

## **4. From Difference to Disadvantage: Language Variation and Children's Experiences in School**

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*Recent reports in Ireland present stark findings of serious underachievement in literacy among children from disadvantaged backgrounds. This research investigates whether variation in patterns of language use may contribute to educational disadvantage. Success in school is associated with facility in 'literate' style patterns of language use (e.g. ability to adopt an impersonal and expert stance, use explicit vocabulary and present ideas coherently). The ability to use these patterns of language expected in school is related to membership of social class. Children from 'working-class' backgrounds, unlike their 'middle-class' counterparts, often experience a 'discontinuity' between patterns of language use at home, and school expectations for language use. Children from middle-class backgrounds are enabled to engage in synchronous interaction with the teacher, enhancing their academic development. Conversely, children from working-class backgrounds are sometimes evaluated by teachers as being deficient because of their language variety, and may underachieve in school. This research explores the link between social class and facility in 'literate' style language with a view to highlighting patterns of variation in language style as a factor for consideration in the education of children in primary school in Ireland.*

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...language practices, beliefs and management are not necessarily congruent...the way people speak, the way they think they should speak, and the way they think other people should speak regularly differ (Spolsky, 2004, p.217).

### **LANGUAGE VARIATION AND SCHOOL**

The field of sociolinguistics has identified that variation exists among speakers of a language and that this variation is associated with social class – ‘A whole body of sociolinguistic research confirms that dialectal variation occurs according to a range of largely socially constructed parameters’ (Carter, 1995, p.158). Sociolinguistic research which has focused on the language variety of minority children and on differences in language use between home and school (notably introduced by the research of Cazden, John & Hymes, 1972) and, since then, has identified schools as significant social institutions, and classrooms as sites where power and control of access are mediated through discursive practices. This research took a great interest from the outset in looking at cultural differences in the school context on the premise that school as a social context requires socialization to its particular *modus operandi*. The work of researchers such as Heath (1983) and Cazden (1988) concurred with the view of Wolfram et al., 1999 that

All children have to learn new ways of interacting with language when they go to school. Typically, however, the language socialization experiences of middle-class children prepare them to ease into school language patterns. Because the gap between home and school is wider for children whose background is not middle-class, their language abilities are not as relevant for schooling. The reason for this bias...is *that middle-class expectations and practices generally pervade schools* (Wolfram et al., 1999, p.106, emphasis added).

### **LANGUAGE VARIATION AND LEARNING**

“Children’s background experience with language and literacy remains a crucial variable in educational success”. (Wolfram et al., 1999, p.108). The link between a child’s language variety and his/her educational

achievement has been the subject of much research in the decades since the 1960's. High rates of underachievement among 'working class' children, in particular in relation to literacy development, have been, and continue to be, a matter of serious concern for educators. "Educational failure results from a mismatch between children's language and experience and the language and experience demanded by schools" (Stubbs, 1980, p.143). The children characterised as disadvantaged have been variously referred to in the literature as: Children from low-income families, culturally deprived, culturally different, urban disadvantaged, inner-city children, children at risk, children from low SES backgrounds, working class/lower class children, or children with educationally disadvantaged parents. Essentially what all of these children have in common is a background where parent(s) are often unemployed/uneducated, there is poverty/instability and possibly cultural or racial differences compounding the situation. The modern consensus in relation to the language of these children is that it is *different* – not inferior, not deficient, not deprived and not restricted, as it has been described in the past (e.g. Cazden, 1988; Snow, 1991; Tough, 1977). For these children, a major difficulty is learning how to handle the scholastic and linguistic demands of the dominant culture that is significantly different in many respects from their own. Edwards (1997) argues that

The effect of standardization is to legitimate the norms of formal registers rather than those of everyday language. Since working-class people have less experience of those formal registers, there is a greater distance between their language and that normally thought appropriate for schooling. They are then disadvantaged by a tendency to denigrate varieties of spoken language which depart markedly from the standard dialect even when these present few difficulties of mutual comprehensibility across social boundaries (p69).

Thus he argues that what are in effect *differences* in terms of language variety lead to *disadvantage* for these children when accessing the education system, resulting in underachievement. This is brought about essentially by the use of monocultural schooling in multi-cultural societies (Edwards, 1997).

## LANGUAGE OF SCHOOL

The ability to operate institutionally...is something that has to be learnt; it does not follow automatically from the acquisition of the grammar and vocabulary of the mother tongue (Halliday, 1973, p.11).

Research has unequivocally established that there is a difference between the language of the home and the linguistic knowledge demanded by the school – “Schooling is a context in which the kinds of meanings that are made are quite different from the meanings made in more informal contexts of everyday life” (Schlepegrell, 2004, p.22). In school, children are expected to use language to express thoughts and ideas, to demonstrate knowledge and learning and to do this in ways that can be shared and evaluated. If children perform school tasks by using language styles which would more normally be used in ordinary conversation they may be judged negatively by teachers, especially if children are native speakers of English but are using a variety of language not normally associated with the context of school (Schlepegrell, 2004, p.2, Wolfram et al., 1999, p.108). The type of language most often expected in a school context closely approximates a ‘literate’ style of language, one which is more formal and organized, more coherent and precise than would typically be found in ordinary conversational interaction. Wolfram et al. (1999) describe this ‘academic’ talk as “less elliptical, less dependent on the surrounding talk and other aspects of the context. Meanings are usually made more fully explicit through words in academic talk” (p.127). Research points clearly to the link between appropriateness of language variety and social class, indicating that the language demands of the school much more closely approximate standard language use, the variety most familiar to middle-class children whose language use in the school context is more likely to be deemed correct and to count for success than is the language use of other children (e.g. Schlepegrell, 2001; 2004; Wolfram et al., 1999).

The purpose of this study was to investigate style of oral language use by children when in school focussing particularly on whether patterns of children’s oral language use in school vary by social class and the implications of such variation for success in school. Findings in relation

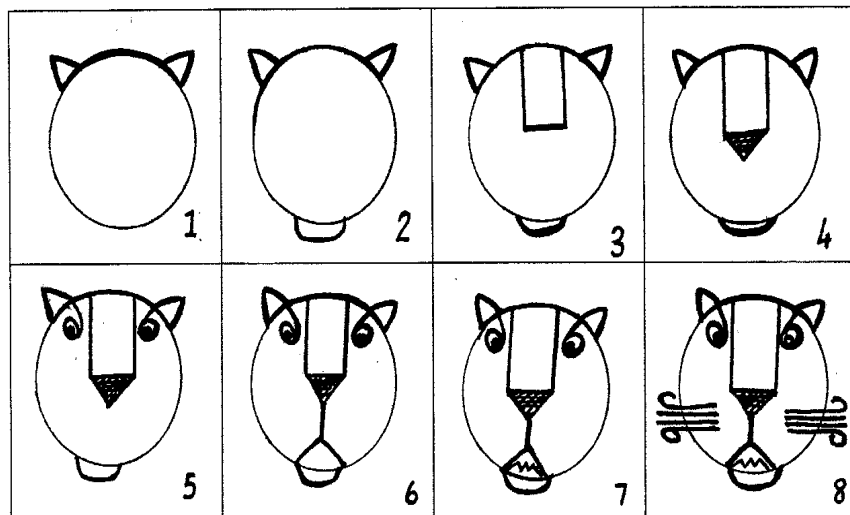
to variation in patterns of language use by social class have already been well documented in international literature but have not to date been investigated in the context of children and schools in Ireland. This study aimed to analyse oral language samples from children in schools in Ireland in an attempt to uncover the extent to which features of school patterns of language use are present in the language of children when engaged in typical school type talking tasks, and to compare the presence of such features in the language patterns of children by social class.

One example of children's use of oral language to complete a school-type talking task will be presented to illustrate variation in patterns of language use between children from contexts designated as disadvantaged, and those from middle-class settings. Language samples are analysed following Schlepegrell's (2004) assertion that "In schooling contexts, the overriding features of the situational context are that students display knowledge authoritatively in highly structured texts" (p.74). This type of language use is realised by:

- ❑ Presenting ideas choosing explicit vocabulary which constructs new understandings and includes relationships such as time, consequence, comparison or addition and is organised using integrated, embedded relationships;
- ❑ Taking a stance which projects a distanced relationship with the listener using appropriate mood (declarative, interrogative, imperative) and modality (expression of certainty and confidence); and
- ❑ Structuring the text so that there is a dense presentation of information organised in a coherent manner and expanded and elaborated on appropriately.

Children in sixth class in four schools (three disadvantaged schools and one school in a middle-class setting) completed an oral task in pairs. A divider was placed between each pair of children. One child was given a blank sheet of paper and a pencil and was asked to follow the directions given by the other child. The second child was given a series of pictures illustrating how to draw a cat's head.

Figure 1



This child was asked to describe/instruct the other child to draw the picture, following the sequence of directions given in the diagram. Children were asked not to mention what the final picture was. Below are the responses of some of the children giving the instructions.

**Example one (Disadvantaged)**

*One child is giving instructions while the other draws*

Circle face.

Pointy ears. Ah (Needs to be reminded here to give partner time to do the drawing)

a kind of neck, roundy neck (what, a roundy neck? partner asks).

(Needs to be reminded to give time again here – very poor awareness of the other child).

A square down between his eyes. (A square? Down his eyes? or down between).

You've to tach black on to the end of it.

pointy end.

am two eyes.

draw a line down, line down and then draw two things and they come out. (Line down where?).

A line down, the top of the nose down.

And draw squiggly things in between his mouth.

and then you draw whiskers.

### *Presenting ideas*

There is a clear lack of explicit vocabulary used here – kind of neck, roundy neck, square down between his eyes, tach black on to the end, top of the nose down, squiggly things. There are no new understandings constructed, no relationships of time, consequence, comparison. Addition is included – then draw....and... No evidence of integrated, embedded relationships.

### *Taking a stance*

This child shows evidence of a distanced and non-interacting relationship with the listener only in so far as he seems oblivious to the existence, let alone the needs of his partner who unsuccessfully seeks clarification more than once throughout the exercise. While an imperative mood needs to be adopted, the mood is predominantly declarative, describing, staccato style, what he sees resulting in a modality which expresses uncertainty and lack of confidence, displayed through clipped expression, haste of description and lack of concern for partner. The imperative mood is only in evidence some of the time – ‘draw a line down’ – and only emerges halfway through the task.

### *Structuring text*

There is no evidence of dense presentation of ideas and there is a distinct lack of coherence – ‘square down between his eyes’ – what eyes, whose eyes? ‘You’ve to tach black on to the end of it’ – of what?; ‘line down’). There is very little evidence of expanded phrase or elaboration of ideas. The child is using only one or two adjectives throughout the task. Lots more elaboration, coherence and clarity is needed within the explanation provided.

**Example two (Disadvantaged)**

*One child is giving instructions while the other draws*

The first one you draw am a circle and there's two ears coming out of it.

And then you have a little kind of square at the bottom of the head and then there's a triang, not a triangle, but a rectangle coming out.

And you draw the, you draw a triangle coming out of the rectangle. Then you draw two eyes and then you draw two lines, three lines, three lines coming, one coming out of the nose and then two down the square out the head. (Asked to repeat by the other child. Repeats and then continues).

The line, there's a line coming out of the nose and then there's two lines at the, do you know the square at the bottom of the head, you draw two lines to that and then you draw some teeth inside it.

and then you draw whiskers.

***Presentation of ideas***

Here again there is a lack of clear, explicit vocabulary in evidence. There is evidence of time relationships with the opening – ‘the first one you draw’, and the repeated ‘and then’. There is no integrated, embedded relationships apparent in this segment of transcript.

***Taking a stance***

All of the statements made are declarative in nature. There is no evidence of imperative statements. Evidence of this includes the following comments ‘you draw’ and ‘you have’ and ‘there's ..’ These incomplete statements and absence of any self-correction suggest lack of confidence and uncertainty in modality.

***Structuring text***

There is more expansion evident than in the previous sample – ‘at the bottom of the head’, ‘some teeth’, ‘little square’. Evidence of anaphoric reference include the following – ‘the square at the bottom of the head, you draw two lines to *that* and then you draw some teeth inside *it*’. The first reference to rectangle is correctly introduced with an indefinite article and subsequent reference to it is using a definite article.

**Example three (Disadvantaged)**

*One child is giving instructions while the other draws*

Do a circle with points on the top.

Do a mouth and a jaw.

It has a rectangle coming down to the middle. (A rectangle is it?).

There's a triangle underneath the rectangle.

There's a 6 and a backward 6 on the bottom of the line

There's a line from the triangle to the other triangle. (Request for clarification).

The triangle that's coming from the rectangle.

There's a line coming from that triangle and there's another triangle

There's squiggly lines inside the mouth

There's eight lines on each cheek.

***Presenting ideas***

This child needs to make more use of explicit vocabulary. There are no relationships of time, consequence, comparison and addition in evidence in the extract. The child has used some prepositions indicating physical position – 'underneath', 'inside'.

***Taking a stance***

There is no evidence of imperative statements contained in this extract.

***Structuring Text***

While reasonable evidence of clear organization and appropriate referencing used is contained in this extract, there is very little evidence of expansion and elaboration for clarity.

**Example four (Middle-Class)**

*One child is giving instructions while the other draws*

Draw a circle.

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And do two triangles at am coming out at either side of the top of the circle.

And now at the bottom of the circle do a little ah it's kind of like a square coming out of it.

And now in between the two triangles at the top, inside the circle do a rectangle coming down from the top.

Am at the bottom of the rectangle do another triangle coming pointing out from it.

and colour it in with the pencil.

On either side of the rectangle below the two triangles do two circles, small circles.

And do two smaller circles within those two circles.

Now you know the rectangle below, I mean the triangle below the rectangle, you have a line coming down from it just a tiny one and then there's two lines coming down gradually on either side of the line coming down.

Now inside those two lines there are kind of squiggly things joining them together.

Like a zigzag.

And at either side of the lines you have some lines coming out with a bit of curl on them curling up and down.

About four at either side.

### *Presenting ideas*

There is evidence of clear vocabulary being used – either side of, the top of, like a square, coming out of, in between, inside the circle, small, smaller, colour it in, pointing out, within, just a tiny one, coming down gradually, joining them together, bit of a curl....

New understandings constructed by expanding and clarifying instructions are present throughout the exercise.

Examples of relationships of time include the following – ‘and now’, ‘and then there’s’; comparison – ‘it’s kind of like a square’, ‘like a zigzag’, ‘a bit of a curl’. Again there is a lot of evidence of addition for example ‘and colour it in’. Integrated, embedded relationships are evident also – ‘in between the two triangles at the top, inside the circle’, ‘on either side of the rectangle below the two triangles’, ‘smaller circles within those two circles’, ‘at either side of the lines you have some lines coming out with a bit of curl on them curling up and down’.

### *Taking a stance*

The child utilizes a strong confident opening using imperative mood – ‘Draw a circle’. The imperative mood is used many times throughout the presentation.

### *Structuring text*

There are many examples of dense presentation of information in this text – e.g. ‘two triangles coming out at either side of the top of the circle’, ‘on either side of the rectangle below the two triangles do two circles, small circles’. The text is organized, clear and coherent – appropriate use of definite and indefinite articles, anaphoric reference, clear repetition of content words when needed and this within highly dense text with embedded clauses. All references are clearly marked and expanded on appropriately.

This text repeatedly uses the strategy of thematic fronting for coherence and clarity – beginning the sentence with reference to a previous sentence and moving on from there, e.g. ‘at the bottom of the rectangle’, ‘inside those two lines’.

### **Example five (Middle-Class)**

*One child is giving instructions while the other draws*

First of all draw a circle.

Then draw two triangles coming out from the top of it.

Draw a small rectangle coming out of the bottom of it.

And draw another rectangle coming from the top on the inside of the circle.

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Draw a triangle pointing downwards at the end of that.

Then draw two eyes at either side of the rectangle.

And from the triangle draw an upside down Y that goes down to the bottom of the circle.

Ah, inside of the bottom of that Y, you know the kind of V part of it, am draw a squiggly line coming across it.

And draw two straight lines coming out from the side of the circle. And then on the other side as well.

And then on either side of those two squiggly lines, or those two straight lines draw two curly ones.

### *Presentation of ideas*

The presentation of ideas is clear and explicit – ‘upside down Y’, ‘pointing downwards’, ‘two curly ones’ ‘coming from the top on the inside of the circle’, ‘draw two eyes at either side of the rectangle’. New understandings are clearly constructed, introduced, explained and expanded on appropriately. Relationship of time is well established – ‘first, then, and then....’;

Relative pronouns are in evidence – ‘draw an upside down Y that goes down to the bottom of the circle’

### *Taking a stance*

Strong, confident use of the imperative mood with clear expression of confidence is in evidence throughout.

### *Structuring text*

Lots of evidence of density of information is present– e.g. ‘Draw another triangle coming from the top on the inside of the circle’.

There is clear organization and coherence with appropriately expanded reference and evidence of integrated, embedded relationships contained in this transcript extract – ‘Draw a triangle pointing downwards at the end of that’. Evidence here also of the thematic fronting for clarity – ‘from the triangle...’; ‘inside the bottom of that Y...’.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that the presentations from the children in the middle-class school much more closely approximate 'literate' or 'academic' style language in terms of their presentation of ideas, stance and structure. They are more explicit, choose more appropriate vocabulary, clearly construct understanding on the part of the listener, are strong and confident in stance and involve a dense presentation of ideas using complex syntax, organized coherently and expanded appropriately. This is the language style expected and favoured by teachers in a school setting, though not always articulated or explicitly taught. Children who do not use this style may be negatively judged and may not receive as much attention from a teacher as children who do. The links with developing literacy skills are clear also in that facility with literate style language is a pre-requisite for developing literacy skills, particularly beyond the initial stages of learning to read and write. All of the children above from disadvantaged schools fall below the mean in terms of their reading ability as measured by standardized reading tests. Because "the linguistic challenges of schooling come from the specialized ways that language construes experience and social roles simultaneously in the densely structured texts of various subject areas" (Schlepegrell, 2004, p.163), perhaps it is time to include variety of style of language use as an important factor for consideration in the education of our children:

For pupils to learn to use language with clarity, purpose and confidence they (teachers) need, above all, to understand the different varieties of English and the choices that accompany their use (Carter, 1995, p.160).

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