

## Chapter 3

# Language Gap: Cultural Assumptions and Ideologies

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### ABSTRACT

*The language gap is one of the most widely cited explanations for existing socioeconomic disparities in educational performance. Since Hart and Risley's 1995 publication on the socioeconomic differences in language input among children living in the United States, the language gap has permeated research, education, policy, and public awareness both in the United States and abroad. Since then, critiques have emerged that question the validity of the language gap as a concept and as means to close educational disparities. In this chapter, the authors build upon existing critiques by highlighting the cultural assumptions and ideologies that underpin the language gap and challenging these assumptions by drawing upon cross-cultural research on human development. Future directions are discussed on ways to move research forward using methodology that attends to cultural variability, builds on families' funds of knowledge, and recognizes societal contexts and structures that address systemic inequities.*

### INTRODUCTION

The language gap is one of the most widely cited explanations for socioeconomic disparities in children's academic performance (Golinkoff, Hoff, Rowe, Tamis-LeMonda & Hirsh-Pasek, 2018; Hoff, 2013; Suskind, 2015). Research on the language gap posits that the language environment of children living in low socioeconomic contexts is characterized by a small quantity and limited diversity of vocabulary (Weisleder & Fernald, 2013; Hart & Risley, 1995), which subsequently places children at a disadvantage in educational settings. Since the publication of Hart and Risley's study on disparities in language environments of U.S. children (1995), the language gap has gained international appeal, attracted copious media attention, and spurred large investments in initiatives seeking to close educational disparities by

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encouraging parents to talk to their children (e.g., Thirty Million Words; Talk to Your Baby). Within the language gap discourse, talking to infants is widely regarded as the “magic bullet” for eliminating educational inequities and improving opportunities for upward mobility (Avineri et al., 2015).

Hart and Risley’s (1995) study of 42 families has since been criticized for its approach to examining language in the home and its implications for educational outcomes (Avineri et al., 2015; Blum, 2017; García, & Otheguy, 2017; Johnson, Avineri, & Johnson, 2017). One key critique points to the study’s methodology: the small number of families and the focus on only mothers’ speech yields an incomplete representation of language input in the home of many families, as evidenced by a recent study using similar methods and sample (Sperry, Sperry, & Miller, 2018). Other prominent rebuttals suggest that the language gap portrays the linguistic practices of impoverished families within a deficit perspective, and that it is rooted in the culture of poverty argument which blames impoverished parents for their economic circumstances (Dudley-Marling, 2007; Miller & Sperry, 2012). Together, these critiques offer a deeply contextual understanding of the roots, framing, and consequence of the language gap. The discourse on the language gap emerges from and pertains to *a specific context*—the economic, political, and cultural context of the United States. The specificity of the American context problematizes generalizability of the language gap to other countries, since adults use language to socialize children to become competent and contributing members *of their own communities*, and neither developmental milestones nor end goals of development are identical across cultures. Thus, the international application of the language gap in addressing educational disparities is culturally and contextually insensitive.

In this chapter, the authors expand on existing scholarship that highlights how cultural research on child development challenges the theoretical and methodological foundations of the language gap. Specifically, they demonstrate that the language gap is rooted in: 1) cultural assumptions that implicitly privilege certain forms of communication over others, thereby hindering societal efforts to support cultural and linguistic diversity in the U.S. and internationally; and 2) racial, political, and ideological discourses in the United States that are based on individual-centered social policy, many aspects of which do not generalize to international contexts. In the discussion, the authors suggest considerations for moving forward given these assumptions and ideologies, as well as avenues of study that examine the complex role of culture and broader societal systems in language development.

## CULTURAL ASSUMPTIONS OF THE LANGUAGE GAP

Lauren, a curious toddler, sits next to her mother on a carpeted floor in the family living room. In front of the dyad is a book filled with colorful pictures of animals, accompanied by nouns (e.g. dog) and speech bubbles emanating from animals filled with onomatopoeia sounds (“woof!”). Lauren enthusiastically points to a cat on the page. The mother immediately looks to where Lauren is pointing and says “Yes! That’s a cat. What sound does a cat make?” Lauren meows in response. “Good job!” says her mother and directs her to turn the page. “What’s that?” the mother asks, to which Lauren responds, “A cow!” The question-answer game continues until the last page of the book.

Behind this interaction lay numerous cultural norms about language exchanges. The young child is regarded as a conversational partner who is encouraged by the parent to describe and reflect on the shared object. The parent is a talkative adult who uses descriptive language, questions, and affirmations to engage the child in back-and-forth conversational exchanges. Gestures and other forms of nonverbal communication are regarded as accompaniments to speech, the privileged modality for expressing

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