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Errors in the use of English by a group of pre-school children

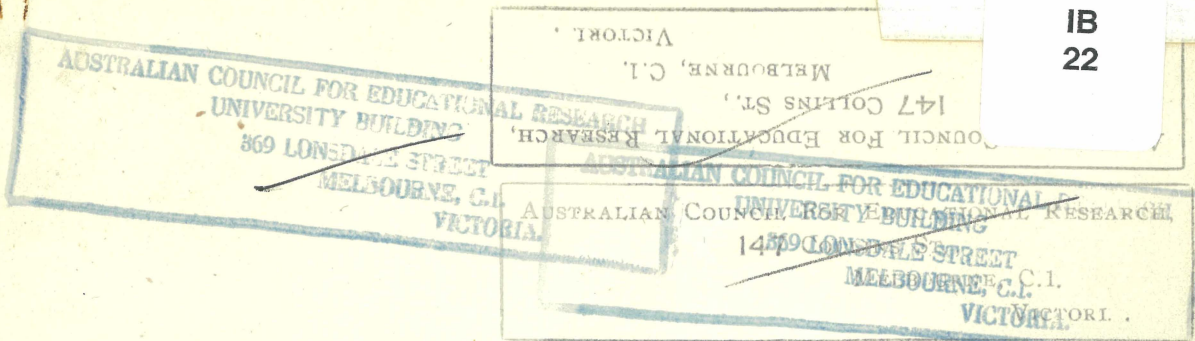Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH.

INFORMATION BULLETIN NO. 22.

ERRORS IN THE USE OF ENGLISH BY
A GROUP OF PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN.

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147 Collins Street,   April, 1951.
Melbourne.   C.1.

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AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH.

ERRORS IN THE USE OF ENGLISH BY
A GROUP OF PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN.

Information Bulletin No. 21 reported the pronunciation errors of a group of pre-school children in an inner suburb of Melbourne. This bulletin reports their errors in English Usage.

THE GROUP:

The group consisted of twelve boys and twelve girls, all of whom in 1951 enrolled for the first time at a state school in Melbourne. They were observed, and their speech recorded, for the ten days November 20-24, and November 27-December 1st*, while in a special group formed for the purpose at the Lady Gowrie Centre in Melbourne. Their ages ranged from 4 years 10 months to 5 years 8 months. Four girls and four boys came from the children already attending the Centre, four girls and four boys from other kindergartens and creches in the area, and four girls and four boys had no previous pre-school experience in kindergartens, nurseries or creches. * (1950).

THE RECORDS:

The records used for the analysis of errors in usage were made by stenographers who were instructed to record the children's speech as accurately as possible, recording errors and incomplete words or sentences exactly as they were uttered. The primary purpose of these records is to prepare a vocabulary list for these children, but as the material lends itself also to analysis of errors in usage, such an analysis has been made in the hope that it may be of use particularly to teachers of infant classes, kindergartens etc. No similar analysis of Australian children has, as far as is known, been made public.

METHODS OF CLASSIFICATION:

Table 1 at the end of this bulletin shows the number of children making the errors recorded. The errors are classified into certain conventional groups for ease of reference, and within those groups they are, as far as possible, in order of frequency of error.

There is, however, another way in which the errors can be classified. The type of classification given in Table 1 is doubtless of help in organising instructional work in the classroom. Effective eradication of the error depends, however, upon substituting for it the habitual use of the correct form. This is perhaps best done by considering the origin of the defect. This has been attempted in Table 2, where some of the main errors are considered under the following heads:

1. Wrong form is almost, if not completely, fixed.
2. Right form is not fully fixed, and there are lapses.
3. Both forms are used, apparently indiscriminately.
4. Wrong form is used because child is expressing a complex idea and has not the necessary experience in language to do this properly.
5. Colloquialisms.
6. Redundancies.

It is thought that the classification in Table 2 may prove more helpful in the long run than that in Table 1. It is evident, for instance, that there are stronger forces at work to establish and maintain the errors in Category 1 than those in Category 3. The practice of the correct form in school speech and writing may, therefore, eradicate the errors in Category 3, but may fail to affect those in Category 1.

Errors in Category 2 are probably unimportant, and it may well be that they, as well as many in Category 3, disappear with increase in age or under the influence of schooling.

Errors in Category 4 are an interesting group.   It is probably a sign of growth in the child that such errors are made, although if they are too common it is an indication that the child's linguistic training is not keeping pace with the increase in experience and the growth of intelligence - a type of unbalance which may lead to frustration and behaviour problems.

It is doubtful whether the colloquialisms of Category 5 can be considered as errors.   The question whether any attempt should be made to eradicate them is a difficult one to which the answer may well vary from school to school.

The redundancies of Category 6 are a mixed group.   Some of them are true redundancies:- they add nothing to the sense, balance, or emphasis of the utterance.   Others, however, although structurally they are redundant, seem to be deliberately used by the children for emphasis, or to attract attention to themselves or their actions.   If the first type is eradicated, there is no loss to the language of the child; if the second type is eradicated and nothing substituted for it, there is a loss of colour and flavour in the speech which is regrettable.

SEX DIFFERENCES:

Boys appear more prone than girls to make errors in certain verbs.   'I seen', 'That come undone', 'He drunk it', 'I ain't', 'It busted', with their variants, are more frequently used by the boys than the girls.   Boys also appear more prone to use double negatives, to misplace 'only', to misuse 'what' in expressions such as 'The one what we had', to use 'lend' for 'loan' as a noun, to say 'that nother (or nuvver)....', to use the expression 'So as' in such combinations as 'So's I don't have to go', to follow an indefinite singular pronoun with a plural pronoun as in 'Someone can help, can't they', and to use the adjectival form when the adverbial should be used.   Girls are more prone than boys to use the form 'I'm finished' for 'I have finished'.

There is a slight difference between the sexes in the total incidence of error, but it is doubtful if it is significant for educational practice.   The median boy makes about one error in every twenty-seven words, the median girl about one in twenty-one.   The differences between children of the same sex, however, are far more marked, ranging for the boys from one error in every seventeen words to one in every thirty-one words, and for the girls one error in every twelve words to one in every twenty-eight words.

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE:

The boys from the Lady Gowrie Centre were the best spoken, errors occurring less frequently in their speech than in any other group. There was no difference between the other two groups of boys.   The girls without pre-school experience were slightly better than the girls from the Lady Gowrie Centre, although the worst speaker among the girls was in the former group.   Both of these groups were better than the girls from other kindergartens, although the best speaker among the girls came from this group.

An examination of specific errors showed no evidence that any of these groups used errors of a different kind, or any particular error, more frequently than the others.

CONSISTENCY OF ERROR:

Table 2 shows, in addition to the number of children making the error, the number of such children who used the correct form while under observation.   The frequency of such entries is a warning that class teaching of a common usage without considerable individual attention, may involve a good deal of wasted time for some children.   What

might be called the 'intensity' of an error in particular children varies greatly.   Some children make a particular error frequently, rarely, if ever, using the right form.   Others, like J----- W---, can alternate right and wrong indiscriminately, as in the consecutive 'Take me pearls off.   Here's my pearls'.

POSSIBILITY OF MAKING ERRORS:

Tables 1 and 2 are based upon actual errors made.   They are, therefore, minimum figures.   It would be desirable to examine the records in detail to see whether the children who did not make a particular mistake used the correct form in one or more of their utterances.   This examination would be very time consuming.   We have, therefore, limited our study to the use of 'I did', and 'them'.   The one boy who did not use 'I done' used 'I did' correctly on two occasions;   the three girls who did not use 'I done' did not use 'I did' at all.   All the children used 'them' correctly as a pronoun in such expressions as 'I want them', 'Can I see them', etc.

COMMENTS:

It was evident that despite the errors made, the speech of the children fulfilled its purpose of communication with their fellows. Even the double negatives served their correct purpose and appeared to be understood by the children in their correct sense.   The final justifications for correct usages appear to rest on the following grounds (not mutually exclusive):-

(i)   that they avoid ambiguities and errors;   (I ain't got none)
(ii)   that they save words;   (I'm going to go home)
(iii)   that they say things in the clearest fashion;
        (Got to dig me here)
(iv)   that they are the established conventions of those educated
        persons whose native language is English;   (That there bike;
        I and Lorraine)
(v)   that they are the correct forms in accordance with the
        structural analysis of speech we call grammar;
        (I seen him;   you and me will go;   who with).

The last of these is evidently the basis of many of the established conventions.   It is used as a 'reason' for good usage in its own right by many teachers, errors being corrected on the grounds that they are 'bad grammar', although this may be for any one of the reasons enumerated.

Some thought might be given, in the teaching of correct usage, to the effectiveness of explanations on the grounds of (iv) and (v) above.   It is evident, for example, that the sentence 'I seen him down the street', is, to its user and probably to its hearer, clear, concise, and unambiguous.   If it is classed as 'bad grammar' to a child who hears it constantly and effectively used outside the school, what effect will instruction in the correct form have?   Might it not be a counsel of wisdom in such cases to enlist the co-operation of home and community by explaining the purposes of teaching correct usage?   How effective would such an approach be in a community where wrong usages of this type are commonplaces?   No one knows the answers to these questions, although it is probable that all teachers are aware that many of the most consistently occurring errors in spoken and written usage are those which are heard by the child outside the school.   In correcting them the school has to counter exceedingly strong environmental influences.   It is a reasonable suggestion that at the same time as the attempt is made by the school to establish correct usage by the child at school, it should attack the problem of wrong usage at its source - the home and the community.   Might this be a field where adult education and child education could effectively combine forces?

MENTAL AGE AND ERRORS:

An inspection of the types of error made by children of different mental-age levels showed no errors to which children of one level were more prone than others.   The variation between children of mental

age 5 years 6 months and above was far more pronounced than the slight differences between this group and those with a mental age of 4 years 11 months or less.   A measure of 'purity' of speech was established for each child by dividing the number of recorded utterances by the total number of errors, and multiplying this figure by the square of the number of different errors made.   The rank correlation (Spearman) between this measure and mental age was -0.392.   Other correlations were: Purity -

(i)   with chronological age   ...   ...   -0.403

(ii) with number of different words used in
       the record of spontaneous speech ...   -0.727

The measure of 'purity' used was designed to give credit to the child whose language development, as measured by the length of his sentences, was advanced.   At the same time it penalised those whose speech included many different errors.   The correlations found were unexpected.   The simple explanation for them appears to be that at this age level, and in a group from this particular environment, the greater facility with speech of the brighter and older children gives them more opportunity to make errors.   There is as yet no urge in them to speak correctly (in the adult sense); they do not, in fact, know they are making errors. The correlation between total words used and mental age (although under the circumstances of the study too much store cannot be placed on it) is +0.316.

The best predictor of purity of speech is the ratio of different to total words used.   The two measures have a rank order correlation of +0.653 i.e. there is a tendency for those who use the most varied vocabulary in their spontaneous speech to be most free from error in usage.

TABLE 1.

Number of children making types of error recorded, and average
number of times the error occurred. (Total words recorded:-
Boys: 50,754 Girls: 30,773)

Error Type	Child Frequency and Average Error			
	Boys (N = 12)		Girls (N = 12)	
	Child Frequency	Average No. of Errors	Child Frequency	Average No. of Errors
A. VERBS				
1. Failure in concord				
1. There's sick boys	11	5.4	10	4.1
2. Is there boys there	3	1.7	1	1.0
3. Here comes two	4	2.25	5	1.6
4. I are: I were	5	1.2	3	1.3
5. You was: Was you etc.	5	1.6	4	1.75
6. You am	3	1.0	1	2.0
7. Which is my shoes	4	1.25	2	1.0
8. No one is allowed are they	2	1.0	0	-
9. Someone can play if they help me	2	1.0	0	-
10. Who wants some in their mouth	1	1.0	0	-
2. Wrong Verb (including colloquialisms)				
1. I have got etc. ... for have	12	17.4	12	22.5
2. I got ... for have	12	17.3	11	8.7
3. Can ... for may	12	16.0	12	11.3
4. I done ... for did	11	5.6	9	3.7
5. I have to put	8	2.5	8	3.75
6. Going to go	6	3.0	6	2.5
7. Leave me go ... let	7	3.2	4	3.5
8. I never ...	9	2.1	5	2.2
9. It's broke or broked	4	2.25	7	1.6
10. It is took or tooken	3	2.3	1	1.0
11. He don't	7	1.4	6	2.7
12. That come undone	6	2.2	2	2.0
13. He give me	1	2.0	1	4.0
14. Ain't	8	2.7	2	1.5
15. Its busted	7	1.5	2	2.0
16. I falled off	6	2.0	10	2.1
17. I won you	3	1.3	3	3.3
18. I'm finished ... for I have finished	3	1.3	9	1.5
19. Got to ... for must	4	1.3	4	1.0
20. I seen ... for saw	6	1.8	2	1.0
21. To lay down	6	1.0	3	1.0
22. He putted	1	1.0	2	1.0
23. If you be good. If you be a girl	0	-	2	1.0
24. Is this digged	4	1.5	0	-
25. He drunk it etc.	4	1.25	0	-
26. You didn't brought	1	1.0	0	-
27. He will be gone ... will have	1	1.0	0	-
28. If I knew ... If I had known	2	1.0	0	-
29. They're gone ... They have gone	4	1.0	4	1.0
30. Did you saw me	0	-	1	1.0
31. Got to sleep ... go to sleep	2	1.0	1	1.0

Error Type	Child Frequency and Average Error			
	Boys (N = 12)		Girls (N = 12)	
	Child Frequency	Average No. of Errors	Child Frequency	Average No. of Errors
32. Didn't you ... for haven't you	1	1.0	0	—
33. I lit a house on fire	1	1.0	0	—
34. No one helded it	1	1.0	0	—
35. Do ... for does	3	1.0	0	—
36. All blowed away	1	2.0	0	—
37. Sweared ... for swore	0	—	2	1.5
38. Catched ... for caught	0	—	3	1.0
39. Flied ... for flew	0	—	1	1.0
40. We drived one in	1	1.0	0	—
41. She went and put it all over me	1	1.0	1	—
42. We should a went	1	1.0	0	—

3. Verb Omissions

Error Type	Child Frequency	Average No. of Errors	Child Frequency	Average No. of Errors
1. When ... we getting up	11	6.2	10	5.8
2. ... you want to wet me	2	2.5	9	7.3
3. That ... peanut butter	8	1.2	4	6.0
4. Why ... you keep talking him	7	2.2	2	11.0
5. You ... better look out	10	2.6	8	3.1
6. I ... been to the beach	7	2.0	5	7.6
7. I ... show you	5	2.5	2	2.0
8. We ... finished	3	1.0	0	—

B. DOUBLE NEGATIVES:

Error Type	Child Frequency	Average No. of Errors	Child Frequency	Average No. of Errors
1. We ain't got no	4	3.0	2	1.5
2. We haven't got no	4	3.0	2	1.5
3. I don't have no	5	2.0	2	4.0
4. I can't find none	3	1.5	0	—
5. I don't want nothing	3	2.0	3	1.7
6. Don't let no-one (nobody)	5	1.4	2	1.0
7. You weren't going to play with me no more	3	1.0	1	1.0
8. I never had nothing	1	1.0	0	—
9. He's not there, I don't think	1	1.0	0	—
10. I ain't gonna do nothing	0	—	1	1.0
11. Aren't you having this or not	0	—	1	1.0
12. I can't hardly touch it	0	—	1	1.0
13. Its not nothing	0	—	1	1.0
14. Nobody better not touch me	1	1.0	0	—

C. ADJECTIVES AND ADVERBS:

Error Type	Child Frequency	Average No. of Errors	Child Frequency	Average No. of Errors
1. I'll do it quick	7	2.6	8	3.1
2. Put it slow	6	1.7	3	2.7
3. More quick	3	1.3	1	1.0
4. Say it loud	1	1.0	1	1.0
5. Doing it wrong	0	—	2	2.0
6. They talk funny	2	1.0	0	—
7. You talk mad	1	1.0	0	—
8. More softer	2	1.0	0	—
9. I did it good	3	1.3	0	—
10. I easy got up	2	2.0	0	—
11. This is awful wet	0	—	1	1.0
12. Its nearly getting bigger	0	—	1	1.0
13. Why did you come in here for	0	—	1	1.0
14. Misplaced 'only'	12	3.0	8	2.0

Error Type	Child Frequency and Average Error			
	Boys (N = 12)		Girls (N = 12)	
	Child Frequency	Average No. of Errors	Child Frequency	Average No. of Errors
15. Omission of first 'as' in 'as big as'	3	2.0	2	1.5
16. Leave it how it was	0	–	1	1.0
17. Have you got no cars	1	1.0	1	1.0

D. PRONOUNS:

1. Us for me (givus, let's)	12	6.2	9	3.0
2. Wrong use of them (for those, they)	7	4.4	6	2.0
3. Objective for nominative	10	3.5	9	2.3
4. Youse	9	1.2	3	2.0
5. Who for whom	5	1.4	4	1.25
6. All on me own	4	1.25	1	1.0
7. Wrong use of relative – (The one what we had)	6	1.3	3	1.0
8. That there bike	3	1.0	1	1.0
9. Wrong reflexives ... their-self, mineself	3	1.0	3	1.0
10. Mine for my ... mine garage	1	2.0	0	–
11. Someone's wants you	0	–	1	2.0
12. Me ... for I will (me come)	6	1.7	0	–
13. Don't someone put that in these	1	1.0	0	–
14. He's for his	0	–	1	1.0
15. Hisself for himself	0	–	1	1.0
16. I don't need more, do we	1	1.0	0	–

E. PREPOSITIONS:

1. Omission of:

General:	11	4.0	10	4.1
Look the way I do it	5	–	4	–
Let it go around itself	1	–	0	–
I'm going chop	1	–	0	–
I've got one ... home	4	–	4	–

2. Wrong:

By my own (?)	4	1.0	2	1.0
Took it off me	7	1.6	7	1.1

3. Inclusion:

We'll make it to this long	1	1.0	0	–

F. REDUNDANCIES: (General)

1. I'm going to go	6	3.0	6	2.5
2. General –	11	6.7	11	6.3

e.g. I see all furniture
All of these ones
Off of it
Nearly right at the top
My brother he brought
A whole lot
I've been two times I have
That girl there she's
taking our water

Error Type	Child Frequency and Average Error			
	Boys (N = 12)		Girls (N = 12)	
	Child Frequency	Average No. of Errors	Child Frequency	Average No. of Errors

G. MISCELLANEOUS:

Error Type	Boys Child Frequency	Boys Average No. of Errors	Girls Child Frequency	Girls Average No. of Errors
1. After for afterwards or later	5	2.2	6	2.1
2. A bit fast	1	2.0	1	2.0
3. Like you did (As)	2	1.0	1	3.0
4. Say we take	6	1.3	7	2.4
5. Look at ... he done	3	1.0	4	1.75
6. Look ... what I	5	1.2	4	1.3
7. Mucked it up	4	1.5	3	1.3
8. Thisie, thatie, biggie, etc.	7	2.6	4	1.5
9. Good on you	3	2.0	2	1.0
10. It looks like they're going	1	1.0	2	1.0
11. Do it like me	0	—	1	1.0
12. How you eating quick like I do	1	1.0	0	—
13. Look at the really spider	1	1.0	2	1.0
14. I'm not that old	2	1.0	2	1.0
15. I can't even find my other shoe	3	1.3	2	1.0
16. A whole lot	4	1.5	1	1.0
17. A bit of water	2	1.0	1	1.0
18. Put it on fire	1	1.0	0	—
19. The both of them	0	—	1	1.0
20. No good	3	1.0	0	—
21. Its all gone just about	1	1.0	0	—
22. I belong into this book	2	1.0	0	—
23. Got to dig me here	1	1.0	0	—
24. A quarter half	1	1.0	0	—
25. Two times	0	—	1	1.0
26. So's I don't have to clean them	3	1.0	0	—
27. There goes me	1	1.0	0	—
28. All the steps are most wet nearly	0	—	1	—
29. Further as me ... further than I	0	—	1	—
30. ... that fast it smashed	1	1.0	0	—
31. That nother car	4	1.75	0	—

H. NOUNS:

Error Type	Boys Child Frequency	Boys Average No. of Errors	Girls Child Frequency	Girls Average No. of Errors
1. Wrong plurals --				
foots — feet	1	1.0	0	—
feets — feet	1	1.0	1	1.0
mans — men	1	1.0	1	1.0
mens — men	1	1.0	0	—
wornses — worns	0	—	1	1.0
2. Lend for loan	5	1.6	2	1.5

J. ADJECTIVES:

Error Type	Boys Child Frequency	Boys Average No. of Errors	Girls Child Frequency	Girls Average No. of Errors
1. Omitted possessive -- ship's boat	1	1.0	0	—