Manchester Metropolitan University

e-space
Manchester Metropolitan University's Research Repository

Please cite the Published Version

Cushing, Ian (2024) A response to Brown. Language and Education. ISSN 0950-0782

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2024.2413141

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

Version: Published Version

Downloaded from: https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/635858/

Usage rights: BY-NC-ND Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0

Additional Information: This is an open access article that was first published in Language and Education.

Enquiries:
If you have questions about this document, contact openresearch@mmu.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines)

Language and Education

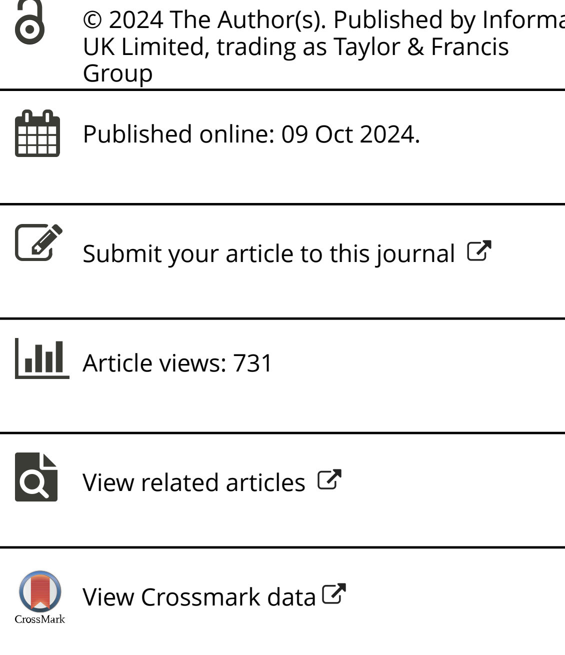
ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rlae20

A response to Brown

Ian Cushing

To cite this article: Ian Cushing (09 Oct 2024): A response to Brown, Language and Education, DOI: 10.1080/09500782.2024.2413141

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2024.2413141



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 09 Oct 2024.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 731

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rlae20

LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2024.2413141

A response to Brown

Ian Cushing

Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK

ABSTRACT

This rebuttal to my work is coming from a different perspective about language, race, and social justice. In response, I focus on how the rebuttal fails to address the core critique I have of the tiered vocabulary framework: that its very origins lie in deficit perceptions of working-class Black children and their alleged linguistic inferiority. I show how the rebuttal mischaracterises genealogical work and a raciolinguistic perspective, and instead sees the policing of language as about individual racist acts, rather than a system underpinned by raciolinguistic ideologies. I reject the rebuttal's claim that tiered vocabulary is an asset-based framework, on the grounds that that no amount of tweaking or modification to a framework with deficit thinking at its roots will somehow fix it. I end with a brief discussion of genuinely asset-based frameworks which seek to uproot raciolinguistic ideologies and sustain the language practices of marginalised children.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 25 September 2024
Accepted 29 September 2024

KEYWORDS
Deficit thinking; raciolinguistic perspective; tiered vocabulary; academic language

My work takes a raciolinguistic perspective to trace the colonial roots of language ideologies and how contemporary deficit thinking is underpinned by these. Taking a genealogical approach, it involves a close scrutiny of how linguistic frameworks were first designed. It questions the assumptions made about the particular communities on which those frameworks were based. It exposes ideologically laden descriptions of language. It considers language a central part in social justice efforts, but only when struggles for linguistic diversity are connected to struggles for the creation of radically new social structures (Cushing 2024). It is clear that this response to my work is coming from different perspectives about language, race, and social justice.

The response to my work subscribes to bordered notions of academic vocabulary. This perspective considers academic vocabulary to be an objective category with neat boundaries. It assumes that the acquisition of academic vocabulary is a core means by which marginalised children can successfully challenge power structures. It relies on the idea that there is a clear distinction between academic vocabulary and social or home vocabulary, and that academic vocabulary is more complex, specific, rich, important, sophisticated, and big[1]. This distinction tends to frame working-class children as not having the ability to use academic vocabulary. The logics of this follow that these children are linguistically deficient, and so require linguistic interventions to both guarantee educational success and to equip

CONTACT Ian Cushing i.cushing@mmu.ac.uk Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

them with the so-called codes of power so they can fully participate in mainstream society. Under a guise of benevolence, this approach simply maintains the linguistic status quo and overlooks broader dimensions of oppression. It positions academic language as a key tool in dismantling social barriers. But as Audre Lorde told us 40 years ago, the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house (Lorde 1984/2003; see also Cioè-Peña 2022).

What if the distinction between 'academic' and 'home' does not reflect how people use language? I am not the first to ask this question. Linguistic ethnographers have been asking and answering it for decades (e.g. Rosen 1982; Brice-Heath 1983). All communities use complex, specific, and sophisticated language, regardless of whether they are engaging in traditionally 'academic' activities such as writing an essay or giving a lecture[2]. False distinctions between academic and non-academic language fail to recognise the linguistic strengths that marginalised children bring to school with them. They overlook the socioeconomic and political factors which shape their lives. They position marginalised children as incapable of using complex language and requiring remediation (Flores 2020). They rely on dominant theories of social justice which suggest that marginalised children can become less marginalised if they just used more 'powerful' language.

Differing perspectives aside, I will now deal with how this response fails to engage with the core part of my original argument. The response focuses initially on my perceived 'problematic tone', which misreads my arguments as saying that the original architects of word tiers are engaged in a 'bigoted façade' and motivated by 'racist intent'. This is a mischaracterisation of genealogical methodologies and a raciolinguistic perspective. Racism is not about individual beliefs, and racial justice in linguistics is not about modifying individual minds. Racial justice in linguistics is about the radical transformation of structures to uproot raciolinguistic oppression and dismantle dominant language ideologies. My work is not a critique of individuals, but of systems and frameworks which reproduce such ideologies.

It is crucial to be aware of the histories of where linguistic frameworks come from and the underlying ideologies they are built on. My original article showed how tiered vocabulary (here used interchangeably with 'word tiers' and 'robust vocabulary instruction') in its original conception in the 1980s was rooted in deficit discourses about Black children from low-income families. These discourses were not invented as part of tiered vocabulary of course, but they are anchored to a colonial history in which European colonisers co-constructed hierarchies of language and race to produce raciolinguistic ideologies.

Taking this raciolinguistic perspective offers a different understanding of language policing to how it is conceptualised in the response to my work. The response sees it as 'heavy-handed admonitions from a person in authority for persons with less authority to stop using certain language'. This sees language policing as simply about hostile acts of linguistic correction as performed by powerful individuals, such as a verbal correction in the classroom. But this is not the default mode of language policing. It is a system and a structure that is hard-wired into curricula, assessments, and pedagogical frameworks built on underlying discourses of linguistic deficiency. The result of this is that some communities' language gets framed as more acceptable than others. My point is that tiered vocabulary is part of this system.

This structural analysis is what a raciolinguistic perspective and a raciolinguistic genealogy brings to the conversation. I note that the response fails to engage with these two core methodological approaches I employed in my original article. Instead, it focuses on a small vignette based on my fieldwork notes which formed part of a broader project, and suggests

this is 'scant evidence' for my claims. The point of the vignette is illustrative – to show how teachers are influenced by dominant language ideologies which legitimise language policing. I observed this first as a teacher and now as an academic who works closely with schools on designing linguistically just classrooms. If the writer of the response needs more evidence, then it is readily available in Cushing (2022).

My main concern with this response, however, is that it fails to address one of the core critiques I have of the tiered vocabulary framework: that its very origins lie in deficit perceptions of low-income Black children and their alleged linguistic inferiority. The approach I took in my article was to bring the receipts to show this, and so it is worth repeating a few illustrative quotes here. Remember that the framework was formulated in the 1980s and based on experiments by white academics in schools serving predominately Black children from low-income homes. The framework repeatedly frames these as suffering from linguistic deficiencies and requiring remediation.

McKeown et al. (1983) suggest that such children lack the ability to 'manipulate words in rich ways' (ibid., 6) and struggle to display 'deep and fluent knowledge of words' (ibid., 16). They claim they are less likely to experience 'language rich' environments at home and with peers, unlikely to use language in 'reflective, playful, or novel ways', and unlikely to encounter 'extensive and sophisticated vocabulary' (Beck et al. 1987: 156). They claim they experience 'slow vocabulary growth' (ibid., 162) and that robust vocabulary instruction will produce a 'lively and productive verbal environment' (ibid., 158). The implication here is that Black, working-class children do not already live in such environments. No attention is paid to the privileged positionalities of the researchers. No attention is paid to the socially unjust structures which shape these families' lives, and there is no recognition of the existing linguistic strengths which such children already possess. Instead, they are framed as individuals who need to modify their language.

More recent work continues these deficit framings, and a failure to attend to the broader socioeconomic and political barriers which confront racialised communities. Beck and McKeown (2007) describes tiered vocabulary as a linguistic intervention, based on experiments with exclusively Black, working-class children in a single school. They describe children in this school as having an 'inadequate vocabulary' (ibid., 253), as coming from homes which 'do not include extensive interactions with language' (ibid., 254), as 'children who may not be read to' (ibid., 262), and in need of vocabulary which is 'more refined', 'more advanced', and 'sophisticated words of high utility' (ibid., 253). Discourses of the so-called word gap were used to bolster these claims – an ideological construction which also has its roots in the stigmatisation of working-class Black children. In other work, 'tier one' words (i.e. 'non-academic') are described as 'basic'. 'Tier two' words (i.e. 'academic') are described as 'sophisticated', 'important', and 'rich'. These are not objective labels, but ideological constructions. The response rejects the idea that word tiers are underpinned by discourses of deficiency. I find this troubling, given the use of ideologically laden labels to describe the allegedly less complex language of working-class, Black families.

The response fails to address these issues. Instead, it describes tiered vocabulary as an asset-based framework which is 'grounded in [students'] own varied cultural experiences'. These asset framings are negated however, because of the deficit thinking which lies at the very root of the framework. If the foundations of a linguistic framework lie in deficit assumptions about marginalised families, then tweaking that framework in attempt to make it more inclusive and culturally sustaining doesn't somehow fix it. A completely new framework is needed.

What might alternative frameworks look like? The response seems to suggest there are none available. But this is a disservice to generations of scholars who have developed genuinely asset-based frameworks. For example, April Baker-Bell's (2020) *Black language pedagogy* directly questions whose linguistic norms are privileged by labels like 'academic vocabulary'. Built on years of classroom fieldwork, she proposes a pedagogy centred on facilitating critical conversations about the intersections between language and power, anti-Blackness, and white linguistic hegemony. Patriann Smith's *Black immigrant literacies* (2023) is a pedagogy which pushes teachers to question notions of 'better vocabulary', which includes rejecting notions of word tiers and academic language. Rooted in first-hand experiences and rich classroom fieldwork, Smith shows how schools committed to racial justice can centre the linguistic agilities of Black immigrant children rather than policing alleged defects. Nelson Flores' *language architecture* (2020) rejects the dichotomous framing of 'academic' and 'non-academic' vocabulary. He proposes a framework which centres the linguistic knowledge that marginalised children are already in possession of, and that this linguistic knowledge is legitimate in its own right.

Unlike tiered vocabulary, these alternatives are clear that simply proposing new linguistic frameworks is never enough, and that struggles for linguistic justice must be connected to broader socioeconomic struggles and the systemic discrimination confronting marginalised communities. Combatting language ideologies in education is an ongoing struggle. Rejecting frameworks which have deficit thinking at their very core is just one part of this struggle.

Notes

1. I have not made these labels up to make a point. This is how vocabulary is described in the original framework of tiered vocabulary.
2. Critics will say yeah, but you're using academic language in this article. But I'm also using linguistic patterns which are typically not thought of as academic. The distinction is not objective.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the editors for their comments on a previous version of this response, and to Nelson Flores for his advice and encouragement.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

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

References

Baker-Bell A. 2020. Dismantling anti-Black linguistic racism in English language arts classrooms: toward an anti-racist black language pedagogy. Theory Into Practice. 59(1):8–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2019.1665415.

Beck I, McKeown M. 2007. Increasing young low-income children's oral vocabulary repertoires through rich and focused instruction. Elementary School J. 107(3):251–271. https://doi.org/10.1086/511706.

Beck I, McKeown M, Omanson R. 1987. The effects and uses of diverse vocabulary instructional techniques. In: McKeown, M & Curtis, M., editors. The nature of vocabulary acquisition. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum; p. 147–163.

Brice-Heath S. 1983. Ways with words: language, life and work in communities and classrooms. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cioè-Peña M. 2022. The master's tools will never dismantle the master's school: Interrogating settler colonial logics in language education. Ann Rev Appl Linguist. 42:25–33. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190521000209.

Cushing I. 2022. Standards, stigma, surveillance: raciolinguistic ideologies and England's Schools. London: Palgrave.

Cushing I. 2024. Transformative justice as a method in applied linguistics. Ann Rev Appl Linguist. :1–10. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190524000023.

Flores N. 2020. From academic language to language architecture: challenging raciolinguistic ideologies in research and practice. Theory Pract. 59(1):22–31. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2019.1665411.

Lorde A. 1984/2003. The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. In: Lewis, R & Mills, S., editors . Feminist postcolonial theory: a reader. London: Routledge; p. 25–27.

McKeown M, Beck I, Omanson R, Perfetti C. 1983. The effects of long-term vocabulary instruction on reading comprehension: a replication. J Read Behav. 15(1):3–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/10862968309547474.

Rosen H. 1982. Language in the education of the working class. English Educ. 16(2):17–25. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-8845.1982.tb00449.x.

Smith P. 2023. Black immigrant literacies: intersections of race, language, and culture in the classroom. New York: Teachers College Press.