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ABSTRACT

Sociolinguists have proposed various beginning reading approaches to remedy the reading problems of disadvantaged black children. Their programs reflect their theoretical biases concerning the nature of Black English and the type and degree of interference that may exist between the language of the Standard English (SE) text and the child's dialect. The "majority" approach to dialect-caused reading problems is bidialectal, which suggests that SE should be taught as a supplementary or alternative dialect without stigmatizing the child's indigenous speech. Linguists vary in their approaches to this method. Some suggest methods which focus on teaching SE prior to reading or in the lower grades; others opt for methods which permit the child to read the traditional material in his own dialect. Still others recommend that reading materials be altered to match the child's dialect. A more recent suggestion calls for a modification of dialect readers which avoid grammatical features not found in the child's dialect. Whatever the pedagogical justification, educators and linguists must be able to recognize how the community norms of interpretation are embodied in speech to avoid negative feedback from the community. (HOD)

# BLACK ENGLISH AND READING PROBLEMS: SOCIOLINGUISTIC CONSIDERATIONS



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Recently, I was struck by the truth of Baratz and Shuy's remarks in their preface to TEACHING BLACK CHILDREN TO READ (1969):

> During the four year time span of these papers there have been changes in the rhetoric concerning the American Negro. In McDavid's paper (1964), and even more so in Goodman's paper (1965). . . no reference to race is made -- the black man was still 'the invisible man.' Finally, however, the overt identification is made: Labov (1966-67) addresses himself to describing reading problems of Negro children, while in 1968, Baratz, Fasold, Shuy and Wolfram use such terms as black, Negro, inner-city, ghetto dweller, and Afro-American synonymously. (p.xi)

Indeed, many changes have occurred; the black man is no longer the "invisible man" and educators no longer need use circumlocutions when they specifically mean the child who speaks Black English. And most signficant is the enormously increased attention paid to "dialect-based" reading problems since 1964.

What is the relationship of Black English to reading problems? The relationship is a complex one, encompassing not only linguistic factors, but cultural and political issues as well. It is the purpose of this paper to 'sift' out and examine these factors as they affect reading instruction for the black disadvantaged student.

During the past decade, Black English has been intensively investigated by sociolinguists (Labov, Wolfram, Dasold, Stewart, Dillard) as a social dialect spoken by most blacks of the lower socio-economic c[illegible]s. Their studies have established important findings concerning the systematic differences between Black English and other varieties of English, and they have provided educators with insights into the functional roles of this dialect within its cultural matrix and the

verbal repertories of its speakers. Linguists agree that Black English exists as a well-ordered, cohesive linguistic system; that though it shares many features with other dialects of English, it has features of pronunciation and grammar which are unique to that dialect. (See appendix for list of phonological and structural characteristics of Black English). Although there are blacks whose speech has few or none of these characteristics, there are few speakers of this dialect who are white.

Although sociolinguists concur on the description of these features, they differ in their theoretical schema, in research methodology, and expecially with respect to their assessment of the relationship of Black English to other dialects of English. One can group these linguists, essentially, into two categories with respect to this assessment: (1) the social dialectologists and (2) the creolists. (Baratz, 1973)

The social dialectologists interpret Black English as "the transformation of a regional dialect into a class and ethnic pattern." (Labov, 1967: 36); that is, it shares the British origins of white sub-standard Southern dialects, and differs in trivial ways from other dialects of English. The focus of this group, with Labov at the helm, is on variation within language, and the quantification of this variability as correlated with social factors of class, race, ethnic groups, age, sex and speech styles. This methodology shores up their thesis that the differences in black and white dialects are superficial, low-level phonological processes; the essential differences are the frequencies with which specific features occur in actual speech.

The Creolists, represented here by Stewart and Dillard, stress the deep structural differences, affecting meaning, between Black English

and other dialects of English. These qualitative differences are expecially apparent in the verb systems, and reflect the historical origins of this dialect, which they trace to a language contact situation between West African languages and slave-trade English. Stewart and Dillard present comparative evidence of the relationship of Black English to other pidgin and creole-based systems originating in coastal West African languages. (Dillard, 1973; Stewart, 1969) They describe the current dialect strata in B. E.[1] in terms of a sociolinguistic hierarchy: the "topmost" dialect as acrolect - (closest to Standatd English) - and basilect at the lower extreme, (closest to creole source).

The reading programs proposed by these two groups of linguists for black inner-city children can be seen as an extension of their theoretical biases and positions toward Black English. Before I describe their pedagogical strategies, however several sociolinguistic principles relevant to language and reading behavior should be presented for consideration.

DIALECTS

First of all, it must be pointed out that despite their divergent theoretical assessment of Black English, both groups of linguists are monolithic in their goal of dispelling current misconceptions about the linguistic functioning of Black English. They agree that it exists as a well-formed system, that it is in no way an impoverished language system, nor are the verbal or cognitive abilities of its speakers deficient in any sense. Their purpose is to make teachers aware of language differences, not deficiences, in formulating reading and language arts programs for Black English speakers.

[1] B. E. is an abbreviation for Black English

It should also be made clear that the term "Standard English" is a convenient fiction. There is no such speech as "pure Standard English", for all speakers of English speak some dialect or other. There is no intrinsic superiority in the pronunciation or grammar of one dialect over another, save that the historical association of a particular dialect with the prestige of its speakers has elevated it to a position of an accepted standard. ("A Language is a dialect with a navy and army," Max Weinreich once said.) Standard English in America has many regional varieties, distinguished predominantly by different sets of phonemic contrasts that we all recognize (and accept with amused tolerance). The speech of "educated speakers" in all its regional varieties is covered by the umbrella of "Standard English". But the social or ethnic dialects of disadvantaged Blacks or immigrant communities, particularly in urban areas, are stigmatized as inferior or substandard speech patterns.

ATTITUDES TOWARD LANGUAGE

The power of language attitudes in shaping verbal behavior is well-attested in sociolinguistic research. As Labov has stated, "Language may be looked upon as a system for integrating values." (1964:94) The ambivalence of many Black speakers to their own dialect manifests itself in various ways; from its self-conscious repression in the classroom as stigmatized speech to virtuoso performances in folkloristic verbal games as an expression of peer-group identity and cultural solidarity. There are conflicting pressures on the child who speaks Black English if the teacher exerts pressure on him to change his speech patterns at the time

he needs to maintain them as a marker of his identity. Labov points out that it is not until children are close to adolescence that they become sensitive to the social implications of speech; it is during this stage, beginning around the age of twelve, that the conflict of value systems becomes especially acute, often resulting in a polarization of linguistic behavior.

The role of language in the classroom is currently being investigated as part of the general study of language in its social contexts. Children from urban ghettos, particularly black children, are afte described by teachers as "linguistically deprived". This view, known as the "verbal deficit hypothesis" is usually expressed as follows: "Black ghetto children are impoverished in their means of verbal expression, for there is little lang ge, or ill-formed language in their homes. They cannot formulate complete sentences; they lack crucial concepts; they cannot produce or understand logical statements, and so on." (Dale, 1972: 249)

Linguists and linguistically-sophisticated educators decry this verbal deficit hypothesis as unscientific and absurd. Modern linguistic theory holds as one of its major tenets that there are no genetic differences between ethnic, racial or other groups in the basic linguistic ability inherent in the structure of the human mind. And all languages and dialects are equally complex, efficient systems which permit the expression of abstract thought. (Labov, 1969) But psychologists and educators are largely concerned with language and reading behavior from a normativistic stance, and as a result have ignored, (or have been unaware of), the social correlates of linguistic differences; of the

differences in communicative styles, in verbal strategies, and the effect of language attitudes. As a result, divergent language behavior is labeled as verbal and cognitive deficiency.

Loban's study, Problems in Oral English (1966) is a case in point of the "normativistic" scale: the speech patterns and oral performance of black elementary school children are described by such phrases as "problems of the double negative", "missing word endings", "difficulties with verbs", "low in language proficiency", "have not acquired all the phonemes of Standard English". In short, Loban's study interprets black dialect patterns through the filter of Standard English, and thus they are seen as "oral language problems" of usage and coherence. (pp. 47-50)

In her survey of the research dealing with the language abilities of black children, Baratz raises the critical issue of standardized tests as inappropriate or culturally biased instruments which purport to measure the language development of dialect speakers.

> Using standard English criterion for tasks that ask, 'How well has this child developed language?' is absurd if the primary language that the child is developing is not standard English. The question to be asked in assessing language development in these (black) children is 'are the linguistic structures that the child uses highly ordered rules or random utterances, and how well do these utterances approximate the ordered rules of the adults in his environment?' (1973:157)

In agreement with Baratz, Cazden (1972) suggests that the language acquisition or developmental progress of lower-class black children should be evaluated in terms of the norms of their dialect, and brings to our attention that the issue of "dialect-fair" scales of language may become as significant in the future as that of "culture-fair" tests of intelligence has been in the past. (p. 247) There is also a need for detailed longitudinal studies of the acquisition of language by black children which parallel the studies of white

middle class children done by Brown and Bellugi (1964), Brown, Cazden and Bellugi (1967), Bloom (1970) and others.

A corrolary of the hidden bias in much of the language research is the concept of compensatory education. The assumptions underlying intervention-oriented research and programs are called into question by both Cazden and the British sociologist Bernstein who states:

> It implies that something is lacking in the family, and so in the child. As a result, the children are unable to benefit from schools. It follows then that the school has to 'compensate' for the something which is missing in the family, and the children become little deficit systems. . . Once the problem is seen even implicitly in this way, then it becomes appropriate to coin the terms cultural deprivation, linguistic deprivation, etc. And them these labels do their own sad work. (1972:137)

BLACK DIALECT AS INTERFERENCE IN READING

I have tried to point out in the foregoing discussion that the misinterpretation of dialect and cultural factors have contributed to the academic difficulties of many black disadvantaged children.

As for the role of dialect as 'interference' in reading, linguists acknowledge that it exists, but differ on the precise nature of the interference and the nature of the remedies that should be applied. As was stated earlier, the interpretation dialect interference depends on the theoretical bias of the investigator. Thus, Stewart, in keeping with his creolist position, maintains that the syntactic features of Black English is the major source of reading interference, whereas Labov, who treats the dialect differences as superficial ones, focuses on phonological features as the source of interference.

The solutions to dialect-caused reading problems fall into three major groups:

1) eradication of dialect approach

2) bidialectal approach

3) dialect materials approach

The first method is, obviously, not an alternative supported by linguists, for the rationale behind it is that of the "verbal, cognitive deficit" hypothesis; that is, the assumption that the child's deficient dialect must be replaced by Standard English before reading instruction begins.

The second approach, bidialectalism, is the "majority" view. Although there are variation within this approach, it utilizes existing, basic materials for teaching reading. The basic principle involved is that Standard English should be taught as a supplementary, or alternative dialect without stigmatizing the child's indigenous speech. The vatiations of this approach concern differences of opinion as to whether Standard English should be taught prior to reading, or at what grade it should be taught, and what techniques should be employed. Wolfram suggests a classification of these alternatives within the bidialectal framework into two main options: (1) those methods which focus on teaching S. E. prior to reading or in the lower grades, and (2) those methods which permit the child to read the traditional material in his own dialect. (1970)

The first option, teaching SE[2] for a semester or year prior to reading, has been endorsed by Venesky (1970, 1971) under the explicit assumption that the concepts "appropriate" and "inappropriate" replace the notions of "correct" and "incorrect" (cf "everyday talk" and "school talk" proposed by Gladney and Leaverton, 1968). Venesky especially recommends delaying the teaching of reading for a few months to a mixed-dialect class "until each has acquired the language patterns necessary for handling the reading materials." (1970:342). But his assumption

[2] SE is an abbreviation for Standard English

that SE can be taught in a semester or a year to young dialect speakers is seriously questioned by Baratz (1971), Labov (1964), Wolfram (1970) and others. The pessimism which greets Venesky's proposal stems from sociolinguistic observations that the vernacular speech of these children persists despite different methods, for the peer group pressure on the black child is stronger than the school's attempt to acculturate him.

The second option, permitting the child to read the material in his own dialect, places greater demands on teacher education and behavior than on specific materials. Of crucial importance in this approach is that the teacher be knowledgeable about the systematic patterns of the pupil's dialect so that she can distinguish between 'legitimate' dialect renditions of the text from reading errors which arise from incomplete mastery of reading skills. Here, the teaching of reading is sharply delineated from the teaching of spoken SE.

Labov feels that teacher ignorance of the rules of nonstandard dialect has contributed toward reading problems (1967). He focusses particularly on sets of homonyms in BE words which he believes to be the major cause of interference for the dialect-speaking child. These sets of homonyms (such as tore/toe, miss/mist, all/awe, coal/cold, Paris/pass, etc.) are the result of phono-logical processes in BE which include simplification of final consonant clusters, weakening of final consonants, r-lessness, and l-lessness. In Labov's interpretation, certain grammatical features of BE, such as the frequent omission of the past tense (-ed) morpheme is a result of such phonological processes which intersects with syntax. He provides an '-ed reading test' (a set of sentences) to help the teacher diagnose whether

the pupil understands the past tense concept which is masked by his pronunciation. (1967:57)

In the same vein, Fasold presents convincing arguments (in which he explicates, formally, the relationship of English spelling to underlying phonological rules) to demonstrate that dialect speakers do not have any special difficulty with traditional orthography. He writes:

> The correct way to pronounce certain spellings in BE is not the same as the correct way to pronounce them in SE. ... A child who reads test as (tes) should be praised for his complete mastery of the reading process, not condemned for 'leaving out the t/." (1969:87)

Most linguists have pointed out that regional and social dialects of English can be served by the same spelling system, for regularities in sound-spelling correspondances are set up, a system of "calibrations" is made by the speaker which allows for effective word identification.

Goodman is a staunch advocate of accepting dialect renderings using SE materials. His studies in oral miscue analysis reveals a 'translation' process that occurs in the performance of the dialect speaker as he reads, engrossed in the story. His contention seems to be that reading comprehension is not hampered by the mismatch between SE materials and the child's linguistic system, but supportive data on this question is still lacking. However, the translation behavior reveals the importance of the underlying language structure in the reading process, as well as a greater receptive bidialectal control for some dialect speakers than had been assumed. Goodman urges educators to accept and encourage the language that children bring to school, to have them read the way they speak. Thus, his road to beginning reading is the language experience approach.

It is not certain that the proposals of Kenneth Johnson (1970a) fit in at this point, for he is primarily concerned with the acculturation problems in connection with SE rather than with specific instructional strategies in reading. But his program for teaching SE is based on Labov's sociolinguistic stages in the acquisition of standard English. Thus he believes that the young black in primary grades should not be subjected to ESL drills (differing from Stewart here), for example, involving discrimination tasks of final /f/ and /th/ in such words as mouf/mouth, or wif/with, etc. Not only are such drills futile for the child still struggling to master his own dialect, but such practice has little psychological or cultural relevance for children oriented toward the present and isolated from the main stream culture. Hence, Johnson recommends delaying ESL techniques until upper intermediate and secondary grades at which time the pupil's motivation and awareness of the social implications of SE can be more effective. Elsewhere, Johnson calls for a "custom-made" reading program for disadvantaged black children which seems to be a potpourri of many approaches. (1970b:35)

DIALECT READERS

At the other end of the methodological spectrum is that approach which recommends that reading materials be altered to match the child's dialect. Stewart proposes that beginning reading materials be adapted to the grammatical patterns of lower-class black children, while maintaining standard orthography. He focusses on the syntactic differences between BE and SE as the major source of interference for speakers of Black English. (1969)

Stewart describes the mismatch between the child's dialect and the language of the reading materials in terms of a quasi-foreign language

situation; he outlines procedures for teaching SE to dialect speakers by ESL drills. Such a technique would provide instruction in SE grammatical patterns by transitional stages in 'native-to-foreign-language' steps. Each stage would concentrate on a particular set of differences, as in the following:

Stage 1. Charles and Michael, they out playing.
Stage 2. Charles and Michael, they are out playing.
Stage 3. Charles and Michael, are out playing. (1969:185)

Stewart is staunchly supported by Baratz in the use of dialect materials for initial reading. But this proposal has stirred up much controversy, especially in the black community, which prevents its experimental trial in the schools. (parenthetically, Stewart seems to enjoy the political controversy, and anyone who appreciates the rhetoric of debate will find him to be a master. See Stewart, 1969a)

A modification of dialect readers has been proposed by both Venesky (1970 1971) and Shuy (1969) which calls for a 'neutralization' or avoidance of grammatical features not found in the child's dialect. This means that such sentences as John's-house, John runs, He jumped, She is a cook would be avoided as potential points of grammatical interference. But Venesky's proposal goes a step beyond by calling for revision of materials to represent a 'common core' language for all pupils which should be as dialect and 'culture-free' as possible. He writes:

> It should be kept in mind that there is a considerable overlap in the experiential background of children everywhere in the world. . . and there is an equally large overlap in the syntax and vocabulary of the various standard and non-standard dialects of English spoken in the United States. Not all reading passages need concern farm animals, private homes, and a father who returns joyfully from the office at 5:25 every week-day. Whatever may be the reading difficulties caused by present-day readers, there is every reason to assume that within the limited vocabulary range, sentence length and syntax forms commonly prescribed for initial reading, materials can be developed which are valid for all dialects and cultures within the United States. (1973:68)

Venesky's rather breezy proposal is seriously evaluated by Wolfram who demonstrates that such an approach has major flaws. Primarily, the difficulties of neutralizing such potential problem areas as the copula, negation, possession, third singular present tense, indirect questions and other grammatical features makes it difficult if not impossible to write a narrative, and at best results in clumsy circumlocutions. Baratz points to the new basal series, the Shuy-Ginn Project 360 which utilizes this principle, as the"nonlinguistic" alternative which "consciously avoids aspects of the child's linguistic competence" and "has no data to stand on, save the publisher's recommendation." (1971:102)

SUMMARY

Sociolinguists have proposed various beginning reading approaches to remedy the reading problems of disadvantage black children. Their programs reflect their theoretical biases concerning the nature of Black English and the type and degree of interference that may exist between the language of the SE text and the child's dialect. The pedogogical factors cannot be separated from their cultural and political implications, as illustrated by the controversy stirred by the dialect readers. Stewart and Baratz have proposed such materials on the basis of their research and the success of vernacular materials in literacy programs throughout the world, and they regard its rejection by the black community as as emasculation of a promising program. One recognized, at the same time, that this rejection is an amalgam of negative views which have their roots in historic, if not pedagogical, justifications.

But values and attitudes about language and literacy are complexly interwoven with major institutions of our society. Many American parents and teachers, both black and white, still adhere to fictions about language and dialect usage that negatively affect classroom instruction. As Dell Hymes points out, "When one teaches a variety of language to children for whom it is not a normal variety, one is engaged not in logic, or reasoning, or cognitive growth, but in social change."

> If we are to understand what children from a community are saying, and how they hear what we say to them, we must come to be able to recognize how the community norms of interpretation are embodied in speech. (1972:xxx - xxxi)

APPENDIX SOME CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF BLACK ENGLISH

I. Phonological: homonyms resulting from

/r/-lessness in medial and final position: sore = saw
Paris = pass

/l/-lessness before certain consonants
and in final position: toll = toe = told
help = hep, colt = coat

Simplicication of final consonant clusters: mist = miss = missed
bend = ben
test = Tess; desk = dess
(plural, tesses, desses)

Weakening of final consonants: road = row

final -th = /f/ Ruth = roof; mouth = mouf, etc.

II. Grammatical

| Variable | Black English | Standard English |
|---|---|---|
| Copula | He talkin'. | He is talking. |
| Possessive | Mary father | Mary's father. |
| Plural marker | John got ten cent. | John has ten cents. |
| Past marker | Yesterday he walk home. | Yesterday he walker.... |
| Verb Agreement | John run fast. | John runs fast. |
| Subject expression | Mary she work hard. | Mary works hard. |
| Future form | I'ma go home. | I will go home. |
| Negation | It ain't no cat can't get in no coop nohow. | No man can get in a coop. |
| 'If construction | I ask did he do it. | I asked if he did it. |
| Be: invariant | He be workin' | 'He works steady' |

(He ain't workin' is negative of He workin.
He don't be workin' is negative of He be workin'.)

Perfective Aspect:
done = immediate perfective: I done go, or I done gone.
been = remote perfective: He been done gone.
I been had it there a long time.

Verb have in present perfect tense: omitted, or in uninflected form:

He taken it ; He been tired

He have done it: He have did it

The Black English completives (aspect forms done, been come closest to perfective function of have in Standard English.

Q. Is present perfect tense a synchronic fact of B.E. grammar?

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