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## Linguistic Moments: Language, Teaching, and Teacher Education in the U.S.

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## **Linguistic Moments: Language, Teaching, and Teacher Education in the U.S.**

**By LaVada Brandon,  
Denise Marie Taliaferro Baszile,  
& Theodora Regina Berry**

When will a legitimately American language, a language including Nebraska, Harlem, New Mexico, Oregon, Puerto Rico, Alabama, and working class life and freeways and Pac-man become the language studied and written and glorified in the classroom? (Jordan, 1985, p. 30)

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Reflecting on a dilemma that is neither new nor resolved, two decades ago political essayist June Jordan (1985) asked the question: “When will a legitimately American language, a language including Nebraska, Harlem, New Mexico, Oregon, Puerto Rico, Alabama, and working class life and freeways and Pac-man become the language studied and written and glorified in the classroom” (p. 30). Since the advent of compulsory education in U.S. society, the question of cultural and linguistic pluralism has been a source of controversy. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a major impetus for the common school movement was a need to Americanize Eastern European immigrant children, which in part meant re-

## Linguistic Moments

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placing their native tongues with English (Tyack, 1974). Today American schooling continues its quest of Americanization, albeit focused on different populations of students, including African American, Latin American and Asian American students among others.

Demographic projections show that increasing numbers of bilingual and bidialectal children entering U.S. public schools continue to be a primary challenge for the overwhelmingly White and monolingual (English Only) teaching force in K-12 classrooms (Nieto, 2004). The most profound effect of such schooling situations is language barriers, which stifle communication and hinder the possibilities of educational and social experiences. While the debate rages on about whether to and how to engage students' home languages as part of the effort to teach Standard English, we are entering this debate with a specific concern about the lack of significance given to language in teacher education "diversity" courses.

Many diversity courses that prepare pre-service teachers do not address the significance or the impact of language barriers on linguistically diverse learners. Often time, new and veteran teachers construct their bilingual and/or bidialectal students as others and are unaware of how to use their students' social, cultural, and political linguistic communities to facilitate the academic growth and development of these learners. Too many teachers perceive students who are linguistically different from the mainstream as inferior. In many cases the home language of learners are prohibited in the classroom (Franqiz & Reyes, 1998). The end result is that teachers silence their students' cultural perspectives and approach them as little broken bodies needing to be fixed. Yet, countless researchers hold that successful learning experiences for bilingual and bidialectal students connect school to students' home language, culture, and community and as such use current knowledge to build future learning experiences (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 2004; Perry and Delpit, 1998).

Each of the contributors to this article is a teacher educator who currently has or has had in the recent past the responsibility of teaching "the diversity" course within their respective teacher education programs. Based on our distinct yet similar experiences, we believe that it is critical to find ways to effectively address language—within these courses—not simply as a technical skill and not simply by stressing the need to learn standard English, but more importantly by seeing language as a fundamental expression of cultural identity which is shaped by the interplay between family/community values and beliefs and educational policy and practice. In our efforts to bring this perspective into our classrooms, we often use our own linguistic experiences as a way to critically examine how profoundly they shape the ways in which we come to understand language and engage it with our students. In what follows we each share a critical linguistic moment, which we frame as critical race counterstories, to make visible the ways in which our own diverse linguistic experiences have shaped our concerns, and efforts as teacher educators.

To accomplish this end, we grapple with the following questions: (1) In what ways can an awareness of language as an evolving dynamic dialogical process help

to facilitate an understanding of language diversity as an opportunity to create new linguistic communities? (2) How does this understanding help educators re-imagine language barriers as educative experiences for both themselves and their bilingual and bidialectal students? (3) What is the responsibility of teacher educator to address bilingual/bidialectal issues? (4) What is the role of teacher education programs in shaping new perceptions about educative possibilities for dominant and marginal languages in a democratic multicultural society? Before presenting our experiences as a way to address these questions, we want to briefly elaborate on our choice of critical race counterstory as a methodological framework.

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### The Language of Critical Race Counterstories

According to Delgado and Stefancic (2001), the mission of critical race theory is to study and transform the relationship among race, racism and power, placing conventional race studies, “in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, context, group- and self-interest, and even feelings and unconscious” (p. 3). One of the ways many CRT scholars have sought to carry out this mission is through the strategy of counterstorytelling. Counterstorytelling is a way to both uncover the subjugated stories of the marginalized and a strategy for analyzing the stories that work to maintain racial and other forms of domination. Some CRT scholars have noted the importance of counter/storytelling as a way to incorporate experiential knowledge and establish relevance of voice/s (Barnes, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Williams, 1991). Gloria Ladson-Billings (2000), for example, expresses the possibilities that such a framework allows:

My decision to deploy a critical race theoretical framework in my scholarship is intimately linked to my understanding of the political and personal stake I have in the education of Black children. All of my “selves” are invested in this work—the self that is researcher, the self that is parent, the self that is community member, the self that is a Black woman. No technical-rational approach to this work would yield the deeply textured, multifaceted work I attempt to do. (p. 272)

As Ladson-Billings’ comment insinuates, counterstorytelling functions as an onto-epistemological intervention on rationalist discourse. Its purpose, then, is not simply to make racial injury and injustice visible, but it is to point out and interrogate the cultural literacy that gives rise to and sustains such injury and injustice (Gutierrez-Jones, 2001).

One of the foundational tenets of critical race theory holds the idea that race and races are products of social thought and relations and as such are often used by the dominant society to racialize certain minority groups at different times in response to shifting needs in the labor market (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). We are confident that one of the primary ways in which certain groups are racialized, that is marked not only as different but as less than the dominant group, is through the narrow conceptions of language that drive language policy and practice in American schooling. As many of the authors in Delpit & Dowdy’s (2002) *The Skin We Speak*

## Linguistic Moments

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emphasize, when we understand language simply as technical skill rather than as part and parcel of identity formation and negotiation, then we severely limit our efforts to engage linguistically diverse students in not only acquiring the language of power, but in positive educational experiences in general. In framing our critical linguistic moments as critical race counterstories, we are attempting to not only to challenge the view of language simply as technical skill, and to make visible the ways in which language—especially ones home language—is an expression of cultural/racial identity but to also emphasize the importance encouraging prospective and practicing teachers to interrogate their own linguistic experiences and the ways in which they might influence one's understanding of and approach to linguistically diverse students.

The first of the next three sections, "Linguistic Moments #1: Facing the Power of Language," recounts the experience of a mother/teacher/educator who faces the power of language as her child's teachers attempt to silence and replace her daughter's native tongue with Standard English. Contesting this either/or paradigm the section illuminates the theoretical frames of bell hooks' (1994) and Mikhail Bakhtin's et al. (1981) to forefront possibilities of language diversity as a novel dynamic reinvention of experience. The second section, "Linguistic Moments #2: *Tu hija tiene mucho poopoo!*," forefronts the efforts of a novice teacher to teach her Spanish-speaking students as they faced down the tyranny of California Proposition 187. Emphasizing both personal and political dynamics of language diversity, a teacher's experience is fore grounded in theoretical frames that support the inextricable links between language and identity. In the third section, "Linguistic Moments #3: A Bilingual/Dialectical Dilemma in Teacher Education," the author relives her experience as a woman of color fighting against "stereotypical oppression" while attempting to advocate for a bilingual/bidialectical pre-service teacher in the ivory tower and the schoolhouse.

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### Linguistic Moments #1: Facing the Power of Language

This section seeks to answer the question: In what ways can an awareness of language as an evolving dynamic dialogical process help to facilitate an understanding of language diversity and linguistic communities? To accomplish this end, the work begins with a counterstory. In this episode my African American daughter, her European American teachers, and I, a mother/teacher-educator, are confronted with the power of language to name, validate, silence, and/or ignore experience, culture, and community. Next, the section historicizes notions of language diversity in the United States. Finally the part concludes with possibilities of language as an evolving process based on notions offered by bell hooks and Mikhail Bakhtin.

*In 1997, Ebonics, the vernacular used by many African Americans, found a place in U.S. classrooms. Thousands of children in Oakland, California, were taught Standard English through the use of Ebonics. Many educators and linguists saw Ebonics as a necessary option to bridge African American children's linguistic community*

and home culture to their schooling experiences—a practice believed to facilitate their ongoing academic success (Perry & Delpit, 1998). Because of its recognition as a non-intelligible dialect, the subsequent debates regarding its use inflamed many Americans. These heated debates marked the beginning of my fascination with the power of language and, most importantly, how language use and signification could either hinder or enable the learning experiences of historically marginalized learners. Little did I know that this fascination would take a very personal turn when my own child of African American descent entered kindergarten. While attending an outstanding school recognized for its use of constructivist approaches and experientially based pedagogy, she and I were faced with the power of language.

During a casual meeting with the director of my daughter's school, I was told that my little one was doing excellently except that my daughter used "Black" talk. The school director worried that "it" (Black talk) would hinder my daughter's reading and recommended that she get speech remediation. Geez, I thought to myself at least sixty percent of the school's student body is African American. Haven't the teachers read the Real Ebonics Debate? Are they not aware of current literature that speaks of the importance of using children's home languages to transition them into understanding and using Standard English? What was my daughter's teacher doing when she taught her students to write words and paragraphs using phonetic spelling? And more importantly why did they feel a need to replace her current speech. Is it not possible for her to read the world in two languages? Did her teachers not know or did they not care enough to know that I am proud of my daughter's use of "Black" talk. In my view, her verbiage reflects our southern African American culture, history, and family. Her language is a beacon of pride.

Representing the linguistic dialect of a subordinate group, my daughter's home language and her use of "black talk" was not seen as an opportunity for future learning experiences but rather was regarded as a potential hindrance to her academic success. Lisa Delpit (1995) in her text *Other Peoples Children* notes:

... adults probably are not bad people. They do not wish to damage children; indeed, they likely see themselves as wanting to help. Yet they are totally unable to perceive those different from themselves except through their own culturally clouded vision. (Delpit, 1995, p. xiv)

Though her teacher and the school director had my daughter's best interests at heart, their ability to see the significance of her home language was tainted by perceptions of Standard English as right and her home (native) language as wrong. Vail and White (1991) state that such binary oppositions were formed during European colonization to distinguish "they/imperialist" from "us/subjects." Specifically Vail and White write:

It was in the [imperialist] intellectual climate, with its concern for constructing boundaries between "civilized" and "primitives" and with its wide acceptance of Social Darwinism, that the discipline of anthropology, dedicated to describing and explaining "their" cultures to "us" began to be professionalized. At one

## Linguistic Moments

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and the same time, Native Americans, Australian aborigines, Pacific islanders, Asians, and Africans came to be the subjects of racist discourse, the victims of imperial expansion, and the objects of study of anthropology, the very existence of which was based on the assumption that “they” differed in fundamental ways from “us.” (p. 4)

Crafted by anthropologists through the theory of evolution, these binaries fixed relationships between civilized colonialists and their savage subjects. Moreover, “they imperialist” and “us subjects” established the distance between good and bad to justify colonization.

In contemporary United States discourse, the divide between “good” and “bad” language gained saliency with Standard English connection to patriotism. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt’s restrictive language policy made this connection vivid. This policy stated: “We have room but for one language here, and that is the English language; for we intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans, of American nationality and not dwellers in a polyglot boarding house” (Crawford, 1992). Speaking about the large influx of eastern European immigrants entering the United States, President Roosevelt linked language to patriotism. Seen as an albatross around the necks of policymakers, non-English speakers were viewed as a burden that could be lifted once they had acquired Standard English. This modernist “either/or” paradigm came to solidify understandings of who was and who was not American. Nationhood became synonymous with speaking Standard English. Lynn Zimmerman (2004) notes:

The dominant culture in a country is often considered to be synonymous with national identity, because, this cultural identity presents what at first seems to be a coherent unified worldview that is actually the ideology of a dominant group or interest. This ideology or worldview may or may not correspond with the cultural identity of its entire people, but every self-regulating state attempts to socialize the individual in a manner deemed to be consistent with the goals of its political system. This socialization is usually accomplished through the use of language. (p. 3)

Consequently, in U.S. classrooms Standard English became the vehicle used to transmit and maintain Anglo-American culture and language. Immigrant children soon learned that if they wanted to succeed in American society, they needed to acquire the language of dominant discourse; they needed to know Standard English. Simultaneously, linguistic diversity came to be viewed as a temporary, troublesome barrier to learning whose remedy was achieved by ridding students as quickly as possible of what was perceived as the burden of speaking another language (Nieto, 2004).

The approach used to achieve linguistic homogeneity was offered through bilingual education. Vacillating between complete immersion in English-only classrooms to pull out programs where students learn subjects in their native language and receive additional instruction in Standard English, bilingual education has had mixed success in the United States (Drashen, 1982). Scholars have argued the reasons for its capricious success rate are largely due to inconsistency of programs,

inadequate funding, and nonqualified teachers teaching Limited English Proficiency (LEP) children (Nieto, 2004; Zimmerman, 2004).

Falling prey to the either/or paradigm of its origin, approaches in bilingual education are limited because they fail to recognize the fluid dynamic nature of language. English-only approaches recommend a complete break and replacement of one's home language with the dominant language in classroom settings. Ignoring the importance of home/school relationship in the acquisition and the retention of new information (Dewey, 1938/1997), this approach has left many LEP students a-literate (Nieto, 2004).

On the other hand, pullout programs recommend using students' home language to help them transition into an understanding of Standard English. Realized as a linear learning continuum, this approach is cognitively logical (Piaget, Gruber, & Vonèche 1977). In using a learner's home language to enable them to better understand Standard English, old information becomes the building block for new information. Hence, Ebonics, for example, becomes the means through which Standard English is understood and learned.

However, what is left out of conversations on how to best provide learning experiences for LEP students is a more complicated understanding of language. Language is a bifurcated idiom that blends with other languages to create new linguistic forms. Language constructs argued by both bell hooks (1994) and Mikhail Bakhtin et al. (1981) emerge by mixing the old with the new to create a hybrid of voices operating in the in between space of control and chaos.

According to hooks these forms of language constructs are vivid in Black vernacular. Black vernacular was created by enslaved multi-ethnic Africans who were forced to embrace Standard English, a language historically laden with conquest and silence, as their only means of communication and survival. However, the English language did not become a mechanism for domination or silence but rather merged with enslaved African's native tongues and became a novel reinvention of sounds rendering not despair but empowerment. A recreation of words in form of broken speech and Negro spirituals used to simultaneously accommodate and resist their oppressors. The linguistic moments of formerly enslaved Africans enable hooks to imagine language as a process in constant negotiation and reinvention, a dialectical procedure where social, cultural, and political binary oppositions intersect and intertwine to create a common voice and new experiences.

Bakhtin likewise argues that historically language has been used as a gatekeeper whose imagined power rests in its ability to silence and name experience. This silencing occurs through a hierarchical categorization of language(s) that are made meaningful through one's social, cultural, and political positionality to power: a process he names monoglossia. However, complicating the absolute nature of monoglossia in defining experience, Bakhtin finds hope through polyglossia. Bakhtin argues, "[P]olyglossia fully frees consciousness from the tyranny of its own language and its own myth of language" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 140) Polyglossia is a reinvention of meaning through a mergence of social, cultural, and political



## Linguistic Moments

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linguistic forms. In polyglossia language is defined through a contestation of voices and dialects within a language.

Though polyglossia offers hope and vision for linguistic moments in a multicultural society, monoglossia continues to govern the teaching of ESL, Bilingual, and Bidialectal students. Whether students are immersed in Standard English only classrooms or receive instruction in two languages, the end result is the same. LEP students are at a tremendous disadvantage, not because their native language is ineffectual for learning but because many teachers and schools see students' native languages as a hindrance to their academic success (Nieto, 2004). Consequently, one language gains space as another is simultaneously silenced. In the next section, "Linguistic Moment #2: *Tuhija tiene mucho poopoo!*," further reimagines language barriers as educative experiences for both bilingual /bidialectal students and their teachers.

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### **Linguistic Moments #2: *Tu hija tiene mucho poopoo!***

Building on the idea of language as more than words used to speak, this section grapples with the question: How does new understandings of language diversity help educators re-imagine language barriers as educative experiences for both themselves and their bilingual and bidialectal students? The section addresses the pedagogical shifts that should take place when and if teachers are exposed to more complex understandings of language as essentially an expression of cultural identity. Specifically I share my counterstory as a novice teacher (who was/is herself ever-becoming bilingual and bidialectal) who, by circumstance, was forced to theorize and retheorize the possibilities and impossibilities of teaching bilingual and bidialectal students within the dominant structure of public education.

*In 1984, I was hired as an assistant teacher at a racially diverse elementary school in Los Angeles Unified School District. Although the school was located across from an affluent African American community, it also was in the path of a notorious housing project with on going gang activity. In fact students were forbidden to wear red or blue clothing because many had to walk through gang territory to get to school. The student population was largely free and reduced lunch and consisted of 60% African American and approximately 40% Chicano.*

*I was thrilled to have gotten a job doing what I had spent the better part of my childhood playing at. I played school nearly everyday until I was fourteen. My imaginary students had always resembled the largely African American and working class European American students with whom I had gone to school. At fifteen, I became an assistant teacher in the ESL classroom in my new high school. I never did quite figure out how or why I was graced with this assignment. Although I was a top-notch student for all four years in Spanish, mostly all of the students in the ESL class were Korean, in fact I can't recall a one that spoke Spanish. In my first quarter in college, I placed in advanced Spanish course in which Spanish was the only language spoken during class time. After that course, I took one more in Spanish literature and then decided I had had enough.*

*By the time I was hired at the elementary school it had not occurred to me to mention my background in Spanish much less describe myself as bilingual. So I didn't, and I was initially assigned to work with a group of "at risk" students who could not be accommodated in the regular class format. After two weeks of doing the difficult work of breaking the ice and building rapport with these students, the assistant principal called me down to her office morning and greeted me with, "I did not know that you were bilingual." I smiled and then hesitated, "Well.... I wouldn't exactly say." Before I could finish, however, the assistant principal announced my new assignment, while handing me some Spanish language workbooks. I was anxious about teaching this new group of students, which consisted of about 10 children of various ages who spoke different dialects of Spanish as they were children coming from Mexico, El Salvador and at least one from Venezuela.*

*The first weeks were grueling, because I had not yet learned to think in Spanish. I was still translating from one language to the other in my head, before speaking to the children. This, as can be imagined, drastically slowed down communication. In the beginning the children would ask for something, and I would respond with "Si, si manna" meaning "Yes, yes tomorrow," which was a way to buy me more time to figure out what they were asking for. I often had occasion to realize that there were still many words I did not know, because they were not words that would have been taught in my studies of Spanish in school. For a week or so in the beginning, one young male student had been calling me "mija" which I assumed was just another name for "maestra" or teacher. It took me some time to figure out that "mija" was a blending of "mi" (my) and "hija" (daughter), meaning my daughter, my baby. It took me even longer to figure out that he was using it as a colloquialism meaning "hey baby." On another day, I was called down to the office to notify a Spanish-speaking parent that her daughter was having a severe case of diarrhea. I, of course, had no idea how to say diarrhea in Spanish, and was quite embarrassed as I managed to tell the flabbergasted parent, "Tu hija tiene mucho poopoo!"*

Coming face to face on a daily basis with how much I actually still did not know helped me to realize how the students and I were in ironically similar predicaments. We shared a significant language barrier. My obvious limitation was that although I had a good working knowledge of Spanish from my school studies, I was lacking in my ability to communicate with fluidity, which many times not only limited my ability to be clear, but also to engage the students in culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Essentially my conscious learning or rule-based acquisition (Drashen, 1982) of Spanish had not prepared me to engage comfortably or effectively in context-dependent conversation.

Reflecting on my own limitations forced me to grapple with a more complex understanding of the psychology and politics of language (Haskin & Butts, 1993), a notion that moved beyond simply using words to talk to another person or the assumption that one language can or should be easily replaced by another. Ultimately, I came to understand language not simply as a form of communication but more significantly as the core of one's cultural identity and an expression of one's

## Linguistic Moments

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reading of the world. This is the experience I call on to understand heuristically what Freire meant when he noted that “language is also culture. Language is the mediating force of knowledge; but it is also knowledge itself” (Freire in Macedo, 1994). A similar idea is expressed in Block’s (1995) psychology of reading, where he notes that, “Self comes into existence in the act of reading. I am what I read; I am when I read; I am by reading” (119). Just as reading is a language-based mode of meaning production, so too is speaking. Thus it can also be said that, the self comes into existence, through language, in the acts of reading and speaking. We are what we read/speak; We are when we read/speak. We are by reading/speaking. In this sense, language is far more than simply speaking or reading words, it is a context dependent or a culturally significant emergence and presentation of the self (Fanon, 1967).

Yet my new perspective on language complicated my thinking about my pedagogical practices as well as the political debates over language in the state of California and the ways they might discipline language pedagogy. I began to contemplate many questions, which I had never been concerned about before. If the goal of my teaching was to “replace” their Spanish with English, did that not also mean replacing their Spanish speaking selves with American selves? Why was superior value placed on acquiring one language over another as opposed to supporting both languages, and teaching students how to transition from one to the other? How did the view that English is the language of power effect my own second language education? How does it effect the acquisition of a second language on behalf of English speakers in general? How can I encourage acquisition and code-switching in the classroom as opposed to re-emphasizing, consciously and dysconsciously, the perceived superiority of Standard English?

Grappling with some of these questions, I became convinced that I would be more successful with the children if I understood our teaching/learning relationship as one of mutual exchange. While I taught reading and writing in the Standard Spanish I had learned, the children taught me much in their various colloquial Spanish dialects. In my time with the children, I also began to create simulations that required the children to determine what language would be appropriate in that particular situation and to use it to the best of their abilities to accomplish the task at hand. For instance, when we did a unit on family, we would pretend we were on Carlos’ front porch talking with his family and friends in Spanish. Other days we might be trying to take the bus downtown or be working as tour guides in a border museum. As the children and I continued to work together in this manner, the fluidity of my Spanish improved just as the students began integrating more and more English into their dialogue.

However, I still had several concerns, not the least of which was the English Only Proposition going for a vote in the next state election. I knew this would drastically alter my work with the children, because they did not only speak Spanish, they dreamt and thought in Spanish as well. While I knew that children had a remarkable ability to acquire a second language before the age of 10 or 12 and that some language immersion programs had considerable success, I also

knew that the politics in this particular situation would be more destructive than constructive.

As Macedo (1994) has pointed out the most dangerous assumption of the English Only Movement is that learning English constitutes education itself. That is there is very little consideration of a number of factors, which under this movement adversely affect various groups of linguistically diverse learners. First, until these students learned English, their growth in other subject areas would be unnecessarily put on hold and what progress they did make would be undervalued. I was already disturbed by the fact that I was not allowed to give any of the students a grade above a "C." Despite the considerable progress many had made from the time they entered school to report card time. Since they were still not fluent, they could not receive As or Bs.

Secondly, English would continue to be taught mostly by teachers who do not speak Spanish and most probably any language other than English, and therefore would have little understanding of what it was like to learn much less think in another language. When one is neither bilingual nor bidialectical, it is quite easy to miss the fact that translation is never direct and exact. What must be said in one language because of the political and cultural circumstances, under which it has emerged, has absolutely no meaning at all in another with different political and cultural circumstances. I often witnessed the detrimental effects of teachers who did not understand the dynamics of living on the border. I once saw a teacher shoo a Mexican child off to the office because he refused to look at her when she was scolding him. Little did that teacher know that in Mexican culture, children show respect and remorse by not looking at the authority figure in the eye when they are being scolded. How confused must that child have been?

Third, children would be forbidden to speak in their home language, which often gives the impression that something is wrong with the way they speak/think and thus who they are. This, I worried, would turn their eagerness to learn another language into resistance. Yet this is the position the English Only Movement supports despite evidence to the contrary, evidence that supports the usefulness of integrating the student's home language as part of the effort to teach Standard English (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Delpit, 1995; Macedo, 1994; Soto, 1997). Although I was adamant that the students learn Standard English, because it would better afford them access to the rules and codes of power in society (Delpit, 1995; Soto, 1997), I had grown equally as adamant about interrogating political and pedagogical practices that would aggressively force English on the children as opposed to helping them acquire it, not as their only or even primary language, but as an enhancement of their multilingual abilities.

Unfortunately, in the middle of that school year, my worse fears came to pass. California Proposition 187, better known as the English Only Proposition was successfully passed. My group of students was disbanded and I resumed my previous assignment, only occasionally sneaking an opportunity here and there to speak to the children in Spanglish, a blending of what the students and I had learned in our time together.

## Linguistic Moments

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Yet back in the group of “troubled” students, who were mostly African American, I began to see in a similar yet more complex ways the significance of language to their being labeled and treated as problem children. I had not expected to see effects of the English Only Prop on the bidialectalism of African American children, but they were extensive. It was a profound moment of clarity for me. It reminded of the many times that people had pointed out the improperness of my language. In the third grade, I was reprimanded (which was a very rare thing for me) by the teacher for using the word “got” instead of “have.” I remember spending the remainder of that day doing my own investigation as to the difference between the two words. No one could give me a definitive answer, except my parents who simply told me that one was a school word and the other was not. Another time a fellow co-worker had commented that she couldn’t understand how such a beautiful young lady could talk so ghetto. And in yet another incident, I had shared with a mentor that I wanted to be a newscaster. She assured me that that would be unlikely because I still sounded Black.

These are the experiences that resonated with me many years later when I encountered studies that not only looked at the systematic differences in the vernacular of many African American children, but the ways in which their dialect/language (this is an on-going debate) captured the historical, cultural, and political dynamics of their lived experiences (Smitherman, 1986; Perry & Delpit, 1998). It seemed obvious to me that the primary difficulty in teaching these students to learn and to use Standard English was and is simply their resistance to it. Unfortunately their resistance is often understood as an inability rather than a reaction to the adverse politics of language pedagogy in the U.S., which is still strongly committed to an English Only Movement that identifies, in explicit and implicit ways, English as a superior language rather than as simply the official language in relation to the many others that makeup the multilingual realities in a democratic society.

I entered a teacher education program after my experiences at this school. I was, of course, dissatisfied with the fact that teachers were not required to take any language courses beyond the two years of foreign language required to enter college. There was little to nothing on the politics of language in the U.S. and how it often renders language pedagogy ineffective. The fact that these issues are not readily taken up in teacher education programs is but another way of reinforcing the superiority of Standard English and thus reinforcing the superiority of those who speak it as their first and only language. The next section considers the struggle with and sometimes the blatant absence of a focus on language politics in a teacher education program.

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### **Linguistic Moments #3: A Bilingual/Dialectic Dilemma in Teacher Education— Oppression in the Field**

In teacher education, there are numerous spaces where language, specifically its

access and dialect, becomes a power tool for oppression. Language use and dialect has, in some cases, become a gatekeeper in the development of new teachers. The foundational question here is what is the responsibility of teacher educators to address bilingual/bidialectal issues? Uncovering the question, this final counterstory forefronts how the practice of linguistic and dialect oppression is legitimated in the ivory tower in a pre-service bilingual education program. This section will start with some background information about the pre-service teacher and my relationship with her. The background information will also include connections between her experiences in the college and the school and school community.

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### Christine

*Christine is a Chinese-American woman born in a large Midwestern city, raised by her Taiwanese parents who spoke both English and Chinese at home and educated by the Archdiocese of that city. In an educational autobiography she prepared as a class assignment, her description of her learning experiences and those involved in facilitating them with a mixed sentiment. "Many aspects of my schooling had an impact on my life. I had teachers who truly cared about me and cared about my learning and was able to motivate me into wanting to learn and expand my knowledge on the world around me. I also had teachers who just did not care and made me not want to care." But it was her first two years of schooling that initiated and solidified her desire to become a teacher, most especially, a bilingual teacher. "... I remember when I began going to school it was really hard for me and I hated to go. I would go to school crying and would be unwilling to do anything in class because I was scared and shy. It got to the point where my kindergarten teacher thought that I did not know English. She put me in a bilingual class where I would be pulled out of the regular classroom for part of the day. That experience confused me during my early days of school because I knew English very well. When I was in first grade I was no longer in the bilingual class but I was still afraid of going to school and would still cry going to school. My teacher got frustrated with me and stuck me in the back corner of the classroom the whole year."*

*A key factor toward Christine's developmental desire for teaching surfaced as a result of her dislike for reading. In her educational autobiography, Christine explains how she just didn't like to read, regardless of her sister's and her parents' encouragement. Christine began to learn to enjoy reading through her sixth grade reading teacher. "I remember in sixth grade I borrowed the book Dragonwings by Lawrence Yep and that caught my attention because it was about my culture. After reading Dragonwings and The Joy Luck Club I have found that reading was a lot of fun and that I could learn a lot from reading especially things about my culture..."*

Christine was one of 22 senior undergraduate students in a social studies methods course I taught in a college of education at a large metropolitan Midwestern university. These students also served as my research participants in a study funded by the American Education Research Association which focused on the use of

## Linguistic Moments

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memoir in bell hooks' engaged pedagogy as a means of preparing White female pre-service teachers to teach in urban school settings. Although Christine did not fit the demographic of the students identified for this study, she requested to participate as a means of garnering additional support for the development of her practice. The most interesting aspect that evolved from the study was the performance of language and dialect as a tool of oppression.

Within the elementary education teacher preparation program at this large Midwestern university, students were divided into cohort groups. All of the students within a cohort group were assigned to the same classes with the same group of faculty in addition to being assigned to the same group of schools for their field practicum and student teaching experiences. As a practice, the faculty in each cohort met monthly to discuss similarities and differences in the coursework and concerns about student performance. During one such faculty cohort meeting, Christine became the topic for much discussion. Of the four faculty members teaching in the cohort, I was the only one who was not concerned about Christine's use of the English language in relationship to her performance in her courses and her field practicum. I was also the only woman of color amongst the four. I sat and listened quietly as I heard words like "unclear," "lacks comprehension," "soft-spoken," and "unintelligible." My colleagues were strongly implying that this student would not be a good teacher because of what they perceived to be her inability to effectively use the English language. I wondered what I could have been missing. Could my identity as a woman of color have somehow clouded my perception about this student's language abilities? My dialect and speech was somewhat different from the others at the table. Maybe, I wasn't hearing what they were hearing. But, I thought I was listening. Christine was none of these things in my classroom and I always clearly understood everything she said. And it appeared to me that her classmates did not have any trouble understanding her. I just didn't understand.

The next day, Christine came to me at the beginning of the class session and said that she had heard I was visiting some of the students in our class at their field sites and wanted to know if I would be willing to visit her. I found her request odd in light of the fact that faculty members had expressed concerns about her just the day before this conversation. I consented to conducting the visits for two reasons: (1) she was assigned to the same school as another student who was participating in the study and (2) this would provide me with opportunities to confirm or deny claims made by my colleagues about the impact of her language abilities on her course and field experiences. Christine and I scheduled a date for my first visit two weeks after our conversation.

The school where Christine was engaged in her field practicum was located in the central Chinatown community of the city. Christine was assigned to a first grade bilingual Chinese-English classroom. She had not only grown up in the community but she also worked part-time in the local daycare center. Before the students entered the classroom, Christine introduced me to her cooperating teacher who informed me that Christine knew all of the students and their families because

they all attended the local daycare prior to attending this school.

The children entered the room, removed their shoes, placed them on one side of the room then went to a large multi-colored rug on the opposite side of the room and sat down. Christine went to the front of the room. "Today is what day"?, she asked. "Thursday," the children responded.

"And yesterday was ..."

"*Wednesday.*"

"And tomorrow is ..."

"*Friday.*"

"And remember, there is no school tomorrow, so tell your parents not to bring you to school tomorrow."

The children laugh. During their laughter, Christine takes out three cards, hiding what is on the front of the cards. As she turns the cards over for the children to see, she asks, "What does the top card say"?

"*Yesterday.*"

"And the bottom card"?

"*Today.*"

"And the one in the middle"?

"*Tomorrow.*"

"Who wants to put the cards in the calendar?"

At this point, the cooperating teacher asks a question to the children, in Chinese. Several children raise their hands. Christine selects one female student and the student places the cards on the calendar in the appropriate slots. Christine then instructs the students to return to their seats. The cooperating teacher then says something to the children in Chinese. The students go to the other side of the room, put their shoes on, then return to their seats. Christine explains to the students that she wanted them to get their shoes but not to put them on. "We're going to make a graph with the shoes today," Christine informs the students. She continues to explain that the graph will be made based on the way they have to put on their shoes: laces, Velcro, or slip-on. The children place their shoes on a row based on the type of shoe. Christine is providing instructions and assistance to the students in English; the cooperating teacher provides additional assistance with instructions in Chinese only.

"Now, looking at the graph, what can we say about the graph? Which row has more shoes?"

"That one," the children reply as they point to the top row of shoes. Christine then has the children count each row of shoes, in English. Immediately afterwards, the cooperating teacher begins counting the rows of shoes in Chinese; the children join in the counting. After the exercise, Christine instructs the children to sit on the rug area.

After approximately one hour of instruction, the classroom aide takes the children out for a bathroom break. I take this opportunity to have a conversation with the cooperating teacher. I invite Christine to join us in the conversation if she feels comfortable. She joins in.



## Linguistic Moments

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“I really enjoyed the lesson this morning.”

“Christine did well today.”

“Christine, how do you feel you did with the lesson today?”

“Christine was well prepared but she really needs to work on her language skills,” the cooperating teacher interjected.

“Christine’s English is very good.”

“But her Mandarin is weak. She must do better. You know, Mandarin is not her home language. She’s from Taiwan.” The cooperating teacher looked at me as if there was another message I was to take from that statement. I turned to Christine, hoping she would provide me with some explanation.

“I learned Mandarin only in first grade when I was in a bilingual classroom but I am trying to learn,” Christine explained.

“But the children seem to understand you when you speak to them in Chinese,” I commented.

“Many of the children are from Taiwan and were Christine’s students last year or two years ago in daycare. But, in this school, the appropriate dialect is Mandarin.”

During the course of the academic year, Christine and I encountered many more of these situations around language use and dialect in our teacher education experience together. It didn’t seem to matter how accurate or timely Christine’s course assignments had been completed; my colleagues continued to want to believe her use of the English language was not adequate enough for teaching. It didn’t seem to matter how much time Christine put into learning Mandarin on her own time, at her own expense; her cooperating teacher seemed to continuously repeat things Christine would say to the children in English or in Mandarin, although the frequency decreased as the school year progressed. The ivory tower and the schoolhouse did not want to acknowledge the talent and diligence Christine brought to the classroom.

Fighting against such oppression toward language use and dialect in teacher education is not an easy task and it was not especially easy for me. I clearly understood oppression as a person of color and as a woman. Such marginalization is societal and teacher education is, indeed, a microcosm of society. I understood dialectical issues as a native Philadelphian in the Midwest. But how was I, as an African American woman for whom English was my home language, to advocate for a Chinese-American woman for whom English was not her primary home language and Mandarin was not her home dialect?

After my first visit with Christine, it was apparent to me that she was a victim of what I call stereotypical oppression: the marginalization of a person based on who others believe they are. It’s all about perception. This perception is developed by the person(s) in power espousing deficit theory. According to Nieto (2004), deficit theory is

The theory that genetic or cultural inferiority is the cause of academic failure ... singled out for blame were the children’s poorly developed language ... Students’ identities—that is, race, ethnicity, social class, and language, among other characteristics—can also have an impact on their academic success or failure,

but it is not these characteristics per se that cause failure. Rather, it is the school's perception of the students' language, culture and class as inadequate and negative ... (pp. 231-232)

Based on this perception, the faculty and the cooperating teacher enacted stereotypical oppression. Such marginalization is usually designed to the detriment of the marginalized; in essence, it is designed to make the marginalized appear to be failing simply based on what they thought about her. This was Christine's case. You see, because Christine appeared to be stereotypically Chinese (soft-spoken and compliant), my colleagues thought they could just suggest to her to change her major and she would. Using the same rationale, Christine's cooperating teacher believed that Christine's inability to speak Mandarin meant she was not intelligent (since Mandarin is the official Chinese language in school). According to Frank Wu (2002), such stereotypical oppression for Asian Americans has existed for decades. Even today, many still assume all Asians are Chinese, many are first generation immigrants, and many do not speak English. I understood such stereotypical oppression as a woman of color.

As a group, Black women are in an unusual position in this society, for not only are we collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder, but our overall social status is lower than any other group. Occupying such a position, we bear the brunt of sexist, racist and classiest oppression. At the same time, we are the group that has not been socialized to assume the role of exploiter/oppressor in that we allowed no institutionalized "other" that we can exploit or oppress ... White women and Black men have it both ways. They can act as oppressor or be oppressed. Black men may be victimized by racism, but sexism allows them to act as exploiters and oppressors of women. White women may be victimized by sexism, but racism enables them to act as exploiters and oppressors of black people. Both groups led liberation movements that favor their interests and support the continued oppression of other groups. (hooks, 1984, p.15)

But now I had to find ways to translate my understandings toward advocacy for my student that would fight against such oppression.

Christine and I understood that within teacher education there are many gatekeepers and, sometimes, subversive measures are necessary to pass through a few of the gates. Christine possessed mastery of the English language but the ivory tower and the schoolhouse maintained a different perception of her. Therefore, it was necessary for her to master the signs and symbols of the "mainstream discourse" while still exercising her right to her home language. I learned it is important to facilitate nurture, and appreciate possession of a dual discourse. According to Gee (as cited in Delpit, 1995), this would mean that Christine would have a "mainstream discourse" (p. 160) and a "home or community-based discourse" (p. 160). This meant engaging in such activities as speaking to the children at her field site in Mandarin only when she felt completely comfortable, allowing the cooperating teacher to focus only on her teaching skills and using her home language when working with the children one-on-one. As the school year progressed, Christine

## Linguistic Moments

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was not only conducting lessons in Taiwanese, English and Mandarin but also, periodically, correcting the cooperating teacher.

Christine also ensured that all of her written work was proofread by a graduate student or someone in the writing lab prior to submission to any faculty person. In cases where she received assistance from the writing lab, a form was sent to the faculty member verifying the visit. I also advised Christine to engage in creativity in her class presentations, making use of overhead projectors, slide presentations, poster boards, and class exercises so that the faculty person was focusing on the engagement as opposed to her language use. Additionally, I suggested that she provide a brief survey to the class each time she participated in such a presentation in order to gain a sense of her effectiveness amongst her peers. Finally, I encouraged her to rehearse her presentations and anticipate any questions that might arise.

Delpit (1995) eloquently speaks of how persons of color are often disenfranchised during their teacher education experience. Teacher candidates who are persons of color are left to feel that their personal experiences, expertise, and knowledge are not valued in the collegiate classroom. In many cases, these candidates do not enter teaching due to such marginalization. Schools, students, and communities lose opportunities to have valuable, diligent, talented, and dedicated teachers when this happens. Teacher education can potentially silence important scholarship and academic contribution when we, as colleagues, do not encourage such advocacy.

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### **The Role of Teacher Education Programs in Shaping New Perceptions on Language Diversity: A Conclusion**

In a multicultural society multiple languages exist, for example one's home language, the language of dominant discourses, communal languages, and regional languages. However, because of dominate space conferred to Standard English in the social arena and its connection to economic success, Standard English remains central in dominant discourse (Zimmerman, 2004), and, consequently is required in most U.S. classrooms (Nieto, 2004).

However, the authors in this article argue that the transition from students' native language to acquiring Standard English is neither linear nor absolute. Through the process of acquiring Standard English, new social, political, and cultural forms emerge to create an idiom that assimilates the language of dominant discourse as it simultaneously makes possible new linguistic forms embodying progress and change.

Because of the positionality of Standard English as the language of dominant discourse, many mainstream teachers perceive students who are linguistically different from them also as inferior. These static notions of linguistic differences have aided in the perpetual failures of many LEP students (Nieto, 2004). But realized as an evolving dynamic dialogical process, language and specifically language diversity offer possibilities for both LEP students and their teachers. Teachers must

realize that language is not static but evolves by taking bits and pieces of different verbiage to create new linguistic forms. In a classroom setting teachers become facilitators of these new language idioms. They serve to orchestrate a symphony of new sounds. Borrowing from cognitive psychology that asserts that new learning situations must be an outgrowth of prior experience, teachers then become responsible for learning as much as they can about their new language speakers (Cummins, 1996). In-service and teacher educators must give LEP students space in the classroom to share their cultural expression in ways that they are both validated and celebrated. They must use this knowledge as a premise for enabling students to acquire Standard English. Lastly, they must be aware that this acquisition is neither absolute nor linear but rather involves the creation of a novel democratic discourse that originates behind their classroom doors.

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### Linguistic Moments

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