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ABRAHAM STAHL

Class differences in the use of language have been observed in various countries for several decades (Descoeudres 1921; Hetzer and Reindorf 1928; Fries 1940; Bossard 1945; Schatzman and Strauss 1955). They have been brought to the foreground of educational theory and practice regarding culturally deprived children through the work of Basil Bernstein and his associates since the late 'fifties (Bernstein 1971, 1973). These papers have generated much educational research, part of it aimed at investigating the interrelationships, postulated by Bernstein, between social class, patterns of family organization and socialization, and modes of speech; and part of it directed towards the improvement of teaching methods for the disadvantaged (e.g. Lawton, Schwebel, Poole, Hess and Shipman, Gahagan and Gahagan). Another line of approach to the literature describing social class differences in language (which often are linked to differences in the cognitive sphere) is the questioning of various aspects of the theory and the methods used in research (e.g. Coulthard, Ginsburg, Labov). This paper poses still another question, which may be of far more practical use in education than appears at first sight: What is the origin of the sociolinguistic differences described by Bernstein and others? What caused them in the first place, and why do they still persist?

Bernstein accounts for the difference in language by pointing out its immediate sociological causes:

> "If a social group by virtue of its class relation, that is as a result of its common occupational function and social status, has developed strong communal bonds; if the work relations of this group offer little variety or little exercise in decision-making; if assertion, if it is to be successful, must be a collective rather than an individual act; if the work task requires physical manipulation and control rather than symbolic organization and control; if the diminished authority of the man at work is transformed into an authority of power at home; if the home is over-crowded and limits the variety of situations it can offer; if the children socialize each other in an environment offering little intellectual stimuli; *if all these attributes are found in one setting* (my italics, A.S.) then it is plausible to assume that such a social setting will generate a particular form of communication which will shape the intellectual, social and affective orientation of the children." (Bernstein 1971, p. 143.)

According to Bernstein in the above passage, the speech characteristics of the English working class are determined by the combined effects of a number of factors operating in that particular

society. This may sound reasonable as long as our research is limited to this group or to similar ones in the West today. But when we find the same characteristics, both linguistic and cognitive, in populations where this special interaction of sociological factors does not operate, we must necessarily conclude that the explanation offered is culture-bound.

Some of the principal features of working-class speech and thought, as listed by Bernstein in his various papers, are: restricted vocabulary, imprecise use of words, rigidity in the employment of adverbs and adjectives, simple and repetitive use of conjunctions, simple or faulty syntax, redundancy and frequent use of idiomatic phrases. Modes of speech reveal ways of thought peculiar to the working class: imperfect logical relationships, a stress on the concrete and the communal rather than the abstract and the individual, a limited degree of conceptualization, causal reasoning and planning. Most of these characteristics are found in groups of people other than the English working class and differing from them in sociological background. Four of such groups will be briefly presented here; the description of the first two is based on my own research;* for the remaining two references will be cited. The references are minimal and of a general nature; full presentation would take up very much space.

A. *Culturally disadvantaged children in Israel.* These children originate mostly from Islamic countries in the Middle East and North Africa; in Israel they are known as 'Oriental', to differentiate them from children of European origin. In this group there is an almost total overlap between ethnic and socioeconomic variables: almost all the Oriental children are working-class. The descriptions of Bernstein and others regarding lower-class speech, modes of thought and patterns of socialization, were found to be essentially similar to those of the Israeli culturally disadvantaged.

B. *Traditional Jewish communities in Islamic countries.* As has been stated, most culturally deprived children in Israel belong to Oriental Jewish communities. It has therefore seemed relevant to analyse the written and oral literature produced by Jews in Islamic countries during the last few generations, in order to study the modes of language and thinking common to Jewish traditional culture in the East.*† This material, written mostly in Hebrew and partly in various Jewish-Arabic dialects (in Hebrew script), includes folk tales, proverbs, folk songs, sermons, exempla, biblical exegesis, letters, poetry and other kinds of writing. Some of this material was oral, and subsequently committed to writing. Extensive analysis showed that the linguistic and cognitive characteristics of culturally deprived children in Israel parallel characteristics found in literature intended for their parents and grandparents. It is logical to infer that the modes of speech and thought of Oriental children in Israel derive from the cultural heritage of their parents, and not from their recently-acquired lower-class status in Israel. For our purpose it is important to stress that the sociological context in which this literature has been produced was entirely different from that of the English working class. Many of the authors and a fair part of their readers belonged to an intellectual elite, and often to the economic upper class. Sermons and folk tales were intended to edify and entertain people of all classes.

C. *Medieval society in Western Europe.* Most English working-class speech-traits, as described by Bernstein, are characteristic of medieval European texts. Edward Storer, in the introduction to his translation of the 13th century *Novellino*, notes the simplicity of syntax, the imprecise use of personal pronouns, the scarcity and repetitiveness of adjectives (Storer, pp. 21–25). J. F. Goodridge, introducing his modern English translation of Langland's *Piers the Ploughman*, points out looseness and ambiguity of syntax, redundancy, extensive use of

* Most of the material was published in Hebrew and has recently been summarized in Stahl (1973).

† This culture is not materially different from that of the Muslim communities in the same countries, or from traditional European Jewish culture. I have not included these two groups with the four presented here, as my reading in their literature has been sporadic and somewhat haphazard.

common phrases, repeated use of 'and' and 'for' (Langland, pp. 56–57). Many characteristics of language and thought found in descriptions of the lower class in modern times—verbosity, impulsivity, concreteness—are mentioned by Huizinga in his study of medieval life (Huizinga). This literature (of which many more examples could be easily adduced) was not ordinarily written by lower-class people, nor was it aimed at a lower-class audience; Huizinga deals with all classes of society, with kings as well as peasants. Once again the same modes of speech and thought are not connected with the sociological conditions listed by Bernstein.

D. *Young children, irrespective of social class.* Any description of the language of young children will show their limited use of the lexical and syntactical resources of the language; their language very much resembles what Bernstein tells us of working-class language. In his review of the Opies' *Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, Bernstein sees the language of children as a kind of 'public' speech, like that of the lower class (Bernstein 1971, p. 79). Iona and Peter Opie collected their material from schools all over Britain, middle- as well as working-class (Opie, p. viii).

If my main line of argument is accepted despite its sketchiness, it follows that the view of a special mode of language generated by the interaction of certain socio-economic factors cannot be accepted. What we need is a theory able to explain the existence of sociologically different populations using essentially the same linguistic code and sharing in large measure the same modes of thinking. According to my view, most of the facts can be explained by means of a theoretical framework differentiating between oral, semi-literate, and literate cultures (Goody & Watt; McLuhan).

Medieval society in Europe was semi-literate: only a tiny minority of the population was able to read. Written texts existed and were very influential; but for most people the only source of information was oral. This oral culture, consisting of sermons and epics, folktales and ballads, was shared by all ranks of society. When the professional reciter told his tale in the hall of some nobleman, retainers and servants were his listeners, as well as the lords and ladies. A cultural gap between the classes developed only after the Renaissance, as formal education became more widespread in the upper and middle classes, while the peasants, who composed the mass of the people, remained for the most part illiterate (Doyle, pp. 88–89; R. J. Tiddy, cit. in Burrow, p. 166; Dobrowolski, p. 280). Most people lived in the country, whereas most educational facilities were located in the towns. The effect of this division was the gradual development of two different cultures: one urban and progressively more literate, one rural and mostly illiterate (Cipolla, p. 55). The educational and cultural gap between the social classes was widened by the effects of print; reading, and more particularly the reading of printed matter, effected changes in language and thought. The spread of literacy led to a questioning of traditional values and an accentuation of the place of the individual in society (McLuhan, Eisenstein). Books affected the ways of socialization and education (Ariès, Ch. 15). But most of these changes were confined to the upper and middle classes; literacy increased very slowly in rural areas, where schools were few and motivation for study low (Altick, p. 18, p. 89).

One of the profoundest changes, connected with increased literacy in Western countries, was the development of modern industry and economy (Cipolla; Anderson & Bowman). These changes exercised their effects on the rural population, at first slowly, but from the 19th century onward more and more rapidly. With growing urbanization, literacy increased among the lower classes. Absorption of the workers into the schooling-system was very slow, as was their inclusion in the reading public (Altick, pp. 84–90, pp. 141–171); the gap in level of education and of reading has not yet been closed. The contemporary working class is experiencing changes which affected the urban middle class a century or more back. 'Uneducated' speech, in the past, was as usual in the upper and middle classes as it is now in the working class (Williams, pp. 245–247). Modes of speech and ways of thought, now found to be characteristic of the lower class, are for the most part a continuation of medieval forms, which have remained relatively unchanged through not

being exposed to the culture of the printed book. This explains the many similarities found between modes of language and thought in the middle ages and in the modern working class.

For exactly the same reason, oral patterns of language and traditional ways of thought have survived to recent times in Oriental Jewish communities and in their children now living in Israel. The effects of print were neither profound nor widespread in the Islamic countries (Lerner, pp. 114–115); there have been Hebrew printing presses since the 16th century, but these produced almost exclusively traditional works, as prayer-books and works on Jewish law and mysticism. These books reinforced rather than changed traditional patterns of culture. It is therefore not surprising that qualities of language and thought characteristic of these groups, in most respects very much resemble those of past and present semi-literate cultures in Europe.

Children, till affected by book-culture at school, live in an oral (or more exactly, in the shadow of literate adults, in a semi-literate) society. In the past, just as the cultural gap between the classes was not as wide as it became later, so the differences between adults and children were not so pronounced then as today. The Opies, in their work on the oral traditions of British school-children, and Ariès in his study of the changing concept of childhood, note many instances in which verbal matter and games, once common among adults, are now transmitted from one generation of children to the next; at least part of this inherited stock is still in use among lower-class adults (Examples in Opie, Ch. 3–5; Ariès, Ch. 4). Jokes, told by modern children and unsophisticated adults amused people of all classes in medieval Germany (Helmers, *passim*); fairy tales, which in other times entertained all members of the family, are now thought appropriate only for children. It is but quite recently that middle-class people began to feel a need for special books for their children; up to the 18th century there was almost no literature of this kind (Hürlimann).

Seen in this light, the causes of linguistic and cognitive differences between the social classes are cultural and educational; indeed, even the sociological factors listed by Bernstein can be explained on the basis of cultural change affecting different groups at different periods in their history. The characteristic qualities of *restricted* and *elaborated* codes are essentially those of *oral* and *literate* language. These terms are not identical with *spoken* and *written* language; oral language can be written, and literate language can be spoken, without changing their basic character. Oral language, even when written (as for instance by working-class children in Britain or Oriental children in Israel), will show many signs of its origins in speech: lack of overall organization, simple vocabulary and syntax, much redundancy, many digressions, associativeness. Literate language, even when spoken (as for instance by educated people in modern societies), will reveal the influence of reading, in word-choice and structure as well as in impersonality and in systematic presentation.

A comparison of any list of characteristics of spoken and written language (e.g. Rosen, pp. 267–268; Perrin, pp. 12–14) with Bernstein's two sociolinguistic codes reveals many similarities. In fact, this was pointed out to Bernstein at quite an early stage in his work (by W. H. N. Hotopf; Bernstein 1971, p. 56, note 4)—but was rejected, perhaps because of a too narrow interpretation of the meaning of 'oral' and 'written' language. I have tried to show that the identification of the two sets of distinctions (restricted/oral—elaborated/literate) is justified, after a clarification of the terms. Such an approach would accept Bernstein's description of the two linguistic codes, as well as much of the sociological background (patterns of authority in the family, modes of socialization the place of the individual vs. the community, and other points). The main difference would be the discarding of immediate sociological causation in favour of more remote cultural and educational antecedents. This wider theoretical framework would fit in with some remarks made by Bernstein himself in several of his papers: he notes that the learning of an elaborated code requires formal study, whereas a restricted code can be learned informally (1971, p. 79, p. 130); he remarks that, even now, there are differences in the accessibility of education for members of different social classes (1971, p. 175, p. 186). Bernstein occasionally refers to the differences in linguistic codes between the West and newly developing societies (1971, p. 163, p. 196) and of course it is not to be

expected that restricted codes in these societies were generated by the same processes as in Britain. All these stray references can more readily be accounted for in a theoretical framework which takes into account cultural and historical factors (for instance the rate of literacy in a given population, or the impact of print at a certain period) rather than in a theory of mainly socio-economic nature.

The proposed cultural theory takes into consideration facts regarding populations not accounted for by Bernstein's sociological theory. Moreover, it has the advantage of referring the problems encountered by the culturally deprived in school, to the sphere of education, rather than pointing to the spheres of sociology and economy, in which changes are so difficult to effect. According to this view, a way out of the vicious circle of socio-linguistic determinism can be indicated on the basis of historical precedent: what occurred to the European middle class in the past, can certainly be made to recur, and more rapidly (through planning and guidance), in other populations.

This optimistic view should not be misinterpreted. Processes which in the past required many generations to complete cannot be compressed into a few years. Programs aimed at bringing about the desired changes by means of direct linguistic instruction would seem less likely to succeed than more roundabout methods (which are necessarily more time-consuming and less open to evaluation), such as guided reading, group discussions of books and newspapers, and improved library services to the culturally disadvantaged. The achievements of the Western middle class were the result of the accumulated effects of living in a literate society. The children of semi-literate groups may be guided in the same direction by exposing them to the same experience of literacy.

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