

"The Daily Grunt":The resurgence of the deficit model of language competence in children

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Published version

GRAINGER, Karen (2011). "The Daily Grunt":The resurgence of the deficit model of language competence in children. In: Language, Education and Disadvantage, Sheffield Hallam University, 19th-20th April 2011. (Unpublished)

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BAAL/CUP Seminar April 2011

Language, Education and Disadvantage: a response to the deficit model of children's language competence

This seminar took place at Sheffield Hallam University on April 19th and 20th.

It was coordinated by Peter Jones and Karen Grainger, Language and Literacy Research Group, Sheffield Hallam University.

The aims of the event were to bring together scholars whose research challenges the 'deficit' view of working class language patterns that was prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s and which has re-emerged in both academic and non-academic quarters recently.

Specific objectives were to:

- share knowledge and research findings in relevant areas of expertise, viz.
 - sociological analyses of the links between social disadvantage and educational attainment.
 - sociolinguistic studies of working-class children's language practices.
 - sociolinguistic studies of classroom and school interaction.
 - educational perspectives on the teaching of literacy.
 - critiques of language research which purports to offer linguistic evidence for the 'deficit' view of working-class families' communicative competence
- to understand the history and intellectual underpinnings of arguments for a link between 'language deficit' and educational underachievement
- promote in-depth discussion of the above topics
- to promote alternative accounts of the relationship between social class and educational attainment
- discuss ways in which the 'deficit model' of working class language may be counteracted
- create opportunities for future collaboration between individual researchers, research teams and institutions

The event took place over a day and a half and included 4 keynote speakers, as well as presentations from the 2 seminar coordinators. The rest of the time was devoted to discussion. We aimed to have a maximum of 25 participants and a total of 21 registered. A number of others expressed an interest but could not make the particular dates (possibly too close to Easter?) and a further 2 registered and subsequently dropped out. Nevertheless, we were very happy with the level of participation: it was a small and friendly group, which made for some very stimulating discussions. There was a valuable mix of expertise and disciplinary background, including linguists, educationalists, speech and language therapists, sociologists and one head teacher. These included both experienced academics (several professors) as well as early career academics. Some of these came from the local area (both Sheffield University and Sheffield Hallam University) and others were from further afield: London (King's College and Institute of Education), Sussex, York, Leeds, Newcastle, Lancaster and Dublin.

Day one

1. The afternoon started off with a presentation from Karen Grainger (Sheffield Hallam University,) entitled "*The daily grunt*": *middle class bias and vested interests in the 'Getting in Early' and 'Why Can't They Read?' reports*. This explained the motivation for organising the seminar, which came mainly as a reaction to two publicly-funded reports that were published in 2008 and 2010 and whose findings were covered in the press. These reports, published by highly regarded think-tanks, betray a worrying lack of knowledge of sociolinguistic research and communication theory, twinned with a notable middle-class bias, when they address the topic of children's linguistic competencies, in terms of both spoken language and literacy. In their treatment of the linguistic interactions within working class and poorer families they represent a resurgence of a prejudiced and socially intolerant 'deficit' approach to children's language and communication which is consistent with, and often draws on (directly or indirectly), the work of Basil Bernstein.

2. Next, John Hardcastle (Institute of Education, London) spoke on *The Origins of the Deficit View*, which he related to the project 'Social Change in English 1945-65'. He posed the question, 'Why do the same arguments about deficit persist today?' and discussed the various trends in philosophical thought that have contributed to the view, e.g. the connection that the English philosopher John Locke made between poor thinking and poor speaking. The deficit issue is to do with attributing a "lack of worth" to the practices of certain groups in society. One difference between present day educational practice and post-war teaching is that teaching has been de-politicised. Whereas teachers used to go into the profession with the aim of 'making a difference' to the lives and opportunities of children from working class backgrounds, nowadays they are so pre-occupied with meeting targets that there is no time or space left for creativity or independent thought in curriculum design.

3. Louise Gazeley (University of Sussex) gave a presentation entitled *Perspectives on Working Class Under-achievement* in which she gave a critical account of recent policy discourses of educational attainment and disadvantage. The link between socio-economic position and conventional educational under-achievement is clear and evident. But the relationship has to do with a history of educational failure in the past - blaming the (lack of) language skills of parents is futile. Instead we need to find ways of breaking the cycle and of improving the educational prospects and motivation of working class children now in school. It was also noted, another parallel with worrying developments in the US, that 'genetic' causes of educational failure are being discussed in official reports.

4. The final formal session of the day was the 'Open forum' which was chaired by Jodie Clark (Sheffield Hallam University). She posed 2 questions to all three speakers of the day: (1) what are the key priorities for either research or policy in language and education? and (2) what is the benefit of the deficit model? The discussion that followed from these questions talked about challenging the assumption that poor language equals poor intellect, bringing the 'social class' dimension back into discussions about under-achievement, and the need to develop a broader and richer picture of both language and society, that reflects the complexities of modern society. There was broad agreement that the deficit model serves a purpose - it legitimates inequalities, and this explains why it persists.

In the evening 11 of the participants enjoyed a meal at a local restaurant.

Day 2

1. Peter Jones (Sheffield Hallam University) spoke on *Linguistics in the service of the 'deficit model': Halliday, Hasan and Bernstein*. He critiqued the work of Hasan which attempts to build on Bernstein's work on elaborated and restricted code with an apparently systematic way of coding interactions between mothers and children according to 'semantic variables'. These variables include notions of 'appropriacy' and 'informative' and 'formative' meaning. They are then said to reflect different 'forms of consciousness' which coincide with the occupational status (higher' and 'lower' autonomy professions of the breadwinner). Lower autonomy (which tend to be working class) families' styles of communication are judged to be generally less appropriate for the explicit transmission of information and thus deficient in an educational setting. Jones argued that Hasan's work starts from a deficit premise and can be shown to be completely untenable both linguistically and socially. One of the most fundamental, and erroneous, assumptions underpinning Hasan's work is that conceptual learning is a process taking place via the transmission of explicit verbal tokens.

2. The third keynote speaker, Julia Snell (King's College, London) gave a talk on *Dialect, Interaction and Class Positioning at School* in which she reported on her ethnographic research in classrooms in 2 schools in Teeside. She provided empirical evidence of how children who could be considered 'socially disadvantaged' have access to a rich repertoire of spoken language strategies, including invoking the regional vernacular, as a way of managing their relationships in school. Snell proposed that non-standard varieties of English that are spoken by children should be viewed as part of a rich repertoire which is a resource for making meaning, rather than simply being an alternative that is 'different' to standard English.

3. The final keynote speaker was Guy Merchant (Sheffield Hallam University) who gave a presentation entitled *The Trashmaster: Popular Culture, Bad Language and Writing Online* in which, he presented evidence that, far from having 'no language' (as claimed by some teachers), children who have difficulty with print literacy are often competent in digital literacies that are associated with popular culture. He argued that linguistic deficit and disadvantage resides not in the children but in the school system. The education system, then, is out-moded and needs to catch up with the 'new communication' culture.

4. Ben Rampton (King's College, London) chaired the open forum and posed the following questions to the 3 speakers of the day: (1) what do people see as the links between the different perspectives presented during the seminar? 2) what has changed since the 'last time round' (i.e. 1960s and 70s)? and (3) what's the balance between intervention and analysis that we should aim for?

In the discussion it was pointed out that there are continuities of discourse, in terms of disadvantage and deficit, which don't seem to go away with time, and yet many things in society have changed (increased consumerism, globalisation, the 'feminisation' of work). We need to think about how we tackle the same issues but in

the current context and develop sophisticated models of social stratification and of language use. It was pointed out that Labov and Trudgill's 'difference' approach is no longer sufficient in today's society and sociolinguists need to take account of the developments in society and communication (e.g. new literacies; multicultural communities). We need to be "intellectually ambitious" for all children and promote the idea of new literacies and non-standard forms as part of a repertoire *in addition* to other forms of language.

5. The final session of the seminar was a general discussion, chaired by Peter Jones, on *The way forward: how can we work together to challenge the deficit model and influence educational policy?* The group made several suggestions:

- (a) work for a special issue of an appropriate journal to include the papers given at the seminar,
- (b) organize a network of interested scholars and professionals for the purposes of sharing information and research in progress, keeping in touch about relevant developments and contributing to future projects related to the theme,
- (c) work towards joint conference papers for those amongst the group with similar or complementary research interests,
- d) think about organizing a larger event on the topic at a future date.

Evaluation and feedback

We solicited feedback in the form of a written questionnaire; some participants also gave informal spoken feedback. All the feedback was very positive - participants had enjoyed the seminar and found it useful. It was suggested that it could have been improved by including the opportunity for small group discussion, so as to give everyone a chance to have their say.