Language Patterns Of Poverty Children

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The cultural and dialectal differences as they currently exist in rural and inner-city poverty areas are the primary foci of this volume. The text contains the conclusions from the authors' research studies involving several hundred children of various racial and ethnic backgrounds along with numerous examples of children's oral response to school English. A discussion of how language develops and dialects are learned, techniques for diagnosing elementary school age children's stage of language development, and instructional strategies to facilitate children's oral language and reading development round out this engrossing volume.

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For Roberta and for Cara and Jena

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CONTENTS

LANGUAGE PATTERNS OF POVERTY CHILDREN

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

A PETITE FIVE-YEAR-OLD black girl sits across from an experimenter. He asks her to repeat a sentence spoken in typical school English and played on a tape recorder. The tape recorder plays the sentence: "I asked him if he did it and he said he didn't do it." She smiles, presses down the folds of her thin dress and says, "I asks him if he did it and he says he didn't did it but I knows he did." With barely a measurable delay, this five-year-old had changed or "reconstructed" the typical English spoken in the school to her own vernacular. Some persons would maintain that her English indicates that she is less intelligent, deficient in language development, or delayed in speech. We, as many others we will cite, argue that the reconstructions she made are an indication of rapid mental functioning, which indicates the child is intellectually alert. Further, we will maintain that this one anecdote can serve as an example of what masses of children, who speak a vernacular different from that of the school, do when they hear typical middle-class English: They automatically change spoken middle-class vernacular to their own. These children are capable of achieving in school. The school personnel assume that these children can understand the language of the school, which they usually can, but the school also assumes that the child will speak the language of the school which, without training, they usually cannot. Further, the school assumes that the child must begin formal reading instruction as soon as he begins first grade. We will maintain that until the child has ample experience in matching his own language with that of the school, formal reading instruction should be replaced with intensive instruction and experience in language arts. Failure to help the child master the full range of typical speech sounds of middle-class English before attempting to teach him to read begins a failure pattern all too common

among members of minority groups in all sections of the United States. It is both an ethnic and social-class problem. Yet interestingly, one ethnic group, the Japanese-American, has managed to shake the restrictive nature of its environment and is succeeding at comparable levels with the Anglo-Caucasian, a feat that will be discussed in detail later in the book.

This book is an attempt to present the language studies we have conducted with children from lower socioeconomic as well as minority groups over the past four years. We feel that there is a great need for teachers and administrators to reexamine their practices in the light of evidence available from a number of sources. Besides our own studies, there are many others that indicate that children who reside in poverty can succeed in school. The fact that these children are not succeeding is due more to a failure of the school to modify its practices than it is to the lacks or deficits of the child. Wilson Riles' phrase the "Child as the Victim" sums up our position. Too often we blame the child for his failure rather than plan instruction whereby the child may succeed.

HISTORIC OVERVIEW*

Historically the problem of educating masses of children of immigrant parents, the "melting pot" phenomenon, raised a few questions about genetic differences to account for the intellectual deficits of lower achievers. The achievement differences were attributed to differences in the language spoken in the home and outside of the home (bilingualism) and to the cultural shock of first-generation Americans in rejecting the patterns of the Old European-Asiatic culture and adapting to the new. These positions are ably summarized by Anastasi (1958a) in her article "Heredity, Environment and the Question 'How?'" (1958b).

The drift of the argument changed from the "cultural difference phenomenon" of the 20's to the "social-class difference" of the 40's and 50's. Allison Davis (1951) argued that achievement differences among classes were due to the bias of the tests used

* Portions of the following section appeared in Anastasiow (1972).

to measure intelligence and achievement. Race was not an open issue but social-class differences were. Davis had hoped to develop a culture-free test, one that did not contain bias in favor of the middle-class. It should be recalled that IQ and intelligence were synonymous terms in the earlier discussions, and the notion of a fixed IQ was widely held. Davis explained that the fact that lower-class children did poorly on aptitude measures was due to a function of the inappropriateness of the measuring instrument, particularly the Stanford-Binet. Ginsberg (1972) presents an excellent discussion of the weaknesses of existing measures of intelligence. He points out that there are four major myths concerning intelligence measures such as the Stanford Binet. The tests assume: (1) Intelligence is a unitary measure, which it is not; (2) IQ scores reflect fundamental differences in intellect rather than subcultural and motivational differences; (3) IQ tests measure competence rather than performance; and (4) IQ tests can measure innate ability unaffected by experience. What IQ tests do measure are some intellectual activities which are predominantly verbal (Ginsburg, 1972). In addition, the IQ measure assumes that all children taking the test have had an equal opportunity to master a common set of experiences and are equally motivated to do well on the test (Cronbach, 1967). Obviously, none of the above assumptions can be made for children who reside in poverty situations.

DIFFERENT OR DEFICIT

Hunt's (1961) argument changed the focus of the discussion by postulating and documenting the instability of IQ measures. In addition, he postulated that achievement differences could be due to the effects of early experience on intellectual functioning. He summarized animal and human research and postulated that the young of both species were active and curious even in situations lacking apparent rewards. Hunt stated that the long-term effect of negative environments would tend to limit children's cognitive functioning. The major body of research drawn upon to demonstrate this negative effect were the so-called maternal-separation and sensory-deprivation studies (Spitz, 1946; Bowlby, 1960; Heinicke, 1956). The positive effects of enriched

environments were documented by Skodak and Skeels' (1949) study which demonstrated the superiority of the achievement of adopted children compared to those who remained in orphanages. The constructs of curiosity (Berlyne, 1965) and competence (White, 1959) were presented to account for the organism's need to transact with the environment to develop his cognitive and affective functioning. Thus, the lower-class child, particularly the inner-city child, was postulated to suffer from a deprived environment which did not allow for the active physical interaction necessary for the full development of his intellectual functioning.

LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES

What became apparent to those who worked in programs designed for the poor was that the language of these children was markedly different from that of the middle-class child. Each research position, from the drill-and-practice-oriented curriculum of Bereiter and Engelmann (1966) to the cognitive orientation of Gray and Klaus (1965), Karnes and others (1970), Weikart (1969), and Anastasiow, Stedman, and Spaulding (1970), tried to account for the language patterns of black children, which appeared to be deficits when measured by standardized tests.

Deutsch and associates (1967) proposed that the deficits were a product of a poor home environment which retarded the child's overall development. Similarly, Hess and Shipman (1965) and Deutsch (1965) perceived the deficits as products of such conditions as punitive parent-child interactions, the nonverbal communication patterns of poverty homes, and overly noisy and confusing homes.

Jensen (1969) proposed that the differences were not a product of the environment but of genetic constraints. In this position, he interpreted the *cognitive-deficit* position in terms of innate biological factors rather than as a function of environmental and child-rearing practices as Hunt had suggested and with which Hess and Shipman and Deutsch and his associates seemed to agree. Consequently, the deficit of Hunt now became two pronged: the deficit position due to environmental conditions and the deficit position due to genetic constraints.

The genetic argument has serious weaknesses. As Scarr-Salapatek (1971) has shown, genetic factors are not strong determinants of aptitude in disadvantaged groups regardless of race. However, genetic variance accounts for major differences within the socioeconomic advantaged groups. As Scarr-Salapatek states, "If all children had optimum environments for development, then genetic differences would account for most of the variance in behavior." The assumption that the poor have "optimum environments" clearly cannot be made.

LINGUISTS' VIEW

Given the verbal nature of schooling and the large proportion of verbal items on intellectual and achievement measures, it is not surprising that language, or the verbal expression of language, became the focus of the controversy. It was at this point that the linguists challenged both deficit positions and postulated that the language of poverty children was not deficient but different.

To linguists, describing any language as deficient is an untenable position. Language is acquired by all children approximately at the same time regardless of culture (Lenneberg, 1967; McNeill, 1970a). Differences appear in the surface characteristics of the language rather than in its underlying logic. Labov (1971) and Baratz and Shuy (1969) have demonstrated clearly that black inner-city children's language, while differing in surface characteristics, contains the necessary logical structures to express abstract reasoning and thought.

Labov (1972) more recently suggested that teachers expect the child to have abilities that are beyond the opportunities for language development provided children from lower socioeconomic environments. Labov's list of teacher expectations includes:

1. ability to understand spoken English (of the teacher)
2. ability to read and comprehend
3. ability to communicate (to the teacher) in spoken English
4. ability to communicate in writing
5. ability to write in Standard English grammar
6. ability to spell correctly
7. ability to use Standard English grammar in speaking

8. ability to speak with a prestige pattern of pronunciation

Labov's major point is that while the child's language is sufficient to handle his needs in his home, neighborhood and peer situations, it is different from that of the school and, consequently, the child must decode the spoken language of the teacher and make his own language match that of his teacher's.

Our observations of teachers and schooling would tend to agree with Labov: The major fallacy is the school's assumption that the child will come to school understanding the spoken English of the teacher and, further, that the teacher is *not* responsible for *teaching the child* how to understand the spoken English of the school. It has been shown that when teachers do stress spoken English and communication skills, children make significant gains in language development and score higher on Piagetian tasks (Anastasiow, 1972). These results will be presented in Chapter 7.

Further, we agree with Labov that teachers need to teach the inner-city child the rules needed to translate from the child's system to the teacher's. However, the teacher must help the child in a manner that does not belittle the child's current language. A negative evaluation of the child's language produces a negative effect on the child's self-concept.

As we will demonstrate in Chapter 4, the language of the poverty child has unique characteristics which serve his linguistic community. Any language that serves a linguistic community cannot be called a deficient language. All that can be said is that it is different from the *prestige* white, middle-class language.

SOCIAL-CLASS AND POVERTY

Social-class is not a single isolated phenomenon. It is a cluster of highly interrelated, inseparable variables. When the social-class level of the child is not taken into account, major misconceptions take place. For example, in Terman's (1925) famous gifted studies, the children who obtained high scores on the Stanford-Binet were from favorable economic conditions. One of Terman's often quoted findings is that gifted children are taller and mature more rapidly than nongifted children. This

was a troublesome finding for many educators who observed that many of the gifted children in their schools were physically immature and small for their age when compared to other children. In a recent study challenging Terman's findings, Hobson (1956) was able to show that when the social-class of the child was controlled, gifted children were smaller than their age peers. Hobson concluded that Terman, in selecting bright middle-class children, confused the benefits of a favorable diet on growth and assumed that growth was an associated factor of giftedness rather than of social-class.

Social-class and economic level are positively related. The higher the social-class, the more favorable the economic conditions of the family. Hollingshead's (1965) social-class scale considers both the occupation level of the father and his number of years of formal schooling. An engineer who has a B.A. would tend to be rated lower than an engineer who possesses a Ph.D. However, Hollingshead noted that the income of an individual was not a completely accurate predictor of social-class. He also determined how many people were directly responsible to the individual. Thus, education, income, and the number of people responsible to the person became a means of estimating the relative social position of an individual.

It should be clear at this point that those members of our society at the lower end of the social-class ladder have less income, fewer years of schooling, and usually no one under their direct supervision or employment.

Poverty families are generally defined as those families who live below a certain yearly income figure. The figure varies, particularly in time of inflation, but it is usually several thousand dollars below the average yearly income.

Low income means poor diet, inadequate housing, and higher incidence of severe mental and physical disorders. To paraphrase a nursery rhyme, "when things are good, they are very, very good; when they are bad they are horrid."

In contrasting a group of mothers and children who reside in poverty to those of the middle-class, Birch and Gussow (1970) state:

> The differences are profound and prolonged. Mothers of such children tend to be less well fed, less well grown, and less well cared for before they reach child-bearing age. When they reach it, they begin to bear children younger, more rapidly, and more often, and they continue to bear them to an older age. When such a mother is pregnant both her nutrition and her health will tend to be poorer than that of a woman who is better off, but she will be far less likely to get prenatal care and far more likely to be delivered under substandard conditions.
>
> Children of such mothers are smaller at birth, die more readily, and are generally in poorer condition in infancy than are children born to the more affiuent. If they survive the first month of life, their mortality thereafter is excessively high and their illnesses more frequent, more persistent, and more severe. Their early nutrition is negatively influenced by their mother's health, her age, her income level, her education, her habits and attitudes, so that among such children in the preschool years frank malnutrition, as well as subclinical manifestations of depressed nutritional status (reflected in anemia and poor growth), are markedly more prevalent. During the school years they eat irregularly, their health care continues to be almost totally inadequate, their housing is substandard, their family income is low, subsistence on public assistance is high, and family disorganization commonplace. (p. 266)

Thus, the child born into economic poverty is threatened before birth by imminent death in the period just preceding and just succeeding his birth. If he does not die, he may be maimed; if he survives with a handicap, he finds that his life is a series of lacks and that he is isolated from the mainstream of American life. Further, if he is black, Mexican-American, American Indian, Eskimo, or Oriental he may be denied basic human and civil rights in subtle and sometimes blatantly racist ways.

Robert Coles's series *Children of Crises* (1972, 1973) describes the overwhelming and deadening effect of poverty on the spirit of children who reside in its conditions. Coles speculates that the migrant child may suffer the most severe lacks. To Coles, the rootlessness of the endless car rides from camp to camp destroy the child's ability to develop beyond primitive notions of self-identity. The enslavement of migrant workers to the road boss, and their poor diet, inadequate housing, and dependence on the car for survival is a bleak picture. Many of these children drop

out of life, as well as out of school, when they are six or seven. Most migrant workers die young, worn out from overwork and misuse of their bodies and spirit.

The sharecropper, although he still suffers, fares better than the migrant worker. The sharecropper has roots in the land even though the land may not belong to him.

In contrast to the migrant worker and the sharecropper, Coles feels that the Appalachian poor has a more highly developed conception of self-identity. The Appalachian's pride in his Irish-Scot heritage, as perpetuated through story and song, gives this group a sense of belonging and of family. This feeling for the land, their trust in the land, makes this group distinct.

Three novels deal with the same issues as Coles's books. Joyce Carol Oates' *A Garden of Earthly Delights* deals with the migrant worker and his identity crisis. Oates' powerful National Book Award winner *Them* portrays very effectively the Appalachian white transplanted to the city and the resulting disintegration of the family. Green's *The Doll Maker* explores a similar theme.

The movie and novel *Sounder* gives a fair portrait of the black experience and sharecropping. The moving portrait presented in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pitman* (both novel and television) displays the struggle and enormous effort those who reside in poverty must make to survive—not to overcome, but just to survive.

The most devastating impact of poverty on the individual is not so much in his cognitive development but in his emotional development. The migrant child's lack of self-identity deprives him of the protective security of knowing who he is and where he has come from—his family and past. Plant (1950) called this basic human security that each human must develop in order to survive *The Envelope*. He perceived The Envelope as a product of development through interactions with parents and relatives. Thus, The Envelope serves as a protective "skin" which helps the individual withstand normal daily pressures. Without it, the individual suffers from anxiety or develops patterns of behavior that lead to societal conflict.

Poverty can take its toll physically, but it also can limit the emotional development of the child. This immaturity of emotional development may in the long run be more accountable for school failure than the heretofore hypothesized cognitive deficits. How a parent views himself influences how successful a child will be in school and life. The manner in which the parent teaches the child and the parent's view of the world do much to insure the child's success or failure.

ETHNIC DIFFERENCES, SOCIALIZATION, AND SCHOOL SUCCESS

Teaching or parenting is the assisting of the child in making his own discoveries about the world. Socialization is the process whereby children are taught to see the world in the same way adults view it. What a family teaches a child are the normative beliefs held by the family and the subculture to which the family belongs.

Carlos Castaneda (1972) has described the process very well in one of his recent books in the Don Juan series. Castaneda claims that every culture teaches the child how "to see" the world in the way members of the culture perceive and define reality. To Castaneda, every member of the culture is a teacher who reinforces the child's perceptions once they become consistent with the adult accepted view of reality.

Subculture normative beliefs vary with the basic value-orientation of the total group. For example, the immigrant groups who have made the most successful transition from European and Asiatic cultures to the "melting pot" of the American culture are those who hold values similar to those of the American system. The dominant value system of the United States is the so-called Puritan ethic, which prizes, among other things, a future-goal orientation, delay of gratification, hard work, thrift, perseverance, and achievement. Both the Greek and Jewish cultures hold very similar values and have made the transition relatively easily. The Italians, Polish, and Irish, who hold somewhat different values, have had a more difficult time, with a great deal of second generation cultural conflict. Similarly, we find today

that the Japanese Tokugawa ethic is very similar to the Puritan ethic, and the Japanese-American now occupy favorable economic and prestige roles in the culture. The Hawaiian, Mexican-American, Philippine (Werner, et al., 1971), and Puerto Rican (Lesser, Fifer, & Clark, 1965) cultures, which allow the child to mature slowly without environmental pressure, occupy the lowest economic positions in the United States. Thus, social classes and ethnic groups differ in terms of child-rearing practices and in their training of the child in the value orientation of what they want the child to become.

Some of these child-rearing practices and value-oriented training techniques, however, are counterproductive to the child's success in school. Let us consider for a moment what the school demands and what mothers of various social classes and ethnic groups do to prepare their children for school.

Children are capable at birth of learning about the world into which they have been born. Children of a few days old can discriminate patterns and colors. There is evidence to suggest that the child's brain at birth is a major organ of survival, and from the first day following birth the child is developing the skills which we later will call intelligence or problem solving abilities (Lipsitt, 1967, 1971).

However, although the child is marvelously equipped mentally, he still is relatively helpless physically. The child is dependent upon his caretaker, usually his mother, for food, care, and comfort. What the child does on his own is to learn about the natural phenomena of the world; for instance, that speech sounds contain meaning, that objects behind a screen are still there, that things can change shape and remain the same amount. As Piaget (1955) suggests, children learn through their experiences the basic laws of nature. What the child cannot learn by himself are the names of things and the particular language of his culture.

The American school is predominantly a verbal-oriented institution, which places primary emphasis on learning to read. The most fundamental relationship in learning to read is the degree to which the child has mastered the language orally. Parents who spend a great deal of time talking to the child and stressing the

child's use of objects and play have children who are more successful in school. (We will deal specifically with the issue in Chapter 3.) Mothers who encourage their children in a warm supportive environment tend to have children who mature more rapidly. By talking to the child while diapering, feeding, and playing, the mother provides the child samples of language.

White middle-class mothers and Sansei (third generation Japanese-American) mothers tend to use a great deal of language while they feed, change, and bathe their babies (Caudill & Schooler, 1973). Philippine-American, Mexican-American, Puerto Rican-American and white lower-class mothers tend to use less spoken language but a great deal of nonverbal communication, such as hugs and smiles. The Philippine and Puerto Rican-American mother tends to be very indulgent about the child's acquisition of skills. There does not appear to be a press for the child to grow rapidly.

In consequence, given the demands of the American school, white middle-class and Sansei mothers are very skilled teachers who provide a "hidden curriculum" in the home that prepares their children to succeed in school. Equally bright Philippine-American, Mexican-American, and Puerto Rican-American children do not come to school with a "set to learn," and in addition, they have developed communication skills which are predominantly nonverbal. These children not only possess a language that is different from that of the school but have been oriented toward a value system that allows the child to grow at a relaxed rate.

Within all groups—white, Philippine-American, Mexican-American, Puerto Rican-American, and Japanese-American—there are parents who are less sucessful teachers of their young children. Unfortunately, many mothers who reside in poverty fall into this category. These mothers tend to be authoritarian rather than authoritative, use physical punishment to an extreme, and are very demanding of the child's obedience. The result of such acts is a child who is anxious, often frightened of adults, and overly aggressive with his peers (Bandura & Walters, 1959). In some extreme cases, the children produced by these mothers are severely disturbed and do not possess the social skills necessary to succeed in school (Pavanstedt, 1967).

Thus, inappropriate parenting skills may do much to interfere with normal emotional or affective development. If this is the case, the child's lack of social and self development can seriously interfere with his school success.

The question confronted by those who work with children from poverty homes is whether or not the child can be helped to succeed in school. The school's problem (not the child's) may be that the child is bilingual or speaks a different dialect, or that the child has an inadequately developed concept of self or is emotionally threatened by life and school.

In a recent summary of intervention studies with poverty children, Stedman et al. (1972) concluded that positive results can be obtained when:

1. environmental conditions of the home are modified to offset the impact of poverty in poor diet, crowded conditions, and disorganized families, thereby reducing physiological and emotional disorders;
2. parental child-rearing attitudes and techniques focus on rewarding independence and establishing achievement standards through the use of reasoning and warmth;
3. training by the parent (or intervention) begins early, before one year of age;
4. the intervention program is able to hire quality staff and to maintain a stable staff;
5. the intensity of the training program is such as to provide systematic intervention procedures based on a theoretical rationale.

The evidence to date supports the position that intelligence is a product of: (1) a healthy body with growth and maturation factors functioning; (2) direct experience in which the child experiences and then internalizes the world; (3) teaching the child the names of objects and aspects about the world; and (4) the warmth and support the parenting figure gives to the child. Parents can be very effective teachers (Schaeffer & Bayley, 1963), and parents can directly influence and modify even physiological damage which occurs before or just after birth.

In a remarkable study, *The Children of Kauai,* Werner and her colleagues (1971) followed all identified pregnancies within