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CHAPTER 8

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN THEORIES OF ACADEMIC FAILURE FOR LINGUISTIC MINORITIES

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INTRODUCTION

Why do English-language learners (ELLs) struggle in school? Since concern for educational equity reached public awareness some time in the middle of the last century, numerous educational researchers have addressed this important question. Language has often been posited as a causal factor, often in ways characterizing the language that immigrant children bring to the school setting as the principal culprit. We review the history of this literature in the specific context of language minority students and argue that it adopts a traditional prescriptivist perspective on language inconsistent with linguistic research. We conclude with a description of an alternative perspective.

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LANGUAGE AS A THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT

Language has played a central role in theories of academic achievement differences but is rarely explicitly defined as a psychological construct. In order to evaluate or measure language in any group, we must first clearly understand what it is. In the context of language minority education, the matter is especially important, as attitudes and prejudices about language differences have often served as a proxy for less socially and politically acceptable kinds of prejudice.

Research on language acquisition has found cross-culturally that all normal children acquire the language of their respective speech communities and do so effortlessly and without formal instruction (Slobin & Bowerman, 1985; Pinker, 1994). During the most active acquisition period in the preschool years, children learn approximately 10–12 new words per day, often on one exposure and in highly ambiguous circumstances (Gleitman & Landau, 1994), and they acquire knowledge of elementary aspects of sentence structure for which they have no evidence at all (Lightfoot, 1982). Moreover, as Tager-Flusberg (1997, p. 188) has pointed out in a review of the literature, "by the time children begin school, they have acquired most of the morphological and syntactic rules of their language," and possess a grammar essentially indistinguishable from adults. These facts and others have led many researchers to believe that language acquisition is inwardly directed by innate principles of Universal Grammar (Chomsky, 1981), or an internal "bioprogram," as Bickerton (1981) has termed it.

Universal Grammar (UG) is presumed to be a biological endowment common to the human species, and unique in essential respects. It defines a narrowly delineated hypothesis space for the language learner who uses primary linguistic data from the speech community to set options permitted by UG. Thus, UG begins in an initial state, S_0, which successively approximates the language of the speech community through a series of intermediate states, $S_1 \ldots S_n$, until it reaches a steady state, S_s, after which it appears to undergo only peripheral changes (acquisition of new vocabulary, development of new speech styles, and so on) (Lightfoot, 1982; Pinker, 1994; Chomsky, 1986; Ritchie & Bhatia, 1999).

Of course, languages differ across communities of speakers and across individuals as well (Fillmore, Kempler & Wang, 1979). Thus, when we identify a speech community as "speakers of English" or "speakers of Tyrolian German" we engage in an idealization, assuming homogeneity for the purpose of discussion, much in the way that natural scientists assume homogeneity of body organs and other objects of study. We might usefully think of "speakers of a language L" as those speakers whose languages are each sufficiently alike as to permit intelligible intercommunication in L. In doing so, however, we recognize that, in actual fact, speech communities have considerable internal variation, even to the level of individual speakers (idiolects), and that speakers may be members of multiple speech communities.

Thus, a particular language—such as English, German, or Swahili—is a set of expressions defined by a grammar, a psychological mechanism that maps sound to meaning and that is represented in the mind/brain of a speaker–hearer, and a vocabulary. The grammar of a particular language is a set of values over the range of variation permitted by UG once it has entered the steady (or "mature") state (Chomsky, 1995). In the context of first language (L1) acquisition, then, we take "language proficiency" to be a state of linguistic maturity in which a learner has acquired a grammar that is compatible with the language of the community of origin.

Although children's acquisition of their native language is essentially complete by the time they reach school, school-aged second-language learners (SLLs) may exhibit linguistic errors of a sort that typically developing school-age children do not exhibit in their native language. Unlike school-aged native speakers, SLLs have developed only partial knowledge of the structure of their target language and exhibit substantial errors associated with tense, case, grammatical agreement, word order, pronunciation, and other aspects of language structure. In addition, while all normal human beings acquire a language effortlessly and without instruction, second-language (L2) acquisition often meets with only partial success, at times depends upon considerable effort, and may be facilitated by purposely structured input (Bley-Vroman, 1989; Coppieters, 1987). Thus, in the case of school-aged SLLs of English, we expect "English proficiency" to reflect growing mastery of the structure and vocabulary of English over some range of time.

Literacy and other school subjects will no doubt make use of a child's language ability, but these seem substantially different in character. Humans acquire language by instinct, upon exposure, the way birds acquire birdsong; but the learning of school subjects, such as literacy, physics, and mathematics, do not follow a biologically endowed program (Chomsky, 1986; Gee, 2001; MacSwan, 2000; MacSwan & Rolstad, 2003). Academic achievement denotes a domain of knowledge that is specific to a particular human context—namely, the world of schooling. While all (typically developing) children develop a vocabulary and a grammatical system, not all children will come to know specific facts about geography, history, or physics. Nonetheless, when features of literary discourse (peculiar vocabulary, impersonal author, distant setting, special order of events, so on) are familiar to children and are present even in their oral language, as has been found among very young middle-class children, then achievement in school literacy becomes a much easier task, since a considerable portion of it has been accomplished before students enter school. This "middle-class advantage" relates to the special alignment of children's particular home

experiences and speech styles with those encountered at school (Heath, 1983; Wiley, 1996).

In addition, a child's tacit understanding of the rules that govern language use are also sensitive to social and situational contexts, and the interpretation of particular linguistic expressions is tied to a language user's appreciation of relevance, coherence, and context (Sperber & Wilson, 1986; Kehler, 2002). As Gee (1999) has pointed out, language use has the effect of establishing a *who* and a *what*, a socially situated person engaged in a particular kind of craft or activity—a teacher, doctor, a member of a club or street gang, a regular at a local bar, or a student at school. These roles enter into a speaker–hearer's perspective and are part of what Gee calls "Discourses"—ways of acting, interacting, thinking, and valuing within a particular community of speakers. Gee (1999) uses the term "social language" to denote the role of language in discourse, the set of conventions that result in an expression of personal and social identity, and of relationships among interlocutors and participants. Thus, as we each make meaning out of language, we do far more than compute an interpretation deriving from the interaction of syntax and word meaning. We make use of a wealth of knowledge and theories about the world and of a particular set of cultural models, practices, and beliefs.

We might usefully regard these components of our mental life as part of the domain of *language use*, classically termed linguistic performance, and take *knowledge of language*, or linguistic competence, to refer more narrowly to the speaker–hearer's knowledge of language structure (Chomsky, 1965; Kasher, 1991). While knowledge of language and knowledge of school subjects are certainly different psychological constructs, the language of an academically successful student will be affected in concrete ways by school experience, introducing (or reinforcing) new vocabulary, speech styles, and "social languages," in Gee's (1999) sense.

To sum up, we define knowledge of language as a linguistic construct, reflecting a grammatical system that consists of the rules and principles that govern syntax (word order), morphology (word formation), and phonology (pronunciation) and that interface with principles of discourse, pragmatics, and semantic interpretation. Speakers and communities differ with regard to the particular form these principles might take, resulting in the formation of distinctive varieties and conventions of language use, but each community nevertheless has a language every bit as rich and complex as the next (Crystal, 1986; Newmeyer, 1986; Milroy & Milroy, 1999). With regard to L2 acquisition among school-aged children, we naturally expect to see a maturational process that proceeds on an independent timetable, with ongoing evidence of development in core linguistic systems.

Central to these points about the nature of linguistic knowledge is the observation that languages vary within and across communities, as previously noted. Some varieties have higher social prestige than others, but the prestige associated with a linguistic variety results from social and political forces

that are altogether independent of the linguistic system itself. Prescriptivists make the error of assuming that language varieties each reflect certain cognitive advantages underlying the relative social and political success of the groups represented, an assumption that made its way into educational theories about the academic achievement of minorities in U.S. schools. We turn to this topic in greater detail directly.

LANGUAGE VARIATION AND DEFICIT THEORIES: A BRIEF HISTORY

Prescriptivism is the view that one or another language or variety of language has an inherently higher value than others, and that it ought to be imposed on the whole of the speech community to maintain standards of communication; prescriptivists have often characterized minority languages (or dialects) as "inexpressive," "primitive," or lacking complexity in comparison to their own language (Crystal, 1986; Pinker, 1994). Language academies employed with the task of "purifying" the regional linguistic descendants of Latin were set up as early as 1582 in Italy, 1635 in France, and 1713 in Spain. Proposals for a language academy in England were also popular in the seventeenth century, but the suggestion lost support as it became evident that the continental academies could not halt the tide of language change. (See Crystal, 1986, and Pinker, 1994, for further discussion.)

The prohibitions regarding English usage, which are most familiar from U.S. school curricula, typically turned to Latinate analyses advanced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that were used to validate varieties of speech associated with the educated classes in England and the United States (Baugh and Cable, 1978; Nunberg, 1983). In contrast to work in the prescriptivist tradition, the structuralist linguists in the United States had undertaken an empirical project, following Bloomfield's (1933) lead, in which all languages were analyzed using the same taxonomy, leading to the conclusion that all languages, even "primitive languages," were equally complex. This research agenda ultimately had serious consequences that threatened sacred distinctions that kept privilege and social prestige in the hands of the educated classes. As Newmeyer (1986) has put it:

> As long as American structuralists confined their campaign to the languages of remote tribes, they did little to upset their colleagues in departments of modern and classical languages—in which almost all linguists were situated in the interwar years. But such was certainly not the case when they began crusading for the linguistic equality of *all* dialects of English and other literary languages, no matter how "substandard" they were regarded. This egalitarian view came in direct conflict with the long-seated tradition in the humanities that values a language variety in direct proportion to its literary output. (p. 42)

While much of seventeenth-century Europe was preoccupied with the "special languages" of elites, the *Port Royale Grammar* of 1660 advanced a very different view of language and of the human condition. Written in French, the *Port Royale Grammar* formed part of the movement to displace Latin as an outdated mode of academic discourse. However, what marked the *Port Royale Grammar* as deeply distinct from contemporaneous approaches was its devotion to philosophical and universal properties of human language in descriptive terms (Robins, 1967; Chomsky, 1968; Newmeyer, 1988). As in modern approaches in linguistic science, the Port Royale grammarians worked on the Cartesian assumption that normal human intelligence is capable of acquiring knowledge through its own internal resources, making use of the data of experience but moving on to construct a cognitive system in terms of concepts and principles that are developed on independent grounds.

The fear that languages might "decay" in the process of change, or the notion that groups from different cultural backgrounds speak "diminished" or "simplified" languages when compared to Europeans, is incompatible with these assumptions since languages are held to "grow" in virtue of common human resources (today, UG). Indeed, in the early twentieth century, Franz Boas (1911) and others painstakingly showed that non-Western languages were every bit as linguistically sophisticated and rich as their European counterparts represented in the universities.

In contrast, early work in the sociology of language followed in the tradition that viewed culturally distinct languages as related hierarchically, with the languages of the dominant social classes at the top of the "intellectual" scale. According to Dittmar (1976), Schatzmann and Strauss (1955) were the first to formulate what he terms "the Deficit Hypothesis"—the view that the linguistic abilities of particular social groups are deficient or restricted in some way. Schatzmann and Strauss (1955) interviewed members of the lower class and middle class about their impressions and experiences after the occurrence of a disaster and found that the former used a significant amount of emotional language that reputedly gave rise to "elliptical syntax." Accordingly, Schatzmann and Strauss (1955) concluded that the lower classes only conveyed their meaning "implicitly," while the educated classes conveyed their meaning "explicitly."

This and other work led Basil Bernstein (1971) to formulate a distinction between "public language" and "formal language," later termed "restricted" and "elaborated" code. Bernstein studied speakers of a stigmatized dialect in London and characterized their speech as accessing restricted code, but not elaborated code. According to Bernstein (1971), restricted language is characterized by "fragmentation and logical simplicity." By contrast, elaborated code may be used to express "universal meaning," which was ill defined in Bernstein's work. For Bernstein, the restricted code expresses meanings which form a proper subset of the

range of meanings expressed in the elaborated code. The appropriate remediation, then, ". . . would seem to be to preserve *public* language usage but also to create for the individual the possibility of utilizing a *formal* language" (1971, p. 54).

Numerous commentators have portrayed Bernstein as positioned squarely within the camp of the "deficit" theorists, as we do here (Trudgill, 1974; Dittmar, 1976; Boocock, 1980; Bennett & LeCompte, 1990), while others have come to his defense (Halliday, 1995; Danzig, 1995; other papers in Sadovnik, 1995, and Atkinson, Davies, & Delamont, 1995). However, as Dittmar (1976) points out, what makes Bernstein's view a species of the Deficit Hypothesis is his perspective that the speech of the educated classes is in some way *greater* (more expressive, less elliptical, and so on) than working-class speech; that is, the characteristics of "better speech" are taken to be precisely those characteristics that socially less prestigious groups lack.

About the same time, Bereiter and colleagues (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966; Bereiter, Engelman, Osborn, & Reidford, 1966) posited a relationship between African American vernacular English and the poor educational achievement of African American school children. Bereiter reported that the four-year-olds he studied communicated by gestures, "single words," and "a series of badly connected words or phrases." According to Bereiter and colleagues, these children could "without exaggeration . . . make no statements of any kind," and could not ask questions. Of particular significance was Bereiter's expectation that children answer in complete sentences. In response to the question "Where is the squirrel?" Bereiter's subjects tended to answer, "In the tree"—a response Bereiter characterized as illogical and badly formed. As Labov (1970) pointed out, the response "In the tree" is the natural response in this context, and the one that anybody would use under normal circumstances—except, perhaps, in the context of an academic exercise. Labov (1970) concluded his review of Bereiter and others with a harsh rebuke 40 years ago: "That educational psychology should be strongly influenced by a theory so false to the facts of language is unfortunate; but that children should be the victims of this ignorance is intolerable" (p. 260).

Language and its relation to lower educational achievement dominated conversations about African American students amid the American civil rights movement. Language similarly moved to the forefront of conversations about achievement among other linguistic-minority students at about the same time, particularly in the wake of the Mexican American student walkouts in East Los Angeles in 1968 (Crawford, 2004). Thus, educational researchers concerned with academic underachievement among bilingual students began to address important questions about the language these children bring to school and how it may factor into our understanding of student achievement.

EXPLAINING ACHIEVEMENT DIFFERENCES AMONG ENGLISH-LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Educational researchers concerned with explaining academic achievement differences among ELLs considered at least two distinct paths. Paulston (1975), for instance, observed that "in every single study where monolingual children did as well as or better in L2 instruction than did native speakers, those children came from upper- or middle-class homes" (p. 9). Similarly, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1975) noted, "Those individuals who are commonly designated 'bilingual' . . . in this country are also those who, bearing the brunt of many forms of discrimination, tend to be of a low socioeconomic status [SES] such as Mexican Americans, Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, and many immigrant groups" (p. 68).

SES has been shown to be a consistent predictor of academic success, both in the general population and among language minority children (Rosenthal, Milne, Ellman, Ginsburg, & Baker, 1983; Genesee, 1984; Berliner & Biddle, 1995). This is not a surprising finding. The language and literate practices of the middle and upper classes are valued at school in ways that put children of other cultural backgrounds at a decided disadvantage (Heath, 1983), and schools that service the poor and working-class tend to have inadequate resources (Kozol, 1991) and to be much more focused on obedience to authority, punctuality, and other forms of social control (Willis, 1981). By contrast, children from higher SES backgrounds generally have caregivers who are more educated, better prepared to assist with school work, and have the time and bureaucratic know-how to interact with the school (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). For these children, education in school literacy and academic discourse begins at home and remains in place as a continual support throughout the school years.

The wide range of cultural capital linked to SES is arguably a central difference between successful and unsuccessful school experiences for linguistic minorities as well. ELLs have two objectives that they must meet in order to achieve academic success in the United States. Like language majority children, they must master academic content; but unlike language majority children, they must also learn English at school. In programs in which all instruction is in English, language minority children of lower SES tend to fall further and further behind by the end of elementary school (Ramirez et al., 1991), showing the accumulative effects of only partially understanding the language of instruction. By contrast, children of higher SES who either immigrated to the United States with prior educational experience or who have parents who are better prepared to assist with schoolwork at home, or both, do well even in the absence of native-language instruction, because their caregivers and their own past experience provide content area assistance through a language children understand, or what Krashen (1996) has referred to as "de facto bilingual education." Indeed, years of formal schooling in L1 have been identified as an important predictor affecting school achievement for language minority children, whether the schooling takes place in the home country or the United States (Collier, 1992; Turner, Laria, Shapiro, & Perez, 1993; Krashen, 1996; Thomas & Collier, 1997). According to this perspective, language minority children benefit from native-language instruction because it allows them to keep up academically while learning English. We might refer to this perspective as the facilitation theory; it posits that bilingual education and other remedies provide ELLs with intelligible access to school content, transferring to and thereby facilitating growth in school-related knowledge (MacSwan & Rolstad, 2005).

Despite early support for the facilitation theory in language minority education, the field as a whole has been strongly dominated by the idea that the quality of children's native language is the principal culprit underlying minority children's difficulties at school. Cummins, for instance, who has played a major role in promoting what we might call the *primary-language theory*, has argued that while SES may play a role, "the linguistic competence attained by bilingual children" is nonetheless one of the "intervening variables in the causal chain whose influence needs to be specified" (Cummins, 1976, p. 19). Cummins's work, embodied in the Threshold Hypothesis and the BICS/CALP distinction, came to dominate the field of language minority education and to this day remains the dominant perspective internationally. We turn now to a critical review of each in turn.

THE THRESHOLD HYPOTHESIS AND SEMILINGUALISM

Cummins's (1976, 1979) Threshold Hypothesis embeds a specific conception of language which posits a condition known as *semilingualism*. The core idea underlying the Threshold Hypothesis was that the level of linguistic competence attained by a bilingual child in an L1 and L2 may affect cognitive growth in other domains. In his early work, Cummins believed that there were two thresholds, and that attainment beyond the lower threshold "would be sufficient to avoid retardation, but the attainment of a second, higher level of bilingual competence might be necessary to lead to accelerated cognitive growth" (1976, p. 24). For him, children with low levels of proficiency in both their L1 and L2 may suffer "negative cognitive effects." Once mastery in one language has been obtained, the child has moved beyond the first threshold and will suffer neither positive nor negative effects. Finally, "positive cognitive effects" result when a child develops high proficiency in both languages. Cummins represents these ideas graphically as in Figure 1 (Cummins (1979, p. 230).

"Semilingualism" was first introduced in a 1962 radio talk by the Swedish philologist Nils Erik Hansegård (who called it *halvspråkighet*). The term,

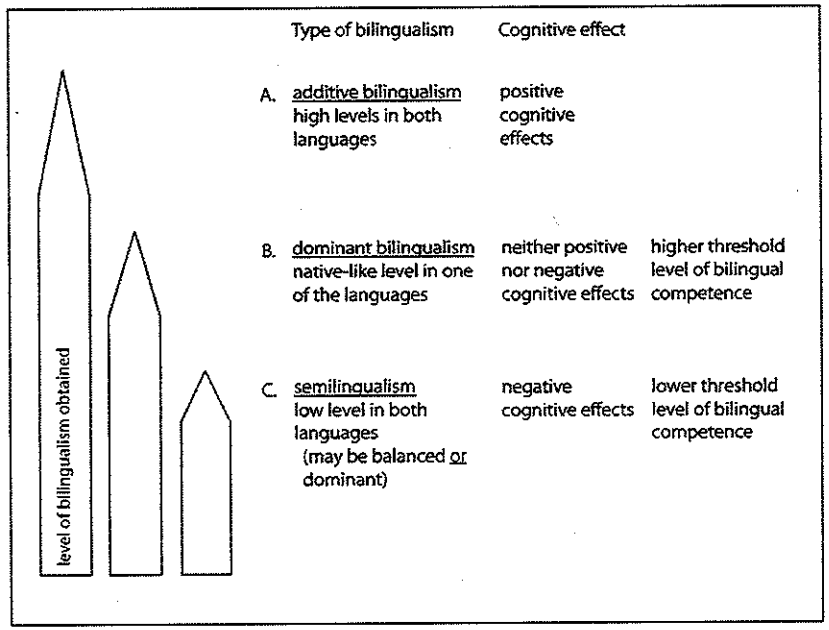

Figure 1: Threshold Hypothesis: Cognitive Effects of Different Types of Bilingualism

Reproduced from Cummins, 1979, p. 230

which denotes a lack of competence in all languages an individual knows, was introduced to scholars in the United States by Skutnabb-Kangas and Toukomaa (1976) and was adopted by Cummins as a component of his Threshold Hypothesis:

> [N]egative cognitive and academic effects are hypothesized to result from low levels of competence in both languages[,] or what Scandinavian researchers (e.g. Hanseg[å]rd, 196[8]; Skutnabb-Kangas & Toukomaa, 1976) have termed "semilingualism" or "double semilingualism" . . . . Essentially, the lower threshold level of bilingual competence proposes that bilingual children's competence in a language may be sufficiently weak as to impair the quality of their interaction with the educational environment through that language. (Cummins, 1979, p. 230)

Cummins's use of the term and concept of semilingualism was strongly criticized. Edelsky and colleagues (1983, p. 2), for example, characterized the notion as "a confused grab-bag of prescriptive and descriptive components," and Martin-Jones and Romaine (1986) called it "a half-baked

theory of communicative competence" in the title of a highly critical article. Perhaps due in part to remarks such as these, Cummins soon began using the phrase "limited bilingualism" instead of "semilingualism," but the definition of the term and the role it played in Cummins's overall account of language minority children's difficulty in school, captured in the Threshold Hypothesis and related notions, remains unchanged (Cummins, 1981).

It is important to note what, in the context of the controversy, Cummins meant by "language proficiency." Language proficiency, Cummins (1981) wrote, can be conceptualized along two continua called context-embedded and context-reduced:

> In general, context-embedded communication derives from interpersonal involvement in a shared reality that reduces the need for explicit linguistic elaboration of the message. Context-reduced communication, on the other hand, derives from the fact that this shared reality cannot be assumed[,] and thus linguistic messages must be elaborated precisely and explicitly so that the risk of miscommunication is minimized. (p. 11)

The continua Cummins posited were strongly reminiscent of Bernstein's restricted and elaborated codes discussed a decade earlier.

The value of a continua-based system, in Cummins's view, was that it reflected a "developmental perspective"—a view of language as growing and developing over time. Moving beyond the acquisition of the "species minimum" (a term borrowed from Jerome Bruner to denote the acquisition of the rules of word order, word formation, pronunciation, and meaning), Cummins believed "other aspects of language proficiency continue to develop throughout the school years and beyond," principally including "literacy-related language skills such as reading comprehension, writing ability, and vocabulary/concept knowledge" (1981, p. 8).

Cummins's objective was to find a unified view of language proficiency befitting both the goals of second-language instruction in school and children's home language, one that differentiated the two in terms of developmental levels of language growth. However, the apparent implications for children's home-language proficiency were troubling: Cummins positioned the language of school as developmentally superior to the language of other contexts, recalling traditional claims by linguistic prescriptivists, the view that some language varieties are inherently superior to others (as discussed above), and ties to traditional deficit psychology. Baetens Beardsmore (1986), for instance, suggested that "the notion of semilingualism has been influenced by the deficit hypothesis put forward by Bernstein (1971) in which the social-class-determined notions of restricted and elaborated code account for different linguistic behaviour" (p. 12).

Efforts have been made to empirically evaluate the notion of semilingualism, and these have consistently found no basis for the notion.

Paulston (1983), for example, who conducted a review of empirical research on the topic, concluded her report this way: "Semilingualism does not exist, or put in a way which is non-refutable, has never been empirically demonstrated" (p. 54). Similarly, MacSwan (2000) reviewed four sources of reputed evidence for semilingualism—studies of language variation, linguistic structure, school performances, and language loss—and could find no empirical grounds for the idea.

Studies of commercially available Spanish-language tests, frequently used in school and that have been used to assess Spanish-language-background children as "non-" or limited speakers of their native language, have also been studied and found to lack validity. For instance, MacSwan and Rolstad (2006) found that while the Language Assessment Scales-Oral (LAS-O) Español and the Idea Proficiency Test I-Oral (IPT) Spanish identify 74 percent and 90 percent (respectively) of Spanish-speaking ELLs as limited speakers of their first language, a natural language measure found only 2 percent of participants to have unexpectedly high morphological error rates ($n = 145$). Children with higher error rate were conjectured to be primary speakers of English with limited exposure to their heritage language. See also MacSwan, Rolstad, and Glass (2002) and MacSwan and Mahoney (2008).

Skutnabb-Kangas (1981) has suggested that the term no longer be used. "In the scientific debate," she wrote, "the word has outlived its usefulness" (p. 248). Cummins (1994, pp. 3813–3814) remarked, "There appears to be little justification for continued use of the term 'semilingualism' in that it has no theoretical value and confuses rather than clarifies the issue." He then added,

> However, those who claim that "semilingualism does not exist," appear to be endorsing the untenable positions that (a) variation in educationally-relevant aspects of language does not exist, and that (b) there are no bilinguals whose formal language skills are developed only to a relatively limited level in both L1 and L2. (p. 3814)

However, while Cummins insisted that literacy and school-related language were aspects of language proficiency, he also conceded that the "species minimum"—involving phonological, syntactic, and semantic knowledge of language—are acquired by "most native speakers . . . . by age six" (p. 8). The core problem, as suggested by critics (Edelsky, Hudelson, Flores, Barkin, Altweger, & Jilbert, 1983; Martin-Jones & Romaine, 1986; Baetens Beardsmore, 1986; Wiley, 1996; MacSwan, 2000; Petrovic & Olmstead, 2001; MacSwan & Rolstad, 2003, 2006), has been the embedded presumption that school-based practices of language use have special properties that distinguish the language of school (that is, of the educated classes) from language used in other contexts for other purposes (say, the language of farming or skilled craftsmanship). For Cummins, these differences amount to distinctions of

ability, not distinctions of *context and use*. In other words, language varieties of distinct communities are characterized as hierarchically and developmentally related, making the semilingualism thesis indistinguishable from classical prescriptivism and other deficit-oriented conceptions of language proficiency. As Martin-Jones and Romaine (1986) remarked,

> The type of literacy-related skills described by Cummins are, in fact, quite culture-specific: that is, they are specific to the cultural setting of the school. In this setting, only a narrow range of prescribed uses and functions of literacy is seen as legitimate. (p. 30)

THE BICS/CALP DISTINCTION

While we join Cummins in supporting bilingual education programs (see especially Rolstad, Mahoney & Glass, 2005), we believe there are undesirable conceptual consequences of the BICS/CALP distinction as it is currently formulated. Specifically, we argue that the distinction confounds language ability and academic achievement and does not take into account the crucial differences between L1 and L2 development outlined earlier; as a result, a consequence of the BICS/CALP distinction is the ascription of special linguistic status to the language of the educated classes, a view we find indistinguishable from classical prescriptivism and reminiscent of semilingualism.

We argue that Cummins's view entails that schooling has the effect of improving our language, and that the language of the educated classes is, in certain respects, intrinsically richer than—or an improved version of—the language of the unschooled or working class, a view we reject. Furthermore, we argue that because the BICS/CALP distinction is applied in the context of native-language development—not just second-language—it is conceptually indistinguishable from prescriptivism and related deficit views of working-class language.

Cummins identifies "schooling and literacy" as the agency by which this more advanced stage of development, called CALP, or "academic language," is reached:

> 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, 2000a, p. 63)

Similarly:

> In short, the essential aspect of academic language proficiency is the ability to make complex meanings explicit in either oral or written modalities by means of language itself rather than by means of contextual or paralinguistic cues such as gestures and intonations (Cummins, 2000a, p. 59).

Cummins also sees BICS and CALP as different with regard to how much "knowledge of language" is involved in each:

> Considerably less knowledge of language itself is usually required to function appropriately in interpersonal communicative situations than is required in academic situations. . . . In comparison to interpersonal conversation, the language of text usually involves much more low frequency vocabulary, complex grammatical structures, and greater demands on memory, analysis, and other cognitive processes. (Cummins, 2000b, pp. 35–36)

Let us consider for a moment a few of the specific properties Cummins associates with academic language—characteristics of the linguistic system which he believes distinguish BICS from CALP, or conversational language from academic language, in the L1 context. CALP is said to involve the ability to make meanings explicit by means of language itself rather than by means of gestures and intonations. However, there is no reason to believe, and no evidence to support, the presumption that academics are better at explaining their craft than the less-schooled are at explaining theirs, or that accompanying gestures are less useful to academics than to others. Imagine a typical professor of English, for instance, trying to talk in detail about farming, boatbuilding, or auto repair. Academics would typically lack knowledge of relevant vocabulary in these contexts—words which would be "low frequency" for them but not for many others. Moreover, evidence must be presented to demonstrate that academic language involves "complex grammatical structures" in ways that nonacademic language does not, lest it appear to be little more than a traditional assertion by academics of the superior quality of their own language variety. 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 nonacademic language, and then we would expect empirical evidence showing that, for some distinctive trait *t* of academic language that meets the definition of linguistic complexity, there is no trait *t* of nonacademic language that is as linguistically complex as *t*. Historically, a number of attempts have been made to distinguish languages or language varieties in such terms, but none have succeeded (see Crystal, 1986; Milroy & Milroy, 1999, for discussion).

Although Cummins has frequently stressed that he did not intend to rank CALP above BICS (Cummins, 1979, 2000a, 2000b), it is essentially *necessary* in his framework for BICS to precede CALP developmentally in order for his basic argument to succeed. Cummins's proposal was that while BICS develops fairly rapidly in immigrant children, producing "surface fluency" early on, several more years are usually required before children develop sufficient levels of CALP to warrant placement in an all-English classroom. Cummins argued that this developmental dimension was essential to a theory of language proficiency, advocating that such a theory "must incorporate a developmental perspective so that those aspects of communicative proficiency mastered early by native speakers and L2 learners can be distinguished from those varying across individuals as development progresses . . ." (1981, p. 11).

In response to criticisms, Cummins (2000b) has written that "the greater relevance of academic language proficiency for success in school, as compared to conversational proficiency, does not mean that it is intrinsically superior in any way" (p. 75). If "academic language proficiency" were indeed understood in terms of *contextual relevance* or *situational/cultural appropriateness,* the notion would not be problematic. That would indeed be a description of language difference, relative to distinct sets of purposes of contexts, rather than the attribution of special linguistic and cognitive properties to one variety over another, as one sees in Cummins's discussions of BICS and CALP. Thus, the advantage that middle-class children have in school relates not to some presumed superior quality of the oral language of middle-class children, but to the special alignment of their particular home experiences and speech registers with those encountered at school. As Wiley (1996) has put it,

> [L]anguage proficiency is important in understanding academic success not because it is associated with universal cognitive thresholds, or common underlying language proficiencies, but because it is associated with the norms, practices, and expectations of those whose language, cultural, and class practices are embodied in the schools. Failing to appreciate this, we are left with the illusion that school practices involve universal, higher order cognitive functions and that all other uses of language are merely basic. (pp. 172–173)

Our disagreement with Cummins is over the specific way in which CALP is defined: Rather than identifying cultural and linguistic *differences* that privilege some children, Cummins describes CALP as having specific context-independent properties from which advantages related to academic achievement are derived, seeing schooling as the agency by which basic conversational skills are transformed into the linguistically complex language of the educated classes. More specifically, Cummins distinguishes CALP from BICS by asserting that the former is characterized by an expanded range of vocabulary and complex grammatical structures (Cummins, 2000a, p. 63; Cummins, 2000b, p. 35–36), by an ability to make complex meanings

explicit (Cummins, 2000a, p. 59), and by greater demand on memory, analysis, and other cognitive processes (Cummins, 2000b, p. 35–36). Considerable research has shown that there simply is no human language or language variety that does not have complex grammatical structures or mechanisms to create new words as new situations arise or to make complex meanings explicit by means of language itself, as discussed earlier. The common belief that academic language has specially enriched properties results from a long tradition of prescriptivist dogma, now propagated primarily in the academy—a tradition that has had the principal effect of justifying social inequalities in terms of "objectively assessed" deficiencies located in language, culture, and behavior.

In the context of children's native language, it is important to think critically about how we characterize linguistic changes that may take place as a result of schooling. Proficiency is presumed to be quantifiable, and *levels* of language proficiency are presumed to be ordered with respect to one another. If we claim that the usual effects of schooling on native language constitute *improvements* or *gains* in native-language proficiency in ways that other typical sustained experiences do not, then we have developed a conception of language proficiency that is not easily distinguished from classical prescriptivism. In other words, if we say that schooling has a special effect on language proficiency that makes it better (higher, expanded, improved) than the likely effects of out-of-school experiences, then we imply that the language proficiency of the unschooled or working class is inferior (lower, basic) to that of the educated classes.

Cummins explicitly endorses the view that schooling improves our language. For example, he asserts that instruction in school has the effect of extending "students' basic knowledge of syntax, semantics, and phonology . . . into new functional registers or genres of language" (2000b, p. 75) and vigorously challenges the view, adopted here and elsewhere (MacSwan, 2000), that schooling plays little role in developing language proficiency in the context of native-language ability (2000b, pp. 106–108). However, while the language used at school may differ in some respects from that used in other contexts, one cannot conclude that school has the effect of improving children's language, as Cummins claims. Schooling may change our language, but what results is different, not more complex. In the same way, taking up a new line of work, moving to a new region of the country, or undergoing an apprenticeship to work as a craftsman may very well make one's language different—but not more complex. Therefore, in the absence of relevant empirical evidence that shows academic language to be a "complex" or "expanded" version of nonacademic language, we strongly reject the view that school improves our language, or that the language of the educated classes is in any sense richer or more complex than the language of the unschooled.

Cummins nowhere intended these consequences and has vigorously defended the BICS/CALP distinction against claims that it represents a deficit theory (Cummins & Swain, 1983; Cummins, 2000b). We believe that it does, but we wish to suggest here that the implications of deficiency inherent in the distinction may be largely avoided by carefully distinguishing between language ability and academic achievement, and between L1 and L2 ability in school-aged children.

CONCLUSIONS

We have argued that languages differ, at the level of both communities and individuals, but that they also possess well-studied universal properties that might be said to constitute a common linguistic core (e.g., Comrie, 1981; Chomsky, 1995). Early twentieth-century linguists refuted the prescriptivist idea that some communities are linguistically impoverished by showing that this claim is put forth in the absence of evidence, and that comparable richness and complexity in such languages may be readily exhibited. Semilingualism is a claim about individuals who reputedly do not know the language of their community, rather than a claim about a socially definable community of speakers. As such, it has the same political force as prescriptivism and may be dismissed on similar grounds: it is put forth in the absence of relevant evidence, and the richness and complexity of the language of "semilinguals" may be readily shown.

Our language continues to change in various ways as we encounter new experiences, and both schooling and school-based literacy are certainly among the common life experiences in literate societies that can influence the structure and vocabulary of our language throughout our lives. But schooling is not unique in this regard; any sustained experience can lead to new specialized vocabulary, new speech styles, and even structural changes. A skilled shipwright will know numerous vocabulary items completely foreign to non-specialists, will have expressions and a way of talking that academics find difficult to understand, and will use his language along with other cognitive resources to accomplish the goals and tasks of the trade. But as academics we would not attribute our own lack of success in boatbuilding to having an intrinsically less complex grammar and impoverished vocabulary with respect to the craft. Rather, we realize that the language difference and skill difference both relate to our limited exposure and apprenticeship in boatbuilding.

We see bilingual education in particular as beneficial to ELLs not because it lifts them to a new threshold or transforms BICS to CALP, but because it provides them with intelligible access to school content, transferring to and facilitating growth in school-related knowledge (MacSwan & Rolstad, 2005). The *primary language theory*, which seeks to explain achievement differences in terms of qualitative differences in children's native language, seems to us to be a theoretical dead end, and one closely associated with the history of deficit psychology applied to educational settings.

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