LANGUAGE IN THE INNER CITY

Studies in the Black English Vernacular

WILLIAM LABOV

University of Pennsylvania Press
Philadelphia
© 1972
To the Jets, the Cobras, and the Thunderbirds
who took on all odds and were dealt all low cards
IN the past decade, a great deal of federally sponsored research has been devoted to the educational problems of children in ghetto schools. In order to account for the poor performance of children in these schools, educational psychologists have attempted to discover what kind of disadvantage or defect they are suffering from. The viewpoint that has been widely accepted and used as the basis for large-scale intervention programs is that the children show a cultural deficit as a result of an impoverished environment in their early years. Considerable attention has been given to language. In this area the deficit theory appears as the concept of verbal deprivation. Black children from the ghetto area are said to receive little verbal stimulation, to hear very little well-formed language, and as a result are impoverished in their means of verbal expression. They cannot speak complete sentences, do not know the names of common objects, cannot form concepts or convey logical thoughts.

Unfortunately, these notions are based upon the work of educational psychologists who know very little about language and even less about black children. The concept of verbal deprivation has no basis in social reality. In fact, black children in the urban ghettos receive a great deal of verbal stimulation, hear more well-formed sentences than middle-class children, and participate fully in a highly verbal culture. They have the same basic vocabulary, possess the same capacity for conceptual learning, and use the same logic as anyone else who learns to speak and understand English.

The notion of verbal deprivation is a part of the modern mythology.

1. This chapter first appeared in Georgetown Monographs in Languages and Linguistics No. 22 (1969).
of educational psychology, typical of the unfounded notions which
tend to expand rapidly in our educational system. In past decades
linguists have been as guilty as others in promoting such intellectual
fashions at the expense of both teachers and children. But the myth
of verbal deprivation is particularly dangerous, because it diverts
attention from real defects of our educational system to imaginary
defects of the child. As we shall see, it leads its sponsors inevitably
to the hypothesis of the genetic inferiority of black children that it
was originally designed to avoid.

The most useful service which linguists can perform today is to
clear away the illusion of verbal deprivation and to provide a more
adequate notion of the relations between standard and nonstandard
dialects. In the writings of many prominent educational psycholo-
gists, we find very poor understanding of the nature of language.
Children are treated as if they have no language of their own in the
preschool programs put forward by Bereiter and Engelmann (1966).
The linguistic behavior of ghetto children in test situations is the
In this paper, we will examine critically both of these approaches
to the language and intelligence of the populations labeled "verbally
deprived" and "culturally deprived." and attempt to explain how
the myth of verbal deprivation has arisen, bringing to bear the
methodological findings of sociolinguistic work and some substantive
facts about language which are known to all linguists. Of particular
concern is the relation between concept formation on the one hand,
and dialect differences on the other, since it is in this area that the
most dangerous misunderstandings are to be found.

Verbality

The general setting in which the deficit theory arises consists of
a number of facts which are known to all of us. One is that black
children in the central urban ghettos do badly in all school subjects,
including arithmetic and reading. In reading, they average more than
two years behind the national norm (see New York Times, December
3, 1968). Furthermore, this lag is cumulative, so that they do worse
comparatively in the fifth grade than in the first grade. Reports in
the literature show that this poor performance is correlated most
closely with socioeconomic status. Segregated ethnic groups seem
to do worse than others—in particular, Indian, Mexican-American,
and black children. Our own work in New York City confirms that
most black children read very poorly; however, studies in the speech
community show that the situation is even worse than has been
reported. If one separates the isolated and peripheral individuals
from members of central peer groups, the peer-group members show
even worse reading records and to all intents and purposes are not
learning to read at all during the time they spend in school (chap-
ter 6).

In speaking of children in the urban ghetto areas, the term lower
class frequently is used, as opposed to middle class. In the several
sociolinguistic studies we have carried out, and in many parallel
studies, it has been useful to distinguish a lower-class group from
a working-class one. Lower-class families are typically female-based,
or matrifocal, with no father present to provide steady economic
support, whereas for the working-class there is typically an intact
nuclear family with the father holding a semiskilled or skilled job.
The educational problems of ghetto areas run across this important
class distinction. There is no evidence, for example, that the father’s
presence or absence is closely correlated with educational achieve-
ment (e.g., Coleman et al. 1966). The peer groups we have studied
in south-central Harlem, representing the basic vernacular culture,
include members from both family types. The attack against cultural
deprivation in the ghetto is overtly directed at family structures
of lower-class families, but the educational failure we have
been discussing is characteristic of both working-class and lower-
class children.

This paper, therefore, will refer to children from urban ghetto
areas rather than lower-class children. The population we are con-
cerned with comprises those who participate fully in the vernacular
culture of the street and who have been alienated from the school
system. We are obviously dealing with the effects of the caste system

2. I am indebted to Rosalind Weiner of the Early Childhood Education group of
Operation Head Start in New York City and to Joan Baratz of the Education Study
Center, Washington, D.C., for pointing out to me the scope and seriousness of the
educational issues involved here and the ways in which the cultural deprivation theory
has affected federal intervention programs in recent years.

3. The concept of the black English vernacular (BEV) and the culture in which it
is embedded is presented in detail in CRR 3288; sections 1.23 and 4.1. See chapter
7 for the linguistic traits which distinguish speakers who participate fully in the BEV
culture from marginal and isolated individuals.
of American society—essentially a color-marking system. Everyone recognizes this. The question is: By what mechanism does the color bar prevent children from learning to read? One answer is the notion of cultural deprivation put forward by Martin Deutsch and others (Deutsch and associates 1967; Deutsch, Katz, and Jensen 1968). Black children are said to lack the favorable factors in their home environment which enable middle-class children to do well in school (Deutsch and assoc. 1967; Deutsch, Katz, and Jensen 1969). These factors involve the development of various cognitive skills through verbal interaction with adults, including the ability to reason abstractly, speak fluently, and focus upon long-range goals. In their publications, these psychologists also recognize broader social factors. However, the deficit theory does not focus upon the interaction of the black child with white society so much as on his failure to interact with his mother at home. In the literature we find very little direct observation of verbal interaction in the black home; most typically, the investigators ask the child if he has dinner with his parents, and if he engages in dinner-table conversation with them. He is also asked whether his family takes him on trips to museums and other cultural activities. This slender thread of evidence is used to explain and interpret the large body of tests carried out in the laboratory and in the school.

The most extreme view which proceeds from this orientation—and one that is now being widely accepted—is that lower-class black children have no language at all. The notion is first drawn from Basil Bernstein’s writings that “much of lower-class language consists of a kind of incidental ‘emotional’ accompaniment to action here and now.” (Jensen 1968:118). Bernstein’s views are filtered through a strong bias against all forms of working-class behavior, so that middle-class language is seen as superior in every respect—as “more abstract, and necessarily somewhat more flexible, detailed and subtle.” One can proceed through a range of such views until one comes to the practical program of Carl Bereiter, Siegfried Engelmann and their associates (Bereiter et al. 1966; Bereiter and Engelmann 1966). Bereiter’s program for an academically oriented preschool is based upon their premise that black children must have a language with which they can learn, and their empirical finding that these children come to school without such a language. In his work with four-year-old black children from Urbana, Bereiter reports that their communication was by gestures, “single words,” and “a series of badly connected words or phrases,” such as They mine and Me got juice. He reports that black children could not ask questions, that “without exaggerating . . . these four-year-olds could make no statements of any kind.” Furthermore, when these children were asked “Where is the book?”, they did not know enough to look at the table where the book was lying in order to answer. Thus Bereiter concludes that the children’s speech forms are nothing more than a series of emotional cries, and he decides to treat them “as if the children had no language at all.” He identifies their speech with his interpretation of Bernstein’s restricted code: “the language of culturally deprived children . . . is not merely an underdeveloped version of standard English, but is a basically nonlogical mode of expressive behavior” (Bereiter et al. 1966:112–13). The basic program of his preschool is to teach them a new language devised by Engelmann, which consists of a limited series of questions and answers such as Where is the squirrel? The squirrel is in the tree. The children will not be punished if they use their vernacular speech on the playground, but they will not be allowed to use it in the schoolroom. If they should answer the question Where is the squirrel? with the illogical vernacular form In the tree they will be reprimanded by various means and made to say, The squirrel is in the tree.

Linguists and psycholinguists who have worked with black children are apt to dismiss this view of their language as utter nonsense. Yet there is no reason to reject Bereiter’s observations as spurious. They were certainly not made up. On the contrary, they give us a very clear view of the behavior of student and teacher which can be duplicated in any classroom. In our own work outside of adult-dominated environments of school and home, we have not observed black children behaving like this. However, on many occasions we have been asked to help analyze the results of research into verbal deprivation conducted in such test situations.

Here, for example, is a complete interview with a black child, one of hundreds carried out in a New York City school. The boy enters a room where there is a large, friendly, white interviewer, who puts on the table in front of him a toy and says: “Tell me everything you
can about this.” (The interviewer’s further remarks are in parentheses.)

(12 seconds of silence)
(What would you say it looks like?)
(8 seconds of silence)
A space ship.
(Hmmmm.)
(13 seconds of silence)
Like a je-et.
(12 seconds of silence)
Like a plane.
(20 seconds of silence)
(What color is it?)
Orange. (2 seconds) An’ whi-ite. (2 seconds) An’ green.
(6 seconds of silence)
(An’ what could you use it for?)
(8 seconds of silence)
A je-et.
(6 seconds of silence)
(If you had two of them, what would you do with them?)
(6 seconds of silence)
Give one to some-body.
(Hmmmm. Who do you think would like to have it?)
(10 seconds of silence)
Cla-rence.
(Mm. Where do you think we could get another one of these?)
At the store.
(Oh ka-ay!)

We have here the same kind of defensive, monosyllabic behavior which is reported in Bereiter’s work. What is the situation that produces it? The child is in an asymmetrical situation where anything he says can literally be held against him. He has learned a number of devices to avoid saying anything in this situation, and he works very hard to achieve this end. One may observe the intonation patterns of

\[ ^a \overline{\text{3}} \overline{\text{0}} ^a \text{Know} \]

and

\[ ^a \text{space} ^a \text{sh} ^a \text{ip} \]

which black children often use when they are asked a question to which the answer is obvious. The answer may be read as: “Will this satisfy you?”

If one takes this interview as a measure of the verbal capacity of the child, it must be as his capacity to defend himself in a hostile and threatening situation. But unfortunately, thousands of such interviews are used as evidence of the child’s total verbal capacity, or more simply his verbosity. It is argued that this lack of verbosity explains his poor performance in school. Operation Head Start and other intervention programs have largely been based upon the deficit theory—the notions that such interviews give us a measure of the child’s verbal capacity and that the verbal stimulation which he has been missing can be supplied in a preschool environment.

The verbal behavior which is shown by the child in the situation quoted above is not the result of the ineptness of the interviewer. It is rather the result of regular sociolinguistic factors operating upon adult and child in this asymmetrical situation. In our work in urban ghetto areas, we have often encountered such behavior. Ordinarily we worked with boys 10 to 17 years old, and whenever we extended our approach downward to eight- or nine-year-olds, we began to see the need for different techniques to explore the verbal capacity of the child. At one point we began a series of interviews with younger brothers of the Thunderbirds. Clarence Robins interviewed eight-year-old Leon L., who showed the following minimal response to topics which arouse intense interest in other interviews with older boys:

CR: What if you saw somebody kickin’ somebody else on the ground, or was using a stick, what would you do if you saw that?
Leon: Mmmm.
CR: If it was supposed to be a fair fight—
Leon: I don’ know.
Leon: No.
CR: Did you ever see somebody got beat up real bad?
Leon: . . . Nope . . .
CR: Well—uh—did you ever get into a fight with a guy?
Leon: Nope.
CR: That was bigger than you?
Leon: Nope . . .
CR: You never been in a fight?
Leon: Nope.
CR: Nobody ever pick on you?
Leon: Nope.
CR: Nobody ever hit you?
Leon: Nope.
CR: How come?
Leon: Ah 'o' know.
CR: Didn't you ever hit somebody?
Leon: Nope.
CR: (incredulously) You never hit nobody?
Leon: Mhm.
CR: Aww, ba-a-a-be, you ain't gonna tell me that!

It may be that Leon is here defending himself against accusations of wrongdoing, since Clarence knows that Leon has been in fights, that he has been taking pencils away from little boys, and so on. But if we turn to a more neutral subject, we find the same pattern:

CR: You watch—you like to watch television? ... Hey, Leon ... you like to watch television? (Leon nods)
What's your favorite program?
Leon: Uhhmm ... I look at cartoons.
CR: Well, what's your favorite one? What's your favorite program?
Leon: Superman ...
CR: Yeah? Did you see Superman—ah—yesterday, or day before yesterday? When's the last time you saw Superman?
Leon: Sa-aturday ...
CR: You rem—you saw it Saturday? What was the story all about? You remember the story?
Leon: M-m.
CR: You don't remember the story of what—that you saw of Superman?
Leon: Nope.
CR: You don't remember what happened, huh?
Leon: Hm-m.
CR: I see—ah—what other stories do you like to watch on TV?
Leon: Mmmmm? ... umm ... (glottalization)

CR: Hmm? (four seconds)
Leon: Hh?
CR: What's th' other stories that you like to watch?
Leon: Mi-ighty Mouse ...
CR: And what else?
Leon: Ummmm ... ahm ...

This nonverbal behavior occurs in a relatively favorable context for adult-child interaction. The adult is a black man raised in Harlem, who knows this particular neighborhood and these boys very well. He is a skilled interviewer who has obtained a very high level of verbal response with techniques developed for a different age level, and he has an extraordinary advantage over most teachers or experimenters in these respects. But even his skills and personality are ineffective in breaking down the social constraints that prevail here.

When we reviewed the record of this interview with Leon, we decided to use it as a test of our own knowledge of the sociolinguistic factors which control speech. In the next interview with Leon we made the following changes in the social situation:
1. Clarence brought along a supply of potato chips, changing the interview into something more in the nature of a party.
2. He brought along Leon's best friend, eight-year-old Gregory.
3. We reduced the height imbalance by having Clarence get down on the floor of Leon's room; he dropped from six feet, two inches to three feet, six inches.
4. Clarence introduced taboo words and taboo topics, and proved, to Leon's surprise, that one can say anything into our microphone without any fear of retaliation. The result of these changes is a striking difference in the volume and style of speech. (The tape is punctuated throughout by the sound of potato chips.)

CR: Is there anybody who says your momma drink pee?
Leon: (rapidly and breathlessly) Yee-ah!
Greg: Yup!
Leon: And your father eat doo-doo for breakfast?
CR: Ohhh! ! (laughs)
Leon: And they say your father—your father eat doo-doo for dinner!
Greg: When they sound on me, I say C.B.S. C.B.M.
CR: What that mean?
Leon: Congo booger-snatcher! (laughs)
Greg: Congo booger-snatcher! (laughs)
The Logic of Nonstandard English

fights, but he can no longer use monosyllabic answers, and Gregory cuts through his facade in a way that Clarence alone was unable to do.

CR: Now, you said you had this fight now; but I wanted you to tell me about the fight that you had.
Leon: I ain’t had no fight.
CR: Yes you did! He said Barry . . .
CR: You said you had one! you had a fight with Butchie.
Greg: An he say Garland! . . . an‘ Michael!
CR: an ’Barry . . .
Leon: I di’n; you said that, Gregory!
Greg: You did!
Leon: You know you said that!
Greg: You said Garland, remember that?
Greg: You said Garland! Yes you did!
CR: You said Garland, that’s right.
CR: Did you have a fight with Garland?
Leon: Uh-Uh.
CR: You had one, and he beat you up, too!
Greg: Yes he did!
Leon: No, I di—I never had a fight with Butch! . . .

The same pattern can be seen on other local topics, where the interviewer brings neighborhood gossip to bear on Leon, and Gregory acts as a witness.

CR: . . . Hey Gregory! I heard that around here . . . and I’m ‘on’ tell you who said it, too . . .
Leon: Who?
CR: about you . . .
Leon: Who?
Greg: I’d say it!
CR: They said that—they say that the only person you play with is David Gilbert . . .
Leon: Yee-ah! yee-ah! yee-ah! . . .
Greg: That’s who you play with!
Leon: I ‘on’ play with him no more!
Greg: Yes you do!
Leon: I ‘on’ play with him no more!

5. The reference to the pork chop God condenses several concepts of black nationalism current in the Harlem community. A pork chop is a black who has not lost the traditional subservient ideology of the South, who has no knowledge of himself in Muslim terms, and the pork chop God would be the traditional God of Southern Baptists. He and His followers may be pork chops, but He still holds the power in Leon and Gregory’s world.
Greg: But remember, about me and Robbie?
Leon: So that's not—
Greg: and you went to Petey and Gilbert's house, 'member? Ah houah!!
Leon: So that's—so—but I would—I had came back out, an' I ain't go to his house no more . . .

The observer must now draw a very different conclusion about the verbal capacity of Leon. The monosyllabic speaker who had nothing to say about anything and cannot remember what he did yesterday has disappeared. Instead, we have two boys who have so much to say they keep interrupting each other and who seem to have no difficulty in using the English language to express themselves. In turn we obtain the volume of speech and the rich array of grammatical devices which we need for analyzing the structure of black English vernacular; for example: negative concord ("I 'on' play with him no more"), the pluperfect ("had came back out"), negative perfect ("I ain't had"), the negative preterite ("I ain't go"), and so on.

We can now transfer this demonstration of the sociolinguistic control of speech to other test situations, including IQ and reading tests in school. It should be immediately apparent that none of the standard tests will come anywhere near measuring Leon's verbal capacity. On these tests he will show up as very much the monosyllabic, inept, ignorant, bumbling child of our first interview. The teacher has far less ability than Clarence Robins to elicit speech from this child. Clarence knows the community, the things that Leon has been doing, and the things that Leon would like to talk about. But the power relationships in a one-to-one confrontation between adult and child are too asymmetrical. This does not mean that some black children will not talk a great deal when alone with an adult, or that an adult cannot get close to any child. It means that the social situation is the most powerful determinant of verbal behavior and that an adult must enter into the right social relation with a child if he wants to find out what a child can do. This is just what many teachers cannot do.

The view of the black speech community which we obtain from our work in the ghetto areas is precisely the opposite from that reported by Deutsch or by Bereiter and Engelmann. We see a child bathed in verbal stimulation from morning to night. We see many speech events which depend upon the competitive exhibition of verbal skills—sounding, singing, toasts, rifting, louding—a whole range of activities in which the individual gains status through his use of language (chapters 8 and 9). We see the younger child trying to acquire these skills from older children, hanging around on the outskirts of older peer groups, and imitating this behavior to the best of his ability. We see no connection between verbal skill in the speech events characteristic of the street culture and success in the schoolroom.

**Verbosity**

There are undoubtedly many verbal skills which children from ghetto areas must learn in order to do well in the school situation, and some of these are indeed characteristic of middle-class verbal behavior. Precision in spelling, practice in handling abstract symbols, the ability to state explicitly the meaning of words, and a richer knowledge of the Latinate vocabulary, may all be useful acquisitions. But is it true that all of the middle-class verbal habits are functional and desirable in the school situation? Before we impose middle-class verbal style upon children from other cultural groups, we should find out how much of this is useful for the main work of analyzing and generalizing, and how much is merely stylistic—or even dysfunctional. In high school and college, middle-class children spontaneously complicate their syntax to the point that instructors despair of getting them to make their language simpler and clearer. In every learned journal one can find examples of jargon and empty elaboration, as well as complaints about it. Is the elaborated code of Bernstein really so "flexible, detailed and subtle" as some psychologists believe (e.g., Jensen 1969:119)? Isn't it also turgid, redundant, bombastic, and empty? Is it not simply an elaborated style, rather than a superior code or system? 6

Our work in the speech community makes it painfully obvious that in many ways working-class speakers are more effective narrators, reasoners, and debaters than many middle-class speakers who

---

6. The term *code* is central in Bernstein's (1966) description of the differences between working-class and middle-class styles of speech. The restrictions and elaborations of speech observed are labeled as codes to indicate the principles governing selection from the range of possible English sentences. No rules or detailed description of the operation of such codes are provided as yet, so that this central concept remains to be specified.
temporize, qualify, and lose their argument in a mass of irrelevant detail. Many academic writers try to rid themselves of that part of middle-class style that is empty pretension and keep that part that is needed for precision. But the average middle-class speaker that we encounter makes no such effort; he is enmeshed in verbiage, the victim of sociolinguistic factors beyond his control.

I will not attempt to support this argument here with systematic quantitative evidence, although it is possible to develop measures which show how far middle-class speakers can wander from the point. I would like to contrast two speakers dealing with roughly the same topic—matters of belief. The first is Larry H., a fifteen-year-old core member of the Jets, being interviewed by John Lewis. Larry is one of the loudest and roughest members of the Jets, one who gives the least recognition to the conventional rules of politeness.7 For most readers of this book, first contact with Larry would produce some fairly negative reactions on both sides. It is probable that you would not like him any more than his teachers do. Larry causes trouble in and out of school. He was put back from the eleventh grade to the ninth, and has been threatened with further action by the school authorities.

**JL:** What happens to you after you die? Do you know?
**Larry:** Yeah, I know. (What?) After they put you in the ground, your body turns into—ah—bones, an’ shit.

**JL:** What happens to your spirit?
**Larry:** Your spirit—soon as you die, your spirit leaves you. (And where does the spirit go?) Well, it all depends... (On what?) You know, like some people say if you’re good an’ shit, your spirit goin’ the heaven... ’n’ if you bad, your spirit goin’ to hell. Well, bullshit! Your spirit goin’ to hell anyway, good or bad.

**JL:** Why?
**Larry:** Why? I’ll tell you why. ’Cause, you see, doesn’t nobody really know that it’s a God, y’know, ’cause I mean I have seen black gods, pink gods, white gods, all color gods, and don’t nobody know it’s really a God. An’ when they be sayin’ if you good, you goin’ the heaven, tha’s bullshit, ’cause you ain’t goin’ to no heaven, ’cause it ain’t no heaven for you to go to.

Larry is a paradigmatic speaker of black English vernacular as opposed to standard English. His grammar shows a high concentration of such characteristic BEV forms as negative inversion (“don’t nobody know”), negative concord (“you ain’t goin’ to no heaven”), invariant be (“when they be sayin’”), dummy it for standard there (“it ain’t no heaven”), optional copula deletion (“if you’re good... if you bad”) and full forms of auxiliaries (“I have seen”). The only standard English influence in this passage is the one case of “doesn’t” instead of the invariant “don’t” of BEV. Larry also provides a paradigmatic example of the rhetorical style of BEV: he can sum up a complex argument in a few words, and the full force of his opinions comes through without qualification or reservation. He is eminently quotable, and his interviews give us many concise statements of the BEV point of view. One can almost say that Larry speaks the BEV culture (see CRR 3288, vol. 2: 38, 71–73, 291–92).

It is the logical form of this passage which is of particular interest here. Larry presents a complex set of interdependent propositions which can be explicated by setting out the standard English equivalents in linear order. The basic argument is to deny the twin propositions:

(A) If you are good, (B) then your spirit will go to heaven.
(∼A) If you are bad, (C) then your spirit will go to hell.

Larry denies B and asserts that if A or ∼ A, then C. His argument may be outlined as follows:

1. Everyone has a different idea of what God is like.
2. Therefore nobody really knows that God exists.
3. If there is a heaven, it was made by God.
4. If God doesn’t exist, he couldn’t have made heaven.
5. Therefore heaven does not exist.
6. You can’t go somewhere that doesn’t exist.
(∼B) Therefore you can’t go to heaven.
(C) Therefore you are going to hell.

---

7. A direct view of Larry’s verbal style in a hostile encounter is given in CRR 3288 Vol. 2:39–43. Gray’s Oral Reading Test was being given to a group of Jets on the steps of a brownstone house in Harlem, and the landlord tried unsuccessfully to make the Jets move. Larry’s verbal style in this encounter matches the reports he gives of himself in a number of narratives cited in section 4.8 of the report.
The argument is presented in the order: C, because 2 because 1, therefore 2, therefore \(\sim B\) because 5 and 6. Part of the argument is implicit: the connection 2 therefore \(\sim B\) leaves unstated the connecting links 3 and 4, and in this interval Larry strengthens the propositions from the form 2 "Nobody knows if there is . . . " to 5 "There is no . . . ". Otherwise, the case is presented explicitly as well as economically. The complex argument is summed up in Larry's last sentence, which shows formally the dependence of \(\sim B\) on 5 and 6:

\[
\text{An' when they be sayin' if you good, you goin' t'heaven,} \\
\text{(The proposition if A, then B)} \\
\text{tha's bullshit, (is absurd)} \\
\text{'cause you ain't goin' to no heaven (because B)} \\
\text{'cause it ain't no heaven for you to go to (because 5 and 6).}
\]

This hypothetical argument is not carried on at a high level of seriousness. It is a game played with ideas as counters, in which opponents use a wide variety of verbal devices to win. There is no personal commitment to any of these propositions, and no reluctance to strengthen one's argument by bending the rules of logic as in the 2-5 sequence. But if the opponent invokes the rules of logic, they hold. In John Lewis's interviews, he often makes this move, and the force of his argument is always acknowledged and countered within the rules of logic. In this case, he pointed out the fallacy that the argument 2-3-4-5-6 leads to \(\sim C\) as well as \(\sim B\), so it cannot be used to support Larry's assertion C:

\[
\text{JL: Well, if there's no heaven, how could there be a hell?} \\
\text{Larry: I mean—ye-eah. Well, let me tell you, it ain't no} \\
\text{hell, 'cause this is hell right here, y'know! (This is hell?)} \\
\text{Yeah, this is hell right here!}
\]

Larry's answer is quick, ingenious, and decisive. The application of the 3-4-5 argument to hell is denied, since hell is here, and therefore conclusion C stands. These are not ready-made or preconceived opinions, but new propositions devised to win the logical argument in the game being played. The reader will note the speed and precision of Larry's mental operations. He does not wander, or insert meaningless verbiage. The only repetition is 2, placed before and after 1 in his original statement. It is often said that the nonstandard vernacular is not suited for dealing with abstract or hypothetical questions, but in fact speakers from the BEV community take great delight in exercising their wit and logic on the most improbable and problematical matters. Despite the fact that Larry does not believe in God and has just denied all knowledge of him, John Lewis advances the following hypothetical question:

\[
\text{JL: . . . but, just say that there is a God, what color is he?} \\
\text{White or black?}
\]

\[
\text{Larry: Well, if it is a God . . . I wouldn't know what color,} \\
\text{I couldn't say,—couldn't nobody say what color he is or} \\
\text{really would be.}
\]

\[
\text{JL: But now, jus' suppose there was a God—} \\
\text{Larry: Unless'n they say . . .}
\]

\[
\text{JL: No, I was jus' sayin' jus' suppose there is a God, would} \\
\text{he be white or black?}
\]

\[
\text{Larry: . . . He'd be white, man.}
\]

\[
\text{JL: Why?}
\]

\[
\text{Larry: Why? I'll tell you why. 'Cause the average whitey} \\
\text{out here got everything, you dig? And the nigger ain't} \\
\text{got shit, y'know? Y'unnerstan? So—um—for—in order} \\
\text{for that to happen, you know it ain't no black God that's} \\
\text{doin' that bullshit.}
\]

No one can hear Larry's answer to this question without being convinced that they are in the presence of a skilled speaker with great "verbal presence of mind," who can use the English language expertly for many purposes. Larry's answer to John Lewis is again a complex argument. The formulation is not standard English, but it is clear and effective even for those not familiar with the vernacular. The nearest standard English equivalent might be: "So you know that God isn't black, because if he were, he wouldn't have arranged things like that."

The reader will have noted that this analysis is being carried out in standard English, and the inevitable challenge is: why not write in BEV, then, or in your own nonstandard dialect? The fundamental reason is, of course, one of firmly fixed social conventions. All communities agree that standard English is the proper medium for formal writing and public communication. Furthermore, it seems likely that standard English has an advantage over BEV in explicit
analysis of surface forms, which is what we are doing here. We will return to this opposition between explicitness and logical statement in subsequent sections on grammaticality and logic. First, however, it will be helpful to examine standard English in its primary natural setting, as the medium for informal spoken communication of middle-class speakers.

Let us now turn to the second speaker, an upper-middle-class, college-educated black adult (Charles M.) being interviewed by Clarence Robins in our survey of adults in central Harlem.

CR: Do you know of anything that someone can do, to have someone who has passed on visit him in a dream?
Charles: Well, I even heard my parents say that there is such a thing as something in dreams, some things like that, and sometimes dreams do come true. I have personally never had a dream come true. I’ve never dreamt that somebody was dying and they actually died, (Mhm) or that I was going to have ten dollars the next day and somehow I got ten dollars in my pocket. (Mhm). I don’t particularly believe in that, I don’t think it’s true. I do feel, though, that there is such a thing as—all—witchcraft. I do feel that in certain cultures there is such a thing as witchcraft, or some sort of science of witchcraft; I don’t think that it’s just a matter of believing hard enough that there is such a thing as witchcraft. I do believe that there is such a thing that a person can put himself in a state of mind (Mhm), or that—er—something could be given them to intoxicate them in a certain—to a certain frame of mind—that—that could actually be considered witchcraft.

Charles M. is obviously a good speaker who strikes the listener as well-educated, intelligent, and sincere. He is a likeable and attractive person, the kind of person that middle-class listeners rate very high on a scale of job suitability and equally high as a potential friend. His language is more moderate and tempered than Larry’s; he makes every effort to qualify his opinions and seems anxious to avoid any misstatements or overstatements. From these qualities emerge the primary characteristic of this passage—its verbosity. Words multiply, some modifying and qualifying, others repeating or padding the main argument. The first half of this extract is a response to the initial question on dreams, basically:

1. Some people say that dreams sometimes come true.
2. I have never had a dream come true.
3. Therefore I don’t believe 1.

Some characteristic filler phrases appear here: such a thing as, some things like that, and particularly. Two examples of dreams given after 2 are afterthoughts that might have been given after 1. Proposition 3 is stated twice for no obvious reason. Nevertheless, much of Charles M.’s response is well-directed to the point of the question. He then volunteers a statement of his beliefs about witchcraft which shows the difficulty of middle-class speakers who (a) want to express a belief in something but (b) want to show themselves as judicious, rational, and free from superstitions. The basic proposition can be stated simply in five words: But I believe in witchcraft. However, the idea is enlarged to exactly 100 words and it is difficult to see what else is being said. In the following quotations, padding which can be removed without change in meaning is shown in parentheses.

1. “I (do) feel, though, that there is (such a thing as) witchcraft.” 
2. “(I do feel that) in certain cultures (there is such a thing as witchcraft).”
3. “(or some sort of science of witchcraft.)”
4. “I don’t think that it’s just (a matter of) believing hard enough that (there is such a thing as) witchcraft.”

Charles M. is obviously a good speaker who strikes the listener as well-educated, intelligent, and sincere. He is a likeable and attractive person, the kind of person that middle-class listeners rate very high on a scale of job suitability and equally high as a potential friend. His language is more moderate and tempered than Larry’s; he makes every effort to qualify his opinions and seems anxious to avoid any misstatements or overstatements. From these qualities emerge the primary characteristic of this passage—its verbosity. Words multiply, some modifying and qualifying, others repeating or padding the main argument. The first half of this extract is a response to the initial question on dreams, basically:

1. Some people say that dreams sometimes come true.
2. I have never had a dream come true.
3. Therefore I don’t believe 1.

Some characteristic filler phrases appear here: such a thing as, some things like that, and particularly. Two examples of dreams given after 2 are afterthoughts that might have been given after 1. Proposition 3 is stated twice for no obvious reason. Nevertheless, much of Charles M.’s response is well-directed to the point of the question. He then volunteers a statement of his beliefs about witchcraft which shows the difficulty of middle-class speakers who (a) want to express a belief in something but (b) want to show themselves as judicious, rational, and free from superstitions. The basic proposition can be stated simply in five words: But I believe in witchcraft. However, the idea is enlarged to exactly 100 words and it is difficult to see what else is being said. In the following quotations, padding which can be removed without change in meaning is shown in parentheses.

1. “I (do) feel, though, that there is (such a thing as) witchcraft.”

Feel seems to be a euphemism for ‘believe’.
2. “(I do feel that) in certain cultures (there is such a thing as witchcraft).”
3. “(or some sort of science of witchcraft.)”
4. “I don’t think that it’s just (a matter of) believing hard enough that (there is such a thing as) witchcraft.”

Charles M. is obviously a good speaker who strikes the listener as well-educated, intelligent, and sincere. He is a likeable and attractive person, the kind of person that middle-class listeners rate very high on a scale of job suitability and equally high as a potential friend. His language is more moderate and tempered than Larry’s; he makes every effort to qualify his opinions and seems anxious to avoid any misstatements or overstatements. From these qualities emerge the primary characteristic of this passage—its verbosity. Words multiply, some modifying and qualifying, others repeating or padding the main argument. The first half of this extract is a response to the initial question on dreams, basically:

1. Some people say that dreams sometimes come true.
2. I have never had a dream come true.
3. Therefore I don’t believe 1.

Some characteristic filler phrases appear here: such a thing as, some things like that, and particularly. Two examples of dreams given after 2 are afterthoughts that might have been given after 1. Proposition 3 is stated twice for no obvious reason. Nevertheless, much of Charles M.’s response is well-directed to the point of the question. He then volunteers a statement of his beliefs about witchcraft which shows the difficulty of middle-class speakers who (a) want to express a belief in something but (b) want to show themselves as judicious, rational, and free from superstitions. The basic proposition can be stated simply in five words: But I believe in witchcraft. However, the idea is enlarged to exactly 100 words and it is difficult to see what else is being said. In the following quotations, padding which can be removed without change in meaning is shown in parentheses.

1. “I (do) feel, though, that there is (such a thing as) witchcraft.”

Feel seems to be a euphemism for ‘believe’.
2. “(I do feel that) in certain cultures (there is such a thing as witchcraft).”
3. “(or some sort of science of witchcraft.)”
4. “I don’t think that it’s just (a matter of) believing hard enough that (there is such a thing as) witchcraft.”

Charles M. is obviously a good speaker who strikes the listener as well-educated, intelligent, and sincere. He is a likeable and attractive person, the kind of person that middle-class listeners rate very high on a scale of job suitability and equally high as a potential friend. His language is more moderate and tempered than Larry’s; he makes every effort to qualify his opinions and seems anxious to avoid any misstatements or overstatements. From these qualities emerge the primary characteristic of this passage—its verbosity. Words multiply, some modifying and qualifying, others repeating or padding the main argument. The first half of this extract is a response to the initial question on dreams, basically:

1. Some people say that dreams sometimes come true.
2. I have never had a dream come true.
3. Therefore I don’t believe 1.
5. "I (do) believe that (there is such a thing that) a person can put himself in a state of mind . . . that (could actually be considered) witchcraft." Is witchcraft as a state of mind different from the state of belief, denied in 4?

6. "or that something could be given them to intoxicate them (to a certain frame of mind) . . ." The third learned word, intoxicate, is introduced by this addition. The vacuity of this passage becomes more evident if we remove repetitions, fashionable words and stylistic decorations:

But I believe in witchcraft.
I don't think witchcraft is just a belief.

A person can put himself or be put in a state of mind that is witchcraft.

Without the extra verbiage and the "OK" words like science, culture, and intoxicate, Charles M. appears as something less than a first-rate thinker. The initial impression of him as a good speaker is simply our long-conditioned reaction to middle-class verbosity. We know that people who use these stylistic devices are educated people, and we are inclined to credit them with saying something intelligent. Our reactions are accurate in one sense. Charles M. is more educated than Larry. But is he more rational, more logical, more intelligent? Is he any better at thinking out a problem to its solution? Does he deal more easily with abstractions? There is no reason to think so. Charles M. succeeds in letting us know that he is educated, but in the end we do not know what he is trying to say, and neither does he.

In the previous section I have attempted to explain the origin of the myth that lower-class black children are nonverbal. The examples just given may help to account for the corresponding myth that middle-class language is in itself better suited for dealing with abstract, logically complex, or hypothetical questions. These examples are intended to have a certain negative force. They are not controlled experiments. On the contrary, this and the preceding section are designed to convince the reader that the controlled experiments that have been offered in evidence are misleading. The only thing that is controlled is the superficial form of the stimulus. All children are asked "What do you think of capital punishment?" or "Tell me everything you can about this." But the speaker's interpretation of these requests and the action he believes is appropriate in response is completely uncontrolled. One can view these test stimuli as requests for information, commands for action, threats of punishment, or meaningless sequences of words. They are probably intended as something altogether different—as requests for display,¹⁰ but in any case the experimenter is normally unaware of the problem of interpretation. The methods of educational psychologists used by Deutsch, Jensen, and Bereiter follow the pattern designed for animal experiments where motivation is controlled by simple methods as withholding food until a certain weight reduction is reached. With human subjects, it is absurd to believe that identical stimuli are obtained by asking everyone the same question.

Since the crucial intervening variables of interpretation and motivation are uncontrolled, most of the literature on verbal deprivation tells us nothing about the capacities of children. They are only the trappings of science, approaches that substitute the formal procedures of the scientific method for the activity itself. With our present limited grasp of these problems, the best we can do to understand the verbal capacities of children is to study them within the cultural context in which they were developed.

It is not only the black English vernacular which should be studied in this way, but also the language of middle-class children. The explicitness and precision which we hope to gain from copying middle-class forms are often the product of the test situation, and limited to it. For example, it was stated in the first part of this paper that working-class children hear more well-formed sentences than middle-class children. This statement may seem extraordinary in the light of the current belief of many linguists that most people do not speak in well-formed sentences, and that their actual speech production, or performance, is ungrammatical.¹¹ But those who have

¹⁰. The concept of a request for verbal display is here drawn from a treatment of the therapeutic interview given by Alan Blum.

¹¹. In several presentations, Chomsky has asserted that the great majority (95 percent) of the sentences which a child hears are ungrammatical. Chomsky (1965:58) presents this notion as one of the arguments in his general statement of the nativist position: "A consideration of the character of the grammar that is acquired, the degenerate quality and narrowly limited extent of the available data [my emphasis], the striking uniformity of the resulting grammars, and their independence of intelligence, motivation, and emotional state, over wide ranges of variation, leave little hope that much of the structure of the language can be learned . . ."
worked with any body of natural speech know that this is not the case. Our own studies (Labov 1966b) of the grammaticality of everyday speech show that the great majority of utterances in all contexts are complete sentences, and most of the rest can be reduced to grammatical form by a small set of editing rules. The proportions of grammatical sentences vary with class backgrounds and styles. The highest percentage of well-formed sentences are found in casual speech, and working-class speakers use more well-formed sentences than middle-class speakers. The widespread myth that most speech is ungrammatical is no doubt based upon tapes made at learned conferences, where we obtain the maximum number of irreducibly ungrammatical sequences.

It is true that technical and scientific books are written in a style which is markedly middle-class. But unfortunately, we often fail to achieve the explicitness and precision which we look for in such writing, and the speech of many middle-class people departs maximally from this target. All too often, standard English is represented by a style that is simultaneously overparticular and vague. The accumulating flow of words buries rather than strikes the target. It is this verbosity which is most easily taught and most easily learned, so that words take the place of thoughts, and nothing can be found behind them.

When Bernstein (e.g., 1966) describes his elaborated code in general terms, it emerges as a subtle and sophisticated mode of planning utterances, where the speaker is achieving structural variety, taking the other person’s knowledge into account, and so on. But when it comes to describing the actual difference between middle-class and working-class speakers (Bernstein 1966), we are presented with a proliferation of *I think*, of the passive, of modals and auxiliaries, of the first-person pronoun, of uncommon words, and so on. But these are the bench marks of hemming and hawing, backing and filling, that are used by Charles M., the devices that so often obscure whatever positive contribution education can make to our use of language. When we have discovered how much of middle-class style is a matter of fashion and how much actually helps us express ideas clearly, we will have done ourselves a great service. We will then be in a position to say what standard grammatical rules must be taught to nonstandard speakers in the early grades.

**Grammaticality**

Let us now examine Bereiter’s own data on the verbal behavior of the children he dealt with. The expressions *They mine* and *Me got juice* are cited as examples of a language which lacks the means for expressing logical relations, in this case characterized as “a series of badly connected words” (Bereiter, et al. 1966:113). In the case of *They mine*, it is apparent that Bereiter confuses the notions of logic and explicitness. We know that there are many languages of the world which do not have a present copula and which conjoin subject and predicate complement without a verb. Russian, Hungarian, and Arabic may be foreign, but they are not by that same token illogical. In the case of BEV we are not dealing with even this superficial grammatical difference, but rather with a low-level rule which carries contraction one step farther to delete single consonants representing the verbs *is*, *have* or *will* (see chapter 3). We have yet to find any children who do not sometimes use the full forms of *is* and *will*, even though they may frequently delete them. Our recent studies with black children four to seven years old indicate that they use the full form of the copula more often than preadolescents 10 to 12 years old or the adolescents 14 to 17 years old.12

Furthermore, the deletion of the *is* or *are* in BEV is not the result of erratic or illogical behavior; it follows the same regular rules as standard English contraction, as we showed in chapter 3. The appropriate use of the deletion rule, like the contraction rule, requires a deep and intimate knowledge of English grammar and phonology. Such knowledge is not available for conscious inspection by native speakers. The rules worked out for standard contraction in chapter 3 have never appeared in any grammar and are certainly not a part of the conscious knowledge of any standard English speakers. Nevertheless, the adult or child who uses these rules must have formed at some level of psychological organization, clear concepts of tense marker, verb phrase, rule ordering, sentence embedding, pronoun, and many other grammatical categories which are essential parts of any logical system.

12. This is from work on the grammars and comprehension of black children, four to eight years old, carried out by Prof. Jane Torrey of Connecticut College 1972 in extension of the research cited above in Labov, et al. (1966).
Bereiter's reaction to the sentence *Me got juice* is even more puzzling. If Bereiter believes that *Me got juice* is not a logical expression, it can only be that he interprets the use of the objective pronoun *me* as representing a difference in logical relationship to the verb—that the child is in fact saying 'the juice got him' rather than 'he got the juice'? If on the other hand, the child means 'I got juice' then this sentence shows only that he has not learned the formal rules for the use of the subjective form *I* and oblique form *me*. We have in fact encountered many children who do not have these formal rules in order at the ages of four, five, six, or even eight. It is extremely difficult to construct a minimal pair to show that the difference between *he* and *him* or *she* and *her* carries cognitive meaning. In almost every case, it is the context that tells us who is the agent and who is acted upon. We must then ask: What differences in cognitive, structural orientation are signalled by the fact that the child has not learned this formal rule? In the tests carried out by Jane Torrey it is evident that the children concerned do understand the difference in meaning between *she* and *her* when another person uses the forms; all that remains is that the children themselves do not use the two forms. Our knowledge of the cognitive correlates of grammatical differences is certainly in its infancy; for this is one of very many questions which we simply cannot answer. At the moment we do not know how to construct any kind of experiment which would lead to an answer; we do not even know what type of cognitive correlate we would be looking for.

Bereiter shows even more profound ignorance of the rules of discourse and of syntax when he rejects *In the tree* as an illogical or badly-formed answer to *Where is the squirrel?* Such elliptical answers are of course used by everyone; they show the appropriate deletion of subject and main verb, leaving the locative which is questioned by *WH + there*. The reply *In the tree* demonstrates that the listener has been attentive to and apprehended the syntax of the speaker.\(^\text{13}\) Whatever formal structure we wish to write for expressions such as *Yes* or *Home* or *In the tree*, it is obvious that they cannot be interpreted without knowing the structure of the question which preceded them and that they presuppose an understanding of the syntax of the question. Thus if you ask me "Where is the squirrel?"

---

\(^\text{13}\) The attention to the speaker's syntax required of the listener is analyzed in detail in a series of unpublished lectures by Prof. Harvey Sacks, Department of Sociology, University of California-Irvine.
something.' I need not emphasize that this is an absurd interpretation. If a nonstandard speaker wishes to say 'He does not know nothing,' he does so by simply placing contrastive stress on both negatives as I have done here (He don't know nothing) indicating that they are derived from two underlying negatives in the deep structure. But note that the middle-class speaker does exactly the same thing when he wants to signal the existence of two underlying negatives: He doesn't know nothing. In the standard form with one underlying negative (He doesn't know anything), the indefinite anything contains the same superficial reference to a preceding negative in the surface structure as the nonstandard nothing does. In the corresponding positive sentences, the indefinite something is used. The dialect difference, like most of the differences between the standard and nonstandard forms, is one of surface form, and has nothing to do with the underlying logic of the sentence.

We can summarize the ways in which the two dialects differ:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive:</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>BEV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He knows something.</td>
<td>He know something.</td>
<td>He don't know nothing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative:</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He doesn't know anything.</td>
<td>He don't know nothing.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Double Negative:</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He doesn't know nothing.</td>
<td>He don't know nothing.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This array makes it plain that the only difference between the two dialects is in superficial form. When a single negative is found in the deep structure, standard English converts something to the indefinite anything, BEV converts it to nothing. When speakers want to signal the presence of two negatives, they do it in the same way. No one would have any difficulty constructing the same table of truth values for both dialects. English is a rare language in its insistence that the negative particle be incorporated in the first indefinite only. The Anglo-Saxon authors of the Peterborough Chronicle were surely not illogical when they wrote For ne wæren nan martrys swa pined also he wæron, literally, 'For never weren't no martyrs so tortured as these were'. The "logical" forms of current standard English are simply the accepted conventions of our present-day formal style. Russian, Spanish, French, and Hungarian show the same negative concord as nonstandard English, and they are surely not illogical in this. What is termed "logical" in standard English is of course the conventions which are habitual. The distribution of negative concord in English dialects developed in the last chapter can be summarized as follows:

1. In all dialects of English, the negative is attracted to a lone indefinite before the verb: Nobody knows anything, not *Anybody doesn't know anything.

2. In some nonstandard white dialects, the negative also combines optionally with all other indefinites: Nobody knows nothing. He never took none of them.

3. In other white nonstandard dialects, the negative may also appear in preverbal position in the same clause: Nobody doesn't know nothing.

4. In black English vernacular, negative concord is obligatory to all indefinites within the clause, and it may even be added to preverbal position in following clauses: Nobody didn't know he didn't (meaning, 'Nobody knew he did').

Thus all dialects of English share a categorical rule which attracts the negative to an indefinite subject, and they merely differ in the extent to which the negative particle is also distributed to other indefinites in preverbal position. It would have been impossible for us to arrive at this analysis if we did not know that black speakers are using the same underlying logic as everyone else.

Negative concord is more firmly established in black English vernacular than in other nonstandard dialects. The white nonstandard speaker shows variation in this rule, saying one time Nobody ever goes there and the next Nobody never goes there. Core speakers of BEV consistently use the latter form. In repetition tests which we conducted with black adolescent boys (CRR 3268: section 3.9), standard forms were repeated with negative concord. Consider again three trials by two 13-year-olds, Boot and David, Thunderbirds:

**Model by interviewer:** Nobody ever sat at any of those desks, anyhow.

**Boot:**
2. Nobody never sat any any o’ tho’ dess, anyhow.
3. Nobody as ever sat at no desses, anyhow.

**David:**
1. Nobody ever sat in-in-in- none o’—say it again?
2. Nobody never sat in none o’ tho’ desses anyhow.
3. Nobody—aww! Nobody never ex—Dawg!
It can certainly be said that Boot and David fail the test; they have not repeated the sentence back correctly—that is, word for word. But have they failed because they could not grasp the meaning of the sentence? The situation is in fact just the opposite: they failed because they perceived only the meaning and not the superficial form. Boot and David are typical of many speakers who do not perceive the surface details of the utterance so much as the underlying semantic structure, which they unhesitatingly translate into the vernacular form. Thus they have the asymmetrical system we saw in chapter 2 in responses to embedded questions.

**Model:** I asked Alvin if he knows how to play basketball.

**Boot:** I ax Alvin do he know how to play basketball.

**Money:** I ax Alvin if—do he know how to play basketball.

Here the difference between the words used in the model sentence and in the repetition is striking. Again, there is a failure to pass the test. But it is also true that these boys understand the standard sentence, and translate it with extraordinary speed into the BEV form—which is here the regular southern colloquial form. This form retains the inverted order to signal the underlying meaning of the question, instead of the complementizer if or whether which standard English uses for this purpose. Thus Boot and Money perceive the deep structure of the model sentence in the diagram below.

```
S
I asked Alvin — S
Q — Alvin knows how
S
one plays basketball
```

The complementizers if or whether are not required to express this underlying meaning; they are merely two of the formal options which one dialect selects to signal the embedded question. The colloquial southern form utilizes a different device—preserving the order of

the direct question. To say that this dialect lacks the means for logical expression is to confuse logic with surface detail.

To pass the repetition test, Boot and the others have to learn to listen to surface detail. They do not need a new logic; they need practice in paying attention to the explicit form of an utterance rather than its meaning. Careful attention to surface features is a temporary skill needed for language learning—and neglected thereafter by competent speakers. Nothing more than this is involved in the language training in the Bereiter and Engelmann program, or in most methods of “teaching English.” There is of course nothing wrong with learning to be explicit—as we have seen, that is one of the main advantages of standard English at its best—but it is important that we recognize what is actually taking place, and what teachers are in fact trying to do.

I doubt if we can teach people to be logical, though we can teach them to recognize the logic that they use. Piaget has shown us that in middle-class children logic develops much more slowly than grammar, and that we cannot expect four-year-olds to have mastered the conservation of quantity, let alone syllogistic reasoning. The problems working-class children may have in handling logical operations are not to be blamed on the structure of their language. There is nothing in the vernacular which will interfere with the development of logical thought, for the logic of standard English cannot be distinguished from the logic of any other dialect of English by any test that we can find.

**What’s Wrong with Being Wrong?**

If there is a failure of logic involved here, it is surely in the approach of the verbal deprivation theorists, rather than in the mental abilities of the children concerned. We can isolate six distinct steps in the reasoning which has led to positions such as those of Deutsch or Bereiter and Engelmann:

1. The lower-class child’s verbal response to a formal and threatening situation is used to demonstrate his lack of verbal capacity, or verbal deficit.
2. This verbal deficit is declared to be a major cause of the lower-class child’s poor performance in school.
3. Since middle-class children do better in school, middle-class speech habits are seen to be necessary for learning.
4. Class and ethnic differences in grammatical form are equated with differences in the capacity for logical analysis.
5. Teaching the child to mimic certain formal speech patterns used by middle-class teachers is seen as teaching him to think logically.
6. Children who learn these formal speech patterns are then said to be thinking logically and it is predicted that they will do much better in reading and arithmetic in the years to follow.

In the preceding sections of this paper I have tried to show that the above propositions are wrong, concentrating on 1, 4, and 5. Proposition 3 is the primary logical fallacy which illicits identifies a form of speech as the cause of middle-class achievement in school. Proposition 6 is the one which is most easily shown to be wrong in fact, as we will note below.

However, it is not too naive to ask: What is wrong with being wrong? There is no competing educational theory which is being dismantled by this program, and there does not seem to be any great harm in having children repeat “This is not a box” for twenty minutes a day. We have already conceded that BEV children need help in analyzing language into its surface components and in being more explicit. But there are serious and damaging consequences of the verbal deprivation theory which may be considered under two headings: theoretical bias and consequences of failure.

Theoretical Bias

It is widely recognized that the teacher’s attitude toward the child is an important factor in his success or failure. The work of Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) on self-fulfilling prophecies shows that the progress of children in the early grades can be dramatically affected by a single random labeling of certain children as “intellectual bloomers.” When the everyday language of black children is stigmatized as “not a language at all” and “not possessing the means for logical thought,” the effect of such a labeling is repeated many times during each day of the school year. Every time that a child uses a form of BEV without the copula or with negative concord, he will be labeling himself for the teacher’s benefit as “illogical,” as a “non-conceptual thinker.” Bereiter and Engelmann, Deutsch, and Jensen are giving teachers a ready-made, theoretical basis for the prejudice they already feel against the lower-class black child and his language (for example, see Williams 1970). When teachers hear him say I don’t want none or They mine, they will be hearing through the bias provided by the verbal deprivation theory—not an English dialect different from theirs, but the “primitive mentality of the savage mind.”

But what if the teacher succeeds in training the child to use the new language consistently? The verbal deprivation theory holds that this will lead to a whole chain of successes in school and that the child will be drawn away from the vernacular culture into the middle-class world. Undoubtedly this will happen with a few isolated individuals, just as it happens for a few children in every school system today. But we are concerned not with the few but the many, and for the majority of black children the distance between them and the school is bound to widen under this approach.

Proponents of the deficit theory have a strange view of social organization outside of the classroom. They see the attraction of the peer group as a substitute for success and gratification normally provided by the school. For example, Whiteman and Deutsch (1968:86–87) introduce their account of the deprivation hypothesis with an eyewitness account of a child who accidentally dropped his school notebook into a puddle of water and walked away without picking it up: “A policeman who had been standing nearby walked over to the puddle and stared at the notebook with some degree of disbelief.” The child’s alienation from school is explained as the result of his coming to school without the “verbal, conceptual, attentional, and learning skills requisite to school success.” The authors see the child as “suffering from feelings of inferiority because he is failing; he withdraws or becomes hostile, finding gratification elsewhere, such as in his peer group.”

To view the peer group as a mere substitute for school shows an extraordinary lack of knowledge of adolescent culture. In our studies in south-central Harlem we have seen the reverse situation—the children who are rejected by the peer group are most likely to succeed in school. Although in middle-class suburban areas, many children do fail in school because of their personal deficiencies, in ghetto areas it is the healthy, vigorous, popular child with normal intelligence who cannot read and fails all along the line. It is not necessary to document here the influence of the peer group upon the behavior of youth in our society, but we may note that somewhere between the time that children first learn to talk and puberty, their language is restructured to fit the rules used by their peer group. From a linguistic viewpoint, the peer group is certainly a more
powerful influence than the family (e.g., Gans 1962). Less directly, the pressures of peer-group activity are also felt within the school. Many children, particularly those who are not doing well in school, show a sudden sharp downward turn in the fourth and fifth grades, and children in the ghetto schools are no exception. It is at the same age, at nine or ten years old, that the influence of the vernacular peer group becomes predominant (see Wilmott 1966). Instead of dealing with isolated individuals, the school is then dealing with children who are integrated into groups of their own, with rewards and value systems which oppose those of the school. Those who know the sociolinguistic situation cannot doubt that reaction against the Bereiter-Engelmann approach in later years will be even more violent on the part of the students involved, and their rejection of the school system will be even more categorical.

The essential fallacy of the verbal deprivation theory lies in tracing the educational failure of the child to his personal deficiencies. At present, these deficiencies are said to be caused by his home environment. It is traditional to explain a child’s failure in school by his inadequacy. But when failure reaches such massive proportions, it seems to us necessary to look at the social and cultural obstacles to learning and the inability of the school to adjust to the social situation. Operation Head Start is designed to repair the child, rather than the school; to the extent that it is based upon this inverted logic, it is bound to fail.

Consequences of Failure

The second area in which the verbal deprivation theory is doing serious harm to our educational system is in the consequences of this failure and the reaction to it. As failures are reported of Operation Head Start, the interpretations which we receive will be from the same educational psychologists who designed this program. The fault will be found not in the data, the theory, nor in the methods used, but rather in the children who have failed to respond to the opportunities offered to them. When black children fail to show the significant advance which the deprivation theory predicts, it will be taken as further proof of the profound gulf which separates their mental processes from those of “civilized,” middle-class mankind.

A sense of the “failure” of Head Start is already in the air. Some prominent figures in the program have reacted to this situation by saying that intervention did not take place early enough. Caldwell (1967:16) notes that:

...the research literature of the last decade dealing with social-class differences has made abundantly clear that all parents are not qualified to provide even the basic essentials of physical and psychological care to their children.

The deficit theory now begins to focus on the “long-standing patterns of parental deficit” which fill the literature. “There is, perhaps unfortunately,” writes Caldwell (1967:17), “no literacy test for motherhood.” Failing such eugenic measures, she has proposed “educationally oriented day care for culturally deprived children between six months and three years of age.” The children are returned home each evening to “maintain primary emotional relationships with their own families,” but during the day they are removed to “hopefully prevent the deceleration in rate of development which seems to occur in many deprived children around the age of two to three years.”

There are others who feel that even the best of the intervention programs, such as those of Bereiter and Engelmann, will not help the black child no matter when such programs are applied—that we are faced once again with the “inevitable hypothesis” of the genetic inferiority of the black people. Many readers of this chapter may be familiar with the paper of Arthur Jensen in the Harvard Educational Review (1969), which received immediate and widespread publicity. Jensen (p. 3) begins with the following quotation from the United States Commission on Civil Rights as evidence of the failure of compensatory education:

The fact remains, however, that none of the programs appear to have raised significantly the achievement of participating pupils, as a group, within the period evaluated by the Commission (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1967, p. 138).

Jensen believes that the verbal-deprivation theorists with whom he had been associated—Deutsch, Whiteman, Katz, Bereiter—have been given every opportunity to prove their case, and have failed. This opinion is part of the argument which leads him to the overall conclusion (p. 82) that “the preponderance of the evidence is... less consistent with a strictly environmental hypothesis than with the genetic hypothesis.” In other words, racism—the belief in the genetic inferiority of blacks—is the most correct view in the light of the present evidence.

Jensen argues that the middle-class white population is differentiated from the working-class white and black population in the
ability for "cognitive or conceptual learning," which Jensen calls Level II intelligence as against mere "associative learning" or Level I intelligence:

... certain neural structures must also be available for Level II abilities to develop, and these are conceived of as being different from the neural structures underlying Level I. The genetic factors involved in each of these types of ability are presumed to have become differentially distributed in the population as a function of social class, since Level II has been most important for scholastic performance under the traditional methods of instruction. (Jensen 1969:114)

Jensen found, for example, that one group of middle-class children were helped by their concept-forming ability to recall 20 familiar objects that could be classified into four categories: animals, furniture, clothing, or foods. Lower-class black children did just as well as middle-class children with a miscellaneous set, but showed no improvement with objects that could be so categorized.

The research of the educational psychologists cited here is presented by them in formal and objective style and is widely received as impartial scientific evidence. Jensen's paper has been reported by Joseph Alsop and William F. Buckley, Jr. (New York Post, March 20, 1969) as "massive, apparently authoritative . . ." It is not my intention to examine these materials in detail, but it is important to realize that we are dealing with special pleading by those who have a strong personal commitment. Jensen is concerned with class differences in cognitive style and verbal learning. His earlier papers incorporated the cultural deprivation theory which he now rejects as a basic explanation.14 Jensen (1968:167) classified the black children who fail in school as "slow learners" and "mentally retarded" and urged that we find out how much their retardation is due to environmental factors and how much is due to "more basic biological factors." His conviction that the problem must be located in the child leads him to accept and reprint some truly extraordinary data. To support the genetic hypothesis Jensen (1969:83) cites the following percentage estimates by Heber (1968) of the racial distribution of mental retardation (based upon IQs below 75) in the general population:15

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socioeconomic status</th>
<th>Percent of whites</th>
<th>Percent of blacks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (highest)</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>37.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (lowest)</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These estimates, that almost half of lower-class black children are mentally retarded, could be accepted only by someone who has no knowledge of the children or the community. If he had wished to, Jensen could easily have checked this against the records of any school in any urban ghetto area. Taking IQ tests at their face value, there is no correspondence between these figures and the communities we know. For example, among 75 boys we worked with in central Harlem who would fall into status categories 4 or 5 above, there were only three with IQs below 75. One spoke very little English; one could barely see; the third was emotionally disturbed. When the second was retested, he scored 91, and the third retested at 87.16 There are of course hundreds of realistic reports available to Jensen. He simply selected one which would strengthen his case for the genetic inferiority of black children.

The frequent use of tables and statistics by educational psychologists serves to give outside readers the impression that this field is a science and that the opinions of the authors should be given the same attention and respect that we give to the conclusions of physi-

14. In Deutsch et al. (1968), Jensen expounds the verbal deprivation theory in considerable detail, for example (p. 119): "During this labeling period ... some very important social-class differences may exert their effects on verbal learning. Lower-class parents engage in relatively little of this naming or labeling play with their children ... That words are discrete labels for things seems to be better known by the middle-class child entering first grade than by the lower-class child. Much of this knowledge is gained in the parent-child interaction, as when the parent looks at a picture book with the child . . . ."

15. Heber's (esp. 1968) studies of 88 black mothers in Milwaukee are cited frequently throughout Jensen's paper. The estimates in this table are not given in relation to a particular Milwaukee sample, but for the general United States population. Heber's study was specifically designed to cover an area of Milwaukee which was known to contain a large concentration of retarded children, black and white, and he has stated that his findings were "grossly misinterpreted" by Jensen (Milwaukee Sentinel, June 11, 1969).

16. The IQ scores given here are from group rather than individual tests and must therefore not be weighed heavily; the scores are from the Pintner-Cunningham test, usually given the first grade in New York City schools in the 1960's.
cists or chemists. But careful examination of the input data will often show that there is no direct relationship between the conclusions and the evidence (in Jensen's case between I.Q. Tests in a specially selected district of Milwaukee and intelligence of lower-class black children). Furthermore, the operations performed upon the data frequently carry us very far from the common-sense experience which is our only safeguard against conclusions heavily weighted by the author's theory. As another example, we may take some of the evidence presented by Whiteman and Deutsch for the cultural deprivation hypothesis. The core of Deutsch's environmental explanation of poor performance in school is the Deprivation Index, a numerical scale based on six dichotomized variables. One variable is "the educational aspirational level of the parent for the child." Most people would agree that a parent who did not care if a child finished high-school would be a disadvantageous factor in the child's educational career. In dichotomizing this variable Deutsch was faced with the fact that the educational aspiration of black parents is in fact very high, higher than for the white population, as he shows in other papers.\(^1\) In order to fit this data into the Deprivation Index work, he therefore set the cutting point for the deprived group as "college or less." (see Whiteman and Deutsch 1968:100). Thus if a black child's father says that he wants his son to go all the way through college, the child will fall into the "deprived" class on this variable. In order to receive the two points given to the "less deprived" on the index, it would be necessary for the child's parent to insist on graduate school or medical school! This decision is not discussed by the author; it simply stands as a fact accomplished in the tables. Readers of this literature who are not committed to one point of view would be wise to look as carefully as possible at the original data which lies behind each statement and check the conclusions against their own knowledge of the people and community being described.

No one can doubt that the reported inadequacy of Operation Head Start and of the verbal deprivation hypothesis has now become a crucial issue in our society.\(^1\) The controversy which arose over Jensen's article typically assumed that programs such as Bereiter and Engelmann's have tested and measured the verbal capacity of the ghetto child. The cultural sociolinguistic obstacles to this intervention program are not considered, and the argument proceeds upon the data provided by the large, friendly interviewers whom we have seen at work in the extracts given above.

The Linguistic View

Linguists are in an excellent position to demonstrate the fallacies of the verbal deprivation theory. All linguists agree that nonstandard dialects are highly structured systems. They do not see these dialects as accumulations of errors caused by the failure of their speakers to master standard English. When linguists hear black children saying He crazy or Her my friend, they do not hear a primitive language. Nor do they believe that the speech of working-class people is merely a form of emotional expression, incapable of expressing logical thought.

All linguists who work with BEV recognize that it is a separate system, closely related to standard English but set apart from the surrounding white dialects by a number of persistent and systematic differences. Differences in analysis by various linguists in recent years are the inevitable products of differing theoretical approaches.

---

17. In Table 15.1 in Deutsch and associates (1967:312), section C shows that some degree of college training was desired by 98, 97 and 100 percent of black parents in class levels I, II, and III, respectively. The corresponding figures for whites were 79, 95, and 97 percent. In an earlier version of this chapter, this discussion could be interpreted as implying that Whiteman and Deutsch had used data in the same way as Jensen: to rate the black group as low as possible. As they point out (pers. comm.), the inclusion of this item in the Deprivation Index had the opposite effect, and it could easily have been omitted if that had been their intention. They also argue that they had sound statistical grounds for dichotomizing as they did. The criticism which I intended to make is that there is something drastically wrong with operations which produce definitions of deprivation such as the one cited here. It should of course be noted that Whiteman and Deutsch have strongly opposed Jensen's genetic hypothesis and vigorously criticized his logic and data.

18. The negative report of the Westinghouse Learning Corporation and Ohio University on Operation Head Start was published in the New York Times (April 19, 1969). The evidence of the failure of the program is accepted by many, and it seems likely that the report's discouraging conclusions will be used by conservative Congressmen as a weapon against any kind of expenditure for disadvantaged children, especially black children. The two hypotheses mentioned to account for this failure are that the impact of Head Start is lost through poor teaching later on, and more recently, that poor children have been so badly damaged in infancy by their lower-class environment that Head Start cannot make much difference. The third "inevitable" hypothesis of Jensen is not reported there.
and perspectives as we explore these dialect patterns by different routes—differences which are rapidly diminishing as we exchange our findings. For example, Stewart (1970) differs with me on how deeply the invariant be of *She be always messin' around* is integrated into the semantics of the copula system with am, is, are, and so on. The position and meaning of have ... ed in BEV is very unclear, and there are a variety of positions on this point. But the grammatical features involved are not the fundamental predicates of the logical system. They are optional ways of contrasting, foregrounding, emphasizing, or deleting elements of the underlying sentence. There are a few semantic features of BEV grammar which may be unique to this system. But the semantic features we are talking about here are items such as “habitual,” “general,” “intensive.” These linguistic markers are essentially points of view—different ways of looking at the same events, and they do not determine the truth values of propositions upon which all speakers of English agree.

The great majority of the differences between BEV and standard English do not even represent such subtle semantic features as those, but rather extensions and restrictions of certain formal rules and different choices of redundant elements. For example, standard English uses two signals to express the progressive, be and -ing, while BEV often drops the former. Standard English signals the third person in the present by the subject noun phrase and by a third singular -s; BEV does not have this second redundant feature. On the other hand, BEV uses redundant negative elements in negative concord, in possessives like mine, uses or either where standard English uses a simple or, and so on.

When linguists say that BEV is a system, we mean that it differs from other dialects in regular and rule-governed ways, so that it has equivalent ways of expressing the same logical content. When we say that it is a separate subsystem, we mean that there are compensating sets of rules which combine in different ways to preserve the distinctions found in other dialects. Thus as noted above BEV does not use the if or whether complementizer in embedded questions, but the meaning is preserved by the formal device of reversing the order of subject and auxiliary. Linguists therefore speak with a single voice in condemning Bereiter’s view that the vernacular can be disregarded. The exact nature and relative importance of the structural differences between BEV and standard English are not in question here. It is agreed that the teacher must approach the teaching of the standard through a knowledge of the child’s own system. The methods used in teaching English as a foreign language are recommended, not to declare that BEV is a foreign language, but to underline the importance of studying the native dialect as a coherent system for communication. This is in fact the method that should be applied in any English class.

Linguists are also in an excellent position to assess Jensen’s claim that the middle-class white population is superior to the working-class and black populations in the distribution of Level II, or conceptual, intelligence. The notion that large numbers of children have no capacity for conceptual thinking would inevitably mean that they speak a primitive language, for even the simplest linguistic rules we discussed above involve conceptual operations more complex than those used in the experiment Jensen cites. Let us consider what is involved in the use of the general English rule that incorporates the negative with the first indefinite. To learn and use the rule we worked out in chapter 4, one must first identify the class of indefinites involved—*any, one, ever*, which are formally quite diverse. How is this done? These indefinites share a number of common properties which can be expressed as the concepts ‘indefinite,’ ‘haphazard,’ and ‘nonpartitive.’ One might argue that these indefinites are learned as a simple list, by association learning. But this is only one of the many syntactic rules involving indefinites—rules known to every speaker of English, which could not be learned except by an understanding of their common, abstract properties.

What are we then to make of Jensen’s contention that Level I thinkers cannot make use of the concept “animal” to group together a miscellaneous set of toy animals? It is one thing to say that someone is not in the habit of using a certain skill. But to say that his failure to use it is genetically determined implies dramatic consequences for other forms of behavior, which are not found in experience. The knowledge of what people must do in order to learn language makes Jensen’s theories seem more and more distant from the realities of human behavior. Like Bereiter and Engelmann, Jensen is handicapped by his ignorance of the most basic facts about human language and the people who speak it.

There is no reason to believe that any nonstandard vernacular is in itself an obstacle to learning. The chief problem is ignorance of language on the part of all concerned. Our job as linguists is to remedy this ignorance; but Bereiter and Engelmann want to reinforce
it and justify it. Teachers are now being told to ignore the language of black children as unworthy of attention and useless for learning. They are being taught to hear every natural utterance of the child as evidence of his mental inferiority. As linguists we are unanimous in condemning this view as bad observation, bad theory, and bad practice.

That educational psychology should be strongly influenced by a theory so false to the facts of language is unfortunate; but that children should be the victims of this ignorance is intolerable. It may seem that the fallacies of the verbal deprivation theory are so obvious that they are hardly worth exposing. I have tried to show that such exposure is an important job for us to undertake. If linguists can contribute some of their available knowledge and energy toward this end, we will have done a great deal to justify the support that society has given to basic research in our field.

6 The Relation of Reading Failure to Peer-group Status

THE first four chapters of this book dealt with the structures of the black English vernacular—the rules which govern it, the relations between these rules, and the relation between them and those of other dialects.1 We have been particularly concerned with the relation between BEV and the standard English of the classroom, because the conflict between these two dialects of English must be resolved to achieve the educational goals of our society. Both black and white sections of the community strongly endorse the proposition that schools should teach standard English to all children.

Just how and where the two dialects should alternate in the school situation is an open question for educators to resolve. The first part of our work is designed to give them the information they need to cope with, overcome, and perhaps utilize the structural differences between BEV and SE. Some writers seem to believe that the major problem causing reading failure is structural interference between these two forms of English. Our research points in the opposite direction. The structural differences between SE and BEV outlined in chapters 1-4 are largely modifications and extensions of rules found in other dialects. The number of structures unique to BEV are small, and it seems unlikely that they could be responsible for the disastrous record of reading failure in the inner city schools.

That failure is hard to overstate. In our first research in 1965, we interviewed 75 black youth, ages 10 to 12, in a geographically random sample of “Vacation Day Camps” in Harlem. Boys had to be enrolled

1. This chapter is a revised version of “A Note on the Relation of Reading Failure to Peer-Group Status in Urban Ghetto,” by William Labov and Clarence Robins, which appeared in The Teachers College Record 76: No. 5 (Feb. 1969).