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Selling the Language Gap

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False Premises, False Promises

You may have read recently about a novel approach to solving inequality (eg, here and here). First, strap an electronic device onto the clothes of disadvantaged children and measure the paltry amount of language they hear in their everyday lives (both the clothes and the device are available online from www.lenafoundation.org for a pretty penny). Next, provide funding for social workers to train parents to talk to their young children more like affluent families do (because research shows that middle-class children are immersed in 30 million more words by the age of three than are disadvantaged children which puts them at a linguistic and cognitive disadvantage before they even reach school). Finally, provide more funding for researchers to confirm how programs designed to "bridge the language gap" are correcting the cognitive and linguistic deficiencies responsible for producing failure at school and in the workplace.

This apparently scientific and benevolent (aka neoliberal) approach to inequality is based on research that first gained traction with Hart and Risley's 1995 publication *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*, has since been developed by Fernald's research at Stanford, has been smoothly transformed into policy and adapted for application in a number of real world contexts such as "Providence Talks," an ambitious program set up by the mayor of Providence, RI and funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies. In this program, the LENA device will be strapped onto children in hundreds of lower-income households (though so far only ten have signed up for the program) to record and analyze the children's acoustic environment (broken down into estimates of the amount of words spoken by adults, the amount of vocalization by children, and the amount of electronic noise in the background—for details on how the technicians say this is done, see here). Armed with this charted data, social workers coach low-income parents in how to speak better (ie, more) to their children rather than let them sit in front of a TV all day, which is the assumed mode of childrearing in these families.

The silver-bullet thinking is appealing, but scholars have been debunking similar blame-the-victim approaches to language and poverty for at least half a century. We have long demonstrated fallacies in well-intentioned research that identifies some form of linguistic deficit as the causal link in correlations between school failure and any single social factor—class, ethnicity or gender. We have convincingly refuted the idea that individuals can be blamed for making supposedly incorrect linguistic choices or for socializing their children to do so. We have rousingly rejected simplistic cures—usually but not always involving education. To name some of the most prominent of these language ideologies and the debates that swirled around them: the notion of *restricted* and *elaborated codes*, the concept of *semi-lingualism*, the *Ebonics* controversy, the debate over *women's language*, and the hegemonic belief in a monoglot standard. The sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists involved in these fights include many of our finest: William Labov, Pierre Bourdieu, Deborah Cameron, John Rickford, Michael Silverstein, Kathryn Woolard, Bonnie Urciuoli, Susan Philips to name a few.

But apparently the fight is never over. So here we go again: the offer to eradicate poverty through improving parents' language is a false promise because it is based on false premises. The faulty argument is as follows:

a) income inequality is perpetuated by the perceived fact that lower-income children enter school at a linguistic and cognitive deficit;

b) this deficit is due to the supposed fact that lower-income parents use many fewer words with their children than do upper-income parents who use what is described as more and richer language;

c) lower-income children will be as successful at school and in the workplace as upper-income children if only lower-income parents would learn to direct more words their way.

The critique of this agenda has already been launched elsewhere (see Blum, Flores, and Urciuoli), but let's unpack the flaws in the logic here step by step.

First of all, an array of other factors put lower income children at a disadvantage when they start school—everything from quality nutrition and healthcare to pre-school training and extra-curricular opportunities are lacking (in this respect, we applaud Mayor DeBlasio's recent victory for universal pre-K in NYC and are saddened that he was unable to expand after-school programming for secondary school.

Secondly, research in support of these points naturalizes the practices of affluent families, making them appear to be the only right way to speak and the only right way to teach children to think and speak. In fact, the socialization and linguistic practices of many disadvantaged families *are* rich—they are simply not the *same* as those rewarded in schools. Several generations of language socialization researchers (for a good collection, see here) have demonstrated the *strengths* of alternative language socialization processes: children learn to think, act, and interact appropriately in diverse settings around the world in response to a fascinating array of socialization forms.

Of particular interest to the present critique of language gap research is the fact that many of these alternative forms of language socialization do *not* depend on parents directly instructing their children by using lots of words with them. First of all, in many communities, parents are not the only or even primary caregivers; instead, an extended family—from older siblings to grandparents—has input into a child's socialization. Also, in a number of societies, children learn through situated participation and non-verbally encouraged observation rather than via direct and top-down verbal instruction. Finally, in many parts of the world, the socialization of respect, compassion, and interdependence are coded precisely by teaching children *not* to speak to authority figures (no asking for clarifications or practicing verbal routines) until they have reached a certain state of maturity (instead they try things out with peers or near-peers).

In other words, non-mainstream homes in the US are not necessarily impoverished linguistically, but the proposed cure—stigmatizing families for their childrearing methods—may indeed be deleterious. Relying on the authoritative voice of science—*Counting! Processing! Technology!*—well-meaning workers inform parents (who are willing to do anything to help their children succeed) that their childrearing is all wrong. Shaming families in this way creates insecurity not only for the children at school but also for their respected adults at home, further disrupting the benefits of the parents' normal language socialization patterns.

In other words, despite the well-intentioned goals of language-gap researchers, foundations, and social workers to change the system, their programs to bridge the so-called language gap are recycling and maintaining old elitist assumptions that continue to disempower people whose patterns of language use and socialization differ from those whose ways have been essentialized as natural and valuable by Western schooling and political-economic structures. The linguistic forms of the structurally powerless continue to be devalued whereas many disempowered youth find alternative linguistic means to resist domination, while also continuing to fail at school and in the workplace.

In short, even in the best of all possible worlds these language-gap efforts are very unlikely to achieve the promised aims: disadvantaged families will not enter the middle classes simply by being taught to direct more words at their infants and toddlers. If anything they need to be engaged in a dialogue about the differences between how they engage with their children and how their children will be addressed in school, recognizing that this is not merely about the *quantity* of verbiage directed at their child, but also about a huge range of semiotic capital (from non-verbal to rhetorical) that is not measured by the Lena device. Additionally, funding ought to be spent not on preaching to parents but on developing and supporting pedagogical approaches from Pre-K through secondary school that are sensitive to alternative communication strategies and thus support the acquisition by non-mainstream children of the Western modes of thinking, learning, and communication being taught at the schools. Linguistic anthropologists and anthropologists of education have plentiful information and insight to offer along these lines (For example, here).

Finally, socioeconomic and political inequality is best combated directly. Of course, more than 30 million words may be needed to figure out how to make that happen. But that is the word gap in need of bridging first.

Save your money and resist technological false promises.

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