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ABSTRACT

To make teachers more aware of certain linguistic skills possessed by black children, why they are important, and how they might be capitalized upon in the classroom, this report examines the manipulation of figurative devices within the black community. The discussion focuses on seven forms of communicative devices prevalent in black language: (1) the rhetorical style of black ministers; (2) proverbs and sayings; (3) idioms; (4) folktales; (5) signifying; (6) marking; and (7) sounding. The paper concludes that black children receive a great deal of exposure to metaphorical language and seem to understand it. (HTH)

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CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF READING

Reading Education Report No. 20

FIGURATIVE DEVICES IN BLACK LANGUAGE: SOME SOCIO-PSYCHOLINGUISTIC OBSERVATIONS

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Figurative Devices in Black Language:

Some Socio-Psycholinguistic Observations

This paper is an attempt to make teachers more aware of certain linguistic skills possessed by black children, why these skills are important, and how they might be capitalized upon in the classroom setting. The skill that I am referring to is the manipulation of figurative devices. Within the black community, reliance on nonliteral interpretation is a phenomena as often witnessed as it is practiced. In this paper, seven forms of nonliteralness prevalent in black language communities will be discussed: the rhetorical style of ministers, proverbs and sayings, idioms, folktales, signifying, marking, and sounding. Each of these communicative devices involves figurative language in one form or another and is employed in varying degrees by children, adolescents, and adults from both urban and rural environments. Examples will be drawn from works written by Labov (1972), Mitchell-Kernan (1972), Smitherman (1977), and our own observations.

Rhetorical Style of Black Ministers

Much has been written about the duality of meaning found in the black man's religion. The songs, prayers, and preaching all display a multiplicity of meanings and messages which may not all be apparent to those outside of the community. For example, when the slave owners were listening to the melodic voices of their workers singing "Steal Away to Jesus" and "Wade in the Water," little did they realize that preparations were being made for an escape to the North. "Steal Away" being a call for those slaves who were ready to make the journey, and "Wade in the Water" signaling to those already en route that plantation owners and dogs were in pursuit and that they should "wade in water" to avoid detection.

The rhetorical style of black preachers has received considerable attention, not only in the dramatic arts, but in numerous studies devoted to black folklore. Black ministers have often been portrayed as lively and inventive in their oratory style (Smitherman, 1977; Mitchell, 1970). One crucial element of this style is the rampant use of figurative language. A common pattern is for the minister to draw a parallel between a scriptual source and a current-world situation. According to Mitchell (1970), the Bible "provides the basis for unlimited creativity in the telling of rich and interesting stories, and these narrations command rapt attention; while the eternal truth is brought to bear on the Black experience and the struggle for liberation" (p. 113). He goes on to say that the black preacher "lets the Bible use him. . . . not merely to entertain but to get across a spiritual message" (pp. 113, 133). Consider the following excerpt from a sermon entitled "From Disgrace to Dignity":

> Now listen to this verse: "He was sitting at the feet of Jesus
> clothed and in his right mind and they were afraid."
> This is an indication that while the man was torn apart,
> while he was naked and without integrity,
> while he was not together,
> while he was without his clothes,
> when he didn't know Jesus and didn't know himself.
> nobody was concerned about him.
> But when they found him dressed up,

when they found him hanging around Jesus
when they found him together, they were afraid.
I see a black and white man parallel here!
As long as we were strugglin' in the cotton fields of Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi,
with cottonsacks across our shoulders and to our side,
pickin' cotton and havin' our fingers burnin' with stingin' cotton worms that could hide under the cotton leaves,
as long as we were barefoot,
actually and symbolically,
laughin' when we were not tickled,
as long as we were sayin' "Yes sir" and "No ma'am" when we really meant "Hell no!",
as long as we were in that bag, tied up with Christmas paper, with the symbol of Santa Claus on it and he was White, America was satisfied.
But when the American looked up an' saw us standing before the supreme court,
interpreting the constitution much better than those who wrote it--
things began to get upset.
One day
America saw us marching to the voting booth,
sitting down at lunch counters,
and all of America became afraid.
And as the movement continued,
every community in the nation found it necessary to draw up new appropriations for police equipment.
They started training men how to shoot their guns rather than how to think better.
"And they found the man out of whom the devils were departed, sitting at the feet of Jesus,
clothed and in his right mind,
and they were afraid." (Tatum, Note 1)

In this example, the minister forewarns the audience that an analogy is about to be drawn. But even with this warning, the audience expresses surprise, agreement, and amusement at exactly how it is drawn. The minister goes on to say that due to more revolutionary changes in Africa, "England and the Western civilization had a nervous breakdown." This metaphor had an explosive impact on the audience-participators. But the minister did not slow down; comprehension was assumed to be immediate and automatic. An effective minister is one who refuses to rely on man's individual capacity to make the Bible relevant to his life. Instead the minister directs the audience's attention to the parallels he feels would be the most enlightening and instructive.

Proverbs and Sayings

Another source of figurative language found in the black community is the use of proverbs and sayings. Black children grow up with a great deal of *mother wit*, otherwise known as common sense, imparted to them through a proverbial saying. For example, black children soon learn that the expression "A hard head makes for a soft behind" often literally means that "if you continue to disobey me, I will spank your rear end." A more global, proverbial, interpretation is also sometimes made, namely that "those who insist upon being stubborn and refusing to listen often end up paying a stiff price" (Smitherman, 1977). Not all sayings are proverbial; some are downright insulting. An intruding neighbor is quite apt to hear "Why don't you let the door hit you where the good Lord split you!" Or someone professing to be financially well off may indeed be told that

"He ain't got a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of!" For some people, such sayings may conjure up negative and distasteful images, but these images are realistic portrayals of life explicitly drawn for the listener by the vivid use of semantics.

Idioms

Idioms are a universal pattern of discourse; universal in that they are found not only in dialects of English, but in other languages. For example, in French we have "être dans son assiette," which literally means "to be in one's dish." Figuratively this expression means "to be very satisfied and happy." In Spanish there is the expression "dar luz," literally "to give light," figuratively "to have a baby." Black English has some interesting idioms of its own--idioms that sometimes have quite different meanings than they do in "standard" English. For example, imagine a situation where a woman named Ann has come over to visit her friend Mary, just as Mary finishes preparing a new recipe. Ann tastes it and says, "Girl, you really put your foot in that!" Contrary to the negative mainstream interpretation of "putting one's foot in" something, this idom is a highly flattering compliment. What Ann is saying is that Mary went beyond the recipe and added her own special seasonings and spices which resulted in a new form of manna for the tastebuds! Idiomatic expressions are themselves special spices in a conversation, which if found lacking, would result in a bland and dull interaction.

Black Folklore

Black folklore, another fountain of figurative language, is replete with narrative and allegorical tales. Most people are familiar with, or at least have heard of Bro' Rabbit Tales. The usual plot in these trickster tales involve a supposedly weak puny character, the rabbit, being caught in a bad situation by a larger animal, the fox or the bear but being sly enough to get out of it. The general moral being--"Brute and brawn is never sufficient, and seldom adequate to keep you overpowered. Try a little brain-power. Think fast and live by your wits." Since the 60's, although Bro' Rabbit tales are not often heard, there has been a resurgence of interest in the use of animal characters to teach lessons. The tales most often used today are African in origin. One well-known character is Ananse, the spider, who is thought to be a literary ancestor of Bro Rabbit. A case in point is "How Spider Obtained the Sky-God's Stories" (1964). At one point in the story the spider tricks a fairy into captivity in much the same way the fox captures the rabbit in the Tar-Baby Story. A doll, covered with a sticky fluid, is mistakenly thought to be a very rude person. The fairy is insulted and tries to slap the doll. It is well known what happens after that. The only difference in the two stories being that since the spider is the trickster in the African folktale the fairy stays stuck, whereas in the Tar-Baby story the rabbit succeeds in getting away.

It has often been said that in the days of slavery parents were letting their children know that even if it seemed that Ol' Massa had the upper hand, there were still ways to get the best of the situation and to come out on top. For example, the story was often told of how one particular slave owner used to mistreat his slaves and not feed them properly:

> One day, just before hog killing time, the master went down to the pen and quite a few of the biggest hogs were laying out dead. He became quite upset and asked the hog-tender what had happened. The slave responded, "Well Massa, t'was a terrible thing. They came down with malitis."
>
> "Malitis!" said the master. "Well git those hogs out of da pen and give em to da nigras!" and the master rushed away so he wouldn't become contaminated. After the master had left, one of the children piped up and said, "Well what is malitis?" The slave answered, "When I hit those hogs inda middle of their heads with a mallet, they dropped dead away from ma-li-tis."

Many stories of a similar nature were often recounted to instill lessons in subtlety, persuasion, and other techniques which would facilitate self-preservation.

Signifying

Another rhetorical device is the art of signifying. In standard English the term "signify" can either refer to an explicitly stated relationship between a meaning and an act ("yes" can be signified by, for example, raising the hand), or to an implicit relationship which stems from conventional associations (tattered clothes can signify poverty). In black communities signifying is more like the latter in that the relationship is often implicit although the association is seldom conventional. The term is used to refer either to a tactic employed in verbal dueling or to indirect ways of encoding messages or meanings in natural conversations (Mitchell-Kernan, 1972). Signifying is used to imply, goad, beg, or boast by indirect verbal or gestural means. It can be done to stir up trouble for the sake of amusement or vindictive reasons, or it can be done to simply transmit a message (often negative) without being direct or blunt. Black speakers make special use of indirection and innuendo with this verbal manipulation. A double entendre is often implied or hinted at, but the responsibility for message interpretation lies with the hearer, often together with an audience of listeners. Signifying allows the speaker to maintain control of the interchange by reserving the right to insist on a harmless interpretation if the listener indeed shows signs of challenging the speaker's motives or intent. For example, B had been visiting A for quite some time when A asks:

A: What time is it?
B: Are you asking me to leave?
C: Naw man, I just want to know what time it is.

A's tone and expression played a large role in B's detection of the underlying meaning. So that in fact B did "get the message," despite A's denial, and left shortly thereafter.

Signifying, although used for specific purposes, may spring up in any natural, free-flowing conversation, with signaling cues which are often subtle and/or ambiguous. Inflection of the voice, eye gaze, cutting of the eyes, and facial expression, are just some of the paralinguistic hints that influence interpretation. Although signifying can be used as a diplomatic way to communicate a fault, this is not necessarily the case. Sometimes it is amusing or treated as a joke. Mitchell-Kernan reports the following example:

Grace: After I had my little boy, I swore I was not having any more babies. I thought four kids was a nice-sized family. But it didn't turn out that way. I was a little bit disgusted and din't tell anybody when I discovered I was pregnant. My sister came over one day and I had started to show by that time.

Rochelle: Girl, you sure do need to join the Metrecal for lunch bunch.

Grace: (non-committally) Yea, I guess I am putting on a little weight.

Rochelle: Now look here, girl, we both standing here soaking wet and you still trying to tell me it ain't raining (p. 323).

Rochelle was letting Grace know in no uncertain terms that she knew Grace was pregnant and that there was no need to act as though she was not. In this example, an entire sentence, "We both standing here getting soaking wet and you still trying to tell me it ain't raining," requires a metaphorical interpretation.

Marking

Marking is a narrative device commonly used in black communities in the telling of folktales or in the description of a scene witnessed by the speaker. In addition to reproducing the actual words of the original speaker(s), the narrator may adopt the voice, the speaking peculiarities, and the behavioral mannerisms of the speaker(s) often inserting new content to gain specific expressive value. The replayed scene appears to be more of a caricature or parody than a direct imitation, but by portraying every observed nuance and idiosyncrasy, while overplaying notable features of the speaker, the narrator provides for the audience the full impact of what the narrator has perceived. Mitchell-Kernan uses the following example to illustrate these points.

> The individuals here, with the exception of S_1, had recently attended the convention of a large corporation and had been part of a group which had been meeting prior to the convention to develop some strategy for putting pressure on the corporation to hire more blacks in executive positions. They had planned to bring the matter up at a general meeting of delegates, but before they had an opportunity to do so, a black company man spoke before the entire body. S_2 said, "After he spoke our whole strategy was undermined, there was no way to get around his impact on the whites."
>
> S_1: What did he say?
>
> S_2: (drawling) He said, "Ah'm so-o-o happy to be here today. First of all, ah want to thank all you good white folks for creatin so many opportunities for us niggers and ya'll can be sho that as soon as we can git ourselves qualified we gon be filin our applications. Ya'll done done what we been waiting for a long time. Ya'll done give a colored man a good job with the company."
>
> S_1: Did he really say that?
>
> S_2: Um hm, yes he said it. Girl, where have you been? (Put down by intimating S_1 was being literal.)
>
> S_1: Yeah, I understand, but what did he really say?
>
> S_3: He said, "This is a moment of great personal pride for me. My very presence here is a tribute to the civil rights movement. We now have ample evidence of the good faith of the company and we must now begin to prepare ourselves to handle more responsible positions. This is a major step forward on the part of the company. The next step is up

to us." In other words, he said just what S_2 said he said. He sold us out by accepting that kind of tokenism. (p. 334-335)

In this example, the entire passage spoken by Speaker 2 requires a figurative interpretation. The narrator is implicitly identifying the speaker at the convention with a stereotypic portrayal of an "Uncle Tom," and he expects the audience to understand the full import of his message. In fact, a member of the audience is mildly ridiculed for even asking if that was in fact what occurred. Notice, also, that the last speaker's statement of what was "really said" could be taken as a figurative reinterpretation of S_2's original parody.

Sounding

Another kind of nonliteralness prevalent in black linguistic communication is sounding, in many locations also referred to as playing the dozens. It is also sometimes called cracking, or ranking. These terms are all labels for what Labov calls ritual insult. Engaged in by males, females, young and old, sounding is most common amongst adolescent and pre-adolescent black males. The purpose of sounding is to put down one's adversary by means of insults which tend to involve close relatives (especially the mother) and which make derogatory allusions, typically to physical or sexual aspects of that relative. Although sometimes done solely for purposes of amusement, dexterity in this verbal skill is one way to achieve status in the male peer-group. Sounds often, but not necessarily, involve taboos and obscenities. The appropriate response to a sound is another (ideally more clever) semantically or syntactically related sound. The measure of success is given by the evaluative response(s) of the audience.

In his paper, "Rules for Ritual Insult," which is based on observations of an inner-city community, Labov analyzes sounding from the perspective of a sociolinguist concerned with discourse analysis in general. Sounding, he argues, is a form of ritualized insult. There is a subtle, delicate boundary between it and genuine, personal insult, a boundary that occasionally is traversed either through ineptness or ignorance, and a boundary whose transgression is potentially capable of leading to dire, even fatal, consequences. One of the distinguishing features of sounding is that the protagonist says something that is patently untrue. The potential danger lies in the fact that the speaker has to have an appropriate knowledge of the adversary's background if he or she is to be sure that the allegation is indeed untrue. The falsity of the assertion is sometimes guaranteed by its absurdity. On other occasions, however, the claim could be true. For example, compare "I went in Junior house 'n' sat in a chair that caved in," with "When I walked across your house, a rat gave me a jaywalkin' ticket." Both of these allude to domestic poverty and squalor. However, the first describes a situation which is a possible one. Since sounding always and necessarily involves an audience, the speaker would have to presuppose that the audience knew that it was factually false--but no such presupposition was warranted in the particular situation in which the utterance was made. The rules for sounding were broken and the response, rather than another (hopefully) "superior" sound, was a literal denial: "You's a damn liar. . . ." It is situations of this kind, wherein the playful (if often cruel) nature of sounding is replaced by genuine "badmouthing," that have the potential for violent conflict. Both ritual and personal insults are means of putting people down, but the former are socially acceptable means while the latter are not.

Discussion

All of these discourse patterns--idioms, preacher rhetorical style, signifying, marking, proverbs, and sounding are fascinating communicative devices in their own right, but the skills that their production and comprehension require have some especially interesting psycholinguistic and educational implications.

Black children, often only 8 or 9 years of age, listen to and frequently engage in linguistic activities that are bound by quite strict sociolinguistic conventions whose recognition is essential for successfully engaging in the activity. A high degree of complexity is involved in both production and comprehension. Much of this complexity derives from the reliance of these forms on metaphors and metaphorlike relations. For example, sounding, which seems to appear developmentally before the other forms, is based upon metaphorical comparisons. Labov represented the form as that of an assertion to the effect that the target has some property to some degree. The degree to which it has it is implied in terms of some (bizarre) consequence that would follow from possessing that property to that extent. The consequence is literally untrue in just the same way that in a simile, or its corresponding metaphor (e.g., John is like a telephone pole), the referent, John, is not believed by the speaker or hearer to be literally a telephone pole, and, for that reason, is not believed to be literally like (as thin as) one. In other words, in such a simile or metaphor, John is alleged to be like, or as thin as, a telephone pole only metaphorically speaking. The two things being compared are not claimed to be really alike at all (Ortony, 1979). Thus, if we recognize that similes are essentially metaphorical in nature, we discover that the use of metaphorical devices is rampant in the language of both black adults and children, and that it is already widespread by the time children reach fourth grade.

The important point about the heavy dependence on metaphorical language in the black language patterns is that children seem to be getting a lot of exposure to metaphorical uses of language, and seem well able to understand them. This is interesting in the light of attempts by various psychologists to show that the ability to properly understand metaphors does not appear until early adolescence (e.g., Asch & Nerlove, 1960; Winner, Rosenstiel, & Gardner, 1976). This research has typically been conducted using middle-class white children. But, if young black children understand and engage in sounding, while their middle-class white counterparts are still reputed to be having difficulties in understanding figurative language, it tends to suggest that skill in handling figurative language may indeed depend largely on having sufficient, appropriate experience rather than on some more abstruse cognitive requirements.

Metaphor is important in all manner of communicative situations. It is especially powerful in its capacity to elucidate new concepts in terms of familiar, but superficially only remotely related, old ones (see, Petrie, 1979). Furthermore, the skillful use of metaphors in sounding and related culture-specific linguistic practices amongst young black children can give rise to high-quality performance and attendant peer-approbation. Linguistic dexterity is highly valued among black children. This presumably means that they aspire to it. It would be an interesting challenge to find a way whereby the educational system could capitalize on this source of potential for high performance.

Perhaps utilization of the skill and dextrous manipulation of metaphorical devices exhibited in the black language community is one way to uncork this source of potential for higher performance. However, much research would be needed to determine if this were so. A first step would be to determine whether the black child's adroitness in dealing with metaphorical language generalized beyond the specific, sometimes stereotypic, forms found in the subculture. Recent research findings (e.g., Reynolds & Ortony, 1980; Winner, Engel, & Gardner, 1980) would lead one to suspect that sensitivity to metaphorical uses of language is largely dependent upon familiarity with various pragmatic factors. For example, the research suggests that young children can understand the metaphorical comparisons implicit in similes that they cannot understand when cast in the form of the corresponding metaphors. In other words, children need to know that sometimes making a comparison is called for even when it is not explicitly signaled (for example by a verb of similitude). The wide and frequent exposure to metaphorical uses of language that the black child experiences may bode well for research along these lines, and perhaps, eventually, for the school performance of the black child. As noted in the introduction, it is only after teachers and other practioners are made aware of these potential sources for high performance can there be understanding. The more we understand the better able we are to capitalize on our knowledge in order to maximize our students' potential.

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