

# Literacy practices, linguistic anthropology and social inequality: ethnographic cases and theoretical engagements<sup>1</sup>

James Collins<sup>II</sup>

## Abstract

This paper discusses my efforts during several decades of research to understand the interaction of schooled literacy, language diversity, and social inequality. It draws on semiotic and Marxian traditions to investigate language diversity and social inequality in contemporary European and North American settings. Focusing especially on racialization practices and class dynamics, the arguments present early studies of minority language and schooling, which build toward and frame a recent study of federal education policy and immigrant experiences of schooling and language hierarchy. That study draws from sociolinguistic and ethnographic research among multilingual migrant families and communities in upstate New York, with particular focus on children's experience with multilingual repertoires and monolingual language policies in schooling (COLLINS, 2012). Examining federal education policy and debates and comparing classroom interaction processes involving different ethnolinguistic groups, I identify two "state effects" (TROUILLOT, 2001) as they operate across different institutional sites. I argue that such effects are ways in which contemporary states attempt to regulate globalized class and racial dynamics. By shaping educational subjects whose social and linguistic characteristics, and especially their class characteristics, are both obscured and employed in school-related categorizations and school-based communicative processes, such effects contribute to the hegemonic reproduction of social, linguistic and educational inequalities (HYMES, 1996; MENKEN, 2008).

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II- University at Albany/SUNY, Albany, NY, EUA.  
Contact: jcollins@albany.edu

## Keywords

Ethnography – Hegemony – Indexicality – Literacy – Migration – Multilingualism – State effects.

# **Práticas de letramento, antropologia linguística e desigualdade social: casos etnográficos e compromissos teóricos<sup>1</sup>**

James Collins<sup>II</sup>

## **Resumo**

*Este artigo discute meus esforços durante várias décadas de pesquisa para compreender a interação entre letramento escolarizado, diversidade linguística e desigualdade social. Inspira-se em tradições semióticas e marxistas para investigar a diversidade linguística e a desigualdade social em contextos europeus e norte-americanos contemporâneos. Enfocando especialmente as práticas de racialização e a dinâmica das aulas, os argumentos apresentam estudos iniciais sobre línguas de minorias e escolaridade que contribuem para e contextualizam um estudo recente sobre a política federal de educação, experiências de escolarização de imigrantes e hierarquia linguística. Este estudo baseia-se em pesquisa sociolinguística e etnográfica com famílias e comunidades migrantes multilíngues e comunidades no norte do estado de Nova Iorque, com foco específico na experiência de crianças com repertórios multilíngues e políticas linguísticas monolíngues na escolarização (COLLINS, 2012). Examinando a política e os debates federais sobre educação e comparando os processos de interação em sala de aula, que envolvem diferentes grupos etnolinguísticos, identifico dois “efeitos de Estado” (TROUILLOT, 2001), conforme eles operam em diferentes locais institucionais. Defendo que tais efeitos são maneiras como os Estados contemporâneos tentam regular aulas globalizadas e dinâmicas raciais. Ao moldar sujeitos educacionais cujas características sociais e linguísticas – e especialmente as suas características de classe – são obscurecidas e empregadas em categorizações relacionadas à escola e em processos de comunicação centrados na escola, tais efeitos contribuem para a reprodução hegemônica das desigualdades sociais, linguísticas e educacionais (HYMES, 1996; MENKEN, 2008).*

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**II-** University at Albany/SUNY, Albany, NY, EUA.  
Contato: jcollins@albany.edu

## **Palavras-chave**

*Etnografia – Hegemonia – Indicialidade – Letramento – Migração – Multilinguismo – Efeitos de Estado.*

## Introduction

We live in a time of increasing awareness of social inequality, including a sobering recognition that schools must engage the divisions of class inequalities, ethnoracial stratification and fractionated citizenship while attempting to draw students' linguistic and social resources into a common project of learning. The studies discussed below examine language difference, schooling practices, and social dynamics. They are drawn from investigations into language use and such topics as schooled literacy, the interplay of race and class in minority status, and social reproduction. My enduring research engagements have been with language and literacy practices (an educational arena and field of study), linguistic anthropology (a research tradition) and social inequality (an ethical-political project as well as research area).

In my work, prior to the advent of the literacy practices framework,<sup>1</sup> the study of literacy events was part of an effort to understand institutional processes leading to social reproduction. In this initial work, I came to ideas of practice through Bourdieu's work on reproduction as practice (BOURDIEU; PASSERON, 1977) and have always viewed the study of practice as committed to investigating the dialectic of the subjective and objective in social life and social structures. This dual focus on events and structures has been shaped by conceptual frameworks and knowledge commitments originating in Linguistic Anthropology as well as what came to be called the New Literacy Studies. In particular, my research has been influenced by Gumperz' insistence on the interactive bases of meaning (1982; 1996), Silverstein's work on semiotics and indexicality (1976; 2003) and Hymes' vision of ethnography as a critical, democratic mode of knowledge (1996), as well as Street's original formulation of

an ideological model of literacy (STREET, 1984), which pushed forth both an event-centered methodology and a set of productive if unsettled questions about power. My studies of literacy have been motivated by a desire to understand its relationship to social inequality.

My intellectual horizon for understanding inequality – how it comes about, what forms it takes in everyday life, how it is reproduced, what opposes or lessens it – has been a Marxian tradition encompassing studies of economics (HENWOOD, 2003; MARX, 1906), politics (GRAMSCI, 1971), language (OHMANN, 1987), global systems (ARRIGHI, 2011; WALLERSTEIN, 1983), and intersections of class, race and gender (FOLEY 1990; WEIS 1990). Among the subjects that I have studied as a linguistic anthropologist, dispossession of linguistic resources has always accompanied economic precariousness and material scarcity, whether the people concerned were Native Americans (COLLINS, 1998), working-class African-Americans and whites struggling with school in the U.S. (BRANDA; COLLINS, 1994; COLLINS, 1999a), or migrants in Belgium and the U.S. (COLLINS, 2012; COLLINS; SLEMBROUCK, 2006).

In the argument that follows, I briefly discuss several studies of literacy and literacy practices, conceptualized from evolving perspectives within linguistic anthropology that illustrate aspects of both social practices and reproductive processes. These studies employ semiotic concepts of indexicality and ideology to examine how situated communication is linked to differing social-institutional scales in classroom settings, wider debates about language and education, and multilingual literacy practices in urban migrant neighborhoods. A final study, presented at greater length, analyzes language and education policy as social practice. It examines the implications of the federal legislation and implementation of *No Child Left Behind* for English Language Learners (ELLs), a large category of bilingual students in the U.S., many of whom are immigrants.

**1-** It began with theoretical and methodological commitment to studying literacy as an event rather than a text (HEATH, 1983), which was also a starting point for influential early work in the theory and study of what came to be called literacy practices (e.g. BAYNHAM, 1995.)

It analyzes “state effects” (TROUILLOT, 2001) as they operate in and across differing institutional sites. I conclude by arguing for the interplay of theory and ethnography in studying how broader political and institutional processes interact with language diversity in and out of schools.

### **Perspectives on literacy practices; or, an evolving conceptual framework**

My earliest academic research on literacy emerged from a context where the primary empirical and analytic focus was on the social interaction that accompanied acts of reading or writing. The overall study was the School-Home Ethnography Project, which involved year-long classroom interaction analyses of classroom literacy events as well as research into students’ social networks and their language use at home (COOK-GUMPERZ, 2006 [1986]).

### **Literacy events and indexes of identity**

My study investigated differential treatment<sup>2</sup> in classroom literacy lessons, based on a year-long study and analysis of tracked or streamed early elementary reading groups. Because I was in regular conversations with educators and sociolinguists Sarah Michaels, Jenny Cook-Gumperz, and John Gumperz, the nature of literacy events, which we discussed as activity types, and the interactional meaning making in such events, which we discussed as situated inference, were among the primary descriptive and conceptual concerns. So also was a concern with socialization, viewing teaching and learning as an exchange, in which all parties shaped one another’s evolving sense of what reading consisted of as over time students learned and teachers taught

**2-** Briefly, differential treatment referred to Civil Rights era school research reporting that students from working-class and minority backgrounds received different instruction from middle-class white students, whether in the same schools or, as was typically the case, in urban versus suburban school districts (e.g. LEACOCK, 1973).

particular ways of reading in events of reading (COLLINS, 2006[1986]; COOK-GUMPERZ, 2006 [1986]).

The primary findings from this research were that students classified as “low-ability” and “high-ability” had different approaches to text. These approaches resembled what was reported in the educational psychology research literature on the reading styles of good and poor readers as a lifelong profile: poor readers conceived of and performed reading as word-based decoding, and speed and fluency were hallmarks of good performance; good or skilled readers conceived of reading in terms of meaning, and understanding text content was the hallmark of successful reading. A question, not answered in the psychological literature on this subject, was how such differences emerged and persisted. My study was of first-grade reading groups as they developed over the course of a school year. There was evidence that the different initial orientations to reading emerged very early and persisted over the school year. My final analysis was that teachers and students socialized each other to different styles of reading. This was in part because we had evidence that students’ language use, both their use of intonation to segment syntactic and rhetorical units and their ways of pronouncing English words differed between groups. This seemed to influence their interaction with the teacher in reading lessons, during which they read aloud from text as well as answered questions about meaning.

In 1a and 1b, we see examples of reading group interaction in which response to dialect is prominent. Here the effort is to correct “gahbage can” to “garbage can”, focusing on the presence or absence of post-vocalic R. In the fuller publication, I analyze in detail what we can see from inspection below: Concern with regulating pronunciation can distract from the activity of reading (COLLINS 2006[1986], p. 158).

Figures 1 and 2: examples of reading group interaction

### Example 1a:

#### *Dialect Correction During Reading*

M: And then . . . he . . . threw his  
T: sound it out / thr:ew:  
M: bu- (boat)boat / . . . into the . . . **gahbage can** //  
T: guh-  
**gar:bage** // Say 'garbage' //  
M: **gahbage**  
T: Don't say **gahbage** / 'look at me // Say **ga:r:bage** /  
**gar:** / Say it // Everybody say it //  
CC: **gar:bage**  
T: Celena / say it //  
Ce: **gar:bage**  
T: Right // Marlon / Liza

### Example 1b:

#### *Dialect Correction During Reading*

T: What's the boy's name // . . . John  
M: John . . . said  
T: did // She saw what John did // Marlon / what  
did he do // She 'saw what he did // Now what did he do //  
M: He threw his things in the **gahbage**  
T: **gar:bage** // Right //  
Go on //

Source: Collins, 2006.

The implications of the study were several-fold. First, viewing reading lessons as literacy events orients analysts to the diverse sources of meaning making, in the text, in participants' expectations, and in their interactive responses to each other. Second, event-based processes cohere over time; as we would now say, they

travel across discursive sites. In that coherence, that inter-discursive trajectory, there is evidence of socialization to school identities as "good" or "poor" readers, and thus as "good" or "poor" students. Put otherwise, we find evidence of a pathway for how differential treatment emerges and persists, helping to produce distinct literate

identities. These implications, in turn, raise questions about social reproduction, that is, how schooling perpetuates social inequalities among students; and they raise questions about practice, that is, how mundane, everyday activities are connected to larger-scale entities, processes, and outcomes. In the case at hand, the salient question is how early primary school experiences with literacy can reinforce hierarchies of race and class in educational attainment.

Let me focus on one aspect of this multifaceted issue, the treatment of nonstandard English, that is, the correction or rejection of nonstandard English in classroom settings. I have examined this issue in historical and comparative perspective (COLLINS, 1988); explored it in a re-analysis of primary school responses to dialect, models of reading, and group interaction, using new empirical material from Chicago (COLLINS, 1996); and discussed it as part of a general argument about schooling and social reproduction (COLLINS, 2009). All of these studies explore the interplay of social categories, language use, and language evaluation. A primary question has been how responses to class differences in language use, intertwined with ideas about ethnoracial identities and associated ways of speaking, influence the school project of promoting universal literacy in Standard English (COLLINS; BLOT 2003).

### **Racialized language-ideological debates: the Ebonics controversy**

A dramatic, public illustration of language conflict over the acceptable varieties of English for public education emerged in the United States in the winter of 1996-1997, when the School District of Oakland, California, proposed to have "Ebonics," or African American Vernacular English, taught in the public schools along with Standard English. A national media furor soon followed the Oakland School Board action, and in the

ensuing national debate, it became clear that white media elite were resolutely against the proposal that Black English be taught in a public school and that middle class African Americans were also opposed, although more conflicted by the issue.

In late winter of 1997, I took part in several public forums on the Ebonics controversy at my university and in the wider community. One was held at the main public library of the City of Albany. It was organized by an African-American community organization, and featured community speakers, speakers from the state Department of Education, and myself as a university academic. Let me first give the title of the event, then briefly comment on remarks made, before turning to what I see as the wider significance of both the remarks and title. Here's the forum title (COLLINS, 1999b, p. 208-209):

#### **(2) "Ebonics: legitimate language or gibberish?"**

During the forum that night, several African-American speakers commented on the controversy and spoke to their affection for Black Speech. One audience member described it as the language she learned from her mother and family, but she and others on the panel and in the audience argued also that the vernacular, Ebonics, should be banned from any classroom setting. The conflict between intimate association and il-legitimate language was painful and telling.

What I took away from a study of this event and the wider controversy over Ebonics (COLLINS 1999b) were several points relevant for how we think about literacy practices and social inequality. First, language ideologies are often about kinds of language and kinds of people, and those ideologies shape social subjectivities, including intimate domains, such as pride and shame. Second, language-ideological debates are conflicts over what Bourdieu called "the linguistic field" (1991, p. 57, *passim*). All fields concern value, often

hinged on fundamental cultural contrasts of good and bad that are themselves rooted in material inequalities in society. With the question “Ebonics: Legitimate Language or Gibberish?” we pose a stark question of value: whether a major social dialect of American English, a primary language variety for tens of millions working-class African Americans (MUFWENE et al., 1998), can be a legitimate vehicle for acts of learning, for practices of reading or writing; or, conversely, whether Ebonics is gibberish – that is, unintelligible or meaningless noise.

I suggest that the society-wide dynamics of language hierarchy just described – in which the variety of English known as Ebonics is forbidden from the fields of education and legitimate language – must be part of the analysis of literacy practices. Here I am arguing that the analysis of literacy practices entails both the situated, ethnographic study of literacy events coupled with analysis of inter-event, structuring principles such as language hierarchization (ROGERS, 2003; WORTHAM, 2005). In the two cases discussed so far, such inter-event structuring principles are (a) investigated as processes unfolding during the ordinary course of an ordinary school year, in the classroom reading study, or they are (b) revealed in the analysis of exceptional, national debates and conflicts about legitimate language, in which an enduring national language hierarchy is challenged and powerfully re-asserted, as in the society-wide controversy over Ebonics in school. Let us note that the hierarchy involves overt issues of class and race in relation to language and education.

The field of linguistic anthropology, because of its emphasis on situated, interactional meaning and its intensive study of communicative events and inter-event structuring principles, has specific contributions to make to educational research on literacy practices. The semiotic concept of indexicality is central to the field, as are the related concepts of language ideology and

indexical ordering. Indexicality rests on a principle that the communication of non-referential, non-literal social meaning depends on knowledge of “regular relationships between language use and social structure” (GUMPERZ, 1968, p. 45). The study of such “regular relationships” has been the bedrock of linguistic anthropology, for it underpins both the normativity and performativity of language use (GUMPERZ, 1982; SILVERSTEIN, 1976). Language ideology, at its simplest, consists of statements connecting ideas about language difference to ideas about social difference, and such ideas are always suffused with moral judgments as well as political interests (IRVINE; GAL, 2000). The Ebonics controversy is a case in point. In recent decades, like much social science research, linguistic anthropologists have grappled with the challenge of reconciling micro and macro analysis. Semiotic-functional research has benefitted from Silverstein’s (2003) clear conceptual argument that we must understand interaction to extend beyond face-to-face processes, involving dialectic relations between situated, micro-analytic processes and macro-scale phenomena that, in their real-time unfolding, typically produce multiple, layered indexical orders (see also BLOMMAERT, 2005). Such orders can range, for example, from (a) the indexical layers involved in the “social meaning” signaled by the habitual classroom correction of a child’s reading aloud in a nonstandard dialect, as in the classroom study above, to (b) the indexical layers involved in the social meaning about kinds of language and kinds of people that is at stake in nation-wide debates about legitimate and illegitimate language, as in the Ebonics controversy. If we add to this semiotic focus Hymes’ vision of ethnography as a critical, democratic mode of knowledge (1996), then we have a tradition of linguistic anthropology that has contributed much to the study of communicative events in relation to wider cultural orders, social structures, and historical frames. It is a tradition that shares with the study of literacy practices assumptions

about the communicative underpinnings of social orders and a desire to use critical inquiry to make a better world (COLLINS, 2006).

Although rooted in North American Anthropology, Linguistic Anthropology has been enriched by international exchanges. In my personal work, this included collaborating in a joint engagement with both Linguistic Anthropology and Critical Discourse Analysis (BLOMMAERT et al., 2001). In addition, for several years in the last decade, I was fortunate enough to collaborate with both Jan Blommaert and Stef Slembrouck on studies of multilingualism and literacy practices in immigrant neighborhoods in Belgium, which we presented and debated at forums and conferences in Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, the UK and the US (BLOMMAERT; COLLINS; SLEMBROUCK, 2005a, b; COLLINS; SLEMBROUCK, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009).

### **Literacy practices and indexical orders**

One study which came out of the work in Belgium concerned multilingual shop signs, a phenomena that Slembrouck and I had first encountered, noted variations in, and puzzled over, during early ethnographic forays into the working-class immigrant neighborhoods that ring the Flemish city of Ghent. "Reading shop windows: Multilingual literacy practices and indexicality" (COLLINS; SLEMBROUCK, p. 2007) examined how different readers made sense of the multilingual shop signs encountered in the immigrant neighborhoods we studied. Having decided to focus on signs that featured Turkish and Dutch, we obtained translations of a set of Turkish and Dutch bilingual signs from a visiting Turkish scholar, and then later obtained translations of the same signs from a Belgian-Turkish community activist who lived in one of the neighborhoods of our study. We were intrigued by the ways in which our two Turkish-speaking interpreters attended simultaneously to features of spelling, word choice and grammar in the Turkish and Dutch signs, as well as to textual signals of the social

background and intentions of sign-makers. We were fortunate, as the research progressed, to literally triangulate: We set up an additional interpreting session with a Flemish man we knew from our fieldwork. His translations and commentary similarly combined attention to word choice, spelling, and sign design with assumptions about social background and communicative intention, which he framed in terms of a discourse about native/migrant ethnic relations in Belgium. He arrived at different interpretations from the other two, whose interpretations had differed from each other.

What this variation in response to the same sets of Turkish and Dutch shop signs led us to investigate were the indexical meanings associated with varieties of Turkish, varieties of Dutch, and the juxtaposition of Turkish and Dutch. Briefly, the Turkish academic, Meryem, read the Turkish of the signs in terms of an Istanbul educated standard, seeing evidence in the linguistic form of the signs that the writers of the signs were of rural, Anatolian, uneducated origins. Our Turkish-Belgian consultant, Nežat, examined features of Dutch as well as Turkish in the same signs, interpreting variations in signs as indicating variations in the multilingual repertoire of sign makers, which in turn indexed the signer makers' length of residence in Belgium, and their membership in different immigrant networks. Our Flemish consultant, Herman, interpreted the orthographic, lexical, and design features of signs as indexing both the kinds of immigrants who operated a given shop or enterprise and the state of immigrant/native ethnic relations in a given Flemish city.

In the interests of space, I will not discuss particular examples and analyses further (see COLLINS; SLEMBROUCK, 2007), but the lesson we drew from the alternative interpretations of Meryem, Nežat and Herman is that all reading is a contextualized practice utilizing diverse frames of interpretation. Such frames may be organised, *inter alia*, by assumptions about geographic scale, as in Meryem's contrast between rural and urban varieties; historic



social relationships, as in Nežat's evoking of migration histories to account for varieties of Turkish and Dutch; or combined linguistic-grammatical norms and sociolinguistic typifications, as Jef, in particular, utilized. In addition, and this will provide a bridge to our last study, language contact is seen in terms of class and ethnoracial differences and conflict.

In their readings of multilingual shop signs, our consultants were drawing upon widely-shared views of the contemporary world, in which large-scale working-class migrations and multilingual language practices are seen alternately and simultaneously through lenses of class and race. For Meryem, immigrants were seen as the uneducated, rural poor; for Herman, Turkish immigrants were an ethnoracial threat to Flemish livelihoods and ways of life, as Turkish was a rival to Dutch. Despite Belgium's vaunted reputation as a multilingual society, the Francophone and Dutch-speaking regions each insist on official monolingualism, especially in education (BLOMMAERT, 2005). Although we have not yet discussed it, it usually takes the work of a state to preserve the dominance of monolingual Standard language registers in the face of sociolinguistic diversity wrought by regional histories, transnational migrations, class divisions, and ethnoracial hierarchies.

In *Literacy & Literacies*, Collins & Blot (2003) provide a historical account of how state classifying practices influence literacy, attending closely to the dynamics of class, race and gender hierarchies in the history of public schooling in the U.S. In the last case, presented below, I argue that contemporary efforts to preserve the dominance of monolingual Standard English in public schooling in the United States emerge from a politics of racialized language difference (CRAWFORD, 2000; ZENTELLA, 1997) with effects that operate across different social scales, selectively dispossessing speakers whose primary languages are other than English from linguistic resources relevant for learning and literacy. We will examine how educational policy explicitly presented as a way to combat

inequality of education nonetheless contributes to such inequality.

As stated in the introductory remarks, I think the intellectual horizon for thinking about inequality remains the Marxist legacy. It offers two lessons pertinent to thinking about literacy practices in the current century:

- Lesson one: Historical capitalism, in all its variety, is organized into global systems that, in turn, generate a multiply-tiered ranking of regions and nations. Part of its restless dynamism is the construction and transformation of spatio-temporal scales. These have been fruitfully explored by sociologists (WALLERSTEIN, 1983) economists (ARRIGHI, 2011) and anthropologists (FRIEDMAN, 2003). Sociolinguists have investigated how time-space scales comprise highly-differentiated relations of verticality, that is, hierarchies or inequalities, reflected in national and global sociolinguistic fields (BLOMMAERT, 2010; COLLINS; SLEMBROUCK; BAYNHAM 2009).

- Lesson two: Language plays a vital role in forms of consciousness and structures of perception in class societies. This role has been conceptualized and analyzed as "structures of feeling", in Williams (1977) formulation; as "habitus", in Bourdieu's (1977) terminology; and as "hegemony", in Gramsci's (1971) important conception of the inextricability of state and civil society.

### **Language diversity and education policy: a contextualized analysis of state effects as literacy practice**

In an essay "Report from an Underdeveloped Country: Towards Linguistic Competence in the U.S.", Hymes provides a frank discussion of what he termed "cultural hegemony" through language:

The heart of the matter, I have suggested, is that language has been a central medium of cultural hegemony in the United States. Class stratification and cultural

assumptions about language converge in school to reproduce the social order. A latent function of the educational system is to instill linguistic insecurity, to discriminate linguistically, to channel children in ways that have an integral linguistic component, while appearing open and fair to all (HYMES, 1996 [1975], p. 84).

This is a blunt statement of social reproduction and schooling, and it still seems accurate many years after it was first presented. However, it needs reworking conceptually and empirically if we want to investigate how “class stratification and cultural assumptions converge in schools” in the 21st century or if we want to examine “latent function[s] of the educational system” after several decades of economic restructuring, shrinking support for public education, and recurrent controversies over culture, identity, language, and citizens’ rights.

In an essay on the anthropology of the state, Trouillot (2001) raises two issues relevant for such conceptual and empirical reworking. The first concerns Gramsci’s original conceptualization of hegemony and the need to think about the state as well as culture or society:

Gramsci’s insist[s] on thinking state and civil society together by way of concepts such as hegemony and historical bloc [...]. I read Gramsci as saying that, within the context of capitalism, theories of the state must cover the entire social formation and articulate the relation between state and civil society (TROUILLOT, 2011, p. 127).

Second, Trouillot argues that in our era of globalization, we cannot assume that nation and state are simply equivalent and this non-equivalence has implications for how we conceptualize and study state processes and powers:

If we suspend the state–nation homology, as I suggest we should, we reach a more powerful vision of the state, yet one more

open to ethnography, since we discover that, theoretically, there is no necessary site for the state, institutional or geographical. Within that vision, the state thus appears as an open field with multiple boundaries and no institutional fixity—which is to say that it needs to be conceptualized at more than one level (TROUILLOT, 2001, p. 127).

In what follows, I will examine empirical materials, focused on the federal legislation No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and its consequences operating “at more than one level” in the educational system. Taking inspiration from Menken’s (2008) excellent study of the multiple effects of NCLB on English Language Learners in New York City schools, I will argue the federal legislation, and its testing regimes, and its realization in classroom practices comprise *de facto* language policy. Such state practices channel children, devaluing and excluding the linguistically diverse, thus serving what Hymes’ termed a “latent function of the educational system,” but doing so across multiple social-linguistic scales and through what Trouillot terms “state effects”.

By state effects Trouillot means the decentralized practices through which political and cultural subjectivities are shaped in relation to sharpening national and transnational inequalities, especially those of race and class. Two effects discussed by Trouillot are relevant for the data and themes of this paper. First, there is an isolation effect, the “production of atomized individual subjects molded and modeled for governance as part of an undifferentiated but specific ‘public’...” (TROUILLOT, 2001, p. 126). I argue below that the category English Language Learner within No Child Left Behind legislation and implementation produces just such an isolation effect. Second, there is an identification effect, processes that align individuals within collectivities, whatever the complexities of their actual lives and histories. We will consider below how class- and race-sensitive models

of educational success and failure, operating in classroom lessons, help produce just such identification effects.

**NCLB and the discursive erasure of class at the national level: an “isolation effect”**

The signature school reform of President George W. Bush was No Child Left Behind, an unprecedented federal intervention into schooling and education. Since 2010, the reach of legislation has been scaled back, as the Obama administration has presented its own federal program for school reform, Race to the Top. As of this writing, NCLB faces strong congressional pressure to further limit its scope (NYT EDITORIAL BOARD, 2015). However, the original emphasis on standardized assessments and accountability driven by budget pressures continues under the Race to the Top funding competitions, as does the way of defining ethnolinguistic minorities (BAILEY; CARROLL, 2015; RAVITCH, 2010).

NCLB handles linguistic diversity in U.S. education by focusing on the category English Language Learners, by which is intended every public school student whose primary language is other than English and who is assessed as needing language instruction or support. English Language Learners, or ELLs, are in fact a very heterogeneous category, including those with high proficiency in English and those not; those literate in their primary languages and those not; the immigrant and the U.S.-born; those living in middle class affluence or in poverty. This definitional erasure of heterogeneity matters because it displaces the issue of social conditions on school learning from official policy discussion.

Such displacement can be seen in a federal congressional hearing on NCLB re-authorization (U.S. CONGRESS, 2007). Entitled “The Impact of No Child Left Behind on English Language Learners,” the report of this 2007 hearing presents a range of expert

testimony: from the federal Government Accountability Office on how individual states define and assess ELLs; from state university systems on how best to prepare teachers to work with ELLs; and from Hispanic advocacy organizations on problems with test validity and reliability in assessment of ELLs under NCLB. What gets mentioned only once in the long report, and is never taken up for questioning or subsequent commentary, are the following demographic facts: That  $\frac{3}{4}$  of ELL students are Spanish-speaking, and that more than “ $\frac{2}{3}$ s” or 66%, are from low-income families (U.S. CONGRESS, 2007, p. 29).

Such demographic data seem noteworthy. After three decades of English Only campaigns throughout the U.S., often targeted at Spanish language bilingual education programs, that  $\frac{3}{4}$ s of ELL students are Hispanic gives the category a strong social value (CRAWFORD, 2000). Similarly, after decades of research showing that family economic status is the strongest variable predicting with poor school performance (HENWOOD, 2011; ROTHSTEIN, 2004), that  $\frac{2}{3}$ s of ELL students live in low-income families seems relevant to understanding their performance on literacy and math assessments.

There is evidence that the demographic facts about ELLs are significant for school performance. A study by the Pew Hispanic Resource Center (FRY, 2008) describes an interplay between ELL status and social class that, in turn, creates an interpretive conundrum. It is widely-documented that ELL students perform worse on literacy and math assessments compared to non-ELL students. The report shows, however, that such students are also concentrated in schools where, on average, everyone performs worse on standardized assessments. So the interpretive problem becomes how to determine whether there is an “English Language Learner Achievement Gap” or a “Poor and Minority Kids in City Schools Achievement Gap”?

The report documents the following social class-related educational disadvantages of “ELL-reporting” schools:

- ELLs are more likely to be concentrated in central cities, rather than in suburban or rural areas; e.g. among California elementary schools, 48% of ELL-reporting schools were in central city vs. 30% non-ELL-reporting schools.

- ELLs are more likely to be concentrated in large schools, e.g. in New York elementary schools, the average size of ELL-reporting schools were 691 students vs. 456 for non ELL-reporting schools.

- ELLs are more likely to be in schools with a high proportion of student poverty, measured as the proportion of the student body eligible for free lunches, e.g. in Arizona elementary schools, 80% of the students in ELL-reporting schools were eligible for free lunches vs. 45% of students in non-ELL-reporting schools.

Such findings document the intertwining of ethnolinguistic minority status and working-class locations, schools and poverty. They raise an obvious question: How much does poverty count in school performance? This question was not asked by any of the expert witnesses testifying before the Congressional Review Panel about the impact of NCLB on ELLs. However, in an analysis of state performance rankings based on 2010 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), Henwood (2011) argues that the rate of student poverty is the most powerful statistical predictor of an individual state’s school performance on NAEP assessments ranking:

[...] almost 60% of the states’ positions in the rankings can be explained statistically by the share of the student population on free or subsidized lunches...” [Regarding students whose primary language is other than English] “... the share of students with limited English proficiency ... yields only a modest correlation coefficient ( $r = .17$ )... and adding it to the [school] lunch

model adds nothing to its explanatory power (2011, p. 3, 5).

To sum up, there is good evidence that class inequalities are implicated in ELL performance on standardized assessments, but these inequalities are not part of category definition or assessment criteria. Henwood also notes that ELL status by itself only modestly accounts for state variation on the NAEP assessments, to which I would simply observe that the burden of Fry’s (2008) report, noted above, is that ELL status and class conditions are frequently compounded, though not necessarily in ways reflected in NAEP reporting categories. I suggest that the category of ELL and its use in NCLB-mandated assessment practices performs what Trouillot terms an “isolation effect”. That is, the category and its use represents students as atomized individuals, aggregating them in normalized achievement distributions, and obscuring the connections of any cultural or historical relationship, including those of social class. It renders them instead as individuals before a state process, in particular, a federal intervention into what counts as literacy and math education and its assessment.

The following section examines a second state effect, analyzing how macro-scale cultural models and micro-scale dynamics of language use implement education policy in different ways. The ethnographic data are drawn from case studies of Korean and Mexican immigrant children in Upstate New York.

### **Social class and ethnoracial hierarchy in the differential treatment of Korean and Mexican ESL students: An “identification effect”**

In a study of primary-school Koreans in a suburban school in Upstate New York, Hong (2006) describes how the teacher of the ESL classroom she studied accommodated to the children’s primary language in various ways. The teacher in this school, which we will

call Farmer Elementary, allowed special times when the students could speak Korean amongst themselves; she brought Korean books and pictures into the classroom; she incorporated numerous references to Korean cultural practices into her teaching; and she endeavored herself to learn some Korean words and phrases.

This situation of relative linguistic accommodation differed strikingly from that discovered by myself and a research assistant when we studied how Spanish-speaking immigrant children fared in the same region (COLLINS, 2012; COLLINS; LA SANTA, 2006). One of our sites was a suburban school similar to that studied by Hong – both schools served predominantly middle class and professional populations and were high achieving schools. In the elementary school we studied, which we will call Sanderson Elementary, several teachers whose classrooms we observed said that they spoke Spanish. But they were also quick to point out that they felt Spanish should not be used with their immigrant Mexican students, and that they strove to keep Spanish out of school activities. In the ESL classroom there was no accommodation to the children's primary language.

Both groups of students brought their language repertoires into the school setting. As Hong reports, the Korean students at Farmer Elementary frequently spoke Korean among themselves. Although the ESL teacher discouraged the practice during formal lessons, she also established special times, "play time" and "snack-time," when they were free to use their primary languages. In addition, Korean also entered into the regular ESL lessons in diverse ways, as we can see from example (3):

#### (4) Example 3: Using English and Korean in ESL at Farmer

1T: (reading the book) "Aekyung went to school for the rest of the week and tried to ignore the teasing of the other children. On Sunday, Aekyung's Aunt Kim came to visit. She had

just returned from Korea with many presents for the family, fancy dress for Aekyung. "How's everything in Korea?" asked Father.

2T: What's this called? (pointing to the picture in the book, which includes a girl wearing a Korean traditional costume.).

3Dan: Uh...

4Mina: *Hanbok*.

5Kim: *Hanbok*.

6T: *Hanbok*, remember that we had that in the play last year?

7Mina: How... how do you... know... in English? Like... that English?

8T: How do I know that?

9Mina: Yeah.

10T: Because you taught me when you brought to me that dress, you taught me it was called *Hanbok*.

11Mina: No... (speaking in Korean and walking to her sister, Hana, who is sitting across the table and whispering in Korean to her).

12Hana: How do you know, like, how to say *Hanbok* in English?

13T: I think it's the same word, same word. There's no English word unless you want to say *Hanbok* fancy dress.

14Mina: Oh. That's the same thing?

15T: I think that means fancy dress.

(HONG, 2006, p. 90-91).

Several things are notable about this excerpt. First, the teacher reads to the ESL students a story about Korea (in turn 1). In addition, when she asks them for the name for a dress, and they reply in Korean, she then incorporates the Korean word, *Hanbok*, into her subsequent questions (in turn 6). When one of the students, Ming, grows frustrated with her questioning of the teacher (because of an apparent misunderstanding ) she turns to her sister, Hana, (in turn 11) and asks Hana in Korean to interpret the question to the teacher. Hana does this and the teacher supplies an answer (in turns 12 and 13). As Hong comments about this exchange, the students are not only reading about Korea, and discussing Korean

words, they are using their primary language to arrange interpreting tasks among themselves, in the service of lesson discussion.

When possible, the Mexican immigrant students at Sanderson Elementary also used their full linguistic repertoires. There were, however, no special times, such as playtime or snacktime, when they were licensed to do so. Instead, they were repeatedly enjoined to only speak English in school settings. They were likely, however, to use both Spanish and English when there were enough Spanish-speakers present to constitute a sub-group within a classroom. One such occasion occurred during an ESL lesson late in our research period. During this lesson, there were four Spanish speakers in the room: three young girls plus our project research assistant. Throughout the class period, the ESL teacher interacted with the students solely in English.

Thus in example (4a), a student, MV, asks the teacher about a picture/word vocabulary-building activity in which they identify words and circle animals. As we see, all business is conducted in English: MV asks “This is elephant?”; the teacher acknowledges the question, but corrects MV’s work and sends her back to finish the sheet.

#### **(4a) Example 4a: Receiving instructions in English in ESL at Sanderson**

(MV approaches teacher, T).

T: Sure can, bring it over here (to MV).

MV: This is elephant?

T: Uh, no... FINISH and then come and see me.

MV: Ok.

During this same lesson the project research assistant, (AL), a fluent bilingual, had been working with another student on a similar vocabulary activity. She would pose her questions in English, but allow the student to reply with answers or questions in Spanish or English. At one point, shown in the next

example (4b), MV and a new girl approach (AL), in order for MV to introduce the new girl:

#### **(4b) Example 4b: Introductions in Spanish at Sanderson**

1 MV: Ella es mi prima (She is my cousin.).

2 AL: Si? Como se llama? (Yes? What is her name?)

3 MV: Ella? (Her?)

4 AL: Uh huh.

5 MV: LAURA [lawra]... Pero se dice “Laura” [lorə] en ingles.

6 (LAURA [lawra]...but you say “Laura” [lorə] in English).

We can see in this exchange that the Sanderson students – like the Farmer students – have metapragmatic as well as metalinguistic knowledge in their primary languages, which they use in organizing interaction during classwork. MV introduces her new classmate and also comments on the differences in Spanish and English pronunciation of the name Laura ([lawra]/[lorə]). The exchange resembles example (3), depicting Korean as used at Farmer Elementary, in this regard: When the use of the primary language was interactionally-enabled by speaker demographics, the children would use both languages, for social interaction as well as pedagogical tasks.

Normatively, however, Spanish was never a licensed part of the classroom at Sanderson Elementary. The predominant pattern at Sanderson was as shown in example (4a), with interaction restricted to English. The pattern was consistent in the half dozen ESL lessons we observed. In addition, the principal of the school, as well as two of the classroom teachers whose classrooms we studied, articulated very clearly their commitment to English Only instruction. Under this language regime, that is, in these linguistic circumstances, the Spanish-speaking students were much quieter and restricted themselves to brief exchanges in English.

An initial question is why the ethnolinguistic difference of Korean students at Farmer was viewed as a resource to be used in learning English, while the ethnolinguistic difference of Mexican students at Sanderson was viewed as a hindrance to learning the same language. In appreciating this puzzle, we should also recall that at Farmer the teachers, including the ESL teacher, did not know Korean, whereas at Sanderson some of the teachers did claim to know Spanish, though they did not use the language in classroom activities. It seems that we are not dealing with objective linguistic or cultural differences, but rather with how differences are perceived. The literature on Asian immigrants as model minorities shows that there is a wide-spread cultural stereotype in which Asian immigrants are presumed to be middle-class, destined for success in schools, and likely to acquire “good” English (PARK, 1996; SHANKAR, 2008). Conversely, non-model minorities – African Americans, Latinas/os, and Native Americans – are presumed to be working-class, or poor, at-risk for failure in school, an unlikely (or unwilling) to acquire good English. Such stereotypes often have some basis in social realities, though as typifications they inevitably simplify and skew the realities they frame. The Korean students at Farmer did come from professional, middle class families, while the Mexican students at Sanderson were from working-class families, but these socioeconomic contrasts were bundled together with assumptions about safe and problematic language and kinds of student.

Based on Hong’s descriptions of relations between the school and home, the middle-class Korean migrant students in ESL at Farmer seem to have been viewed as model minorities. The school staff valued the children’s language and culture: “Students’ heritage language and culture [were] considered as valuable resources to facilitate students’ acquisition of English as well as to connect home and school throughout the school year” (HONG, 2006, p. 60). The ESL teacher encouraged the students’ parents to

volunteer in the children’s classroom, and the ESL program organized several celebrations to acknowledge the achievements of the Korean students in learning (HONG, 2006, p. 61). In brief, their language difference was seen as a resource for learning and thus was licensed in some school settings. In contrast, the working-class Mexican migrant students in ESL at Sanderson were not seen as model minorities. The school principal warmly endorsed the ethos of hard work and family cohesion that she and members of the teaching staff perceived as traits of the Mexican migrant families, but she and members of staff also said that because of language differences, the parents were not able to help their students with schoolwork. In the course of our classroom visits and teacher interviews, we heard the discourse of “language problems” from the principal, several regular classroom teachers, and a reading specialist.

Given the differing responses to language diversity in classroom ESL lessons, and the staff perceptions of student languages and family backgrounds as resources or barriers to learning, it seems that a model minority stereotype is operating. I suggest that it contributes to the advantages Korean speaking students in ESL classes encounter at one school, by drawing on their existing linguistic and social resources, and to the disadvantages Spanish-speaking students in ESL classes encounter at another school, by excluding their existing linguistic and social resources. I argue further that recurrent everyday enactments of this cultural model provide school children with an intimate encounter with a second state effect, what Trouillot terms an “identification effect”. These are processes that align atomized individuals into collectivities; in the case at hand, they align students into ethnicized versus racialized ethnolinguistic categories (URCIUOLI, 1996).

Lest connecting widely-circulating cultural stereotypes to state processes seems far-fetched, we should bear in mind that the model minority stereotype arose in reaction to the demands of the 1960s Civil Rights

movements. Those movements mounted collective demands for redress from state and national governments, based especially on African American, Latino and Native American organizations, mobilizations, and civil disobedience. In response to this process, beginning in the early 1970s, popular, academic, and governmental discourses emerged in which Asian immigrants were represented as an alternative, “model” minority (LEE, 2009; SHANKAR, 2008), an ethnoracial minority, to be sure, but one destined for success.

## Conclusion

In the preceding case, we have seen that in order to understand literacy or language policy as a social practice, it is necessary to examine how policy operates across multiple levels, from national legislation to face-to-face interaction in classrooms. In order to conduct such multi-leveled analysis, a conceptual focus is necessary, and I have argued for a focus on hegemony and state effects. Hegemony encourages us to examine, as Hymes noted, how class stratification and cultural assumptions about language converge in the school. The Gramscian rejection of the dichotomy between state and civil society, between public and private spheres, poses new challenges for the study of state processes and powers and enables more supple conceptions of relations between the official and the popular, such as those between official definitions of language problems and widely circulating stereotypes of kinds of minorities.

The concept of state effects derives from a vision of the state “as an open field with multiple boundaries and no institutional fixity” (TROUILLOT, 2001, p. 127), needing to be conceptualized at more than one level, and needing ethnographic study in order to document and analyze the diverse contexts in which state effects operate, as forms of power shaping social subjects, whether in civil or state, private or public settings. All of the

preceding analyses have shown that alertness to indexical meaning in language use and its layering into local and broader-scale ideologies of language and person are ways of exploring the social and the linguistic. Concepts of index and ideology help us investigate and understand how cultural-historical frames of differing generality – national, institutional, organizational, personal – are evoked and “made practical” in immediate circumstances of communication.

In Menken’s (2008) excellent sociolinguistic and comparative study of the implementation of NCLB in New York City schools, she argues that NCLB represents de facto language and education policy. Analyzing the linguistic complexities of test questions, the hierarchy of languages created by translation protocols, students’ comments on the stigma of being classified as ELLs, and teachers’ reports on their curriculum planning in response to NCLB, Menken concludes as follows:

[...] No Child Left Behind is a language policy, even though it is not presented as such and rarely seen in this light. *At every level of the educational system*, the law’s top-down testing policies are interpreted and negotiated, such that all of the individuals involved become language policymakers, with teachers acting as the final arbiters of policy. Tests are de facto language policy in schools, and essentially become policy for language education when curriculum and teaching are aligned to the tests. Testing and accountability under the law ultimately reflect a ‘language-as-problem’ or ‘deficit model’ orientation in recent US language policy, where language has become a liability for ELLs (MENKEN, 2008, p.160; emphasis added).

Menken’s conclusions provide an apt illustration of Hymes’ (1996 [1975], p. 84) insight that “a latent function of the education system is to instill linguistic insecurity, to discriminate



linguistically...,while appearing open and fair to all,” allowing language to function “as a central medium of cultural hegemony”.

I have built upon this insight by analyzing several state effects, dispersed through a variety of sites and social scales, in which a semiotic processes of category formation and indexical-inferential processes connecting language use to social regularities both create and reflect social realities. This dialectic between creativity and presupposition, performativity and normativity, is a broader social-semiotic movement at whatever scale it operates, whether it concerns the treatment of dialect differences in reading groups, or the treatment of different languages in ESL classrooms. Both

the nation-wide controversy over Ebonics in school and the national implementation of a policy category, English Language Learner, evoke and presuppose language ideologies that link varieties of language to kinds of person. In so doing, they evoke and obscure significant cultural and historical relationships to inequality. Inequality is a feature of all known human societies (FOLEY, 1997), but economic inequalities are fundamental in capitalist societies. Understanding the complex relations of economic inequalities to quotidian capacities for communication and thought, including schooled forms of literacy, remains a pressing challenge for the anthropology of education.

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**James Collins** is a professor of Department of Anthropology at University at Albany – State University of New York (SUNY).