



On the Language of Lower-Class Children

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On the Language of Lower-Class Children

It is a commonplace observation that the language of lower-class children differs remarkably from the standard English in which most school business is transacted. Difficulties caused by the differences in language probably contribute to the fairly widespread disaffection of lower-class children from our public school culture. All too often, these children do not succeed in our schools, do not know the satisfaction enjoyed by children of the higher classes, and, in general, are unable to use much that the school teaches.

Lower-class English may be viewed as an inferior version of standard English. Or the two may be considered as points on a continuum that ranges from the most formal to the most free. Or standard and lower-class English may be regarded as entirely separate modes of expression. Each approach has its uses; here we shall regard the language of the lower class as a separate dialect, related to, but distinct from, standard English. This way of looking at these speech differences, we believe, can contribute to a more adequate common education for all our children.

The British sociologist B. Bernstein recently argued rather forcefully that lower-class language is inferior to standard English (1). He showed that the language as well as the general perceptual apparatus of the lower classes ordinarily permits only gross intellectual distinctions. In contrast, standard English and the generally more refined perceptual apparatus of the middle and upper classes facilitate fine distinctions. Bernstein prefers to regard lower-class speech as an inferior form of the standard language; he does not like to think in terms of a separate lower-class dialect.

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But students of Hawaiian-English speech have shown that it is quite possible to acknowledge perceptual deficiencies in lower-class language and yet think of it as a separate dialect. Reinecke and Tokimasa described the general confusion of grammatical forms in Hawaiian English and in such lower-class speech forms as those used by many Negroes in the South (2). Such radical simplifications in language structure, these authors point out, make it well-nigh impossible to formulate intellectual generalizations in lower-class speech. These scholars, together with Hormann (3), another Hawaiian sociologist, insist on treating Hawaiian English as a separate dialect. We would also hold that to speak of a certain inferiority of the lower-class language need not deny it the respect due a dialect.

The assertions of Bernstein and the Hawaiian investigators concerning the intellectual deficiencies in lower-class speech are convincing. But there is always a danger in our culture of equating intellectual shortcomings with moral shortcomings (4).

A first step toward a morally neutral consideration of the two types of language may be taken by inquiring into their function. Students of the problem seem to agree that standard English, which has a more elaborate syntax, is far superior to lower-class English for purely intellectual purposes. The finer distinctions to which Bernstein has pointed, the greater exactness shown by Reinecke and Tokimasa and others, as well as the common experience of most of us, demonstrate that standard English is much better adapted for those analytic and scientific functions that Susanne Langer has described as discursive thought (5). Moreover, practically the whole permanent depository of formal knowledge is laid down in standard language. Access to this depository requires familiarity with forms of standard language. Discursive thought, couched in standard language, seems to be required for the study of science and for all those "rational" activities to which our higher classes are dedicated. The reason for the quotation marks around *rational* becomes apparent when we consider that competitive business, advertising, and war-making, are among the higher-class pursuits made possible by our discursive standard English.

What are the uses of lower-class English? Is there communication of anything—of anything worthwhile—that is not “discursive”? Intimate and satisfying personal communication among lower-class parents, children, and friends is carried on almost exclusively by means of lower-class speech. It may be argued that, since the higher classes seem to use standard English for the same purposes, lower-class speech is not absolutely necessary. This objection, even if it were true, would not dispute the usefulness of lower-class speech, though it would question its indispensability.

Actually, lower-class speech is at times used by the higher classes for a variety of purposes. Bernstein noted that the difference between the speech of higher- and lower-class youngsters does not lie in an absolute language distinction, but in the acquisition by the higher classes of standard English in addition to the common lower-class forms. The emotive capacities of lower-class speech, so well adapted to lower-class communication needs, are frequently enlisted also by higher-class people for non-discursive purposes (6).

Members of the higher classes often borrow from lower-class vocabulary—obscene expressions, for example—while retaining essentially standard English syntax. More extensive borrowings, which involve not only vocabulary but syntax as well, appear in creative writing. Some writers use lower-class language forms to reproduce common speech realistically. But others, like Faulkner, seem to choose lower-class language for its greater emotive expressiveness.

Further light is thrown on the division of labor between lower-class and standard English when we consider certain differences in values of lower and higher classes. A study by Leanna K. Barker (7) showed that middle-class boys generally held to a Puritan ethic of business obligation, while lower-class children were more prone to emphasize personal attachments and to display considerably more generosity in peer-group relationships. One might say that the lower-class boys tended toward an ethic of *Gemeinschaft*, or community, while middle-class boys tended toward an ethic of the prevailing *Gesellschaft* of our business society, that is, an ethic of legalistic obligations (8). This difference would suggest that lower-class Eng-

lish, in its more casual grammatical habits, may carry less demanding, less competitive, and possibly more generous modes than the standard language.

All these considerations lead us to certain practical suggestions concerning lower-class English in the public schools. Most of our proposals have been borrowed from writers on the Hawaiian-English dialect, writers we have already mentioned.

First of all, it would seem that a moralistic depreciation of lower-class English mirrors an undesirably ethnocentric depreciation of lower-class values. Class antagonism on the part of the middle-class teacher toward lower-class children is one of the most important contributing factors in the alienation of the lower classes from our public schools. Actually, one suggestion can be stated rather simply: it is necessary and important for the teacher to understand and respect lower-class speech if he wishes to gain the confidence and respect of lower-class children (9). Individuals in authority who disparage this language endanger the emotional security of lower-class children in their charge. Lower-class language is the only language with which lower-class children are thoroughly familiar and with which they communicate with their parents. It is the carrier of their most important emotional attachments.

This is not to say that standard English should not be taught in our public schools to children of all classes. As we have seen, standard English is important for all intellectual disciplines. But one cannot teach a new language to people whose native tongue one scorns. Hormann's advice for Hawaii seems applicable to our problem:

Pedagogically, a systematic knowledge of the local dialect would make possible the development of better techniques for teaching standard English. In grammar, for instance, the structure of the local dialect can be worked out inductively by the pupils. These pupil-discovered rules can then be used to bridge the gap to the structure of standard English. This is the way many of us learn a foreign language when it is efficiently taught [10].

To teach lower-class children the alien tongue that we call standard English involves more than technical problems of educational meth-

od. The purposes of standard English and formal learning are ordinarily not related to the self-image of the lower-class child; he does not usually think of himself as the kind of person who would speak this stilted-sounding standard language. The problem is probably too large for the school system alone to handle; the whole social structure is involved, particularly our patterns of social mobility and the values of lower-class culture. These considerations, which lie beyond the scope of this article, are mentioned only to indicate the complexity of the problem and the need for skepticism concerning easy solutions.

It should not be difficult for higher-class children to learn to respect and use lower-class speech. For these children know and often use lower-class language. The teacher who has a rational approach to the differences between the two languages, the teacher who is unhampered by moralistic and snobbish attitudes, can help children overcome their ambivalence toward language expression. If he succeeded, the great power of lower-class language to express emotions, a power ordinarily exploited with a clear conscience only by novelists, would become available to all and could extend the range of expressed feelings and perceptions.

The writer does not expect his suggestions to find wide acceptance at this time. We fear lower-class speech and are inclined to give it no quarter. The more precarious our social status in the higher classes—that is, the closer we are to the line that divides the middle from the lower classes or the more recent our ascent from the lower strata—the more insistent we are on the purity of our linguistic credentials. Such insecurity is perhaps especially troublesome to public school teachers, whose separation from the lower classes is often recent and precarious.

Linguistic snobbishness is part of the price we pay educationally for being chained to the demands of our social-class system. But our culture also has a tradition of resisting considerations of social class in dealing with people (11). Our tradition of emphasizing personal needs of individuals rather than outward social esteem contains the

promise of a more rational handling of language problems and a more adequate public school education for all our children.

NOTES

1. B. Bernstein, "Some Sociological Determinants of Perception, An Enquiry into Sub-cultural Differences," *British Journal of Sociology*, IX (1958), 159-74.

2. John E. Reinecke and Aiko Tokimasa, "The English Dialect of Hawaii," *American Speech*, IX (1934), 48-58; 122-30. See also John E. Reinecke, "'Pidgin English' in Hawaii: A Local Study in the Sociology of Language," *American Journal of Sociology*, XLIII (1938), 778-89.

3. Bernhard Hormann, "Speech, Prejudice, and the School in Hawaii," in *Community Forces in Hawaii*, ed. Bernhard L. Hormann (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1956), pp. 232-37. This article appeared originally in 1947 in *Social Process in Hawaii*.

4. The "intellectual inferiority of the lower classes," of course, is an oversimplification. The great complexity of this problem was classically discussed by Allison Davis in *Social Class Influence upon Learning* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1948). For a more recent discussion and review of the literature, see Seymour B. Sarason and Thomas Gladwin, "Psychological and Cultural Problems in Mental Subnormality: A Review of Research," *Genetic Psychology Monographs*, LVII (1958), 3-290.

5. Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1942), chaps. iv and v.

6. Compare the quotation from a university department chairman in Theodore Caplow and Reece J. McGee, *The Academic Marketplace* (New York: Basic Books, 1958), p. 160.

7. Reported by Albert K. Cohen, *Delinquent Boys* (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1955), pp. 105 ff.

8. Compare Ferdinand Toennies, *Community & Society, Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1957). A new edition of a work that originally appeared in 1887.

9. Compare Norman A. McQuown, "Language-Learning from an Anthropological Point of View," *Elementary School Journal*, LIV (1954), 402-8.

10. Bernhard Hormann, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

11. Werner Cohn "Social Stratification and the Charismatic," *Midwest Sociologist*, XXI (1958), 12-18.

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Notes

¹ **Some Sociological Determinants of Perception: An Enquiry into Sub-Cultural Differences**

B. Bernstein

The British Journal of Sociology, Vol. 9, No. 2. (Jun., 1958), pp. 159-174.

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² **The English Dialect of Hawaii**

John E. Reinecke; Aiko Tokimasa

American Speech, Vol. 9, No. 1. (Feb., 1934), pp. 48-58.

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² **"Pidgin English" in Hawaii: A Local Study in the Sociology of Language**

John E. Reinecke

The American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 43, No. 5. (Mar., 1938), pp. 778-789.

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⁹ **Language-Learning from an Anthropological Point of View**

Norman A. McQuown

The Elementary School Journal, Vol. 54, No. 7. (Mar., 1954), pp. 402-408.

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