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The Language Gap: Ideologies within Varying Communities of Practice

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ABSTRACT

The “language gap” claim, originally framed by Hart and Risley, has received powerful attention throughout our society regardless of its lack of qualifications. In this paper, I explore language ideologies concerning language development throughout early childhood and its role in future academic achievement. I conducted interviews with university faculty members in education, preschool and elementary teachers, and parents of young children in order to attain perspectives about their experience within language acquisition and socialization. In short, I found that the participant’s indicative level of expertise affected their ideologies regarding the “language gap” claim as the university faculty in education aligned their perspectives with unnamed research and few examples of personal experience while teachers and parents more fully relied on their personal experiences. Furthermore, I offer insight on the powerful influence of ideology and the necessary reframing of linguistic differences. **Keywords:** language ideologies, Language Gap, language development, expertise, early childhood

INTRODUCTION

In his 2008 article, “Academic Urban Legends,” Rekdal describes the “avalanche of low quality research” we have been experiencing throughout academia (638). In turn, we, as a society, “have a tendency to assume that everything we see in print is true, with or without reference, as long as it is printed in a fairly respectable scientific journal” (650). Without acknowledging the author’s level of expertise, one can tend to automatically believe that all published, scientific research is worthy and qualified to reach the public. Thus, when the 1995 study by Hart and Risley, *Meaningful differences in the everyday experiences of young American children*, claimed a “30 million word gap” between children from low-income households and high-income households, initiatives were created in order to educate others about how to “close the gap” concerning language “deficiencies” among poor children. In the original study, Hart and Risley conducted one-hour recordings each month for two-and-a-half years in 42 families, in which they found a difference of almost 300 words spoken per hour between families receiving welfare and high-income households (2003). Although the word count difference is prevalent in their research, they recognize this difference as an academic deficiency without regard to language socialization processes, cultural values, and social practices in diverse home learning environments (Ahearn, 2017, p. 75).

In this paper, I examine language ideologies in a small Midwest college town regarding the “word gap” claim between children of low-income and high-income households through interviews of local university faculty in Education, preschool and elementary teachers, and parents of young children. By conducting face-to-face interviews, I explored language ideologies about the “language gap” based on children’s early home learning environment and household socioeconomic status and the role of each in future academic achievement. Through these frames of analysis, I argue that the participants’ professions and their respective communities of practice situate their language ideologies within their level of expertise. The participants within different levels of expertise acknowledge similar ideologies about language acquisition while they present differing ideologies about overcoming a low socioeconomic status. In the following sections, I explain the background and theoretical foundation, research design and methodology, analysis, and conclusions regarding the results of language ideologies.

BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The Hart and Risley study claims a “30 million word gap” in the exposure of words in which children from low-income households hear less words than children from high-income households (1995). Furthermore, if a child hears a low number of words in their household by the age of three, Hart and Risley (1995) argue that they are less likely to be successful throughout their education in comparison to children who hear more words in the first three years of development. In a later summary of their original study, “The Early Catastrophe: The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3,” the original participant demographics included one upper socioeconomic status (SES) African-American family, three middle SES African-American families, seven lower SES African-American families, and six African-American families on welfare, while the remaining consisted of 26 white families (2003). As visible, Hart and Risley not only connect the African-American race to all six of the welfare families, which creates unwarranted associations of the linguistic and cultural difference with families on welfare, but they also “offer no compelling reason to believe that the poor families they have studied have much in common with poor families of other communities” (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009, p. 364).

In addition, educational initiatives and organizations continually contradict scholarly peer reviewed work. Despite the many studies by linguistic anthropologists in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, that critique and disprove the “language gap” claim, among them (Heath, 1983; Ochs and Schiefflin, 1984; 2001; Zentella, 2005), the Hart and Risley study (1995) has received attention in many educational initiatives, such as Providence Talks, the Thirty Million Word Initiative, and Too Small to Fail. These nonprofit and public policy organizations claim to help close this “gap,” yet base their initiatives specifically on Hart and Risley’s “language gap” claim without providing other evidence to further support their purpose. These initiatives directly connect this achievement gap to parent interaction in which they offer counseling to parents in order to interact with their children in a more “teacherly manner” or offer “word pedometers” to track the number of communicative interactions (Ahearn, 2017, p. 75).

More recently, an invited forum in the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* includes several scholarly perspectives from the fields of education and linguistic anthropology that problematize existing ideologies around diverse linguistic practices (2015). To begin, such initiatives ignore the necessity of including both economic and healthcare changes to further student achievement and to challenge hegemonic norms of children of color being framed in “gaps” (Heath, 2015; Alim & Paris, 2015). Shirley Brice Heath acknowledges that scholars in the field of child development reproach these organizations as an increase in direct talk must include changes to the economic and healthcare situation of children living in poverty in order to gain future academic success (2015, p. 68). Furthermore, Netta Avineri and Eric Johnson, in the fields of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)/Teaching Foreign Language (TFL) programs and education, recognize that this deficit perspective continues as the “language gap” claim and educational initiatives focus on what minority communities do *not* have and fail to recognize the richness of all communities (2015, p. 67). These initiatives entrench a deficit perspective toward minority groups as they assume language, race, and impoverishment are strongly related, as demonstrated by the participant demographics of the Hart and Risely study (Avineri & Johnson, 2015, p.67). The persistent ignorance of this scholarly work and the quick acceptance for the low-quality research supporting the “language gap” claim demonstrates the powerful influence of ideology in enactments of expertise as visible through the participant responses.

Within the broader context of the field of linguistic anthropology, this paper acknowledges language ideologies concerning the role of language development and later achievement while reframing deficit ideologies. These deficit ideologies favor high-income households at the expense of low-income households, which are framed as lacking resources and opportunities that are assumed to be easily accessible. With the support from previous research by linguists and linguistic anthropologists, I continue the necessary discussion of reframing the “language

gap” claim as linguistic differences and not educational deficiencies. I do not aim to make broad generalizations regarding linguistic differences, but to apply a linguistic anthropological lens to the context of the language ideologies in a small Midwestern community. I contribute my personal experience attaining a degree in elementary education, in which I have heard derivations of the “language gap” claim. Though a specific number of words was not given, the university faculty members in education have expressed ideas that support ideologies of the claim. I have chosen to further research this topic because of the conflicting ideologies between the fields of education and linguistic anthropology.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In order to attain information regarding language ideologies concerning the “language gap,” I conducted structured interviews in which I asked the questions in the same order for all participants (Ahearn, 2017). The methodology of interviews allowed me to gather local perspectives pertaining to ideologies about the impact of a child’s early development and its connection to future academic achievement. The interview questions included:

1. Does a child’s early home learning environment reflect their academic success or failure? Explain.
2. Does a child’s household socioeconomic status have an influence on a child’s language acquisition? Explain.
3. Can a child’s level of vocabulary at a young age reflect future academic achievement? Explain.
4. Do early interactions/communication between parents and children lay the foundation of children’s future language and cognitive development? Explain.
5. Do you find reading books to children starting at a young age (0-3 years) important? Why or why not?
6. Do you believe there is a gap in the amount of language interaction between children of low-income households and high-income households? Explain.
7. Do you know anything about the language gap?
8. Are there other factors besides vocabulary that are important to future educational success? Explain.
9. Do you think a language gap claim creates an educational disparity between children from low income versus middle/high income families? How does it rank with respect to other factors in creating educational disparity?
10. Have you heard of opposing claims to the “language gap”?
11. How can the education field propose different perspectives/approaches of inclusiveness towards diverse groups?

The participant group included two university faculty members in education, two teachers in the community school system, and two parents with young children. Each of the interviews were recorded by voice and then transcribed for further analysis. For the purpose of this essay, I only transcribed the voice recordings of selected portions of the interview at the level of lexical detail. Additionally, this study received SDSU Human Subjects Committee approval on 02/16/17 (IRB-1702019-EXM), the institutional equivalent to the federally mandated Institutional Review Board (IRB).

I purposefully chose participants with differing levels of expertise and familiarity with language acquisition and development in order to explore a range of possible ideologies in each community of practice. Throughout the interview questions, I wanted to explore the participants’ personal ideologies in two separate categories. I began by asking questions about language development and future academic achievement without mentioning the “language gap” claim by Hart and Risley (1995). Following the first six questions, I asked specific questions regarding their knowledge about the Hart and Risley (1995) research claim and their personal ideologies considering the study. I chose to create two distinct sets of questions in order to explore the participants personal ideologies without a possible influence of mentioning the specific “language gap” research claim. I was also interested in exploring if mentioning the Hart and Risley (1995) research

claim would change their original perspective as I did not state my personal view on the Hart and Risley claim, but only mentioned their claim of a “30 million word gap” between children from low-income households and high-income households.

Before analyzing the data, I must acknowledge limiting methodologies of this research. First, although interviews do provide participant insights, they are a “complex, culturally mediated social interaction” (Ahearn, 2017: 58). Therefore, people can and often do express themselves differently in interviews than in natural, informal conversation. Next, I position my personal bias through my own language socialization and inexperience with the “language gap” claim as I have grown up in a white, middle class household and was socialized in alignment with hegemonic practices. Additionally, I intended to create a diverse group of participants as I began with two Asian participants and six white participants, but because of language barriers due to limited English proficiency in the Asian participants, I decided to discard their data. Their level of English proficiency likely prevented them from understanding the context of my research through my interview questions and consequently hindered their ability to provide relevant information. Therefore, I have decided to analyze the data with reference to each participant’s socioeconomic status and their indicative level of expertise. Although the diversity of my research sample is limited, I believe that it does accurately reflect the demographics in Midwest public schools. Specific to a Midwest state, South Dakota teacher staff are 98% white while the student population is expanding its diversity with minority races (Kelley, 2017). According to the South Dakota Department of Education, the total number of teachers by ethnicity are as follows: 20.50 Asian, 18.00 Black, 1.00 Hispanic, 132.09 Native American, 9,258.31 white, and 87.87 multi-race (2016). Despite my limitations, the small participant size reflects the Midwest community and I do not intend to make large generalizations to populations elsewhere, but aim to provoke reflections on expertise and to offer insight as a preliminary study.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the participant interviews, I have recognized three main areas of analysis. First, my participant group as a whole described similar ideologies concerning the importance of literacy and language activities in early childhood. Second, the participant groups of parents and teachers demonstrated perspectives describing the “self-making person” as defined by Davey (2009). Third, throughout the participant responses, particular communities of practice became evident as parents, teachers, and university faculty members distinguished themselves from one another according to their level of specialist expertise and experience within the content of my research. I have separated my analysis accordingly in order to further discuss these specifics.

Throughout the interview questions pertaining specifically to language acquisition and socialization, each community of practice (parents, teachers and university faculty members) provided similar responses of high importance to literacy and language activities throughout early childhood. These particular participant responses relate to the hegemonic ideology of literacy and language activities playing a crucial role in early childhood language development. University of California – San Diego Professor Emeritus of Ethnic Studies Dr. Ana Celia Zentella describes this hegemonic ideology of language development as the portrait of the dominant white, middle class household in the United States in which parents portray reading to their children as a “magic bullet” that guarantees their academic success (2015, p. 76). Zentella expands on her own childhood as she did not see children’s books until first grade, yet she went on to graduate from college and earn her MA and PhD. With reference to her personal experience, she strongly acknowledges that those who share this hegemonic view “ignore the fact that in many homes where there are few or no books, adults and older children foster literacy in other ways” such as creating and sharing cultural stories and participation in religious activities of prayer, songs, and Bible study (Zentella, 2015, p. 76). This hegemonic view was prominent throughout many participant responses including these examples.

Question 1: Does a child’s early home learning environment reflect their academic success or failure? Explain.

- (1) University Faculty Member 1: ... if you think about literacy and language and what the home environment is like if you are read to, if you are spoken to, if your parents play kind of word games or just talk with you more then your vocabulary develops more quickly ...

Question 4: Do early interactions/communication between parents and children lay the foundation of children's future language and cognitive development? Explain.

- (2) Parent 2: ... with my oldest we had all the time in the world, and we did the "Baby Can Read" and we were like doing flashcards and she was seriously just ... talking. ... With my other kids, honestly, the second kid didn't get near as much time and her language was delayed ... I remember thinking, "oh, she needs to have speech" ... just because she didn't talk and jabber as much as the other one ... but she did good.

As noted, University Faculty Member 1 connects these specific actions to the development of vocabulary in a young child, thus identifying their importance to children's overall language acquisition. In relation, Parent 2 gives insight to her personal experience of using "Baby Can Read" and flashcard activities to provide early literacy development while suggesting a delay in her second child's language acquisition due to a lack of time spent doing these activities. These references to specific literacy and language activities follow the hegemonic view of language activities, specifically reading books, as a tool to future achievement. It is important to recognize that literacy and language activities do help foster language acquisition and socialization, but the continued hegemonic view toward language development not only ignores other ways of raising children, but also constructs them as inferior to those raised via the dominant perspective (Zentella, 2015, p. 77). Therefore, as Hart and Risely (1995) connect word count to household income and academic success or failure, they fully ignore and devalue the role of one's cultural background.

Additionally, ideologies concerning the "self-making person" described by Davey from the FrameWorks Institute were relevant throughout the interviews as participants, specifically teachers and parents, described the ability for one to overcome a low socioeconomic status and individually construct their own success (2009). Although Davey relates the "self-making person" narrative to racial inequality as it "is explained as a failure by minorities to exhibit appropriate values" and not conform to societal norms, this narrative strongly reflects a common American belief of citizens simply being able to work hard, overcome tough situations, and create their own success (2009, p. 3). Thus, participants have related this "self-making person" to the ability to overcome a low socioeconomic status in order to achieve academic success in questions 10 and 12.

Question 10: Have you heard of opposing claims to the "language gap"?

- (3) Teacher 1: ... I'm sure there would be an argument that a child as a teenager, that had a sanitation worker as a dad, could be very intelligent and become a doctor. So, I'm sure that does happen and that would be the opposing figures that you can be anything you want to be.

Question 2: Does a child's household socioeconomic status have an influence on a child's language acquisition? Explain.

- (4) Parent 2: [With reference to the influence of a child's household socioeconomic status on language acquisition], whatever your socioeconomic status is, you should be able to learn and thrive, so it doesn't matter. You can overcome if you don't have the resources. You can gain them elsewhere...

While these examples may demonstrate the participants' "unconscious beliefs about personal responsibility," they provide strong evidence of one simply being able to work hard enough to receive opportunities to become successful without acknowledging the inequalities one began with (Davey, 2009, p. 4). Without acknowledgment of access to resources, Teacher 1 and Parent 2 perceive that all children begin on level

ground with the ability to overcome what lies in their future. In Dudley-Marling and Lucas’ 2009 article, “Pathologizing the Language and Culture of Poor Children,” they recognize that “most Americans do not easily embrace systematic explanations for academic failure” (367). Therefore, it is often assumed that academic underachievement is a result of personal failures and not a lack of basic necessities, resources, and equal opportunities (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009, p. 367). Once again, this creates a need for reframing this deficit discourse of enduring prejudices and hegemonic perspectives instead of implementing initiatives that aim to “close the gap” with methods of direct talk and word pedometers.

Through the communities of practice, the participant responses have clarified differing levels of expertise according to their indicative level of education and class. Harry Collins provides insight on expertise in his book, *Are we all scientific experts now?* in which he constructs levels of expertise around that idea that “an expert is someone who shares the tacit knowledge of a specialist group” (2014, p. 61). Furthermore, Collins explains how “almost everyone who works for a living has some kind of specialist expertise: the expertise associated with the training or experience they gain in doing their specialist job” (2014, p. 117). With relation to my participant group, the communities of practice of parents, teachers, and university faculty members illustrate different intersections of specialist expertise that are indicated through their interview responses. Although the university faculty members have more education regarding language and literacy within child development, and thus the highest level of specialist expertise, they gave vague responses dismissing their personal experience. On the other hand, the parents and teachers have less education in language and literacy yet provided personally-reasoned responses to back up their ideologies.

The university faculty members in education have demonstrated their language ideologies with statements referring to *research, studies, or data shows* while instances of *in my experience* occurred evenly across all three communities of practice. These specific statements are important to analyze as they depict default and specialist expertise. Default expertise refers to one’s reference to unidentified, assumed trustworthy research without acknowledging the credentials of the researchers and the quality of the research design, whereas specialist expertise refers to the participants’ own developed experience within the subject matter of the “language gap.” To quantify these validations, I numerically tracked the transcripts for instances of *research, studies, or data shows* and separates instances of *in my experience*. The university faculty members in education included instances of *research, studies, or data shows* in their answers eight out of the twelve total occurrences with two statements from teachers and two statements from parents. On the other hand, university faculty members in education only included *in my experience* in six out of the nineteen total occurrences with seven statements from teachers and six statements from parents.

	Instances of <i>research, studies, or data shows</i>	Instances of <i>in my experience</i>
Parents	2	6
Teachers	2	7
University Faculty in Education	8	6
Total	12	19

Table 1: Participant Statements

The following participant responses to question two provide evidence for further analysis.

Question 2: Does a child’s household socioeconomic status have an influence on a child’s language acquisition? Explain.

- (5) University Faculty Member 2: So, unfortunately, it does. Children who come from lower economic status homes tend to hear less words and aren't always guaranteed the resources or able to provide the resources to the children. So, unfortunately, research has shown that children who come from those households do have lower language abilities and skills.

Although the university faculty participant acknowledges research in the response, she fails to specify the research with which she associates her opinion. Furthermore, she does not share any experience that she may have regarding her specialist expertise in the profession. In contrast, the teacher participant responded to the same question by stating her own experience with families from different socioeconomic status.

Question 2: Does a child's household socioeconomic status have an influence on a child's language acquisition? Explain.

- (6) Teacher 1: I think stereotypical the answer would be yes. Although with my experience, it's very surprising that I would say no because of the fact that no matter what they have for material wise and financially that a parent is going to make time with their child no matter if they choose to or not. And some of the times what surprises me is that you would think that the upper class would benefit more, and that's not always true because both parents are so involved in their careers that they don't take the time to read a book at night.

While the university faculty member in education refers only to knowledge of research, the teacher first acknowledges a societal stereotype, and then refutes it with her own experience of parents choosing to spend time with their child despite their level of income. Additionally, she refers to high-income households possibly lacking involvement with their children due to their career choices. While Teacher 1 doesn't explicitly refer to a specific personal experience, she acknowledges her experience with higher income families possibly lacking time with children. On the other hand, University Faculty Member 2 does not provide her own experience with children from low-income households, yet simply relies on past knowledge of research. Furthermore, the university faculty member continues to refer to unnamed research in response to Question 6.

Question 6: Do you believe there is a gap in the amount of language interaction between children of low-income and high-income households? Explain.

- (7) University faculty member 2: Yeah there is. Research has shown that children who come from lower economic homes don't hear as many words as individuals who are in middle and/or upper class ...

As demonstrated, the university faculty member in education begins her response with a relation to unspecified research. One may think this reference to research is beneficial, but it devalues her own experience with the education field and possible experiences she may have with families of different socioeconomic status.

Question 6: Do you believe there is a gap in the amount of language interaction between children of low-income and high-income households? Explain.

- (8) Teacher 2: That one is kind of tricky, I think kind of yes and no. I think depending on the family and their level of involvement, so I guess I don't know.

Although the teacher participant does not directly relate her response to personal experience, she questions the "language gap" claim. Furthermore, she relates her response to the family's level of involvement, which reduces the association to the particular "language gap" claim based on household socioeconomic status and instead places it on the family's practices.

Through the analysis of these specific instances and further examples in the full data set, the university faculty members in education have

demonstrated their language ideologies with alignment to what unidentified research says while undermining their own experience given the subject matter. Furthermore, teachers and parents have demonstrated their language ideologies with descriptions of their personal experiences and few acknowledgements of research. The devaluing of personal experience from the university faculty members in education exemplifies default expertise through reference to ambiguous research claims. Thus, they demonstrate trustworthiness of this *scientific* research throughout their responses although they fail to cite the specific studies, make any qualifications of their ideologies, or acknowledge any alternatives, unlike the teachers and parents. Therefore, although the university faculty members in education have specialist expertise through their professional experience and level of education, they diminish their personal experience with language development in young children and refer to unnamed *scientific* research as worthy of trumping their specialist expertise.

CONCLUSION

Despite previous research and critiques by linguists and linguistic anthropologists, the Hart and Risley (1995) “language gap” claim remains prominent within local hegemonic ideologies, evident in my participant group whose responses aligned with the hegemonic view of language development. Furthermore, the parent and teacher participants demonstrated perspectives of overcoming a low socioeconomic status as Davey expressed as the “self-making person” (2009). Additionally, the participant responses clearly illustrated differing levels of specialist expertise as the university faculty members in education correlated the majority of their responses to research claims without providing evidence while the teachers and parents relied on their own personal experience and often qualified their claims. As I only examined six participants throughout the communities of practice of university faculty members in education, preschool and elementary teachers, and parents of young children, this paper provides preliminary research for further exploration about language ideologies concerning the Hart and Risley (1995) “language gap” claim. Additionally, further research about the numerical approach and connecting slogan of the Hart and Risley’s (1995) “language gap” claim would offer insight on how scientific research reaches the overall public view with such power. Despite the results of my analysis, future examination of ideologies concerning the “language gap” claim remain necessary in order to better understand how one uses their attained level of expertise to form their opinions about such commonly distorted and catchy research.

Last, there is no doubt that “children enter school with more or less of the linguistic, social, and cultural capital required for school success,” but these differences cannot be seen as deficiencies (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009, p. 369). As we see with the Hart and Risley (1995) “language gap” claim, a deficit lens only further entrenches those living in poverty. Furthermore, these linguistic differences should not be recognized as deficiencies because of the family’s household income or cultural differences. Instead, a change of societal thinking requires the reframing of the way people view poverty. In order to begin this reframing, it is necessary that teachers recognize and respect that “all children come to school with extraordinary linguistic, cultural, and intellectual resources, just not the same resources” (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009, p. 369). Therefore, the range of student backgrounds and resources become great tools for future learning in the classroom if we look at what language has the possibility to do.

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