ORAL AND LITERATE TRADITIONS AMONG BLACK AMERICANS LIVING IN POVERTY

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Abstract: Verbal skills traditional in many Black communities were acquired by a pattern of socialization that emphasized children’s participation in community interaction, their adaptability to changing circumstances and their individual interpretive talents. These skills, including the oral negotiation of written materials in family and social context, were largely adaptive to community needs but his pattern of language socialization was not as congruent with school use of oral and written language as the mainstream socialization pattern.

Current changes in the needs for language use in the workplace call for greater adaptability, collaborative skills and individual responsibility and commitment. Aspects of traditional Black language socialization could make a contribution here, but current changes in Black family and community structures in inner-city life are rapidly eroding the earlier pattern. The changing workplace needs raise educational problems for both mainstream and minority populations.

Within the past decade, scholars from a wide variety of disciplines have given considerable attention to the oral and literate traditions of Black Americans, especially in an attempt to compare their family and community patterns with those of school and other mainstream institutions. Anthropologists, social historians and folklorist have detailed the long-standing rich verbal forms of Afro-American rhymes, stories, music, sermons and joking and their interdependence with Black-White relations as well as male-female and cross-age interactions within Black communities (Folb, 1980; Hannerz, 1969; Levine, 1977; Smitherman, 1977; Whitten & Szwed, 1970). Yet, schools and employers have repeatedly pictured a majority of Black students and workers as victims of language poverty and called for increased emphasis on literacy skills for Black Americans—young and old.

It is important to bring together these divergent views about language abilities, especially as they relate to oral and written language uses, and to compare family and community language socialization, on the one hand, with the expectations and practices of schools and workplaces, on the other. When children learn language, they take in more than forms of grammar. They learn to make sense of social world in which they live and how to adapt to its dynamic social interactions and role relations. Through the reciprocal processes of family and community life that flow through communication, children develop a system of cognitive structures as interpretive frameworks and come to share to greater or lesser degrees the common value system and sets of behavioral norms of their sociocultural group (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). These frameworks and ways of expressing knowledge in a variety of styles and through different symbolic systems will vary in their congruence with those of the school and other mainstream institutions. Similarly, those of the school may differ from those of employers. It is important, idealized—degrees of congruence from home and community to school and workplace.
In all these settings, judgments about language use extend to evaluations of character, intelligence, and ways to thinking, thus, negative assessments of language abilities often underlie expressions of sweeping prejudicial characterizations of Black Americans, especially those living of poverty. We consider first the primary uses of language in family and community life and poor and Black Americans, rural and urban and then those of the school and the workplace, taking a comparative view across these varied contexts.

Family and Community Language Socialization

Families socialize their children so that they will learn the forms and functions of language that will help them achieve some self-identity as group members and also meet the needs of everyday interactions. Americans Black families during slavery and subsequently in the often tumultuous and ever-changing circumstances of their daily lives socialized their young to respond to change, to adapt their communicative behaviors, and to define family in terms that extended beyond kin to neighbor, church, and community (Sobel, 1988; Wood, 1974). In response to the perils and pressures of White society, Black communities formed independent organizations—from schools and churches to mutual aid societies—that embodied their sense of being “a people within a people,” capable of relying on their own resources and responding to the ever-shifting circumstances of their society (Nash, 1988). Children had to learn from an every-shifting network, continuously adapting through considering when to apply, discard, reform, and supplement facts and skills that others transmitted to them. Standing behind this self-reliance were an array of literate behaviors—interpreting oral and written texts, preparing and practicing oral performances and written summations of them, feeding texts through the tests of individual experience, and remaking texts conceived by other groups in other times and places into confirmation of current group identities and purposes.

In traditional patterns of rural life, especially in the southeastern part of the United States, open spaces and climate conditions have favored a considerable amount of outdoor public life that, in turn, ensured that youngsters heard and participated in a great variety or oral language performances (Levine, 1977). Children inherited and ethics of group involvement in oral decision making. These public occasions for oral performances helped sustain certain other characteristics such as persistence, assertive problem-solving and adaptability in role-playing (Spencer, Brookins & Allen, 1985). Family members and trusted community members assumed child-rearing responsibilities and demanded numerous kinds of role-playing from the young apparently in the belief that children learn best that which is not directly taught (Barnes, 1972; Hill, 1972; Stack, 1970; Ward, 1971; Wilson, 1971; Young, 1970). Looking, playing, imitating, listening and learning when to be silent complemented children’s learning of oral language skills for negotiating, interpreting and adapting information. These abilities transferred well into individual and group survival in adult life.
Since the 1960s, numerous demographic and socio-economic changes have affected Black Americans. Many have entered the middle and upper classes; yet, many remain in poverty, primarily in the rural Southeast or in the inner-cities of many parts of the country where their parents or grandparents migrated in the early decades of the 20th century. Then ghettos consisted primarily of two-family dwellings or small apartment houses; with the 1990s came high-rise, high-density projects, where people took residence not through individual and free choice of neighbor and community, but through bureaucratic placement.

In the late 90s, nearly half of all Black children live in poverty, and most of these, especially in urban areas, grow up in households headed by a mother under 25 years of age who is a school dropout. Between 1970 and 1980, the proportion of young Black families with fathers fell drastically; the Children’s Defense Fund estimates that approximately 210,000 Black men in their 20s are not accounted for in the 1980 census (Edelman, 1987, p:11). Multiple explanations are offered of account for the “hidden” Black men and the relatively low Black marital rates for men in their 20s (Wilson, 1987). However, in over half of the states, children—regardless of how low the family’s income is—are not eligible for Aid for Families with Dependent Children if an unemployed father resides in the household (Edelman, 1987). Furthermore, housing rules restrict the number of occupants of a single apartment, and assignments of apartments can rarely take into account the needs or expressed desires of members of extended families to live close to each other. Regardless of the theories—economic and social—for these changed family circumstances, the effects on language socialization of the young are undeniable.

Differences in the space and time of interactions in rural and urban Black communities of poverty greatly influence both the degree of their divergence from earlier patterns of language socialization and the increased extent of disparity between rural and urban child-rearing patterns. The picture that most closely resembles that of earlier years comes from those areas in which either agricultural or mill work remain viable options and a majority of families still live in single or dual-family dwellings. Much of the social life is out-of-doors, and times of employment, especially for men, vary with seasonal and daily shift patterns. Both male and female adults of several ages are often available in the neighborhood to watch over children who play outside and to supplement the parenting role of young mothers.

Caregivers ask children only “real” questions—those to which the adults do not know the answers. They accept from children and issue to them direct commands and reprimands. To the grandmother who has just started to iron, the toddler says “stop that now; stop it,” or “Ma, sit down.” To the toddler who has removed the top from a perfume bottle, the grandmother says “Put that top back on and come on” as she starts out the door.

Adults tease children, asking them questions and often threatening to take away possessions, getting them to show their ready wits in front of an audience (Ward, 1971; cf.
In the following interactions between two-year old Tyrone and his grandmother, his biological mother and an aunt and uncle sit on the porch talking. Several conversations take place at the same time, but all participants are mindful of the drama between younger and older combatants.

**Grandmother:** “That your hat? Can I have it? [she is sitting on the porch in a low chair with a lap full of beans to shell, and Tyrone plays nearby with an old hat]
**Tyrone:** “Huh?”
**Grandmother:** “Can I have it?
**Tyrone:** “Yea”
**Grandmother:** “Give it here then”
**Tyrone:** “Huh?”
**Grandmother:** “Let me have it”
**Tyrone:** “No” [in a loud voice]
**Grandmother:** “I buy me one”
**Tyrone:** “Buy one then”
**Grandmother:** “I buy one this big. I buy one that big” [stretching her hands]
**Tyrone:** “That more big”
**Grandmother:** “You get one bigger than that?”
**Tyrone:** “Yea”
**Grandmother:** “I don’t care, I get one bigger than that. I get one this big” [stretching her hands]
**Tyrone:** ‘Huh?’
**Grandmother:** “I get one this big” [repeating her arm stretched]
**Tyrone:** “I get big” [standing up and stretching out his arm and one leg]
**Grandmother:** “So.” [with an air of resignation on the fact that she can neither stand nor stretch out either leg]
**Tyrone:** “Yea”
**Grandmother:** “Yea”.

**Tyrone**’s requests for repetition by which he builds on his grandmother’s sentences illustrate just one kind of challenge game that fills long hours of interactions between youngsters and available older family and community members. Children take adult roles, issue commands and counterstatements, and win arguments by negotiating nuances of meaning verbally and nonverbally. Adults goad children into taking several roles and learning to respond quickly to shifts in mood, expectations, and degrees of jest. Adults expect children to *show* what they know rather than to *tell* what they know (Heath, 1983, 1986, in press).

Numerous forms of written language enter these communities through either bureaucratic or commercial transactions, as well as from the school and church. Adults make public the most significant of these written messages, in order to debate their meanings, offer judgments and negotiate appropriate actions. For those who participate in the many organizations surrounding

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1 I have detailed (Heath, 1983, 1986) language socialization in the Black working-class community of Trackton in the piedmont Carolinas between 1960 and 1977. I have also (Heath in press) described the language socialization of Black children in both a small-town neighborhood and in a high-rise inner-city project and contrasted the patterns of the current generation with those of their parents not quite two decades ago. Data and generalizations that follow in this section come from unpublished transcripts and fieldnotes of language interactions in the homes of four preschoolers who are the children of two young women who were children at the time of the original Trackton study.
the church, there are many occasions for both writing long texts (such as public prayers) and reading Biblical and Sunday School materials, as well as legal records of property and church management matters. Through all of these activities based on written materials, oral negotiation in groups makes the writing matter. The spoken word carries behind it personal relations, institutional affiliations, and common goals and ideals (Rosenberg, 1970). The community values access to written sources and acknowledged the need to produce written materials of a variety of types for their own purposes, as well as for successful interactions with mainstream institutions, yet they do not necessarily value the accumulation of all skills within every individual; instead, different levels and types of talent within the community provide a range of varied resources for the community. Thus, some members become valued as the best storytellers, others as mediators or peacemakers, others as invaluable sources of underground information, and still others as careful record-keepers and schedulers. For example, with Black churches, members acknowledge some members as appropriate treasurers, others as secretaries, and others as brokers who interpret documents from city and state bureaucracies (Bethel, 1979). Within families, members ideally distribute and alternate among many roles, especially those related to caregiving for children and the elderly or infirm (Slaughter, in press; Slaughter & Epps, 1987).

Within these communities, members maintain interpersonal stability by challenging individuals to try to outwit or outdisplay others, while at the same time members expect, and indeed depend on, having a range of sources of knowledge, degrees of expertise, and access to power within the group. The community regards as accomplished, smart and literate those who have the ability to change forms of interactions, to gather and use information from a variety of sources outside their personal experience, to adjust knowledge to fit different interpretations, and to act on information in individual ways.

The picture of family and community life given above differs radically from that of blighted urban areas of high-rise housing projects, there, spatial and interpersonal boundaries, as well as time constraints of the dominant 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. time frame of employment and the prevalence of young single mothers contribute to socialization patterns that contrast sharply with those of rural or small-town residents. Small apartments and public housing rules discourage extended families; high-rise buildings often eliminate the possibility of free play outside by very young children.

Young mothers, isolated in small apartments with their children, and often separated by the expense and trouble of cross-town public transportation from family members, watch television, talk on the phone, or carry out household and caregiving chores with few opportunities to tease or challenge their youngsters verbally. No caring, familiar, and ready audience of young and old is there to appreciate the negotiated performance, playmates and spectators are scarce, as are toys and scenes for play. The mother’s girlfriends, the older children
of neighbors, visits to the grocery store, welfare office, and laundromat, and the usually traumatic visits to the health clinic may represent the only breaks in daily life in the apartment.

One mother agreed to tape-record her interactions with her children over a two-year period and to write notes about her activities with them (for a full discussion of these data, see Heath, in press, for an explanation of this participatory data collection technique used with another dropout mother, see Heath & Branscombe, 1984, 1985; Heath & Thomas, 1984). Within approximately 500 hours of tape and over 1,000 lines of notes, she initiated talk to one of her three preschool children (other than to give them a brief directive or query their actions or interactions) in only 18 instances. On 12 occasions, she talked to the children as a result of introducing some written artifact to them, in the 14 exchanges that contained more than four turns between mother and child, 12 took place when someone else was in the room. Written artifacts, as well as friends or family members anxious to listen to talk about the children’s antics, stimulated the mother’s talk to her preschoolers.

The spatial—and resultant social—isolation to urban project life often forces such young mothers into dyadic rather than multi-party interactions with their children. Even for those mothers who were themselves socialized through multi-party teasing and rich community and church life, their childhood playful and teasing exchanges drop away when there is no audience of new potential challengers. Cut off from the family and communal activities of rural life, these young mothers find it difficult to arrange tasks on which to collaborate with their children. Thus, little of their talk surrounds either planning or executing actions with or for the young. Few allegiances, such as church life, provide a sustaining ideology of cultural membership, pride in being Black or guidance in collecting, assessing, and interpreting information. Instead these young mothers depend in large part on each other, with only infrequent contact with older members of their own families, or they acquiesce to the advice and interpretations of bureaucratic and educational representatives such as social workers.

Institutional Supports of Language Learning

The implications of this shift from association with family and community alliances are wide-ranging. For example, in a comparative study of Black dropouts and high school graduates in Chicago, those who graduated had found support in school and community associations, as well as church attendance; 72% of the graduates reported regular church attendance whereas only 14% of the dropouts did. Alienation from family and community, and subsequently school, seems to play a more critical role in determining whether a student finishes high school than the socioeconomic markers of family income or education level (Williams, 1987). In a study carried out in inner-city Boston, positive effects on the academic success of children came with the association of their mothers with organizational ties beyond the family (and with friends who has
such ties) and with nondenominational religious affiliations, as well as with stability in the labor force over a number of years (Blau, 1981).

In many housing developments, the diversity of languages ethnic groups, and regional and religious backgrounds punctuate young mothers’ isolation. These strange and unfamiliar surroundings cut sharply into possibilities of building mutual trust and shared responsibilities for childcare. Poverty and the stretch for more than the wages can meet erode family bonds, as do the ever-accessible alcohol and drugs of inner-city life. Once children are old enough to leave the isolation of their apartments, they join life on the street, where linguistic and cognitive stimulation abound, often inviting role switching in language and demeanor (Lefkowitz, 1987; Lipsitz, 1977; Rappaport, 1985). However, the potential of older peers to channel the energies and goals of the younger in societally beneficial direction is often overcome by the environmentally harmful conditions that surround youth in the inner city: malnutrition, child abuse, substance-related damage, and criminal activities. Those who manage to transform these street experiences into success in mainstream academic life may suffer considerably from the sociocultural schizophrenia of being both Black and mainstream American (Anson, 1988). They may live (often with devastating outcomes) with the ringing questions that surrounded W.E. DuBois’s (1961, 1903) analysis of double-consciousness in The Souls of Black Folk.

The School’s View of Spoken and Written Language

The school has seemed unable to recognize and take up the potentially positive interactive and adaptive verbal and interpretive habits learned by Black American children (as well as other nonmainstream groups), rural and urban, within their families and on the streets. These uses of language—spoken and written—are wide ranging, and many represent skills that would benefit all youngsters keen listening and observational skills, quick recognition of nuanced roles, rapid-fire dialogue, hard-driving argumentation, succinct recapitulation of an event, striking metaphors, and comparative analyses based on unexpected analogies (Baugh, 1983).

Many educators tend to deny the fundamental contribution of these verbal abilities to being literate in the broadest sense. Rather, schools tend to deal with literacy skills as mechanistic abilities that separate out and manipulate discrete elements of a written text, such as spelling, vocabulary, grammar, topic sentences, and outlines apart from the meaning and interpretation of a text as a whole. Being literate often means having a labeling familiarity with the content of specific written texts (Hirsch, 1987).

The insistent focus in school on learning to read and write as the natural forerunner of reading and writing to learn creates innumerable classroom scenes of individuals reading aloud and responding to teacher and test questions about the content of reading materials. After the
sole writing of short-phrase answers in the early school years come the short essays and research papers on the secondary school. Teachers usually constraints time and task so that these longer pieces written without opportunities to shape and test ideas by talking with others. These expectations stand in sharp contrast to those of family and street associates of children from Black and other nonmainstream communities.

The majority of teachers and a major portion of commercial language arts materials stress that children (as well as adults) must learn to read and write as individuals and display their skills and knowledge in the specified and limited forms of work-sheets, standardized tests, brief academic essays, and answers to teacher and textbook questions. Inner-city schools and those perennially at the bottom of educational profiles receive the most intense pressure to improve the verbal scores of their students; thus, they tend to rely more on teaching materials of the above sort than other districts.

Thus, for the majority of students that score poorly on standardized tests, the school offers little practice and reward in open-ended, wide-ranging uses of oral and written language (such as giving and reinterpreting direction or creating and debating alternative plans of action). Occasions for extended reading, writing, or talking on a sustained topic are relatively few and far between (Applebee, 1981, 1984; Goodlad, 1984). Yet, such occasions lie at the very heart of being literate: sharing knowledge and skills from multiple sources, building collaborative activities from and with written materials, and switching roles and trading expertise and skills in reading, writing and speaking.

Language in the Workplace: Changing Needs

Across almost the entire first century of industrialization and urbanization in the United States, the image of the isolated factory worker carrying out direction given from superiors stood behind many school activities: good students who followed directions and predictably worked on their own made good workers (Graff, 1979, 1987). But during this century of industrial growth, governmental and human service agencies increased their influence over individual lives by generating more and more documents that needed interpretation—generally negotiated orally and with several interchanges with both individuals and groups. To take action on matters ranging from childcare to insurance choices and appliance warranties, all Americans came increasingly to need oral negotiation skills and practice in interpreting written documents.

Yet ironically, schools offered little practice or instruction in those language uses related to negotiation and collaboration in groups. In schools direct and single “right” answers given by individuals predominate over group interpretations of written texts. The underlying basis of group work—that most “real” questions have no direct or right answers—is that no single individual is likely to have the range of information or technical skills needed for most of the
decisions we must make. In most interactions with bureaucracies and other institutions beyond the family, adults—young and old—depend on distributed cognition or the construction of knowledge that is possible through talk that compares, questions, and assesses a wide range of forms of written and spoken language (Rogoff & Lave, 1984; Wertsch, 1985).

Similarly, in a rapidly growing percentage of current employment settings, employers rely less on individuals acting to follow directions and more on individuals collaborating and negotiating under conditions of almost constant flux. From jobs paying minimum wage to professional and executive positions, workers must be able to draw inferences from a variety of types of information, understand and transmit instructions, develop alternatives, reach conclusions, and express their decisions effectively. For example, in fast-food restaurants, cashiers, cooks, and dishwashers negotiate orally with each other and interpret written directions and numerous highly technical and legal specifications that abound in commercial establishments and public agencies (e.g., health inspections and building codes). In the mid-1980s, American manufacturers and service sector employers consistently began to call for workers who were “well-grounded in fundamental knowledge and who have mastered concepts and skills that create and intellectual framework to which new knowledge can be added” (National Academy of Sciences, 1984, p.17). Increasingly, even the first jobs of young adults assume collaborative work settings and occasions for sharing orally the group’s knowledge about ways to solve problems in the workplace. Earlier single-task factory jobs or apprenticed craft positions demanded very different types of language skills. But in the 1980s, advancement depends increasingly on the ability to compose and read graphic and text information about real-world decisions, consult source materials, handle and explain mathematical concepts, control and take responsibility for complex equipment, and transmit information to those both above and below in the work hierarchy (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986; Gainer, 1988).

Institutions—from governmental bureaucracies to commercial workplaces—acknowledge that information and contexts of work now change constantly. These institutions require collaboration and shared knowledge building, as well as individual responsibility and commitment. Most of their members, as well as citizens and workers who come in contact with them, operate primarily and most effectively through a wide range of types of oral language uses as well as an awareness of the power and purposes of written documents. The most valued oral language habits include giving directions, asking clarification questions, offering rapid and on-the-spot summaries, laying out short-term as well as long-range plans, and giving effective and nonthreatening assessments or recommendations to fellow workers. Rarely is any single individual entrusted with writing a document of any significance and for a wide audience: Drafts, multiple readers, and several editions intervene before any final written version. Even more rarely is the reading of a document of any importance given over to a single individual; instead
several read the document and meet to discuss its meaning and relevance for action (Barbee, 1986; Mikulecky, 1982; Mikulecky & Ehkinger, 1986; Mikulecky & Winchester, 1983).

In the valuation of collaboration and numerous verbal forms of displaying knowledge, as well as taking multiple approaches to interpreting a wide variety of types of texts, formal schooling does not mesh well with either nonmainstream communities or workplaces. Schooling pursues actions and evaluations of students that validate answers instead of questions, fixed knowledge accumulated by individuals reading in isolation, an assumption that learning once acquired need not change in relation to context, and individual performance of one-time-only writing of a very narrow range of genres.

Reexamining What It Means to Be Literate

The insistence of the school on individualizing literacy and separating it from social and oral roots has ignored traditional oral and literate habits of Black Americans. Yet, ironically these traditional habits match the demands and needs of employers in the late 20th century far better than those of most classrooms. The workplace of the late 20th century demands language skills far beyond those identified as important and taught in schools. Classrooms’ narrow focus on only certain kinds of literate behaviors typically discourages Black children’s positive transfer of adaptability, keen interpretive talents, and group collaboration to either academic life or employment. Too often Black students, worn down by the effects of poverty and/or the realities of inner-city life, lose hope in themselves. Furthermore, current changes in Black family and community structures of inner-city life are rapidly eroding earlier socialization patterns that offered adaptability, persistence, and strong self-identification within a group. In schools, teachers identify the subject matter and skills to be taught and determine as well the path of development along which the learner should move to reach certain prespecified goals. Repeated denial, punishment, and truncation of family and community language socialization patterns minimize the chances that students will manage to transfer these profitably to either the classroom or workplace.

In contrast to Black American family and community life, as well as new demands of the workplace, in school the competitive display of knowledge by individuals breaks apart the communal acceptance of differential levels of talent and expertise. The focus on general and leveled knowledge across all individuals and the movement of learning along a path prespecified by scope and sequence isolate the learner from the learning group and privatizes knowledge and skills. The school generally insists that adults must always be the teachers, that the verbal display of knowledge is central, and that individual demonstration of literacy prowess is both valued and valuable.
The descriptions given in this article have been of how Black Americans in rural and urban poverty have tried to sustain traditional patterns of learning and roles of spoken and written language. Other nonmainstream sociocultural groups also hold expectations of language and learning that differ markedly from the school’s majority premises about literacy. Studies of different groups of Native Americans, as well as those communities of any one of the several different Hispanic groups (e.g. Puerto Rican, Chicano, recent Mexican-origin, Dominican Republican, Cuban), also document the varieties of ways that young children learn to use oral and written language.

Group sharing, down-playing individual achievement, and remaining available as a resource to members of one’s family and primary community have supported language uses and have been among the ideals of many nonmainstream cultural groups throughout American history. Most certainly, numerous exceptions to these ideals have come in recent decades. Individual minority members have left their family connections and communities to join the mainstream and operate ostensibly apart from their cultural and linguistic roots. In addition, environmental and economic forces have cut deeply into traditional community-sustaining patterns of oral and written language use. For Afro-Americans and Native Americans—and increasingly for Hispanic groups—many economic and social policy forces have eroded family and community-based efforts to sustain group cohesion, shared goals and negotiated intentions.

The majority of the American population wants to hang onto their folk theories about literacy and continue their faith in school as the place where individuals learn to read and write in order to get good jobs. A major function of research in the social sciences is to offer evidence that such premises do not apply universally across cultures or periods of history. Moreover, basing norms and practices of formal schooling on such folk theories may diminish the larger society’s ability for self-assessment and adaptation. In the late 1980s, multidisciplinary investigations of language in the life of minority communities and workplaces strongly suggest that the public adopt a radically different conception of literacy than that which drives formal schooling. These studies (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986) find within families and communities a wide variety of ways that oral and written language can sustain the adaptive and innovative strategies of problem solving that American employers and public service proponents see as rich human resource investments. If, as our folk theories maintain, schools are in the business of improving benefits for society, they have much to learn from the oral and literate traditions of Black American family and community life.
References:


