How Early Maternal Language Input Varies By Race and Education Level and Predicts Later Child Language At School Entry

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Rationale and Study Goals
1. Mothers with higher SES have been shown to use great quantity of language and complexity of language with their young children (Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2003; 2006; Huttenlocher et al., 2010; Vernon-Feagans et al., 2013) which in turn has been related to children’s early language. The SES gap has been called “the Word Gap”.
2. This study focused on disentangling maternal education and race in examining maternal language input and race by collecting language data in the home during a wordless picturebook task from 6-36 months and examining child language during the transition to school in a large sample.
3. This study also examined whether maternal language input was a mediator of the relationship between maternal education and later child language and if there were differences by race.

Sample and Methods
- Participants from The Family Life Project, a representative sample of every baby born to a mother who lived in one of six rural counties in Pennsylvania and North Carolina, over sampling for poverty and African American (N = 1292)

Findings for Research Question 1: Disentangling education and race
- No race differences on five maternal language input variables within maternal education and only one race difference on child language within maternal education.
- Large maternal language input differences and child language by maternal education

Findings for Research Question 2: Maternal language input as a mediator
- Maternal language number of different words, mean length of utterance and wh-questions were partial mediators between maternal education and child language
- There were no race differences in the mediation models

Maternal Language Output as a Mediator between Maternal Education and Later Child Language
- Maternal Language Complexity as a Mediator between Maternal Education and Later Child Language

Summary
- No race differences within maternal education levels on five measures of maternal language input from 6 to 36 months.
- Number of different words, mean length of utterance and number of wh-questions were partial mediators of the relationship between maternal education and later child language at school age.

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