Do Language Codes Affect Multilingualism?: A Case Study of an Inclusive School

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Introduction

When I first visited Poorna, an inclusive, 'alternative' school in Bangalore and spent time with the students, I was struck by their candour and easy articulation, and most of all by their free and fluent expression. They showed a complete lack of self-consciousness about background, class, caste and religion, in forging relations. I wondered how social rights and equality, expressed so matter-of-factly by these young ten-year-olds, had come to be a part of their lives. In a school hallmarked by its socio-economic and cultural diversity, how did the identities and expression of the students, escape from falling into class traps?

I wanted to observe how these learners had chartered this journey, and whether class distinctions had initially played a role in the way they expressed themselves. Therefore, armed with Bernstein's theory of language codes, I revisited Poorna at the beginning of their academic year, and observed and spoke to children and teachers of the youngest classes.

Bernstein's theoretical framework

Basil Bernstein, a British sociolinguist, made a significant contribution to education with his theory of language codes. Bernstein studied the influence of the structures of class, power and ideology, and their impact on language. He found a strong relationship between societal class and language. He derived the terms 'restricted code' and 'elaborate code' to explain his findings.

While Bernstein's restricted code speaks of a language that is highly contextual and is understood only by those aware of circumstantial specificities, the elaborate code is more universal in its outlook. The elaborate code refers to an explicit language that does not assume that its audience will be homogenous. Bernstein found that learners from a working class background spoke a restricted code and performed poorly in language-related subjects, while their middle class counterparts performed better at language-oriented subjects and spoke an elaborate code.

However, his analysis did not stop at this superficial level. Bernstein viewed language not only as an instrument of communication, but also as an expression of mental structures shaped by a symbolic differentiation of classes. According to Grimshaw (1976), Bernstein believed that the language one used was symptomatic of internalized class structures, and revealed one's *Weltenshauung* (one's conception or apprehension of the world based on one's specific standpoint).

Although criticized for being a deficiency theorist, Bernstein sought answers as to *why* discrepancy between language codes occurred and pinpointed pedagogical and curricular aspects that hindered or fostered elaborate code.

To understand this discrepancy, he coined the terms classification and framing. According to him, classification refers to the *separation* between the subjects taught in school. Strong classification means the boundaries between subjects are clearly defined, while weak

classification allows for links to be made between subjects. By being able to relate different subject matters to each other and to their everyday life, students gain the ability to transcend context and speak in a manner that people beyond their class can understand, i.e. using elaborate code. However, if, for instance the language used in a Mathematics class cannot be used in an English class, then one remains in the restricted code, able to confer only with an audience that has exactly the same information. It then becomes very difficult for these learners to go home and tell their parents what they learnt in the Maths class if the parents themselves are not in the Maths class, because the general concepts do not seem to transcend the boundaries of the class into actual life.

The framing of the classroom reveals who has the *right to expression*. While high framing suggests that it is mostly the teacher who is relaying information, low framing implies that the dialogue in the classroom is structured so that the students too are able to contribute to discussions and express themselves. Bernstein noticed that classrooms which have low framing, encourage students' expression and create environments for an elaborate code, so that the student's own words and home contexts find relevance with the subject matter.

Arriving at a hypothesis

On my first day at Poorna, I observed the children interacting with each other and the teacher in the UKG class. I remarked something curious which I thought related to Bernstein. A young girl S, from an affluent background, told me immediately after meeting me that she spoke Hindi at home. She said this in English, she talked to her friend in Hindi, and in her Kannada class, she seemed to be most vociferous, even though this was her third language. On the other hand, another young girl C from a migrant labourer family whose first language was Kannada, remained largely quiet, and mostly played alone. Even during the Kannada class she seemed to express herself only by making inarticulate sounds and gestures.

This observation led me to wonder whether children who spoke in a restricted code found it harder to grasp a second language. Does being able to traverse contexts relate to being more easily able to traverse between entire languages? I was inclined to think so. Therefore, I decided to investigate whether one's language code had any implications on multilingualism.

Method

To study the impact of language code on multilingualism, I undertook classroom observations, watched out-of-class play, and conducted teacher interviews for class I at Poorna . During classroom observations, several questions were going through my mind. Some of these were: *Was the language in the classroom mostly the teachers'? Was there formal or informal use of language? How did the teacher cue/ restrict students' response? When students spoke who did they direct their speech to and was it self-regulated? What did students use their speech opportunities for? How did the teacher deal with students' mistakes? Did students' degree of expression vary depending on the language being taught and familiarity with it?*

Findings and analysis

The language used in the classroom was controlled mostly by the teacher, who led the class, and chose the song and the activity carried out. While the teacher used formal language, she did not hint at any correction when the children expressed themselves using incorrect grammar. Her focus instead was on the expression itself. Students spoke to each other

and to the teacher in the class, sometimes about related topics, asking questions, giving their comments, and sometimes saying unrelated things. They did not self-regulate, which was indicative of low framing.

When students made mistakes while repeating the songs being sung, the teacher did not reprimand them. Instead for S, she reiterated the instructions once again and for C, she repeated the instructions in Kannada. Hence, while initially it seemed that C's expression in English was limited because she did not know the language, as she became familiar with the classes she became the loudest of all. The fact that she *did not know* the language very well was never emphasized, and special translations were made for her. As a result, she never felt that her expression should be limited.

The analysis of C's teacher vis à vis her potential for expression and her propensity towards multilingualism ties in with Bernstein's ideas of classification and framing. The teacher took pride in the fact that C did not have predetermined boundaries dictating how she should behave and what she should say in school. If she walked out barefoot from her home, she was happy to do the same from school. She had a strong connection between her school life and her everyday life, and this implied that classification of activity—which precedes the classification of subjects in a child's education—is a non-entity.

As far as out-of-class play was concerned, C applied her learning in everyday life as well as in play. In fact, while playing by herself in the sandpit, I heard her say, "*mele, kelegede*, up, down," (up, down in Kannada and then in English) and making corresponding hand gestures and laughing to herself as she recited the words.

S brought her knowledge of language to all the classes, and sometimes made an effort to ensure that all the children understood her, thus stressing upon a non-particularistic understanding.

This observation illustrates that these students are generally not aware of any class distinctions in the classroom, and even if they are, it does not shape or influence the way they interact or express themselves. There are no feelings of superiority or inferiority based on class or caste. This is fortified by the fact they are never ever disparaged in class for not expressing themselves in a 'correct' manner, nor are they ever compared to one another. These are, perhaps, social factors that influence whether one has an elaborate or restricted code in early primary school years, in the sense that they are probably highly influential in determining whether a child who speaks a restricted code in the primary years is able to arrive at the elaborate code expression later. The very fact that societal class does not impact the children's lives outside of their home—at school where they spend most of their day, means that they are not given a chance to internalize class differentiation as mental structures. At this stage, therefore, C's working class background does not seem to precipitate her speaking in a restricted code, nor does it seem to have any effect on her inability to relate to another language besides her mother tongue. On the contrary, she seems to be making meaning of what she is learning in the classroom outside the class, in Kannada and in English.

It seems likely, therefore, that the relationship between class, language codes and multilingualism depends firmly on the curriculum and the pedagogy of the school, and is highly susceptible to classification and framing, just as Bernstein suggested. In the case of Poorna, in fact, the curriculum and pedagogy deliberately addresses differences in language exposure in the classroom, which in turn seems to dissolve the stratification of language codes so that one is not affected by the other.

Conclusion

While Bernstein undertook his research in Britain, this study demonstrates that his theories can also be applied in the Indian context. With regards to whether language codes do or do not relate to multilingualism, I am not sure whether my findings will be replicated if this study is conducted in Britain. Perhaps, this is largely because the majority of India is multilingual, and multilingualism is often a matter-of-fact part of our day to day living. Moreover, in India, multilingualism is mostly acquired conversationally, rather than in academic arenas and is part of informal socialization, rather than pedantic expression. When a language is learnt informally, then the connections between code and language acquisition seem to disappear, as in the case of Poorna.

Finally, I believe that this investigation into Bernstein's theories emphasizes just how crucial it is for educators to be cognizant of the larger responsibility and influence they have, which goes far beyond transacting the transmission of information. It is with this hope that we may use Bernstein's theory to foray into critical thinking so that learners and teachers alike may step back and examine the structural forces imposed upon them, in order to consciously and concertedly use our own understanding and expression to transform prejudice. My study establishes that there is absolutely no relationship between the societal class and the *potential* linguistic ability of a child. Such stratifying connections seem to be hegemonic constructs that we as educators must work towards dissolving with what seems to be a rather sturdy scaffolding of weak classification and low framing. If the autonomous beings we help shape, develop in this solid environment, as opposed to crumbling under the subjected expression of others, I am sure they will be able to hold their own and exude their own identities and worth.

References

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