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Language development in disadvantaged children and the research related to this area are the subjects of this issue of the IRCD Bulletin. The first part discusses the functions of the various components of language and the effects of language deprivation on disadvantaged youngsters. The educational approaches to teaching language fundamentals which is proposed here implies that correction of pronunciation and grammar should be de-emphasized at the primary grade level. The second part notes the various research approaches to the study of language development--cross-sectional comparisons of social class differences, studies of fundamental processes of language acquisition, and the monitoring of language. Other research orientations include studies of language as a class of metiational behavior, as a social class communication pattern, as interpersonal communication, and as a social dialect. An extensive selected bibliography is included. (NH)

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FROM THE INFORMATION RETRIEVAL CENTER ON THE DISADVANTAGED

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LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN

The current interest in the language development of socially disadvantaged children reflects a growing concern that the language which they spontaneously acquire may be a major barrier to their achievement of intellectual and social equality.

The audible manifestation of language is, of course, speech. Because the children with whom we are concerned represent a variety of populations, they produce a variety of different sounds when they speak: the Spanish of the Puerto Rican and Mexican-American children, the tribal languages of the American Indian children, and the Babel of dialects of the urban slums, brought in by poor Negroes and whites from the southern and mountain states. It is important that their diversity be recognized, but it is equally important to acknowledge that language is not merely speech. Diversity of spoken sound does not necessarily reflect a corresponding diversity of underlying language behavior or language structure, and what little we know about the verbal behavior of these populations suggests that many of their problems may well be similar.

In a monolingual society, where the ability to communicate sentiments, thoughts, and characteristics through the verbal symbols of "standard" speech is one of the attributes of the educated man, to be inarticulate in English, or even to be moderately articulate in a low-status dialect is to be inherently unequal. It appears that some such inequality exists for many disadvantaged children. There have been a number of studies comparing the language of disadvantaged children with that of their more privileged peers on such speech measures as sentence length and complexity and size of vocabulary, or on tasks of verbal comprehension. Such studies have consistently indicated the existence of a quantitative deficit among the disadvantaged, though the factors of sex, race, I. Q. and such other variables as the ethnic identity of the experimenter appear to affect the results significantly and often unpredictably. On the whole, however, such studies would seem to indicate that low social status (rather than ethnic status or even bi-lingualism per se) actually does have a quantitatively depressing effect on certain forms of language production. These children know conventional names for fewer things, whether objects or actions; they have a more restricted grammatical range and produce simpler sentences. But language is more than quantity and language behavior consists of a good deal more than countable, audible items. Qualitatively we know almost nothing about language among disadvantaged populations. While psychologists have often confined themselves to counting, linguists have, with a few recent exceptions, absented themselves from this field of study. We have almost no studies analyzing the dialect patterns of complex urban communities. Other than the fact that they are non-standard, we know almost nothing of the phonologies, grammars or lexicons of the dialects with which we are concerned. Nor do we know much more about the functions of language for these populations.

We do have some studies which examine various of the physical, social, and psychological aspects of lower class home life for their possible effect on the verbal development, the overall intellectual development, or the life-style of the children involved. Considerable attention has been paid to the notion that a particular language style may reflect a particular attitude toward social relationships or a class-defined authority structure in the home. But a paucity of experimental and observational data precludes our viewing as more than theoretical any specific causal relationship between a given style of life and a given language style.

There is some evidence that in many lower-class homes there is less opportunity for adult-child verbal interaction than there is in the typical middle-class home. We know a fair amount about the ontogenous development of language, and the sequence of emergence of various linguistic structures among children. Though such studies have tended to concentrate on middle-class children, they seem to demonstrate clearly that the opportunity for one-to-one interaction with a familiar adult is one of the most effective known language learning situations. It is often assumed, or at least hoped, that in some cases the disadvantaged child is getting significant amounts of "compensatory" language experience in the school. But, though we know little about what goes on in the classroom, it is obvious that even in the ideal situation there is a good deal less verbal interaction between teacher and individual pupil than is often assumed.

If there is less mother-child interaction in the lower-class home, which would seem to be the case, and if, in addition, there is actually little adult-child interaction in the classroom, are there other situations in which these children face more optimal conditions for acquiring language? Actually we know little about the motives involved in language learning. We know, for example, that lower-class children watch TV (as much or more than their middle-class peers) and can frequently reproduce units of standard speech which they have heard on TV. But that such reproduction is non-functional would seem apparent from the fact that such standard speech is not subsequently adopted as a variant appropriate in naturalistic situations unrelated to TV.

While we know only a little about the possible effect on language of lower-class home life, we know even less about the structure of the lower-class community as it relates to the language development of these children. We have much to learn about the kinds of roles which are perceived as prestigious by the children, or about the kinds of speech behaviors which accompany these roles. We know little about the influence of the peer group on language behavior, though it is likely to be a more potent force among the early independent urban slum child than among his middle-class peers. There is an almost total absence of socio-linguistic studies of these populations. Studies which focused simultaneously on both the structure of language and its functions within the home and community could tell us not only what the child's language is but what it does. We want to know what view of the world it expresses and what kinds of natural situations evoke it or are reflected in it.

Even without the school's intervention, language does exist among these children. All too frequently, attempts to improve the verbal performance of these children have assumed a starting point of zero. These children are, so the

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argument goes, "non-verbal," and we must give them language. The fact is that every mentally and physically intact child grows up to be a speaker. While we may question the adequacy of his verbal range or flexibility, he learns to say those things which it seems important to him to say. It has been suggested that language may be less functional for this population. It is probably more accurate to say that it is equally functional in those situations where it is seen as needed, but that such situations may be fewer in a lower-class community.

What is undoubtedly and unfortunately true is that a good deal more effort has been expended in primary school classrooms across the nation on modifying the pronunciation and syntax of lower-class speech, than has been expended on improving language functioning for these children. There are several respects in which such effort is questionable. First, if we are really concerned with social acceptance, we have no information on the kinds of "corrections" which should be emphasized. We do not know which phonological deviations, which syntactical "errors" or which lexical substitutions have the most negative effect on the listener. We do not know which interfere the most with social mobility and which kind of "standard" speech, if any, we should be working toward.

Second, we know that in situations of true bilingualism the introduction of fundamental educational material in the native language provides a promising approach to fostering competence in the dominant, non-native language. The advantage of considering such an approach is that it would substitute for spurious moral judgments of "correct" and "incorrect," notions of practicality and usefulness which are more appropriate to the teaching-learning situation. It is not necessary, of course, that school be conducted in non-standard dialect or in languages other than English. What has been proposed is that we concentrate in the early grades on teaching the fundamentals rather than on the correction of pronunciation and grammar. (Implied within this proposal is a suggestion that perhaps school administrators should be more concerned with teacher competence than with the teacher's own ability to speak a standard dialect.) One specific suggestion has been made that we separate the teaching of reading from phonological considerations. It would not seem inappropriate to permit the child to speak the visual symbol in his own way so long as its experiential meaning was clear to him, for it is unlikely that constant correction of his pronunciation when he has correctly "read" a word is the most effective way to promote literacy.

The third reason why an overly early or severe emphasis on "correct" speech may be educationally questionable is because constant correction of these children seems often to result not in improving their language behavior, but merely in suppressing it. And if our concern is with the maximum development of the child, we must recognize that his language is not merely related to the way he speaks, but to the way he thinks. A low status dialect may hamper his social mobility, but a restricted language development may limit his intellectual potential. This is the crucial issue: not "how well do these children speak," but "how well do these children think?" What is the extent and nature of the relationship between language, thought and learning? How and to what degree do limited verbal skills reflect and/or contribute to the underdevelopment of cognitive capacities? It has often been assumed that the ability of these children to use language as a cognitive tool is impaired in proportion to their inability to communicate in standard English. The question is unanswered as to whether most substandard dialects do provide language structures and resources adequate to the needs of complex communicative or problem solving tasks. If they do, then clearly the school has failed to tap the potential that exists. There is, however, a pervasive conviction that they do not and can not. The restricted style of "lower-class" language is generally viewed as inadequate to the conceptual tasks of modern society. Clearly, if the language forms of these populations at the level to which they have now developed are inadequate to the abstract conceptual demands of science, philosophy, and other complex intellectual disciplines, we have no choice but to intensify our efforts at language modification and substitution in populations which suffer this disadvantage. If, on the other hand, we have failed to make adequate use of the potential resources to be found in a variety of indigenous language styles, it is clearly our charge to develop modifications and utilize substitutions for the "standard" language limitations of traditional educational content, materials and methodology.

J. Gussow

RESEARCH RELATED TO LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN

The psychological literature indicates that there have been several major approaches research has taken in the area of language development in the disadvantaged.

A. One of them is the traditional cross-sectional study comparing middle-class children with lower-class children, where the measures used are the ones that developmental psychologists have been proposing as reliable in highlighting class and ethnic differences. These would include mean sentence length or performance on vocabulary tests, or the somewhat more sophisticated and newer techniques such as the "Cloze" technique. These approaches are not too different from other kinds of cross-sectional studies, which again and again underscore the decreased performance level of the lower-class non-white child.

Of all the many studies of this type, perhaps the most interesting is the Lesser study which compared four ethnically different groups of children at several levels of the social class ladder. Language variables were combined with other variables of intellectual performance, such as spatial visualization, and it was shown that while the ethnic membership of the child produced a certain configuration of intellectual skills, social class affected the overall level of performance within this configuration.

B. There are a number of studies that have used a particular population, such as young disadvantaged children, as a target population in which to study fundamental processes of language acquisition. In Cazden's paper on the child's acquisition of grammar, as yet unpublished, the difference studied is between "modeling" and "expansion." In this type of study the scope of the examination is broadened to include experimental exploration of certain kinds of interventional processes designed for language enrichment and language growth. This is an area in psychological research where there is some promise for breaking away from the purely normative-comparative focus and actually examining directed growth in an educational setting and its impact on changes within children.

C. The approach of simply monitoring the language behavior of young children is of genuine promise. One of the approaches currently under way at the Institute for Developmental Studies (IDS Annual Progress Report, 1965) is the repeated administration of standard telephone interviews. At various points during the four and five-year old's school year, children are given standard questions, relating to their morning's play for example, which are broad enough so that they can be repeated and discussed on the telephone.

Because of the appeal of the telephone, this is an attractive technique for the children, and because of the nature of the telephone, the child has to rely more heavily on verbal communication than he does in the face-to-face interaction situation.

D. A further group of studies examines language as one of the major classes of mediational behavior, namely, the role of words in thought and problem-solving. The research of Arthur Jensen on verbal mediation and its trainability in children of different ethnic and social class backgrounds is a milestone in this area. Here the experimental psychologist employs his tools most productively by not endlessly and repetitively measuring existing differences between groups but by actually participating in a powerful way to modify these differences. In this manner the psychologist can expand the possibilities of using language for cognitive purposes.

Despite the enormous contribution of this type of research, we still lack understanding in the way language which is acquired in a communicative context is transferred, by the growing child, into a tool of thought. We know that this transformation does take place, but the details are not yet understood.

E. The examination of the actual communication patterns in lower and middle-class homes has been much stimulated by the theoretical work of Bernstein. He presents highly elaborated theories of the usage of language in definite social class settings. Although the applicability of this particular model to the American scene has bothered some, it has value in examining, as Hess has done, the diverse patterns of verbal interaction in families of varying social status.

F. Inter-personal communication within a home is not too open to the kind of investigation that social scientists demand. Most of our research has been carried out in settings of our own making, and therefore the transplanting of subjects into that setting, although a long-standing preference, produces a somewhat artificial research style. The adaptation of the psychologist to taking himself, his tools and his approaches, away from the setting of his preference is still in its infancy.

The classical study of Esther Milner which stressed the importance of certain kinds of inter-personal communication of young children of five and six for language and reading has been oft-quoted. She investigated the frequency and the stability of the settings in which communicative interaction might take place between mother and child among middle-class Negro families, as contrasted with lower-class Negro families. Very little, however, has been done to repeat the study, expand it, or modify it in terms of a different research methodology.

G. The study of lower-class language as a substandard dialect is another area where research has developed from a comparative point of view. We find ingrained in this area of psychological research a particular kind of comparative approach which pulls features out of a total system of language and then compares them from group to group. This is done without any clear recognition as to the functional reliance on the set of features for communicative effectivness within one's own speech community, as contrasted with another. In addition, the very selection of research variables, such as one word units, brings in to question the applicability of these findings to the learning process as it is related to sequences of words or longer passages of words. Our ability to elucidate the process of comprehension, and then the process of production of speech, is limited by our use of very short and very atypical units of language. To offset this limiting choice, we are now gathering longer samples of children's language in an attempt to improve on the vocabulary-test tradition.

In the final analysis we need to expand upon the tradition of comparative and normative research; furthermore, we need to divert emphasis from the stability and reliability of the small unit of speech. We need to research in more profound style the production of language in its natural setting and the functional development of language acquisition. To this end, we might borrow from the psychological-ecological tradition of Barker and Wright.

We must also understand that as long as we have a comparative approach to language modification, in work with the disadvantaged child, we underemphasize the real problem, which is the examination of the relationship between language and learning. As yet we have no systematic knowledge of the ways in which lower-class children use language for cognitive purposes. We assume that because these children perform poorly on certain kinds of standard tests, where the language they are presented with is standard English, their ability to utilize language as a cognitive tool is similarly impaired. What this assumption fails to consider is the functional diversity to which language is put by children of disparate backgrounds. We have in the psychology of this problem no real evidence that substandard English cannot be used for complex problem-solving and accurate communication.

As long as we limit ourselves to modifying substandard speech so that we may improve chances of social mobility, we deprive ourselves of a potentially rich resource - the operational linguistic wealth that the substandard speaker brings with him. It is hoped that in the future we can rely upon the substantial social science tradition of the anthropologists and the linguists to assist psychologists to develop a genuinely functional approach to language development in the disadvantaged.

V. John

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