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Reflections on Class and Language

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In the fall of 1978, I was consultant to a video project called "The Unemployment Tapes,"[1] designed to explore through talks with local people the human costs, the causes, and the possible cures of unemployment in an old industrial area of Connecticut. At the time, I was also reading and thinking about class, language, and the theories of Basil Bernstein.[2] I began to notice in the taped interviews a close correspondence to Bernstein's central distinction between "restricted" and "elaborated" codes: almost all the people interviewed on the streets spoke in the restricted code that Bernstein attributes to the working class, while managers and officials used the elaborated code of what Bernstein calls the "middle class." Brief excerpts from two interviews will illustrate this distinction.

I. A Couple

Interviewer: I'd like to ask you if you have jobs right now.

Respondents: Yes.

I: Have either of you ever been unemployed for any length of time?

R: No.

I: Well, would you say there was an unemployment problem in this area?

Man: Well, we're new in the area. We just moved in a couple of months ago. From what I've been reading there is unemployment in the area.

Woman: I would say so. There are an awful lot of people going to Oakfield and Hill County to get jobs. They're not staying in the Valley.

I: Do you have any ideas about what causes that problem?

M: I have no idea.

W: Not enough industry up here. A lot of industry is just leaving the area.

I: How come?

W: Taxes are too high. There's no rebate or anything else for them.

I: So if we give a tax break and some other breaks to business, then --

W: I would say that there's no reason for businesses to stay in Connecticut. They're not getting any benefits from it. It's cheaper to go down to the South and get cheap labor now.

II. The Mayor of Mill Town

Interviewer: How do you think the high rate of unemployment has affected this community as a whole, in terms of its self-image, in terms of its ability to deal with problems?

Respondent: Well, you know a very high percentage of unemployment is never a healthy condition, whether it's in

Mill Town or anywhere else, and this lower Mill Valley region here has been pretty much plagued by high amounts of unemployment for at least fifteen to twenty years, and probably the greatest contributor to that would be the fact of how automation has taken over so much of the factory process that was once the main employer.

I: What are the other causes of unemployment besides automation?

R: Well, I believe that automation is perhaps the chief cause of unemployment. Secondly, if we delve with other causes I would say it would be the lack of opportunity for the number of people that you have. We have a very densely populated area here, and like Mill Town with 6.2 square miles and you have over 21,000 people cramped into them, doesn't leave much space for industrial growth . . . .

I: Whose responsibility is it to see that industry comes to, like, stop the high rate of unemployment? Do you see that as the responsibility of government? Do you see it as the responsibility of business? . . .

R: Well, I don't think there is any one segment of society which, you're trying to point out, that is responsible. Like if it isn't there, that this is part of the responsibility of this particular segment. I think that it is very conducive to government to encourage industry in their area . . . .

I: Do you think that the federal government should play a major role in bad economic times, as it is doing with CETA?

R: Well, certainly. I think if you look at the entire history of our country, that it has always been the federal government that has come to the rescue. Take the Great Depression and all the federal programs that we used to bail it out. What you are really doing is, you stimulate the economy by priming up the pump and throwing money into the economy. That's -- but by giving these people salaries and positions and all, they are going out and spending money, which gives business, the private sector, more of a stimulus, because they've got money coming in, they have the cash flow, and you hope for expansion.

Now here are some features that mark the couple's speech as restricted and the mayor's as elaborated (quite apart from judgments of eloquence or substance):

A. Length and Complexity

The responses are much shorter in I; so are the sentences. There is little coordination and almost no subordination in I, except in sentences beginning "I think," "I would say," etc., while there is much of both in II. There are few explicit causal or logical connections in I, and many in II.

B. Modifiers

There are few adjectives and adverbs in I, and those mainly of degree. Modifiers are many and varied in II.

C. Abstraction

There are few abstract nouns in I, many in II. Those in I appear mainly in simple constructions with the verb "be," and are unrelated to one another: "There is *unemployment* in the area"; "Taxes are too high." The abstract nouns in II

appear in a variety of syntactic positions, and are often related syntactically and conceptually to one another.

D. Reference to Context

The man and woman refer only a few times to the context of the discussion: "Oakfield," "Hill County," etc. The mayor not only anchors the discussion geographically to Mill Town with its 21,000 people in only six square miles, but also gives it a context in the social system (the economy, the government, etc.) and in history (the last fifteen to twenty years, the Depression, the early 1900s).

E. Reference to the Discourse Itself

There is virtually none in I, other than expressions of uncertainty, like "I think" and "I don't know." The mayor uses such constructions, and also refers to the discourse in at least four other ways: He comments on the interviewer's question -- for instance, when he begins his first answer by implying that the question is silly. He implicitly rejects the question: when asked who's responsible for reducing unemployment, he denies the presupposition that one part of society is. He comments reflexively on his own terms and statements: "In other words"; "I mean"; "Like if it isn't there." And he makes new starts in the middle of a sentence, indicating that he has reconsidered and thought of a better way to proceed.

Contrasts like these run through "The Unemployment Tapes." In Bernstein's analysis, they are caused by class, and they have important cognitive consequences. The elaborated code of the middle class facilitates distinctions of all sorts, in particular logical ones. Elaborated code users distance themselves more from the immediate situation and from the content of their talk, through abstraction, through passives, through expressions of probability, through suppositions, through questions and refusals to commit themselves quickly to definite interpretations of an ambiguous experience. The elaborated code allows or encourages more individuation of response and more reflection on language itself. Restricted code users are more bound to the local, concrete situation. Much of their meaning is implicit -- dependent on prior understandings of the context. In Bernstein's own words,

> …elaborated codes orient their users toward universalistic meanings, whereas restricted codes orient, sensitize, their users to particularistic meanings… Restricted codes are more tied to a local social structure and have a reduced potential for change in principles. Where codes are elaborated, the socialized has more access to the grounds of his own socialization, and so can enter into a reflexive relationship to the social order he has taken over. (p. 176)

The political implications are clear. Bernstein himself doesn't dwell on them, but the moral is drawn more fully in *The Politics of Communication,* by Claus Mueller, who integrates a great deal of research besides that of Bernstein. Mueller argues that in advanced capitalist societies a social order marked by severe inequality and the powerlessness of most people is sustained and legitimated, not so much by coercion -- the police and the army -- or even by manipulation -- propaganda, the media -- as by one-sided "political communication":

> Because of the restricted language code and rigid socialization patterns, the individual from the lower classes engages in arrested communication and tends to see the political universe as a static one and to abide by the prescriptions of external authorities.[3]

Mueller thinks this impasse especially intractable because the codes are passed on in the home to very young children. He agrees with Bernstein that class differences in child rearing are decisive, and that working-class parents block the development of linguistic autonomy in their children through strategies of instruction and discipline that call on authority more than on reasoning and exploration. If this is so, neither school nor *Sesame Street* could easily undo the damage. Mueller concludes that the only likely challenge to the legitimacy of the political and economic system in countries like ours will come, not from the traditional working class, but from the intellectual and cultural "strata."

But an alternative explanation of the linguistic facts is possible -- one with strikingly different and much less dire political implications. Although both interviews explore the same subject through similar questions, they are in significant ways two sharply contrasting events. One takes place in the street outside a shopping mall; it is impromptu. The other takes place in the mayor's office, by appointment. He has had time to prepare his thoughts. The mayor is interviewed because he is who he is; the identities and positions of the man and woman are of no consequence. They are selected precisely because they are representative, part of a mass. Again, the mayor must be -- or seem -- knowledgeable about the economy of the Valley. That is part of his job, while the man and woman suddenly find themselves in an intellectual terrain that is unfamiliar. Finally, the mayor is used to such encounters, and the man and woman are not. We may guess that the video equipment is at least a bit intimidating for them; it must make them feel that they are being observed, tested. Working with television is a familiar challenge for the mayor. In a way, television is an extension of his office and his power, something he can use to his own ends if he is skillful. The television people are there by his sufferance and on his timetable: he begins the interview as in some ways their superior. So although the issues remain constant in the two interviews, the social relations do not.

As you might expect, the participants also create their relationships differently in the two interviews, through the ways they talk to each other. For instance, the interviewer in I begins with four yes-no questions in a row. This is a way of getting out some basic information, but it also establishes a tight cognitive paradigm and narrow limits for the man and woman. By contrast, the three wh-- questions with which interview II begins all accord the mayor a kind of carte blanche as to how detailed and lengthy the answer may be. The sidewalk interviewer also assumes in his first two questions the prerogative of asking the couple for personal information, while the first question to the mayor is not only general and impersonal but assumes much knowledge on his part. It positions him as an expert, someone whose opinion is worth knowing, in detail and on a highly complex subject. It is an invitation to expatiate.

These differences arise from no bias of the interviewers, I believe, but from the speech situations themselves, and from moves that the participants make which accept and confirm those situations. As a result of these moves the first interview proceeds somewhat like a quiz. The man and woman respond like school children being drawn out against their will by an insistent teacher who is asking them to *have* opinions and ideas so they may be judged. In interview II, by contrast, the mayor freely expounds his position, which then becomes the subject of the discussion, and is in this way dignified. The interviewer is pressing him, as a serious antagonist.

These contrasts may be largely responsible for eliciting a restricted code from the man and woman, and an elaborated code from the mayor. Let me return, briefly, to my initial analysis of the interviews, and look at them in this light.

A. Length and Complexity

The short responses and short, simple sentences of the man and woman are obedient answers of unprepared people who feel themselves tested and perhaps judged. Why not, with the camera looking on, and a questioner who clearly knows more than they about the subject? The mayor is invited to expand upon his subject; he does so, and in the long and complex (if often inflated and garbled) sentences appropriate to that task.

B. Modifiers

The man and woman are not being asked to individuate their opinions, to shade, specify, qualify. But the mayor is invited to discourse on the "community as a whole," its "self-image," "its ability to deal with problems." He could hardly take on this huge and complex subject without qualifying his answer along the way -- and guarding his words because, after all, he's the mayor.

C. Abstraction

For the man and woman, terms like "industry," "taxes," "rebate," and "cheap labor," are hand-me-downs from television, the newspapers, casual conversation about distant matters out of their control. They produce these terms as part of their role in the quiz, but the terms are alienated. The man and woman have nothing to back them up with, no way to relate them conceptually to one another and to reality. For the mayor, abstractions about the economy are rooted in his daily work: in technical reports bearing on decisions he must make, in talk with advisors, the chamber of commerce, state and federal bureaucrats. This is not to say that his account of unemployment is better than that of the man and woman. In my own view, automation is a shallow cause, and the lack of acreage in Mill Town an empty one; and the woman is right on target in pointing to the free flow of capital in pursuit of cheap labor, though she is unable or unwilling to develop this hunch. But abstractions are a verbal medium the mayor is used to and works within. He manipulates them freely and voluntarily, rather than tentatively and with an air of talking someone else's language, under pressure. They are an instrument of power for him in this situation, and a token of powerlessness for the man and woman.

D. Reference to Context

The subject of the interviewer's questions belongs to the mayor's field of action. They already have a context in his work and thought. For the man and woman, government, the movements of corporations, unemployment, and history in the large sense are distant forces and events, not because of any cognitive or linguistic deficit, but just in that the man and woman are connected to such matters only through activities like drawing a wage, buying commodities, and voting, which relate them to the historical context only in fragmented and isolating ways.

E. Reference to the Discourse Itself

The mayor's self-reflexive expressions, his comments on the interviewer's questions, his refusal to accept their premises, his new starts, all reflect the mayor's sense that he is in charge of the conversation. And what he says is important enough to him to warrant taking pains, finding just the right formulation.

In all these ways the interviews embed power relations and speech conventions that existed prior to the encounters. But this is not to say that the speakers' codes reflect only the social relations that previously obtained. Choice is available at every point: note, for instance, how the mayor takes over leadership of the interview by volunteering the chief cause of unemployment without being asked, how he changes the terms of the questions, and so on. Only custom (only!) prevents the man and woman from doing likewise. The participants create the social relations of each encounter. In so doing they reproduce society. By such tiny increments is class made and remade.

At least as I see it. Bernstein and Mueller use a concept of class taken from mainstream social science, basically an heuristic concept obtained by calibrating one or more factors such as income, education, and occupation (the three that Bernstein uses). These factors are selected for the convenience of the theorist or experimenter, then correlated with others such as child-rearing patterns, voting behavior, or speech codes. Since a class constructed this way has no hard relation to the structure of society or its historical evolution, the selection of criteria is arbitrary, except in relation to the manipulations the sociologist wishes to perform.

A marxian concept of class, built from relations to the means of production, would take us further. Both working class and middle class, in Bernstein's analysis, are part of the marxian proletariat (except for a few small business people and independent professionals); they must sell their labor power to survive. The significant difference is that the "working class" sells its power to execute routine tasks at someone else's command, while the "middle class" sells its power of conception and planning as well. This distinction, I believe, would go a long way toward making sense of Bernstein's findings. Quite simply, a class builds its life on its role in production. If that role is limited, as for assembly line workers or keypunch operators, a "restricted" code of speech will suffice. If that role calls for conception and a measure of creativity, an "elaborated" code is a necessity.

But this notion of class is still inadequate, because too static. In E.P. Thompson's formulation,[4] class is something

that *happens.* People do not simply and eternally belong to a class; they create their class position (even as it is created for them) through all their doings from day to day and year to year, including their verbal encounters with co-workers, bosses, subordinates, friends, families, and with interviewers who stop them on the street or come to their offices.

And so Bernstein's idea of code is also too static. One does not simply *have* a code, I believe, in the way that one has a car in the garage, ready to use for any journey. A code has no material existence, except as it is ceaselessly recreated whenever people speak. And of course when we speak we do so with other people, and never in a setting that is socially neutral. We talk within frameworks of power, status, intimacy or remoteness, family roles, institutional roles, designs on one another, and so on.[5] The code people use at a particular moment is strongly influenced by the whole network of social circumstance within which they speak -- perhaps more than by relatively remote factors like income, the job status of their parents, or the number of years they spent in school.

If this argument, which I have sketched out all too briefly, is right, then Bernstein and Mueller ground their conclusions in damagingly static ideas of class and code. In effect, they correlate two things, neither of which can be abstracted without distortion from the stream of social interaction, and both of which are incrementally recreated in every encounter. In short, we are dealing here with a phenomenon that is dialectical as well as dialectal. The power relations of a society permeate speech and shape it, while speech reproduces or challenges the power relations of the society. The way we talk is not just an artifact of class, any more than class is an artifact of the ways we talk. Speech takes place in society, but society also takes place "in" speech. The point is well illustrated, I believe, by what happened in those two interviews. A Bernsteinian explanation of their contrasts badly misrepresents the social forces at work in them, assigning to static "class," differences in speech that express dynamic and changeable power relations.[6]

More the pity, because 1) Bernstein clearly meant his analysis to serve the working class; 2) it has been highly influential, especially in Britain; 3) the pedagogical inference drawn from it has generally been that we should teach elaborated codes to working-class kids, within the customary social relations of the school. Instead, I think the educational moral is roughly that of the 1960s reform movements, now much condemned: students should have as much responsibility as possible for their own education. The habits of expressive power come with actual shared power, not with computerized instruction in sentence combining or with a Back-to-Basics movement that would freeze students' language into someone else's rules, imposed from without. Respect the linguistic resources students have. Open the classrooms again.

Finally, Mueller's political pessimism is justified only if we suppose that political consciousness is fixed, either at home in infancy and childhood or even more deeply than that, by gross structural features of the society, if we assume that workers cannot become equal communicators and political participants step by step, and through action, but only by understanding, in a kind of conversion experience, the fundamental concepts of Marxism. Movements toward worker self-management, co-ops, progressive credit unions, consumer movements, union organizing, populist movements of many kinds, are all fertile soil in which elaborated codes (put to better use than by the mayor, I hope) may grow along with the habit of democracy.

Notes

1. Thanks to Gerry Lombardi and Jan Stackhouse, who carried out the project and gave me copies of some of the tapes. In the transcripts that follow, some names and places are disguised.

2. See especially Basil Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), Vol. I, from which I quote later on. I have also drawn on research published in volume II of this three-volume work, and from other books by Bernstein and his collaborators. For my starting point in this inquiry, see "Questions About Literacy and Political Education," *Radical Teacher* 8 (May, 1978), 24-25. The present article is a much abbreviated version of one I hope to publish elsewhere.

3. Claus Mueller, *The Politics of Communication: A Study In the Political Sociology of Language, Socialization, and Legitimation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 84.

4. E.P. Thompson, "Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle Without Class?" *Social History*, 3 (May, 1978), 146-51.

5. The notion of "variable" rules and varying codes is well established in American sociolinguistics, especially through the work of William Labov and Dell Hymes.

6. The mayor, it is worth noting, came from the industrial working class, and was a high school baseball coach before entering politics. I don't know the class position of the man and woman, and for the purpose of this article it doesn't matter.