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Looking closely and listening carefully: A sociocultural approach to understanding the complexity of Latina/o/x students' everyday language

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ABSTRACT

The definitions of “academic language” available to teachers and teacher educators often invoke generalized assumptions about the supposed gap between complex, discipline-specific forms of language and the everyday language of Latina/o/x students. In this article, we advance an alternative hypothesis – that Latina/o/x students boast expansive linguistic repertoires and engage in complex and sophisticated forms of everyday language, including some that overlap directly with the forms of language and literacy explicitly outlined in official English language arts standards, including the Common Core State Standards. With this as our premise, we draw on a robust theoretical tradition of sociocultural scholarship on language and literacy, as well as on our own ethnographic data, to highlight the complexity of Latina/o/x students' everyday language practices, and to showcase how these complex language practices overlap with those typically framed as academic. We conclude with practical suggestions for beginning to explore Latina/o/x students' everyday linguistic complexity.

“Academic language” is an idea. Rather than an empirically observable set of linguistic features, it is an idealized notion of the kinds of language valued in schools. In our work preparing pre-service teachers, we have often defined academic language as *the forms of language privileged in schools*. But this definition is not entirely accurate because it presumes that various linguistic features cohere in the form of a static register – or set of registers – that is universally recognized as academic. In reality, not all linguistic features are perceived as being equally emblematic of academic registers, and any given feature that gets perceived as academic by a teacher in one setting may not be similarly interpreted by another teacher in another setting. To complicate matters, ideological constructions of academic language incorporate configurations of both linguistic and extra-linguistic signs, such that whether or not Latina/o/x students get perceived as speaking in academic ways can often be more about race than about language (Flores & Rosa, 2015).

Academic language is an idea that we must interrogate because it has material consequences for Latina/o/x students. Over the past decade or so, the scholarly community has begun to offer more specific definitions of academic language. Some scholars, for example, have explicitly defined academic language by specifying the *language demands*

associated with school learning (Bailey, 2007; Fang, Schleppegrell, & Cox, 2006; Quinn, Lee, & Valdés, 2012; Snow, 2010). Insofar as any consensus has been reached among educators and policymakers as to what constitutes academic language, it is arguably best reflected in current content area standards, such as the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (CCSS.ELA), which have been adopted by 41 states since 2010. Such standards are about as close as the education community has come to saying what it wants children to be able to do with language.

In our view, however, researchers, policymakers, and educators often still mischaracterize the relationship between these definitions of academic language and the linguistic competencies that Latina/o/x students bring to academic contexts. Consider, for example, that the notion of *complexity* is central to many of the definitions of academic language available to teachers and teacher educators, as illustrated in the following examples:

- “A set of thinking skills and language abilities used to decode/encode **complex** concepts” (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2002)
- “A set of linguistic registers that construe multiple and **complex** meanings at all levels and in all subjects of schooling” (Schleppegrell, 2009)
- “The set of words, grammar, and organizational strategies used to describe **complex** ideas, higher-order thinking processes, and abstract concepts” (Zwiers, 2014)

While scholars use the word *complexity* to explain the demands of academic language, they rarely use this word to characterize the everyday language of Latina/o/x students. Everyday educational discourse often draws on generalized assumptions about the supposed gap between discipline-specific forms of language and the everyday language of Latina/o/x students. This tendency to presume a gap is grounded in longer histories and broader contexts related to the racialization of Latina/o/x populations (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Rosa, 2009). Much of the everyday discourse around academic language conflates Latina/o/x students with “English learner” and “at risk” student populations, and presumes these students to be linguistically deficient and/or especially vulnerable to academic failure (Martínez, 2018). These generalized assumptions inform public perceptions of what Latina/o/x students can – and, more often, what they *can’t* – do with language.

But what if we didn’t view Latina/o/x students first and foremost as English learners? And what if we didn’t begin with the premise that they’re categorically at risk? What if we began, instead, with the assumption that they come to school with various linguistic strengths? In other words, what if we *presumed competence* (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011)? How might this more *appreciative stance* (Bomer, 2011) afford a different way of seeing them and recognizing their linguistic competencies? This presumption of competence is precisely our starting point for making sense of Latina/o/x students. In contrast to deficit-oriented perspectives that presume a gap between these students’ everyday language and the language of the classroom, the alternative hypothesis we wish to advance is that Latina/o/x students boast expansive linguistic repertoires and engage in complex and dynamic forms of everyday language, including some that overlap with the forms of language and literacy explicitly outlined in official English language arts standards. With this as our premise, we draw on a robust theoretical tradition of sociocultural scholarship on language and literacy to highlight the complexity of Latina/o/x students’ everyday

language practices, and to showcase how these complex language practices overlap with those typically framed as academic.

Sociocultural perspectives on language and literacy

An appreciative stance prompts us to look closely and listen carefully to how Latina/o/x students use language in their everyday lives. We begin with the understanding that there is necessarily variation both across and within racialized communities, and that all people engage in dynamic *repertoires of practice* (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). In order to begin to understand how individuals and communities use language, we need to spend a sustained period of time building relationships with them, closely examining their language practices in context, and eliciting their perspectives on those practices. Indeed, this is our rationale for drawing on a body of sociocultural scholarship grounded in careful ethnographic study of the everyday language and literacy practices of racialized children and youth (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejada, 1999; Lee, 2001, 2007; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992; Orellana, 2001, 2009).

Cultural modeling

We draw, in particular, on the work of Carol Lee, who devoted her scholarly career to exploring the everyday language and literacy practices of African American youth. Based on her own long-term engagement with African American communities in Chicago, Lee (2001, 2007) proposed what she called a *cultural modeling* framework, which she described as “a framework for the design of learning environments that examines what youth know from everyday settings to support specific subject matter learning” (2007, p. 15). Drawing on the Vygotskian notion that there are fundamental similarities between forms of reasoning in and out of school, Lee argued that racialized students’ everyday language practices constitute “cultural displays of knowledge” (2007, p. 18), and that these “practices and ways of using language in the world that are typically vilified in academic settings may actually be generative sources for both generic learning as well as rigorous literary reasoning” (2007, p. 7).

A central component of Lee’s cultural modeling framework is the use of what she calls *cultural data sets* – or representations of students’ everyday experiences that feature “practices and knowledge that schools not only devalue, but which schools have historically viewed as detrimental to academic progress” (2007, p. 58). One example of a cultural data set would be a transcript or video-recording of students engaging in everyday language practices such as *signifying*. Lee suggests that teachers might engage students in closely analyzing such texts in order to highlight the parallels between the linguistic skills, features, and practices deployed in their everyday speech and those that they are expected to master in school. The point of using cultural data sets, as Lee notes, is to “provide students with support for making public and explicit the tacit knowledge they possess” (Lee, 2007, p. 61). Helping students recognize these parallels, she argues, can serve as a productive scaffold for developing related language practices that are officially framed as academic.

Exploring Latina/o/x students' everyday language

Building on Lee's foundational work, Orellana (2009) has used the cultural modeling framework to examine the everyday language and literacy practices of Latina/o/x children who translate and interpret for their immigrant parents across a range of social settings, including commercial, educational, financial, legal, medical, and religious domains (Orellana, Dorner, & Pulido, 2003; Orellana & Reynolds, 2008). Orellana has drawn on her extensive ethnographic work in Latina/o/x schools and communities to identify parallels between the interpreting and translating that Latina/o/x children do in their everyday lives and the academic literacy skills involved in displaying audience awareness, summarizing and paraphrasing information, and interpreting texts, all of which are highlighted in relevant English language arts content area standards. For example, she and her co-authors document how students helped their parents by doing things such as translating a jury summons, reading labels on medication, clarifying misunderstandings at the grocery store, filling out a police report, interpreting at a doctor's visit, reading tax-related correspondence from the IRS, and interpreting at a parent-teacher conference. While helping their parents navigate these varied types of written texts and spoken interactions, these Latina/o/x children displayed complex and sophisticated language practices that overlap directly with the kinds of close reading, careful listening, and specialized vocabulary that are officially outlined in CCSS.

Ramón has collaborated with Orellana and colleagues to begin exploring ways to leverage Latina/o/x students' everyday translating and interpreting for language and literacy learning (Martínez, Orellana, Pacheco, & Carbone, 2008). Working with a middle school English language arts teacher and her sixth-grade students, we co-constructed a curricular unit focused on the translating and interpreting these youth did for their families. We began the unit by asking these students if they had ever translated or interpreted for others (which they all had), inviting them to brainstorm the various kinds of translating and interpreting experiences in which they had participated, and then asking them to re-enact select translating and/or interpreting scenarios. These re-enactments served as a cultural data set, which the students then reflected on and analyzed with an eye towards identifying relevant linguistic skills. Among other things, we discovered how adept these students were at considering the linguistic needs of their interlocutors and then shifting voices for these different audiences.

As it turns out, this kind of audience awareness is explicitly outlined in relevant English language arts content area standards. For example, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.4, states that sixth-graders should be able to "produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are **appropriate to** task, purpose, and **audience**." If we say we want to see signs of audience awareness in students' writing, and Latina/o/x students are already displaying such awareness in their everyday speech, then this is a potentially fruitful point of pedagogical leverage. This was part of the rationale that informed our design of the curricular unit mentioned above. Although our work with the students in that study predated CCSS, the statewide standards in place at that time included a similar focus on audience awareness. As a way of directly leveraging those students' translating and interpreting skills, we engaged them in a persuasive writing activity that required them to make the same point for two different audiences. We found

that when engaged in lessons and activities that explicitly leveraged their translating and interpreting skills, students easily applied those same skills to school-based writing tasks.

Building directly on this cultural modeling tradition, Ramón has also explored how bilingual Latina/o/x children and youth move flexibly between English and Spanish in their everyday talk – a form of translanguaging that mainstream linguists have historically referred to as *code-switching* and that many of his young participants called *Spanglish* (Martínez, 2010). Drawing on his ethnographic research in urban elementary and middle schools, he has closely examined the ways in which these students disrupt the supposed linguistic boundaries between English and Spanish, and he has documented some of the conversational functions that this serves in the classroom. Among other functions, Ramón has documented how translanguaging facilitates shifting voices for different audiences, and he has examined various examples of Latina/o/x children and youth displaying forms of audience awareness similar to those reflected in the translating/interpreting studies cited above.

For example, consider the following transcript¹ featuring Pablo, a third-grade student at an elementary school in central Los Angeles. Pablo's teacher has just sent him to the school's main office to ask the secretary to send an additional microphone out to the playground, where their class is rehearsing for an upcoming school assembly. As he enters the office, he begins to talk to the secretary, but then stops mid-sentence to greet a teacher who is exiting the office. Upon exiting the office, Pablo engages in a very quick verbal exchange with another student who is running by on the playground. Notice how Pablo switches back and forth between Spanish and English as he engages with these three different interlocutors.

- 01 Pablo: **Buenos días, Doña Olga.**
 02 Secretary: **¿Qué pasó, Pablito?**
 03 Pablo: **Dice-** ((turning to greet Ms. Park, who is exiting office)) Hi, Ms. Park!
 04 How are you?
 05 Ms. Park: Good, Pablo. How are you?
 06 Pablo: Good. ((turning back to secretary)) **Dice Ms. Cervantes que si usted nos**
 07 **puede mandar otro micrófono para el ensayo.**
 08 Secretary: **Sí, espérame un segundito.** ((reaches under counter, retrieves cordless
 09 microphone, and hands it to Pablo)) **Toma. Llévaselo. (1.0) Con mucho**
cuidado, ¿eh?
 10 Pablo: **Sí, gracias. (1.0) Con permiso.**
 11 Secretary: **Sí, mijo. Que te vaya bien.**
 12 ((Pablo exits office, and sees his friend Angel running by on playground))
 13 Angel: Oooh, you got sent to the office!
 14 Pablo: Yeah, right! **¡Tú fuiste!** ((Pablo laughs and then runs in opposite
 15 direction towards where his class is rehearsing on playground))

Pablo's audience awareness is on full display in the interaction above. He greets Olga, the school secretary, in Spanish in line 01, but then switches immediately to English to greet Ms. Park, who speaks English and Korean (but not Spanish). Notice how he then immediately switches back to Spanish in the middle of line 06 to continue his conversation with Olga. Although Olga is bilingual in English and Spanish, she reported being

Spanish-dominant, and Pablo had observed her interact in Spanish with other adults on multiple occasions. When asked why he spoke to Olga in Spanish during this interaction, Pablo responded that he thought she “probably feels more comfortable talking in Spanish.”

Pablo’s audience awareness is reflected not only in his use of English with Ms. Park and Spanish with Olga, but also in the relatively formal and polite voice that he uses with Olga. Notice, for example, that he initiates the conversation by addressing her as “*Doña Olga*” (line 01) rather than simply Olga. In Spanish, “*Doña*” is an honorific – or title of respect – that is often used to address elders and/or women of high social rank. Pablo’s formality and politeness are also reflected in his use of the formal second person singular pronoun “*usted*” in line 06 (rather than the informal *tú*). Finally, in line 10, just before exiting the office, Pablo says, “*Con permiso.*” (literally, “With your permission.”), which is a formal and polite way of taking leave of someone. In multiple ways, then, Pablo signals politeness and respect towards Olga, resulting in an overall formal tone.

The formality of Pablo’s conversation with Olga stands out in juxtaposition with his brief exchange with Angel in lines 13-15. When Angel teases Pablo by jokingly suggesting that he had been sent to the office (line 13), Pablo replies with a sarcastic “Yeah, right!” (line 14). In addition to Pablo’s sarcasm, notice his use of the relatively informal “yeah” (vs. “yes”) here. He then switches to Spanish mid-utterance to add: “*¡Tú fuiste!*” (roughly translated as “You did!” or “It was you!”). In contrast to his interaction with Olga, this utterance incorporates the informal second person singular pronoun “*tú*” (vs. the formal “*usted*”). Of course, the translingual nature of this utterance also reflects Pablo’s knowledge that Angel was bilingual in Spanish and English. When asked, for example, why he mixed English and Spanish in his exchange with Angel, Pablo replied, “Because he speaks both. He’s bilingual like me.” By speaking Spanish with Olga, switching to English with Ms. Park, switching back to Spanish and conveying a formal tone with Olga, and then mixing both English and Spanish in an informal exchange with Angel, Pablo displays an impressive ability to shift voices for different audiences. Although this kind of skillful audience awareness is explicitly labeled “academic” in CCSS, it is precisely the kind of linguistic dexterity that might not get recognized as “academic” when it emerges in Latina/o/x students’ everyday talk.

The facility with shifting voices for different audiences that we highlight above is not only complex, but it is also complex in ways that overlap directly with specific ELA standards in CCSS. Our running hypothesis is that no matter how educators, researchers, and policymakers define academic language, Latina/o/x students will be doing something analogous in their everyday talk. And even when these analogous ways of using language do not overlap completely with the linguistic features, functions, and demands of classroom and disciplinary contexts, they will overlap enough to serve as points of pedagogical leverage.

Recognizing the complexity of everyday language

Scholarship in the cultural modeling tradition compels us to reject the misconception that Latina/o/x students’ everyday language always necessarily diverges from the kinds of language valued in school. While there are certainly language demands and related linguistic features

associated with school, these do not bundle together neatly in the form of a register or set of registers that is completely separate from Latina/o/x students' everyday language. Although teachers might agree that particular students would benefit from adding individual linguistic skills, features, or conventions to their linguistic repertoires, no student has or lacks *all* of these. We can acknowledge that there are valuable dimensions of language worth teaching Latina/o/x students without assuming that these students lack an entire register or set of registers. To assume the latter is to conflate discrete components of an imagined linguistic variety with the variety itself, and this kind of thinking undergirds and facilitates deficit discourses around Latina/o/x students. Put simply, our point is that the everyday language of Latina/o/x students is not categorically less complex or sophisticated than so-called "academic language," that it's not necessarily always distinguishable from "academic language," and that framing Latina/o/x students as lacking an entire academic register or set of registers makes it all too easy to see them as deficient.

Of course, not all Latina/o/x students translate/interpret or combine English and Spanish in their everyday speech, and many Latina/o/x students display various other forms of linguistic complexity that we have not mentioned here. This is precisely why we argue for the need to first explore students' linguistic repertoires before making essentialist assumptions about their everyday language (Martínez & Martinez, *In press*). Neither our ethnographic research nor the sociocultural theory on which we draw describes the full range of language practices in which Latina/o/x children and youth engage. We should expect that there is much more to learn about the richness and expansiveness of these students' linguistic repertoires, and we should be suspicious of any research that claims to have conclusively determined what these students lack. This should be our default starting point – the premise on which we build as teachers and policymakers, and the hypothesis with which we start as researchers.

Looking closely and listening carefully

With this presumption of competence as their starting point, teachers can work together with students to collaboratively examine the complexity in their everyday language, identify parallels between the skills deployed in their everyday language and those highlighted in relevant content area standards, and then leverage those points of overlap to teach officially sanctioned forms of academic language and literacy. In previous work, we have suggested practical ways of building on students' translating and interpreting skills to support academic writing instruction (Martínez et al., 2008), and we have suggested ways of extending some of the literacy skills embedded and displayed in kids' everyday translanguaging while also helping them to cultivate related metalinguistic awareness (Martínez, 2010). However, because we do not know exactly what any given group of Latina/o/x students will be doing in their everyday language, the most immediate suggestion we can make has to do with how to begin exploring Latina/o/x students' everyday language – how to start looking closely and listening carefully.

One practical starting point for such exploration is *language mapping*, which involves using graphic organizers to begin to identify and chart the various ways that students use language across different spaces, places, and interlocutors. In our teacher preparation work, we've learned that it's generative to first help pre-service teachers develop a better understanding of their own linguistic repertoires – to recognize their own linguistic dexterity – as a prerequisite for understanding the richness of their students'

linguistic repertoires. We often begin by inviting pre-service teachers to document the various places and social spaces they traverse and inhabit on a daily or weekly basis, with an eye towards identifying the various audiences or interlocutors with which they engage across these contexts. Pre-service teachers often identify educational, professional, athletic, political, religious, familial, and other social spaces in which language use is central. We then invite pre-service teachers to reflect on and chart the ways that they use language with these different interlocutors across these settings, emphasizing that they should identify points of contrast as they shift voices for different audiences. For example, they might document how they speak in more formal ways in educational, business, or religious settings than in they do at home, how they use particular kinds of vocabulary with close friends, how their intonation shifts when addressing children versus adults, or how they engage with different kinds of spoken and written texts, genres, and modalities in certain spaces. Invariably, the pre-service teachers report gleaming fresh insights about their own linguistic repertoires, including complex and skillful language practices that they had previously ignored or taken for granted.

Once teachers have identified their own language and literacy practices across a variety of contexts, they will be better prepared to work with students to explore their linguistic repertoires using the same approach. They can modify the activity described above as necessary, layering on specific scaffolds that elicit and support students' careful examination of (and explicit reflection on) their own linguistic strengths. After mapping their language practices, students can drill deeper by *exploring language ethnographically* in their homes, schools, and communities. This exploration can provide real-world contexts in which students begin to more systematically describe and analyze their language practices and those of their family and friends. This is an opportunity for teachers to de-center themselves as experts by relying on students as experts and by equipping them to further cultivate this kind of expertise. Especially in multilingual classrooms where teachers may not speak all of the languages spoken by their students, they can equip their students with the ideas and methods needed to become experts in discussing their own language practices (Lee, 2007). This can disrupt traditional hierarchies around who holds knowledge, and also serve to help students further cultivate meta-linguistic awareness (Lee, 2007; Martínez, 2010).

Similar approaches to language inquiry with students of various ages (including young children) have been implemented by a variety of scholars and educators in the United States and in international contexts, often resulting in students developing the capacity to articulate understandings of their language practices and ideologies, while simultaneously supporting teachers in learning about these forms of language. See D'warte (2014, 2018) for examples from an Australian elementary school context, and Martínez and Montaña (2016) and Orellana, Martínez, Lee, and Montaña (2012) for examples from a US middle school context. If teachers look closely at – and listen carefully to – their Latina/o/x students' everyday language, they can begin to glimpse the pedagogical potential of a cultural modeling perspective. We hope that this perspective and the related practical suggestions we make here can support individual teachers as they seek to explore, recognize, and build on the complexity and sophistication embedded and displayed in their Latina/o/x students' everyday language, while also supporting broader efforts to expand what counts as academic language (Bunch, 2014; Martínez, Durán, & Hikida, 2019; Martínez & Rojo, [Forthcoming](#)) and to transform how we perceive Latina/o/x students.

Note

1. See [Appendix](#) for a brief description of transcription conventions.

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Appendix. Transcription Conventions

In the transcript featured in this article, we use **bold italics** to mark Spanish words and phrases. We do this not in order to reify Spanish and English as separate codes, but rather to highlight the precise points in each interaction where students disrupted the supposed linguistic boundaries between the two. In addition, we use the following transcription conventions:

-A dash indicates a sudden cut-off of a given word or sound

(1.5)Numbers in parentheses indicate silences or pauses in seconds and tenths of seconds.

(())Double italicized parentheses enclose material that is not part of the talk being transcribed.

Additional resources

- (1) **D'warte, J. (2014). Linguistic repertoires: Teachers and students explore their everyday language worlds. *Language Arts*, 91, 352-362.**
This article describes how elementary school teachers and students in Australia explored the linguistic diversity of their classrooms and communities, and it provides concrete suggestions for how teachers can begin to explore their students' linguistic repertoires.
- (2) **Martínez, R. A., Orellana, M. F., Pacheco, M., & Carbone, P. (2008). Found in translation: Connecting translating experiences to academic writing. *Language Arts*, 85, 421-431.**
This article describes a curricular unit aimed at leveraging bilingual Latina/o/x students' translating and interpreting skills as resources for academic writing, and it includes practical suggestions for things teachers can do in their own classrooms.
- (3) **Martinez, D. C. & Montaña, E. (2016). Toward expanding what counts as language for Latina and Latino in an urban middle school classroom. *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice*, 65, 200-216.**
This article describes a design research project that sought to leverage the language brokering skills of Latina/o/x middle school students, and it includes suggestions for how classroom teachers can expand students' understandings of what counts as academic language.