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Interrogating the Language Gap of Young Bilingual and Bidialectal Students

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ABSTRACT

This article describes how the belief in the existence of a language gap has negative educational consequences for bilingual and bidialectal children from minoritized communities. This article first positions the idea of the language gap within the “achievement gap” discourse that has long been prevalent in educational circles. We then identify conceptual problems related to the ways that the language gap has been constructed, problems that we see as undermining its validity. We locate the gap not in the ways families and young children use language but in the ways racism has regimented language so as to exclude language-minoritized children. Insisting on the nature of language as a form of semiosis, we consider how a diverse society can educate its children in ways that extend their meaning-making potential, rather than in ways that restrict it to one autonomous enumerated language in whose reified name only some of the children’s structural and lexical features are legitimated. And we end by describing how a theory built around the notion of translanguaging allows us to locate the gap in social, educational, and academic practices rather than in the raciolinguistically minoritized students and their families.

KEYWORDS

Bilingual; bidialectal;
language gap;
raciolinguistics;
translanguaging

Introduction

Since the publication of *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children* (Hart & Risley, 1995), discussions of what is called the “language gap” have become common in educational and scholarly circles in the United States. Educators and scholars use the term to refer to what they see as a delay in the acquisition of vocabulary, and of language more generally, in very young children of lower socioeconomic status. Many have claimed that the language gap leads to cognitive deprivation (e.g., Hoff, 2013). The term has been picked up by the media, which have played an important role in naturalizing the concept. In response to the perceived language gap, many educational projects have been advanced to attempt to repair it. The *Bridging the Word Gap National Research Network* promotes research to solve what is portrayed not only as a crisis of education but of public health. And cities, counties, and civil organizations have developed ameliorative initiatives, such as Providence Talks (www.providencetalks.org), the Thirty Million Words Initiative (tmw.org), and Too Small to Fail (toosmall.org) (see Johnson et al., 2016).

But is there a language gap? Is there a crisis? Does the concept of the language gap address a verifiable reality, or is it an illegitimate construction? Furthermore, what have been the consequences of accepting the validity of the language gap? In this article we question the reality of the language gap, aiming to understand the manner of, and the reasons for, its creation. We propose that the deficits that are assumed by proponents of the language gap are conceptually unfounded, and we identify the negative consequences that the assumption of its existence has had on bilingual and

bidialectal children, especially Latino and African American children, and their families. We focus in particular on the harmful effects of assuming the reality of the language gap for bilingual and bidialectal young children, whose ways of using language at home differ substantially from those of most teachers, school authorities, and educational and psychological researchers.

This article first positions the idea of the language gap within the “achievement gap” discourse that has long been prevalent in U.S. educational circles. We then identify conceptual problems related to the ways that the language gap has been constructed, problems that undermine its validity. We locate the gap not in the ways families and young children use language, but in the ways that traditional linguistic scholarship has shaped understandings of language in society and especially in schools. We consider how a diverse society can educate its children in ways that extend their meaning-making potential, rather than in ways that restrict it to one autonomous enumerated language in whose reified name only some of the children’s structural and lexical features and linguistic practices are legitimated. And we end by describing how a theory built around the notion of *translanguaging* allows us to locate the gap in social processes of racism and discrimination, rather than in the minoritized students and their families.

From deficiencies to differences to “GAPS”

In the early 20th century, some U.S. scholars claimed that African Americans and certain immigrant groups had inferior intellects due to biological differences, a claim that served as justification for racism in the society in general and for racial segregation in schools. Reacting to these conditions, in 1954 the ruling known as *Brown v. Board of Education* declared that the segregated educational system was unconstitutional. Ten years later, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act (1964) was passed, protecting people from discrimination based on race, color, or national origin in programs that received U.S. federal financial assistance. And in 1968, the U.S. Department of Education, formerly the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, required school officials to provide *equal educational opportunities* for all, *regardless of nationality or race*.

This body of rulings and laws meant that its opponents had to find a category of exclusion other than race to classify African American and Latino children as deficient and thus unworthy of the same educational arrangements as White children. As Lippi-Green (1997) has shown, language became a proxy for race. It was no longer acceptable to denigrate Blacks directly, but aspects of language could be used to exclude them, as well as to exclude others considered non-Whites, like Latinos. This is the beginning of what, under the rubric of *raciolinguistics*, many are now studying as the process of coconstructing race and language (see Alim, Rickford, & Ball, 2016; Flores & Rosa, 2015). By using language as the proxy for race, it was possible to continue to segregate non-White students. In this process, race and genetic inferiority were replaced by discourse about the *language deficiencies*, later *language differences* and today *language gap*, of poor African American and Latino students, all three concepts supporting the continuation of covert racial segregation in educational programs.

Educational psychologists in the 1950s and 1960s started claiming that what racially minoritized students had was a language deficiency, not a genetic inferiority (which is not to say that the genetic argument had been abandoned; in 1969 Arthur Jensen still maintained that there was a genetically based constraint on types of learning). A relevant development was the proposal advanced in the 1960s and early 1970s by Basil Bernstein that poor children had what he called a “restricted code.” Bernstein (1971) was making the point that language socialization processes differ across socio-economic levels:

Clearly one code is not better than another; each possesses its own aesthetic, its own possibilities. Society, however, may place different values on the orders of experience elicited, maintained and progressively strengthened through the different coding systems. (p. 135)

But, misunderstanding him to some extent, many U.S. educational psychologists found in Bernstein's work the excuse for saying that African American and Latino children were inferior. Now it was no longer genetics that was to blame, but the deficiency resulting from the children's social, cultural, and economic environment. The work of Hess and Shipman (1965), as well as Deutsch and his associates (1967), exemplify this position in the claim that poor minoritized students are deficient due to something called "cultural deprivation." In 1969, Gerber and Hertel published a widely read article entitled "Language Deficiency of Disadvantaged Children" that explicitly named the language deficiency argument.

Compensatory educational programs were developed to combat the supposed lack of language of African Americans and the other large group of non-Whites, namely Latinos. At the same time, remedial education programs provided a new venue to continue to educate African American and Latino students separately. The preschool programs developed by Bereiter and Engelmann (1966) were an important example of this approach. These scholars conceived of minoritized children as not having an appropriate language of their own, so that language skills had to be taught through direct instruction. The evidence for what should have appeared from the start as an outlandish position was said to be found in the linguistic behavior of these children in test situations (Jensen, 1969).

At around the same time, scholars interested in language started paying closer attention to the relationship between language and society. Modern sociolinguistics was born in an era of deep social change, when questions started to be raised about how language, not only race, constituted a technique of nation building and social control. Perhaps it was one paper in the field of sociolinguistics, "The Logic of Non-Standard English" (Labov, 1969), that set many scholars on a path toward different understandings of language of minoritized students. Opposing the view that Black children had no verbal stimulation, Labov (1969) writes:

Black children in the urban ghettos receive a great deal of verbal stimulation, hear more well-formed sentences than middle-class children, and participate fully in a highly verbal culture. They have the same basic vocabulary, possess the same capacity for conceptual learning, and use the same logic as anyone else who learns to speak and understand English. (p. 1)

Labov opened the door for talking about *differences* in the use of language by Black children, what became known as their bidialectism. In a parallel development, Joshua A. Fishman, at around the same time, started describing the linguistic capacities of Latino and other bilingual school children in difference rather than deficit terms (Fishman, 1968).

In 1974, the U.S. Congress passed the Equal Educational Opportunity Act (EEOA), which affirms that states cannot fail to take appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by students in instructional programs. Some important judicial decisions relied on the EEOA to affirm the right of students who were not proficient in English. In 1974, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Lau v. Nichols* in favor of Chinese plaintiffs who had claimed that a school district in San Francisco had denied them participation in classes by not providing them with appropriate instructional measures (for more on this history, see Crawford, 2004; García & Kleifgen, 2010; Wiley, 1996). Despite continued opposition by many to the use of languages other than English in education, bilingual education programs that use the children's home languages have continued to provide some measure of equal educational opportunity to immigrants and students whose bilingualism is emergent.

The situation with African Americans and language was, and continues to be, rather more complex. In 1974, as EEOA was passed, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), a division of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), issued a resolution that stated:

We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for

speakers and writers and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language. (1974, p. 2)

Sociolinguists and educators had started experimenting with what were called *dialect readers* to address the bidialectism of African American students (Simpkins, Holt, & Simpkins, 1977; Stewart, 1969). Reaction to these readers was never positive. In 1979, in what became known as the Ann Arbor Decision (*Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children et al. v. Ann Arbor School District*), a federal judge for the Eastern District of Michigan ruled that African American English speakers had to be identified and that their language variety had to be used to teach them how to read standard English. But this decision found little favor among many African Americans, who themselves led the opposition to readers using the vernacular (for this history, see Rickford & Rickford, 1995). Some felt that the dialect readers disadvantaged Black children, others denied the variety itself, and yet others said that racism was the problem, not language. The controversy over whether the language of African Americans was different from that of others came up again in 1996 when the Oakland Unified School District in California called for Ebonics to be used in an instructional program for African American students in order to improve their educational achievement (Morgan, 1999; Rickford, 1999).

As more and more communities started to demand equal educational opportunities for students who had been historically segregated in U.S. schools in the late 1960s and 1970s, sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists insistently reminded laymen and scholars alike that the language of linguistic minorities was simply *different*, not inferior or deficient. The work of many sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists during this time focused not, as in the past, on deficiencies revealed by test scores but on the children's "ways with words" (Heath, 1983). Important sociolinguistic anthropological work emerged in the decade of the 1980s, such as, for example, Au (1980) with Hawaiian students and Delgado Gaitán (1987) with Mexican American students.

None was as influential in focusing on the linguistic differences of communities than that of Shirley Brice Heath. Though, as Prendergast (2000) has argued, Heath's work downplayed the race of the Black residents of Trackton, who lived in a segregated community clearly as a result of the persistence of prejudice and racism. Instead, Heath identified the closed nature of the community and its culture as the reason for the prevalence of linguistic differences. Many scholars followed Heath's lead in arguing that we were facing language differences, not deficiencies. While this was a step forward, it nevertheless obscured the effects of racism and did not explicitly identify how language had replaced race as a category to exclude minoritized students from participation in a meaningful education.

As the 20th century came to a close, even the understanding of linguistic difference that had informed efforts to provide an adequate education for minorities began to unravel. A more conservative approach to social, political, and educational matters started to take hold with the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980. The passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002 solidified the change. Academic performances became valid only if rendered through the medium of English and in adherence to structural and lexical features regarded as correct or standard English. Discourse about bidialectism was eradicated and that about bilingualism was mostly silenced. The term *bilingual* was removed from every aspect of legislation and from the titles of government offices and substituted by *English language acquisition* (García, 2009; Hornberger, 2006). Bilingual education itself was rendered illegal in California (1998), Arizona (2000), and Massachusetts (2002). The term "equal educational opportunity" also fell out of the discourse, as talk of achievement gaps became prevalent. For African Americans and Latinos, racialized speakers whose language repertoire had features that were different than those of White monolingual speakers, there was only one option for success, the adoption of standardized linguistic norms with origins in the speech of educated White English speakers.

The accountability movement unleashed by No Child Left Behind measured and compared the achievement of Whites, Blacks, Latinos, Asians, and those classified as English language learners. But

these comparisons were made on the basis of standardized tests that validated academic achievement only if it was rendered in the naturalized linguistic practices of White educated monolingual Americans. The result, inevitably, was “the achievement gap,” a form of discourse that considers itself liberal and well intentioned, and reflective of concern over the welfare of others, but that does not in any way recognize either language differences or the racism that has made White middle-class linguistic habits the only norm.

The focus in education has become outcomes in test scores rather than inputs in the quality of education. That is, the focus has turned to the achievement of better standardized test results and away from the resources—human, sociolinguistic, and financial—that language minoritized students need in order to perform well in school. Heller (2008), based on Uchida (1992), has referred to this paradigm shift in the education of racialized linguistic minorities as going from *difference* to *dominance*. This time, though, the dominance is different from the one that came before, when raciolinguistic minorities were simply ignored and not included in efforts to educate the populace. This time the dominance has come paved with good intentions—a road purportedly leading to the elimination of the achievement gap and recently also the language gap.

The language gap discourse that interests us here parallels that of the achievement gap. Both are based, as we show presently, on similar conceptual misunderstandings of language and how to assess its use. That said, as we will argue, the concept of the language gap is even more pernicious than that of the achievement gap. Important distinctions need then to be made between these two popular notions in education today. First, although the achievement gap refers to the different outcomes of White middle-class and poor African American and Latino students, it indexes the failure of the *school* to improve the children’s performances. On the other hand, the language gap refers to the failure of the raciolinguistically minoritized *family* to speak and use language effectively, a purported failure that is then seen as turning the children into limited language users. The language gap discourse does not blame educational institutions and practices for the problems of minoritized children; it blames the families. The consequence of this blame is the proposed solution to the problem—namely, the suggestion that families change the way they use language. Second, the achievement gap is usually predicated on educational results located at the end of an educational process, while the language gap is located at the beginning of the educational process, even before young children enter schools.

The concept of the language gap is most dangerous because it delegitimizes families and their natural bonding experience with their children through their own language and cultural practices, what the CCCC resolution we mentioned previously called “dialects of their nurture,” or dialects in which students find “their own identity and style.” The concept of the language gap insists that the ways of using language in Black and Latino families are not nurturing but bad for the children’s health and futures. It is our contention that the language gap blames African American and Latino families for the racism that persists in U.S. society. We see the language gap discourse as making clear that there will be no countenancing of any such thing as the children’s “own identity and style.” Only to be accepted are the ways of using language by White middle- and upper-class families, for whom correct lexical and structural features and healthy linguistic practices are seen as the only keys to school success.

The language gap is a cover for a notion that we thought we had long discarded—that Black and Latino families are disadvantaged because of their own language deficiencies. Instead of laboring to transform the societal norms that conspire to racialize Blacks and Latinos, and that contribute to keep them segregated and excluded, the concept of the language gap works to keep intact pernicious race-based social arrangements. At the same time, the school and the academy embark on a project to rob these families of the little that they do have—the intimate bond with their very young children, a bond forged through the family’s participation in the community’s distinctive and often ancient and deeply embedded ancestral language practices.

Undermining the validity of the language gap

Two problems undermine the validity of the notion of the language gap. The first is old and well understood and represents an unfortunate restatement of the already amply debunked proposals of “disadvantage.” The second problem has to do with continuing to support language theories that are not in sync with the ways in which people make meaning and especially not in the globalized diverse and technologically enriched world in which we live.

First is the well-known interpretive problem of jumping from the observation of discontinuities with the language of the researcher to the conclusion of deficits in the language of the researched. Proponents of the language gap may have shown that the languaging of children from raciolinguistically minoritized families is *different* from their own and at times in some circles and with respect to some features less universally valued. But they have not succeeded in establishing that these ways of using language are inferior in any absolute or theoretically interesting way. As the concept of the language gap has been developed, on one side of the gap we tend to find speakers who are White and integrated into the cultural and economic mainstream. On the other side of the language gap, we tend to find speakers who are not.

We note this: On both sides of the so-called gap, speakers communicate their purposes with what appear to be equal measures of in-group effectiveness and satisfaction and especially to care for their children in equally fulfilling language-mediated intimate and loving ways, both sides achieving their own communicative goals, irrespective of what one may think of the language life of the other. This situation of equivalent in-group communicative success by means of equally valid linguistic instruments that may or may not receive equal levels of social approval by some people in some circles is well known. We take it that the situation is, or should be, familiar to scholars in all language-related fields. It scarcely requires the coining of a new term or the insinuation of the discovery of a new concept.

But not for being old has the analysis that silences racism and turns differences into deficits become any less dangerous. The danger lies in that the analysis implicitly attributes to minoritized children of preschool age and their families not only linguistic but also cognitive deficits. Worse, it locates in these unfounded deficits, purportedly manifested in linguistic gaps, the reason for eventual school failures that are almost certainly causally connected with pernicious race-based social arrangements rather than with linguistic gaps.

A second danger has to do with the mistake of thinking of language as a unique and distinct capacity that is in no way continuous with other ways of obtaining signification. What we may term “linguistic exceptionalism” finds its roots in the abandonment in parts of the field of linguistics of the tradition of Saussure and his interest in language as a form of *semiotics*. This linguistic exceptionalism finds it useful to conceive of language through a machine metaphor (a “computational system” at the center of linguistic competence in the now more than half-century-old Chomskyan tradition). The machine at the heart of language, the Chomskyan autonomous syntax, excludes *semiosis or human communicative will* from the core of systemic linguistic organization and explicitly theorizes communication as separate from, and irrelevant to, the analysis of the structure of language (for eloquent recent statements of this position, see, for example, Chomsky, 2002, 2012). By separating language from communication, speakers, and meaning, linguistic exceptionalism erects human syntax as an unsurmountable barrier between language and other ways of signifying.

The alternative proposal with Saussurean roots, that the structural units of language are all meaningful and that language is thus a form of semiosis, has continued to attract numerous sponsors in the social sciences. Even perhaps more important, the alternative is now firmly planted in linguistics itself, where theories diverging between themselves in the details but all recognizing the centrality of meaning to linguistic structure are now well established (see, for example, Croft, 2013; Diver, 2012/1975, 2012/1985; Diver, Davis, & Reid 2012; Goldberg, 1995; Diver, Huffman & Davis, 2012; Langacker, 1988, 2004).

Since all linguistic units are carriers of meaning, language is, as recognized with different levels of explicitness by these theorists, continuous with other forms of human behavior, especially other forms of meaning making. Seen in this way, the language of marginalized or minoritized children must be evaluated in conjunction with other ways of signifying. We take the position that it is theoretically incoherent to compare the language of poor Latino bilingual children, or poor Black bidialectal children, to that of children who are socialized in White monolingual, often middle- or upper-class homes, where the prevailing language structures and practices have achieved standard status through their association with powerful monolingual elites and their beneficiaries. Once language is seen as an autonomous bounded natural object that can be named or acquired whole and separately from other means of signification, then White middle-class speakers can be positioned as having the right kind of language, for it is their language that is constructed as the norm. In contrast, African American and Latino students can then be positioned as not having—or having the wrong—language, for their ways of using language are not considered the norm (see, for example, Park & Wee, 2012, for this argument in their treatment of markets of English).

Language as a semiotic system

In monolingual and predominantly White middle- and upper-class families in the United States, verbal input in what is considered standard English is most often construed as the main means of socialization. In predominantly Black and Latino working-class and often poor families, who are in many cases also multilingual, features from what are considered other languages or other varieties of English are more prevalent. Importantly among these, multimodal inputs such as music, dance, gestures, and images play a role in socialization and signification that is additional to language in ways not necessarily relevant to, or known by, the dominant social groups. That is why it is not revealing to compare a solo-lingual process—that is, a process that only makes meaning through oral or written language—to a process that *additionally* construes other means of signification as valuable.

Social semioticians have increasingly recognized that people use a range of semiotic resources to communicate and that speech and writing are not necessarily the most developed or comprehensive resource for all forms of meaning making (Bezemer & Kress, 2016; Jewitt, 2014; Kress, 1997). These scholars have shown that the communicative force of all signs is constantly made anew and is motivated in the apt combination of form and meaning by the sign-maker's intent and interest (Bezemer & Kress, 2016; Kress, 2010). There is no linear form of communication from sender to receiver—from teacher to student or from parent to child. When a sign is made, it becomes available for interpretation only through what others have done before, in response to similar social and semiotic needs.

Thus, the selection by parents of semiotic units to communicate with their children is motivated by communicative interest and intent and by a history of use that is embedded in layered cultural and meaning-making practices. Parents use all their semiotic resources to communicate with their children, and children learn to make meaning when they interpret those signs and transform them to fit their interest. Families construct social learning environments for themselves and their children. They do so by bringing different factors into coherence with each other, including their interests and those of their children, as well as those of their ancestors and of their communities of practice. This view of social semiotics rests on Bezemer and Kress's (2016) concept of *generosity of recognition*. Families and their children take all signs seriously, regardless of who made the sign or in what mode it was made.

Preschool children make meaning by using their emergent words but also facial and bodily gestures and movement. The latter are not usefully regarded in these very young children as paralinguistic but as part and parcel of their semiotic communicative practices to express love, anger, frustration, etc. As children are socialized to verbal and written literacy in schools, children

whose socialization has privileged other modes are told that some of these rich semiotic practices are not appropriate in the school context.

In order to make sense of school texts, bilingual and bidialectal children learn to suppress features of their language repertoire that are not considered standard school English. Hearing children learn that gestures and movements are not appropriate semiotic practices in schools, where eventually only verbal cues are valued for their signification. Before literacy is acquired in school, drawing and acting-out are considered at home signs that signify. But once the process of reading and writing is underway in school, children's semiotic practices are restricted to verbal and written ones.

In this privileging of strictly oral and written practices in what is considered standard English, young African American and Latino children who come from homes with other language and semiotic practices are constantly deemed inferior by standardized tests that restrict meaning making to a limited number of accepted signs. It is important then to understand that these children are being evaluated not on the basis of the full deployment of their meaning-making repertoire but on their ability to suppress many of the signs of their repertoire in order to use only those deemed appropriate in school.

If we were really interested in assisting families of young Latino bilingual and African American bidialectal children to prepare them for school, we would be supporting them in increasing the children's ability to signify through multiple means and not just in standardized forms of English. After all, not all families can or should do so, since they may have different linguistic and semiotic structures, inventories, and practices. The focus must not be on changing families whose language practices will become even more stigmatized than they already are, but on naming the racism that has enthroned White middle-class linguistic practices as universal and natural. It would then be important to transform early childhood schooling to accept the multiple meaning-making potential of different children, as they extend these practices to encompass those valued in schools. The gap is not located in the ways of languaging of African American and Latino families and their young children, in their bilingualism or bidialectism. The gap is in our understandings of how the construction of language by U.S. schools as only that which closely matches the linguistic practices of the White monolingual middle class continues to perpetuate the exclusion of bilingual and bidialectal students.

Whose gap?

Schools, as we have said, privilege especially the written mode, and also the oral mode, but do so only according to certain norms and conventions. In the United States, these norms match what has been constructed as "English." But English is much more than the few features that are accepted in school. English has been appropriated by descendants of Native Americans, African slaves, early European settlers of non-English origins, and by the continuous flow of European, Asian, African, and Latin American immigrants who continue to settle in the United States. The question that we must then raise in the deconstruction of the language gap is: Whose English? The answer to this question would then determine where the gap is located.

At the same time, language is, as we have said, part of a semiotic system by which people communicate. And this semiotic system is much more than written and oral language. It includes gestures, sound, and image, all combined with one another, as well as speech and script, all contextualized and recontextualized to fit the communicative needs of families. The other question that we must then raise in the deconstruction of the language gap is: Which semiotic means? The answer to this question would then also help us determine where the gap is located.

African American and Latino families communicate for the same reasons as do all families. They talk about the world, express feelings, address others, establish social connections, etc. In these families, when language use is not being policed, other signifiers are often foregrounded to communicate messages appropriately. For example, it has been widely observed that Latinos hug each other and kiss each other more than White Americans. Latino and Black families often live in closer

proximity, and thus physical gestures mean more than when families live in larger quarters where gestures cannot be seen and physical touch cannot be experienced. It is also widely known that Latino families listen to the radio much more than White families. Music and dance are important meaning-making signs in Latino families. Bachata and salsa may signal happiness, but when one is sad, a bolero does one good. Latino and African American children often learn to move their bodies in particular ways in order to signify, as ways of expressing how one feels, as ways of establishing social connections. These children do not lack words or have an impoverished grammar. They simply use, in many instances, additional semiotic resources that serve purposes that in many White middle-class children may have been served by means of certain words.

Young Latino and African American children may use languages other than English—or features from “their” English—or yet other semiotic means in ways that function well within the family to communicate about their world, express how they feel, address others, and establish social connections. It is only when they get to school that their language and means of expression is seen as “deficient.” Blommaert (2010) describes repertoires as the “complexes of linguistic, communicative, semiotic resources people actually possess and deploy” (p. 102). Seen in this light, White middle-class monolingual students have in their repertoire fewer features, and use their repertoire for more restricted circumstances and purposes, than do minoritized children who have to live in the borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1999). It is White middle-class children whose semiotic repertoire then can be seen as “restricted,” allowing us then to pose the question: Whose language gap?

The foregoing considerations lead us to conclude that the concept of a language gap has to be disrupted if we are to move toward justice in education, toward success for all children, and to what is likely the prerequisite goal of ameliorating, or redressing altogether, prevailing systems of control that sustain excessive power differentials. These differentials have been installed in conceptions of languages and sign systems that can profitably be seen as ultimately the product of colonial expansion and nation building (Mignolo, 2000). The language gap is a product of a racism that by constructing legitimate language solely in the image of White middle-class speakers stigmatizes and silences what are considered bilingual and bidialectal practices. The objectivation of language then impacts on the subjectivation of both speakers and listeners.

In comparing their bilingual and bidialectal practices against the naturalized norm, African Americans and Latinos consider their linguistic practices illegitimate and impoverished. At the same time, as Flores and Rosa (2015) have argued, White middle-class listeners continue to hear Black and Latino language as inappropriate, regardless of what they say or do. With these considerations in mind, in the next section we discuss the concept of *translanguaging* (García & Wei, 2014; Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2015). We offer translanguaging as a lens through which an attempt can be made to reduce to its deserved insignificance the concept of the language gap.

Translanguaging

A translanguaging approach takes an internalist perspective from which all speakers are seen as possessing a single, unitary linguistic system, regardless of whether, from an externalist perspective, society sees them as speakers of a single named language, as speakers of two named languages, or as speakers of two dialects or varieties (Otheguy et al., 2015). From the internal, translanguaging perspective, those we call monolinguals, bilinguals, and bidialectals are all the same. They differ only in terms of what, from the external perspective, are socially dictated partitions of their unitary language into named entities such as Arabic, Bulgarian, Catalan, Dutch, English, French, German, Spanish, African-American Vernacular, Caribbean Spanish, Castilian Spanish, Cockney English, Latino English, etc. The translanguaging perspective insists on the fact that named languages (and varieties) are social *constructions* (Heller, 1999) and even *inventions* (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007).

Relevant here is that, as readily acknowledged, linguists are unable to make decisions *on structural or lexical grounds* about the identity or boundaries of named enumerated languages, about the lines between two languages or dialects, or about the “one language or two” status of any socially

contested pair of named languages. The translanguaging perspective insists as well on the centrality of the well-known fact that those we call bilinguals and bidialectals behave, in unmonitored settings, as if the boundary between their named languages or varieties had no internal existence (because, says the translanguaging perspective, it in fact does not). That is, the translanguaging perspective pays attention to the simple fact that the fluid language practices of speakers (such as so-called code-switching) are counterexamples to the claim that the linguistic systems of the bilingual or bidialectal are internally dual (code-switching being thus the name of the key counterexample to the existence of two codes). Practices that are considered bilingual, bidialectal, or multidialectal are consonant with the position that speakers have a unitary system.

The point bears restating in a different way. From the translanguaging perspective, the linguistic system of all speakers is, from the internal view, a list of (more or less) structured but unpartitioned lexical and structural features, which appear to be subdivided by languages or varieties because we have, without evidence, imputed to the mind the limits and boundaries that society has constructed—that is, we have made the unwarranted assumption that the social breaks provided by our constructed external view of languages or varieties hold as well for the internal linguistic system of the speaker.

For those we call bilingual, the monitored linguistic behavior when they are not exhibiting fluid language practices is an exercise in suppression. The features that experience has told the speaker are not to be used with, say, interlocutor A are kept unused, to deploy only the ones that interlocutor A can handle. The same happens when the bilingual speaks with interlocutor B, with whom another set of features has to be suppressed. But if speaking with a bilingual interlocutor, let's say interlocutor AB, in an unmonitored or less monitored setting, the unsuppressed flow of the bilingual's entire unpartitioned linguistic inventory will often be unleashed.

Monolinguals too possess a translanguaging mind (a mind that does not reflect social linguistic boundaries), and they too have to do a little suppressing in monitored settings (suppressing of, for example, adult features when addressing toddlers or young children, of highly learned features when addressing the uneducated, of profane features in polite company, etc.), but the magnitude of the suppression is nothing compared to the severe exercise in alternating suppression that is the lot of what society calls bilinguals.

In the same boat as the bilinguals are the bidialectals, who daily suppress features of their unitary system in observance of what they know to be socially dictated boundaries of region or correctness. In the United States, to speak English for the bilingual is not unlike what, for the bidialectal, is to speak proper, or to speak White; they are both engaged in an exercise that involves all speakers (inasmuch as all are to some extent bidialectal or aware of what we call register and style) but that is especially present in the life of racially minoritized speakers like African Americans.

Schools are the monitored settings par excellence. In them, children whom the society calls bilingual are asked to engage in severe acts of suppression of about half the contents of their linguistic repertoire, a suppression that is present in monolingual instructional settings or in bilingual ones that adhere to severe one-language, one-teacher, one-room approaches. While the monolingual child is asked to suppress a little, the bilingual one is asked to suppress a lot. And most important, when it comes to language or proficiency assessment, the monolingual is allowed to enlist the full contents of his or her linguistic system, while the bilingual and bidialectal student is only allowed to enlist some of it. The assessment is thus deeply and inherently biased, set up to compare children in a type of linguistic drum playing where one of the drummers gets two sticks, one for each hand, while the other is forced to play with only one stick in one hand, the other hand tied behind the back.

Translanguaging gives us another way to dismiss the concept of the language gap of African American and Latino children. When scholars work with the concept of a named language or a named variety as a societal construct, they are assessing the child's language inventory only from an external perspective; but they are not taking into consideration the child's unitary language system that makes up their entire language repertoire, the internal perspective. Take, for

example, the case of Paco, a child we know who is 16 months old and lives in the United States. Paco's mother is Latina, his father is White, and they are both English-Spanish bilinguals. Paco has many words: *hi*, *bye*, *no*, *más*, *árbol*, *car*, *truck*, *guagua*, *leche*, *agua*, *baba*, *tete*, *duck*, among others. From an internal perspective, these are Paco's *own* words; they make up his linguistic repertoire. It is a complex and fully functional age-appropriate semiotic system that, together with gestures, enables Paco to communicate well with his mother and father.

From an external perspective, however, people can say that he has words from two languages. Scholars who assess Paco's language using only an external perspective of what he may know in "English" or "Spanish" may say that he has a language gap. In what is known as "English," he has words for two types of vehicles (*car*, *truck*), but he lacks *bus*, which he renders, in what is known to him as *guagua* (which is his mother's word, in what society would call Caribbean or Canarian Spanish). Paco has words to make contact with others in what is known as "English" (*hi*, *bye*), but he doesn't have those in what is known as "Spanish" (he lacks *hola* or *adiós*). And he has words in what is considered Spanish for what he is most interested in—*leche*, *agua*, *más*, which he uses with gestures to get what he wants, lacking what would be considered English: *milk*, *water*, *more*. His words in one or the other language are not specialized according to topic because he also says *ba-ba* for the bottle in which he drinks his *leche*. Paco simply has his own words. He doesn't speak either English or Spanish. He speaks. Period. And his lexical inventory is quite extensive for a 16-month-old.

If Paco were assessed in one or the other language (the external perspective), the complexity and richness of his lexical repertoire would not be made visible. To get a true picture of Paco's linguistic ability, we must assess his entire linguistic system (with the internal perspective), and we must observe how he uses his linguistic system in combination with other semiotic modalities, such as gestures, to communicate effectively. The language gap then disappears, as the complex use of his entire linguistic repertoire serves him well and efficiently. With time and purpose, of course, Paco will add new features to his repertoire. He will do so as his world expands and as he comes into contact with people for whom *leche* doesn't mean and in places where it doesn't mean. It is then that he will acquire *milk* and select that feature when speaking in many settings outside of his home (in others, around where he lives in the United States, he will intelligently continue to say *leche*).

To address what U.S. scholars refer to as the language gap, we need to uncover its main assumption—that the language and language practices of White middle-class monolingual students is natural and universal. Only by insisting that this is a social construction that has served to justify an enduring racism that limits the educational opportunities of Latino and African American children will we be able to unmask it. What is needed is not to fill the language gap but to bridge the *opportunity gap* that has continued to exclude Blacks and Latinos from meaningful participation in society and schools.

Bilingual and bidialectal children acquire new language features as they have opportunities to mean among people and in situations in which those features are meaningful. Language is an instrument to mean, and only when we have opportunities to voice what we mean can we extend our linguistic repertoire. No amount of "linguistic training" will ever fill what is labeled a language gap, when what is needed is to combat racism and create more social opportunities to signify and to mean. But for members of the majority in U.S. society to offer opportunities to Latino and African American children, they must start by *not* minoritizing them, by valuing their entire language repertoire and acknowledging their linguistic virtuosity, by seeing them as full of the same meaning-making potential as their own children. For educators and scholars to do so, they must uncover the raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa, 2015) that have been at play since language was made a proxy for race in order to continue the exclusion of Latino and African American students from meaningful educational and social opportunities.

Conclusion

This article has debunked the idea that there is a language gap among Latino and African American children when compared to White children. We have shown that the history and development of the concept of the language gap emerged in conjunction with the abandonment of race as an acceptable social category of exclusion. African American and Latino children often come into school with very different ways of making meaning, ways that the school refuses to recognize. Their bilingualism and bidialectism is stigmatized and seen as impoverishing. We have thus located the gap *in the school* and *not* in the children themselves or in their families. Based on the concept of translanguaging, we made a point that should be obvious and uncontroversial—namely, that bilingual Latino and bidialectal African American children (as shown by the bi-) have a broader linguistic repertoire than White children who are said to be speakers of standardized English. The language gap thus is created when scholars assess language skills from an external societal perspective, based on named languages or varieties, that only accepts and makes visible linguistic features associated with the constructed norm, a linguistic norm that only matches the language of White middle-class monolingual children. If there is any gap, it is in social and educational opportunity—opportunity for all children to be valued in their meaning making, to be heard, to have a significant and powerful voice.

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