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Language development, linguistic input, and linguistic racism

OPINION

Megan Figueroa, Ph.D., Department of Psychology, University of Arizona, megan@arizona.edu

ABSTRACT

Language development is both remarkable and unremarkable. It is remarkable because children learn the language(s) around them, signed or spoken, without explicit instruction or correction. It is unremarkable because children have done this for thousands of years without worldwide incident or catastrophe. Yet, much research on this organic developmental phenomenon relies on an empirical falsehood: "quality" linguistic input is necessary to facilitate language development. "Quality" is a value judgment, not a structural feature of any human language. I argue selectively legitimizing some linguistic input as "quality" is possible only through mischaracterizing what language is. This falsehood is also *linguistic racism* because it is based on a deficit perspective of the early linguistic experiences of a subset of children, specifically racialized children. I explore how linguistic racism stalls our collective understanding of language development and promotes an environment of bad science.

1. INTRODUCTION

As you read these words, children across the world are developing the language(s) of their families and communities without explicit teaching or correcting. While children develop language, just as they have for thousands of years, research in the ivory tower grapples with the nature of language development as it relates to larger questions of human cognition. Linguistic input and the role(s) it plays, or does not play, in the process of development, lies at the heart of the language puzzle. Some researchers argue there are children who lack the right kind of linguistic input that facilitates language development. But what is the "right kind" of linguistic input? To what end are researchers defining it? Who does it serve to define the "right kind"? The scientific pursuit of the "right kind" of linguistic input for language development fosters a research ecosystem in the psychological and cognitive sciences that is paternalistic, regressive, and inaccurate, cultivating bad science.

Children have been developing language for thousands of years without worldwide incident or catastrophe. Exploring the nature of this development is a scientifically and humanistically worthwhile endeavor. It is this endeavor that drives my own scholarship. Through research, I find scientists are pursuing questions related to *optimizing* language development for culturally specific purposes, not uncovering the organic nature of language development itself. This is evidenced by several realities presented in the literature, the most harmful of which is conflating the development of language with the explicit learning of cultural, socially constructed tools, like reading and writing. You can read these words I've written because you and I were taught how to read and write. One is simply not *taught* how to language, just as humans are not *taught* how to breathe. Researchers' attempts to define the "right kind" of linguistic input is no longer a question of the organic nature of human development as it unfolds within and across children, it is about optimizing socialization and the teaching of socially constructed tools.

The "right kind" of linguistic input is used time and again to refer to a narrow subset of linguistic input, essentially equating differing discourse styles, a matter of socialization, with "quality"[1] (Johnson, 2015). This is a value judgement based on ideology and not a structural feature of human language. An ideology is a set of beliefs held by members of a social group or doctrines that form the basis of a system. A LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY "locate[s] linguistic phenomena as part of, and evidence for, what [people] believe to be systematic behavioral, aesthetic, affective and moral contrasts among the social groups indexed" by language use (Irvine & Gal, 2000, p. 37). A language ideology—an abstract, socially constructed ideal—essentially frames one form of linguistic socialization as superior to others. Importantly, since there is nothing inherently "good" or "bad" about any language or language variety, a language ideology reflects and reproduces broader cultural beliefs about the people using the language and nothing about the actual structure of the language. That is, a language ideology is a proxy for how the users of that language are viewed by individuals and in society, not about the language itself (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Rosa & Flores, 2017).

For decades, the language use of historically and systemically marginalized children, families, and communities has been described in terms of deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997): standardized language ideologies favoring the linguistic practices of those in power – in the case of the United States, the monolingual English-speaking white, non-disabled, neurotypical, middle- and upper-classes (Lippi-Green, 2012; Phillipson, 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988) – have positioned language use by racialized[2] communities as inherently deficient and in need of outside remediation. Put another way, RACIOLINGUISTIC IDEOLOGIES conflate the language use of racialized bodies with linguistic deficiency (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Rosa & Flores, 2017).

Language and race cannot and must not be analyzed as two separate social processes. Even when racialized people engage in linguistic practices that are situated as "normative" based on standardized language ideologies (i.e., when they "sound/sign white"), their language may still be perceived as "deficient" to the white listening/perceiving subject (Flores & Rosa, 2015). The marker of linguistic mastery, then, is always shifting for racialized people (García et al., 2021). This has tangible, real-world consequences, resulting in diminished access to resources, both material and immaterial. A standardized language ideology that favors white linguistic practices and views non-white linguistic practices as deficient reproduces, regulates, and legitimizes unequal division of power and resources (Alim et al., 2016; Dovchin, 2020; Flores & Rosa, 2015; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2015). This is LINGUISTIC RACISM: the denial of fundamental human rights in institutional and non-institutional settings based on language use.

Most scholars do not explicitly state that the language use of racialized communities is a deficit; instead, the charges are couched in coded terms[3] like "quality" linguistic input. Importantly, the existence of "quality" linguistic input is a falsehood and this discursive construction ignores two fundamental tenants in the field of linguistics: 1. Children[4] will learn the language variety of their environment whether it is signed or spoken, and they do so without direct teaching or correction (e.g., Brown, 1973; Cazden, 1968; MacWhinney & Snow, 1985), and 2. All language varieties are systematic, rule-governed, generative, creative, and equal (Labov, 1969, 1970, 1972).

Linguistic Racism
The denial of fundamental human rights in institutional and non-institutional settings based on language use. This subset of racism reproduces, regulates, and legitimizes unequal division of power and resources (material and immaterial), favoring linguistic behaviors associated with white people, promoting white linguistic hegemony and white supremacy.

In this perspective article, I problematize deficit thinking in the study of language development. I argue discursive and ideological manipulation undermine advancements in our collective understanding of language development through linguistic racism masquerading as fact. The structure of the paper continues as follows: I discuss what I mean when I refer to language

[1] Throughout this paper, I refer to "quality" linguistic input, within quotations or use the phrase *so-called* to emphasize the subjective nature of this description and to communicate that I do not support the underlying assumptions.
[2] Racialized is to be understood as the people who, through colonization and subsequent oppression, have been situated as inferior in racial terms (García et al., 2021).
[3] While it is coded language for some, it is overt for those who experience linguistic racism.
[4] In this paper, I will focus on children not labeled as having disordered language. See also Henner and Robinson 2023 for a discussion of how no languaging is "disordered".

development (**Section 2**). Then, I outline how linguistic input is described and operationalized in the language development literature (**Section 3**), and how conceptualizing input as "quality" relies on a mischaracterization of what language and language development is. Next, I argue researchers portray racialized children as experiencing a *word* or *language gap* and that these children receive less "quality" linguistic input, and this reflects and reproduces the white supremacist status quo in the United States through linguistic racism (**Section 4**). Finally, I summarize how we can and must approach linguistic input—a focal point of developmental research—in a way that does not pathologize linguistic variability across families, communities, and cultures, because to continue to do so promotes inaccurate and limiting descriptions of language, which is bad science (**Section 5**).

2. LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley explores, among other themes, what makes us "human." Frankenstein's Monster, upon discovering human language, called it "a godlike science": "I found that these people possessed a method of communicating their experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds. I perceived that the words they spoke sometimes produced pleasure or pain, smiles, or sadness, in the minds and countenances of the hearers" (2012). Indeed, many argue core to what makes us "human" is the homo sapiens' ability to use language. Whether language is uniquely human is debatable; regardless, language undeniably connects each of us with other humans, and a the capacity for language is something children all over the world develop every single day.

Language development is part and parcel of human development. Children go from not having language to having language, which is both remarkable and unremarkable. It is remarkable because children break up the speech/sign stream, discover the phonemic inventory(s) and phonotactics of their language(s), learn word forms and word meanings, and uncover the morphosyntax and sentence structure, all from the linguistic input available in their environments (e.g., Brown, 1973; Cazden, 1968; Figueroa & Gerken, 2019; Gertner & Fisher, 2012; Gleitman, 1990; Jusczyk & Aslin, 1995; Jusczyk, Luce, & Charles-Luce, 1994; Lillo-Martin & Henner, 2021; Maratsos & Chalkey, 1980; Naigles, 1990, 1996; Saffran et al., 1996; Werker & Tees, 1984). Children do all of this within the first few years of life and *without* explicit teaching. It is unremarkable because children have been doing this without worldwide incident or catastrophe for a very long time.

There are some iconic examples from the research that illustrate the organic nature of language development. Research has shown language is not purely imitative (*cf* Skinner, 1957), since children are capable of imitating, but they return to their current linguistic representation anyway, as seen in (A) from MacWhinney and Snow (1985).

(A) Child: Want other one spoon, Daddy.
Adult: You mean, you want the other spoon.
Child: Yes, I want other one spoon, please, Daddy.
Adult: Can you say 'the other spoon'?
Child: Other...one...spoon.
Adult: Say, 'other'.
Child: Other.
Adult: Spoon.
Child: Spoon.
Adult: Other...spoon.
Child: Other...spoon. Now give me other one spoon?

This example also shows that correcting the language of children backfires, often leading to comical interactions between adult and child. Indeed, children's productions include creative structures they have not experienced in their input, as illustrated in (B) from Cazden (1972). (Note that "holded" is the past tense of "hold" in some varieties of English, though clearly not in this adult's variety.)

(B) Child: My teacher holded the baby rabbit and we patted them.
Adult: Did you say that your teacher held the baby rabbit?

Child: Yes.
Adult: What did you say she did?
Child: She holded the baby rabbit and we patted them.
Adult: Did you say she held them tightly?
Child: No, she holded them loosely.

These examples are not errors, but organic byproducts part of a developing language system. Describing these as errors undermines the dynamic process that is each child's individual language development. In fact, "errors" provide insight into cognitive processes. Take, for example, the *fis phenomenon*. Psychologists Roger Brown and Jean Berko (1960) describe the following scenario: A child's pronunciation of "fish" is "fis." The child's parent imitates the child's pronunciation of 'fish' and asks, "Is this your 'fis'?" The child, adamantly, replies, "No! It's my 'fis'!" The child can hear the difference between the adult's production of "fish" and "fis," knows that "fish" is the target pronunciation and is upset that the parent is purposefully mispronouncing it. In this case, it is possible the child's motor abilities have not caught up with their language abilities.

Remarkably, children proceed through the phenomenon of language development before they enter school. Heath (1983) summarizes the phenomenon well in her ethnographic research with two communities with vastly different linguistic practices:

> In each community, by the time they go to school, the children know the sounds, words, and grammatical systems of the language spoken around them. They have learned their community's ways of using language to get along with the people and to accomplish their social goals. They have learned to use language to acquire the knowledge their community has judged they should know at their age, and they have learned appropriate ways of expressing that knowledge (p. 100).

It is hard to reconcile Hoff's (2003) assertion that there is linguistic input with "more of the characteristics…that are positively associated with language development" (p. 1369). The implicature here is that linguistic input should be a certain way or language development will not proceed correctly, nor will it be successful if certain conditions are not met. This is patently and empirically false. As Heath describes, children learn the language(s) to which they are exposed, and they do so without explicit instruction and *before* they enter school. To suggest otherwise is disingenuous given a fundamental tenant of language science research: Children develop the language(s) of their environment, whether signed or spoken, and they do so without direct teaching and from very little linguistic input given the vastness of language (e.g., Brown, 1973; Cazden, 1968; MacWhinney & Snow, 1985).

This paper is not meant to succinctly articulate the nature of language development as it proceeds within an individual child or children as a group. It is not meant to do that because no one can (yet) do that. I do not want to introduce any grounds for disagreement or greater reason for doubt into the debate (Allen & Spencer, 2022) by quoting Chomsky, but I do want to make the same point he makes so succinctly, "[T]here is little point in speculating about the process of acquisition without a much better understanding of what is acquired" (1959, p. 55; as quoted in Johnson et al., 2020, p. 595). In the next section, I will lay out examples of how language is mischaracterized through descriptions of linguistic input that are argued to be "necessary" for language development, with the knowledge that language is part and parcel of human development, and it has been developed by children for thousands of years without worldwide incident or catastrophe.

3. LINGUISTIC INPUT

The developmental journey from not having language to having language has left scientists grappling with existential and empirical questions, one of which is the role(s) of input. How much input is necessary to facilitate language development? Language scientists theorize anywhere along the spectrum from a little to a lot. Frankly, no one can agree on how much input is necessary (e.g., Chomsky, 1959; Skinner, 1957). What everyone can agree on is that linguistic input *is* necessary. This is uncontroversial. The debate is over how much input and what that input should sound like. I use "sound" here, intentionally since mainstream science has ignored language development across modalities, focusing only on speech.

The research literature of the past few decades portrays parental linguistic input, particularly the mother's (Allen & Spencer, 2022), as the most powerful indicator of a child's language development. As Leffel and Suskind (2013) argue, "Parent linguistic input lies at the heart of the problem; yet it also lies at the heart of the answer." On the surface, the idea that parental linguistic input robustly predicts a child's language outcomes makes sense. Children must be exposed to sustained and meaningful linguistic input to develop language, and often that input comes from adult caregivers. However, it is inherently misleading if you consider how children are not taught how to use their brain to develop language, just as they are not taught how to use their lungs to breathe.

Giving adult caregivers, usually mothers, omnipotence in their child(ren)'s language development "collapses into a more radical form of nativism, only this time locating the competence within the mother rather than the child" (Burman, 2016, p. 203). Nativism is the postulation that children have an innate facility for language (Chomsky, 1959), considered absurd by many linguists, developmental psychologists, and cognitive scientists alike. What is not equally absurd to some, apparently, is the assumption that mothers or caregivers have an innate, "omniscient" (Shatz, 1982, quoted in Burman, 2016) facility for promoting language development in their child(ren). This omniscient ability allegedly allows mothers to adapt their language to their child(ren)'s current ability level to maximally promote language development. Importantly, there is no singular model for communicating with children, which would be necessary if mothers did have this omniscient ability. But this omniscient ability does not follow if you consider the empirical evidence. All children develop language and there is no singular model of communication (Burman, 2016). Since there is no singular model, there could not possibly be reason to assert that mothers and other caregivers hold the key that unlocks language development.

Children develop the language(s) of their community without explicit instruction or correction within the first few years of life. Too much research in developmental psycholinguistics seemingly ignores this, leading to what Johnson and colleagues (2020) call, "opaque or questionable conceptualizations about what is being measured – i.e., 'language' – which are not grounded in the language sciences" (p. 595). Language development is organic.

There is no variety of language that is better for development. All language varieties, written or not, regardless of modality, are systematic, rule-governed, generative, creative, and equal. Much work in developmental psycholinguistics approaches linguistic input as something that can be "good" or "bad", which is not something that can be structurally true of language. Any judgments about the nature of linguistic input should be understood as just that: a subjective judgment. Subjective judgements about language devalue a subset of linguistic practices and describe them in deficit terms (Valencia, 1997). A standardized language ideology favoring the linguistic practices of those in power—in the U.S. context, the English-speaking, white, non-disabled middle- and upper-classes (Lippi-Green, 2012)—has positioned language use by racialized communities as inherently deficient and in need of outside remediation. The remediation is meant to "better" their language, to get them to sound more like those in power, which will allegedly allow access to resources and opportunities. This pathologization of language use places racialized children at an unfair disadvantage when they enter school, since their languaging is not valued under this deficit perspective.

Subjective descriptions of the language of racialized families are not new. The idea of "deficient" language has been repackaged and renormalized across time. In 1966, Bereiter and Englemann egregiously argued that Black children speak in a "non-logical" way and are experiencing "cultural deprivation" (also Bernstein, 1971 and "restricted codes" in the form of "verbal deprivation").[5] Labov's (1969, 1970, 1972) research on African American Language refuted the work of Bereiter and Englemann, demonstrating that "the concept of verbal deprivation has no basis in social reality" (1969, p.1). Much work has refuted the idea of so-called verbal deprivation since (e.g., Baugh, 2017; Heath, 1983; Rickford, 1999), yet the discourse of deficiency persists. As I discuss in the rest of this section, the rhetoric has shifted to "word gap" (and later "language gap") and "quality" linguistic input (Hart & Risley, 1995), but the position of deficiency remains (Boykin & Allen, 2000). This is because a rhetorical shift from deficiency to "difference" (e.g., Golinkoff et al., 2019) or even

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[5] D/deaf and hard of hearing children are frequently denied access to a natural sign language (Hall et al., 2019; Lillo-Martin & Henner, 2021; Spellun & Kushalnagar, 2018), which is an actual example of *language deprivation* and a public health crisis; unfortunately, the presence of real language deprivation is often buried by research addressing supposed "language gaps" in the input to hearing children.

"adaptation" (Taylor et al., 2023) is just that, rhetorical. The people who are "different" or are meant to "adapt" are still racialized children.

3.1 THE "WORD GAP"

Developmental psychologists Betty Hart and Todd Risley call it "the early catastrophe" (2003): By the age of four, they claim, some children are exposed to 30 million fewer words than other children. Worse yet, they suggest, this "word gap" (later termed the "language gap") is fueling the "achievement gap" —the fact that racialized children, whose families are usually lower on the socioeconomic ladder, have "persistently, pervasively, and disproportionately low academic achievement" (Valencia, 1997, p. 1). There are two ways to approach the phenomenon of disproportionate academic achievement between different groups of children as a social problem: blame the system or blame the individual (Ryan, 1971). Hart and Risley infamously chose the latter. Hart and Risley argue linguistic input in the first few years of life is better preparing some children for academic success while placing others at-risk for failure.

Hart and Risley motivate their research as a call to action in the war on poverty—the unofficial name for legislation by the U.S. government to lessen poverty and its deleterious effects. Early intervention programs for poor children were one manifestation of this era. Before undertaking their study, Hart and Risley were working within an intervention program for preschool-aged Black children who came from poor homes. Their job was to intervene upon these children's "everyday language" to better prepare them to succeed in school (p. 5). However, the researchers could not find anything wrong with the children's language: the children "…seemed fully competent to us, well able to explain and elaborate the topics typical in preschool interactions. We became increasingly uncertain about which language skills we should be undertaking to improve" (1995, p.8). At this point, I would have asked how preschool intervention programs consistently measure a subset of children as behind before school even begins. Hart and Risley, instead, decide "we needed to know, not from our textbooks, but from advantaged children, what skilled spontaneous speech at age four is in terms of grammar and content" (1995, p.8). This decision to compare the Black children's language to the "skilled speech" of "advantaged children" is one of the most critical moments in the study of child language development.

Hart and Risley were interested in the linguistic environments of children across socioeconomic backgrounds: Were there interactional differences between caregiver(s) and child(ren) across the socioeconomic spectrum that may account for later academic success or failure? That is, is the stage set for the "achievement gap" before children even enter school? Is language responsible for this "gap"? After two-and-a-half years of observing 42 families in Kansas City, Kansas, the researchers claim that the higher up caregivers are on the socioeconomic ladder, the more words (i.e., higher quantity) and higher "quality" of language caregivers direct to their children. This results in children who are growing up poor experiencing a "gap" of 30 million words by the time they are four years old.

Hart and Risley's argument was first published in their 1995 book *Meaningful differences*, which is widely considered "groundbreaking" (Masek et al., 2021, p. 274), "seminal" (Merz et al., 2019, p. 17), and "renowned" (Zauche et al., 2016, p. 319). For many people inside and outside of academia, this work is a foundational text that reifies the relationship between early home language exposure and use and later academic achievement (or failure). Few other academic works have been afforded such mass appeal. An article in *The New Yorker* writes, "The poorer parents are, the less they talk with their children" (Talbot, 2015, p. 1). This sentence sums up Hart and Risley's claim well. This popular book, and even more popular argument, is simply a manifestation of the idea that certain discursive practices are superior to others (Johnson et al., 2017), which is possible only through a misunderstanding of the nature of language development. Although Hart and Risley knew children were capable communicators by four years old, which is what it means to develop language, they exhibit a steadfast dedication to a standardized language ideology, which is racist and culturally biased by its very nature (more in section 4; Flores & Rosa, 2015; Lippi-Green, 2012).[6]

[6] It is also ableist since the modality of sign is erased from the conversation.

3.2 METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Many scholars critique Hart and Risley (1995) on theoretical (e.g., Baugh, 2017), discursive (Abraham, 2020; Johnson et al., 2020), and empirical (e.g., Sperry et al., 2018) grounds. Hart and Risley's (1995) study contains methodological flaws that severely limit the generalizability of their findings and it is important to briefly interrogate those here. First and foremost, 30 million is an *extrapolation* from averages in observational data from only 42 families in the Midwest U.S.—occurring once a month for one hour—an undeniably miniscule window into the lives of families. This window is likely affected by the OBSERVER'S PARADOX, the problem described by Labov (1972): "the aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain this data by systematic observation" (p. 209). Since the researchers were white and all the "welfare" families were Black, it is likely the observational data was even less reflective of the families' authentic linguistic behaviors since any speculation on the researchers' part is just that: an outsider's speculation (Teo, 2008). Further, only one of the "professional" families in Hart and Risley's study was Black, so the researchers conflated class with race while simultaneously failing to examine the systemic patterns of historical harm under institutionalized racism (Figueroa, 2023). There will be more on this in Section 4.

The measurement of number of words spoken to children across the socioeconomic spectrum lacks integrity[7] in several other ways. The extrapolation of 30 million is predicated on several illogical assumptions, including that children hear a consistent number of words every day for the first four years of life, which research has shown to be untrue (Bergelson, Amatuni, Dailey, et al., 2019; Soderstrom & Wittebolle, 2013). The input children receive is also not evenly distributed throughout the day (Casillas et al., 2020), which is presumed by the method in which Hart and Risley extrapolated their 30 million number. Even further, Purpura (2019) argues that a gap of 30 million words is "mathematically unlikely" (p. 1840). The "word gap" also necessarily presumes loquacious people raise children who are somehow better at language development (Hart & Risley, 1995). If this were true, only a subset of children across the world would develop language. We know this to be false. Hart and Risley also discount the speech of multiple caregivers and bystanders, which leads to the undercounting of words (Sperry et al., 2018). Taken together, it is methodologically unlikely researchers can capture a genuine "gap" of any kind. Still, the gap narrative perseveres because measuring a "gap" between "advantaged" and not is required by deficit thinking.

If racialized children and their families are not meeting the "standard" that Hart and Risley constructed, which is talking more and talking "better," then academic failure is sensible, especially in the United States where individual responsibility is valued (Syed et al., 2018). But this does not explain what is occurring. This belief that any caregiver could manipulate the linguistic input their child(ren) receives in such a life-altering way that children will be set up to "succeed" in school and beyond, is a contortion of the nature of language development and ignores the role of societal factors on "success" and "failure." It also relies on a subset of discursive practices to be favored over others.

3.3 "QUALITY" DOES NOT EXIST

Hart and Risley's influence remain far-reaching, especially as a means to measure children's language "ability," and this manifests in a number of ways in the literature. Importantly, measuring words under Hart and Risley and the "word gap" has always been about quantity *and* "quality." Quantity is straightforward: it is counting words. "Quality" is esoteric. It changes depending on the study, the researchers, and the goal of the work. For Hart and Risley, "quality" linguistic input was defined by "memorable interactions" during the observational period of their study. These interactions between caregiver and child became the "basis for describing parenting behaviors that seemed to make these interactions higher in quality ('better') than others in terms of their developmental importance to language learning" (p.76). This is counter to a point they make multiple times in their book, which is that "…all 42 children learned to talk. All the parents had apparently provided whatever amount of experience was necessary for the children to become effective users of the language" (p. 71). It is unclear to me how they themselves made the leap from this statement to describing certain parental

[7] I follow Boykin and Allen (2000) who call for an emphasis on psychological integrity.

behaviors as more "quality" in the process of language development, but its ramifications continue to reverberate throughout the literature.

After quantifying the interactions of the "advantaged" families, Hart and Risley (1995) describe "quality" linguistic input as the words and sentences children are exposed to, and the interactional contexts in which they are presented. The interactional contexts entailed three components: discourse function, or if the sentence(s) require a response from the child, "adjacency condition," or the back-and-forth of conversation between caregiver and child, and valence, or emotional tone of the sentence(s) from the caregiver. So, for example, a sentence that is said in a "nice" manner that requires a child to respond is "quality" input. The sentence is even higher "quality" if the parent responds within five seconds of the child's response. And so it goes.

There is no single way to communicate with children. Describing linguistic input as "quality" is a matter of favoring certain discursive styles over others. For example, the emotional tone of a sentence references the individual uttering the sentence, not something inherent to the sentence. "Quality" is a value judgment, not a structural reality of linguistic input. All languages and language varieties are structurally equal. Thus, the descriptions of "quality" linguistic input lack integrity, just as Hart and Risley's 30 million word gap claim does. Further, selectively framing some linguistic input as "quality" for "successful" language development is ultimately a non-starter: the idea that language development would not be "successful" for children is based on a misunderstanding of what language is and how it develops, as I have argued. Regardless, it is widely argued that children from families lower on the socioeconomic ladder receive "significantly less high-quantity and high-quality language" (Schwab & Lew-Williams, 2016, p. 271). It is worth examining how "quality" appears in the literature because it is inescapable falsehood that relies on selectively legitimizing a certain subset of input as valuable.

The developmental literature has since defined "quality" linguistic input a myriad of ways, sometimes contradictory, other times not linguistic. In some cases, "quality" isn't defined at all (MacLeod & Demers, 2023). When "quality" is defined, descriptions are for speech, not sign. Here is a sampling of the characteristics of caregiver speech that have been defined as "quality": higher quantity of language input (e.g., more words)[8]; use of "rare" words, lexical diversity, and lexical complexity[9]; syntactic/sentence/structural complexity and longer utterances[10]; decontextualized language[11]; affirmations (as opposed to prohibitions)[12] and the limited use of "direct commands" or "directives"[13]; referential or didactic language and iconic and deictic gestures[14]; dyadic conversational turn-taking[15]; extratextual talk during shared book reading, including the use of open-ended and *wh*-questions[16]; child directed speech[17]; "native" speaker input[18]. Critically, all these descriptions of "quality" linguistic input are discursive features that are not required for "successful" language development.

So-called child-directed speech (Gallaway & Richards, 1994)–once called 'motherese'–is broadly claimed to be "critical for language development" (Quigley & Nixon, 2020, p.146) and described as "parents' effective communication to the infant" (Rowe & Zuckerman, 2016, p. 827). However, not all caregivers, even those from the same cultural background, use the characteristics that are commonly associated with child-directed speech (Heath, 1983; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984)—higher pitch, more repetition, shorter utterances, and use of words in isolation (Fernald, 1989; Schwab & Lew-Williams, 2016)—or to the same degree (Ferjan Ramírez et al., 2022). Slower rate of speech is also associated with CDS; however, this is not found across languages (Han et al., 2021) or even

[8] e.g., Dwyer et al., 2019; Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2003; Hoff & Naigles, 2002; Gilkerson et al., 2017; Huttenlocher et al., 1991; Levine et al., 2020; Rowe, 2008, 2012; Vanormelingen & Gillis, 2016; Wong et al., 2020
[9] e.g., Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2003; Hoff & Ginsburg, 1991; Rowe, 2008, 2012; Scott et al., 2020
[10] e.g., Hirsh-Pasek et al, 2015; Hoff, 2003; Rowe, 2008
[11] e.g., Bernstein, 1971; Rowe, 2012
[12] e.g., Conger et al., 2010; Hart & Risley, 1995
[13] e.g., Fannin et al., 2018; Hart & Risley, 1995; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994, p. 205; Hoff-Ginsberg, 1991; Rowe, 2008, Tulviste & Tamm, 2023
[14] e.g., Hirsh-Pasek et al, 2015; Kuchirko et al., 2020; Kuchirko et al., 2018; Romano & Windsor, 2020; Rowe & Goldin-Meadow, 2009; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2018; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2013),
[15] e.g., Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2015; Leffel & Suskind, 2013; Lopez et al., 2020; Masek et al., 2021; Romeo et al., 2018
[16] e.g., Hutton et al., 2017; Logan et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2020; Zambrana et al., 2020
[17] e.g., Ferguson, 1964; Fernald, 1989; Hutton et al., 2017; Snow & Ferguson, 1977
[18] Hoff et al., 2020

across ages at the same rates (Cox et al., 2022). Some children hear a lot of language directed to other people, like the Tsetal Mayan, Tzotzil Mayan, children on Rossel Island in Papua New Guinea, and the children in the Piedmont region of the U.S. (Bergelson, Casillas, Soderstrom et al., 2019; Brown & Gaskins, 2014; Casillas et al., 2021; Casillas et al., 2020, 2021; de León, 2000; de León, 2022; Heath, 1983). Children in these communities develop language without any delay and they are not exceptions to some cognitive developmental rule.

"Language gap" studies also portray certain parent-child interactions during book reading as "quality." Referential and didactic language, which is said to be "quality" in other circumstances, is inferior to open-ended and *wh-* questions during shared book reading. This brings up two points: *Referential* or *didactic* language is not a linguistic characteristic, but a meta-cognitive act (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2015) that is one way to get word learning, but it is not necessary, since, for example, children can form categories without word labels (Chan et al., 2023). Second, why would shared book reading be better for language development when literacy is a modern condition? Children have been developing language for much longer than literacy has been around.

Some of the descriptions of "quality" are contradictory. While shorter utterances and words uttered in isolation, are revered on the one hand, on the other there is structural complexity and longer utterances. In terms of structural complexity, it is well established language produced spontaneously in speech or sign is less structurally complex than written language (Hsaio et al., 2023; Roland et al., 2007). To put it another way, we do not speak/sign as we write. Using more relative clauses does not make one more intelligible. In fact, it can be confusing in spontaneous speech (Frazier & Fodor, 1978). This makes sense given speaking/signing is a part of human development that is not taught, and writing is a culturally devised tool we must be taught.

Putting aside the fact that children will learn the language to which they are exposed within the first few years of life, a problem with the above defining characteristics of "quality" linguistic input is that these features are not universal characteristics of communication, nor of child rearing (Johnson & White, 2020; Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2015; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984; Paugh & Riley, 2019). Childhood is a social and cultural phenomenon, and the type of linguistic environments children are raised in varies widely (Berman, 2019; Casillas et al., 2020, 2021; James & Prout, 1997; Lancy, 2015; LeVine, 2007; Ochs and Schieffelin, 1984; Rogoff, 2003). There is an egregious lack of diversity in research samples (Syed et al., 2018), going well beyond psychology's WEIRD—Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, and Democratic (Heinrich et al., 2010)—problem. The acronym WEIRD fails to recognize that it is specifically white populations that are overrepresented (Clancy & Davis, 2019; Girolamo et al., 2022; Nielson et al., 2017; Rowley & Camacho, 2015; Syed & Kathawalla, 2022), including white infants from North American and Western Europe in journals about development (Singh et al., 2023).

Language development is largely studied as a monolingual English pursuit by hearing people (Kidd & Garcia, 2022), which is the minority experience worldwide. This pervasive sampling bias normalizes white cultural and linguistic behaviors and interactions as "good" (Clancy & Davis, 2019; Rowley & Camacho, 2015) and essentializes these behaviors as "non-ideological common sense" (Fairclough, 2010, p. 31). The features of "quality" linguistic input are certainly familiar to many of the people reading this article because 1. These characteristics are highly valued by members of the white, middle- and upper-classes and 2. Members of the white, middle- and upper-classes are disproportionally represented in all areas of academia, from tenure track positions to academic journal editorships (Auelua-Toomey & Roberts, 2022; Roberts et al., 2022). Put another way, generalizations about language development from families of Western European descent are taken for granted as "normal" because members of the white middle- and upper-classes are disproportionally writing these articles and consuming them (Clancy & Davis, 2019; Syed et al., 2018). This is troubling since essentialist claims are made about language based on differing discursive styles and beliefs about child rearing. These essentialist claims remain unquestioned if the producers of the work recognize their own experiences and do not think to question them.

Diversity of experience poses a real problem for work under the "language gap" tradition. As Johnson and colleagues point out, "Contending with cultural differences in child language socialization would conflict with their proposal that one form of socialization is superior, and thus the oversight might be strategic" (Johnson et al., 2020, p. 595). Without a discussion of the lack of generalizability, the knowledge construction of the fields concerned with child language development will continue to be deeply biased toward white participants and researchers. And at a certain point, it is deliberate.

"Quality" is used time and again in the literature to refer to a narrow subset of spoken linguistic input essentially equating differing discourse styles and language modalities with "quality" (Johnson, 2015). This is rhetorical manipulation. In the documentary *Talking Black in America*, Dr. Keith Cross sums up the problem with selectively legitimizing some language as "quality":

> What does standard English accomplish that these so-called versions of substandard English don't accomplish in terms of communication? Nothing, you know what I mean? Nothing at all. And anything that seems to stand in the way, you say, 'Oh, it'll help you get a job.' Well, is that because of the language? It's not that you're unable to communicate. Or is that because of all these various 'isms' that stand in the way of you being able to take care of yourself?

Cross is right. "Standard" English does not accomplish something that other varieties of English cannot. At least not linguistically, and certainly not cognitively. Instead, rhetorical manipulation constructed a standardized language ideology that favors white middle- and upper-class hearing people's speech, to exclude others from accessing material and immaterial resources and opportunities.

Hart and Risley's "word gap" work rhetorically created "quality" input in the literature, raising the critical question: Is there linguistic input that is "quality"? The answer is unequivocally *no*. "Quality" linguistic input does not exist and so it certainly is not necessary for language development to proceed without incident. I will repeat: all children, whether they grow up in a middle- or upper-class white community or not, will learn the language around them without direct teaching or correction. Hart and Risley concede this point: "Though different in personality and skill levels, the children all learned to talk and to be socially appropriate members of the family with all the basic skills needed for preschool entry" (1995, p. 47). This concession often gets lost in the conversation about Hart and Risley's research. Thus, research on the "language gap" seemingly ignores what linguists already know about language: parents do not *teach* their children language and all language varieties are systematic, rule-governed, generative, creative, and equal. Failing to engage with decades of advances in language science means that "language gap" scholarship is moving the science backward.

"Quality" linguistic input does not exist, so it certainly is not necessary for language development to proceed without incident. Children go from not having language to having language. Whether you believe that a little or a lot of linguistic input is necessary for children to develop language, it is undeniable that children develop the communication skills necessary to navigate their families and communities by the time they are five years old and enter school. In practice, the question many researchers are trying to answer is how much a child's early environment has prepared them for literacy, a modern condition. For example, during shared book reading, caregivers may encourage phonological awareness skills, like rhyming. This skill is not necessary to be an effective communicator in any given language. To confuse this skill with language development is core to the problem I articulate in this piece.

Unfortunately, when some children's early environments have seemingly prepared them "better" for learning to read, and other so-called school-based activities, there is a reason why these skills are valued in the school setting: institutionalized racism.

4. LINGUISTIC RACISM

What is a word worth? Socialization away from the "norm," including language use deviating from the socially constructed standardized ideal, allegedly causes a range of social ills, from disparate school achievement (e.g., Hart & Risley, 1995) to intergenerational poverty (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) to changes in the thickness or increased activation of language-related cortical structures in the brain (Demir-Lira et al., 2021; Romeo, Leonard, Robinson, et al., 2018; Romeo, Leonard, Grotzinger, et al., 2021). These strong claims about causality are worth examining. Those who are scientifically, morally, and economically invested in the "language gap" narrative believe the experiential trench is associated with "income disparities, healthcare outcomes, high school graduation rates, job placement, and many more life milestones" (Golinkoff et al., 2019, p. 1). If we were to believe some children from marginalized homes are exposed to 30 million fewer words than their more privileged peers by 4 years old (an extrapolated number; Hart & Risley, 1995), and this "language gap" is associated with income disparities and high school graduation rates, then a word is worth $00.01: Someone who earns a bachelor's degree in the United States will earn $29,100 more each year than someone who dropped out of high school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

The damning problem with accepting the "language gap" narrative uncritically is that it is a byproduct of institutionalized racism in the United States. Studies grounded in the unquestioned reality of the "language gap" rely on the ideological stance of COLOR-EVASIVENESS[19], which emerges from a racially stratified society that relies on a narrative of "the American Dream" and values "equal opportunity, meritocracy, and dispositionalism" (Syed et al., 2018, p. 814). There is no equal opportunity. Societal structures are meant to benefit the dominant group (e.g., white people in the U.S. context) by decreasing access to opportunities and resources for racialized groups (Jones, 2000; Crenshaw et al., 1995). This is precisely what work under the "language gap" tradition does by assigning deficiency to the language of racialized children and their families. That is, in order to believe in the possibility of the "language gap," you must necessarily believe underachievement of racialized children is due to their disposition, not to any external factor, like institutionalized racism.

It is impossible to interrupt the cycles of intergenerational poverty (or racism) by talking more to children; yet Hart and Risley and work under the "language gap" tradition prescribe just that. The language of "quality" follows in a long tradition of discursively framing the language use of children from racialized homes as deficient. As Fernald and colleagues (2013) write, it is "old news" that children from families who are lower on the socioeconomic ladder enter school with "lower language and cognitive skills" than children from families higher on the ladder (p. 235). This framing locates the problem within the child and family. This is the epitome of deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997). A more accurate explanation of the reality is this: It is old news that measures under institutionalized racism favor the "standard" and consistently fail to capture the depth and breadth of communicative ability in racialized children and families. In the next section, I discuss how discursive constructs of language development and poverty – which are based on mischaracterizations of the nature of language development – evade discussions of race and obfuscate institutional racism and this directly feeds into deficit-based research agendas and interventions.

4.1 DO WORDS EVADE RACE?

When "language gap" work references "low income" and "poor," this is a repackaging of earlier stigmatizing class *and* race views in the United States (Rosa & Flores, 2015; Rosa & Flores, 2017). "Race" is a social construct created to maintain power, privileging white people (Crenshaw et al., 1995). Although race is not a biological reality, race has real-world consequences because of racism and racialization processes (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Socioeconomic status is also a social construct meant to preserve white supremacy. Genocide, chattel slavery, de jure and de facto segregation, the school-to-prison pipeline, the prison industrial complex, and many other ever-evolving, racist barriers to social equality bar racialized people from accruing wealth. Black and Indigenous children have triple and Latine children have double the rates of poverty as white children (Pew Research Center, 2015). Black, Indigenous, Latine, and other racialized people represent a disproportionate share of the lowest socioeconomic groups because institutionalized racism necessitates socioeconomic disadvantage and segregation based on race (Pitts-Taylor, 2019). Thus, socioeconomic-based disadvantages cannot be separated from disadvantages due to racialization processes (Blanchett, 2006).

The idea that socioeconomic status, a social construct, is reflecting another social construct, race, might be unfamiliar or even disagreeable. I follow in a tradition of thinkers arguing the United States operates as a caste system (Du Bois, 1935; Wilkerson, 2020). Wilkerson (2020) writes, "Caste and race are neither synonymous nor mutually exclusive. They can and do coexist in the same culture and serve to reinforce each other. Race, in the United States, is the visible agent of the unseen force of caste. Caste is the bones, race the skin" (pp. 42-43). Practically, this results in studies conflating

[19] I use "color-evasiveness" following Annamma and colleagues' (2017) expansion of color-blind racial ideology to 1. Explicitly name the erasure of the experiences of racialized people and communities via evasion and 2. Move beyond the ableism inherent in a term like "color-blind" that equates blindness with ignorance.

socioeconomic status with race. Hart and Risley's study asked if there were interactional differences between parent-child across the socioeconomic spectrum. Indeed, much of the work in the "language gap" tradition, including Hart and Risley (1995), has purportedly looked at differences across the socioeconomic strata, not at racial differences. To be sure, white children from working-class families or from families below the federal poverty line, often geographically rural but not always, experience linguistic prejudice or bias. However, under the U.S. caste system, "class" as a categorical factor acts to make "race" and racialization processes invisible (Syed & Ajayi, 2018). This leads to race evasion.

The confounding of race and class in American scientific discourse means that any attempts to claim race is not a factor – race evading – is disingenuous. Hart & Risley are race evaders – those who rhetorically circumvent race so that racist assumptions embedded in their arguments become more palatable. They specifically evade a discussion of race by claiming that race was "quickly eliminated" (p.61). Yet, all "welfare" families in their study were Black, while only one out of 13 "professional" families were Black. Similarly, all "low-income" father-child dyads in Rowe, Leech, and Cabrera (2017) were Black. This confounding of race and class is pervasive in scientific research and discourse. Researchers who attempt to disentangle race and class often fall short because poverty is purposefully racialized. Vernon-Feagans and colleagues (2020) found no racial differences in the quantity and "quality" of input to children; instead, maternal education differentiated the input. However, African American mothers were overrepresented in the "high school or less" and "very poor" groups. The so-called "language gap" essentially positions poverty and the social construct of socioeconomic status as shorthand for all the consequences of institutionalized racism. Controlling for SES is essentially controlling for race. Race does not change the nature of language development – "race" is a social construction that does not affect language development. Race will affect socialization practices and behaviors, and how communities utilize language, which is not something to be judged; rather, I state it merely as a fact. For example, racialized families have conversations about race with their young children, while many white families do not (Sullivan et al., 2022).

As another example, the supposed connections between linguistic input and high stakes outcomes places a high premium on "quality" input, which is indicative of a cultural ideal of children as communicative projects (Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante, 2015): "Caregivers look for signs of infants' and toddlers' expressive language competence not just to promote emotional bonding and sense-making and not just as a sign of normal development but also as a sign of precocity that will translate into symbolic capital and academic advantage" (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2015, p. 73). Linguistic acts are marketable commodities instead of expressions of selves (Heller, 2010) and some parents attempt to fill their children up with economic potential. Further, *wordism*– the idea that the more words is the better – is specific to certain communities and cultures (Blum, 2015, 2017). Not every caregiver is concerned with their child having a "robust" vocabulary, however that might be defined, including the author's mother (C. Figueroa, personal communication, 2021). All of this can be true, while it is also true that race does not affect whether a child develops language or if their caregivers are providing a good enough linguistic environment for that child.

Race evaders discuss words as if certain ones are better than others for language development. Rowe and colleagues, for example, write, "Not all input is created equal" (2017, p. 163). This is not true. When it comes to language development, there is no point in conceptualizing words specifically, or linguistic input, generally, as "better" or "worse" than other words or linguistic input. It is a falsehood. And when this falsehood is standardized, its foundational claims of deficiency hurt racialized children, families, and communities in the service of white supremacy.

4. 2 STANDARDIZATION

"Language gap" discourse inherently emphasizes standardization. A standardized language ideology that values white linguistic practices will also favor these practices in standardized tests. When a child's capacity is measured with standardized tests, researchers are purposefully measuring a socially constructed way of thinking about what children should know and how they should know it (McCarty, 2015; Milner, 2012; Yosso, 2005). Standardized testing essentially grades all children against white European norms in cognition and language (Nair et al., 2023). Thus, white linguistic hegemony is disguised via normalization (Fairclough, 2010; Johnson et al., 2020), and consequently goes unquestioned. There are serious consequences for essentializing these behaviors and it is a form of educational oppression (Valencia, 1997). Labov (1966) points out that standardized measures of language ability are

> the natural product of educational psychology, which is concerned more with discriminating among children than finding out what a given child's actual capacity is. By subjecting each child to a 'controlled' stimulus, they are able to claim scientific status for the comparisons they make between individual children… and in fact, these pictures of the child's capacity are so profoundly misleading that they are an open invitation to educational disaster (pp. 5-6).

Labov is right. Standardized language tests do not give us what a given child's actual capacity for language is, even white children's capacities.

An illustration of how measures cannot capture any child's true capacity for language is that many studies use receptive or expressive vocabulary as their dependent measure of children's language development. A review of studies of the effects of early linguistic environment on children's later cognitive and language development found, "The most commonly used standardized assessment to measure language or cognitive development was the MacArthur-Bates Communicative Development Inventories (MCDI)" (Zauche et al., 2016, p. 321). The MCDI is a parent-completed instrument in which caregivers indicate which words on a predetermined list their children produce or comprehend, depending on age. Measuring which words children know from a predetermined list only tells researchers which words on that list children know or reported by their parents as knowing. If the goal is to measure language development with integrity, this is misguided. Vocabulary knowledge is socially determined and dynamic. It is also socially determined that some vocabulary is included on the MCDI, or is described to be important for school, while other vocabulary is not. This is a matter of epistemology – standardized tests are measuring only one way of knowing (Yosso, 2005). Further, when "language skills" become confused with vocabulary, context dependent knowledge rooted in the social world and not the mind, the focus is no longer on whether someone knows a language or is able to use it to effectively to communicate with other users of that language. By the time children enter school, children know the language(s) of their community; they will continue to acquire vocabulary for the rest of their lives.

When differences in language are interpreted as a deficit as they are when standardized tests are used to measure language "ability", this is EPISTEMOLOGICAL VIOLENCE (Teo, 2008). Teo (2008) defines epistemological violence as

> a practice that is executed in empirical articles and books in psychology when interpretative speculations regarding results implicitly or explicitly construct the 'Other' as problematic. The term *epistemological* suggests that these speculations are framed as knowledge when in reality they are interpretative speculations regarding data. The term *violence* denotes that this 'knowledge' has a negative impact on the 'Other' and that the interpretative speculations are produced to the detriment to the 'Other.' The negative impact can range from misrepresentations and distortions, to a neglect of the voices of the 'Other,' to statements of inferiority, and to the recommendations of adverse practices or infringements concerning the 'Other.' The term epistemological violence as it is used in the argument refers not to the misuse of research in general but to a hermeneutic process (interpretative speculations of date) that has negative consequences for the 'Other' (p. 57).

Work under the "language gap" tradition is rightfully termed *epistemological violence* because there is no interrogation of *why* standardized measures fail to authentically represent racialized children's language capacity; it is about fixing an inherent deficiency of the 'Other' that is assumed solely on the basis of demographic variables when demographic variables do not affect language development.

Standardization does not exist without framing one group as the norm (Milner, 2012). Deviation from the "norm," i.e., linguistic diversity, only leads to negative outcomes for students when they are evaluated based on linguistic racism masquerading as fact. When tests that are normed on a very specific culture's idea of what constitutes a "strong" linguistic foundation (McCarty, 2015) and are used to assess so-called language abilities, this results in something akin to "false positives" (Baugh, 2017). This is epistemological violence. Below average performance on these assessments does not exist and persist because of cognitive or linguistic deficits; rather, it exists and persists because these measures are designed to perpetuate the status quo and maintain white linguistic hegemony (Baker-Bell, 2020). Thus, research predicated on the so-called "language gap" *put* racialized children at risk by labeling them as such (Dyson, 2015). Ultimately, these measures do not tell us whether a child's language development was "successful" – there is no need to measure for that when all children learn the language(s) of their community. Children learn their language(s) by the time they enter school and start taking these standardized tests that fail to capture the depth and breadth of the linguistic knowledge of children, especially racialized children.

4. 3 THE BUSINESS OF INTERVENTION

So far in this section, I have argued that work under the "language gap" tradition relies on both a language "standard" and color-evasiveness. These ideological stances are forms of deficit thinking because white linguistic practices are valued under the "standard" while racialized people's language is devalued. Rhetorically, race evaders circumvent discussions of race by blaming performance on standardized tests and academic achievement on another social construct: poverty. This is disingenuous because poverty is extremely racialized, and it is so on purpose. Standardization of these stances through measurements of language "ability" – often ones that rely on vocabulary, which is context-dependent knowledge – facilitates the endurance of these positions.

Standardized tests measure what they are meant to: "gaps" in language "ability" and lack of "quality" linguistic input from caregivers, particularly mothers. Ideological manipulation then positions these "gaps" as a public health issue requiring outside intervention (e.g., Suskind et al., 2016; Walker et al., 2020); put another way, the "language gap" and "quality" linguistic input rhetoric pathologizes racialized children's linguistic environments and tests standardize these pathologizations.

The language of individual level intervention creeps in when poverty is treated as a characteristic of the people (e.g., *culture of poverty*; Lewis, 1959; Payne, 2001), rather than a condition created and maintained by institutionalized racism acting as a caste system. If poverty is equated with lacking, and "lacking" is semiotically constructed, then the bodies of the "undeserving poor" (Gans, 1995, p.1) will need to be remediated. If people living in poverty are deficient, their language must be lacking "**rich** verbal engagement" (Fernald & Weisleder, 2015, p. 1; emphasis added) and their children must receive "**impoverished** language input" (Walker et al., 2020, p. 69; emphasis added). This logical leap happens because "negative labels rarely stereotype only behavior; more often they transform and magnify it into a character failing" (Gans, 1995, p. 12). Language becomes a proxy for how we view the people held in poverty by capitalism. This affects both white children from families lower on the socioeconomic ladder and racialized children, no matter the socioeconomic position of their families.

Hart and Risley say that the "goal of an intervention would be to equalize children's early experience" (2003, p. 8). If linguistic input is the target of intervention, researchers are not equalizing a child's early experience in our society: they are blaming families and communities for the disparate treatment they receive. In fact, a central component of deficit thinking is *blaming the victim* for social inequities (Ryan, 1971). Individual behaviors, not structural factors, become the target of intervention. The ways mothers have been blamed for their children's language run the gamut. For example, maternal cortisol levels in the third trimester (Mumm et al., 2023), maternal depression (Treat et al., 2020), length of breastfeeding (Natale et al., 2021), and of course the lack of "quality" linguistic input are all claimed to affect child language development and ability.

Deficit thinking mobilizes into action quickly from blaming the victim: "The formula for action becomes extraordinarily simple: **change the victim**" (Ryan, 1971, p. 8; emphasis mine). First, you identify a social problem (e.g., academic inequity). Then, you conduct a study to find out how advantaged and disadvantaged are different (e.g., Hart & Risley, 1995). Next, you identify differences and define these differences as the cause of the social problem (e.g., the "word/language gap" and lack of "quality" linguistic input). Finally, you work to apply intervention to correct differences (Valencia, 1997). Golinkoff and colleagues (2019) argue in favor of intervention, stating, "It is crucial to understand the source of these **differences** to design effective, evidence-based interventions" (Golinkoff et al., 2019, p. 1; emphasis added). However, the question then becomes, *Why would you need to intervene for differences?*

There are many programs and pedagogical interventions in the United States (Labov, 1966) that are grounded in the ideological stance of linguistic deficiency. Bettye Caldwell, an early advocate of Head Start, writes in 1967, "The research literature of the last decade dealing with social-class differences has made abundantly clear that all parents are not qualified to provide even the basic essentials of physical and psychological care to their children." Similarly, Hart and Risley write in 1995, "Competence as a social problem is still with us. American society still sees many of its children enter school ill-prepared to benefit from education. Too many children drop out of school and follow their parents into unemployment or onto welfare, where they raise their children in a culture of poverty" (p. 2). Claims that children live in a "culture of poverty" are no longer palatable, but the deficit thinking remains. Researchers working under the "language gap" are responsible for further marginalizing racialized communities and undermining their agency and personhood through epistemological violence and linguistic racism in the form of unnecessary intervention.

The belief that any caregiver could manipulate the linguistic input their child receives in such a life-altering way that the child will be set up to "succeed" in school and beyond ignores the role of structural factors like institutionalized racism in constructing "success" and "failure". But, as I have argued, that is the point under color-evasiveness and a standardized language ideology: Individuals and their behaviors, not institutions or systems, become the target of intervention.

Many researchers, practitioners, and others in helping professions argue that coaching parents on "quality" linguistic input is a necessary intervention to get children on track for school readiness and academic success. Ferjan Ramírez et al. (2020) state parent coaching "put[s] both parents and children on a trajectory of enhanced social communication (p. 3487). "Enhanced social communication" is a misleading characterization that is only meaningful when value judgments are placed on different discursive styles. The evidence used for "enhanced" communication is an increase in conversational turn taking, an alleged characteristic of "quality" linguistic input. Again, certain linguistic behaviors are sold as worthy of emulation. In another study of parent coaching, Ferjan Ramírez et al. (2019) find that an increase in both speech directed to the child and 'parentese' speech used between 6 and 10 months and 10 months and 14 months increased the amount of babbling at 10 and 14 months. At this point, I think it is worth a cost-benefit analysis. Is an increase in babbles worth the investment of human power and money? What is the benefit of maximizing or accelerating babbling? It seems too much research has "an unexamined assumption that the earlier a child speaks or exhibits a particular construction the better" (Burman, 2016, p. 202). Remarkably, as Burman points out, "nowhere has it been established that rate of language development bears any relation to later linguistic or educational competence. This is simply an unanalyzed assumption that is overdetermined by the technologization of development and the drive to maximize and accelerate it" (p. 207). As an expert in child language development, I am hard pressed to find a reason accelerating babbling matters in the grand scheme of language development. In fact, research under the "language gap" tradition is most appropriately filed under work driven to maximize and accelerate language development at the cost of letting development proceed naturally.

One of the most honest descriptions of what an intervention would need to look like for children from racialized communities deemed linguistically deficient is from Hart & Risley (2003/1995): "…an intervention must address not just a lack of knowledge or skill, but an entire general approach to experience" (p. 9). This is a major infringement on racialized families' lives and another example of how this work is epistemological violence. "Interpretive speculations" about the cause of results on standardized tests leads to infringements on their persons via unnecessary intervention (Teo, 2008).

Racialized children and families must fundamentally change to win a rigged game. Interventions promoted by researchers are often prescriptions for parents to abandon their familial child-rearing practices and linguistic behaviors for linguistic behaviors researchers have decided are worthy of emulation. In this way, researchers are responsible for further oppressing these communities (Milner, 2012) and undermining their agency. Importantly, even when racialized caregivers *do* exhibit the characteristics of high "quality" input in interactions with their child(ren), it is never enough. For example, Hart and Risley find that, "The children in the welfare families heard a prohibition twice as often as they heard affirmative feedback" (1999, p. 169). It is not the case that these caregivers failed to produce any "affirmative" feedback, a marker for some of "quality" input, it is that they did not use as much as was subjectively defined by the researchers (e.g., in comparison to the "professional" families). The socially constructed marker of "quality" is forever moving further down the line—an "imagined line" that García and colleagues (2021) refer to as "ongoing coloniality" (p. 3). Not only is it hard to pin down what exactly "quality" linguistic input is given the wide range of descriptions in the literature (Section 3), but racialized caregivers are unlikely ever to hit the mark when the descriptions are embedded in coloniality and institutionalized racism, which looks a lot like a caste system. “Quality” linguistic input is impossible for racialized families to reproduce. The heuristics of “quality” are fluid to meet the demands of white supremacy.

There is a final child-parent interaction I want to share that illustrates how correcting or intervening in the language of children has preoccupied the minds of researchers and parents alike, as seen in (C) from MacWhinney & Snow (1985):

> (C) Child: Nobody don’t like me.
> Mother: No, say ‘Nobody likes me.’
> Child: Nobody don’t like me. (dialogue repeated eight times)
> Mother (now exasperated): Now, listen carefully. Say ‘Nobody likes me.’
> Child: Oh, nobody don’t likes me.

I am struck that the mother is correcting her child’s grammar instead of asking why the child feels like nobody likes them. I repeat again: Children will learn the language variety of their environment whether it is signed or spoken, and they do so without direct teaching or correction.

Although decades of sociolinguistic and anthropological research have documented an expanse of linguistic features from different languages and language varieties, a large subset of those remain pathologized because the features are considered differences from a (white) norm. Variability is not a problem to overcome but a social reality of language (Johnson & White, 2020) and of being human. Thus, the realities of variability are not deficits or differences that merit intervention (*cf* Ferjan Ramírez et al., 2020; Fernald et al., 2013; Suskind et al., 2016; Weber et al., 2017), they are simply realities.

5. CONCLUSION

How can some linguistic input be more positively associated with language development if all children exposed to language will learn language? That is the question I want you, the reader, to have after making it through this perspective piece. In my research, I have learned what Zentella (2015) put so succinctly: “Certain words count more than others” (p. 77). Zentella and I both know this is not true linguistically. All languages and language varieties, signed or spoken, written or not, are structurally and cognitively equal. Socially, however, language ideologies have placed certain ways of languaging above others. In the United States, a standardized language favors the linguistic practices and behaviors of the monolingual English-speaking, non-disabled, neurotypical, white middle- and upper-classes. The linguistic input that this demographic provides their child(ren) is valued in institutional and non-institutional settings, including them in access to resources, both material and immaterial, while actively excluding racialized children and families from these same opportunities. This is linguistic racism, and it is pervasive in the child development literature.

I broke this paper up into three major sections that follow the title: Language development, linguistic input, and linguistic racism. Within this structure, I argued that language development is grossly mischaracterized in the literature. All children, whether they grow up in poverty or not, or are white or not, develop the language(s) of their communities without direct teaching or overt correction or intervention. Children do this by the time they are five years old and enter kindergarten. It is both remarkable and unremarkable. The fallacy that “quality” linguistic input is necessary for “successful” language development is linguistic racism because “quality” linguistic input serves white supremacy. In the United States, a standardized language ideology and color-evasiveness work together to create a societal milieu in which white middle- and upper-class linguistic behaviors and practices are exalted while the languaging of racialized people is rhetorically and practically positioned as a deficit. This is an example of color-evasiveness – even though race evading attempts to disguise issues of race as issues of class – because the experiences of racialized peoples are ignored or erased. There is “‘no view from nowhere,’ no gaze that is not positioned” (Irvine & Gal, 2000, p. 36). As such, researchers’ ideologies will shape how language is described or whose experiences will be erased, intentionally or not. The status quo is maintained and re-legitimized by ignoring the racist societal relationships embedded in our institutions that have pathologized the linguistic practices and experiences of racialized children, families, and communities in the first place. Racialized scholars, like me, can point out the racist assumptions embedded in describing racialized persons language(s) in deficit terms, but our perspectives must not be erased (Figueroa, 2023; Syed & Kathawalla, 2022; Syed et al., 2018).

Certain questions matter more than others in "mainstream" science (Syed et al., 2018). As it stands, many of the questions that are asked about language development are no longer about the organic developmental process that is part and parcel of human development. Instead, the questions are related to optimization of language for socially and culturally defined purposes. This disconnect is nontrivial. When language skills and literacy skills are conflated, some children are said to arrive at school "behind" other children. How can a child already be behind before school even starts? The idea that there is a "language gap" and that this explains academic underperformance by racialized children is simply deficit thinking.

The "language gap" argument fails because its premises are false, yet it continues to influence measures of children's language "ability." This story is sold by standardized tests that purposefully measure only one way of knowing, usually based on vocabulary counting. Further, the definition of "quality" is at best rough, and it continues to shift, and it does so *purposefully*. To continue to use "quality" linguistic input to describe linguistic environments is to intentionally choose epistemological violence; this work puts children at-risk by measuring "gaps" in their linguistic experiences when no such gaps exist (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Those doing work under the "language gap" must drop this framework altogether because anyone working under this tradition is colluding with the status quo (Allen & Spencer, 2022).

There are over 14,000 citations of Hart and Risley as of the writing of this article. This piece will be another that cites them, albeit critically. If researchers are to continue to use the rhetoric of "language gap" or "quality" linguistic input, it is imperative they understand they follow in the tradition of Hart and Risley (1995), a study that is, to say the least, incredibly flawed. I know that the end of the debate cannot be concluded with all sides satisfied. Still, hopefully, I urge those doing work under the "language gap" tradition to drop this framework altogether – instead of continuing to shift the rhetoric – because working under this tradition is colluding with the racist status quo (Allen & Spencer, 2022).

I am not the first scholar to rebuke the "language gap" (e.g., Abraham, 2020; Avineri et al., 2015; Baugh, 2017; Cushing & Snell 2022; Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009; García & Otheguy, 2021; to name a few). I will also not be the last, nor will I stop. With that in mind, I still imagine a future in which I no longer must serve as a critic for "language gap" research (see Allen & Spencer, 2022).

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I identify as a Mexican American, first-generation college student from a working-class family.

Dedicated to the memory of Dr. Jon Henner, a fierce advocate for all ways of languaging.

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