Psychological Misconstructions of Language Development

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Abstract

In this paper, I present an overview of several proposals in the early childhood literature which posit that children who lack proficiency in standard English suffer from diminished linguistic ability. I argue in each case that the argument for diminished linguistic ability is poorly made, and suggest that we reconceptualize language acquisition in terms consistent with modern linguistic research and positive, affirming perspectives which validate children's linguistic resources.

Introduction

Despite advances in the understanding of language stemming from linguistic theory, few researchers take current linguistic theory into consideration, and strangely enough, the majority seem to see no need to do so. Psychologists, in particular, who lack relevant expertise and hence tend to use traditional, unexamined assumptions about language have enjoyed a long, undeserved tenure as de facto "experts" on language; they advance "psychological theories" – theories about cognition – but without grounding them in the empirical study of language. For these reasons, I have termed the results of their analyses "psychological misconstructions." In this paper, I discuss some of the negative effects this phenomenon of linguistic misconstruction by the field of psychology has had on the study of language development, among both practitioners and researchers.

Although recognition of language diversity has begun to affect policy statements such as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)'s Standards for the

English Language Arts, where "students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns and dialects…" (1996, p.4), many teachers remain actively engaged in convincing children that nonstandard English is incorrect - not that it may be judged inappropriate in certain social contexts, but that it is wrong, and even shameful. Supported by teachers and the media (Lippi-Green, 1997), the general public continues to accept this misconception. Charged with facilitating development of young children, early childhood teachers expend great efforts in planning and activities aimed at developing children's first language, under the assumption that it is helpful, even necessary, to model, for example, the production of complete sentences. This sort of 'language development' is seen as particularly important when children come from 'disadvantaged homes,' because children of poverty are believed to be exposed to 'impoverished language.' Yet, the literature on language acquisition and development within theoretical linguistics reveals such beliefs about nonstandard and impoverished language to be baseless.

Prescriptivism and Deficit Theories of Language

What is the basis for claims that teachers play a critical role in developing children's language? Linguists who study child language acquisition report the amazing similarity of outcomes of language acquisition by all normal children regardless of settings. Language is a biological endowment of human beings (Chomsky, 1959; Gee, 2000; MacSwan & Rolstad, 2003), and the ability to learn and use a language does not develop differentially; rather, differences in language brought about by differences in experience result in every individual having and using a variety of language registers. Some registers are held to be more valuable than others by the dominant society, but

social value is quite different from biological development. There exists a significant discrepancy between what linguists see as a natural, biologically-driven process and what teachers see as an educational process calling for intervention and remediation. Perhaps the discrepancy is caused by teachers misunderstanding the *social* value of particular registers, varieties of language or language skills as constituting *linguistic* value.

Valencia (1997) defined a deficit theory as one which posits "that the student who fails in school does so because of internal deficits or deficiencies" manifested “in limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn and immoral behavior" (p. 2). Because common perspectives on language development in early childhood education relate presumed qualitative differences in children’s linguistic abilities to educational outcomes, such views may reasonably be regarded as representative of a deficit perspective.

Historically, popular beliefs about language and language instruction have reflected what is called “prescriptivism,” the notion that one dialect of a given language is linguistically superior to other, supposedly degraded, versions of that language, and that some individual or group can “prescribe” to other speakers how their inferior dialect can be remedied (Crystal, 1987; Pinker, 1994). Prescriptivism has been closely aligned with racism, which holds that a given race is biologically superior to others. While research has shown beliefs about racial superiority to be scientifically baseless, research which has proven the falsity of prescriptivism has had no effect on the linguistic beliefs of otherwise informed, intelligent people.

In fact, linguistic prejudice has in many cases replaced racial prejudice as an acceptable way to discriminate against individuals and groups. As James Baldwin

(1979) said, “It is not the Black child’s language which is despised: It is his experience,” observing that the language has been scapegoated for other characteristics that are socially unacceptable to the dominant society. “The underlying motivations of language education policies are rarely overtly racist or eurocentric, and it is precisely for that reason that they work so well” (Lippi-Green, 1997:117). Linguistic prejudice is based on the tenet that everyone must be made to believe that speakers of nonstandard dialects are responsible for their own stigmatization; since racism and classism are no longer a problem in this country, it is believed, they (Blacks, Latinos, poor Whites) could change if they would only try harder. Although quality teacher education programs include courses in multicultural/anti-bias education, linguistic discrimination and prescriptivism are much less often addressed.

Prescriptivism is responsible for stifling even standard-speaking children’s natural curiosity about language (Andrews, 1998; Crystal, 2000), and for crushing the spirit of children who come to school speaking a nonstandard dialect. As one veteran English teacher explains, “When more attention is paid to the way something is written or said than to what is said, students’ words and thoughts become devalued. Students learn to be silent, to give as few words as possible for teacher criticism” (Christensen, 1994:143). Lippi-Green asserts that “…the language arts classroom is one of the best places to watch the way the languages outside the mainstream are subordinated by means of misinformation, trivialization, and a carefully constructed set of threats and promises” (1997:114).

Educational researchers often conduct research which can be used to improve educational practice, but if we turn to educational research, we find that these same linguistically-baseless language prejudices often underlie otherwise well-designed, well-conducted studies. Linguistic research conducted within theoretical linguistics, anthropological linguistics and sociolinguistics has had virtually no impact on language-related research elsewhere. Below, I discuss language prejudice and its influence on research in early childhood and language minority education, ranging over the last several decades.

The Influence of Language Prejudice on Research

Language prejudice is pervasive; examples demonstrating the inadequacy of popular beliefs about language as a foundation for conducting research on language could be drawn from a variety of fields. I will then focus on examples drawn from work by psychologists because of the continued influence of psychological perspectives in education and children's development, and because each of these researchers, trained in psychology, has sought linguistic explanations for why certain groups of children tend to experience academic failure. In each case, one notes that the prevailing view is that children of poverty fail to achieve in school because of their diminished linguistic abilities. Each researcher clearly espouses a deficit view, seeking to locate the source of academic failure within children or children's language and culture.

Consider first the now classic work of Bereiter and Engelmann (1966), who posited a relationship between Ebonics (also known as Black English and African American Vernacular English) and the poor educational achievement of African

Americans in schools. In their work with four-year-old children, Bereiter and Engelmann reported that their communication was by gestures, "single words," and "a series of badly connected words or phrases." They reported that the children they studied could "without exaggeration … make no statements of any kind," and could not ask questions.

Of particular significance was Bereiter and Engelmann's expectation that children answer in complete sentences. In response to the question "Where is the squirrel?" subjects tended to answer "In the tree"–a response which Bereiter and Engelmann characterized as illogical and badly formed. As Labov (1969) pointed out, the response "In the tree" is the natural response in this context, and the one that anybody would use under normal circumstances. Furthermore, the "fragment" response reveals the speakers' tacit knowledge of the internal structure of the larger phrase from which it is extracted (MacSwan & Rolstad, 2003). Indeed, to answer in the way preferred by Bereiter and Engelmann ("The squirrel is in the tree") requires that the speaker suspend knowledge of the pragmatic constraints which govern ordinary conversation in order to satisfy the requirements of an academic exercise.

Cummins (1979, 1980, 2000) has been extremely influential in language minority education, and his work has served positively to develop a rationale for native language instructional support for non-English speakers. However, like Bereiter and Engelmann, Cummins's theoretical framework attributes special characteristics to the language of school; since school and non-school language mirror cultural and social communities, the position leads to a traditional deficit orientation. Cummins contrasts school language, or Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), with conversational language, or

Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), and shows clearly that, in his framework, the distinction extends to children's native language communities:

> In monolingual contexts, the [BICS/CALP] distinction reflects the difference between the language proficiency acquired through interpersonal interaction by virtually all 6-year-old children and the proficiency developed through schooling and literacy which continues to expand throughout our lifetimes. For most children, the basic structure of their native language is in place by the age of 6 or so but their language continues to expand with respect to the range of vocabulary and grammatical constructions they can understand and use and the linguistic contexts within which they can function successfully (Cummins, 2000, p. 63).

While there are excellent reasons to support bilingual education for language minority children, Cummins' distinction between academic and conversational language is not one of them. His conception of language is linguistically naive, and his belief in the complexity of academic language is presented without evidence. MacSwan and Rolstad (2003) ask in connection to Cummins' view why

> one would consider academic language to involve "complex grammatical structures" in comparison to non-academic language. Are double negatives less complex than single negatives? Is <u>ain't</u>, a socially stigmatized contraction, less complex than <u>won't</u>, a socially acceptable one? Minimally, we would expect to see an explicit and theoretically defensible definition of linguistic complexity accompanying the claim that academic language is more complex than non-academic language, and then we would expect empirical evidence showing that [academic language exhibits those features and conversational language does not].

Ideas that Cummins has articulated, such as the BICS/CALP distinction, are so deeply rooted in bilingual education theory they fail to be recognized as controversial. Misconceptions like Cummins' semilingualism, the notion that a potentially-bilingual individual might know no language adequately, and BICS/CALP typically lead researchers to make claims like the following:

> While children who are second language learners appear to converse with ease, their ability to think, read and write in an academic realm may be quite limited; this is especially true if the child is from a semi-lingual population

> that has no native language CALP on which to build his English academic skills (Meskill, Mossop & Bates, 2002).

This assertion is problematic for several reasons, the most glaring of which is the introduction of the concept of a "semi-lingual population". The authors fail to define or describe a "semi-lingual population," presumably because they feel no such explanation is needed. Interestingly, however, nowhere in the research literature has evidence been provided that there exists such a thing as a semilingual *individual*, let alone a semilingual *population*, despite the claims of Cummins and others regarding the dangers of semilingualism. Linguistic analysis would make short work of disproving the semilingual concept were data ever provided, but few researchers have requested such evidence; yet the concept lives on (Edelsky et al., 1983; MacSwan, 2000).

Finally, consider the recent work of Hart and Risley (1995). Hoping to reveal linguistic deficits in syntax and morphology in disadvantaged children, these authors initially found that children in their study

> 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. We decided we needed to know, not from our textbooks, but from advantaged children, what skilled spontaneous speech at age 4 is in terms of grammar and content (Hart & Risley, 1995, p. 8).

The researchers' linguistic prejudices against these children prevent them from seeing that the children probably "seemed fully competent" because they are. Upon analysis of their language data, Hart and Risley (1995) failed to find any difference between the syntactic or morphological complexity of lower- and middle-class children's language. The "meaningful differences" they discovered were related to their finding that lower-class children's vocabularies appeared to be smaller than the vocabularies of the children

of professors. In fact, however, the researchers discounted vocabulary items not located in the dictionary of standard English, thereby artificially deflating the vocabulary size of children likely to know and use nonstandard words. Lacking awareness of the problems inherent in using a dictionary of standard English to validate vocabulary size in speakers of nonstandard English, the researchers fell into a reliance on traditional assumptions about language variation and development.

Prescriptivism in Teacher Education

As long as prominent researchers whose work is applied to educational contexts and policies continue to found their work on linguistically ill-informed theories, it is hard to see how much progress can be made. Teachers who rely on researchers to inform their practice are left unaware of linguistic theory, and often subscribe to outdated, "common-sense" views of language. One common misunderstanding involves the confusion of "performance" (what we say) with "competence" (what we know implicitly about our language). When teachers or adults hear teenagers speak, they may complain that the language of teenagers is less developed, citing, for example, teenagers' frequent use of 'ain't' or other socially less-acceptable words.

However, differences in adolescent and adult language use do not necessarily imply differences in competence, nor must they entail lack of development. That teenagers use "ain't" more (Romaine, 1984) and "may," "shall", and "whom" less than adults (Perera, 1984) says less about language competence than about language as an identity marker. Identity is particularly salient among adolescents, where using "ain't" can demonstrate a rebellious attitude to peers and adults, perhaps in an attempt to gain covert prestige, whereas using "may" and "whom" can mark one as a teenage

sycophant. Lack of use in no way signifies lack of knowledge of what these words mean or even a lack of ability to produce them. What speakers happen to say, or not to say, does not provide sufficient evidence for making judgments regarding what they know about their language. Further, the decline in use of "whom" and "shall" reflects the fundamental, inevitable process of language change, rather than any sort of educational failure or lack of individual development. Unfortunately, due to the strength of our societal prejudices toward language, otherwise excellent teachers may well have difficulty recognizing this basic fact. To be effective, teachers need valid information about language development and language variation.

In her contribution to a recent edited volume, *What Teachers Need to Know about Language*, early childhood educator Sue Bredekamp (2002) confesses that she lacks or fails to use much of the linguistic knowledge that the editors recommend that teachers know. Undaunted, however, Bredekamp goes on to present her views on the linguistic knowledge necessary for preschool teachers to teach language development effectively. She argues that "early childhood teachers need to talk with children in ways that ensure that their language continues to develop, their vocabulary increases, and their grammar becomes more complex" (p. 60). Bredekamp reveals here the assumption, quite prevalent in the field of early childhood, that children depend on teachers to enable them to develop their first language, and that without the teacher's help, children may fail to increase their vocabulary and develop complex grammar. Yet even Hart and Risley (1995) had to report that children from the most poverty-stricken homes, with no help from trained adults, were able to produce grammatical utterances that were identical in complexity to those uttered by privileged children.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Why has linguistic research, conducted within theoretical linguistics, anthropological linguistics and sociolinguistics, for example, so inadequately influenced language-related research elsewhere? The answer may be that teachers and researchers, like other adults, tend to place tremendous confidence in their own naïve linguistic knowledge and beliefs. This confidence in intuition, combined perhaps with the highly technical nature of linguistic theory as it is commonly studied in linguistics courses, has the effect of discouraging reflection and further study of linguistic issues in any but the most talented and motivated students. It seems that we are caught in a vicious cycle, where students remain unexposed to linguistic inquiry because neither their teachers nor their teachers' teachers have had access to the vast body of knowledge that has been developed in the field of linguistics over the past half-century. When these students become teachers and professors, they are unlikely to see any need to expose their students to linguistic knowledge, instead continuing to reinforce popular beliefs.

While research in linguistics over the past four decades has provided a valuable body of knowledge, little of it has been transmitted to students outside the field of linguistics. For instance, while linguists have discovered through sustained empirical research that standard English is not linguistically superior to other forms of English, few teachers appear to be aware of this. Yet these matters are extremely relevant to elementary language arts. Surely, in no other field is there so little understanding by teachers of the relevant subject matter. It would be surprising to find mathematics teachers who had never had a course in mathematics but only a course in how to teach

math. Yet language arts teachers typically receive no information about linguistics (Heath, 2000), and their only exposure to language arts regards methods of instruction. Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez and Turner point out that "…what counts as language, both in theory and in classroom practice, has rarely been at the core of these discussions. Nor has there been significant discussion on the social and cognitive consequences of current language arts practices" (1997:368).

While it is a shame that findings of linguistic research are not more generally available, it is unconscionable that teachers continue to interact with students with no awareness of the social, psychological and academic consequences which may result from their ignorance. As Anzaldua asserts, 'If you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself" (Anzaldua, 1990).

Examples of this sort of misconstruction of language deficit in non-mainstream children are all too prevalent in the literature, based as they are on intuition and given credence by psychologists who purport to study language. As long as prominent researchers whose work is applied to educational contexts and policies continue to found their work on linguistically ill-informed theories, it is hard to see how much progress can be made in improving education for young children. Connections must be forged between linguists and educational researchers, and all researchers need to be made aware of some fundamental facts of linguistics in order that the field of early childhood can begin to reconceptualize language development in children and how it can and cannot be

facilitated, and to help move the field beyond deficit views of language as an explanation for the academic failure of language minority children.

We must move beyond deficit views of language as an explanation for the academic failure of children who happen to be linguistically different. It is less likely that children's language causes the academic problems of language minority students; rather, it is more likely the misconstruction of our beliefs about language that causes problems. Researchers and practitioners must reconceptualize language development in early childhood, incorporating basic information produced by actual linguistic theory into our notions of what language is, how it works, and how children can and should develop their language.

By pushing for change at two instructional levels, in elementary language arts instruction and in early childhood and other levels of teacher education programs, we could begin to break the cycle of linguistic ignorance and prejudice among students. At the same time, all researchers interested in conducting research related to language topics ought to consider incorporating some fundamental notions of linguistic theory in their studies of language. Until they do, experts and laypeople alike will only continue to misconstruct linguistic concepts and misjudge users of language, at every level.

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