’Leary, 2015, p. 6), portrayals of parents’ responsibility to modify their language patterns as akin to dietary neglect (Fernald et al., 2013, p. 245), and attempted correlations between language and mental nutrition (Fernald & Weisleder, 2015, p. 3). These types of health-related points might catch the attention of well-intentioned individuals passionate about improving academic outcomes for students in poverty, but as pointed out earlier, such assertions simultaneously gloss over the historically structured role of U.S. schools that perpetuates educational inequities based on broader social factors (Kozol, 1992, 2005) while also ignoring the potential for integrating the language skills of linguistically diverse students into classroom practices to enhance learning experiences (Hornberger, 2010).

Sociolinguistic and anthropological perspectives of language

Fundamental to our discussion is the view that all language varieties: (a) meet the linguistic and social needs within the verbal repertoire of a speech community, (b) are determined by cultural norms of interaction that are negotiated and established by the actors within a given social context, and (c) are acquired by individuals to achieve communicative competence within a given speech community. While language varieties that differ from standard forms prioritized in academic settings—which are often spoken by lower- and working-class communities—are often denigrated as inferior, sociolinguistic research has documented the systematicity and sophistication of many different varieties of English, including: African American English (Baugh, 1983; Labov, 1966, 1972; Rickford, 1999; Wolfram & Thomas, 2002), Appalachian English (Luhman, 1990; Wolfram & Christian, 1976), Spanglish (Wolfram, 1974; Zentella, 1997), Native American English (Leap, 1993), and Chicano English (Fought, 2003).

We need to point out that not all speakers of “nonstandard” dialects live in low-SES contexts, nor are these varieties mutually exclusive across ethnic or racial categories. That said, language-attitude studies reflecting public perceptions reveal how particular varieties are consistently decried as substandard (Galindo, 1995; Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner, & Fillenbaum, 1960; Luhman, 1990). This is important, especially considering that the minority groups who come from linguistically diverse backgrounds are overrepresented in poverty (Institute for Research on Poverty, 2014; U.S. Census, 2015) and experience disproportionate rates of academic underachievement (Aud, Fox, & Ramani, 2010). The linguistic axiom that all language varieties are systematic and rule governed helps explain educational inequity; that is, when kids speak a variety of English that is not reflected or respected in the school curriculum, educational equity is threatened.

Language ideologies

A long history of sociolinguistic and anthropological research has demonstrated that language features like pronunciation, turn taking, register, body language, questioning strategies, and vocabulary (among others) vary among groups from diverse cultural backgrounds (Labov, 1966; Pinker, 1994; Pride & Holmes, 1972). Additionally, linguistic anthropologist Hymes’s (1972) concept of *communicative competence* highlights how sociocultural expectations of appropriate language interactions shape the way an individual uses language to participate as a member of a speech community. In spite of this perspective, it is necessary to point out that linguistic hierarchies that position some language varieties and features as inherently superior still emerge based on dominant-class language ideologies (Schieffelin, Woolard, & Kroskrity, 1998; Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). This point is particularly relevant to the current discussion in terms of what forms of language are valued, which are targeted for remediation and intervention, and how this can lead to linguistic prejudice. As Woolard (1998) asserts, “in liberal democratic societies, the misrecognition or revalorization of

the indexical character of language may make discrimination on linguistic grounds publicly acceptable where the corresponding ethnic or racial discrimination is not” (p. 19). By highlighting the lack of attention to the inherent value of diverse language patterns, we heighten attention to the way ideological assumptions drive “language gap” discourses, which in turn preclude recognizing and valorizing diverse linguistic resources as valuable “funds of knowledge” (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

Language socialization

A significant theoretical pillar of our work here is the well-established research on language socialization. As explained by Ochs (1986), language socialization entails “both socialization through language and socialization to use language,” such that “children and other novices in society acquire tacit knowledge of principles of social order and systems of belief (ethnotheories) through exposure to and participation in language-mediated interaction” (pp. 2–3). Hence, language use is inextricably linked to an individual’s identity and her/his conceptualizations of the world. How these patterns manifest in different contexts varies cross-culturally (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). This field of research has provided important insight into children’s language development, as demonstrated by research within diverse cultural groups (see Duranti, Ochs, & Schieffelin, 2014).

While the “language gap” is mobilized to explain, in part, why children from disadvantaged SES backgrounds continue to struggle in school, a language socialization lens provides an alternative view of academic challenges based on language. Heath’s (1983) ethnographic work on discourse and literacy practices of families from different SES groups reveals the complex and varied nature of home-language practices across all SES and ethnic groups. Heath found that the discursive and literacy practices found in the more affluent homes (e.g., features like questioning strategies and the structure of literacy events) reflected the types of language expectations valued in schools. She also showed how students from less affluent backgrounds struggled with preestablished literacy and language expectations in schools because they differed from some of the language patterns in their home and community settings (i.e., not because they are linguistically inferior).

Heath’s work has since inspired multiple lines of scholarly research validating the complex nature of language and literacy practices in minority communities (e.g., Au, 2008; McCarty, 2005a; Pérez, 2004; Zentella, 2005). Notwithstanding the depth of work in this area, distinct disparities in academic achievement based on language and literacy patterns abound in schools within high-minority and low-SES contexts (McCarty, 2005b; Moll & Ruiz, 2002). Examining this phenomenon from a language socialization perspective helps to explain that students from disadvantaged SES backgrounds are not linguistically deprived or cognitively inferior. The “language gap” perspective ignores how schools do an inadequate job of recognizing students’ diverse linguistic repertoires and, therefore, cast blame on students (and their parents) for operating from different cultural and linguistic schemas—thereby implicitly and explicitly dissuading educators from scaffolding in culturally relevant ways that incorporate the students’ strengths as a means toward mastering the prescriptive skills expected in academic contexts (Alim & Baugh, 2007).

Methodological approach

Critical discourse analysis and the “language gap”

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a label that has been appropriated by a variety of researchers who examine the relations among language, power, and ideology (Cameron & Panovic, 2014; Fairclough, 2010; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Van Dijk, 2001). Power is of primary interest to CDA, and a central principle is that language is shaped by, and *shapes*, the social context. As Fairclough (2010) puts it, language “is always a socially and historically situated mode of action, in a dialectical relationship with other facets of ‘the social’ (its ‘social context’)—it is socially shaped, but

it is also socially shaping, or constitutive” (p. 92). CDA draws connections between the structure of written and spoken texts and the multiple layers of discursive practices and social contexts to illuminate connections between discourse and power. Through its focus on implicit assumptions and inferencing (Fairclough, 2015, p. 102), CDA highlights the various unspoken ways that power is embedded in social discourses.

Intertextual links between multiple discourses allow for particular notions to become common sense and naturalized, something that is especially evident with “language gap” discourses circulating in literature, media, and policy texts. The problematic ways that particular communities and linguistic practices are portrayed in these texts are naturalized because they are circulated often and in similar modes. A Foucault (1984) sense of discourse is of distinct relevance to our discussion—especially how it can create, sustain, normalize, and contest social systems of power. Discourses make certain ways of talking, being, and acting seem “normal” and can thus be hegemonic (Foucault, 1978). This is notably relevant in our analysis of media representations of the “language gap” and the communities who are portrayed as experiencing it. Our use of CDA to analyze “language gap” discourse mirrors our argument that social meaning is made through more than just *words*. From this stance, we interrogate the current discourse around the “language gap” in an effort to illustrate existing social and educational inequities and ultimately raise awareness of practices that promote equity for all social groups.

CDA, intertextuality, and metaphors

The persistent challenge of analyzing connections across multiple domains, contexts, and layers of semiotic activity between and among research, media, and institutional texts is benefited by a strategy within CDA that employs *intertextuality*, a concept that describes how utterances derive meaning from other utterances (Allen, 2011; Kristeva, 1986). Particularly important is the notion of *dialogism*, which Bakhtin (1986) used to describe how works of literature are inextricably “in dialogue” with other works. Bakhtin (1986) proposes that the (spoken and written) texts we create are filled with echoes of previous speakers and writers, and any given utterance can only be understood against the backdrop of other utterances. Whereas intertextual analysis largely attends to the lexicogrammatical features of a text, *interdiscursivity* refers to the connections between texts and discourses. As explained by Fairclough (1992), interdiscursive connections reveal how discourses circulating across various contexts—from the macro to the micro—get reified in texts.

One way of organizing interdiscursive themes between texts involves focusing on the metaphors used to frame particular issues. Previous critical metaphor analyses demonstrate the way metaphorical rhetoric is deployed in the media to influence public opinion about highly contested political issues (Charteris-Black, 2004; Hart, 2008; Johnson, 2005; Santa Ana, 2002). This approach to discourse analysis is based on determining how specific metaphorical rhetoric affects the way people construct a cognitive framework of social knowledge and conceptualize specific issues (Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff & Turner, 1989). Examining prominent metaphors used in “language gap” discussions provides a better understanding of the underlying ideological platform that supports such widespread approval for linguistic interventions.

Analytically, metaphorical expressions are first identified within broader discussions of specific topics. For example, the following metaphorical expressions are used to describe language in terms of starvation: “*Poor Kids Are Starving for Words*. . . . This issue was the focus at a recent White House conference, *calling for people to address the word gap with the same passion they do child hunger*” (Walker, 2014; emphasis added). The metaphorical expressions listed here derive from the underlying metaphor LANGUAGE AS FOOD. In this example, the semantic source domain FOOD is mapped onto the semantic target domain LANGUAGE to produce a series of negative cognitive entailments equating linguistic patterns with the harmful effects of nutritional deprivation (i.e., lacking language = lacking food). In metaphor analyses, capital letters are used to represent the underlying ontological metaphor from which the actual linguistic expressions in the rhetoric are

derived. Similar analyses have been undertaken on descriptions of language in the media to demonstrate how English is portrayed metaphorically as superior to minority languages (Johnson, 2005). In the following, we apply the same analytical approach to describe prominent metaphors in “language gap” discourse.

Analyzing the “language gap” in public discourse

Our analysis of the “language gap” in public discourse concentrates on two areas: (a) the assumptions of hierarchy among languages and communities that are reflected in the publicly available rhetoric, and (b) the way metaphorical descriptions of the language gap are used in the public discourse. After describing our data sources, we highlight the intertextual and interdiscursive connections in scholarly research, institutional statements, and media discussions. We have organized our discussion around thematic categories that include four overarching themes (Research Says, Language Quality, Language Deficits, Language and Literacy) and three prominent metaphors (LANGUAGE AS WEALTH, LANGUAGE AS HEALTH, LANGUAGE AS FOOD). This allows us to illustrate the deficit nature of “language gap” discourse and illuminate the way publicly circulated rhetoric reflects ideologically manufactured assumptions about minoritized languages and communities.

Data sources

To gauge the discourse within the media, we analyzed 63 different online-accessible articles/stories focused on the word gap between 2012 and 2015. We specifically focused on the 47 articles that discussed the word gap concept. The media outlets ranged from nationally recognized news periodicals (e.g., *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Boston Globe*) to popular news magazines (e.g., *The Atlantic*, *Huffington Post*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and *The New Yorker*), as well as national news outlets (e.g., NPR, CBS, and PBS). While our collection of articles also includes a number of less-known or smaller-market publications, many of the national media outlets published multiple articles on the topic (e.g., we collected seven articles in *The New York Times* alone).

We also sought out organizations, programs, foundations, and institutions that are either involved in managing “language gap” interventions or publicly in favor of them. All of these data were collected via the organizations’ Web sites. The list in Table 1 includes 19 different institutional organizations, ranging from medical associations to the U.S. government.

Theme #1: Research says

One common characteristic that is shared between media and institutional discourse is a particular type of leveraging of the word *research*. In media documents, *research* usually refers to individual

Table 1. List of organizations used for institutional narratives.

American Academy of Pediatrics (2014)	National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families: Zero to Three (2014)
Annie E. Casey Foundation (n.d.)	NEED Lab: Neurocognition, Early Experience, and Development Lab (2015)
Association for Library Service to Children (n.d.)	Providence Talks (2015)
Bridge the Word Gap Conference (2013)	Reach Out and Read (2014)
Bridging the Word Gap National Research Network (n.d.a, n.d.b)	TALK: Tools for Advancing Language in Kids (2014)
Clinton Foundation (Clinton, 2013)	Thirty Million Words Initiative (2016)
GPO: US Government Publishing Office: Bridging the Word Gap Competition Challenge (2015)	Too Small to Fail (n.d.)
Health Resources & Services Administration (n.d.)	U.S. Department of Education (2015, n.d.)
LENA Research Foundation (2015)	(Shankar, 2014)

researchers or their studies without giving background on what the study actually entailed—e.g., Jaffe’s (2015) media article highlighting Noble et al.’s (2015) work or White’s (2013) piece on Fernald et al.’s (2013) research. For many of the institutional Web sites, however, the use of *research* and *science* is much more generic, and representations of the research are manipulated to garner credibility. For example:

- “**Research shows** that during the first years of life, a poor child hears roughly 30 million fewer total words than her more affluent peers” (Shankar, 2014, para. 1).
- “**Science reveals** that early language and literacy skills are important predictors of later success in school—and that as a group, children in families of lower socioeconomic means have fewer skills and know far fewer words than their more privileged peers” (National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families: Zero to Three, 2014, para. 1).

For some institutional Web sites, there are embedded links to “language gap” reports or research citations (e.g., NEED Lab, LENA Research Foundation), but for many others, such links are not easily encountered (The White House) or the way they ground their program in “research” is to reference the “30 Million Word Gap” (e.g., Association for Library Service to Children). Regardless, the research supporting these organizations can be traced to Hart and Risley’s original work and/or the subsequent lines of “language gap” research described previously. This heavy reliance on a very limited and monolithic body of empirical research, lacking a critical perspective, proves problematic—especially since implications based on them are then made about programmatic next steps and actions. Also significant to note here is the overall lack of reference (in both the media and institutional narratives) to the sociolinguistic or anthropological research mentioned previously.

Theme #2: Language quality

The scholarly research on language quality encompasses a variety of different linguistic features (including quantity of vocabulary words) and language “environments.” When examining how the notion of language “quality” is portrayed across the following three discursive domains, it becomes apparent that the media and organization discourse is entirely based on “language gap” research. Linguistic deficits are blamed on language patterns in low-SES households such that a natural syllogistic argument is established—i.e., poverty produces low-quality language interactions, which are seen as contributing to an environment of toxic stress, which necessitates scientifically based interventions to remediate language use. Table 2 includes specific examples.

For over five decades, linguistic and anthropological research has established that all languages share grammatical, lexical, pragmatic, and semantic complexity (Baugh, 1983; Fought, 2003; Labov, 1966, 1972; Leap, 1993; Rickford, 1999; Wolfram, 1974; Wolfram & Thomas, 2002; Zentella, 1997). However, the same language features highlighted in this tradition of sociolinguistic research are frequently called out in the “language gap” literature to suggest that the language varieties of economically marginalized communities is subpar in various ways, as compared with standard English. For example, Hoff (2013) alleges that “[c]hildren from low-SES homes show lower levels of oral language skills than do children from more advantaged backgrounds on measures of language

Table 2. Language quality discourse.

<i>Language Quality</i>	
Research	“Interventions that affect children’s vocabulary development focus on the quality of language as well as quantity” (Wasik & Hindman, 2015, p. 54).
Institutions	“Researchers link the achievement gap between high and low SES children to differences in quality and quantity of verbal interaction in high and low SES families” (Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d., p. 2).
Media	“There’s been a turn in the road on the topic, too: A new study released at the conference found that it’s quality, not just quantity, that matters ” (Walker, 2014).

processing, language comprehension, and language production” (p. 5), and Leffel and Suskind (2013) assert that “[a]n early language environment lacking rich and abundant language input, lexical complexity, joint attention, and reciprocity contributes to diminished child language outcomes” (p. 268).

These types of claims are in direct contrast with the evidence provided in the linguistic and anthropological literature mentioned previously. For example, Hoff’s description of “oral language skills” and Leffel and Suskind’s emphasis on “joint attention and reciprocity” are based on dominant-class notions of superior language patterns (i.e., and not a linguistically acknowledged description of language proficiency). Even though “language gap” researchers attempt to identify linguistic areas for eventual remediation, their impact on dominant-class ideologies is apparent in the way these claims are taken up in the public sphere. For example, in a recent news article on the “language gap,” it was recommended that “it’s much better to explain the words than to dumb down your speaking” (Nest, 2015). This logic emphasizes that using more words is better (no matter the context, interlocutor, or circumstance), and lower-SES communities are frequently targeted for interventions based on this line of thinking (e.g., PBS, 2014).

Theme #3: Language deficits

As described by Hadjistassou (2008), the deficit orientation posits that “children of minority ethnic or racial or of White low socioeconomic backgrounds bring into the classroom what are believed to be limited oral, social, interactional, and cognitive skills” (p. 219). This perspective suffuses “language gap” discourses across all contexts. Accusations of inferior language quality, especially when cast against academic achievement gaps, open the door for explicitly describing dialects spoken by families in poverty as a deficit. Table 3 includes examples of the deficit perspective across the discursive domains surrounding the “language gap.”

Language deficit discourse

The deficit perspective is deeply embedded in the problematic ways economically challenged communities are portrayed (Payne, 2001). Although SES-based cultural deficits are commonly suggested as a cause for academic achievement woes (Jensen, 2009), there is an expansive body of literature that illustrates: (a) the ideological assumptions that perpetuate this view (Heath, 1983; Noguera, 2001; Trueba, 1988; Valencia, 1997); (b) the historically entrenched structural inequities that hinder the academic progress of minority students (Kozol, 1992, 2005); and (c) alternative multicultural approaches that can be applied in schools to build on minoritized students’ background experiences and skills (Alim & Baugh, 2007; Delpit, 2006; González et al., 2005). Not only does the “language gap” literature regularly omit these types of linguistic and cultural perspectives (even as competing viewpoints), the authoritative nature of “scientific research” precludes these perspectives in the public sphere as well.

Table 3. Language deficit discourse

<i>Language Deficits</i>	
Research	“By the pragmatic criterion of usefulness for academic success, the different skills of lower SES children constitute a deficit ” (Hoff, 2013, p. 7).
Institutions	“The day’s agenda was designed to facilitate cross-sector conversations about cutting-edge research, interventions and technologies that could be implemented at a national level to reach the large numbers of families and children who are among America’s most affected by the impact of a language deficit ” (Bridge the Word Gap Conference, 2013, para. 4).
Media	“You have probably heard about what is called the ‘word gap’ found in many low-income children, who were found in a famous 1995 research study to be exposed to 30 million fewer words than their more fortunate peers by age 3, and that this deficit affects literacy development ” (Strauss, 2015).

Theme #4: Language and literacy

An emphasis on the importance of literacy activities between parents and their children is common in “language gap” research. The overall focus on academic skills is frequently communicated by conflating language with literacy such that the description of parent-child conversational quality and quantity is expected to include books (Montag, Jones, & Smith, 2015). For example, a lack of reading is included by Morsy and Rothstein (2015) among “parenting practices that impede children’s intellectual and behavioral development” (p. 5). The conflation of language with literacy is yet another example of how claims about a “language gap” are often based on a flawed understanding of both language learning and the essential nature of language itself. Within linguistics, there is general consensus about the primacy of spoken over written language. Not all languages are written down, and many rely on an oral tradition as opposed to a literary tradition—often referred to as the “Great Divide” (McCarty, 2005b). Furthermore, acquiring spoken language is in many ways different than acquiring literacy—the former being a universal part of human development and facilitated by implicit language acquisition, the latter being something that must be explicitly learned.

While reading books does socialize children into particular ways to use words (which are also reflected in school contexts), other means of oral language use have also been proven to develop sophisticated narrative skills (Heath, 1983). The examples in Table 4 demonstrate how this point is often overlooked in “language gap” discourse.

Again, we do not wish to denigrate literacy nor argue against the potential *academic* benefits that may result from developing literacy skills. That said, literacy practices that are based on school-oriented reading events (e.g., a storybook) are not inherently superior; rather, they merely reflect the types of literacy expectations that occur in a classroom and prepare students for those particular literacy events (Heath, 1983; McCarty, 2005a). In addition, this line of thinking does not recognize the sociolinguistic research that has yielded a better understanding of “multiliteracies” (New London Group, 1996) nor the ideological influence that literacy has had on Western societies (Street, 2001), especially in terms of how teachers perceive the literacy practices of minority students from low-SES groups (Johnson, 2014).

Metaphor #1: Language as wealth

The “language gap” campaign and related discourses are based on socioeconomic disparities, and the arguments rest on the contexts and circumstances that vary between wealthy families and those in poverty. In statements like “[t]he researchers suspect what’s happening is that wealthier parents simply have more tools to nurture a developing brain” (Jaffe, 2015), it is implied that those who live in difficult economic situations lack the appropriate parenting skills to benefit their children’s cognitive development. Essentially, “poverty” is a metonym that encompasses a host of social, cognitive, and academic woes. The focus of this section is not to fully unpack the meaning of poverty; instead, we aim to illustrate how the general perception of poverty provides a fertile gestalt for using metaphors to describe the “language gap.” Not surprisingly, the most prominent metaphor interdiscursively linked throughout “language gap” discourse frames LANGUAGE AS WEALTH.

Table 4. Language and literacy discourse.

<i>Language and Literacy Discourse</i>	
Research	“Compared with children from more advantaged backgrounds, lower SES children have deficits in these language skills, which literacy requires ” (Hoff, 2013, p. 7).
Institutions	“After controlling for family education and socioeconomic status, the literacy-related qualities of a child’s home are associated with language skill development ”(American Academy of Pediatrics, 2014, p. 405).
Media	“And much of the word gap stems from disadvantaged households not even having access to books and other texts ” (Walsh, 2015).

Table 5. Language as wealth discourse.

LANGUAGE AS WEALTH	
Research	“An early language environment lacking rich and abundant language input, lexical complexity, joint attention, and reciprocity contributes to diminished child language outcomes . . . ” (Leffel & Suskind, 2013, p. 268).
Institutions	“However, many families lack access to the types of information and resources that can help them make everyday moments into learning opportunities that are rich in language . Researchers have found that some children are exposed to more language-rich environments than others during the early years, which can result in a gap in the quantity and quality of words that children hear and learn. The richness of children’s language environment can impact school success and outcomes later in life” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, para. 2).
Media	“... the important message to take away is not the poor versus wealthy families, but the opportunities children have to interact with rich language ” (Sparks, 2015).

Considering the emphasis on socioeconomic status across all three discourse domains, this metaphor easily bridges the notion of monetary wealth to linguistic wealth (see Table 5).

The LANGUAGE AS WEALTH metaphor entails language as both “rich and abundant” in linguistic and financial terms. Claims like “the power of language is priceless” entail that only certain forms and patterns of language are valued. The emphasis on monetary quantity as equating to linguistic wealth also builds on the notion of quantity that is reflected in counting words and interactions—i.e., “language gap” research is founded on the principle that the more money one has, the more language one has. When associating language skills with academic progress, this metaphor is even more powerful in terms of essentially rationalizing why certain groups do better than others in school. In this line of thinking, it is therefore the child’s and parents’ responsibility to close the “gap” as opposed to educators’ and policy makers’ responsibility to build meaningful bridges. This rationalization connects to the underlying United States-based ideology of meritocracy that eclipses broader societal and structural inequities.

Metaphor #2: Language as health

While the WEALTH metaphor has direct conceptual correlations to socioeconomic status, other metaphors were applied that stem from the lack of resources that is commonly associated with living in poverty. One disturbing trend casts linguistic patterns in terms of the metaphor LANGUAGE AS HEALTH. As Hillary Clinton (2013) contends, “[c]oming to school without words is like coming to school without food or adequate health care. It makes it harder for kids to develop their creativity and imagination, to learn, excel, and live up to their full potential. It should spur us to action just like child hunger and child poverty” (para. 3). Clinton’s call to action is based on the perception that the language patterns of families in low-SES communities causes direct physical detriments. This premise underlies the expressions that explicitly relate language to health (see Table 6).

This apparent “threat” to children’s well-being was even framed by Hart and Risley (2003) as “an early catastrophe” (p. 4). Although the prevalence of the LANGUAGE AS HEALTH metaphor might

Table 6. Language as health discourse.

LANGUAGE AS HEALTH	
Research	“If a mother was told that her child had a ‘cultural deficit in nutrition,’ such a broad, vague claim could only be perceived as a perplexing insult. However, if she heard about new research showing that iron is absolutely critical for optimal brain development in infancy, and that healthy brain development is vital to her child’s success in school and in later life, she might be more interested in learning about new ways to provide more iron in her child’s diet” (Fernald et al., 2013, p. 245).
Institutions	“And the more I learn about the new research in the field, the more I am convinced that this is an issue vital to the future competitiveness of our country, the strength of our families, and the health of our communities ” (Clinton, 2013, para. 7).
Media	“This is pure biology... Which is why it’s a public-health initiative ” (Deruy, 2015). “ The Talking Cure ” (Talbot, 2015)

be conceptually related, in part, to the lack of access to health insurance facing individuals living in poverty, expressions like “The Talking Cure” and efforts to “improve children’s health” suggest ontological underpinnings with pathological descriptions—i.e., nonstandard dialects of English are pathologies that cause harm and must be cured. Similar rhetorical strategies have been noted in descriptions of undocumented immigrants (Johnson, 2005).

Metaphor #3: Language as food

Within “language gap” discourses, the LANGUAGE AS HEALTH metaphor is frequently associated with the notion of LANGUAGE AS FOOD. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) describe a system of related metaphors as “metaphor coherence” (p. 41). Coherent metaphors like LANGUAGE AS HEALTH and LANGUAGE AS FOOD fit together “by virtue of being subcategories of a major category and therefore sharing a common entailment” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 44). In the case of “language gap” discourse, lacking food is a health concern and has dire consequences. By equating language to nutrition, “language gap” advocates are able to frame diverse dialects of English as unhealthy and inadequate for physical and mental development (see Table 7).

The LANGUAGE AS FOOD metaphor is multifaceted. Not only does it impel the public to think of language in terms of nutrition, it poses standard forms of English as more nutritious by evoking those suffering from a “language gap” as starving in some way. This point facilitates arguments about child starvation and impact on physical and cognitive development. Not only does this entail that the language patterns of families in poverty lack adequate nutrition, they lack in quantity (i.e., causing starvation). In addition to establishing the need for adequate amounts of oral language, the LANGUAGE AS FOOD metaphor also substantiates the need for literacy-based activities (seen as essential nutrition and sustenance). This metaphor therefore invokes the idea that these parents are negligent and irresponsible if they do not provide the vocabulary nutrition a growing child needs.

Discussion

Since the popularity of “language gap” concept is based on remedying academic disparities, many measures of linguistic and cognitive development in the research literature are founded upon academic-oriented assessments (e.g., standardized tests, evaluating reading contexts, or using some type of decoding skill like identifying images in a picture). These methods are not based on authentic language use within meaningful communicative contexts and, on face value, should be questioned as primary metrics for characterizing students’ language patterns. Based on these approaches to measuring linguistic and cognitive development, there is also an overemphasis on the benefits of reading books at home. This is explicitly seen in how Hoff’s (2006) work prioritizes linguistic

Table 7. Language as food discourse.

LANGUAGE AS FOOD	
Research	“As with physical under-nutrition, lack of ‘mental nutrition’ can also compromise the developing brain, with lasting consequences for children’s ability to build the skills they will need to flourish in school and later life” (Fernald & Weisleder, 2015, p. 3).
Organization	“Nourishing a child’s mind in the first 5 years of life is as essential as feeding her body. . . Unfortunately, too many of our kids today are not getting the nourishment they need” (Clinton, 2013, para. 1). “Nurturing minds, changing lives: A baby’s brain grows to 80% of its adult size in the first 3 years, and during that time parent talk is the most crucial element for building neural connections” (LENA Research Foundation, 2015, para. 3).
Media	“Language is like nutrition for your brain. The more words you hear, the more your brain develops” (BabyiSpeech.com., 2015). “When a child is deprived of food, there is public outrage. . . We believe that the poverty of vocabulary should be discussed with the same passion as child hunger” (Lahey, 2014).

features that privilege language patterns found in schools (pp. 68–69) and faults mothers from low-SES backgrounds for negatively affecting their children’s vocabulary and grammar (p. 73).

Although we applaud efforts to heighten awareness of academic inequities that promote pathways for leveling economic disparities, our critique of the “language gap” hinges on the ideological assumptions of linguistic superiority upon which it is founded, as well as the resulting negative associations it promotes about the cognitive abilities of economically disadvantaged groups. The overall “language gap” discourse is based on research that overtly assumes the superiority of school-based language patterns. This line of reasoning essentially normalizes statements like: “A substantial body of evidence makes it clear that higher SES children have more advanced language skills than lower SES children of the same age” (Hoff, 2006, p. 61). Moreover, rejecting sociolinguistic and anthropological research as ignorant of SES differences in child-directed speech (e.g. Rowe, 2008, p. 187) elides the perspective that school language patterns are merely reproduced by individuals who are successful in academic settings.

Our argument here scrutinizes specific tenets of the “language gap” to demonstrate how it ignores other potential contributing factors like inequitable access to educational and economic opportunities that are perpetuated in schools. By looking at the ways the “language gap” resonates between scholarly literature and public spheres, we have pointed out discursive themes that continue to advance deficit orientations toward language-use and parenting practices in linguistically diverse communities. This process has illuminated interdiscursive links that focus on language in terms of “quality,” “deficit views,” and “literacy” among the three discursive domains. Our findings also highlight the interdiscursivity of prominent metaphors between the three domains to critically point out ideologically rooted (mis)representations of economically and linguistically minoritized communities. Ultimately, the perspective promoted in the research, media, and institutional rhetoric serves to reify the perceived superiority of school-based language and literacy activities—while simultaneously justifying the implementation of intervention programs that aim, at their core, to alter the way language-minority communities communicate such that they behave in ways that are as similar as possible to White, middle-class children. This trend has troubling resonances with historical events surrounding colonization and forced assimilation.

Although the “language gap” continues to be widely promoted across the three domains examined here, it has also been staunchly contested for its lack of sociolinguistic merit (Dudley-Marling, 2007; Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009; Johnson, 2015), negative educational and social implications (Avineri et al., 2015; Blum, 2014; Blum, Avineri, & Johnson, 2015; Blum & Riley, 2014; Gorski, 2012), and misleading and overessentialized claims about language patterns within and between socioeconomic status contexts (Sperry, 2014). Building on this body of linguistically informed arguments, our interrogation of the “language gap” is not meant to solely point out its absence of sociolinguistic and anthropological merit; rather, we seek to challenge subsequent studies to rigorously operationalize the notion of “language” such that it reflects the linguistic perspective of the human capacity for language. Moreover, we encourage further critique of the media and institutional representations of language patterns to show how scholarly research is taken for granted as authoritative and in turn influences the way concepts like the “language gap” contribute to larger discourses that perpetuate economic and social hierarchies.

Conclusion

We acknowledge that children who live in poverty are more likely to face challenges that affluent children do not (e.g., access to health care, adequate nutrition, work responsibilities). We also recognize the trend in academic disparities between economically advantaged and disadvantaged groups. That said, we oppose concepts like the “language gap” that denounce cultural features of parents and children who live in poverty as inherently inferior. Calling out the language patterns of minoritized communities as inadequate continues to ignore the fact that widespread academic challenges are historically rooted and extremely complex. By pointing out the misguided theoretical,

methodological, and rhetorical underpinnings of the “language gap,” we hope to encourage scholars, practitioners, and the public at large to reconsider the way that academic and economic disparities are conceptualized.

Our critique of the “language gap” does not suggest that children from linguistically diverse backgrounds continue to have limited access to academic language registers. Our point is that their home-language skills should not be targeted as a deficit for remediation. By communicating that the language patterns of certain communities cause academic and cognitive disadvantages, subscribers to the “language gap” ideology are missing the opportunity to help children develop metalinguistic awareness and scaffold their home-language skills to develop academic registers. Helping children understand the value of different language proficiencies across multiple contexts should be the goal—without solely promoting the legitimacy of language forms prioritized in school.

Considering that the United States has the second-highest child poverty rate among all industrialized countries (Adamson, 2012), it is imperative that we take a course of action that differs from the traditional approach to educating children from economically impoverished backgrounds. By critiquing the pejorative way “language gap” discourse frames linguistically diverse communities, we hope to draw attention to alternative perspectives of language use that prompt an asset-based view of students and their families so that educators will honor community-based language skills as valuable in their own right and also potentially as tools for supporting academic progress. With over 80% of U.S. teachers coming from a White background (Hrabowski & Sanders, 2015), a positive step for improving the education of culturally diverse students should involve a more concerted effort to recruit educators from diverse backgrounds, in addition to more widespread emphasis on pedagogical training grounded in sociolinguistics and anthropology within preparation programs for teachers and educational leaders. Instead of so 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 such that the diverse linguistic practices that are relevant within their communities are honored as strengths, not deficits.

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