

# A Sociocultural Study of Intercultural Discourse



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*Empirical Research on Italian  
Adolescent Pupils*

By

Antonella Castelnovo

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Empirical Research on Italian Adolescent Pupils

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*To Basil Bernstein, a scholar, a teacher, a friend.*



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## PREFACE

TONY BURGESS

A challenge for those who seek to develop a truly intercultural education is to provide a knowledge of cultural difference capable of grounding an adequately informed pedagogy. This is the challenge that Antonella Castelnovo addresses here, in her profound and carefully researched enquiry.

Her work centres on a highly focused research – a local secondary school in a small rural town in central Italy, experiencing migration from the South, from Calabria and Sicily, and from Sardinia. A selected group of fourteen students forms the core of the study - girls and boys, from families with different social class backgrounds and with different family histories though all with Italian as their first language, achieving differently in school. Within this everyday school setting, written and spoken tasks are presented to these young people in order to explore differences between them, in their knowledge and values and, especially, in their management of exploratory, educational discourse.

One of the book's most striking commentaries explores the various ways in which students of different backgrounds approach a common task, interpreting a story. For some students – for those from a migrant background, from families from the South, and also for those from local working class families - their insecurity with the nature of what is being asked leads to their closing down the task. Amongst the local students, the pressure to achieve an agreed consensus simply cuts out any real exchange. Meanwhile, the approach taken by the students from migrant families is limited by the purely “disputational” strategy that they adopt. Neither set of students can manage the task without extensive adult probing. In contrast there are others, who characteristically achieve more highly, whose patterns of interaction enable them to open up the discussion. The different style of communication that they pursue leads to exploratory strategies and to a wider exchange of ideational meanings. That these are significant differences for education, with implications for pedagogy, will be readily apparent.

These and other differences that Dr. Castelnovo highlights are not to be regarded as in some sense permanent features of these young people's social landscapes, as abiding intellectual deficits. She argues, and she seeks to show, that the differences detected in her evidence are in experience of discourse, and in particular in the sorts of discourse which are highly regarded in education and in school. Her analyses reveal the cultural and linguistic gaps that exist between students who inhabit the same school and classroom; but she makes clear at the same time that these are not beyond the reach of a pedagogy that is sufficiently adjusted to the variety of experience to be found in intercultural settings.

As I have already indicated, Dr. Castelnovo's primary concentration is on the role of language in mediating thinking. She works in a long tradition that looks to the Russian psychologist, Vygotsky, for its inspiration, and also to the British sociologist, Basil Bernstein. In a shrewdly judged account, she takes from this tradition what she finds most valuable and guides the reader through some complex arguments. Referring to a commonly accepted starting point, that it is through discourse that young people gain access to certain kinds of thinking, she points out that Vygotsky does not draw on any detailed description of the language system to develop this position. She is surely also right that Bernstein's account of codes pays most attention to the structural links from society to language and does not explore the detail of micro-social interaction. The work that she develops, by contrast, seeks the source of discursive difference in cultural interaction, rather than in social structure, and adds the insights of linguistics to the Vygotskian perspective. She is guided by reference to the British linguist, Michael Halliday, both for his descriptive categories and for the orientation of his work towards language in use, in contexts of culture and of situation.

The detailed apparatus she assembles to analyse students' written and spoken language combines creative use of concepts drawn from systemic functional linguistics with qualitative insight. If the central concentration is on the tenor of students' discourse - that is, on the interpersonal function - illuminating reference is also made to other levels of analysis and to other categories. Student choices in the realisation of nominal and verbal groups are explored in relation to differentiating value systems, in a powerful analysis of judgements made on characters in a given story. Choice of semiotic strategy is a central thread in the manner of discussing this story. The cumulative analyses of linguistic features permit the integration of quantitative evidence and qualitative judgement in estimating the differences in young people's responding to the tasks with which they are presented.

This important work offers an account of student language which reinforces broad educational understanding of the role of discourse in mediating thinking, and at the same time illuminates the differences that can lie between students and below the surface of an ordinary classroom. While the starting point is a single school in a small Italian town, the findings are global in their implications, relevant wherever different cultural histories meet. The different outcomes that emerge in response to spoken and written tasks provide strong arguments against an educational tradition that overlooks the different needs of students in a simple “one size fits all” approach.

The case made here is for a pedagogy that attends to cultural histories, informed by understanding of the differences in resources that students bring to their encounter with educational discourse. For pupils who have already accumulated the essence of school knowledge, many of our favoured educational methods will work well, including guided discovery and dialogic enquiry. Other pupils, less well versed in schooling, will need, in the writer’s words, “techniques of mediation”.

This work will be of interest to anyone concerned with the learning of young people, and it carries particular implications for work with those who presently do not succeed in schools. Dr Castelnuovo’s findings about differences in student discourse raise key questions for the nature of the pedagogy needed to shape our educational futures.

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# INTRODUCTION

Any attempt to overview a research study lasting about twenty years is even more difficult when the area of research is interdisciplinary, involving pedagogy, language, psychology and sociology. Fully aware of the risks this involves, I will describe the present study in a subjective narrative manner, with a review of my own professional and academic history throughout all those years. I believe that in order to explain the great length of time it took me to accomplish this work I should offer a synthesis of my professional and academic progress, both in England and in Italy, during its various stages. Somehow experiences, especially when taking place in two different countries, can resemble an apple split into two halves; on the one hand England represented the “opening years” of my academic studies by providing new horizons and new possibilities. On the other hand, Italy is my homeland, where I now live, work and put into practice my theoretical knowledge. I needed to bring together the halves of the apple, but the process was not always easy as both of my experiences presented different problems and possibilities for solving them. Thus, this need for personal and academic integration implied an assimilation of knowledge and constant empirical testing of concepts and ideas in the appropriate context. Indeed such a process may sometimes take a lifetime and is typical of deep internal and dynamic psychic experiences, such as immigration or scientific creation: In this respect Galileo expressed science’s creation in a moving, dynamic sense by referring to it with the gerund form “*provando e riprovando*” (experimenting again and again), thus showing how continuous and complex the process of assimilating knowledge can be. This quote may appear presumptuous if related to my situation, but somehow great thinkers have the gift of describing collective experiences, which justifies my use of Galileo’s words.

At present my field of work is related to sociocultural studies with special reference to discourse practices in educational contexts. In our Western tradition teaching and learning are generally a specifically verbal affair. Learning is often an abstract process of a decontextualized education, resulting in insulated activities which do not take into account the culture and the context in which they occur (Lave & Wenger 1990). Yet verbal discourse in school contexts cannot be treated as an end in itself but as a means to help pupils to attain broader purposes and educational

goals. The main goals in education are achieved through the acquisition of knowledge, often expressed by the medium of language. However such knowledge is also the result of socialisation patterns which are antecedent to pupils' school experiences, arise from their family structure and are mediated by different cultural experiences.

For these reasons I will look at discourse, i.e. verbal discourse, as a learning activity involving socio-cognitive processes. In my study these processes are expected to vary according to the historical and cultural background of the pupils in my empirical sample, differentiated according to social class variation and gender.

The great interest I have always had in speech was the first driving motive for my research.

I first worked as a speech therapist, dealing with language retardation and children with reading difficulties. I realized the deep impact that language had on children's personalities, and on other important aspects of their psychological development. At the time I realized that while language was indeed the central aspect of my work, by helping children to speak I was also helping them with other psychological functions connected with their development. This complex interwoven set of neurological and psychological relationships provided the interest to continue my studies and to obtain an M.Sc. in Human Communication from London University. Eventually, this led to a position in Italy, in Siena University as a lecturer in intercultural communication, and allowed me to continue my research on multicultural education. These aspects of my career are somehow deeply related to the subject of my present research.

The second strong drive is connected to the great impact that two theories had on my academic formation: the work of Lev S. Vygotsky and that of Basil Bernstein. I had the privilege of meeting the latter personally and working with him as supervisor of the first draft of my Ph.D. thesis. In this respect, "*Si parva licet componere magnis*" (if small things to great may be compared)<sup>1</sup> this study pays homage to both their theoretical contributions in an area of research - intercultural education - which was envisaged as a possibility both by Vygotsky and by Bernstein but was not fully explored by either of them. My attempt to compare them in a new field of application is the result of my inner progress and changes in my academic perspective; in this light it is possible somehow to justify the great length of time which my study has required.

When I was an M.Sc. student at Guys' Hospital Medical School, I came across for the first time the work of Basil Bernstein. His theory had a deep impact on me: it was a sort of *déjà vu*, especially when he spoke of



elaborated and restricted codes (now I can recognize that he spoke of experiences I had in my childhood), and I felt I wanted to go on exploring the theory. At that time I had already studied psychology in depth, but somehow I was unsatisfied as I felt that those studies were too individualistic, and what was missing was a broader dimension which I found in the sociological work of Basil Bernstein. Indeed I was not disappointed: during the following years, as one of his Ph.D. students, the seminars and his supervision were stimulating, opening new possibilities of enquiry, and most notably they extended across fields in a truly interdisciplinary nature. As the recently-deceased Norberto Bobbio, one of our greatest Italian philosophers, used to say: “*Gli uomini di cultura devono stimolare dubbi non proclamare certezze*” (Educated individuals must raise doubts, not proclaim certainties).

Indeed, Bernstein himself was opening up doubts about his concepts, and he often reformulated them for a more explicit understanding. In those days – the early 1980’s – this attitude was not much appreciated in Britain; rather it was perceived as a lack of scientific rigour, especially in the field of language studies, which attempted to establish a strong disciplinary identity following the American tradition.

This approach did not disturb me as, being Italian, my tradition sensitized me more towards the humanities than science<sup>2</sup>, and I thoroughly enjoyed this broad approach which opened new connections as well as new possibilities of thought and intuition. It was during those years that I understood the meaning of a quote by Herni Marion, the 19th century French pedagogue: “*Pedagogy is both the science and the art of education*”.<sup>3</sup> Bernstein’s pedagogical approach was indeed a mixture of science and art, i.e. an unfolding creative process sustained with theoretical logical support.

However those were not easy moments; the theory of sociolinguistic codes was very much under criticism, especially following Labov’s experiments (1972) which did not disprove Bernstein’s concepts, although they probably were intended to.

In England criticism concerned many aspects of the theory such as the lack of experimental data (Rosen 1972; Edwards 1974; Stubbs 1976), its over-functionalistic approach (more recently Harker and May 1993), its inadequate treatment of class relations (Huspek 1994), and finally the fact that it was more concerned with cultural transmission than highlighting possibilities for social change.

This to me, as a young student, was somehow an incentive to provide a small contribution to the theory. I felt this would be intrinsically pleasing to me, even if I agreed with certain criticisms such as the lack of empirical

investigation, especially within families and in classroom situations. In particular I felt the theory was missing the interactional aspect, which Bernstein analysed only structurally with his concepts of *personal* and *positional* families.

Collaboration with Halliday offered Bernstein the “linguistic counterpart” to his sociological theory, and this was an important epistemological step toward clarifying many aspects of his conceptual paradigm. In this respect, he had relied on Halliday’s model of discourse in his attempt to explain the role of language and speech accordit the context of situations in which it is found. In particular he clarified the issues concerning differences between code, meaning, register and dialects, often confused in many assessments of his theory and used as a criticism against his work.

In the 1980s Bernstein was working on his later formulation of the notion of code (1981), which was a kind of synthesis of his ideas: the sociosemiotic account of the transmission/acquisition process, and the process being mediated by language in its contextualized forms of speech.

Parallel to the code, he was revising his operational concepts of classification and framing which were functional to it. Classification referred to the relationships between subjects’ institutional boundaries, while framing was concerned with the description of roles and relationships in pedagogic exchange. In this way Bernstein had created the basis for a pedagogic model which attempted to describe the reproduction of the power and control of meaning across generations, and between and within social classes. The theory was ready to analyse how power would affect discursive practices in schooling but also outside schooling, showing the limits of access to certain types of meanings connected to the language of power and to institutionalized forms of symbolic control. Using these new sets of operational tools the theory seemed ready to operationalize appropriate teaching paradigms and to advocate a pedagogic strategy for change.

A few years later Bernstein would achieve his theory of code by integrating it with the concept of *pedagogic discourse*, which gave him the scientific basis not only to state that the potential for social change is “*intrinsic to the subject*” (Bernstein 1994: 104), but also to formulate systematic strategies and forms of collective action.

At that time the subject of my thesis - an empirical investigation of the discourse practices of British adolescents (divided according to social class and gender) interviewed in different educational contexts – was able to provide the opportunity for such investigation.

In particular my empirical design was set up in such a way as to elicit group discussion of a story made up for the purpose, in two different types of evoking contexts (formal and informal) devised within the research design. Different outcomes in terms of social interaction and discursive production were attributed to different rules of interpretation of the context, affecting the pupils' coding production (realization rules) as a result of their general code orientations (restricted versus elaborated). Such a hypothesis (eventually confirmed by the data) raised the question of how speech and knowledge were constructed by different pupils depending on their gender and social class (working class boys/girls versus middle class boys/girls) within the specific context of an artificial educational situation (i.e. the context of the interview). In addition it also highlighted the motives and goals that different pupils attributed to school practices and activities, providing evidence that pupils' code orientations were not changed by informal instruction.

As a matter of fact, the working class samples (both from the school and from the youth club) produced restricted coding irrespective of the change of the type of adult's instruction and the creation of an informal educational situation within the experimental context (formal school versus informal youth club).

For me this was confirmation that code orientations, as Bernstein always claimed, have a social and psychological aspect as they result from inter-subjective class relations regulated by power and control, internalized by the subjects and visibly manifested at the intra-subjective level. Such regulated relations were also apparent in the context of my research design.

Methodologically, the creation of an experimental context to analyse children's speech rather than analysing in a natural environment was one of the controversial issues in Bernstein's approach.

Schools are social institutions implicated at many levels in the process of cultural reproduction (Bowles & Gintis 1976; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977); thus learning is constantly enacted within institutions and, in such a perspective, classrooms are not naturalistic contexts but highly defined by culture both symbolically and institutionally. Their social semiotics are highly structured (both in space and in time), and the dynamics of the interaction between pupils and between teachers and pupils is completely different from that at home, as is the speech production required by those interactions.

Going back to my research data, I realized that they could provide empirical evidence of pupils' resistance to certain forms of schooling and to certain types of pedagogic practices. I also realized that the working

class groups interviewed in their youth club premises would not produce elaborated coding in their discussions. The interview paradigm, even if informal, was somehow related to the teaching paradigm, and I sensed it as problematic for those working class pupils. Power articulated through discursive practices, mostly rooted in language, limited their access to the language of power (elaborated coding) and symbolic control; those pupils acted somehow as passive recipients of knowledge and not as producers of it.

The order of meanings that pupils are predisposed to is code-regulated, so that resistance to a change of code when pedagogical practices can be offered in an alternative form (like in one of my experimental devices) seemed to indicate a resistance to change in the socio-cognitive structures of school requirements, and this seemed to be an important finding in my research.

Bernstein's sociological and pedagogical concerns had serious grounds and provided a linear chain of connection between micro processes and macro forms. Despite the "pessimism" of the theory, it provided a possibility for change in the reorganization of the context of education, with its dominant forms of power and symbolic control (Bernstein 1996).

I also realized that in his concept of code Bernstein was hinting at cognition even if this was not explicitly acknowledged. Somehow the theory could provide the sociological juncture with mental activity, and this was probably due to the influence that the work of Vygotsky and Luria had on Bernstein.

Although at the time I had read Vygotsky and Luria, I was not much concerned with those authors. I considered them as being somehow in the background, both of Bernstein's work and of my own, with regards to the problem my study sought to address. They seemed too psychological and were therefore bypassed by my new sociological perspectives.

My empirical work went as far as collecting and organizing my data to obtain results.

I primarily applied classification and framing concepts, stemming from Bernstein's theory of codes, but I still lacked a tool for investigating the deep structure of discourse in its psychological dimension: i.e. the merging together of thoughts and language.

For reasons which are too complex to explain fully, with the economic factor coming last but not least (meanwhile my grant had expired), I was not able to complete my thesis; before finishing the discussion and the revision of my data I returned to Italy, where I started to work on school projects and teachers training courses.

The many years spent in London sensitized me to issues which were not quite so applicable to my country of origin. The issue of social class, for instance, which is so fundamental in English society, was not one of the most crucial issues in the Italian context nor within Italian educational policies. The latter were directed to the revitalisation of regional dialects which had been disregarded, being considered for many years minor languages opposed to Standard Italian which was considered the language of social status and of educated speech. The problem of class was, in fact, present as a wide economic gap existed within Italian society. However this gap was blurred and hidden behind regional varieties of speech and lifestyles, linked to socio-economic status overlapping with other social factors (rural /urban, urban, suburban).

Moreover, the educational practices within the school system were still based on Giovanni Gentile's fascist ideas, relying on a teacher-centred approach with an authoritarian bent. In this respect, I had to reformulate my ideas on teacher/learning practices according to the new and problematic issue of context. At the same time a new phenomenon was emerging from the recent waves of immigration into Italy. As immigrants started to send their first-generation children to school, these new arrivals transformed Italian elementary and secondary schools.

The officially mono-cultural classes which artificially made pupils homogeneous in teachers' perceptions (a relic of the Catholic Church's ideology of homogeneity throughout the Italian school system) were faced with the multiplicity and diversity of the newcomers. At the time I was living and working in Rome, where the class structure was more evident than in other parts of the country and was perceived as socially problematic. In those days I was working on regional projects for the integration in schools of different social strata of the population, such as gypsies and children coming from suburban areas, who were felt to be at greater risk.

Back then there was no trace of intercultural education. Educational differences were equated with spoken dialects and overlapped with social status, as in the case of gypsies and handicapped children.

In my pedagogical approach I worked on teachers' communicative styles, and the work of Bernstein very much led my return back into the Italian educational scenario.

In my work in schools, I often referred to the concept of code, but I applied it to teachers' speech productions i.e. their *pedagogical code*, somehow re-interpreting Bernstein's ideas. In this sense I considered teaching as cultural transmission and the pedagogical code was considered

a regulative principle, distributing options and choices within the repertoire of meanings of pedagogical practices.

During those years I wrote several papers on this subject, which were collected in a book<sup>4</sup>.

When I moved to the University of Siena I was appointed lecturer in intercultural communication. In that period, (late 1980s and early 1990s) a new wave of immigration started to shake the foundations of Italian society as well as its educational system.

During those years, I coordinated projects on intercultural education, aiming at successfully integrating immigrant children into Italian schools. For this purpose I needed a dialogical theory providing a model of negotiation of meanings and cultures for use during interactive exchanges within the classroom.

While doing systematic observation in classrooms, I found that ethnically different pupils faced similar problems to those I had observed in my early studies on social class differences.

Their difficulties in schooling were not so much linguistic (as the language barrier could be overcome in a few months, especially by young children) as cultural, because their models often clashed with the social requirements of the classroom with all its implicit rules and requirements (i.e. space, time, social rituals etc.). I found striking similarities with the findings in my old data, which I often consulted as a reference; but I needed a different new paradigm to deal with the diverse social dynamics of pupils within the classroom.

In those years Vygotsky was being rediscovered thanks to the new Italian translation of his texts (Mecacci 1990), and a few studies on learning through dialogue appeared (Pontecorvo 1993)<sup>5</sup>. Bernstein and Vygotsky appeared complementary to my work and theoretically compatible. However this comparison raised a number of questions: which one represented my theoretical paradigm? And even more importantly, what was my field of enquiry, sociology or psychology? And again, what were the links between ethnic differences (i.e. cultural differences) and (sub-cultural) differences in social class? Can these two categories be equated and related? And if so to what extent? How does social class overlap with ethnicity? Researchers have investigated the working class in education in many ways but have somehow underestimated how this dimension interacts with cultural and ethnic differences. Most studies on differences in culture, ethnicity, gender and class are based on ethnography. This means that there is a selective focus on interaction activities and on symbolic interaction meanings constructed and negotiated during face-to-face encounters, in dyads or in small groups.

However such studies cannot explain *how* the context of culture creates a given social order, as they mainly deal with the context of situations. Variables of power and control over the discursive structure are not made evident by this type of analysis; hence they remain unexplored in the background.

If one examines cultural differences, one must also choose the method of enquiry, i.e. how to observe them and in what context. Moreover, it appeared that the issue of social class as a predictor of school failure remained an unsolved question still very much under investigation (Portes and Vadeboncoer 2000; Panofsky 2003).

With those epistemological problems in mind, I started to analyse my old data, adopting a new theoretical approach. I used Vygotsky's cultural historical theory, focusing on questions that highlighted the relevance of a sociocultural approach.

Vygotsky believes that intellectual development and acquisition of knowledge are to be found in the requirements of schooling; and it is schooling which plays a central role in mediating further understanding. For Vygotsky, school is focused on the construction of higher mental functions as a result of peer interaction and teacher's mediation through the Zone of Proximal Development.

Vygotsky's approach to the acquisition of new mental tools is highly psychological, a-contextual and universal, while Bernstein in his sociological view believes that knowledge is contextual, institutional, and class-regulated.

These two traditions of child development and educational research were theoretically compatible, but for different reasons neither of them was appropriate for my sociocultural perspective.

In my empirical design I needed a multiple coding system to link macro-structure to micro-levels of linguistic analysis, and Vygotsky's theory of semiotic mediation was only implicitly providing such a possibility.

This approach was represented by Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, which provided the theoretical paradigm to link the macro-sociocultural dimensions to micro-contextual production and, at the same, to analyse speech in empirical research.

The possibility of analysing the dynamic collective forms of discourse as a result of a common participative interaction between socioculturally diversified subjects was essential to my methodological requirements. Moreover, the multifunctional layering implied by the analytical model I used (i.e. learning how to use language is a multidimensional process) allowed me to understand speech as social action as well as verbal

interaction. From such a perspective analysis of discourse proceeded along a number of interrelated semiotic dimensions. These could reveal different goal orientations among teachers and pupils, and hypothetical mismatched meanings resulting in conflicting agendas, and/or a lack of pupil commitment to the task at hand. This approach was adapted to capture the features of my collected data and to link its interpretation to my new ideas.

Before illustrating an overview of the methodological and theoretical issues concerning this work, I will briefly present the structure of its context.

This study is divided into theoretical and empirical components.

The first part introduces the theoretical framework, i.e. a sociocultural study used as an epistemological framework to investigate socio-semiotic mediation by means of language in a multiplicity of tasks in educational settings. Discourse is conceived as an activity-based cultural tool and analysed with semantic categories stemming from Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar.

The second part illustrates the empirical chapters with methodology and linguistic data; this is analysed in terms of Halliday's interpersonal and ideational macro-functions representing semiotic mediated actions to allow for understanding of pupils' production of meanings as well as variations in their discourse production.

The first chapter *Bernstein's theory of codes* illustrates my theoretical paradigm, mainly through Bernstein's work. I focus on a presentation of his main key concepts with reference to current educational debate.

The second chapter *Vygotsky and his tradition in educational and cultural practices* discusses Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory and clearly distinguishes between Vygotsky's original work and its later interpretation in post-Vygostkian studies, both within Russia and in the West.

Chapter Three, *Sociocultural theory and discourse: the theoretical background* illustrates Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, and outlines its compatibility and complementarity with Vygotsky and Bernstein. These approaches are discussed in the light of the theoretical framework applied to my empirical investigation, so that similarities and differences between these theories are illustrated and discussed

Chapter Four, *Research study: perspective and methodology* illustrates the research method, its sampling and procedures, in the light of a sociocultural dimension.

Chapter Five, *The coding of the discourse* introduces the analytical categories applied to the analysis of discourse, stemming from Systemic Functional Linguistics.



Chapter Six, *Sociocultural mediation and psychological tools in verbal activity settings* illustrates the empirical results of a classificatory task (classification of social agents) and a sub-task (pupils' value systems) administered in the classroom to the pupils in my sample. The aim was to understand pupils' *a priori* sociocultural knowledge, conceived as a psychological tool produced in oral and written tasks devised by the research study.

Chapter Seven, *Sociocultural interactions* explores verbal activity characterizing peer interaction in the context of a discussion task. In particular it examines how through language the pupils in a group engage in a discussion to construct situated meanings, identities and strategies through socio-cultural tools that vary across situations or events.

Chapter Eight, *Conclusions* outlines the main achievements of the research, highlighting limits and suggesting possible directions for future work, both methodologically as well as empirically. Comments on the conclusions are outlined and suggestions are made as to the possible use of a composite theoretical approach featuring the work of Vygotsky, Halliday and Bernstein to offer a fuller understanding of learning and discourse.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Virgilio. *Georgiche* IV, 176, 37-30 B.C.

<sup>2</sup> In those days science and humanities were clear-cut disciplinary fields.

<sup>3</sup> *La pédagogie selon Herni Marion. Extraits de Leçons de psychologie appliquée à l'éducation*. Armand Colin, 1882.

<sup>4</sup> Camilletti, Evelina and Antonella Castelnovo. *L'identità multicolore*. Milano, Franco Angeli, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Pontecorvo, Clotilde, ed. *La condivisione della conoscenza*. La Nuova Italia, Firenze, 1993.

# CHAPTER ONE

## BERNSTEIN'S THEORY OF CODES

### Introduction

In this section I will briefly review Bernstein's main theoretical concepts to provide a critical assessment of the theory and its changes over the years. This attempt is motivated by a number of issues, deeply interconnected to the present work.

Firstly, because a concise review of the code theory could prove useful in the light of its continuous changes over time, an assessment of its main constructs could be useful in the light of my comparison with Vygotsky, which will follow in the next chapters.

The second reason is that Bernstein's theory of codes had been the guideline for the original version of my empirical research, and in this respect represents the theoretical framework to it. Thus such a framework can provide the indispensable path to an understanding of the theory inspiring the research.

Finally, an historical outline of Bernstein's theory can prove useful in the light of the empirical work which started in the early 1980s, when the theory was moving from its early interest in sociolinguistic codes to its later focus on pedagogic practice and pedagogic discourse. This shift is not marginal with respect to the theory, and must be kept in mind also in the light of the present empirical study and the means for its interpretation. Some of the constructs now available in Bernstein's model were not even developed at the time of my research. However, this is not, hopefully, a limiting factor, as on the contrary, it sets my findings into a broader, more fully developed sociological field of enquiry related to linguistic and educational dimensions, and school knowledge.

The organization of my sociological overview of Bernstein's work is by no means exhaustive, but focuses on the development of concepts relevant to the present study.

The first part will introduce Bernstein's theory illustrating its general framing within its development in the context of British sociology of education.

The second part will examine Bernstein's main theoretical constructs, mainly focused on the sociolinguistic and semiotic foundation of meanings, and their relation to pedagogic practices within schools and educational institutions.

## 1.1 General principles of the theory

In this section I shall review some of Bernstein's basic concepts, on the basis of their relevance to my study and to a later comparison with Vygotsky.

Bernstein's sociolinguistic code theory is a complex social theory aiming to analyse the relationships between social class, family and the reproduction of symbolic order through a variety of communicative systems. In Bernstein's view, code is a sociolinguistic concept which allows us to make the links between social structure and discourse: he acknowledges his theoretical debt to Cassirer, Durkheim, Hymes, Mead, and particularly to Luria and Vygotsky for their interpretation of language as a regulative system (Bernstein 1996: 147).

Bernstein believed that there are differences between middle class and working class children in their production of verbal meanings, and such differences give rise to different communicative codes: the restricted code, more likely to occur among the working class, and the elaborated code, more likely to be produced by the middle class. The origin of these differences is social, and, in particular, can be adduced to class and power relations in the social division of labour, within families and schools. Thus, Bernstein's theory deals primarily with social variations in the production of relevant meanings in the use of speech. The major factor responsible for such variations is social class, as class relations are fundamental for understanding the regulation of the distribution of power and mechanisms of social control. The set of relationships which generate, reproduce and legitimate the principles of power and control between and within social groups produces certain forms of consciousness. During this process the notion of codes is of primary importance as, in Bernstein's view, code acquisition is responsible for the formation of consciousness. Bernstein provided a detailed analysis of these aspects in his work, in particular in Vol. 3 and 4 of *Class, Codes and Control* (Bernstein 1975; 1990).

However, Bernstein's primary interest was not language but the possibility of throwing light on the mechanisms which hold together language, culture and society, and the key concept of this process was "internalization".

He stated:

I was preoccupied theoretically with what was then conceptualized as the outside-inside-outside problematic and empirically, with problems of the class specialization of the cultures of schools and families which gave rise to differential access and acquisition. (1966: 147)

Indeed, the codes perspective focused upon the contextualization of groups and individuals into their class positioning, their regulation through the distribution of power and principles of control, their communicative performance principles and their practices of interaction.

Even if the code theory is a multidisciplinary approach to language, Bernstein's main interest remains society and how this enhances, preserves and transforms individual micro differences into class macro inequalities. To quote Bernstein:

My approach is too limited to deal with large questions of culture and symbolic control; rather I have been exploring the processes whereby symbolic control and its modalities are realized, how power relations are transformed into discourse and discourse into power relations. The process whereby this transformation takes place, formally and informally in families and education, is to my mind essentially a pedagogic process and, in more generalised and diffuse forms, by the public media within the context of the arenas of power of state-manage societies. (1996: 12)

The major feature of the theory of sociolinguistic codes is that it deals with meanings expressed primarily through speech in evoking contexts. In fact Bernstein, like Vygotsky, dealt with a "contextualistic" approach, invoking multiple levels of analysis, and this created some methodological difficulties in providing empirical evidence for the relationship between each level. In his empirical analysis he deals with the micro level, trying to understand how differences in the realization of specialized meanings are created and legitimized by society and how education reproduces such distribution. In order to resolve this dilemma, he tried to construct valid analytical tools for his research.

Of this effort he stated:

It is possible that a theory which attempts to integrate macro and micro levels of analysis, that is, interactional levels, institutional levels and macro-institutional levels, necessarily constructs a language which integrates those levels or rather attempts such an integration. The forms of description which such a language generates may well create specialized descriptions which do not satisfy the requirements of differently orientated research or interests. (1996: 2)

In fact, one of Bernstein's most difficult tasks was to provide the analytical tools to specify his research object, to provide clear terminology describing the details of his empirical research. Bernstein defines himself as a "non field person" (Bernstein 1996: 152) to justify the use of sociolinguistic terminology according to his personal relationship to that discipline. With respect to researchers, as opposed to those who write textbooks, he poses these arguments:

How can I make a valid reliable, systematic description of what I wish to describe? How do I relate my description and interpretation, horizontally, to similar studies, and vertically to other levels of sociological analysis? From this, rather different perspective, a different view of the theory may well arise. (1996: 2)

Thus, while Vygotsky was attempting to define general issues responsible for the formation of consciousness through social semiotic mediation, drawing particular attention to the abstract tool of language, Bernstein's effort was directed towards the specification of the sociological phenomenon which creates, as Hasan has stated, "socially differentiated individual minds" (Hasan 1992; 1995b).

Bernstein's framework also considers language as the most important tool for semiotic mediation, but this process is also socially mediated and as such subject to specific features creating different forms of human consciousness. According to Bernstein our social structure, located in specialized contexts, lies between language and consciousness, and his code theory tries to envisage the links between these multiple levels in a sociological perspective. To Bernstein, in this process codes become:

...culturally determined positioning devices as the particular forms of social relation act selectively upon what it is said, when it is said and how it is said...[they] can generate very different speech systems or codes...[which] create for their speakers different orders of relevance and relation. The experience of the speakers may then be transformed by what it is made significant and relevant by different speech systems. (1971: 144)

For Bernstein the social structure translates itself into "the child's psychological reality through the shaping of his act of speech" (Bernstein 1971: 144); consciousness results from the way of relating to others, generated by the language system (code) realized and grounded in the social context. Bernstein's idea of consciousness rests on a inner device which acts as symbolic ruler on the acquisition, transmission and reproduction of meaning systems, which in turn are dialectically related to the division of labour.

Thus, like Vygotsky, Bernstein talks of performance and language use but he introduces a powerful notion between the language system and the individual, i.e. the notion of code, which is a social filter integrating macro and micro levels of analysis in given, specific and legitimate texts.

Bernstein's great effort in the theoretical exposition of his concepts represented the struggle to reconcile his early structural approach, featuring Durkheimian roots, with his later development, which lays emphasis on processes and functions. This latter, more dynamic aspect of his code theory was probably the result of the influence of the Western interaction school of thought (i.e. Mead) and of Vygotsky *et al.*, with whom Bernstein also shared ideas about the social origins of mental functions and the concept of speech as a means of behaviour control.

During the revisions of his concepts over time, Bernstein redefined his theoretical framework of the notion of code through the concepts of classification and framing. These concepts were crucial for his conceptual definition but also for his operational analysis in the multiple levels of his empirical research. In fact, at many levels, he was able to conceptualize macro-constraints on micro-processes (Bernstein 1996), conceptually bridging the gap of his initial methodological approach.

As Bernstein specifies, he took his classification from Durkheim and his framework from the early symbolic interactions, thus maintaining structure and process in a sort of equilibrium as a result of this methodological compromise. These new concepts allowed Bernstein to add dynamism to his previous definition of codes (restricted and elaborated), providing a range of potential in the production of *what* can be communicated in specialized contexts and *how*.

What seems important to clarify is that code theory, despite some methodological weaknesses, attempts to explain how the external social dimension becomes internalized by the individual in the process of cultural transmission. Such processes can be investigated empirically, and related "...[to] problems of the class specialization of the cultures of schools and families which gave rise to differential access and acquisition," (Bernstein 1996: 147), as Bernstein explains in defining his early views which resulted in his theory.

At a more general level, Bernstein's theory is neither linguistic nor sociological nor psychological, but it can be categorized as a sociosemiotic one. Bernstein's real interest is indeed the process of social mediation in human behaviour (interactional, linguistic and cognitive): to explain how society orients individuals towards the production of modes of discourse and modes of thought corresponds to a particular form of social organization with unequal distribution of power and forms of symbolic