

Online Publication Date: 10 April 2012
Publisher: Asian Economic and Social Society



Presentation of Bernstein's Deficit Hypothesis

Basel Al-Sheikh Hussein (Assistant professor of Linguistics at the Department of English Language and Literature, Al – Zaytoonah Private University of Jordan. Amman – Jordan)

Citation: Basel Al-Sheikh Hussein (2012): "Presentation of Bernstein's Deficit Hypothesis" International Journal of Asian Social Science Vol.2, No.4, pp.550-555.



Author (s)

Basel Al-Sheikh Hussein

Assistant professor of Linguistics at the Department of English Language and Literature, Al – Zaytoonah Private University of Jordan. Amman – Jordan.

Email: facultyofarts2@yahoo.com

Presentation of Bernstein’s Deficit Hypothesis

Abstract

Sociolinguistics has tried to work towards a solution to shortcomings in education. In the USA, linguists were aware of the fact that children in poor districts did not receive the expected benefits from public education (cf. Stewart 1966; Labov et al. 1968; Wolfram 1969, and Fasold 1972b). Similar steps were taken in Britain; linguists applied the results of their linguistic studies to problems in the education of the children of the working class (cf. Trudill 1975a). Among the prominent sociolinguists in this area was B. Bernstein whose Deficit hypothesis gave the first impetus to an investigation of speech barriers. He claimed that two kinds of English “code” could be distinguished: ‘elaborated code’ and ‘restricted code’. Bernstein indicated in his studies that children from the working class were limited to restricted code, while those of the middle class to the elaborated code. Accordingly, the success of members of a society and their access to social privileges is directly dependent on the degree of organization of their linguistic messages. In this paper, the author discusses Bernstein’s work together with some of the numerous publications on his hypothesis of speech codes to arrive at the results which are specific to social class.

Introduction

The principle from which Bernstein started his invaluable studies was that the speech habits of members of the lower class, who have little social influence, differ syntactically and semantically from those of the middle class, who are powerful and influential because of their material and intellectual privileges. The linguistic characteristics which differentiate the speech behavior of the lower class from that of the middle and upper classes are interpreted as a language deficit phenomenon. This assumption by Bernstein is called ‘Deficit Hypothesis’.

In fact, the restricted ability of the lower class can by no means ascribed to Bernstein but to Schwartzman and Strauss (1955) because they were the first Sociologists who formulated the theory of the restricted language ability of particular social groups compared with that of other groups.

Schatzmann's and Strauss’s observations that the lower class speakers lack the linguistic ability to express themselves led Bernstein in

1958 to distinguish between a ‘public’ language of the lower class and a ‘formal’ language of the middle class. From 1962 onwards he applied the terms ‘restricted’ and ‘elaborated’ speech codes for ‘public’ language and a ‘formal’ language, respectively. The former is regarded as inferior to the latter because of its limited range of linguistic expression, and it is considered by Bernstein to be “decisive cause of social inequality of opportunity. The theory behind Bernstein’s distinction, said n. Dittmar (1976), is that the different speech styles originate in the different psychological and social experiences of their speakers. Bernstein regards these experiences as being determined by membership of a particular social class. Such a dependency relation between ability of linguistic expression and sociopsychological experience is expressed by Sapir; he wrote that “the (real world) is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group “ (1929,209) . Whorf took this view a step further when he stated that “the background linguistic system... of each

language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity..." (1956, 212). Whorf's viewpoint is that different linguistic systems imply different social experiences

Whorf's and Bernstein's concepts of language reveal similarities in many respects' e.g., their concepts claim that different linguistic forms produce different social experience. Whorf observed these differences in different language communities; Bernstein transfers these observations to social barriers between classes within a society. Bernstein has added a decisive theoretical supplement to Whorf's relativity thesis with his assertion that it is primarily the social structure which determines linguistic behavior and this in turn comes full circle to reproduce the former. The reproduction of the social structure by way of linguistic behavior is a weaker formulation of Whorf's deterministic concept; it is in this weekend from that it is integrated into Bernstein's wider conceptual scheme (cf. Dittman 1976).

Whorf's and Bernstein's concepts are similar in postulating a close relationship between language and the shaping of experience. But this relationship is unilateral for Whorf ; this means, grammar conditions experience. Whereas for Bernstein is circular; the social structure conditions linguistic behavior, and this reproduces social structure. However, Whorf did not deny the influence of society on language. Thus he asks "Which was first: the language patterns or the cultural norm? In main they have grown up together, constantly influencing each other "(1956, 156) . The Whorfian thesis of the language-bound experience of speakers is available in Bernstein's distinction between restricted and elaborated speech codes (cf. Sapir 1971a). The similarities between Bernstein and Whorf are also mentioned in Gumperz's and Hymen's introduction to Bernstein. Thus one can read there: "Bernstien places his work in relation to that of Whorf. Whorf, of course, did not consider the form of social relationships, or differences in function within a single language. He did, however, specify that it was not a language as such but rather a consistent active selection of its resources, a 'fashion of

speaking' that was to be studied. Bernstein's delineation of communication codes can be seen as giving Whorf's insight new life and sociological substance" (Gumperz and Hymes 1972, 471). Empiricallly, Whorf's and Bernstein's hypotheses deal with the demonstration of a dependency relationship between language and thought on the one hand, and language and social structure on the other. But because Bernstein instigated a crucial impetus to research into the problems of language behavior specific to social classes, the author discusses in the next section some of Bernstein's relevant works.

Language and Social Behavior

Bernstein's critical idea of the importance of language for the process of learning the rules of social behavior has a manifestly sociopolitical origin. For Bernstein the existence of speech variation within a society is caused by economically wealthy people who are seen as the privileged social class that determines different uses of speech in such a way that the class with a versatile verbal repertoire can attain more privileges than speakers with a limited verbal repertoire; i.e., the middle and upper classes than the lower class (cf. Gumperz and Hymes 1972). This, in turn, means that underprivileged groups can only be socially successful if they acquire the particular linguistic ability which is controlled by the norms of the dominant class through educational institutions, newspapers, television, etc., and whose language is considered the standard language. The standard language then becomes the speech variety of a language community which is legitimized as the obligatory norm for social intercourse in that society. The act of legitimizing a norm, said Dittmar (1976), is effected by means of value judgements which have a sociopolitical motivation. In addition to the standard, speech varieties exist in all societies which can be termed dialects in the case of regional variation, or sociolects in the case of social variation. These regional and social variants frequently cause their speakers to be given a lower social valuation which is measured by the norms of the supraregional and more highly valued standard variety.

For Bernstein, the linguistic performance, as demanded by the speakers of the dominant social class, determines the standard variety, and thus the recognition and approval of speech behavior, and so decides the normative scale of valuation according to which other speech varieties can be described as deficient. Bernstein describes the speech of the dominant (middle) class as 'elaborated' and that of the lower class as 'restricted'.

Unlike elaborated speakers, restricted speakers lack the verbal repertoire that guarantees their success in the society. The speech of the middle class thus represents a mechanism of selection which acts as a social filter in controlling social privileges through speech form (cf. Dittmar 1976).

With his 'restricted' and 'elaborated' speech codes, Bernstein principally equates social privileges with greater self-expression, and social disadvantage with poorer speech. In fact, the social inequality between classes is due to economic-political dominance.

Bernstein's Original Concepts

Like de Saussure, Bernstein in his essays (1965; 1967) distinguishes between language and speech. Language, as an abstract linguistic rule system, represents a code; while speech signifies an activity (performance, verbal strategy) engaged in during actual speech encounters aiming at transmitting information by varying the application of the roles of the code. According to Bernstein, the code is capable of producing different speech codes which are realized through the system of social relationships (cf. Bernstein, 1967: 126). The first term that was adopted by Bernstein for 'speech codes' was 'sociolinguistic codes': "The concept of sociolinguistic code points to the social structuring of meanings and to their diverse but related contextual linguistic realizations" (1971a). According to Bernstein, the sociolinguistic codes are to be understood as linguistic planning strategies which are realized systematically as speech form independent of the individual contexts, but in certain respects they imply varying linguistic capabilities on the part of their speakers; in other respects they express varying speech capabilities that depend on contextual constraints, whether this is due to

the varying modeling competence of the speakers, or rather to their varying fluency in performance, was not clear because Bernstein himself gave no answer to this. He writes "The codes refer to performance ..." (1972b: 475), whereas in (1971a) he identifies them with "the deep structure of communication". The speech /sociolinguistic codes, said Dittmar (1976), are presumably to be taught of as existing on a level between competence and performance. Taking Houston's term (1970), this level could be called systematic performance". The speech codes become manifest in 'elaborated' and 'restricted speech forms'. The conceptual unity of the speech codes can be grasped by the term 'range of alternatives' which is relatively large for the middle class and small for the lower class. In this sense, the middle class tends to realize more alternatives than the lower class; e.g., in elaborated speech (cf. Dittman, 1976). A restricted speech code can be used by a speaker when he uses only part of the structural linguistic possibilities, and cannot correctly verbalize complex trains of thought or logical relationships. Frequently he has to resort to nonlinguistic signs in order to convey the message he has in mind. As a result, according to Bernstein (1971a), speakers of the restricted speech code can only bring about inadequate mental operations, and then can be identified as belonging to the lower class. In comparison, the speakers of the elaborated speech code are able to express complex relations with their environment, to solve conflicts and problems and to pass on personal emotions and intentions. For the middle class speaker, the lower class speech behavior is characterized by repetitions and incoherent argumentation. The speakers of the restricted code think, according to Bernstein, in a concrete rather than abstract manner. Unlike the elaborated, the restricted speech code can, in relation to lexical and syntactic options, be largely predictable. Judging by the criteria of verbal planning, one is dealing with an 'elaborated' speech code, "if it is difficult to predict the syntactic options or alternatives a speaker uses to organize his meanings over a representative range of speech" (Bernstein 1967:57).

The 'Circularity Principle' of the Speech Codes

Oevermann explains in his book (1970:183-2005 in Dittman 1976) how the 'circularity principle' of the codes is formed. He says that A speaker of the elaborated or restricted speech code selects via the specific planning strategies peculiar to him (high v. low level of planning) from syntax and lexicon in such a way that restricted or elaborated speech forms become manifest . The feedback process lies in the fact that the social structure itself is again stabilized by the speech forms. According to Dittmar, in order to specify the relationship between the speech codes "we can imagine elaborated and restricted speech forms as two sets of communicative symbols, such that the elaborated incorporates the restricted as a subset. This means that everything which is expressed in the restricted room can also be realized in the elaborated form; the reverse, however, is not possible. In other words, elaborated speakers can also express themselves in the restricted form, though the restricted speakers cannot do so in the elaborated form. At the same time this inclusion relation makes it clear that restricted speech is limited compared with elaborated speech" (Dittman, translated ed. 1976, London: Edward Arnold publishers, ed.: 12-13).

The Justification of the Restricted and Elaborated speech Codes

Bernstein regards Durkheim's division between mechanical and organic solidarity as substantiating his deficit hypothesis that members of the lower class are status-oriented and dependent upon a maximum of reciprocal mechanical solidarity; linguistically , this is manifested in reassuring solidarity stereotypes and in a rapid but not very qualified speech form : Sapir and Whorf (cf. Bernstein 1956; 1971a , 1972b) Strengthen Bernstein's initial view that "language powerfully conditions all our thinking about social problems and processes..." (Sapir quoted in Bernstein 1965) . Sapir-Whorf's relativity thesis is transposed by Bernstein in a weak analogy to the stratified English social structure. In so doing he is applying the relativity thesis of exotic language communities to his own (cf. Dittmar, 1976) .

Bernstein regards Luria's and Wygotsky's psychological theory as relevant for acquiring language. According to the theory , situations and events in the speakers' external environment are transformed by way of verbal planning strategies into manifest linguistic utterances : "The speech system..., itself a function of the social structure, marks out selectively for the individual what is relevant in the environment . The experience of the individual is transferred by the learning which is generated by his own apparently voluntary acts of speech" (Bernstein 1964b:56).

In addition to the influence of the above-mentioned psychologist, Bernstein's claim that children of the lower class use concrete meanings and those of the middle class abstract meanings is based on the psychologist Piaget, who has differentiated in the psychological development of the child between 'concrete' and 'formal' operations (Bernstein quoted in Hymes 1964a:256) . Piaget subdivides the development of the child into 'pre-operational', 'concrete-operational' and 'formal-operational' stages of thinking. These three stages are described as cognitive universal features (cf. Ginsburg, 1972:127-9). Bernstein supports the theory, borrowed from Piaget, that lower-class children remain at the stage of concrete operations. This would mean that they are limited in their cognitive capabilities. Empirically, it had not been possible to give sufficient proof of differences specific to social class in the cognitive development of children (cf. Ginsburg 1972:75-239).

Bernstein was also influenced by Malinowski (1923), who in his opinion had shown that circumstances could give rise to a simplified syntax and a limited lexicon. Bernstein appears to derive a supporting argument for the concrete speech of the lower class from the tendency of 'primitive' speakers to gear their language completely to concrete living conditions. In concluding this section, the author of this paper agrees with Dittmar (1976) in saying that Bernstein attempts to use extremely heterogeneous fragments, from works of various authors with very different scientific intentions, in order to support his own theory of the existence of two different speech codes and their social implications. Bernstein's

argument, which disregards contradictions, has the advantage of making his conception difficult to criticize. With regard to his sources, it seems that Bernstein does not want to commit himself to a particular standpoint.

Conclusion

Concurring with N. Dittmar (1976), the author of this paper considers the following aspects to be characteristic of Bernstein's ideas of the different speech codes. The 'elaborated' speech code provides access to social privileges, whereas the 'restricted' speech code prevents this; the difference between the 'elaborated' and 'restricted' codes is precisely the deficit which prevents the social success of 'restricted' speakers. In addition, the social structure intervenes between language as a rule system and speech as performance, and determines specific speech codes by way of specific planning strategies. The 'elaborated' speech code is to be found in the middle class, the 'restricted' code in the lower class, characteristic of Bernstein's ideas is that the speech codes have social, psychological and linguistic correlates. They are defined by their lexical and syntactic predictions.

Bernstein's theoretical concepts imply that a close correlation exists between speech and thinking. A linguistic deficit implies at the same time a cognitive deficit, and differences in the communicative behavior of speakers are not established from speech acts but from the predictability of linguistic sequences. And linguistic, not socio-economic, differences that are blamed for social inequality.

Finally, social inequality for Bernstein can be compensated by raising the standards of speech. Bernstein's work is now regarded as a contribution to research into the communicative competence of speakers.

References

Arnot, M. (2001) Bernstein's Sociology of Pedagogy: Female Dialogues and Feminist Elaborations. In: Weiler, K. *Feminist Engagements: Reading, Resisting and Revisioning Male Theorists in Education and Cultural Studies*, Ch. 6. New York, Routledge.

Atkinson, P. (1981) "Bernstein's Structuralism" *Educational Analysis*, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 85-96.

Atkinson, P.; Davis, B.; Delamont, S. (1995) *Discourse and Reproduction: Essays in Honor of Basil Bernstein*. Cresskill, NJ, Hampton.

Bernstein, B. (1958) "Some Sociological Determinants of Perception: an Inquiry in Subcultural Differences" *Brit. J. Social.* Vol.9, pp. 159-74.

Bernstein, B. (1962a) "Social Class, Linguistic Code and Grammatical Elements" *Language and Speech* Vol.5, pp.221-40.

Bernstein, B. (1962b) "Linguistic Codes, Hesitation Phenomena and Intelligence" *Language and Speech* Vol.5, pp.39-46.

Bernstein, B. (1964) "Elaborated and Restricted Codes: Their Social Origins and Some Consequences" In Gumperz and Hymes, pp. 55-69.

Bernstein, B. (1965) A Sociolinguistic Approach to Social Learning. In J. Gould (ed.), *Penguin Survey of the Social Sciences*, 144-68. Harmondsworth, England.

Bernstein, B. (1967) "Elaborated and Restricted Codes: an Outline" In Lieverston Vol.4, pp.126-133.

Danzig, A., (1995) Applications and Distortions of Basil Bernstein's Code Theory. In: Sadovnik, A.R., ed. *Knowledge and Pedagogy: the Sociology of Basil Bernstein*, pp. 145-70. Norwood, NJ, Ablex Publishing.

Bernstein, B. (1971) *Class, Codes and Control*, Volume 1. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Bernstein, B. (1971a) Social Class, Language and Socialization. In A. S. A. Abramson et al. (ed.), *Current Trends in Linguistics 12*. The Hague.

Bernstein, B. (1972) A Sociolinguistic Approach to Socialization; with Some Reference to Educability. In Gumperz and Hymes, pp.465-97.

Dittmar, N. (1976) *Sociolinguistics: A Critical Survey of Theory and Application*. London: Edward Arnold Publishers.

Edwards, J.R. (1979a) *Language and Disadvantage*. New York: Elsevier.

Edwards, J.R. and Giles, H. (1984) Applications of the Social Psychology of Language: Sociolinguistics and Education. In Trudgill, pp.119-58.

- Fasold, R. (1972b)** Tense marking in Black English. Washington, DC: Center of Applied Linguistics.
- Fasold, R. (1984a)** The Sociolinguistics of Society. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publishers.
- Fasold, R. (1990)** The Sociolinguistics of Language. UK: Oxford, Basil Blackwell Publishers.
- Fishman, J.A. (ed., 1968b)** Reading in t Sociology of Language. The Hague.
- Ginsburg, H. (1972)** The Myth of the Deprived Child. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey.
- Gumperz, J.J. and Hymes, D. (eds., 1964)** The Ethnography of Communication. Amer. Anthropologist. Special Publication, Vol. 66 (6), Part 2.
- Gumperz, J.J. and Hymes, D. (1972)** Directions in Sociolinguistics: the Ethnography of Communication. New York.
- Housten, S.H. (1970)** "Competence and Performance in Child Black English" Language Sciences Vol.12, pp.9-14.
- Hymes, D. (ed. 1964a)** Language in Culture and Society: a Reader in Linguistics and Anthropology. New York.
- Labov, W. et al. (1968)** A Study of the Nonstandard English of Negro and Puerto Rican Speakers in New York City. United States Office of Education Final Report. Research Project No. 3288.
- Labov, W. (1987)** "Are Black and White Vernacular's Diverging?" Section II. American Speech Vol.62, No.1, pp.5-12.
- Lucas, C. (1986)** 'I ain't got none / you don't have any': Noticing and Correcting Variation in the Classroom. In Montgomery and Bailey, pp. 348-58.
- Malinowski, B. (1923)** The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages. In C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards: The Meaning of Meaning, Supplement I,296-336, London.
- Morias, A.M., Et Al., Eds (2001)** Towards a Sociology of Pedagogy: the Contributions of Basil Bernstein to Research. New York, Peter Lang.
- Oevermann, U. (1970)** Sprache und Soziale Herkunft. Ein Beitrag Zur Analyse Schichtenspezifischer Sozialisationsprozesse und ihrer Bedeutung fuer den Schulerfolg. Studien und Berichte 18.Berlin: Institut fuer Bildungsforschung in der Max – Blank – Gesellschaft.
- Sadovnik, A.R. (1991)** "Basil Bernstein's theory of Pedagogic Practice: a Structuralistic Approach" Sociology of Education Vol. 64, No. 1, p. 48-63.
- Sapir, E. (1929)** "The Status of Linguistics as a Science" Language Vol.5, pp.207-214.
- Schatzmann, L. and Strauss, A. (1955)** "Social Class and Modes of Communication". American Journal of Sociology Vol.60, No.4, pp. 329-38.
- Semel, S.F. (1995)** Basil Bernstein's Theory of Pedagogic Practice and the History of American Progressive Education: Three Case Studies . In : Sadovnik, A.R. , ed. Knowledge and Pedagogy : the Sociology of Basil Bernstein , p. 337-58 . Norwood, NJ. Ablex.
- Stewart, W. (1966)** "Nonstandard Speech Patterns" Baltimore Bulletin of Education Vol.43, No.2-4, pp.52-65.
- Trudgill, P. (1975a)** Accent, Dialect and School. London: Edward Arnold Publishers.
- Tyler, W. (1985)** Organizational Structure, Factors and Code: a Methodological Inquiry Into Bernstein's Theory of Educational Transmissions . Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Kent.
- Whorf, B.L. (1956)** Language, Thought and Reality. Cambridge, Mass., New York, London.
- Wolfram, W. (1969)** A Sociolinguistic Description of Detroit Negro Speech. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Wolfram, W. and Fasold, R. (1974)** The Study of Social Dialects in American English. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice – Hall.