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The sound of misbehaviour: deficit thinking and language policing in school discipline policies

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ABSTRACT

What does 'misbehaviour' sound like? This article answers this question by analysing 563 behaviour policies from the 34 largest multi-academy trusts in England, contextualising this within a long history of deficit thinking which perceives marginalised families as lacking adequate language and discipline. Combining insights from anti-deficit perspectives and language ideologies, I interrogate the co-construction of 'im/proper language' and 'im/proper behaviour', examining how these allegedly objective categories interact to produce ideologies of idealised linguistic personhood. I show how behaviour policies *hear* – that is, how normative categories in spoken language become imbued with positively encoded behavioural traits and how non-normative categories get construed as imagined signs of misbehaviour which require policing. I argue that these language ideologies are a fundamental part of the philanthropic logics on which the academies agenda is founded on, which sees the disciplining of allegedly deficient speech as an efficient means for marginalised children to escape racial injustice and poverty.

The sound of misbehaviour

A secondary academy school in east London, with a large intake of racially marginalised children from low-income homes, lists the following as part of its behaviour and discipline policy:

Students are getting 'Ready for University, Ready to Lead' by:

- Entering the classroom calmly, greeting the teacher and starting the 'Do Now' activity in silence.
- Being an active learner by engaging with the activities set by the teacher and demonstrating this by using the learning position (eyes tracking the

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    speaker, hands on the desk, body still, completing all work and answering questions).
- Speaking in Standard English, and giving all answers in class in full sentences.
- Making eye contact when speaking to friends, teachers or visitors.
- Always smiling and saying 'Good morning' or 'Good afternoon' to any visitor.

This extract illustrates the central arguments that I make in this article: that the disciplining of language is central to how children are disciplined in academy schools more broadly, as part of an ideology where allegedly deficient language practices are symptomatic of 'bad behaviour'. I show how this is consistent with a long history of deficit thinking in England's education system (Coard, 1971; Valencia, 1997, 2010), in which intersectionally marginalised children are perceived as lacking in adequate linguistic and behavioural abilities, and thus require remediation. Put another way, I show how ideologies of 'im/proper language' and 'im/proper behaviour' are co-constitutive of one another and are used to construct models of idealised linguistic personhood which are pervasive in academies.

Disciplinary logics and the academies agenda

Behaviour management has become a core policy priority in England's education system over the last 15 years or so (e.g. DfE, 2020; Steer, 2009), legitimising excessively strict discipline policies in what Reay (2022) calls a 'slide to authoritarianism'. This has dovetailed with a revival of deficit thinking more broadly, especially in relation to language, in which marginalised children are repeatedly framed as linguistically deficient and requiring intervention (Cushing, 2022; Shannon & Hackett, 2024).

    These deficit narratives are acutely present in the governance of academy schools. Academies are state-funded schools independent from local authorities, and typically part of multi-academy trusts overseen by self-appointed boards of trustees. Taking inspiration from US charter schools, academies were originally introduced by Labour in the 1990s to target areas of economic deprivation and 'establish a culture of ambition to replace the poverty of aspiration' (Adonis, 2008). The model has been accelerated by successive governments. Various critiques have shown how academies curtail the professional autonomy of teachers, undermine community expertise in the service of neoliberal policy making, impose disproportionately harsh discipline regimes, and reproduce deficit thinking by suggesting children can be lifted out of poverty through strict routines and hard work (e.g. Kulz, 2017; Pennington et al., 2024). As Kulz's (2017) ethnography of Mossbourne Community Academy in east London shows, discipline interventions are

often justified as part of a social justice narrative, which claims that the homes of marginalised children are chaotic, lacking in authority, and devoid of boundaries – and so school is a place where they can experience order and civility. Through individualised narratives of grit and resilience, such children are framed as responsible for undoing their own oppression by working hard, behaving well, and, as this article argues, speaking 'properly' (see also Golden, 2017).

These theories of social justice and mobility begin from the starting point that marginalised children lack adequate language and behaviour, and thus can successfully integrate into mainstream society by simply making tweaks to how they talk and behave. Yet such logics pin responsibility on oppressed individuals and deflect away from oppressive structures (Rosa & Flores, 2023). In addition, such practices are often justified as part of a narrative that behaviour is declining, out of control, and strict measures are necessary to protect teachers and allow them to do their job (Ball et al., 2011; Lanas & Brunila, 2019; Maguire et al., 2010). Whilst challenging behaviour is undoubtedly an issue for some teachers, recent media coverage has highlighted overtly hostile behaviour policies in academies, including in how children's voices are policed and silenced (e.g. Gyane, 2023). These issues are not confined to England, with similar patterns documented in Australia and the US (e.g. Brown, 2019; Golann & Torres, 2020). At the core of these critiques is the idea that schools reward behaviours encoded as white, ablebodied and middle-class – or what Youdell (2006) conceptualises as the ideal learner (see also Bradbury, 2013; Westwood 2024).

In this article I build on these critiques and extend the notion of the ideal learner by showing how academies use discipline policies to construct representations of the 'ideal speaker'. This pushes the critical sociology of education in new directions by showing how discipline policies become sites for the management of language, and thus how teachers are positioned to encode nondominant speech patterns as symptomatic of misbehaviour and requiring disciplinary interventions under guises of philanthropy and benevolence. My critique here is not of individual academies but of the dominant ideologies about language, behaviour, and social justice which shape contemporary education policy in England.

Deficit thinking and 'disruptive' behaviour

Deficit thinking is an ideological phenomenon which frames marginalised individuals as deficient and in need of corrective interventions. It is a victim-blaming, person-centred narrative which locates faults within marginalised individuals and deflects attention away from broader socioeconomic structures of discrimination and injustice (e.g. Ryan, 1971; Valencia, 2010). It begins from the perspective that marginalised children

and their families have various internal defects (such as in language, ambition, motivation, and behaviour) which curtail their ability to learn and succeed – rather than examining how schools and society are structured to maintain inequalities.

Valencia (1997) documents the long histories of deficit thinking, tracing its roots to European colonialism and the representations of Indigenous populations as sub-human, due to both their 'animal-like' language and 'wild' behaviour. In the 1900s, these overtly racist discourses evolved to incorporate eugenicist, hereditarian ideologies which claimed school failure was primarily the result of depressed IQs which produced uncontrollable behaviour and broken language. The mid-1900s saw genetic models of deficit thinking replaced by cultural models which pointed the blame at parents and their alleged inability to discipline their children and provide a linguistically rich home environment. Traces of these periods continue into the present (Smyth et al., 2018). Whilst deficit thinking is a dynamic model which changes according to the period it emerges in, its underlying logics remain stable: that the language and behaviour of marginalised communities are inferior and require corrective intervention.

Academics, activists, and abolitionist organisations have shown how this kind of deficit thinking contributes to the so-called 'discipline gap' – by which racialised and low-income children are more likely to be perceived as disruptive and receive punishments (e.g. Gopalan & Nelson, 2019; No More Exclusions, 2024). Various US-based scholarship (e.g. Ferguson, 2000; Morris, 2016) has documented the connections between deficit thinking and perceptions of defiance, especially for Black children. Like Kulz (2017), Sharma (2018) shows how deficit thinking is in harmony with neoliberal agendas to emphasise 'efficiency' in schools, resulting in remedial programmes designed to fix the 'troublemaking behaviours' of marginalised children. Townsend (2000) pays particular attention to language and the disproportionate disciplining of Black children, showing how nonstandard English, vernacular forms, excessive gestures and loudness get perceived as combative and aggressive. Such language practices get institutionalised as 'outlawed literacies' (Rosa, 2019) which affiliate some children with signs of criminality, and get framed as 'educational and cultural impediments rather than skills that could contribute to broader learning opportunities' (Rosa, 2019, p. 187).

Deficit thinking operates in conjunction with language ideologies: sets of commonly held beliefs and evaluative judgements about what constitutes legitimate language. Language ideologies are rarely, if ever, only about language. They index various beliefs about the users of language, including in behaviour and attitudes to school (Cushing & Snell, 2023). Scholarship has repeatedly demonstrated that ideologies of linguistic deficiency map onto racialised speakers from low-income backgrounds (see Flores & Rosa,

2015), even when such speakers produce language which gets classified as acceptable when produced by white, middle-class speakers. Put another way, what determines 'standard' or 'correct' language is not based on empirical linguistic fact, but on ideological modes of perception which are both racialised and classed. A language ideological perspective thus places critical attention not on how people speak, but on how they are perceived. My focus in this work, then, is to examine how behaviour policies 'hear'.

Language, discipline and England's schools

The disciplining of language in schools has a long history, packaged together as part of a broader institutional ideology that schools are places designed to slot people into categories and punish those perceived as nonconformist. Numerous accounts of European colonial schooling from the 1600s onwards demonstrate how Indigenous children were subjected to physical and psychological abuse by teachers if they were heard to be using their own language (e.g. Nakata, 2007). The eradication of linguistic difference was a core part of how European colonisers justified their project, as part of broader attempts to discipline populations into compliance. At the core of these deficit logics is the narrative that marginalised communities can be remediated through education, with schooling providing them with the standards that their homes allegedly lack. These colonial logics continue to shape contemporary schools, where children are subjected to tests, curricula, pedagogies and policies designed to systematically exclude deviations from idealised norms along the intersections of race, class and ability (Sriprakash et al., 2022).

Linguistic and behavioural control have long coalesced. Since the emergence of mass schooling in the 1800s, popular textbooks instructed teachers to imprint linguistic standards by eradicating linguistic diversity, under the ideology that this was symptomatic of defective intelligence and poor discipline. These ideologies are exemplified in John Gill's 1880 behaviour management manual, who wrote that 'ignorance' and 'defective intelligence' materialise through 'incorrect pronunciation' and 'troublesome provincialisms' – and so 'every instance of mispronunciation coming under the teacher's observation must be corrected' (Gill, 1880, p. 118). In the early 1900s, language and discipline were packaged together as part of the eugenicist movement which attempted to explain school failure in terms of alleged innate biological, racial, and linguistic deficiencies (Gould, 1981). Deficit thinking about language and discipline accelerated in the post-war Windrush generation, where Black immigrant children were routinely perceived in terms of low intelligence, misbehaviour, and a lack of linguistic ability. For example, an influential report by the DES (1971) blamed the low educational performance of Black children on 'boisterous and aggressive

behaviour, restless activity and inability to concentrate' (DES, 1971, p. 65) and 'inadequacies of language' in the form of 'pidgin English' (DES, 1971, p. 65). Bernard Coard's (1971) pamphlet further exposed the intersections of racism, classism and ableism in Britain's educational system, paying particular attention to how perceptions of alleged linguistic inferiority and reluctance to talk in class were used to frame Black children as aggressive, lacking in discipline and displaying a disinterest in school. Victim-blaming narratives were reproduced by educationalists and government advisers, such as Tony Sewell, who described Black speakers of non-standard English as 'rebels' who 'disobeyed rules', had an 'inability or unwillingness to communicate on the same level as their teachers' and therefore 'cannot succeed in school' (Sewell, 1997, p. 81).

Bipartisan government initiatives since the early 2000s have granted schools a 'green light to get tough' (Gove, 2014) and permitted schools increased legal powers to discipline children. These were accelerated as part of the government's response to the 2011 riots in England, which claimed the root cause of unjust societies was not poverty, but poor parenting, gang culture, and Jamaican patois (see Cushing, 2022, pp. 83–86). The rise of so-called zero tolerance approaches to discipline and governance has legitimised punitive responses to minor infringements, as part of a deficit-based 'sweating the small stuff' narrative which claims marginalised children are in desperate need of structures, boundaries, and stimulating verbal environments because they do not experience them at home (e.g. Whitman, 2008). This deficit narrative of working-class children characterises much of the rhetoric by Tom Bennett, who since 2015, has acted as the behaviour advisor to the UK Department for Education, and leads the 'Behaviour Hubs' project, a ~£10 million program designed to provide 'disadvantaged children with the routines and structures needed to help them fulfil their potential' (DfE, 2021; see; Bei et al., 2021 for a critique). In Bennett's textbooks for teachers, he draws ideological connections between a perceived lack of language and misbehaviour – for example:

> These are the less fortunate children, whose lives may have been characterised by lack or little luck. They may have been babysat by a television or immersed in low language-ability backgrounds. [. . .] Their behaviour might often present as misbehaviour. [. . .] They may be functionally illiterate and see little point in trying to do something they feel foolish at. (Bennett, 2020, pp. 58–59)

He goes on to suggest that teachers should 'teach them to express themselves in full sentences' and 'model good language choice [and] good answer sentence structures' (Bennett, 2020, p. 168), reproducing the ideology that 'speaking well' is analogous to 'behaving well'. Whilst textbooks and behaviour policies do not tell the whole story of how ideas come to be enacted within schools (Ball et al., 2011), they are important artefacts, especially in

how teachers are often instructed by management and consultants to 'stick to the policy'. Indeed, as Tom Bennett tweeted in 2024:

> Having a behaviour policy is useless unless
>
> Everyone knows what it is.
>
> Everyone knows what *they* are supposed to do to uphold it.
>
> Everyone knows *how* to implement it.
>
> Everyone actually does it.
>
> If 1–4 aren't happening, then it may as well be written inside a locked chest buried at the bottom of the ocean (Bennett, 2024).

Bennett, however, is simply one man whose work is characteristic of a long history in educational policy which has overlooked the structurally unjust design of schooling and society in favour of individualised victim blaming. Perceptions about language have long played a part in how children are labelled as 'badly behaved'. These contemporary co-constructions of alleged linguistic and behavioural defects are what I turn to next, focusing specifically on behaviour policies designed by secondary academy schools.

Methodology

The aims of this research were to examine how ideologies of linguistic correctness get packaged together with discipline and standards more broadly. These aims were addressed through the construction and analysis of a corpus of 563 behaviour policies downloaded from secondary school websites, specifically from the 34 largest multi-academy trusts in England. All policies been approved by senior management no earlier than 2022. A research assistant built this corpus.

Perceptions about language arise out of specific socioeconomic contexts. To pay attention to how this was surfacing in my data and how contextual factors concerning race and class shape the policing of language in schools, the postcode of each school was mapped against the 2019 English indices of deprivation database (Open Data Communities, 2019). Finally, the latest available Ofsted inspection report for each school in the corpus was also downloaded. This was used to provide additional context about student demographics as well as wider institutional ideologies concerning language and discipline. In the sections that follow, I illustrate my arguments with reference to specific school policies, but where appropriate, situate these within the wider socioeconomic context of each school.

The analytical process for this research combined language ideological analysis with reflexive thematic analysis, especially as applied to large

datasets (e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2019; Vessey, 2017), to uncover how promi-
nent linguistic patterns are illustrative of broader language ideologies. My
approach here was to interrogate the social construction of 'im/proper
language' and 'im/proper behaviour', examining how these categories inter-
act with each other to produce ideologies of idealised linguistic personhood.
I recognise my subjectivity as a researcher here, using my extensive ethno-
graphic experience of schools and language policies to help interpret the
data.

Me and the research assistant read all policies closely, engaging
deeply with the data and sketching out initial prominent patterns. All
policies were then imported to NVivo, where I ran searches for key-
words and phrases which helped to build a set of themes and allowed
me to tell an interpretative story about the data. Searches focused on
terms identified during these close readings. These related to spoken
language (e.g. 'speak clearly', 'reply', 'tone of voice', 'respond', 'slang',
'shout', 'interrupt') and to sound/volume (e.g. 'noise', 'silence', 'quiet').
This intensive process fed back into the ongoing construction and
eventual finalisation of themes, as well as generating illustrative exam-
ples for each theme, which formed the basis for my language ideological
analysis.

There were two main themes, organised into subthemes. The first
main theme, *regulating spoken standards* (organised into *linguistic signs
of 'good'/'bad' behaviour*; *philanthropic language policing*) captured how
certain features of spoken language were framed as indicative of meet-
ing or deviating from behavioural standards. These features were often
classed and racialised, and often related to microscopic details (e.g.
a single phoneme or grammatical construction). Subthemes captured
how the disciplining of these linguistic features was framed as a social
justice and mobility endeavour. The second main theme, *regulating
interaction* (organised into *scripted routines*; *silent conditions*; *movement
and body policing*) captured how communicative patterns more broadly
were framed as il/legitimate behaviours. Subthemes described the
tightly controlled policing of classroom interaction through scripted
routines, the control of volume and requirements for silence, and
how children's facial expressions and entire bodies were regulated.
Using these themes, I compiled textual evidence which enabled me to
build a constellation of linguistic features categorised as signs of
misbehaviour.

Regulating spoken standards

A pervasive ideology across the dataset was in how named features of
spoken language were enregistered as unacceptable behaviour more

broadly, especially those categorised as 'non-standard', 'informal', and 'non-academic'. Here are some examples:

> Beware of the trap of the over-familiarity with scholars: do not use colloquial language and expect them to speak to you in a formal style and in full sentences – 'yep' or 'nope' is not acceptable. (School #3)

> Students should arrive on time to lessons and should greet their teacher courteously. [...]. Students should speak using polite, positive language and formal language. (School #276)

> - We have the highest standards of uniform, inside and outside school.
> - We speak in standard English.
> - We behave professionally inside and outside school.
> - We have excellent manners. (School #507)

> Use academic language – we must ensure that in our speech, and the talk of students, we insist upon academically accurate language and full sentence responses at all times (School #108)

> Have high expectations of pupils, accept no excuses [...] and teach good oracy. (School #67)

These examples illustrate how normative categories in spoken language become imbued with positively encoded behavioural traits – and how non-normative categories get construed as imagined signs of misbehaviour which require policing. Whilst there is no quantifiable relationship between 'standard English' and 'good behaviour', there is a robust and long-standing ideological one. Put simply, children heard to be speaking 'standard English' and 'academic language' are deemed to be behaving well, whereas children who use 'non-standard' or 'non-academic' language are framed as misbehaving. Yet these labels do not represent empirically observable or quantifiable linguistic categories, but represent language ideologies which signify idealised modes of communication, and, by extension, personhood (Agha, 2005). Notions of linguistic standards are based on the language practices of white and middle-class speakers. What this means is that when schools bundle together allegedly empirical linguistic categories as corresponding to signs of il/legitimate behaviour, this reifies the ideology that deviations from speech not perceived as white and middle-class are signs of deficiency.

This becomes especially marked when examining policies from academies with largely racialised students in areas of high economic deprivation. For example, School #418, with a majority South Asian student population from low-income homes, states that:

> We speak in a polite calm manner and in full sentences, we make sure our hands are away from our faces as we speak, we articulate using Standard English and do not use slang. We never mumble. (School #418)

And from an academy in south London with a student community of predominately Black Caribbean children:

> Non-negotiables include [...] using Standard English and correct grammar at all times. (School #216)

Perceptions of what counts as 'standard English' are anchored in raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa, 2015) – which conflate the language use of racialised speakers with linguistic deficiency, even when they produce language which is likely to be perceived as inherently legitimate when produced by white speakers. This ideological relationship is not just reproduced by schools but by Ofsted. As Cushing and Snell (2023) show in an analysis of raciolinguistic ideologies in inspection reports, schools with predominantly working-class and racialised children were framed by Ofsted as sites of linguistic deficiency, with these perceptions forming broader negative judgements about the school, including in children's behaviour.

The racialised and classed dimensions of linguistic im/purity in behaviour policies become further clear when looking at linguistic features which have been historically enregistered to racialised communities. Kissing teeth provides one example of this, as a gesture which has its origins in the African diaspora and later distribution across the Caribbean and North America (Rickford & Rickford, 1999). It forms part of everyday Black language practices, generally as a sign of negative evaluation. Kissing teeth typically lasts under a second, but is a powerful example of how even microscopic linguistic features get ideologically mapped onto unacceptable behaviours and contribute to processes of racialisation which then punish Black children (Baker-Bell, 2020). Here are two examples from the data, both taken from schools located in areas of high economic deprivation with large communities of Black children, and both of which criminalise kissing teeth in terms of referral, infringement, and punishment:

> Major infringements include [...] kissing teeth. (School #122)

> Examples provided below result in serious consequences [...] Kissing teeth, sighing or tutting. (School #48)

Two schools included kissing teeth as part of their 'student code of conduct', which all students were required to sign – for example:

> I must [...] be polite, formal and respectful in all my responses to staff. I must never use colloquial and/or offensive language; answer back; interrupt; roll my eyes; kiss my

teeth; or demonstrate any behaviours that are perceived as rude or disrespectful. (School #331)

Kissing teeth in these policies is construed as an offensive gesture and a sign of defiance. Given its origins in Black language styles and its continued associations with Black communities, the policing of kissing teeth in behaviour policies functions as anti-Black linguistic racism (Baker-Bell, 2020), in which the language and cultural practices of Black children are denigrated, criminalised, and marked out for correction. As the abolitionist and anti-racist organisation No More Exclusions (2024) has shown, schools unfairly sanction and punish Black children for hairstyles, behaviour, and kissing teeth because schools lack understanding about specific cultural practices. A major report by the anti-racist campaign group Just for Kids Law (2020) exposed how the punishing of kissing teeth contributes to the over-representation of racially marginalised children being excluded from school, particularly Black children.

This section has shown how behaviour policies reproduce dominant language ideologies which classify allegedly objective categories of language as signs of il/legitimate behaviour. Whilst there is no empirical connection between 'good/bad speech' and 'good/bad behaviour', there is a durable and long-lasting ideological connection which co-constructs imagined signs of linguistic deficiency with imagined signs of misbehaviour. These ideologies are far from politically or racially neutral. When baked into policies, they become technologies to privilege and uphold whiteness (Gillborn, 2005; Sriprakash, 2023) whilst positioning teachers to hear non-dominant language practices as audible signs of misbehaviour.

Disciplining language as a social justice endeavour

Here I focus on how the policing of allegedly sub-standard language gets justified in behaviour policies. Echoing Kulz (2017), by far the most prominent justification was rooted in individualistic narratives of progress which framed the challenging of inequities as a matter of modifying individual behaviours, rather than addressing broader institutional structures. Through these logics, behavioural and societal progress is achieved by placing demands on marginalised children to modify their language. These narratives typically occurred as part of a deeply altruistic endeavour, in which academy leaders positioned themselves as philanthropists who were committed to lifting children out of poverty and into work. For example, School #193 suggested that 'students are getting "Ready for University, Ready to Lead" by [. . .] speaking in Standard English, and giving all answers in class in full sentences'. School #326 suggested that 'staff will

ensure students can reach their full potential by [. . .] modelling and teaching good oracy', whilst School #97 insisted that children 'speak like a scholar' at all times, and that this would make them oven ready for entry into prestigious universities.

Ark Schools, a MAT with 39 academies, framed behaviour policies as devices to 'ensure our students have the education and character to go on to live happy, fulfilled lives as the *drivers of their own destinies*', and '*we* will be the ones to make our world a better place' (emphases added). Numerous policies from Ark asked students to show 'grit' and 'resilience' in their behaviour (see Golden, 2017). The remediation of language was part of these individualistic theories of change:

> A formal register is impersonal and often follows a prescriptive format. The speaker uses complete sentences, and avoids slang. (School #16)

> We always display the 'habits of excellence' in lessons:
> ✓ Full sentences
> ✓ Standard English
> ✓ Presentation voice (School #14)

> Pupils should not refer to other pupils using slang terms. Pupils should be encouraged to use their presentation voice when answering a question. (School #23)

> The academy will [. . .] ask that all students answer questions in full sentences and use formal, academic English (not slang) when at school. (School #4)

United Learning Trust, the largest MAT in England with 90 schools, also subscribed to these logics of individualised linguistic remediation as a means by which children might overcome structural inequity. This was present, for example, in the policy from School #241, located in one of the most economically deprived parts of Manchester (and the UK), with a community of largely Black Caribbean children. The policy states that students should use 'full sentences in line with our oracy benchmarks both in and out of the classroom', cross-referencing the school's Teaching & Learning Handbook, which includes how 'teachers should insist upon the use of full sentences' and how 'students are encouraged to respond formally and in full, developed sentences'. This was justified in reference to Doug Lemov's *Teach Like a Champion* programme, specifically 'Format Matters', which instructs teachers to insist on 'standard', 'formal', 'academic' and 'traditional' spoken language – what Lemov (2015, p. 117) calls 'the language of opportunity' for students to communicate 'the worthiness of their ideas' and a 'tool box for closing the achievement gap' (Lemov, 2015 , p. 2; see Cushing, 2021 for a critique).

The Manchester school in question here has been subjected to a spate of deficit representations in national discourse. It was described by Andrew Adonis, the architect of the academies programme, as 'one of the worst gang-infested comprehensives in the country' (Adonis, 2012, p. 68). Kathy August, its previous headteacher, made national headlines when she banned students using 'street slang' and 'playground patois' and claimed this was the core reason exam results were improving (see Henry, 2008). Another United Learning academy, also serving a community of largely racialised, multilingual, and economically disadvantaged children, took a similar approach in its policy of 'the street stops at the gate', designed to police linguistic and behavioural borders between 'home' and 'school'. This policy was praised in Ofsted's report of the academy, for which it received a grade of 'outstanding'.

These reports and policies locate the root cause of racial and socioeconomic injustices not in the unequal distribution of resources, but in the alleged linguistic deficiencies of marginalised children. Such deficit thinking begins from the assumption that marginalised children lack the linguistic and behavioural skills suitable for school and society, and thus require remediation to prepare them for work. These logics frame linguistic interventions as the solution to sociopolitical problems (Rosa, 2019), reproducing a flawed theory of social justice which assumes that if marginalised children make small tweaks to their language, they can dismantle structural barriers and escape their own oppression.

Regulated interaction and scripted routines

Whilst the previous section examined the policing of microscopic linguistic features as imagined signs of misbehaviour, this section focuses on the regulation of communicative interaction more broadly. Teachers and students were regularly reminded of the power structures of the school, positioning children as passive recipients of policies – such as in School #6, which stated 'I will always follow staff instructions, first time, every time, remembering that the adult is in charge'. Various policies listed specific phrases for students to use, as a means by which they were expected to demonstrate fidelity to the linguistic and behavioural ideologies of the school. As two illustrative examples:

> Students never push past or interrupt people. If they want to get past, they say 'Excuse me' politely. Then they wait patiently if necessary. Similarly, if they want to talk to somebody, a teacher for example, they say, 'Excuse me' followed by the adults preferred pronoun and/or name. Do you have a minute? Could you help me with something? (School #32)

> We ask and answer questions in full sentences. This allows us to contextualise key words and link the question and answer together. If a teacher asks 'When was the Battle of Hastings?' We don't reply '1066'. We answer with a SHAPE answer, 'the battle of Hastings was in 1066, sir.' This shows we are confident and can expand our answer into a full sentence. (School #135)

'SHAPE' is an acronym which was present in many of the policies, with variants on the following formula:

- **S**peak in Standard English
- **H**ave your idea ready
- Be **A**rticulate
- **P**roject your voice
- **E**ye contact (School #99)

Also STAR:

> **S**it up straight and listen (pens down and arms folded)
> **T**rack the speaker or the text
> **A**lways address your teacher with hands straight up
> **R**espect through silence (School #97)

And SLANT:

> **S**it up
> **L**isten
> **A**sk and answer questions in full sentences
> **N**od your head
> **T**rack the speaker (School #99)

STAR and SLANT originate from Doug Lemov's *Teach Like a Champion* programme, as mentioned above. I and others have critiqued STAR and SLANT elsewhere (Cushing, 2021; Reay, 2022; Vainker & Bailey, 2018), conceptualising it as a language policy rooted in punitive, institutional ableism. Lemov frames his project under guises of social mobility and social justice, arguing that it transforms 'students at risk of failure into achievers and believers, and rewrites the equation of opportunity' (Lemov, 2015, p. 2). This 'at risk' label, as Pica-Smith and Veloria (2012) show, is part of a race and class evasive narrative which stokes deficit perspectives of intersectionally marginalised children and pins responsibility on them to modify themselves. In the data, STAR and SLANT were repeatedly deployed in these ways, positioned as a tool to enable high-quality teaching, resilience, hard work, and the reproduction of social norms – for instance:

> We SLANT in every lesson and every assembly. This is a key habit that will help pupils to succeed in school and in life. When pupils SLANT they learn more, they remember

more, they develop more self-control and they demonstrate that they are polite young people who demonstrate respect towards their teachers and their peers. (School #53)

Unacceptable behaviour includes failing to engage with our whole school systems (line up, SLANT) to promote social norms. (#417)

The school ranked with the highest multiple indices of deprivation in my data prescribed *Teach Like a Champion* and SLANT as compulsory tools for classroom management, stating that their usage allowed for the creation of a 'stimulating environment that encourages pupils to be engaged'. An alternative reading of SLANT argues it is an ableist instrument for co-policing behaviour and communication, which simultaneously deskills teachers and degrades children under ideologies of social justice (Sondel et al., 2022). Ableist ideologies of language and behaviour were also present in policy requirements for children and teachers to maintain eye contact when speaking to others (see Tigert & Miller, 2022), for example:

As you enter the classroom make eye contact and greet. Students should move straight to their seats in silence. [. . .] Slang language is prohibited. Students always walk on the left in corridors and on the stairs. (School #280)

Positive behaviours improve learning: sitting upright and making eye contact with the teacher. (School #58)

Teachers, too, have their language policed – in how they are provided with scripts to follow when managing behaviour:

John, you are talking over me. You are not Ready to Learn; that's a warning. (School #326)

I can still hear two people who have forgotten that we enter the room in silence (School #16)

If they do not immediately do what has been asked, the member of staff will say; 'if you refuse this reasonable request I'm going to have to issue you a with 30 minute detention.' (School #327)

These scripts were not just in the form of responses to perceived misbehaviour, but as deterrents, for example:

As soon as any slouching, daydreaming, non-tracking or distracting occurs, swiftly use these pre-emptive reminders:

(1) Silent non-verbal: hand signal, eye contact, facial expression, shake head, sharp pause or clicking.
(2) Unnamed: 'We're tracking. Just waiting for 100%. We need one person . . . and 100%.'

(3) Named: 'David, we listen so we can learn. Thank you.' (School #326)

Some policies included scripted routines which prescribed instructions to the very minute. These were typically justified as part of a productivity and so-called 'lost learning' narrative which sought to ensure that every second in school was controlled and structured (see Harmey & Moss, 2023 for a critique). For example, the following extract is taken from an academy in north London with a large intake of Black African and Caribbean children from low-income homes:

> **Before school**: We line up calmly in pairs by the secondary gate speaking in normal conversation voice.
>
> **08.15–08.27**: We stay in our designated area. We speak in normal conversation voice. No running in the courtyard.
>
> **Morning line up**: When the whistle is blown at 08.27, we stand silently in our lines and track the speaker. We remain in our line in silence in perfect uniform and wait until our teacher leads our line to our classroom. (School #21)

Language plays a core part in how children are disciplined in school here, with notions such as 'normal conversation voice', 'stand silently' and 'track the speaker' all ensuring that children's language and movement are perpetually monitored. This monitoring takes place amidst discourses of productivity and learning loss, locating faults and blame at the feet of marginalised children and their families. Yet these narratives rely on deficit thinking, which begins from the assumption that the homes of marginalised children are devoid of routines and boundaries – and so school is a place where they are socialised into what they allegedly lack. Whilst such deficit ideologies about the parenting styles of low-income families are nothing new, they have seen a marked resurgence as part of the academies agenda. For example, the right wing, pro-academy campaign group *Parents and Teachers for Excellence* pushes for strict discipline policies as a tool to remediate the 'bad habits' of children who come from 'chaotic home lives with poor discipline' (Parents and Teachers for Excellence, 2016, p. 1).

These crude stereotypes sit within a long genealogy of deficit thinking about the home environments of marginalised families, which claims that these lack routines, structure, and adequate verbal stimulation. Claims of this nature have been repeatedly rejected (e.g. Dyson, 2021; Snell, 2015; Sperry et al., 2019) with ethnographic accounts of working-class life documenting school and domestic environments that are both linguistically dexterous, verbally stimulating, and place a high value on education. Yet school is often a place where their linguistic

capabilities are at best not recognised and at worst classified as requiring remediation. As such studies have argued, the 'problem' is not located in how children use language, but in the language used to construct and control them.

Silenced voices

Whilst the above sections have focused on what children say and how they talk is ideologically co-constructed with imagined signs of il/legitimate behaviour, this section shows that the total silencing of speech also plays a part in how children are disciplined. 'Good behaviour' is constructed as near or total silence; a well-behaved child is one that says nothing at all. Here are some initial examples:

> Use the correct voice, as instructed by the teacher: silence, working whisper, paired conversation, clear contribution, performance projection. (School #41)

> Students should move straight to their seats in silence [...]. Complete Do Now in silence [...] Students stand behind their seat in silence [...]. When dismissed, students walk quietly and quickly to their next lesson. (School #277)

> - Corridors should be quiet, and noise should not disrupt others.
> - Be polite and greet teachers with 'good morning' or 'good afternoon'.
> - During lessons, students must enter the classroom in silence.
> - Work in silence unless asked to participate in a discussion activity by the teacher [...].
> - When reading a text in class put both hands on a ruler. Read along with the speaker, moving the ruler down as you speak [...]. Pay close attention to pronunciation. (School #399)

One school in the data had attracted media criticism in 2021 following formal complaints from parents whose children were forced to chant 'silence is my natural state' (see Casey, 2024). As well as classrooms, corridors were a space where silence was often required, typically justified by drawing on the learning loss discourse as discussed in the previous section:

> We believe that silent corridors are [...] an important part of our ambition for our students to get the best possible outcomes as they ensure a minimum amount of learning time is lost through students travelling between lessons and around the school. We therefore expect our students to be silent when travelling around our school building and students who fail to meet this expectation will be sanctioned with a detention. (School #49)

Schools which have policies on silent corridors are represented as models of good practice by the state and as an integral part of its 'discipline drive' (DfE, 2020). A DfE video published on Twitter in 2021 (DfE, 2021) advertising its Behaviours Hubs programme featured Stuart Lock, the principal of Bedford Free School and CEO of Advantage Schools, publicising his school's silent corridors and policies on 'sweating the small stuff' for marginalised children. Yet, as Bei et al. (2021) show, these logics – and the Behaviour Hubs programme more broadly – simply deflect attention away from structural and racial marginalisation and redirect it towards modifying the behaviour of children who have been wronged by such structures.

Hanna's (2021) work on contemporary secondary schools shows how various injustices are rendered visible when silence permeates the very fabric of schools. They write how young people marginalised in terms of gender, ability, class and race get presented with messages that their voices are not valued – especially in classrooms, where 'students were permitted to respond with a prescribed answer, but not to probe or examine knowledge' (Hanna, 2021, p. 1171). Silence does not equate to 'work' or 'productivity', but simply mutes critical engagement and opportunities for children to talk, question, and ultimately 'erode[s] participation because students withdraw from discourse and disengage, which ultimately takes the form of denying students a voice' (Hanna, 2021: 1171). Furthermore, the silencing of children's voices as part of a social justice argument is particularly flawed given how various studies (e.g. Snell & Lefstein, 2018) demonstrate the power of dynamic classroom interaction in creating spaces where marginalised children are made to feel welcome and validated.

What does 'misbehaviour' sound like?

Educational policy and conventional academic research have long attributed educational injustices to undesirable cultural, linguistic, and behavioural practices. These deficit narratives fail to attend to the structurally unjust features of how schools are organised and lay the blame on marginalised or so-called 'at risk' children for their alleged linguistic gaps and cultural failures. In this article, I have focused on how the coalescing of language and discipline emerges as part of these narratives, and how discipline becomes a critical site for the management of sound and language. By placing an emphasis on spoken language in discipline policies, teachers are positioned to listen out for perceived linguistic rule-breaking as symptomatic of rule-breaking more broadly. Figure 1 is a consellation of linguistic features which are ideologically co-constructed with signs of 'misbehaviour'.
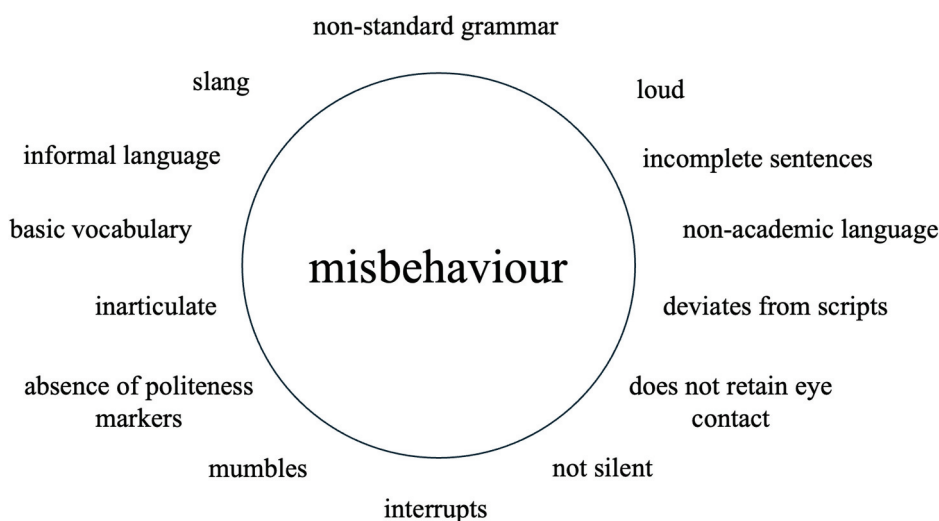
Figure 1. The ideological co-construction of 'bad speech' and 'bad behaviour'.

There is no empirical relationship between 'bad speech' and 'bad behaviour', but there is a stubborn and durable ideological connection between them. Whilst this ideology is by no means exclusive to academy schools in England, I have argued here that academies are particularly welcoming spaces for such thinking, given the deficit thinking which lies at the very foundations of how they were first conceptualised (see Pennington et al, 2024; Kulz, 2017). These critiques of academies have focused on the neoliberal and corporate logics which govern them, and my focus on spoken language builds on this to expose how perceptions of il/legitimate language play a fundamental role in the over disciplining of children, especially those from racially marginalised and low-income backgrounds who are so often framed as displaying imagined linguistic deficiencies. Behaviour policies have long been a central strategy in efforts to control language and bodies, but the slide to authoritarianism in England's schools (Reay, 2022) has created spaces where particularly hostile approaches to discipline are not just permissible, but framed as a social justice narrative reliant on individualistic notions of grit, hard work, and resilience.

What then, does 'misbehaviour' sound like? My analysis of discipline policies reveals a constellation of linguistic features that are categorised as imagined signs of misbehaviour. The misbehaving child is one who speaks non-standardised English, uses slang, does not speak in full sentences, does not use conventional politeness markers, is inarticulate, does not sustain eye contact with others, slouches in their chair, uses informal registers, goes off script, speaks too loud or fails to be totally silent. The well behaving child is one who speaks standardised English, does not use slang, is silent, and so on. This constellation exposes the deeply flawed ideologies about language that

permeate academy discipline policies, and how subjective perceptions about language are used to construe what counts as misbehaviour. Efforts by academies to remediate these alleged signs of linguistic and behavioural deficiencies are not empowering or socially just, but simply a mechanism for social reproduction and stigmatising discourses of deficit.

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