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Academic framings of bilingualism have significantly shifted over the past century. What was once considered a cognitive deficit that should be avoided is now promoted as a cognitive advantage that should be encouraged (Bialystok & Viswanathan, 2009). Yet, one aspect of academic framings of bilingualism has remained consistent—that Latino students are not sufficiently bilingual and that their lack of bilingualism is a primary barrier to their academic achievement. Equally consistent have been scholars who provided theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical interventions that have challenged this deficit framing of the bilingualism of Latino students. Despite these important interventions, deficit perspectives of the bilingualism of Latino students remain as strong as ever. This is because despite being framed as objective descriptions of linguistic reality, these deficit perspectives are raciolinguistic ideologies that co-construct language and race in ways that overdetermine Latino students to be linguistically deficient in ways that are unrelated to empirical language practices (Flores & Rosa, 2015).

Bilingualism as Deficit

Prior to the 1960's the debate about bilingualism was related to whether the low scores of bilingual children on intelligence tests was a result of cultural deficiency caused by their home environment or hereditary deficiency caused by their racial or ethnic background (Goodenough, 1926). This perspective was not without its critics. Opposition to this perspective with a specific focus on Latino students can be found in the work of George Sanchez, a Mexican-American education professor who dedicated his career to challenging the racism that lied at the root of intelligence testing. He raised questions as to the cultural biases of intelligence testing, arguing that “a test is valid only to the extent that the items of the test are as common to each child tested as they were to the children upon whom the norms were based” (Sanchez, 1934, p. 766). He pointed to the ways that schools were actually not providing bilingual children with the necessary skills to perform well on these intelligence tests. That is, the bilingualism of the students was not the barrier that prevented them from scoring well on intelligence tests. It was, instead, the fact that schools were providing them remedial education that did not expose them to the knowledge that they needed to do well on these assessments that was the root of the problem.

In short, prior to the 1960s, bilingualism was seen by many educational researchers as a deficiency for all members of bilingual communities. Yet, some educational researchers challenged this deficit perspective and provided more nuanced representations. George Sanchez provided strong counterpoints to the biological and cultural racism of early research on bilingualism in the Latino community. He was able to challenge deficit perspectives of Latino students by pointing to the school factors that impacted their academic achievement. This advocacy work no doubt contributed to the eventual decline of overt racism in research on the bilingualism of Latino students. Yet, as will be described below, the deficit perspective of the bilingualism of Latino students would continue in a new form.

The Rise of the “Semilingual”

The 1960's witnessed a paradigm shift in understandings of bilingualism. What was once seen as a cognitive deficiency was now reframed as a cognitive advantage. This paradigm shift began with a seminal article that examined the cognitive advantages of the bilingualism of French-English bilingual children in Canada (Peal & Lambert, 1962). This research, alongside community demands for bilingual education in the US as a product of the Civil Rights Movement, led to the proliferation of bilingual education throughout the country. However, as bilingual education began institutionalization, it became increasingly divorced from the political struggles of the Civil Rights Movement in ways that once again pathologized the language practices of Latino children (Flores, 2016).

As was the case in previous generations, assessments played a key role in the production of this deficit perspective. In order to determine eligibility for bilingual education programs, students were administered language proficiency assessments in both English and Spanish that included tasks that were disconnected from their daily communicative practices. Many students performed poorly on these decontextualized assessments in both English and Spanish. As a result, many of these children were labeled “semilingual,” or not fully proficient in either English or Spanish (Heath, 1984).

There were two opposing academic perspectives on the reasons for this semilingual labeling. Psycholinguistic framings of language saw semilingualism as an objective description of the limited linguistic skills of Latino students that was a product of the fact that many of these students came from homes that did not offer them systematic access to any language (Cummins, 1979/2001). These scholars advocated for schools to provide structured linguistic experiences that would support Latino students in developing an independent sphere of influence for each of their languages. Their argument was that developing this independent sphere of influence would lead these students toward more abstract language and thought processes. In contrast, anthropological framings of language saw semilingualism as an ideological framing of language that confused language difference with language deficiency (Heath, 1984). These scholars called for schools to support students in becoming ethnographers of both their home and school language and literacy practices in ways that affirmed their home language practices while supporting their development of new language practices associated with formal schooling (Heath, 1983).

One way that this argument has been taken up by researchers advocating specifically for Latino students is through the funds of knowledge framework. Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) define funds of knowledge as “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for households or individual functioning and well-being” (p. 133). In the funds of knowledge approach, teachers and researchers conduct home visits in order to document the wealth of linguistic and cultural knowledge of Latino families with the goal being to incorporate this cultural and linguistic knowledge into classroom instruction. In contrast to the discourses of semilingualism, where students' home language practices are seen as a barrier to academic learning, the funds of knowledge approach sees these home language practices as resources for enhancing academic learning.

Since the early 1980's, the use of the term semilingualism has gradually disappeared from both scholarly and school-based framings of the language practices of Latino students. Indeed, even scholars who originally proposed the term have since distanced themselves from it because of its negative connotation (Cummins, 2000). The funds of knowledge and other

approaches drawing from more anthropological framings of language have consistently offered a counter-narrative to the deficit framing of semilingualism. Yet, as will be explored in the next section, deficit framings of Latino children continue to be produced in the literature on bilingual education.

The Rise of the “Long Term English Language Learner”

Though the term semilingualism has essentially disappeared from scholarly discussions of the language practices of Latino students, its specter remains firmly entrenched in dominant framings of bilingual education. What was once termed semilingualism is now referred to as lacking academic language (Cummins, 2000). As was the case with previous deficit perspectives of Latino students, the determination of one’s mastery over academic language is determined through language proficiency assessments that often have little to do with the actual language practices that Latino children engage in on a daily basis. Various terms have emerged to replace semilingualism in order to describe Latino children who do not score as proficient in either English or Spanish including “non-nons” and “clinically disfluent” (Veladez, MacSwan, & Martinez, 2002). Though most of these terms have been criticized by bilingual education scholars for having similar negative connotations as semilingualism, one term that has gained traction in the scholarship is Long-Term English Learner (LTEL).

LTEs have been defined in the literature as students who have been officially designated as English learners for more than six years (Olsen, 2010). The specter of semilingualism at the core of this category can be found in a widely circulated policy report on LTEs that describes these students as having “high functioning social language, very weak academic language, and significant deficits in reading and writing skills” (Olsen, 2010, p. 2). The report goes on to describe them as lacking “rich oral language and literacy skills in scholastic English needed to participate and succeed in academic work” (Olsen, 2010, p. 23). The report describes the home language of LTEs “as commonly referred to with terms such as ‘Spanglish’ or ‘Chinglish,’ and while it is expressive and functional in many social situations, it is not a strong foundation for the language demands of academic work in Standard English” (p. 23). In other words, the home language practices of LTEs are seen as contributing little to the development of the linguistic practices deemed appropriate in a school context.

As has been the case in previous generations, many scholars have challenged the deficit framing at the core of the construction of this category. Brooks (2016) adopts a social practice view of literacy to challenge the framing of Latino LTEs as having few literacy skills in either English or Spanish. She provides a multidimensional examination of the literacy practices of LTEs that demonstrates that they are “capable of engaging in multiple successful reading practices” (p. 12). She concludes that the LTEs in her study “can construct meaning from academic texts in English, yet, as is the case with other high school students, experience difficulties comprehending some parts of the text” (Brooks, 2016, p. 12).

Flores, Kleyn, and Menken (2015) add to the critique of the deficit orientation of the LTEL label by focusing their attention on the bilingualism of Latino students classified as LTEs illustrating the ways that these students are adept at using their bilingualism in strategic and innovative ways. They point to the ways that institutional racism that privileges monolingualism in Standardized American English marginalizes these language practices in ways that position these students as lacking proficiency in either English or Spanish. In a similar vein to the funds of knowledge approach, they advocate a re-framing of the language practices of

LTEs so that they are treated as a resource for academic learning rather than a barrier that must be overcome.

In summary, while ideas about cognitive advantages of bilingualism have continued to penetrate educational research and mainstream societal perspectives, certain subgroups of bilinguals have been left behind. One such group are so-called LTEs, the majority of whom are Latino students who engage in English and Spanish on a daily basis. Once again we have a linguistic categorization in academic research of bilingual Latino students that positions them as not fully proficient in either English or Spanish. Once again we have scholars trying to disprove these claims by pointing to their linguistic dexterity and the racism of the assessments used to determine their language proficiency. It would appear that the more things change the more they stay the same.

Toward a Raciolinguistic Perspective on Bilingualism in the Latino Community

Despite decades of research that has demonstrated and continues to demonstrate the linguistic dexterity of Latino students, their status as not fully proficient in any language continues to reappear. This indicates that this phenomenon is not simply about empirical linguistic practices but rather about the racialized position of these students in U.S. society. That is, these deficit perspectives are not objective linguistic descriptions but rather raciolinguistic ideologies that racialize the bilingualism of Latino students in ways that position these students as languageless despite the fact that these students engage in bilingual performances on a daily basis (Rosa, 2016). Therefore, continuing to provide more evidence to dispute these perspectives may continue to shift the terminology in new directions but will do little to challenge the racialization process at the core of deficit perspectives of Latino students.

Perhaps it is time for a new approach to challenge these deficit framings of the bilingualism of Latino children. This new approach would refuse to engage in the debate about the legitimacy of the bilingualism of Latino children. It would resist the white gaze that seeks to evaluate the language practices of these students from the perspective of their proximity to whiteness (Paris & Alim, 2014) and the white listening subject that over determines these language practices as deficient (Flores & Rosa, 2015). But more importantly, this alternative approach would situate advocacy work for Latino children within a larger project to dismantle the white supremacy and capitalist relations of power that are the root cause of these deficit perspectives to begin with.

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