

Institutional language policing and the maintenance of race-class inequalities

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Abstract

In this article, we show how Ofsted operates as institutional language police, and how the inspectorate's attitudes about language maintain race-class inequalities under a guise of social justice, equality and evidence-based practice. Our research has repeatedly demonstrated how Ofsted reproduces long-standing, deficit-based and colonial logics that marginalised children lack adequate language, and that school is a place where they can be compensated for these supposed shortcomings. We outline three key areas of this work. First, we trace the kind of research about language that Ofsted draws on to build the so-called evidence-base which underpins its contemporary policies. Second, we reveal the language ideologies that circulate in school inspection reports and how the inspectorate evaluates the language of teachers and pupils. Finally, we show how these stances on language have direct impact on the lives of teachers and children in schools. We argue that the extent of the language policing and discrimination we have uncovered in Ofsted's policies and reporting demonstrates that these are not simply individual mistakes but an institutionalised, systemic and normalised feature of the inspectorate's practice.

Keywords: Ofsted; language policy; language policing; race-class inequalities; inspection report; standard English; ability; discrimination

Ofsted, whiteness and language ideology

In this article, we reflect on our recent collaborations which have shown how Ofsted operates as institutional language police, and how the inspectorate's attitudes about language maintain race-class inequalities under a guise of social justice, equality and evidence-based practice.¹ Our findings are based on multiple datasets, including historical and contemporary school and teacher education inspection reports, inspectorate policy, classroom observations and interviews with practising teachers where we have repeatedly demonstrated how Ofsted reproduces long-standing, deficit-based and colonial logics that marginalised children lack adequate language, and that school is a place where they can be compensated for these supposed shortcomings.

Our analysis shifts attention away from the stigmatised speaker and towards what we have conceptualised as *the white ears of Ofsted*. The white ears of Ofsted represent a version of what Pak calls a state listening subject, defined as a 'host of state-representative

actors that listen, perceive, and rearticulate on behalf of the larger state'.² Our critique is not concerned with individual inspectors but with an institution, and what we argue is a structural design feature of the inspectorate which discriminates against low-income and racialised speakers. We see whiteness and economic privilege as fundamental design features of Ofsted, with its latest workforce statistics showing how 92 per cent of inspectors are white and earn an annual salary of around £70,000.³ As such, our argument is that the inspectorate's judgements about spoken language are made through its predominantly white, middle-class ears and ways of listening. Educational linguists have long shown that white, economically privileged communities are the architects of normative ideologies about language,⁴ and that these are anchored to European colonial representations of the purportedly inferior language of Black African and Indigenous communities.⁵ Put simply, our work has exposed how Ofsted maintain these ideologies.

Our research about Ofsted and language has focused on three things, which correspond to the organisation of this article. First, we have traced the kind of research about language that Ofsted draw on to build its so-called evidence-base which underpin its contemporary policies. Second, we have examined language ideologies in school inspection reports and how the inspectorate evaluates the language of teachers and pupils in relation to constructions and dichotomies such as 'in/correct grammar', 'speaking im/properly' and 'non/standard English'. Finally, we show how these stances on language have direct impact on the lives of teachers and children in schools. We put terms such as 'standard English' in scare quotes to problematise them, highlight their existence as social constructions, and reject the assumption that they are real, audible things that can easily be defined in a way everyone agrees upon. Who gets to decide, for example, what counts as 'proper', 'academic' or 'standard' speech, and what are the consequences for speakers who are perceived to deviate from these imagined boundaries? These are just two of the core questions that motivate our research agenda.

Ofsted's use of research about language in its contemporary policies

In this section we focus on the kind of research about language that Ofsted relies on in order to build its so-called evidence-based policymaking. Since the mid 2010s, Ofsted has placed an increasing reliance on academic research in its policies, as part of a narrative of scientific robustness and 'what works' which claim to centre the interests of racially and economically disadvantaged children.

Following the publication of Ofsted's 'curriculum research reviews' in 2022, others have raised concerns about a lack of rigour, the misuse of research and unsubstantiated theory.⁶ We echo these concerns and raise broader questions about Ofsted's use of research to inform its policies on language. Cushing's work has critiqued the kinds of research about language that Ofsted uses to underpin its inspection frameworks.⁷

This work has traced how Ofsted relies on academic research rooted in deficit perspectives about working-class and racially marginalised children's language. Deficit perspectives frame marginalised children as lacking adequate language and pose that school is a place where they can be compensated for their supposed shortcomings, typically through targeted interventions which ask them to modify their language so that it resembles that of white, able-bodied middle-class communities.⁸

These logics place responsibility on the most marginalised members of society to adapt their language, under the false narrative that these modest, language-based reforms are the solution to social disparities and open the door to social mobility. For example, in speeches and documents which framed new inspection frameworks, Ofsted labels marginalised children as displaying 'impoverished language' and 'limited vocabulary'.⁹ The 2019 education inspection framework calcified these ideologies of linguistic deficit by relying on academic knowledge production rooted in tiered vocabulary,¹⁰ and the so-called word gap.¹¹ Tiered vocabulary is a framework built on a hierarchical organisation of words which emerged from experiments conducted on almost exclusively Black, low-income children, and the claim that they are less likely to experience 'language rich' environments at home and to use language in 'reflective, playful, or novel ways'.¹² The word gap emerged from a single US research study that collected language data from 42 families in Kansas across three socio-economic categories ('professional', 'working-class' and 'welfare') in the 1980s. All families in the 'welfare' group were Black. Extrapolating from this limited data, Hart and Risley approximate that by the age of four, children from low-income households have been exposed to 30 million fewer words than those from affluent households. However, these findings have never been replicated; indeed, a study that set out to do so did not support Hart and Risley's oft-cited claim.¹³ More concerningly, others before us have shown how the original research relied on racist, classist and anti-Black methodologies which miscategorised low-income, Black families as linguistically inferior and used these framings as a justification to place these communities in remedial programmes.¹⁴

Despite the anti-Blackness that lies at the core of tiered vocabulary and the word gap, they are concepts which are feverishly taken up by Ofsted, who in turn, frames marginalised children as displaying linguistic deficiencies which require remediation if they are to experience social justice.¹⁵ 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, claiming that, for example, 'the correlation between vocabulary size and life chances is as firm as any correlation in educational research' and that 'children from the most disadvantaged background ... heard a narrower range of vocabulary, than their more advantaged peers'.¹⁶ Similar deficit-perspectives are found in Ofsted's 2022 subject-specific research reviews, where schools are told that 'developing spoken

language is especially important for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are the most likely to be word-poor', and are encouraged to subscribe to tiered vocabulary and word gap interventions to 'reduce the word gap in the early years', and to enable disadvantaged children to 'develop their vocabulary faster'.¹⁷

It is important to stress that these policy discourses have direct and harmful implications for schools. For example, Cushing's work has shown how literacy leaders subscribed to word gap ideologies in their own school-level policies, which resulted in low-income, Black children having their language policed in ways that did not happen for their white, middle-class peers.¹⁸ Similarly, interviews with racially marginalised pre-service teachers revealed how school-based mentors would often justify accent policing in reference to Ofsted policies and the expectations in these about complying with normative patterns of spoken language.¹⁹ Our concern then, is how these messages about linguistic normativity in Ofsted policy find their way into schools, and how teachers and school leaders justify their own policy decisions about language in reference to top-down messages from Ofsted and the underlying academic research found in these.

Attitudes and ideologies about spoken language in inspection reports

The purported 'lack' of vocabulary in children from marginalised backgrounds is often associated with a 'lack' of standardised grammar and an apparent inability to 'speak in full sentences', all of which are ideologically packaged as a communicative mode that limits academic development. This was apparent in our investigation of Ofsted inspection reports, where language that is perceived by inspectors to not align with white, middle-class norms is described in terms of gaps, restrictions, and deficiencies.²⁰ The following extracts from school inspection reports illustrate this point (with date of publication shown and our emphases in italics):

Many pupils have a poor command of standard English and have only a *limited* range of vocabulary and advanced speech structures. (2000)

Lack of standard forms of English is still evident and general vocabulary often remains *restricted*. (2003)

Pupils' speech is *poorly constructed* and very ungrammatical. They use a *limited* range of vocabulary and regular employ 'thingy' and 'whatsit' in the gaps for words that they would like to use, but cannot recall (or do not know). They mimic the speech pattern they hear and employ slang and colloquialisms as if this is the only way to speak. (2005)

[S]peaking skills are *restricted* by the *poor* command of standard English ... most pupils have very *poor* language skills on entry. (2019)

We constructed a digital database of 3000 Ofsted school inspection reports published

between 2000 and 2020, and then searched this for phrases that were representative of different attitudes and ideologies about spoken language (such as ‘speak clearly’, ‘correct grammar’, ‘fluent speech’, and so on). Across this data, we found an overwhelming number of instances where inspectors had made negative judgements about speech they heard as ‘non-standard’, and that these judgements were particularly marked in schools serving racialised children from low-income homes. These judgements assumed that ‘standard English’ applies to speech as well as writing, and made a link between ‘standard English’ and correctness. As we alluded to above, from a language ideological perspective, the notion of a spoken ‘standard’ is based on beliefs about what counts as ‘good’ speech, and which social groups speak in ‘better’ or ‘worse’ ways. In England, ‘good’ speech has been associated, historically, with white middle-class speakers from the South East of England.²¹

Negative comments about spoken language were targeted at both teachers and pupils. A 2018 report of a school described how ‘some teachers model incorrect grammar in their spoken English’, whilst a 2016 report noted how ‘adults use slang’. In a 2019 report, Ofsted criticised a school on the grounds that:

Some adults have weak spoken standard English and grammar ... Too many staff make errors in their standard spoken English when they teach. In some cases, this means that they model bad habits or teach incorrect grammar. Leaders should make sure that all staff, when they teach, use correct standard English. Leaders need to ensure consistency to avoid confusing the children. Staff need to do more to correct pupils’ poor language or vocabulary.

Teachers we interviewed described how pressure from Ofsted and other accountability measures cause a ‘domino effect’ in which teachers are made to feel that they must model ‘standard English’ in their own speech, and then transfer this expectation to their students through overt correction and language policing.²² We found evidence in Ofsted’s reporting that teachers are congratulated for doing just that. For instance, a 2016 report described how ‘teachers model standard English well and readily correct incorrect use of English’, whilst a 2015 report described the good practice of teachers who would ‘paraphrase speaking in standard English when pupils lapse into the local dialect’. Praise was also offered to schools who had implemented ‘slang ban’ policies, where words categorised as overly informal are prohibited from being used in the classroom. A 2013 report highlighted that ‘in the best lessons, teachers reference the need for standard English and students are provided with a list of banned words’, whilst one school was commended for its progress in ‘almost eradicating the use of ‘like’ as a sentence connective’ (2014). Here we can see evidence that, for the inspectorate, those who are perceived as speaking in ‘standard English’ are equated with correctness, properness and high-quality teaching, whereas the opposite is true for those who are

perceived to use features classified as ‘non-standard’.

These discourses of deficit are produced by an institution who increasingly attempts to provide a social justice and liberal progress narrative to its work. For example, in a video presented by Ofsted’s deputy director of schools, Matthew Purves, he claims that ‘disadvantaged children are often those who have access to the fewest number of words heard in conversation and don’t have access to the most complex words in conversation’ and that ‘this is about equity and it’s about social justice’.²³ We firmly oppose this vision of social justice and reject the notion that modest, language-based reforms are the solution to the structural and intersectional inequalities that marginalised families are confronted with. Indeed, our work found that some of the most hostile comments about language Ofsted made were in relation to schools serving low-income and racially minoritised communities. For example, in one 2004 report of a school that served a community of economically disadvantaged students, the inspectorate gave a lengthy description of how ‘non-standard English’ was working as a barrier to creativity, imagination and complex thought:

Throughout the school, one of the main barriers to pupils’ achievement is their lack of descriptive vocabulary either verbally or in written form. Many pupils struggle to answer questions in full sentences and often revert to phrases, one-word answers or gestures. The spoken English of the majority of pupils does not conform to Standard English with words like ‘of’ and ‘have’; ‘was’ and ‘were’; ‘is’ and ‘are’ being inter-used. This, together with pupils’ limited use of descriptive English is hindering their creative efforts. Many pupils do not have the confidence to move into an imagined world because they feel they do not have the language to support their creative ideas. Too frequently, this results in pupils taking the simple alternative. (2004)

Significantly, speaking ‘standard English’ was often associated by Ofsted with higher ability (e.g., ‘more able pupils use standard English fluently’), while those using non-standardised accents and dialects (predominantly those from low-income and minoritised backgrounds) were positioned as less able, lacking in clarity, badly behaved, unwilling to learn and confused. A 2000 report of a school in Moss Side, one of the most economically deprived areas of Manchester and serving a majority Black Caribbean community, drew links between low academic ability and the presence of classed and racialised language, in a clear example of accent-based discrimination:

By the age of eleven, many pupils have fallen behind, and are not achieving satisfactorily, particularly the boys. The more able pupils are mainly speaking standard English in school, with sound pronunciation and good sense. A few pupils lack clarity in their speech which results in some confusion in the way they say ‘t’ and ‘th’, as ‘d’ or ‘f’.

We want to be clear in stating that the only connection between how someone is perceived to use language and how they are perceived in terms of their willingness to learn, their interest in school, their discipline and their intellectual ability is an ideological one. Yet when these ideological links between language and personhood are made by Ofsted, they reify and calcify long-standing assumptions that racialised and working-class children require remediation through compensatory methods. As we demonstrate in the following section, these assumptions have serious consequences for children's experience of schooling.

The impact of Ofsted language policy on schools

The way Ofsted writes about language in its reports, guidance and research reviews has far-reaching consequences, because these unevidenced and potentially damaging ideas about language filter into local school policies and pedagogical choices. We demonstrate this in relation to two areas in which Ofsted has promoted uninformed views about language: the relationship between speech and writing; and the perceived link between language, student background and ability.

Our analysis of inspection reports demonstrates that Ofsted often conflates speech and writing, and promotes the unevidenced notion that talking in 'standard English' bears direct consequences on the development of pupils' literacy. The confusion between speech and writing is most apparent in Ofsted's focus on speaking in 'full sentences', a phrase that was used to frame pupils' spoken language as 'limited', 'struggling' or 'high attaining':

Higher attaining children answer in full sentences, whilst the average use shorter phrases. (2003)

Many pupils struggle to answer questions in full sentences and often revert to phrases, one-word answers or gestures. (2004)

All members of staff are highly effective in their promotion of speaking and listening. Children are encouraged to speak in full sentences, and are able to hold a conversation with adults and other children. (2018)

Here, patterns of written standardised English are erroneously used as a benchmark to rate the audible quality of speech and the ability of children to engage in everyday conversation. There is a long history of the notion of speaking in 'full sentences' being used by proponents of deficit discourses to claim that marginalised children are incapable of producing the language necessary for success in schooling. For instance, Bereiter and Engelmann's work,²⁴ which dominated deficit thinking in the 1960s, frames the speech of Black, working-class children as 'lack[ing] the solidity and wholeness that characterises the child reared in a linguistically rich environment' (*ibid.*, p54) and having an inability

to 'speak in sentences that are composed of discrete words' (*ibid.*, p42).

Ofsted also makes explicit links between the presence of non-standardised grammar in speech and writing. While a range of features were marked out as particularly unsuitable (e.g., 'ain't', 'yous', 'we done'), variation in *was/were* received particular attention:

Average and below average pupils in Year 6 still tend to write as they speak: 'We got on the carpet easy. It was very hot when we was walking around' or 'I went to see my baby cosin and I holded him'. (2001)

... a minority of pupils sometimes forget to write in standard English and they intersperse their written work with words or phrases that they use in their everyday speech. For example, some pupils write, 'We was going' rather than 'We were going' ... These errors are not addressed by your teachers and so the errors recur. (2019)

Our work also found that teachers can come to internalise these views, believing it to be pedagogically productive to correct pupils' speech as well as their writing. Teachers we interviewed made comments such as: 'I think if we don't correct spoken form then it does reflect into their writing, and they do end up writing it incorrectly'.²⁵ These teachers named Ofsted and other top-down policy pressures as being influential in their approach to language. They described how they are made to feel that they must model 'correct' speech for their pupils in order to ensure that the children produce standardised English in their speech and writing: 'You have to use *was* and *were* correctly, and if you're not, the children use *was* and *were* incorrectly and then they write it down incorrectly, and then they're suddenly not writing standard English and then they're not at age-related expectation' (primary teacher, Leeds).

However, contrary to the perception in Ofsted reporting and teacher discourse that non-standardised grammar is a significant issue in relation to pupils' developing literacy, we found it to be relatively infrequent in pupil writing. Non-standardised *was* appeared less than once per 1000 words in written work we examined from pupils in Leeds and London, despite teachers believing it to be 'a huge issue' that 'come[s] through *massively* in writing'. In addition, some forms that are routinely problematised by Ofsted and corrected in pupils' speech (e.g. *ain't*, as in 'I ain't got any') did not occur in their writing at all.²⁶

We have argued that teachers are sensitive to non-standardised speech not because it really *is* an issue in relation to developing their pupils' writing – we have shown that it is not – but because it is *highlighted* as an issue in educational policy and evaluative mechanisms, including in Ofsted documentation and inspection reports.²⁷ This is consequential because children whose language is regularly corrected or negatively evaluated at school may be less likely to participate in classroom discussion.²⁸ These

students will miss out on opportunities to share and refine their thinking through classroom dialogue. This is significant because a growing body of research has shown that children who participate in academically stimulating classroom discussion – what researchers have termed ‘dialogue’ – do better than their peers who have not had this experience. Gains in achievement have been most significant for children from low socio-economic status backgrounds.²⁹ Thus, good quality classroom discussion has a significant impact on children’s learning and cognitive development and can be a lever for educational equity, but only where all pupils participate. This requires the provision of a ‘safe space’ which ‘privileges standards of reasoning over “correct” forms of expression’.³⁰ Hence, ‘policing’ pupils spoken language works *against* the social justice agenda Ofsted purportedly aligns with, because it denies pupils the opportunity to participate in academically productive talk that would enhance their learning. We want to emphasise, however, that we do not see dialogic talk as a single solution for addressing social inequalities, for that would risk relying on the very same logics that underpin language-based interventions as discussed above.

We have further shown that Ofsted reinforces an unsubstantiated and potentially dangerous interaction between speaking ‘standard English’, student characteristics (such as race or class), and ability (or related characteristics like clarity, fluency and confidence). These views are also present in schools. For example, in a study designed to facilitate dialogic teaching and learning, Snell and Lefstein found that participating teachers appealed to aspects of their pupils’ social background as an explanation for lack of achievement, and especially for poor linguistic skills. Many of the teachers identified a ‘gap’ between students they believed experienced lots of talk at home and those for whom ‘obviously, nothing goes on at home, at all’.³¹ The English of this second group was characterised as ‘quite poor’ and their language ‘very limited’ and lacking ‘the kind of richness of vocabulary and extended language that you can get in other kinds of areas’.³² These pupils were considered less able and not capable of participating in cognitively stimulating classroom discussion. These beliefs affected how teachers interacted with their pupils. For instance, teachers tended to pose open and cognitively demanding questions only to those pupils perceived as articulate and high ability, and they posed closed and/or cognitively undemanding questions to pupils perceived as inarticulate or low ability. Consequently, pupils perceived as high ability engaged in more productive interactions with their teacher, while those perceived as low ability were often involved in unproductive interactions which were not conducive to their learning or to their identities as learners.

Thus, when Ofsted fortifies links between ‘standard English’, ‘academic language’ and ability, there are material consequences in the classroom for pupils who speak non-standardised English who may be perceived as low ability and/or not capable of participating in academically robust classroom discussion. Once again, these pupils will

miss out on opportunities to make their thinking public, and thus to extend and refine their reasoning. In reality, of course, there is no link between standardised English and ability – complex ideas can be expressed in a variety of different linguistic forms and styles³³ – but belief in this link can drive behaviour that is detrimental to some children, especially those marginalised because of their race or class.

Conclusion

Our work contributes to broader discussions about the negative impacts that Ofsted have on teachers, school leaders, and children. We know that these impacts are felt disproportionately by schools serving underprivileged communities, who are more likely to have poor Ofsted grades, and who, as a consequence, are more likely to scrutinise teachers' work and impose greater uniformity of practice, with this pressure often passed to students.³⁴ Our research has shown that Ofsted's strict position on spoken language is discriminatory on the grounds of both race and class because it encourages language policing, and this has a negative impact on the teachers and pupils involved (who are disproportionately people of colour and/or living in areas of socio-economic disadvantage). Language policing and discrimination damage speakers' confidence, motivation and sense of identity, which has a negative impact on their educational experience. Crucially, it also risks shutting down spoken interaction in the classroom and thus runs counter to the proven benefits of dialogic talk for learning (evidenced by a wealth of research on dialogic pedagogy and highlighted in policy by the 2021 Oracy APPG *Speak for Change* report).³⁵ This compounds the disadvantage that underprivileged pupils in England face from a narrowing of the curriculum,³⁶ increased discipline,³⁷ and a degree of teaching to the test that disproportionately affects schools in poorer areas.³⁸

The extent of the language policing and discrimination we have uncovered in Ofsted's policies and reporting demonstrates that these are not simply individual mistakes, but an institutionalised, systemic and normalised feature of the inspectorate's practice. Indeed, we found clear evidence of oppressive ideologies about language in inspection reports dating back to the mid-1800s and the formation of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Schools.³⁹ Cushing also found evidence of these ideologies in HMI reports of schools in former British colonies.⁴⁰ Whilst our work has shown how deficit, anti-Black and colonial ideologies about language are undoubtedly institutionalised design features of Ofsted, we want to stress that these ideologies frequently underpin academic knowledge production in education and linguistics, and that Ofsted cites and relies on this kind of research to craft its own narratives on what counts as evidence and social justice. Our work has repeatedly pushed back against these stances and logics which place the burden on marginalised children to modify the way they use language. These 'solutions' simply maintain, rather than address, inequalities because they leave untouched the

broader structures of racial and economic injustices. Instead, we situate our analyses within wider research on the social psychology of language and raciolinguistics, which has shown that those who are not seen as speakers of 'standard English' will never be heard or perceived as legitimate speakers of 'standard English'.⁴¹ This body of work challenges the notion that promoting 'standard English' is an issue of social justice because the speech of some children will continue to be heard as inadequate, regardless of the grammar or vocabulary they use. Put differently, language ideologies are never just about language.

Whenever we have presented our work to academics and teachers, a question we are always asked is whether we have engaged with Ofsted, and if so, what the response has been. To date, we have had three private meetings with Ofsted representatives where we have voiced our concerns and presented evidence that Ofsted plays an active role in perpetuating race and class inequalities. Despite this, the responses to our work from Ofsted have been inadequate. So far, it seems that the white ears of Ofsted have not been listening to our concerns. As we write this, Martyn Oliver has just been announced as Ofsted's next chief inspector. Given that Oliver was one of the commissioners of the Sewell Report on race disparities in the UK,⁴² a document which attempted to deny the existence of institutional racism and recommended that terms such as white privilege be avoided, we have little confidence that Ofsted's future activities will take seriously our concerns.

We have always remained open to working with the inspectorate. Whilst we are not averse to Ofsted inspectors engaging with training about language diversity and inequality, we want to express caution that any training which simply seeks to modify individual attitudes is not sufficient to mitigate against the likelihood of language discrimination in the inspectorate's future work. Furthermore, any training about language should be located within a broader programme of staff development which connects issues of language struggle to issues of class and race-based injustices, and directly addresses the structural and colonial conditions of inequality which produce language stigma. When language discrimination is a foundational feature of an institution, as in the case of Ofsted, any anti-discrimination efforts require large-scale, systemic transformations, rather than modest and reformist alterations. As part of these structural changes, we recommend that Ofsted conducts a thorough review and update of its policy on spoken language to focus on the content of speech rather than form of expression. The aim should be for schools to provide pupils with a safe space within which to hone their ideas and develop their skills in reasoning and argumentation. Ofsted should further review and update its training materials and future policy outputs. Finally, we suggest that Ofsted reflects on the nature and scope of the academic research about language which it relies on, and its conceptualisation of issues of social and racial justice.

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Notes

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