

# Academic English as standard language ideology: A renewed research agenda for asset-based language education

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## Abstract

The author situates language education policy and scholarship on Academic English within the broader historical context of standard language ideology, the view that the language variety of socio-economic elites is intrinsically more complex than other varieties. It is argued that the current predominant focus on the nature of school language gives the impression that school language alone can express complex ideas or use complex grammar, leaving little conceptual space for leveraging children's home language varieties. The author calls for a return to historical commitments to an asset-based approach to school and home language differences in mainstream language education research.

## Keywords

academic language, African American English, basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS), cognitive-academic language proficiency (CALP), common core state standards, standard language ideology

## I Introduction

In the first special issue on Language Teacher Education published by the *TESOL Quarterly*, Freeman and Johnson (1998) outlined a framework for a knowledge base of language teacher education, concerned that the impact of an emerging understanding of language teacher education as socially situated had not been adequately felt. They argued that language teacher education research and programs should move beyond a focus on the nuts and bolts of the content of teaching methods and materials to one which appreciates the personal, social, and political context of teachers and teaching.

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We now know that teachers' beliefs about teachers and teaching are instrumental in shaping how they interpret what goes on in their classrooms. And we admit that teachers' beliefs and past experiences as learners tend to create ways of thinking about teaching that often conflict with the images of teaching that we advocate in our teacher education programs. (Freeman & Johnson, 1998, p. 401)

Among the beliefs and past experiences which shape teachers' views of good teaching are those which define their language ideologies, or 'the ideas with which participants and observers frame their understanding of linguistic varieties and map those understandings onto people, events, and activities that are significant to them' (Irvine & Gal, 2000, p. 35). More specifically, as with any of us, teachers' beliefs and past experiences may lead them to adopt a standard language ideology, the view that the language variety of socio-economic elites is intrinsically more complex than other varieties (Lippi-Green, 2012; Milroy, 2001). In the US, standard language ideology takes the form of an 'ideology of standard English' (Wiley & Lukes, 1996) which positions the language of the educated classes, often called Academic English, as a more advanced and more complex version of varieties of English used in non-school settings. Standard language ideology is an inherent part of mainstream political dogma, perpetuated through powerful social, political, and economic forces in US society (Lippi-Green, 2012; Wiley & Lukes, 1996; Wiley & Rolstad, 2014).

These observations raise questions about the relationship between students' home language and schooling, and how a more socially situated perspective of the sort Johnson and Freeman (1998) envisioned might be realized. These different points of view relate to Ruiz' (1984) classic distinction between orientations toward home language as a problem, on the one hand, or a resource, on the other. More recently, the resource perspective has been incorporated into a movement for asset-based pedagogies, which seeks to draw out and emphasize community- and home-based knowledge, culture, and language as part of the school curriculum, permitting these to form a bridge to school-based teaching and learning for non-dominant groups just as they do for dominant groups. López (2017) recently examined how teachers' beliefs about asset-based pedagogy and their related behaviors were associated with Latino students' ethnic and reading achievement identity, revealing that teachers' understanding of the sociohistorical influences on traditionally marginalized students' trajectories moderated their expectancy, resulting in higher school achievement (see also López, 2018). Rather than seeing children's home language as a deficit, asset-based pedagogies see it as a critical resource to be affirmed, valued, and fully utilized as part of a child's school-based learning experience.

I argue that in the twenty years since Johnson and Freeman's (1998) important reflection, the field of language teaching and teacher education has moved more strongly toward a deficit perspective on children's home language, especially in the context of race- and socioeconomically-related language differences, and farther away from an asset-based perspective. While there are no doubt many mechanisms that have supported this trend, an important influence on teachers' beliefs about children's home language has been an over-emphasis in teaching and teacher education curricula on the nature of school language, generally called Standard English or Academic English, and an inadequate focus on the nature of children's home language as a linguistic asset. While there

remain strong examples of contemporary asset-based language education research – for recent collections and reviews, see Alim, Rickford and Ball (2016), Paris and Alim (2017), and Martinez, Morales and Aldana (2017) – this tradition has largely been marginalized. I argue for a return to a more asset-based approach to school and home language differences in mainstream language education research, a revitalization of the progressive roots of sociolinguistic research in education, and a corresponding decreased focus on the special characteristics of the language of social elites.

## II Linguistic diversity and schooling

According to Dittmar (1976), Schatzmann and Strauss (1955) were the first to formulate what he termed the linguistic deficit hypothesis, the view that the language 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 lots of emotional language which 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’. In a similar vein, 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’, 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). As Dittmar (1976) points out, Bernstein’s view represents a deficit perspective because it positions the speech of the educated classes as 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 which socially less prestigious groups lack.

About the same time, Bereiter and colleagues (Bereiter & Engelman, 1966; Bereiter, Engelman, Osborn & Reidford, 1966) posited a relationship between African-American 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 forty 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. 187).

Labov's research, focused specifically on speakers of African American English (AAE), had a powerful influence on the development of an asset-based perspective on the education of AAE speakers. In July, 1979, a federal suit filed in the Eastern District Court in the state of Michigan provided a significant legal precedent for the determination of school districts' legal and educational responsibilities with regard to the particular issue of AAE in public schools. The final disposition of *Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children et al. v. Ann Arbor School District Board* is commonly known as the Ann Arbor Decision. Judge Charles W. Joiner found in favor of plaintiff's claim that the Ann Arbor School District had violated federal statutory law because it failed to take into account the home language, AAE, of the children enrolled in the district. The case was rooted in the Equal Educational Opportunities Act (EEOA) of 1974, which had essentially codified *Lau v. Nichols* (1974), a case in which the Supreme Court unanimously found that a 'disparate impact' occurred when a San Francisco school district failed to provide for the language barriers facing school-age second language learners, a violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In court, William Labov and J. L. Dillard, among others, organized by Geneva Smitherman, discussed the phonological and syntactic characteristics of Black English, in addition to educational barriers confronted by African American children, 'the most damaging of which is the tendency of teachers to make such speakers ashamed of their native dialect by teaching standard English without recognizing that the child uses a dialect acceptable to his linguistic community,' as reported by Bountress (1982, pp. 79–80).

While public perceptions of AAE appear to have changed little since the Ann Arbor Decision, considerable progress has been made toward establishing asset-based approaches to the education of AAE speakers in language teaching and language teacher education (Smitherman, 2004). However, challenges persist. As Reaser, Adger, Wolfram and Christian (2017) note:

For years, debate on teaching Standard English has ebbed and flowed in education and linguistic forums, and in the popular press. Just as interest in dialect issues seems to be waning, debate flares up again when a school district introduces an instructional program or policy related to dialects, as happened in 1996 and 1997 when Oakland (CA) Unified School District drew attention to its program through a school board action. More recently, the debate has emerged again in response to the Common Core State Standards ([2010]). These standards include both 'Speaking and Listening' and 'Language' strands, which some interpret as requiring instruction in standard oral language. (p. 151-152)

While language education scholars have come to accept AAE as an instance of language variation, and affirm the well-established finding that AAE is a richly structured variety of 'Standard English', the view that other socioeconomically-marked varieties of English reflect inherent deficiencies relative to the language of schooling remains a widely accepted belief. While AAE scholars were emphasizing the inherent value of the language of African American communities, scholars concerned with the education of bilingual students reinforced standard language ideology by embracing hierarchical

dichotomies of language proficiency, such as Cummins' classic distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive-Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Though often understood as related to second language development, Cummins' BICS/CALP distinction actually fundamentally pertained to monolingual speakers. 'In monolingual contexts', Cummins wrote, 'the 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' (Cummins, 2000a, p. 63). Cummins defined 'the essential aspect of academic language proficiency' as '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).

Despite a history of focused critique of the BICS/CALP distinction in bilingual education (e.g. Aukerman, 2007; Edelsky, 2006; Edelsky et al., 1983; MacSwan, 2000; MacSwan & Rolstad, 2003, 2006, 2010; MacSwan et al., 2017; Wiley, 2005), the idea nonetheless formed the basis of the academic language movement which underlies such policy documents as the Common Core State Standards (2010) (Rolstad, MacSwan & Guzman, 2015). Under this influence, language education and language teacher education has witnessed a dramatic surge in scholarship devoted to the detailed description of the language of school (for review, see DiCerbo, Anstrom, Baker & Rivera, 2014; Snow & Uccelli, 2009). While research on Academic English (AE) sometimes includes a note affirming linguistic equality, its focus on the discourse and structural characteristics of AE nonetheless conveys the impression, wittingly or not, that there are special 'cognitively demanding' features of AE that are absent from out-of-school varieties, and in so doing it reinforces and perpetuates standard language ideology in teacher education.

For instance, Snow and Uccelli (2009) provide an extensive summary of research on AE, and outline the specific features that set AE apart from non-school English, or what they call 'colloquial' language. Among these contrasts, distilled from the extensive AE literature, colloquial English is reported to be characterized by 'redundancy' and 'wordiness' while AE is characterized by 'conciseness'. These contrasts do not emerge from empirical research on colloquial language, but on speculation and personal reflection on the part of AE researchers, generally based on the difference between published academic texts, which benefit from multiple reviews and proofing by a plurality of skilled editors, and the imagined informal spoken language used by non-academics in out-of-school contexts. Of course, it is not difficult to imagine a spoken academic lecture that is highly repetitive, redundant, and wordy, or a non-academic text, such as a crowd-sourced gaming manual or hip hop lyric, that is perfectly concise.

Another dimension of contrast observed in Snow and Uccelli's (2009) list of defining features of AE is grammatical complexity. While colloquial language, or non-school language, uses simple grammar (e.g. 'You heat water and it evaporates faster'), academic language is reported to involve 'complex' grammar (e.g. 'If the water gets hotter, it evaporates faster'). Elaborating, they argue:

It is simply more difficult to explain the process by which cells replicate, or the theory of evolution, or the various factors contributing to global warming than it is to negotiate the

purchase of onions or respond to an addition problem; therefore, the language required must be more complicated. (p. 123)

However, non-academics talk about much more than purchasing onions, and academics have been known to discuss less lofty topics than cell replication. While these academic topics, developed over generations of rigorous scientific research, represent complex conceptual understandings, that does not imply that the language used to talk about them is linguistically more complex. It is not linguistically more complex to say 'I conducted an experiment' than to say 'I bought an onion.' When Zack de la Rocha refrains 'Who controls the past now controls the future' in 'Testify', a heavy metal hip hop song, the structure is not less complex than, say, 'Each species living today arose from pre-existing species,' as found in an advanced biology text designed for high school students (Kent, 2000, p. 436).

These contrasts do not relate to linguistic differences in the usual developmental sense, but to the language that happens to accrue to different interests and participation, as 'an accidental product of varied experience' (Chomsky, 1995, p. 6). Just as youth who do not do well in school may be at a loss to talk about the mechanisms of global warming, so, too, academics may be at a loss to write hip hop lyrics, or intelligently discuss the complex world of Pokémon, whose activity is associated with language that is every bit as complex as AE (Gee, 2004). This point of view differs from many AE researchers, who, like Snow and Uccelli's (2009), believe explicitly or implicitly that 'academic language is intrinsically more difficult than other language registers' (p. 114).

### III A research agenda for asset-based language education

Early sociolinguistic research, fueled by the pioneering work of William Labov, inspired generations of researchers to draw out the wealth of linguistic knowledge and talent of non-dominant groups. Labov (1965, 1970), Fasold (1972), Wolfram (1969), and others showed through painstaking analysis that stigmatized language varieties spoken by African-Americans were just as rich and complex as the language of the educated classes, and researchers focused on the language of bilingual communities similarly undertook to show that language mixing, or codeswitching, reflected rule-governed and systematic linguistic knowledge, like other ways of speaking (Poplack, 1981; Timm, 1975). Others have studied language differences across geography, social class, age, sex, sexual orientation, and other dimensions (see Chambers & Schilling, 2013). Heath's (1983) classic work focused not on what poor children lack with respect to the language of schooling, but on what they already have, and how their language practices may differ in interesting ways. The movement focused on the study of non-dominant groups' linguistic talents further gave rise to New Literacy Studies (e.g. Cazden, 1988; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Gee, 1987, 1992; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984), which understood literacy in its social, cultural, and historical contexts, not simply as a set of psychological processes.

This research was enriching to education and to teacher education because it informed teachers about the linguistic talents indigenous to the communities they served, and directly challenged standard language ideology. It was revolutionary in that it focused not on what these children did not know, but on what they did know. The insights permitted teachers to

relate content to the lived experiences of children, to draw directly upon their home and community as rich sources of knowledge, or ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll et al., 2013).

Research focused narrowly on ‘the language demands’ of school runs the risk of contributing to standard language ideology, by giving the impression, or directly asserting, that the language of school is intrinsically more complex than language used in other contexts: that school language alone can be used for argumentation, concision, or with complex grammar. Rather, language research aiming to improve conditions for children who do not do well in school should seek to discover how children use language in non-school contexts and for non-school tasks, with the aim of informing strategies for connecting school experiences with home experiences.

Such an approach is inclusive, and focuses on children’s home language and interests as assets rather than deficits, and as such forms a critical part of asset-based pedagogies. It reaffirms our commitment to move language education beyond an atheoretical product-process orientation and toward one that is socially situated, and which seeks to include rather than exclude diverse language backgrounds in classroom settings, as Freeman and Johnson (1998) recommended twenty years ago.

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