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Social in/justice and the deficit foundations of oracy

Ian Cushing

Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK

ABSTRACT

Oracy is a hot topic in England's education landscape, increasingly deployed as part of a bipartisan theory of social justice which claims that improved abilities in spoken language can afford working-class and racialised children a route out of the economic and racial inequalities they experience. In this article, I reject these logics, making two main arguments. First, I examine the language ideological foundations of how oracy was first theorised in 1960s' academic scholarship, showing how it was informed by a flawed theory of language rooted in deficit and dichotomous framings which essentialised working-class, disabled, and racialised children as producing less legitimate language than their wealthier, able-bodied, and white peers. Second, I show how the contemporary oracy agenda relies on a flawed theory of change in its assumptions that social justice can be unlocked by marginalised children making tweaks to their language. I argue that this theory of change frames social justice as a matter of individualised remediation and thus obscures the structural dimensions of inequality. I show how these logics are embedded in purportedly progressive academic scholarship and guises of charitable benevolence. I call for new visions of language education rooted in radical, transformative justice.

KEYWORDS
Social justice; language ideology; schools; England; deficit thinking

The following is a quote from Peter Hyman,[1] one of the founders of School 21 in East London and of Voice 21,[2] an educational charity whose work focuses on oracy in schools:

> Teaching oracy is an issue of social equity. Too often young people are denied the opportunity to learn how to articulate their ideas effectively and gain the confidence to find their voice – opportunities consistently afforded to more advantaged students. Which would have a bigger impact on social mobility: more grammar schools or every child being taught how to become an eloquent speaker? (Hyman, quoted in Henshaw, 2016)

Hyman frames oracy as a progressive endeavour and the solution to granting racially and economically marginalised children social justice and upward mobility. In this article, I reject this theory of change, contending that it is flawed on two grounds. The first is that the original concept of oracy which emerged during 1960s' academic scholarship was informed by a flawed theory of language rooted in deficit and dichotomous framings which essentialised working-class, disabled, and racialised children as producing less legitimate language than their wealthier, able-bodied, and

CONTACT Ian Cushing i.cushing@mmu.ac.uk Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester M15 6BH, UK

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white peers. The second is that the oracy agenda's vision for social justice is flawed in how it relies on a theory of change where marginalised children can experience equality and upward mobility by making tweaks to their language, and that oracy provides the compensatory tool to do so.

Marginalised children routinely experience the hostile policing of their language and public humiliation for their purported inability to speak correctly. My own work and collaborations have sought to challenge that (e.g. Cushing, 2020, 2023b; Cushing & Snell, 2023; Snell & Cushing, 2022), and so it might be expected that I welcome initiatives around spoken language. Whilst I and others applaud efforts to promote affirmative pedagogies which build on the linguistic strengths of marginalised children (e.g. Flores, 2020; Smith, 2022; Willis et al., 2022), in this article I expose how the oracy agenda can lead to the modification of language practices perceived as non-normative, and how its theory of social justice overlooks the structural determinants of inequality. Whilst language plays a vital role in social justice efforts, here I show how oracy often gets framed as a reference point for societal progress in ways which enregister marginalised speakers as inferior and poses that the modification of their purportedly sub-standard language practices serves their own interests. These bipartisan logics obscure and leave intact the broader, structural injustices that marginalised children are confronted with, calcify a raciolinguistic ideology that marginalised children lack adequate language, and assume that language-based reforms are a viable method of undoing social inequalities. Put another way, I argue that England's oracy agenda interprets structural inequality as a 'linguistic problem requiring linguistic solutions, rather than as a politico-economic problem requiring politico-economic solutions' (Rosa, 2016, p. 165). Whilst the apparent progressivism of oracy may appear to some to be a liberatory means to afford marginalised children greater opportunities, I show here that it is rooted in deficit-based assumptions about language which overdetermine marginalised children as linguistically inferior and blames them for their own struggles.

Clarifications and positions

I am a critical applied linguist whose research is inspired by my experiences of working as a schoolteacher and witnessing how marginalised children were institutionally perceived as lacking adequate language. I witnessed how such children were placed into remedial programmes designed to modify their purportedly deficient language, as part of a narrative which framed this as a social justice endeavour. Yet all I saw here was children forced to abandon their own ways of speaking whilst the structural inequalities they were experiencing remained untouched. When I began a career in a university, I saw how these same logics underpinned much of the academic scholarship my peers were producing, and that this research was used by schools as justification for their own practices. In this article, I apply these observations to the oracy agenda. My focus is on oracy rather than dialogic teaching, which are often conflated. Mercer (2019) distinguishes them as follows:

> *Oracy education* is the direct, explicit teaching of speaking and listening skills as part of the curriculum, comparable to, say, the direct, explicit teaching of algebraic skills as part of mathematics. *Dialogic teaching* is the use of the best, evidence-based talk strategies for teaching any subject, whether it be maths, history, English, a second language, sport, oracy or whatever. (Mercer, 2019, p. 7; original emphases)

My position is not to suggest that children having greater opportunities to use their voice in the classroom is a bad thing. But I am deeply sceptical of any language-based intervention which claims to be an instrumentalist tool for achieving social justice. At the same time, whilst my critique names individuals and institutions who have normalised this narrative as part of the oracy agenda, it is not my suggestion that these individuals and institutions are somehow malicious. Instead, my critique is of a durable set of language ideologies which have long co-stratified language, dis/ability, race, and class, and of theories of social justice rooted in individualised remediation.

Language, education, and social in/justice

Educational linguists have long grappled with questions concerning how much their work contributes to social justice efforts. Whilst language has always played a central part in the production of social in/justice, linguists have also been complicit in social justice narratives based on normative understandings of language, race, class, dis/ability, and educational attainment (Cushing, 2023a). These narratives have, for example, located defects within marginalised communities and marked them out for remediation, framing these corrective reforms as the most pragmatic way of achieving justice. Yet these visions of social justice are typically focused on inclusion and tolerance within an inherently unjust system as opposed to structural transformations which target the root causes of inequality. At the same time, such solutions often fail to recognise how the language practices of marginalised communities transcend socially constructed linguistic categories and conventions (García & Otheguy, 2017).

Social justice is a long-term project which will only be ever achieved when our efforts are on structural transformations as opposed to tweaking individual behaviours (Gandolfi & Mills, 2023; Kaba, 2021; Picower, 2012). Taking my lead from others, I envision social justice as a 'contested concept and existential problem that remains to be realised rather than a pragmatic challenge that can be reconciled in any straightforward way' (Avineri et al., 2019, p. 2). This is in contrast with how social justice is often framed in the oracy agenda, where oracy is seen, for example, as the key means to 'tackling entrenched social immobility and dismantling barriers for children and young people from less advantaged backgrounds to increase equity and social justice' (All-Party Parliamentary Group [APPG], 2021, p. 27; see also Centre for Social Justice, 2023).

Whilst language by itself is not the solution to social justice, it is a key part of tackling the profound disparities which characterise education. Language is deeply implicated in the production and maintenance of social inequalities, especially where blame is located within the purportedly deficient language practices of marginalised communities. Social justice efforts must therefore jointly address issues of language struggle with material, historical, colonial, economic and racial power structures to challenge the root causes of intersectional injustices. Put another way, linguistic justice is 'always about more than language, requiring careful analysis of deeply intertwined relations among languages and political economies' (Rosa & Flores, 2023, p. 100). A failure to do so relies on simplistic notions of social justice that have long characterised mainstream education policy, especially in England. For instance, Reay's work has exposed how dominant conceptualisations of social justice in education are ones rooted in individualised explanations of inequality, and result in individualised and reductive solutions (Reay, 2012, 2017). She describes how this ‘displaces attention and blame from the policy and practices of the powerful in society to those who are relatively powerless’ (Reay, 2012, p. 589) and legitimises theories of change which rely on small tweaks as opposed to radical transformation. These also often rely on deficit perspectives which frame marginalised communities as being responsible for their own difficulties and therefore ought to shoulder the blame for righting them (Valencia, 2010). Such theories of change are appealing to policymakers because they deflect attention away from the state and onto marginalised communities.

Dorling (2015) tracks how the phrase social justice has been co-opted by the political right since the 1980s, producing a narrative reliant on individual change rather than state responsibility. The Labour Party has reproduced these same logics in relation to oracy and social justice (e.g. Hardy, 2020; The Labour Party, 2023; Starmer, 2023). Whilst my critique is of a bipartisan narrative, then, of particular concern here are the social justice logics emerging from the left, particularly academics and charities who position themselves as liberally progressive. I am not the first to express these concerns. Knight (2023), for example, is sceptical of the levelling-up agenda that oracy proponents have subscribed to, showing how teachers view oracy as a tool to shatter glass ceilings, break down socioeconomic barriers, and replicate the experiences of privately educated children. As Cameron (2022) argues in relation to oracy, we should all reject the idea that private education provides a yardstick to which all state-educated children must also be subjected to, as well as rejecting the idea that privately educated children come to occupy positions of power because of dedicated input on oracy. Yet these logics are often reproduced by charities, inquiries, and think tanks who frame oracy as a transferable linguistic skill designed to prepare working-class children for competitive labour and social prestige (e.g. APPG, 2021; Centre for Social Justice, 2023; Millard & Menzies, 2016).

Finally, it is only recently that oracy has become explicitly framed as a tool for social justice. The National Oracy Project (1987–1993) and its journal *Talk* focused on teachers’ developing awareness of spoken language practices in schools and gave less attention to the performative and deliverable aspects of talk. The Language in the National Curriculum project (1989–1992) took a similar approach, albeit with a more critical focus, yet still paid little attention to the intersections of language and race. Whilst I do not offer a history of oracy in England’s schools here, existing histories (e.g. Holmes-Henderson & Wright, 2023; Jones, 2017) have failed to adequately interrogate the language ideological foundations of oracy in 1960s’ academic scholarship and the assumptions it made about the language of marginalised children. In the following section, then, I offer a language ideological perspective on oracy to show how it relies on deficit and dichotomous framings which essentialise marginalised children as linguistically impoverished and in need of remediation.

The language ideological foundations of oracy

Any description of language is ideological, and these ideologies are products of specific sociopolitical contexts. Oracy emerged as a concept from academic scholarship in the 1960s (Wilkinson, 1965), during a wave of deficit perspectives which systematically framed the language of marginalised communities as inferior because it was deemed to deviate from the communication patterns of white, able-bodied, middle-class communities. Academics portrayed such language in terms of restricted codes (Bernstein, 1964), accumulated environmental deficits (Hess & Shipman, 1965), verbal deprivation (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966), and semilingualism (Hansegård, 1968). These deficit perspectives continued into the twenty-first century in terms of the 'word gap' (Hart & Risley, 1995), blaming low academic performance on irresponsible parenting and broken homes rather than the structural inequalities within wider society (Valencia, 2010). Whilst the terminology used to represent marginalised communities as displaying linguistic deficiencies has shifted over time, the underlying logics remain the same. Yet oracy has, for the most part, evaded academic scrutiny and been positioned as a progressive linguistic concept which stands in opposition to deficit thinking.

Here, I show how the original theorisations of oracy in the 1960s relied on mainstream deficit thinking of the time, drawing crude dichotomies between the language practices of working-class and middle-class children, and, by extension, non/whiteness and dis/ability. In his original conception of oracy, Wilkinson (1965) draws the boundaries between 'orate' and 'inorate' on the lines of social class – but given how class intersects with race and dis/ability, these boundaries must be taken to include all three (Leonardo, 2012). Wilkinson defines a lack of oracy as the 'inability to talk adequately' (Wilkinson, 1965, p. 40) and 'an ignorance of the appropriate content, style, register and conventions to adopt' (Wilkinson, 1965, p. 41), whereas competence in oracy is presented as 'knowledge of the appropriate conventions [. . .] awareness of the correct procedure [and] a certain style and perhaps register which is suitable' (Wilkinson, 1965, p. 49). This, argues Wilkinson, enables children to become members of 'articulate societies [where] speech is often the only acceptable form of expression' (Wilkinson, 1965, p. 40). Put another way, 'orate' is synonymous with idealised, articulate, and appropriate; inorate is synonymous with deficient, inarticulate, and inappropriate. These discourses of appropriateness are anchored in raciolinguistic ideologies which categorise marginalised speakers as displaying linguistic deficiencies in ways which are unrelated to any objective linguistic practices (Flores & Rosa, 2015).

Wilkinson's purportedly objective boundaries of in/oracy are dangerously misleading and represent an over-simplification on how people use language. They rely on additive and appropriateness-based approaches to language education which begin from the assumption that marginalised speakers are lacking in linguistic ability, in what Wilkinson (1969, p. 246) calls an absence of 'language quality', grounded in his claim that 'normal' children grow up in 'favourable language environments' (Wilkinson, 1965, p. 42). Here follow three further examples of how Wilkinson reproduces essentialist dichotomies between marginalised and privileged families, or, in his words, 'working homes' and 'good language homes':

> [. . .] certain patterns of social behaviour are more favourable to oracy than others [. . .] In many working homes the members never meet together as a family [. . .] when children do talk it will be predominantly with their peers, which is regrettable even though the parents could perhaps offer very little as language models. (Wilkinson, 1965, p. 46)

> In some independent and some preparatory schools, there is a high degree of oracy [. . .] because the pupils possess a high degree of confidence and language experience from their home backgrounds. (Wilkinson, 1965, p. 59)

> In the good language home the child is constantly compelled to verbalise: why, where, how, what, did you do. Children ask questions, so do parents. (Wilkinson, 1969, p. 245)

These dichotomous framings lead him to the conclusion that 'oracy is particularly important in the education of the less academic pupils' (Wilkinson, 1969, p. 240). The implication here is that oracy is a compensatory tool which provides the kinds of linguistically rich experiences that working-class and racially marginalised children are purportedly lacking.

Wilkinson's theorisations of oracy and linguistic in/competence were in ideological harmony with 1960s deficit thinking more broadly. He cites, for example, Bernstein's notions of 'restricted codes' and 'culturally induced backwardness' to dichotomise and stratify the 'right' language experiences (characteristic of middle-class families) and the 'wrong' experiences (characteristic of working-class families):

> The quality of language experience is crucial; quantity, though necessary, is not enough. The wrong language experience may result in a culturally induced backwardness. (Wilkinson, 1965, p. 56)

Others have written extensively about Bernstein's ideas and the debates about them (e.g. Block, 2014, Jones, 2013). Despite varied arguments, one simply cannot ignore the dichotomous framings about language and social class which lie at their core, and the ways in which they produced durable ideologies of middle-class linguistic superiority. Wilkinson uses Bernstein's work to support his contention that working-class families have linguistic and cultural shortcomings, that their language is too 'blunt' for school, and thus requires correction:

> [In] lower working-class households the discipline may be authoritarian, partly because the parents have not the words in which to explain or persuade. And because the parents have difficulty in verbalising they do not require verbalisation from their children. Affection, for instance, may be expressed by a hug, rather than by 'I love you darling'. Thus the child acquires a restricted language which deals in concrete objects rather than abstractions; and which uses generalisations rather than exact discriminations. Such a language is effective in the family circle, but is too blunt for the tasks and quality of thinking required at school; and thus the child, even though his potential intelligence may be as great as that of his fellows, falls behind them. [. . .] the children are deficient in words, which is what has always been said. (Wilkinson, 1969, p. 243)

Wilkinson frames the language of working-class and racialised children as a barrier to their cognitive capacities, representing them as 'only possess[ing] a form of English which is incapable of coping with abstract ideas and logical connexions' (Wilkinson, 1965, p. 48). These representations align with Bereiter and Engelmann's depictions of working-class African American children in the 1960s, who were deemed to be 'not simply deficient in their use of words; they are deficient in their repertoire of concepts', and thus incapable of abstract thought (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966, p. 127).

Just as Bereiter and Engelmann's work reproduces ableist discourses, so too does Wilkinson, who relies on oral-centric ideologies to pose that 'in the first few years of life children acquire language completely orally' (Wilkinson, 1969, p. 242) and that 'without oracy human fulfilment is impossible; speech and personality are one' (Wilkinson, 1965,

p. 40). Wilkinson pathologises deaf children as abnormal, isolated, frustrated, and cognitively inferior to hearing children:

> deaf infants are not merely like normal children [. . .] orectically they are isolated and frustrated in their attempts to form relationships [. . .] their progress in generalisation is poor [. . .] Before they are two they are already retarded compared with children with normal hearing. (Wilkinson, 1965, p. 41)

These ableist labels are reflective of a long history of academic scholarship which perceives non-speech languages and their users as disordered and primitive (see Henner & Robinson, 2023). In similar ways to other deficit perspectives of the time and overlooking the structural inequalities marginalised children experience, Wilkinson poses that it is inadequate linguistic abilities which put such children at a disadvantage in school, and that these inadequacies act as an impediment to the interactions required for the middle-class conditions of school:

> A child possessing only public language will be at a grave disadvantage at school where middle-class assumptions operate, where formal language is used, where the ability to see relationships and distinctions, to understand causal connexions are at a premium, abilities which are developed by an early explanatory use of language and the further curiosity this stimulates. (Wilkinson, 1965, p. 48)

Wilkinson attempts to provide empirical descriptions for the dichotomies between 'public' and 'formal' language, which he views in terms of 'playground' and 'school' English:

> Thus playground English is marked by short sentences and ejaculations; words used for their emotive rather than their intellectual significance; a high proportion of current cliches; blanket terms, expressing approval or disapproval (*super*, *fab*); stock characterisations (*a nit*, *birk*, *nutcase*, *creep*); private vocabulary, the significance of which is known only to members of the group. (Wilkinson, 1965, pp. 46–47)

He provides no detail of where these observations come from, and I question whether these deficit perspectives of 'playground language' are grounded in sociolinguistic reality. As linguistic ethnographers have repeatedly shown (e.g. Snell & Lefstein, 2018) working-class children have vast stylistic repertoires which they consciously and dexterously draw from, yet are routinely perceived by teachers as linguistically less competent than middle-class children and afforded fewer opportunities to talk in class. What Wilkinson derides as playground language is, in reality, highly complex, creative, and simply transcends the kind of artificially imposed borders that Wilkinson and his contemporaries rely on. Thus, the language ideological foundations of oracy then rely on dichotomous framings which identified faults in the language practices of marginalised families and then proposed seemingly rational interventions to correct them. These framings tie together race, class, and dis/ability in producing discourses of deficiency which continue to circulate in contemporary policy, which I turn to next.

Bipartisan narratives of oracy and social justice

Whilst the discourses of deficiency that lie at the core of oracy have circulated since the 1960s, it is only recently that it has been framed as a tool for social justice. Oracy is high on the contemporary political agenda, as illustrated by Keir Starmer's recent announcement that it would play a central part in Labour's education reforms should they come into power (Starmer, 2023). In this, he frames marginalised children's supposed inability to 'speak fluently' as one of the core obstacles to upward social mobility and poses oracy as a means to topple economic barriers:

> We must improve speaking skills. This is a subtle and significant layer of the class ceiling – don't doubt that. The inability to speak fluently is one of the biggest barriers to opportunity, and it's also a massive challenge left behind by the pandemic, particularly in early language development. [. . .] We will weave oracy through a new national curriculum that finally closes the gap between learning and life, academic and practical, vocational skills, school and work. (Starmer, 2023)

It is no surprise to me that Starmer subscribes to these logics, given his senior advisor is Peter Hyman – co-founder of Voice 21 and whose 'teaching oracy is an issue of social equity' line opened this article. In 2022, a Labour House of Lords member, Michael Watson,[3] packaged these same discourses with ideologies of the so-called language gap (see García & Otheguy, 2017), and, like Wilkinson before him in the 1960s, dichotomous framings of language-rich/poor homes – stating that a lack of oracy puts children

> at a significant disadvantage if they do not live in a language-rich home where conversation and discussion is the norm. All too often that is the case, which underlines the necessity for children to be able to access these experiences and develop their oracy at school as a key part of the curriculum. For some children, this will be their only chance to develop their confidence and competence in spoken language. [. . .] the COVID-19 pandemic has widened the already stubborn language gap and exacerbated the inequities facing children in our school system. (Watson, 2022)

Yet these logics are not a product of partisan politics or the supposedly progressive ideologies of Labour. As the hard-right Conservative MP Andy Carter argued, in near identical language to Starmer and Hyman:

> It is critical, now more than ever, that oracy is fully embraced by schools as a key tool for levelling up opportunities for working class kids [. . .]. We must ensure oracy is at the heart of our approach to tackle educational inequality for children, and crucially, to level the playing field later in life. (Carter, 2022)

The oracy for social justice narrative is, then, a bipartisan one, and one entirely in line with recent, mainstream political conceptualisations of social justice which focus on individualised remediation rather than endemic structures of inequality which require radical transformation (Reay, 2017). In the following section, I show how this narrative has been popularised into schools under a guise of charitable benevolence.

Oracy, social in/justice, and charitable benevolence

The oracy for social justice narrative has been popularised by educational charities and think tanks whose work is characterised by seeming benevolence and helping hand logics. These include the Centre for Education and Youth, Voice 21, and the English-Speaking Union. Here I primarily focus on Voice 21, an educational charity whose mission is dedicated to 'ensuring that economically disadvantaged children develop the spoken language skills they need [. . .] to realise their full potential in school and life' (Voice 21, 2021, p. 1). Voice 21 works primarily with schools serving working-class and racialised children, with its project shaped by the logics that oracy-based modifications and interventions represent the most powerful means to produce social equality and mobility. Whilst I applaud Voice 21's efforts to raise the profile of dialogic teaching in schools, my critique here focuses on its underpinning theory of change concerning oracy and social justice, and its reproduction of deficit discourses which characterised the language ideological foundations of oracy in the 1960s.

Voice 21 relies on reductive framings of language and justice which separate out language from the racial and economic struggles that marginalised communities experience. Writing for Voice 21, Millard and Menzies (2016)[4] argue that 'oracy [. . .] has enormous potential for addressing social disadvantage' (Millard and Menzies 2016, p. 8), that 'poor spoken language ability can therefore act as a mechanism for entrenching socio-economic inequality in education' (Millard and Menzies 2016, p. 39), and that a lack of oracy skills is one of the core reasons that marginalised children continue to be excluded from school, struggle to find employment, and are overrepresented in the criminal punishment system. I find the lack of structural analysis concerning here, and reject claims that oracy provides the means to reducing school exclusions, tackling mental trauma, and improving employment opportunities. Yet, for Millard & Menzies, oracy does precisely this – and thus relies on the logics that language is an isolated site of remediation and that language modifications alone can topple broader social barriers (Rosa & Flores, 2023).

These are the logics that underpin Voice 21's theory of change (Voice 21, 2022, 2023). This vision for social justice begins by outlining its target population of children from low-income families, and ends with the logic that following oracy interventions, 'society is fairer and more equal' and that (disadvantaged) children are 'equipped to thrive in democratic and civic life' (Voice 21, 2022, p. 3). As well as espousing a theory of change which frames oracy interventions alone as the means to producing a more equitable society, these logics are underpinned by deficit perspectives reminiscent of Wilkinson's foundational oracy work in the 1960s – but have taken on additional ideologies in terms of the so-called language gap:

> [. . .] this disadvantages children from low-income families who start school up to 17 months behind their more advantaged peers in spoken language development, a gap which widens as they move through school [. . .] children with better spoken language skills are happier, have greater confidence and achieve more. On leaving school they are less likely to suffer mental health difficulties, more likely to thrive in further education, and have better job prospects. [Voice 21] are changing the education system as we know it, by making society a fairer and more equitable place. (Voice 21, 2023)

When children are framed as suffering from gaps in their language, logics follow that they require interventions to close them, which often legitimises language prescription and policing under the purportedly progressive aims of oracy:

> [. . .] modelling talk and setting expectations, for example asking pupils to speak in full sentences and avoid using words such as 'like', are important in developing the quality of pupils' oracy. (Millard & Menzies, 2016, p. 48)

Immediately following this is a quote from Voice 21 co-founder Peter Hyman, who suggests that oracy intervenes on ‘weak speak’ and ‘takes away the rough edges of someone’:

> As a minimum [some schools] pick up on students who aren’t speaking in full sentences, they will pick up on students who are saying ‘like’ every second word, so they’ll sort of take away the rough edges of someone … and the question is whether we can go beyond that. And I think that is having the mindset for the intervention on ‘weak speak’ as you would on weak reading and writing. (Hyman, quoted in Millard & Menzies, 2016, p. 48)

These discourses of limited, weak, and impoverished language are found throughout Voice 21’s submission of written evidence to the Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group, which it acted as the secretariat for. Here, Voice 21 frames working-class children as ‘start[ing] school with lower language levels than their more advantaged peers’ and as having ‘less language’ than middle-class children (Voice 21, 2021, pp. 7–8), with oracy positioned as being ‘particularly potent in supporting vocabulary development and the narrowing of the word gap’ (Voice 21, 2021, p. 5). This evidence fed directly into the resulting All-Party Parliamentary Group report, which framed oracy as being key to ‘tackling entrenched social immobility and dismantling barriers for children and young people from less advantaged backgrounds to increase equity and social justice’ (APPG, 2021, p. 27). Marginalised children in this report are framed as displaying ‘poor oral language’ and ‘low language levels’ (APPG, 2021, p. 26), with oracy framed as an enabling panacea for ‘socially-just outcomes, by improving the life chances for children facing disadvantage’ (APPG, 2021, p. 27).

As well as written evidence, such recommendations were put forward by an all-white cross-partisan panel during an oral evidence session held in June 2020 entitled ‘Can oracy help tackle the disadvantage gap and address inequalities?’. Contributions to this panel included Jean Gross, the UK Government’s former ‘Communication Champion’, describing working-class teaching assistants as ‘inadvertently compounding the disadvantage gap’ and blaming their purported linguistic inferiority as the reason working-class children struggle in school. In comments which went unchallenged by other panel members:

> Very often those groups [of working-class children] have teaching assistants sitting with them and we do have to face this tricky, really difficult issue, that many disadvantaged schools in poor estates serving poor areas recruit their teaching assistants from their immediate community [. . .] it is very possible that those teaching assistants may themselves [. . .] not have been able to develop that rich vocabulary. (Gross, 2020)

Voice 21 positions itself as a liberally progressive charity which claims to be driven by social justice struggles but simultaneously reproduces ideologies of linguistic deficit. These contradictions are also found in its ‘oracy framework’ (Voice 21, 2019; Mercer et al., 2017), a flagship document used by schools to assess the physical, linguistic, cognitive, and social dimensions of oracy, but reproduce ableist discourses such as ‘clarity of pronunciation’ and ‘eye contact’ in what constitutes ‘effective communication’ (see Henner & Robinson, 2023). Such contradictions are also evident in its collaborations with the English-Speaking Union, part of which platforms headteachers who encourage the punitive policing of language:

> Rather than overwhelming everyone with the task of tackling every possible speech error, we decided to focus on a few common issues. We made posters for each classroom to highlight them:
>
> We don’t use fillers: ‘umm, err, like’
>
> We don’t use double negatives: ‘I ain’t done nothing; there isn’t nothing’
>
> We say: ‘we were’ not ‘we was’
>
> We say: ‘I did it’, not ‘I done it’
>
> We never start to speak by saying ‘basically’.
>
> [. . .] We have also promoted a simple bit of pedagogy that I have seen lots of teachers use very effectively: ‘Say it again but say it better’. This simple response to students’ half-formed, fumbled answers is hugely effective, giving students space to reframe the content of their answers into a grammatically correct sentence structure that contains the correct terminology. (Sherrington, 2016, p. 42)

This section has shown how oracy is typically framed as a progressive intervention which can tackle social injustices but often materialises into language policing through its reliance on deficit perspectives. Whilst I am not suggesting that all proponents of oracy would endorse some of the aggressive mechanisms of language policing I have shown here, oracy in some contexts has taken on a meaning which includes ideologies of linguistic correctness – but deployed under benevolent and charitable logics which claim to be in the interests of marginalised children.

Contemporary discourses of deficiency

Earlier I showed how the original conception of oracy in the 1960s had deficit and dichotomous framings about language at its core. In this section, I demonstrate how contemporary academic scholarship is in direct lineage with its predecessors and has maintained these framings.

This critique begins with the work of Oracy Cambridge, a research group based at the University of Cambridge whose projects bridge research and practice in oracy. Oracy Cambridge has produced valuable work on dialogic talk in classrooms, repeatedly demonstrating the relationship between children’s thinking and the type of linguistic interaction they experience (e.g. Alexander, 2018). Yet it has also been complicit in reproducing ideologies which frame marginalised children as lacking adequate language and positioning school as a place where they can be compensated for these shortcomings through oracy interventions. For example, in its written evidence to the oracy APPG, it states that oracy should ‘tak[e] account of our most vulnerable children with poor language’ (Oracy Cambridge, 2021, p. 4) and that ‘the most vulnerable children in our society, including children in areas of disadvantage [. . .] are at high risk of having poor spoken language’ (Oracy Cambridge, 2021, p. 2). The evidence goes on to suggest that children who do not receive oracy education are ‘the most likely to fail [. . .] undermining their life chances and perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage and poverty’ (Oracy Cambridge, 2021, p. 3).

Valencia (2010, pp. 101–125) shows how deficit perspectives frame marginalised children as part of an 'at-risk' discourse, in which struggling families are both blamed for their own educational failures and responsible for addressing them. This at-risk discourse underpins Oracy Cambridge's APPG evidence, where, citing Mercer and Mannion (2018), it argues that oracy enables marginalised children to overcome social disadvantage, lower the rate of youth crime and school exclusions, and improve future earnings (Oracy Cambridge, 2021, p. 2). Yet these outcomes are derived from deficit perspectives about the language of such children – for Mercer and Mannion claim that:

> In general, pupils from economically deprived backgrounds are less likely to have had a rich talk experience in their home environment. As a consequence, when they start school, they are likely to have a more limited talk repertoire. (Mercer & Mannion, 2018, p. 5)

Mercer and Mannion deploy these framings in reference to the so-called word gap, a long-debunked concept which originated from mid-1990s US academic scholarship (Hart & Risley, 1995; see Avineri et al., 2015). At the core of Hart and Risley's claims is that by the time they are three years old, Black children from working-class families have heard 30 million fewer words than white children from middle-class families, and that this 'word gap' explains the correlation between race, poverty, and school failure. Despite the linguistically flawed, anti-Black methodologies that the word gap emerged from, Oracy Cambridge relies on it to argue that:

> The implication is that children who do not have sufficiently rich language experience suffer emotionally, socially, intellectually and academically. The best way to improve their life outcomes is through direct oracy education in school. (Oracy Cambridge, 2021, p. 2)

I find it troubling that influential academics associated with the oracy movement rely on word gap logics to draw reductive dichotomies between the home and school experiences of working- and middle-class families (see also Massonnié et al., 2022, Mercer et al., 2017). There is a direct language ideological lineage here to Wilkinson's original work on oracy in the 1960s, where working-class parents are blamed for their purported failure in engaging their children in adequate conversation. For example, Neil Mercer, the lead academic at Oracy Cambridge, states the following in a Voice 21 publication setting out its vision for what constitutes high-quality oracy education:

> You are the only second chance for some children to have a rich language experience. If these children are not getting it at school, they are not getting it. (Mercer, cited in Voice 2021, 2020, p. 4)

And in a blog for teachers, two academics from Oracy Cambridge:

> Such youngsters, deprived of a talk-rich experience, know thousands fewer words and ways of saying or thinking about things by the age of five. [. . .] Children brought up in households where people talk to one another, read together, and discuss ideas and their understanding of how the world works together, develop a greater ability to speak confidently, using rich, nuanced vocabulary which helps them think deeply and profoundly. (Dawes & Dudley, 2019)

Dawes and Dudley state this is 'a matter of social justice' which 'has the potential to help eradicate gaps in education outcomes and life chances that blight so many lives'. These same dichotomous framings are found in work from Voice 21's senior leadership team (Gaunt & Stott, 2018). Citing academic proponents of the word gap, they argue that 'for many children, their exposure to language and interaction through talk in the early years is vastly unequal' (Gaunt & Stott, 2018, p. 75) and that for children who come from low-income homes, 'school is their second chance to acquire the rich and varied vocabulary they will need for success both in life and academically' (Gaunt & Stott, 2018, p. 75).

Whilst oracy is often framed as a progressive project, then, I have shown here how it has long relied on academic scholarship rooted in deficit, dichotomous, and anti-Black ideologies about language and supposed gaps. This has surfaced without any critical interrogation of language gap ideologies, despite the extensive body of scholarship which has debunked and rejected them (e.g. Aggarwal, 2016, Avineri et al., 2015, Cushing, 2023b, García & Otheguy, 2017, Johnson & Johnson, 2021). Interrogating the academic scholarship which underpins educational concepts is an important undertaking, especially when such concepts are taken to be universalist and taken for granted, as is often the case with oracy.

Levelling up through talk?

This article has offered a critique of the oracy agenda in England, making two core arguments. The first exposes the flawed theory of language underpinning the original foundations of oracy in the 1960s. This relied on deficit and dichotomous framings which essentialised racialised, working-class, and disabled children as producing less legitimate language than their white, wealthier, able-bodied peers. There is a direct language ideological lineage here in how contemporary oracy proponents often rely on deficit ideologies of the so-called word gap, despite the anti-Black linguistic racism which lies at its core. Whilst oracy was founded on troubling ideologies of linguistic conservatism, it has traditionally been positioned as a progressive endeavour and associated with the political left. Yet oracy also attracts support from the political right (e.g. Carter, 2022) and is often framed as a rare area in which 'progressive' and 'traditional' teachers can seek consensus (Staufenberg, 2019). This, however, is a misleading debate – for both sides rely on normative notions of language which rely on deficit and dichotomous framings.

The second argument I make in this article concerns the oracy agenda's flawed vision for social justice, reliant on a theory of change where marginalised children can experience equality and mobility by making small tweaks to their language. This vision assumes that individualised, language-based modifications to an inherently unjust system will unlock social justice. Yet these logics are rooted in deficit perspectives which place responsibility on marginalised children to transform themselves whilst leaving broader inequalities overlooked and intact (Reay, 2017). The idea that levelling up through talk[5] is a legitimate logic for social change is baked into contemporary policy, as part of an ideological package which (mis)assumes that marginalised children can experience equality by simply changing their language (Cushing & Snell, 2023). I reject this theory of change on the grounds that it frames structural inequalities as a linguistic problem requiring a linguistic solution (Rosa, 2016). Whilst I stand in solidarity with efforts to promote classroom talk which affirms the language practices of marginalised children, I argue that we should all be suspicious of bipartisan narratives which position oracy as a pragmatic tool for structural change. These helping hand logics have charitable guises but are rooted in reductive theories of justice which locate deficiencies within individual children and place responsibility on them to modify their language. As the Labour Party enter into an election campaign with oracy and social justice as a key part of its education manifesto (The Labour Party, 2023), I hope that this article asks probing questions of what ideologies and academic scholarship that manifesto is built on.

I am not suggesting that language does not have a role to play social justice efforts. Linguists have long told us that there is no social justice without linguistic justice (e.g. Baker-Bell, 2020, Coard, 1971). Nor am I suggesting that marginalised children do not face distinct challenges in schools. But I am deeply sceptical of theories of language and justice which locate language as an isolated site of struggle, how these theories detract from the structural determinants of inequality, and how they encourage teachers to take up listening positions which assume that marginalised children arrive at school without a 'rich' language experience. I am equally concerned about how oracy charities, initiatives, and organisations have commodified these perspectives and converted ideologies of linguistic deficit into economic profit.

Genuine social justice efforts require transformative methodologies which target the root causes of injustices and reimagine the societies which our schools are part of, generating solutions which modify systems as opposed to individuals (Kaba, 2021). Language plays a central part in a vision for transformative justice (Cushing, in press, Winn et al., 2018). This vision requires us to reject dichotomous framings of language which bear little resemblance to the fluid realities and dexterities of how marginalised families use language. It requires us to question normative ideologies of linguistic deficiency which often materialise under benevolent guises of appropriateness, pluralism, charity, and mobility. It requires us to connect language struggles to broader, socio-economic, and racial struggles, to articulate a theory of change which refuses to separate language from the lived experiences, histories, and positionalities of its users (Rosa & Flores, 2023). These visions must go further than simply celebrating or advocating for linguistic diversity, but must push for societal transformation as opposed to placing responsibility on marginalised communities to transform themselves, as the oracy agenda has so often done.

Notes

1. Peter Hyman is a co-founder of School 21 and Voice 21. He was Tony Blair's chief speechwriter and is currently a senior advisor to Keir Starmer.
2. Voice 21 is the UK's national oracy charity. It works primarily with schools in working-class communities, offering training on oracy. It publishes research reports on oracy and holds annual conferences.
3. Watson was a Vice-Chair of the Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group.
4. Millard and Menzies also drafted the Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group Inquiry. They were also two of the authors of the 2020 Oxford Language Report 'Why Closing the Word Gap Matters', a report which I have critiqued elsewhere for its role in perpetuating ideologies rooted in anti-Black linguistic racism (see Cushing, 2023b).
5. *Levelling Up Through Talk: How Does Oracy Contribute to Social Mobility and Employability?* is the title of a British Academy Innovation Fellowship led by Arlene Holmes-Henderson at Durham University, which involves working with Voice 21 to explore how oracy is pivotal to upward social mobility.

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Notes on contributor

Ian Cushing is Senior Lecturer in Critical Applied Linguistics at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. His research examines the intersections of race, class and language in educational settings, and he collaborates closely with teachers on developing anti-deficit alternatives. His monograph, *Standards, Stigma, Surveillance: Raciolinguistic Ideologies and England's Schools* won the 2023 British Association of Applied Linguistics book prize, and he was the recipient of the 2023 Outstanding Contribution to Research award from the National Association for the Teaching of English. His current research is funded by the Spencer Foundation and the British Academy/Leverhulme.

ORCID

Ian Cushing http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1752-1411

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