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ABSTRACT

The study described here was intended to test Basil Bernstein's contention that different types of speech patterns can be identified for lower and middle class children, and that lower class children may, because of their speech behavior, have difficulty in performing cognitive tasks necessary for success in the school situation. Spontaneous speech samples were collected "unobstrusively" by an observer who recorded, verbatim, the verbal interactions between fifty lower and fifty middle class mother-child pairs in a doctor's waiting room. These interactions were analyzed according to formal categories, such as the number of words used, and to content categories based on the nature or purpose of the interchange. The authors found that the language used by the two different groups fell into divisions very similar to the language modes described by Bernstein, a lower overall verbal productiveness being typical of the lower class group. The authors feel that if the observations made in waiting rooms can be assumed to be valid for other contexts as well, then this study can be said to support the notion that the home situation gives middle class children an important advantage in school, as well as the idea that compensatory programs may be necessary for lower class children. (FWB)

Social Class Differences in Spontaneous Verbal Interactions

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Introduction

Recently published socio-linguistic studies have focused on two points of view: One is represented by Basil Bernstein (1960) who regards language as "the major means through which the social structure becomes part of individual experience" and who has dealt with language as a function of social class. He has described two modes of speech, one associated with lower class membership and one associated with middle class membership. These modes "elicit and sustain particular forms of relationships to the environment and so establish different orders of learning and relevance". Major characteristics of lower class language, referred to by him as "public language", include:

1. the use of ready-made phrases to designate a referent (e.g., comments about the weather);

2. speech is the result of common conditioning and learning;

3. utterances tend to be "short, fast, fluent, and relatively unpaused", have an"automatic character" and permit "high affective ventiliation," and

4. speech tends to become a vehicle for concrete rather than analytic thought processes.

Major characteristics of middle class language, referred to by Bernstein as "formal language," include the following:

1. speech is specially and often newly created to fit a particular referent;

2. it is individuated, unexpected and symbolic of individual experience;

3. utterances tend to be slower, longer, with longer pauses within the speech sequences, and

4. speech tends to become a vehicle for analytic thought processes.

The language of black ghetto children has been described in terms of the characteristics of lower class membership by such writers as Bereiter,

(1962), Deutsch, (1963), Hunt (1968), and others who have stated that the black ghetto child has an inadequate and deficient linguistic and conceptual system, i.e., a system inappropriate to most cognitive, or school, tasks. This idea has been challenged by such writers as Baratz and Baratz(1970) and Labov (1969) and others, who represent the second socio-linguistic point of view relevant to this study. These authors state that the linguistic and cognitive systems of black ghetto children are not inferior, but are "culturally different". According to Baratz and Baratz, "the linguistic competence of black children has been well documented in a number of recent investigations (Stewart, 1968, Labov and Cohen, 1966, Labov, 1969, Dillard, 1969, Baratz, 1969, Wolfram, 1969). Many lower-class Negro children speak a well ordered, highly structured, but different, dialect from that of standard English." What linguistic differences have been demonstrated are believed to be due to social or situational causes: Labov states that the allegedly defective linguistic behavior "...is merely the product of a defensive posture which children adopt in an alien and threatening situation," and by no means represents their natural linguistic behavior. The "threatening situation" referred to is the test or interview administered by middle-class examiners.

Since children tend to speak a language similar to that of their parents and peers, class differences in language can be expected to exist in the very young. Indeed, Kagan has found class differences even before the onset of speech, in the vocalizations of four months old infants. Class differences have been documented in studies by Irwin, (1948, a,b.) Sampson, 1956) Labov and others. The topic of class differences in the language patterns of children is salient insofar as it is basic to policies of educational intervention such as compensatory programs. If ghetto children speak the language of their parents and peers, and if such patterns are not inferior to middle

class language patterns but are "culturally different" patterns, equally as well suited to cognitive tasks as middle class language, educational intervention in the form of compensatory programs would seem to be superfluous. Indeed such programs may even be viewed as evidence of oppression on the part of the more powerful class. If, on the other hand, lower class language patterns, as they are transmitted from parents to children, render the lower class child linguistically and cognitively deficient, then it is incumbent upon society to formulate compensatory programs.

In this study we set out to look for spontaneous language behavior in an attempt to find whether one mode of language was specifically related to social class and analyze the type of language it represented. Motivating our study was the question of differential preparation for later cognitive or school learning as has been postulated to exist for the two classes. This is the issue of the "hidden curriculum", the notion that the middle class child is well prepared for school since he has, by the time he enters Kindergarten, received approximately 5 years of individual tutoring, a type of instruction thought to be inexistence among most middle class families but among few lower class families.

Our focus was on an analysis of language as it might be relevant to later school learning and our categories reflect these concerns. It was for this reason that proposed categories such as Bernstein's were not used by us. Unobtrusive observation probably is the only appropriate method for a study of spontaneous verbal interactions. This method rather than interviewing was used to eliminate the effect of the middle class observer on the lower class language phenomenon to be observed, and in this manner to avoid placing the child into an "alien and threatening situation."

Procedures

We decided to use a setting in which children were waiting to see a doc-

tor. The settings were differentiated by the fact that in one group parents paid for medical care while in the other their medical care was subsidized. The observer played the role of another waiting patient and there was no evidence that the subjects were aware of his presence in any other role. The observer recorded verbatim protocols of spontaneous verbal interactions between a parent and a child in the waiting room. Fifty middle and fifty lower SES child-parent pairs were observed. Children ranged in age from 3 to 6 years. No selection procedure was used and all pairs present in the waiting room at given times were observed until the desired sample was reached. Time of observation for each parent-child pair varied with their waiting time, i.e., the observer began recording when the parent-child pair entered the waiting room and continued recording until the pair was called in to see the physician.

Results

All verbal interactions were analyzed according to formal categories (e.g., number of words) and according to content categories (e.g., conversation about medical matters).

Social class differences were found in regard to the following indicators:

1. Total time of observation: LC subjects waited longer to be called into the physician's office. Mean time of one MC observation = 9 minutes

" " " " LC " = 13 minutes

2. Despite the shorter overall time devoted to MC observations (7 1/2 hours, 11 1/2 hours for LC), out of a total number of words spoken by both mothers and children, 66% were spoken by MC subjects and 33% by LC subjects. Similarly, 2/3 of all mothers' statements were made by MC mothers and 1/3 by LC mothers. 72% of all statements made by children were made by MC children and 28% by LC children.

3. Per minute, a mean of 4.7 words were spoken by MC subjects and a mean of 1.5 words by LC subjects. No social class difference was found in the mean number of words per statement (5.0 vs. 5.1).

4. The number of statements made by MC mothers ranged from 0 to 13 and from 0 to 7 for LC mothers. Ten LC mothers and two MC mothers made no statements at all.

X^2 was 14.5, significant at the .001 level.

The same comparison was made for statements by children. Range was from 0 to 10 statements for MC children, and from 0 to 7 for LC children. X^2 was 26, significant at the .001 level.

5. "Management," or commands

Out of a total of 417 statements made by MC mothers and children, 18% were classified as "management". Out of a total of 203 statements made by LC mothers and children, 33% were classified as management".

6. "Eliciting", or questions

Questions were asked as follows:	Mean number of questions
by 28 MC mothers	1.9
by 30 MC children	1.8
by 11 LC mothers	1.3
by 17 LC children	1.1

When analyzed for content, the following was found:

7. category "medical" (i.e., any reference to the doctor, illness or medicine):

13 MC mothers and 11 MC children dealt either once or twice with medical matters. 1 LC mother and 2 LC children dealt once with medical matters.

8. Category "environmental" (i.e. a reference to people or objects in the waiting room).

		Mean number of statements
The category was used by	41 MC mothers	2.4
	34 MC children	1.8
	14 LC mothers	1.4
	11 LC children	1.7

9. Category "previous event"(i.e. a reference to a previous event)

		Mean number of statements
The category was used by	13 MC mothers	1.5
	11 MC children	1.5
	0 LC mothers	--
	0 LC children	--

10. Category "personal" (includes "management" and references to self or other member of pair)

		Mean number of statements
This category was used by	37 MC mothers	2.2
	29 MC children	1.6
	38 LC mothers	2.7
	26 LC children	1.7

Discussion

Our categories overlap with some of Bernstein's. His description of "formal" (MC) language is exemplified in our content categories ("medical", "environmental", "previous event") by its "individuated, unexpected and symbolic of individual experience" character. It is also language which is "specially and newly created to fit s particular referent". Use of our three content categories according to classmembership reveals the following: Entries in these categories were made at least once on 123 different occasions by the middle class and on only 28 occasions by the lower class mem-

bers of our sample. Commands were used more frequently by LC members than by MC members (33% vs. 18%). The characteristics of a command fit several of Bernstein's "public language" description in that they are "short, fast, fluent, unpaused" utterances, have an "automatic character" and permit "high affective ventilation".

In general, almost all data follow class lines, i.e. the data for the mothers resemble the data for the children within their class and the difference in findings for the two classes is in most cases significant. In one category alone, content category "personal", is there no class difference, and both classes have an equal number of entries. Moreover, there is an added similarity: the data for the MC children are more similar to the data for the LC children than they are to their respective mothers' data. The reason for this similarity may be that the primary function of the mother, i.e. that of socializing the child, varies little from class to class and the response of the children to the process of socialization varies equally little across social classes.

Our findings lend support to Bernstein's hypotheses. The lower overall verbal productiveness for the LC members might represent a "cultural difference", or a less adequate language pattern when compared to our MC findings. It is also possible that the presence of the mother, or the doctor's nurse induce the alleged "defensive posture" which children adopt in an"alien and threatening situation"(for Labov it was the white teacher or examiner to whom the children had reacted negatively, not their mother!).

If one can assume that the differences in types of language behavior observed by us also exist in other contexts and are not peculiar to behavior in the waiting rooms of physicians, then the notion of a "hidden curriculum" in the middle class style of rearing receives support, as does the notion of the usefulness of early intervention for non-middle class children.

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