

LANGUAGE, ETHNICITY, AND CHANGE

My objectives are several: I want to clarify what ethnicity means and what it does not mean—cannot mean; I want to clarify the relationship, if any, between language and ethnicity, from the viewpoint of a sociologist who views language as a component of culture and not of a linguist or sociolinguist whose primary focus is language itself; and I want to consider how it is that bidialectism or bilingualism can be either a creative process or an impediment, the circumstances under which one or the other is likely, the way in which ethnicity relates to the outcome. I shall explore these issues by comparing the experience of Black Americans and Black Caribbean peoples, especially those in the Commonwealth Caribbean. I shall conclude with some remarks about the implications of what I have to say for what has been called a literate democracy.

Few terms are subject to more confusion than the term “ethnicity.” It is essentially a form of group consciousness in which the primary focus of one’s identity is a group which is defined in a quite arbitrary way. The actual content of belief, the cultural or other basis of this identity, is secondary to the fact of having chosen it as the basis of identity. Ethnicity has three aspects: first, a belief dimension, the element of consciousness, of primary focus; second, a group dimension, the group with which one identifies on the basis of this criterion; and third, a dimension often ignored, an ideological component, a commitment to the idea of ethnicity itself. The best way to illustrate this is to refer to religion where, similarly, there is a belief component, the theology or belief system; a group component, the church; but also, just as important, a commitment to the idea of religion itself; so much so that it is possible no longer to subscribe very much to the belief or to participate in the group, the church, but nonetheless to have a strong commitment to the idea of the thing itself. Every child who has been forced to go to church by parents who themselves never go knows the difference between the actuality of something and a

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strong commitment to it. The distinction is important in understanding what is happening in America today because a great deal of the so-called ethnic revival is a commitment to the idea of ethnicity.

An ethnic group, as I have defined it, is not to be confused with a culture group. All peoples—it's a truism—have a culture, belong to groups. It is spurious to point to this as evidence of the existence of ethnicity, and it is equally ridiculous to criticize critics of ethnic movements by claiming that all people belong to groups. But the culture group is not the ethnic group. Culture, or its main component, language, or a great many other aspects of behavior can become the basis of ethnicity. There is always the potential for a shared culture to become the basis of an ethnic identity, but only a potential. Shared culture does not necessarily produce an ethnic group. To take a dramatic example, German secular Jews and German gentiles who migrate to New York will share a common culture, but sharing that common culture does not make them a single ethnic group; in fact, we know that they are not. The same holds for language; belonging to a common speech community does not imply that one belongs to an ethnic group or has any propensity to belong to such a group.

Ethnicity is basically a chosen form of identity. It is optional, and among the options open to individuals are choosing not to be ethnic, selecting a particular form of ethnicity, or choosing to cross ethnic boundaries. People frequently change ethnic allegiances. Puerto Ricans—Black Puerto Ricans in New York—can opt for a Puerto Rican identity or a Black identity or both or neither. The same is true of Jews in Europe or elsewhere. Further, it is important to understand that there are fundamental differences between ethnic groups, and in classifying them it is wholly descriptive simply to do so on the basis of their formation and their relationship to the wider society in which they exist.

There are three major types of ethnic groups. Traditional ethnic groups are essentially adaptive. By their very nature, they are paving the way for their eventual dissolution in that their primary function is the adjustment, mainly of immigrants, to a new host society. They have existed not only in America, but in India, Southeast Asia, Africa, and elsewhere. By contrast, there are ethnic groups which come about as the basis for political mobilization. Whenever a group has been defined out and discriminated against, it must, of necessity, mobilize on this basis of rejection. But ultimately such groups, like the traditional transitional ethnic group, can opt out of the ethnic mode once the political objectives have been achieved. There is nothing primordial about that choice.

But there is a third kind of ethnic group. It is what I call a symbiotic ethnic group. Such ethnic groups are distinctive in that they have evolved

over long periods, sometimes two thousand years, sometimes less, several hundred, within the context of a particular civilization. Even if they are not involved with that civilization, the particular focal points of their own culture which they have emphasized make their way of life, assuming that way of life becomes a basis for ethnicity, highly conducive to success in the host society. The Chinese in Southeast Asia, the Indians in Africa, and the Jews in western societies are examples of this type. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of recognizing the fundamental difference between this kind of ethnic group, this kind of ethnic identity, and the other kinds of ethnic groups I mentioned earlier. It is a profound error not to remember this distinction, for if one assumes that what is possible for one is possible for another, one is likely to advocate policies which are quite disastrous.

Against the view of ethnicity I have just advocated, there exists a strong counter-tradition, the view that ethnicity is primordial, intrinsic, instinctive, innate. In this view, to be human is to be ethnic, whether one admits it or not; there is something profoundly treacherous about the crossing of ethnic boundaries or the denial of all ethnicity. In this view, anyone who denies his ethnicity or accepts the possibility of no ethnicity is attempting to go against the grain of human existence.

A great deal of the current rhetoric and academic writing about ethnicity in America makes this fundamental assumption, but I have never found it stated in a more extreme form than by Levic Jessel in *The Ethnic Process: An Evolutionary Concept of Languages and Peoples* (Hawthorne, NY: Mouton, 1978). Jessel strongly attacks the position that ethnicity is optional, or chosen, and argues to the contrary that ethnicity is innate, that there is an ethnic process which explains all diversity; that such diversity is inevitable and desirable—desirable because it is unavoidable. Drawing on certain areas of linguistics as well as on ethnology, he argues that there is in man a territorial imperative, the imperative to a speech community, and a strong ethnic homing instinct, so to speak. He identifies all culture with ethnicity and sees all culture as latent ethnicity, ethnicity waiting to be realized. Jessel writes, for example:

The ethnic process may be compared to an anatomical system where the simple group principle is the bare skeleton and the ethnic group is a corporal pool inclusive of integument, physiology, and biochemistry. In relationships between the ethnic group and its individual members, countless interactions take place mentally, linguistically, and societally. If we are to assume that under evolutionary conditions this might indeed resemble the operating behavior of an ethnic complex with a resultant effect of an ethnic society, then a non-ethnic group in an ethnic world must be regarded as an anomaly. It can be conceived of only as a transitory social phenomenon. Either it had

once belonged to an ethnic system and had been squeezed out for reasons presently unknown or it would ultimately find itself as an integral part of an ethnic system in the future.

The notion of a speech community is very important in Jessel's work. He argues that there is an innate propensity for a speech community and further, that the symbolism of language expresses the ceaseless flow of the ethnic process. His is the classic primordial conception of ethnicity, and, sadly, it is essentially this conception that underlies a great deal of the mushy thinking about ethnic pluralism in America.

Now I think any notion of innate ethnicity is absolute madness. And it is particularly dangerous for certain groups whose ethnicity, because of the kind of ethnicity it is, may well create problems for the achievement of objectives which they desire. I want to illustrate my position by comparing the Black experience in the Caribbean and the United States. The comparison is a fascinating one. It enables us to control certain crucial variables and to tease out those elements of the Black experience in the New World which might be due to specific African cultural factors as opposed to those which are a product of the form of discrimination which American Blacks experience. It also hints, to some extent, at what solutions to the problems might be.

Blacks in America and the Caribbean came from essentially the same areas of West Africa. They came from the same genetic pool and the same aboriginal cultures. While they spoke a variety of languages, most of the Blacks who came to the Caribbean and the United States spoke West African languages from the same family of languages. Not only do they have a common origin, but, in broad terms, they have had remarkably similar experiences in their enmeshment with Western civilization and capitalism—primarily the experience of slavery in a particularly virulent form, plantation slavery. And beyond that, in the post-Emancipation period there are also striking parallels.

To understand how the differences came about, one has to look more closely at the specificities of their separate experiences—to begin with what happened to their cultures. While both groups suffered a considerable dislocation of their traditional cultures and languages, the degree to which their aboriginal cultures were retained or transformed varied tremendously between the Caribbean and the United States. These differences are partly due to the migration process, but more due to specific differences in the nature of the interaction between slaves and the dominant, exploitative European group in the two societies.

The Caribbean is a tropical part of the world. The landscape, the

geography, and the climate which Africans encountered there was strikingly similar to what they had known in West Africa. This had important implications for what slaves could do in the Caribbean and what they couldn't do in the United States. In the area of material culture, for example, it was possible to transfer the entire material cultural base of West Africa to the Caribbean. The yam culture complex which is the basis of many West African cultures not only persisted in the gardens which the slaves were allowed to farm in order to support themselves, but actually influenced the material culture of the whites themselves: the technology of the plantation, the method of cultivation, was very West African; the major implement being used, the hoe. It meant too, that the food they ate could be the same. By contrast, while the Southern United States is somewhat warmer than the North, it is still very much part of the temperate climate zone. What you call the yam in the United States is something of a misnomer; strictly speaking a sweet potato is a New World food as opposed to the real yam culture of West Africa which persisted in the Caribbean. And the fact that there were familiar, if not identical, material things encouraged language retention.

The nature of the slavery also differed in somewhat interesting ways. Primarily the differences were demographic. There were, from very early, far more Blacks than whites in the Caribbean. From the beginning of the eighteenth century, Blacks outnumbered whites ten to one in most Caribbean societies outside of the Latin areas. Because of the rather brutal economic decision of the Caribbean whites that it was cheaper to buy a slave as an adult from Africa, work him or her nearly to death for eight years, write him or her off, and then recruit more Blacks, the proportion of the population in the Caribbean who were African was always much, much higher than was the case in the United States and for a much longer period. By contrast, slaveholders in the United States believed that it was always cheaper to rear their own Blacks and imported far fewer. At no point, except for a very short period in the Carolinas, did Blacks ever outnumber whites in the United States.

This demographic difference continuously reinforced in the Caribbean tendencies to retain traditional African elements. The fact that the white population was essentially absentee in the Caribbean meant that the white ruling class never had the same profound commitment to the society and culture of the Caribbean which the whites in the South had to the society and culture they shared with slaves. Thus, they never developed an ideology of paternalism, of creating a new kind of civilization. And although Caribbean whites were far more brutal in actual physical contact than their counterparts in the United States, nonetheless they interfered

somewhat less with the culture of the Blacks, or at least in those areas, primarily expressive, which were not particularly relevant to the plantation's main objective, which was to grow sugar. And finally, perhaps one of the most important differences, the racial insecurity of the rather small white population in the Caribbean meant that whites saw the free colored population as an important buffer in their own survival, a status which the free coloreds used to their own advantage from very early in the period of slavery. In the United States, however, the existence of a large free white lower class population not directly involved with the slave plantation meant that there was constant hostility to free coloreds, and therefore their status was fundamentally different. They were always seen as an anomaly and never recognized.

The status of coloreds profoundly influenced the nature of race relations in the two locales. It laid a foundation in the Caribbean for slavery to be superseded by biculturalism—one culture essentially Euro-Caribbean, the other essentially Afro-Caribbean. This biculturalism, to some extent, had a component of bilingualism because the Euro-Caribbean culture was essentially one in which speaking English properly was a critical factor, whereas the Afro-Caribbean culture, primarily a peasant culture, first spoke a pidginized form of English which later developed into a Creole language. There was, however, an important additional factor—that this biculturalism did not become identified with racial differences. Indeed, the group in the Caribbean which most promoted the Euro-Caribbean culture was not the white community, which was in a state of cultural disintegration and largely semiliterate, but the free colored upstarts who aspired to a black version of the European. From very early, they were far more adept and skilled at European culture than the local whites who slowly sank into slothful ruling-class degeneracy. It was the colored group who went to Oxford and acquired the Oxford accent. It was the colored group who came back and dominated the professions, leaving the whites to stagnate on their plantations.

So a strange situation arose in the Caribbean where there was no identification between race and possessing European culture, or speaking a European language. On the contrary, the situation was genuinely bicultural in that people capable of moving from one language to the other, from a dialect, or Creole more properly, to standard English, also had the capacity to move from one culture to the other. There is no innate ethnic propensity operating here. People are quite skilled at moving from one culture to another—not just acquiring the language, but all aspects of the one culture and the other. Upwardly mobile peasants did not perceive of mobility into, and the acquisition of, European culture as a denial of some

innate racial identity. Notions of racial identity were to come much, much later when intellectuals got in on the act, discovered ethnicity, then read back into their past the pain and agony of denial. In fact, most West Indians were not intellectuals and had very little problem moving from one language to the next, from one culture to the next.

A further point to note is the discovery by sociolinguists that bilingualism is often creative intellectually for the bilingual child. The same may well hold true for biculturalism. There are some formidable challenges posed by shifting from one culture to the next. Consider the problem of a ten-year-old Jamaican peasant in the primary school who is asked by his English teacher to write an essay on "A Winter's Day," when temperatures simmer in the nineties throughout the year, or an even more formidable task, to write an essay on "A Summer's Day," to draw on the concept of "summerness" in a climate which is a perpetual summer. The genesis of my own early fascination with English literature came in trying to understand what was meant by "a host of golden daffodils"—a flower which, growing up in Jamaica, I didn't see until the age of twenty-two when I went to study in Britain. An intellectual interpreting this situation from the standpoint of ethnic chauvinism will view all of this as a very painful business. In fact, it was nothing of the sort. It is simply wrong to contend that this kind of cultural domination, which in one sense it was, created enormous problems.

The Caribbean experience was, however, quite different from the experience of Blacks in the United States. Here a highly polarized situation developed very early. The dominant culture was always identified with the dominant race and the dominant ruling group. Culture, race, and language became configured and polarized. This polarization was paralleled by the very peculiar form of racism, of racial categorization into Black or white, which exists in the United States as opposed to the more flexible continuum which exists in the Caribbean, where no one claims to be wholly white unless they have just come off a ship from Britain, or wholly Black. While quite invidious in many respects, the Caribbean system, the continuum, allows flexibility. The point that one occupies on the continuum is largely a function of economic success.

Within the context of the polarized exclusion of Blacks in the United States, it was inevitable that the dominant culture and the dominant language should be actually experienced very painfully. It was inevitable, too, that in mobilizing for equality, ethnicity should become an important rallying point since race had been the basis of their exclusion from involvement with the dominant culture. Ironically, then, although there are far more resources in the Caribbean in purely cultural terms for a genuine

claim of a culturally-based identity, it was in the United States, where this claim was far more precarious in objective anthropological terms, that a strong ethnic consciousness developed. Yet this pattern is true of most ethnic movements; they are functions of insecurity about either the dissolution of or the non-existence of the culture which is claimed as the basis of one's ethnicity.

What I've said should indicate first of all that there is no basis whatever for claiming a propensity for the choice of a specific ethnicity. In terms of the two groups I've just looked at, one would expect the great propensity to have existed in the Caribbean rather than the United States. But ethnicity is a function of the situation in which groups find themselves and is chosen for specific ends. Similarly, there is no primordial passion for a speech community except one invented by intellectuals.

This comparison tells us some interesting things about the Black experience in America, and particularly the attitude towards literacy in the dominant language and the problems of relations with the dominant group. First, the literacy problem is clearly not a language problem. West Indian Creole is an even more distinctly separate language than Black speech in the United States. Yet there is no evidence that under the right conditions West Indians have had any problem in learning standard English or in continuing to move between it and the Creole. When I go back home and I am in the company of my mother and my relatives, I speak Creole. When I am with my working class friends, I also speak Creole. When I am with my middle class friends, I speak a version of the Creole which is more a blend of standard English and the peasant Creole. When I am with my more upper class friends, I speak standard English. I have never had any problems making these switches. There is nothing in the nature of Black speech, which we find in an even purer version in the Caribbean, which prevents the kind of acquisition of second languages which Professor Fishman described in the case of the schools he discussed.

Why then the literacy problem? It is partly a class problem, but not entirely. Again, when one looks at the experience of working class West Indians who speak the Creole, one sees no evidence of limitation to a restricted code in language, such as Bernstein describes in England, in their adjustment to and acquisition of the dominant culture. Nor is the problem inherently one of personal domination or of domination by an alien WASP culture. The simple fact of being dominated by another culture does not necessarily mean that a dominated group will find itself incapable of acquiring competence in the dominant culture. The ease of acquiring competence depends primarily on the role models with whom one associates the domination. The crucial difference in the case of the

Caribbean is that it wasn't whites who were identified with the dominant Euro-Caribbean culture, but fellow Blacks. Quite often Blacks were upwardly mobile from the peasant group. Acquiring the dominant culture was like acquiring standard English. One could take it or leave it. Moving into the dominant culture did not trigger the anxieties which one finds so prevalent in Blacks in this culture.

Part of the problem lies in the educational system. A comparison of the two school systems suggests that attitudes are much more critical than the material resources of the schools or the homes of the students. In objective material terms, the poorest Black American is materially much better off than the average West Indian peasant. The poverty of Harlem does not begin to compare to the poverty of a shanty town in Kingston or any rural village in Jamaica. Educational facilities are usually far more inadequate in Jamaica than in the United States. School success does not seem to depend on the physical condition of the home or of the school; it is more profoundly related to attitudes toward the dominant culture on the part of the parents, the students, and the teachers. Attitudes are critical. The fundamental assumption in the Caribbean on the part of those Black teachers who taught me throughout elementary school—in classes which averaged eighty-six students in one-room schoolhouses, sometimes several hundred students in a large room—was that we were teachable: "I did it, so can you." No one doubted for a moment that the students could be taught: not the students, their parents or teachers. If we wanted to succeed, we had to acquire this thing; if we didn't, well, it was up to us. But we never suffered the painful anxieties about it. That is another absolutely critical difference which this comparison points to.

Another important factor is the rewards of literacy, which have differed for Blacks in the Caribbean and the United States. When I was growing up, we all knew that success in literacy through the school system would be tremendously rewarded: one could become a clerk in the civil service, a teacher, a doctor, a university professor, a permanent secretary, or what have you. On the contrary, a Black American child knows that even if he were to pay all the prices, so to speak, and make the effort and succeed, the rewards are not worth the effort because the job he will ultimately get pays no more and is no more secure than the job obtained by a student who dropped out of school years before. And the attitude toward that child, having succeeded, is no different than the attitude toward any failure. This is a critical difference. Recent developments in the Caribbean underscore the importance of assured rewards. In recent years, the number of school places and graduates has begun to outpace, by far, the number of jobs available. So Caribbean students, like their American counterparts, are

beginning to view the rewards of becoming educated as not worth all the effort, and what has resulted is the beginning of a pattern of school failure similar to that in the United States.

Another vital point of comparison between the American and Caribbean experience is the all-pervasive element of racism in the general culture, something which it is not possible to be specific about. But living in a society where the whole ambience, the whole climate is racist, and where one identifies racism so intimately with what one is doing at school must operate as an overwhelming pressure for failure. That pressure does not arise when people live in a society in which they are in the majority, in which there is no pervasive racial awareness, no such racist ambience.

There are still other factors to be noted in explaining the differences between the Black experience in the Caribbean and the United States. I have emphasized so far factors external to the Black group. While it is important to avoid the fallacy of blaming the victim, it is also important to examine the American Black sub-culture itself, to see whether there may be dysfunctional factors which are operative. It seems to me that there are. The problem does not lie in bilingualism. As I have said, there is nothing from a linguistic point of view in the nature of American Black speech which presents a problem. However, there is another way of viewing the language of Black Americans which linguists and sociolinguists tend to neglect. And that is as an institution. There is some danger, not to be underestimated, of institutionalizing Black speechways as an expression of Black ethnicity, some danger that doing so will operate to obstruct the acquisition of literacy in the standard dialect, if only psychologically. It seems to me that there are, indeed, several essentially dysfunctional elements in American Black culture, including Black attitudes toward Black speech—elements which have arisen because Black culture has had to be so much a reaction against white oppression.

This brings me back to ethnicity. The problem with ethnicity is that while it is vital as a means of political mobilization for American Blacks, it is a two-edged sword. I think Blacks have exhausted the constructive possibilities of ethnicity and that a continued commitment to ethnicity not only legitimizes the reactionary ethnic revival (an issue which I can't develop here) but more importantly reinforces styles and orientations which are dysfunctional for the group in its attempt to seek an equal place in that society. These dangers and difficulties are typically ignored by ethnicist intellectuals who belong to successful symbiotic ethnic groups, who, extrapolating from their experiences, encourage Black ethnicity without recognizing the problems which it poses.

I want to end on a note which has been a central theme of this conference:

cultural literacy. Black Americans need to view in a more guarded way the dysfunctional aspect of their ethnicity precisely because they must go beyond acquiring literacy in the purely functional sense. Industrial capitalism has developed a lot of curious, contradictory patterns. On the one hand, continued specialization and increased technology have created a situation which yields the increasing simplification of tasks for working class people. In this regard it is perfectly correct for a Black seeking a job as a fireman or work on a conveyor belt to argue that it is absurd to demand a level of literacy which is not necessary for those jobs. For the increasing pattern of industrial civilization is that even cretins can do many of the tasks of the work place precisely because they have become so oversimplified. For large numbers of jobs, the three R's are at once necessary and sufficient—and it is legitimate to demand that job requirements be appropriate to the tasks.

However, there is another process taking place in the development of industrialized civilization. Paralleling this increasing specialization and simplification of tasks on the micro-level is, at the macro-level, a growing cultural and structural complexity which requires persons who have a broad grasp of what Professor Hirsch has called cultural literacy: a deep understanding of the mainstream culture, which no longer has much to do with White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, but with the imperatives of industrial civilization.

It is the need for cultural literacy, a profound conception of the underpinnings and premises of the whole civilization, which is often neglected in talk about literacy. The people who run the society at the macro-level must be literate in this culture. For this reason, it is dangerous to overemphasize the problems of basic literacy or the relevance of literacy to specific tasks and more constructive to emphasize that Blacks will be condemned in perpetuity to oversimplified, low-level tasks and will never gain their rightful place in controlling the levers of power unless they also acquire literacy in this wider cultural sense. And how does one obtain literacy in this wider sense? Only by becoming totally involved in the wider culture, by refusing to segregate oneself from it, by moving into it, capturing it, changing it.

To assume that this wider culture is static is an error; in fact it is not. It's not a WASP culture; it doesn't belong to any group. It is essentially and constantly changing and it is open. What is needed is recognition that the accurate metaphor or model for this wider literacy is not domination, but dialectic; each group participates and contributes, transforms and is transformed, as much as any other group. There are clear signs that this

wider culture is receptive and reciprocal. Jazz, for example, is now part of the wider civilization; it is no longer specifically ethnic music. The English language no longer belongs to any single group or nation. The same goes for any other area of the wider culture.

I now return to my major point: while basic literacy is critical for getting jobs on the conveyor belt and so on, if American Blacks are ever to achieve the commanding presence they deserve in this society, they must also attain the higher literacy, have command of the wider culture. Striving for that wider literacy is their real imperative.