Language, place, and the body in childhood

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1 Language, place, and the body in childhood: Theory, practice, and social justice. Introduction

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Abstract

This chapter makes a case for why a book that pays attention to place and body in relation to children's language is important. It sets out our capacious and critical definition of what we mean by language, as well as introducing the reader to the idea of the 'more-than-human' and why this is a useful concept in relation to language and childhood. The chapter introduces three key themes of the book, with some orientating ideas and prompt questions for the reader to consider. The themes are: 1) language is bodily and material, 2) place and language co-constitute each other, and 3) language is not simply a process of transmitting and receiving meaning. The chapter ends with a section on why this book is necessary; the 'more-than-human' helps us to rethink dominant assumptions about children and language that locate the fault in the individual child, and invites the reader instead to ask *what else?* and to foreground what children themselves value or are interested in.

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Introduction

Children's language always happens *somewhere.* Playful voices float on the air from the playground or bounce off the walls of a classroom. Chatter in a quiet space causes adults to jump and tut, or an interjection at a moment of reverence during a quiet religious ceremony causes chuckles. A favourite British Sign Language or Makaton sign is repeated gleefully out of context, or invented words are whispered and sung to a special cuddly toy in a corner of the home. The premise of this book is that *where* language happens – be it spoken, signed, danced, or assisted through one or more communication tools – is not a neutral backdrop or controllable variable in *how* language happens, but is deeply entangled in the emergence of words and signs from the body. Place and space and the context of the body are integral to how these vocalisations make their way into the world, what they might feel like and set into motion, and how they are received, heard and listened to, whether by humans or non-human beings.

Whilst there are many books for educators and researchers about young children's language, few account well for the role of body and place. This is surprising because anyone who spends time with children will likely have noticed one or more of the following:

- Often children can happily chat in one place yet remain silent in another (often less familiar) one.
- When a child feels they are the only 'different' one in the room, it impacts their willingness to communicate.
- Body movement is important to children's vocalising, singing, chanting, shouting, signing, picture exchange, and storying.
- Children might use different modes for communicating, and different kinds of talk depending on context and location.
- Children often transcend the boundaries imposed by named languages and modalities, allowing fluidity, complexity, and creativity in their everyday linguistic practices.

- Children interact with objects around them, bring them to life in unexpected ways, and develop imaginative languaging practices with/through these objects.
- Children can read the room and feel when it is appropriate to use languages they associate with 'home'.
- So much of what comes out of children's mouths is difficult to recognise as words, but instead is a mix of musical babbling, creative vocalisations, and experimentations with what the voice can do (often occurring alongside moving and playing).

Internationally, an emerging body of interdisciplinary research is helping us to make sense of why children's language – including their talk, their vocalisations, their singing, their embodied expressions, and their other forms of multimodal meaning-making – seems so entangled with place and body. The aim of this book is both to introduce educators, parents, carers, and families to some of these theories (which are not usually the most dominant ones in current policy and curriculum) and to provide case studies of how practitioners and researchers are working with place, the body, and movement to open up space for children's improvisatory, creative, playful language practices.

What do we mean by 'talk' and 'language'?

It is important to our definitions of 'talk' and 'language' that we do not limit these concepts to what is 'spoken'. Of course, lots of children don't use spoken language, instead speaking British Sign Language, or making use of communication tools such as Makaton signing, picture exchange, or assistive communication devices. Moreover, lots of children communicate using non-words, nonsense words, words (seemingly) out of context, or wordless vocalisations. This is important for all children. However, it is particularly important in our practices with children labelled as having a speech and language difference. Such children might use words that seem out of context – naming cars, quoting famous YouTubers, or repeating words or phrases verbatim – in ways that are deeply meaningful for them and those closest to them, but unclear to those unfamiliar with their communication practices. Others might not use words at all, and they communicate using a rich range of movement, gestures, vocalisations, and utterances. In this book, we take a broad stance as to what we mean when we say 'talk' and 'language', to encompass all those strategies mentioned here, and more.

More-than-human?

This book describes children's language as 'more-than-human'. The idea of the more-than-human is an invitation to shift our focus from the role of humans (teachers, parents, the children themselves) to consider what else might be involved in the vocalising, moving, connecting, playing, experimenting, and meaning-making that make up children's language. In other words, the more-than-human is an invitation to consider how non-human, *tangible* 'things' such as craft materials, food, the weather, sounds in the environment, animals, and sticks and stones can be significant in shaping the ways that children use language. Place is a particularly important tangible influence on children's languaging. It plays a fundamental role in constraining or encouraging different kinds of activities and, so, different kinds of language. With the notion of the more-than-human, we also extend the invitation to consider *intangible* things, such as a feeling, a good (or bad) mood, an atmosphere, trust, power, oppression, and relationships. Even the human body itself, made up as it is of many non-human elements, involves the more-than-human! Therefore, the term more-than-human is a deliberately open one, inviting us to consider language beyond an individual child or child/adult dyad, and instead to look around and ask *what else?* It might not be possible to pin down and account for everything, but to acknowledge that these more-than-human things are worthy of our consideration is a very good starting point.

Children's language, place, and the body: A summary of the research

Children use different kinds of communication, in quite different ways, depending on place, context, and bodily sensation. Pinning down exactly what these differences are is difficult for researchers because:

- These differences are particular; there are few generalisable rules.
- Many techniques of analysis from linguistics and developmental psychology have in the past tended to prefer 'data' collected in quiet environments, but this is not compatible with understanding how children communicate in busy, noisy environments, such as early education settings.

- Experimental methods have been developed to collect naturalistic data from children whilst they play, explore, and get on with their day. These are valuable but none are perfect (no methodology ever is!).
- Overall, despite a small but growing body of work with young children growing up in ethnic and linguistic minority communities, early childhood research in the UK continues to be dominated by 'typically developing', white participants, often from middle-class, able-bodied families. This skews the findings and shapes our understanding of 'normal' in racist, classist, and ableist ways.

Of course, there are exceptions to these trends. Previous studies have involved large-cohort data sets, with children wearing continuous recording devices (Maybin, 2012; Tizzard & Hughes, 1984; Wells, 2009): by definition, these projects cannot confine their data collection to quiet environments. More recently, long-term ethnographic research has also been vital for our understanding of young children's language practices in context (Flewitt, 2005; Hackett et al., 2021). Researchers have also begun experimenting with continuous audio-recording of children's talk in everyday contexts, using a range of new technologies (Dean, 2021; Richardson & Murray, 2017). Each of these studies offers us glimpses of the complexity of young children's language use, revealing how language is only one of many forms of communication, and how it is deeply entangled with power, relationships, place, and the body.

Plurilingual children are affected in quite particular ways by the entanglement of place, context, and language, given the largely monolingual framing of many English educational contexts (García et al., 2021; Viruru, 2001). Historically, many children were banned from speaking home languages in school settings (Anzaldúa, 1987; Saavedra & Esquierdo, 2020). Anzaldua (1987) viscerally recalls the punishment, rejection, and other negative consequences she experienced for speaking Spanish in school in the United States. Children are still receiving the same message, both directly and indirectly, that minority home languages and dialects are not welcome in classroom spaces, where standard English is the preferred or only accepted medium (Badwan, 2021). Scholars interested in bilingual and translanguaging practices have employed careful ethnographic, qualitative, and action research approaches to gain insights into how children use space to find opportunities to resist school-based language restrictions, seeking out private spaces where they can use their home

languages and create a sense of belonging through language use (Björk-Willén, 2016; Fashanu et al., 2020). Moreover, anti-racist scholars have illustrated the significant harm that uncritical approaches to language education can cause to students of colour (Baker-Bell, 2020; Garcia et al., 2021) while, at the same time, children find opportunities to resist that harm (Frieson, 2021).

Language in the more-than-human world and joining in with place

Often in literature about early language, there is an emphasis on the role of adults in talking to young children and scaffolding activities through talk. In our research, we have noticed that children are not always focused on adults and nor do they necessarily wait for cues from them. Instead, a particular object, the feeling of a space, or the opportunity to run in a particular kind of circle around a place, drives children's energy, creativity, and communication. Children's language is often bound up in their energy and movement. The risk with paying too much attention to the role of adults in prompting children's talk is that we might under-value the vital energies that children invest in their communication through other modes, and the close attention they often pay to their peers. Indeed, for some children who do not verbalise (for physical, emotional, or other reasons), communicating through movement or gestures becomes even more important. And yet these modes are deemed less 'appropriate' than talking, thereby positioning the child as already 'not good enough' (Burman, 2012; Murris, 2016).

In this book, we set out how different theories connected with the idea of the more-than-human offer expansive insights into how language is always entangled with bodies, objects, and place in a world where place is always political. Below, we outline the parameters of these theories and pose provocative questions for readers to consider how understanding talk as more-than-human might resonate with their own experience.

1. Language as bodily and material

Bodies jiggle and spin, arms and hands stretch and sweep. Breath must be thrust through throats and vocal cords in order for vocalisations of any sort to emerge. Lips and tongues

move and flex to make words that might (or might not) be understood by adults. This book joins a growing body of research interested in foregrounding the connection between children's moving bodies and their talking, vocalising, mark-making, creating, and various other ways of communicating. Movement of many different kinds is essential to children's language.

Dominant notions of talk consider language as a primarily cognitive process that "fl[ies] between lips and brain" (Hackett, 2021, p. 16) of an individual child. Connected to this perspective is much of the research on the so-called 'word gap', a problematic explanation for marginalised children's perceived 'lack' of vocabulary, which lays the blame with parents and home environments. It imagines that words are 'banked' inside an individual brain, to be retrieved and 'produced' via the mouth and throat at any given opportunity. Yet, this banking metaphor and the emphasis on cognition overlooks the bodily-ness of talking, the importance of how bodies feel and function differently, the importance of how children feel, and the political relationship between language and place.

When young children are not enthusiastic to talk in a particular way in a particular place, it is rarely because they have insufficient vocabulary 'banked' in their brains. Assumptions such as these are damaging to children and to communities, firstly because they point in unhelpful directions that engender deficit discourses about what children cannot do and what professional interventions may be needed to support children. As Ruth Churchill Dower (2022b) puts it, we can end up with a "language-based solution for a complex, heterogeneous [body]-based situation" (p. 142). Secondly, these assumptions open the door to the pathologisation of families and communities, who get 'blamed' for what they apparently have not previously done (in terms of ensuring their children are banking the correct kinds of vocabulary in the correct way).

Expecting or desiring children to speak in particular ways (confident, elaborated, individualised statements), regardless of the context in which they find themselves (atmosphere, unspoken rules and relationships, (un)familiarity) or their developing sense of identity (which may not cohere with the kind of mainstream, *white* language identity that such talk requires them to enact), can be experienced as an exorbitant demand on a young speaker. It is hardly surprising that the lonely burden of speaking in institutional contexts, even for adults, is often accompanied by anxiety (Jones, 2013; Thiel, 2015), and often

registers in the *body*: in the gut, the pulse, the dry mouth, the invisible film of sweat on the skin.

Questions to consider

- What types of movements do our spaces invite, encourage, or make possible?
- How do (or could) children experiment with what their bodies can do in the different places where they play?

- Time to move: how does time limit or open up sense-making when thinking about language in early childhood?

2. Place and language co-constitute each other

Place (and the stuff in place) is never just the backdrop to what unfolds: it shapes and inspires children's play, learning, and movement. We could say, then, that learning to talk is not just a matter of mastering a system of sounds and abstract rules under the encouragement and guidance of adults. It is fundamentally a matter of getting involved in the world, creatively and politically. This includes joining in with other people and with the more-than-human world. One way we can imagine this is to think about opportunities for children to 'join in with place'. If, as adults, we want to make irresistible invitations for children to join in, we need wide, expansive possibilities for what joining in with place could look like, including joining in with place in unplanned ways. And we need to create atmospheres in which joining in, whether that be through vocalisations, movement, making, or any other kind of multimodal literacy, feels comfortable and easy.

When we think about place in relation to children's language, we must always be mindful of the power relations and histories involved, and what Sara Ahmed has called "the angle of [one's] arrival" (2014, para 4). That is, the same spaces are not experienced in the same way by everyone. How we experience the politics of place depends on our sense of identity, our previous experiences in similar places, and the effect these have on how they make us and our bodies feel.

The political-ness of place is an important distinction between the ideas we discuss in this book and the narrower notion of the Home Learning Environment (HLE) (e.g., Rowland et al., 2020) which has been used to understand how place and wider context might influence nursery/school learning. HLE research has found correlations between different aspects of the immediate family context, neighbourhood characteristics, and children's language development (see Iruka et al., 2015, for a review). These findings have been interpreted into actionable and 'empowering' guidance for parents, suggesting that by changing their home practices and behaviours they can better support their children's language, and consequently achieve upwards social mobility for their children. Yet, for this logic to cohere, place and language must be regarded as discrete and modifiable variables. These deficit-centric portrayals of children's capacities and their home learning environments run counter to the view of place we offer in this book. Here, we explore how children, bodies, language(s), and the more-than-human are deeply entangled, temporally as well as spatially, and cannot be neatly separated out or neatly correlated. In addition, we encourage readers to beware of making unjustified associations between economic deprivation, 'poor' quality environments, and children's language use: these discussions frequently reinforce racialising and classist corporeal hierarchies that are not borne out by rigorous research (c.f. Basit et al., 2015; Li et al., 2022).

Questions to consider

- *What else* (in terms of objects, spaces, atmospheres, and so on) might be important to children and their language practices in our contexts?
- What might 'joining in with place' look like in our contexts?
- How might we create irresistible opportunities for joining in, which are welcoming and relevant for all children?

3. Language is not a simple process of transmitting and receiving meaning

Western education systems have historically relied heavily on the assumption that learning is a process of transferring skills and knowledge from one person to another, or from one situation to another. This transmission model has led to functional approaches to learning, and the belief that language – as a medium for representing things, ideas or feelings through words, in ways that are clearly understood – is central to learning. Following this logic, the

absence of language has been pathologised. However, neither learning nor communication are such straightforward processes. Language does not simply transmit meaning like a radio mast. Rather, it reflects the identity of the language user (e.g., their age, gender, race, culture, status) and language use involves a complex interplay between power relations, asymmetrical relationships, systems of communication, and activities, which all unfold in different places.

Communicating meaning also involves affective and sensory forces that can arise independently of signification and are expressed through bodies as well as through words. All language includes breaths, coughs, sniffs, or giggles that may not be strictly equated with meaning (MacLure, 2013), and children's language often involves language play, musicality, experimentation, and vocalisations that are not easily recognised as words. Instead of seeing these aspects of children's language as irrelevant or in need of improved pronunciation, grammar, or sentence formation, what would it mean to honour the "ongoing, everyday, moment-by-moment, autotelic, intra-active, seemingly pointless or *meaning-less*" qualities of children's talk? (Horton & Kraftl, 2018, p. 929).

There is an alarming predicament hidden just beneath the surface of this culture in the West of measuring children's ability to meet developmental goals to ascertain whether they are physically, cognitively, emotionally, or socially 'normal' (as if this were a real thing). The pressure to conform means that educators, parents, and carers can feel obliged to ignore, even to stop, the *meaning-less* in children's play. There is an increasing sense that there is no space or time to play without *purpose*, without it ticking at least some of the 'developmentally appropriate' boxes, and certainly not if these meaning-less expressions might indicate something is 'wrong' (Burman, 2017). Educators and parents alike are stuck in a cleft-stick situation of trying to meet their professional (or dutiful) expectations whilst still honouring children's expressions of who and how they are. In this context, improvisation can be a powerful conceptual frame. It is a means of acknowledging the productive agencies of young children with their obscure and varied body languages in relation to the world around them (Arculus & MacRae, 2022).

Recognising young children as skilled improvisors can, in turn, inform what Arculus and MacRae (2022) have called pedagogies of improvisation. These approaches challenge the

dogma requiring structured plans for specific learning outcomes, and they resist anticipating the spontaneous expressions that are produced when new flows of thought and action are opened up. Often these involve what Olsson (2009) calls a "bodily logic" as opposed to conscious thinking (p. 55). Oftentimes these "unpredictably experimenting" lines of flight (Olsson, 2009, p. 74) are set off by imperceptible but culturally important minor gestures (Manning, 2016). The space opened up by pedagogies of improvisation is ripe for expressions, movements, gestures, and signs that may be suppressed in more formal environments (Lenz Taguchi et al., 2016). Improvisation allows bodies and minds to travel in surprising directions, releasing a complex web of entangled identities and creative imaginaries that may never be apparent otherwise. It offers children and their grown-ups "different ways of communing, affecting, and tuning in with each other and the material world which might make a difference to how they, and we, think about communication" (Churchill Dower, 2022a, p. 77). In this way, improvisation can open up new languages of multiple identities that resist the partial definition, reduction, and representation that can dominate early childhood environments (Hackett & Rautio, 2019; Ollson, 2009; Lenz Taguchi et al., 2015).

In addition to valuing language and communication as involving connection, energy, surprise, and motion, we encourage readers to consider the political importance of something that Viruru (2001), drawing on the work of Glissant (1997), has called children's 'right to opacity'. There is often an assumption that children ultimately *want* to convey exactly how they feel to adults, and that enabling children to express their feelings and desires is *always* empowering or emancipatory. However, in the work of Glissant (1997), the idea of rendering another person completely transparent and knowable involves reducing or simplifying the other person. Opacity, or the right *not* to be fully transparent and knowable, should be everyone's entitlement. As adults we can respect children's feelings, actions, and language *even when* (especially when?) we do not fully understand the meaning. The right to opacity is an important principle which upends many of education's assumptions about what language is for and how it is experienced in childhood. The concept of opacity informs many of the ideas in this volume, including the 'rights of the talker' manifesto with which we end the book.

Questions to consider

- How can we plan for the unpredictable?

- How can we make space for things we have not yet imagined?
- How can we value opacity and resist demanding fixed meanings and clear logics?

Why use this book?

Children's language has long been associated with educational success, social mobility, and economic prosperity. How children talk (nicely, clearly, appropriately, and preferably in a language the educator can understand) is increasingly seen as evidence of children's 'proper development' and an indicator of their future success. From this standpoint, early interventions to fix and correct their talk, and stimulate the most desirable kinds of talk, are sometimes viewed as benign practices that are 'for children's own good'. We also note how requirements to still the body, fix meanings, and comply with dominant hegemonies of communication intensify as a child moves through school. We see back-and-forth effects of these requirements during a child's (supposedly linear) progression through the educational system. Practice in early childhood settings is foreshadowed by the pressure to make a child 'school-ready' (still body, clear speech, dominance of the English language), and children in primary school or beyond who are deemed lacking are described as 'behind' or 'operating at the level of a X-year-old'. The way in which these ideas about language, place, and the body ripple through infanthood, early childhood, and primary schooling (and beyond), with differential effects and consequences, was the rationale for a book that looks across the first 11 years of childhood.

One of the key things we hope that readers will take from this book is that thinking about children's language as more-than-human will prompt them to rethink many of the assumptions and hierarchies that abound in policy and curriculum about what counts as language and what kinds of language practices are preferred in education environments. For example, the rationale set out in one language-screening package makes clear the sheer weight of societal and educational concern that has come to be attached to young children's language: "By targeting preschool children, the aim is to increase school readiness and decrease the risk of poor literacy, behavioural difficulties, mental health difficulties, criminal activity, and unemployment that are associated with poor early communication skills." (RSPH, n.d.).

Not-speaking, then, is viewed as undesirable and troubling. It is pathologised like an illness that can best be remedied by professional intervention. Vocalisations that are not easily recognised as words (by the adults listening) are categorised as pre-language, with potential for improvement (Hackett, 2022). A child who remains silent in an educational context risks being read as either defiant or pathological (MacLure et al., 2010). However, these logics about defiance, pathology, and future success, and the essential/normal/natural character of certain kinds of talk, only hold up if we conceptualise language as purely human, residing in the brain, and separable from place.

The more-than-human helps us to rethink these assumptions that locate the fault in the individual human child. Words are not 'banked' in a child's brain to be pulled out in each and any future context if they so choose. Instead, language can be understood as something collective that moves through bodies, emotions, relationships, and atmospheres. Often, children creatively improvise with sound and movement in order to see how something might feel, or what it might do or set into motion, both for other humans and the more-than-human world they are constantly exploring, such as enjoying the sounds of an echo. Children's improvisations with sounds and words do not unfurl in a vacuum, but in places that are loaded with the far-reaching politics of culture, power, and belonging.

So, we repeat our invitation to readers to understand the more-than-human as an invitation to ask *what else*?, and to foreground what children themselves value or are interested in. We hope this will offer a refreshing contrast to the oft-felt constraints of curriculum and practice where there is pressure to focus on predetermined criteria of what 'quality' talk or 'appropriate' language development looks like. These predetermined criteria are known to be particularly damaging to children of colour, working-class children, bilingual children, and indeed all marginalised communities (Baker-Bell, 2020). As Yoon and Templeton (2019) have pointed out, in neoliberal educational spaces where certain behaviours and responses are valued over others, we need tools to help us really listen to children and to 'hear them out' (p. 55). We hope that more-than-human theories of children's language may be one such tool. In this sense, we would argue that the more-than-human is not *actually* about decentring the human, but rather about decentring a particular kind of human, one who is rational, sensible, stationary, who always talks in complete sentences, who does not actually exist, and who is not doing any favours for children or the adults who work with them.

We hope that this book will be useful for anyone working with or spending time with children. It is for anyone who would like to create spaces and moments for children where moving, playing, communicating, storytelling, disrupting, experimenting, surprising, and confusing, will feel easy, comfortable, and right.

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