SOCIAL CLASS, LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION IN JAMAICAN CHILDREN

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Summary

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Standard Jamaican English used by the educated native Jamaican of the upper class though internationally understood and acceptable is different from standard British, American or Australian. However, there is a wide range of variation between it and the "dialect" or Jamaican Creole spoken by the majority of Jamaican in the lower socio-economic sectors. Hence, children from the lower social class use a language system, and socio-cultural norms significantly different from that used by their upper class counterparts.

The study traces and compares for the lower and middle class groups and the upper class group the point of lexification in language development, the use of basic formats, internal processing, verbal vocabulary, the use of adjectives, the use of sentences in relation to quantity of words, and the use of words per unit of time, for the expression of a common set of basic meanings.

The conclusion drawn is that socio-cultural conditioning influences the purpose and content of a child's language, and that the implication for education is that school language programmes can be structured to focus on one or more of the aspects - purpose, content, format - depending on the needs of differently conditioned children.

Report

The majority of the Jamaican population, especially in the lower socio-economic sectors of the society speaks what is commonly referred to as 'the dialect' and what linguists refer to, in its most extreme form,as Jamaican Creole (JC). There is a wide range of variation existing between JC and the varieties of English that are spoken predominantly in upper social-class situations. Among these varieties is what may be referred to as Standard Jamaican English (SJE) which is the language of educated native Jamaicans and which, though differing from Standard British, or American, or Australian or any other standard is, like these, a part of internationally acceptable English.

This means that children from lower social-class backgrounds in Jamaica differ from their upper social-class counterparts firstly, by the use of a significantly different language system, JC, and secondly, by having a different set of socio-cultural norms.

The research whose results will be outlined here aimed to study the habitual purposes, content and form of communication that are evidenced in the language of young Jamaican children living in contrasting socio-cultural environments. It was felt that the study of such habituations in children would have important implications for education in a society where social integration is a top educational priority.

It was further felt that most current researches on social-class influences in children's language tend to confuse aspects of purpose, content and the format of communication. Each of the latter aspects is in the present study considered as having its own distinct implications; it is felt that socio-cultural groups may conceivably differ in one or more of these aspects without necessarily differing in all; in any case, the inferences to be drawn from such differences would be capable of focusing on language behaviour in a way not possible in current researches where social-class language differences are treated as being either mainly linguistic on the one hand or mainly cognitive on the other. A description of the research follows.

On the criteria of parental occupation and school of the child, samples of Jamaican children at age $6\frac{1}{2}$ to $7\frac{1}{2}$ years were selected in three social-class categories: urban low-social-class (L); deep rural, which in this context also means low-social class (RL); and urban upper-social-class (U). Groups of 5 children each, in the same social-class category, were taken out of their class-rooms and left to converse together in the absence of an interviewer or other outsider on several occasions; on one of these occasions for each group, without the knowledge of the children, the group-conversation was tape-recorded for approximately 11 minutes. The conversations were transcribed without any attempt to identify individuals, so that only a single continuous stream of speech that was mostly audibly dominant might be studied for each group. 63 groups of children, 21 in each social-class category, were studied in this way and their relevant language characteristics were quantified and compared.

As far as morpho-syntactic characteristics of speech were concerned, the research showed as would be expected that the L and LR groups were using a JC system with its peculiarities of sentence-structure, different conventions relating to tense-marking, inflections, pronominal systems, and so on as compared with English. It showed also, however, that some JC morpho-syntactic characteristics such as the zero-copula sentence (e.g. 'John running', 'The book red') and absence of the English 3rd person, singular, present-tense s/z inflection on verbs were significantly present in some of the U groups. This meant that social classes were differentiated by JC more in terms of the frequency with which some JC characteristics occurred, than in terms of the absolute presence or absence of such characteristics. The complexity of intra-lingual variation that is evident proves that the JC situation is not a static one with clearly polarised language varieties.

On the assumption that the purpose for which language is used are identifiable as specific 'performative' functions in language, the research showed that socio-cultural groups differed as follows in the purposes of language use.

The L and LR groups were more disposed than the U groups to find pragmatic purposes: callings, greetings, context-based replies, questions, commands, and so on for using language; this was shown empirically by the relative occurrences of non-predication sentences ('Hi', 'Not now', 'Yes', 'No', and so on) that express the latter purposes.

Other differences in the preferred purposes of language use were evidenced between urban (L and U) and rural (LR) groups. The LR groups seemed more disposed than both the L and U groups towards indulging in conversational exchanges; the latter disposition was evidenced empirically by a wider variety of question types and a greater use of some types of negation among LR than among other groups, although the total occurrence of negation was just as great in U girls as in LR children. The latter finding relative to LR children was also supported by the fact that these children tended to interrupt each other less frequently in speech than other children did and therefore produced smaller quantities of fragment or interrupted sentences on the whole. Urban/rural differences were also found in respect of a special type of performative behaviour: the vocal imitation of sounds which was most present in urban children.

Sociocentric sentences (Interposed instances of 'You know', 'You see', etc.), sometimes felt to be another reflection of specific purposes of language use, occurred most frequently in L and LR groups; however, it is felt in the present study that this characteristic was not due so much to the purposes of speakers as to the type of communication strategy that was being employed.

As a general rule, the purposes for which language was used by the subjects of this study were closely related to what might be regarded as the dominant everyday requirements of the respective socio-cultural environments; however, after the expression of these purposes in language was accounted for, there still remained a significant set of language differences that could not be attributed either to morphosyntax in its strict sense or to purposive behaviour.

The influence of socio-cultural environment was strongly evident in the content of language as well; thus the L and LR groups had the most frequent references to adults and adult behaviour, urban groups (i.e. L and U) the most frequent references to mass-media, fictional topics and characters; girls were dominant, for example, in references to colour, boys in the use of certain types of delimiters and intensifiers that give a certain vigour to language, and so on. The differences in content were shown empirically by means of a detailed subcategorisation of lexical items according to syntactic and 'selectional' criteria so that adequately narrow, lexical subcategories could be described in terms of the type of reference they permitted.

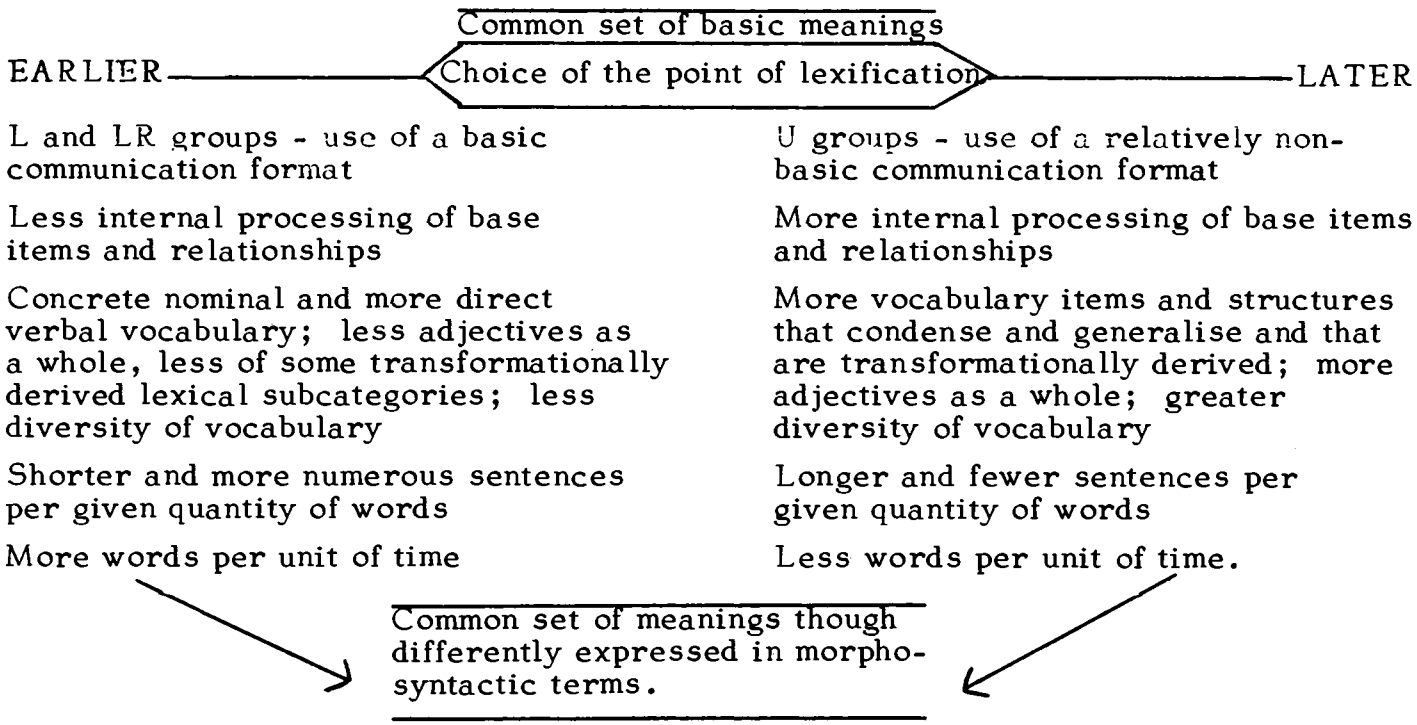
Certain categories of language content, such as references to place, time, number and quantity, modalities and logical relationships, that seem relevant to cognitive abilities of a general sort did not differentiate absolutely between socio-cultural groups, but differentiated rather in terms of the detailed alternatives that groups seemed disposed to select within specific content categories. Thus, for example, the total references to place and time were about equal for all children, but the L and LR references conformed with previous indications by being more immediate and face-to-face than U references in the same broad categories; the total references to modalities and logical relationships were about the same for all children (except for U boys who produced less because they indulged in more playful behaviour than other children did in the speech situation), but L and LR children tended more than others to reference concepts of obligation, necessity and numerical order, while U girls tended more than other children did to reference concepts of probability, possibility and potentiality.

Differences in the content of language accounted for only a small part of the differences left unexplained after the study of language purposes. These so far unexplained differences seem relevant to what has already been referred to as the 'format' of communication, and the possibilities of speakers possessing different communication formats can be described as follows within a generative theory of language:

a. The speaker's linguistic knowledge can be described as a sequence of operations, some of which must of necessity occur before others do. Some linguistic operations may therefore be considered as occurring 'earlier' or 'later' than others.

b. The speaker's vocal output of language can occur at any point in the earlier/later sequence or range of operations. When he makes this output, he can be said to 'lexify' or give a morpho-phonological form to such language elements as exist at that point in the sequence of processing.

Within this theoretical conception, the remaining language differences observed in the present study indicate that the L and LR groups tended to lexify their language earlier than the U groups tended to do. The result was as shown in the illustration below which indicates two possible extremes of communication formats, although it is possible for many speakers to fall somewhere between the two.



The general conclusions to be drawn from this study are that socio-cultural conditioning has an influence on the habitual purposes for which children use language and the kind of content that comes up for treatment in language; at the same time, however, many language characteristics considered in previous researches as indicators of maturity, cognitive abilities, and so on, and as differentiating in these terms between socio-cultural groups of children are here considered as indicating nothing more than the preferred lexification points in communication, and as having nothing to do with whether the children are expressing or are in the habit of expressing the same repertoire of basic meanings.

The implications for education are that school language programmes can be structured to focus precisely on one or more of the aspects: purposes, content or communication format depending on the goals of education and the specific needs of differently conditioned children.

For a fuller description of this research see "The use of Language by 7 year old Jamaican Children living in Contrasting Socio-economic Environments" - D. R. Craig. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, London University Institute of Education.