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GENERATING SPONTANEOUS SPEECH IN THE UNDERPRIVILEGED CHILD.

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IN ORDER TO TEST THE EFFICACY OF METHODS USED BY VARIOUS RESEARCHERS FOR GENERATING SPONTANEOUS SPEECH FROM UNDERPRIVILEGED CHILDREN, 20 THREE- TO FOUR-YEAR-OLD GIRLS WERE SELECTED AT RANDOM FROM A HEADSTART-TYPE PROGRAM AT HOWARD UNIVERSITY FOR TESTING. ALL WERE NEGROES AND FROM A TARGET AREA FOR POVERTY PROGRAMS. THE CHILDREN WERE TESTED INDIVIDUALLY OR TWO AT A TIME BY TWO FEMALE EXAMINERS, ONE WHITE AND ONE NEGRO. TEST SESSIONS WERE SHORT AND CHILDREN UNWILLING TO PARTICIPATE OR SUSPICIOUS OF THE TEST WERE EXCLUDED. TECHNIQUES FOR GENERATING SPONTANEOUS SPEECH INCLUDED USE OF A DOLL AND CRIB, TOYS, COLORING BOOKS, A MALE PUPPET, AND A TELEPHONE. PLATES FROM THE AMMONS FULL RANGE PICTURE VOCABULARY TEST WERE ALSO USED. IT WAS FOUND THAT MOST OF THE CHILDREN GAVE LITTLE MORE THAN ONE WORD RESPONSES. LONGER RESPONSES WERE USUALLY ELICITED RATHER THAN SPONTANEOUS. THEREFORE, MANY OF THE METHODS USED TRADITIONALLY TO GENERATE SPONTANEOUS SPEECH IN THE UNDERPRIVILEGED CHILD WERE JUDGED UNSUCCESSFUL OR OF QUESTIONABLE VALUE. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN THE FALL 1967 ISSUE OF "THE JOURNAL OF NEGRO EDUCATION." SINGLE COPIES ARE AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST FROM THE OFFICE OF THE DEAN, THE COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS, HOWARD UNIVERSITY, WASHINGTON, D.C. 20001. (JD)

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Generating Spontaneous Speech in the Underprivileged Child*

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Generating Spontaneous Speech in the Underprivileged Child*

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Each year more and more children from lower socioeconomic and minority group settings are entering public schools and other programs with substantial handicaps in educational readiness. These children are bringing with them unique experiences, different standards and values, a culture of their own, different learning and living styles, and speech and language patterns which are, in many respects, different from the speech and language patterns of their teachers. Widespread efforts to cope with and solve problems created by these linguistic differences have revealed defects in our educational system that only intensive research and experimentation can resolve. Thus, the present investigation was initiated with a view toward ultimately improving understandings about the language styles of these children and eliminating the barriers to communication existing between students and teachers.

The decision to study spontaneous speech was prompted by the feeling that this was the best way of getting an ac-

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curate view of such aspects of linguistic ability as grammatical constructions, syntactical forms, levels and types of vocabulary, phonetic and phonemic capabilities, and linguistic styles generally. Specifically, this study sought to investigate the reliability of language development assessments, derived through relatively standardized procedures, for generating spontaneous speech samples from underprivileged children. Questions surrounding this issue resulted from a feeling that many underprivileged children have been adjudicated unfairly as possessing seriously underdeveloped verbal skills and subnormal intelligence. Since placement in lower tracks and image-shattering remedial courses is too often the ultimate outcome of being labeled as subnormal in language development or intelligence, the need for comprehensive studies to separate fact from unsupported theory is self-evident. Secondly, identification of valid and invalid methods of determining actual language development in special socioeconomic groups is essential for evolution of satisfactory developmental and enrichment programs. It is in this way that a first step can be taken also toward eliminating any communication barrier between the teacher and the disadvantaged child.

The need for additional research activity on language development in the underprivileged child is clear-cut (11). Although researchers (2,3,4,5,13,16) have amassed what seems to be extensive data to support the generalization that underprivileged children are verbally impoverished and linguistically underdeveloped, their descriptions of the speech and language patterns of underprivileged children are unsystematic, lacking in detail, and fail to consider the in-group and non-standard language patterns that often remain unused in the presence of strangers. Further, only a few longitudinal studies have been conducted on the chronological development of speech and language in underprivileged children. As a result of these few, however, there is some evidence attesting to the existence of an almost indiscernibly rich repository of language in lower-class children; a repository that usually remains untapped by most evaluational and instructional procedures in use today.

Basic to the rationale underlying this work are the findings by John and Goldstein (7) in 1964 that the rate and breadth of speech and language acquisition are proportional to the scope of a child's verbal interactions with those charged with his care. This confirmed McCarthy's (8) earlier postulation, that verbal proficiency is determined by environment. Middle-class children learn language by feed-back — by being heard, corrected, and modified and by gaining operant control over their social environment through using words they have heard. These researchers (7) expressed the belief that the underprivileged child lacks this needed feedback during crucial periods of development. In consequence, his rate of language learning is retarded.

Other researchers (9,10,12,13,14) have indicated that underprivileged children learn most of their language skills through hearing words and viewing their effects rather than through correction by adults of their speech patterns. Thus, their communication patterns tend to take on an entirely different form from that of the middle-class child (6).

All of this implies the existence of differing linguistic styles on the part of middle-class and lower-class children. These different styles are very suitable to meet the needs of their respective users. More importantly, each group tends to respond to verbal stimuli according to their developed response patterns. In the face of relatively unfamiliar testing circumstances, the probability for intellectual confusion and subsequent inarticulate behavior on the part of the underprivileged child is very great. It may be hypothesized, therefore, that techniques which are successful for generating spontaneous speech from middle-class children are probably altogether ineffective with lower-class children, with the result that test scores for the latter group are seriously depressed. Even more significant is the potential for these depressed scores to mislead us in our attempts to evaluate these children objectively.

In order to test the efficacy of methods used by various researchers for generating spontaneous speech from underprivileged children, a sample of twenty subjects was randomly selected from a group of three- to four-year-old girls enrolled in a Head-start-type program at Howard University. All of the children were Negroes and came from a target area for poverty programs in Washington, D. C.

The testing took place in a small room,

away from the main play area, and was conducted by two female examiners, one Negro and one white. Both examiners were present at every session. Children were tested alone and with another child. At no time were more than two children tested in any single session.

Techniques utilized in the attempt to generate spontaneous speech included use of a doll and crib, a fire engine with a bell, a coloring book and crayons, a male puppet, and a telephone, all mentioned prominently in the literature.

Once they began playing with a toy, the children were asked various questions about the toy, their activity with it, various experiences outside of the school situation, etc. Picture books, appropriate to the age of the children, were also used. In this latter technique the examiner would either point to an object or a person in the picture and ask the child what he saw. Another procedure using pictures encouraged the children to engage in a game with the examiners. Plates from the Ammons Full Range Picture Vocabulary Test (1) were used as stimuli for the game. Each plate contains four separate pictures and the child's task was to describe one of the pictures on each plate so the examiners could guess which one was being described. As a third procedure, the children were asked to tell about a trip they had taken to the zoo and describe what they had seen.

Tape recordings of the speech were made at every session. When the tape recorder was used, the children were told as simply as possible what the machine was and what it did. Very often their own speech was played back so they could hear it.

In order to obtain generative rather

than elicited speech, the examiners tried to stimulate speech on the part of the child. Verbal reinforcement, in the form of praise for correct response, and feedback were provided. Further verbal prodding was given to those children who seemed more reluctant to speak.

Some of the children appeared suspicious of the tasks and did not want to stay, while others were content to remain but refused to talk. These children were not included in the sample. Moreover, no child was kept against his will, and when a child included as part of the sample showed signs of disinterest or fatigue, the session was terminated. Sessions were conducted in the mornings and lasted from one-half to one hour. No more than three sessions were conducted in a single day. On the days that the examiners did not work directly with the children, they observed the children in the nursery school setting to gain an indication of normal peer group behavior and linguistic proficiency as demonstrated by oral interplay between and among members of the group.

RESULTS

As one major result, this investigation found that generating spontaneous speech from underprivileged children is a challenging task which taxes the ingenuity of the researcher. Most of the children gave little more than one word responses, and when longer responses were obtained, they were usually elicited, rather than spontaneous. In one sense, consequently, many of the methods used traditionally to generate spontaneous speech in the underprivileged child must be classified as unsuccessful, or at the very least of questionable value with this population. Even the methods or stimuli which held the

interest of the children and were preferred by them, were not truly effective in generating speech. The children appeared quite content to play with the toys with a minimum of verbal behavior; in fact, questions directed to them frequently went unanswered. The maximum of verbal exchange between two children playing with the same toy occurred when there was some question as to ownership of the toy.

Picture books with familiar objects, things, or animals were more effective in stimulating simple responses, but did not of themselves generate more complex verbal responses. That is, even when shown an action picture replete with people and objects, the typical response of these children was to name single items. There was little spontaneous use of action words, plurals, or rudimentary sentences containing the subject, action word, and object, even with further questioning by the examiner. If, for example, a child were shown a picture of children playing with a ball, the child might respond "Ball." When asked "What do you do with a ball?", the responses elicited most often were "ball," "bounce," etc. It was unusual to elicit, "I bounce a ball," or "I play with a ball," etc. Furthermore, there was even some doubt in the minds of the examiners as to whether the children understood the meaning of such words as how, what, where, who, etc.

The methods of asking the children to tell a story and of playing the picture guessing game were also entirely unsuccessful. Again, with the latter, the children were not able to do more than make simple, one-word responses. When asked to play the picture game, the children named objects in all the pictures on a

single plate and were unable to concentrate on any single picture. When asked about the trip they had taken to the zoo and what they had seen, the typical response was to name animals.

There was also reason to doubt that the children understood the directions, even though they were given several times in acceptable, standardized form, and repeated in very simple and straight-forward language before each trial.

In short, the language samples obtained from this group of children were relatively meager. Neither the white nor the Negro examiner, using varied methods, was successful in generating any significant amount of spontaneous speech. Moreover, the children's responses were generally one-word sentences and reflected little spontaneous use of plurals, action words, or any of the other more complex parts of speech. In addition, the children tended to speak in such low voices that it was extremely difficult to record their speech. This is further indication of the difficulties encountered by strangers attempting to communicate with these children.

DISCUSSION

The finding that little spontaneous speech was generated from the children can, it seems, be attributed with some finality either to the nature of these children or to the particular methodology employed. In other words, generating spontaneous speech in these children using methods successful with middle-class, white children is an unprofitable exercise and very misleading.

Although the language obtained was minimal, we are not in a position to view it as the totality of the language capabilities of these children. It is not un-

likely that this paucity in usage is largely a function of the test situation, especially in view of their substantial increase in oral word play when observed outside of the test situation.

Finally, it seems important that careful studies in the cognitive areas be conducted with this population. If we assume that the perceptual discrimination abilities and thought processes used for differentiating between and among objects are important, then we must learn how to teach these children the ability to perceive, conceptualize, and verbalize these differences for both simple and complex stimuli. Initially, however, it is necessary to conduct some carefully controlled studies on a very basic level. In this way, we can hope to partial out many of the significant factors which are related to the response patterns demonstrated by subjects in this study. For example, we have noted that if the child is presented with four pictures of children playing and asked to point to the girl playing with the ball, this is accomplished. When asked, however, what he sees (pointing to this very same picture in isolation), the response by the child is often just, "girl," "ball," etc.

The exact nature of the relationship between the child's receptive or expressive language and his visual or auditory perceptions that are most critical to his responses remains a question that future research must answer.

In summary, evaluation of verbal skills and research on language development in underprivileged children must be concerned with much more than the verbal processes alone. If procedures that can help these children overcome mental and emotional problems are to be devised,

we must know a great deal more about the interrelationships among cognitive, affective, and verbal variables. There is need, also, to investigate the extent to which sensory deficits, in the absence of physiological insult, develop and become more debilitating over time as a function of the situation in which the child finds himself. It would seem, on the basis of available data, that the functional deficits, which have been hypothesized to be directly related to the way in which children respond verbally, can be remediated if the extent of the problem is determined and opportunities for correction are provided during the early years.

It seems logical, also, that many of the present difficulties in arriving at satisfactory answers concerning the nature of the problem of verbal differences in underprivileged children are an outgrowth of our insistence on examining its subdivisions in isolation rather than examining as a single entity the entire constellation of variables which are interrelated constituents of the total problem. In the studies planned as part of the present research effort, an inter-disciplinary team of researchers will investigate various relevant aspects of the child's behavior and capacity to function normally. The inclusion on the investigating team of such disciplines as genetics, linguistics, psychology, social work, speech, audiology, and communication sciences reflects confidence in this approach to studying the problem of language development in the underprivileged child. Hopefully, future reports will fulfill the promises of the initial planning stages. These later reports may also give some more accurate appraisals of linguistic development in the underprivileged child. The bases for these

projections will be approaches that provide for evaluation under circumstances conducive to verbal performance at maximum ability levels.

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