

**Teaching Students to Talk *Real Good*:  
Language, Networks, and Justice**

Emma Busse 2015  
POV 423  
Winter 2015  
Professor Howard Pickett

**Abstract:** Standard American English (SAE) has emerged as the dominant language in traditional American marketplaces because of the affiliation of SAE with certain social groups. Many students in America, however, grow up in homes where the dominant language of America is not used. Teaching language in America's schools involves hard tradeoffs between extreme system inequity and high individual costs. Given Bourdieu's understanding of the interaction between language and power, the American school system must find a way to teach the dominant language without overwhelmingly imposing the dominant culture on all citizens. To do this, there must be a focus on the role of networks, code switching, and the way that non-economic capital is valued in America. In order to promote SAE without undermining the language that students enter school with, there must be a shift in the way that Americans understand linguistics and value languages.

## Teaching Students to Talk *Real Good*: Language, Networks, and Justice

### 1. Introduction

Language exists as a means of communicating ideas, as a facet of personal identity, and as a proxy for demonstrating power. Given the important role language plays for individuals and society alike, understanding the value of specific languages, the historical structures that led to the emergence of a dominant, and the growing debate about language in the classroom are important aspects to understanding personal identity, the distribution of resources within society, and the association of language with power. But, because of the intricacies that explain language in society, language education becomes a question of justice when concerns about economic outcomes of students, social inclusion, and fair equality of opportunity enter the equation. Language, while far from the only facet of financial poverty and social inclusion, certainly deserves some careful consideration when trying to optimize justice within the existing American social world because of the complex role it plays for individuals and institutions.

Imagine a student coming into an English only grade school who speaks only Spanish. That student would be taught to speak only an English standard, ignoring the language capabilities that the student entered school with. There would be no appreciation for the value of Spanish speaking ability or acknowledgment of the jaded history of discrimination that led to the emergence of English as the dominant language in the American society. The student would likely become either discouraged from learning or feel it was necessary to distance themselves from the perceived inferiority of their home environment. However, that student who learned English in the formal setting would have the ability to enter into the typical American job market speaking in line with what the market requires. In this example, though, simply because teaching English has led to increased market opportunities and economic potential for this student, the

requirements of justice have not been wholly met. The question here becomes is it morally permissible to allow a practice to continue that solidifies economic gain for some at the cost of further reifying social norms that are emergent due to unjust systems of subjugation of people and cultures, as would be occurring through this pure standardization of English approach.

On the other hand, take a social world where the primary goal for meeting the requirements of justice in terms of language ability is avoiding the reification of a dominant language tied to unjust hegemony, all else in society equal to today's standards. Imagine a group of three students entering a classroom, each from drastically different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. One student speaks Spanish, one speaks a non-standard dialect of English, like Ebonics, and the final speaks in a manner that is mostly consistent with Standard American English (SAE). Given that the social world that these students are existing in is determined to destandardize English (as a means of reducing the reification of culturally imposed unjust dominants), the teacher may be able to communicate with some of the students, but the students without formal knowledge of a common language will be unable to speak to one another, to share experiences, and to participate in a macro world. This inability to communicate could lead to social exclusion at school despite preserving ability to affiliate with speakers of the same language in the home network and to identify as a speaker of said language. Additionally, given that the social world we are hypothesizing about that is, for all intents and purposes, the same as current American culture, these students would potentially leave school without a common market language. This lack of a common language could come because the teacher is incapable of speaking to all students or simply because the teacher is making calculated efforts to prevent imposing an unjust norm. Commonality of language is important for dissemination of information. If individuals cannot share information they cannot participate in the same market

without assistance. A world where this is the case would undermine the last few centuries of social development and the development of trade. A common economic axiom is that trade theoretically makes everyone better off (Mankiw 2008), but if language barriers prevent a market from developing, then trade cannot occur. Therefore, people are not as well off as they could be otherwise. Ultimately, while achieving the goal of decreasing cultural imposition of language, this world is both impractical and unjust.

If the two polar arguments of potential language teaching practices are both unjust, an optimization problem develops about creating tradeoffs to find the most just way of teaching language possible within the constraints of the social reality within which we live. An optimization problem simply refers to a situation where benefits must be maximized and costs must be minimized. The ethical question here becomes how we maximize justice when facing tradeoffs in the real world. And while optimization of justice and tradeoffs sound like a sacrifice of justice, the unjust nature of the current culture dictates maximizing justice by considering systemic inequities and individual's costs in their daily lives. The scenarios above describe conflicting approaches to language and justice, but the first highlights a systemic inequity that leads to injustice. The second highlights individual's costs within an attempt at a non-prejudicial or discriminatory system. The implications of this issue are of increasing importance, too, considering that 35 million US residents (or 12% of the population) speak Spanish in the home, with many other languages also being widely spoken throughout the American populace (Leveen 2011). Therefore, balancing these two extremes is a challenge that involves understanding the tradeoffs that are made when choosing a dominant language as opposed to esoterically valuing all languages equally leading to a completely impractical world. While the language of optimization and facing tradeoffs here seem to reference economic outcomes, the nature of

language involves financial poverty but also poverty of capabilities and of whole social networks.

It seems as though the current American system is at an equilibrium, in terms of an equilibrium referring to a state where opposing forces are balanced. However, this equilibrium is not as just as it could be. The only way to move past a non-optimal equilibrium is to introduce an exogenous shock to the system.<sup>1</sup> The argument that I am making here is that changing the way that American society views linguistics could act as the exogenous shock to change the way we teach English to a better equilibrium between system-wide injustice and high individual costs.

Throughout the early twentieth century, Spanish speakers in the American school system were marginalized in a formal education system that taught solely English and failed to acknowledge the importance, both culturally and practically, of the language these students were speaking. In 1968, President Johnson signed into law The Bilingual Education Act, with virtually no dissent that recognized the nationwide need for improved education options for students of Limited English Speaking Ability (LESA) (Crawford 1998). However, this law, while a step towards promoting a system that attempted to ameliorate some of the systemic inequities in the language realm, ultimately adopted practices that have been aimed at increasing Standard English ability in America, as opposed to promoting true bilingualism or appreciation for other languages while teaching English. This failed to recognize the emergence of English from hegemonic and discriminatory roots or what linguists of the nineteenth century have been pointing to: the fact that “idealized language... is an object which has been *pre-constructed* by a set of social-historical conditions endowing it with the status of the sole legitimate... language of a particular community” (Thompson 2003).

The reality of the current system is that the English language tends to dominate economic, educational, and social exchanges in America, and within the task of reconciling the two linguistic worlds above in respect to language education in the American school system comes the need to address the systemic injustice while still preserving as much individual benefit as possible. To start, understanding why English dominates may involve some of the common assumptions associated with being a capable speaker of a language, for:

As competent speakers we are aware of the many ways in which linguistic exchanges can express relations of power. We are sensitive to the variations in accent, intonation and vocabulary which reflect different positions in the social hierarchy. We are aware that individuals speak with differing degrees of authority, that words are loaded with unequal weights depending on who utters them and how they are said. (Thompson 2003, p.1)<sup>2</sup>

The power dynamics of language and social hierarchy are only further reified when access to the dominant is withheld from minority groups, as happens when legitimate access to SAE is contingent upon the language that a student enters school with. But, just because practically, the ability to speak SAE is necessary to appropriately navigate the American social world today does not mean there is less value in other languages or that English-only curriculums are the best option.

Each time individuals communicate, information is exchanged, but what happens if two individuals come together in the social space to exchange information but do not have a common language through which to exchange said information? There becomes a fracture in society that prevents individuals from connecting through information exchange; there becomes a social space where the two players lack ability to participate because they do not share a common understanding of the rules of the game in this social setting. Information dissemination becomes increasingly challenging as fractures appear in the language of a populace. However, all of this

does not necessitate that only one language is used, but rather that one, single language is accessible and understood by all. Valuing one way of communicating is not mutually exclusive from valuing another, and there should be a change in the way languages are viewed, moving more toward a complementary idea of languages' value together and away from a competitive or supplementary conception of language. Arguably teaching English while preserving students' nonstandard home languages could benefit society through an understanding of non-financial capital by increasing economic outcomes, decreasing social exclusion, and fostering greater access to fair and equal opportunities for all. This idea is essentially a middle ground between the two polar worlds of the injustice of high individual costs and systemic inequity.

## **2. Dominant versus Nonstandard Forms**

When speaking about language value, it is important to understand that languages are never more valuable linguistically than one another, but rather social and cultural affiliation of speakers, vocabulary, and arenas of use often lead to dominance of some languages. SAE is in no way linguistically superior to other languages or dialects but has taken a forefront in American society because of its affiliations. For Pierre Bourdieu portrays, “everyday linguistic exchanges as situated encounters between agents endowed with socially structured resources and competencies, in such a way that every linguistic interaction... bears the traces of the social structure that it both expresses and helps to reproduce” (Thompson 2003, p.2). Given the interaction between language and power, the importance or perceived normalcy of SAE is truly a testament of the hierarchical social power of the agents who perpetuate SAE as the norm.

SAE refers to the form of English used by those traditionally in power or to “the variety... used in writing, especially printing; ... the variety associated with the education system... the variety spoken by those who are often referred to as ‘educated people’” (Rickford

1999, p. 330). Non-standard can mean either a dialectal difference or an actual language difference from this standard. Differentiating between languages and dialects can be quite difficult for social and political reasons. For example, as linguist John Rickford pointed out, Cantonese and Mandarin are both technically dialects of Chinese despite being mutually unintelligible, but Norwegian and Swedish, often mutually intelligible languages, are considered as separate languages (1999, p. 322). For this reason when the term non-standard is used it refers both to languages and to dialects. Non-standard speakers in America, for example, include those who speak Spanish and those who speak Ebonics or African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Given this understanding of the dominant and various non-standard forms, it is easy to see how so many students in the American public education system come into school speaking a language separate from the language of the school.

However, just because SAE has become a market standard does not mean that other languages lack value and merit. There is nothing abnormal about being a speaker of a language outside of English. In fact, there is an increasing percentage of the American population that does not speak SAE in their home networks—for example, over 25% of school aged populations in California are classified as English Language Learners (ELL) (Wolf et al. 2008). This goes to show that there is no “normal” language in broad American culture, but at the same time there remains a dominance of SAE due in part to the political, economic, and social dominance of its commonly cited affiliates but also because of the cited need for a universal means of communication.

### **3. Language as Code**

Language codes refer to the style of language being used at a given time. The spectrum of codes goes from quite formal to completely informal, or as Basil Bernstein, a twentieth century



sociologist, put it, from elaborated to restricted codes. These modes of expression vary from words used to the implicit references made by speakers; elaborated codes assume very little shared knowledge and context in comparison to restricted codes (Bernstein 1971, p. 125). For example, think how a public speaker on a national scale spells out each aspect of his argument, this is the employment of a greatly elaborated code. Considering that “Some variants of codes will be very crudely associated with social class” (Bernstein 1964, p. 56), the restricted code, which empirical evidence shows is more common in working class settings, draws on shared understanding, depicts a social inclusion of speakers, and includes much more use of unexplained highly specialized terms (Bernstein 1964). Restricted codes are, for example, the way that you speak with your close friends, using references that are automatically understood without a recapitulation of previous or outside events. Elaborated codes, typically associated with middle and upper classes, on the other hand, are more detailed and involve fewer assumptions of common language and common knowledge (Bernstein 1964).

In the broad discussion of linguistic codes, code switching, or the ability to switch from way of speaking immediately to another, matters when exposure to multiple codes is a reality. In a classroom that has speakers of multiple languages, there must be an active attempt to teach the art of code switching, and in order to do this there must be an increased understanding of linguistics for all parties. However, this increased need for education in code switching is applicable across the board—to speakers of any language. Elaborated codes, by nature, require more work at explanation with fewer assumptions of commonality, so teaching an elaborated SAE code in the school system, while necessary is not the only issue here. Teachers should also become aware of the need to show code variation. This can be done through incorporating a

range of written and oral activities that highlight the times and places where various codes make the most sense (Whitney 2005).

Dialectal differences can be seen as code based differences, and language differences can be seen as code differences as well. The true struggle here is twofold—first of all, as explicated before, a common language is necessary for exchanging information and an ability to use the proper code based on the setting is necessary for social inclusion in all contexts. Commonality of language is necessary for economic success in terms of market-based employment, but ability to use a common language with the home network is necessary to feel included there—hence, a practical implication of valuing multiple ways of speaking and of code switching. Ultimately, teaching SAE involves teaching the elaborated code of SAE for all, while incorporating examples of times and places where other codes are appropriate. Code switching is something individuals do all the time, especially educated and privileged individuals because of their unknowing exposure to a series of codes. Therefore, emphasizing code switching in the classroom may help to lessen the implications of the gap between the language of home and school for some students who speak nonstandard forms of English at home.

#### **4. Capital: Economic, Social, and Cultural**

Capital traditionally refers to the monetary assets and physical property that an entity holds that can be invested or spent to gain something else. But capital's definition has evolved and changed to include non-monetary and non-physical resources as well. The broadening definition of capital seems to include just about any resources that are available to be used for any sort of gain. Pierre Bourdieu differentiated three forms of capital: economic, social, and cultural capital (1986). Economic capital is those monetary and physical assets that can be invested to make a monetary profit. Social capital is an individuals' embeddedness in socialized

networks of individuals and institutions. Cultural capital, however, references any social assets that promote social mobility or the ability to move (typically upward) between social classes. When speaking about the value of gaining social and cultural capital for social mobility, it is important to note that social mobility does not necessitate economic mobility, but the two are certainly correlated. The social mobility mechanism through which cultural capital facilitates movement is that increased exposure to and therefore embodiment of different social experiences, including exposure to the arts, to certain types of sports, to new ways of thinking via education, etc. This promotes affiliation with social groups that value those things.

#### ***4a. Social Capital and Networks***

Social capital, understood as network positions and ties, can exist as either bridging or bonding capital. Bonding social capital involves inward reinforcement of network identities. Bridging social capital involves, on the other hand, outward position and ties across cohesive subgroups in a network (Putnam 2000). Bonding social capital also plays a role in defining and strengthening what it means to be an “in-group” member, this can further the dichotomy between insiders and outsiders within various networks in society (Putnam 2000). Social networks typically include like members; this is a principle known as homophily (McPherson et al. 2001). This fact supports the assertion that networks tend to share a common language in order to diffuse information effectively. In many regards, highly bonded networks use highly restricted codes because of the social proximity of members and density of their ties. The commonality of language bonds networks together creating lines of the in-group versus the out-group when language dichotomy exists. Those who are socially positioned and have the ability to speak the languages of two tangential social networks (like the home and the school) become potential bridging ties for the networks. Networks with highly bridged resources may be more likely to

employ elaborated codes because of the variability within group membership. Therefore, if code switching is seen as a positive aspect of valuing multiple languages, increasing bridging capital positions can help to increase access to types of code.

Bridging and bonding capital are also reflective of the strength of ties and the density of networks. Strong and weak network ties refer to the ties between acquaintances (weak) and close friends (strong) (Granovetter 1983). In his groundbreaking work, “The Strength of Weak Ties,” Granovetter revolutionized network theory by changing the focus from strong ties to the weak ties of acquaintances. Before Granovetter, social scientists tended to focus on the reinforcing relationships that increase the density of networks (i.e. Putnam’s bonding capital), but Granovetter showed that information dissemination occurred most quickly and reached the furthest through populations with a great number of weak ties (i.e. Putnam’s bridging capital)<sup>3</sup>. As his title implies, there is a great wealth of resources that can be acquired through weak ties of acquaintanceship. Ultimately this theory concludes that “individuals with few weak ties will be deprived of information from distant parts of the social system and will be confined to the provincial news and views of their close friends. This deprivation will not only insulate from the latest ideas and fashions but may put them in a disadvantages position in the labor market” due to the limited dispersion of new information in their networks (Granovetter 1983, p. 202). Those individuals in the bridge position in terms of social capital have the potential to create new weak ties in other networks and promote information dispersion throughout both networks.

Within social capital, networks overlap and do not always have clear, definitive boundaries. In the American education system, students are members of a home network and a school network. For many students today, a dichotomy exists between the home and school language, and therefore between the home and school networks. In 1999 seventeen percent of the

American population ages five to 24 spoke a language other than English at home (Klein et al. 2004, p.iii), and this percentage has continued to increase since that time. While the number of strong ties in the home network may be great, limited weak ties can further disadvantage students by disadvantaging whole networks. Weak ties are highly unlikely between those who do not share a common language. This gap in networks of home and school can affect a student's life trajectory by limiting the ties they have to social networks with various languages if both languages are not learned and preserved. A student can seldom succeed in a network with a primary language that they do not have access to and therefore do not understand. For example, if just SAE were taught to a student who grew up in a home where AAVE was the primary language and AAVE were taught to be a bastardized form of English, then said student would likely spend their time speaking SAE even when at home. This may result in the exclusion of this individual from their home network when they denounce the language of that network. Cutting ties with an entire network disadvantages all involved.

Therefore, by increasing the ability of the student to communicate in the language of both networks, there can be an increase in ability to remain a member in each network. The proponents of only teaching and recognizing standardized English implicitly focus on escaping the home network in favor of joining the school and eventually labor market network. This is however problematic. Language plays an important role in culture because of the practical purpose it serves as a currency in person-to-person exchanges but also because of the role language plays in personal identity. Ties to various networks promote an increase in access to social roles and ultimately bolster a student's potential.

Every social network has some good, useful, and important traits, and by teaching only a standardized language without paying attention to the position that these students hold in other

networks, schools are disadvantaging youth who do not speak the standard in their home network by de facto encouraging that they cut ties with other networks. Homophily, or association of like bodies with one another, exists for all types of ties—strong and weak (McPherson et al. 2001). Since, as Granovetter famously noted, there is strength in weak ties, increasing access to English language ability is a means of increasing access to other languages by providing a personal quality (i.e. English language ability) that many share and could associate under the pretexts of language homophily.

Networks are ever changing, and as students develop their personalized capital, including their social and cultural capital, they are definitively going to be exposed to a series of networks (and subgroups within networks) that use various types of language. Having the ability to coexist peacefully between two distinct social groups while students, usually as done through learning to code switch, will help students later to develop their ability to value ways of taking that differ from their own, increasing their ability to exist in society, no matter what shape society takes.

Given the location of the students between two coexisting network structures when the network language varies, schools have the opportunity to bolster the student's potential as a bridge of social capital. The bridging social capital network offers a "linkage to external assets and [increases] information diffusion" (Putnam 22). Information diffusion across networks with different languages can only occur through bilingual and dual members of the networks. This potential for community level gain only buttresses the potential for individual level gain through finding a way to support dual membership in networks through the re-evaluation of home language as a necessary part of linguistic capital while also teaching the formalized school language in order to further increase potential future network membership opportunities.

#### *4b. Cultural and Linguistic Capital*

Cultural capital includes a broad range of exchangeable social assets including linguistic capital. Linguistic capital is the linguistic resources that can be invested by an individual in order to make a gain—economic or social in nature. For as Auguste Comte said, “Language is a kind of wealth, which all can use at once without causing any diminution of the store... for all, freely participating in the general treasure, unconsciously aid in its preservation” (Bourdieu 2003, p. 44). Bourdieu builds on Auguste Comte’s classic conception of the investable potential of language ability by explaining linguistic capital and its relation to symbolic power first by pointing to the structures through which a dominant language emerges by saying, “The recognition of the legitimacy of the official language has nothing in common with an explicitly professed, deliberate and revocable belief, or with an intentional act of accepting a ‘norm’” (Bourdieu 2003, p. 51). This points to the hegemony of discriminatory practices that led to SAE dominance in America today. Bourdieu continues by saying, “It is inscribed...in dispositions which are impalpably inculcated...by the sanctions of the linguistic market, and which are therefore adjusted...to the chances of material and symbolic profit which the laws of price formation characteristic of a given market objectively offer to the holders of a given linguistic capital” (Bourdieu 2003, p. 51). In this convoluted definition of linguistic capital, Bourdieu is basically defining linguistic capital as the language ability of a speaker in a given market that can be invested to produce a personal profit—sometimes economic and sometimes symbolic. Linguistic capital mirrors traditional economic capital in that it refers to something that can be invested to gain something else. Therefore, based on Bourdieu’s operationalization of linguistic capital it is evident that a sufficient definition of this conception includes all of communication and not simply vocabulary and grammar rules.

Based on Bourdieu's conception, linguistic capital typically refers to the dominant language in a given market or social network, but in places and networks where languages diverge from the dominant, linguistic capital still exists, but no longer as SAE ability. Linguistic capital can refer to communicative ability in all languages, not just the English standard, depending on the market/network that is being considered—essentially anywhere that another language dominates. Students who come to school speaking a non-standard dialect do not just lack linguistic capital in English but have linguistic capital from another language that can be used to derive profit in networks outside of the dominant market network. The single-mindedness of American culture with regard to language may lead some to believe that linguistic capital here only references English ability. But that is far from the truth.

### **5. Language and Social Exclusion: Why an Understanding of Language Matters**

Traditionally, the American school system has systematically rejected the language of the home in cases where it is not in line with the dominant. However, I argue that justice would require the school system to increase legitimate access to the standard without undermining the language of the home in order to promote new economic opportunities, to keep existing opportunities (both market-based and social), and to create new opportunities for social inclusion without eliminating pre-existing ones.

The task of figuring out how to do this can be quite challenging, but if teachers were more aware of language differences at home, a step could be made towards at least acknowledging the existence of a dichotomy. One teacher, who supports this notion, goes as far as to state, "It is time for a revolution, one in which teachers respect and value students' home language and use it to help students become more effective rhetoricians" (Whitney 2005, p.69). Practically, teachers may never be capable of understanding every home language of every



student, but that does not mean that justice would not require a legitimate attempt to broaden the linguistic knowledge of educators.

By acknowledging the existence of non-standard dialects and recognizing non-English language speakers as capable communicators, the school system can increase standard linguistic knowledge without reifying systemic injustice. Simply acknowledging the home language in order to teach the dominant de facto pits the gains an individual might get from getting higher social status linguistic capital (that of the school system) against the offense of the home “culture.” Making real steps toward teaching language in a manner that displays how and why language is a proxy for power while not devaluing any languages, ultimately emphasizes that there is something to be gained through access to different networks but language can determine whether or not an individual has that access. Membership in any network can be empowering because of the social resources that are tied to that network. Social resources are “accessible through one’s direct and indirect ties” (Lin 1999, p.468). By only teaching and supporting English, schools are failing to recognize how empowering it can be to be a part of multiple networks and to have access to all of those networks’ social resources. It is important to note that while certain status positions are tied to increased social resources, there is a presence of social resources in all networks. The economic terminology that often goes along with investment and profit of social resources brings up an important point: “social relations are often built up for non-economic reasons...and sometimes actors benefit from social resources without actively striving for it” (Huber 2008, p.165). Teaching English to a certain threshold is necessary to provide access to some networks that historically have held great power in American society (like the traditional market), but English is not the only language that has value. Supporting the

language of the home, increases access to various networks. Access to various networks, including a supported affiliation to kinship networks, promotes broad social inclusion.

While poverty is commonly identified as a shortage of economic resources, some scholars argue poverty is at its core about social exclusion. John Iceland, a poverty focused sociologist, references classical sociologist Marx Weber's concept of exclusion (Iceland 2003, p.79) while discussing poverty as a result of the unequal distribution of power in society (Iceland 2003, p. 88). Poverty scholars in decades past have sometimes cited a culture of poverty where, "the poor are essentially different, governed by their own code of values and behavior" (Iceland 2003, p. 95). Iceland, along with many other contemporary scholars, disagrees with this culture of poverty thesis mainly because it fails to highlight that the poor are not innately "different" but rather exist in a society seeking to marginalize them to the point of social exclusion. Language plays a part in the exclusionary process in a manner consistent with Bourdieu's conception of language as symbolic power. American public schools by failing to recognize the language of the home become primary agents in the process of social exclusion of "non-standard" members. By failing to preserve and support the home languages of American school children from varying backgrounds, the school system is failing to promote social inclusion in other networks, outside of the standard of school. Doing this repeatedly only results in a cumulative stratification of society where those who are different are socially excluded (Iceland 2003, p.80).

Based on a study supported by the US Department of Education, language minority students are more likely to be from low-income families (Klein et al. 2004, p.vii) and to have trouble with employment later (Klein et al. 2004, p.29). Given this average of a home with fewer resources, increasing the linguistic capital (understood as an asset necessary to not only maintain but to build the "bridge role" and the social position of the student) would increase students'

access to opportunities in both networks. Teaching the standard through employing the non-standard is a proposal that saw some light about a decade ago. In 1996, in Oakland, CA, the Board of Education attempted to make Ebonics an acceptable language of instruction in public schools (Labov 2012, p.77-78), a step towards trying to integrate the language of the home and school for students who spoke primarily AAVE at home. Many argued that this may be a step too far, but if general understanding about language and power were promoted, hopefully proposals like this one would gain more traction for their attempts to promote social inclusion through language. This would be a step towards understanding the linguistic capital of students who are speaking any language when they come into the formalized school setting.

Oftentimes, especially for English speakers of non-standard dialects, there are negative consequences stemming from a structural misclassification of their primary language as a bastardization of English as opposed to a subset of a language existing with different rules. For example, AAVE exists as a subset of SAE that, unlike almost all other known American dialects of English, uses its own grammatical structure. Many scholars have wondered how AAVE trends have persisted in groups that are geographically separate, and William Labov offers an answer, “The answer to the question, why are these differences increasing? is first and foremost, residential segregation, as reinforced and maintained by institutional racism” (2012, p.65). AAVE exists with a codified set of grammatical rules that are different from the standard, but that are often misunderstood as failures to comprehend SAE grammar. This misunderstanding of linguistic variation has major consequences for speakers of the nonstandard.

Currently, African Americans have a higher risk of being falsely diagnosed with a literacy related learning disability due in large part to the difference in the language that they speak when they arrive at school (Craig and Washington 2006, p. 63). Teachers often have a

hard time differentiating variations in speech and writing that are developmental versus dialectal for speakers of a non-SAE variety (Craig and Washington 2006, p.29). The potential misclassification of language habits of students often results in a misdiagnosis of a learning disability, further disadvantaging and excluding the student. This is just one of the concrete examples of how hierarchical distinctions in language based on the social status of its speakers have explicit costs on individuals. With a diagnosis of a learning disability comes a new set of challenges for a student, especially for one who has been misclassified as learning disabled. An approach that only looks to Standard English as solving the educational, employment, and economic problems of individuals reifies the hierarchy that is leading to these explicit social costs for real individuals.

AAVE is not economically as advantageous as SAE in most traditional labor markets in the US because these labor markets are embedded in social systems and relationships. Creating a group of students who are increasingly marginalized for their lack of SAE language ability only furthers the systemic inequities that reinforce historical discrimination and racism. Part of the reason why SAE has emerged in labor markets as the most useful comes from the social status of the groups typically speaking this language. Essentially, large groups of privileged individuals who dwell higher up in the social stratification of American societies have traditionally spoken SAE. By doing this, they have created a society dependent on a SAE because of the reproduction of language as a public good, used by all without depleting a source, unconsciously reinforced in society again and again. This consensus of language by socially higher ranked groups has led to language becoming a marker of status, with language differences hinting at differences in social status. People have come to pay penalties for speaking dialects and languages that coincide with minorities. In many cases, language deviation from SAE has become a marker of lower social

status, a stigmatization of language identities occurs with the focus only on SAE. The language of America, while a useful part of modern society, cannot be seen wholly outside of this historical context, noting roots in discrimination. Therefore, acknowledging this, Americans can begin to accept other means of communicating as valid and having worth while still enjoying the ease of a commonly understood and spoken de facto national language.

### **6. What Might A Compromise of the Polar Extremes Look Like?**

Mitigating systemic inequity while maintaining maximized individual economic opportunity through changing the way English and all languages are taught in the American school system seems like a reasonable goal, but the exact steps that will make this happen are not wholly or immediately clear. While I do not have a silver bullet to solve this optimization problem, a few ways to begin reaching this lofty goal are apparent.

A first step toward a just equilibrium between systemic injustice and individual costs is increasing the education of teachers in linguistics. This would increase the knowledge of those who come into contact with speakers of languages other than the dominant of languages outside of the dominant. This could reduce the number of misdiagnoses of learning disabilities associated with literacy for speakers of the non-dominant. Additionally, this could increase the teacher's ability to speak about the relationship between language and power—or help teachers show why certain languages are dominant, why a dominant continues to prevail, and what role non-dominant languages play in personal identity.

In addition to increasing educators' knowledge of linguistics, creating integrated curricula could help to show the value of non-dominant languages. There can be a concerted effort to integrate examples and literature from other cultures. Some classic literature involves dialogue in non-dominant language and cultural references, settings, and characters that are from

networks or cultures where non-dominant languages typically prevail.<sup>4</sup> The use of multi-cultural literature allows for a conversation to begin about language differences.

Another approach to integrated linguistic curricula would be to start teaching a second language, like Spanish, in conjunction with English from a young age. This would open up a dialogue about both code switching and the derivation of Standard English as dominant. Some may argue that political support for bilingual education would be impossible to gain on a national level. However, there is a common value placed on bilingualism in the most affluent socioeconomic sector of society, so why could this principal not be applied universally to all socioeconomic status individuals. Claire Bower, a professor at Yale University, characterizes the current polarized issue of bilingualism quite well when she points out that “To put it bluntly, bilingualism is often seen as ‘good’ when it’s rich English speakers adding a language as a hobby or another international language, but ‘bad’ when it involves poor, minority, or indigenous groups adding English to their first language, even when the same two languages are involved” (Bower 2014). This points directly to the interplay between language and power that Bourdieu highlights in his discussion of the social value of language coming from the affiliation of its speakers.

I do not think that any one of these options will on its own (or even necessarily in conjunction with the others) completely eliminate this issue. Increasing integrated curricula, teachers’ knowledge of linguistics, the teaching of code switching, and opening a dialogue about the relationship between language and power are all potential cogs in the wheel that begins to touch the problems that our current school system faces with justly teaching language. These are real and practical steps that can help to reach a more just equilibrium.

## 7. What Does Justice Require?

An easy first step for a budding ethicist trying to ground an argument in a theory of justice is to turn to John Rawls' oft-cited *Theory of Justice*.<sup>5</sup> However, the reason why I believe that changing the way that language is taught to students in the American education system comes from a principle of Fair Equality of Opportunity, but not necessarily the Principle in the manner that Rawls' articulates it. Richard Arneson, a contemporary philosopher rejects Rawls' theory for a number of reasons.<sup>6</sup> These criticisms of and objections to Rawls are in line with why this proposal for revamping language education is rooted in justice. Students should have access to Fair Equality of Opportunity that takes into account socialization. Socialization undoubtedly includes the language that a student speaks at home, and when the socialization process (both in school and at home) leads to differences in ambitions and developed talents (like ability to speak a language), then this process must be taken into consideration in order to guarantee Fair Equality of Opportunity. Therefore, I argue that creating a system that offers legitimate access to the dominant language while preserving the home language is an attempt at mitigating the effect of language socialization on ambitions and talents that together affect true Fair Equality of Opportunity.

Drawing from Arneson's critique of Rawls, I argue that language is a clearly visible trait but a morally arbitrary one. But, if, as Bourdieu and Thompson claim, language gains de facto superiority because of the affiliation of the speakers of a language, then as I have been arguing, the dominant language is reinforcing hegemonic traits and history of its speakers while also remaining a barrier for non-dominant speakers to attaining certain positions in modern social contexts. Thus, while language is acting as a proxy for further subjugating some members of the worst off groups in American society (a practice agreed to be morally impermissible by Arneson

and Rawls), the need for ability to affiliate and communicate necessitates the promotion of a common tongue, hence my emphasis on the value of all languages but the requirement to teach the dominant sufficiently.

Arneson puts forth a personal view that “foundational principles of justice should be responsive to the quality of lives that people would be enabled to lead by the proposed social policies rather than to the amount of resources they are enabled to get” (1999, p. 97). In line with John Iceland’s arguments equating poverty to social exclusion, I see justice as based on more than accumulation of goods and poverty as stemming from much more than just lack fiscal resources.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, I see promoting a dominant language while preserving native tongues as necessary for promoting the highest levels of social justice in American society because of the influence that knowledge of these two languages can have on the quality of life of individuals. Feeling socially included and being able to identify with your home network through language is highly important to measuring quality of life. Being able to provide for yourself economically, being able to participate in political discourse, and being able to cross affiliate with individuals outside of your home network is also influential in understanding quality of life. Increasing quality of life for individuals can often be done through increasing resources and social goods of an individual, but this relationship should not lead to confusion about what the goals of justice should be. This is one point where I vehemently support Arneson’s opposition to Rawlsian justice as understood through individual holdings of primary social goods.

Both Arneson and Rawls discuss the lack of importance of irrelevant qualities, and in considering what traits of individual’s are irrelevant, some may argue that knowledge of a dominant language is irrelevant, but given Rawls’ initial thought experiment, would it not be fair to say that behind the veil linguistic capital and network position matter in calculating a just



society? Arguably, behind the veil of ignorance, most would assume that individuals would have opposition to some being born into disadvantaged networks while others are born with privileged network affiliations. The explanation of those behind the veil may not include language itself, but if it includes the association of networks with advantaged and disadvantaged positions in the social hierarchy then it de facto includes language since language is a part of network identity.

If some philosophers, in a true classic liberal sense, were to argue that behind the veil a just society would only establish political rules without legislating future outcomes, then some may try to falsely claim that linguistic capital and network ties are the result of individuals' choices outside of the rules of the game. But, given a sociological understanding of choice, networks, and social class, linguistic capital as a byproduct of network affiliations is greatly exogenous to the individual. Despite the hegemony that produced English as the dominant language, a common language, regardless of what it is, is necessary for justice of economic opportunity. Given the practical implications of trying to switch the dominant language away from the discriminatorily rooted English, preserving this as the main language while acknowledging its shortcomings makes the most sense in terms of finding a reasonable common language. In essence, this is a manner of valuing freedom and equality in the networks of all citizens.

Ultimately, this proposal is rooted in justice as promoting true Fair Equality of Opportunity that acknowledges the role of society in individual's development while maintaining a focus on prioritizing the worst off in terms of quality of life. The goal of this proposal is not that much different than many other attempts to maximize justice in today's society by finding an equilibrium between systemic inequity and individual cost such that economic outcomes, social inclusion, and fair equality of opportunity are truly maximized.

## 8. Conclusion

Thinking about the two polar extremes originally put forward in conjunction with an understanding of the role of networks, codes, a history of discrimination, and unequal outcomes for social groups based on the language that students enter school with makes it apparent that neither of the extremes is just. However, figuring out the equilibrium that is most just is not an easy task either. While I do not know what this equilibrium necessarily should look like, the current system is certainly not that equilibrium, and a few steps focused on promoting general acceptance and literacy would certainly help. For example, increasing overall knowledge of linguistics for teachers, supporting integrated curricula, and developing a conversation about language and power in the classroom would be real steps toward mitigating the individual costs and system-wide injustices.

Scholars from Granovetter to Bourdieu indirectly touch on the importance of fluency, and the argument here is bringing language education of minority speakers to the forefront of this discussion. Promoting justice should be the goal of a government and all of its institutions, but doing so in the real world given the current stasis of injustice that many social processes are lingering in, can be a challenge. Ultimately, if as a society, we change the way we view language without losing the value of having a common language intelligible by all, we can promote justice by increasing the quality of life for real people.

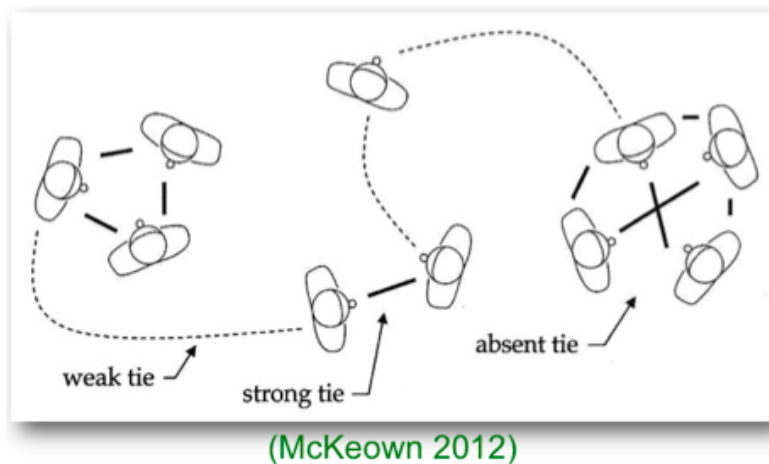
“Poverty is a peculiar, insidious thing: a cause whose effects then cause the original cause, or an effect whose causes are caused by the effect” (Shipler 2005, p.53); as David Shipler put it, poverty does not have a single solution because it does not have a single cause. Given that understanding of poverty, it is clear that if language teaching practices lead to poor economic outcomes, social exclusion, and a lack of fair equality of opportunity then they may play a role in

the poverty equation. While the issue of language teaching may not have a clear and just solution, adding this piece to the puzzle that is the conversation around poverty moves the ball down the field, even if just a single yard. Each part of the complex problem that can be identified can help to slowly but calculatedly improve the lives of real people. I argue that a language education system in the American school system that teaches English while also preserving the language of the student's home environment will promote justice and opportunity for those who have been consistently and historically discriminated against by minimizing both macro-level inequities and costs in the daily lives of real people.

<sup>1</sup> Graphically, an equilibrium is the intersection between two lines. Moving up or down on one line would lead to an imbalance in the system. The only way to move from this intersection point is to actually shift one of the lines through outside (or exogenous) forces. This shift of one of the lines would necessitate a movement along the other line in order to rebalance the system. This concept and graphical representation is widely used in the social sciences, especially economics.

<sup>2</sup> John Thompson is the editor of the most recent edition of Pierre Bourdieu's *Language and Symbolic Power*. The quotes by Thompson are in regard to Bourdieu's work and the way that Bourdieu shaped the sociological view of the relationship between language and power.

3



This graphic shows what strong and weak ties look like in networks. The dotted lines represent weak ties, and the solid lines are strong ties. Granovetter's theory depends on the existence of weak ties throughout a network, as is shown here. However, many networks have absent ties that could increase the dissemination of information. The child entering the classroom with non-standard speaking knowledge may be an example of absent ties, where bridging capital could be developed.

<sup>4</sup> For example, classic novels like *Don Quixote* by Miguel Cervantes and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston involve cultures and dialect that are outside of the dominant. These two recommended titles are far from the only options. However, they are traditionally accepted as part of the canon of academic literature, so there is less likely to be pushback from reading these pieces. Incorporating more non-dominant literature too, however, should be done.

<sup>5</sup> Rawls' *Theory of Justice* necessitates that all people be treated as free and equal citizens. Rawls argues that if society were created behind a "veil of ignorance," people would make decisions such that regardless of what final position they wind up in they are content with their station in life. In order to achieve a just society sufficiently pleasing to individuals in all positions, that society must protect the basic liberties of all citizens. The society must offer fair access to equality of opportunity of upward mobility without punishment for an individual's

---

irrelevant qualities. Finally, a just society must create a safety net such that the individuals in the “lowest” positions have the most resources possible. Rawls’ theory is defined by three principles: the Fair Equality Principle, the Difference Principle, and the Fair Equality of Opportunity Principle.

<sup>6</sup> A necessary point of clarification when discussing Rawls’ *Theory of Justice* comes in understanding the Fair Equality of Opportunity Principle. Philosopher Richard Arneson goes so far as to reject Rawls’ theory, particularly his Fair Equality of Opportunity principle. However, given Arneson’s criticism and Rawls’ theory, I think that making a few amendments to Rawls’ theory based on Arneson’s objections sets up a theory of justice in line with why teaching linguistic capital matters. First of all, Arneson states that the Principle of Fair Equality of Opportunity fails to indicate that wrongful discrimination that occurs as a byproduct of the way that an individual’s socialization has affected his or her ambitions is morally wrong. Next, Arneson argues that discrimination is not always wrongful and sometimes happens innocently. Rawls leaves no room for this distinction and condemns all discrimination, regardless of motivation. Finally, Arneson argues that the Fair Equality Principle fails to defend meritocracy to a sufficient degree. This principle also limits the overarching pursuit of justice when that pursuit is seeking to maximize opportunities and liberties of all while keeping the priority on improving the outcomes of the worst off.

<sup>7</sup> This is in line with Martha Nussbaum’s capability approach and Iris Marion Young’s approach to understanding responsibility to solving injustice. Poverty, understood as a lack of economic resources, is not necessarily a problem. The injustices that cause poverty and emerge from poverty are the true problem.

---

### Works Cited

- Arneson, Richard J. "Against Rawlsian Equality of Opportunity." *Philosophical Studies*. 93:1 (1999): 77-112. *Springer Link*. Web. 15 April 2015.
- Bernstein, Basil. *Class, Codes, and Control: Theoretical Studies Towards a Sociology of Language*. New York: Schocken, 1971. Print.
- Bernstein, Basil. "Elaborated and Restricted Codes: Their Social Origins and Some Consequences." *American Anthropologist*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ser. 66.6 (1964): 55-69. *Wiley Online*. Wiley, 4 Feb. 2011. Web. 9 Mar. 2015.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Ed. John B. Thompson. Cambridge: Polity, 2003. Print.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Forms of Capital." *Handbook of Theory of Research for the Sociology of Education*. By J. E. Richardson. N.p.: Greenwood, 1986. 241-58. Web. 3 Feb. 2013.
- Bowern, Claire. "Why Is Bilingual Education 'good' for Rich Kids but 'bad' for Poor, Immigrant Students?" *Comp. Valerie Strauss*. *The Washington Post*. *The Washington Post*, 24 Oct. 2014. Web. 14 Apr. 2015.
- Craig, Holly K., and Julie A. Washington. *Malik Goes to School: Examining the Language Skills of African American Students from Preschool--5th Grade*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006. Print.
- Crawford, James. "Language Politics in the U.S.A.: The Paradox of Bilingual Education." *Social Justice* 25:3 (1998): 50-69. *JSTOR*. 23 March 2015. Web.
- Granovetter, Max. "The Strength of Weak Ties: A Network Theory Revisited." *Sociological Theory* 1 (1983): 201-233. *JSTOR*. 28 March 2015. Web. 12 April 2015.
- Huber, Franz. "Social Capital of Economic Clusters: Towards a Network-Based Conception of

- 
- Social Resources." Wiley Online. Wiley, 6 Mar. 2009. Web. 05 Apr. 2015.
- Iceland, John. "Causes of Poverty." *Poverty in America: A Handbook*. Berkeley Adn Los Angeles: U of California, 2003. 70-97. Print.
- Klein, Steven, Rosio Bugarin, Renee Beltranena, and Edith McArthur. *Language Minorities and Their Educational and Labor Market Indicators—Recent Trends*. Rep. Washington: National Center for Education Statistics, 2004. Print.
- Labov, William. *Dialect Diversity in America: The Politics of Language Change*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2012. Print.
- Leveen, Steve. "How America Can Get Her Bilingual Groove Back." HuffPost: Impact. The Huffington Post, 25 May 2011. Web. 14 April 2015.
- Lin, Nan. "Social Networks and Status Attainment." *Annual Review of Sociology*. 25 (1999): 467-487. *JSTOR*. 30 March 2015. Web.
- Mankiw, N. Gregory. *Essentials of Economics*. 5th ed. Mason, OH: South-Western Cengage Learning, 2008. Print.
- McKeown, Kevin. Strength of Weak Ties. Digital image.Close Up. LexBlog, Inc., 14 Dec. 2012. Web. 5 Apr. 2015.
- McPherson, Miller, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and James Cook. "Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks." *Annual Review of Sociology*. 27(2001): 415-444. *JSTOR*. 30 March 2015. Web.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011. Print.
- Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000. Print.

- 
- Rawls, John. "A Theory of Justice." *The Philosophy of Law: Classic and Contemporary Readings with Commentary*. Ed. Frederick Schauer and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong. Orlando: Harcourt Brace College, 1996. 518-29. Print.
- Rickford, John R. *African American Vernacular English: Features, Evolution, and Educational Implications*. Malden: Blackwell, 1999. Print.
- Shipler, David K. *The Working Poor*. New York: Vintage, 2005. Print.
- Thompson, John B. "Editor's Introduction." Introduction. *Language and Symbolic Power*. By Pierre Bourdieu. Cambridge: Polity, 2003. 1-31. Print.
- Whitney, Jessica. "Five Easy Steps toward Integrating AAVE into the Classroom." *The English Journal* 94.5 (2005): 64-69. *JSTOR*. Web. 2 February 2015.
- Wolf, Mikyung K., Jenny C. Kao, Joan L. Herman, Lyle F. Bachman, Alison L. Bailey, Patina L. Bachman, Tim Farnsworth, and Sandy M. Chang. *Issues in Assessing English Language Learners: English Language Proficiency Measures and Accommodation Uses--Literature Review*. Rep. no. CRESST 731. Los Angeles: Regents of the U of California Part of the Center for the Study of Evaluation, 2008. CRESST. Web. 1 Apr. 2015.
- Young, Iris M. *Responsibility for Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Print.

Professor John Eastwood served as an advisor to this project, and many of the thoughts in this paper were derived from conversations with him. I made some changes to my initial draft based on comments made during a poster session of this project on April 14, 2015 in Leyburn Library. Additionally, Sonja Meighan and Maggie Hambleton read various drafts of this project.

On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unacknowledged aid on this paper.

Emma Busse