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# Finding out about children's language

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*LVC* is publishing this long inaccessible paper, a forceful instance of Labov's ever-innovative approach to field work, commitment to social justice, and consistent efforts to defend the speakers of speech varieties that have been labeled as inadequate and even nonexistent. It is from a 1971 Working Paper at the University of Hawaii from a copy typed by Betsy Sneller, with minor corrections by Gillian Sankoff in November 2024.

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I'd like to say first of all that the field work I'm doing myself here in Hawaii is really not the major part of my summer work. I've been invited here by the Department of Linguistics at the University to work with a number of other linguists and anthropologists who are interested in doing research in the community. I'm coordinating the efforts of four or five groups interested in Chinese, Korean, and Japanese, as well as Hawaiian English. Some of the linguists are studying the older Japanese-English or Filipino-English pidgin; some are interested in the Hawaiian language itself, and its effects on English. The largest group is concerned with the current Hawaiian pidgin spoken by young people of school age, and the transition between this Hawaiian pidgin and standard English. Their work is of the most direct interest to you.

I think you've already seen some results of linguistic research, in the Hilo project and elsewhere, and I know that there is in this room more knowledge of the basic vernacular used by children than we find in mainland schools. In talking with teachers here in Hawaii I've been struck with two characteristics of the Hawaiian situation which make for more favorable results in teaching English. One is that many teachers have roots in the community and knowledge of the community; knowledge which is either missing or forgotten on the mainland. And secondly, people don't hate each other as much here in Hawaii as they do elsewhere. Of course, there is a certain amount of antagonism and viciousness everywhere. When you get out in the countryside, you can find towns where almost nobody talks to anybody else because they have such a long history of disagreement. But in Hawaii I think that's a minor trend; the situation contrasts very sharply with that on the mainland.

What I wanted to talk about today is something that is of immediate interest to all of you: how can you as teachers or educational researchers find out about the language of the children you're dealing with? Even if you know a great deal about traditional Hawaiian pidgin that does not mean that you know anything about the children in your particular class; you have a wide range, from those who know practically no Hawaiian

pidgin to those who are completely confined to it. There are children who come from Japanese-English backgrounds who have never heard any *real* pidgin, but only mixtures of Japanese and English. We have reason to think that *full* knowledge of Hawaiian pidgin does not develop in children at the age of 3, 4, or 5, but may actually develop later in adolescence; a really good pidgin speaker hasn't learned everything he needs to know in order to speak the language well until he is 12 or 13 or even older. All this being the case, it's very helpful to know something about the language range of the children you're dealing with when you make educational decisions about how you're going to teach reading and English.

Let me give a few examples. Suppose you're going to teach the past tense—or suppose you're going to teach reading and you have to deal with the *-ed* suffix. The first thing you have to decide is, does this group of children know about the *-ed* suffix? And do they have a solid knowledge of the past tense? Now the basic pidgin system as it's spoken by children all over the island is this: the irregular past forms—*ate, came, ran*—are used in the same general way as standard English, with some individual exceptions. But you use the auxiliary *wen* with the regular verbs that take *-ed* in standard English, as in *I wen grab 'im*. So, there is no basis for an *-ed* suffix in the basic pidgin: it simply doesn't exist in that grammar. It's not a question of its being dropped by a rule of pronunciation, as in nonstandard Negro English.[1] It just isn't there, except in one or two special verbs like *started* and *wanted*.

So, you have to find out if the children know enough about the *-ed* to have something to build on. If there isn't enough knowledge there, you have to teach it by a very different technique. In other words, when something is there in the grammar, but isn't always clearly said, you can call children's attention to it in their own speech. You can tell them: "You just said, '*I grabbed him*.' Did you hear that /d/?" But in Hawaiian pidgin we're not dealing with a rule of rapid speech that allows the /d/ or /t/ to be dropped now and then. If that element is there, it will be pronounced quite clearly. If you don't hear it, it's probably not there at all, in the knowledge of the speaker.

You might want to know a great many other things in teaching English in Hawaii: if the children have the copula *is* or if it's missing; or in a word like *just*, do the children "know" if there is a /t/ at the end? Or let's take a grammatical example. Suppose you have a reading text in the second grade with the word *never* in it. *Never* is an important member of the auxiliary system in both standard English and Hawaiian pidgin. But as most of you realize, in Hawaiian pidgin it means only "past tense plus negative." It has no sense of "indefinitely many times in the past" as it does in standard English. You have to know, in teaching children to read, whether they had the sense of *never* meaning "indefinitely many times in the past." When a boy says "*He never like go*," does he mean, "He never wanted to go" or does he mean "He just didn't want to at that particular time"? When you first approach the teaching of reading, you have to decide whether you know enough about the child's language resources to use what is known as the "language experience" approach. I bring this up because it became a crucial question in a mainland school in the East where I've been working recently. Children were tested in the experimental kindergarten program to find out what their verbal skills were. They wanted to use the "language experience" approach of Roach Van Allen, but their tests seemed to show that the children didn't have enough language

to use as a base for this method. They decided that they had to set this aside, and they bought the DISTAR method of Siegfried Engelmann for teaching the children a "new language." I've been observing the results since that time.

## A critical decision for teachers

The psychologists' decision not to use the language-experience approach but to use Engelmann's was a crucial one. Their conclusions were based on the finding that they didn't get enough language from the children to work with. That problem is not confined to the mainland or to the ghettos.[2] Professor Donald Topping just returned from Guam where the decision has been taken to teach both Chamorro and English in a bilingual program. He tells me that the teachers had already decided that many of the school children didn't have any language at all: they didn't know English and they didn't know Chamorro. When he asked them how they knew that, they described the very same kind of testing procedure that I have observed and reported in mainland schools. The child is typically confronted with a picture or an object and told, "Tell me everything you can about *this*!" This method is one of the natural products of educational psychology, which is concerned more with discriminating among children than finding out what a given child's capacity actually is. By subjecting each child to a "controlled" stimulus, they are able to claim scientific status for the comparisons they make between individual children.

So in Guam, teachers who themselves spoke Chamorro and English came to the conclusion that the children didn't know either language. It is therefore logical for them to use a method like Bereiter and Engelmann's, based on the notion that children have no language of their own, and teach them to say "This is a book," "This is not a book," and so on. They argue that we have to teach the children this new language because propositions, identifications, questions, and negations are quite beyond them. It seems to be a realistic approach, because it reflects the way that children behave face-to-face with those teachers. When a teacher tells me that a child does not know the names of *knife, fork*, and *spoon*, that teacher is being accurate to the extent that this is the way that the child behaves in that teacher's presence. And the educational methods used must be based upon the way that the child is going to behave in the classroom.

The difficulty, of course, is that this doesn't give any insight into what actually happens in the interaction between teacher and child. It doesn't explain the failure. It merely explains why the teacher does what the teacher does. It doesn't explain why the child does what the child does. And in fact, these pictures of the child's capacity are so profoundly misleading that they are an open invitation to educational disaster.

You are in a much more favorable situation here in Hawaii. As the Hawaiian Curriculum Center program shows, you follow a very different approach in dealing with children than that used in most of the schools that I'll talk about. At the same time, the general principles of how to find out more about children will apply here. I'm going to outline certain negatives and some patterns to avoid in dealing with children if you want them to display their linguistic abilities in talking to you. They are also principles that will be of use in talking to younger relatives, such as your grandchildren or nieces and nephews, because teachers aren't the only ones faced with the problem

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of how to talk with children. Everybody has that problem and very few people have solved it to their satisfaction.

First, let me mention briefly some of the larger social issues connected with the problem of locating the language and capacities of the children we deal with. I'm not going to dwell on the Bereiter and Engelmann approach except to say that it is increasingly widespread. Science Research Associates has published the DISTAR method of Engelmann, very well worked out in some ways, but firmly based on the notion that many children have no language worth mentioning. As we'll see, there is a great gulf between this program and the fact of children's real abilities.

The last time I was here in Hawaii I criticized Operation Head Start to the extent that it was based on this "verbal deprivation" hypothesis. The person in charge of the Head Start program in Honolulu rose up to defend Head Start vigorously, saying "Well, your description has nothing to do with Head Start here." I had to say that I may have overstated the case as far as Hawaii was concerned. However, the painful truth has emerged since then that the major goals set for Head Start have not been met. The Westinghouse Report shows that there was no significant improvement in the children's reading and school achievement in the years following the Head Start program.

One reaction to this reported failure is to say that Head Start failed because we didn't take care of the children early enough. We should therefore take them away from their mothers at the age of six months, perhaps returning them for a little mother-love in the evening. The people who are promoting these programs say, like Bereiter, "We are not professional child lovers." They believe that the role of sentiment and affection has been overplayed, and that we need a "cognitive" approach to restructuring the child's mind. I think that most of you would feel that their cure is worse than the disease.

A more alarming reaction to this reported failure is that of Arthur Jensen, one of those originally associated with the idea of "cultural deprivation." In his well-known article in the *Harvard Educational Review*, Jensen has disavowed this earlier point of view and concluded instead that if Head Start has failed it must be the fault of the basic assumption that all children have the capacity to develop logical thought. His own conclusion, in my paraphrase, is that racism is the most probably correct scientific hypothesis: that there are large numbers of children in the United States and elsewhere who lack genetically the capacity to form concepts. This deficiency is said to be heavily concentrated among lower-class Negroes—but is characteristic of all Negro groups. Jensen adds that undoubtedly the greatest cruelty shown towards the Negro is to give welfare without "eugenic foresight."[3] Those of you who lived through the 1930s will be able to translate that phrase without any difficulty. But it has been translated for us by a group headed by the physicist William Shockley, who has introduced Jensen and Jensenism to the National Academy of Sciences. Shockley's group has been advocating eugenics based upon such possibilities as giving a person $1,000 for every I.Q. point under 100, if he agrees to be sterilized.

I want to give you some indication of how serious these reactions to Head Start's problems are, because you don't have to have a great many psychologists going around saying that it is time for the gas ovens or mass sterilization. All you need is a few, because those who want to apply eugenic foresight only need one or two experts to tell them that what they are doing is scientifically correct and morally justified.

This wider view of the social consequences will outline for you the seriousness of the issues that are involved when you talk to children and report what their verbal abilities are. Now let me return to the mainland program I mentioned, developed by several very competent educational psychologists for this purpose.

## How standardized tests are constructed

The particular test that I'm going to discuss was designed to elicit the verbal response of kindergarten children in an experimental program. It was designed as a controlled test in which each child was subjected to the same stimulus and his response would be measured and compared to those of others. The data were supposed to give information on the children's cognitive capacities, their linguistic development, and the grammatical system of their dialect. It was hoped that this information would provide the basis for materials to be used in the first grade program. The test has three main parts: five factual questions, a request to tell a story in response to a stimulus, and a series of probing questions about the picture.

The five factual questions were: (a) What's your name? (b) Who's your teacher? (c) What grade are you in? (d) Have you any brothers or sisters? (e) Do they go to this school? These are all "known-answer" questions: the teacher-tester has the information in front of her. Their purpose was to test the children's ability to comprehend and respond accurately to simple questions.

The child was next shown a large photograph of children playing on a city street, and given careful instructions for what to do: "I want you to look at this picture on the wall. Do you see it? I want you to look at the children in this picture and I want you to see if you can tell me a story about what the children are doing. Do you think you can do that? All right, whenever you're ready you can begin your story." We can call this a "request for display."

Responses to this request were never more than a few short sentences. The teacher-tester then asked questions about what particular children in the picture were doing, where the children were playing, about some litter in the street, etc. Finally, the child was asked if he had finished his "story" or if he had something else to say. There were two teacher-testers: one black, one white, in a predominantly black school.

The children's response to this test, in general, was to say as little as possible. Here is one of the most verbal responses to the main question:

James: There's a girl riding a bike.
Teacher: Good. Go ahead.
James: A boy is playin' a ball and runnin'. And a boy ch- is got his sleeves on his head.
Teacher: Mhm.
James: And the girl is—uh—playin'.

James is one of the most talkative children in the group. Others said much less. Some were paralyzed into silence by the request for display:

Teacher: Can you tell me something about that picture? Everything that you see in that picture?

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And everything that you see the children doing?
Eunice: [3 seconds of silence]
Teacher: Will you do that, Eunice? …
All right, go ahead. You just begin your story.
Eunice: [3 seconds of silence]
Teacher: Tell me what you see in the picture, Eunice.
Come on, look at the picture. Tell me what you see in it.
Eunice: [4 seconds of silence]
Teacher: Hmmm?
Eunice: [10 seconds of silence]
Teacher: What's this boy doing, Eunice?
What's he doing?

To all these questions, Eunice preserved a stubborn resistance. Finally, she produced a minimal response to the teacher's verbal bludgeoning:

Teacher: What's he doing? You do that all the time in school. What's he doing? What's he playing with?
Eunice: Ball.
Teacher: Hmmm?
Eunice: Ball.
Teacher: What's he doing with the ball?
Eunice: [Silence]

The teacher-tester is a pleasant person when you meet her face-to-face as an adult. But in the frustration of the test situation, she plainly loses her patience, and resorts to one of the primary devices used by adults in talking to children: direct commands.

### *Ordering children to talk*

The resistance which children show to the teacher-tester's requests leads her to respond in turn with direct commands such as "Come on, look at the picture," "Look at the picture," "Tell me that in words." The second adult administering the test, a black teacher, is even more abrupt:

Teacher: Do you think cars can come through that street?
Todd: [Silence]
Teacher: Talk to me now, Todd!
Todd: Yeh.

The command "Talk to me!" is heard frequently on these tapes. The teachers' behavior is rather similar to that of certain Spanish missionaries as reported to me by a friend doing fieldwork in the Amazon Valley. The missionaries' desire to help is automatically translated into direct orders to the local speakers: *You want to talk to Indians. Very well. Here, you, Indian, talk!*[4]

The teacher-testers, under the influence of the "experimental method" of educational psychology, are proceeding on the assumption that direct questions or commands are an effective way to elicit comparable data. Commonsense reaction to their

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behavior is that they are drying up the stream of speech rather than making it flow. To understand why they behave in this seemingly self-defeating manner, we have to draw on some general considerations of discourse analysis.

An important dimension of discourse is that of "mitigation" and "aggravation" of utterances, particularly commands. When we decide to make a request for action, we can choose from a large number of devices for doing it. If I want someone to sweep up around the house, I can say to him, "Well look, the place is kind of dirty," or "Your brother didn't sweep up last week," referring only to the need for the action to be done. Or I can refer to his ability to do it by saying "Have you got a minute to help out here?" These are mitigated commands. But we can also aggravate the command by saying "Clean up that garage or I'll break your arm!" The conventions for the use of mitigation and aggravation are very sensitive to the relative status of the speaker and listener.

Let me now quote from a therapeutic interview with a girl who had to make a demand of her mother: her mother had been away baby-sitting at the house of a married sister, and the girl was having a lot of trouble going to school and trying to keep the house clean at the same time. She planned to call up her mother and say, "Look Ma, you've been away from home long enough!" But what she actually did when she called her mother up was to say, "Well, when do you plan to come home?" The question about her mother's intentions mitigated the effect of the demand which was understood by both of them. That's the normal way of dealing with a person of higher status. But when we deal with people of lower status, we move in the reverse direction. An adult will say to himself, "Well, I'm just going to *tell* this boy he's been staying up too late for his own good." And what he actually says when he gets home is something like "God damn it! Get to bed!"

Parents often say to their children, "Do as you're told!" They don't tell other adults "Do as you're told," and they don't tell them "Talk to me!" Bare imperatives simply aren't used. In fact, many languages show that the tendency of adults to mitigate their negative commands is so great that the negative and the imperative don't even occur together. In Spanish or Greek or Swahili, for example, if you take the positive form of the imperative and put a negative with it, the combination is meaningless, because people long ago stopped using it. Instead, they use a negative with the subjunctive, the more polite form. But if we had grammars based on the way that adults talk to children, they'd not only have a plain form, but an aggravated form as well. So, in dealing with children, we have to beware of the fact that our natural tendency is to aggravate our commands to them in the course of everyday life.

### *Repeating children's words*

A second tendency of adults in dealing with children is to repeat what they have just said. This is an overpowering pattern for many adults:

Teacher: Talk to me!
Todd: Yes.
Teacher: What is it?
Todd: [Pause] A clock.
Teacher: It's a clock.

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The intonation contour used here is a very striking one, easily recognized as "patronizing." The voice quality is soft and breathy, and the pitch pattern is

It's—a—
clo—
ck.

This is the pattern used for responses to known-answer questions—when the adult already knows the answers. It is heard most often in

Isn't—that—
ni—
ice.

We can paraphrase this intonation contour as "surprisingly good for a child of that age to be able to say that." The same contour is used sarcastically by adults to each other; but to a child, it is used to convey the limited approval of a superior. Repetition is also used with children when they have given new information which the adult did not have.

Teacher: Tell me what your name is.
Child: Janice Donovan!
Teacher: Janice Donovan.

This repetition uses a matter-of-fact, falling intonation. It occurs over and over in the interviews of less practiced interviewers, often as a device to give them an opportunity to get the next question ready. But when talking to a child, the adult uses it to signal his need to be sure that he has heard correctly. Since the child often mumbles, the adult repeats in his adult phonology to set the record straight: "so this is what was said." Whether or not children sense the full meaning of the intonation contours as just described, the act of repetition itself has a striking tendency to delay and choke off spontaneous interaction. If the adult wants a child to talk, he should act as if he understands what the child is saying, and react as if he is dealing with someone of equal status. The automatic repetition of the child's words is a fatal bar to the flow of speech.

### *Lying to children*

A third characteristic of adults' talk to children is deliberate and obvious lying. The teacher-testers frequently try to force answers to known-answer questions by claiming that they don't know things which they plainly do. As the children follow the strategy of saying as little as possible to stay out of trouble, they frequently answer with "Uh-huh" or a shake of the head. The teacher could simply point out that the tape recorder wouldn't pick that up. But instead she says, "I don't know what uh-huh means." A few minutes later we hear:

Teacher: Is Jerry your brother?
Child: Yeh.
Teacher: Uh-huh.

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When children feel that their backs are against the wall, they sometimes produce fierce resistance to known-answer questions.

Teacher: What grade are you in?
Bryan: [With falsetto break] You know what grade I'm in!
Teacher: No I don't, you have to tell me.

The child remains mute in the face of this outrageous lie; finally the teacher probes:

Teacher: Are you in the first grade?
Bryan: [Silence]
Teacher: Are you in the second grade?
Bryan: Second grade.
Teacher: But you're not in the second grade, you're in kindergarten, aren't you!

### *Improving the child*

The fourth tendency of teachers in talking to children is the most destructive, although it seems on the surface to be harmless, even beneficent. In the course of a test designed to measure the child's command of language, we find that most of the questions demand correct answers to moral questions, rather than factual questions. The teacher-testers show extraordinary persistence in getting the right answers to these questions.

Teacher: What do you think the children should do about that litter that's in the street, all that paper that's on the street?
Todd: Pick it up.
Teacher: Do you think they will? [Sharply] Talk to me.
Todd: Yes'm.
Teacher: All right.

Even children who begin the test with great enthusiasm and a desire to please the teacher will sometimes show resistance at this point. But the desire to force the morally correct answer is irresistible in the teacher.

Teacher: And how about all the litter that's on the street?
Janice: [Silence]
Teacher: What should they about all the papers that are on the street?
Janice: Nothin'.
Teacher: Nothing? You don't think they should pick them up?
Janice: [Silence]
Teacher: Well talk to me, tell me.
Janice: Yes.
Teacher: Why?
Janice: [Silence]
Teacher: Well how do you think the street will look if the children pick up all that litter?
Janice: [Silence]

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Teacher: Hmm?
Janice: Throw it in the garbage can.
Teacher: That's right, they'll throw it in the garbage can.

Here we observe direct commands, repetition, and a fierce insistence on the morally right stance. Both the teacher and Janice recognize that her last question is only a device to demand the correct answer, and when Janice provides this, it is accepted even though it is literally not responsive. Some children anticipate this "correct" answer; they see the intention of the teacher before it actually appears.

Teacher: Where are the children playing, Michael?
Michael: In the street.
Teacher: Why do you think they're playing in there?
Michael: 'Cause they don't 'posed to be in there.
Teacher: Well, why do you think they are there then?
Michael: 'Cause the car'll s'posed to be comin'
Teacher: M-hmm. Well if cars are coming, why do you think children would play in the street?
Michael: They get ran over.

Michael presents the opposite side of the coin from Janice. He knows and has absorbed the message "Don't play in the street or you'll get run over" and even when the teacher probes for a reason to play in the street he produces his adult-oriented message. One suspects that Michael will go far. He has already chosen sides in this game, and is determined to win the approval of the captain on his side. There are others who are so anxious to be with the "good" guys that they jump the gun:

Teacher: Why are the children playing in the street?
Child: 'Cause they'll get hit when they go home!

All of this correctly foresees the next question on the teacher's schedule: "Do you think the street is a good place to play in?" Children who answer "Yes" are then faced with a withering "Why do think the street's a good place to play in?" and they are hopelessly trapped in a "bad" position. Nevertheless, a great many children stubbornly take this path, and retreat into a defensive silence.

We must grant that one of the important goals of education is to socialize children. For some people, that means sitting up straight and being quiet. But let us accept the idea that everyone can become a better citizen, and the school might play a role in that. The question remains, do these socializing and improving processes have to begin in the very first moment that the child sets foot in school? Does the teacher have to take up the same punishing attitude as mothers and fathers do? Those of you that have teenage children are aware of the fact that you have been correcting your children for 10 or 12 years and acting as a socializing agent to the point that you can no longer communicate with them on a one-to-one basis. The end result of this process of correcting middle-class children is that they know the path to success lies through pleasing adults, even to the extent of complying with their requests before they state them. The child who leaps to stigmatize others in these verbal exercises has been socialized indeed.

Some of you may think that this push for moral imperatives is simply a bad mistake of incompetent psychologists: that these testers were not true professionals. That is far from the case. If you will study the Wechsler test for pre-adolescents—the WISC or the Stanford-Binet—you will see that the general comprehension questions are loaded with such moral issues. Here is a question from the WISC: "Why is it better to give money to an organized charity than to a beggar?" Of the 14 general comprehension questions in this test, 12 are about what the child should do in terms of adult moral values. "Why should a promise be kept?" A "correct" answer to this question cannot be the simple and logical response "so that people will keep their promises to you." That will get you only 50 percent credit. To get 100 percent (2 points) you have to give an answer which is equivalent to "because a promise is a contract and should be honored for its own sake."

Those of you familiar with the Kohlberg scale of Moral Development will recognize that such highly valued answers to IQ questions would be at the sixth or highest level of the Moral Development scale. At this level, the person desires nothing himself as an ordinary human being; he abandons all personal interest in favor of the abstract good. But the constructors of IQ tests are not Zen Buddhists. They are realists who know that these are the terms in which parents most often instruct their children. They are not interested in having children show a knowledge of what behavior is needed in the real world. In answer to the question "What should you do if a child smaller than yourself comes up and hits you?" they do not want "Hit him back." They want the child to exhibit a knowledge of what adults want him to say. This is the knowledge that will predict the child's later success in school. So, it is not the amateur psychologist or teacher who thinks up moral questions for want of something better: it is the profession of educational psychology as a whole which searches out this kind of adaptive intelligence.

But the purpose of these tests was not to predict the child's later performance in school. We started out to find out something about the true range of the child's linguistic ability. Presumably we want to change the school program to fit the picture we get of the child's capacity at this age. We already know that children from ghetto areas in the inner cities do not have the skills necessary to appear as "good," obedient citizens in the teachers' eyes. The end result of such a testing program is to show the children as mute and non-verbal—the empty containers into which the cognitive psychologists would most like to build their structural apparatus.

## The real linguistic ability of children

The adult-dominated situation which provokes nonverbal behavior in children gives us very little insight into the real abilities that they possess. Even if the adult is friendly, insightful, gentle, and persuasive, we find that the language children use in his presence is essentially a response to him. To understand what children can do with language, we have to observe them talking to each other. Ideally, we want to record their spontaneous interaction with members of their own peer group, children that they see every day after school. The setting should be as remote as possible from the classroom or the testing laboratory. It should be dominated by the children, not by adults. They should be confronted with a difficult task, something which provokes disagreement and challenges understanding. And we will obtain the best results if the child we are studying

has someone slightly lower in status than himself, someone that he can explain things to. Careful studies of the uses of language show that a great deal of speech is produced to raise the status of the speaker. No different from adults, children will talk the most when they have the most to gain from doing so. They will talk to those who look up to them more than to those who look down.

When I went to the mainland school where these tests had taken place, I wanted to see what I could do to get at the children's actual capacity. They were then being trained for 20 minutes a day in a method which presumes no linguistic competence at all. Following the principles I just outlined, I came into the classroom with a rabbit under my coat. The children wanted to know: "What's that under your coat?" At first, I wouldn't tell them, but finally I said:

*Look, I've got a rabbit here.*
*Can any of you help me out?*
*Somebody's got to take care of him while I'm talking to the teachers.*

Everyone naturally volunteered. I selected one (in later trials we always picked the least verbal child in the classroom), and asked him to pick three friends. They took the rabbit into a little room where my tape recorder was set up and running—in plain view. They were told, "He's kind of nervous, so just keep talking to him. He's used to people talking to him: talk to him and he won't get nervous."

Here are some extracts from Harold, James, and Mays' conversations with Vincent, the rabbit.

James: [To Vincent] So listen, please. Would you—you like to play with me?
Mays: Wait, you tell 'im sump'n.
[To Vincent] When you gotta go to the bathroom, go to the bathroom. Don't do it on the floor.
Go into there.
Harold: He tellin' you sump'n.
Mays: How can a bunny rabbit talk to *you*? He only don' even know how to speak!
James: Lookit! He tryin' to jump!

The language used by Mays and James talking to the rabbit is far more complex than their responses to the teacher-tester. It is not uncommon to find causal arguments of considerable depth, together with comparatives which are *still* too complicated for linguists to analyze.

James: He said, talk to 'im, 'cause he very nervous.
Mays: You talk to 'im sometimes.
James: Oh, all *right*. [To Vincent] Please play with me. I like to play with you, but I never play with rabbits before.

At this point, Harold brought the rabbit up to the windowsill.

Mays: Harold, don't do it, 'cause he could jump outa that window *so fas'*
James: Harold *did*! So he can jump *back*!
Mays: If … we in trouble. If he run away, we have to *pay* for him!

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The tape recorder was the center of a great deal of attention. Mays was especially anxious to put down Harold, who thought that the VU-meter was a clock, and explain how it worked to him.

Harold: Ooh! Look at 'at clock!
Mays: Where? What clock?
Harold: Right here—c'm'ere, *look*!
Mays: Tha' ain' no clock! No clock never been like … .
Harold: [Making noises into the microphone to make the meter jump] Ooh! Hup! Hup!
Mays: You better get away from there. That man he got it on! See that thing under there is the sound playin'. Talk through it an', then … … Hey James, Harold's up there sayin' this a clock. This ain' no kind of (clock).

A delight in the complexity of language for its own sake begins to appear in the culmination of this conversation. Faced with the stimulus of Harold acting "bad," James formulates a statement which wins the admiration of Mays.

Harold: HUP! AWAWOOWAOO!
Mays: Shut up, Harold. One more word out of you…
James: You gittin' 'im nervous.
Harold: AYUKK!!
James: Harold keep makin' noises, makin' that thing nervous. The more he git nervous, the more–
Mays: The more he gonna jump off.
James: –the more he die.
Harold: Uh-uhn!
James: The more he git nervous, the more he die, the more Harold gona hafta pay the doctor bills!
Mays: Right! … 'N' the more he git nervous…
James: Tsk! … the more he die, the more Harold gonna hafta pay the doctor bills.

These extracts will give you some idea of the level of verbal sophistication that these six-year-olds have reached, the linguistic competence they can use in talking to each other. But on the basis of the tests I have cited, these children are now being subjected to the Bereiter and Engelmann program designed for those who have no language worth considering. For these 20 minutes, James and Mays are being drilled in such routines as:

Teacher: This is a clock. What is this?
Child: This is a clock.
Teacher: Where is the clock?
Child: The clock is on the table.

It should be clear at this point that whatever these educators think they are doing, they are actually doing something else. What can it be?

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## Where will it all lead?

When we compare the school program with the child's actual abilities, we can only wonder what he thinks about being subjected to such nonsense. He sees school as a series of tests and traps, where he must cope as best he can with the incomprehensible demands put upon him by adults. The fact that most schools are run with all the exterior marks of prisons adds to the child's feeling that he is "in for it." Those who succeed are those who have decided that they have to go through with it; those who fail include a large number of children who cannot in good conscience make that decision. There is a well-known, possibly true story about a boy who came home and said, "Mom, you know what happened today? Some papers blew out of the window, and I went outside with the teacher to help pick 'em up. And you know what, Mom? I could have escaped!"

Here in Hawaii, you have gone a long way toward constructing school systems where children can escape, but they don't want to. I'm aware of many of the new developments at the Hawaii Curriculum Center, now being tested in many parts of the state; this is an educational program so remote from the situation I have shown you that it may make many of my remarks seem irrelevant. But I give them to you for several reasons. First of all, I think it will always be important for teachers to know how to talk to children, to find out what children are thinking and what they know. That can best be done if the teacher can talk to the child directly and simply, without using aggravated commands, repetitions, lies, or moral injunctions. Just by avoiding these four patterns you can greatly increase the flow of language from child to adult.

The do's and don'ts that I have outlined here form a large part of the methodology of our research into the Pidgins and Creole spoken here in Hawaii. Eventually, we hope that linguists at the University will be able to supply you with a clear, accurate, and useful account of the basic grammar spoken by children as they enter school. This is a grammar which is changing from one generation to another, yet remarkably consistent within a given generation—if you know how to elicit it. But if you take a child from Nanakuli or Kalihi out of the classroom, and throw a series of questions at him, you will obtain very little for your pains. The result will be a strange and inconsistent mixture of standard English and the basic vernacular: a product of the child's attempt to give you what you want. Even stranger results are produced by asking the child (or an adult) "How do you say this in Pidgin?" The responses are even more like standard English than the formal utterances you obtained a moment before.

These problems are typical of the adult-dominated school situation. When we move out of that situation, using the principles that I have outlined, we have no difficulty in obtaining a rich and unlimited record of the linguistic skills of the children of Hawaii. I hope that it will not be long before some of this material is available to you.

But there is a second reason for giving you this view of the testing of children in a mainland ghetto school. I want to give you some sense of your advantage in being located here in Hawaii with a considerable distance between you and the mainland. You may feel a bit isolated at times, but that very isolation helps you to avoid some of the problems that overwhelm the mainland schools. The knowledge that you have of the community, and the feeling that you have for the language of the children, is a

major factor in helping you to develop educational programs that will eventually be of tremendous value to everyone in the United States.

## Notes

**1.** The editors do not wish to censor any original terms such as nonstandard Negro English, which were in use at the time. Over the decades, various terms have appeared in publications on these issues, beginning with Black English Vernacular in *Language in the Inner City* (1972) (see Bibliography at the end of the article).
**2.** The editors have not altered terms earlier in use that do not align with 2020s inclusive language.
**3.** Labov is referring to American educational psychologist Arthur Jensen and his 1969 *Harvard Educational Review* paper "How much can we boost IQ and scholastic achievement?".
**4.** Labov's friend who did fieldwork in the Amazon was Arthur Sorensen (see Sorensen, A.P. Jr. (1967). Multilingualism in the Northwest Amazon. *American Anthropologist* 69:670-684).

## Labov's publications on African American English *after the 1971 paper "On locating children's language"*

**Compiled by Gillian Sankoff based on Labov's publication list as kept in his laptop and discontinued after his retirement from Penn**

**1972**

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