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LANGUAGE AND NATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT: BLACK
ENGLISH IN AFRICA

by

which group does not distinguish it in this respect from other dialects or languages. Now then, one might say, is language acquired by children?

According to our present knowledge, children acquire their first native language spontaneously (Levinskas 1967; Brown 1973; Fletcher and Searce 1973). While the exact process involved in language acquisition remains to be determined, the best available data collected to-date in various case studies strongly suggest that the ability to acquire one's language is innate, and that the different stages which the children go through are closely correlated to motor development (Levinskas 1967).

More specifically, a child is born with a predisposition to acquire spontaneously the language spoken in his milieu. This ability is exhibited in different stages of language development, and has been extensively discussed in the literature (see, e.g., Levinskas 1967; Brown 1973; Fletcher and Searce 1973). After the first initial stages of cooing and babbling (2 weeks to 12 months), the child begins to pick up knowledge in his language development at the age of 12 months: the child builds an active vocabulary of about three to fifty words as it progresses towards the age of 18 months. According to Levinskas (1967), the development which takes place from 18 to 24 months is the

Paper presented at the National Invitational Symposium on Black English and the Education of Black Children and Youth; Center for Black Studies, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, February 21-23, 1980.

(Proceedings of this conference will be published under the editorship of Dr. Geneva Smitherman of Wayne State University)

LANGUAGE AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: BLACK ENGLISH IN AFRICA

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In this paper I will summarize some of the salient characteristics of language acquisition and language policy, and then relate these features to the broader issue of national development with particular reference to the role of language in personal development and upward mobility.

General development involves many dimensions of which education is only one. Education in turn crucially involves language; in fact one cannot think of education without language. While this is true, it is equally important to point out in this respect that although language is an inherent characteristic of the human species, the use of a particular language or dialect in education is almost always a political decision. As Gorman (1974: 397) observes, "pedagogical considerations, while relevant, are seldom primary in influencing decisions relating to the use of particular languages as media or subjects of instruction." The court case which has led to the present Symposium on Black English and the Education of Black Children and Youth¹ is an eloquent example in point here. One of the issues that this symposium is called to address is the question of the role and proper place of Black English in the education of Black children. This question entails a discussion of the manner and conditions under which such a dialect is acquired.

Black English, as most linguists will agree, is acquired in the same manner as any other dialect or language. The fact that it is a particular dialect of English generally associated with a particular

ethnic group does not distinguish it in this respect from other dialects or languages. How then, one might ask, is language acquired by children?

According to our present knowledge, children acquire their first/native language spontaneously (Lenneberg 1967; Brown 1973; Fletcher and Garman 1979). While the exact process involved in language acquisition remains to be determined, the best available data collected to-date in various case studies strongly suggest that the ability to acquire one's language is innate, and that the different stages which the children go through are closely correlated to motor development (Lenneberg 1967).

More specifically, a child is born with a predisposition to acquire spontaneously the language spoken in its milieu. This ability is exhibited in different stages of language development, and has been extensively discussed in the literature (see, e.g., Lenneberg 1967; Brown 1973; Fletcher and Garman 1979). After the first initial stages of cooing and babbling (12 weeks to 11 months), the child begins to pick up momentum in its language development at the age of 12 months: the child builds an active vocabulary of about three to fifty words as it progresses towards the age of 18 months. According to Lenneberg (1967), the development which takes place from this period on to the age of 30 months is so rapid that it is difficult to keep pace with it. For example, the child's active/speaking vocabulary increases from fifty words (at the age of 18 months) to more than one thousand by the age of 30 months, while its passive vocabulary climbs to 2,000-3,000 words. Further, between 24-30 months there is a bursting of language activities, called by Lenneberg (1967) the naming explosion.

By the time the child reaches the age of 36 months, language acquisition is almost complete in the sense that the child has developed the level of competence that will enable it to produce and understand almost any sentence. There are comparatively fewer mistakes at this stage, and the speech approximates that of an adult colloquial register. By the age of 45 months or so, the child has near-native competence in his/her native language; whatever mistakes occur are generally traceable to unusual constructions.

From all indications, the child develops his language according to built-in biological schedules. This development is spontaneous: the child utilizes data from parents, siblings, and other speakers around him/her as input for the formulation of hypotheses about the structure of language. What is particularly intriguing about this process is that the child extracts regularities from limited language data which are often unstructured and replete of errors of performance and all types of gaps. Yet the child manages to achieve complete mastery with amazing perfection in a very short time.

It is the nature of language acquisition that encodes into language the socio-cultural features that we have come to associate it with. In particular, because language is acquired spontaneously by the child in a specific socio-cultural setting, the vocabulary, accent/intonation, and sentence structure that the child learns will reflect that cultural or sub-cultural setting. For example, if a child grows up in a poor Black community, he/she will reflect that socio-economic setting in his/her language; if he/she grows up in a middle class Black community, he/she will reflect that milieu in her speech also. A child born of

Chinese parents in an English-speaking community is likely to acquire English as its first language and Chinese as its second. It is entirely possible, however, that the child will develop equal competence in both languages.

The centrality of language and its omnipresence in human life as well as the manner and conditions under which it is acquired have led social scientists to recognize it as an automatic signaling system which is second only to race. As Deutsch (1975: 7) puts it,

An individual cannot easily change his language and his language habits become manifest as soon as he opens his mouth to speak. Changes in their language habits take a long time to acquire for people once past childhood. People are stuck with their language; but in addition to language signaling them out as passive targets for discrimination of a positive or negative type, language goes far to influence their capacity to act, their capacity to communicate, their capacity to organize, their capacity to form a self "I" image, to develop a sense of self-identity and a sense of self-respect.

I am certain many, if not all, of us here can testify to the veracity of this statement from our own experiences.

Given the mode of language acquisition just outlined, it follows that different socio-cultural or economic communities will develop different languages and/or dialects. The development or existence of such languages and dialects often leads to the formulation of language policies and language planning. Because of various economic, social, political, and educational factors which are perceived by governments as contributing to a more efficient and unified nation, a decision is made to select a particular dialect or language to serve as the medium

of national education, administration, commerce, mass media, and all other aspects of communication that have a national character. As stated previously, the decision to select a specific dialect in a monolingual society with several dialects or in a multilingual society is dictated by what the national government considers as primordial conditions effecting or relating to national intergration; these conditions vary from one country to another.

Consider for example in this regard the case of African nations. During the colonial period all colonizing powers, viz. Britain, Belgium, France and Portugal had imposed their languages on their respective colonies as the sole media of national administration, education, commerce, diplomacy, and mass media. Wherever indigenous African languages were permitted to serve as media of communication, e.g., in the case of the British and Belgian colonies, they were relegated to low level functions (cf. Bokamba and Tlou 1977; Spencer 1971). After the advent of political independence, the newly elected African governments decided to not only retain the colonial languages as the official languages, but also reinforced these colonial policies by demoting further the African languages by either disallowing them to be used as media of instruction in grades one through three and/or discontinuing their use as subjects of instruction (cf. Bokamba 1976; Bokamba and Tlou 1977). The arguments often given in favor of the retention of the colonial languages as the sole media of instruction and national communication were (1) efficiency and expediency; (2) national intergration; and (3) national progress.

The argument for efficiency and expediency of European languages was based on the fact that African languages were underdeveloped in the sense that they were not "intertranslatable with other languages in a range of topics and forms of discourse" considered to be characteristic of the so-called developed nations. A related argument was that teaching in African languages would require massive effort in the preparation of teaching materials and in the training of teachers, and that the new governments had no time for these types of activities. A statement cited in Gorman (1974: 441) from the Report of the Kenya Education Commission appointed by what was then the new government of Kenya in 1964, speaks eloquently on this issue and reflects very much the kind of thinking found in other African nations at that time.

The Commission, after reporting that the great majority of the witnesses interviewed with regard to the use of English as the medium of instruction in Kenya wished to see its use universalized to all levels of formal education, concurred with the view by stating that:

First, the English medium makes possible a systematic development of language study and literacy which would be very difficult to achieve in the vernaculars. Secondly, as a result of the systematic development possible in the English medium, quicker progress is possible in all subjects. Thirdly, the foundation laid in the first three years (of schooling) is more scientifically conceived, and therefore provides a more solid basis for all subsequent studies, than was ever possible in the old vernacular teaching. Fourthly, the difficult transition from a vernacular to an English medium, which can take up much time in Primary V, is avoided. Fifthly, the resulting linguistic equipment is expected to be much more satisfactory, an advantage that cannot fail to expedite and improve the quality of post-primary education of all kinds. Lastly,

advantage has been taken of the new medium to introduce modern infant techniques into the first three years, including activity and group work and balanced development of muscular coordination. In short (the report concluded), we have no doubt about the advantages of the English medium to the educational process.

This statement can be transposed almost word-for-word in support of the efficiency of French and Portuguese.

The argument for national unity and integration was based on the assumption that the selection of an indigenous national language in a multi-lingual African nation would engender political and social unrest which would be destructive to efforts undertaken for the achievement of national unity. The claim here was that those ethnic groups whose languages will not have been chosen to serve as the national languages would be unhappy. To avoid this type of conflict, it was argued, it would be preferable to retain the European languages as the official media of communication, because they were ethnically "neutral."

With regard to the national progress argument, it was maintained that the retention of the colonial languages in all major functions of the government was conducive to national progress or development. Progress and development in such discussions was generally equated to industrialization and technological achievements, rather than the happy coincidence of structural and socio-political changes that will improve the over-all living conditions of the people. It was argued further that the use of African languages in education would impede the progress of the African people and retard their integration into the modern world. A statement made by Dr. Dowuona (1969: 3), then Minister of National Education in Ghana, accurately summarized the kind of thinking that

was prevalent during that period. According to Dr. Dowuona (1969: 3):

The reasons behind all of these (changes in the language policies) were partly political and partly practical. On the one hand, politicians striving for national unity, for the suppression of tribalism, for rapid industrialization and accelerated economic development, saw in Ghanaian languages a barrier to progress. On the other hand, the vast majority of the people themselves wanted to enter quickly into the new material civilization to which a knowledge of English provided one of the keys. Rapid development, it was felt, could be achieved through knowledge of English, and new experiments in English as a medium of instruction right from the first year of school were begun in the so-called Experimental Schools.

I have argued elsewhere (see Bokamba and Tlou 1977; Bokamba 1978) that while there is some truth to these arguments, the conclusions derived from them are unwarranted. The adoption of an indigenous national language in an African country does not necessarily exclude the teaching of an international language as a research tool or means of international communication. Any aspect of development that might be derived from the knowledge of an international language such as English or French or Portuguese. I have maintained, can still be made available to the nation in question through the adoption of a language policy which includes obligatory instruction of such a language as a subject.

Of the three arguments outlined here, the last two, viz. national integration and national progress, also underlied the melting pot language policy of the United States. The adoption of one of the English dialects which has become the standard dialect now had nothing

to do with its superiority or efficiency over other possible dialects that could have been selected and standardized; instead, the choice was largely dictated by perceived political and social imperatives by the governing white elite. Pedagogical considerations appear to have had very little influence in the formulation of this language policy, as is often the case in many other countries.

It should be pointed out here though, that it is possible to adopt a comprehensive and just language policy which can be beneficial to educational developments and other aspects of developments which are predicated on education. The adoption of a multilingual policy in the Soviet Union where the various languages of the Republics are used as media of instruction, with Russian being taught as an obligatory subject throughout the country, is one example in point. One of the results of that language policy has been the rather phenomenal achievement of almost 100% literacy within a period of less than fifty years.

While the adoption of a particular language policy is often viewed as being conducive to national integration and development in general, the implications it has on the types of opportunities available to the individual in that society can be highly negative.

Consider, for example, the case of educational opportunities. As I have indicated previously, education crucially involves language: a child learns reading, basic concepts in natural and social sciences through language; he/she formulates his ideas about relations between objects in language; he/she communicates such ideas and other needs in language. In short, his/her ability to function effectively in an

academic milieu, not to mention society in general, depends critically on language. Now, given that each child acquires the language of his/her community, the choice of a specific language or dialect as the sole medium of instruction can be either beneficial or highly limiting. If the chosen dialect or language happens to be that mastered by the child before schooling, there will be no significant problems. However, if the language or dialect so adopted is non-native to the child, his/her over-all performance will be severely affected, because he/she will have to learn simultaneously the new dialect or language and the other skills that the school is attempting to teach him/her. This is one of the main reasons why many children who come from low income families, and who happen often to speak the non-standard dialect, often have difficulties with reading. Black English speakers are an example in point here. Their poor performance in reading and other subjects are well-known to this audience to require discussion.

Another complicating factor in this endeavor is the teacher's attitude: if the teacher's attitude towards the child's language is negative, the upward mobility of that child will be severely handicapped. The child develops an inferiority complex, and thereby a negative relation between him and the teacher. As a result, he cannot learn or perform well academically and is therefore sent to a special class. We all know of cases where many children have been sent to institutions for the mentally retarded because of their alleged incompetence and mental deficiencies. Clearly, the condemnation of otherwise mentally competent children to such institutions destroys their chances for

survival in the society. Further the more cases like these are repeated, the more the society as a whole is robbed of its potential for effecting changes and making national progress.

If, on the other hand, the child manages to master the new dialect or language sufficiently as to complete his/her education, but does not acquire native-like competence in the said dialect or language his/her chances for employment, personal upward mobility and continued socio-political development will be affected. There are numerous documented cases where individuals who are otherwise academically highly qualified have been denied employment and/or promotion opportunities because of their language. It is cases such as these that create and intensify class differences in society. As K. W. Deutsch (1975: 8) has observed, this kind of language conflict intensifies with value agglutination in that those individuals who are high in income are also high in status and other perceived high values in the society. Language, as stated earlier, targets individuals for economic rewards, careers, prestige and other social values. Denials of these rewards or discrimination thereof not only intensify class and group conflicts, but they also lead to socio-political turmoil and affect the capacity of individuals to function effectively in the society.

Crockcroft, Frank, and Johnson (1972: xvi) have proposed a definition of development that is very pertinent to this discussion. They state:

Real development involves a structural transformation of the economy, society and culture of the satellite (nation) that permits the self-generating and self-perpetuating use and de-

velopment of the people's potential. Development comes about as a consequence of a people's frontal attack on oppression, exploitation, poverty that they suffer at the hands of the dominant classes and their system.

In other words, development becomes here what Johnson (1972: 273) has defined as "the happy coincidence of structural change and improvement in the human condition."

This, I would like to contend, should be the ultimate goal of any language policy which is concerned with national development. In other words, as long as education is viewed as the vehicle par excellence for both personal and national development, the language policy adopted by a nation should be consonant with this goal. The language policy should enhance the ability of any child to avail himself/herself of all educational opportunities that the society offers, and thereby enabling him/her to participate effectively in the society.

In the light of the facts discussed here, I would like to advocate a language policy that properly includes the use and appreciation of the Black English dialect as a subject and medium of instruction for certain subjects at least during the first nine years of education (i.e., elementary school and junior high/middle school). For example, reading, language arts, natural sciences, and civics can be taught in Black English, while other subjects are taught in standard English. The adoption and implementation of such a bi-dialectal policy should be studied carefully by school administrators, educators, and linguists. Given the fact that Black English is the dialect spoken by the vast majority of Black children in the United States before their

schooling into standard English, the adoption of the policy suggested here cannot fail to improve their academic performance and other developmental opportunities.

NOTES

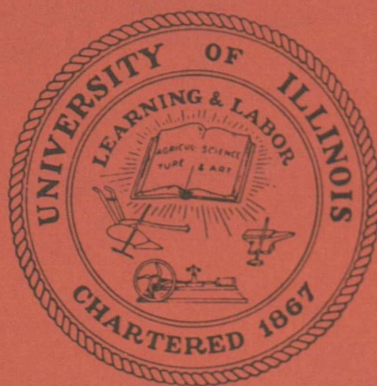
*The presentation of this paper at the Symposium was made possible in part by a travel grant from the Afro-American Studies and Research Program, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign; and in part by the Black Studies Program, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan. I am grateful to the directors of these programs for this assistance.

¹An abbreviated version of this paper appeared in Language and Development: An International Perspective (1980) 1: 6-9. Published by the Division of Applied Linguistics, Department of Linguistics, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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