3-27-1981

The Pygmalion Syndrome

Laureen Cardon

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Cardon, Laureen (1981) "The Pygmalion Syndrome," Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 18. Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol7/iss1/18

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
'Disadvantage' is a word of some importance in our society. In a land where equal opportunity is considered to be of major worth, inherent disadvantage is not only untenable, but unjust as well. 'Disadvantage' is defined as: "1. absence or deprivation of advantage or equality. 2. the state or an instance of being in an unfavorable circumstance or condition. 3. something that puts one into an unfavorable position or condition." (Random House College Dictionary, 1975) Equal opportunity implies a lack of disadvantage. If we as human beings desire a society in which all human beings are provided with all of their needs, we must create conditions such that no members of that society will be placed at a disadvantage because of the circumstances of their birth.

Unfortunately, there is no nation on earth in which there are no disadvantaged subgroups. Even in the United States, where equality is the professed ideal, there is no area of the country that is totally lacking in its share of the disadvantaged. If we as a nation are not to be considered hypocritical by our neighbors, we need to be doing all that we can to alleviate this problem.

Perhaps one of the most cruel forms of disadvantage is cultural, and the seeds of this disadvantage are often carried in language. It has been well established that there are certain markers of speech which convey information about the speaker such as social class, age, sex, and ethnicity. Not only do markers carry this information, they also serve as cues which influence the listeners as they judge the personal worth and abilities of the speaker. In the case of nonstandard speech, this judgment is usually negative and serves to place the speaker at a social disadvantage; and in such a situation, those who are concerned with spreading social equality must act to remove this disadvantage.

There are two major schools of thought regarding cultural disadvantage. The first is the 'deficit theory'. In this model, the culturally disadvantaged are viewed as being in some way cognitively deficient. This deficiency prevents the people of the cultural minority from learning certain of the skills which the dominant culture values, or only permits them to learn a less complete version of these skills. On the other hand, the 'difference theory' contends that each of the cultures (both the dominant group and the disadvantaged group) have comparative skills of equal sophistication. It is just that the two groups are different, and the dominant group considers the subordinate group to be inferior (and unfortunately, the subordinate groups often agree). According to the first hypothesis, the skills of the disadvantaged group are in fact less adequate, while in the second, skills that are in reality completely adequate are considered inferior. (Wiggins, 1976; Giles, Bourhis and
Linguists and anthropologists have traditionally propounded the difference theory, and this theory is finding more and more acceptance in other circles.

The result of cultural disadvantage is a person who cannot fit well into the dominant culture of his society. This person has been placed in a position of lesser potential in relation to his peers who are not so disadvantaged. It is to be hoped that as both cultures become more enlightened, they will work together to improve the situation. We are becoming more able to cope with the linguistic aspect of cultural disadvantage, but we are still faced with the problem of how to alleviate the situation.

An obvious solution is simply to teach the culturally disadvantaged to speak the standard dialect. But removing this barrier to equality is not so simple as it might seem on the surface. There are important cultural concepts which are embodied in language, and forcing a person to change his language means depriving him of one of his most important bases of identity. Is it fair to do this, when there is no indication that one culture is better than another?

Even should it be decided that this were the best course to follow, it would be impossible to implement it. People have a tendency to cling to their primary language and dialect very tenaciously. Labov has found that speakers with a high frequency of stigmatized factors in their own speech show a strong tendency to downgrade others for their use of the same features. Yet they show no signs of altering their own speech patterns. "Why do people not conform to the normative values they express?" (Labov, 1972 quoted by Ryan, 1979, p. 146) Ryan proposes that "the value of language as a chief symbol of group identity is one of the major forces for the preservation of nonstandard speech styles or dialects." (1979, p. 147) For these people, the security of belonging to a social group is of greater value than the promise of advancement offered by a risky change in language patterns.

It may not even be advisable or necessary to attempt to form all language to a perfect standard. Each of us knows from personal experience that even members of the dominant culture speak in a manner which is individually characteristic. We are able to identify the voices of our friends and relatives easily, even when we are unable to see them. Therefore, it seems obvious that while one does not speak in a rigidly prescribed manner when using the standard dialect, there are certain underlying characteristics which mark it and set it apart from other dialects of the same language.

Here, again, we encounter some difficulty. How are we to isolate and identify the specific characteristics which invoke cultural discrimination from the other parts of speech which vary among cultures? The traditional method of comparing dialects is to record samples of each and then compare, tabulating the frequency with which the patterns under study occur. However, this method does not account for the many other variables which can affect language usage. It is also incapable of isolating a cause/effect relationship. Because of these limitations, several other methodologies have been developed. Scherer (1979) identifies three of them: 1) the encoding of specific source states via role playing, 2) semi-naturalistic studies of group interactions, and 3) the systematic manipulation of voice and speech cues. As most of my information comes from studies of these types, I will briefly describe each.
The 'state encoding approach' entails using a subject or actor to portray a speaker role differing from his own. The recordings of these portrayals are then either analyzed themselves for alterations in speech patterns from the subject's normal patterns, or they are rated according to the accuracy of the role portrayed. For example, an actor with a white, middle-class background might be asked to portray the role of a black student on his first visit home from college (or it could be a black actor portraying the role of a white businessman at a cocktail party). The role play would be recorded on tape, along with the actor's normal speaking voice. The speech sample would then be analyzed to determine the amount of accomodation to the new role or the accuracy of the portrayal. An advantage of this approach is that there is only one person portraying two roles, thus the researchers can compare 'outsider' versions of particular dialects with the actual dialects themselves, as well as determining which aspects of speech the subject associates with the new dialect. A disadvantage of this type of research is that stereotype versions of a dialect may have little resemblance to the actual dialect, and this variable must be controlled for.

The 'interactional approach' consists of a situation which may be either partially or totally true-to-life. Subjects are placed in this semi-naturalistic situation in such a way that they must interact with each other in the capacity of the assigned roles. When the activity is completed, the subjects then rate their own performance and that of their fellow subject in the context of certain specified characteristics. These ratings and the transcript or recording of the proceedings are then analyzed together to extract the pertinent information. For example, a group of subjects from a high socio-economic status (SES) group might be told to act as if they were factory workers at a union meeting deciding whether or not to go on strike. The verbal accomodations these people would make would then be analyzed to isolate the salient characteristics. The advantages and disadvantages of this design are similar to those above.

It is interesting to note that after many of these studies, the subjects would deny any linguistic accomodation or alterations in the context of their speech as a result of their assigned roles when the purpose of the experiment was explained to them during the debriefing session. At times they even went so far as to accuse the experimenter of faking the tapes when the phenomenon was pointed out to them. This is evidence that the perception of and accomodation to vocal cues of social status must not be conscious.

The third experimental approach is called 'cue synthesis' or 'cue manipulation'. In this method, recordings are made of volunteers speaking about a variety of topics in their normal voices. Certain features of the voice can be altered systematically through the use of sophisticated computers and synthesizers. These recordings are then rated by judges who are unaware of the purpose of the experiment. Generally the judges are asked to determine certain of the personal characteristics of the 'speaker'. These characteristics could range in anything from kindness to competence, attractiveness to monetary worth. By analyzing the characteristics varied and the attributions they receive, the experimenter can determine what vocal qualities elicit which type of judgment. A variation of this design which uses either bilingual or bidialectal speakers and allowing each subject to be his own control is called the 'matched guise' experiment. This is a very strong design which allows for statistical control and cause/effect inferences. Most of my data is due to this type of study, with supporting evidence coming from each of the first two designs.
It has by now been fairly well documented that social status can be accurately determined through vocal cues. Brown and Lambert (1976) have reviewed some of the studies completed previous to their own. Putnam and O'Hearn recorded over 100 samples of speech from American Blacks of all social classes and of many regional dialects. They then had white college students from the Washington, D.C. area rate the speakers according to social class. Their ratings correlated .80+ with the Warner social status scores originally used to classify the speakers. Harms repeated the study with the same tapes but using judges from the midwest, and obtained similar results. Hart and Brown report that when the verbal content is held constant and the judges hear only the vocal or phonological aspects of the speech samples, they give much more extreme ratings to the speakers on social status scales with greater inter-judge agreement. This indicates that vocal qualities are the primary channel through which information about social competence is transmitted. In 1967 Ellis determined that "most of the information about social status is contained in the vocal aspects of speech." (quoted by Brown and Lambert, 1976, p. 240)

Robinson has hypothesized that:

"if features of speech are to serve as discriminating markers for interpersonal behavior, then their efficiency will be greater the earlier in any interaction the signs become evident, the more salient these signs are, and the more invariant their occurrence is across a range of contexts." (ibid, p. 10)

He has also pointed out the fact that since "valid judgements of SES can be made after hearing only short extracts of speech there is a lack of any necessity to make counts of features across extended corpuses." (ibid, p. 241) The only feature of speech which is readily apparent in such short speech segments and which is also generally invariant is the vocal aspect. Therefore, in order to determine how attributions are made according to speech style, it is the vocal aspect of speech which we should study.

Perhaps at this point I should define the terms 'vocal' and 'verbal'. 'Verbal' refers to the content of the speech samples, while 'vocal' refers to all of the other, phonological aspects of the samples. What can be recorded in a transcript then, is verbal, and all of the descriptive information is vocal (i.e. intonation, pitch, tone, etc.). As Brown and Lambert put it, "verbal is what is said, and vocal is how it is said." (1976, p. 246) Therefore, when Ellis demonstrated that status cues are carried in the vocal aspects of speech, he showed that with the content held constant, the judges were still able to determine accurately social status.

In 1976 Brown and Lambert published a study which had been conducted to determine which specific characteristics were involved in the transmission of social status information. In this study they used a group of 20 French Canadian speakers of various social classes. These speakers were recorded as they read a short passage from the book The Little Prince. Thus holding content constant so the variation would only be phonological, they insured that the ratings would be on the basis of these vocal qualities alone. They had 90 French Canadian boys attending 3 different schools in separate areas of Quebec rate the speakers on social status. The ratings of the judges correlated at a level above .80 with the actual SES of the speakers. In a second study using only English speaking judges, Brown and Lambert found
that the correlation between judged SES and actual SES was about .67 with the mistakes being reasonable. (Both inaccurately judged speakers had attended college but were in the low SES group.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>French-Canadian judges</th>
<th>English-speaking judges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2) A + B Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Judged social status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Intelligént - pas intelligent</td>
<td>9.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Surt de soi - pas sur de soi</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Beau - laid</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Ambitieux - sans ambition</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Actif - passif</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Sourire - faux</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Grand - court</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Poli - impoli</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Volontaire - sévère</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Courageux - féneaux</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Têtu - inflexible</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Amusé - drôle</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Nerveux - pas nerveux</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Calme - pas calme</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Gentil - pas gentil</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Chaleureux - pas chaleureux</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
1. The column labelled "cw^2" (column 1) gives an estimate of the amount of variance that is predictable as computed in an anova statistic (Hays, pp. 324-9). Although the means and the F apply only to the AB or CD comparison, the implied by the F test for each of the four means.
2. In interpreting the means (columns 2 and 3) a rating of one is the highest possible rating on the trait listed and a rating of seven is the lowest. When the pattern of more favourable ratings (low numbers) going to the higher social level is reversed, an "r" is placed between the two mean in the comparison.
3. The entries in the column labelled "F" (column 4 for the data from each study) give the significance level of the difference between means from the planned comparisons F test (Hays, 1963, pp. 490-8). One star (*) indicates p < .05, double star (**) indicates p < .01, and triple star (****) indicates p < .001.

(Taken from Brown and Lambert, 1976, p. 42) To compute the correlation coefficient us 'w', the square root of the 'cw^2' in the table.)

Putnam and O'Hearn, mentioned earlier, report that the major cues used by their listeners to identify social status were "inclusion of aberrant vowel and diphthong allophones, consonant articulation and the degree of sophistication of vocabulary and sentence structure." (ibid, p. 239) In 1970, Frenser, Brown and Lambert compared the speech styles of lower SES French Canadian boys who were doing poorly in school with that of their peers who were doing well. They report that those who were being well were judged to have higher-pitched voices; a greater variety in their intonation patterns; more appropriate intonation patterns; and a more rapid, confident style of speech. This indicates that even children are at least subconsciously aware of these vocal characteristics and will try to imitate those which they hear adults use. Robinson suggests that the five salient features used to determine social status are: pronunciation, prosody, endemic grammar, greetings, and lexical preferences. (1979, p. 240)

Perhaps the ability to determine social status of the speaker upon only hearing short segments of speech would not be so important, if this ability
were not also used as a means of enforcing cultural discrimination. In our society, 'lower class' speech styles are used to label the speaker as inferior, and thus to place him at a disadvantage.

Edwards brings the subject of disadvantage to the classroom. He says, "Disadvantaged children are those whose home background and early socialization are such as to make the transition from home to school difficult." (1979, p. 22) This inherent disadvantage of the child is compounded by the reactions of teachers and other educators to 'disadvantaged speech'. Specifically, the speech of a child, although not necessarily indicative of the child's academic potential, may be such that the teachers will form a lower expectation of the child's performance. In the past, a regular difference between children of different SES levels has been a difference in performance on verbal ability measures. Lower class children perform worse on measures of verbal (in contrast to non-verbal) intelligence scores in comparison with their upper class peers. "Since educational success depends largely on verbal intelligence, lower class children are therefore handicapped, relatively." (Frender, Brown and Lambert, 1970, p. 2)

Generally, since these measures of verbal intelligence have been conducted in the standard dialect, a dialect with which lower class children may be unfamiliar, these tests also contribute to the inaccurate judgments of ability on the part of teachers. As in other such instances, these expectations can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy cycle in which the child will not progress because his teacher is of the opinion that he cannot do so. And the teacher's opinions will be justified by the child's lack of progress.

This tendency of people to be shaped by the expectations of those around them has sometimes been called the 'pygmalion effect'. But since the problem is endemic to our school and social system, I feel it would be more appropriately labeled the 'pygmalion syndrome'. And as with any other endemic 'disease' a cure is necessary before the society can be considered to be healthy and progressing.

In order to test his hypothesis, Edwards conducted a study of teacher reactions to disadvantaged speech, and then had each teacher rate his/her own confidence in the reactions made. The speakers in this study were 40 children, 20 from a low SES area in inner-city Dublin, and 20 from the surrounding middle SES areas. The language of the two groups was not linguistically compared, as a prior study of these variables had already been made. Instead, these tapes were played to 14 teachers-in-training at a local college. These students were asked to react to the recorded speech samples on the basis of variations in vocabulary, fluency, and pronunciation. The judges also reacted to and formed impressions of the children on the variables listed in Table 2. After making each judgment the student teachers were asked to rate their responses on a confidence scale. It was found that 'disadvantaged' children were rated lower on almost every variable, and that the judges were highly confident that their judgments were correct. (Edwards, 1979, table from p. 29)

There is some evidence that these judgments may be somewhat due to personal experience with members of the group being 'judged'. But many times the quality ascribed to the entire group is representative of only a small portion of it.
Table 2  The rating scales


*The end of the scale given a value of 1 in the scoring procedure.

As Robinson says:

"Sometimes it is assumed that those people who are prepared to assess SES on minute extract of speech are using 'stereotypes' of doubtful validity. On the evidence presented here this is not so; among the samples studied, judgments of identity made have been generally both reliable and valid." (1979, p. 238)

Robinson has also noted that "in education we have seen that teachers make inferences to educationally relevant attributes on the basis of the accents and prosodic features of children's voices. . . . These inferences do not represent inaccurate or arbitrary judgments so much as exaggerations of real but lower correlations." (1979, p. 245) The problem we have is that while it is fairly easy to establish social status on the basis of speech cues, it is not the same thing to assign personality characteristics on the basis of those same cues. And in many cases the personality characteristics ascribed to people of subordinate groups are unfounded for the majority of the group members.

It is highly disturbing to me that teachers would feel so confident about rating a child's abilities according to speech cues. This kind of prejudging tends to place the child in a mold from which he will not escape for the rest of his life.

Frender, Brown and Lambert are among those who have been concerned about this phenomenon. And they have tried to isolate the main features of speech which listeners use to classify a speaker's language as being of a lower prestige variety. They point out that "a lower class youngster's style of speech may mark . . . him and thus adversely affect his opportunities to better himself in various situations, including the school environment." (1970, p. 14) Some of the characteristics that they have isolated as significant follow: "upper class in contrast to lower class speakers are more articulate and accurate in their pronunciation; use more intonation; sound more confident and self-assured; stumble less over words;" and have more of a standard accent. (1970, p. 3) In talking about disadvantaged speech they say, "if these features of speech are passed on
to children, one would expect the perceptions and judgments of teachers to be influenced even in their evaluation of the child's school performance, making the lower class child 'the victim of an educational self-fulfilling prophecy.'" (1970, p. 9)

It is now the task of the educator to overcome this pygmalion syndrome. In his play, "Pygmalion", George Bernard Shaw presents a situation in which Eliza Doolittle, a woman of obvious cultural disadvantage, is taken in by an English linguist, Professor Higgins, and is changed into a gentlewoman through linguistic training. But the linguistic training is not the only cause of Eliza's transformation. It is also due to a large extent to the treatment Eliza received at the hands of Colonel Pickering. It was this treatment which taught Eliza the cultural mores she needed to know in order to become a gentlewoman. In our case, the solution is not so easy. There are a great many 'Eliza Doolittles' out in society, and it would be impossible to provide linguistic training to all of them, not even considering the fact that many would refuse to change.

But there are cases in which this disadvantage has been overcome. For example, in the Anacostia Preschool Program in Washington, D.C. children were taught to be fluent both in the standard dialect and in their Black English dialect. This was accomplished through encouragement by the teachers without any form of judgement or disparagement: The method was simply to have the teachers work with the children in the natural preschool environment. The children came to admire the teachers and to imitate them in many areas, including language usage. There was no pressure to make the children use the standard dialect in all situations, and they eventually came to use each dialect in its appropriate situation. In this way the educational disadvantage of the children was reduced without forcing them to relinquish their own ethnic identity. (Covington, 1976) I am very much in favor of such programs, and I hope to see more developed in the near future. I also believe that there are more ways than one to combat the pygmalion syndrome, with proper support and funding, they will be developed.

To summarize, we can see how 'disadvantage' in speech can lead to disadvantage in education. And disadvantage in education can then lead to further disadvantage in all the socially-determined aspects of adult life. But it has been shown that it is not necessarily a lack of intelligence which hinders the speakers of low-prestige dialects, nor even a non-standard linguistic system; but rather the attitudes of society towards non-standard groups which have been attached to linguistic variations and markers, and which act to retard advancement. If this factor could be overcome even in a small degree, it would mark a great advance for our society. Perhaps one of the best places to begin is with the children. "Realizing that getting ahead in life is dependent on success in school, and that socially deprived children are generally poorer school performers, it follows that the chances of the of the less fortunate children could be improved if those factors that are known to affect school performance . . . could be effectively modified." (Frender, Brown and Lambert, 1970, p. 1) If we but take the first step, it is likely that further programs such as community-sponsored cultural interchange programs and adult bidialectal education programs (for members of both the dominant and subordinate groups) will soon follow. Now is the time for the first step.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Frender, Robert, Brown, B.L., and Lambert, W.E. "The Role of Speech Characteristics in Scholastic Success." The Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science. (Volume 2, Number 4) pp.299-306. (I have a pre-publication copy of this reference, which is why page numbers differ.)


also:
