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Researching language and place: What is the evidence base?

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3b Researching language and place: What is the evidence base?

Abi Hackett and David Shannon

Abstract

This chapter reports the findings of a narrative review of literature on how young children's language is entangled with place. The authors identify and explore three emerging themes in the extant literature: (1) how children's language emerges through place; (2) how place is re-signified and re-made through children's language; and (3) how place reconfigures how children are heard. The authors argue that educators, researchers, and others need to attend more carefully to how children's language emerges where they talk, and to the politics of how language and place reproduce whiteness in relation to what is valued and what counts as language.

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Introduction: The entanglement of language and place

What do we know about the connection between children's language and place? In 2022, we carried out a literature review to address this question. We drew from several different fields – primarily from scholarship in early childhood education, developmental psychology, and anthropology, as well as policy and curricula documents – to explore how early language emerges with and through children's embodiment in place. The review was funded by Manchester Metropolitan University and published in the journal *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies* (Shannon & Hackett, 2024).[1] In this chapter, we summarise some key themes and research findings that explore the complex connection between place and *when*, *why*, and *how* young children communicate: we theorise this complex relationship as *entanglement*.

We conducted this review of the literature for two reasons. Firstly, within our own research and professional practice, we noted the significance of place and the body for when and how children use language. However, we found ourselves struggling for the theoretical tools necessary to make sense of this entanglement. Our aim in this review, then, was to identify scholarship from different disciplines that foregrounds the significance of place, in order to begin building a conceptual frame for how we might investigate the entanglement of place with language.

Secondly, we find that dominant discussions of early language tend to overlook how language practices are shaped by hierarchies such as racism, classism, ableism, and cis-hetero sexism. As anti-racist speech and language therapist Warda Farah has urged, "we need to actively de-centre white ways of conceptualising language" (Farah, 2022). We agree, and this impetus to reconnect language with the body and place in ways that re-politicise standardised talk (Flores & Rosa, 2015) was an aspiration underpinning our review.

What do we mean by entanglement?

[1] You can read the full review paper for free here Full article: The entanglement of language and place in early childhood: a review of the literature (tandfonline.com)

Dominant theories conceptualise language as a process that "fl[ies] between lips and brain" (Hackett, 2021, p. 16) of an individual child whose subjectivity can be neatly separated from those around them. In contrast, in this chapter, we are using the word 'entanglement' to describe the ways that language is connected to a host of more-than-human entities that sit outside the body.

More-than-human theories explore how seemingly human social processes, such as language, emerge through and are mediated by a web of socio-material forces. These forces operate both above and below the threshold of human perception. In practical terms, this means attending to how children's language practices might be heard, detected, and felt, but also conditioned and evoked, by other humans, as well as non-human animals, non-animal life, and non-living matter. In this chapter, we pay particular attention to the entanglement of children's language with place.

Environment and place: What's the difference?

In language acquisition literature (which is mainly grounded in a medicalised and psychologised model of research), 'environment' is usually framed as anything outside the developing child (e.g., Rowland et al., 2020). Typically, researchers identify environmental features or behaviours within the immediate family context (e.g., Roulstone et al., 2011) and, less commonly, broader structural issues such as levels of state financial investment in local communities (see Iruka et al., 2015 for a review), as factors influencing children's language development. Thus, discussion often involves deficit-centric explorations of the impact of economic deprivation and 'poor quality' home environments on language: these discussions frequently reinforce racialising and classist hierarchies (c.f. Basit et al., 2015; Li et al., 2022). Sometimes these conclusions are presented as positive and empowering for families, with a message to parents that the power is in their hands to achieve social mobility for their children if they put enough effort into their parenting behaviour and home environment. Yet, in order for this logic to stand, environment/place and language must be regarded as separate and individually changeable.

Moreover, whilst developmental psychology research emphasises the significance of environment to the quality of children's language development, it also regards place as a

troublesome factor that interferes with the quality of assessment of children's language (Camilleri & Botting, 2013). For example, Camilleri and Botting (2013) argue that children undertaking speech and language assessments are often extracted from their usual learning environments because the other sounds and experiences of the classroom are understood as negatively affecting children's performance: children are removed in order to assess their language in the 'purest' way possible, free of distraction. In contrast, early years educators point out that extracting children from their everyday learning environment to assess their language abilities means that such assessments do not reflect the children's everyday learning situations nor, therefore, their everyday *language* experiences (Duncan et al., 2020).

Across the literature on home learning environment and 'scientifically reliable' language assessments, we note a distinction between environment and place, where:

1) environment is a series of controllable and measurable factors that research is interested in modifying to draw conclusions about language development; and
2) place is a wild and unwanted variable that must sometimes be tolerated or considered as a limitation of the study in order to work practically with children, families, or practitioners.

It is this context within and against which we situate the present literature review.

Methodology: A narrative review

While we knew from the outset that there was likely to be only a small amount of literature that deliberately addressed the entanglement of language and place in education, we suspected that there would be other studies that touched tangentially on similar questions or that would complicate our review in ways that we had not expected. For this reason, we started without a clear sense of how an attention to place might emerge in papers we read.

A narrative review is a summary of a body of literature combined with "interpretation and critique" (Greenhalgh et al., 2018, p. 2). Thus, our purpose was not to produce an exhaustive review. For one thing, our review was limited to papers published in English. For another, as predicted, some of the articles only theorised place tangentially to their main argument, while the relevance of other articles to our topic only became clear when read alongside something

else. So, the body of literature led us to a more nuanced approach to narrative reviewing that emphasises flexibility rather than reproducing a canon.

More detail on the search terms we employed and how we identified the literature is provided in our journal article in *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies* (Shannon & Hackett, 2024). In total we identified 50 articles for inclusion in the narrative review and we worked across them to identify the following three emerging questions:

1. How does place change children's language?
2. How does language re-signify or re-make place?
3. How does place shape the possibilities for listening to children?

We propose that these questions will support the building of a conceptual framework for scholars interested in researching the entanglement of place with children's language. In the next sections, we attend to each question in turn.

1. How does place change children's language?

In this section, we discuss the extant research exploring how place – as a physical, geographic context and a socially structured environment – changes what and how much children say.

It has long been understood that children's speech is changeable depending on the physical location. For instance, young children may speak much less in school or nursery than at home (Flewitt, 2005; Wells, 1979). Researchers have also found differences in the kinds of communication practices children use between contexts. For instance, early childhood communication scholar Rosie Flewitt (2005) used longitudinal video ethnography to explore how four 3-year-old children's language practices differ between home and pre-school. At home, the children drew from shared, carer-child understandings to structure their language. In pre-school, where these carer-child understandings are absent, and where time for talking was prescribed by school staff, children talked less. Instead, they engaged in a variety of different, multi-modal communicative practices "negotiated through gaze, facial expression and body movement, supplemented by speech primarily to be specific" (Flewitt, 2005, p.

217). Flewitt contends that both school and home enrich children's communication in different ways, and neither should be understood as imposing limitations. Similarly, Bronya Dean (2021) explored how young children's singing changes between social contexts. Dean conducted non-participant observations of the singing practices of fifteen 3-4-year-olds using wearable microphones. Children wore the microphones for sustained durations. Dean found that the type of singing was shaped by where children were in the home, who they were with, and what was happening at the time. The most common kind of singing was improvised singing whilst playing alone, whereas children typically sang learnt songs or songs with clear words when interacting with others.

The scholars discussed above both observed that children's speech changed between places. Likewise, scholars of early childhood education, Richardson and Murray (2017), identified significant differences in language use in unstructured 'natural' outdoor learning spaces compared with more formal indoor or outdoor 'classroom' learning spaces. Using a case study approach, they coded the language of four child participants aged 4-5 years. The researchers found that the children tended to use more verbs, exclamations, and adjectives in natural outdoor learning than in more formal classroom learning, while two children used more nouns in the formal classroom environments. Moreover, the children involved in outdoor learning preferred more onomatopoeic adjectives than those in the classroom (e.g., "'wriggly, 'sticky' and 'slimy'": Richardson & Murray, 2017, p. 465), suggesting that children experimented more with experiential language. The authors suggest that increased verb use might indicate greater action-focused learning, more exclamations might reflect more emotional engagement, and more adjectives might be rooted in the children's engagement with a greater range of sensory experiences. Similarly, Hackett et al. (2021) identified significant changes in the language practices of 2-year-old children when their early childhood education setting adopted an outdoors-orientated pedagogy. Hackett and her colleagues argued that the shift to less structured learning outdoors "unsettled the customary assumptions about what counts as language" (p. 926), resulting in a freer experience (for both adults and children) of vocalising and experimenting with language and song. Moreover, their analysis of whole-cohort data indicated a dramatic reduction in the number of children referred for formal speech and language assessment when compared to previous cohorts from the same setting. Finally, MacRae and Arculus (2020) draw from the SALTMusic action research project to describe two 2-year-olds' improvisations during arts-based workshops, revealing the imbrication of place and music with language (you can read more about

Arculus' work in chapter 2c). The above scholars all build on earlier scholarship to show that the place where children's language happens changes that language, although they extend this work by also arguing that the social context further conditions the physical context.

Also relevant to our review are the socio-structural positions of children's cultures, languages, and literacies in how children use language in a given place. Place is invoked in the politics of how plurilingual students make space for their non-English languages in formal education contexts. This is because the classroom is "polycontextual" (Gutiérrez et al., 1999, p. 288) in that it operates across official and unofficial spaces that are often "characterized by their various and often oppositional discourses and social practices, [but] are also mutually constitutive and transformative" (p. 288). Language and literacy scholar Brittany Frieson (2021) explores how first-graders' use of African American Language in a bilingual immersion English-Spanish classroom interrupts standardised rules and teaching formats of 'formal' European languages. Likewise, learning and behaviour scholar Anna Martín-Bylund (2018) draws from her ethnographic research in a bilingual Spanish-Swedish preschool to challenge the idea of the 'silent' phase, which many plurilingual learners are described as going through. Rather than posing the silent plurilingual child as lacking agency and needing extra intervention, Martín-Bylund takes an example of a child's silence when offered water to consider how silence might be used strategically to resist following adults' instructions. Similarly, drawing from her ethnographic research with a UK-based Reception class (whom she followed into Year 1), early childhood scholar Christina Tatham-Fashanu and her colleagues (2020) noted that children are more likely to speak non-English home languages in parts of the classroom where they feel unobserved. In this way, children self-regulate to switch between languages based on place: for instance, in the transition from indoor to outdoor spaces, when secreted away in a corner of the library, or during a lapse in the teacher's talk during 'lining-up time'. In Spain, Inmaculada M. García-Sánchez (2010) explores how first-generation Moroccan immigrant children employ hybrid language practices during play at home as a means to create a clandestine private space. García-Sánchez observed that the children organised and negotiated the play in Moroccan Arabic (their home language) but then enacted their characters in Spanish. This served to make the play less transparent to non-Spanish-speaking outside observers, including older siblings and parents. Rather than being a practice of code-switching, these translanguaging behaviours illuminate how child and place entwine as a way of resisting the dominance of institutional

languages, whether the dominant language of the classroom, or the dominant language of the home.

In this section, we have examined a body of research that grapples with the difference that place makes to the quantity and qualities of children's language. This research traces the ways in which the full repertoire of children's languages and meaning-making threads and oozes through place. In the next section, we consider how these linguistic behaviours (re)signify and (re)make places, including how plurilingual children demarcate place through strategic use of different languages.

2. How does language re-signify or re-make place?

Freire (2017) contended that people transform the world by naming it. Taking up this contention, Margaret Somerville and her colleagues have portrayed young children's literacies as world-making (Hackett & Somerville, 2017; Somerville & Powell, 2019). In ethnographic fieldwork with 1-3 and 4-6-year-olds in early childhood education settings in New Zealand and Sweden, Bateman and Cekaite (2022) rethink the common presumption that place (or what they term 'context') is static. Instead, they consider how interaction in and with the environment, and particularly how children emphasise or accentuate aspects of it, shapes that environment – in other words, a child "talks the environment into significance" (Schegloff, 1992, cited in Bateman & Cekaite, 2022, p. 63). For instance, Bateman and Cekaite describe how children's narration of the properties of a patch of long grass reconstitutes the outdoor play space. Similarly, Gallagher and colleagues (2018), conducting 'sound walks' with 3-4-year-old children and their parents, describe how tall vegetation is talked into being a hiding place for speculative tigers. In this way, children's language-making practices redefine their relationships with space.

Children's language practices can add layers of meaning to places. Early childhood education scholar Polly Björk-Willén (2016) shows how the entrance hall of an early years education classroom becomes a 'transit zone' through which two children move between their non-Swedish home languages (Arabic, French, Albanian, and Greek) and the Swedish language of the classroom. Using video recordings, Björk-Willén observes the use of the home languages as transitional languages, for instance, when a carer leaves their child behind. She also notes

that non-Swedish languages create privacy for carers and children in those spacetimes of transition for moments of intimacy or anxiety, to which the preschool practitioners (who cannot speak those languages) are merely 'bystanders'. Moreover, Björk-Willén suggests that these transitions are possible due to the presence of material 'transition objects' (e.g., mitts and shoes) or embodied gestures (e.g., hugs and kisses) that provide focal points for language transition.

Emerging research shows how the process whereby language re-makes and demarcates place can also occur virtually, digitally, and across space. Martín-Bylund and Stenliden (2020) describe the ways that three transnational, multilingual families in China, each with children aged between 3 and 9, maintained proximity to relatives in European countries through the use of online video calls. The authors suggested that proximity and the language practices associated with proximity are mediated by physical objects in one or both of the physical locations. For instance, the camera on the video-calling device renders body(mind)s visible or invisible. Or proximity is mediated by objects that have transitioned between spaces, such as a bag gifted to one of the children by their grandparent. Similarly, Flewitt and Clark (2020) use a 'day in the life' style of ethnography to recount how two children (aged 1 and 2) use digital technology to adopt new kinds of social practices. They explore how children's digital literacy practices operated across "material resources in actual and virtual social spaces" (p. 465), arguing that children's home literacy environments have permeable borders between physical and digital spaces, and that these boundaries are made and remade through language.

Some scholars of bilingualism have mobilised Homi Bhabha's (2004) idea of 'third space'. For Bhabha, third spaces represent the hybridity that emerges when two people or cultures interact, thereby unsettling Euro-Western ideals of cultural homogeneity and sameness. Scholars have taken up this idea to explore how the 'first space' of "home, community, and peer networks" might re-constitute the 'second space' of "work, school, or church" (Moje et al., 2004, p. 41). For instance, education scholars Eisazadeh et al. (2017) conducted participant video ethnographic research with 4-year-old Ojibwe children during their play in a small, remote, Indigenous community in Nishnawbe Aski Nation territory in central Canada. Although not the main purpose of the study, the authors briefly describe how the children formulate spaces that straddle Indigenous and popular cultures in their dramatic play: for instance, they fended off the "Minecraft guy" during a hunt, and constructed a UFO that later evolved into an aeroplane to transport them to and from their remote community. These

might be thought of as examples of third spaces, where play is formed from across different cultural spaces. Similarly, Christina Tatham-Fashanu (2021) draws from the idea of third space to suggest that the bridge between home and school languages and cultural practices might be rethought as a complex network of 'multiple bridges'. For example, she describes three children playing 'pirate ship' by throwing orange felted fabric at each other. The felt is then described as fire, and then as confetti when one of the children yells "shaadi!". Although the Hindi word shaadi typically means 'wedding', the child explains an alternative meaning, 'party', and so the other two also start shouting "shaadi!" while pelting each other with fire/felt/confetti. In recounting this episode, Tatham-Fashanu illustrates not only how children make bridges from home languages into the classroom, but also how third spaces are more than the sums of their parts: in this case, the construction of an alternative meaning and etymology for the word shaadi ('party' rather than 'wedding', via fire and pirates). Tatham-Fashanu suggests that an "appropriate metaphor for the third space might be an intersubjective 'spaghetti junction' with multiple entrances, exits, levels and connections" (p. 14), rather than a singular bridge between two cultures and languages. In this way, plurilingual children construct both shared and contested meanings that draw from linguistic and identity practices from across home and school, and put them to work re-making and re-claiming place. So far in this review, we have discussed how researchers have explored the entanglement of children's language with place, considering how each shapes the other. In the final section of this review, we consider how 'listening' to children is mediated by place.

3. How does place shape the possibilities for listening to children?

We have emphasised in this chapter that place shapes how and what young children communicate. Importantly, place also shapes how adults are able (or willing) to 'listen' to children's communication. We use the word 'listen' here to stand in for a range of receptive communication strategies, including listening to spoken language, understanding signing and picture exchange, and discerning meaning in children's own personal communication styles. Frequently in education – including in the use of speech and language therapy assessments – listening to children is framed as requiring silence, stillness, and a minimising of background inputs or influence. We feel that this conventional approach prioritises convenience for adults and the maintenance of school structures over the creation of a more accurate, if messy, portrayal of children's linguistic practices. Instead, we conceptualise listening to children in a

more expansive way, even where that is difficult or inconvenient for the adults (Davies, 2014; Yoon & Templeton, 2019). Researchers have argued that the possibilities for adults to 'hear children out' (Yoon & Templeton, 2019) are filtered through curriculum or adult expectations of what children are supposed to say. Consequently, the limits of what the curriculum expects or is looking for, and what adults have learnt to habitually value or imagine, operate to shape and constrain the possibilities for listening to children (Olsson, 2013; Yoon & Templeton, 2019).

Scholars have explored how teachers' reception of pupils' speech is mediated by racial hierarchies (Bryan, 2020; Rosa, 2019; Thiel & Dernikos, 2020) and normative notions of ability and capacity (Shannon, 2020, 2022), with the result that teachers hear different groups of children differently. In a case study of two African American children from their own families, Boutte and Bryan (2019) identify the suppression in school of African American Language through the privileging of "White Mainstream English" (Baker-Bell, 2017, as cited in Baker-Bell, 2020), which they recognise as a mode of anti-Black violence in education. They argue that in certain school spaces, the relations between Black children's language, identity, and race are devalued, serving to disconnect grammar and linguistic features from lived reality, and in effect reimposing the 'mastery' of white people. Drawing on critical race theory, Nathaniel Bryan (2020) unsettles idealistic white fantasies of the role of the playground in children's lives. Invoking the powerful imaginaries of what he calls the 'school playground-to-prison pipeline', he explores how adults adopt the logics of incarceration in their responses to Black boys' behaviour. Just as with the discussions of racism in the above papers, Flewitt et al. (2009) complicate what disability 'sounds' like by drawing on video ethnographic data from a small-scale study with three 4-year-olds attending early education settings. The authors consider how 'Mandy', a girl labelled with Special Educational Needs, unfolds her language practices differently across three settings: a children's centre, a playgroup, and home. At home and in the playgroup, Mandy engaged in multi-modal communication practices through a combination of vocalising, gaze, and bodily position, in addition to her use of a picture exchange communication system (PECS): in one instance, when a class reading included a birthday cake, Mandy "rocks excitedly to and fro, vocalising sounds in her excitement" (p. 223). However, the authors argue that such "intentional, idiosyncratic communicative competences" (p. 232) are squeezed out by the emphasis on Makaton signing or picture exchange in the more formal education context of the children's

centre. In other words, formal disability accommodations intruded on Mandy's use of her personal, unique communication practices.

The above examples all describe how place changes how adults 'listen' to children. Concomitantly, disability studies in education scholar David Ben Shannon (2021) explores how place changes the ways that 5-6-year-olds listen to one another. Shannon recounts a series of experiments designed to prompt a kind of synesthetic 'listening'. In one episode, the children lay on their backs on a large, square carpet engaging in a "Deep Listening" activity (p. 14). Some children also wore sleep masks or ear defenders designed to alter their sensory experience. Following the episode, children reported how their perceptions of sounds were heightened, such as each other's "shouting" voices, "fidgeting", and breathing, but also indicating which senses were involved (for instance, one child reported "hearing the sun so bright"). In this way, the Deep Listening activity carved out a new 'place' in the classroom, in which sensory experience was remade. In all of these examples, scholars have identified how the socio-material construction of patterns of relation (and in some cases, systemic oppression) shapes how children are heard in education settings.

Conclusion

In conducting this literature review, we aimed to start a conversation on the entanglement of place with early childhood language, a field usually dominated by 'scientific' discourses of health and development that emphasise extraction from place and abstract notions of language competence. We identified a growing body of research that explores the entanglement of children's language with place. We explored this through three themes: (1) how place shapes language; (2) how language shapes place; (3) and how place shapes listening to children. This said, in comparison to the important and well-established body of scholarship resisting the pathologisation of families' language practices, we found much less literature that pays specific attention to language's entanglement with place and the politics of this. Indeed, in our review, we found that most discussion of children's language relies on some kind of extraction of children's language from place, reinforcing the idea that language is not emplaced. With this in mind, future research and practice should attend to how different places – outdoor or indoor spaces, different classrooms, different parts of the same

classroom, or hybrid spaces – present different opportunities for different kinds of talk, and different kinds of listening, with implications for what and who gets privileged.

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