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Poverty and Children's
Language in Anthropological
Perspective

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Abstract

From the “verbal deprivation” and “restricted codes” of the 1960s to contemporary “language gap” discourses, deficit models of children’s language have been posited to explain social ills ranging from school failure to intergenerational poverty. However, researchers from a range of disciplines have problematized such models on the basis of the power of language to reflect, articulate, produce, and reproduce structural inequality. This review considers how the discursive construction of language, poverty, and child development contributes to deficit-based research agendas and the resulting interventions aimed at remediating language use in homes and schools. We suggest that an anthropological language socialization approach deconstructs ideologies of linguistic (in)competence and more accurately traces how children across cultures and social contexts develop communicative resources, cultural knowledge, and social practices in the face of political and economic adversity; it also helps articulate alternative ways of respecting and building on difference.

INTRODUCTION

A gap of 30 million words? According to a psycholinguistic study from a generation ago (Hart & Risley 1995, 2003), that number characterizes the difference between poor kids and rich. This “word gap” or “language gap” (LG) has been touted in child development research and popular media as a magic bullet to explain a host of social ills from school failure to intergenerational poverty. The LG claim is that middle-class caregivers direct a higher quantity of words and a better quality of language to their children than do less affluent parents, resulting in poor children developing inferior linguistic skills and long-term cognitive deficiencies. Consequently, intervention programs have been designed to change the way poor parents talk to their children. However, many scholars classify LG as the kind of deficit model that they have been problematizing for decades while also seeking more refined understandings of the relationship between language and structural inequality.

In this review, we consider how language, child development, and poverty are constructed in deficit models and remediation programs. We apply an anthropological lens (Zentella 1997, 2018) to the study of language and language socialization (Ochs & Schieffelin 2017) and suggest that an anthropological language socialization (APLS) approach can be used to deconstruct ideologies of linguistic (in)competence and more accurately trace how children across cultures and social contexts develop language(s), cultural knowledge, and social practices in the face of political and economic adversity.

LANGUAGE, POVERTY, AND DEFICITS

The European American ideology that some languages (and their speakers) are better than others is grounded in the Enlightenment’s focus on individuality and reason. Competition erupted over which European language was the most rational, academies were instituted for consolidating and standardizing the national languages, and public schooling was eventually used to impose these in the provinces and colonies (Bauman & Briggs 2003, Burke 2004). Influential models of language developed by Ferdinand de Saussure and expanded by Noam Chomsky in the twentieth century furthered the depiction of language as an ideal system structured by and for the human brain, homogeneously run by naturally rational rules of rightness and performed via modes that ideologically privilege writing and formal speaking over informal and nonverbal communication. In such views, language skills can be measured via standardized linguistic and psychological testing, and any differences from the idealized tokens, codes, or modes are interpreted as evidence of either performance-related static or individuals’ deficiencies—biological, cognitive, cultural, and/or linguistic.

Linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists have exponentially expanded the definition of language over the last century. It is still partially understood as a Saussurean system of referential signs (words) structured by phonological and morphosyntactic rules into logical propositions (sentences) with which humans communicate across intersubjective divides. But language is additionally analyzed as a multimodal technology for imagining and engaging in our social worlds, with linguistic diversity encompassing variations in dialect, genre, style, register, and entexted or embodied communication. Because all communicative forms are treated as inherently valuable, researchers investigate the discursive processes by which some forms are constructed as better or worse (e.g., “standard” or “nonstandard”) or “(dis)fluent” within local, national, and/or global political economies (Heller & McElhinny 2017, Jaspers 2016, Milroy 2001, Silverstein 1996).

Poverty, as both material reality and ideology, has been similarly constructed over many centuries within the framework of imperialism and colonialism, neocolonial states and immigrant communities. Many social scientists now eschew simplistic models of how “cultures of poverty”

are maintained (Lewis 1969), building instead on notions of “cultural hegemony” (Gramsci 1992), “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu 1984), and “structural violence” (Galtung 1969) to explore how social injustice is enacted. They critically deconstruct how poverty is framed by social categories (sex, class, race, ethnicity, etc.) that are discursively formulated, ranked, and circulated via discriminatory legislation, employment policies, and educational practices. Poverty is not merely the result or state of lacking material stuff but also a dynamic process by which “lack” is semiotically constituted and experienced owing to structural inequalities that are materially doled out in intersectional and interrelated forms around the world.

However, mid-twentieth-century language deficit theories were attached to poverty in fairly simplistic ways. Bernstein (1971), for instance, claimed that working-class British students spoke an informal, grammatically simple, “restricted code” that assumed shared background knowledge with listeners while middle-class students controlled a more formal, less context-dependent “elaborated code.” The working-class restricted code “limited” expression and success, whereas middle-class students’ ability to wield both codes as needed gave them the edge (see the critique in Jones 2013). In France, Bourdieu’s structuralist theories of language, society, and education also seemed to doom working-class people to reproduce the conditions of their oppression [Bourdieu & Passeron 1990 (1977)], but with a subtlety that has led some scholars to discover potential for social transformation (e.g., Mills 2008).

Across the ocean, anxieties in the United States about falling behind in science education and losing the Space Race triggered fears of an achievement gap while the civil rights movement and President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty focused attention on poor and minority students’ language skills (Cole 2013, Collins 2009, McCarty 2015, García & Otheguy 2017). To explain the school failure of African American children, Bereiter & Engelmann (1966) asserted a verbal deprivation hypothesis, while Jensen (1969) argued that it was due to genetic inferiority. Interventions into children’s development, such as Project Head Start, were initiated to grapple with class- and race-related educational disparities. By the 1970s, the speech of children learning African American English (AAE) was classified as pathological by comparison with children learning Standard American English (SAE), leaving actual speech disorders undiagnosed (Green 2011).

Linguistic anthropologists, sociolinguists, educators, and some psychologists levied critiques against such deficit-oriented research and offered more ethnographically nuanced accounts (e.g., Cazden et al. 1972, Feagans & Farran 1982, Heath 1983, Labov 1972, Philips 1983, Trudgill 1975, Williams 1970, Willis 1977). For instance, in response to Bereiter & Engelmann’s claim that African American children went to school with no real language, Labov (1972) argued that AAE is rule-governed, systematic, and as complex as SAE or any other dialect and that African American children “participate fully in a highly verbal culture” (p. 201). He further questioned the superiority of middle-class verbal skills, judging SAE as often “simultaneously overparticular and vague” (Labov 1972, p. 222). Western, educated, industrial, rich, democratic (WEIRD) speakers’ ideological fascination with the referential power of naming and controlling the world via huge vocabularies has been labeled “wordism” (Blum 2015, 2017).

Scholars have increasingly explored the impact of language ideologies (Schieffelin et al. 1998), from moral panics over created languages such as argots and youthspeak (Riley 2016b) to the deficit-based denigration of sign languages and Deaf communities (Polich 2000). Debates rage on over whether multilingualism muddles thinking and speech or improves executive functions (Antoniou 2019). Deficit ideologies discourage attempts to raise multilingual children while living in poverty, even as multilingualism for the rich is credited as an asset (Flores & García 2017, Zentella 1997). By contrast, linguistic anthropologists have long pointed out the prevalence of societal multilingualism across societies and throughout history (Gal 1979, Hill & Hill 1986, Jackson 1974).

In short, sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists hold that deficit language models are deficient: They are grounded in limited definitions of language, and they demean nonelite speakers and disqualify them from access to education, health and judicial systems, and employment because they “lack” specific forms of communicative competence (Avineri et al. 2019, Morgan 2002, Zentella 1997). Deficit language research not only is steeped in ideologies about what counts as good and bad language, but also emerged out of debatable theories of childhood, caregiving, and the development of communicative skills.

CONSTRUCTING THE LANGUAGE GAP

Language acquisition hypotheses were forged within twentieth-century debates over the role of nature versus nurture, as well as species-universal versus culture-specific factors, in human behavior. Particularly influential was Chomsky’s (1965) proposition of universal grammar and an internal language acquisition device (LAD) that could function despite what he considered the fragmented and unsystematic language that children heard adults speaking around them.

Early language acquisition research countered Chomsky’s arguments by focusing on parental input, specifically the modified, child-directed speech register known as “babytalk” observed, in particular, among middle-class Euro-American caregivers (Ferguson 1964, Snow & Ferguson 1977). This attention-getting register—involving distinctive prosody, special lexicon, and grammatical simplification—was characterized as facilitating language acquisition. Research proliferated in the 1980s and 1990s with the goal of measuring the sorts of linguistic input that “improved” developmental outcomes. Language quantity was measured through the number of words and mean length of utterance (MLU), whereas quality included subjective features deemed supportive of language acquisition, such as repetitions and expansions of child speech, questions and labeling, and attention to children’s topics and utterances. “Positive” question-oriented speech was contrasted with “negative” control-oriented speech, presumed to engender slower language development (Hoff-Ginsburg 1991, Olson et al. 1986). Socioeconomic status (SES) was a variable in correlating input, child language growth rates (especially vocabulary), and school readiness (Hoff 2006, Pace et al. 2017).

Representative of this literature, Hart & Risley’s (1995, 2003) LG study stands out owing to its methodology and the enduring influence of its claims. Rather than collecting data during one or two short sessions in controlled laboratory or interview settings, as was the norm in developmental psychology, the researchers audio recorded the spontaneous family interactions of 42 language-learning children in their Kansas homes for one hour per month over two and a half years. Investigators classified the families into four SES categories: professional (13), middle (10), lower (13), and welfare (6). They reported that the families all seemed “average,” with caregivers and children interacting in similar ways. However, extrapolating from their limited data, Hart & Risley calculated significant differences, claiming that professional families served up 2,153 words per hour such that their children heard 45 million words by age 4, whereas the welfare group provided 616 words per hour such that their children heard only 13 million words by the same age (Hart & Risley 1995, pp. 197–200; 2003, p. 8). In addition, the quality of parental speech was judged and counted: An upper-class child “accumulated 560,000 more instances of encouraging feedback than discouraging feedback,” whereas a lower-class child “accumulated 125,000 more instances of prohibitions than encouragements” (Hart & Risley 2003, p. 9). Standardized tests given at age 3 were said to predict vocabulary use and growth when 29 of the children were tested again in third grade.

This astounding claim, despite being based on such limited evidence, has had a significant impact on developmental psychological studies of language acquisition and SES (Fernald et al. 2013;

Fernald & Weisleder 2015; Golinkoff et al. 2019; Hoff 2003, 2006, 2013; Hurtado et al. 2008; Marchman et al. 2017; Pace et al. 2017; Rowe 2018). It has also fueled neuroscientific studies of child brain functioning, now understood to be impacted by supposed deficiencies in linguistic input (Hutton et al. 2015; Noble et al. 2012, 2015; Romeo et al. 2018). Although some psychological research has become more nuanced and provoked debate within the field (Kuchirko 2017), the conclusion remains that there are better and worse class-inflected ways of talking to children, which lead to differences in the development of language, literacy, and cognition and later academic achievement.

The widespread appeal and circulation of the LG model derive from key metaphors embedded in its discourse. Through a critical discourse analysis of online media and institutional narratives supporting LG interventions, Johnson and colleagues (2017; see also Johnson 2019) found that language is equated with compelling concerns such as wealth, health, and food: Language environments are described as “rich” or not, the word gap is called a “public health concern,” and children living in poverty are said to be “starving” for more vocabulary. These LG discourses have spawned parenting advice books (Suskind 2015) and programs to improve the linguistic practices of caregivers [e.g., the Thirty Million Words Initiative (<https://cri.uchicago.edu/portfolio/thirty-million-words/>), Providence Talks (<http://www.providencetalks.org/>), Too Small to Fail (<http://toosmall.org/mission>)]. These interventions record and calculate the quantity and quality of the child’s home language environment, provide social workers to discuss the results, and advise caregivers on how to engage with their children. Some employ a portable recording device, developed by the LENA Foundation and sold for US\$299, which measures word counts and conversational turns in the home. Its accompanying software provides analysis that can supposedly be used to alter the child’s language environment “to close the early talk gaps.” LG discourse is also found in the United Kingdom (Monaghan 2018, Quigley 2018; cf. Grainger & Jones 2013) and Australia (The Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation; <https://alnf.org/program/early-language-literacy/>), with LENA (<https://www.lena.org/about/#what-is-lena>) operating in the United States, Britain, Canada, and New Zealand.

Popularized research in education parallels these diagnoses and recommended treatments (Jensen 2009, Payne 2013; cf. Ahlquist et al. 2011). As with earlier deficit-oriented interventionist programs, these have been designed to fix what is deemed wrong, abnormal, or deficient (Pace et al. 2017, pp. 296–99) while rarely addressing the actual conditions of poverty: for example, food insecurity, housing instability, poor instructional quality, and limited access to health care and employment. However, LG research and related interventions have also incited an explosion of anthropological critiques aimed at deconstructing Hart & Risley’s most shocking and popular claims.

DECONSTRUCTING THE GAP

Critics have raised questions about the use of loosely forged SES categories, which are based on income level and/or education and result in labels such as “poverty” or “low income,” to make far-reaching claims about how families talk to their children (Dudley-Marling & Lucas 2009, Johnson 2015). Small numbers of families are taken as representative of broad swaths of the population, erasing the actual heterogeneity found within SES categories by disregarding race, geography, culture, and linguistic background. Hart & Risley made weighty claims about low-income families based on only six welfare families and dismissed race as a salient variable, even though all six welfare families were African American and all but one of the professional families were white (Adair et al. 2017). Such elision conflates poverty and race and reinforces harmful stereotyping (Dudley-Marling & Lucas 2009, p. 364). Even referring to them as “welfare families” in contrast with “professional families” is problematic and stigmatizing.

Then, correlations are sought between verbal abilities and these ill-defined classes, as if the former could be so easily measured. An emphasis on the decontextualized and purely referential linguistic forms known as words creates a cultural bias in the standardized linguistic and psychological tests designed to gauge IQ and school readiness (McCarty 2015, Sperry et al. 2019b). Tests that are focused on vocabulary, MLU, and literacy skills inevitably tilt the judgments in favor of WEIRD children whose families tend to label things, incite full-sentence production, and read to babies in the womb. Even strong LG proponents acknowledge the difficulty of assessing levels of language development across cultures and SES categories owing to cultural and linguistic biases, which may “depress the test performance of children from lower-SES backgrounds” (Pace et al. 2017, p. 290; see also Hoff 2006). This association of SES categories and language development is even more problematic when scholars lack training in the study of dialectal variation and multilingualism. For instance, Hart & Risley manifest no understanding of the phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic distinctions between SAE and AAE (Baugh 2017, Johnson 2015). Technical problems with recognizing difference slide easily into a diagnosis of deficit, especially in contexts where the causes and consequences of racialization are erased and/or conflated with class and poverty.

Also of concern are the contexts and ways in which Hart & Risley’s data were collected. Although they discouraged researchers from conversing during recording sessions, they otherwise claimed that their presence in the home had little effect on the interactions, despite long-standing evidence that language production is influenced by the formality of the communicative event and the participants’ perceptions of power asymmetries between the observer and the observed (Baugh 2017, Labov 1972). Additionally, to minimize the transcription task, Hart & Risley (1995, p. 34) instructed researchers to record only family interactions that directly involved the focal child. This “data reduction process” (Sperry et al. 2019c, p. 1304) privileged direct input gathered from mother–child dyadic interactions and excluded from the data set overheard or bystander speech and multiparty interactions, thereby underestimating input from siblings, peers, and other interlocutors as well as other forms of ambient aural, visual, and haptic communication within and beyond the home.

Furthermore, Hart & Risley did not actually observe or record a 30-million-word gap between the highest- and lowest-SES families in their study; they just extrapolated this finding from one-hour monthly samples of direct speech. To test the LG hypothesis, Sperry et al. (2019b,c) analyzed longitudinal language data collected over 20 years (1970s–1990s) involving a similar sample of 42 children, grouped into 3 SES categories (poor, working class, and middle class), from 5 US communities. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and videotaped interactions with and around the focal children, including child-directed speech as well as bystander speech and multiparty configurations, Sperry and colleagues found that some middle-class families used fewer words than did some poor and working-class families. One African American community produced more words than all others except for families in Hart & Risley’s professional category. In this study, the word gap vanished.

In reaction to Sperry et al. (2019c), Golinkoff et al. (2019) insisted that there have been multiple replications of Hart & Risley’s findings, citing Hoff (2003) and Huttenlocker et al. (2010). They say that newer studies look not only at quantity but also at lexical diversity and conversational turns around child-friendly topics (Golinkoff et al. 2019, p. 988). They acknowledge that overheard speech may contribute but is inefficient because it requires inference about others’ intentions, which they suggest is too cognitively demanding for children. But this brings us to the overarching critique of LG research: that it ethnocentrically naturalizes the childrearing practices of WEIRD parents.

That language acquisition studies have typically been conducted with white, monolingual, middle-class mother–child dyads has had the effect of constructing their socializing practices as typical and “good” (Heath 2015, Kuchirko 2017, Ochs & Schieffelin 1984, Sperry et al. 2019b). These include prioritizing word production and literacy practices, affirmative rather than prohibitive language, joint attentional focus between parent and child, and question-and-answer routines similar to the initiate-response-evaluate (Mehan 1979) patterns found in contemporary Western classrooms and research laboratories (Johnson et al. 2017). Against this standard, the everyday language of others (poor, immigrant, nonwhite) is presented as inadequately supporting language learning, cognitive development, or academic and occupational success. Different interactional styles that reflect different childrearing goals, such as assertiveness or respect, are transformed into deficiencies (Avineri et al. 2015, Bhimji 2005, Dudley-Marling & Lucas 2009, García & Otheguy 2017, Johnson 2015, Kuchirko 2017, Michaels 2013, Miller & Sperry 2012, Sperry et al. 2019a).

Educational policies and practices similarly privilege these ways of knowing and displaying knowledge. Educational disparities are managed through standardized testing, resulting in “remedial curricula, over-representation in special education services and increased dropout rates” (Johnson 2015, p. 44). Students’ educational experiences and outcomes are impacted by teachers who view the cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom as a deficiency and their students as incapable of complex learning (Dudley-Marling & Lucas 2009, McCarty 2015, Michaels 2013, Sperry et al. 2019b). In one study, educators claimed that Latinx students could not manage dynamic learning experiences because of a lack of vocabulary, while students themselves disparaged more agentive techniques as incorrectly challenging the expectations of classroom stillness and obedience (Adair et al. 2017).

This failure of state-level language-planning approaches to furthering the spread of standardized languages via public schooling has now, not surprisingly, given way to family language planning (Blommaert 2018). LG-inspired interventions that rely on a kind of Foucauldian biopower reach into the earliest years, most private realms (e.g., home), and most intimate relationships (e.g., mother–child). Biopower uses hegemonic ideologies to convince people to monitor and blame themselves for not living up to the parenting advice provided by professionals presumed to have accurate knowledge on child development and language learning (Rowe 2018). Underlying this discourse is “a class-based and anxiety-filled vernacular notion of the child as a communicative (cognitive developmental) project” (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik 2015a, p. 73). This ideology shapes middle-class language socialization practices—catering to children’s interests, offering direct input by labeling objects, modeling reflexive communication, and instilling self-control—in ways designed to create entrepreneurial children with the language skills to succeed in the postindustrial knowledge economy (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik 2015b; see also Lareau 2003 on “concerted cultivation”) while still holding true to Enlightenment ideals.

Because LG research is depicted as science, it is taken as authoritative fact resistant to critique (Alim & Paris 2015, p. 79; Dudley-Marling & Lucas 2009; Johnson et al. 2017). When the associated interventions fail, neither the scientific studies nor the schools are held responsible; instead, children are blamed for failing to respond, or parents are blamed for “not providing their children with the basic needs for survival” (Avineri et al. 2016; see also Johnson & Zentella 2017). Although LG proponents acknowledge the psychological and emotional impacts of deficit discourse on a disparaged child’s self-esteem (Hoff 2013), they barely consider how embracing a school-based model leads to cultural and linguistic assimilation and loss. With the end goal being school success, the assumption is that the home language and culture must make way for standard varieties, genres, and literacy skills (Heath 1983, Miller & Sperry 2012). As studies of language socialization and shift worldwide have demonstrated, the hegemonic force of national and colonial educational

policies takes a direct toll on indigenous and minority languages, cultures, and people (Garrett 2012, Nonaka 2012, Shulist 2018).

THE LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION APPROACH

By contrast with the ethnocentrism of the LG model, the ethnographic study of language socialization demonstrates that there is no one correct way to raise a child and that modified child-directed speech in dyadic parent-child interaction is not the only way that children successfully learn to communicate (Ochs & Schieffelin 1984). Instead, language socialization research sheds light on the cross-cultural variation in linguistic and cultural learning as interrelated processes embedded in the many mundane contexts of everyday social interaction over the life course (Duranti et al. 2012, Garrett & Baquedano-López 2002, Schieffelin & Ochs 1986).

Language socialization research differs from psycholinguistic research in that it uses a qualitative, holistic methodology that is sensitive to context (Garrett 2008, Kulick & Schieffelin 2004, Sperry et al. 2019a). Engaging in long-term participant observation allows researchers to locate variable socialization contexts and patterns and also confront the issue of the observer's effect head-on by considering the possible consequences of their presence and positionality, which is also partially mitigated through becoming a familiar participant in family interactions over time. Naturalistic interactions are then recorded, transcribed (often with assistance from participants), and analyzed in fine-grained detail, targeting a range of multimodal communicative acts, routines, and processes as they unfold. Dialogic interviews are used to elicit and make sense of local beliefs about childhood, language, and childrearing.

Additionally, a larger set of data is collected on the basis of an expanded understanding of who is being socialized, what counts as language input in the socialization process, and what is being learned in the process. All humans are socialized throughout their lives into multiple, intersecting, culturally constituted categories, social roles, and stances; and they develop a multimodal communicative repertoire, as well as the cultural knowledge, practices, and moral principles appropriate to their communities. Thus, categories such as class are questioned and complicated before being applied, taking into account the intersectionality of age, gender, class, ethnicity, etc. (Fader 2009; Heath 1983, 2012, 2015; Mendoza-Denton 2008; Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik 2013). And even when focused primarily on the development of infants and young children, studies do not treat language socialization as a one-way, top-down process as both caregivers and children contribute to and are transformed by their interactions (Ochs & Schieffelin 2017). Children are viewed as active agents and not simply passive receptacles and reproducers of language and culture (see also Bluebond-Langner & Korbin 2007, Lancy 2015, Meek 2019).

Children develop in response to a wide array of communicative modes. In the realm of kinesics and proxemics, caregivers engage children, from infancy through adolescence, with facial expressions, gaze, body language, and touch. For instance, participant-framing body language socializes children to pay attention and show respect: Mayan infants tied to their mothers' backs are directed to ongoing interactions through nonverbal cues (de León 2012); Fulbe children in Cameroon are taught to read, write, and honor the Quran via bodily direction (Moore 2008). Socialization also takes place via affective stance-taking and paralinguistic shifts in volume, speed, pitch, and other forms of voicing that metapragmatically instantiate an emotional relationship such as shaming, teasing, etc. (Briggs 1998, Eisenberg 1986, Ochs 1988, Schieffelin 1986).

Language socialization takes place across a wide range of culturally salient spatio-temporal-social settings—homes and workplaces, schools and religious institutions—where routines shift throughout the day, year, and life cycle. Additionally, it occurs and must be studied within the full spectrum of culturally relevant participant frameworks that govern who talks to, for, and around

whom, whether children grow up in nuclear or extended families, or are raised by older siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc. (Ochs 1988). Additionally, multiple forms of engagement exist—some unspoken, but very instructive—within these varied participant frameworks. In some societies, infants are held facing the caregiver, whereas elsewhere, infants are faced outward towards the social group. Some cultures emphasize dyadic communication with the child, while others privilege triadic participation, such as through “say-it” or calling out routines used to model for children how they need to engage with others (Schieffelin 1990). Indirect and multimodal input is key to understanding how children develop socially appropriate communicative resources and strategies as well as culturally salient cognitive pathways and knowledge through immersion in socially relevant, structured, and embodied interactions or legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger 1991).

Socialization is also accomplished intertextually via oral storytelling and exegesis, as well as through other written, musical, and visual genres. Corsican language maintenance is negotiated through literacy training (Jaffe 1999), and Mexican Americans in California learn their sense of community through oral Christian narratives (*doctrina*) taught at Sunday school (Baquedano-López 2001). A growing number of language socialization researchers focus on food and other multisensual semiotic props with which humans index who they are and how they want to relate to others—whether through gossiping while cooking (Riley 2016a), negotiating the relative values of vegetables and dessert (Ochs et al. 1996, Paugh & Izquierdo 2009), or shaming an immigrant child for what is in their lunchbox (Karrebæk 2014). Many language socialization studies also demonstrate that children are capable of acquiring and strategically employing multiple linguistic varieties, engaging in multilingual practices such as code-switching, and contributing to the transformation of their communities’ codes (Fader 2009, Heller 1994, Kulick 1992, Paugh 2012b, Riley 2007, Woolard 2016, Zentella 1997).

Children also socialize and are socialized by one another (Goodwin & Kyratzis 2012). Through unmonitored play and peer socialization, they develop linguistic and pragmatic skills they might never practice in the presence of adults. For instance, through pretend play they acquire a range of vocabulary and practices that adults expose them to but discourage them from actually producing—e.g., swearing, acting authoritative, using a minority language (Garrett 2005; Goodwin 1990, 2006; Meek 2010; Minks 2013; Paugh 2012b; Reynolds 2008). The peer socialization of deaf Nicaraguan children produced an organic sign language out of sight of their teachers who were attempting to teach them Spanish lipreading and writing (Senghas & Coppola 2001). And children both are cared for and act as brokers of care for each other and sometimes older family members, for instance translating during parent–teacher meetings (García-Sánchez 2018). Recording children only with adults or in institutional settings and without attending to all the communication that goes on around them through sustained participation in the community neglects the key interactional nature of language socialization processes (Ochs & Schieffelin 2017).

Various ideological regimes about language and children influence socialization routines (Paugh 2012a). For example, the Kaluli (Bosavi) of Papua New Guinea believe that children must be “hardened” and shown language in an explicit and directive fashion (Schieffelin 1990). The African American communities studied by Heath (1983) and Morgan (2002) and the Native American communities studied by Nevins (2004) and Philips (1983) manifest a belief that language is learned as part of a larger system of attending to community needs and norms; learning to listen is taught not through explicit instruction but through indirect silence and teasing, forms that are deemed inappropriate in the American school system. The privileging of referential language input through babytalk and other dyadic, child-directed speech may work in the communicative styles and educational systems of child-centered WEIRD communities. However, this approach is

not universal (Ochs & Schieffelin 1984, Solomon 2012) and, at times, may do harm when imposed on children who are differently abled or simply ill-at-ease with the WEIRD moral economy.

For instance, babytalk may inhibit language and social development among children diagnosed with autism (Ochs et al. 2005, Solomon 2012). Similarly, storytelling during the family meal, a genre idealized and deemed nurturing by WEIRD culture as it prepares children for Western schooling, may also engender fears about the family's well-being due to uncertainties at work (Paugh 2012c) and anxieties when children's narratives are assessed by parents (Blum-Kulka 1997, Ochs & Capps 2001). By contrast, a study of Matsigenka and Samoan language socialization suggests that the body hexis used to engage children in everyday tasks in these societies promotes early competence and independence, whereas the face-to-face body hexis of US child socialization closes off sensory involvement in activities, increasing expectations of and dependence on adults (Ochs & Izquierdo 2009). Blum (2015, p. 75) suggests that efforts to instill WEIRD school-based techniques in the home actually promote passivity and dependence on adult approval among children.

This language socialization critique addresses the real gaps in cross-cultural understanding and social justice that undergird LG research and associated remediation programs. As Zentella (2015, p. 77) argues, "[L]anguage socialization research must unmask the ways in which one or more group's ways of speaking or raising children are constructed as inferior to the benefit of the continued domination of a powerful class, and it must challenge the policies that encourage and enforce subjugation." Such an anthropolitical language socialization (APLS) approach sheds light on how language ideologies become hegemonic in a range of political-economic contexts, while children around the world are nonetheless empowered to develop and deploy communicative resources even in contexts of structural violence.

APLS RESEARCH AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Even before Zentella explicitly formulated the need to frame language socialization research within a political context, an APLS approach was emerging. Ward (1971) examined how poor African Americans in a Louisiana community raised their children to be seen and not heard, to rely on kin beyond the nuclear family to discipline and support them in predictable ways, and to be free of the fear that their behavior would reflect poorly on their parents. Miller (1982) analyzed the interactional and emotional resources that white working-class parents in South Baltimore brought to raising their children despite economic constraints. Heath (1983) explored the exegetical skills and commitments to truth and chronicity developed by children in working-class African American and white communities in North Carolina, which were unrecognized at school. Philips (1983) identified how teachers mistook their students' approaches to learning at a school in the Warm Springs Indian Reservation in Oregon as a failure to engage. Like Zentella's (1997) study of how the bilingual strategies developed by Puerto Rican children in New York City rarely led to success at school or when seeking employment but did contribute to their own and their community's social well-being, all these APLS studies detail the complex verbal environments and participant frameworks within which children acquire linguistic skills of importance at home and in the community but which are misunderstood and/or devalued in mainstream educational settings.

In the time since these earlier studies, language socialization researchers have been working in "poverty" contexts within the United States and beyond, each the result of macropolitical economic processes related to colonialism and globalization. These continue to confirm that there is no single best pathway for linguistic and cultural learning; instead, they show how these practices are shaped by cultural differences and preferences as well as by historical, political, economic, and

social constraints (Duranti et al. 2012, Garrett & Baquedano-López 2002). And they demonstrate that exposure to alternative language ideologies, communicative strategies, and childrearing practices can lead to children developing into resilient members of and speakers for their community even in contexts of extreme structural inequality. For instance, Perley (2011) investigated attempts to revive the endangered Maliseet language through interactive school activities for First Nations children in Canada. Paugh (2012b) showed how children in a neocolonial corner of the Caribbean in Dominica could contribute, through peer socialization and creative play, to the maintenance of their endangered Afro-French creole, Patwa. García-Sánchez (2014) explored how immigrant Moroccan children negotiated the shoals of stigma and miscomprehension constructed by their teachers and fellow students in a primary school in southern Spain. In the United States, numerous analyses resulting from the Center on the Everyday Lives of Families project have focused on political aspects of language socialization among middle-class families in California, which may be impoverished in their own ways (Ochs & Izquierdo 2009; Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik 2013, 2015b).

An APLS approach to studying children's language and poverty takes into account not only the political contexts and ideologies that affect how the scientific questions are framed and explored but also the political consequences of the findings, especially how they are transformed into remediation programs and policies that affect people's lives. APLS-based recommendations for resolving such problems involve shifting the discussion away from posing deficits and remediating the language of the home to "building on strength" (Zentella 2005) and using metalinguistic awareness to teach children to value and use multiple communicative forms, including academic registers (Johnson et al. 2017).

At the national level, scholars suggest creating language policies that recognize and represent indigenous and immigrant languages and discourse patterns (Lo Bianco & Bal 2016). Language revitalization efforts, for instance, can have additional positive benefits aside from maintaining the endangered variety, such as improving health for indigenous communities and individuals (Zuckermann & Walsh 2011). The benefits of multilingualism must be more widely disseminated so that educators and pediatricians understand the consequences of discouraging attempts to raise bilingual children (Zentella et al. 1998). In addition, terminology and models that identify language as lacking and deficient should be dropped; instead, publicly funded research and policy should identify and rectify the real gaps in funding for health, housing, and education rather than constructed word gaps. Reframing the LG as a "multipath bridge" (McCarty 2015, p. 72) can promote more "inclusive intervention programs" (Heath 2015) that focus on "challenges" rather than remediation (Callanan & Waxman 2013) and encourage parents to feel pride in and maintain their family language socialization practices rather than model themselves on WEIRD patterns.

Suggested remediations of the education system include hiring more teachers from diverse backgrounds [at present some 80% are white (Hrabowski & Sanders 2015)] and providing training in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology to help teachers recognize variations in children's language as difference, not deficit. For instance, Alim's (2010) Hiphopography project (i.e., teaching schoolchildren to do the ethnography of when, where, and how they use specific AAE features in their everyday lives) can contribute to their critical awareness of, pride in, and strategic usage of AAE. Children's translanguaging practices can be utilized rather than suppressed in instructional activities to contribute to sociocultural sensitivity and pragmatic flexibility (García & Otheguy 2017, Lauwo 2019). Teachers can also be sensitized to alternative language socialization models found in their students' homes and build on these home-grown assets (Zentella 2005), "funds of knowledge" (González et al. 2005), or cultural strengths (Rogoff et al. 2017)—for example, transforming oral storytelling into literacy skills (Dudley-Marling & Lucas 2009, p. 366). Some linguistic anthropologists and educators are promoting Paulo Freire-inspired forms of culturally sustaining pedagogy, which support cultural and communicative diversity (Alim &

Paris 2015, Ladson-Billings 2014, McCarty & Lee 2014, Paris 2012, Paris & Alim 2017). For instance, beyond innovative bilingual immersion programs, these actors explore pedagogical attempts to combine music and language in the high school classroom or invite family members to elementary schools to share their cultural stories, music, artwork, and food (but in ways that do not essentialize them as cultural representatives).

In sum, the most effective interventions may take the form of activist research into understanding how wide swaths of marginalized persons are not being provided with the opportunities to be socialized for success in their local communities as well as in our globalized society. An anthropological lens clarifies that the problem is grounded in systemic inequity and structural violence and that these are the real problems that need to be more deeply addressed. As Rosa & Flores (2015, p. 79) challenge, “[W]e must move beyond asserting the legitimacy of stigmatized language practices, focusing instead on interrogating the societal reproduction of listening subject positions that continually perceive deficiency.”

CONCLUSION

The language gap, like other deficit models before it, is a constructed problem based on the ideology that children’s educational failure can be blamed on insufficient language, thus reproducing low socioeconomic status from one generation to the next. This model is widely appealing because it offers the humane hope for a magic cure: that socioeconomic ills can be overcome and cognitive health attained if parents are taught to feed their babies “good” and “rich” language in the home, especially via the magic panacea of books. In short, the LG model has circulated so successfully because of the easy fix it seems to proffer: Just add words and stir. Such language deficit models are powerful because language is powerfully capable of building deficits.

First, language is used to package symbolic capital by labeling social categories on the one hand and ways of communicating on the other and indexically linking the latter to the former in ways that mirror the societal hierarchy (Bourdieu 1991). Thus, the codes of those with power, resources, and prestige become the institutional standard while other codes are marginalized as incorrect, limited, and deficient by comparison. Because ideologies that privilege particular ways of communicating only indirectly index stereotypes of gender, class, and race, and these ideologies operate invisibly for most, stigmatized ways of speaking are not judicially protected and practices that discriminate against them are not legislatively proscribed [Cameron 2012 (1995), Hill 2008, García & Otheguy 2017, Lippi-Green 1997, Zentella 1997]. Vice versa, individuals may be assigned language deficits solely on the basis of their phenotype according to raciolinguistic ideologies, which “conflate certain racialized bodies with linguistic deficiency unrelated to any objective linguistic practices” (Flores & Rosa 2015, p. 150; see also Alim et al. 2016, Rosa 2019).

Second, dominant ideologies are both produced and reproduced via language socialization in hierarchical societies, breeding the habitus—both the ways of speaking and the linguistic (in)securities that people feel in their bones—which then feed into socioeconomic and political forms of (in)security. Thus, deficit models, from Bernstein’s restricted and elaborated codes to the language gap, not only reflect but also instantiate the ideology that some ways of speaking are more valuable than others. While the good-hearted objective is to provide interventions to help children overcome the limitations of their backgrounds, reification and evaluation of some codes and parenting models as good and others as bad are socialized along with the codes and thus provide the structural stasis that makes intergenerational reproduction seem inevitable. Classifying some ways of speaking as better than others has psychosocial impacts: Shaming individuals for not being articulate contributes to linguistic insecurity and linguistic violence as individuals and whole communities may give up their complex systems of expression and their cultural content.

Finally, through hegemonic discourses, dominant groups find subtle ways to articulate their resistance to transforming the institutional systems and policies (health, education, economic, judicial, legislative) that mediate oppression, and the ideological consent of subordinated groups is manufactured (Herman & Chomsky 1988). Uncritical discourses about poverty shape language deficit-oriented research designs and drive the resulting remediation policies and programs. Anthropological scholars critically examine how language deficit research puts the blame on parents and families rather than on history, political economy, or schools, which then undermines local forms of language socialization and contributes to language loss.

Thus, from an anthropological perspective, we can see that LG research designs, analysis, and remediation of children's language rely on essentialized and linguistically mislabeled social categories; focalize forms of communication that have been politically valorized and devalue others; and stigmatize the socializing linguistic and cultural practices of families in poverty, implicating them in their children's low academic performance in ways that may undermine how these children are socialized. An APLS approach has the potential to expose how language is used to reflect and reproduce structural inequality but may also be used to contravene the damage and articulate new ways forward.

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