

Bernstein's Theory of Language Codes : Is It a Theory of Linguistic Deficit ?

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Introduction

I have found some difficulties to understand his ideas, but I managed to do so from secondary references and from the criticisms which were levelled against him. I have stated a number of criticism against Bernstein's theory which are reasonable in my opinion.

The third point is the answer to the question stated in the essay which is about the deficiency of Bernstein's theory claimed by a lot of social scientists. They take his theory as a good example of linguistic deficit in schools, and use it to account for educational failure.

Bernstein's theory of language codes

The first idea in Bernstein's theory is related to the characteristics of speech forms. He distinguishes between two types of language-use: « public language » and « formal language ».

The characteristics that determine « Public language » are as Dittmar (1976) stated them :

- 1- Short, grammatically simple, often unfinished sentences.
- 2- Simple and repetitive use of conjunctions (So, then because...).

3- Inability to hold a formal subject through speech sequence.

4- Rigid and limited use of adjectives and adverbs. (p.20)

The Characteristics of « Formal speech » are in Dittmar's words :

1- Accurate grammatical order and syntax regulates what is said.

2- Logical modifications and stress are mediated through grammatically complex sentence construction.

3- Frequent use of prepositions which indicate logical relationships.

4- Frequent use of the personal pronoun « I ».

5- A discriminative selection from a range of adjectives and adverbs (Dittmar, 1976, p.20).

The most widely known theory of Bernstein states that there are two different kinds of language-use within the class society, « restricted » and « elaborated » code. The difference between the two languages is within the quality of speech used by the working class and the middle class. The difference between the two classes- in terms of languages- is not a matter of underlying grammar, dialect or slang; but it is of the different way of using the grammatical system and vocabulary.

Rosen (1974) believes that Bernstein assigns the differences in speech between the two classes to their different relationships to the social structure (Rosen, 1974, p.4).

Rosen (1974) gives a good account of why the two classes use different « codes ». He said that : « the two classes can be said to be using different codes because there are differences in the principles which underlie the particular choices they make in speech. They arise because there are two different kinds of socialization involved which find their expression in different kinds of languages » (p.4).

After drawing attention to the existence of codes in the working and middle class languages, we try now to emphasise on the essential differences between the two codes. Rosen (1974) summarises the main points of difference.

1) The restricted code is qualified by being predictable because it is derived from narrow resource of language, therefore it is rigid, the elaborated code is rather flexible.

2) The speaker using the restricted code has some difficulty in « verbalizing » his thoughts, but the middle class speaker finds it easier to verbalize his intention.

3) From the codes derive different orders of meaning, the restricted code end to « particularistic » meanings in which principles are never made explicit, so that no availability to inspection and change. The elaborated code gives room to « universalistic » meaning which makes the principles and operations explicit so that it gives chance to the individuals to some possibility of change.

4) The concepts « universalistic » and « particularistic » are linked to two others which are « context-free » and « context-bound ». The speaker of the restricted code is related to the immediate situation, and his speech can be understood only by the participants. But the speaker using elaborated code is free from this limitation; therefore, he could be understood by all people.

5) The restricted code is known to operate through « metaphor » and condensed symbols, but in the elaborated code, condensed symbols are more rational. (Rosen, 1974, pp.4,5).

Rosen (1974) points out that all these differences are connected with two types of family, so that we find the restricted code related to the « positional » working class family, and the elaborated code in the middle class « personal » family (p.5).

Stubbs (1976) draws attention to some details about this latter point that « both family types can be found in both middle class and working class, but implies that, at the present time, « positional » families are more characteristic of the working class » (p. 44).

Stubbs (1976) explains further more about Bernstein's theory.

He said that Bernstein makes a distinction between « sociolinguistic » codes (elaborated and restricted) and « speech variants » (elaborated and restricted) which convert the codes into real facts. (p. 43)

He defines the « codes » from Bernstein's point of view that they are entirely abstracts, underlying interpretive procedures which « generate » different speech variants in different contexts. » (p. 43)

From this definition, Stubbs (1976) argues that Bernstein is no longer claiming that there is a direct relationship between a speaker's social class and the codes he uses. Bernstein has introduced two new kinds of concepts of speech, variant and context (p.43). Stubbs (1976) points out that « speech variant » is not a language in itself. He defines it as « contextual constraints upon grammatical lexical choices » (Bernstein 1973, quoted in Stubbs 1976, p.43).

He argues that there is no detail specified in Bernstein's work of these choices, but they are defined in the same way as codes, so in the case of a

restricted speech variant, it is characterized by a reduced range of syntactic alternatives and a small range of vocabulary.

In sum, speech variants are not defined in terms linguistic forms, but in terms of « meanings » (Stubbs 1976, p.43).

Stubbs (1976) continues arguing that elaborated speech variants are known to form « universalistic » meanings which are explicit and related to a given context. On the other hand we have restricted speech variant giving access to « particularistic » meanings which are « implicit » and don't give importance to many meanings shared between the speaker and the hearer (p.43).

Stubbs (1976) draws attention to what Bernstein calls the four critical socializing contexts which determine whether a person is an elaborated or restricted code user.

The Bernstein's four critical socializing contexts are :

- 1) Regulative, e.g; to be told off by mother.
- 2) Instructional, e.g; the classroom.
- 3) Imaginative, e.g; in play.
- 4) Interpersonal, e.g; in talking with others where the child is made aware of emotional states (Stubbs 1976, p.43).

In the end we come to the crucial point of Bernstein's theory. Stubbs (1976) believes that Bernstein is attempting to formulate a theory which relates a child's social class, family background, language-use and cognitive style »(p.44).

Bernstein (1974) claims that access to the codes is « broadly related to social class » (Bernstein 1974, quoted in Stubbs 1976, p.44) and that possibly there is a selective access to elaborated code. In other words, some working class speakers do not have access to elaborated code but on the other hand, middle class speakers have the opportunity to speak both codes, and this is because there is a selective access to the role system which brings out the use of the codes (Stubbs, 1976, p.44).

In order to make clear the concept of class in Bernstein's theory, I prefer to quote what Adlam (1977) said in this context : « In Bernstein's thesis class is seen as regulating the distribution of what counts as dominant or privileged meanings and the acceptable form of their realisation. According to this particular thesis, class affects the form of transmission and the institutionalisation of elaborated codes⁰ in education as well as their distribution between families. Middle class families are orientated to the meanings and communication patterns of the elaborated code because the class structure points such families towards a structure of social relationships which gives rise to an elaborated code. The structure of social relationships typical of many lower-working class families gives rise to the semantic orientation and communication patterns of the restricted code again through the action of the wider class structure » (p.3)

Criticisms of Bernstein's theory :

There have been some criticisms against Bernstein's theory. In this essay, I would like to summarise some of them in the following points :

1) Jakson (1973) believes that Bernstein's theory has been changing a lot, because what was said in the period between 1965 and 1971 is not the same after 1971. The idea of « code » in 1971 means something quite different from what was its conception before.

The same criticism is levelled by Stubbs (1976) when he said that « It is difficult to assess Bernstein's work for several practical reasons (...) first, his views have altered in crucial respects since his first paper was published in 1958 (p.36).

2) Jakson (1973) points out that there is no evidence that the codes exist. In other words, there seem to be no data uncovered by Bernstein or anybody else, for which could be taken as a proof to the existence of elaborated and restricted codes, and which may be considered as a useful or economical explanatory hypothesis (p.66).

The same argument is held by Stubbs (1976). He is sceptical about the existence of the codes, because as he said : « Bernstein dropped the notion that the codes exist as observable language » (p46).

Stubbs (1976) believes that there is only one sense in which the codes could be said to exist which is as « hypothetical constructs » having the role to explain the social class differences in language use and cognitive orientation. (p46)

3) Dittmar (1976) argues about the division of language into « public » an « formal » language that « the characteristics of the two speech forms do not correspond either in their sequence or in their references to linguistic, psychologic or other evidence » (p.21).

He summarises the criticisms of Bernstein's characterization of the speech forms in the following points, he said :

1) « They only give us a very global idea of what kind of differences can exist between the two speech forms ».

2) « The division between the linguistic level and other levels is not clarified » (p.21)

3) « The characterizations originate from normative concepts which are neither questioned from the social point of view nor justified by any explicit, empirically explanatory model »(p.21).

Jackson (1973) also criticises Bernstein's distinction between « public » and « formal » language. He said that « It is natural to comment that these are habits of thought rather than of language, and their connection with matters like - say- the structure of syntax is not at all obvious »(p.69).

4) Stubbs (1976) suggests that « Bernstein's theory has an unclear and unacceptable status. First, it is now formulated in a way which makes it untestable. Second, it has a loose, if not actually contradictory relationship to the experimental evidence said to support it » (p48).

5) Rosen (1974) has tried to make the following criticisms of Bernstein's work, he said :

a)

It is based on an inadequate concept of class which lacks theoretical support.

b) « Arising from that, he presents a stereotyped view of working class life in general and its language in particular »

c) Further, he attributes to middle class speakers in general certain rare and remarkable intellectual virtues, but there is an inadequate examination of the way in which their language is affected by their class position »(p13).

Rosen (1974) goes further in his criticism to Bernstein's work, thus he said that there is an ambiguity in Bernstein's stance, or possibly a kind of tension between some of his arguments and others. He said also that :

« there can be found throughout his work a persistent concern that education should be reshaped to accommodate the working – class child by embodying his value and his culture »(p13)

Rosen (1974) stated also that « this concern is tied to giving working-class children access to the elaborated codes, a concept which is explained in such a way that it furnishes no guide to possible strategies and can be made to justify quite contradictory practices. »(p.13)

I feel that the three criticisms pointed out by Rosen (1974) are quite fair but the last point which dealt with education and the social class is misleading because Bernstein does not have in his strategy to help the working class to overcome their language problem when he constituted his theory. I can conclude from that a judgment on Rosen's attitude. He is taking Bernstein's theory as a deficit one.

6) Bernstein (1971) claims that the working class has a restricted code, but Rosen (1974) proves from a Bernstein's quotation-that the working class has powerful potentialities of speech. He argues also that some of his colleagues (Barnes, Britton) have said that :

« expressive language is persistently outlawed in schools, especially in those areas of the curriculum which supposedly demand the elaborated code, history, science, etc. »(p.14)

7) Rosen (1974) considers that the criticisms of Bernstein to the concept of « compensatory education » is applicable to his theory as well. He wonders why Bernstein claims that there is something lacking in the working class which is the « elaborated code », and in the same time protests against the harm provoked by the label « linguistic deprivation »

Bernstein stated in one of his books that « the normal linguistic environment of the working class is one of relative deprivation ». (Bernstein, 1971 p.66 quoted in Rosen, 1974 p.15)

I think that Rosen (1974) from his last criticism to Bernstein is bearing in mind that his theory is a deficit one.

8) Westergaard and Resler (1975) criticise Bernstein's theory in several points, I shall point out two important ones only :

a) Bernstein is promoting a « caricature » when he labels the working-class perspectives and orientations to be lacking vision and capacity to move from the particular to the general and from the present to the future. This attitude of Bernstein leaves out of account those features of the working class life and history which cannot be fitted with it (p. 336)

b) Bernstein has a progressive inspiration because he encourages the content of education for the majority of children to be designed to make schooling more relevant to their current and probable future daily experience, and more closely to the local circumstances and particular situations with which they are familiar.

I think, from the second point of criticism that Westergaard and Resler tend to consider Bernstein's theory as a deficit one.

9) Dittmar (1976) reported the critics of Coulthard to Bernstein. He said that : « apart from the contradictory formulated definition of the code concept, it is still unclear to Coulthard by what linguistic characteristics the further subdivisions of the codes (object, person division, means, aims, etc...) can be diagnosed ». (p. 91)

Coulthard (1969) Concludes also that « the theory now has three binary divisions producing eight codes, but there is no reason why it should stop here (1976 p91).

10) The criticisms levelled by Labov (1971) against Bernstein deals with the implications of the code concept for grammatical theory. In his view, the idea of a limited vocabulary in Bernstein's restricted code means that there is a limited possibility of speech utilizing grammar, which helps

to predict the occurrence of vocabulary items. But that cannot happen unless the speakers have a command of grammar capable of generating only a finite number of sentences. However, as all speakers of English can produce an infinite number of sentences, so Bernstein cannot reach to the idea of restricted code from the quantification of lexical units such as rare adjectives, pronouns etc. (In Dittmar 1976 p.91).

Dittmar (1976) Points out that « It should be borne in mind that with a basic vocabulary of 850 words, the speaker of English can already produce an unlimited number of sentences » (p. 92).

11) Even though Oeverman (1970) has been influenced by Bernstein's theory, he has criticized it in some points :

1) He said that « Bernstein has not paid sufficient attention to the « non –verbal » factor of behaviour.

2) Oeverman (1971) finds the definition of the « linguistic codes » « circular », so he describes that as a general methodology dilemma of sociological measurements.

He finds also that this circularity deriving from the unspecified definition of the « linguistic codes » on the sociological, psychological and linguistic levels.

3) Oeverman (1970) argues that « there is a difference between » « linguistic code » and « dialect ». He believes that « apart from the « codes » which are primarily relevant to class differences, dialect can act solely as a secondary filter of intellectual capabilities » (In Dittmar, 1976 p.77).

Bernstein's theory : is it a deficit one ?

In order to come to the conclusion whether Bernstein's theory is a deficit one or not, we must start by the definition of the deficit theories, and state their arguments about the educational failure.

Robinson (1976) considers a deficit theory, the one which says that «some children are lacking qualities which the educational service has to make up»(p. 39)

Dittmar (1976) has the same argument as Robinson (1976) when he said that «the fallacy of the proponents of the deficit theory lies in their tracing the failure of the child at school to his personal deficiencies, to the « harmful » environment of the peer group »(p. 94)

Some deficit theories are known by their emphasis on the crucial feature of «cultural deprivation» which is linguistic and cognitive deprivation. Some of the recently researches have concentrated on the characteristics of the verbal deprivation which are :

- 1) The « lower-class child's verbal response to a formal and threatening situation is used to demonstrate his lack of verbal capacity, or verbal deficit ».
- 2) « This verbal deficit is declared to be a major cause of the lower-class child's poor performance in school ».
- 3) « Since middle class children do better in school, middle class speech habits are seen to be necessary for learning ».
- 4) « Class and ethnic differences in grammatical form are equated with differences in the capacity for logical analysis » (Labov, 1970, quoted in Dittmar 1976 p.93).

Educationalists have found in Bernstein's theory a good support for their educational policies, and recommended the solution for the working-class children within the « compensatory education ».

Stubbs (1976) said that « Bernstein's work has been used, for example, to support the oversimple statement that « educational failure is linguistic failure »(p. 48).

As I have said previously, there are some social scientists who have been using Bernstein's theory as a basis for their research and as a

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theoretical solution to the deprived children. We can give as examples, Bereiter and Engelmann.

According to them, « the poor intellectual ability of black lower class children is reflected in their inadequate speech. »(In Dittmar, 1976 p. 80)

I can cite also Dittmar (1976) and Rosen (1974) who are taking Bernstein's theory as a deficit one.

Dittmar (1976) said that « the value attached to the tests is based on the assumption that the verbal part has more significance than the non verbal part. If this is valid as a general assumption for the intelligence test, then we must, together with Eels et al. (1951) object that this very promise inflicts an unfair handicap on lower-class children »(p. 33)

Rosen (1974) believes that Bernstein has criticized himself when he has rejected the idea of « compensatory education ».

Jensen (1969) also finds in Bernstein's theory a useful support to his argument. He believes that the « elaborated code » of Bernstein is so « flexible », detailed and subtle (in Keddie, 1973 p.4).

There are also Hess and Shipman who draw on their interpretation of the early work of Bernstein to prove that there is a linguistic differential responses between different social groups (In Robinson, 1976 p. 41).

The last one I would like to mention here is Labov (1969). Apart from his criticisms to Bernstein's theory, he is taking it as a deficit one. He believes that « Bernstein's views are filtered through a strong bias against all forms of working-class behaviour, so that middle-class language is seen as superior in every respect » (Labov, 1969 quoted in Keddie, 1973, p.24).

Now we come to the conclusion about the deficiency of Bernstein's theory, whether it is right to say so. As Stubbs (1976) points out that it is unfair to Bernstein that a lot of social scientists have been using his theory to explain the educational failure. He reported that « beyond a pupil's language, Bernstein emphasises a highly complex set of factors : family background, social class, and so on » (Stubbs, 1976, p. 48).

I think from the facts stated earlier that Bernstein's theory is far from being a deficit theory because as the deficit theories blame the victim he has not done so.

Cook-Gumperz (1973) describes Bernstein's theory in the aspect of the relationship of the family to social class. He says that « a child socialized by his parents and family into a restricted code will be less able to acquire the other code as he grows up, unless it is transmitted by the school, his socio-cognitive abilities will be continuously reinforced by his speech, and by social interactions which the speech regulates ». (p 17)

From this quotation we find that Bernstein believes that the child is not cast by his restricted code but he can move to the elaborated code through the process of school.

Yet there is also another argument which helps to prove that Bernstein's theory is not a deficit one. Bernstein is known by his famous criticisms to the programmes of « compensatory education ». He said in this purpose that, « the concept of compensatory education serves to direct attention away from the internal organisation and the educational context of the school, and focuses it instead upon the families and children. It also implies that something is lacking in the family, and so in the child. As a result the children are unable to benefit from schools. « (Bernstein, 1972, in Cazden, 1972 p. 135).

this quotation shows that Bernstein is not holding the idea of the deficit theories. He firmly believes that the fault is within the system and not within the family and the child as the deficit theories said.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have tried to find out whether Bernstein's theory is a deficit one or not, because a lot of social scientists take his theory as a deficient one and use it to justify the « educational failure ».

In reality, Bernstein's theory is more complicated as to be used in such an easy way. In fact, he never claims that the « restricted code » of language has been an obstacle to the achievement in school from the lower class children.

Therefore the claim of the deficit theories has no logical basis, thus I can not qualify his theory as a deficit one, but I am still confused about what he wants to say specifically.

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