

Cultural Horizons and Language Usage

BY JAN OCAMPO

Language is a specie-specific, unique human trait, composed of a set of sounds which are assembled according to set rules and which interact with the experiences of the users.

Usage is the way we utilize language, the manner in which we choose words and structures, the way in which we express particular ideas. Since no two idiolects are the same, we can say that usage is a personal thing. Yet, although all idiolects are different, we assume they have some characteristics in common or they would not make up a dialect.

The area in which we live is called culturally disadvantaged. Because of our isolation, the children are lacking the necessary exposure and learning. As a result, their language has been affected. Of course, language usage is not the only factor which is involved when speaking about a cultural disadvantage, but this is the area of interest.

Limited Experience

Our children on Molokai, Hawaii, are limited in the variety of their experiences. They cannot go to a zoo, climb the steps of a 20 story building, ride an escalator or take a bus. They do not have the vocabulary which these situations call for. Someone from another place might say, "I took the bus from Waikiki to Ala Moana." In contrast, one of our children might say, "I ben' go de kine when I stay Honolulu--you know, de kine bus." Although the first sentence is closer to standard English, neither can be called correct or incorrect. Language exists mainly for communication and that's exactly what these two speakers have done. If language is behavior, then these two speakers have behaved properly in front of their listeners.

Some people would call the second speaker's sentence wrong, but we must remind them that language relates to the culture in which it is used. Since this is the culture of our children, this is their language.

Bi-Dialectical Students

However, we want to try to show them how their language differs from that of others. We want to teach them a more appropriate form of usage, not just to reject their present usage. We need to show them there are times when this informal speech is appropriate and times when a more formal pattern is necessary. The good speaker is the one who can use either form of speech at the proper times.

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As teachers on Molokai, we have grown accustomed to the speech patterns of our children. We know what they are saying, but we want to make them more sensitive to the shades of language meaning. Good English is that which is appropriate to the purpose of the speaker and comfortable to both speaker and listener. If we can instill this idea in our students, then we may be able to motivate them to develop their vocabulary and their manipulation of sentences.

Of course we know that we are not going to change our children's ingrained language habits overnight. Actually, we do not want to change but only modify and add to them. Language shapes our culture and as a result culture makes a system of language. If we can broaden the cultural horizons of our students, then we will have made a step in the right direction towards helping them with their language problems.