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More than Just a Hammer: Building Linguistic Toolkits

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The movement in national educational policy towards teaching a singular, non-accented American Standard English reached a crescendo with the Arizona Board of Education's attempt to prevent any teacher with a "heavy accent" or "ungrammatical" speech from teaching English. We suggest that part of what underlies the fears that were articulated in Arizona are ideologies about language learning (as well as about language itself). We challenge those ideologies as we present a model of language development and curriculum that recognizes and affirms the multiple tools or "repertoires of linguistic practice" that all young people possess. Our research suggests that when students are supported in examining their various language practices, the insights they gain will help them work towards mastery over all of their linguistic "tools," including those tools that are most valued by dominant society.

Metaphors and Thinking

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) argue that metaphors drive our thinking, because they structure our perceptions and understanding of the world. Lakoff, Dean and Hazen (2004) more recently called for new metaphors in order to drive thinking in new directions. To break out of old paradigms, it is not enough to say, "Don't think that way." They suggest that Democrats have structured their political arguments, in contrast to Republicans, in ways that amount to saying, "Don't think of an elephant." But what happens when we say, "Don't think of an elephant?" What image lumbers through our minds?

Metaphors That Drive Our Thinking about Language

Turning to the domain of language, in this short manuscript we explore the metaphors that have been used in relation to language and language learning. We suggest the need for new metaphors that can drive our thinking in new ways, and possibly calm some of the fears that fan the flames of xenophobia, as were articulated in Arizona's attempts to ban teachers with "heavy accents" from the classroom. We then illustrate how we are working with young people to cultivate new ways of thinking about language, and to use that thinking to examine their own language practices as well as to build their linguistic toolkits.

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The "Container" Metaphor

Language learning is typically talked about using a "container" metaphor, where language learning is treated as a matter of filling up a tank. Educators ask about "how much" language people "have." We measure language in terms of how many sentences or words people produce. Researchers like Hart and Risley (1975) did this with working class children and claimed that their language containers were lacking. (We leave aside here the problems of just how they measured output and the conditions under which it was measured.)

In bilingual education, the metaphor model takes on an expanded form. Here, the field treats young bilinguals as having two language containers in their brains. Great care is taken to keep the two languages separate – to avoid mixing or "contamination" of the contents. In dual language education, this is institutionalized by separating languages either by speaker, subject matter, day and/or hour. In actuality, studies of dual language classrooms provide evidence of more language mixing than the model assumes (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, Alvarez, & Chiu, 1999), but the assumption is that language separation is necessary or important in order to ensure that each container gets filled, and filled with "pure" language forms.

The "Input-Output" Model

Another metaphor that drives thinking about language learning in schools is, we would suggest, an input-output model. The container metaphor focuses on the input side of this equation, with little attention to what students produce after their tanks have been filled. Krashen's (2003) classic "comprehensible input" hypothesis – that comprehensible input is all that is needed in order to acquire language, with no need to practice or produce language in interaction with others – is built on a "container" metaphor for language.

An input-output model, on the other hand, is equally concerned with the language that students produce. But this model tends to assume that what goes in is what comes out – perhaps in a weakened form, but effectively the same. This assumption seems to underlie some of the panic about teachers with accents in Arizona. The fear is that non-standard accents will affect the quality of the input that students receive, and that students will mimic what they hear. "Contaminated" language will go into those language tanks, and that is what will come out when students speak.

The Fear of Certain Accents

Arguably, of course, the fear is not really that any kind of accented English will be taken up by students. Rather, the fear surrounds the speech of teachers who have particular kinds of what Lippi-Green (1997) calls second language (L2) accents. Lippi-Green argues "when a native speaker of a language other than English

acquires English, accent is used to refer to the breakthrough of native language phonology into the target language" (p. 43). Thus the fear is not about any accent, but about non-native accents. And whose non-native accents are most feared? Those of non-dominant social groups. Mexican-Spanish or Chinese-accented English, which index racialized groups who historically have never been valued in the U.S. (Hill, 1998), are the main targets. Would the Arizonians who proposed this legislation fear the take-up of French- or British-inflected English?

We recognize that the real problem in Arizona is not accented English in itself, but fears of a take-over by the people who are represented by non-dominant and non-native forms of English. Nevertheless we still think there is something to understand about the metaphors of language learning that fuel some of these fears. And we believe there is power in offering alternative models, and of infusing these into public consciousness and educational practice, in order to focus attention away from fears of language "contamination." We will spend the remainder of this short essay examining this metaphor and illustrating it with our research with eighth grade students in an urban public school.

Language as a Toolkit

Sociocultural researchers of language and literacy practices think about teaching and learning language quite differently than either the input-output or the container model would suggest, and implicitly or explicitly operate with different metaphors for language. Grounded in a Vygotskian notion of language as the "tool of tools," socioculturalists focus on what language can be used to do, with the learning happening through apprenticeship, the way a carpenter becomes a master of his tools. If we think about language this way, and conceive of language not just as a singular tool, but as a set of tools in a toolkit, we might ask what schools are doing today to help students master the use of diverse linguistic tools, and to use those tools to build things of great beauty and utility for the world.

Unfortunately, it seems that schools in this country – and in Arizona to the extreme – are rather narrowly focused on teaching kids to wield only a single linguistic tool: that of standard, unaccented English. This is rather like teaching young carpenters in training only to use a hammer. The hammer is an important tool – perhaps one of the most useful tools one can wield in the carpentry world, and certainly a powerful (if heavy-handed) one. But it's not the only one a carpenter needs. What would it mean to assess kids not just on how well they use this metaphorical hammer of standard English– or even how well they use it to do the narrow range of things that one can do with just a hammer – but on how well they use a variety of tools appropriately and flexibly and in combination, to create things and fix things and do things in the world? And what if we provided ways to help students expand their skills with all the tools in their toolkits? Can we accept the value of knowing how to use wrenches and levels and screwdrivers and other tools, even as we recognize the power of the hammer?

Repertoires of Linguistic Practice

Over the last few years we have worked with Los Angeles area teachers to design and implement curriculum that acknowledges the tools that students have in their linguistic toolkits (Vygotsky, 1978), or what has variously been called verbal repertoire (Gumperz, 1964), linguistic repertoires (Zentella, 1997), and more recently repertoires of linguistic practice (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003), and communicative repertoires (Rymes, 2010). The curriculum we designed is available at http://centerx.gseis.ucla.edu/xchange-repository. This work, in the "Cultural Modeling" tradition established by Carol Lee (2007), builds on prior ethnographic research in which we documented bilingual youths' experiences as language and culture brokers for their immigrant families (Orellana, 2009).

We started with the assumption that youth use varieties of English and their home language to do all kinds of things in their everyday lives, and we looked for ways to leverage those abilities in school (Eksner and Orellana, 2005; Orellana and Reynolds, 2008). This included guiding youth to "translate" their ideas into writing for different audiences (Martinez, Orellana, Pacheco & Carbone, 2008 and Carbone and Orellana, 2010) and to use different registers of English in the classroom. We engaged youth in talk about talk (D'warte, forthcoming), and we looked at how students viewed and understood their own language practices (Orellana, Martínez, Lee, and Montaño under review).

In having students engage with language in these ways, we introduced these eighth graders to the metaphor of language as a toolkit, as well as to an "academic" term that we use in our work: repertoires of linguistic practice. We recognize that toolkits and repertoires are not precise equivalents, but both move away from the container models of language, and we wanted to expose these students both to a concrete image for rethinking ideas about language and to a term that is used in the educational research world. We showed them a film that Clifford Lee made of his own ways of speaking in different contexts, relationships and activities. In the film, Clifford speaks to his professor in "academese," to his son in Chinglish (combination of Cantonese and English), and to his friend in urban Oakland street discourse, typically associated with Hip Hop culture. During the three-minute film clip, Cliff demonstrates five of the language styles available to him in his linguistic toolkit, all of which he uses on a daily basis. These repertoires of linguistic practice contain both overlapping and distinct elements in language, word choice, phrasing and tone.

We then worked with the youth to identify and document their own repertoires of linguistic practice, and we studied the practices along with the kids. Students filmed themselves as they engaged in different activities, and selected samples of their own language practices to represent on film. Vin Vin (a self-selected pseudonym, like those for all students in this manuscript) filmed himself talking on the playground with his coach, working with his father to fill out an English form (using a combination of Spanish, English and gestures, or what he called

Spanment, "Spanish + movement = Spanment"), and speaking to a friend about his grades (what he called Fralk: "Friend + talk = Fralk.") Another student, Maya, filmed herself speaking to her brothers playing video games, with her mother folding laundry, and with her psychology teacher where she called the subject specific language she deployed "Psycholonese."

After editing and producing short films that displayed some of their repertoires of linguistic practice, we looked together with the youth at how they shifted their ways of speaking as they moved across the various activity settings of their daily lives. We also followed a few students to examine these shifts ourselves.

For example, we followed one boy, Jimmy, as he moved between AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) and Art class, passing period, an after school Math tutorial, hanging out after school with family members and friends. We witnessed overt changes in the language he used: English, Spanish and/or Spanglish (a mixture of the two) and also more nuanced shifts, for example, as he used subject specific vocabulary from school or from urban Hip Hop vernacular, and different degrees and kinds of slang, set in different grammatical structures, and inflected with varying kinds of intonation.

In an interview, Jimmy displayed his awareness of stylistic changes when conversing with different individuals in distinct settings. He provided several specific examples of vocabulary modifications and sentence structure changes in his language practices. For example, he explained, "Instead of saying. 'Ummm, 'I'm just wondering', I'd say, 'I'm curious about this question' or something… Like, for example, in this interview, I'm trying to talk smart, a lot better." Jimmy's recognition that the words he used may shape how others see him demonstrated his understanding of the power of language and aspects of its social-political ramifications.

Expanding Repertoires of Linguistic Practice

As we listened to the students in this project, we wondered what it would mean for schools to recognize, celebrate, and help to expand (Zentella, 1997) their repertoires of linguistic practice. What would it mean to assess their language not only in terms of "how much" academic English language they "have," but in terms of their flexibility and versatility in using different language forms? Rather than measuring students on a single criterion – such as their competence in standard, academic English – we might study how versatile they are with the tools in their linguistic toolkits, and how they use those tools to build things and make things happen in the world. We can also, as Richard Henne (2010) recently argued, "examine more thoroughly how language practices that are not ordinarily sanctioned in schools significantly interrelate with schooling" (p. 331). Using the metaphor of a toolkit, we can help students to see how experience with the tools of non-sanctioned language practices can in fact help them gain access to the tools of power.

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