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Tiered vocabulary and raciolinguistic discourses of deficit: from academic scholarship to education policy

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ABSTRACT

Tiered vocabulary is a pervasive concept in academic scholarship, education policy, and schools. It involves placing individual words into hierarchically arranged tiers, based on their apparent simplicity, sophistication, utility, and complexity, with these categorisations used to determine which words carry value in the classroom. In this article I conduct a genealogy of tiered vocabulary and argue that it is a raciolinguistic ideology which frames the language practices of racialised and working-class children as deficient and requiring modification. I trace the ideological roots of tiered vocabulary to European colonial representations of the purportedly limited vocabulary of Black African communities. I then examine how tiered vocabulary emerged as a concept in 1980s US academic knowledge production, based on experiments led by white academics on predominantly Black children from low-income homes. I show how tiered vocabulary is descendant from deficit, anti-Black thinking which characterised mainstream educational linguistics in the 1960s. I then focus on how it has become normalised in England's education policy in the 2020s, as part of a flawed theory of change which deems that the acquisition of academic language is a tool for enabling social justice. Ultimately, I show how tiered vocabulary is a flawed theory of language which ties together race and class in producing discourses of linguistic deficiency, and legitimises language policing which undermines the education of marginalised children.

The raciolinguistic logics of tiered vocabulary

In 2022 I conducted fieldwork in a London secondary school with a large community of Black, working-class children. My focus was the language ideologies that the school subscribed to and the kind of academic research that teachers cited to justify these subscriptions. One of the most prevalent of these was so-called tiered vocabulary, referring to a hierarchical system which places individual words into one of three tiers, according to their purported simplicity, sophistication, utility, and complexity. In short, tier one words are deemed to be basic whilst tier two and tier three words are deemed to carry academic prestige.

In the school, Black, working-class children were repeatedly categorised as unable to produce academic and tier two vocabulary. Yet in my observations, the language that Black,

working-class children used fitted all the descriptors attached to tier two vocabulary (rich, complex, technical, high utility, sophisticated, literate, and so on), but their language still came under institutional scrutiny in ways that their white peers evaded. This scrutiny led to their language being categorised as inadequate, and they were instructed by teachers to modify their language to use more tier two vocabulary. Put simply, the tiered vocabulary framework used by the school did not reflect actual language use but was used to legitimise interventions to fix and enhance the purportedly limited vocabulary of Black, working-class children. When I asked teachers and management about their use of tiered vocabulary, they responded that it was in keeping with the latest academic research, was in line with government education policy, and was part of their progressive endeavours to liberate marginalised children.

This vignette illustrates the core argument I make in this article – that tiered vocabulary is not a set of objective linguistic features but is a raciolinguistic ideology which frames the language practices of racialised and working-class children as deficient and requiring remediation (Rosa and Flores 2017). My critique is targeted not at schools or individual teachers, but at both academic knowledge production and education policy makers – especially in how the purportedly progressive aims of educational researchers and policy architects often rely on and reproduce discourses of linguistic deficit. Ultimately, my critique points to the colonial and anti-Black histories of language ideologies in academic knowledge production which continue to shape normative assumptions about language, and how racialised and working-class communities are framed as displaying inherent linguistic deficiencies which require fixing.

An overview of tiered vocabulary

Tiered vocabulary was first conceptualised in 1987 by three white north American academics Isabel Beck, Margaret McKeown, and Richard Omanson (Beck et al. 1987) and later popularised in books for teachers (Beck et al. 2002[2013], 2008). It involves categorising individual words into a choice of three hierarchically arranged tiers, typically represented in a pyramid shape. This arrangement is based on subjective perceptions of the value of individual words, such as their purported complexity, precision, sophistication, frequency, and utility. Pedagogical applications of tiered vocabulary argue that classroom time is best spent on developing students' knowledge of tier two words, with these deemed to be representative of the language of 'literate language users' (Beck et al. 2008, 7) and tier one words deemed to be basic, conversational, common, simple, and carrying little value in the classroom. Much like the school in the vignette above, Beck et al. (1987, 156) claim that low-income and racialised children require particular attention for tier two vocabulary instruction because they are less likely to experience 'language rich' environments at home and are less likely to use language in 'reflective, playful, or novel ways'.

Claims of this nature, and indeed the original conception of tiered vocabulary, are based on the findings of three small-scale experiments from the 1980s conducted in four schools in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage with predominately Black children (Beck et al. 1982; McKeown et al. 1983; McKeown et al. 1985). In later experiments, often conducted exclusively Black African children from low-income homes (e.g. Beck and McKeown 2007) they claim that targeted instruction of tier two words improves the 'quality' of 'verbal functioning', arguing for its role as an oral language intervention designed to fix and develop

the purportedly limited speech of marginalised children. The tiered vocabulary framework is underpinned by the reductive logics that language-based interventions offer a solution to the race and economic-based injustices that marginalised children are confronted with. These logics are in ideological concert with the so-called word gap (Hart and Risley 1995), an academic construct which frames the vocabulary size and quality of working-class, racialised, and multilingual children as lower and lesser than their privileged peers (see Cushing 2023a; Johnson and Johnson 2021). Yet in this article I show how tiered vocabulary simply adopts long-standing colonial logics under the guise of social justice and equity, reproducing discourses of race and class deficiency whilst claiming to be in the interests of marginalised children.

Raciolinguistic borders and dichotomies

Tiered vocabulary relies on the empirical existence of linguistic borders, where categories within language are deemed to have objectively defined, bounded edges. Border making has long been central to the work of academic linguists, with the construction of linguistic borders being integral to the hierarchical organisation of languages and language varieties. The construction and maintenance of linguistic borders has colonial roots (Makoni and Pennycook 2005) and remains a key mechanism for the suppression of marginalised speakers whose language practices are deemed to transcend and trouble them (Savski 2023). In fracturing these narratives, a raciolinguistic perspective (Rosa and Flores 2017) examines how linguistic, racial, and nation-state borders were drawn up by European colonisers, missionaries, and linguists in their attempts to categorise and represent Indigenous and enslaved African communities as sub-human, based on perceptions that their lack of cognitive and linguistic capacities positioned them as inferior to whiteness. The raciolinguistic ideologies that were first designed during the European colonial project continue to circulate in contemporary society, especially in academic linguistics and its reluctance to acknowledge its role in reproducing white linguistic supremacy (see Charity Hudley et al. 2020). A body of work has shown how such ideologies later get transferred to schools via various policy routes (e.g. Cushing 2023a; Flores 2020; Willis 2023). For example, a raciolinguistic perspective considers labels such as 'non/standard English', 'academic language', and 'English language learner' to be ideological notions designed to maintain raciolinguistic dichotomies, borders, and discourses of inherent linguistic deficiency within marginalised individuals. Consequently, those who are perceived to transcend those borders – typically racialised, bilingual speakers from low-income families – are cast as deviant and requiring remediation in order to socialise them out of such practices (Heller and McElhinny 2017, 104).

My critique of tiered vocabulary argues that it represents a continuation of these socially and colonially constructed linguistic borders, producing homogenous, bounded, and artificial categories of language which are ideological rather than objective, and do not reflect actual language use. As García and Solorza (2021, 510) write, the division of words into tiers along with Beck et al's recommendation that teachers focus on words deemed to be tier two is at 'the detriment of authentic uses of language, which always goes beyond a single word tier'. As such, speakers who are perceived to not conform with ideologies of linguistic competence are institutionally limited by rigid notions of borders which both pathologises and polices their natural language practices. Given that tiered vocabulary was originally conceived in reference to the purportedly deficient vocabularies of Black, working-class

children, it ties together race and class in producing discourses of language deficiency and, specifically, anti-Black linguistic racism (Baker-Bell 2020). Anti-Black linguistic racism represents the ideology that there is something inherently deficient about the language of Black and working-class communities – an ideology which is, in part, produced and maintained by academic knowledge production. I argue that tiered vocabulary is part of this system, and functions as a deceptive form of intersectional stigmatisation which positions Black and working-class children as linguistically inferior.

Raciolinguistic genealogy as a method in dismantling tiered vocabulary

My interrogation of tiered vocabulary is done with the use of raciolinguistic genealogy (Flores 2021). Building primarily on Foucault (1984) and Stoler (1995), this methodology provides a means to trace the colonial histories of raciolinguistic ideologies and their durable manifestations across times and contexts. Recent scholarship (e.g. Austin 2023) has showed the power of raciolinguistic genealogy in exposing how Black children in the US are positioned as disproportionate burdens on the state due to their purported linguistic inferiorities, and therefore responsible for their own struggles. My own work (e.g. Cushing 2023a, 2023b) has traced how ideologies about language in the current national curriculum for England are rooted in colonial and anti-Black thinking which preserves the interests of whiteness and frames marginalised children as culturally deficient.

Flores (2021) outlines raciolinguistic genealogy in three components, centring issues of race, class, coloniality, and power in uncovering how marginalised communities are expected to conform with normative modes of living and communicating. The first is a genealogical stance, which exposes how the colonial 'past' continues to shape the present in terms of deeply embedded, taken-for-granted ideologies about language which perpetually frame racialised and working-class communities as linguistically deficient. The second is a materialist framing, which locates these discourses of deficiency within the broader project of modernity which is itself shaped by the histories and ongoing logics of European colonialism, anti-Blackness, and white supremacy (see also Willis 2023). The third involves taking a raciolinguistic perspective, which places critical attention away from the purportedly deficient language practices of stigmatised communities and towards what Rosa and Flores (2017) define as the white perceiving subject. The white perceiving subject is an institutionalised mode of perception animated by mechanisms such as curricula, tests, policies, and interventions which are designed to surveil and modify language practices categorised as deviating from idealised linguistic whiteness. This raciolinguistic perspective is crucial in calling for systemic change in a way which foregrounds structural determinants of oppression rather than isolating language as a single means of struggle and liberation.

In this article I deploy a raciolinguistic genealogy to trace how tiered vocabulary has become normalised in schools, especially in England. This focus on England, however, should not distract from the fact that tiered vocabulary is embedded into other education policy contexts around the world, especially in the US, where the original architects of tiered vocabulary reside and work. Genealogy is both conceptual and empirical, and so my data includes British colonial writings, academic research, educational policy, language-based interventions, teacher textbooks, classroom resources, and documents produced by Ofsted.[1] This data was selected through my own close observations of post-2010 education policy shifts in England, which have placed a central focus on language and social justice, and put

an increasing impetus on teachers and school leaders to draw on academic research to inform their practice (see Cowen 2019 for one critique).

Beginning with UK education policy which names tiered vocabulary as 'research evidence' (e.g. DfE 2019; Ofsted 2022) I followed citations in these documents to conduct a close reading of Beck et al's work from the 1980s and an analysis of the language ideological assumptions at the core of the tiered vocabulary framework. This involved scrutiny of the methodologies Beck et al employed and the population samples they based their findings on, as well as following key citations used to provide a conceptual base for tiered vocabulary. Following these citations located tiered vocabulary within both a broader context of deficit thinking in academia and a much longer history of language ideologies produced by European colonialism. In exploring contemporary sources, I focused on how tiered vocabulary is positioned by policy makers as a material tool for tackling social injustices and how this reproduces deficit framings which blame the victim for their purported linguistic deficiencies. Using these documents as data, I selected extracts which I present as empirical evidence to argue that tiered vocabulary is not an objective set of linguistic descriptors but a raciolinguistic ideology rooted in colonial, deficit, classist, and specifically anti-Black perceptions about language. In the sections that follow I present some of these extracts and unpick discourses about language and marginalised communities which co-produce these perceptions.

Colonial representations of vocabulary

At the heart of this genealogy is the raciolinguistic ideology that the language practices of white, privileged communities are fully established and complex, and that these are dichotomised with the purportedly under-developed and basic language practices of racialised, working-class communities. These raced and classed distinctions lie at the core of the emergence of raciolinguistic ideologies in the 1500s, in which European colonisers perceived the language practices of Black African and Indigenous communities as not fully human (Errington 2008; Mignolo 2000; Trautmann 2006). The documentation and hierarchical organisation of linguistic systems was a central part of the maintenance of European colonial power, in which raciolinguistic difference naturalised and justified oppression. This kind of historical consideration is central to a raciolinguistic perspective and the undoing of supposedly universal ideas about language which have long linked Europeanness to linguistic elegance and non-Europeanness to linguistic disarray. Thus whilst tiered vocabulary as a named concept emerged from academic knowledge production in the early 1980s, it is important to genealogically trace how hierarchical notions of linguistic variation are anchored to European colonial logics.

Racist perceptions and representations of the vocabulary systems of African languages in particular were a common characteristic of the writings of British colonisers, missionaries, and linguists – who would often be working as one and the same. Gilmour (2006) describes multiple examples of where white British coloniser-missionary-linguists contrasted their own vocabulary with those of African communities, constructing dichotomies such as ordered and clumsy, civilized and savage, cultivated and wild, tamed and untamed, and extensive and limited. These perceptions of lexical inferiority were presented as scientifically objective and empirically sound, framing European linguists as exponents of civilization and reason (Errington 2008). As an illustrative example, in 1844 the missionary linguist

William Boyce described the Khoisan language group of southern Africa as limited in its vocabulary and thus of detriment to cognitive ability:

> […] they abound in those peculiar and barbarous sounds called 'clicks'; and, from their harshness, and the limited nature of their vocabularies, appear to be barriers in the way of religious and intellectual culture, and, as such, doomed to extinction by the gradual progress of Christianity and civilization. (Boyce 1844, ix–x, cited in Gilmour 2006, 87)

Deficit perceptions of the size and quality of Indigenous vocabulary were central to the European colonial project. In particular, the creation of word lists by linguist-colonisers was a major activity in attempting to empirically document, classify, and rank non-European languages and their speakers. For Trautmann (2006), colonial word list building is akin to specimen-collecting which rendered languages not as a means to communicate but as classifiable, hierarchical taxonomies which were used to rank human groups. Put differently, the colonial construction of hierarchical linguistic and biological taxonomies was happening at the same time, and each was integral to the other. Trautmann (2006) shows how in the construction of word lists, colonisers made active design choices which excluded vocabulary items relating to complex ideas such as art and science, and thus produced narratives of inherent vocabulary deficiency. In this way, colonial word list technologies can be seen as a predecessor to tiered vocabulary, itself a framework which relies on abstractions from real-life language and hierarchies of discrete words. These surgical procedures of tiering and ranking vocabulary items are not a neutral enterprise but an 'abstraction from living languages that freezes and organizes certain aspects of them for a certain purpose' (Trautmann 2006, 22).

Contemporary academic word lists such as those compiled by Coxhead (2000) – and which Beck et al. (2013) use as a conceptual base for tiered vocabulary – maintain these logics in their attempts to objectively define and dichotomise 'conversational' and 'academic' language. Others before me (e.g. Flores 2020; García and Solorza 2021) have shown how attempts to dichotomise language rely on raciolinguistic ideologies and institutional modes of perception which categorise the language practices of racialised communities as perpetually deficient. Put simply, the hierarchical arrangements of vocabulary within and across languages is a colonial invention and a practice which contemporary linguists cling fast to.

Deficits, deprivation, and academic linguistics

Whilst tiered vocabulary reproduces the same logics as first articulated in European colonial representations of language, this section shows how it is tied more explicitly to deficit thinking in academic knowledge production. Deficit thinking refers to scholarship which rose to prominence in the 1960s and involved framing racialised, multilingual, and working-class communities as suffering from *restricted codes* (Bernstein 1964), *verbal deprivation* (Bereiter and Engelmann 1966), *accumulated environmental deficits* (Hess and Shipman 1965), and *semilingualism* (Hansegård 1968). As they were used at the time of their original conception, these framings continue to justify language-based interventions which seek to modify the linguistic behaviour of marginalised communities in the belief that this will afford them success in school. Deficit thinking blames the victim for school failure rather than interrogating how schools are structured to prevent marginalised children from succeeding, with perceptions about the purportedly deficient language of marginalised

communities playing a central role in their own struggles (Valencia 2010). Whilst anti-Black deficit thinking around so-called academic vocabulary rose to prominence in the 1960s (see Baker-Bell 2020), there is a longer history of this in academic knowledge production (see Willis 2023). For example, the white psychologist George Stetson described poor, Black children as displaying a 'limited vocabulary and feebler comprehension of the language' (1897, 287), arguing that targeted interventions were necessary in order develop their vocabulary and to improve their broader linguistic competence. It is my contention that tiered vocabulary represents a continuation of these framing and ideologies, but newly packaged under a narrative of academic benevolence and research reliability.

Bereiter & Engelmann's work deemed the vocabularies of Black, working-class children to be limited due to a purported lack of verbal stimulation in their home environments, and that this was dichotomous with the experiences of white, middle-class children. Their work frames the speech of Black, working-class children as, for example, 'immature and nonstandard' (Bereiter and Engelmann 1966, 31), as 'consist[ing] not of distinct words […] but rather of whole phrases or sentences that function like giant words' (ibid., 1966, 34), as sounding like 'all the words tend to become fused into a whole' (ibid., 36), as 'amalgamated noises' (ibid., 1966, 37) and as 'lack[ing] the solidity and wholeness that characterises the child reared in a linguistically rich environment' (ibid., 1966, 54). Bereiter and Engelmann (1966, 37–38) cite Bernstein here, locating their arguments in harmony with his notion of restricted and elaborated codes, as well as Hess and Shipman (1965) claim that working-class, Black mothers only used 'basic' vocabulary when speaking to their children (Bereiter and Engelmann 1966, 32). Their solution was the Direct Instruction programme, a set of scripted routines for vocabulary teaching which rest on pathological assumptions about Black and working-class inferiority (see Hall-Erby 2010). Direct Instruction has seen a recent resurgence in popularity, and underpins much of the pedagogical approaches as advocated for in the tiered vocabulary framework (e.g. Beck and McKeown 2007, 254; Beck et al. 2008, 63).

These same ideologies of incomplete language were central to Hansegård's (1968) notion of semilingualism, conceived as a 'half-mastered', 'reduced' or 'limited' form of bilingualism which led to a 'substandard' or 'deficient' command of both first and second languages (see Karlander and Salö 2023). Karlander & Salö's genealogy shows how Hansegård's interest in linguistic ab/normality, itself derived from Nazi linguistic science, produced models of so-called competent and normal speakers who displayed larger and better vocabularies than their racially and economically minoritised counterparts. Others before me (e.g. Martin-Jones and Romaine 1986) have shown how the logics and terminology of semilingualism were repackaged into the dichotomous framings of Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) as first proposed by Cummins (1980). Cummins defined BICS as the 'everyday', interpersonal communicative practices and CALP as the language skills required to perform successfully in academic environments. This dichotomy suggested that whilst bilingual speakers may have developed full mastery of BICS in their home language, they had failed to develop full mastery of CALP in either their home language or English, and therefore required targeted interventions in order to ensure they became proficient in so-called academic language. As Flores and Lewis (2022) show, whilst the terminology shifted from semilingualism to BICS/CALP, the underlying raciolinguistic logics did not, with racialised, low-income bilingual children continuing to be framed as not fully linguistically proficient. This same argument

can be extended to include a shifting of terminology to tier two and tier three vocabulary items, which are often analogised by Beck et al. (2008, 2013) with academic vocabulary. As a result, marginalised children are the ones most likely to be targeted for tiered vocabulary-based interventions which rely on BICS/CALP distinctions, themselves which are tied to a long history of anti-Black and deficit thinking in academic knowledge production. Indeed, Beck et al. (2008, 64) and Beck et al. (2013, 161) cite work by Cummins (1994) which itself relies on discourses of semilingualism and the BICS/CALP dichotomy. In the following section, I examine more closely the emergence of tiered vocabulary in the 1980s, and how it perpetuated these same kind of deficit discourses – especially in terms of anti-Blackness.

The emergence of tiered vocabulary

Tiered vocabulary first appeared as a named concept in a 1987 chapter by Beck, McKeown and Omanson where they reflected on their experiments concerning vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. The concept is first presented as follows:

> To elaborate, consider a mature, literate individual's vocabulary as comprising three tiers. The first tier consists of the most basic words – *cat*, *mother*, *go*, *red*, *talk*, *chocolate*, and so on. It would be difficult to argue that any direct instruction be devoted to the meanings of these words in school. The third tier consists of words whose frequency of use is quite low, or that apply to specific domains. This tier might include words such as *divertimento*, *nebula*, *resistivity*, *non-restrictive*, and *tidal pool*. […]. Now, to return to the second tier. It is this tier that contains words of high frequency for mature language users. They are also words of general utility, not limited to a specific domain. Some examples might be *unique*, *convenient*, *retort*, *influence*, *ponder*, and *procrastinate*. It is words of this type toward which the most productive instructional efforts can be directed. Because of the role they play in a language user's verbal repertoire, rich knowledge of words in this second tier can have a significant impact on verbal functioning. (Beck et al. 1987, 155)

It is a very specific type of child that Beck and her colleagues have in mind when arguing for the targeted instruction of tier two vocabulary: Black children from low-income communities. Reproducing the same raciolinguistic ideologies as articulated in the writings of white European colonisers and anti-Black deficit thinkers as I described above, Beck et al claim that such children are unlikely to experience 'language rich' environments at home or with peers, unlikely to use language in 'reflective, playful, or novel ways', and unlikely to encounter 'extensive and sophisticated vocabulary' (Beck et al. 1987, 156). Tiered vocabulary interventions, they argue, have the effect of 'creating a rich verbal environment for children at home as well as in school […] a characteristic that is lacking for many children who experience slow vocabulary growth' (ibid., 162) and will 'lead to the creation of a lively and productive verbal environment' (ibid., 158). Given the way that Beck and her colleagues dichotomise the language practices of white and Black children, it is white children who are framed as already living in a 'lively and productive verbal environment' and Black children who are framed as in need of linguistic remediation. These extracts alone demonstrate how the tiered vocabulary framework is rooted in deficit assumptions about the language of Black, working-class families in ways which rely on anti-Black, colonial logics and seek to modify language used at both home and school.

The tiered vocabulary framework is based on the findings of three studies from the early 1980s (Beck et al. 1982; McKeown et al. 1983, 1985), all of which draw on the methods of vocabulary instruction detailed in Beck et al. (1980). This method of instruction was trialled with children aged 9–10 from low-income homes from a single school in inner-city Pittsburgh, and designed to teach them 104 target words from 12 semantic categories, many of which are rooted in able-bodied assumptions about how we navigate the world: people, what you can do with your arms, eating, eyes, moods, how we move our legs, speaking, what people can be like, ears, more people, the usual and the unusual, and working together or apart (ibid., 15). For 30 minutes a day over 5 consecutive days, children were taught up to 10 new words from these lists, via teacher-dominated pedagogies characterised by tightly regulated scripts and regular standardised testing akin to Bereiter and Engelmann (1966) Direct Instruction programme, to 'determine the extent of their mastery after this relatively intense instructional treatment' (Beck et al. 1980, 18).

These attempts to determine children's linguistic 'mastery' formed the basis of a trio of experimental studies which were used as the core evidence-base for tiered vocabulary (Beck et al. 1982; McKeown et al. 1983, 1985). Beck at el (1982), which was replicated in McKeown et al. (1983), is a small-scale RCT study with a sample of 66 children aged 8–10 in a single school from low-income communities, of whom 46 were Black. These children were subjected to standardised tests which, according to Beck et al, produced a 'deep and fluent level of word knowledge' (1982, 509). Yet these claims are based on artificial and decontextualised examples of language produced in near-silent conditions, in ways which divorces language away from its speakers and the contexts in which they use it. Additionally, terms such as 'rapid lexical access' (ibid., 506), the 'conceptual richness of word meaning' (ibid., 508), 'semantic network connections' (ibid., 520) and 'semantic richness' (ibid., 521) are never defined by Beck et al, yet are presented as objective and desirable linguistic capabilities which white, middle-class children are in possession of and Black, working-class children lack, and thus require remediation though targeted vocabulary instruction.

This same kind of vague and deficit language is found throughout McKeown et al. (1983), where it is suggested that low-income, Black children lack the ability to 'manipulate words in rich ways' (ibid., 6), struggle in displaying 'deep and fluent knowledge of words' (ibid., 16) and do not come from homes characteristic of a 'lively, verbal environment' (ibid., 16). McKeown et al. (1985) had a sample of 8–10 year old children from three schools in the same district. All children were from low-income communities and 70% of them were Black, and were tested on their knowledge of recently taught vocabulary items via multiple-choice tests, yes/no questions which measured the speed of their responses, and in stories manufactured for testing purposes. Again, discourses of deficit are used to frame Black, working-class children as lacking in 'verbal processing skills' (ibid., 522), 'word knowledge skills' (ibid., 524), 'word knowledge proficiency' (ibid., 529), and thus requiring remediation in the form of 'rich or elaborated instruction [which] fosters verbal skill' (ibid., 524). McKeown et al claim that this remediation enabled children to use new words outside of the classroom. Yet these children were simply responding to a behaviourist reward system called 'word wizard' where they received rewards if they incorporated new vocabulary into their language, with the results 'prominently displayed in the classroom and used as an ongoing record of students' progress' (ibid. 527).

These three studies provided the evidence-base for tiered vocabulary, a framework which was fleshed out in future work. Beck and McKeown (2007) for example, uses similar

sampling and methodologies as found in their studies from the 1980s, conducting trials on 98 children aged between 5–6 years, all of whom were Black African and 82% from low-income families, in a single school identified for state takeover. Young Black children living in poverty were specifically chosen for this study because of 'the early appearance of a vocabulary gap' (ibid., 254) due to a purported lack of 'high-quality' vocabulary at home (ibid., 257). Others before me (e.g. MacLeod and Demers 2023) have exposed how descriptors such as 'high quality language' are not neutral, but reflect white, monolingual, and Anglo-American values of parenting, literacy practices, and interaction. Beck and McKeown (2007) continue to frame Black, working-class children through a deficit lens, suggesting that they 'come to school with inadequate vocabulary and remain at risk' (ibid., 253), that their homes are 'environments [which] do not include extensive interactions with language' (ibid., 254), and to counter this, they should be directly taught words that are 'more refined', 'more advanced', and 'sophisticated words of high utility for mature language users that are characteristic of written language' (ibid., 253). These discourses of deficit are framed as part of a liberal progress and social justice narrative, with Beck & McKeown suggesting that a wide vocabulary is central to 'future possibilities' (ibid., 251) and for 'more advanced literacy development' (ibid., 258). So-called sophisticated and high utility words are described as tier two words, which the authors claim have a positive impact on 'verbal functioning' (ibid. 254; see also Beck et al. 2013, 9). Once again, this is a concept which is never fully defined by Beck and her colleagues, but is geared around simply increasing students' capacity to use tier two vocabulary in classroom interactions. 400 tier two words per year is presented as a suggested number to teach. This suggestion relies on the same kinds of reductive, vocabulary accumulation logics that underpin word gap interventions (Hart and Risley 1995). Indeed, directly citing Hart & Risley in support of this claim, Beck and McKeown (2007, 254) argue that it is children from low-income homes who are the main beneficiaries of tiered vocabulary because 'this type of child is less likely to acquire, and become proficient in using, rich conceptual networks of tier two words independently'.

Throughout Beck et al's foundational work, there is no attention given to the structural determinants of oppression which confront marginalised communities, nor to the kinds of unique cultural and linguistic knowledge that they bring to school with them. Instead, Beck et al reproduce long-standing colonial and deficit logics which frame the language practices of working-class Black children as inferior, resulting in a flawed theory of language which is ideological rather than empirical.

Bringing Words to Life and Creating Robust Vocabulary

This section focuses on the two major works which mainstreamed the tiered vocabulary framework, *Bringing Words to Life* (Beck et al. [2002] 2013; henceforth BWTL) and *Creating Robust Vocabulary* (Beck et al. 2008; henceforth CRV). My discussion here refers to the second edition of BWTL. These texts have been integral to the dissemination of tiered vocabulary into schools and teacher education programmes. Yet neither of these texts describe the methodologies that tiered vocabulary was built on, nor that it emerged from studies based almost exclusively on low-income, Black children. My concern in this section then is centred on how BWTL and CRV disseminate to teachers a theory of language which relies on anti-Black and deficit assumptions about the language practices of marginalised children who are framed as having inadequate

vocabularies when compared against the 'rich' vocabularies of their more privileged peers (Beck et al. 2013, 1).

Throughout BWTL and CRV, the arrangement of words into different tiers is described in ways which rely on subjective perceptions about language. Tier one words are defined as basic, familiar, everyday, highly concrete, appearing in informal oral conversations, and in simple written materials. Tier two words are described as being high utility, characteristic of written language, difficult to learn, reflective of mature language users, essential for literacy, existing mainly in books, wide-ranging, not basic, sophisticated, important, rich, technical, scholarly, academic, precise, and big. Tier three words are described as being rare, very specific, limited to specific domains, narrow, conceptually challenging, and tightly associated with a content area. Tier one and tier three words are generally dismissed as not important for teaching, and tier two words are equated with academic vocabulary, and therefore the kind of words which are granted institutional value. These purportedly objective decisions about which words fall into which tier is given great attention in BWTL yet always reverts to subjectivity – for example, Beck et al suggest to teachers that 'some criteria for identifying tier two words' are 'importance and utility', 'conceptual understanding' and 'instructional potential' (2013, 28). Yet none of these criteria are objective ways of categorising language but are defined by context, ideology, and institutional modes of perception.

Beck et al ground their tiered dichotomies in reference to academic knowledge production which claims that academic vocabulary is a category with objectively definable borders. They cite studies such as Stahl and Nagy (2006), who draw their own dichotomies between 'high-frequency words' (tier one in Beck et al's phrasing) and 'high-utility general vocabulary' (tier two in Beck et al's phrasing), representing words which 'you'd expect to be part of a literate person's vocabulary' (Stahl and Nagy 2006, 61, cited in Beck et al. 2013, 22). Yet what Beck et al mean by 'literate' is never fully defined in BWTL or CRV, and given how their earlier work framed working-class, Black children as lacking literate language, we can only assume that 'being literate' means producing language associated with the white middle-classes. Indeed, the closest definition of 'literate' they offer is made in reference to Corson's (1985) notion of the lexical bar, which, as they describe it:

> characterize[s] the distinctions between everyday oral language and academic, literate language. Compared to oral language, literate language has a greater variety of words and a greater density of high-content words, and the words are less concrete and longer. (Beck et al. 2008, 60)

We can ask important questions here about how so-called literate language is presented in seemingly objective ways, such as what constitutes being 'academic', 'high-content', and 'less concrete'. As alluded to in Beck et al's definition above, the lexical bar relies on dichotomous framings of language which assume the existence of what Corson (1995, 180) calls a 'gulf between the everyday meaning systems and the high-status meaning systems created by the introduction of an academic culture of literacy'. In the same ways as Beck et al's work in the 1980s which first proposed tiered vocabulary, Corson's (1984) work which first proposed the lexical bar is built on methodologies which sought to compare the vocabulary of working-class, Black children with middle-class, white children. Of the former, Corson claims that they 'lack the lexical competence necessary for success' (1984, 121), that their purported linguistic incompetence affects their cognitive ability, and that their home dialects work as an interference to the acquisition of academic vocabulary. Subscribing to these

deficit, anti-Black logics, Beck et al. (2008, 8) claim that 'academic success is possible […] only if learners cross the lexical bar'. These framings pose that the lexical bar is the ultimate factor which creates educational struggles, rather than the broader structures of class and race-based inequalities. It follows from these logics then, that Beck et al position vocabulary-based interventions as a panacea for the racial and class injustices that marginalised children are confronted with. This is articulated throughout BWTL and CRV, for instance:

> Tier two words are essential for literacy, and lack of knowledge of such words is at the root of vocabulary and comprehension problems that leave students on the wrong side of the lexical bar, unable to gain facility with higher-status meaning systems of written language (Beck et al. 2013, 162)

Despite the anti-Black linguistic racism which lies at the core of Corson's concept of the lexical bar, Beck et al. (2008, 2013) fail to include details about methodology or participants which produced this concept – much as their popular books fail to include similar details about the background to their own research.

Both BWTL and CRV largely assume a monolingual perspective, with very limited attention given to multilingualism. Throughout both books, so-called English Language Learners are framed largely in terms of deficiencies, being 'confused by multiple meanings or senses' (Beck et al. 2013, 51), whose 'language proficiency limits their ability to learn grade-level academic material' (ibid., 158), who know 'fewer words' (ibid., 158), have 'less developed knowledge about word parts' (ibid., 159), have 'difficulty accessing aspects of word meanings' (ibid., 159), and have 'looser semantic networks between words' (ibid., 158). 'Semantic networks' is a concept which is never fully defined in either BWTL or CRV. Despite this, Beck et al claim that they are 'looser' in multilingual children, referring to Verhoeven (2011, 672) who states that multilingual children have 'fewer associative links between the words in their vocabularies' and that their purportedly limited capacities in language are reflective of cognitive limitations more broadly.

Multilingual children, claim Beck et al. (2013, 161), are typically competent in 'informal oral language' (i.e. tier one vocabulary) but lack the ability to produce and comprehend 'academic language' (i.e. tier two vocabulary). They write that 'much of the problem for [English Learners] lies in the distinction between […] tier one words […] and tier two words' (ibid., 161). Citing Cummins (1994), this claim directly relies on the BICS/CALP distinction as discussed earlier and maps this dichotomy onto tier one/two vocabulary, with Beck et al. (2013, 161) arguing that English Language Learners need to 'cross the lexical bar to achieve any measure of academic success' and that 'all students need to start crossing early'. These claims are bolstered by references to scholarship which subscribes to raciolinguistic ideologies of academic language and the word gap, which point the blame at racialised bilinguals for their purported semilingualism and their lack of adequate language (e.g. Carlo et al. 2004). Such work poses that languages other than English are simply the bridge and the scaffold to acquiring academic language in English rather than something which is legitimate on its own terms. As such, Beck et al. (2013, 171–172) argue that 'robust instruction' in English tier two vocabulary is the solution to the language needs of 'struggling' multilingual children, with Beck et al. (2008, 64) arguing that classroom interaction should be purely in English to provide 'focused and extended language input' to 'benefit the development of language competence'. These descriptions bear no acknowledgement of how multilingual children might draw on their vast linguistic repertoires in the classroom,

representing a stance on additive multilingualism which is rooted in a remedial-based practice concerned with the perfection of English as opposed to recognising the linguistic dexterity that multilingual children have.

As Flores (2020) argues, these deficit framings co-articulate with raciolinguistic ideologies to represent racialised bilinguals as lacking academic language. Yet in reality, the heterogenous language practices of racialised bilinguals simply transcend the rigidity of the academic/non-academic borders which themselves are based on idealised versions of white, print-centric, monolingual understandings of language. Put simply, the distinctions which underpin the tiered vocabulary framework do not reflect actual language use, yet are still used to frame racialised, working-class, and bilingual children as lacking capabilities in the kind of language necessary for success in school.

Tiered vocabulary, education policy, and social justice narratives

This section moves from a critique of academic knowledge production towards how tiered vocabulary has been taken up by education policy makers in England. I argue that this is just one manifestation of a growing impetus for school leaders to apply externally produced research evidence to improve outcomes for students, particularly those that are as racially and economically disadvantaged (see Cowen 2019 for a critique). At the heart of this section then, is a critique of the underpinning theory of change which policy makers subscribe to, namely one where language-based interventions are posed as a solution for structural injustice.

Academic vocabulary (and by extension, tiered vocabulary) is a major component of the current National Curriculum for England (DfE 2014), with teachers instructed to develop 'rich vocabulary' as part of 'the essential knowledge that they need to be educated citizens' (ibid., 2014, 6). A consistent logic underpinning the design of this curriculum is that modifications to a child's language provides a path to social justice, and a means to remediate children who have 'low levels of prior attainment or come from disadvantaged backgrounds' (ibid., 9). These reductive logics are foundational to the work of two white, north American male academics whose ideas heavily influenced the design of England's current national curriculum and the way it is taught: Eric Hirsch and Daniel Willingham (see also Cushing 2023a). For example, Willingham (2009, 28) claims that the reason white, middle-class children have an advantage in schools is because of their apparent linguistic and cultural superiority, stating that they 'come to school with a bigger vocabulary and more knowledge about the world than underprivileged kids' and that this is the reason why 'the gap between privileged and underprivileged kids widens'. Hirsch claims that marginalised children are 'impoverished linguistically', experience 'less rich language experiences at home' (Hirsch 1996, 148), and that the 'only enduring way to raise achievement and narrow gaps between groups of students is by closing the knowledge and vocabulary gap' (Hirsch 2016, 171).

In 2022 the Department for Education solidified its commitments to tiered vocabulary with the publication of new guidance for schools on early literacy practices (DfE 2022). Academic vocabulary as a panacea for social injustices features prominently in this guidance, in how it can 'lessen or even eliminate the impact of early life disadvantage' (DfE 2022, 4), and how 'extending children's familiarity with words across domains is particularly important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds who might not otherwise meet such vocabulary' (DfE 2022, 23). The DfE pose that marginalised children must be provided

with a 'language-rich environment' at school, with the implication here being that their home environments are 'language-poor'. They state that schools must 'reduce the language gap between children from language-rich homes and those from homes in which spoken language is not as varied or rich' (ibid., 22), and engage marginalized children in 'high-quality dialogue and direct teaching' (ibid., 23) which involves 'providing models of accurate grammar' and 'helping children to articulate ideas in well-formed sentences' (ibid., 23). These dichotomous discourses of correctness and purity create a space where the policing of marginalised children's language is a legitimate social justice endeavor, and the tiered vocabulary framework provides a suitable tool to do so with. For example, tier two vocabulary is framed by the DfE as the language that marginalised children are 'unlikely to hear in everyday conversation' (ibid., 32), instructing school leaders to systematically audit and monitor the use of tier two vocabulary as part of classroom interaction (ibid., 40).

As others have shown (e.g. Innes 2023), a major policy driver of normative and deficit assumptions about language in schools is the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). The EEF, funded by the Department for Education, are one of fourteen members of the UK Government's *What Works Network*, which produces policy briefings, research reports and guidance for schools. From 2017 onwards, the EEF has placed a marked focus on literacy, publishing reports which are widely used in schools, distributed on social media, and championed by education policy makers. Like the DfE, these reports frame tiered vocabulary as solution to addressing social injustices, presented to teachers as a method of remedying 'students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are more likely to have a less extensive vocabulary' (EEF 2018, 8), to provide such children with a 'rich language environment' and 'high quality interactions' (ibid., 8). One of the authors of the EEF reports is Alex Quigley, a former teacher and author of the popular book for teachers *Closing the Vocabulary Gap* (Quigley 2018). Quigley's work is just one of many books and teacher blogs which has been instrumental in normalising word gap ideologies and tiered vocabulary in England's schools, yet these consistently fail to describe the anti-Black, deficit methodologies that the original research was founded on. Quigley presents tiered vocabulary as a 'hierarchy for words' (2018, 87) and tier two vocabulary as 'valuable words' which are 'essential to cracking the academic code (2018, 88)'. Like Beck et al, Quigley draws borders and dichotomies between what he calls 'everyday' and 'academic' talk, with the latter being language which 'characterises the voices of the powerful' (2018, 93). It is important to stress here that 'powerful' should be read as a synonym for white, able-bodied, and middle-class. Conversely, children who are categorised by Quigley as disadvantaged are framed as experiencing 'debilitating vocabulary gaps' (2018, 11), having 'small word-hoards' (2018, 57), and being 'word poor' (2018, 177). In similar logics deployed by his employers the EEF, Quigley poses that one of the most efficient means by which marginalised children can experience upward social mobility is the modification of their language so that it appropriates tier two and academic language.

In the final part of this section I document how Ofsted act as a language policy driver in embedding tiered vocabulary into policy. This builds on my previous collaborations (Cushing and Snell 2023) which have exposed how Ofsted perpetuate raciolinguistic ideologies in its inspections of schools. Around 2018, Ofsted's work shifted towards a focus on curriculum, which was initiated under a narrative of social justice. This placed an emphasis on academic vocabulary, and Ofsted's claim that the acquisition of academic vocabulary could act as a social leveller for children who are marginalised at the intersection points of race and class (Ofsted 2019). These ideological connections between bigger vocabularies

and social justice were repeatedly reproduced in the run up to the publication of Ofsted's new inspection methodologies for early years provision and schools (e.g. Ofsted 2019a), claiming that, for example, 'the correlation between vocabulary size and life chances is as firm as any correlation in educational research' (ibid., 7), and that 'children from the most disadvantaged background […] heard a narrower range of vocabulary, than their more advantaged peers' (ibid., 7). These same logics are found in teacher education policy, with the Core Content Framework (DfE 2019) reproducing the language of tiered vocabulary, stating that pre-service teachers must be taught how to 'plan for pupils to be repeatedly exposed to high-utility and high-frequency vocabulary' (DfE 2019, 15).

In 2022, Ofsted published a collection of subject specific research reviews, framed as representing the best available evidence about different curriculum subjects. Tiered vocabulary features prominently here, presented as a means for teachers to 'model language forms that pupils might not encounter away from school' (Ofsted 2022a, n.p) and consider 'reframing pupils' spoken language and asking pupils to repeat back the reframing' (ibid., n.p). Ofsted argue that these acts of language correction and policing are crucial for schools to 'reduce the word gap in the early years, and to enable disadvantaged children to 'develop their vocabulary faster' (ibid., n.p) and that 'developing spoken language is especially important for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are the most likely to be word-poor' (ibid., n.p). Soon after the publication of the research reviews, an online leak of confidential training materials for inspectors showed how they were being actively trained to praise teachers who were 'modelling and insisting on the correct academic register in speech' (Ofsted 2020, 24) and praise schools who had embedded tiered vocabulary into their local policies.

Just as tiered vocabulary is prominent within academic educational linguistics, it is prominent too in education policy. In England, as this section has shown, this is presented to teachers as a valid theory of language which represents scientific evidence and 'what works', yet conveniently overlooks the deficit, anti-Black thinking which lies at is core. Furthermore, this is also presented to teachers as a valid theory of social justice, where it is (mis)assumed that equity is achieved when marginalised children modify their language. In the final section of this article I reflect on these flaws and explore some of the ways that educational linguists might continue to reject them.

Dismantling tiered vocabulary

The genealogy of tiered vocabulary I have conducted in this article shows how it is not a list of objective, empirically definable linguistic features as presented by its architects, but a raciolinguistic ideology which categorises the language practices of racialised and working-class communities as perpetually deficient and requiring remediation. This builds on scholarship which has exposed similar ideological processes in the construction of so-called academic language (e.g. Flores 2020; García and Solorza 2021; Thompson and Watkins 2021). As my genealogy revealed, tiered vocabulary relies on long-standing colonial logics which co-constructed linguistic and biological deficiencies in the language practices of colonised populations. Its original academic conception in the 1980s was based on deficit assumptions about the language practices of Black children living in poverty and their purported inabilities to use and comprehend language in ways which resembled their white, affluent peers. As such, tiered vocabulary is a realisation of anti-Black linguistic racism

(Baker-Bell 2020) which continues to surface under guises of benevolence which falsely assume that language-based modifications provide the path to social justice. This theory of change assumes that the root of social injustices is language, and therefore social justice efforts should focus on the modification of language to enable marginalised communities to become less oppressed. Yet a focus on language and language alone simply obscures the larger political and economic realities that the root is made up of, and allows this root to grow unchecked. Put simply, tiered vocabulary is a flawed theory of language which relies on a flawed theory of justice.

Tiered vocabulary is a concept which has been enthusiastically taken up by academic linguists and education policy makers, despite the colonial logics, deficit thinking, and anti-Blackness which lie at its core. It is concerning to me that this has taken place without due critical interrogation of its methodological foundations and its underlying assumptions about language and justice. This worrying lack of critical attention is found across work by consultants (e.g. Quigley 2018), policy makers (e.g. Ofsted 2022), teachers (e.g. Mortimore 2020), and academics (e.g. Deignan et al. 2023; Hellman 2018). Others before me (e.g. Charity Hudley et al. 2020) have stressed the urgent need for academic linguists to pay critical attention to the racial and class dynamics that shape our field, engaging in inward-looking work which seeks to expose, dismantle, and uproot the ways in which linguistic research reproduces colonial logics, deficit thinking, and anti-Blackness. Oppressive ideologies about language are not simply things which exist outside academia – they exist within it. Work within and towards educational linguistics is one space where this is much needed, especially given that education policy makers increasingly rely on purportedly objective academic scholarship and scientific 'evidence' to shape and justify policies, tests, curricula, interventions, and other such mechanisms which are imbued with raciolinguistic ideologies. This article represents one attempt to engage with this inward-looking work, responding to Charity Hudley et al's manifesto (2020) to expose the deep flaws within the apparently universalist and purportedly progressive concept of tiered vocabulary. It is my hope that this work connects with other scholarship which is pushing back against raciolinguistic ideologies by turning our analytic lens on educational linguistics itself. This critical self-interrogation provides a powerful way by which we can resist designing, citing, and reproducing solutions which rely on colonial, deficit, and anti-Black logics which assume the problem is located within the language practices of marginalised communities and their apparent lack of the right kind of words.

Note

1. The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. Ofsted conduct inspections of all educational providers in England, from early years providers through to schools, colleges, and initial teacher education. Ofsted were established in their current format in 1992, but England has had a schools inspectorate of some form since 1839.

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