Basil Bernstein on restricted and elaborated Codes

Basil Bernstein (1924–2000) was a linguist and researcher at the Institute of Education, University of London, who put the case that the form of language use of working class (who speak a 'restricted code') as contrasted with middle class students (who speak an ‘elaborated code’), in part explained their comparative performance at school.

Here, Bernstein analyses one of the ways in which the dynamics of social class affects learner outcomes in school:

Two general types of codes can be distinguished: elaborated and restricted … In the case of an elaborated code, the speaker will select from a relatively extensive range of alternatives … In the case of a restricted code the number of these alternatives is often severely limited … On a psychological level the codes may be distinguished by the extent to which each facilitates (elaborated code) or inhibits (restricted code) an orientation to symbolize intent in a verbally explicit form.

The pure form of a restricted code one where all the words, and … the organizing structure irrespective of its degree of complexity, are wholly predictable for speakers and listeners. Examples of this pure form would be ritualistic modes of communication: relationships regulated by protocol, types of religious services, cocktail-party routines, some story-telling situations. Consider the case of a mother telling her child stories which they know by heart. ‘And Little Red Riding Hood went into the wood’ (ritualistic pause). ‘And what do you think happened?’ (rhetorical question) …

The most general condition for the emergence of this code is a social relationship based upon a common, extensive set of closely-shared identifications and expectations self-consciously held by the members. The speech is here refracted through a common cultural identity which reduces the need to verbalize intent so that it becomes explicit … The speech in these social relations is likely to be fast and fluent, articulatory clues are reduced; some meanings are likely to be dislocated, condensed and local; there will be a low level of vocabulary and syntactic selection; the unique meaning of the individuals is likely to be implicit.

An elaborated code, where prediction is much less possible at the syntactic level, is likely to arise in a social relationship which raises the tension in its members to select from their linguistic resources a verbal arrangement which closely fits specific referents … The preparation and delivery of relatively explicit meaning is the major function of this code. The code will facilitate the verbal transmission and elaboration of the individual’s unique experience …

We can expect … to find … elaborated code within the middle class … In the lower working class we could expect to find a high proportion of families limited to a restricted code …
If a social group by virtue of its class relation … as a result of its common occupational function and social status, has developed strong common bonds; if the work relations of this group offers little variety or little exercise in decision-making; if assertion, if it is to be successful, must be a collective rather than an individual act; if the work task requires physical manipulation and control rather than symbolic organization and control; if the diminished authority of the man at work is transformed into an authority of power at home; if the home is over-crowded and limits the variety of situations it can offer; if the children socialize each other in an environment offering little intellectual stimuli, if all these attributes are found I one setting, then it is plausible to assume that such a social setting will generate a particular form of communication which will shape the intellectual, social and affective orientation of the children.

In the case of an elaborated code, such a code points to the possibilities which inhere in a complex conceptual hierarchy for the organization and expression of inner experience. This is much less the case where experience is regulated by a restricted code, for this code orients its speakers to a less complex conceptual hierarchy and so to a lower order of causality. What is made available for learning through elaborated and restricted codes is radically different. Social and intellectual orientations, motivational imperative and forms of social control, rebellion and innovation are different. Thus the relative backwardness of many working-class children who live in areas of high population density or in rural areas may well be a culturally induced backwardness transmitted by the linguistic process. Such children’s low performance on verbal IQ tests, their difficulty with ‘abstract’ concepts, their failures within the language area, their general inability to profit from the school, all may result from the limitations of a restricted code. For these children the school induces a change of code and with this a change in the way the children relate to their kin and community. At the same time we often offer these children grossly inadequate schools with less than able teachers. No wonder they often fail-for the ‘more’ tend to receive more and become more, while the socially defined ‘less’ receive less and become less.

A restricted code contains a vast potential of meanings. It is a form of speech which symbolizes a communally based culture. It carries its own aesthetic. It should not be disvalued. We must ensure that material conditions of the schools we offer, their values, social organization, forms of control and pedagogy, the skills and sensitivities of the teachers are refracted through an understanding of the culture the children bring to the school. After all, we do no less for the middle-class child.