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Some Notes On The Problem Of Children Who Speak Dialect

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It is only within the last two decades that educators and sociologists have "discovered" that black ghetto children speak a language of their own black dialect—and are not essentially lacking in fundamental language skills.

It is now fashionable to study black dialect, not only to discover the linguistic features which distinguish black dialect from "white speech," but also as a basis for information leading to the development of instructional programs in multicultural education. Just what is the best learning procedure for children who speak a dialect other than "standard" English?

During the sixties, the study of black dialect was to lead to the identification of elements of black dialect which distinguish it from dialect associated with "textbook speech" and to identify features which might interfere with children's comprehension while reading. (Shuy, 1974) At that time the study of black dialect satisfied both black and white educators, since both groups agreed that standardized reading test scores in most black urban areas were low, indicating that reading skills needed to improve. It was felt that the study of the relationship of black dialect to reading was one means to discover the cause of the low reading scores.

Also during the sixties, it was not uncommon to use the terms "standard" and "non-standard" when describing dialect. The use of those terms is judgmental, assigning one dialect a position of inferiority in terms of another, which has overtones of the ethnocentrism that has often characterized attitudes toward the dialects of low income and minority groups.

Today, linguists take each dialect as a language and describe the rules which govern its use. This generates

a grammar for identifying the language and the speaker. And now during the eighties, teachers are generally aware of the implied message in the label "standard/non-standard" speech. However, teachers may still need to think about children's speech in contrast to "textbook" speech. They may need to think about their feelings regarding black speech and what these feelings suggest about children's learning achievement and life in the classroom.

This article is an effort to discuss the problem of black dialect with teachers and future teachers, particularly pointing out the social and educational aspects, including their relationship to self-image and identity.

The linguist, Martin Joos, describes the effects of non-standard speech and helps us create an image of its relationship to standard dialect (Joos, 1967). This leads us to the following description and the feeling level with respect to black speech. Non-standard dialect is not just something that can be described linguistically, but is, in the Joos context, "personality." It is something with which the individual speaker can identify and which is part of his image of himself.

Socially, dialect has an entity and existence of its own. It is a created matrix within the society and is maintained as a way to express identity, role, and expectations. Symbolically, dialectical variations help society members understand the richness and variety of the society and offer a means to understand personality and origin. The ability to categorize, or sort, people into given social and educational slots is learned early in life; and if not prejudicial, contributes creatively to the process of assigning order and category.

Because of this categorizing of people according to their speech

patterns, it is important, especially for teachers, to understand the role that dialect plays in assigning superior and inferior slots to children and assessing personalities as "responsible" or "irresponsible." Unfortunately, dialect plays a role with respect to the low status characterizations of low income and minority speakers. This often unconscious process of judgment on the basis of speech is a problem which must be brought to the awareness of all educators.

TEACHING NON-STANDARD DIALECTS

Linguists Roger Shuy (1974), William Labov (1972), and Walt Wolfram (1971) have studied characteristics of dialects, including black. Roger Shuy, for instance, feels that non-standard dialect is not the children's problem, but the teacher's. He says that "what is apparently meant by the non-standard dialect problem of the student is only that the child's speech does not correlate, one-to-one, with the expected speech patterns of the classroom" (Shuy, 1974).

In an effort to explain where the one-to-one patterns did not occur, some linguists and educators set out to identify where standard and non-standard linguistic features differed. The thrust was to identify and contrast the phonemes and grammatical structure of the dialects, to list those in black dialect which were different, and to assess the potential cause of interference with reading textbooks (Shuy, 1974). The predominant question which ensued was whether non-standard speech delayed proficiency in reading comprehension.

If children were instructed in standard English as a second dialect, they would need to master standard speech while learning to

read. This would put the burden of learning the second language on them rather than on the teacher. On the other hand, if children were taught to read by teachers trained in both dialects, it would put the burden on the school district and teacher training institutions to prepare teachers to learn how to teach the children and not the textbook (Shuy, 1974).

Yetta Goodman and Carolyn Burke (1972) were early leaders in the move to help teachers evaluate the place of dialect and to offer creative suggestions. They encouraged teachers to use the child's own words in teaching. With a language experience approach, a child can read the words he or she speaks and thinks, whatever the dialect or language style may be. This is one solution to the problem.

ANN ARBOR COURT DECISION

In the Ann Arbor, Michigan, court decision (Martin Luther King, Jr., Elementary School Children vs. Ann Arbor School District, August, 1979), the point was made very clear that dialect is not the child's problem, but one of teacher education. Detroit Federal Judge Charles W. Joiner stated that black English becomes a "...language barrier when teachers do not take it into account in teaching standard English.¹ He instructed the School Board that teachers must take black English into account when teaching. Teachers need to be trained to identify children with a reading problem "due to dialect 'shift' or 'decoding'." They need to understand that black and other dialects are governed by rules that determine their grammatical structure. It is very apparent that talking about black dialect and the teacher's responsibility to use the child's language in the teaching situation is similar to two programs: bilingual classes and English as a Second Language (ESL). The bilingual classes afford non-English-speaking children the opportunity to have schooling in their own language until their proficiency in English is such that they can be transferred to regular classes. The

ESL programs make it possible for children who speak language other than English to be given instruction in English until they are sufficiently adept to manage courses in English.

LOS ANGELES PLAN

A program was initiated in Los Angeles, Standard English as a Second Dialect (SESD) 1977-1980. The special program was taught at La Salle Elementary, a southcentral school of the Los Angeles School District and the oral language of black children became the focus of attention. Teachers were given in-service training, and children were taught to become bidialectal — they were to learn to speak standard English in addition to black.² The SESD instruction program was written for "Ebonics"³ speakers on the premise that reading comprehension as well as social and economic opportunities would improve if the speaker spoke both black and standard English.

Several specific linguistic goals were set for SESD by Walter Loban, Roger Shuy and Kenneth Johnson, the developers of the project, who also assisted with staff training and with the program for dialectical teaching and learning. Instructional materials were written specifically to teach the particular speech patterns which identified and differentiated Ebonics English and standard English.

During the three-year period of SESD, a research project was initiated under the direction of Roger Shuy, to analyze the oral language of groups of children. Beside the "Oral Language Competence Assessment Instrument" which was developed to evaluate the children's language patterns and abilities in Ebonics, or any language, there was an analysis of audiotapes which were made of 16 children in the third grade. These children's language habits were assessed and analyzed according to several dimensions of the four categories of the assessment instrument: conversational abilities, narrative abilities, referencing abilities, and style shifting.

The children were judged skillful or not skillful in language on each of the dozen items of the four categories. The project was interested in the relationship of phonology and grammar to oral language competency. For instance, could a particular occurrence of oral language composition be found which would prevent a child from being a competent user of the language, not just the dialect, but the language itself?

Although the sample of 16 is a small, the results indicate an important finding and should be verified by a study of a larger number of children. It is of great interest that the evaluators were unable to find that black dialect inhibited children's use of language itself. In fact, the study was notable for the fact that no differences were found in the black dialect, children's use of language, and the expected performance of children using standard English.

So where does that leave the educator or even the theoretician with respect to the best way to proceed with children who speak a dialect different from "usual" English—and by extension even another language altogether?

Experience and research seem to point to the same conclusion—that children who speak dialects which vary from standard English learn best when allowed to write and speak in their own words while at the same time receiving instruction in standard English. With respect to those children who speak a language other than English, there is a good deal of controversy, although with a competent bilingual teacher, it appears to be preferable and more effective if the child is educated first in his own language. English as a Second Language also produces good results, probably better for those children who have some knowledge of English.

However, as with all teaching, the effectiveness depends on the competence and sensitivity of the individual teacher. It seems very clear that training of teachers, prior or in-service, to accommodate other dialects is a very important element

1. According to Martha Hindes, newsreporter (Aug. 16, 1979, p. 3p13, *Detroit News*).

2. The project director for SESD was Bernice Christensen. Since I had the privilege of working with the evaluation section of this project in 1980 from February to August—the

last seven months of three years of operation—this section of the report is based on data which I reviewed at the time.

3. Ebonics = black dialect "ebo(ny) + (ph)onics (sound).

in the successful learning process for children who speak dialects. Besides teacher training, assessment instruments can be of help, and learning aids such as filmstrips, special books, games, puppets and pictures are of vital importance, as was shown with the SEDS program in Los Angeles.

CONCLUSION

Probably one of the most important aspects in the successful learning of children is the attitude of the teacher toward pupil who speak dialects or other languages. If these children are seen to be inferior, and consciously or unconsciously assigned a lower status and lower role categories, children speaking dialects will not learn as readily, rapidly or well. It is of great importance to any teacher in a bilingual, bidialectal, or multilingual situation to be aware of his or her own attitudes toward the speech of pupils with particular attention to possible hidden biases.

Thus, it is hoped that this article has acquainted teachers and future teachers not only with the problems and possible solutions for handling pupils who speak dialects but also with the need for awareness of categorizing children by their speech patterns and the negative effect this can have on the children and on their learning.

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The International Reading Association is seeking outstanding articles on reading and related fields for entry in its annual Print Media Award contest. Articles by professional journalists appearing in newspapers, magazines and other print publications during the 1982 calendar year are eligible for this year's contest.

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The Print Media Award, which carries a \$500 stipend, will be presented during IRA's Twenty-eighth Annual Convention, May 2-6, 1983 in Anaheim, California. In addition to the main award, "Certificates of Merit" will be sent to runners-up in various categories defined by publication circulation, frequency of issue and manner of presentation (series or single article).

Entry forms and further information are available from Dr. Wallace Ramsey, 14 Meadowbrook C.C., Ballwinn, Missouri 63011, USA. Entries should be mailed to Dr. Ramsey, and must be received by January 15, 1983.

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