



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

SPOKEN ENGLISH LANGUAGE OF NATIVE CHILDREN - A CANADIAN PERSPECTIVE

Peter D. Moss,
University of Adelaide

Reading S.G. Harris's timely article summarizing recent work in bilingual education (1) prompted me to write for readers of *The Aboriginal Child at School*, this brief report of part of a project I carried out in Canada in 1972/73. In particular, Harris's reference to Susan Philips's work (2) reminds us all of the complex and vexed matter of social contexts governing the use of language. It may be of interest to teachers of Aboriginal children to read examples of language interactions between white and native, and native and native people in several contexts, from another country which has similar 'pluralistic' cultural problems - Canada.

My work (3) was carried out with Cree Indian children who spoke English as a first language and Cree only occasionally during vacations, at home on the Reservation. During term-time they were pupils at a boarding school. Briefly, the aim was to examine oral language in a variety of contexts. The situations monitored were :

1. Talk in the classroom with the class teacher.
2. Talk in class with no teacher present.
3. Talk out of school with peer group.

I shall characterize these situations as Formal (F), Informal (I) and Personal (P) respectively. The same four children were monitored in the three situations. The group was chosen on the basis of observed friendship.

The short account which follows is descriptive and general but has the value of being actual. The transcriptions of talk did occur in normal, familiar contexts over a period of six weeks.

CONTEXT F.

These are examples of dialogue, sometimes unnecessary monologue,

taken during teacher-pupil talks in lesson time. The most pronounced feature of the F tapes was that the teacher talked too much, generally out of a concern to establish accuracy and correctness in the pupils' tasks. At times it seemed an obsessive desire to lead the pupils through every stage of the activity or assignment.

Here are two different kinds of example :

A) The teacher asked the class to write a paragraph about the part each of them played in a recent sports meeting with other schools.

Teacher: "Well, now, I think most of us remember what we did on Friday. What was that?"

Class: Field Day

Teacher: Yes. Why do we have a Field Day, anyway? To practise? To compete? What do you want to compete for?

Class: (Several shout out at the same time).

Teacher: Yes. That's it, to compete for a trophy. And you remember once they won, what did they get when they were first?

Class: A ribbon.

Teacher: What colour?

Class: Red.

Teacher: Wilma, you tell us a little bit about the Field Day. (Wilma is shy and reluctant). We'd like to hear. Wilma's going to talk a little bit. Would you like to come up to the front and tell us, Wilma? Please come out Wilma, tell us a little about the Field Day - what you did and where you went... You said you would tell us. Where was the Field Day? (Wilma says quietly that she was excited). You were excited? Yes. Why? You wanted to win the ribbon... When did you get up to go? (Answer). You got up at seven in the morning. Then what did you do? (Answer). You got your breakfast and then you put on your best shorts and things so you could take part in the Field Day, right? And then how did you go? (Answer). In cars. Do you remember how many people went?"

There are several points to notice about this extract. Firstly, it is essentially a monologue. The questions are really discrete and don't have a natural flow from one to another. All of them, of course, are controlled by the paragraph topic but the effect is of a verbal machine which cannot be turned off until it has reached the end of its run. Secondly, there is the unnecessary repetition of each answer, unnecessary from the standpoint of meaningful dialogue.

However, there are two functional techniques connected with this repetition. For the children, it fixes the content of the paragraph which they are to write (usually the class's answers were put on the blackboard under appropriate headings); for the teacher, it extends the monologue of information. This is deliberate because the general assumption lying behind the English work (in this classroom) is the need for order and formal shape. Finally, and connected with this latter point, the teacher domination of the talk ensures that the individual student (and all the consequent potential disorder and random recollection) does not intrude into the writing.

B) Teacher: "I have right here some words. There is a list up here at the top (pointing to text book). We have a list of apostrophes. Remember apostrophes? When do we use apostrophes? (Answer). Yes, that's to show possession isn't it? To show that something belongs to someone... And then I'll give you a little exercise where you have to do this sort of thing. You have the word "take" and you're supposed to make a new word out of it by just putting on an 'n'. What would you have then? You'd have 'taken', wouldn't you? Now, another question is where they want you to write some words and put the long or the short accent. You know, where you have a long one like this and a short one like that (demonstrates on blackboard). Another place we have a little pressure right here to put some words in alphabetical order. But you only have to pick out those that start with f, g, and s... All right, now let's see if we can do this. O.K.?"

This extract illustrates the consequence of placing total emphasis upon the lesson-objects, disregarding manner, where the need to explain specific and direct tasks drained all sense of personality from the spoken language. This is not to imply that

the teacher's normal language is devoid of personality but that the task which he set himself made such an outcome inevitable. More interesting is the (unconscious?) language of invisible authority. Phrases such as, "where you have to do this"; "you're supposed to make"; "where *they* want you to write"; "we have a little pressure right here". This style is characteristic of this teacher though his performance in class was gentle, and relatively permissive. Reliance on a dull mechanical text-book could account for the adoption of such a style over a period of time.

One suspects that the habitual use of such language would reinforce any natural reluctance among the children to talk in a free way. Not only are they ranged against the overt teaching authority but also the covert authority of the text doubly stressed in teacher language. As one would expect, the classroom participations and language responses of these children under these hidden pressures were of a low order. In fairness to them, however, the nature of the questions did not allow for anything more than monosyllabic answers. The following is just one example, among many, illustrating the responses:

- T - Is this a Sports Day?
S_A - Yes.
T - When is it you're going?
S_A - Thursday.
T - When.
S_B - Night.
T - How many of you?
S_B - Sixty.
T - Are you going?
S_C - No.
S_D - I am.

It is worth noting in this context that when the investigator attempted to elicit elaborated responses by encouraging discussion about a number of blow-ups of dramatic photographs which had a possible connection with their experience, for example, deserted farm building in

a snow covered prairie, the response was still the same.* Several other 'relaxed' ploys were used, including listening to evocative music and handling and investigating unfamiliar objects, including the researcher's saxophone. The following gives the flavour of these desultory responses:

A piece of music from "The Enchanted Forest" had been played:

- R# - Did you get any ideas?
- S_A - It was like a cat chasing a mouse.
- R - Like a cat chasing a mouse. That's an interesting one. Why did you think that?
- S_A - The little music was the mouse, you know.
- R - The little music?
- S_A - Yeah. Then the big music. By the cat.
- R - I see. That's a good idea. What would you say, Lester?
- S_B - A man chasing after somebody else.
- R - A man, yes. I thought that it might be a man.

There are, of course, a number of things working against the possibility of a natural exploratory use of language: firstly, the novelty of the task; secondly, and more importantly, the closed nature of the questions albeit their apparent invitation to a total freedom of reply. In fact, the form of the questions themselves signal the established classroom conditions and the children know that they are obliged to reply. Hence the pat, rather obvious responses. This can only be speculation in the absence of detailed long-term studies in teacher language, but in a classroom situation where the children are under the twin compulsions of teacher authority and text-book authority, then the more questions asked of them demanding simple information-giving answers, the more likelihood their formal school language will be sparse, repetitive and devoid of personal involvement. One suspects that if the practice is continued long

.....
**One would expect this with a stranger, of course, but my discussions with the children began after several weeks of getting to know them, including playing soccer regularly with them.*

R = Researcher.

enough, then the strategy of asking simple response type questions will become a narcotic. In this connection one of the taped lessons produced a fifteen minute spell when 36 questions were asked!

The following is another example of the way the structured question, the 'prompted' question, inhibits these children to such an extent that their language becomes stilted even in the relatively open atmosphere of the small group discussion. The stimulus was a photograph of a prairie scene in winter:

- R - I'd like you to look at this picture without saying anything. Don't speak. Just look at it. In a minute I'll ask you something about it... Now, why do you think that lady is looking the way she does? How does she look? Can you think of a word to describe her?
- S_B - She's sad.
- S_C - She's happy.
- R - Do you really think she's happy?
- S_C - She's worried.
- R - Good. Why do you think she is sad and worried?
- S_C - Conscious.
- R - What does conscious mean?
- S_C - Nervous.
- R - Nervous. All right. It doesn't mean nervous but it's a good word. So we've got nervous, sad. What was the other one?
- S_B - Worried.
- R - All right. They are all good words. What do you think has happened to make her sad, nervous, and worried?
- S_B - Maybe somebody died.
- R - Perhaps.

- S_A - Something happened to her little boy.
S_B - Yeah.
S_C - Somebody had an accident.
R - Maybe.

There are a number of apparently insignificant points to consider in this transcription which suggest the fine balance which has to be maintained, for these children, between critical, encouraging and neutral tones in discussion. Conversation around the picture continued for a further two pages of transcription, yet student D took no part in the talk after his confusion over 'nervous' and 'conscious' had been pointed out. Although some praise had been given, some support had also been taken away by Authority. Of course, this should not be of much import in a natural relaxed situation, but where formal teaching atmospheres are the norm (under a white authority?) then perhaps a sense of threat is inserted between private reaction and public utterance. An excellent instance of the immediate reception which these children make of signals of mild disapproval is in the investigator's reply to student C's suggestion that the woman in the picture is happy. He asks, "Do you really think she's happy?" and the student takes an immediate refuge in a (near) opposite - "worried". A similar reaction occurs later when the investigator makes the non-committal "perhaps". The suggestion is that the 'neutral' authority is non-supportive in their learning experience and that they need clear indication of the correctness of their attempts at answer. Other examples of classroom talk were similar to the foregoing and need not be detailed any further. It is sufficient to stress again that the formal classroom/teaching structure does not appear to be conducive to varied language performance in speech.

The significant aspect which might be worthy of further, controlled study, is the extent, hinted at in these tapes, to which the overall formality (or informality) and the way that language signals the atmosphere, sometimes in quite subtle ways, affects children so that they feel confident and secure enough to place their personalities at some risk.* This latter point is brought into sharper focus after one has examined the nature of the children's language in the settings where they were alone and with the peer group.

.....
* See Appendix I

This next transcription is taken from a context P transcript during the children's free time, during the evening, when they were unsupervised.

Girl A : "I like what God made. How about Georgina?

Girl B : Me? I like the dandelions. I think they're nice flowers.

Girl A : How you like Joanne? Huh?

Girl C : Flowers.

Girl A : You like flowers? What colour flowers do you like? Do you like dandelions? Roses? Roses. You like roses?

Girl C : Yes.

Girl A : Well, that's good. Good for you maybe - maybe one day you'll get a rose on your dress. Oh? Maybe. You never know."

Comment will be made later on the non-standard variety of English language adopted. The point to note in relation to personal language is obviously related to student A, a girl who was uncharacteristically verbally demonstrative among this particular group. The talk is almost a monologue, with a distinct echo of the classroom style of questioning and yet illustrates beautifully a very natural connection which a young girl might make between roses and her own life, or that of her friends, in this case. It is fanciful but has its own reality.

Later in the talk the children are discussing other common friends and Student B made the following interjection:

"And Charlie hits him all over the place.
Just like when I tease. While I tease him
he's so *angryyyy*, like a bear."

This was the only occasion on the tapes when a conscious attempt was made to use words dramatically and the deliberate stress on 'angry' transforms the cliché-term into something much more personal and pointed.

More varied examples of personal language come from a long transcription of a discussion between the three boys in the sample

group. They were left alone in a room and talked together whilst looking through a colour-illustrated calendar of Canadian scenes.

CONTEXT I (Looking at an ocean scene of British Columbia).

Boy A : "I'm going to swim in the ocean.

Boy B : Jesus Christ, Yeah. I'd like to be there. You?

Boy C : New Westminster or Victoria you like?

Boy B : Victoria.

Boy A : I like both.

Boy C : Me too. Look at this (turning to another scene of St. Lawrence River.) Would you like to swim right now?

Boy A : No. We'd freeze. Kinda cold.

Boy B : St. Lawrence Lowlands or Highlands? Hey, what's the five F's of Norway?

Boy C : Fishing, flowers, farming, forests, fuels. That's all. Five S's.

Boy A : You mean F instead of five S's. Five F's. What's the five S's of Norway?

Boy C : Sex. Ha, ha."

The first part is a fairly obvious, low-level example of free-association (swimming in the sea to swimming in the St. Lawrence, to a remembered similarity with a picture of a Norwegian fiord, to the formula formality of the classroom learning tricks). But the second part is something very different, witty (in a conventional way) and psychologically cunning. Cunning because the listener has been led, unsuspecting, into a carefully laid trap. One cannot, nor need not, know the particular associational process which connects Norway and sex, but the student has slipped in the baited error (5 s's) at exactly the right moment - when the listener has accepted the closure of the formula answer, after "that's all". Of course, the 'error' is pounced upon and the trap is sprung.

That this is not a fortunate accident can be seen in the next example where the same student (C), prepares for another funny climax-line by focusing on and leading the group into a minute detail in one of the pictures.

Boy A : "Now let's see. This picture doesn't look too interesting.

Boy B : No.

Boy C : Hey look! Freckles!

Boy B : Freckles - that big!

Boy C : Yes. How did you put them on? By pen or something?

Boy A : Jeez. I'd like to see a guy have freckles that big.

Boy C : Yeah. The freckle family".

This may not be an example of a gem of humour but it *is* real and does signal a personality at work. Perhaps more importantly the two examples show that these children are perfectly capable of using the resources of their language to turn what, after all, was a dull chore into an activity of fun.

This tendency towards fun is a marked feature of the Context I tapes when these boys were alone together. Time and time again their own brand of juvenile humour jumps out of this page in the most unpromising situations. Here are a few instances.

1. (When discussing a picture which they could not decide was in Ottawa or Scotland. Suddenly, an odd cracking noise comes over the tape) :

Student A : "Sorry. The bug he just slapped me. Ouch! my bowling arm."

2. (When talking about the relative merits of living in the city or in the town and then the difficulty of travelling to a city especially when living on a Reservation. The talk comes round to hitch-hiking). :

Student B : "Yeah. You go, 'hey', and you stick out your moose legs and point your finger down that way. See, you go like this. Gee! I wish he can see

but he can't. If I were a girl I'd do like this.
Stick out your lips. You'd get a ride."

3. (When looking at a picture of a flour-pack contest. Attention has been wavering at this point).

Student A: "There's about 15 more minutes to talk on here.
Then we're finished with one side.

Student B: Never mind.

Student A: Don't hit me! You wanna get punched? Holy!
look at this one, boy!

Student C: Really strong, eh?

Student A: 'Betcha my great-great-great-grandmother could
beat him.

Student B: Oh??

Student A: My great-great-great-grandmother can carry 500 lbs
for about a mile."

4. (When looking at two attractive girls in a spring-time picture).

Student A: "This seems like a couple of girls in there. I'm
sure interested in that.

Student B: Mary Blossom time.

Both Mary Blossom time.
together: Mary Blossom time.

Student A: Hey, My bon bons! You like to feel it up? Oh,
sorry about that."

Many educators have banished 'correct' and 'incorrect' from their vocabularies and refer instead to Standard and Non-standard respectively. A term such as 'elegance' when applied to speech and writing has long since been considered antediluvian, and qualities such as clarity and directness are more valued by our society. Putting aside the various qualities in these overall attitudes neither aspect of the disjunction is of much help in a study of student language for the simple reason that each takes attention away from particulars, albeit with the best of intentions. Such guides have the effect of placing language learning in a straitjacket and the necessary variety of styles and language exploration with which young people should be confronted are stifled.

The spoken language examples just quoted do not represent anything which could be called 'correct' or even possessing formal elegance, but they do suggest potentially helpful pointers in our attempts to understand these students' language. Two examples from the second sample above suggest two enquiries. Firstly, the term 'mooselegs'. This expression occurred frequently on the tapes. It had a special meaning for the students in relation to a particular teacher, but one would like to know its history; whether it originated in the school; whether it was used on the reservations and therefore had a Cree connotation. In any case it is notable because of its frequency of use in different contexts, e.g.

As simple description - "He has mooselegs".

As ejaculation - "Oh my mooselegs!"

As specific reference - "There's old mooselegs".

As qualifier of praise - "Look at those wonderful legs. Mooselegs."

and also because it is a term not used by white children.*

Secondly, the extremely interesting moment when the boy seemed to be transported momentarily and to be actually living *within* the picture, ("I wish he can see") and yet to be conscious of the phantasy ("...but he can't) simultaneously.** This was a rare flash of spontaneous internalisation but obviously one of some significance for the boy. (Did he wish that he could hitch a lift at that moment?) An example, perhaps, of language giving shape to a need.

These, and the other interesting moments of talk, came from informal sessions where there was little, if any, structure. They indicate the shape of a personality beginning to emerge out of a particular environment. There were no examples of this in the

.....
*It need hardly be pointed out that these 'group vernaculars' never were expressed in classroom situations. It could be argued, I suppose that these pupils have learned their language etiquette well, and in addition, a series of sociolinguistic rules for their particular classroom. More's the pity, when such personal and personality and group-defining ambiguities are felt to be inessential in the classroom.

**D.W.Harding has written perceptively on the roles of participant and spectator in literature (4). James Britton has developed the ideas for their classroom significance (5). For an interesting, more theory-based discussion of the 'self' on speech acts, see G.H.Mead (6).

formal teaching sessions where the teacher dominated. There was just no environment in which the sense of a spontaneous personality could fit. The problem is that of the pedagogical strait jacket, the textbook Authority. When language (in its narrowest sense) is taught from the text because it is assumed that any one group of children is disadvantaged and therefore in need of particular help in formal structure, then language (in its widest sense) is ignored. Fortunately, as these tapes have suggested, children, even so-called linguistically disadvantaged ones, use language out of their own personality. In this area Robert Lowe's often-quoted (and much misunderstood) dictum that, "we must educate our masters" seems to apply.

SUMMARY

To summarize the Indian student tapes. Under the prevailing classroom conditions their spoken English language performance was restricted and uninspired but there were many examples of witty, personal, aware usage in the unstructured spontaneous situations. There was some evidence that the students were conscious of Standard English norms and also some indicators that they may partake of a systematic form of non-Standard speech. If this were to be proved then presumably it would have generated from the family and tribal band situations and been carried over into residential school. In the two examples which suggested that something unique might be taking place in the way that language was being organized by the students, the significant aspect of the conditions was that it came from their spontaneous peer-group experience. Here, of course, no constraints were in evidence nor were any covertly present.

APPENDIX I

One section of transcription which illustrates how the prevailing classroom tone affects conditions even when a conscious attempt is being made to relax the atmosphere. Comment on the nature of the language of both the teacher and the children is unnecessary.

"My name is Mr. X. We're taking (the tape recorder) around the room. Everybody has a chance to talk. I hope everybody will say something and say something good and nice so we'll be able to leave it on the tape recorder. Tell us a little bit about yourself. The first boy will be Joe Smith.* All right Joe.

.....
*The names used are fictitious.

- J.S. My name is Joe Smith. Thank you.
- C.D. My name is Charlie Davis and I come from Whale Creek. Thank you.
- R.L. My name is Ray Lewis. I come from Durham House. Thank you.
- G.W. My name is Greta Wilson. Thank you ...

APPENDIX II

Suggestions for Further Study

a) The examples above which illustrate the 'social' uses of language are the ones which might well be developed in further study. In particular it might be interesting to test the validity of an assumption which has taken on the proportions of myth. It is a widely held view about American Indians that they exhibit "a fierce reluctance to speak except when absolutely necessary". Similar views have been put to me about Canadian, and in particular, Cree Indians. It is possible that the refusal to speak may not be an inability to verbalize but rather an acceptance of cultural convention. What one could call 'Ceremonies of Silence' may well be profoundly expressive. This kind of cultural awareness obviously should be made available to teachers.

In relation to the acceptance of such myth, these tapes have shown that, under the right conditions, the Indian students were perfectly capable of using language with verve and originality. If evidence could be collected for a large number of children over larger areas, then the tapes might help to destroy a potentially harmful assumption about Indian (English) language.

b) Study needs to be conducted to establish whether the students do use an internally consistent non-Standard variety of English.

c) Opportunities should be made available for teachers to undertake courses in the appropriate linguistic areas to enable them to become sensitive to child language. In particular, socio-linguistics study.

d) Banks of taped spoken English should be established in order to facilitate systematic study. No attention appears to have been paid in Canada to the English language of Native peoples.

References

1. Harris, S.G. : Beyond common sense in bilingual education, *The Aboriginal Child at School*, 3 (4), 1975, 3.
2. op.cit., 13 and Philips, S.U. : Participant structures and communication competence, in J. Cazden (Ed.) *Functions of Language in the Classroom*, Teachers College Press, New York, 1972.
3. *A Pilot Study of the Spoken English of White and Native Students in School and Home*, commissioned by the School Trustees' Board, Saskatchewan, Canada, 1973
4. Harding D.W. : *Experience into Words*, Chatto & Windus, 1963.
5. Britton, J. : *Language and Learning*, Pelican, 1970.
6. Mead, G.H. : *Mind, Self and Society*, University of Chicago, 1934.
7. Basso, K.H. : To give up on words, *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Autumn, 1970.

.....