

"Talking Posh!"
Sociolinguistic Perspectives on the
Context of Schooling in Ireland

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"Talking Posh!"
Sociolinguistic Perspectives on the
Context of Schooling in Ireland

- ⌘ Language Variation
- ⌘ Language Variation and School
- ⌘ Description of Study
- ⌘ Analysis of Data
- ⌘ Findings and Recommendations

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Language Variation

"We know that children's differences in language ability, more than any other observable factor, affect their potential for success in schooling...that **language is the central achievement necessary for success in schooling**" (emphasis added)

(Corson, 1985, p.1)

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Language Variation

Language varies according to the

- ☐ **Purposes** for which it is used
- ☐ **Contexts** in which it is used
- ☐ **People** by whom and with whom it is used (Carter, 1995, p.157).

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Language Variation

- One variety of English, known as Standard English, is the variety which is usually
- ☐ Used in print
 - ☐ Spoken by 'educated' people
 - ☐ Used in news broadcasts and other similar situations
 - ☐ Variety which is accorded Prestige
 - ☐ Variety which is Prescribed as Correct
 - ☐ Variety through which schools function

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Language Variation

- ⌘ Parent(s) are unemployed
- ⌘ Parent(s) are uneducated
- ⌘ Poverty
- ⌘ Instability
- ⌘ Cultural/Racial Differences compounding the problem

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Language Variation

- ⌘ Not inferior
- ⌘ Not deficient
- ⌘ Not deprived
- ⌘ Not restricted

⌘ **Different**

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Language Variation

Culturally and linguistically different children

- ☐ Are not non-verbal
- ☐ Do not lack experiences
- ☐ Are not culturally disadvantaged
- ☐ They possess language but it may not be standard, middle-class English
- ☐ They come to school with perhaps as many experiences as other children but possibly not the experiences that appear to be critical in achieving academic success

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Language Variation *How?*

- ⌘ Complexity of linguistic structure- children of educationally advantaged parents perform significantly higher
- ⌘ Range of complexity of linguistic structure - no significant difference
- ⌘ **All children can and do use a wide range of complex linguistic structures. Children of educationally disadvantaged parents, however, use them less frequently.**

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Language Variation *How?*

- ⌘ Purposes - major and significant differences
- ⌘ Analyse and reflect
- ⌘ Reason and justify
- ⌘ Predict and consider alternatives
- ⌘ Talk about events in the future
- ⌘ Project into the lives and feelings of others
- ⌘ Build up scenes, events, stories in imagination

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Language Variation *Why?*

- ⌘ Nature of talk used by parents
- ⌘ Book Reading
- ⌘ Imaginative Play

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Language Variation

- ⌘ 'non-standard' varieties – highly structured, complex systems (e.g. Wardhaugh, 2006)
- ⌘ Every speaker/hearer of ... English, regardless of dialect, has control of an equally complex and rule-governed grammar' (Gee, 2002, p.32)

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Language Variation and School

- ⌘ Discontinuity
- ⌘ Language Demands of the Classroom
- ⌘ Teacher Attitude

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Language Variation and School Discontinuity

"...part of the problem can be explained by the concept of **discontinuity**, that the culture of the school, predicated on middle class language style and behavioural norms, makes it appear an inhospitable place". (emphasis added)

(Poverty and Educational Disadvantage, Breaking the Cycle; INTO 1994, pp.28,29)

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Language Variation and School Discontinuity

" Some children's ways of making meaning with lanugae enable them to readily respond to the school's expectations, but the ways of using language of other students do not...many children lack experience in making the kinds of meanings that are expected at school, or with the kinds of written texts and spoken interaction that prepare some children for school-based language tasks. **This lack of experience makes it difficult for these students to learn and to demonstrate their learning**" (Emphasis added) (Schlepegrell, 2004, p.21-22)

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Language Variation and School *Discontinuity*

- ⌘ Ask fewer questions
- ⌘ Interact less with the teacher
- ⌘ Tend to approach adults more for purposes of management
- ⌘ May approach teachers less often for contact, conversation or involvement
- ⌘ *There may be a difference in style of interaction due to the different context that the school provides. (Corson, 1988)*

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Language Variation and School *Language Demands of the Classroom*

- ⌘ Getting a turn to talk
- ⌘ Acceptable topics for talk
- ⌘ Predetermined by someone else
- ⌘ Evaluate the acceptability of pupil talk
- ⌘ Knowledge of language patterns but may not be familiar with the language of literature
- ⌘ Effective communication skills but displayed in an inappropriate way in the classroom context
- ⌘ Purpose for speaking and listening
- ⌘ Audience

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Language Variation and School *Language Demands of the Classroom*

- ⌘ Provide information that is structured in conventional ways
- ⌘ Talk explicitly grounded temporally and spatially
- ⌘ Minimal shared background knowledge or context
- ⌘ **Literate Style**

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Language Variation and School *Language Demands of the Classroom*

Not all children come to school equally prepared to use language in the expected ways, nor do all share the same understanding that certain ways of using language are expected at school - evidenced in social class differences among kindergarten children (Schleppegrell, 2001, p.434).

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Language Variation and School *Language Demands of the Classroom*

- ⌘ Authoritative presentation of ideas
- ⌘ Using apt vocabulary
- ⌘ Complex grammatical structures
- ⌘ Expanded appropriately
- ⌘ High degree of organisation
- ⌘ High in new information
- ⌘ Adopt an impersonal stance

(e.g. Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Michaels, 1981; Schleppegrell, 2001,2004; Snow et al., 1989)

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Language Variation and School *Language Demands of the Classroom*

“The use of a specific oral language register...literate language, is fundamental to becoming literate in school”

(Pellegrini, 2002, p.55)

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Language Variation and School *Language Demands of the Classroom*

- ☐ Being familiar with and able to use literate style oral language has been shown to be a developmental precursor to school-based literacy learning as well as
- ☐ A strong predictor of early literacy development

(e.g. Dickinson & Moreton, 1991; Olson, 1977; Pellegrini & Galda, 1998; Snow, 1983)

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Language Variation and School *Teacher Attitude*

- ⌘ Teachers are bound by the standard language ideology
- ⌘ By implication, non-standard varieties become tacitly devalued
- ⌘ Negative teacher attitudes Affects teacher expectations
- ⌘ In turn affects pupil performance
- ⌘ *There is a longstanding finding of researchers that teachers' perceptions of children's non-standard speech produces negative expectations about the children's personalities, social backgrounds, and academic abilities* (Giles, 1987)

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Description of Study

Purpose

- ⌘ **whether patterns of children's oral language use in school vary by social class**
- ⌘ **children's awareness of language variation**
- ⌘ **implications of such variation**

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Description of Study

- ⌘ Interpretive Case Study Design
- ⌘ Exploratory
- ⌘ Elicited Production Techniques
- ⌘ Focus Group Discussions
- ⌘ Standardised Test Results

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Elicited Production Data

- ⌘ Factual
- ⌘ Narrative
- ⌘ Analytical
- ⌘ Imaginative

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Framework for Linguistic Analysis of Academic Language

In schooling contexts, the overriding features of the situational context are that students

- **Display knowledge**
- **Authoritatively**
- In highly **structured** texts

(Schlepegrell, 2004, p.74)

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Framework for Linguistic Analysis of Academic Language

- ⌘ PRESENTING IDEAS
- ⌘ TAKING A STANCE
- ⌘ STRUCTURING TEXTS

What are the linguistic elements that are functional for these purposes?

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Presenting Ideas

" School-based texts typically select complex nominal syntax that draws on technical and abstract lexis and processes through which logical meanings are instantiated...**texts need to be rich in information**" (p.75)

- Lexical explicitness realised through vocabulary choices
- Presents information and constructs new understandings about the physical world vs focussing on individual actions and personal viewpoints
- Includes relationships of time, consequence, comparison, addition
- Conjunctive relationships are integrated into the clause

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Taking a Stance

" In academic contexts, students are typically expected to project a noninteracting and distanced relationship with the listener/reader in their writing and formal speaking" (p.58)

- **MOOD** – declarative, interrogative, imperative
- **MODALITY** – resource which enables the expression of degrees of probability, certainty, necessity

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Taking a Stance

"the expert, authoritative role of the student is typically realised in the choice of declarative mood and use of modality and attitudinal resources instead of intonation to convey speaker/writer stance toward what is said" (p.75)

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Structuring Text

"In academic texts the dense presentation of information means that more integrated logical relations are typically more highly valued" (p.65)

- Internal conjunction
- Cohesive resources
- Clause-combining strategies of condensation and embedding
- Effective exploitation of thematic position
- Expanded noun phrases
- Nominalisation
- Grammatical metaphor

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Focus Group Discussion Data

- ⌘ Children
- ⌘ Teachers

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Language Variation *Let the children speak!*

- ⌘ Talk as a Learning Medium
- ⌘ Talking time in the Classroom
- ⌘ Talking Style in School
- ⌘ Teacher Talk
- ⌘ Literacy Activities

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Language Variation *Teacher Responses*

- ⌘ Importance of Oral Language
- ⌘ Pedagogic Responses to perceived oral language needs
- ⌘ Awareness of Variation
- ⌘ Support from the Revised Curriculum
- ⌘ Home-School Links
- ⌘ Literacy

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Findings

- ⌘ Clear and compelling evidence of *variation in patterns of language use* by children in the primary schools in this study.
- ⌘ *Variation* in patterns of language use occurs according to *social class*
- ⌘ *Differences* in patterns of language use are related to children's facility with 'literate' or 'academic' style of language, that *style of language expected in the school context*

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Findings

- ⌘ Children in disadvantaged contexts consistently displayed *fewer features of this style* of language use than their middle-class counterparts when engaged in school-type talking tasks
- ⌘ *Differences* in patterns of language use evident in the language of children *emerge in all categories of typical school-type talking tasks* - factual, analytical, narrative, and imaginative

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Findings

Differences evident across all age groups, across both genders, in single class groupings and in multi-class groupings, in both urban and rural schools, and in both big and small schools

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Findings

- ⌘ Children acutely aware of differences in patterns of language use between home and school
- ⌘ Teachers, while acknowledging the importance of oral language, focus more on development of literacy than oracy skills in the school context

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Recommendations

- ⌘ Develop an awareness of the existence of language variation
- ⌘ Establish that language variation does not imply inferiority, either linguistic or cognitive
- ⌘ Embrace all children and their language variety equally
- ⌘ Highlight implications of language variation for success in school
- ⌘ Reach out to children and their parents in a supportive manner

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Recommendations

Ignoring the difference that differences make, or pretending they do not exist, certainly is not in the best interests of children

(Wolfram et al., 1999, p.25)

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Myth of Verbal Deprivation

(Labov)

...the essential fallacy of the verbal-deprivation theory lies in tracing the educational failure of the child to his personal deficiencies. At present, these deficiencies are said to be caused by his home environment. It is traditional to explain a child's failure in school by his own inadequacy; but when failure reaches such massive proportions, it seems to us necessary to look at the social and cultural obstacles to learning and the inability of the school to adjust to the social situation (Labov, 1973, p.55)

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