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Language Acquisition and Dialectalism

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We have no neat Litmus-Paper Test for the evaluation of language acquisition. We know that all children begin to speak at about the same age, regardless of the language involved. We also note that normal children have learned the basic structure of their language by the age of five or six. Houston emphasizes the common age of onset of language and the common course of language acquisition of children around the world, making the general assumption that this was due to neurological factors.¹ Many speech pathologists and psychologists accept man's inherent tendency to learn language by exposure to linguistic features. In the case of the child, this is not a matter of formal teaching, but informal listening to the phonology, morphology and syntax of the language, resulting in his "figuring out" the relationships of the sounds, forms and patterns surrounding him. In the situation in which he says "foots" for "feet," as in an analogy with "hand-hands," a simple correction by parents, peers, siblings or teacher may serve to correct the error. This

would similarly be true of "bringed" for "brought" or "blowed" for "blew."

In the case of the adult learning a second language, the learning problem is different from that of the child, but it is a common problem in all language learning. Children rapidly expand their vocabularies if they are expanding in their native tongue; this is a normal procedure. The basic units are already formulated; the sounds, spelling, and pronunciation are quite similar. It is possible

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to increase a child's vocabulary from 1,000 words to 10,000 words by using the same familiar language rules. The sentence structure is basically the same. His "accent" will be that of his parents and playmates whom he first heard and imitated. The speech pattern of imitation which we learn when we are beginning to talk is the one which generally remains with us in adult life.

Lado says: "The adult speaker of one language cannot easily pronounce language sounds of another even though he has no speech impediment, and what is even more startling, he cannot easily hear language sounds other than those of his native language even though he suffers no hearing defect. This is one of the major problem areas confronting the bilingual student."²

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Time and pitch differences are likely to be a major factor, for we recognize immediately these deviations from our own speech. In addition, there are changes of word emphasis within the structural make-up of the sentence or thought. On the basis of these differences, it appears logically sound that the term "accent" fails to embody the problems evidenced by the majority of students who learn English as a second language. Grant Fairbanks suggested the term "dialectal speech."³

However, dialectal speech, or "bidialectal" speech has another connotation today. This term is currently utilized to describe the language of the economically disadvantaged child in the United States. It is applied to the disadvantaged black child, to the Spanish-speaking child in the Southwest, and to the culturally deprived child in any area. The speech of these children is not the so-called "standard" speech of the middle-class monolingual English speaker in this country. Baratz defines dialectal speech within a frame of reference of substandard speech learned in a language environment where standard English is not spoken.⁴

Does the bilingual speech or dialectal speech or substandard speech of such youngsters fall into the category of "defective" speech? Is this "defective speech" when it is used by an adult?

My personal feeling is that the child or adult learning English as a second language should be taught the phonology and syntax of an educated person, if only for the ultimate goal of being able to communicate with all persons with whom he will come in contact. He will appear to be uneducated if his speech reflects otherwise. Although his speech may not be considered "defective" in the sense of the word, he may be "language handicapped."

Phonology must be *taught*; morphology must be *taught*; syntax must be *taught*. The ultimate language goal of the student will determine his needs. We have no means of judging language outside of the function it serves in its own cultural environment. One dialect is not "better" than another. Our judgments are valid only within the limitation of our immediate society. How do you measure, in terms we can all understand, language proficiency?

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