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ABSTRACT

The conditions for the acquisition of communicative competence in standard English must be considered in the case of language learning by immigrants, indigenous minority language groups, and speakers of Black English. The crucial factor in language learning is the relationship between the minority group and the local society. Among immigrant groups and indigenous minority language groups, interlanguages have arisen containing norms which fall partially between those of the mother tongue and the target language. Economic, social, and cultural variables are at play in the creation of interlanguages as they are among speakers of Black English. Efforts to teach standard English to speakers of nonstandard dialects do not consider societal realities. Most current literature on teaching standard English as a second dialect maintains that language is the key to social mobility rather than social mobility being responsible for changes in language. Nobody can be expected to learn the language of a social group if, at the same time, he is denied the means by which he can become a member of that group. (Author/VM)

SOME SOCIAL ASPECTS OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Our common interest in TESOL is the English language. Our common goal is to help our students learn English, and this motivation rests upon a number of assumptions. The most basic is perhaps the belief that schools can and do provide the opportunity for language learning. Most of our methodology courses have led us to believe that language can be taught, provided that we control such factors as presentation, repetition, and the influence of the mother tongue or dialect. Successful language learning is said to bring about the realization of the learner's hopes; school success, job security, financial reward and social mobility, hence our primary responsibility is to see that the condition for the fulfilment of these goals - efficient learning of English - is a product of our ESL program. This emphasis on the importance of standard English as a factor in school achievement and social mobility, is, I believe, a misinterpretation of the role of language in social structure. It has generated a number of popular notions that tend to cloud perception of the causes of a number of problems that confront us in our work, problems which on closer analysis arise not from linguistic but from social issues. Aspects of three areas of concern will be considered here; the learning of English by immigrants, indigenous minority language issues, and the so-called Black English question*. Consideration of each raises the same question. What are the conditions for the acquisition of communicative competence in standard English?

The Learning of English by Immigrants

Why do some immigrants achieve greater success with the learning of English than others? To try to answer this question we need first separate the problems of the individual immigrant family, arriving more or less on their own resources, and coping through their personal initiative, from problems of the immigrant as a group. While the fate of individual immigrants may depend on individual solutions, dependent

on such factors as motivation, intelligence, perseverance, aptitude, learning strategies, socialization and so on, when large numbers are involved the variables involved may be quite different. Kloss emphasizes that the factors relevant to immigrant assimilation are so variegated that their interplay cannot be summarized by a single formulae. (Kloss, 1966). Much depends on the pattern and area of settlement, and factors such as educational level, cultural and linguistic similarity to the mainstream culture, color, race etc, will all affect the rate of assimilation. The learning of standard English is an index of this assimilation, and two different patterns are observable. Some immigrants develop functionally adequate but socially unaccepted (i.e. non-standard) varieties of English, while others don't. In the United States we read of Puerto Rican and Mexican-American English, and in Australia, Italian English, but we no longer have Norwegian English or German English as marked group phenomenon. Why in some cases, do immigrant varieties of English arise?

The evolution of lasting non-standard varieties of a language by immigrants would appear to be a consequence of the perception of the society by the minority group, and a reflection of the degree to which they have been admitted into the mainstream of the dominant culture. Consider the history of German and Puerto Rican immigrants to America. A recent account of the fate of German immigrants to Texas emphasizes that the German-Americans there are not poverty stricken. They do not live in ghettos. They suffer under no handicaps whatsoever. They learn English easily and well. Although a certain amount of German interference is present in their English, it results in no obvious social discrimination. The people of German descent are thus well off and pursue the whole range of occupations open to Americans of purely Anglo background (Gilbert, 1971). The Puerto Ricans however, arrived in New York before or after

world war II when economic and cultural patterns were already well established (Hoffman, 1968). The melting pot which they were invited to join was one which applied to the lower rather than the upper end of the social and economic spectrum. For those immigrants with limited social and economic mobility, the immigrant mother tongue becomes one marker of second class citizenship. The other is the dialect of English generated and maintained as a consequence of these very same social limitations. Ma and Herasimchuk note that ". . . within a large and stable bilingual community like the New York City Puerto Rican community bilinguals interact and communicate with each other, using both languages, far more frequently than they interact and communicate with members of the surrounding monolingual community. In such a community, speakers generate their own bilingual norms of correctness which may differ from the monolingual norms, particularly when there is a lack of reinforcement for these monolingual norms" (Ma and Herasimchuk, 1968; 644). A similar phenomenon has been noted with respect to the German used by the hundreds of thousands of immigrant workers in Germany, who use a non-standard immigrant German to communicate with other Germans and to communicate among themselves when they have no mother-tongue in common (Nickel, in James, 1971).

The particular phenomenon here identified, the generation of language norms which fall partially between those of the mother tongue and the target language, has been referred to as the development of an Interlanguage (Selinker, 1972; Richards, 1971, 1972). Interlanguages arise in a number of diverse settings, and are characterized to varying degrees, by the generation of a form of the target language in which many of the marked/unmarked distinctions are omitted, where inflected forms tend to be replaced by uninflected forms, where preposition, auxiliary and article usage may be modified, and where the influence of the mother tongue may be apparant in phonology and syntax (Nemser, 1971; Ferguson, 1971; Corder, 1971). In the case of immigrant varieties

of English it is this interlanguage which is the focus of study, and it has two dimensions - the linguistic, and the social. While interest in the former would lead to an attempt to locate the rules for the dialect and to account for their origins, recognition of the social dimension of interlanguages leads us to investigate the conditions for the generation of immigrant interlanguages, and these are not linguistic but social (Whinnom, 1971).

Immigrant interlanguages are the product of particular settings for language use. There are said to be two levels of communication in society - the horizontal level, which operates among people of the same status - and the vertical level, which is predominantly downward (Hughes, 1970). In the case of non-standard immigrant English, we are dealing with the language of horizontal communication, and the contexts in which it occurs are those where there are few informal or friendship contacts with speakers of standard English, and no intellectual or high culture networks in English. It may also become part of the expression of ethnic pride. It is a dialect resulting from low spending power, low social influence, and from low political power. It reflects not individual limitations, such as inability to learn language, low intelligence, or poor cultural background, but rather the social limitations imposed on the immigrant community. Favorable reception of the immigrant group leads to temporary interlanguage generation. This has been the case for many European immigrant groups in the United States (Fishman et al 1966). Favorable conditions include fluidity of roles and statuses in the community. Unfavorable social conditions lead to interlanguage maintenance. The economic and social possibilities available for some immigrants do not make the learning of standard English either possible, desirable, or even helpful. Language learning is a function of social organization, and the degree of social acceptance can be seen in the immigrant dialect. We can predict the sort of English likely to be learned by an oriental

immigrant who mixes exclusively with his own language group and who opens a food shop catering almost exclusively to that language group. He will probably first learn to reply to a limited set of questions, to manipulate a closed class of polite formulae, the vocabulary of some food items, and perhaps the language of simple financial transactions. Whether he goes on to learn standard English or develops a functionally adequate but non-standard personal dialect of English will depend on the degree of interaction he achieves with the English-maintained societal structures. If 100,000 such immigrants in similar situations, reach only a minimum penetration of mainstream power structures, begin to self-perpetuate their semi-servile status, and begin to use English among themselves, the setting for the generation of an intrapersonal non-standard dialect of English might be created.

The case of non-standard immigrant English emphasizes the importance of economic, social and cultural variables in language learning. The difficulties of some immigrant children in school result from more than simple questions of language learning. As Leibowitz puts it, "there is another way to look at the facts and interpret the historical aspects the issue is indeed a political one. Whether instruction is in English, or the native language makes little difference; rather what is important are the opportunities that are thought available to the ethnic group themselves educators have provided the most significant evidence to demonstrate this. Increasingly, they have studied the relationship between a pupil's motivation and performance in school to his perception of the society around him and the opportunities he believes await him there the crucial factor is not the relationship between the home and school, but between the minority group and the local society. Future reward in the form of acceptable occupational and social status keeps children in school. Thus factors such as whether a community is socially open or closed, caste-like or not, discriminatory or not, has restricted

roles or non-restricted roles and statuses for its minority segment, become as important as curriculum and other factors in the school itself, perhaps more important " (Leibowitz, 1970). This is well illustrated by an example from New Zealand. Pacific islanders have for the past several years been imported into the large northern city of Auckland, where, forced by the pressures of city life into low-class areas and slum conditions, they readily accept the friendly hand of employment opportunity, providing a cheap labor force. Here is the basis for language and education problems currently being experienced in some Auckland schools.

Immigrant language problems are hence more than mere problems of language. The difference between the learner's language and the language of the school do not present major problems when social factors are balanced in the learner's favor (Tucker and Lambert, 1972). One immigrant group may suffer an entirely different fate from another, though in simple terms of language learning their task appears similar. The planning of immigrant education cannot ignore the economic, social and political hindrances to mobility and advancement that confront many immigrant communities. Non-standard immigrant dialects are the product, and not the cause, of social and economic inequality.

Indigenous-minority language issues

The conditions under which non-standard interlanguages will be the outcome of culture-language contact, are present to a greater or lesser extent in a number of related situations. The particular educational and cultural problems of certain American and Canadian Indian and Eskimo groups are well known, and in other countries the fate of socially displaced and economically underprivileged indigenous minority groups has been the occasional focus of concern. The notion of interlanguage is again useful here to describe the processes contributing to the development of particular varieties of English, generated

from the limited opportunities for social and economic advancement often associated with membership of a native group. Typical descriptions write of loss of or decreasing fluency in the native language and an inadequate command of school English, and local terminologies have evolved for the particular varieties of English generated; Cree English, Pine Ridge English, Dormitory English, Aborigine English, Maori English etc, though no full descriptions of any of these dialects are available (Darnell, 1971; Wax et al, 1964; Dubin 1970; Alford, 1970; Benton, 1964).

In studying the history of Cree English, Pine Ridge English, Dormitory English and so on, it may be possible to use the framework proposed by Fishman for unstable bilingual societies, where language domain separation gradually disappears (Fishman, 1967). In the initial stages of contact between the native community and the colonizing group, domain separation of languages obtains, and English is required in certain limited roles and capacities that are not conducive to the acquisition of a standard form of it. These are the conditions for the generation of a pidgin or a non-standard form of English characterized by structural and morphological simplification, by communication strategies and by interference. (Richards, 1972). As domain separation in language use gradually disappears, English becomes an alternative to the mother tongue, especially in family and friendship domains. The non-standard form of English now has functions related to intimacy, solidarity, spontaneity and informality. The standard language, encountered in the school and through contact with outsiders, has formal functions, thus the characteristics of a diglossic setting may obtain where complementary values-L (Low) and H (High) - come to be realized in different varieties of English. This would appear to apply to some members of the Cree community described by Darnell, and is found with some New Zealand Maories, where the frequency of Maori-English features varies according to the appropriateness of the domain.

Traditionally the so-called "broken speech" of many children from these cultural groups was attributed to poor learning backgrounds, such as bad speech patterns in the home, lack of adequate English reading materials, limited general experience, together with self-consciousness resulting from poor language control. Cultural deprivation was seen as the key to the development of non-standard language. Of course failure in the school means alienation from the school, and the early drop-out levels reported for many native children reflect an early awareness by the child of the school's non-acceptance of his culture and its values. The school's failure, rationalized as the child's failure, generated such concepts as cultural deprivation, restricted language development, and even cognitive deficiency, all of which are symptomatic of analysis that fails to recognize the real ingredients of the child's experience.

Recently emphasis has been placed on the interdependence of social and linguistic variables. Plumer points out that "the relation between knowing English and the ability to perform in school is clearly much more vital and complex for these groups, but the general point of view is the same. If they see themselves locked out of society anyway, then their motivation to learn English will be understandably low, especially if in so doing they risk cutting themselves off from associations **they** already have, namely their peers and families" (Plumer, 1970). Wax et al, describe the progressive withdrawal for Sioux Indian children from the white environment represented by the school. They refer to the existence of Pine Ridge English, and point out that few Indian children are fluent in the English of the classroom. (Wax et al, 1964). Darnell describes an Indian community in Alberta, Canada, and the interaction between Cree and English. (Darnell, 1970). Recent work by Philips highlights the role played by conflicting learning styles and behavioural expectancies between the Indian child's home environment and the school, which explain his reluctance to participate in many normal school activities (Philips, 1970). Benton

notes the role of the non-standard dialect as an instrument of self and group identification and of social perception (Benton, 1964).

"While the type of language spoken by children as reflected in their performance on reliable verbal tests, is often a guide to their likely educational performance, it may be only one of several factors which retard both the growth of language ability itself, and general scholastic achievement. Ethnic differences also play an important part. Very often children from a minority or low status ethnic group may feel less able to control their own destiny than children from a dominant group. They may find it more difficult to work with a teacher whose ethnic background and general outlook is different from their own, either because they feel less secure with someone in whom they can find no point of common identity, or simply because they do not know how to communicate with this stranger. Many children consciously relate their mode of English speech to their ethnic identity. One teacher reported that a Maori child had told her, 'Maori's say Who's your name so that's what I say'. Maori English is often an important sign of group membership and a source of security for these children" (Benton, 1964:93). The whole concept of education may in fact be viewed as a threat, since the abandonment of the community's traditional values, life style and cultural heritage, is seen as the price which must be payed for entry into the mainstream culture.

Education problems encountered with some native minority communities, like those of certain immigrant groups, cannot therefore be seen merely as problems of language learning, comparable say, to the difficulties college students have in learning a foreign language. Language is part of the complex process by which the individual views himself, his peer group, his family, his community, the school, and the nation at large, and where elements of this spectrum appear in direct conflict, the child's verbal behaviour or his refusal to participate in verbal behaviour in the classroom are indications of these

conflicts of interest. More detailed studies are needed of each of the major native communities sharing these cultural, economic, social and linguistic characteristics, to determine the degree to which "language problems" are related to the social, economic, and political status of the native community. The present apparent disadvantages of bilingualism for many native children may then be seen as independent of anything associated with language learning as such, but be simply the result of an unfavourable, social, economic and political environment.

Black English.

The social conditions which lead to the generation of interlanguages, include economic, and occupational subservience, racial and cultural barriers to social and economic mobility, and conflicts between ethnic values and identity and mainstream values. The stratification of language use along ethnic, racial and social lines has led some to propose that language is responsible for social stratification, rather than social differences maintaining linguistic differences. Recently the notion that speakers of non-standard dialects should become bidialectal has been proposed as a goal for speakers of non-standard Black English. A more basic question remains unanswered however. Are dialect differences really a limitation to school success or social mobility?

Most language communities are multidialectal, and in most countries regional and social differences in language use reflect differing networks of social communication. Regional dialect differences are generally attributable to geographical barriers to the spread of the standard speech forms, but these appear to arouse less concern than differences which are ethnically and socioeconomically based. Australia and New Zealand both have "broad" and "standard" dialects, and the transition from high school to university is often accompanied

by dialect change. The differences found between British dialects are considerable, yet the phenomenon of dialect shift is a normal aspect of British life. The prestige dialect in England is never taught directly, but **is** acquired by example rather than instruction (Halliday, 1968). James points out that in England, illiteracy is relatively low, even in those areas where the local dialect is at least as different from standard British as Black English is from standard American (James, 1970). If the barriers to the acquisition of reading skills in a standard language were solely linguistic, one could hardly imagine how the average European child achieves literacy in his mother tongue, particularly in countries like Switzerland and Germany. A number of objections can thus be made to the suggestion that linguistic differences are the cause of the school problems of some black children.

The central notion is that interference from the child's different linguistic system causes difficulty with learning to read and write standard English. ". . . . In all enrichment programs regardless of orientation, language has emerged as a common denominator of the learning deficit. This has lead many investigators to the belief that while other handicaps exist, language is at the core of the difficulty for the disadvantaged child", (Blank, 1970). When the notion of interference is examined however, there is little agreement as to how it contributes to the concept of difficulty. Goodman insists that difficulty is proportional to dialect difference. "The more divergence there is between the dialect of the learner and the dialect of learning, the more difficult will be the task of learning to read" (Goodman, 1969). Shuy believes that the grosser differences between the two dialects are less obtrusive than the minor ones. ". . . . The greater the difference between standard and non-standard grammatical items, the more likely the intermediate child is to have developed the ability to read it aloud" (Shuy, 1969). Linguists report that dialect differences between standard and non-standard Negro English

result from low-level surface structure differences, while a black educator tells us that many of these differences cannot be perceived by the child anyway (Johnson, 1970).

That educational problems resulting from home-school language differences are not necessarily linguistic in origin, has been confirmed in a long term home-school language switch study in Montreal. Ervin-Tripp describes its significance in this way: "Wallace Lambert's recent experimental program in which Canadian anglophones learn French presents a dilemma to advocates of bilingual education. Lambert took a group of English-speaking children and put them into kindergartens in which French was the sole medium of instruction. The pupils were all monolingual. In an astonishingly short time their achievements in language and in other subjects were equal to those of French and English monolinguals. If this could happen, who do Chicano's have problems in our Californian schools? Since the overt linguistic circumstances seem entirely parallel it seems to me the differences are social. In the Montreal environment English-speaking children have no sense of inferiority or disadvantage in the school. Their teachers do not have low expectations for their achievements. Their social group has power in the community; their language is respected, is learned by francophones, and becomes a medium of instruction in the school. In the classrooms the children are not expected to compete with native speakers of French in a milieu which both expects and blames them for their failures and never provides them with an opportunity to excel in their own language" (Ervin-Tripp, 1970).

This should come as a shock to those who advocate that superficial dialect differences are the major reason for the disadvantaged Black or Mexican-American child's learning problems. I fear that the current interest in teaching standard English as a second dialect is another intellectual fashion promoted at the expense of teachers and children, to borrow a phrase from Labov. What is not in question is that

some children have general problems with most school subjects, including reading, and that this is correlated with certain ethnic and social trends. What is at issue is the degree to which differences between home and school dialects is a relevant variable in school achievement, and hence by implication, the efficacy of teaching programs aimed at dialect change.

Much of the literature on teaching standard English as a second dialect, appears to have as a premise, the belief that all men are born equal, some speaking standard and some non-standard dialects, and that the standard speakers rise quickly to positions of social and economic security. We are asked to believe that it is language which is the key to social mobility, rather than social mobility being responsible for changes in language. Are we also being asked to believe that if speakers of non-standard dialects suddenly began speaking standard English overnight, their economic, social, educational and political problems would disappear instantly? If, as Labov has emphasized, many elements of linguistic structure reflect social processes, it would seem to be fruitless to direct attention to those linguistic features without at the same time investigating the mechanisms inherent in the social structure itself which create such marked social, economic, racial and hence linguistic stratification. As Labov puts it, "We are dealing with the effects of the caste system of American society -- essentially a color marking system. Everyone recognizes this" (Labov, 1970: 155). The ideal of social mobility, said to be the motivation of current dialect enrichment programs, always implies that there will be an unending supply at the bottom, that is, that poverty is and will always be self-perpetuating. What is consistently missing in the literature on dialect modification is a realistic consideration of the extra-linguistic and social factors, the persistent segregation patterns which are the background to the maintenance of many non-standard dialects. Johnson notes: "The nature

of our segregated society insures that young disadvantaged black children (and older disadvantaged black children also) have few opportunities to communicate with speakers of standard English . . . young children do learn, surprisingly easily, another language when they begin to live and must function in a cultural environment where another language is spoken and is demanded of them for social and cultural acceptance and the communication demands made on the child by this environment. Under these conditions, children do learn another language more easily than adults. Disadvantaged black children, however, do not have the opportunity to live and function in a cultural environment where standard English is spoken . . . black children are not a part of a cultural environment where standard English is used and where the communication demands of the environment require standard English" (Johnson, 1970). I would add that it is not communication which creates the environment for learning, but communication as equals. The master and his servant may communicate but they do so with a language appropriate to their roles.

Rather than directing attention to the child, attempting to modify his dialect, the alternative is to focus change at the social structure. In Williams' recent book Language and Poverty (Williams, 1970), it is surprising that this objective is not taken up seriously, though there are occasional and somewhat apologetic hints. "One solution is drastic social reform. Since the structure of the family and the attendant family control systems are embedded in the larger structure of society, it may be that nothing short of a major transformation in the economic and social world of the disadvantaged will suffice to bring about a major change in their cognitive world" (Olim, 1970).

Elsewhere in the same volume it is suggested that it would be naive to suggest teaching the standard dialect on a large scale to students "for whom social mobility may be a matter of a chance or

currying favor . . . Change of speech will accompany or follow, not precede (the disadvantaged child's) decision to make his way out of the world into which he was born" (Plumer, 1970:267). Labov suggests: "Those who feel that they can solve this problem by experimenting with the machinery of the learning process are measuring small causes against large effects. My own feeling is that the primary interference with the acquisition of standard English stems from a conflict of value systems" (Labov, 1964). There are other alternatives. Wider social, economic, and political penetration of present social structures by speakers of negro dialect would itself give a certain standardization of this dialect, and elevate the status of the dialect and its speakers. It would then become simply another dialect of English towards which people's attitudes would automatically adjust. And of course, the educational problems associated with economic and social segregation would presumably disappear.

Conclusions

Before commitment can be given to the teaching of standard English to those who speak other forms of English, we need careful investigation of the conditions for the learning of standard English. The conditions for the successful learning of English include fluidity of roles and statuses in the community for members of minority groups. In looking at immigrant interlanguages and at language use in some native communities we see economic and social segregation affecting both the process and the product of language learning. In the case of bidialectalism as a goal for speakers of black English, we see the effects of language planning without consideration of societal realities. "Given the close association between dialect change and a speaker's perception of himself and his role in society, it is also clear that dialect change without an accompanying awareness of opportunities for social mobility is unrealistic and impractical" (Plumer, 1970). The questions

I have tried to raise here however are not questions of methodology but questions of priorities. No amount of pedagogical innovation can **change** the fact that many minority groups are victims of a simplistic political philosophy in which "society itself has become a mere means for private accumulation, rather than the accumulation of capital being a means for the satisfaction of social needs. The poverty and deprivation which persist in times of capitalist 'prosperity' amidst the colossal waste of human and material resources in under-utilized capacity and superfluous production, manifest the contradiction no less" (Horowitz, 1971; 1943). Nobody can be expected to learn the language of a social group if at the same time he is denied the means by which he can become a member of that group. In each of the cases I have considered we see an invitation to learn the language of those who hold economic, social and political power, without any corresponding invitation to become a part of this elitist power structure. Acknowledgement of the social basis of consequent educational problems should lead us to reject weakly conceptualized pedagogic answers, to problems which basically require social, economic, and political solution.

* Parts of this paper are dealt with in my "Social Factors, Inter-language, and Language Learning" (forthcoming, Language Learning), which deals in greater detail with the interlanguage phenomenon, with reference to immigrant language, indigenous minority inter-languages, and three other settings not discussed here.

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