Language beyond meaning

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4a Language beyond meaning

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Abstract

This chapter introduces theory and scholarship that helps us to think about language as more than merely the exchange of information or meaning. As well as *representing* things (e.g., a dog, a tree) and conveying stable meanings, language includes "all the tears, sneers, sighs, silences, sniffs, laughter, snot, twitches or coughs that are part of utterances" (MacLure, 2013, p. 664). In this sense, it might be more productive to pay attention not so much to what children's language is or what it *means*, but to what it *does*. We introduce and explore the concepts of expression, improvisation, and worlding in order to ask: what does language open up, close down, put into motion? We then turn our attention to the question of power and in particular the tendency of formal education settings to require certain kinds of language from children, the kinds of language that do foreground meaning and representation (Arculus & MacRae, 2022; Olsson, 2009). We pose a question first asked by Viruru (2001): what is lost when language is gained? This is an unsettling question in our current educational context, where gaining language is usually assumed to be a beneficial process with no drawbacks. We draw on Glissant's (1997) theory of opacity (as Viruru does) to ask what happens when particular kinds of language are imposed too quickly on young children – what these might *do* to children's sense of identity and potential for creative bodily experimentation.

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This chapter introduces theory and scholarship that helps us to think about language as more than merely the exchange of information or meaning. We begin by reconnecting with the ideas introduced in chapters 2a and 3a, that language is material – it emerges from bodies in places, and it affects and is affected by bodies and places (Canagarajah, 2020; de Freitas & Curinga, 2015; MacLure, 2013; Martin-Bylund, 2018). As we discussed in chapter 1, Western education systems tend to over-emphasise the process of transferring information from one person to another when it comes to learning and communication. This heavy focus on information transfer reduces language to a cognitive skill located in the brain and conceives of communication as the mere exchange of ideas between minds (Badwan et al., 2024; Pennycook, 2018) rather than between entire bodies, entangled with matter. One of the premises of this book is that this perspective does a disservice to what children often do with and bring to language, which is creative, unpredictable, bodily, and deeply connected to their home identities. Therefore, language does not simply *represent* things (e.g. a dog, a tree) and convey 'stable' meanings or messages. It goes beyond representation and includes "all the tears, sneers, sighs, silences, sniffs, laughter, snot, twitches or coughs that are part of utterances" (MacLure, 2013, p. 664). Indeed, language seems to evade attempts at tight definition, as it corresponds to and seeps across many different categories of being: language as something in our heads, as something exchanged between people, as something governed by rules and norms, as something used to internalise meanings, as something used to externalise thoughts, as something used to socialise, as something idealised that no one speaks perfectly (Hall, 2020). Language refers to all these categories and more, leading some scholars to argue for using it as a verb, rather than normatively as a noun. For example, Badwan (2021, p. 7) defines language as "a verb with no boundaries: open, dynamic, overlapping, creative, responsive, proactive, human, post-human, and always in the making". As these different conceptual contributions shake the confidence that this thing we call 'language' can be pinned down, it might be more productive to pay attention not so much to what children's language is or what it *means*, but to what it *does*. What does language open up, close down, put into motion? What connections or relations does it seem to build in any given context?

In chapter 1, we invited readers to consider these questions:

- How can we plan for the unpredictable?

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

The chapters in this section of the book help us explore some possible responses to these questions. We affirm that bodily expressions – the gestures, vocalisations, "tears, sneers and sighs" – are all absolutely part of language, and should be valued and acknowledged as such. This stands in contrast to what Blum (2015) has called 'wordism', that is, an approach to thinking about language that privileges distinct words and their clear unequivocal meanings above all other aspects of language. This is the kind of perspective of language that underpins the problematic notion of the 'word gap', which we discussed in more detail in our introductory chapter.

We find Badwan's (2021) use of 'languaging' helpful, as a single word that encompasses body and sound, meaning and non-meaning. Moving from language to languaging emphasises language as a *doing* rather than a *thing* – a doing that is constantly in motion and lively in the world. This section of the book, then, helps us explore the complexity within that definition of 'language' when it comes to childhood, place, and body. What are the moments when words are important, *and* when words are not needed or wanted? What are the moments when language seeks urgently to pass on a fixed meaning, *and* when language is about the kind of connection that does not rely on fixed, definite meanings? How do we value, acknowledge, and welcome all of this in our work with children?

These wonderments are linked to our commitment to challenge "the partiality of the linguistic tale" (Finnegan, 2015, p. 14) in order to open up a merciful and expansive space for language education. The focus on mercy is deliberate here, especially when children are positioned in a neoliberal education system that exclusively centres knowledge and skills. We add mercy as a moral value that needs to underpin our work with children. Through a merciful lens and a merciful ethic, we pay attention to what is missing from the gaze of the adult as they make judgments or assessments for labelling children as 'competent' or 'incompetent' in linguistic and communicative abilities.

This means that our work is not just about expanding conceptualisations of language, or providing avenues for methodological and pedagogical innovations, but is also (and perhaps more importantly) about adding an ethical dimension to our work with children's language,

creating a space for wondering about what ethical encounters might mean in children's education. Such a question is inspired by the ethics turn in applied linguistics (Kubanyiova & Creese, 2024) which challenges us to ask *how can we exist for each other ethically and aesthetically?* That is, beyond what language means, how is it experienced? We attempt to respond to this challenging question by emphasising the need for merciful arrangements that are expanding, accommodating, acknowledging, respecting, recognising, and indeed challenging (Bhabha, 1994).

In the following sections, we introduce some key ideas from theory that we have found helpful when thinking about children's language beyond meaning.

Expression and improvisation

Thinking about language as something that emerges in relation to others and to the world and through improvised flows of moving bodies experiencing places together, helps us reframe what we mean by 'expression'. Children use language to express themselves. However, there is often a sense that this expression should be the neat and clear articulation of ideas and desires that sit inside individual brains. Instead, we could think about expression as something that happens through the body, not necessarily through words. It does not start from somewhere 'inside' each of us, but is an ongoing response to/with different forces and flows of the world as they work through human and non-human bodies. Since all children experience the world differently, depending on their historical, cultural, social, and economic situations, their expressions of the world will be unique and situated and therefore multivarious and, often, beyond our understanding. In fact, we like to argue that understanding is always partial at best (Badwan et al., 2024).

Expression happens constantly, with millions of tiny movements of bodies, whether we can observe them or not. Expressions manifest in sounds, movements, gestures, humming, ticks and clicks, winks, smiles, tears, shrugs, signs, silences, and silliness – sometimes all at once. These might be a response to a material object, a surfacing of a partial memory, a felt sensation, an attempt to connect with another person, an unusual way of moving. How can we, as grown-ups, make space for and encourage expressive flows (which include ideas, actions, and embodied responses) between children and place and grown-ups, flows that

unfold in the moment rather than being neatly mapped out from the start? In chapter 1, we proposed Arculus and MacRae's (2022) notion of pedagogies of improvisation as an approach to working with children that makes space for the unexpected or illegible. Improvising with children is a skill, rather than merely a stance of 'anything goes', and it takes experience to extend a child's line of inquiry, to respond to their cues. For Churchill Dower (chapter 4c), this kind of practice begins with listening with and to the body. This starting point encourages expression by "curating welcoming, relaxing conditions (with no expectations to speak) in creative places that are interesting to children" (Churchill Dower, this volume).

Louise Klarnett's approach to listening (chapter 4e) is grounded in dance practice and polyvagal theory. Asking readers "have you ever had an eye dance?", she explores in exquisite detail how small flickers and responses form the heart of how we connect with others and the world. This work provides an example of how grown-ups might begin to tune into these expressions better, by starting with the body rather than with meaning. Spencer, Clarke and Shannon (chapter 4b) argue for the importance of children's bodily autonomy – squatting on the carpet or stimming on the grass, for example. They make the important point that when bodies move, it can be meaningful *or* meaningless (or both, or something in between!), and our job as adults is to value *both* and remain open to both possibilities. Valuing and making space for children to squat instead of sit on the carpet, or to stim on the grass, is important and it is not necessary to ask what it means or demand a rationale first. However, Spencer et al. also give us the example of a child stimming in the sand area as a meaningful action that expressed his joy, which they describe as "communicative even though it's not specifically intended to communicate". This is a good example of expression as we have described it above: emerging in the moment and in between human and non-human bodies, it communicates something, but also does more than this. Not all this communication has clear meanings, but we can certainly emphasise that it matters to the being and becoming of the child, and it is our job as educators working with children to adjust our lenses and gazes with mercy, to see children beyond our assessment of their words.

Worlding

> Again and again, we tell children not to be so silly. What if, instead, we recognised the capaciousness of the "multiform and rebel speech of children"? (Leal, 2005, p. 119).

'Worlding' is a term that Donna Haraway (2016) often uses and defines as making worlds together or the co-making of worlds. Words are not the only way of knowing the world. Children know with their senses, they form intense attachments to things, and they respond to the world with motion, (e)motion, and (co)motion. "Children turn into animals, plants, stones and toys", writes Leal (2005, p. 121); this description of playful co-making of the world may be familiar to many readers. We could, perhaps, imagine such bodily, playful co-making as world-making conversations, ones that highlight the affective, the sensory, and the non-representational within language (Canagarajah, 2023). This kind of knowing and responding to the world, through bodies as well as language, is what we mean when we talk about worlding or world-making.

Henner and Robinson (2023) and Canagarajah (2023) propose a critical disability studies frame as a route to understanding language more expansively as an expression of the interconnected relationship between mind and body. Henner and Robinson name this centring of disabled perspectives, practices, and scholarship in conceptualisations of language as 'a cripping of linguistics' which disrupts assumptions about language hierarchies, including the privileging of mind, representation, and individual meaning, over body, mutual understanding, and interdependency.

Recognising worlding means we must take a more capacious approach to language. Instead of thinking of words as simply naming the world, we could think about the lively-ness of language and how it emerges and mutates through play and curious inquiry. In making these shifts, we recognise that oftentimes children are better placed than grown-ups to perceive their connectedness to the world around them. In this respect, adults might themselves be moved to pay attention to the world in new ways when in the company of children. What can we learn from children's world-making practices?

Language as worlding comes into sharp relief in Lee's chapter (4d) where she describes the struggles and problematics of adults choosing and designing Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) technology for users. Her collaborator Jamie Preece's question "who

chooses my words?" points to the importance of language as more than communication and asks how to incorporate sarcasm, humour, irreverence, nonsense, and intimacy into AAC. Spencer et al. (4b) write about the joy of newly invented words, connecting this approach with Biklen and Burke's writing on 'presuming competence'. This also links to Lee's discussion of sound and word play, and familect (invented words or phrases that are meaningful within a family) in AAC and how to value this better in the design of AAC devices.

Opacity

The assumption of, and desire for, a knowable child is central to early childhood education (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). There is often an assumption, for example, that educators should be able to predict how children will respond, be able to adapt activities accordingly to elicit the desired responses, and then be able to explain 'why' and 'what next'. Whilst it is often the case that grown-ups who work with children do know them deeply and build important trusting and loving relationships, Glissant's (1997) work on opacity, which we introduced in chapter 1, helps us to think about what and who can never be fully knowable or totally transparent.

For Glissant (1997), every single being is rich, complex, interconnected, and brings their own history and stories (conscious and unconscious) that sit in their bodies, minds, and souls. Therefore, we can create an illusion of 'fully knowing' another being only if we flatten and simplify them – that is, we create a less rich and complex version of that person for our own purposes. Glissant describes this happening in colonialism, while Canagarajah (2023) writes about the implications for linguistics, and Viruru (2001) discusses this process in relation to young children.

This important idea of the 'right to opacity' disrupts many of education's assumptions about what language is for and how it is experienced in childhood. It disrupts the idea that clear, easily understood spoken language is preferable or superior, pointing instead to all the potential and power that can emerge from the kinds of less-transparent bodily expression we described above. We draw on Glissant's (1997) theory of opacity to ask what happens when certain kinds of language are imposed too quickly onto young children – what that might *do*

in terms of children's sense of identity and their potential for creative bodily experimentation (Shannon & Hackett, 2024; Viruru, 2001).

The contributors to this book demonstrate how powerful the experience of coming alongside, not talking, feeling comfortable, and valuing time just being together, can be for building deep connections between children and the grown-ups working with them. For example, Spencer et al. (chapter 4b) show how leaning into a child's fascination for a bee, even if you do not fully understand it, can be a way of honouring and building on a child's funds of identity without demanding transparency or legibility first. Lee (chapter 4d) advocates for child-led and collaborative approaches to assisted communication, even when these are less clear or less convenient in the classroom. And for Klarnett (chapter 4e), the fleeting nature of dance is part of its power, resulting in practices and connections that are rarely described or recorded.

We acknowledge there is a tension between normalising and valuing children's not-speaking, or the times when what is being communicated is not clear, and ensuring we are prepared to listen to and take children's expressions seriously. What is named often becomes what is valued. Taking stimming as an example, in her chapter (4d) 'Who chooses my words?', Lee points out that there is no AAC sign for stimming, and that gestures, squeals, and stims are often deemed less acceptable as children get older. For us, the balance comes in the stance of presuming competence, and respecting the complexity, contradictoriness, and texture of every individual (child or adult), without requiring evidence of that competence first.

Hierarchies of language in educational settings

We turn our attention now to the question of power and, in particular, the tendency of formal education settings to require certain kinds of language from children, the kinds of language that do foreground meaning and representation (Arculus & MacRae, 2022; Olsson, 2009). The importance and potential of dismantling these hierarchies shows up in different ways across the chapters in this section. For example, Churchill Dower (chapter 4c) describes how her work pushed back some of the dominant approaches for working with non-lingual children, which are often exclusively or mostly focused on getting children to talk. Spencer et al. (chapter 4b) appeal for joyful practice in the context of a teacher retention crisis and

working in classrooms and communities that do not fit the white, middle-class, able-bodied, monolingual mould around which our educational system is currently constructed. Lee (chapter 4d) describes how the demands of school-based communication tend to dominate the design of AAC communication aids, and suggests approaches that might counter this or offer a more personal approach.

We often hear the argument that children need to acquire as much language as quickly as possible for the benefit of their learning, or that children who cannot perform standardised English on demand will struggle in the future. These concerns are real in the sense that within our current structures it can be more difficult for children to thrive in some contexts without as-many-words-as-possible in the dominant language (English in our context), spoken clearly and confidently in full sentences. However, our point is that we should not place the communicative 'burden' on the children: we should avoid the typical neoliberal logic that places responsibility on disadvantaged individuals, rather than on systems, structures, policies, and ideological gazes. Instead, we need to reimagine a more merciful, generous, and inclusive educational system and society.

As the contributors in this book demonstrate, if the process of accelerating and shaping children's 'language gain' is approached in the wrong way, there can be many drawbacks. We risk the non-linguistic being considered less valuable (Churchill Dower, chapter 4c), bodily trauma and emotional wellbeing being overlooked or sidelined (Klarnett, chapter 4e), and sucking the joy out of working with young children (Spencer et al., chapter 4b). When hierarchies of language are created, and clear meanings sit at the top – meanings that are in a language and from a perspective the adult can easily understand – children no longer feel that their home identities and multiple languages are valued, and they no longer feel they can bring their whole selves into every space (Baker-Bell, 2020). We pose a question first asked by Viruru (2001): what is lost when language is gained? This is an unsettling question in our current educational context, where gaining language is usually assumed to be a beneficial process with no drawbacks. Indeed, there are multiple interpretations of the loss and gain framed in this question, including losing community languages when school language is gained (and reinforced as the only valued and legitimate means of communication), losing the effectiveness of embodied language when verbal language is gained (and reinforced as the only valued and acceptable means of communication), losing the messiness and

unpredictability of children's language when pre-engineered language is gained (and reinforced as the only correct and accurate means of communication). Through the lens of merciful ethics and aesthetics, we need to work collectively to challenge the too-many losses that children incur in education as a result of the imposition of an industrialised notion of language that is often "false, linguaphobic, racist, half-baked, or, at best, partial" (Gramling, 2021, p.7).

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