

Language Ideologies and Curriculum Studies

An Empirical Approach to “Worthwhile” Questions

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WITH THE RAPID GROWTH of globalization combined with a disturbing pattern of curriculum and economic bifurcation, curriculum theorists and linguistic anthropologists working from a critical point of view have been increasingly engaged in conversations about identity, ideologies, and language (e.g. Levinson, 2005; Macedo, Dendrinos, & Gounari, 2003; Matus & McCarthy, 2003; Smith, 2003). The economic, cultural, and linguistic challenges that have been accelerated by the forces of globalization have created a fundamental shift in disciplinary epistemologies *vis a vis* the impact on non-dominant and historically marginalized populations. One of the main objectives of this conceptual paper is to show the emerging synergy that exists between critical linguistic anthropology and critical curriculum inquiry and how the next generation of curriculum scholars can potentially benefit from this “merger” (e.g. Siegel, 2006).

Historically, scholars of curriculum studies, particularly those working from a critical perspective have long recognized the need for cross disciplinary conversations, and despite the pressures to “canonize,” “rigorize,” and create a new academic silo, many have adopted an interdisciplinary approach to some of the most fundamental and “worthwhile” questions facing humanity and its implications for educational practice and policy. The question of “what is worthwhile?” has been the cornerstone of the field of curriculum inquiry/studies for more than forty years and has traversed many ideological/pragmatic tensions (Schubert, 2010). The pragmatic relevance of the field has been increasingly under attack citing the “inaccessibility” of its language (Giroux, 1992) or its disproportionate concerns with the philosophical or “theoretical” implying a detached position from practical instructional concerns (Schwab, 2004). Schwab (2004) argues that the field has become “moribund,” and this is partially due to an unexamined reliance on theory in an area where theory alone is inadequate; he states, “The field of curriculum is moribund, unable by its present methods and principles to continue its work and desperately in search of new and more effective principles and methods” (Schwab, 2004, p. 103). One way for curriculum inquiry to position itself within the broader questions about the relevance of curriculum theory and “theorizing” in curriculum and instruction departments everywhere is to foreground language, multilingualism, discourse, and narrative inquiry as

empirical and practical approaches to curriculum inquiry both in urban teacher education and educational research.

The “social turn” in linguistics and psychology (Hymes, 1964) made those fields more viable to issues in education; perhaps curriculum inquiry is in need of a “language return” given many in the field have either explicitly or implicitly recognized the centrality of language, especially narrative inquiry (e.g. Conle & Boone, 2008; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman (2002) state, “it is necessary to understand the curriculum field as discourse, as text, and most profoundly as words.” (p. 7). The “linguistic turn” in curriculum inquiry has potential for curriculum development and inquiry by providing for context-specific practices; however, it still remains a largely unexplored area (Jupp, 2009).

Using a critical perspective, the micro analysis and awareness of discourse for the purposes of understanding and transforming macro inequities has the potential to bridge the divide between the “overly theoretical, ideological and macro” emphasis of curriculum theory and the sometimes “overly procedural emphasis of instruction.” While I fully agree with Giroux (1992), that many of the charges of “language inaccessibility” stem from either intentional or unintentional complicity with the status quo, in this paper I aim to illustrate a *language ideologies* approach to worthwhile curricular questions through the prism of “language” and its extensions: discourse and narrative analysis.

This paper provides theoretical and methodological ways for making the theoretical and/or ideological practical for scholars of curriculum and the practitioners they work with in teacher education programs throughout the United States and beyond. In this vein, I intend to address some of the critical theoretical and methodological conversations surrounding identity, ideology, and language based on my ethnographic work with teachers and grounded in linguistic anthropological perspectives. In particular, I argue for a re-conceptualization of how we think about “language” and “ideology” in the field of curriculum inquiry by drawing on the *language ideologies* framework (Irvine & Gal, 2000; Razfar, 2005). This discussion is anchored in the central curriculum questions of *What should be learned? How should it be organized for teaching? What knowledge is most worthwhile? and Whose knowledge is of most worth?* (Apple, 2000). Through an examination of practitioner voices and national political figures, and an analysis of some of the most contested contemporary debates about language policy in the United States, this paper offers a re-conceptualization of our approach to language and ideology in curriculum theory. Furthermore, I argue for a more critical stance on how we perceive the nature, function, and purpose of language as well as a more grounded approach to *Ideology*, more specifically *ideologies* as discursive practice, with the broader objective of making curriculum inquiry worthwhile and relevant in the current sociopolitical context that threatens the “C” in curriculum and instruction departments everywhere.

Reframing Curriculum: Whose language is worth knowing?

If we consider the fundamental curriculum questions of 1) What should be learned?; 2) How should it be organized for teaching?; 3) What knowledge is most worthwhile?; and 4) Whose knowledge is of most worth? (Apple, 2000) and reframe the questions from a language and literacy perspective we would ask the following: 1) What *language* should be learned?; 2) How should *language* be organized for teaching?; 3) What *language* is most worthwhile?; and 4)

Whose *language* is of most worth? In any nation-state context, the answers to these questions appear so self-evident and common sensical because most have either explicitly or implicitly defined themselves by virtue of a national language. Thus, these questions seem absurd at worst and unnecessary at best. However, these are precisely the questions that should be discussed, especially by those outside formal disciplines of language and literacy. For curriculum studies, these questions directly speak to both the *what* (content) and *how* (instruction) of curriculum. Scholars and practitioners share an ethical imperative to 1) become explicitly aware of how they stand in relation to these questions and 2) consider the consequences of those stances on their teaching and research practices (see Gee, 2008). The ensuing sections are intended to provide a framework and a practical context for inserting curriculum inquiry/studies into the contemporary conversations and debates about language, linguistic minorities, language education, and policy. The most natural gateway or entry point is for critical curriculum and critical language/discourse scholars to engage one another theoretically and methodologically and, of course, to engage the questions of mutual concern already stated. I focus attention on three areas where critically minded curriculum studies can directly engage the ideological and practical issues related to the education of non-dominant linguistic populations. First, I discuss the importance of reframing neutral notions of “language” in favor of a critical, situated view. Second, the current restrictive language policy climate is explained through the broader historical lens of language policy *vis a vis* Latina/o Spanish speakers in the Southwest (i.e. the “bilingual” education debates). This historical account serves as evidence of the critical orientation toward “language.” Third, the public controversies surrounding dialects, more specifically African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Ebonics, is detailed as more evidence regarding the inextricable link between language, identity, and ideology.

Reframing “Language” within Curriculum Inquiry

Implicit in any discussion about language is how we conceptualize the nature, function, and purpose of language. Do we see “language” as inherently neutral and objective (free from the interests of groups and nations), or is there a more critical orientation that views language use as imbued with values, interests, and historical power relations? Do we simply reduce “language” (verbal, non-verbal, and written forms) to a set of formulaic, grammatical rules that are independent of culture, history, and identity? Michael Agar (1994) coined the term “languaculture” to highlight the impossibility of abstracting linguistic forms from the cultural practices, histories, and worldviews (what may be identified as “ideologies”) of people. Many critically oriented linguists have advocated for the term “discourse” to replace “language” given the prevailing reductive and neutral view of the term “language” (e.g. Gee, 2008). Perhaps, these voices resonate for curriculum scholars engaged in the “canon debates.” A lot of the issues are eerily similar. Traditional linguists project themselves as more “scientific,” “objective,” and “disciplined” *vis a vis* their more “applied” and situated counterparts. The former often don’t recognize the latter, as the “circle” of linguistic inquiry is tightly guarded (Agar, 1994). It is in this context that I foreground the issue of monolithic language/culture or *languaculture* hegemony and its relevance to curriculum policy and practice. While this is not the place to delve deeply into the squabbles of linguists, these fundamental questions about language are important for curriculum scholars and practitioners because there are many “myths” and misconceptions about the nature of language and learning, even if we consider the generally

accepted truisms of both linguists and applied linguists; furthermore, these myths have adverse effects not only on second language learners but on ALL learners (Johnson, 2008). Amongst these myths that circulate are the assertions that some languages are more logical, academic, and scientific; languages are best learned through immersion, children (not adults) are best suited to achieve fluent language proficiency, or languages should be taught prescriptively (i.e. grammar worksheets). The prevalence of these myths begs the fundamental curriculum questions of how did these myths come to be, who benefits from them, and what are the consequences for non-dominant populations? In the remainder of this paper, I will illustrate how these fundamental curricular questions about “language” have been contested historically within the American context, where we stand today in the post NCLB¹ era, and the practical implications for curriculum inquiry.

Seeing the “Curricular Wars” through Classroom Discourse

The following vignette taken from my ethnographic work in an urban high school with a predominant Latino/a English language learner population, illustrates the intersection of identity, ideology, and language in the context of instructional practice. Mr. Sanders, a high-school English teacher, and his “sheltered English”² students are discussing the literary work of Ann Beady when the subject of her age comes up, “She was born in 1947, so she’s...” Students begin to chime in with all kinds of responses, one says “she’s old” another says “a hundred.” Mr. Sanders takes exception with this response and exclaims, “She’s fifty three” and proceeds to single out the student who said “a hundred”, “Now Natasha, do the simple math, it’s 2000, subtract forty seven from two thousand and what do you get?” Although the question is directed at Natasha, a Latina English Language Learner (ELL), other students respond to the question. Natasha is silent and appears to be uninterested in participating in this discourse exchange. After a few seconds she responds, “This ain’t a Math class.” She demonstrates her agency by resisting the question and invoking the disciplinary and epistemic boundaries that are the hallmarks of modern schooling. Surely, an English teacher does not have the right or the epistemic authority to ask an arithmetic question in an English class, no matter how simple, especially if its purpose is arguably somewhat duplicitous. Perhaps the teacher would have conceded had it not been for her use of “ain’t” as Mr. Sanders cleverly responds, “This ain’t a Math class? Tell me what class it is?” Natasha ultimately assents, “English” and Mr. Sanders proceeds to elicit the “correct” usage, “This isn’t a Math class,” and reminds her to “Try to speak English the right way”; the original arithmetic question is forgotten (Razfar, 2005). While Mr. Sanders values the linguistic and cultural heritage of his students, he implicitly and, at times, explicitly asserts the assimilationist objectives of schooling. From time to time he invokes the great American “melting pot” metaphor as evidenced by artifacts such “The Great American Melting Pot” poster and pronouncements such as this one:

America is known as a melting pot, immigrants from all over the world come. Russia, Italy, Israel, Czechoslovakia, Austria, China, Egypt, wherever. They learn English and do the things we do here. They blend into American society, start speaking English, do what Americans do.

The important point to notice here is that there is an overt recognition of a mutual, inextricable

link between national identity, language, and cultural practices, what Irvine & Gal refer to as *iconization* (Irvine & Gal, 2000), a process by which dominant symbolic forms or representations and epistemic disciplines are marked and elevated at the expense of lesser, socially undesirable modes of meaning making. The metaphor serves to obfuscate and subordinate variation and diversity in favor of a singular, uniform national identity. These vignettes taken from my own ethnographic work in urban schools, illustrate the subtle (yet not hidden) ways in which language, epistemic ideologies, and language ideologies intersect in the everyday practices of urban schools.

These vignettes are typical in much of the work on urban schools with linguistic and cultural “minority” students and regularly emerge in my own work. As someone who prepares teachers and researchers to work with “English Language Learners” (ELLs) and actively engage the “Language Wars,” the “Reading Wars,” the “Bilingual Wars,” and even “the Math Wars,” I find myself regularly engaged in the process of co-constructing a meta-discourse about language, identity, and ideology. The fact that knowledge and curriculum are and have historically been contested terrain does not come as a surprise to anyone with a critical view of curriculum. Many critical scholars of curriculum have emphasized the need to examine and deconstruct the ideological foundations of standards-based reform efforts, especially as they relate to non-dominant peoples (e.g. Apple, 1979; Giroux, 1981; Luke, 1996; McLaren, 1998). In this regard, *critical discourse analysis* and ideological approaches to language, literacy, and epistemology are essential and have emerged as powerful theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical approaches (e.g. Fairclough, 1995; Freebody, 1992; Gee, 2008; Street, 1993) to engage the implicit assumptions of mandated curricular practices predicated on “basics” and culturally irrelevant (and often oppressive) content. However, very few of these approaches and methods have located these macro Ideological issues within the context of everyday practices of teachers and students in schools. This is, in part, due to how Ideology (with a capital “I”) has been conceptualized in relation to language as discursive practice.

From “I”deology to ideologies

Critical curriculum theorists over the last four decades have provided insightful tools for deconstructing the grand narratives of national identity that have dominated curricular discourse and reform efforts in schools. For most critical curriculum theorists the notion of “I”deology is grounded in Marxist assumptions about how social, political, and economic elites systematically subordinate the modes of labor and production for the purpose of maintaining the status quo. In general, the utility of *Ideology* as a construct is to explain the maintenance of superstructures (i.e., the state), and one of the ways this is manifested is through state mandated curriculums and the official narrative. As a result, in examining the interaction between grand cultural narratives and everyday practice, much of the work in curriculum theory emphasize the “macro” dimensions and the “grand” narratives with less emphasis on developing an empirical approach to micro-levels of discourse and interaction through which such common sense is produced, constructed, and often contested. Even the pioneering work of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995), did not examine issues of power and difference in the context of everyday talk in classrooms, focusing mostly on texts constructed within media and legal modes of communication.³ More recent applications of this work illustrate the powerful possibilities of examining difficult social issues in the context of classroom practices (e.g. Rogers & Christian, 2007; Wodak & Meyer, 2001).

Language ideologies: Iconization, Recursivity, and Erasure

In my work, I draw on *language ideologies* to examine how teacher beliefs about the nature, function, and purpose of language are instantiated through discursive practices such as repair, student challenges, and teacher narratives (Razfar, 2005; 2011; 2012). Gal (1992) says that ideologies are not only ideas, constructs, notions, or representations; they are practices through which those notions are enacted. When human beings use language they are simultaneously displaying their beliefs about language as well as other world views. Language ideologies makes an explicit connection between language use and the interests of the nation-state power structure, including educational policies advocating “English-Only” or other “standard” varieties.

I have found the notions of *iconization*, *fractal recursivity*, and *erasure* to be a cohesive model to understand how micro-discourse processes display macro-relations of power. According to Irvine & Gal (2000): 1) *iconization* is the process by which certain linguistic forms or features of a language are made to be iconic of the social identities of the speakers themselves; 2) *fractal recursivity* is the notion that differences which are made to be iconic are positioned in a dichotomized relationship to produce a “normal” and “other” identities; 3) *erasure* is the process by which these distinctions are created and maintained, and “other” identities are simply disregarded or ignored. This framework is particularly salient when applied to some of the most contentious language debates in American curricular history, namely the status of African American English (AAE) and bilingual education. *Language ideologies*, as an analytic framework, extends and reorients the notion of “Ideology” used by critical curriculum theorists by drawing our attention to the discursive practices through which ideologies are constructed.

One way in which *language ideologies* can be used to understand curricular practices is by applying it to how practitioners frame not only dialects but also more accepted national languages in relation to English use. I would like to illustrate this point with an example taken from interviews conducted with public school teachers who were asked to reflect on the status of bilingual education and other language policies. Shortly after the passage of Proposition 227⁴, one of the participating teachers was asked in an interview to comment on the status of bilingual education in her school, and using *language ideologies*, we can see how she rationalized her ideological opposition *vis a vis* bilingual education through the practices of iconization, recursivity, and erasure. In reference to the proposition she said, “you’re in this country, you know learn the language”; thus, language and national identity are categories that are mutually interdependent. This point is interesting since the point of bilingual education in America was always to learn English, but this possibility is discursively eliminated. She would categorize her students according to language categories (e.g. English Only students v. Spanish speaking students), and says, “I probably had about five EOs (English Only) and the rest of class was Spanish.” One of the features of *iconization* is that it highlights how speakers typify, simplify, and generalize, in this case the identities of the students. Throughout this interview it was clear that the teacher through her talk constructed the following icons interchangeably: bilingual=difficult, Spanish=home, English=public. Languages other than English were spatially linked to the home and temporally linked to Saturday/Sunday. Thus, they were relegated to marginal positions both spatially and temporally.

As speakers use language to construct ideologies of language, the actual stances can vary. While one teacher expresses opposition to bilingual education, another can affirm the power of heritage language maintenance. The following vignette comes from an interview with a Puerto-Rican community activist who serves as a high-school academic counselor in a large urban

district. She speaks of the dual function of language both “as a tool of oppression and resistance in the lives of Puerto-Rican youth.” The following vignette (lines 1-7) illustrate how the speaker rationalizes Spanish use as an assertion of Puerto Rican identity or “Puerto Ricanness,” especially when one “looks white” (line 1). “Puerto Ricanness” becomes a typified category that becomes mutually interconnected with Spanish use. Thus, from a language ideologies perspective, Spanish use in general becomes iconic of being Puerto Rican (line 1), and Puerto-Rican in the absence of Spanish use is assumed to be non-white:

1. Spanish has been the way that I assert my Puerto Ricanness because I look white I,
2. if you look at me at first glance I am white, and I look everything but Puerto Rican
3. or the stereotypical Puerto Rican woman, and so I think for me Spanish is the way that I would,
4. that I assert my Puerto Ricanness

By constructing Spanish use as the key marker of Puerto Rican identity, she may have inadvertently “erased” the possibility of maintaining a Puerto-Rican identity in the absence of Spanish use. However, the construction of ideologies through language helps us see the tensions, complexities, and contradictions. While she asserts the importance of Spanish use and Puerto-Rican identity, especially for “white looking” Puerto-Ricans like herself, she further explores the historical complexities of language loss and identity, especially as it relates to the vast majority of Puerto-Rican youth (lines 5-7):

5. and Spanish as we know it, I think it’s stolen from our culture, from our community the majority
6. of the youths growing up now in this neighborhood, a lot of them don’t speak Spanish and it’s
7. not something that is a characteristic or a definitive factor of being a Latino or Latina.

She assumes a typified, collective voice of solidarity through the use of several inclusive pronouns (“we,” “our”) and abdicates responsibility from the youth for their apparent language loss. The youth didn’t have a choice as the language “was stolen” which is critical to the overall political and historical narrative that binds members of a subordinated people. She expands her rationale based on the colonial relationship of Puerto-Ricans and dominant society (lines 1-2):

1. it’s not, but it speaks to something that’s strong umm and powerful that (.)that living in, as an
2. internal colony of a sort that your language is sort of stripped from you

Later in this paper, I will discuss the broader historical connection of restrictive language policies and their effects on educational plights of Puerto-Ricans. Thus, these seemingly micro-narratives of language loss are linked to macro-social forces. These examples illustrate how the *language ideologies* model can be particularly useful for examining the complexities of fundamental curriculum and language questions that impact the everyday practices of urban educators.

Bilingualism and “Dialects”: Is it just “language”?

The four curriculum/language questions mentioned above have been deeply engrained in the American national psyche, narrative, and discourse (e.g., Anderson & Boyer, 1970; Crawford, 1995; Kloss, 1977). Over the last fifteen years, we have seen a public, revival of debates and “controversies” about the use/status of African American Vernacular (e.g., Golden, 1997) and the use of Spanish in states with increasing Latina/o populations (e.g., Propositions 227 in California, 203 in Arizona, Question 2 in Massachusetts⁵). Of course, it is only a controversy as it relates to uses in the public domain (i.e., schools, government, commerce, etc.), which is a key indicator of how linguistic and cultural hegemony is manifested. Many pundits and advocates of restrictive language policies are unfamiliar with the massive body of work produced by the research community. Many may not realize that upon the arrival of the Europeans into North America and for nearly three hundred years, bilingualism was largely encouraged, institutionalized, especially for the purposes of religious instruction and native language preservation. However, the switch began in the later part of the nineteenth century, with waves of non-Anglo immigrants coming ashore (i.e., Irish, Italians, Jews, etc.) and the consequent “threat to national identity and unity”; the genesis of modern restrictive, and monolithic *languaculture* policies began to take root. Thus, the inextricable link between language (in this case Anglo-English) and the viability and character of the nation state became profoundly visible in the American context. Simultaneously, another sociopolitical trend that impacted the negative stance toward non-Anglo languages and cultures were the conquests of the southwest. It was this period (1880-1960) that witnessed the largest enactments of “English Only” legislation throughout the United States. Proficiency in English was linked with political loyalty and being a “good” American. After the Spanish-American War, the United States government imposed English as the medium of instruction in its new colonies of Puerto Rico and the Philippines (Cafferty & Rivera-Martinez, 1981). One of the most tangible and direct consequences of these policies until today has been the alienation of non-English speaking populations in the form of high drop-out rates, achievement disparity, and access to higher education (Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Padilla & Gonzalez, 2001).

This period of restrictivism, nationalism, and abatement was followed by the Civil Rights era of the sixties. This period also witnessed a significant revolution in the study of language known as the “Hymes” turn. In the mid-sixties, language scholars dissatisfied with the a-cultural, a-contextual, and for the most, part a-political underpinnings of structural linguistics began to develop a more situated, ethnographic, and community-centered approach to the study of language and cultural practice (Hymes, 1964). Many of these sociolinguists dedicated their life’s work to documenting and disseminating research about languages and dialects that had been historically ignored or deemed “low-status.” The demand for equity and civil rights corresponded to the emergence of the Bilingual Education Act of 1968, which mandated funding for transitional bilingual programs that used students’ native language and culture for instruction while the students were learning English. In 1974, the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Lau v. Nichols* required the establishment of special education programs for students whose primary language is other than English. The decision stipulated that failure to teach bilingually is a violation of their Constitutional right to “equal protection under the law.” It is important to note that the bilingual education model adopted since this landmark case has for the most part been a limited, transitional model where instructors can use the heritage language of non-English speakers as a means of transitioning them to English. It has never laid the ground work for

creating a multilingual society where English monolinguals would also become bilingual and equalize the status of languages other than English. In fact, research suggests that the most effective bilingual programs are these types of “dual immersion” where all citizens engage in language learning. These programs foster equal status between dominant and non-dominant languages. In contrast, limited and assimilationist bilingual programs usually further stigmatize bilingual students and sometimes their teachers, as well.

The Rise of Restrictivism & Regressive Language ideologies

While the Civil Rights era marked the beginning of many progressive changes in the form of legislation, court decisions, and political symbolism, we are still well short of achieving its aims (Gandara, 2007; Moss & Puma, 1995). It may seem counter intuitive that, in the last ten years, there has been an erosion of the progressive gains of the Civil Rights era as illustrated by the rise of English-Only movements, anti-immigrant, and anti-affirmative action legislations throughout the country. The advent of *NCLB* (No Child Left Behind) effectively ended the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 and removed the word “bilingual” from all federal documents and the Department of Education’s lexicon. The Office of Bilingual Education has since been renamed the “Office of English Language Acquisition” (OELA). Ironically, given the influx of English learners into mainstream classes, every teacher now has to think about issues of language and culture, not that they shouldn’t have before.

The contestations about language status and how that impacts our national identity has become more profuse in recent years. The ideological and political divisions that have characterized the post 9/11 era have extended themselves into the discussions regarding language, which further underscores the inextricable link. In March of 2007, the former speaker of the House, who at the time was campaigning for the Republican presidential ticket, spoke on behalf of “the American people”:

The American people believe English should be the official language of the government...We should replace bilingual education with immersion in English so people learn the common language of the country and they learn the language of prosperity, not the language of living in a ghetto. (Gingrich, 2007)

I don’t think Mr. Gingrich is actually referring to any surveys of the American people, but the reference is suggestive of an ideologically united America, free from dissent and diversity. Linguistically speaking, the idea that immersion, or the “sink or swim” method of instruction, is the best method for learning languages is reflective of one of the major pervading myths about language learning which has been largely dismissed by three decades of bilingual and language acquisition research. It is significant to note how the status of English is elevated in relation to other languages; English is framed in terms of “prosperity” and other languages (most notably Spanish) are framed as the primary cause of isolation and “ghettoization.”

In contrast, while on the campaign trail in 2008, Barack Obama publicly disclosed an opposing and “controversial” language ideological stance by declaring that “we should all speak Spanish” and that every child should be speaking more than one language:

Instead of worrying about whether immigrants can learn English, because they will learn

English, you need to make sure your child can speak Spanish...we should have every child speaking more than one language. (as cited in Garilovic, 2008)

He would later add how “embarrassing” it was for American politicians who go overseas to only speak one language while their foreign counterparts nearly always speak English. Not surprisingly, given he is on the campaign trail and attempting to appeal to a wide audience, he frames his stance within the framework of globalization and market economies when he says that a foreign language is “a powerful tool to becoming more employable in the global economy” and also concluded with the pervasive myth that “children learn languages easier than adults.” In fact, the literature suggests that while children are more adept at certain aspects of language learning (i.e., phonology, accent, etc.), adults have advantages in other dimensions (i.e., abstract meaning making and problem solving). Nevertheless, now that he is the President, Obama’s stance overall may be signaling a return to the use of the word “bilingual” in federal circles.

The Politics of Dialects and the “Ebonics” Controversy

If highly recognized national languages, like Spanish, can so easily be dismissed and relegated to the margins of our collective identity; the prospects for dialects and “non-standard” varieties are direr. There is a famous linguistic adage regarding dialects: “The difference between a language and a dialect is that a language is a dialect with an army.” No where do these words ring more true than in the debates regarding African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or “Ebonics.” Given many of the same academic struggles of Latina/os in schools, scholars of African American education began to take a deep look at the linguistic and cultural factors that were undoubtedly impacting the schooling of African American children. In the early seventies, psychologist Robert Williams (1975) coined the term “Ebonics” to loosely refer to the language spoken by most those of African descent who were brought to the Americas as slaves. It was never intended to codify the language or suggest that there is a monolithic version spoken by all African-Americans, but rather to advance the argument that the language of African American children was fundamentally distinct from “Standard American English” (SAE) in part because of its African heritage. Since that time, an array of sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists have empirically shown the phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic variation in Ebonics (Baugh, 2000; Labov, 1972; Rickford, 1999; Smitherman, 1999) and some have rationalized these developments in terms of the “linguistic consequences of the African slave trade” (Baugh, 2000). The Ebonics phenomenon represents the cultural and ideological genesis of a struggle for freedom from slavery and against White supremacy.

The term “Ebonics” arrived in popular discourse as a result of the Oakland School Board’s decision to officially recognize “Ebonics” as a language and promote it as a tool for teachers to use in their efforts to teach SAE to young African American children (Golden, 1997). This would have given the Oakland Board access to federally mandated funds for bilingual education. As usual with these language controversies, the outcry was unjustified and reflective of the pervasive ignorance with respect to the Oakland School Board’s rationale. Bill Cosby wrote a mocking editorial for *The Wall Street Journal* denouncing the Oakland School Board for teaching Ebonics, “In London, I guess Cockney would be the equivalent of Ebonics ...and though they may study Cockney at Oxford as part of literature, I doubt they teach it.” The reference to the Queen’s English and Oxford as the highest arbiter of proper English should have rattled American sensibilities. A few years later, on the 50th Anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund honored Bill Cosby, as someone who had

“advanced the promise of Brown,” in which Cosby took the opportunity to attack poor and working class African Americans, their language, and culture:

They’re standing on the corner and they can’t speak English. I can’t even talk the way these people talk: “Why you ain’t?” “Where you is?” . . . And I blamed the kid until I heard the mother talk. And then I heard the father talk . . . Everybody knows it’s important to speak English except these knuckleheads . . . You can’t be a doctor with that kind of crap coming out of your mouth! (as cited in Coates, 2004)

When we examine all of these public commentaries and movements advocating “English Only” or the stigmatization of languages and “dialects” other than English we realize one thing about where we are in our national discourse regarding non-dominant languages and cultures: it is still fair game to assert the dominance of one language over another because we view language as neutral territory.

Conclusion

The public battles about language, curricular content, and the epistemic disciplines that are determined to be “most worthwhile” need to be understood as part of macro AND micro ideological praxis that are rooted in the legacies of colonization, enslavement, and conquest. Whether we look at *ideology* as used by critical curriculum theorists or *language ideologies* as used by linguistic anthropologists, I believe both frameworks are an expression of solidarity with the struggles of stigmatized languages and peoples and share many of the same assumptions about human organization and interaction. The impact of the histories of slavery and conquest on the achievement of non-dominant populations within American schooling is not a new idea, as the late John Ogbu argued thirty years ago about the consequence of “acting and sounding White” for African American children in schools (Ogbu, 1978; 1986). More recently, linguistic anthropologists have taken a serious interest in how battles about language are really battles of supremacy in its fullest sense.

The most important curriculum questions that need to be asked are not only those related to content (*what?*) but also *how* learning is organized and mediated (Egan, 1978). This is precisely where the foregrounding of language and debates surrounding language use are of importance to curriculum inquiry. Many who have asked these fundamental questions and actively pursued them have been able to radically transform the educational trajectories of linguistic and other non-dominant segments of society where issues of communication seriously impacted their ability to participate as equal citizens and members of the human family (e.g. Itard, 1962, Simpson, 2007). Scholars and practitioners of curriculum, especially those engaged in the “canon debates,” should return to questions about language, culture, and ideology with a holistic orientation that bridges the micro and the macro as well as the *what* and *how* of curriculum inquiry. This can raise sociopolitical consciousness by addressing how learning is organized for non-dominant linguistic populations, making potentially harmful “tacit” beliefs overt and subject to change, and foster curricular content and methods that authentically legitimate the “languacultures,” histories, and narratives of historically dominated populations. More importantly, these considerations have the potential to give vitality to the field of curriculum inquiry by focusing on the moral and ethical imperatives that drive our questions, analysis, and

practices in education.

Notes

1. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) is a United States federal law proposed by George W. Bush as a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), which increased “the standards of accountability for states, school districts, and schools.” For more information see <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/overview/intro/factsheet.html>
2. Sheltered English is a transitional course for ESL students in high school right before they are considered proficient enough to enroll in mainstream courses.
3. See Rogers, Berkes, Mosley, Hui, and O-Garro (2005) for a critical review of “Critical Discourse Analysis.”
4. In 1998, voters in California approved Proposition 227, also known as the “Unz initiative” or “English for the Children,” which virtually eliminated bilingual education in California public schools. Analogous propositions were later passed in Arizona and Massachusetts.
5. Proposition 227 in California, Proposition 203 in Arizona, and Question 2 in Massachusetts were “English Only” initiatives that virtually eliminated bilingual education in public schools. In other states similar initiatives failed (e.g. Colorado and Illinois).

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