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# Beyond transparency: more-than-human insights into the emergence of young children's language

Abigail Hackett 

## Abstract

This paper draws on 3 years of ethnographic research with young children and their families in a northern English town, employing a more-than-human lens to pay attention to what, beyond humans, might be involved in the emergence of children's literacies. The paper focuses on the role of the body and place in the emergence of young children's vocalisations and talk. In particular, the paper rethinks the dominant assumption that children's language is primarily for the purpose of transparently conveying meaning. It does this by drawing on posthuman and decolonial scholarship on childhood and language, and particularly on the work of Glissant on opacity and difference, in order to interrogate the relationship between expression, understanding and power. Thus, the paper outlines how an understanding of the relationship between body, place and talk might inform pedagogy by highlighting the need for space to embrace divergent, complicated, irrational, playful and non-functional language practices in early childhood, rather than looking for rapid, straight line development.

**Key words:** Talk, language, movement, early childhood, more-than-human, body, place

*"T is painting at the easel with red paint on a brush, jabbing the brush quite violently against the paper. The paintbrush hits the paper with a thud, bristles bent back. In time with the thuds, T chants, "Daba. Daby. Dabdabdab.""*

Across both human and animal communication, movement and sound are closely connected (Hackett and Somerville, 2017; Jensenius, 2007; Kendon, 1972; Moore and Yamamoto, 2011), and we see this in young children, who frequently vocalise whilst jiggling, spinning, pacing, gesturing or moving in other ways. This paper focuses on the role of the body, place and movement in the emergence of young children's vocalisations and talk. Acknowledging that bodies are not bounded, and, therefore, not capable of being fully separated from place, it makes the argument for

the importance of considering more-than-human (a term explicated below) aspects of young children's language and how an understanding of the relationship between body, place and talk might inform pedagogy. In particular, the paper rethinks the dominant assumption that children's language is primarily for the purpose of transparently conveying meaning, by interrogating the relationship between expression, understanding and power.

LaBelle reminds us that talking is always a bodily act, writing,

*"Is not the acquisition of speech based on the ability to put the words in one's mouth? To push the lips this way and that, shaping breath into particular forms? To handle all sorts of materials and issues, desires and commands, by way of the oral?" (LaBelle, 2014, p.7)*

For very young children, the bodily nature of talk seems particularly apparent. Sounds emerging from mouths are frequently intermingled with things being put into mouths (sometimes simultaneously). In addition, as the above vignette exemplifies, young children's talk encompasses a great deal of humming, babbling and other vocalisations that are not easily recognised as words. Vocalisations that are not words can seem to keep language more closely connected to the body (MacLure, 2013), because they are not easily transcribe-able or reproduce-able, and it may be difficult to attribute clear meanings. Young children are in the process of encountering language as something new and filled with unfolding possibilities. In her study of children's language use in a bilingual kindergarten, Martin-Bylund (2018) noted that the encounter with unfamiliar words and sounds served to highlight the materiality of vocalising; language seemed to be bodily, playful and 'juicy' (p.23). Similarly, in the research described in this paper, children's starting point for talk seemed to be a playful experimentation with what different kinds of vocalisations (both words and not-words) might feel like in the mouth and how they might manifest in a

particular place or join in with a soundscape, thus setting something new into motion.

This paper draws on 3 years of ethnographic research with young children (aged between 12 and 36 months) and their families in a northern English town. The focus of the research was on what young children aged between 1 and 3 years tended to *do* with literacies, with a particular interest in looking beyond the human, to pay attention to *what else* might be involved in the emergence of children's language and literacies. By focusing specifically on young children's vocalisations, including those not recognisable (by adults) as words, this paper asks speculative questions that seek to disrupt the hegemony of talk-as-transparent and consider the implications of this reconceptualisation of young children's language (Hackett et al., 2021) for pedagogy. How bodies feel and respond in places, and how language might be wrapped up in this, undergirds an argument for the importance of making time and space for divergent, complicated, irrational, playful and non-functional language practices in early childhood, rather than looking for rapid, straight line development.

## Hierarchies of talk

Language involves the body and, for young children, encompasses different unfolding possibilities. These are quite ordinary statements that nevertheless seem frequently and increasingly to be overlooked in Early Years policy and curricula in the United Kingdom and beyond. In a context of neoliberalism in early childhood education, emphasis increasingly falls on the creation of self-determining individuals whose competencies can be reliably mapped against fixed metrics (Flewitt and Roberts-Holmes, 2015; Moss and Roberts-Holmes, 2021). The mandatory "Early Learning Goals" (for England), set by the Department for Education (2017, 2021), have been criticised for their narrowly conceptualised notions of language and communication and the tendency for guidance to operate as an inflexible checklist (Bamsey et al., 2021). The "Early Learning Goals" for Language and Communication emphasise the importance of language in order for children to "clarify their understanding", "respond ... with relevant questions", "offer explanations for why" and "Express their ideas and feelings about their experiences using full sentences" (Department for Education, 2021, p.11). Similarly, resources designed to support educators in relation to young children's language development tend to advise educators to look for characteristics such as accuracy, fluency, 'a clear voice' (The Communication Trust, n.d.) and speaking in complete sentences (The Communications Trust, n.d.; The National Strategies, n.d.).

This emphasis in English educational policy on language as abstractable, that is, words that cohere around clear and singular meanings, mirrors a wider international emphasis on vocabulary size as an indicator of children's language competency. A commitment to certain kinds of talk (transparent) and certain aspects of language (vocabulary) as *most* important for young children's development has fuelled the inexplicable ongoing momentum (despite robust and compelling interdisciplinary critique from numerous scholars) of the trope of 'the language gap', claimed to exist between children from wealthy and marginalised households (Ahrenkiel and Holm, 2020; Avineri et al., 2015; Kuchirko, 2017; MacRae, 2020). Blum (2016) names this narrow focus on the development of children's vocabulary as 'wordism', that is, "the assumption that language is words, and more words are better" (p.25). Pedagogically, the most frequently noted consequence of 'the language gap' discourse has been a narrowing of curricula and reduced opportunities for play and creativity, particularly for marginalised children (Adair et al., 2017).

In this way, an emphasis on, or preference for, talk that transparently conveys young children's fixed meanings and rational opinions results in the creation of a kind of *hierarchy of talk*, in which talk that is most easily discernable, meanings that are fixed, sentences that are elaborated and communication that is abstract-able from place are assumed to be superior. Challenging this narrow view of what it means to communicate through vocalisations is important, not only because it overlooks possibilities for difference and creativity (Martin-Bylund, 2018; Olsson, 2009) but also because it reproduces existing social inequalities. In other words, the hierarchy of talk is both raced and classed (Flores and Rosa, 2015; Ivinson, 2018; Kuby et al., 2019). One example of the unequal impact narrowing conceptualisations of what counts as language can have is the experiences of bilingual children. As Viruru (2001) points out, "Dominant Western discourses about language are almost overwhelmingly unilingual" (p.41), and children's practices of translanguaging, that is, the fluid movement and invention across different languages, are frequently overlooked, marginalised or misunderstood in formal education spaces (Axelrod and Cole, 2018; Zhao and Flewitt, 2019). As Saavedra and Esquierdo (2020) write, "One of the ways the teachers would describe children having 'language' was through the children's ability to speak mainly in English." (p.43). As another example, Boutte and Bryan (2019) describe an overlooking of Black children's linguistic capital, whilst presenting White middle class talk as preferred or superior, as linguistic violence, a form of the many kinds of anti-Black violence that can undermine the well-being of children in classrooms. Assumptions

accompanying the hierarchy of talk, for example, that young children's talk should be as easily understood as possible for (largely English monolingual) staff and professionals, that the emphasis should be on the acquisition of as much vocabulary in the dominant language as quickly as possible (Blum, 2016) or that children need to acquire White middle class language practices for their future success (Baker-Bell, 2020), work to uphold existing colonial hierarchies (Burman, 2008; Viruru, 2001). As Yoon and Templeton (2019) point out, when certain responses or particular kinds of language practices are valued over others in classroom contexts, it becomes difficult to really listen to children, to "hear them out" (p.55).

In this paper, starting with the body, rather than with the meaning words might convey, is proposed as a counter to the dominant imaginary of young children's talk, in which they look an adult in the eye, speak clearly and declare their opinion to the world. In particular, this paper is concerned with the growing emphasis, within early year curricula, on 'expression', a narrowly defined concept which, as discussed above, is interested in clear, fixed and logical subject positions. A more nuanced and expansive conceptualisation of 'expression', together with a critical consideration of 'transparency', might enable educators and researchers (and perhaps even policy-makers?) to listen more generously to young children, including during vocalisations that are not clearly words, or for which meanings are not transparent.

### Studying the emergence of language through community ethnography

In order to explore these questions, I draw on data from my recent ethnographic research with families and young children in two close-by urban communities in northern England (Hackett, 2021). Across a pilot phase and two main phases of fieldwork, I spent a total of 21 months in a nursery setting and two community playgroups and worked collaboratively with children, families and staff to arrange a series of trips, experiences and visits for the children. The children attending the playgroups were aged from babies in arms to 36 months, and the nursery catered for children between their second and third birthdays. The 22 children who participated in the research were all aged between 10 and 36 months at the start of their participation. The study combined ethnographic data, including video recordings, still photographs, field notes and informal interviews, with a post-qualitative focus on more-than-human relations. For example, the study was interested in how place, objects, materials, the weather, animals and quite

intangible things, such as an atmosphere or a feeling, are involved in children's literacies. Whilst informed consent was sought from parents at the start of the study, young children's moment-by-moment assent, and responding to their cues for (dis)engagement and (non)participation in the study, was also central to the ethics of this research (Flewitt, 2006; Schulte, 2020).

Posthuman and post-qualitative research in recent years have acted as gathering points for a growing critique of the assumption that 'human' is a fixed and unproblematic category (Braidotti, 2013) and a related interest in what kinds of knowledge qualitative research methods privilege or surface (MacLure, 2013). Implications for educational research include the need to consider young people beyond the confines of the bounded individual, seeing instead how any one child is deeply inter-connected not just to other humans but to the more-than-human context in which they are learning or acting (Dernikos et al., 2020; Taylor and Hughes, 2016). Human bodies themselves are not bounded; host to multiple other beings that influence our well-being and thought processes, the human body, in this sense, is itself more-than-human (Alaimo, 2010). This prompts a rethinking of language and talk as more-than-human and embodied (Hackett, 2021; Mazzei and Jackson, 2017), as this paper explores.

At the same time, decolonial research has developed a rich body of scholarship critiquing the tendency of western thought to privilege particular kinds of knowledge. Ironically, as Todd (2016) has pointed out, this has included a tendency for posthuman research to declare ideas about more-than-human inter-connectedness as 'new' when they are, in fact, well established within Indigenous ontologies. Wynter's (2003) work has importantly expressed how an over-representation of particular modes of being human (bounded, rational, progressive) within western thought stems from colonial and imperialist roots. Within education, imaginaries of 'the human' underpin pedagogical decisions, with implications for socially just education (Snaza, 2019). Decolonial scholars including Wynter (2003) and Glissant (1997) have critiqued the privileging of transparent knowledge issuing from rational individualised subjects as imbricated in over-represented colonial modes of being human. Instead, they urge a reconsidering of the politics of what it means to express yourself, or to understand another, an invitation which this paper takes up.

As Zembylas (2018) has pointed out, both posthuman and decolonial research argue for paying greater attention to what is "objectified, muted or rendered passive by a certain manifestation of anthropocentrism or human exceptionalism" (p.254). However, importantly, there are tensions in terms of the priorities of this scholarship and how they take account of power, history and racism. In order to understand



how alternative ways of conceptualising children's vocalisations might depart from the current dominant focus on transparent expression/meaning, this paper draws on both posthuman/post-qualitative and decolonial scholarship. The term 'more-than-human' has been chosen to describe an attention to what is happening with young children and language when humans (or rather a particular kind of 'being human') are decentred. The complex threads of thinking around being human, what it means to know and the more-than-human world could be summarised thus more-than-human thinking argues that social research should not focus only on humans. *But really* it is a critique of the category of 'human' as fixed and neutral. *But really* this thinking is a pushback against ways of knowing that rely on and validate particular modes of 'being human' above others. Each of these inter-connected strands of thinking has influenced the research described in this paper.

The vignettes I have selected for this paper, from a large dataset of fieldnotes, video and still images, focus on young children's vocalisations, particularly those that are difficult to define as clear words. The vocalisations are recorded in fieldnotes I wrote from memory after each field visit, sometimes supplemented by snippets of handheld video footage. These vocalisations were hard to remember and reproduce accurately in writing from memory. However, I would argue that the likely inaccuracy of the vocalisations adds to their generative-ness for thinking with. Writing with Margaret Somerville, we argued that frequently when trying to transcribe these kinds of events, "Words fail as much of this occurs at the limits of language where vocalisations are not words or are so entangled with water, play and voice that they are not distinguishable" (Hackett and Somerville, 2017, p.384). The very existence of these vocalisations, as partially remembered, and inaccurately reproduced fieldnotes (as all fieldnotes are), together with their irreproducibility, is what matters, because they create shifts in our analytic approach to conceptualising young children's talk.

## Language in/of place

*"J seems to move with the wind. He wanders the outdoors space at playgroup. He picks up a particularly round white stone and says 'loook', then he glances at the trees blowing around in the wind and says 'awwwwww'. He runs inside with his stone, runs back out and throws it in an arc into the air and onto the paving, saying 'yaaaahhhhh'."*

This vignette describes a 2-year-old boy playing in the outside space at a community playgroup. It was a

beautiful warm day, with a soft breeze, and staff had dragged some of the play equipment outside to take advantage of the good weather. As J wandered, inside and outside the space, picking up an incidental object seemingly at random, moving slowly, then quickly, pausing then running and throwing, vocalisations were caught up in the action, closely connected to his moving body and seemingly not directed at anyone in particular.

This kind of vocalisation, caught up in movement and without an obvious human audience, was a familiar event during the study. As part of moving with and experiencing place, J vocalised a mixture of words and not-words. It is possible to understand these vocalisations as being 'about' features of place (for example, J wants us to look at the stone), yet they also seem to exceed this 'about-ness' and instead inter-mingle with and respond aesthetically to the wind, the space and the possibilities for movement that were available. In this sense, the vignette offers an example of Abram's (1996) argument that language frequently attunes with landscape. This argument is paralleled (and predated) by numerous Indigenous scholars, who have described the close relationship between language and place in diverse non-western ontologies, in which, for example, language is learned from the land (Rasmussen and Akulukjuk, 2009), and ways of knowing are not abstract-able from place (Joks et al., 2020; Tuck and McKenzie, 2015). Abram argues that, because of this close connection to place, learning language is best conceptualised as a bodily act. He describes a kind of 'vocal gesticulation' (p.74) which begins with experimental vocal sounding joining in with a surrounding soundscape. Thus, as well as being a bodily act, Abram's conceptualisation of language is as inseparable from the more-than-human world, as the "complexity of the interchange that we call 'language' is rooted in the non-verbal exchange always already going on between our own flesh and the flesh of the world" (p.90). Considering the vignette that opened this paper, in which a young girl is painting, through the lens of 'vocal gesticulation', we might consider how "daba, daby, dabdabdab" are movements of mouth, lips and vocal chords, existing alongside jabbing arm movements, fingers gripping a paint brush, the spreading dampness of the red paint and the bristles of the paintbrush bending back and splaying out. From Abram's perspective, "daba, daby, dabdabdab" are not (only) slightly incorrect versions of the signifier "to dab [the paint]" but also vocal gesticulations that gather their sense, energy and expression from more-than-human bodies and movement.

This understanding of young children's vocalisations as joining in with a place or a soundscape coheres with other research that has demonstrated the influence of place on children's talk (Arculus and

MacRae, 2020; Dean, 2021; Hackett et al., 2021; Heath, 1983; Richardson and Murray, 2017) and the importance of bodies and movement for young children's meaning making (Daniels, 2016; Dernikos, 2020; Flewitt, 2005; Hackett, 2014; Powell and Somerville, 2018; Thiel, 2015). A more-than-human understanding of young children's talk extends this work by rethinking the tendency to separate out place from body and see the one acting on or influencing the other. Alaimo (2010) reminds us that bodies are leaky, unbounded and vulnerable and that "material interchanges between human bodies, geographical places, and vast networks of power" (p.32) are constantly taking place. Therefore, place is not just something that acts on or influences bodies, rather body and place co-constitute each other in so many ways that the boundaries are unclear, and language is wrapped up in this.

## Language and transparent meaning

*"The children frequently look up at the sky. R looks up at a line of cloud and traces it with his whole arm several times, whilst saying wooooooow. R catches my eye and points repeatedly at the sky where some kind of bird of prey is cruising and circling. He say 'baebae'. It is not clear (to me) what the word is. If anything, it sounds more like baby than bird. R repeats the word several times."*

In this vignette, 2-year-old R attended a nursery that had just embraced an outdoors pedagogy, changing their daily routine to spend significant amounts of time in the outdoor space (Hackett et al., 2021). The outside space enabled the children more freedom and unstructured time, and this kind of event, in which R wandered, looked around, gazed at the sky and vocalised in relation to things he encountered, was something I frequently observed. In contrast to the previous two vignettes, on this occasion, I felt R was including me in the conversation, and that his vocalisations of 'wooooooow' and 'baebae' were at least partly directed at me. However, I was not able to understand them as words. Instead, they are an example of how, frequently in the study, children made vocalisations that seemed to exist in a grey area between words and not-words.

From a more-than-human perspective, beyond mastering a system of abstract rules under the encouragement and guidance of adults, language involves creative bodily joining in with the world. This includes joining in with other people, but it also involves joining in with place and the more-than-human world (such as, in this vignette, the sky, and the movement of clouds and bird overhead). Joining in with place,

as an expressive act that occurs through the body, is unlikely to result in (or not only in) transparent fixed meanings. A traditional early language pedagogy might see such vocalisations as unsatisfactory, and educators or parents might be encouraged to repeat the vocalisations back as 'real words', or to try to encourage the child to 'improve' their pronunciation so that the meanings could be more transparently understood. The kinds of vocalisations described in the vignettes in this paper, in which words and not-quite-words are closely entangled with movement, place and sensation, can be understood and valued differently through the lens of "joining in with place". This approach invites researchers and educators to look beyond meaning (Hackett et al., 2021) to ask how language joins in with the wider world and what it sets into motion. This requires a capacious consideration of words, not-words and how bodies and places feel during talk and movement.

Many scholars have drawn attention to the imbrication of language with power and opportunity in the classroom and beyond (Badwan, 2021; Finnegan, 2002; Flores and Rosa, 2015; Viruru, 2001). This work importantly reframes notions of 'expression' and 'transparency' in early childhood language. For example, writing from a postcolonial perspective, Viruru (2001) critiques the assumption that the sooner children became vocal, "the sooner they can express themselves" (p.32). Rather than the desire for children to 'express themselves' enacting a kind of agential or emancipatory view of early childhood, Viruru (2001) argues that an overemphasis on language above other forms of communication (that the child might prefer) is an example of "the continued colonization of the field of early childhood education by dominant perspectives" (p.31). She points out that "often children seem to be denied the right to silence" (p.37). Indeed, continued silence in the early years classroom can quickly result in intervention (the notion of 'getting in early' to 'fix' a perceived problem), or, as MacLure et al. (2010) put it, a kind of "rage for explanation" (p.494) that locates a child's silence in either pathology or disobedience.

Drawing on Glissant, Viruru (2001) points out that the word 'comprehend' has its route (in French) in 'prendre', meaning 'to take'. When someone is rendered fully knowable, or transparent, they lose their own power and privacy and tend to become considered two dimensional, uncomplicated, capable of being mastered, controlled or acted upon. Postcolonial scholars of childhood (Canella and Viruru, 2012; Nxamalo and Brown, 2020; Nxumalo et al., 2011; Viruru, 2001) have long argued that the desire to simplify and generalise child development so that it can be easily understood and acted upon (for example, through increasing the speed or direction in which

children learn) appears benign, yet is mirrored in colonial processes of conquest, study of, intervention into and exploitation of, non-western communities globally by western colonisers.

Glissant's (1997) theory of Relation importantly underpins a view of difference as uncontainable and irresolvable. Within this theory, *opacity*, rather than *transparency*, is an important component, countering the desire for clear fixed meanings to be conveyed through familiar and recognisable routes. Glissant describes how, in western thought, understanding is equated with "the requirement for transparency" (p.190). Such total know-ability-through-transparency can only be achieved through reduction or simplification, which, in turn, tends to lead to presumptions of superiority or creation of hierarchies (such as colonial hierarchies of race). For this reason, Glissant argues, it is vital that we are able to respect others' differences without fully understanding them. This mutual respect for each other's opacity (or complexity, or the contradictory, constantly changing state of all beings) underpins an ability to "conceive of the opacity of the other for me, without reproach for my opacity for him" (p.193). In other words, *transparent understanding* should not be a pre-requisite for respect, care or feelings of solidarity and support.

*"I sit with Y. He has a basket of diggers and other vehicles, touches and picks up each one in turn, saying the same sound. I hear it as either 'car' or 'what's that'. He points to the basket of cars just out of his reach, indicating I should pass him each vehicle at a time. Then he holds out each one, and says the (possible) word; 'Car/what's that?'"*

As I argued at the start of the paper, young children encounter language as something new and emergent. As a child, speaking to an unfamiliar adult can involve putting oneself out into the world (LaBelle, 2014). This is likely to be acerbated by the intensification of adult interest in and evaluation of young children's language practices, particularly at a time when the setting is unfamiliar to them. Y, the 2-year-old in the above vignette, had only been attending nursery for a few weeks. It was the first time he had met me, yet he seemed to welcome me into his space and involve me in his baskets of toys through touch, gesture and vocalisation. Vocalisations such as the one in this vignette seem to retain a certain kind of ambivalence; their multiple interpretations have the effect of keeping interactions provisional. For example, in the vignette above, Y could either be asking me about or authoritatively informing me about the toys he takes from the basket (or something else entirely). Frequently in my research, children tended to use gesture, body movements or vocalisations in

ways that kept multiple meanings or possibilities in motion, seemingly feeling their way into how an interaction might unfold, how it might be interpreted (by adults) and what that might set into motion (Hackett, 2021).

Language, argues Glissant (1997), can offer the illusion of a "dedication to clarity" and a "pleasing rationality" (p.113) that is bound up in notions of human-ness, yet on closer scrutiny, language is complex and entangled with bodies, places, histories and identities. Alison Phipps (2019) writes about the state of vulnerability and uncertainty involved in not knowing the dominant language, but instead having to act on 'the gist', that is, having a sense of the meaning of what is being said, but not all of the detail. She asks,

*"How when we do not share a language, do we work as this fragile edge between human beings, those whose language dominates and those whose language is almost inaudible in cognitive terms?"* (p.41)

For Phipps, rather than a lack of shared language being a problem to resolve as quickly as possible, "incompetence and the opacity of knowledge must be lived and struggled with and even embraced, so that power imbalances can be experienced viscerally" (p.43). In other words, the vulnerability and provisional moving-into-relation with each other that is necessary when meanings are only partially shared has the potential to reframe power relationships. Whilst Phipps is writing about adults learning new languages, her insights are instructive both in relation to the importance of opacity from the point of view of the child and for recognising and advocating for the space of vulnerability and visceral struggle in which educators or researchers might work with young children whilst not conflating transparency, understanding and respect.

Viruru (2001) identifies silence as an important tool of resistance, which children might use to claim their opacity. In addition, I suggest vocalisations that are not easily recognised as words, or that hold the potential for multiple interpretations, may be another route to opacity. Transparent meanings for human audiences to grasp, should not then, be assumed to be the only or most desirable goal for oracy in early childhood, or, indeed, an aspiration that all children share, all of the time. Thus, thinking about the proposition that young children's language involves a bodily experimentation with what different kinds of vocalisations might feel like or might set into motion, we might begin to consider vocalisations that sit in the grey area between words/not-words as more than inadequate pronunciations of 'real' words in need of correction or improvement.



## Implications for educators; attending to place, movement and how bodies feel

The desire for children to ‘express themselves’ in ways that make it easy for adults to understand what children want or are thinking needs to be considered in relation to a history of hierarchisation of language practices, used to control or marginalise some communities, and Glissant’s (1997) assertion that everyone should have the “right to opacity” (p.189). This, I argue, includes the right to silence, to speak in languages educators are not familiar with and to prefer vocalisations (and/or gestures) that do not have obvious meanings. Foregrounding adults’ desire for transparent meanings, or to *understand* the child, can threaten children’s “right to opacity” (Glissant, 1997, p.189, see also Viruru, 2001). Moving beyond ‘transparency’ requires moving beyond a framework of ‘inclusion’ (Shannon, 2020) to consider how hierarchies of talk might implicitly and explicitly manifest themselves in the classroom, and how we can counter and work against these (Baker-Bell, 2020; Viruru, 2001).

Returning to Abram’s (1996) notion of language as ‘vocal gesticulation’, I note that Abram draws on Merleau-Ponty to argue that language is primarily expressive *rather than* symbolic. In other words, expression (or expressing oneself) is not always about symbolic meaning, and it is not always possible to put into words everything that is felt. Rather, expression could be understood as a visceral, fleshy exchange (Abram, 1996, p.90), in which words and vocalisations are sometimes, but not always, caught up. In the early years classroom, it can be easy to forget that language starts in the body, with movement and sound. It can be easy to forget that bodily expression is not always necessarily transparent. Therefore, for educators, pushing back against some of the assumptions and hierarchies of language that I outlined above may mean working against the tendency to still moving bodies and quiet surrounding soundscapes in order to more clearly hear children’s talk, or with the assumption that this kind of environment will enable children to ‘focus’ on the task of speaking. The research described in this paper joins growing evidence for the connection between young children’s moving bodies and talking, vocalising, mark making, creating and communicating in diverse ways. A more-than-human framework for considering the emergence of young children’s language emphasises the entanglement between body, place and language as an essential aspect. In my research, “fostering participation in dynamic, multisensory, collective events” and creating situations where “there are frequent possibilities but little obligation for children to talk” (Hackett et al., 2021, p.926) were often generative and productive of creative vocalisations and other meaning

making practices, such as the ones described in this paper.

Letting go, as adults, of our own investments in *understanding* and *transparency* might involve confronting our vulnerabilities. As described by Phipps (2019), working and acting on ‘the gist’, rather than transparent meanings, involves encountering “the threat of vulnerability inherent in simply not understanding what is being said” (p.41). If language practices are conceptualised as more-than-human, difficulties in understanding every word a child says are not inconveniences or evidence of lack of skill on the part of the educator or researcher. Rather, these difficulties have something important to teach us about the nature of language emergence. If children’s energies do not always seem to be invested in making themselves transparent and fully knowable to educators, this is not evidence of ‘lack’ within the child but rather reveals something to us about the longstanding imbrication of power, coloniality and language.

## Concluding thoughts

Young children and educators need both time and space to embrace and value divergent language practices rather than straight line development that prioritises moving into and using dominant language to express transparent meanings as quickly as possible. Children’s acquisition of *more* literacy practices *earlier* is a not a neutral common-sense goal but a political position in which “different versions of what it is to know” are enacted (Joks et al., 2020, p.310). Those who work most closely with young children – parents, carers and educators – are, together with children themselves, experts on the possibilities, complexity and contingent meanings bound up in and emerging from young children’s oracy. Yet often parents, carers and educators are commandeered into the project of socialising young children to acquire particular kinds of language practices as quickly as possible, and resistance to this can sometimes be met with criticism and pathologisation (for example, the criticism frequently levelled at parents who do not regularly talk to their babies, despite the cultural specificity of this practice (Avineri et al., 2015)). Therefore, this paper is intended as an invitation to educators, to embrace the intuitive and experiential knowledge about language, body and place that comes from spending extended periods of time with young children. Start from there. This genuine listening to what children have to express, without rushing to adult-centric conclusions or interpretations, is challenging (Yoon and Templeton, 2019), vulnerable, creative and essential work in creating more-than-human early years spaces in which all children can genuinely join in.



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