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Black Dialect: The Basis for an Approach to Reading Instruction?

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THE imposing number of students with reading disabilities in inner city schools represents one of the most challenging and pressing problems of educators today. The study of the etiology of this phenomenon includes such possible factors as physiological or intellectual deficiencies, emotional maladjustment, or ineffective teaching. A considerable number of those who seek to explain the prevalence of reading retardation among black children are convinced that the learning impediment is in some way related to their language.

While some would characterize lower class black children as being verbally destitute or having an underdeveloped language, linguists prefer to describe these students as linguistically different rather than linguistically deficient (Baratz, 1969). It is said that they speak a nonstandard dialect which is a well-ordered and fully developed language system, although it may differ from the standard dialect in some of its lexical, phonological, and grammatical properties.

The evidence offered for this description includes content analyses of written samples of the language of black Americans

over the past two and a half centuries, as well as recent descriptive and experimental research on the speech patterns of black children and adults.

Stewart (1967) has found numerous examples of current black dialect patterns in the language of Negro slaves. One such category is the use of "be" to indicate a state of habitual action as compared to a momentary one. Thus, "He be sick" indicates a chronic state of illness while "He sick" implies a temporary ailment. Stewart attributes the following comment to a slave requesting a permanent supply of soap in 1830: "(If) Missis only give we, we be so clean forever."

Similar historical research has convinced many linguists that contemporary black dialect retains vestiges of the creole language spoken by those Africans who were brought to America as slaves. With the intention of warding off conspiracy or revolt, the slave masters separated those Africans who were from the same tribe (Stewart, 1967). As a result, the only language that the slaves on a particular plantation had in common was the pidgin English they had learned in Africa and America. The language expanded

in vocabulary and grammar into a creole language which was adopted by these communities.

From the beginning, however, the whites and blacks exerted a reciprocal linguistic influence upon each other. During the course of the 18th century, a division of labor was inaugurated with some slaves assigned to remain as underprivileged field workers and others chosen as domestic servants. The latter were more frequently in the company of their masters and eventually acquired some of their linguistic characteristics (Stewart, 1967). Likewise, as Charles Dickens noted in 1849, the language of the white people had been influenced by that of the black community (Dillard, 1967).

However, some linguists maintain that this merging of the dialects has been hampered by de facto segregation and that some observed differences between the dialects of contemporary whites and blacks can be traced to the creole language.

Some Characteristics

Recent research has attempted to identify these differences. Labov (1966) has conducted numerous comparative studies in which the careful and spontaneous speech of some New York City whites and blacks has been recorded. He reports the presence of the following phonological variables in the black dialect.

1. *r*-lessness: In many cases the "r" is dropped before vowels, consonants, pauses, and in intervocalic positions. Example: Carol=Cal

2. *l*-lessness: The "l" often is not vocalized. Example: help=hep

3. *Final consonant clusters are simplified*: Labov notes that this is especially true of those which end in "t," "d," "s," or "z." Example: hold=hol

4. *Weakening of final consonants*: The consonants "t" and "d" are most commonly affected. Example: road=row

5. *Similar sounds of short "e" and short "i"*: Before nasals the sounds of these vowels are often indistinguishable. Example: cents=since.

Labov's recordings have shown that although these and other features will also be found in the speech of some whites, there is a difference in the frequency of occurrence and in "their distribution in relation to grammatical boundaries." The following is offered as an example of a difference in frequency. The results are said to be typical of several hundred white and black subjects. Of a total of 98 /s,z/ consonant clusters, the black subject altered 49 of the clusters by deleting one of the two consonants involved. Of a total of 69 similar clusters, the white informant modified 10. Labov concludes that simplification of /s,z/ clusters is more characteristic of blacks than whites.

A more subtle variation has been observed when attention is focused on the grammatical boundaries of the cluster. According to Labov, white and black subjects demonstrate virtually an equal percentage of simplification when a final /-st/ cluster is followed by a consonant. Black speakers, however, also modify these clusters when they are followed by a vowel, whereas white subjects do not.

Grammatical variations which have been observed in the speech of black subjects are also specified by Labov. For a complete listing of these, see Labov (1966) as well as Baratz (1969). Labov attributes most of the grammatical divergence to phonological processes. For example, he cites the absence of the verb of "be" in such sentences as "You tired." He suggests that this variation of "You're tired," can be traced to r-lessness, a phonological rule.

The following is a summary of the implications Labov sees in these findings for the reading instruction of some black children:

1. If the phonological and grammatical variables cited are characteristic of a black child's speech, they are a potential source of confusion and reading difficulties.

2. Teachers must be aware of the properties of the language system of their students which may be different from their own and/or the language of the reading text. After careful listening to a child's speech and oral reading, they must decide whether or not reading "errors" are actual mistakes or are the result of the

superimposition of the child's dialect on the standard text. Pronunciation differences should be accepted during the early stages of reading instruction if it has been determined that the child has grasped the meaning of the text.

3. Extensive instruction may be necessary on those grammatical features of standard English which do not function in the child's dialect. Likewise, phonics instruction will be affected if such patterns as r-lessness or the simplification of consonant clusters are characteristic of the student's speech.

4. Instructional reading materials in standard English are acceptable as long as the beginner is allowed to read them in nonstandard pronunciation.¹

The first implication above is open to question. It may be that the dialect variations Labov has observed are "potential" sources of reading difficulties. The reported research, however, is mainly concerned with an analysis of the oral speech of black subjects. Only one instance of actual reading behavior is given. Two groups of young Negro boys from South Central Harlem (a total of 9) demonstrated considerable difficulty in reading and understanding sentences which included words ending in "-ed." Samples of their oral language disclosed a significant tendency to simplify this morpheme. Similar samples which would test the effect on reading behavior of other variables noted in their speech would be necessary to infer that the dialect is a source of reading difficulty. Finally, it seems remiss that no reading achievement scores are provided. It is not known whether the subjects, regardless of the extent of dialect variation, are actually disabled readers.

Other Recommendations

Joan Baratz and William Stewart have also noted phonological and grammatical variations in the speech of some black subjects. However, these linguists have made different recommendations for the teaching of reading.

¹ William Labov. "Some Sources of Reading Problems for Negro Speakers of Nonstandard English." Cooperative Research Project 3091: ERIC, ED 010 688, 1967.

Baratz (1969) reports the results of a Bi-dialectal Oral-Language Proficiency Test which compared the language behavior of 60 black and white, third and fifth grade students. The black children were from an inner city school in Washington, D.C., whereas the white children attended a lower-middle income suburban school. Thirty sentences—15 in standard English and 15 in black dialect—were tape recorded by William Stewart, a white bi-dialectal male speaker. Subjects were asked to repeat each sentence as best they could after hearing it twice.

Baratz found the black children performed significantly better than the white students in repeating nonstandard sentences. In addition, when asked to repeat a standard sentence, the black subjects were consistent in translating that sentence into the black dialect. For example, when repeating "I asked Tom if he wanted to go to the picture that was playing at the Howard," 97 percent of the black children said, "I aks Tom did he wanna go to the picture at the Howard." On the other hand, white children were significantly more capable of repeating standard sentences than were the blacks. They also exhibited translation behavior when given a nonstandard sentence to recite. For "I aks Tom do he wanna go to the picture that be playin' at the Howard," 78 percent of the white subjects responded, "I asked Tom if he wanted to go to the picture that was playing at the Howard."

Baratz concludes that her assumption—black children are learning a "well-ordered but different system from their white counterparts"—was supported. She also notes the following as being indicated in the results of the study: (a) black children are not generally bi-dialectal; (b) black students are confronted with two dialects in the school environment; (c) their own dialect interferes with their use of standard English.

These conclusions, however, must not be applied to all black children. What degree of difference would be found if the subjects were from an integrated neighborhood?—attended the same school?—were sampled from different grades?—were from a different region of the country?

One may ask whether suggestion in any way inflated the translation behavior observed in the children's responses. Two translations of each of 15 sentences were used as stimuli in the test. Baratz does mention that "two random orders of the sentences were constructed for an order effect." Nevertheless, what degree or type of translation would have resulted if 30 different sentences were used?

Elsewhere, Baratz (1969) states that this study suggests that the black child "has to contend with the interference from his vernacular in learning to read." This conclusion does not follow from the nature of the experiment. That deviations were observed in the oral responses of the subjects to aural stimuli does not of necessity imply that these children experience serious "interference" when confronted with the visual stimuli of standard English readers. No data on the actual reading achievement of the students are given, nor were the students asked to read any part of the test. On the basis of this experiment and similar research, Baratz has concluded it is "imperative" that the inner city black children be taught to read with initial readers written in their dialect. The assumption that dialect materials will facilitate the task of learning to read has not been verified by the research.

Stewart (1969), who shares Baratz's predilection for beginning reading instruction with dialect readers, mentions his experiments with individual black students who are disabled readers. He observes that these children are able to read with facility and accuracy passages written in their dialect. When the same passage written in standard English is given to the students, all the indications of reading disability return. Unfortunately, Stewart does not provide more specific data on the nature, number, and results of these experiments.

Instructional Materials

The dialect passages used by Stewart were written in conventional orthography. The fact that this did not prevent accurate reading on the part of black subjects led

Stewart to conclude that the problems created for these readers by standard texts lie in their grammatical variation from the nonstandard dialect. Therefore, he favors the translation of initial readers into the nonstandard dialect. Labov, it will be remembered, judged phonological variations to be a greater source of difficulty and, thus, did not recommend the use of dialect readers. Until linguistic research is directed to actual reading behavior and the alleged interference of the black dialect on standard texts, either position remains in the realm of supposition.

Stewart (1969) has admitted that "... no adequate study of the role of dialect differences in the reading proficiency of American Negro children has yet been undertaken. . . ." Goodman (1970) reports that Stewart and Baratz have developed readers written in black dialect but, at the time of his writing, the authors were unable to find schools which were willing to use them experimentally.

Certain questions must be raised about the possibility of this approach to reading instruction for black students. An age-grading process has been found to occur in the black dialect by which some features are dropped by a certain age (Dillard, 1967). The development of graded instructional reading materials would have to be based on the nature of this process. Yet age-grading studies are still in their infancy. Longitudinal studies tracing the development and changes that take place in the dialects of blacks have not been done. In the absence of such research, how can authentic dialect readers be developed?

Stewart (1969) has suggested that these instructional materials be written in various stages, allowing for a gradual transition to standard English. Aside from the fact that research has not defined what these stages should be, how is the teacher to determine the appropriate stage for each student? Stewart cites the Bi-dialectal Oral-Language Proficiency Test as being "potentially ideal for this purpose." The complexity of the sentences in this test, however, would suggest that this is not so. These samples are not representative of the basic sentence patterns

found most frequently in the speech of first graders. It seems unlikely that one could infer dialect interference should they fail to repeat the standard stimuli on that test.

The research which has been reviewed here considered the oral language patterns of lower class blacks in New York City and the Washington, D.C., area. The findings, then, can only be predicated on similar subjects in those cities. For some time dialect geographers have presented evidence of regional variations in the dialects of Americans. More recent research has shown correlations between the oral language and social class of white and black subjects. An added variable, which is not discussed by Stewart or Baratz, is the instructional reading level of the student. It seems highly improbable that readers could be developed that would take into account all the possible variations in dialect among individuals due to age-grading, region, social class, and instructional reading level.

Finally, the multi-ethnic composition of many city schools must be considered. Even if readers were available that would match each possible dialect, how would the teacher cope with this proliferation of reading materials? Would the highly transient population of these schools require constant readjustment of the instructional program?

In summary, that deviations in a child's dialect from standard English pose serious obstacles to learning to read remains a hypothesis. Likewise, the research has not indicated that dialect readers are necessary for the instruction of lower class black children. What has been shown is that some phonological and grammatical rules operate in the speech of selected lower class blacks which are not found in the language system of standard English. This finding does have pedagogical implications. According to widely accepted principles regarding reading instruction, a child's success in beginning reading is determined, in part, by his previous learning and experience.

Linguistic research has revealed information about one of these prior learnings—the child's language pattern. If a teacher determines that this information is applicable to some of her students, changes in instructional strategies may be warranted. For example, if certain children in a classroom exhibit a pattern of simplifying final consonant clusters, the teacher should take this into account in planning phonics instruction. This careful utilization of the findings of linguistic research will preclude their wholesale application to all black children and may eliminate one factor contributing to the reading disability of some black youth. Used this way, the contributions of the linguists may help in the achievement of the ideal in the teaching of reading—to match the instruction to the individual student.

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