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## Normalization of language deficit ideology for a new generation of minoritized U.S. youth

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### ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes linguistic deficit discourse as it emerges in language gap research, gets appropriated by language gap foundations, and is reported in the media. Through intertextual analysis, we show how language deficit ideologies combine with neoliberal logic to normalize the marginalization of minoritized families, linguistic and sociolinguistic hierarchies, and the privileging of White middle-class (socio)linguistic norms. Language gap discourse turns parents into scapegoats by blaming them for the linguistic deficiencies of their children and low-income families are encouraged to misrecognize the inherent value of their communication abilities. IN the process, social processes that engender economic and educational inequality are obfuscated. Rather than attempting to find real answers to real problems, language gap discourse emphasizes a quick fix solution (filling your kids up with words) instead of engaging with the real causes of educational inequity.

### KEYWORDS

Language gap; ideology; normalization; intertextuality; discourse studies

Much of what we know about language and language acquisition is unknown, ignored, or scorned in public discourse. For example, it has been clear to linguists for many years that parents do not teach their children to talk. While there is a healthy debate about how much the environment plays a role in first language acquisition, there is widespread agreement that humans are born pre-equipped to acquire language. Yet, despite linguistic and sociolinguistic findings, myths about language and language acquisition fueled by dominant language ideologies, reinforce the power of language deficit discourses. These language ideologies encompass attitudes, cultural conceptions of language and language variation, shared bodies of commonsense notions about the nature of language, and position particular features/varieties as more natural (Woolard 1992). They rely on relationships of power and are part of *habitus*, or, socially learned ways of being that provide different amounts of cultural and linguistic capital (Bourdieu 1977). Linguistic and sociolinguistic hierarchies position minoritized languages and dialects as inferior and normalize the dominance of some language varieties. Their hegemonic power is empirically captured in language attitudes studies in which speakers consistently denigrate their own minoritized dialect as inferior to other language varieties, which are positioned as “standard” (see review in Cargile et al. 1994).

Language ideologies are durable because of the process of normalization, whereby “a set of simultaneous or subsequent discursive strategies gradually introduce and/or perpetuate in public discourse ... patterns of representing social actors, processes, and issues” in ways that privilege the linguistic and sociolinguistic norms of dominant speech communities and therefore leads to the “gradual normalization of key radicalized norms of describing the social, political, economic, [and educational] reality” (Krzyżanowski 2020a, 2). The example par excellence in the U.S. was the “Ebonics debate,” in which African American Language (AAL) varieties were consistently portrayed as slang or ungrammatical or otherwise inferior, despite the research describing the linguistic features of AAL (which differ in consistent and predictable ways from other English varieties), illuminating its syntactic complexity, and yet revealing how its speakers face additional challenges when faced with dominant academic language varieties and discourse practices. Nonetheless, the non-dominant voices of linguists were drowned in a popular discourse – in which the opinions of priests and radio show hosts were given equal footing (Goffman 1979) to those of educators and linguists in, for example, the media and congressional hearings (see Rickford 1999a) – which was thus normalized.

Language deficit ideologies are not new, however, in the same way as discursive shifts that have recently normalized populist, neoliberal, and racist public discourse, which are captured elsewhere in this issue (e.g. Krzyżanowski 2020b, Reyes 2020, and Smith and Higgins, 2020 in this special issue). However, we argue that a *re*-normalization of language deficit ideology is perpetuated by a new generation of researchers, public intellectuals, politicians, as well as foundation and media discourse, which normalizes the notion that poor kids experience verbal, and therefore cognitive, deficits. We reveal how ideological representation of minoritized families and their language varieties “come to be seen as non-ideological common sense” (Fairclough 2010, 31). While we do not portray this process as an intentional “strategy,” it is part of a top-down discursive process that solidifies, perpetuates, and disguises neoliberalism as logical and/or natural (Krzyżanowski 2016).

The intertextual and interdiscursive connections within the echo chamber that promote language deficit discourses – within an ideological-discursive formation (Fairclough 2010, 30) – clearly privilege middle and upper class Standard English speakers who do not endure economic and linguistic marginalization. Economically disadvantaged parents are thus “scapegoats” in the debate, in which non-dominant ideas are silenced in a language gap discourse that normalizes educational inequity for economically disadvantaged children. Low-income families are encouraged to “misrecognize” the inherent value of their communication abilities by seeing themselves as the problem (Bourdieu 1977), a process that obfuscates broader social processes that engender economic and educational (dis)advantages. Thus, language gap discourse and neoliberal logic combine to normalize increased marginalization of the already marginalized.

Portraying their solution as an educational panacea – i.e. that parents should fill their children up with words – language gap researchers cite verbal deficits as the best predictor for eventual educational achievement, and politicians and educational organizations appropriate these arguments, despite a history of educational research documenting a diversity of social and sociolinguistic factors that impact educational opportunity for minoritized students. Thus, what is considered “normal” – i.e. White middle class linguistic and sociolinguistic norms – is based on the “prescriptive character of the norm,” which positions minoritized language varieties as abnormal (Foucault 2007, 57) and pathologizes the sociolinguistic and language socialization processes that incorporate them (Foucault 1990). In

this article, we examine how linguistic deficit discourses emerge from the language gap literature, permeate language gap foundations in the U.S., and find their way into the media.

### Conceptualizing language deficits

While language deficit scholarship has its theoretical roots in Bernstein (1971) and Bereiter and Engelmann (1966), it was popularized as “language gap” research with the publication of Hart and Risley’s (1995) book *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*. The influence of this research has been robust. For example, debatable research findings from language gap studies have become so popular, they are accepted as fact by a U.S. president. In a promotional video for President Barack Obama’s Early Learning Initiative (2014), he echoes a contentious finding from Hart and Risley (1995): “We know that right now, during the first three years of life, a child born into a low income family, hears 30 million fewer words than a child born into a well-off family.” Today, language gap research has become a cottage industry and both individual researchers and large-scale initiatives are funded by wealthy donors (like Michael Bloomberg), private organizations (like the Clinton Foundation), and influential governmental sources (like the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services).

Language deficit ideology can be traced to Bernsetein (1971), who argues that linguistic and socioeconomic differences are intertwined and explain a lack of educational success for children from lower socioeconomic status (SES) communities. He characterizes the language of the working class as a *restricted code*, which is predictable, contains simple and rigid syntax, and restricts the expression of abstract concepts. Middle class speakers, on the other hand, speak an *elaborated code*, which is less predictable, requires more complex planning, and exhibits more complex syntax. Bernstein always emphasizes that the intention is not to devalue the speech of lower-class speakers, and stresses that the codes refer to performance and not to competence (in a Chomskyan sense), and therefore are not related to linguistic ability. For example, he argues that the “restricted code contains a vast potential of meanings” and “should not be disvalued” and that schools must do more to understand these students and, presumably, their restricted code (Bernsetein 1971, 152). In some ways, Bernstein’s arguments were aligned with linguistic anthropological work suggesting a mismatch between language that is spoken at home and the language that is expected in schools (e.g. Heath 1983; Philips 1983).

With a similar focus on class differences in language use, Bereiter and Englemann (1966) argue that the poor – and their focus is African American kids in the United States – suffer from intellectual backwardness and speak a non-logical mode of expression. Based on interviews conducted with children in a laboratory setting, they argue that the culprit for the intellectual inferiority of lower-class kids is cultural deprivation, which results from lacking the necessary knowledge and ability to be successful in school. The main culprit of cultural deprivation, as they argue, is verbal deprivation. Lower-class children are exposed to language that lacks complexity and is simply illogical: “With no known exceptions, studies of three to five-year old children from lower socio-economic backgrounds have shown them to be retarded or below average in every intellectual ability” (3–4).

While Labov’s (1972) groundbreaking research on AAL effectively refuted Bernstein and Bereiter and Engelman, more than two decades later, Hart and Risley’s (1995) seminal study reinvigorated research into the connections between social class and language. They argued

that higher SES families talk more, with more varied vocabulary, while lower SES kids experience a word gap. They conducted observations and audio recordings for one hour a month over approximately 2.5 years in the homes of 42 families (one baby each) from different SES backgrounds in and around Kansas City, Missouri. Based on their data, they projected that over 4 years, this would result in a total of 32 million fewer words of cumulative exposure for children from the welfare category as compared to the professional-class group, thus the claim of a “30-million word gap” by the age of 3 (Hart and Risley 2003). It is important to note that this was not an empirical finding but a projected estimate.

When reflecting on and describing the impetus behind their research, Hart and Risley (2003, 4) state: “Rather than concede to the unmalleable forces of heredity, we decided that we would undertake research that would allow us to understand the disparate developmental trajectories we saw.” The suggestion that there are only two explanations for the poor performance of working-class kids in school – genetics or a word gap – is reminiscent of Bernsetein’s (1971) logic. While both end up arguing that genetics are *not* to blame, proposing it as an alternative explanation, even when rejected, turns a eugenic idea into a reasonable claim. At the very least, the portrayal of the problem in terms of a (false) dichotomy ignores the wealth of educational, linguistic, sociolinguistic, and linguistic anthropological research that proffers other explanations for achievement disparities.

Since Hart and Risley’s publication, there has been a deluge of research, which has grown from a focus on a word gap to a more general language gap, and measured both language quantity and quality in varied ways (e.g. Pace et al. 2017; Rowe 2012). While Hart and Risley (1995) focus on the sheer number of words, others argue that it is not just the quantity of words, but the *quality* of language, which is determined by SES and ultimately is harmful to academic progress. A comprehensive review of this literature is not the focus here (although see Hirsh-Pasek et al. 2015; Pace et al. 2017); however, it is important to note two points of critique. First, while it is often portrayed as monolithic, there is inconsistency in the language gap research about the relationships between quantity of words, quality of language, SES, and linguistic development. For example, while Hart and Risley (1995) argue that the number of words is what matters, others find that the sheer quantity of words does not determine linguistic development (Pan et al. 2005). Some find that socioeconomic status predicts quantity of words (Hoff 2003) while others find no such prediction is possible (Weisleder and Fernald 2013). Some find that child-directed speech, not quantity, is what matters (Weisleder and Fernald 2013) while others argue that speech in the environment, not just speech directed at children, is good enough (Huttenlocher et al. 2002). Second, the measures of quality often rely on standardized assessments, but many are administered in invalid ways. For example, the Mean Length Utterance (MLU) measure is often used, yet incorrectly applied, and the results incorrectly interpreted.

Furthermore, a growing body of research has challenged the findings in language gap research. Criticism has highlighted methodological flaws (Baugh 2017; Dudley-Marling and Lucas 2009), a lack of sociolinguistic awareness (Johnson 2015a), and deficit ideological orientations (Avineri et al. 2015; Johnson, Avineri, and Johnson 2017). An important rebuttal to Hart and Risley comes from Sperry’s (2014; Sperry, Sperry, and Miller 2018) mixed-methods study of language exposure among children from different regions in the US (Baltimore, Alabama, Indiana, and two communities in Chicago), in which he finds variation within and between groups from different socioeconomic groups across the different regions (see also Fernald and Weisleder 2015). Still, the power of language gap research lies in its ability to tap into

already existing popular language deficit discourses, which are a formidable obstacle for research that raises questions about normalized beliefs about language.

### The language gap echo chamber

With a few notable exceptions (e.g. Huttenlocher et al. 2002, 2010), what *is* consistent within language gap scholarship is its lack of engagement with research in linguistics, sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and education. This leads to opaque or questionable conceptualizations about what is being measured – i.e. “language” – which are not grounded in the language sciences. This is a problem because, as Chomsky (1959) argued in his rejection of behavioristic explanations for language acquisition à la B.F. Skinner, “[T]here is little point in speculating about the process of acquisition without a much better understanding of *what is acquired*” (55, emphasis ours). Hart and Risley (1995, 22) make this oblique reference: “We knew the ‘anthropological studies’ describing how children grow up in different cultures and different homes.” However, Hart and Risley do not bother to review, synthesize, or interrogate the major findings from those studies and a reader has to look at their footnotes to discover they are referencing Shirley Brice Heath, Elinor Ochs, and Bambi Schiefflin, among other. There is no discussion about how earlier findings might inform or conflict with their research and they apparently feel no need to respond to the robust literature on child language socialization (cf. Duranti, Ochs, and Schieffelin 2014). Contending with cultural differences in child language socialization would conflict with their proposal that one form of socialization is superior, and thus the oversight might be strategic.

When linguistic research is reviewed in language gap studies, it is often misrepresented. For example, Hoff (2003), characterizes first language acquisition research in terms of a (false) dichotomy between innateness and behaviorism: “One view is that development, in particular language development, unfolds following a genetic blueprint (Pinker 2002). The alternative view, of course, is that the environment plays a substantial role [no citation].” This claim misrepresents decades of linguistics research – i.e. there is no “view” that language is entirely innate. While Pinker and Chomsky argue that humans are innately equipped with Universal Grammar (Chomsky 1975), Chomsky also stresses that, “There is an obvious sense in which any aspect of psychology is based ultimately on the observation of behavior” (1972, 73). On the other hand, those who argue for a more substantial environmental impact also accept that the human capacity for language is innate. For example, Tomasello (2000, 247) whose usage-based theory of first language acquisition is a better theoretical fit for language gap studies argues, “There is no question that human children are biologically prepared to acquire a natural language.”

Sociolinguistic research on language variation and dialectal diversity is either ignored or misunderstood as well. Rowe (2008) declares that there are only two studies on how SES relates to language style among participants in “researcher-directed speech,” ignoring, or unaware of, the body of sociolinguistic research devoted to how and why researchers collect naturally occurring speech data from participants from a variety of SES, racial, and linguistic backgrounds (e.g. Meyerhoff, Schlee, and Mackenzie 2015). Additionally, Hoff (2006) compares the language socialization processes of African American children as described in Heath (1983) to children in “sink-or-swim” second language classrooms, thus conflating first language acquisition at home and second language learning in a classroom. Her review of the literature on African American Language (AAL) relies on research

from scholars with training in speech pathology who focus on communication disorders (Craig and Washington 2004) and completely ignores the vast body of literature on AAL published by linguists. Hoff's (2006, 64) conclusions about linguistic development among AAL speakers reflects this: "The effects on the rate of language development are indistinguishable in the available data from effects of SES," suggesting that like low-SES kids, AAL speakers will suffer from linguistic deficiencies (cf. Labov 1972). Claims like Hoff's ignore a body of research that has helped to highlight the linguistic sophistication found among AAL speakers, and all U.S. speech communities for that matter, which have been disparaged as inferior in public discourse (e.g. Fought 2003; Labov 1972; Leap 1993; Rickford 1999b; Wolfram and Thomas 2002).

Finally, while sometimes alluded to, the research on child language socialization is dismissed. Research across diverse speech communities demonstrates the varied ways in which children are socialized into cultural ways of being and knowing (cf. Duranti, Ochs, and Schieffelin 2014; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986). Language gap research, on the other hand, portrays the sociolinguistic norms of White Middle-Class English speakers as monolithic and superior. For example, one of the central arguments in language gap studies is that child-directed speech is necessary to avoid linguistic deficits. However, while a constant conversational give-and-take between parent and child might be natural among middle-class families in the U.S., language socialization research reveals that this is not a sociolinguistic norm that is ubiquitous everywhere in the world (Ochs 1986) and would be sociolinguistically inappropriate in some communities (Philips 1983).

### **A return to behaviorism**

While Chomsky's (1959) critique dismantled Skinner's ([1957] 2008) behavioristic theory of language acquisition, language gap researchers have seemingly revived it, even if it is never cited. Skinner ([1957] 2008) argues that through imitation and reinforcement, children are taught "echoic behavior." Acquiring language is therefore like learning many other things – based on stimuli, responses, and reinforcement – with the strength of the verbal behavior relying on the strength of the stimulus. Chomsky's (1959) rebuttal emphasizes the arbitrary and unscientific application of Skinner's particular disciplinary expertise in Behavioral Psychology to a phenomenon he did not specialize in (i.e. language acquisition). He notes that Skinner's claims are not based on actual observations of human interaction but on analogies to laboratory studies of animals.

Beyond Chomsky's critique, first language acquisition research over the years has revealed a number of problems with Skinner's ideas: (1) Children are always producing novel sentences, with unique combinations of words, and so it cannot simply be imitation; (2) Even when imitating, children vary widely in *how much* they imitate their parents; (3) Parents don't actually correct their children all that often; and, in fact, (4) Parents often imitate their kids' errors – providing positive evidence that what the child said was correct (O'Grady 2005). Furthermore, first language acquisition research has revealed that while some features rely more heavily on environmental input, others do not appear to be related to parental input (Han, Musolino, and Lidz 2016). As Han, Musolino, and Lidz (2016, 946) point out, "It is widely acknowledged that what children acquire is not merely a recapitulation of their input."

In this paper, we analyze how language gap findings find a home in well-funded organizations which, in turn, sponsor more language gap research. The organizations produce policies



and reports, which reify language gaps, and patronizingly attempt to teach parents how to talk to their children. The media, then, rely on the foundations for their reporting. Existing within an echo chamber, the media and the organizations, create a monolithic language gap discourse that relies on key topoi in its circulation. The analysis section is organized by these topoi.

## Method

The analysis herein is grounded in Critical Discourse Studies (Fairclough 2010; Wodak 1996) and intertextual analysis (Fairclough 1992; Johnson 2015b), which helps reveal connections across multiple layers of discursive activity. Kristeva (1986, written in 1966) is credited for coining the term (l'intertextualité) in her analyses of Mikhail Bakhtin's writings on literary semiotics, which popularized his mostly unpublished and unknown work (Allen 2011). Bakhtin (1986) proposes that the (spoken and written) texts we create are filled with echoes of previous speakers/writers and any utterance can only be fully understood against the background of other utterances. These echoes, or intertextual connections, imbue texts with dialogic overtones: "[A]n utterance is a link in the chain of speech communication, and it cannot be broken off from the preceding links that determine it both from within and without" (Bakhtin 1986, 94). Because of these connections, meaning is not just attributable to one particular utterance in isolation but emerges between utterances, texts, and discourses.

Whereas intertextual analysis largely attends to the lexico-grammatical features of a text, interdiscursivity refers to the connections between texts and discourses. Defined by Fairclough (1992, 271) as "the configuration of discourse conventions that go into [the text's] production" interdiscursive connections reveal how discourses circulating across various physical contexts and layers of discursive activity get reified in policy documents and the media. This analysis relied on multiple data sources. First an exhaustive review of newspaper articles revealed 59 that reported on the language gap. Ten were excluded because they were critical of the language gap research. Second, a review of foundation publications was conducted, focusing on the major organizations devoted to language gap research, including Providence Talks, Too Small to Fail, The Thirty Million Words Initiative, Talk with Me Baby, LENA Research Foundation, Bridging the Word Gap Research Network, and finally, while it is not a foundation like the others, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Intertextual analysis began with a close reading of all the textual data. Within the larger body of textual data, commonly deployed lexico-grammatical and discursive features were traced, which provided a set of codes and grounded the thematic analysis.

## Analysis

### *Topos 1: pith over nuance*

Beginning a sentence with the utterance "We know that . . .," as Obama does in the video cited above, is an assertive speech act that performs what Blommaert (2007) calls scale jumping. For example, to invoke authority, doctors will use "we" when suggesting a treatment and teachers will use "we" when reprimanding students (i.e. "We wait until break to use the bathroom!"). Using "we" instead of "I" jumps from a lower, local, present, here and now scale to a timeless, more widespread scale. Such statements index a social order. The construction "We know that" positions what follows as an epistemological certainty, with no room for debate.



Opaque references to “the science” and “scientists” – especially when unnamed – have a similar effect, normalizing debatable claims as commonsense facts (Fairclough 2010). Both discursive moves invoke a larger community of experts, the power of which is strengthened because it is a nameless faceless community, whose authority is unquestioned and unquestionable. In describing the language gap, media reports are rife with statements like “It is a well-known fact that ...” or “It is now well established that ...,” “The science says ...” and “Scientists have long known ...” Such pith creates the impression that the findings are solid, the debate decided, and the conclusions final.

It is perhaps not surprising that there is little interrogation of the research in media reports since they primarily rely on language gap foundations for their reporting, both of which portray the language gap as monolithic truth. This, in turn, fuels questionable claims. For example, in a *Too Small to Fail* report (Crow and O’Leary 2015, 2), it is claimed that linguistic differences among families are “predictors of children’s development, success in school, and even long-term health consequences.” In a *LENA Foundation* report, it is argued that: “According to research, they’re a very powerful predictor of brain growth.” Neither cite research supporting these claims. Foundation reports do not adhere to the same rules as academic articles and, therefore, specific citations to actual research are rare and, when present, are often research from a member of the foundation. For example, a *Providence Talks* document claims that “Providence Talks supports parents in improving the language environments of their children, at the time when brain development science indicates that language development is most critical (Suskind 2015).” While Dana Suskind is, indeed, a physician, the results in her book, *Thirty Million Words*, (Suskind 2015) rely primarily on Hart and Risley (1995), anecdotal evidence, and her own instincts about the connections between language development and social class, and *not* medical research.

## **Topos 2: pathologization**

Pathologization is an important discursive device for justifying and normalizing bigotry and diagnosing differences as deficits instead of social constructions (Annamma et al. 2019). Foucault (1990) argues that an explosion of medical discourse around human sexuality, and a corresponding pathologization of homosexuality, justified the bigotry of the state, and grounded them as medical truths. The medical discourse around sex, disguised in the language of science, was not scientific, but served the medical and juridical control of the body, or what Foucault refers to as bio-power. By shaping the discourse, the “truth” was formed.

A common feature of language gap discourse is its reliance on pathologization, wherein the language practices of the poor are portrayed as potentially causing health problems. Language becomes metaphorical food for the brain and those who receive deficient input are being malnourished. The result is that children are portrayed as not only suffering from language deficiencies, but potentially cognitive deficiencies, which lead to health consequences. For example, in support of language gap initiatives and President Obama’s Early Learning Initiative, the U.S. Department of Education argues:

It’s important to note that talking to one’s baby doesn’t just promote language development. It promotes brain development more broadly. Every time a parent or caregiver has a positive, engaging verbal interaction with a baby – whether it’s talking, singing, or reading – neural connections of all kinds are strengthened within the baby’s rapidly growing brain (Shankar 2014).

Claims about the connections between language and brain development and “neural connections” are never justified with research findings in the report.

Media reports help normalize these claims, proclaiming for example, that the “Health consequences can be dire and the benefits of eliminating [the word gap] immense” (Deruy 2015), and, “Language is the nutrition for a developing brain” (NPR Staff 2015). A Too Small to Fail publication, entitled *Word Health: Addressing the Word Gap as a Public Health* (Crow and O’Leary 2015) declares that “The lack of words in a child’s life amounts to both a public education and public health concern.” Additionally, an instructional flyer from *Talk With Me Baby* (<http://www.talkwithmebaby.org/>) entreats parents who “want the best for their baby” to “feed their baby’s brain with a steady diet of words” because “language nutrition is free!” The implication is that not heeding the advice of language gap institutions means parents do not want the best for their baby and will therefore deprive them of necessary linguistic nutrition, which in turn will lead to health problems. The message is clear: If you do not speak to your children in the correct way, you are literally making them sick.

### **Topos 3: hyperbole and salvation**

If the crisis is the language gap, the solution is filling your child up with words. In a 2003 piece, Hart and Risley (2003) include this ominous looking picture to illustrate the catastrophe, here portrayed as an apocalyptic looking earthquake that divides two groups of people – presumably the linguistically deprived and the saved – and threatens to swallow them.



This sense of crisis is perpetuated in media reports, which describe the language gap as a “tragic indictment of modern society” (Mansell 2010) and simply “horrendous” (Wallace 2014). An NPR piece describes the tension: “It’s hopeless ... But is it hopeless?” (Spiegel 2011).

Hyperbole is a trope that is intentionally and unabashedly deceptive. It relies on excess and exaggeration but is typically meant to be recognized as exaggeration, as in the expression, “It’s a million degrees outside!” However, hyperbole can also be ontologically

and epistemologically disruptive: “[E]mphasis is produced through hyperbole ... when more is said than the truth warrants ... so as to give greater force to suspicion” (Cicero, cited in Ritter 2010). Newspaper writers use hyperbole to entice their readers and dramatize the potentially mundane; however, if the media is understood as a neutral medium, the hyperbole can normalize questionable claims as inescapable reality.

#### ***Topos 4: parental training: talking = teaching***

The salvation of poor parents is contrasted with the already-saved middle and upper-class parent. Characterized simply as “the talkative mom” in a 2013 piece in the Washington Post (Strauss 2013), the middle-class parent is portrayed as proceeding in a near constant mode of annotation, reading poetry to their children in utero, describing fruit at the supermarket, pointing out the shape of a stop sign, etc. The implication is that because poor children do not exist in continuous receipt of dictation, they are deprived by their parents who lack the appropriate ambition to talk to their children in the correct way. Low-income parents influenced by the wrong cultural norms therefore require interventions, which include a focus on sociolinguistic norms that reflect White middle-class speech communities and their communicative practices. Preferred communicative activities, which are a priori assumed to be superior, include eye contact, constant quizzing, parental narration of their own activities, peppering the children with questions, and the use of display questions, which are unnatural norms and speech acts for many speech communities (Avineri et al. 2015).

Claims about parenting are reinforced in foundation documents, which contend that “[h]ighly educated mothers spend more time with children, read to them more, and use more complex language when speaking with their children as compared to less educated mothers” (Crow and O’Leary 2015, 6). Foundation “tip sheets” published by Too Small to Fail, Talk With Me Baby, and the U.S. Department of Education Suggestions suggest ditching the baby talk, asking questions that require a choice, singing, and making eye contact. More explicit instructions include:

- “A stop sign, a traffic light, or a tree might seem boring to you, but it’s a whole new world to your child, so talk to them about it!” (Talking is Teaching 2016a).
- Let’s turn “wash time” into “talk time”! Laundromats aren’t just for washing clothes! (Talking is Teaching 2016b)
- Move to the child’s level and make eye contact (U.S. Department of Education n.d.)
- Use eye contact, make facial expressions, smile, and gesture (Talk With Me Baby 2016)

Such odd suggestions are repeated in the media which portray every moment of the day as an opportunity to fill your children with words. For example, “Bath time could be a teachable moment” (NPR Staff 2013). Middle and upper-class parents are often portrayed as ambitious: “Ambitious parents who are already reading poetry and playing Mozart to their children in utero” (Rich 2014). “The ambitious parent is always talking ... the child exists in continuous receipt of dictation” (Bellafante 2012). Other suggestions are deeply strange, including the following, which is repeated across media outlets, even though the source is unclear: “Instead of turning on music while fixing lunch, talk about the bowl of fruit on the table!” (Neergaard 2014). Or, this suggestion from Strauss (2018), which is perhaps more to the point: “Talk to your baby like you talk to your dog.”

## Discussion: what's wrong with being wrong?

By burying conflicting accounts, emphasizing a sense of crisis, pathologizing non-middle class sociolinguistic norms, and through sheer repetition, language gap discourse manufactures consent (Herman and Chomsky 1988). Lower-income parents, who already face formidable obstacles (racism, poverty, nativism, actual health care issues), are patronizingly told that talking to their kids more is an educational and economic panacea. Media reports about the language gap and foundation documents reinforce popular ideologies about language, education, and social class, which in turn normalize economic and educational inequality as the natural order of things. As Dana Suskind argues, “It doesn’t happen with one intervention . . . It happens when an idea takes hold in a population” (quoted in NPR Staff 2015). Despite Suskind’s concerns, we argue that the idea has already “taken hold.”

Perhaps the most pernicious impact of this research is the demonization of parents – and how this is normalized. Language gap research takes the focus off of school and instead blames poor families, whose language practices literally make their children unhealthy, and lead to irreversible deficits (unless they join a program or initiative). Notably, in a 1992 article, Hart and Risley refer to their measures of language as “measures of parenting” and, similarly, Suskind, suggests that child-directed speech depends on “maternal knowledge of child development,” implying that the communicative norms in poor households are due to poor parenting. There is no justification for why these are good measures of language (or parenting). Instead, communicative practices that typically reflect white middle-class norms are valorized, not as culturally-based socialization practices, but as simply superior.

Language gap researchers argue that “language ability in early childhood is the single best predictor of school readiness and later school success” (emphasis ours, Hirsh-Pasek et al. 2015, 1071), suggesting that parental language interventions are a panacea for educational inequality. However, beyond language gap studies, which tend to stay stuck in an echo chamber with other language gap research (Hirsh-Pasek et al. 2015 cite another gap researcher Hoff 2013 to validate the claim above), educational research suggests that there are myriad potential factors affecting disparities in educational achievement, including school segregation, racism, poverty, mental health, exposure to violence, teacher–child ratios, educational level of teachers, and even disciplinary procedures at schools, which disproportionately impact Black students (Becker and Luthar 2002; Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera 2010; Lee and Bowen 2006). Furthermore, language gap research ignores the linguistic resources that kids bring to school. Language gap research does not capture, and foundation and media reports do not celebrate, what other research has shown: word play, metaphor, complex narrative events, all of which rely on linguistic sophistication (e.g. Labov 1972).

We are not arguing that the type of linguistic interaction in homes is not connected to achievement in school. However, given the many other factors associated with student achievement, the inconsistency and methodological shortcomings in language gap research, and the research revealing how linguistic and sociolinguistic differences between homes and schools impacts educational opportunity, we argue that ensuring educational equity for culturally and linguistically diverse students begins with an interrogation of linguistic and sociolinguistic hierarchies in which middle-class discursive features and norms are positioned as inherently superior while others continue to be devalued and marginalized as not only inferior but, in fact, harmful.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is the interrogation of language gap discourse as it emerges in language gap research, gets appropriated by language gap foundations, and is reported in the media. Through intertextual analysis, we show how documents from various language gap programs and foundations incorporate particular topoi – pith over nuance, pathologization, and hyperbole and salvation – to normalize the marginalization of minoritized families, and propose parental training as the solution. Both foundation documents and media reports normalize White middle-class linguistic and sociolinguistic norms as inherently superior and ignore the diverse linguistic resources that students bring into the classroom. These studies, reports, and media accounts turn parents into scapegoats by blaming them for the linguistic deficiencies of their children.

Fairclough (2010) (see also, Gramsci 1971) argues that hegemonic power structures are disguised through a process of social conformism and normalization. Our analysis illustrates the ways in which various foundations use questionable findings from language gap research to help substantiate their claims, which get recycled in media reports for the general public, which normalizes popular ideologies and neoliberal logic about social class, language, and education. Not only does this process of normalization reinforce hegemonic linguistic and sociolinguistic hierarchies, it encourages low-income families to “misrecognize” the inherent value of their communication abilities by seeing themselves as the problem (Bourdieu 1977). Language deficit ideology and neoliberal logic combine to obfuscate broader social processes that engender economic and educational (dis)advantages. Illustrating the interdiscursivity of how linguistic diversity is framed by language gap proponents in the media, academia, government agencies, and public programs reveals how the habitus is (re)produced through “principles which generate and organize practices and representations” (Bourdieu 1990, 108). By generating and organizing broader linguistic practices and representations that produce economic inequities, language gap work also masks other factors, including poverty, racism, and political structures, that impact social disparities and disproportionately affect minoritized children. Rather than attempting to find real answers to these problems, language gap discourse instead emphasizes a quick fix solution (filling your kids up with words) instead of engaging with the real causes of educational inequity.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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