**The Linguistic Re-turn:
The Moral and Practical Imperative of "Language" in
Curriculum Studies**

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Abstract

For four decades critical modes of curriculum inquiry have inspired and informed new theoretical directions toward thinking about 'worthwhile' questions, *Ideology* and their relevance toward understanding social inequities and the educational disparity between dominant and non-dominant populations. However, in recent years, the viability and relevance of these modes of inquiry have been questioned on the basis of language accessibility and other 'practical' considerations which threaten to make curriculum inquiry as a field 'moribund.' In this conceptual paper, I argue for a grounded approach to the 'worthwhile' questions and in particular the notion of *Ideology* in curriculum inquiry. More specifically, I propose the *language ideologies* (LI)approach as a way to foreground many of the 'worthwhile' questions surrounding *Ideology* in an empirical, hence more 'practical' manner through the prism of 'language' and its extension: discourse and narrative analysis. Using the discourse analytic approach afforded by LI, I illustrate my case with multiple vignettes from studies of classroom discourse, interviews with teachers about contested language issues (i.e. bilingual education & African American Vernacular), and historical debates surrounding the status of languages other than 'Standard' English in the United States.

Introduction

"**You're** in this **country,** you know, learn the **language**"
- Ms. Rodriguez, Urban Bilingual-Elementary Teacher

"It *ain't?*...isn't"
- Mr. Sanders, Urban High School Sheltered English Teacher

"It's **ask, NOT AX!"**
- Garrard McClendon, African-American Activist & Urban Educator

"Learn the language [English] of prosperity, not the language [Spanish] of the ghetto"
- Newt Gingrich, Former Speaker of the House of Representatives

"You need to make sure your child can speak Spanish!"
- Barack Obama, First African-American President of the United States

Words such as these are being exchanged regularly in urban schools and political debates through out the nation. Whether these words come from teachers, administrators, politicians, peers, or layman, these micro interactions or as some would call it 'microaggressions' (Pierce, 1974;

Solórzano, 1998) are inextricably linked to macro historical, social, cultural, and ideological practices. In most of the last century it was common sense and normal to find signs that read 'Colored-Only'; however, today, any explicit sign of this type would certainly create moral outrage. The term 'English-Only' as used by Ron Unz to spearhead a nationwide 'English for the Children' movement in the late nineties that ultimately lead to the passages of 'English-Only' legislation in California, Arizona, and Massachusetts doesn't nearly evoke the same type of moral and ethical response as the infamous 'Colored-Only' signs. The question is: why? For the most part, there exists a dominant view that language is a choice whereas race and other 'biologically determined' traits are not (Lippi-Green, 1997). Statements like the ones above are still possible without much scrutiny, let alone outrage, because of the prevailing view that language is a choice, language is neutral, and issues pertaining to language are divorced from identity, social and economic stratification, and historical relations of power and privilege. So what makes these issues worthwhile and why should we (especially researchers of curriculum inquiry) care about "language" and our beliefs about it? Why should it be given prominence in our analysis and methods of inquiry whether we are researchers or practitioners? Drawing on Wheatley, Gee (2008) provides two moral principles that form the ethical imperative for his approach to language, ideology, and the *raison d'etre* for doing discourse and narrative analysis as a form of inquiry:

> *First principle*. That something would harm someone else (deprive them of what they or the society they are in view as "goods") is always a good reason (though perhaps not a sufficient reason) not to do it.

> *Second principle*. One always has a moral obligation to change a cultural model into a primary theory when there is reason to believe that the cultural model advantages oneself or one's group over other people or other groups. (p. 26)

Gee argues that the second principle is "the ethical basis and main rationale for schools and schooling. An unexamined life isn't moral because it has the potential to hurt other people needlessly." (Gee, 2008, p. 27). Tacit beliefs that are grounded in broader historical relations (i.e. ideologies) that advantage one group over another, one language over another, or one cultural model over another (on whatever basis) must be publicly scrutinized and made overt. These cultural models, beliefs and ideologies are fundamentally exchanged through words and the texts of everyday life which means a critical 'discourse' analysis of 'the words' is a powerful method for making the scrutiny possible.

With the rapid growth of globalization combined with a disturbing pattern of curriculum and economic bifurcation, curriculum theorists and linguistic anthropologists working from a critical point of view have been increasingly engaged in conversations about identity, ideologies, and language (e.g. Levinson, 2005; Macedo, Dendrinos, & Gounari, 2003; Matus & McCarthy, 2003; Smith, 2003). The economic, cultural, and linguistic challenges that have been accelerated by the forces of globalization have created a fundamental shift in disciplinary epistemologies *vis a vis* the impact on non-dominant and historically marginalized populations. One of the main objectives of this conceptual paper is to show the emerging synergy that exists between critical linguistic anthropology and critical curriculum inquiry and how the next generation of curriculum scholars can potentially benefit from this 'merger' (e.g. Siegel, 2006).

Historically, scholars of curriculum studies, particularly those working from a critical perspective have long recognized the need for cross disciplinary conversations, and despite the pressures to 'canonize', 'rigorize', and create a new academic silo; many have adopted an inter-disciplinary approach to some of the most fundamental and 'worthwhile' questions facing humanity and its implications for educational practice and

policy. The question of 'what is worthwhile?' has been the cornerstone of the field of curriculum inquiry/studies for more than forty years and has traversed many ideological/pragmatic tensions (Schubert, 2010). The pragmatic relevance of the field has been increasingly under attack citing the 'inaccessibility' of its language (Giroux, 1992) or its disproportionate concerns with the philosophical or 'theoretical' implying a detached position from practical instructional concerns (Schwab, 2004). Schwab (2004) argues that the field has become "moribund" and this is partially due to an unexamined reliance on theory in an area where theory alone is inadequate; he states,

> The field of curriculum is moribund, unable by its present methods and principles to continue its work and desperately in search of new and more effective principles and methods. (Schwab, 2004, p. 103)

One way for curriculum inquiry to position itself within the broader questions about the relevance of curriculum theory and 'theorizing' in curriculum and instruction departments everywhere is to foreground language, multilingualism, discourse, and narrative inquiry as empirical and practical approaches to curriculum inquiry both in urban teacher education and educational research.

The 'social turn' in linguistics and psychology (Hymes, 1964) made those fields more viable to issues in education; perhaps curriculum inquiry is in need of a 'language return' given many in the field have either explicitly or implicitly recognized the centrality of language, especially narrative inquiry (e.g. Conle & Boone, 2008; Clandinin &Connelly, 2000; Connelly, & Clandinin, 1988). Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, Taubman (2002) state, "it is necessary to understand the curriculum field as discourse, as text, and most profoundly as words." (p. 7). The 'linguistic turn' in curriculum inquiry has potential for curriculum development and inquiry by providing for context-specific practices; however, it still remains a largely unexplored area (Jupp, 2009).

Another example of the centrality of language, discourse, and 'words' in curriculum inquiry comes from Schubert's (1991) recollection of a conversation he had with his father seeking advice before going into teaching,

> He [his father] answered with two points -themselves more questions than answers. How can I learn to feel more clearly and deeply the hurt within the students? How can I learn to speak the "language" (i.e.,sources of meaning) of the students with whom I work? I am convinced that these questions subtly undergird much that I have done since, as a university professor, researcher and writer, and consultant. (Schubert, 1991, p. 2)

This statement represents the *solidarity* (Gee, 2008) that is built through language and moment-to-moment discursive interactions of not only teachers and students, but people in general. Using a critical perspective, the micro analysis and awareness of discourse for the purposes of understanding and transforming macro inequities has the potential to bridge the divide between the 'overly theoretical, **I**deological and macro' emphasis of curriculum theory and the sometimes 'overly procedural emphasis of instruction.' While I fully agree with Giroux (1992), that many of the charges of 'language inaccessibility' stem from either intentional or unintentional complicity with the status quo, in this paper I aim to illustrate a *language ideologies* approach to worthwhile curricular questions through the prism of "language" and its extension: discourse and narrative analysis.

This paper provides theoretical and methodological ways for making the theoretical and/or ideological practical for scholars of curriculum and the practitioners they work with in teacher education programs throughout the

United States and beyond. In this vain, I intend to address some of the critical theoretical and methodological conversations surrounding identity, ideology, and language based on my ethnographic work with teachers and grounded in linguistic anthropological perspectives. In particular, I argue for a re-conceptualization of how we think about 'language' and 'Ideology' in the field of curriculum inquiry by drawing on the *language ideologies* framework (Irvine & Gal, 2000; Author, 2005). This discussion is anchored in the central curriculum questions of *what should be learned? How should it be organized for teaching? What knowledge is most worth? and whose knowledge is of most worth?* (Apple, 2000). In this paper, the questions are reframed to emphasize the centrality of 'language' in our curricular discourse: What *language* should be learned? How should *language* be organized for teaching? What *language* is most worthwhile? Whose *language* is of most worth? Through an examination of practitioner voices, national political figures, and an analysis of some of the most contested contemporary debates about language policy in the United States, this paper offers a re-conceptualization of our approach to language and ideology in curriculum theory; furthermore, I argue for a more critical stance on how we perceive the nature, function, and purpose of language as well as a more grounded approach to *Ideology*, more specifically *ideologies* as discursive practice, with the broader objective of making curriculum inquiry worthwhile and relevant in the current sociopolitical context that threatens the 'C' in curriculum and instruction departments everywhere.

Seeing the "Curricular Wars" through Classroom Discourse

The following vignette taken from my ethnographic work in an urban high school with a predominant Latino/a, English learner population, illustrates the intersection of identity, ideology, and language in the context of instructional practice. Mr. Sanders, a high-school English teacher, and his 'sheltered English' students are discussing the literary work of Ann Beady when the subject of her age comes up, "She was born in 1947, so she's..."Students begin to chime in with all kinds of responses, one says 'she's old' another says 'a hundred.' Mr. Sanders takes exception with this response and exclaims, "She's **fifty three"** and proceeds to single out the student who said 'a hundred', "Now Natasha, do the simple math, it's 2000, subtract forty seven from two thousand and what do you get?" Although the question is directed at Natasha, a Latina English Language Learner (ELL), other students respond to the question. Natasha is silent and appears to be uninterested in participating in this discourse exchange. After a few seconds she responds, "This ain't a **Math** class." She demonstrates her agency by resisting the question and invoking the disciplinary and epistemic boundaries that are the hallmarks of modern schooling. Surely, an English teacher does not have the right or the epistemic authority to ask an arithmetic question in an English class no matter how simple, especially if its purpose is arguably somewhat duplicitous. Perhaps, the teacher would have conceded had it not been for her use of 'ain't' as Mr. Sanders cleverly responds, "This **ain't** a Math class? Tell me what class it is?" Natasha ultimately assents, "English" and Mr. Sanders proceeds to elicit the 'correct' usage "This isn't a Math class" and reminds her to "Try to speak English the right way" and the original arithmetic question is forgotten (Author, 2005). While Mr. Sanders values the linguistic and cultural heritage of his students, he implicitly and at times explicitly asserts the assimilationist objectives of schooling. From time to time he invokes the great American 'melting pot' metaphor as evidenced by artifacts such 'The Great American Melting Pot' poster and pronouncements such as this one:

> America is known as a melting pot, immigrants from all over the world come. Russia, Italy, Israel, Czechoslovakia, Austria, China, Egypt, wherever. They **learn English** and do the things we do here. They blend into American society, start **speaking English**, do what Americans do.

The important point to notice here is that there is an overt recognition of a mutual, inextricable link between national identity, language, and cultural practices what Gal & Irvine refer to as *iconization* (Gal & Irvine, 1995; Gal,

1998), a process by which dominant symbolic forms or representation and epistemic disciplines are marked and elevated at the expense of lesser, socially undesirable modes of meaning making. The metaphor serves to obfuscate and subordinate variation and diversity in favor of a singular, uniform national identity. These vignettes taken from my own ethnographic work in urban schools, illustrate the subtle (yet not hidden) ways in which language, epistemic ideologies, and language ideologies intersect in the everyday practices of urban schools.

These vignettes are typical in much of the work on urban schools with linguistic and cultural 'minority' students and regularly emerge in my own work. As someone who prepares teachers and researchers to work with "English Language Learners" (ELLs) and actively engage the "Language Wars", the "Reading Wars", the "Bilingual Wars" and even "the Math Wars," I find myself regularly engaged in the process of co-constructing a meta-discourse about language, identity, and ideology. The fact that knowledge and curriculum are and have historically been contested terrain does not come as a surprise to anyone with a critical view of curriculum. Many critical scholars of curriculum have emphasized the need to examine and deconstruct the ideological foundations of standards- based reform efforts especially as they relate to non-dominant peoples (e.g. Apple, 1979; Giroux, 1981; Luke, 1996; McLaren, 1998). In this regard, *critical discourse analysis* and ideological approaches to language, literacy, and epistemology are essential and have emerged as powerful theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical approaches (e.g. Fairclough, 1995; Freebody, 1992; Gee, 2008; Street, 1993) to engage the implicit assumptions of mandated curricular practices predicated on 'basics' and culturally irrelevant (and often oppressive) content. However, very few of these approaches and methods have located these macro Ideological issues within the context of everyday practices of teachers and students in schools. This is, in part, due to how Ideology (with capital 'I') has been conceptualized in relation to language as discursive practice.

Sheltered English is a transitional course for ESL students in high school right before they are considered proficient enough to enroll in mainstream courses.