

SOCIAL CLASS, LANGUAGE AND SOCIALISATION

Bern Bernstein

‘Class, Codes and Control vol. I: *Theoretical Studies towards a Sociology of Language*’, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970

LANGUAGE, SOCIALISATION AND SUBCULTURES

Bernstein's writings show solutions to the problems of connection between cultural and social order, and the internalisation of culture.

Bernstein differentiates between linguistic codes (dialects) and sociolinguistic/speech codes (language usage). According to him a language can generate any number of speech codes; no language is superior in this aspect.

Contrary to the understanding of the layman, Bernstein does not call lower class children 'linguistically deprived' or blame this so-called 'deprivation' for their scholastic failures. Neither does he share views on 'compensatory education'; he blames the imbalance in linguistic performance on the organisation of schools (not the language of the children) and calls for its reform.

Bernstein introduces 'restricted' and 'elaborated' speech codes - codes arising from two social relationships, which cut across social the strata. He further explains the relation between speech code and social class by introducing the concepts of 'speech variant' (regarding the contextual aspect of conversation) and of positional and person-centric families.

In related work, Labov's paper refutes theories of linguistic deprivation held by some educational psychologists. Labov argues that there is no correlation between non-standard English dialects and cognitive failures such as lack of ability in concept formation. In fact, he claims that in the current American system verbal deprivation theories may very easily become self-fulfilling prophecies which hinder the scholastic development of children from ethnically varying backgrounds.

INTRODUCTION AND FOUNDATIONS

Bernstein's thesis arose from the broader question of the relation between symbolic orders and social structures, and is concerned not with educability, but the fundamental structure and changes in structure of cultural transmission.

Examination of related papers reveals:

- I. The gradually emerging dominance of the major, theoretical problem from the local, empirical problem (social antecedents of the educability of groups of children).
- II. Attempts to develop generality of thesis and increasing specificity at the cultural level. This entails attempts to clarify both the logical and empirical status of the basic organising concept (code).

Sociolinguistic code is indicative of the social structuring of meanings and their diverse contextual linguistic realisations. Emphasis is given to 'role' - a complex coding activity which controls the creation and organisation of specific meanings as well as the conditions for their transmission and reception.

Bernstein's sociolinguistic hypothesis explores how the symbolic system of speech is both regulator and realisation of social relationships. Using Durkheim and Marx at the macro level and Mead at the micro level, Bernstein realised a thesis relevant to anthropology, linguistics, sociology and psychology.

Durkheim's works seeks to derive the basic categories of thought from the structuring of social relations. He raised the possibility of a link between the classifications and frames of the symbolic order and the structuring of experience. His study on social integration points to the (implicit) condensed symbolic structure of mechanical solidarity and the (explicit) differentiated symbolic structures of organic solidarity.

Whorf's work alerted Bernstein to the selective effect of culture (patterning of social relationships) on the patterning of grammar, and also the pattern's semantic and cognitive significance. His influence opened for Bernstein the question of the deep structure of linguistically regulated communication.

Bernstein faced two difficulties:

- I. Linking symbolic systems, social structure and the shaping of experience doesn't clarify how the shaping of experience actually occurs; the underlying processes are not explicit.
- II. The question of change of symbolic system.

Mead provides a solution to the first, 'how', from his description of the relationship between role, reflexivity and speech. The Meadian thought does not offer a solution to the question of change in structuring of experience, although both Mead and Durkheim point to the conditions which cause the structuring of experience.

A major theory of the development and change of symbolic structures is that of Marx. He is less concerned with their internal structures or transmission, but helps explain their institutionalisation and change, in terms of the social significance of society's productive system and the resulting power relationships. The theory states that all access to, influence over and change in critical symbolic systems is governed by the power relationships embodied in the class structure. Like economic capital, cultural capital (symbolic systems) is subject to appropriation, manipulation and exploitation.

These were the studies which form the specific matrix of thought underlying Bernstein's approach of his hypothesis.

LINGUISTIC CODES AND SPEECH CODES

Linguistic competence is the Ideal; the child's tacit understanding of the rule system, abstracted from contextual constraints. Linguistic performance is the Fall; the essentially social application of the rule system, with full consideration of context which determines the usage.

While studying speech, it cannot be abstracted from the context of another system of both formal and informal rules - the cultural system. There exists speculation that the linguistic rule systems partly shapes the cultural system. Bernstein states that the linguistic code is capable of generating any number of speech codes. He says language is a set of rules which all speech codes obey; the code realised depends on the culture, acting through social relationships in specific contexts.

Speech codes represent the social relationship, regulate the type of interaction and create different orders of relevance and relation for the speakers. This is a sociological argument which then transforms the experience of the speakers, as the speech form is a quality of the social structure.

Although speech form is initially a function of a social argument, it may still alter the social structure from which it evolved. This evokes the question: in what situation does a speech form sufficiently free itself from the social structure it evolved from, so that it now realises alternative realities in the system of meanings. Here, one becomes concerned with the antecedents/consequents of the boundary maintaining principles of a culture. Bernstein suggests a relation between the forms of boundary maintenance at the cultural level and forms of speech.

SOCIAL CLASS, ORDER OF MEANING AND SPEECH CODES

Socialisation is the process by which a child acquires a specific cultural identity, as well as their responses to such an identity. This is a complex process involving control - moral, cognitive and affective awareness is evoked and given a specific form and content. The child is sensitised to the social orderings as these are given meaning with respect to the roles they are expected to play. Though the agencies of socialisation (family, peer group, school and work) and their relationships with each other, the orderings of society are made manifest.

Bernstein limits his paper to socialisation within the family, treating it as a microcosm of the macroscopic orderings of society. The most formative influence on socialisation is social class. Class structure influences roles in work and education and affects the relationships and structure of life experiences within families.

Social class regulates the distribution of knowledge. It seals communities from each other and ranked their 'worth'. The three components - knowledge, possibility and invidious insulation - affect the socialising procedures of different social classes, and even to some extent the deep structure of communication itself. Only a tiny part of the population has knowledge of the meta-languages of control and innovation (principles of intellectual change); most only has knowledge of context-tied operations.

These orders of meaning may be called linguistically explicit or universalistic, and linguistically implicit or particularistic. Universalistic orders of meaning like meta-languages are context-free, while particularistic orders of meaning are bound to local social structures and embedded in context. Bernstein argues that forms of socialisation orient children to speech codes which limit access to either of the two - elaborated codes to context-free and restricted to context-bound. He states that the linguistic realisation of the two orders is different, and thus so are the social relationships which realise them.

Where codes are elaborated, the socialised has more access to the ground of their own socialisation and can enter a reflexive relationship to the social order they took over. Where codes are restricted, the access and reflexiveness is limited. The social class system limits a person's access to elaborated codes.

Bernstein suggests that restricted codes are based in condensed symbols and elaborated codes in articulated symbols; restricted codes draw on metaphor and elaborated codes on rationality. Codes constrain the contextual use of language, regulating the orders of relevance and relation of the socialised. Thus, change in habitual speech codes involves change in the means by which object-person relationships are realised.

TYPES OF SOCIAL CONTEXT, SOCIAL ROLES AND SPEECH VARIANTS

A speech variant is the contextual constraints upon grammatical-lexical choices.

Two speakers with more shared interests are more likely to have their conversation played out against a backdrop of common assumptions, history and interests, lending it a more metaphoric element. The speakers may be more concerned with how and when something is said, with weight given to silence; it cannot be understood apart from context and the context is lost on those not privy to the shared history. The selective verbalisation of the meaning affects the syntactic and lexical choices, and all assumptions remain restricted to the speakers.

Since the speech is condensed but meaning is unhindered, the speakers are said to have communalised roles. Hence it can be said that restricted social relationships based upon communalised roles evoke particularistic meanings realised via restricted speech variants.

On moving from context-bound to context-free situation, the speech shows editing at both grammatical and lexical levels. Expressive channels are relevant but the meaning is dependent on the verbal channel; the experience of the listeners cannot be taken for granted. If the speaker cannot manage their particular role relationship they cannot produce appropriate speech.

The basis of the social relationship, difference, is made verbally active, whereas in the other context it is consensus. The verbal aspect of conversation becomes the vehicle for transmission of individuated symbols; 'I' stands over 'We'. There is shift from communalised roles to individualised roles, condensed symbols to articulated symbols. The new roles realise universalistic meanings.

An experiment was conducted in London among middle-class and working-class children. They were given four pictures and asked to form a story. It was noticed that the stories of the middle-class children used context-free speech, and the working-class children used context-bound speech, which would require the reader to also have the pictures.

The two class do not differ in passive vocabulary or tacit understanding of the linguistic rule system, rather in the use of language in specific context. One child makes the meanings explicit, taking little for granted while the other leaves the meaning implicit, with a lot taken for granted. Thus the children realise the same context with differing language use – universalistic or particularistic.

In the same contexts, working-class children use comparatively fewer expressions of uncertainty. The eliciting speech context (here, the pictures) did not encourage them to consider possibilities of alternate meanings. While the children do have access to syntactic choices, their usage is constrained; formally framed contexts evoke restricted variants as the child has difficulty in managing the role relationships required in such contexts. This is further complicated when these contexts carry meanings which are removed from the cultural experiences of the child.

Similarly, the middle-class child also faces constraints on their speech. When asked to role play, a larger fraction of the children refused. Direct questions (“What is the man saying?”) resulted in a simple “I don’t know” but hypotheticals (“What do you think the man might be saying?”) evoked their interpretations; this might be as they needed precise instructions to hypothesise in that context. Stories narrated by the children showed primary form and secondary content, and considerably less diversity. This rigidity could be due to their closely controlled linguistic socialisation or deep interpretive rules, limiting imagination. Possibly, the child may innovate more with objects than words, due greater perceived autonomy in play.

On moving from communalised to individualised roles speech becomes increasingly reflexive. The selves of others gain tangibility via speech and enter our self, and grounds of experience are made verbally explicit. Rationality replaces the security of the condensed symbol; there is a change in the basis of our vulnerability.

SOCIAL CLASS, FAMILY TYPES, LANGUAGE AND SOCIALISATION

The socialisation in the family occurs within a critical set of four inter-related contexts:

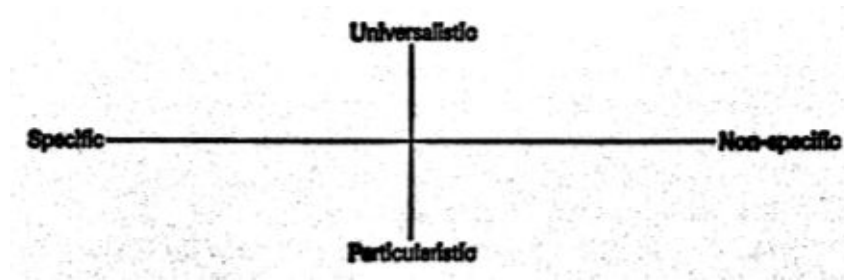
- I. The regulative context, or the authority relationships where the child is made aware of the rules of the moral order and their various backings.
- II. The instructional context, where the child learns about the objective nature of objects and persons, and acquires skills of various kinds.
- III. The imaginative or innovating contexts, where the child is encouraged to experiment and recreate their world on their own terms, and in their own way.
- IV. The interpersonal context, where the child is made aware of affective states - their own, and of others.

Bernstein suggests that critical orderings of a culture become substantive, initially in the family, through the forms of its linguistic realisations of the four contexts.

If the linguistic realisation of these contexts is predominantly the restricted variant, the deep structure is a restricted code based in communalised roles, realising particularistic meanings. If it is the elaborated variant, the deep structure is an elaborated code based in individualised roles, realising universalistic meanings.

Where code is restricted, speech in regulative context is likely limited to commands. Context bound and free criteria must be supplemented with criteria referring to the contextual specificity of the speech with which to apply the general rule. Code elaboration would be accompanied by developed grounds and qualification for the rule, and specificity in term of the socialised, the context and the issue. This does not imply total absence of commands; quite possibly the socialised would be given role options to question.

A possible semantic grid provides a general category system which has been applied to limited regulative context. Turner attempts linguistic realisation of the same. The two sets of criteria may be used for all four socialising contexts. Bernstein suggested that code realisation would vary with context.



In regulative context it is likely for syntactic markers of logical distribution of meaning to be used extensively, and that access to such markers may be irrespective of code restriction or elaboration.

With restricted code, reduction in specificity is expected. Further, children respond to the total frame of the conversation. Still, informal instructional contexts are limited within the family; hence the hypotheticals, conditionals and such may be rarely used – just as linguistic expressions of uncertainty may be received and realised in different contexts by different children.

All children have access to restricted codes and their related condensed meanings, but this is not true for elaborated codes due to selective access to the role system evoking its use. The different focusing of experience via restricted code creates major problems of educability as there is discontinuity between the symbolic orders of the school and the child. Forcefully switching a child's code to one with unfamiliar role relationships and orders of meaning without understanding of the context is both uncomfortable and potentially damaging.

Distinctions in family type and their communication structures (based on boundary maintaining procedure) are found empirically in each social class. We have a continuum from a family exercising rigid distinctions to one where boundaries blur. In families with strong boundary procedures, differentiation of members and authority structure is based on clear-cut, unambiguous definitions of status, and the social identities are a function of age, sex and age-relation. Such families are 'positional' families.

Where the boundary procedures are weak, status boundaries are blurred and differentiation between members and authority relationships is less position-based, and more dependent on differences between persons. These are person-centred. The role system continuously evolves to accommodate and assimilate the attributes of its members; the members make rather than wear their roles. A child's developing self constantly adjusts itself to verbally realised and elaborated selves of others; the boundary between the two is unclear. In positional families, the child reacts to the formal patterns in the role system.

The communication structures within the two family types are differently focused. Positional families are more sensitive to a person's general attributes and person-centred families to particular attributes. In the latter, more of a person's self is made public so they are more vulnerable; speech becomes a major media of control. In the former, speech only symbolises the existing social structures. Hence positional families create strong sense of social identity with low autonomy, and person-centred families the reverse situation. Such ambiguous identity and lack of boundary can form a closed value system in children.

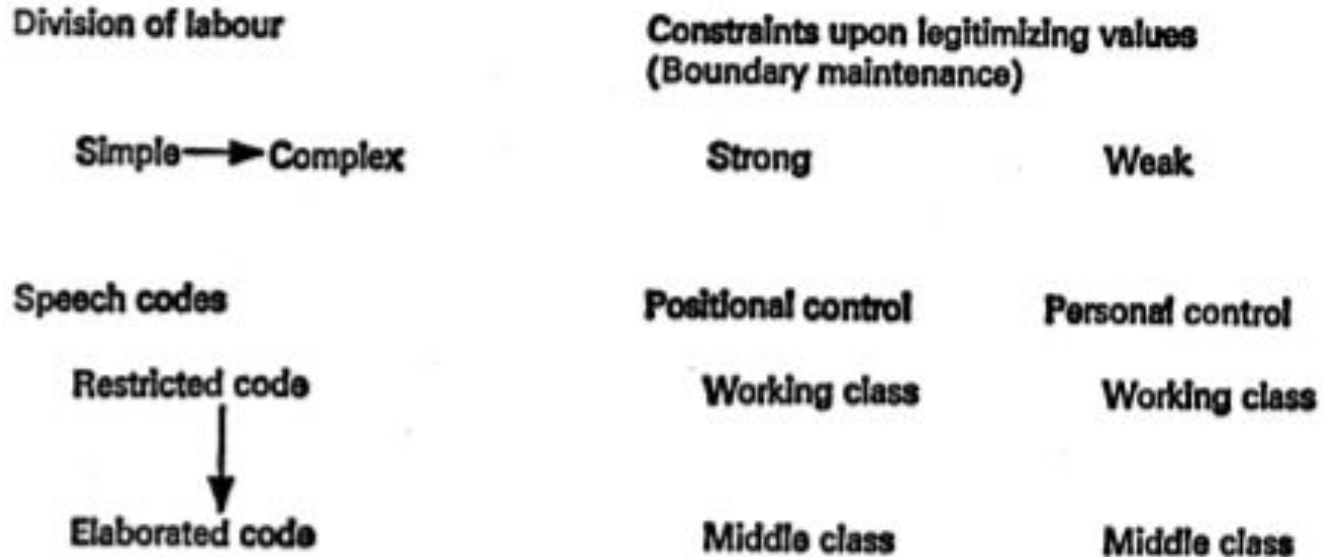
It can be observed that the same speech variant may be differently focused depending on family type. Normally restricted code is expected from positional families; person-centred families may provoke a code switch. Elaborated code focused by person-centred families can cause identity issues in children - they may see language as phony system masking the absence of belief, and thus move towards restricted codes of peer groups subcultures.

Despite popular misconception, restricted codes are not inferior codes. They can give access to a vast potential of meanings and a diversity of cultural forms, and even influence the form of imagining. Yet in complexly industrialised it is undervalued, as schools find their basis in elaborated codes and related social orderings. As a result the middle-class value system permeates the entire learning context. Elaborated codes give access to alternate realities, yet they carry the potential of alienation of feeling from thought, or self from other, or private belief from role obligation.

Change of linguistic code comes from division of labour - from simple to complex, the social and knowledge characteristics of occupational roles also change. Education extends access to elaborated codes, but this is controlled by the class system. Focusing of codes comes from boundary maintaining procedures, as these affect the major socialising agencies. It is possible to have societies with similarly complex division of labour but differing boundary maintaining procedures.

Relative strength of boundary maintenance (upon abstraction) can be measured by looking at the constraints on the values which legitimise power relationships. In societies with weak constraints, there might be a marked shift towards person-centred control; where the constraints are strong and there is severe restriction of choice, there might be a marked shift towards positional control.

The following diagram represents the relationships with reference to the family:



CONCLUSION

There is more to socialisation than the forms of its linguistic realisation.

Bern Bernstein attempts to show how the class system acts upon the deep structure of communication in the process of socialisation, by showing how the speech codes may be differently focused through family types.

Division of labour influences the availability of elaborated codes; the class system affects their distribution; the focusing of codes can be related to the boundary maintaining procedures (the value system) - this is Bernstein's interpretive framework.

There are general aspects of his analysis, which may provide a basis for the consideration of symbolic orders other than language.