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Published online: 22 Oct 2020.

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Academic language and the minoritization of U.S. bilingual Latinx students

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ABSTRACT

Most U.S. educational reforms have narrowly focused on how to improve the ways in which students use language, and most specifically English. But in the last two decades, it is something called "academic language" that has permeated all education discourse. Here we discuss the development of the construct of academic language and the pernicious effects it has had on Latinx minoritized bilingual students. We focus on how academic language is being used to enregister Latinx students as "non-academic," ignoring bilingual Latinx epistemologies and ways of languaging. We interrogate the rigidity of the linguistic borders that have been drawn around the concept of academic language, linking it to the epistemological and ideological orientations about language as an autonomous entity produced by colonialism. We show how standards and other educational products are being used to police linguistic borders that are increasingly responsible for the failure of Latinx bilingual students.

Introduction

When working in classrooms with Latinx students, it is common to hear teachers say: "The problem is that they do not have academic language." But if you then ask them: "What is academic language?" the reply is vague. The closest teachers come to a definition is to say what it is not. We have heard teachers say things like: "It is not what my students use."

This article reviews how the concept of academic language has increasingly been defined as an entity made up of autonomous linguistic features and ways of deploying them that are deemed necessary to enjoy educational success. We argue that because the communicative practices of many racialized students draw from a repertoire of historical, cultural and linguistic features that go beyond those legitimated as academic in this construct, U.S. Latinx students' language practices are constructed as inherently non-academic. By drawing strict boundaries around the features that define academic language and ignoring the varied ways in which bilingual minoritized speakers do language, the construct of academic language legitimates the social and educational exclusion of many Latinx students.

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We argue here that academic language can be considered a historical progression of the ideological invention of language by European elites as "reductionist, atomistic, and individualistic" that "then became a model not just of communication but of thought, rationality, and sociability" (Bauman and Briggs 2003, 299). This conceptualization of language has operated as an instrument of colonialism and nation-building to produce and naturalize forms of social inequality and construct modernity (Bauman and Briggs 2003). Today's construct of academic language is thus a natural extension of this historical model of exclusion and can be considered a result of what the Peruvian sociologist, Aníbal Quijano (2000), has called "coloniality." Quijano points out that the exploitation and domination of racialized groups is now carried out not solely through labor, but through the structuring of knowledge-systems, race, language and sex into superior and inferior. The knowledges and ways of languaging of those racialized as inferior are then deemed not appropriate to become educated. We explore here how academic language can be considered an ideological invention that naturalizes our understandings of the language necessary for learning, ignoring the epistemologies and ways of languaging of Latinx bilingual students.

Academic language and the enregisterment of Latinx students as non-academic

Many U.S. educational reforms in the last decade have narrowly focused on how to improve the ways in which students use language, and most specifically English. This in itself is not new, for language is the medium of education and English is seen as essential to comprehend and learn in U.S schools. The focus on the education of all racialized students in the U.S. since the 20th century— whether conquered, colonized, enslaved, immigrant, or refugee — has been the acquisition of what has been constructed as Standard English. However, what is different today is the discourse that surrounds an imagined language register that is called *academic language* and that is hailed as the panacea for academic and economic success (Bailey 2007; Cummins 2014; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2017; Snow and Uccelli 2009). The naturalization of academic language as an entity (Park and Wee 2012), with formal characteristics that are the only ones appropriate to learning is dangerous, and promotes the failure, rather than the success, of racialized students.

The construct of academic language has targeted all racialized students. Here we focus on Latinx learners, minoritized first through conquest of the Southwest, colonization of Puerto Rico and imperial policies throughout the Americas, and now increasingly through the construct of academic language. Language has always played an important role in the process of colonization, yet, what is different today is that rather than the extension of the U.S. geographical borders, it is language itself that is being extended. No longer is simply what is called "English" or even "Standard English" the mechanism for inclusion or exclusion in educational and occupational opportunities. Now what is constructed as academic language, a specialized and autonomous register essential to achieve success, has become the new instrument around which borders of inclusion and exclusion are drawn. The construct of "academic language" actively excludes the languaging practices of Latinx students, including those who are bilingual and English-speaking, and *enregisters* (Agha 2005) them as "non-academic."

Agha (2007) speaks of *enregisterment* as a process whereby a repertoire of performable signs is "linked to stereotypic pragmatic effects" (80). Agha (2005) points out that registers are used by social persons and index social personae, thus "distinct forms of speech come

to be socially recognized (or enregistered) as indexical of speaker attributes by a population of language users" (38). Academic language has been constructed as a distinct and autonomous linguistic register among educational policy makers and educators. This then enables the drawing of a clear border between those who are said to have academic language and those who do not, and those who can be meaningfully educated and those who need language remediation first.

Latinx students' epistemologies are grounded in their histories and experiences as marginalized communities in the U.S., and in living and speaking in borderlands (Anzaldúa 1987). Despite many cultural and even economic differences, the U.S. Latinx community shares a substantive commitment to their identities that stems from their experiences of subordination and their shared experiences both in Latin America and now in the U.S. (Bernal 2002). What Latinx communities count as knowledge differs from that produced by Eurocentric perspectives because of their experiences with multiple forms of oppression — racism, classism, sexism, homophobia and linguicism.

The differences in what counts as knowledge is especially made obvious in the ways in which Latinx do their languaging and bilingualism. The bilingualism of Latinx speakers responds not to traditional models of additive and balanced bilingualism, but to a dynamic bilingualism (García 2009) that is enacted through their translanguaging (García and Li Wei 2014). Translanguaging theory refers to the actions of multilinguals in leveraging a unitary semiotic repertoire made up of linguistic and multimodal signs that does not always correspond to the strict parameters of one named language or another established by institutions (Otheguy, García, and Reid 2015, 2019). Named languages have been "invented" historically through processes of nation-building and colonization (Makoni and Pennycook 2007), although they remain important sociopolitical realities. Schools have always insisted that Latinx students speak "English," but the figure of "English language learner" has now been extended to many Latinx students who are said not to have academic language. We attempt to show how the invention of academic language with established borders enregisters Latinx bilinguals as being "non-academic." This enregisterment process has more to do with anxieties about the U.S. as a world power, the construction of race, and the country's growing Latinidad (Rosa 2019), than with language.

Latinx students and the beginnings of an academic language construct

When Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas delivered the opinion of the court in Lau v. Nichols (1974) he wrote: "There is no equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers and curriculum; for students who *do not understand English* are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education" (our italics, Lau vs. Nichols, 414U.S. 56,339L. Ed. 2d 1 (1974). The Court ruled that understanding English was necessary for a meaningful education. And scholars and educators started to focus on how to bring this about.

As more Latinx students entered secondary and tertiary education after the era of Civil Rights and the end of racial segregation, scholars increasingly studied what were seen as Latinx students' "errors" when speaking English as a result of "interference" (George 1972). To counteract this position, scholars of bilingualism began to move away from errors, but in so doing, the profession slowly accepted another construct that has proven to be even

more pernicious because its power to marginalize Latinx students is "hidden" —that of academic language.

The pioneer work of Jim Cummins (1981) on bilingualism distinguished what he called Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) from Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALPs). Cummins posited that schools needed to develop CALP, which Cummins saw as associated with higher-order thinking and the ability to manipulate language with texts that were cognitively demanding and context-reduced. Despite some criticism (Bartolomé 1998; Edelsky et al. 1983; MacSwan 2000; MacSwan and Rolstad 2003) and Cummins's own move beyond an abstract definition of academic language to emphasize its power dimensions (Cummins 2000), this division of language into BICS and CALPs has been the basis for the construction of what became understood as "academic language." Although Cummins did not posit "academic language," but a "cognitive academic language proficiency," many interpreted CALP as a different type of language that needed to be developed especially among language minoritized students.

Students designated by the federal government as "Limited English Proficient" were now no longer just those who did not "understand English," as Chief Justice Douglas had considered in Lau vs. Nichols. The federal designation of "Limited English Proficient" and the subsequent one of "English Language Learner" now began to include many bilingual Latinx students who were said to have a more restricted range of linguistic features (see for example, Scarcella 2003). The minoritization process of Latinx bilingual students had now shifted — including not just those who had "limited proficiency in English" or who were considered "English language learners," but also those who despite understanding and speaking English, also lacked a type of English now called "academic." This meant that the categorization of who was an English learner could now also include many more Latinx bilingual students. Another category of English learners thus came into being––the "Long-Term English Learner" — students who despite speaking English were categorized for remediation in special programs and with different curricula (Olsen 2010). More and more Latinx bilingual students were believed to be in need of language remediation. As Latinx students' language practices became more stigmatized, a Latinx subjectivity of being "non-academic" and not "college or career ready" was promoted by the educational discourse.

Shifting educational policies and Latinx students

As the 20th century came to a close, language in school became tied to global economic concerns. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was signed into law in 2002. The law imposed an accountability system on states that relied on high-stakes standardized tests and used "academic" linguistic features to measure educational attainment. To govern the growing language minoritized population in the U.S., bilingual speakers had to submit to a linguistic conduct that excluded their dynamic bilingual practices.

Most Latinx students are educated today in monolingual English-only programs, and mostly in schools that remain racially segregated (García and Kleifgen 2018). In these monolingual programs, there is little to no acknowledgement of Latinx students' bilingualism. As bilingual education came under attack at the end of the 20th century, those designated as "English learners" were increasingly placed in different types of English-as-a-second language programs. Developmental maintenance bilingual education programs that had been won through political struggle in the mid-20th century (see, for example, Flores and

García 2017; García and Sung 2018) were quickly substituted by transitional bilingual education programs where Spanish was used only temporarily.

Eventually, even transitional bilingual education programs came under attack and prohibited in California, Massachusetts and Illinois at the beginning of the 21st century (García and Kleifgen 2018). Over time, the only alternative for bilingual education became the so-called "dual language programs" (García 2009), and even California and Massachusetts jumped on the bandwagon of "dual language" after 2017. These "dual language" programs did not name themselves "bilingual." The linguistic submission prescribed by the strict language separation ideology of most dual language programs now also extended to what was perceived as Latinx students' other language, Spanish. Instruction focused on remediating Latinx students' linguistic practices and developing what was seen not only as their "academic English," but also their "academic Spanish." In addition, Latinx minoritized students could only participate in these dual language programs if half of their classmates were said to be "native English speakers," usually non-Latinx white students. In fact, African Americans who are native-English speakers are seldom present in these programs (Bauer, Colomer, and Wiemelt 2020; Valdés 2018), enthroning a raciolinguistic ideology (Flores and Rosa 2015; Rosa and Flores 2017) that assigns "native-English" only to white monolingual students. This leaves Latinx students in limbo, consigned to non-native status—perceived as having a "second language" (English) and then a "heritage language" (Spanish), both in need of remediation.

Efforts to define academic language

With prophetic vision, Guadalupe Valdés (2004) questioned the growing emphasis on the development of academic language for language minoritized children, positioning academic language in the title of her article as "between support and marginalization." That is, despite the good intentions of scholars to support students said to be lacking academic language, the result has been the increased marginalization of language minoritized students, especially Latinx bilingual students.

Valdés (2004) had pointed out that there was then "no agreed-upon definition of either academic English or academic language in general" (103). And in 2009 Snow and Uccelli acknowledged that the definition of what is academic language was "somewhat inchoate and underspecified" (114). Since then, many scholars, convinced that academic language was the panacea for educational and economic success, have endeavored to name and delimit its features. Snow (2010) described the features of academic language as "conciseness, achieved by avoiding redundancy; using a high density of information-bearing words, ensuring precision of expression; and relying on grammatical processes to compress complex ideas into few words" (450). Many scholars describe academic language as having long and complex sentences and using subordinating conjunctions, including frequently long noun phrases with embedded clauses; using nominalization, that is, using verbs or adjectives as nouns or noun phrases; and employing complex and unfamiliar vocabulary (Bailey 2007; Di Cerbo et al. 2014; Scarcella 2003; Schleppegrell 2004, 2012; Snow and Uccelli 2009, among others).

Besides drawing a boundary in ways that objectify academic language as an entity (Keane 2008), formulations such as these often describe the language of written academic texts. Wong-Fillmore and Fillmore (n.d.) argue that this type of language is only found in some written texts, and that transcripts demonstrate that very little of the language spoken by

teachers, even during explicit instruction, would qualify as what is proposed as "academic language." Furthermore, some definitions of academic language rely not only on written language, but on the language of scientific written texts (see, for example, Snow 2010), leaving out the language of the humanities. It is instructive to realize that authors of written texts in the humanities, and sometimes even in social sciences, often emphasize their individual perspectives. Academic language is touted as not having authors present in texts, and yet, this is a feature that we often find in academic texts in the humanities, and even in social science.

Scholars have increasingly relied on System Functional Linguistics (Halliday 1978, 2004) to describe the specific features of academic language (see Schleppegrell 2004, 2012). System Functional Linguistics (SFL) focuses on how grammatical structures are derived from different types of socially relevant tasks within varied social contexts. Some scholars, for example, Harman and Khote (2018) have advocated a critical use of SFL, proposing educational interventions that incorporate the language and cultural repertoires of minoritized students. But SFL continues to be used as a way to remediate the linguistic practices of minoritized students and not to legitimize them. That is, SFL, even when critical, is often used simply as a bridge, and does not acknowledge the full language architecture upon which racialized bilingual Latinx students perform their lives (Flores 2020). That is, SFL ignores the sociopolitical formations that position social figures differently, and that maintain structural barriers through constructs such as academic language. When a theory of language leaves out racialized and minoritized language users, it is possible to describe language as simply the speech habits and literacy practices of cultural elites and written language, without naming it thus. The tools of SFL are, as Jones (2013) has said, "vague enough, flexible enough or blunt enough to permit the analyst to talk with seeming authority about the 'forms of consciousness' of the language users" (175). But the forms of consciousness of these language users are those of white monolingual middle class students. SFL highlights the ways in which writers and speakers use genre to engage in social activity as "members of their culture" (Martin 1984, 25). But from the perspective of the white gaze and the white listening subject, Latinx bilingual students have been excluded as members of a valid culture. When the linguistic and cultural repertoires of racialized Latinx bilingual students are acknowledged, they simply serve as a gentle scaffold toward what is ultimately seen as the only solution — the acquisition of academic language. And yet, because Latinx bilingual students have been a priori excluded as members of a valid culture, their language practices remain distinct from those said to make up academic language, despite instructional efforts.

It has been the teaching of specialized vocabulary that is often targeted by teachers when they think of "academic language," although scholars have argued that academic vocabulary knowledge is not what they mean by academic language (Uccelli et al. 2015). And yet, especially since the report of Hart and Risley (1995) that by age three, children from affluent households are exposed to 30 million more words than children from families on welfare, educators have focused on closing this "word gap" (for critical perspectives on this position, see, Avineri et al. 2015; García and Otheguy 2018; Johnson 2015; Johnson et al. 2017). The division of words into three tiers—Tier 1, a nonacademic, conversational vocabulary; Tier 2, general academic words; Tier 3, content-specific, technical vocabulary (Beck, McKeown, and Kucan 2002) has captured the attention of educators. Much educational material promotes the explicit teaching of Tier 2 and 3 words, often to the detriment of authentic uses of language, which always goes beyond a single word Tier. Richardson Bruna, Vann, and

Perales Escudero (2007), among others, have concluded that a narrow focus on academic vocabulary ultimately limits language minoritized students from "the very linguistic input and output they need" (51).

The recent work of Paola Uccelli and her colleagues has focused on defining what she calls "Core Academic Language Skills" (CALS), "knowledge and deployment of a repertoire of language forms and functions that co-occur with oral and written school learning tasks across disciplines" (Uccelli et al. 2015, 1079). The skills needed to engage with academic language are identified as unpacking dense information, comprehending complex sentences, connecting ideas logically, tracking themes and participants, organizing analytic and argumentative texts, and recognizing "academic register" (1084–85). The authors acknowledge that CALS are based on engagement with linguistic features in academic texts across content areas which are not frequent in colloquial conversations (Uccelli et al. 2015). They also argue for a "sociocultural pragmatics-based view of language development" that "entails understanding *language* as inseparable from social context, and *language learning* as the result of individuals' socialization and enculturation histories" (Uccelli et al. 2015, 1081, italics in original).

The emphasis by Uccelli et al. (2015) on how context contributes to meaning in language (the "pragmatic-based view") and on how "socialization and enculturation histories" impact language learning are important contributions to the field. However, the framework of Uccelli and her colleagues falls short in their understanding of language and language learning. With regards to language, even though Uccelli et al. (2015) recognize how the meaning of language is contextual and how language and social cognition are related, it reifies the concept of language as a named autonomous entity that is the only valid norm, without addressing how it has been constructed by processes of colonization and nation-building. With regard to language learning, Uccelli et al.'s framework (2015) poses language learning as a simple linear developmental skill. Although the framework acknowledges the impact of "socialization and enculturation histories," it reifies a language learning process that is about acquiring characteristics of what is assumed to be a single valid white middle-class linguistic and cultural norm. This has to do with what the Portuguese decolonial scholar, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) has called "abyssal thinking," an epistemological hegemonic perspective that is the product of the coloniality of power (Quijano 2000). Through this abyssal thinking, dominant knowledge systems have been imposed, while rendering the ecology of knowledges on the "other side of the line" as non-existent or incomprehensible.

Latinx bilingual students are very capable of doing language to unpack dense information, comprehend complex sentences, connect ideas logically, track themes, organize texts (Flores 2020), but they may do so with practices that have been simply rendered invisible a priori, through the racialization/coloniality processes to which they have been subjected. The danger of how CALS is being taken up by policy makers and educators is that the construct is being used to further enregister Latinx bilinguals who language differently, as not only lacking "academic language," but also cognitive skills. Without some attention to how CALS, as defined, leaves out the "knowledge-practices" of students who have been the object of the human suffering caused by colonialism and global capitalism, the public will never understand that it is neither linguistic nor cognitive skills that Latinx students lack (Flores and Chaparro 2018). What Latinx bilingual students lack are opportunities to be in dialogue as equals with all the different visions of knowledge and language that exist. Latinx students

are only allowed to view themselves through *absences* produced when their knowledge is always compared to those of dominant white students. The question for educators is how to make Latinx students *present* to the processes of racialization, exclusion and marginalization so that they can re-signify their lives and knowledge-practices in conditions of equality and dignity.

As language has increasingly been divided into academic and non-academic, or social, some scholars have called attention to the fact that language exists on a continuum and that it is impossible to generate a complete list of all academic features (Lesaux, Galloway, and Marietta 2016). But these scholars also continue to describe academic language as having four components with static characteristics and stable meanings—syntax, morphology, pragmatics, and vocabulary knowledge. The focus continues to be linguistic structures with pre-established meanings. This disregards the many different linguistic ethnographies and the active interpretative process of people who language differently. Meaning emerges in the *interaction* of people, sign systems, objects, and places. Meaning occurs, as Li Wei (2011) has said through "spontaneous, impromptu, and momentary actions and performances" (1224). In privileging language as constituted by educational institutions on "this side of the line," the concept of academic language reinforces the power of the white monolingual middle class, while failing Latinx bilinguals by positioning them as in constant need of linguistic remediation.

Academic language masquerading for exclusion of Latinx students

Some scholars (Flores and Rosa 2015; Rosa and Flores 2017; Rosa 2019) have proposed that academic language could be a construction of what Miyako Inoue (2006) calls "indexical inversion," in the sense that it is NOT the language features or practices themselves, but the social categories (white/non-white, native/non-native or immigrant) that then produce *the perception* of signs that are in turn evaluated as academic or non-academic language by the white monolingual *listening subject*. As Rosa and Flores (2017) say: "No language variety is objectively distinctive or nondistinctive, but rather comes to be enregistered as such in particular historical, political and economic circumstances" (632). These scholars raise the possibility that definitions of academic language are elusive precisely because it includes raciolinguistic categorizations of Latinx students stemming from institutionalized racism, rather than by language alone.

The emphasis on academic language has driven instruction away from what scholars have called an asset-based approach to education (Bartolomé 1998; López 2017; MacSwan 2020; Martínez, Morales, and Aldana 2017). That is, although the linguistic and cultural practices of Latinx bilingual students have always been devalued, more and more educators are today de-emphasizing Latinx students' epistemologies and their knowledge, lives and languaging entremundos (Anzaldúa 2002), as part of the school curriculum.

For most Latinx bilingual students, the discourse on academic language has simply expanded the perception that they are "non-academic," or that they hold no developed language, that they are "nilingües" a term recently used by a NYC bilingual teacher when describing her young bilingual students (G. Aponte, personal communication, 11/2018). By constructing Latinx languaging as simply non-academic or informal (Baker-Bell 2020), the education of Latinx students in the U.S. has become largely remedial, an effort to exercise a verbal hygiene (Cameron 1995) that leaves them without a voice.

Monolingual instruction in the form of English Language Arts and ESL curricula increasingly regulate language and work to sanitize what is constructed as English. Bilingual classrooms often work to purify not only English, but also Spanish, and instruction forbids what is perceived as contact between two separate and bounded autonomous entities. The growth of "Spanish as a Heritage language" classes is also often an effort to eliminate bilingual practices and sanitize a language that is now assigned as "heritage" (Rosa and Flores 2017). This prevents Latinx students from owning their own language practices and takes away their privilege as "native" speakers.

Like the concept of whiteness as property which has produced the accumulation of wealth among whites (Harris 1993), academic language is seen as the property of white monolingual privileged speakers, defined by linguistic features and uses that leave out the practices of racialized speakers. Thus, academic language serves as property by which to accumulate educational success and wealth for white monolingual speakers. Academic English and academic Spanish are then constructed as the exclusive "property" of white "native" elites, and the education system safeguards their position as such.

The standards movement

Academic language by itself does not produce the complicity of students, educators and schools that is needed for the governmentality (Foucault 2008) of the Latinx population. A tool was needed to ensure that bilingual minoritized students and their teachers submit their own tongues and souls to domination. Although state-level standards have been in place at least since the 1990s, the initiative known as The *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects* (2010) for the first time offered a nation-wide tool to control what was validated as knowledge and academic progress. Developed by a partnership between the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were put together to regiment what K-12 students at each grade level had to attain in order to be "college and career ready." Although adopted by 4/5 of the states since 2010, half of those states have now revised them, although these changes have been minor.

The CCSS reflected the contradictions between advancing a theory of language that rightly considered language as a human capacity widely distributed used to listen, speak, read and write, and a theory of language as an economic tool that included some and excluded others by defining what were seen as objective measures of success in possessing it as capital (García and Flores 2013). For example, the CCSS include both *English Language Arts* standards and *English Language* Standards. The *English Language Arts* standards seem to support a view of language as human action related to reading, writing, speaking and listening. But on the other hand, the *English Language* standards do totally the opposite, reinforcing the linear build-up of grammatical structures and vocabulary, and language as a system of structures that must be taught explicitly.

The CCSS made minimal efforts to engage with the social class, racial, sexual and language diversity of students as writers, listeners and readers. The standards provided no explicit inclusion of the life experiences, epistemologies and language practices of Latinx bilingual students. Their languaging differences, even when they spoke English, were completely ignored. And those labeled "English language learners" were given little attention

(Kibler, Valdés, and Walqui 2014; Rymes, Flores, and Pomerantz 2016). The CCSS document devoted a scarce two and a half pages to "English language learners," acknowledging only that "these students may require additional time, appropriate instructional support, and aligned assessments as they acquire both English language proficiency and content area knowledge" (n.p. www.corestandards.org).

Through the standards, Latinx students (even when they are held as "proficient" in English) are asked to, for example, interpret texts. But these texts do not reflect their language practices. Recently a fourth grade bilingual Latinx student in a classroom that García was observing did not comprehend the phrase in a practice test: "She worked all day preparing the *dough*." But when the Latina teacher paraphrased it as, "She worked all day preparing the *masa*," her face lit up! She knew about masa to make tortillas, something her mother prepared often, although her mother never used dough to make cookies. When Latinx authors use words such as "masa" when writing in English, educators often say they are "code-switching" into Spanish, viewing English and Spanish as separate autonomous languages. But for Latinx bilingual children, even for those rendered proficient in English according to school records, "masa" is simply a word from their repertoire. The word "masa" can only be assigned to a language called Spanish if language is defined exclusively as an entity contained in dictionaries. By adopting a view of language that is based on dictionaries, grammars, style-guides, and guidelines of what has been enregistered as English or Spanish, the standards, as put into effect, exclude Latinx students' translanguaging. Rather than include the languaging of bilinguals who perform as listeners, speakers, readers, and writers with a unitary repertoire, their translanguaging is excluded.

Also excluded from the CCSS are the life experiences of Latinx students. For example, the reading texts listed in the CCSS English Language Arts sections do not in any way reflect Latinx realities or the ways in which bilinguals engage in reading (García 2020; García and Kleifgen 2018, 2019). The only text by a bilingual Latinx author is Rudolfo Anaya's essay, "Take the tortillas out of your poetry." But it is instructive to realize that Anaya's essay recalls the self-censorship that he and other Chicano authors impose on themselves, removing their translanguaging so that they could be published or judged worthy by monolinguals. This reflects the same process that Latinx bilingual students are being asked to go through in order to meet state standards in standardized tests.

The effect of the Common Core State Standards as endowing those who meet standards as the only legitimate citizens of the nation is explicitly stated in the CCSS document:

> They [students who meet the standards] reflexively demonstrate the *cogent reasoning* and use of evidence that is essential to both private deliberation and *responsible citizenship in a democratic republic*. In short, students who meet the Standards develop the skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening that are the foundation for any *creative and purposeful expression in language* (our italics, 3).

The standards, as interpreted, work against Latinx bilingual students whose translanguaging goes beyond those reified in authoritative texts meant to regulate who can be a legitimate citizen of the nation.

Meeting standards not only identifies the responsible citizens, but also those who have "cogent reasoning." Without it, Latinx bilingual speakers are rendered as the CCSS says, unprepared for college and career, lacking creativity, unable to express themselves, and as unfit citizens. Latinx failure will now be interpreted as of their own doing, as personal. Their

teachers, their communities and Latinx students themselves are blamed for not working harder to submit to what would be an artificial linguistic conduct for them. Because of the circularity in the standards, success will always be deferred into an imagined future (Rosa 2016). Latinx bilingual students are then engaged in attempting to transform themselves into something they are not, trying to excise themselves and their translanguaging from themselves. As Rudolfo Anaya said in the essay referred to in the CCSS, Latinx students cannot perform to the best of their ability when they are required to take the tortillas out of their poetry because they understand that "It's not just me" (Anaya 1995).

Academic language and the educational industry

This focus on meeting standards of English academic language has created an industry of education materials that claim to develop and assess academic language. In this section we examine a resource that appeared in one of the most popular websites visited by teachers of Latinx students, particularly those labeled as "English learners:" *Colorín, Colorado*. Colorín, Colorado describes itself as the "premier national website serving educators and families of English language learners (ELLs) in Grades PreK-12" (n.p). It partners with the American Federation of Teachers, as well as the National Academy of Education. It is not the product of a for-profit company, and it provides teachers of Latinx bilingual students with much needed help. And yet, the perspective on "academic language" from more mainstream sources also seeps into the content on the website.

We focus here on an article on its website on academic language (Breiseth n.d.). This short article guides teachers to "understand the role that academic language plays in their classrooms and in ELL student success" (n.p.). The author says that academic language is "the language of school and it is used in textbooks, essays, assignments, class presentations, and assessments" (n.p). This definition, and the sharp distinction made in the article between social and academic language tells us with surprising circularity that academic language is academic because it is used in academic contexts, without giving us any clue as to what it is.

The article presents some limited examples of what the author considers social vs. academic English. The author argues that a writer who writes, "It worked," or "I like this book more," is using "social English." The "academic English equivalent," the author tells us, would be: "Our experiment was successful" or "This story is more exciting than the first one we read." The second alternatives do conform to features that have been identified in the literature as of "academic language," that is, the first-person perspective has been removed and nominalizations have been introduced. And yet, these sentences say less and engage the reader less. For example, the positionality and the feeling of the speaker is lost when "I like this book more" is substituted by "This story is more exciting than the first one we read." Keane (2008) has noted that removing the author's voice and their subjectivity actually reduces the agency of the author. And what does it mean to say that a statement made in an academic setting is not academic? What makes it non-academic? Statements with what is characterized as "academic language" are constructed as statements "from nowhere" (Mena and García 2020). In actuality, however, these statements are made from a hegemonic privileged position as a way of devaluing and making invisible the statements of others.

The article on academic language on the website then promotes the idea popularized by Dutro and Moran (2003) that besides "words as bricks" with which academic language is built, students also need "mortar"—signal words, complex phrases and idioms that hold the language together. Although producing texts cannot be compared to working with bricks and mortar, this is a fitting image for the objectification (Keane 2008) of academic language. However, language is never repetitive and objective, but it consists of interactions produced by subjects who are meaningfully trying to communicate. Language is not just internal and, in the mind, or external as what we simply see and hear. Language refers to a human capacity to "assemble" life experiences, relationships with others, feelings, and the many features of a multimodal repertoire in-the-moment, in what Pennycook (2017) has called a "semiotic assemblage."

Bounding academic language as if it were simply bricks and mortar deadens it and objectifies it. Teachers who focus simply on developing what is then presented in curricula, material and tests as "academic language" restrict students' desire to *do* language and be *in* language. Meaningful language can only be produced freely, creatively, imaginatively and generatively by an author whose "I voice" reflects their own subjectivity.

Latinx students can leverage features in their communicative repertoire that have little overlap with that of white monolinguals. But this does not make them non-academic, for in fact we have evidence that Latinx bilingual students deploy their translanguaging in ways that assist them in skilled comprehension and production of academic texts. Martínez (2010), for example, has shown how middle school sixth-graders in Los Angeles shift voices for different audiences and communicate subtle shades of meaning. Scholars working with translanguaging theory have also shown that Latinx bilinguals do language with much more complex lexicon, morphology and syntax than monolinguals (see, for example, Otheguy, García, and Reid 2015, 2019). Bilinguals also have much experience interacting with, and responding to, different communities of speakers, and connecting diverse ideas (García and Wei 2014). These are all areas that Uccelli et al. (2015) have identified as underlying skilled comprehension of academic texts. But from the time they enter school, Latinx bilingual students are told that their translanguaging is not "academic," and that what has been fabricated as an "academic register" does not include their own practices. This contributes to Latinx students' reluctance to use their full repertoire to engage in academic tasks. The result, as we have pointed out, is that they are increasingly placed in remedial instructional programs where they remain racially segregated and linguistically deprived of rich interactions.

Conclusion

As more Latinx minoritized bilingual students enter schools in the U.S., educators have struggled to provide them with a meaningful education. But well-meaning scholarship on educating bilingual students seems to have lost its way, as the construct of academic language has taken root. Educational authorities have increasingly relied upon the concept of academic language to determine who has access to educational and social opportunities. And although the target has not been specifically Latinx students, they have been disproportionately impacted by them, given their numbers, their histories, their economies, and their racialization. In so doing, the construct of academic language has had a double boundary-marking effect. On the one hand, it has built a higher wall around a numerically smaller

group, ensuring that white monolingual students are the majority of those "in" the know and prepared for college and careers. On the other hand, the higher wall around academic language interpreted as "concise, precise and authoritative" (Snow 2010, 450) enregisters Latinx bilingual students as non-academic and keeps them out of an education that would prepare them for college and careers.

Academic language is acting as a subtle tool for segregation and exclusion. The wall that has been built to separate English from Spanish, now reinforced and made higher through the concept of academic language, needs to come tumbling down. Latinx bilingual students ought to be educated meaningfully, creatively and critically *now*, as they are, leveraging their translanguaging, their lives, their experiences, their knowledge systems. We cannot wait for a future that will never come, as Latinx students linger in remedial educational programs where language is restricted to teaching a supposedly academic English register that is defined precisely by not ever being theirs.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure statement

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