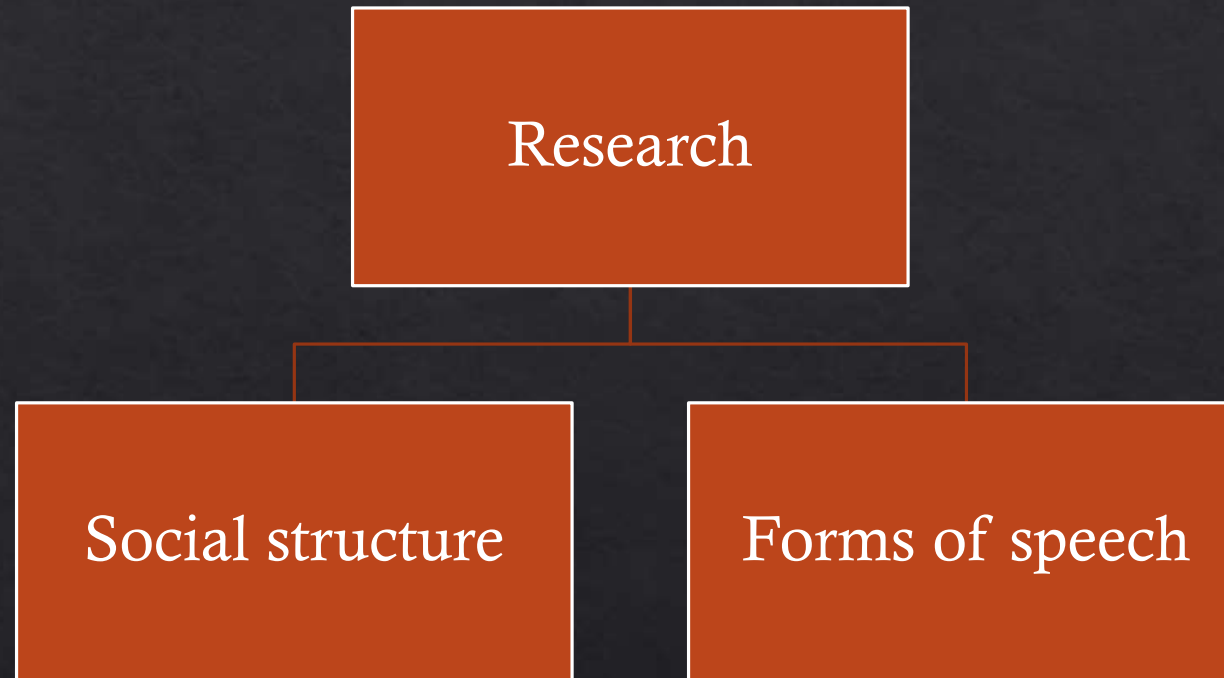# Elaborated and Restricted Codes: Their Social Origins and Some Consequences

BASIL BERNSTEIN

Who is Basil Bernstein? (1924-2000)

- Institute of Education, University of London

- 1971 -> New Sociology of Education

- Concern:
  Educational failure amongst working class

Basic Definitions

Two levels of Language:

Structure

Used for Organization

Rules exist
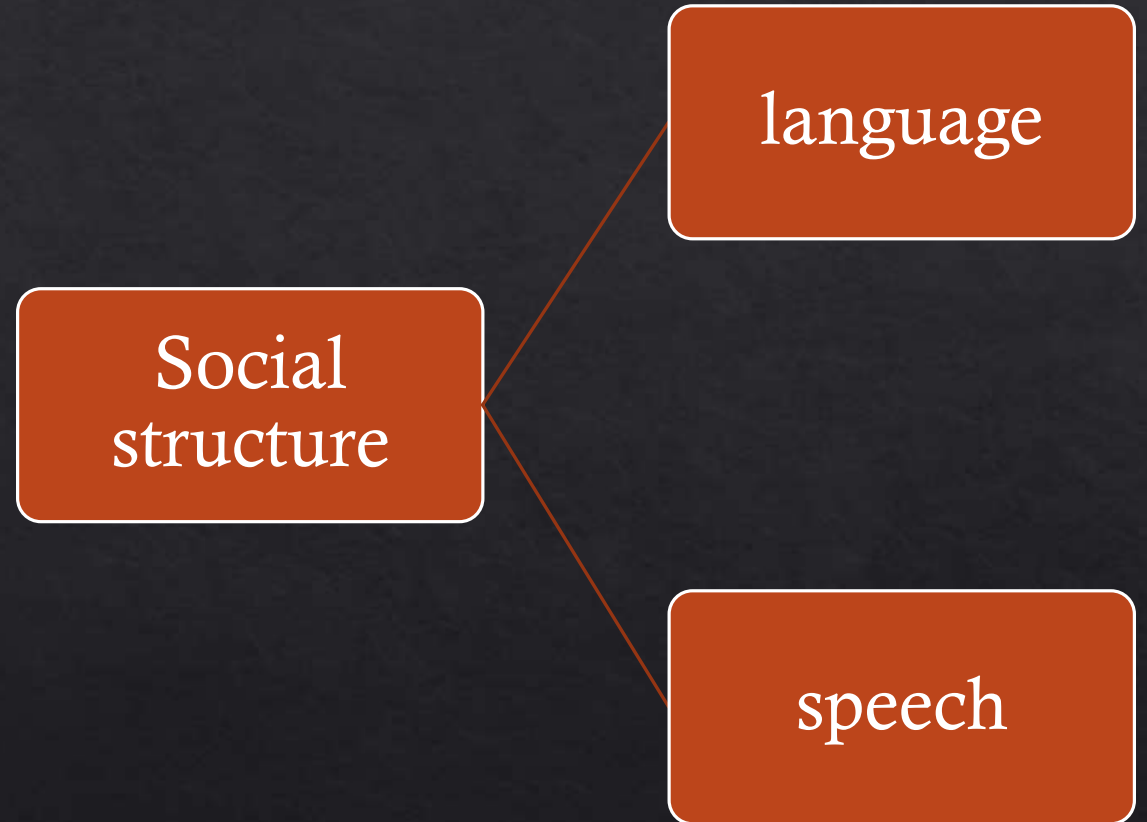
Rational elements and syntactic devices

Vocabulary

Used for totality of meaning

Words which have objective reference

What is speech?

- Circumstance of moment
- Dictates local social relation
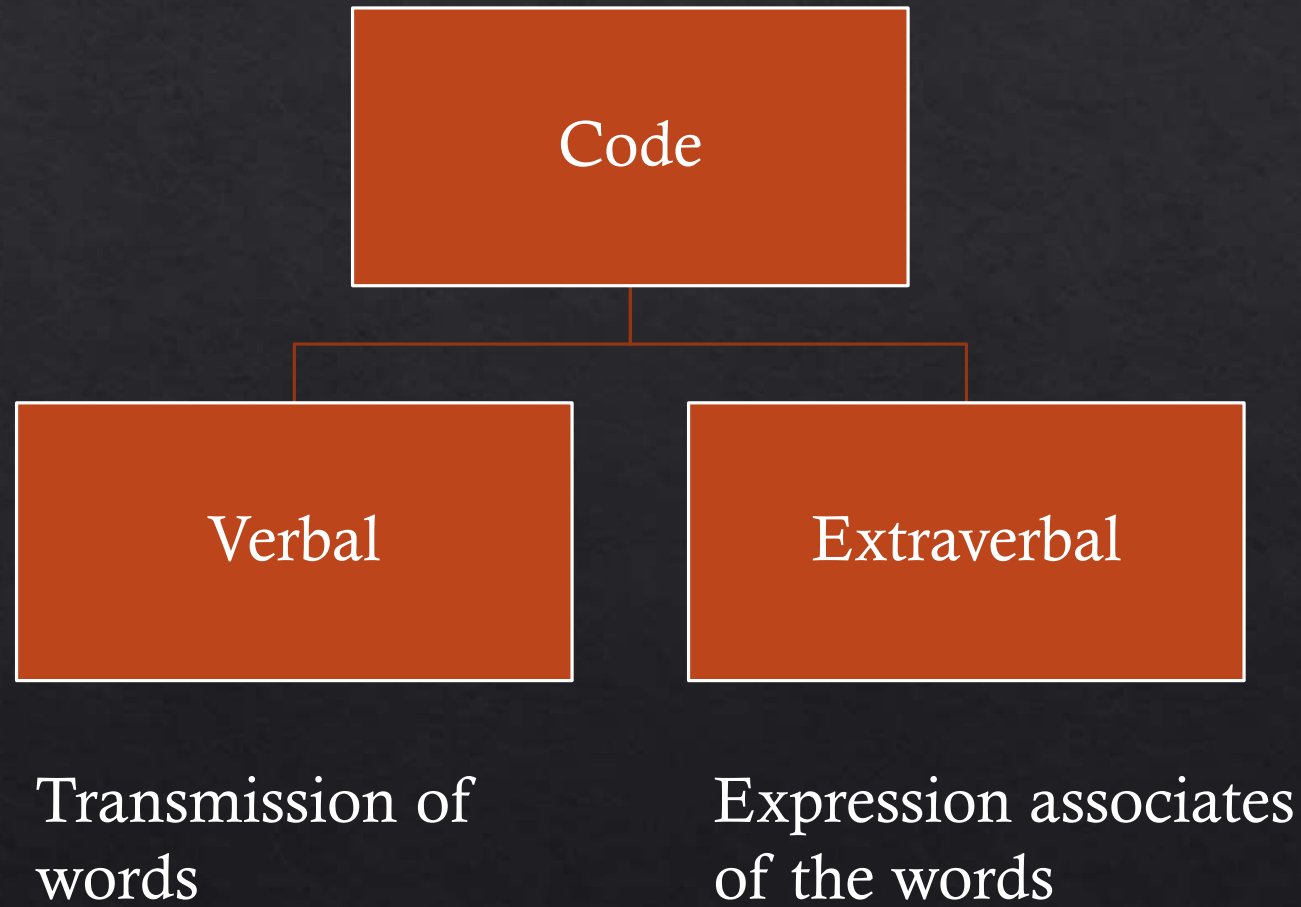
language

Social structure

speech

Code

Specific set of organizing principles behind the language employed by members of a social group.

Guides speakers' preparation of speech and listeners' reception of speech

Social structure = independent variable
Speech system / linguistic code = function of social structure

Elaborate Code

- Difficult to predict alternatives

- Does not require external context to be understood

- Explicit detail and directness

- Standard language forms, complex syntax, more detail

Restricted Code

- Reduced syntactic alternatives (predictable form)

- Dependent on external context or the shared knowledge

- Allows for a lot of meaning to be conveyed in few words

- Non-standard forms, simpler syntax, more idioms

Elaborated Code examples

•**Using fuller and more detailed sentences**, to the point where they can be understood on their own:
'Today I am going to do some grocery shopping because the fridge is empty.'

•Using more **uncommon vocabulary words and synonyms**:
'The old man was being particularly cantankerous.', 'The sunset is quite ineffable tonight; I've never seen such beautiful colours!'

•Avoiding idioms as this code is associated with **formal situations and being direct.**
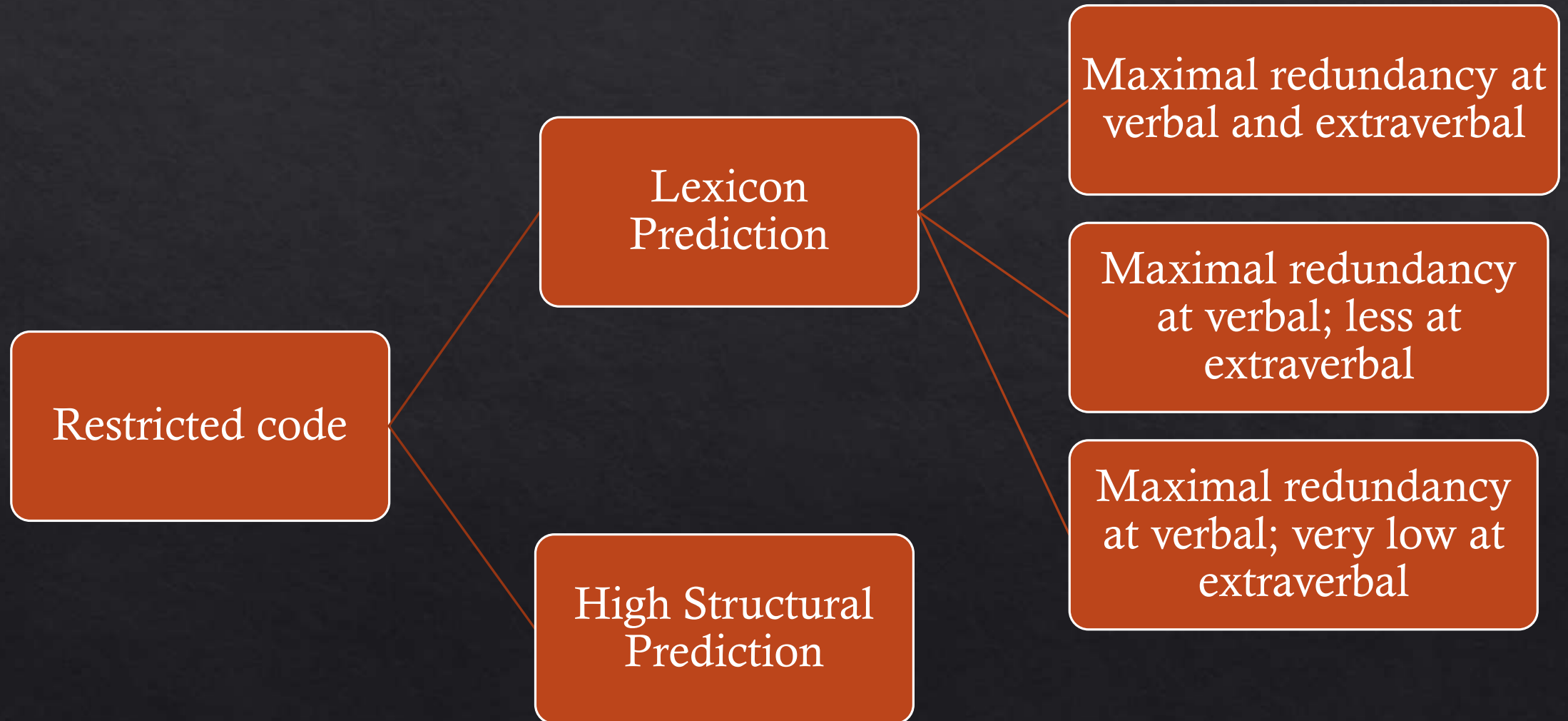
Restricted Code examples

- Adding **filler words and phrases** into a conversation: *'you know', 'right?'*

- Using less formal or **more colloquial linguistic forms**: *'how ya doing?', 'what you up to?'*

- Using more **idiomatic language**: *'He let the cat out of the bag.', 'piece of cake'.*

- Referring to shared knowledge: *'can you pass me the thingamajig.'*

Variants of Restricted Code

Restricted code

Lexicon Prediction

Maximal redundancy at verbal and extraverbal

Maximal redundancy at verbal; less at extraverbal

Maximal redundancy at verbal; very low at extraverbal

High Structural Prediction

Restricted Code (Lexicon Prediction)

1)First variant:
Verbal: Maximal redundancy   Extraverbal: Maximal redundancy

Organization and selection bound by rigid and extensive prescription

Occurs in: Religious, legal, and military social structure

Restricted Code (Lexicon Prediction)

1)Second variant:
Verbal: Maximal redundancy   Extraverbal: Less redundancy

Inability to transmit discrete experience through verbal selections.
Messages transmitted through extraverbal channels: muscular tension, gesture, etc.

Interpersornal aspects regulated by encoding and decoding messages in extraverbal channels.

Restricted Code (Lexicon Prediction)

1)Third variant:

Verbal: Maximal redundancy   Extraverbal: Much lower order of prediction

Extraverbal channels will become objects of special perceptual activity

"Do you come here often?"
"Bit crowded-n'it?"
"S'nice floor?"
"Band's alright/dead/with it."

Low predictability: discrete intents   High predictability: high level of consensus

Interrelated characteristics

- status aspect of the social relation is salient

- New information is made available through extraverbal channels (objects of special perceptual activity)

- Discrete intent can only be transmitted through variations in the extraverbal signals

- The code reinforces the form of the social relation by restricting the verbal signaling of differences.

Restricted Code (High structural Prediction)

- More alternatives for verbal and extraverbal

- Constraint is at syntactic level.

- Presupposes a cultural identity

- Occurs in: closed communities like prisons, combat units of the armed service, criminal subcultures, and also in peer groups of children and adolescents and between married couples of long standing

Observations

1. Observer would be struck by exclusion

2. Speech is fast, fluent, relatively unpaused

3. Reduction in the number of qualifier

4. Increase in some personal pronouns like "you" and "they," and a reduction in self-reference pronoun "I."

5. High frequency of terminal sequences like "isn't it," "wouldn't they," "you know"

6. vitality of the speech

7. Observer's point of view – disjunctive

8. Concrete, narrative and descriptive, rather than analytical or abstract

Elaborate Code (Low structural Prediction)

Verbal elaboration and explicit discrete intent

Personal and discrete speaker meanings are cut to make intelligible conversation

Common intent = mutually held range of identification

Bernstein's theory

Students from higher social classes tended to perform better at language-based subjects than those from lower social classes.

Bernstein theorized that the linguistic codes children use result from environmental and cultural conditioning.

Bernstein's methodology

Bernstein selected two five-year-old school children, one from a working-class background and one from a middle-class background, and showed them three pictures.

'They're playing football and he kicks it and it goes through there, it breaks the window and they're looking at it and he comes out and shouts at them because they've broken it so they run away and then she looks out and she tells them off.'

'Three boys are playing football and one boy kicks the ball and it goes through the window and the ball breaks the window and the boys are looking at it and a man comes out and shouts at them because they've broken the window so they run away and then that lady looks out of her window and she tells the boys off.'

Bernstein's conclusions

Explanation why:

- Exposure to and use of different language forms

- Students from working-class backgrounds were familiar with and raised in communities using largely restricted code

- Students from higher social classes would have been raised in communities using mainly elaborated code

- Elaborated code is typically the type of language code used by teachers, textbooks, and other educational resources, thus the children from higher social classes would have an advantage.

Criticisms

1)Harold Rosen (1972)
- Did not look at working-class life experiences, language use and their interplay.

- Wrongly assumed all working classes used language in the same way

- Different environmental, cultural, and social differences experienced by each working-class community

- **Rosen saw Bernstein's explanation of language codes as reductive**

Criticisms

2) William Labov (1972)
- Did not provide sufficient evidence

- Labov argued that restricted code could be used to express meaning and elaborate on a point to the same extent as elaborated code.

- Criticized Bernstein for generalizing across all communities within a certain social class

- **Restricted codes aren't inferior to elaborated codes and can be just as complex.**

References

1. Alan Cruttenden, Language in Infancy and Childhood: A Linguistic Introduction to Language Acquisition, 1979

2. Basil Bernstein, Class, Codes and Control: Theoretical Studies Towards a Sociology of Language, 1971

3. Harold Rosen, Language and Class: a Critical Look at the Theories of Basil Bernstein, 1972

4. William Labov, Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular, 1972

Thank You