

Book Reviews

Literacy and the Language Barrier

Intelligence and Cultural Environment. PHILIP E. VERNON. Methuen, London, 1969 (U.S. distributor, Barnes and Noble, New York). viii + 264 pp., illus. \$7.25.

Teaching Black Children to Read. JOAN C. BARATZ and ROGER W. SHUY, Eds. Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, D.C., 1969. xvi + 224 pp. Paper, \$5. Urban Language Series, vol. 4.

The two books here reviewed were prepared in rather complete isolation from each other. One continues a psychological research tradition on intergroup differences in intelligence and cognitive development that goes back to the beginning of intelligence testing per se in the early part of this century. The other continues an applied pedagogical concern which is similarly venerable and which has made reading (that is, the learning of reading and reading instruction) the most researched topic in American education. However, while each book fully deserves separate extended consideration in its own right and in the light of cumulative knowledge in its own broader field of inquiry, there are two overriding reasons for considering the two books in conjunction: (i) both are concerned with black children in particular and with other socially disadvantaged populations more generally, and (ii) both regard language as being crucially involved in the lower performance of many black children on intelligence tests and in reading. It is with the latter unifying concern that this review will deal primarily.

For Vernon, although language is only one of a multitude of genetic, constitutional, environmental, and test-situation factors responsible for the lower intelligence test scores of many black youngsters, "the greatest promise of quick advance lies in the field of language teaching, that is the spread of effective methods of acquiring a language which is suitable as a medium for advanced education, communication and thinking among children whose mother-tongue is ineffective for these purposes" (p. 231). For Baratz,

Shuy, and their associates (including such well-known linguists as McDavid, Labov, and William Stewart), however, literacy must be built on the base of the child's existing language and this language is merely structurally different from (rather than a poorer version of) the standard school variety of the language that teachers have traditionally taught and used. Black children, it is stressed, "speak a well-ordered, highly structured, highly developed language system which in many ways is different from standard English" (p. 94), and only if the teacher recognizes these structural differences will he or she be able to anticipate and overcome the reading difficulties that the children encounter.

The disciplinary differences between these two views (and they are primarily disciplinary, rather than merely individual scholarly differences)—the one stressing the extracommunal criteria on which individuals of disadvantaged backgrounds must ultimately "shape up" if they are to succeed in competition with more advantaged groups, the other stressing the intracommunal sophistication and organization of the language and behavior of disadvantaged individuals—lead to two quite different types of recommendations with respect to improving the performance of black children.

Vernon considers "the major barrier to the fuller realisation of human intellectual potential" to be "in the realm of adult values and child-rearing practices." In the light of Soviet success (via "ruthless techniques—[which] other countries would be loath to adopt") in rapidly "transforming a country which was as economically weak, as educationally backward, and as culturally and linguistically heterogeneous as many underdeveloped nations of today" (p. 232), Vernon is encouraged to hope that "more humane approaches . . . [of] community development" can be adopted to attain similar transformations in disadvantaged

communities throughout the world. For Baratz, Shuy, and associates a much more modest goal is, at the moment, sufficient: teaching black children to read. To attain this goal they collectively seek to pinpoint structural differences between black nonstandard and white standard phonology, grammar, and lexicon since these, they believe, are the barriers that render the teacher's efforts impotent. It is their hope that special teaching materials and methods (several of which are sketched in this volume) will enable the teacher to lead the disadvantaged learner past these structural linguistic barriers into the promised land of reading proficiency in standard English.

Obviously, these two schools of thought and practice have much to learn from each other. Many psychologists—and with them the sociologists, educationists, political scientists, historians, economists, and all others who have of late discovered disadvantaged populations, not only far afield but even close at hand—have yet to recognize that most psychologists and social scientists simply do not know how to talk about or think about or experiment with language. Thus, when Vernon, who is himself not a specialist in language theory, language data, or language analysis, is forced to depend on studies by others who also lack adequate sophistication in these respects, it is quite predictable that he will regress to crude Whorfianisms and Bernsteinisms which describe entire languages or language varieties—and, therefore, their speakers—as characterized by "necessary" deficiencies in abstractness, flexibility, and so on. In so doing, Vernon and those whom he cites display all the characteristics of socially disadvantaged groups everywhere when attempting, verbally and conceptually, to cope with phenomena whose true complexity escapes them and which are, at any rate, infinitely greater than and different from the verbal and conceptual experiences which they can immediately bring to bear upon the analysis of the phenomena in question. The criticisms heaped upon psychologists, educationists, and others by Baratz, Shuy, and associates are frequently richly deserved, and indeed are already beginning to have their desired effect in recent training programs in psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and advanced language and behavior studies more generally. These programs will ultimately produce social scientists trained in the detailed analysis of the differen-

tiated linguistic and behavioral repertoires of varied speech networks within speech communities, as well as social scientists and other applied specialists trained to guide the planned and unplanned language change of which all speech communities are capable (1).

On the other hand, many linguists (applied linguists among them) have still to learn a vital lesson that Vernon and most other social scientists have long since taken to heart. This is not merely that "the school is by no means as powerful an instrument in practice as in theory" (Vernon, p. 231) even in connection with such a school-anchored matter as the teaching of reading, but that schools are at least as much subject to social inertia and change as they are agents of pedagogical inertia and change. As a result it is vastly more important and more difficult to change people's attitudes, life styles, and power positions than to derive contrastive phonemic, syntactic, and lexical statements about two languages or language varieties. Linguists are undoubtedly good at linguistic description, but they are regrettably (though understandably) poor judges of the relative importance of linguistic factors in any multifactor nexus. The underdeveloped world is strewn with the corpses of exquisitely developed writing systems in which the phoneme-grapheme correspondences are marvelous to behold. These writing systems have not been accepted by those for whom they were intended or by those in a position to adopt or enforce them (2). The major problem, then, is clearly one of societal adoption, utilization, and implementation rather than of contrastive (or other structural) linguistic analysis per se. To imply that a better contrastive structural analysis is all or most of what is needed to raise the reading level of many black students is both misleading and unwise. It tends to support *linguistic* gimmickry and nostrums (instead of equally untenable psychological and educational panaceas). With respect to planned social change linguists are obviously conceptually and experientially (and therefore verbally) a sadly disadvantaged group, although perhaps little more so than most of their academic peers. The lack of awareness on the part of linguists that linguistic contrasts between social classes represent merely the beginning of sociolinguistics, rather than its goal, is ultimately a danger to sociolinguistics and to linguistics proper. It is currently far easier to convince

psychologists and other social scientists that they do not know what they need to know about language behavior and linguistics than to convince linguists that they do not know what they need to know about social behavior and social science (even though—or perhaps because—some of them "have been around anthropologists quite a bit"). Unless social science training for linguists is soon greatly increased the result may be the same withdrawal of linguistics and the social sciences from each other, due to naively advanced and cruelly disappointed "great expectations," as marked the Bloomfieldian '30's.

Much more remains to be said in praise and in criticism of both books. The praise pertains to the obvious effort of all the authors to write not for each other, or for other specialists, but for the teacher, the educational administrator, and the concerned layman. While it seems to me that both books will still be rather unclear to most nonspecialists and prone to misinterpretation by such readers, they are both obviously better in this respect than most others of their kind. The blame pertains to the sad lack of historical cross-cultural perspective which marks both of them. If parochial, non-urban, traditional, and impoverished origins are truly so central in bringing about intellectual deficiencies, which then handicap the acquisition and maintenance of literacy, how do we explain the nearly universal male liter-

acy (and often multiliteracy) of impoverished and persecuted pre-War *shtetl* Jewry? And if the distance or difference between the vernacular and the school variety is truly so central in causing reading difficulties, then how do we explain the widespread literacy not only in that same population but also among rural Japanese and Germans and Frenchmen and Swedes and Swiss-Germans and many others during the past quarter century and more? As an essentially experimental and quantitative sociolinguist I do not hesitate to say that without historical cross-cultural perspective our growing experimental and technical proficiency strikes me not as versatility but as the same kind of backwardness and provincialism that we so much want to help *others* overcome.

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References

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Problems of National Science Policy

Science and the Federal Patron. MICHAEL D. REAGAN. Oxford University Press, New York, 1969. vi + 346 pp. \$7.50.

Science and the Federal Patron is one of the latest in the growing number of publications having to do generally with science and public policy. The absence of a preface leaves the reader with no clues regarding the author's aims in writing it. Whatever these may have been, the impression gained from reading the book is that he has brought together, in printed form, material equivalent to a quarter's introductory course on current relationships between science (sometimes research and development) and the federal government.

Within the genre, the book is more journalistic than scholarly, both in style and in depth. It is organized essentially

around problems and issues that were current in the latter days of the Johnson administration, covering, in a three-part sequence, the status of government-science relationships, selected events and developments that were then challenging this status, and the author's conception of how relationships between science and the federal government might be improved.

The background section describes the growth of federal support for science (sometimes R&D) and the pattern of support according to various dimensions such as basic versus applied research, supporters versus performers of research, and physical versus social sciences; the innumerable justifications for the government's support of science (by quotation at length, *ad nauseam*); the organizational struc-