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From academic language to language architecture: Challenging raciolinguistic ideologies in research and practice

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I argue that academic language is a raciolinguistic ideology that frames racialized students as linguistically deficient and in need of remediation. I propose language architecture as an alternative framing of language that can serve as a point of entry for resisting these raciolinguistic ideologies in both research and practice. I use this framework as a lens for analyzing the literacy demands of the Common Core State Standard (CCSS). Using data collected as part of a larger ethnographic study, I illustrate how Latinx children from bilingual communities have unique opportunities for engaging in the language architecture called for in the standards. I then describe a unit plan that I developed from this perspective. I end with a call for situating language architecture within broader political struggles seeking to dismantle the political and economic inequities that are the root causes of deficit perspectives of Latinxs and other racialized students.

You walk into a classroom. A group of students is debating whether the n-word with an “a” at the end is a racial slur or a term of endearment. A second group is discussing the politics surrounding how teachers pronounce the names of their students. A third group is arguing about the nuances of translating a word from Spanish to English. You might think these are college students in a sociolinguistics course. In fact, these are elementary school students engaged in spontaneous and unsupervised conversations in a bilingual school in a low-income predominantly Latinx neighborhood where I conduct research. This representation of the language practices of Latinx children stands in sharp contrast to the deficit frameworks that are typically reflected in mainstream depictions. Scholars and practitioners typically describe low-income Latinx students as well as other racialized¹ students as lacking *academic language*. In this article, I seek to challenge this framing and offer an alternative framing that recognizes the language practices of Latinxs and other racialized students as already aligned to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and other college and career ready standards that states have adopted in recent years.

Undoing academic language

The pervasiveness of the framing of low-income Latinx students as lacking academic language can be found in an ESL program evaluation of a small US school district in

Pennsylvania with a large and growing number of children of migrant farmers from Mexico that I participated in a few years ago. The consensus among the educators we spoke with was that the academic challenges confronting their Mexican-origin students were primarily a linguistic problem, in that the majority of the Mexican-origin students had failed to master academic language. Many of the educators we spoke with conflated Mexican-origin with English Learner (EL) and used frameworks from the scholarly literature focused on this population to suggest that all of these students had mastered “social language” but not “academic language.” As a result, the district implemented remediation for the majority of their Mexican-origin students that included pullout classes in elementary school and separate academic tracks in the middle and high school. Their argument was that this remediation would help them to develop the foundation in academic language that they need to be successful in mainstream classes.

I found it troubling that educators, who were predominantly monolingual and white, did not consider the many linguistic strengths of their Mexican-origin students or consider the many other factors that may be contributing to the academic challenges of their large and growing Mexican-origin population. This included in-school issues such as the intense focus on remediation and the lack of bilingual educators and support staff and out-of-school issues such as the high poverty of migrant families and the increasing xenophobia of the broader society that typically forces these communities into the shadows. These larger sociopolitical factors were ignored in favor of a focus on the perceived lack of academic language of their Mexican-origin student population. The solution proposed was to teach them academic language.

Perhaps more troubling to me was the fact that the frameworks available to me as an educational linguist served to reinforce these narratives in uncomfortable ways. One of our major recommendations to the district was to implement dual-language programs that would allow Mexican-origin students the opportunity to develop academic language in Spanish that they would then transfer to English. While I am convinced that implementing dual language programs would go a long way in improving the education of these students, I remain troubled by the fact that the underlying framing of linguistic deficiency went unchallenged. The assumption was that these students did, in fact, struggle with academic language and that a dual language program would be able to remediate these linguistic deficiencies.

These discomforts led me to begin to critically interrogate what exactly academic language was and how exactly it differed from non-academic language. The scholarly literature includes a range of conceptualizations with the dominant strands in discussions related to racialized bilingual students in K-12 schools being a cognitive strand and a functional strand (Haneda, 2014). Both approaches typically frame academic language as a list of empirical linguistic practices that are dichotomous with non-academic language (Cummins, 2000; Schleppegrell, 2004). While educators I have worked with often have less precise definitions of academic language than scholars, the underlying framework remains similar. Two common answers that I have heard from educators are that academic language includes content-specific vocabulary and complex sentence structures. They contrast this with non-academic language that they describe as less specialized and less complex.

This dichotomous framing in both the scholarly literature and among educators suggests that academic language is a special kind of language that warrants a complete

differentiation from the rest of language that is framed as non-academic. Yet, it is unclear to me whether the distinction reflects actual language use. After all, any community of practice has content-specific vocabulary and utilizes complex sentence structures. For example, baseball announcers use content-specific vocabulary that have specific meanings in baseball such as “strike,” “ball,” “inning,” and “homerun” that would likely be unfamiliar to somebody with no background in baseball. I have also personally witnessed the complex sentence structures used by young people trading Pokémon cards. Yet, neither of these linguistic practices are deemed so noteworthy as to warrant us dichotomizing baseball from non-baseball language or Pokémon language from non-Pokémon language as if a baseball announcer or a Pokémon card trader is somehow shutting down other aspects of their linguistic repertoire. A similar description could be offered about this article that I am currently writing. I am making a range of linguistic choices that include linguistic features that would typically be associated with academic language (including content-specific vocabulary and complex sentence structures) alongside linguistic features not often associated with these linguistic practices (such as my pervasive use of the first person alongside personal anecdotes). When I have pointed to some of these complexities to scholars and educators they have often been intrigued yet remained convinced that academic language is a list of empirical linguistic practices that functions in a qualitatively different way than non-academic language and that their racialized students lacked a strong foundation in these language practices.

My contention is that academic language is not a list of empirical linguistic practices but rather a *raciolinguistic ideology* that frames the home language practices of racialized communities as inherently deficient (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Raciolinguistic ideologies were foundational to European colonialism and continue to be used to justify the continued maintenance of white supremacy by suggesting that the roots of racial inequalities lie in the linguistic deficiencies of racialized communities and that the solution to these racial inequalities is to modify their language practices (Rosa & Flores, 2017). A raciolinguistic perspective shifts the focus from the linguistic practices of the speaker/writer toward the perceiving practices of the listener/reader. From this perspective, whether one is positioned as successfully engaged in academic language is primarily determined by the white listening/reading subject whose perceptions have been shaped by histories of colonialism that continue to frame racialized speakers as coming from communities with linguistic deficiencies that need to be policed and corrected. Considering the important role of the white listening/reading subject, it is insufficient, and perhaps even misguided for educational linguists to compile supposed linguistic features of academic language and introduce them to educators. Instead, the role of educational linguists should be to support educators in developing new listening/reading subject positions that recognize the complex linguistic knowledge that their students have developed as part of their lived experience and make this central to the work that they are doing in classrooms. Below I offer one way of approaching this role as an educational linguist working with teachers to develop these new subject positions.

From academic language to language architecture

While the ultimate eradication of raciolinguistic ideologies requires fundamental social transformation and a radical restructuring of schools (Flores & Rosa, 2015), one action

that scholars and practitioners could take to resist these raciolinguistic ideologies is to reject dichotomous framings of language that, as noted above, serve to disadvantage racialized students. One metaphor that might allow us a point of entry into challenging this dichotomous framing is language architecture. Like a building architect, language architects are not free to simply do whatever they want. If this were the case, buildings would be unsafe and communicative efforts would fail. Yet, beyond some broad general parameters, both must adhere to in order to successfully complete their tasks, there is a great deal of decision-making that both make that reflect their own unique vision and voice.

From this perspective, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and other state standards are not demanding mastery over academic language, but are rather calling for students to be language architects who are able to manipulate language for specific purposes. The first reading anchor standard of the CCSS describes the skills associated with close reading to be “to determine what the text says explicitly, to make logical inferences from their interactions with a text; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text” (National Governors Association, 2010, p. 10). This emphasis on close reading is closely related to the fourth anchor standards focused on craft and structure where students are expected to determine “how specific word choices shape meaning and tone ... analyze the structure of texts [and] assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text” (National Governors Association Center, 2010, p. 10). Students are expected to use insights from this close reading to meet the expectations of writing anchor standard four, which asks students to construct texts that “appropriate to task, purpose, and audience” (National Governors Association, 2010, p. 19). In a nutshell, students are expected to engage in close reading in order to critically analyze the author’s language choices and the impact of these language choices on shaping the meaning of the text and to use these insights in constructing their own texts (Shanahan, 2013).

Using the dichotomous framing of academic language might lead an educator to conclude that close reading and writing for specific tasks, purposes and audiences require academic language that is completely dichotomous from the non-academic home language practices of racialized students. In contrast, adopting the perspective of language architecture frames these students as already understanding the relationship between language choice and meaning through the knowledge that they have gained through socialization into the cultural and linguistic practices of their communities. For example, my research team has observed elementary school Latinx students in a bilingual school discussing language variation as they described the differences between the words “habichuelas” and “frijoles” as meanings of the word beans. We have also observed students engaged in discussions of pragmatics in debating whether “farted” or “passed gas” was more polite. We have even observed a student pondering the gendered nature of Spanish and whether the term “amigos” includes both boys and girls. All of these examples point to the ways that Latinx children growing up in bilingual communities have experiences with language architecture that provide them with unique background knowledge that parallels academic tasks (Faulstich Orellana, 2009; Martinez & Morales, 2014). In fact, these students, who have to negotiate socially constructed linguistic boundaries on a daily basis, have unique affordances for developing an understanding of the importance of considering your audience when making language choices as well as the impact of particular language

choices on meaning (García & Wei, 2014). From this perspective, the job of the teacher shifts away from teaching students to engage in an academic language that is understood to be dichotomous with their non-academic home language practices and instead toward helping them to make connections between their existing knowledge and the seemingly unfamiliar tasks demanded by the standards. Below, I describe one effort that a teacher took in making this shift as an illustration of what it might look like in the classroom.

Language architecture and translingual mentor texts

The unit plan described below was developed by two colleagues and me with the explicit goal of providing an exemplar for first and second-grade teachers that supports them in recognizing the language architecture of bilingual Latinx students as already aligned to the CCSS. At the core of the unit was a mentor text that was provided to students as a model of writing that they could utilize in constructing their own texts (Culham, 2014). Specifically, the unit was structured around the translingual mentor text *Abuela* by Arthur Dorros that was intended to serve as a model of translingual rhetorical strategies (Canagarajah, 2013) that strategically incorporates Spanish into a text that is primarily written in English that students could use to construct their own stories. The unit plan is designed around close readings of *Abuela* to develop a stronger understanding of the particular translingual rhetorical strategies used by the author. The goal is for students to make connections between the language architecture that they engage in on a daily basis and the translingual rhetorical strategies utilized in the book in order to construct their own texts (Newman, 2012). Below I describe the implementation of the second day of the unit in Ms. Lopez's second grade bilingual classroom with 100% Latinx students from bilingual households in order to illustrate the ways that the unit built on the language architecture that the students developed as part of their lived experiences.

"There's a Spanish word in there!"

The second day of the unit began with Ms. Lopez asking students to brainstorm a time that they used Spanish with somebody special in their lives. These second graders used this brainstorm as a point of entry for engaging in a close reading of *Abuela* that examined the author's choice to include all of *abuela's* dialogue in Spanish. After leading students through this close reading of the text, Ms. Lopez began to work with students on a shared writing. It was clear that having engaged in a close reading of *Abuela* and having discussed this rhetorical strategy led the students to expect Spanish to appear in the text of the shared writing. This was most evident in a student objection after Ms. Lopez wrote the first few sentences of the story:

Enrique: Eso está casi todo en inglés. Eso casi no está en español. [This is almost all in English. It is barely in Spanish].

Ms. Lopez: Oh. Don't worry. I will get there because remember I told you I am going to use some Spanish to show you what she says. I will get there. Don't worry.

Here, Enrique is himself taking an authorial stance and protesting the fact that despite having just read a mentor text that engaged in translingual rhetorical strategies, the text

had been in English up to this point. In this way, he is drawing a parallel between his lived experiences as a bilingual Latino and author's craft – namely that a bilingual author like him can choose to accurately reflect the bilingual language practices that they engage in on a daily basis in their writing.

The first Spanish word to appear in the shared writing was *torta de manzana*. The students had been well prepared to expect Spanish to appear in the story, as demonstrated in the following interaction:

Ms. Lopez: Since I drew about her teaching me how to make a *torta de manzana* I need to put that in my story. (writing) She taught me how to make a

Ms. Lopez & Students: *torta de manzana*

Isabel: There's a Spanish word in there!

Ms. Lopez: Yes. Here.

Isabel's comment, like Enrique's above, indicates that she was looking closely at the language choices of the text to determine if and how Spanish appeared in the shared writing. At the end of the shared writing, Ms. Lopez led the students in reading the completed draft of the story, which ended with Ms. Lopez's *tía* telling her "Te va a encantar esta *torta de manzana*" [You are going to love this apple cake]. After reading the story Ms. Lopez revisited Enrique's earlier query about the absence of Spanish in the shared writing:

Ms. Lopez: So, Enrique you were asking me where was the Spanish. There it is. "Mija te va a encantar esta *torta*"

Isabel: Y *torta de manzana*! Y *tía*!

Once again, Isabel noticed that Spanish was present not just in the quote but also through *torta de manzana*, which Ms. Lopez emphasized from the beginning of the unit, and *tía*, which Ms. Lopez had not brought explicit attention to.

This second day of the unit provided important opportunities for students to think about the ways that the language architecture that they engage in on a daily basis are, in fact, an essential component in the construction of their identities as writers. It reinforced the idea that they, as bilingual people can decide to use Spanish in a text that is written primarily in English for specific purposes and with specific intent – just as they do outside of the classroom. It also introduced students to a specific way that an author may construct a text in order to do this – namely, having a character speak Spanish as a way of illustrating the authentic speech of that character. As Ms. Lopez led the shared writing with the students, they were prepared to find Spanish words and were able to identify them when they appeared in the text. They were then able to use this model to begin their own stories about a special person in their life who spoke Spanish and to think about how they might authentically write the speech of this special person. Importantly, they were able to engage in this process of language architecture in ways that illustrated that the language architecture they engage in on a daily basis paralleled the skills required for the linguistic analysis associated with close reading and author's craft that are demanded by the CCSS.

To be fair, proponents of the concept of academic language would likely support this unit plan. Indeed, the unit plan has much in common with *identity texts* used to

support bilingual and multilingual students in developing stronger connections between their home language practices and academic language practices (Cummins, Hu, Markus, & Montero, 2015). In particular, both projects seek to encourage students to bring elements of their home language practices into academic tasks. Yet, a key difference is that the framework of language architecture does not have the goal of building bridges between academic and non-academic language practices. Instead, language architecture begins from the premise that the language architecture that Latinx children from bilingual communities engage in on a daily basis is legitimate on its own terms and is already aligned to the CCSS. There is, therefore, no need to build bridges since students already possess the knowledge demanded by the standards. The trick is for teachers to recognize this knowledge and make it an integral component of their work with these students. From the perspective of language architecture what needs remediation is *not* the cultural and linguistic practices of racialized communities but the listening/reading practices that continue to inform mainstream representations of these practices. By framing the language practices that racialized communities engage in as legitimate on their own right, by rejecting the assumption that they are dichotomous with the language practices of schooling and by encouraging students from racialized backgrounds to appropriate language practices associated with school-based tasks that may be unfamiliar to them in ways that reflect their unique identities and voices, the language architecture framework offers an important point of entry for resisting the raciolinguistic ideologies that have historically framed and continue to frame their language practices as deficient and in need of remediation.

Toward a future of language architecture

This article proposes language architecture as an alternative conceptualization of language to counteract the concept of academic language that typically reifies deficit perspectives of racialized students. Specifically, in the case of Latinx students from bilingual households, this perspective recognizes that these children are already language architects who speak Spanish to Spanish speakers, English to English speakers and both with other bilingual people. The framework of language architecture sends students a powerful message that their home language practices are integral to the development of their academic identities rather than simply a bridge at best or a barrier at worst.

My hope is that this language architecture model can open up space for a broader conversation about how schools can work to challenge raciolinguistic ideologies through the rejection of dichotomous framings of language. This language architecture model would include but extend beyond a focus on translingual rhetorical strategies. In such a classroom, the role of the teacher would no longer be to teach academic language as if it were a list of empirical linguistic practices that was dichotomous with the home language practices of racialized students. Instead, the teacher's role would be to recognize that the home language practices of racialized students already align with the linguistic knowledge embedded in the CCSS and other state standards and to develop lessons and units that build on this existing knowledge. To be clear, teachers in such classrooms would certainly introduce students to new language practices associated with tasks and audiences that may be unfamiliar to them. Yet, they would do so from an exploration paradigm that seeks to bring students' attention to the ways that authors

construct particular texts without relying on the crude dichotomy of academic and non-academic.

Teachers would support this language exploration by providing students with opportunities to break down and analyze the language choices of speakers and writers to determine if and how they are using particular language forms for particular effects. They would compare and contrast these language choices with the language choices they make as part of their own lived experiences and have opportunities to experiment with bringing together the language choices of published authors and their personal language choices as racialized students navigating a range of different communities of practice. This language exploration would facilitate the development of critical language awareness that raises both teacher and student understandings of the relationship between language and power as an important first step in challenging linguistic hierarchies (Alim, 2005).

Yet, it is important to recognize that a language architecture framework is not a panacea. This is important to consider in light of the fact that proponents of academic language often suggest that providing racialized students access to academic language will empower them in ways that allow them to resist their marginalization (Cummins, 2000; Schleppegrell, 2004). Indeed, the same risk applies to calls for critical language awareness that imply that the root of social change lies in increasing the critical consciousness of racialized students and their teachers (Alim, 2005). While critical consciousness is certainly an important first step in promoting social change, it is important to keep focus on the larger political and economic factors that lie at the root of the marginalization of the language practices of racialized communities. With this in mind, for the language architecture framework I propose to truly resist the marginalization of racialized communities it is not enough to simply reject the dichotomous theory of language at the core of conceptualizations of academic language. It is also necessary to situate language struggles within broader political struggles that seek to combat the political and economic barriers confronting racialized communities including poverty, housing policy, mass incarceration and immigration policy (Flores & Chaparro, 2018).

To bracket the broader political and economic issues confronting racialized communities and to focus solely on linguistic solutions places the onus on racialized communities to undo their own oppression through the modification of their language practices. To challenge raciolinguistic ideologies, therefore, requires not only new conceptualizations of language that resist linguistic dichotomies but also a systematic incorporation of the structural barriers confronting racialized communities into the solutions we propose. In short, researchers and practitioners must resist dichotomous framings of language that inevitably get taken up by schools in ways that perpetuate deficit perspectives while simultaneously situating this non-dichotomous framing of language within the broader political and economic processes that lie at the root of the marginalization of racialized communities. Only in this way can our work truly avoid being part of the problem and instead part of the solution to the marginalization of racialized communities.

Note

1. I use the term “racialized” as opposed to terms such as “minority” or “people of color” to emphasize that race is “a social construct rather than a description based on perceived characteristics” (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2017, p. 15).

Disclosure statement

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Additional Resources

1. García, O., Johnson, S. & Seltzer, K. (2016). *The translanguaging classroom: Leveraging student bilingualism for learning*. Philadelphia, PA: Caslon Publishing.

This book offers practical strategies for utilizing bilingualism as a resource for teaching and learning in both monolingual and bilingual classrooms.

2. CUNY-New York State Initiative on Emergent Bilinguals (<https://www.cuny-nysieb.org>)

This website offers a range of resources for utilizing bilingualism as a resource for teaching and learning in both monolingual and bilingual classrooms including resource guides, videos and webinars.

3. The Educational Linguist (<https://educationallinguist.wordpress.com>)

This is my personal blog where I explore a range of issues theoretical, political and pedagogical questions that lie at the intersection of language and race in education.