Social class and educational inequalities

29.1 Introduction: Language gaps, absences and deficiencies

Disparities in educational performance between students at the top and bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy have persisted in European countries for many years (Herrera-Sosa, Hoftijzer, Gortazar and Ruiz 2018). This is true also of other countries with a similar level of economic development globally, such as the United States (Herrera-Sosa et al. 2018; OECD 2018). In England, the 'disadvantage gap' between poorer pupils and their more privileged peers is as large now as it was 20 years ago (Farquharson et al., 2022), and there are concerns here and elsewhere that the Covid-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the divide (Hutchinson et al. 2020; see also European Commission 2020; Markowitz 2021; Simon 2021). As policy makers seek to address these concerns, attention regularly turns to language and the perceived linguistic deficiency of children from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds. This is often expressed in terms of a so-called 'word gap' between lower and higher socioeconomic strata. The study most cited in support of the 'word gap' is Hart and Risley's (1995, 2003) investigation of families in Kansas, USA, in the 1980s. Based on the language data they collected from 42 families across three socioeconomic categories ('professional', 'working-class' and 'welfare'), Hart and Risley approximate that by the age of four, children from low income households have been exposed to 30 million fewer words than those from affluent households. These findings have never been replicated; indeed, a study that set out to do so did not support Hart and Risley's oft-cited claim. Sperry, Sperry and Miller (2019) investigated language data from five American communities and found substantial variation in vocabulary environment that could not be explained by socioeconomic status (SES). They also make clear that children from across the socioeconomic spectrum are exposed to far more speech than the Kansas study implies, since

Hart and Risely took account only of speech directed by the primary caregiver to the child, ignoring other speech in the child's ambient environment. This is just one of a range of methodological flaws that have been highlighted by scholars working in this area (see e.g., Dudley-Marling and Lucas 2009; Johnson and Johnson 2021; Sperry et al. 2019; Baugh 2017; Miller and Sperry 2012). Nonetheless, the 'word gap' has been touted as a cause of lower academic achievement in children from economically underprivileged backgrounds and used to justify a range of well-funded educational initiatives and interventions, such as the Clinton Foundation's Too Small to Fail in the US and the Nuffield Early Language Intervention programme in the UK. Cushing (2022a) demonstrates how Hart and Risley's claim has influenced post-2010 UK policy making, with MPs making uncritical and decontextualised references to the 'word gap' in political speeches and parliamentary debates. He further traces how the 'word gap' has been popularised in textbooks targeted to teachers (e.g., Quigley 2018) and institutionalised in the work of the Schools Inspectorate, Ofsted, from where it pervades educational practice.

These research and policy initiatives and interventions promote a problematic 'gap discourse' (McCarty 2015) that echoes deficit language ideologies dating back to the work of Bernstein in the 1960s (Bernstein 1964). As part of this discourse, the purported 'lack' of vocabulary in children from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds is often associated with a 'lack' of standardised grammar and an apparent inability to 'speak in full sentences', all of which are packaged as a communicative mode that limits academic development. This is apparent in Cushing and Snell's (2022) investigation of Ofsted inspection reports, where language perceived not to align with white, middle-class norms is described in terms of gaps, restrictions, and deficiencies. The following extracts from school inspection reports illustrate this point (with date of publication shown in parentheses and my emphases in italics):

> many pupils have a poor command of standard English and have only a *limited* range of vocabulary and advanced speech structures (2000).
>
> *lack* of standard forms of English is still evident and general vocabulary often remains *restricted* (2003)
>
> Throughout the school, one of the main barriers to pupils' achievement is their *lack* of descriptive vocabulary either verbally or in written form. Many pupils struggle to answer questions in full sentences and often *revert to phrases, one-word answers or gestures*. The spoken English of the majority of pupils does not conform to Standard English with words like 'of' and 'have'; 'was' and 'were'; 'is' and 'are' being inter-used. This, together with pupils' *limited* use of descriptive English is hindering their creative efforts. (2004)
>
> speaking skills are *restricted* by the poor command of standard English […] most pupils have very poor language skills on entry (2019)
>
> (cited in Cushing and Snell 2022)

Demographic information regarding the students in question suggests that most are from lower SES backgrounds (one report describes how 'a large percentage' are entitled to free school meals and how 'very few families [are] from a professional background') and/or racially minoritised communities. The apparent failure of these marginalised students to conform with standardised patterns is not only stigmatised as deficient but characterised in some cases as a complete lack of language (e.g., 'Many pupils … revert to phrases, one-word answers or gestures'). Here, ideologies of standardisation interact with ideologies of

'languagelessness' to frame these students as incapable of producing legitimate language, calling into question their 'legitimate personhood' (Rosa 2016: 163; Cushing and Snell 2022).

While sociolinguists and language education scholars acknowledge that there are disparities in school attainment between high and low SES groups, they have challenged gap and deficit discourses that blame young people and their parents (e.g., Cushing 2022a,b; Johnson and Johnson 2021; Ladson-Billings 2017; Baugh 2017; Avineri and Johnson, 2015). In this chapter, I explore how standard language ideology has fuelled gap and deficit discourses and driven educational policies and practices that are detrimental to students from working class and marginalised backgrounds. This exploration focuses primarily on England, as the historical locus of the invention of 'standard English', in which schools played a key role (see Crowley 2003; Mugglestone 2003). The chapter's skew towards English English further reflects the state of existing research in this area, where there is a gap in studies of language variation and ideologies in Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish schools.

In the second half of the chapter, I consider how British sociolinguists have challenged deficit discourses and why such challenges have not had the impact on schooling that many of us would like to see. Finally, I introduce a raciolinguistic perspective (Flores and Rosa 2015) as a theoretical frame through which to consider alternative approaches. This raciolinguistic perspective further opens up class analysis to include other categories, such as race and ethnicity, bringing together histories of class stratification with histories of colonialism.

29.2 Standard language ideology and educational inequalities

The National Curriculum (NC) in England conceptualises 'Standard English' as an objective set of linguistic forms that are appropriate to formal and academic contexts and dichotomous

with ‘non-Standard English’ (DfE 2014: 84, 103-104). ‘Standard English’ is associated with being ‘articulate’, ‘clear’, ‘confident’, ‘fluent’, and in ‘control’, and thus ‘non-Standard English’ with lack thereof (DfE 2014: 11, 16, 18, 81, 84). Whilst linguists are careful to avoid stigmatising ‘non-Standard English’, some do align with the notion propagated in the NC that ‘Standard English’ is an objective linguistic category that can be clearly identified and described. The linguist Richard Hudson authored the NC glossary definition, which states that ‘Standard English can be recognized by the use of a very small range of forms such as *those books*, *I did it* and *I wasn't doing anything* (rather than their non-Standard equivalents)’ (DfE 2014, p. 103-104). In treating ‘Standard’ and ‘non-Standard’ English as discrete entities that can be neatly delineated, Hudson plays down the ideological nature of standardised English in schools (see also Hudson 2020 and Crystal 2006; in critique, see Cushing 2020a, b). Trudgill likewise rejects an ideological stance, refusing even to use the word ‘ideology’ in his description of ‘Standard English’ (Trudgill 1999: 118). Other linguists take the position that debates about ‘Standard English’ are inevitably ideological, bound up with hierarchies of power, class, and race (Cushing and Snell 2023; Milroy, J. 1999, 2001; Milroy, L. 1999; Coupland 2000; Crowley 2003).

This chapter will treat ‘Standard English’ as an ideology rather than an objective linguistic category; that is, as a ‘set of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalisation or justification of perceived language structure and use’ (Silverstein 1979: 193; see also Irvine and Gal 2000). Specifically, standard language ideology embodies a set of beliefs in and around ‘an abstract, idealized homogeneous language, which is imposed and maintained by dominant institutions and which has as its model the written language, but which is drawn primarily from the spoken language of the upper middle class’ (Lippi-Green 2012: 67; see also J. Milroy 1999, 2001; Coupland 2000; Crowley 2003). Within England, the association between standards, speech and social class can be traced back to the nineteenth century, where an emerging spoken ‘standard’ was defined not in linguistic terms

but in relation to the characteristics of a privileged group of speakers – the highest classes in London and those who attended prestigious public schools (Mugglestone 2003) – and was thus 'iconized' (in Irvine and Gal's [2000] terms) as emblematic of 'educatedness', 'civility' and superior moral character (Crowley 2003:117). Regional dialects were conversely stigmatised as 'ignorant', 'slovenly' and 'vulgar' through their association with lower class speakers. The assumption that certain speakers and ways of speaking are inherently superior to others – what Alim (2004) terms 'linguistic supremacy' – endures today. Such beliefs are held not just by powerful groups in society but also by marginalised groups, who feel compelled to align with the norms of the powerful and regulate their own behaviour accordingly. Hence, studies have repeatedly found that speakers systematically 'edit out' stigmatised features from their speech in more formal settings, and, further, such features are judged most harshly by the speakers who use them the most (as in Labov's New York City Study, where he found in tests of perception that the more NCY speakers produced a stigmatised form in their own speech, the more sensitive they were when hearing it in recordings of other speakers (Labov 1972: 130)).

Standard language ideologies have far-reaching consequences in educational contexts. Teachers face considerable pressures to ensure that they and their students measure up to standards-based language expectations, which, in England, are institutionalised not just by the NC but also by the schools' inspectorate (see Cushing and Snell 2022), writing assessment frameworks (STA 2015), and statutory grammar tests (DfE 2019) (see Cushing 2020a). The stance taken towards 'standards' in these policy documents and mechanisms assumes that there is a 'best' way to speak as well as write. Teachers themselves are judged

on their ability to model and promote standardised English. For example, to gain qualified status, the Teachers Standards[1] dictate that trainee teachers:

> demonstrate an understanding of and take responsibility for high standards of literacy, articulacy and the correct use of standard English, whatever the teacher's specialist subject.
>
> (Teachers Standards, DfE 2013: 11)

Against this background of standardised language, testing and benchmarks, children who speak nonstandardised English (i.e., those who are predominantly from working-class and minoritized backgrounds) are often perceived as a problem (Genishi and Dyson 2009). The purported solution is that these children should modify their language practices. Hence, some British schools have adopted formal procedures for monitoring children's speech and disciplining those whose language does not conform to the school's understanding of 'Standard English' (Cushing 2020, 2021). These include formal dialect 'bans' and other 'zero tolerance' measures (e.g., Fricker 2013; Williams, O. 2013; in critique, see Snell 2013, 2015, fc; Giovanelli 2016; and Cushing 2020a). These initiatives are designed to tackle what are perceived as 'problem' features of spoken language, including local dialect grammar, discourse markers, and aspects of pronunciation, even though linguists such as Hudson have made clear that 'Standard English' 'is not limited to any particular accent' (Hudson in DfE 2014: 103-104; Trudgill 1999: 118). While commonplace, it is important to recognise that such overt and explicit language policing is not the default mode. Language policing materialises in covert and implicit ways as part of curricula, assessments, policies, and

[1] The Teachers' Standards have a long history, having first been introduced by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in 1983. Labour's first set of standards, in 1997, is notable for its emphasis on standardised English. The reproduction of standard language ideology continued in successive versions and is apparent in the current *Teachers' Standards* designed by the Conservatives under post-2010 reforms (see Cushing 2022b, p. 104-107).

pedagogies which systematically reinforce the notion that there is only one 'correct' or 'academic' way of speaking. Covert language policing is at work where children are encouraged to leave their 'home' ways of speaking at the school gate and adopt more 'academic' or 'appropriate' speech in the classroom. Some scholars and educational practitioners have strongly advocated for this 'code-switching' approach, believing it to be a means of empowering students who speak stigmatised dialects (e.g., Wheeler and Swords 2004; Delpit 2006). However, others have highlighted the labour, conflicts of identity and cultural alienation that marginalised speakers endure when forced to monitor and police their own language (e.g., Young 2009; Flores and Rosa 2015; Baker-Bell 2020a, b). Ultimately, whether language is regulated via overt or covert means, the message is the same: your ways of speaking are not suitable for school and other important domains, and thus are not valuable.

Flores and Rosa (2015) point out that the appropriateness approach reinforces standard language ideologies that seek to impose neat boundaries between standardised (or 'school', 'formal') English on the one hand and nonstandardised (or 'home', 'informal') dialects on the other. In my research on children's language in north-east England, I have shown that these binaries do not reflect naturally occurring language patterns. Children in two social class differentiated schools used nonstandardised forms alongside a range of other semiotic resources, *including standardardised forms* (as well as phrases from different languages, song lyrics and popular culture). Interactional analysis revealed that the children's language choices indexed social meanings that extended far beyond formality and that what was considered 'appropriate' was continually up for negotiation and contestation, depending on the exigencies of the interactional moment as well as speakers' relative position in the local social order (Snell 2013: 117; see also Snell 2010, 2018b; Moore fc). This research also makes clear that standardised forms can be used effectively outside of formal, academic contexts, while nonstandardised forms can be used in ways that assert status and authority

rather than peer-group informality and solidarity (Snell 2018b; Flores and Rosa 2015: 159). Appropriateness arguments erase this complexity and instead reinforce status differentials between standardised speakers (who are implicitly associated with school success, authority, and the public sphere) and nonstandardised speakers (who are conversely associated with peer-group solidarity, informality, and intimacy). Fairclough (1992) has also argued that because dominant social groups have normalized what counts as 'appropriate', the term tends to be used more flexibly when applied to these groups. I take up this point in Section 29.5 on 'Raciolinguistics'.

Whether imposed overtly or covertly, students may resist standardised English at school if they see it as imitating an identity and culture they do not align with. Others may internalise the message that their own language is not suitable for schooling and develop negative attitudes about themselves, losing confidence in their ability to achieve at school and in education more generally (Cheshire 1982; Heath 1983; Dyson and Smitherman 2009; Snell 2013; Charity Hudley and Mallinson 2014; Baker-Bell 2020a). In addition, students who are made to feel self-conscious about their language and/or led to believe that only those with the 'correct' answer or form of expression have the 'right to speak' (Clarke 2015) may be less likely to participate in classroom discussion (Cheshire 1982; Cheshire and Edwards 1991: 230; Godley, Carpenter and Werner 2007; Snell 2013, 2019). These students will miss out on opportunities to shape and refine their thinking through classroom dialogue (Snell 2019; Snell and Cushing 2022). Students who do participate may reproduce only those forms of talk and knowledge that they believe their teachers want to hear, having internalised the technologies of surveillance used in the classroom (Henning 2019). In both cases, teachers' access to students' thinking and language practices is limited, and thus they cannot effectively assess students' progress or provide meaningful feedback (Alexander 2020: 130). Moreover, research has shown that participation in academically stimulating classroom discussion ('dialogue') raises achievement for all pupils, and most significantly for those

from low SES backgrounds (Resnick, Asterhan and Clarke 2015; Alexander 2018). Some students retain this advantage for two to three years following a dialogic teaching intervention, and some transfer their gain from one academic domain to another (Adey and Shayer 1993, 2015; O'Connor, Michaels and Chapin 2015) and to tests of reasoning skills (Topping and Trickey 2007). Dialogic approaches to teaching and learning can thus have a significant impact on learning and cognitive development, and can be a lever for educational equality, but only where all pupils participate in classroom dialogue. In this regard, Resnick and Schantz (2015: 44) make clear that successful dialogic teaching 'privileges standards of reasoning over "correct" forms of expression, providing students with a safe space to hone their ideas'.

There is thus widespread consensus within sociolinguistics and educational research that policing nonstandardised speech at school can have a negative effect on children's confidence and sense of self and is damaging to their educational experience. However, it is important to recognise that teachers' actions are constrained by the institutions within which they work and by a whole range of policy and surveillance mechanisms, in addition to their legitimate concerns that students may face linguistic discrimination in their lives beyond education. Teachers may see it as their role to 'listen on behalf of a broader society' (Flores, Lewis and Phuong 2018: 19) in which class prejudices give rise to language stigma and discrimination. For these reasons, teachers can find themselves experiencing what Orzulak (2015) terms 'linguistic ideological dilemmas', caught between their desire to 'take up linguistically responsive positions that value student language variation' and 'expectations that they serve as gatekeepers for "standard" English(es)' (2015: 176). In the next section, I consider the broader social and institutional contexts that shape teachers' perceptions of students' language and the actions they can take in the classroom.

29.3 Misplaced sense of social justice

It is crucial to the workings of standard language ideology that acquiring the 'standard' is understood as integral to upward social mobility. This myth is powerful, at least in part, because it has a long history, having circulated for at least 200 hundred years (e.g., Cobbett 1817, cited in Beal 2018; Board of Education 1921: 72). The 1921 Newbolt report on the state of Education in England claims that the child who does not learn 'standard English' will experience 'a serious handicap in many ways' (1921: 67), including in finding employment. It describes the plight of employers, such as 'Messrs. Lever Brothers Ltd.', who purportedly find their young employees to be 'hopelessly deficient in their command of English' (1921: 72). In a clear demonstration of what Rosa (2016) calls the ideology of 'languagelessness', this major report on the teaching of English states that 'the first and chief duty of the Elementary School' is 'to *give* its pupils speech' and thus to 'make them articulate and *civilized human beings*' (1921: 60, my emphasis). Using Rosa's (2016) terms, the report renders these children as 'incapable of producing any legitimate language' and calls into question their 'legitimate personhood'. The report states that teachers will need to 'fight against the powerful influence of evil habits of speech contracted in home and street'. This fight is considered necessary because 'if a child is not learning good English he is learning bad English, and probably bad habits of thought' (1921: 10). Thus, Newbolt foregrounds social advancement and moral standards as justification for the educational reforms it seeks. In addition, it makes claims around social cohesion, identifying spoken language as a key factor in class division (1921: 22-3). Despite these egalitarian intentions, the report consistently stigmatises the language of lower-class children as 'uncouth', 'vulgar', and 'bad English'.

The argument that children must replace their own local dialects with 'standard English' for the sake of future employability prospects and upward social mobility continues

to be invoked in debates about language in education today and has been used by politicians on both sides of the UK political divide to justify aspects of educational policy and practice (e.g., Gove 2013; Lammy 2013). This argument finds renewed emphasis within the contemporary neoliberal framing of education as driving individual economic mobility as well as national economic development and global economic competition (Block, Gray and Holborow 2012: 7). From this perspective, 'standard English' is a 'technical skill' that can be acquired and exploited for individual gain and used as a 'standardized benchmark' from which to assess the linguistic competence of others (Heller and Duchêne 2011: 13). The myth of social mobility is so pervasive that many teachers succumb to it, believing it to be their moral and professional duty to regulate children's language through policing (Cushing 2020a) and whole-school dialect bans (Snell 2015, 2018a). For example, the head teacher at a primary school in Teesside who banned the use of selected local dialect forms justified the initiative by telling reporters: 'we would like to equip our children to go into the world of work and not be disadvantaged' (Williams 2013). This school serves an area of socioeconomic disadvantage, and it is the strong belief of the headteacher (and others) that language policing and the prescriptive teaching of standard English will benefit the children. The headteacher further justified the ban by citing the demands of 'the literacy framework' which 'asks children to write in standard English'. This school's local policy was thus grounded in the requirements of the NC and the assumption that policing students' spoken language will help to drive up standards of literacy (and thus educational achievement and upward mobility).

Snell and Cushing 2022 demonstrate that the assumption that policing students' speech has pedagogical value in relation to improving writing is common in educational policy and among teachers but is not borne out in practice. As their analyses demonstrate, nonstandardised forms that are routinely problematised and corrected in speech occur relatively infrequently in students' writing, and some (such as *ain't*) do not occur at all (see

also Williams 1989a, 1989b, 2007; Williamson and Hardman 1997; Constantinou and Chambers 2020). In addition, there is no evidence that the policing of oral language will help children to conform to the conventions of written standardised English (see also Snell and Richards 2017 for a review), and the potential (unintended) negative consequences are well documented. Snell and Cushing 2022 argue, however, that the perception that spoken dialect is a problem persists and drives educational policy and practice that is detrimental to whole-class participation and student learning. The teachers interviewed by Snell and Cushing describe how top-down policy pressures – e.g., from the NC, Teachers Standards, and Ofsted – cause a 'domino effect' in which they are made to feel that they must model 'Standard English' in their own speech, and then transfer this expectation to their students through overt correction and language policing. Evidence of this pressure was found in many of the Ofsted inspection reports investigated by Cushing and Snell (2022), with some reports criticising teachers and students for using nonstandardised English and others offering praise to schools for explicitly prohibiting such speech. For example, a 2019 report, criticised a school on the grounds that:

> Some adults have weak spoken standard English and grammar. […] Too many staff make errors in their standard spoken English when they teach. In some cases, this means that they model bad habits or teach incorrect grammar. Leaders should make sure that all staff, when they teach, use correct standard English. Leaders need to ensure consistency to avoid confusing the children. Staff need to do more to correct pupils' poor language or vocabulary.
>
> (cited in Cushing and Snell 2022)

Despite Ofsted's professed commitment to social justice, Cushing and Snell found that some of the most hostile comments about language were made in relation to schools serving low income and racially minoritised communities. In addition, speaking 'Standard English' was often associated with higher ability (e.g., 'more able pupils use Standard English fluently'), while those using nonstandardised accents and dialects (predominantly those from low income and minoritized backgrounds) were positioned as less able, lacking in clarity and/or confused.

The relationship between language, social class and perceived ability is documented elsewhere in the research literature, where evidence suggests that it has consequences for classroom practice. During an ethnographic study in a Year 5 primary classroom in the England, Black (2004) found that pupils who participated most often in 'productive' interactions with the teacher were middle-class children who had inherited the 'right kind of cultural capital' (2004: 47). The teacher perceived this symbolic cultural capital as evidence of high ability and formed high expectations of these pupils, affording them communicative rights that highlighted their role as legitimate participants in the classroom. Alternatively, the teacher had lower expectations of pupils who did not possess the same 'kind of cultural capital' and perceived the need to take greater control in her interactions with them. This resulted in 'unproductive interactions' in which the pupil played a relatively passive role, offering at most monosyllabic contributions. Other studies support Black's findings that perceptions of children's ability (whether held consciously or unconsciously) affect the decisions teachers make in the classroom, how they interact with students, and the level of structure and control they apply (e.g., Brophy and Good 1970; Rist 1970; Cooper and Baron 1977; Good and Nichols 2001; Myhill 2002; Snell and Lefstein 2018). Black (2004: 49-50) highlights how this can lead to a 'self-perpetuating cycle' in which teachers implicitly communicate their low expectations to perceived 'low ability' pupils, pupils respond by becoming less interested in classroom activities, and this in turn reinforces their teachers'

perceptions of their low ability or unwillingness to learn (see also Rist 1970; Michaels 1991: 303).

In a study designed to facilitate talk-intensive (or 'dialogic') teaching and learning in an East London primary school, Snell and Lefstein (2018) found that participating teachers often appealed to aspects of their pupils' social background as an explanation for lack of achievement, and especially for poor linguistic skills. Many of the teachers identified a 'language gap' (Avineri and Johnson, 2016) between students they believed experienced lots of talk at home and those for whom 'obviously, nothing goes on at home, at all' (Deputy Head Teacher, cited in Snell and Lefstein 2018: 52). The English of this second group was characterised as 'quite poor' and their language 'very limited' and lacking 'the kind of richness of vocabulary and extended language that you can get in other kinds of areas' (Deputy Head Teacher, cited in Snell and Lefstein 2018: 52). During professional development workshops, participating teachers drew upon these beliefs to make the case that only 'high ability' and 'articulate' pupils could participate in cognitively stimulating dialogic teaching and learning. Snell and Lefstein (2018) demonstrate how this view had consequences for classroom interaction and pupils' developing identities, which in turn had consequences for their learning opportunities (see also Varenne and McDermott, 1998; Wortham, 2006). More broadly, where this view prevails, dialogic teaching and learning – a pedagogic approach shown to raise achievement – will be limited only to pupils perceived as 'articulate' and 'high ability' (who are often the middle-class children already advantaged by the education system (e.g. Applebee et al., 2003)). This further compounds the disadvantage that working-class students in England face from a narrowing of the curriculum (RSA 2015, cited in Reay 2017: 56), increased discipline (Cushing 2021) and a degree of teaching to the test that disproportionately affects schools in poorer areas (Reay 2017; see also Segal, Snell and Lefstein 2016).

In Wales, the relationship between language, class and ability takes on an additional dimension, as parents choose between English- and Welsh-medium schools. Drawing on her research in rural south-west Wales, Selleck (2020) points out that choosing to learn through the medium of Welsh has come to be associated with a middle-class elite[2], with less privileged families '"making do"' with the local school regardless of its medium of instruction'; and thus 'language choice becomes a privilege and a class interest' (2020: 457). This opposition recurs (in Irvine and Gal's (2000:37-39) terms) within English-medium schools, where the Welsh stream is often positioned as prestigious and elite, and thus the preserve of the most able. During fieldwork in an English-medium secondary school, the Headteacher explained to Selleck that 'the Welsh stream consists mainly of the higher ability students' while 'the first-language Welsh speakers (which he says generally come from agricultural backgrounds and are therefore often less able) [are] consequently placed in the lower or "learner" sets' (2020: 457). This is obviously disadvantageous to the 'first-language Welsh speakers' who are effectively excluded from the Welsh language at school due (at least in part) to class stereotypes which fuel negative perceptions of agricultural families.

29.4 Academic challenges to deficit arguments

Sociolinguistics has a long history of challenging deficit views associated with the language of socioeconomically and racially marginalized populations. Following Labov's (1969, 1972) defence of Black English in the US, UK sociolinguists demonstrated that regional dialects are

[2] There may be a similar situation with Gaelic in Scotland. While I have not been able to find research studies that parallel Selleck's, a survey conducted by Stockdale et al. (2003) in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland found that enrolment in Gaelic-medium education (GME) was most commonly associated with highly educated parents. McLeod (2020: 216) makes the point that the association with socioeconomic status was already present in the late 20th century when GME was developing, especially in the cities. Here, the parents who opted for GME 'tended to be disproportionately middle-class' which fuelled a negative perception 'that GME catered to a privileged subgroup of parents whose children benefited from smaller class sizes and other forms of special treatment, such as free school transport' (McLeod 2020: 216; thanks to Claire Nance who directed me to these resources). The association between GME and privileged middle-class families has been noted by parents in Edinburgh (Lauren Hall-Lew p.c.).

as systematic, logical and rule bound as so-called 'Standard English' (e.g., Pride and Holmes 1972; Trudgill 1975, 1978, 1999). More recently, UK researchers have highlighted the sociolinguistic flexibility and dexterity of young people who speak stigmatised varieties of English, foregrounding the social meanings communicated by their linguistic choices (e.g., Cheshire 1982; Snell 2010, 2013, 2015, 2018; Moore and Snell 2011; Moore 2012, fc; Moore and Spencer 2021). Ryan's (2019) work has shown that this applies also to migrant children living in the UK, who adopt local vernacular forms in addition to standardised English (e.g., *aye* in addition to 'yes' in Glasgow) and exploit the social meaning of this variation to enact either pro- or anti-school orientations. This body of work seeks not only to legitimise working-class ways of speaking but also to make clear why attempts to eradicate nonstandardised speech at school will not succeed. Two key points emerge. First, local dialect forms are linked to children's sense of identity and class culture. Second, dialect and other nonstandardised forms index social meanings and stances that are crucial to peer-group interaction. Taking these two points together, it is thus unlikely that pupils will stop using nonstandardised forms just because their teachers tell them to (Snell 2015, 2018a). For example, working-class children in my study of language variation in Teesside, north-east England used salient features of the local dialect (such as possessive 'me' and right dislocated pronoun tags) to take stances of stylized negative affect and explicitly evaluate and position their interlocutors (Snell 2010, 2015, 2018). These stance meanings were shared not only by the working-class children in the Teesside study but also by working-class adolescents in Emma Moore's study of language variation in Bolton (Moore fc; Moore and Snell 2011). Significantly, the middle-class participants in these studies avoided both the dialect forms and the associated social acts and stances. It appears, then, that social class meanings manifest in the social acts, stances and goals communicated through language (Snell 2018). This has important ramifications for schooling. Local dialect forms, including possessive 'me', were stigmatised as 'incorrect' within formal school spaces and teacher

commentary in the Teesside data. Yet, these forms were intimately linked to the children's sense of self and community belonging and were central to negotiations around peer-group status and relationships.

Rampton (2006) has demonstrated how, for some young people, working-class speech can be used strategically in the classroom, as well as in the playground. He describes how one working-class pupil in a London secondary school, Hanif, used an exaggerated (or 'stylised') Cockney accent to transition between work and chat, combine a display of 'being on task' with signs that he is not a nerd, and 'vernacularise' school knowledge for his friends (Rampton 2006: 293-301). In doing so, he momentarily reworked the conventional linguistic hierarchy by linking 'nonstandard' Cockney to a school orientation (Rampton 2006; 298-301, 306-308). Thus, in adolescents' spontaneous stylisations, Rampton sees glimpses of speaker agency. Hanif also used 'quasi-Caribbean' for the same type of speech act, showing that 'rather than allowing ethnicity to *replace* class as an axis of social differentiation in everyday activity, in their stylisations these youngsters could […] display their [functional] equivalence' (2006: 319). Rampton admits that there was little evidence that the adolescents were trying to liberate themselves from the social structuring of their everyday lives, but in their stylisations, they make this structure 'more conspicuous, exaggerating and elaborating evaluative differentiations that were otherwise normally treated as non-problematic in practical activity', and thus 'denaturalised' class stratification (Rampton 2006: 363-354). Adolescents at this school, he argues, used stylisation to position themselves in a multi-ethnic class society (see also Cheshire and Kerswill, this volume).

This body of sociolinguistic research challenges the dominant view of working-class and minoritized children's language as falling short of middle-class standards (Miller and Sperry 2012: 112). Scholars have drawn upon such research to challenge teachers' beliefs about language, with the hope that attitudinal changes will lead to changes in teaching practices and thus in the experiences of marginalised students (e.g., Charity-Hudley and

Mallinson 2014; Reaser, Adger, Wolfram and Christian 2017; Godley and Reaser 2018). Likewise, socio-cultural researchers have challenged the notion that there is a lack of verbal interaction in working class homes (e.g., Miller, Cho and Bracey 2005; Cremin, Mottram, Powell and Drury 2014; Sperry, Sperry and Miller 2019: 1310, 1313). For example, this research has highlighted the greater frequency and sophistication of personal storytelling in poor and working-class homes than in middle-class homes (Health 1983; Miller, Cho and Bracey 2005) and suggested how these narrative skills might better be appreciated and developed within schooling (Michaels 2005). Nonetheless, despite around 50 years of academic advocacy, deficit views persist, in education and beyond. Consequently, scholars have begun to critique theories of social change within sociolinguistics (Lewis, 2018, p. 325). Central to this work is the notion that our efforts at social change should focus on challenging the structures of power that give rise to inequalities of class and race, rather than seeking to legitimise or modify individual behaviours. In the context of an inherently unequal society, these scholars argue that sociolinguistic calls for stigmatised language practices to be valued will never be heeded (Rosa and Flores 2015: 79; see also Snell 2015, 2018a). Even teachers who hold progressive views towards language variation tend to gravitate towards pedagogic approaches that privilege standardised English and existing power structures (Godley and Reaser 2018: 93), such is the pressure to reproduce the status quo. On this basis, Flores, Lewis and Phuong (2018) have argued that we should interrogate the forces that shape the institutional subject listening positions that teachers can inhabit, and then push for structural change that allows for alternative positions. I take up this point in the next section.

29.5 Raciolinguistics

Policy makers and schools prescribe standardised English with the promise that it will grant access to educational success, the job market, and upward social mobility. Those who do not

comply can expect sanctions and stigmatisation, and the dominant narrative dictates that the 'problem' lies within speakers' own language practices. However, the link between language use and upward social mobility can only be made if we view standardised English as a set of objective linguistic practices that can be neatly delineated and thus acquired and exploited. As already noted, research has indicated that this is not the case. US scholars working within the field of raciolinguistics have made the case that institutional assessments of what constitutes 'home' versus 'school' or 'vernacular' versus 'standard' language are really measures of how well a student is able to embody particular subject positions – e.g., 'idealised whiteness' – rather than empirical linguistic practices (Rosa and Flores 2017: 633; see also Alim, Rickford and Ball, 2016; Smitherman 2017; Rosa 2018; Baker-Bell 2020). Alim (2007:164) describes an interview with a teacher in a predominantly African American High School in the US, in which she describes 'she was' as an example of 'vernacular English' that has to be 'combat[ted]'. She is referring here to the generalisation of *was* to plural and second-person subjects (e.g., 'We was', 'You was') but uses the standardised variant 'she was' as her example. Building on this example, Flores and Rosa (2015) argue that forms such as 'she was' are heard as 'Standard English' when used by a privileged white student, but when spoken by an African American student the teacher hears them as 'vernacular' and 'in need of correction'. They explain this through a theory of racialised language perception, in which raciolinguistic ideologies work to position racialised bodies as linguistically deficient unrelated to any objective linguistic practice (Flores and Rosa 2015: 150). Rosa and Flores (2017) situate raciolinguistic and standard language ideologies within the broader history of European colonialism, where racial Others were discursively constructed as inferior to the European bourgeois subject as part of nation state/colonial governmentality. In their contemporary manifestations, these ideologies work to privilege white middle-class speakers, who can deviate from language practices idealised as 'standard' or 'appropriate' without stigma, while discriminating against racialized speakers, who 'can

adhere to these idealized linguistic practices and still face profound institutional exclusion' (Flores and Rosa 2015: 165).

An important aspect of a raciolinguistic perspective is the shift in analytic attention away from the speaking practices of marginalised students and towards the hearing practices of the listening subject. This approach is useful in thinking about the marginalisation of working-class children's language in Britain. In my analyses of children's language in Teesside, I have shown that working-class children regularly use forms prescribed as 'standard' alongside local dialect forms, yet their voices are consistently stereotyped as 'nonstandard' and requiring remediation in educational policy documents and debate and in media discourse. In Flores and Rosa's terms, even when these working-class speakers use forms prescribed as 'standard', they may still be stigmatized as 'nonstandard' speakers from the ideological perspective of the middle-class listening subject, who disregards or perceives as anomalous their use of so-called 'standard' forms (Flores and Rosa 2015:166; Snell 2018a). There is evidence for this in Snell and Cushing's 2022 account of how schools can be coerced by macro-level policy mechanisms into creating meso-level policies which police nonstandardised forms in the classroom, with the assumption that this will improve literacy rates. They discover a preoccupation amongst Year 5 and 6 teachers in a Leeds Primary school with *was/were* variation in their pupils' speech and writing, which they perceive as having stark consequences: 'you have to use was and were correctly, and if you're not (.) the children use was and were incorrectly and then they write it down incorrectly and then they're suddenly not writing standard English and then they're not at age related expectation'. However, despite teachers' perception that *was/were* variability is a 'huge' issue that comes through 'massively in writing', Snell and Cushing found nonstandardised *was/were* to be relatively infrequent in pupil writing, occurring an average of 1.3 times per pupil over a three-month period. They argue that teachers are particularly sensitive to this form because it is highlighted as an issue in educational policy and evaluative mechanisms,

including the NC, the national GPS tests (grammar, punctuation and spelling) taken in Year 6, and Ofsted reports, which have criticized teachers for not 'drawing attention' to the presence of nonstandardised 'we was' (see also Cushing and Snell 2022). The point is that, even where working-class children are willing and able to change the way they speak or write in order to adhere to rules of "correctness" or "appropriateness", this may do little to alter the way they are perceived by others. It is in this sense that adopting a raciolinguistic perspective helps us challenge the assumption that modifying the language of classed and racialised speakers is the key to promoting social mobility and eliminating class and racial hierarchies:

> Simply adding "codes of power" or other "appropriate" forms of language to the linguistic repertoire of language-minoritized students will not lead to social transformation […because] they are still heard as deficient language users. Attempting to teach language-minoritized students to engage in the idealized linguistic practices of the white speaking subject does nothing to challenge the underlying racism and monoglossic language ideologies of the white listening subject.
>
> (Flores and Rosa 2015: 167)

In other words, while society demands that marginalised speakers learn standardised English to advance in education and the public domain, it continues to find their linguistic performances wanting while rewarding white middle- and upper-class speakers whose language does not conform to an idealised 'standard'. The problem thus cannot be found and remedied within individual speakers, but rather within state structures and institutions. On this basis, Rosa and Flores (2017: 640-641) argue for a 'reconfiguration-oriented approach [that] seeks to connect language struggles to broader contestations of power'. They do not suggest that attempts to valorise language diversity (such as those outlined above) are unimportant (cf. Block 2014: 104) – on the contrary, these can improve the education of marginalised students – but they make clear that such attempts must work in lockstep with

efforts to challenge the inequalities of race and class that are baked into global capitalism, otherwise the authority of 'standard English' will remain unchallenged and class-normative white people will benefit much more than the marginalised children we set out to support (see also Flores et al. 2018).

29.6 Conclusion

The language of children from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds is often described in terms of gaps, absences, and deficiencies, with a purported 'lack' of vocabulary and standardised forms blamed as the cause of underachievement. Interventions designed to erase nonstandardised speech and promote the prescriptive teaching of 'Standard English' are thus justified as a means of empowering these pupils under a social justice agenda. As part of this agenda, teachers face pressure from a range of policy and surveillance mechanisms to police their own and their pupils' speech. Many feel compelled to correct nonstandardised grammar in children's talk, often with the assumption that this will improve their writing and school literacy rates. Yet, there is no evidence that the policing of oral language will help children conform to the conventions of written standardised English. In addition, features of spoken dialect grammar are relatively infrequent in pupils writing. Insisting that children modify their speech towards an idealised 'standard' will not work as a pedagogic strategy. Indeed, this approach will only ever exacerbate structural inequalities, given the negative impact that language policing can have on working-class children's confidence, sense of identity, and educational experience.

Sociolinguists have typically countered negative perceptions of nonstandardised language in education by using their linguistic research to challenge teachers' beliefs about language (e.g., demonstrating to teachers that nonstandardised dialects are as systematic, logical and rule governed as standardised English) and/or valorise working class and

marginalised language practices. However, such attempts have not always taken account of the broader sociohistorical context within which discourses of linguistic deficit have developed, and thus have sidestepped the issue of why language policing makes sense to teachers and how their actions are constrained by the institutions and structures within which they work. This is a problem because we can only counter dangerous beliefs about language when we have understood how they are socially produced and accepted as convincing and effective (Woolard 1998:10). Our research needs to reveal, understand, and then challenge the 'stock arguments' (Blommaert 1999:10) that have perpetuated standard language ideology and the practices it engenders. One such stock argument is the notion that speaking 'Standard English' will help working-class children go on to find good jobs and achieve upward social mobility. I have attempted to debunk this myth by arguing that certain groups of speakers – those marginalised in society because of their social class or race – will be heard as deficient language users regardless of whether they adhere to idealised linguistic 'standards' because listener perceptions are influenced by beliefs about class and race and how these social categories link to academic ability. Here I introduced a raciolinguistic perspective, which emphasises the need to attend not to the speaking practices of pupils, but to the listening practices of the individuals or systems that are evaluating pupils' language. In addition, I argued that language policing and the prescriptive teaching of standardised English may actually stifle social mobility, holding back students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. This is because 'Standard English only' policies may discourage some pupils from participating in classroom discussion, causing them to miss out on the dialogic interactions that have been shown to raise achievement for all pupils, and especially for those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Policies and interventions that delegitimise the language of low-income, working class and racialised speakers reinforce problematic gap and deficit discourses, absolve schools and policymakers of responsibility, and shut down other ways of conceptualizing the

issue of educational inequality (Avineri and Johnson, 2015; McCarty 2015). While research which seeks to counter these initiatives by validating and legitimising the language of marginalised speakers continues to be important, scholars such as Block (2014, 2018), Rosa and Flores (2017), and Lewis (2018) have argued that future work must also highlight and address the structural inequalities and injustices that are the true cause of educational underachievement in low-income, working class and racialised pupils if we are to effect real and lasting change. In addition, there is a need for future work that examines how research on the language of socioeconomically and racially marginalized children has been taken up (or not) in educational policy making and practice. For example, why has the forty-year-old notion of a '30-million-word gap' taken hold in British educational debates and policy making despite major flaws in the original US-based research, while counter narratives have failed to gain purchase? What barriers exist when attempting to translate research on British language variation and ideologies into policy or practice? Additional research on language and educational inequalities in Scotland and Northern Ireland, as well as England and Wales, would be useful in this regard. Comparative research across these different settings can help us understand how educational policy on language is translated into practice in different contexts, each with their specific constraints and possibilities. Such a comparison may also help to diminish 'our sense of policy being immutable and suggests ways it can be challenged which may not always be clear without a broad perspective' (Thrupp, 1998: 205).

In addition to understanding the impact research on British Englishes can have on educational policy and practice, future work might also explore how better understanding educational policy and practice can inform research on British Englishes. This chapter has shown how ideas about language in educational policy and accountability mechanisms (such as Ofsted) can filter into local school policies and pedagogical choices. It is possible that these attitudinal currents further emanate into the communities that schools serve, and this might help to explain (some) patterns of language variation and change in those communities.

For example, how (if at all) does the educational preoccupation with tackling nonstandardised *was/were* impact on *was/were* variation in wider communities of speakers? There may be gains to be made in work on British Englishes by investigating how particular linguistic features and varieties are conceptualiused in British educational policy, curricula, guidelines, and evaluative mechanisms.

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