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THE PROBLEMS EXPERIENCED BY VERNACULAR-SPEAKING ABORIGINAL
CHILDREN WHEN ENGLISH ONLY IS USED AS THE MEDIUM OF
THEIR FORMAL EDUCATION *

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The purpose of this paper is to illustrate some of the problems associated with the monolingual approach to the education of Aboriginal children. It does not set out to cover all of the problems experienced by vernacular-speaking children when English only is used as the medium of their primary formal education. By revealing some of the main areas of difficulty, though, it is hoped that bilingual education will be seen as a valuable tool for overcoming many of the problems.

DEFINING THE PUPIL GROUPS CONCERNED

The kinds of problems Aboriginal children face when they are being educated in English differ according to their differing linguistic backgrounds. Aboriginal children beginning their primary education may be divided into two major groups:

1. The Monolinguals: who may be further subdivided thus:
 - a. Those speaking only some form of English. (A group not covered by the title of this paper.)
 - b. Those speaking an Aboriginal language.
2. The bilinguals (or multilinguals): who may be subdivided also in the following manner:
 - a. Those who speak the vernacular fluently and English fluently.
 - b. Those who speak the vernacular fluently but English poorly.

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- c. Those who speak the vernacular poorly, but English fluently.
- d. Those who speak neither language fluently -- a category, unfortunately, into which many Aboriginal children in Western Australia seem to belong.

Although the subdivisions may appear as arbitrary cuts in a continuum, they do represent significant groupings of the types of pupils which teachers face in Aboriginal and part-Aboriginal schools. Groups 1a, 2c and 2d are all special groups which probably occur outside the scope of this paper, although group 2c may be included at certain points.

DEFINING THE PROBLEM AREAS COVERED BY THIS STUDY.

Aboriginal children's schooling may be affected by many forces. For the vernacular-speaking child, the child most likely to have been brought up in a traditional Aboriginal community, there is, for example, the drastic cultural shock experienced when he first goes to school. The child who knows little or no English when he begins his formal education takes generally a year or two before he knows enough English to understand what the teacher is attempting to teach him. By this time he probably dislikes English and is ashamed of his own mother tongue. Then there are many social and psychological problems as well as some economic ones which affect the child's school life and the attitudes which are exhibited towards him in the early periods of his formal education. We cannot deal with such problems in a short paper, but must concern ourselves with those coming into the realm of linguistics and especially with those associated with the use of a foreign language as the medium of instruction in Aboriginal schools.

Linguistic trouble spots may occur in any or all of the dimensions of language - phonological, grammatical, lexical. Examples will be chosen from each dimension.

The cause of the problems in each of these areas, it should be realized, is not to be found in any paucity of the linguistic structure of the Aboriginal language spoken by the child. Each of the several hundred (an estimated 300 extant) Aboriginal languages is a complex highly-structured language with an extensive vocabulary covering the multitudinous concepts of thought shared by the speakers of the language. Nor should we think that the fault lies with the structure of present-day spoken English. Of course, we must confess,

that *written* English poses many problems; but even granting this, it is not the inconsistent orthography which presents the greatest difficulty, but the method of teaching. Here is the crux of the difficulty* - a teacher is using one linguistic code to communicate formal education to a child who already has been "programmed" (as it were) to respond to and to use an entirely different communicating medium. Friction, frustration or communication interference occurs where there is incongruity of overlap between the codes.

PROBLEMS IN THE PHONOLOGICAL DIMENSION

Probably the chief reason for problems here lies in the fact that there is not a sufficient overlap between the phonemic systems of the language spoken by the Aboriginal child and that of the English-speaking teacher.

Space would forbid the adequate description of the many aspects of the phonemic system of a typical Aboriginal language and the comparison of such with the phonemic system of standard Australian English. Such a description would need to cover, not only the inventory of phonemes, including those of length and stress, but also the distribution of the phonemes in syllables and words and the intonational patterns and other phonological features of both languages. It may be helpful, though, to chart the phonemes of the two languages side by side for comparison. For this purpose, modified symbols of the International Phonetic Association will be used. The Aboriginal language chosen is the Western Desert language, probably the most widely spoken language in Aboriginal Australia. (See page 31)

A brief glance at these charts will reveal that while there is a partial overlap of the phoneme inventories of the two languages, there is obvious lack of overall congruence. Although the child himself may have no theoretical knowledge of the phonemic structure of his language, all foreign speech sounds are interpreted through this previously acquired phonemic grid. On the other hand, it is possible that the teacher has little or no knowledge of the phonemic system of English, much less a knowledge of the structure of Aboriginal languages, so he could remain quite unaware of the linguistic problems he poses for the child.

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* The use of a language foreign to the pupil may be only the manifestation of an attitude, a prejudice or a presupposition which may be the true basis of the problem.

THE PHONEMES OF THE WESTERN DESERT LANGUAGE

CONSONANTS:

Manner of Articulation	Point of Articulation				
	Labial	Dental	Alveolar	Retroflex	Velar
STOPS	p	t ()	t	t̡ ()	k
NASALS	m	n ()	n	n̡ ()	ŋ
LATERALS		l ()	l	l̡ ()	
CENTRALS			r	r̡ ()	
SEMI-VOWELS	w		y		

VOWELS:

HIGH:	short	i	u
	long	ii	uu
LOW:	short		a
	long		aa

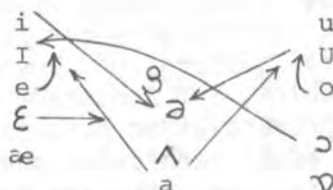
THE PHONEMES OF ENGLISH

CONSONANTS:

Manner of Articulation	Point of Articulation						
	Bi-labial	Labio-dental	Dental	Alveolar	Alveo-palatal	Velar	Glottal
STOPS	p' b			t' d		k' g	
AFFRICATES					tʃ dʒ		
FRICATIVES		f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ		h
LATERAL				l			
NASALS	m			n		ŋ	
SEMI-VOWELS	w			r	y		

VOWELS:

HIGH:	i	u	
	ɪ	ʊ	
MID:	e	ə	o
	ɛ		ɔ
LOW:	æ	ʌ	ɑ



Diphthongs indicated by arrows.

These phonological problems may be physical or psychological or a combination of these.

1. *The physical problems* are generally associated with conditioned reflexes in the vocal apparatus. The tongue of the child goes automatically to the points of articulation to produce the significant sounds of his mother tongue. His lips round or unround, open or close, his vocal chords vibrate or remain static and silent according to the patterns set by the speech to which the particular Aboriginal community responds. When the English-speaking teacher presents new sounds to him - the speech sounds of English which do not correspond with the phonemes of his own language - it appears to the child that the teacher is unable to produce the sounds correctly. He then proceeds to mimic the sounds or to produce the nearest equivalents possible in his own language.

For example: Fricatives occur in English, but not in the Western Desert language. The Desert child when faced with the sounds /f/ and /v/ of English will probably observe that the lips are involved in the production of these sounds. The labial sounds closest to these in his language are the voiceless, unaspirated stop, /p/, and the voiced semivowel, /w/. When he produces for "finger" what sounds like *pinge* (actually /pingka/) and for "fire" what sounds like *byre* (but actually /paya/) the teacher may be tempted to think he needs remedial treatment. The problem is multiplied, however, for English has eight fricatives and several affricates (i.e. stop plus fricative combinations functioning as single phonemes /tʃ/ and /dʒ/) and other affricate combinations such as -ks-, ps- and -ts-). The child who pronounces "fish" as *bitch* (or /pitji/) and "fence" as *bench* (or /pintji/) is doing no worse than the English speaker who pronounces the Western Desert dialect, Pitjantjatjara, as "Pitch-'n-jarra" or /miri/ meaning 'dead' as /miri/ meaning 'skin'.

Where the teacher knows the vernacular, or enough about linguistics to understand the child's problem, he will be able to demonstrate to the child the actual point and manner of articulation of each of the sounds presenting difficulties.

Unfamiliar combinations of sounds also present production problems to the vernacular-speaking child. In languages which have strong structural patterns of consonant-vowel or consonant-vowel-consonant syllables, the consonant clusters found in many English words present pronunciation hurdles to Aboriginal children (and much more so to the adult vernacular-speakers!). English words beginning with sk-, sn-, tr-, and str- are typical problem spots. The words

dress, *bread* and *trousers*, are almost unrecognizable by the English-speaker when they are adapted to the phonemic system of an Aboriginal language. (In the Western Desert these may occur as /turirrpa/, /purilypa/ and /tawitji/ respectively.)

Just as the English-speaking teacher may have difficulty in pronouncing simple Desert words as *manni* 'nest' and *ngarnngi* 'frog', so the Desert child will find difficulty with simple English words such as *jam*, *hot* and *snake*, because of the occurrence of final non-permitted consonants and of other sounds and combinations not found in his language.

2. *The psychological problems* which a vernacular-speaking child may find on this phonological level are so closely tied up with the physical ones it is difficult to disentangle them. An amusing anecdote is quoted by W. Edwards (1967), Superintendent of the Ernabella Mission. It reads :

"Every school day for three years we have done 'sounds'. Yet these sounds are still so strange to them that, when I spell out P-I-T and ask, 'What does that say?' someone will answer, 'Bed'. I go over it again: 'Now listen - P-I-T. It says *pit*.' Then I ask, 'Can anyone tell me what a pit is?' 'Yes. Dat fer stleeping!' says one of the boys."

The problem here, of course, is that psychologically the Desert language speakers do not recognize any contrast between voiced and voiceless stops, nor between aspirated and unaspirated stops. So the words *bit*, *pit*, and *bid* all sound the same. When it is remembered, too, that there are only three vowel positions (*a*, *i*, and *u*) it can be seen that a Western desert child would have great difficulty in recognizing any differences in the list: *bit*, *bet*, *beet*, *pit*, *pet*, *peet*, *bid*, *bed*, *bead*, because, to him, there are no distinctions between the vowel sounds, *i*, *e*, *ee*, and *ea*. Sometimes, it is the English-speaking teacher who does not recognize the differences between allophones in his own language; for example, the difference between the two *p* sounds in the English word *paper*. (The first is aspirated, the second unaspirated - like the Western Desert /p/ sound. Hold a piece of paper in front of the mouth while saying the word *paper*; the difference between the two *ps* will be obvious!)

GRAMMAR PROBLEMS

Some Aboriginal languages have quite complex grammatical structures. Others, such as the Western Desert language and the language of the South-west, have comparatively simple structures. Whether simple or complex, though, the grammar systems of Australian Aboriginal languages differ from that of English. This may be illustrated in the aspect of *word order and inflection*.

English relies on word order fairly heavily to indicate grammar relationships. For example, in the sentence, *The man hit the woman*, we know that *the man* is the subject or actor and *the woman* is the object or goal of the action, because of their order in relation to the verb. Aboriginal languages, generally, indicate grammar relationships such as subject, object, location, time, manner, and indirect object by the affixing of grammatical markers. This means that *word order* is not so important for indicating these relationships; but it can be used for other purposes, such as for the indication of *focus*. The sentence, *The man hit the woman*, may be translated into the Western Desert Ngaanyatjarra dialect as - *watilu minyma pungu*. This reads literally, *man woman hit*. However, the word for *man* (*wati*) is followed by the subject marking suffix - *lu*, so there is no doubt as to who is the one carrying out the action. It will be noted that the verb comes finally. This is usual but not necessary. To change the word order of this sentence to *minyma pungu watilu* (literally, *woman hit man*) would not change the grammatical relationships, for *the woman* is still the object or goal of the action, and *the man* (still retaining the subject marker) is the subject or actor. In this form, however, the *focus* has changed so that an English translation would appear more like a passive construction - namely, "The woman was hit by the man." Depending on the context, though, it could equally well be translated, "He hit the woman, the man did."

On the other hand, there are *preferred* orders in some cases. For example, in *noun phrases* the descriptive or adjective may follow the noun instead of preceding it as in English. The English sentence, *The big man is sitting on the ground* may be translated into the Western Desert language as, *wati purlka parrangka nyinarra* (literally, *man big ground-on sitting*).

The problems which a vernacular-speaking child faces when he attempts to transfer to a different grammatical system could be eased considerably if the teacher could explain to him, in the local vernacular, just what *are* the differences.

LEXICAL-SEMANTIC PROBLEMS

In this dimension, of course, we are touching the whole conceptual bases of the two languages concerned in the teaching process. Restricting ourselves to linguistics as best we can, the problems facing the vernacular-speaking child in this dimension are based, chiefly, on the lack of correspondence between two different lexical systems.

In describing an Aboriginal language, one needs to redefine well-known categories of speech such as noun, verb, adjective and pronoun. Descriptive systems involving colour, size, number and state, pronominal systems, also tense, mood and aspect may all show lack of correspondence between the two languages. When the teacher announces, "You must" the children may be forgiven if they hesitate to puzzle over whether he means *you singular*, *you dual* or *you plural*, for the native pronoun system is likely to distinguish between singular, dual and plural with inclusive and exclusive forms of the dual and plural. In the third person it may be necessary to indicate whether the person is close to the speaker, at mid-distance, or at a distance away from the speaker, or whether he is not now visible but previously referred to by the speaker.

Examples may be drawn from the non-correspondence of body-part vocabulary, kin-relationship terms, food categories, intermarrying systems, the use of metaphors, rhetorical questions, idioms and other figures of speech. By the time the vernacular-speaking child reaches school, he has the rudiments of a cosmology already in-built, but all of this is despised and rejected by the "English-only" teaching approach. As Emeritus Professor A.P.Elkin (1964) stated -

"...The method of teaching English directly to non-English speakers without using the latter's language as a medium, has not proved as successful as was hoped. It is satisfactory for the first year or two with reference to concrete objects and situations. To go further, however, a bridge is needed between indigenous concepts and those the teacher seeks to introduce; and unless the local language is used as the main structure of that bridge, the children are apt to flounder and seem unable to go beyond rote achievement."

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References

Edwards, W.: *Experience in the Use of the Vernacular as an Introductory Medium of Instruction*, Centre for Research into Aboriginal Affairs, Monash University, Melbourne, 1967.

Elkin, A.P.: *Aboriginal Languages and Assimilation*, Oceania, 34, 1964, 149-150.

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INVITATION

In issues this year we have brought you the thinking about Aboriginal education by people outside the classroom; for example, the report of the Western Australian Royal Commission into Aboriginal Affairs, and the Schools Commission Report. We have, over the last three years, been able to produce in the Journal a diversity of teacher comment, particularly in relation to on-going programs in the classroom.

We would be very pleased to receive further articles from teachers

- a. reports on promising innovations in the classroom;
- b. reflections on some of the major issues and challenges in Aboriginal education.

We look forward to your contributions.

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