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INTRODUCTION

Introducing the Language Gap

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In her cogent analysis of the social discourses surrounding the “logic” of education policy over the past 60 years, Teresa McCarty points out that “[o]ne of the most pervasive discursive tropes in U.S. education policy is the gap metaphor” (Avineri et al., 2015, p. 70). The perceived gap in science education triggered by Sputnik and the space race gave rise to the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which was essentially intended as an implement to combat the “War on Poverty.” McCarty shows how the focus on academic gaps and poverty resurfaced in the 1983 “Nation at Risk” report, and again in the 2001 reauthorization of the ESEA—“No Child Left Behind.” It should come as no surprise that efforts to ameliorate academic disparities within the past decades resonate with this type of “gap” discourse. Of particular concern in this special issue are the (often well-intentioned) efforts to address educational disparities that discredit the linguistic capital of culturally diverse communities in the United States by blaming academic challenges on a so-called “language gap” (i.e., the notion that the children in low-income families learn millions of words fewer than middle-class children).

Gap discourses have facilitated the way language use within economically disadvantaged communities is simultaneously blamed for academic disparities and targeted for remediation. Recent fascination with the “language gap” in the media as well as academic and popular journals continually promotes a 1995 study by Betty Hart and Todd Risley, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*. This book continued a tradition of deficit views regarding language patterns within low-socioeconomic communities (see Bereiter & Engemann, 1966; Bernstein, 1971) and correlated children’s home language use with subsequent low academic achievement. Hart and Risley popularized the misguided notion that by 3 years of age, children from wealthier households were exposed to approximately 30 million more words than children from lower-socioeconomic-status (SES) backgrounds. Their claim of a “word gap” (aka the “language gap”) has been used by many researchers and educators to: (a) explain the low academic achievement patterns of students from economically impoverished backgrounds; and (b) suggest ways to correct the problem.

The impact of this study is evident in the rapid proliferation of research studies, language remediation programs, and media coverage touting efforts to change the communication patterns of communities in poverty. In spite of Hart and Risley’s methodological and theoretical shortcomings (see Baugh, 2017; Johnson, 2015), their work has been cited over 5,000 times in the scholarly literature (Rothschild, 2016) and is widely embraced as an underlying tenet for programs aimed at curing poverty by engineering linguistic transformation within minority communities. This notion of a “language gap” has become normalized to such an extent that some individuals from low-SES backgrounds have been led to believe that their ways of speaking to their children are responsible for, and can result in, academic failure (e.g., Ludden, 2014; Talbot, 2015).

The focus of the “language gap” concept is not only the number of words that parents speak. Although Hart and Risley’s initial emphasis on counting words as an indicator of linguistic prowess still permeates numerous research studies and educational programming, the “language gap” has spawned multiple scholarly trajectories that aim to point out linguistic inferiorities in characteristics like communicative quality, language processing, and overall health (see Johnson et al., 2017). Here,

we challenge those views by espousing an anthropological perspective (Zentella, 1997) that interrogates the underlying ideological assumptions behind the “language gap.” An anthropological *linguistic* approach unmasks the focus on language as the source of the problem, pointing to how little educators and policy makers actually know about different ways of speaking and raising children and underscoring the decisive role of the gatekeepers who control access to success. From this perspective, we move forward by addressing two primary concerns.

Concern #1: Education, poverty, and culture

Considering that “language gap” initiatives focus on economically disadvantaged families, it is essential to explore the relationship between poverty and education. According to UNICEF (2012), the United States has the second-highest child poverty rate among all industrialized countries across the globe. More to the point, national statistics shed light on the extent to which poverty disproportionately impacts minority communities. U.S. Census data demonstrate that the poverty rates of Blacks (26.2%), American Indians (24%), and Hispanics (23.6%) vastly exceed national averages (14.8%) (Institute for Research on Poverty, 2014; U.S. Census, 2015). These economic realities become even more glaring when juxtaposed with data from educational contexts.

One indicator of economically challenged communities is the percentage of students within school districts who qualify for the free or reduced-price lunch program (as supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National School Lunch Program). Aud, Fox, and Ramani (2010) report that among all fourth-grade students in the United States, participants in this program were primarily Hispanics (77%), Blacks (74%), and American Indians (68%) (p. 36). The same groups also represented the highest percentages in high school dropout rates, lowest scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and lowest numbers of 18- to 24-year-olds enrolled in colleges and universities (Aud et al., 2010).

A cursory read of these worrisome statistics might lead some to assume that the correlation between ethnic background, poverty, and academic achievement is rooted in cultural differences and skewed priorities (i.e., that minority children are poor and do not succeed in school because of their group’s beliefs and practices). It is important to point out that racial and ethnic disparities in the United States are the result of broader sociohistorical forces rooted in the promotion of dominant-class interests such that minority families and communities have endured limited access to housing, jobs, fair wages, higher education, and political power for centuries (Marger, 2006; Zinn, 2003). While education has been touted as an instrument for eroding social and economic disparities between groups, the truth is that schools have continued to play an integral role in reproducing academic inequities (McCarty, 2005).

Instead of examining whether educators are adequately prepared to work with low-income students from culturally diverse backgrounds, “language gap” research and programs approach linguistic diversity as academically damaging and in need of remediation (see Johnson et al., 2017). Within the “language gap” line of reasoning, poverty becomes inextricably linked to culture such that language becomes a proxy for race, and certain racial groups are believed to speak in impoverished ways—to the detriment of their children’s education. Whereas constructive approaches to educating diverse students should include training teachers to implement *culturally sustaining pedagogies* (Paris & Alim, 2014) and build on their students’ *funds of knowledge* (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) to enhance academic progress, concepts like the “language gap” reinforce stereotypes of cultural inferiority and feed into the larger gap discourses that have guided education policy for decades.

Concern #2: Language and linguistic minorities

A fundamental premise woven through all of the articles in this issue involves viewing languages and language varieties as linguistically equal. In other words, all language varieties are contextually acquired to meet the needs of the individuals within a given discourse community. A language ideology perspective allows us to see why some language varieties are determined superior and others

inferior within and across different social contexts and the extent to which the ways of speaking of those in power are favored (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). Applying this lens to the “language gap” illustrates two main points: (a) there exists a linguistic hierarchy in the United States that prioritizes school-based ways of speaking English and raising children; and (b) research, programs, and media coverage surrounding the “language gap” further reinforce this hierarchy by promoting the notion that the language used by poor people is inferior. Hence, the “language gap” is based on a manifold set of “WEIRD” (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) assumptions that simultaneously reinforce and instantiate these language hierarchies (see Blum, 2017).

While proponents of the “language gap” do not tend to mention specific dialects of minority groups, those who are most represented in poverty tend to be cultural and linguistic minorities as noted previously: Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans. The “language gap” ignores the history of racial oppression in the United States and constitutes yet another effort in the continued campaign of cultural assimilation. In spite of decades of sociolinguistic and anthropological research studies that demonstrate the grammatical validity of African American English (see Baugh, 2017) and other varieties, as well as the linguistic dexterity of bilingual and bidialectal communities (see García & Otheguy, 2017), advocates of the “language gap” perpetuate a deficit perspective toward these groups based on their economic situation (Payne, 2013).

Accommodating students from linguistically and racially diverse backgrounds is any mention of how schools are underprepared to accommodate students from linguistically and racially diverse backgrounds. Taking into consideration that over 84% of U.S. teachers in U.S. public schools are White, and over 50% of students come from a minority background (Hrabowski & Sanders, 2015), it is time to stop blaming students and their families for being different and instead investigate the extent to which disparities in academic achievement are related to the extent to which schools are equipped to support students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and economic backgrounds.

Outlining the issue

The collection of articles in this special issue engage the “language gap” from various vantage points. The linguistic, political, anthropological, and educational arguments established here are meant to provide scholars, practitioners, and policy makers with specific examples that can be used to better understand the culturally biased deficit ideologies upon which the “language gap” is founded. Starting the conversation, Johnson, Avineri, and Johnson portray the way the “language gap” is promoted in research literature, policy making, and in the media. Their examination of the “language gap” research literature is applied to an analysis of the public discourse surrounding the “language gap” to illustrate underlying rhetorical patterns that reinforce unfounded perspectives concerning language and socioeconomic status. Blum’s contribution extends the conversation by highlighting how the influence of WEIRD groups generates taken-for-granted assumptions that reify the “language gap” within research and social contexts. Her interrogation of common understandings of language, childhood, learning, and research illuminates the ideologically driven agendas supporting “language gap” initiatives.

These broader perspectives on the “language gap” are complemented by discussions of how it applies to specific groups. Baugh’s article provides an ethnographic portrait of language patterns in African American communities. In addition to providing detailed linguistic descriptions, he emphasizes the complex nature of collecting language-based data to call into question the deficit hypothesis that guided Hart and Risley’s foundational study. Similarly, García and Otheguy confront the “language gap” by contributing examples from bilingual communities. Building on the notion of “translanguaging,” they underscore the linguistic dexterity that children from bilingual and bidialectal communities possess. Instead of viewing multilingualism as inhibiting academic progress, García and Otheguy encourage educators and scholars to recognize the virtuosity of students’ meaning-making skills and take advantage of students’ entire language repertoire.

We acknowledge that this special journal issue alone will not stem the seemingly ever-increasing tide of “language gap” research and programs. That said, we are confident that the arguments presented here will encourage conversations that bring into question the validity and nature of initiatives based on the “language gap.” We hope these articles inspire other scholars and practitioners to embark on varied trajectories of research and program development that further expose the deficit orientations of the “language gap” while also providing examples of effective ways of supporting teachers, students, and families who come from diverse backgrounds.

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