Language Development, Linguistic Racism, and Social Power:
Why Would We Remediate Differences?

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Roadmap 🗺️

1. Goal for today's talk ✅
2. Truths about language development 👶🗣️✋
3. What is 'quality' linguistic input 🧠❓

4. Linguistic Racism 👶🗣️✋ and Social Power 💪
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6. Takeaway messages 💡🧩
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Goal for today ✅

Move the conversation about the so-called word/language gap forward by calling out the '(high) quality' linguistic input discourse that further perpetuates gap rhetoric and deficit perspectives of racialized and marginalized children's language(s).

truths about language development 👶🗣✋

truths about language development 👶🗣️✋

1. Typically-developing children learn the language of their linguistic environment, spoken or signed, without direct teaching.
2. All language varieties, spoken and signed, written or not, are linguistically equal.
3. Languages are made up of more than just words/vocabulary.

truths about language development 👶🗣️✋

Across all varieties of English, children with a developmental language/speech disorder will struggle to learn language and perform well in school compared to their siblings, cousins, and friends (Oetting, 2020).

Intervention can help.

truths about language development 👶🗣️✋

D/deaf and hard of hearing children are frequently denied access to sign language (Hall et al., 2017; Lillo-Martin & Henner, 2021; Spellman & Kushalnagar, 2018), which is an example of **language deprivation** and a public health crisis.

Intervention is <u>necessary</u>.

truths about language development 👶🗣️✋

Children living in abusive situations of extreme deprivation, like Genie, are not the children referred to by gap rhetoric. These circumstances will absolutely affect language development and cognitive development.

Intervention is <u>necessary</u>.

poverty of the stimulus (1959, 1980)

Children famously learn from little input.

Linguistic input is **impoverished**.

Following this logic, all children's input should, theoretically, be *equally* lacking.

poverty of the stimulus

"Poor" or "deficient" input or input lacking "quality" is routinely and normally ascribed to marginalized children and their families and communities.

Those from families with more social and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), receive linguistic input that has "more of the characteristics…that are positively associated with language development" (Hoff, 2003, p. 1369).

poverty of the stimulus

The question is, *How can some input be more* positively associated *with language development if all typically-developing children exposed to language will learn language?*

"There's all these studies that say that if you don't talk to the baby they end up, like, fucked by the time they're five."

what is 'quality' linguistic input 🧠❓

Contemporary Origins - Hart and Risley (1995, 1999, 2003)

- First study to document language experience of children across **socioeconomic status (SES)**
- Longitudinal study over 2.5 years
- 42 families in Kansas City (Kansas!)
- 7-9 mos - 3yo
- Sequential, monthly 1-hr recordings
- Calculated the mean number of words spoken

Meaningful
Differences
in the Everyday Experience of
Young American Children

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

Betty Hart & Todd R. Risley

Foreword by Lois Bloom
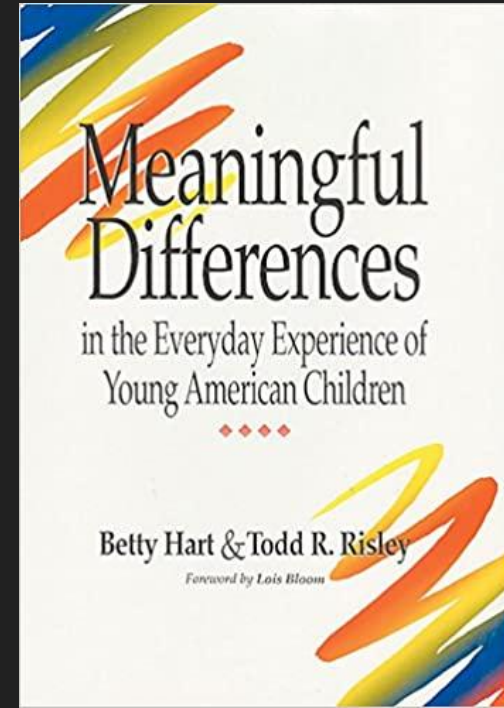
Contemporary Origins - Hart and Risley (1995, 1999, 2003)

- The 42 families in Kansas were separated by SES (measured in this case with maternal education)

                          Black families
  - 13 - Upper   1/13
  - 10 - Middle   3/10
  - 13 - Lower   7/13
  - 6 - "Welfare"   6/6

Contemporary Origins - Hart and Risley (1995)

- Based on the linguistic input gathered during those 1-hour sessions, Hart & Risley concluded that the Black families in the "welfare" category will hear 30 million fewer words than the "professional" families by the time they are 4 years old.

Contemporary Origins - Hart and Risley (1995, 1999, 2003)

All of this. All of it. Is extrapolated from **_SIX_** Black families in Kansas City in the late 1980s.

This is not observed data–it is **extrapolated**!

Tada! 🪄

'Word gap.'

The Number of Words Addressed to Children Differs Across Income Groups

Estimated cumulative words addressed to child

50 million
40 million
30 million
20 million
10 million
0

0   12   24   36   48

Age of child in months

Professional
Working-class
Welfare
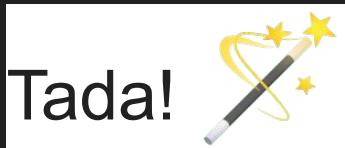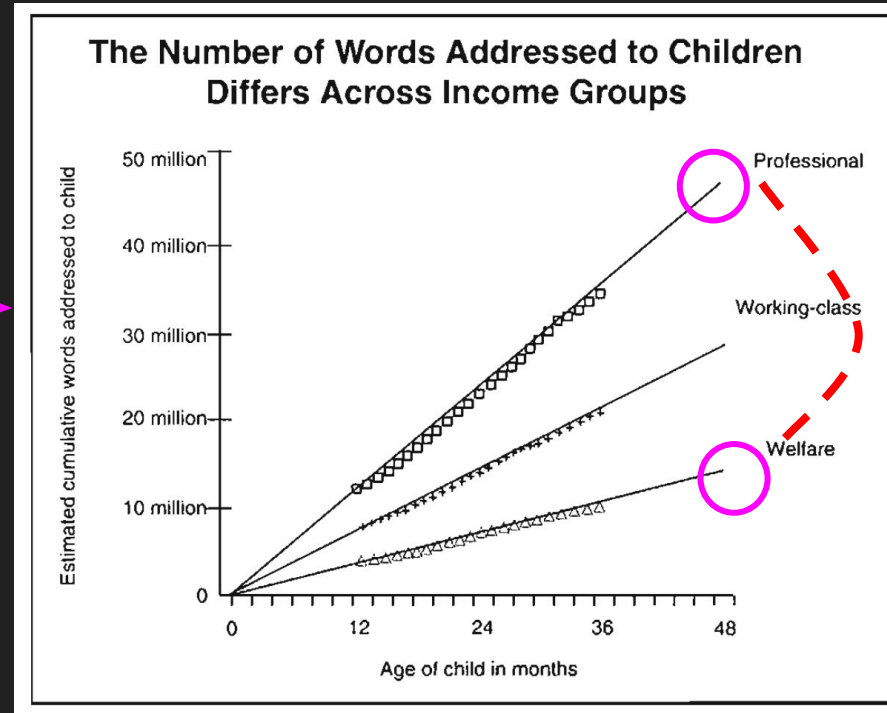
Proliferation

"We want to **help close the word gap** in America by reminding everyone, from pediatricians to parents to grandparents, to spread the message on how they can make talking, reading, and singing everyday activities."

- Hillary Clinton at the launch of *Too Small To Fail*

The Number of Words Addressed to Children Differs Across Income Groups
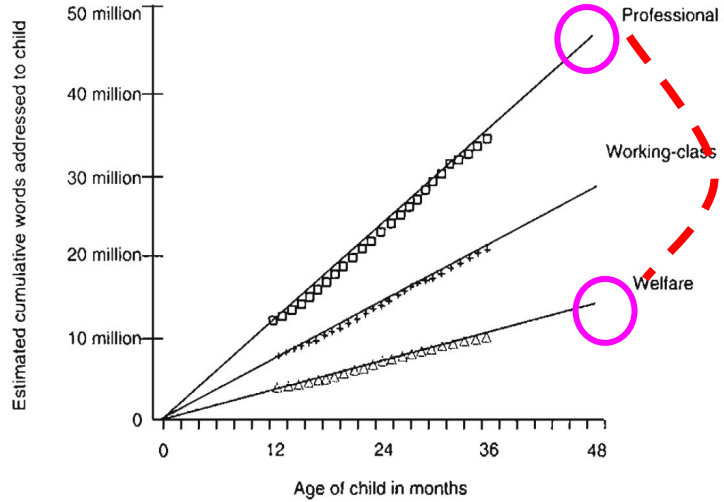
The Word Gap Between Children From High-, Middle- and Low-Income Families
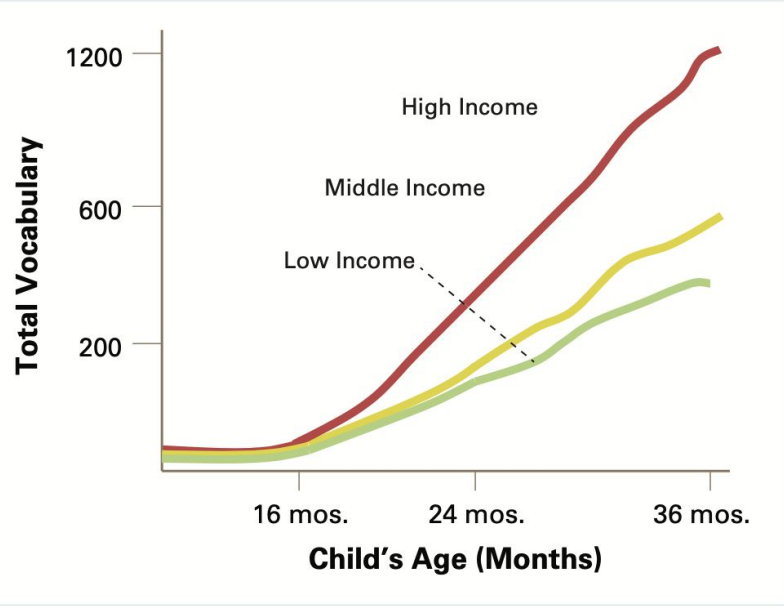
how is quality *linguistic input* defined in the literature? 👶🗣️✋

"Quality" Linguistic Input defined

- Back-and-forth/conversational "fluency"/conversational turn taking (e.g. Hirsh-Pasek et al, 2015; Masek et al., 2021; Romeo et al., 2018)
- Lexical diversity (e.g. Rowe, 2008, 2012) and "Rare words" (Rowe, 2012)
- Decontextualized language (Rowe, 2012)
- "Child-adjusted voice"/motherese/parentese/babytalk (e.g. Hutton et al, 2017)
- Open-ended question, *wh*-questions s (e.g. Hutton et al., 2017)
- Structural complexity (e.g. Hirsh-Pasek et al, 2015)
- Affirmations (Conger et al., 2010; Hart & Risley, 1995)
- Use of iconic gestures (e.g. Hirsh-Pasek et al, 2015)
- Referential (Kuchirko et al., 2020)

- Prohibitions (Conger et al., 2010; Hart & Risley, 1995)
- Directives (Rowe, 2008; Hoff-Ginsberg, 1991; Hart and Risley, 1995)
- Regulatory
- unresponsive, taciturn parenting style (Greenwood et al., 2017)
- "Non-native" (Hoff et al., 2020)

High stakes "outcomes"

"More successful language development" and "Stronger language processing skills" (Schwab & Lew-Williams, 2016, p. 268),

"Collateral benefit" of "developing self-regulation skills and executive function" (Golinkoff et al., 2019, p. 6),

Higher socioemotional competence at 30 mos (Gómez & Strasser, 2021)

Lower symptoms of psychopathology in toddlerhood (King et al., 2021).

High stakes "outcomes"

Warren (2015) wrote, "Most children acquire language without obvious difficulty. Historically, this was sufficient for children to both survive and thrive in agrarian and early industrial societies. But the world we live in today places an increasingly steep premium on the early acquisition of **high-level language skills** and **large, complex vocabularies** that are well beyond basic literacy" (p. 2; bolding added).

High stakes "outcomes"

But what are "high-level" language skills?

This is either a misnomer or a fallacy. All typically developing children, racially or economically marginalized or not, will learn the language to which they are exposed, spoken or signed, and they do so in the first few years of life.

"High" or "low" level skills is not a helpful or accurate description of this phenomenon.

High stakes "outcomes"

Presumably, Warren (2015) and others who refer to "high-level" language skills are referring to school-based skills like vocabulary knowledge.

First, the skills that are associated with school and vocabulary knowledge are both socially determined.

Second, vocabulary growth is dynamic, and language is more than individual words.

High stakes "outcomes"

There is no reason to believe that expansive vocabularies–knowledge that is difficult or impossible to accurately measure–facilitates language development. Yet, the assumption that "large vocabularies" is a boon for development persists in the literature with no meaningful evidence to support this claim.

High stakes "outcomes"

These supposed connections between linguistic input and high-stakes outcomes puts a high premium on so-called high-quality input, which is indicative of a class-based ideal of children as communicative projects (Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante, 2015).

A neoliberal discourse focused on economic competition makes linguistic acts marketable commodities instead of expressions of selves (Heller, 2010).

As Soros (1988) puts it: "Markets reduce everything, including human beings (labor) and nature (land), to commodities" (p. 27).

Children become wells that parents attempt to fill with economic potential.

High stakes "outcomes"

"The exchange relationships we choose determine whether we share them as a common gift or sell them as a private commodity. A great deal rests on that choice. For the greater part of human history, and in places in the world today, common resources were the rule. But some invented a different story, a social construct in which everything is a commodity to be bought and sold. The market economy story has spread like wildfire, with uneven results for human well-being and devastation for the natural world. But it is just a story we have told ourselves and we are free to tell another, to reclaim the old one."

–Robin Wall Kimmerer, member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, from *Braiding Sweetgrass*

Truths about language development 👶🗣️✋

1. Typically-developing children learn the language of their linguistic environment, spoken or signed, without direct teaching.
2. All language varieties, spoken and signed, written or not, are linguistically equal.
3. Languages are made up of more than just words/vocabulary.

🛑 If these things are true, how can some linguistic input be *quality* and some be *deficient*?

This is about more than language.

Linguistic Racism 👶🗣️✋ and Social Power 💪

Not all input is created equal.

Rowe et al., 2017, p. 163

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) that favor linguistic behaviors associated with white people, promoting white linguistic hegemony.

Linguistic racism

RACIOLINGUISTIC IDEOLOGIES conflate the language use of racialized bodies with linguistic deficiency (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Rosa & Flores, 2015). Even when racialized language users engage in linguistic practices that are situated as "normative" based on standard language ideologies (i.e., when they "sound white"), their language may still be perceived as "deficient" to the white listening subject (Flores & Rosa, 2015).

Words matter (lol)

"By the pragmatic criterion of usefulness for academic success, the different skills of lower SES children **constitute a deficit**" (Hoff 2012, p.7)

"The evidence also argues that the cause of these **deficits** is in the amount and nature of the children's early language experience" (Hoff, 2012, p. 10)

Deficit Models

How deficit thinking mobilizes into action:

1. Identify social problem**- educational disparities aka "achievement gap" or "low" scores on standardized language tests**
2. Conduct study to find out how advantaged and disadvantaged are different**- Hart & Risley, 1995**
3. Identify differences and define these differences as the causes of the social problem**- number of words encountered in home**
4. Apply [gov't] intervention to correct differences (read: deficiencies)**- e.g. Too Small to Fail in the U.S.**

Linguistic Input 👶🗣️✋ and Social Power 💪

Childhood is a cultural phenomenon.

Child rearing practices are not universal.

And yet success is measured by assimilation to a certain set of practices.
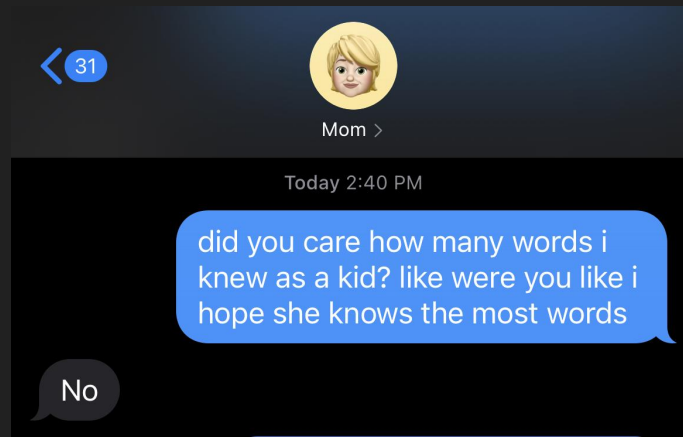
Linguistic Input 👶🗣️✋ and Social Power 💪

- Worldwide, the word/language gap claim **is constructed on** language data from those who are from **W**estern, **E**ducated, **I**ndustrial, **R**ich, **D**emocratic (WEIRD) families/societies
- This sampling bias **normalizes** the language of those with <u>social power</u> e.g., the white, middle- and upper-class in the U.S, **pathologizing** other varieties.
- This manifests as **deficit models** of marginalized and racialized children's language **in the literature and beyond**.

Linguistic Input 👶🗣️✋ and Social Power 💪

Thus, these characteristics of "quality" input do not capture the diversity of linguistic creativity across language varieties (e.g., Baugh, 2017), and they certainly do not capture the complexity of multilingualism (e.g., García & Otheguy, 2017; López, Luque, & Piña-Watson, 2021; Soto-Boykin et al, 2021) and multilingualism across modalities.

Linguistic Racism 👶🗣️✋ and Social Power 💪

Our institutions propagate a *standard language ideology*—a preference for an idealized version of language that is imposed from "above".

In the U.S., the standard language is the linguistic behaviors associated with the white middle- and upper-classes.

Whiteness is unmarked and becomes the default.

Linguistic Racism 👶🗣️✋ and Social Power 💪

Whiteness and white ways of languaging are centered in schools so much that white students enter school and are assumed to be culturally ready to succeed. The same cannot be said for how historically marginalized students are treated when they enter school.

Pygmalion Effect

One of the most established discourse tropes in education policy is indeed the GAP metaphor (McCarty, 2015).

Yosso called it "one of the most prevalent forms of contemporary racism in US schools" (2005, p. 75).

"What if, all along, our well-meaning efforts at closing the achievement gap have been opening the door to racist ideas?" –Dr. Ibram X. Kendi

Pygmalion Effect

Adair and colleagues found that teachers citing the "word gap" had lowered expectations for Latinx/e students (2017). Those lowered expectations translated into classroom practice, such that Latinx/e students were not given learning opportunities that were agentive and promoted self-efficacy.

Pygmalion Effect

The "word gap" discourse has become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), reproducing inequities that it purports to challenge (Arnold & Faudree, 2019; Kozol, 2005). This is facilitated and accelerated by standardized tests.

Pygmalion Effect

"In my gut, I've always known that laws are merely expressions of a society's dominant beliefs. It's the beliefs that must shift in order for outcomes to change. When policies change in advance of the underlying beliefs, we are often surprised to find the problem still with us. America ended the policy of enforced school segregation two generations ago, but with new justifications, the esteem in which many white parents hold Black and brown children hasn't changed much, and today our schools are nearly as segregated as they were before Brown v. Board of Education. Beliefs matter."

Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us*, p.16

Linguistic Racism 👶🗣️✋ and Social Power 💪

According to word/language gap logic, if people living in poverty are deficient under capitalism, neoliberalism, etc., their language must be lacking and their children must receive "impoverished language input" (Walker et al., 2020, p. 69).

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).

This is Linguistic Racism

"The formula for action becomes extraordinarily simple: change the victim" (Ryan, 1971, p. 8)

Intervention

One of the most honest descriptions of what an intervention would need to look like for children from marginalized communities under a deficit perspective is from Hart & Risley (2003):

"...an intervention must address not just a lack of knowledge or skill, but an entire general approach to experience" (p. 9).

Intervention

Recently, there has been a shift in rhetoric from *deficit* to *difference* (Boykin & Allen, 2000).

For example, "It is crucial to understand the source of these **differences** to design effective, evidence-based interventions" (Golinkoff et al., 2019, p. 1; bolding added). However, the question then becomes, ***Why would you need to intervene for differences?***

Intervention

Interventions promoted by researchers are often prescriptions for parents to abandon their familial child-rearing practices. In this way, researchers are responsible for further marginalizing these communities (Milner, 2012) and undermining their humanity.

Intervention

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"...an intervention must address not just a lack of knowledge or skill, but an entire general approach to experience" (p. 9).

Intervention

Prescribing interventions for variability come at the cost of diagnoses for children with developmental language disorder and other genuine language difficulties.

"Nonetheless, the success of parent-directed language interventions for children with disabilities raises the possibility that it may be possible to change the language input that parents from low-SES backgrounds provide to their children."

Suskind et al., 2016, p. 371

Intervention

"Though the interventions mentioned above were developed for children with diagnosed speech and language delays, their broader applicability to addressing the educational achievement gap must be considered…"

"A lack of interventions specifically developed for and tailored to the needs of populations of low SES and typically under- resourced populations only further compounds the challenges already faced by children growing up in poverty."

Leffel and Suskind, 2013, p. 269-270

Intervention

The language skills many researchers are purporting to measure are focused in one aspect of knowing a language: the vocabulary. Thus, "language skills" become confused with vocabulary, socially determined knowledge, and a lifelong pursuit.

Linguistic measures often = vocabulary

"Because the vocabulary that individuals can command reflects so well their intellectual resources, we still have oral examinations, and vocabulary plays a major role in tests of intelligence" (Hart & Risley, 1995, p. 6).

How do you measure vocabulary/words?

Linguistic Racism 👶🗣️✋ and Social Power 💪

When we use standardized tests that are normed on a very specific culture (McCarty, 2015) to assess language abilities, this results in something akin to "false positives" (Baugh, 2017).

Often this looks like measuring "intelligence" or "ability" with instruments that are testing vocabulary knowledge. Vocabulary knowledge is socially determined and dynamic. It is socially determined that some vocabulary is 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).

Thus, interventions targeting low SES and/or racialized children de-emphasizes variability and diversity of thought.

Linguistic Racism 👶🗣️✋ and Social Power 💪

What essentially happens is that differing discourse styles are equated with different levels of intellectual "accomplishment" (Hart & Risley, 1995, p.142; Johnson et al., 2017, Gilkerson et al, 2018).

Linguistic Racism 👶🗣️✋ and Social Power 💪

Deficit thinking obfuscates the <u>broader social processes</u> that engender these disadvantages, socially, economically, educationally (standardized on whose language, culture, etc.), which **reproduces academic inequalities, actually *putting* students at risk.**

Linguistic Racism 👶🗣️✋ and Social Power 💪

Although many children are born into poverty every day in the United States, programs like *Too Small to Fail* seek to eliminate the so-called word gap instead of targeting issues like food insecurity or access to medical care (Heath, 2015).

It is impossible to interrupt the cycle of intergenerational poverty by talking more to children.

Linguistic Racism 👶🗣️✋ and Social Power 💪

It ignores the linguistic resources children bring to school (e.g. Labov, 1972), linguistic resources which are **linguistically equally.** This devalues and de-legitimizes languages/varieties other than the standard ideal.

Felt Theory - Million 2009

Via Dr. Wesley Y. Leonard (2021), a Miami Scholar

Felt theory (Million, 2009)—"creates a context for more complex 'telling'" p. 54

"Academia repetitively produces gatekeepers to our entry into important social discourses because we *feel* our histories as well as think them." p. 54

"The successful struggle to rearticulate the colonial residential school experience as abuse was not a move to articulate victimology, it was a move to ground a present healing in a past properly understood, felt, and moved beyond" p. 73

Felt Theory

"You got swatted… for doing something bad. So we didn't just learn, you know, our first lesson in language, we got our first lesson in making an equation. And our parents said listen to your teacher… You know that you're going to get swatted for speaking Spanish, and you know that you speak Spanish, and you know you get swatted for doing something wrong. You make the equation. You're feeling this with the body. Second grade comes around and the equation widens out. Your body is a little bigger and it fits more now. Because now it's been demonstrated. You get swatted for speaking Spanish and you start to recognize by second grade your parents speak Spanish your family speaks Spanish and if Spanish is bad, they then must be bad. Now you don't say that out loud, but you have learned it through the mechanisms of the body, not the intellect."

–Alberto Ríos, The Vocal Fries, Episode *Borderlands/La frontera*

It is impossible to interrupt the cycle of intergenerational racism by talking more to children.

📌 tl;dr

1. All language varieties, spoken and signed, written or not, are linguistically equal.
2. "Gap" and "quality" input rhetoric is coded language (to some). It promotes a standard language ideology that pathologizing all other varieties → whiteness as proxy for (high) quality" input.
3. The definitions of "(high) quality" linguistic input are not universal features of language or caregiving, **and that's okay**.
4. Learning language is more than learning words, and all typically developing children exposed to language do it.
5. We do not need to intervene for differences

takeaway messages 💡 🧩

takeaway messages 💡 🧩

We need to reject the idea a high vocabulary is indicative of anything other than a high vocabulary.

An element of white, middle-class life, is said to be the "magic bullet" = simplistic and not helpful. In fact, it's linguistic racism.

takeaway messages 💡 🧩

The socially constructed marker of "high-quality" is forever moving further down the line–an "imagined line" that García and colleagues (and before them Quijano, 1991, 2000) refer to as "ongoing coloniality" (p. 3). Not only is it hard to pin down what exactly "(high) quality" linguistic input is given the wide range of descriptions in the literature, but racialized caregivers are unlikely ever to hit the mark when the descriptions are embedded in coloniality.

takeaway messages 💡 🧩

This distracts from the genuine need of intervention for children with a developmental language or speech disorder.

takeaway messages 💡 🧩

Variability is not a problem to overcome but a social reality of language (Johnson & White, 2020). Thus, the outcomes of variability are not deficits that merit intervention (cf Fernald et al., 2013).
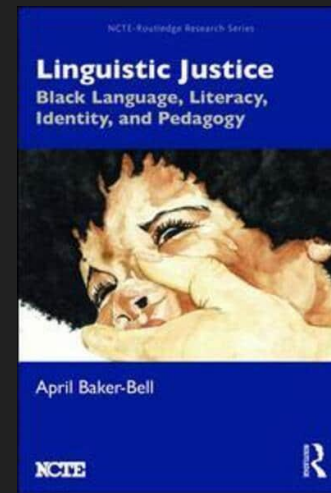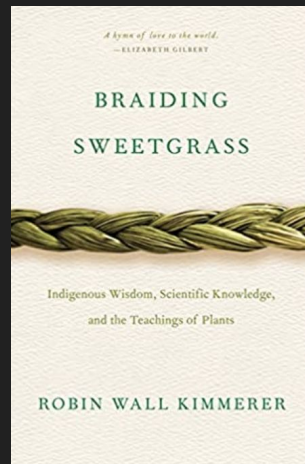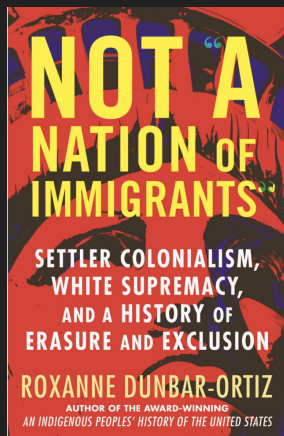
Ida Bae Wells
@nhannahjones

Following ∨

I have challenged this again and again. Outside of the science — it just *never made sense.* Only people who believe deep down that poor black people are intellectually depraved could have thought this possible. 30 MILLION words? Mad dumb.

What can we do? 🔮

- Name oppression for what it is → drop the word/language gap and quality input rhetoric.
- Do not let deficit-based frameworks go unchallenged!
- Linguists/Psycholinguists/Psychologists cannot let anthropologists and educational linguists be the only ones calling this out!

NOT A NATION of IMMIGRANTS

SETTLER COLONIALISM, WHITE SUPREMACY, AND A HISTORY OF ERASURE AND EXCLUSION

ROXANNE DUNBAR-ORTIZ

AUTHOR OF THE AWARD-WINNING AN INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES

A hymn of love to the world. —ELIZABETH GILBERT

BRAIDING SWEETGRASS

Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants

ROBIN WALL KIMMERER

NCTE-Routledge Research Series

Linguistic Justice
Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy

April Baker-Bell

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Questions ❓ 💬

Thank you! 🎉🎊

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