

"The daily grunt": middle class bias and vested interests in the 'Getting in Early' and 'Why Can't They Read?' reports.

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'The daily grunt': Middle-class bias and vested interests in the Getting in Early and Why Can't They Read? reports.

It is a long-standing and commonly held belief in the UK and elsewhere that the use of elite forms of language reflects superior intellect and education. Expert opinion from sociolinguistics, however, contends that such a view is the result of middle-class bias and cannot be scientifically justified. In the 1960s and 1970s, such luminaries as Labov (1969) and Trudgill (1975) were at pains to point out to educationalists, with some success, that this 'deficit' view of working-class children's communicative competence is not a helpful one. However, a close reading of recent think-tank reports and policy papers on language and literacy teaching in schools reveals that the linguistic deficit hypothesis has resurfaced and is likely to influence present-day educational policy and practice. In this paper I examine in detail the findings, claims and recommendations of the reports and I argue that they are biased, poorly researched and reflect the vested interests of certain specialist groups, such as speech and language therapists and companies who sell literacy materials to schools. I further argue that we need to, once again, inject the debate with the social dimensions of educational failure, and we need to move away from the pathologisation of working-class children's language patterns.

Keywords: language deficit; education; social disadvantage; sociolinguistics; social class; language pathology

Introduction

Linguistic diversity in British working-class children has been treated as a problem for education ever since mass education was introduced in the early part of the 20th century (Crowley 1989; Cameron 1995; 2012). In 1921 the Newbolt report stated that 'The great difficulty of teachers in elementary schools in many districts is that they have to fight against the powerful influences of evil habits of speech contracted in home and street.' (Newbolt 1921, quoted in Crowley 1989, p. 243).

Later, the sociologist Basil Bernstein's work on the relationship between social class and language form (published in 1971 in a collection of essays called 'Class Codes and Control') was used by educational psychologists in Britain and in the US to justify the 'deficit' view of the language which black and working-class children brought to the classroom. As most students of educational sociolinguistics will know, Bernstein's original argument was that working-class children are disadvantaged in school because they do not readily have access to the 'elaborated' code that is used in school. Those students will also know of Labov's (1972) stinging critique of Bernstein's work, and educational practices that followed from it, in his well-known piece, 'The logic of non-standard English'. In this he argues that 'Bernstein's views are filtered through a strong bias against all forms of working-

class behaviour' (183) and that the educational policies and practices that ultimately stemmed from this (such as the pre-school programme Operation Headstart) are premised on the faulty assumption that because poor children come from economically deprived homes, their language must also be deprived. Labov called on linguists to share their knowledge about language in an effort to correct this misapprehension, and the efforts of British sociolinguists such as Trudgill (1975), Stubbs (1976; 1986), Edwards (1983) Cheshire (1982) throughout the 1970s and 1980s appeared to have some moderate success in this regard.

Since that time, the linguistic deficit debate has ebbed and flowed with the changing political and cultural climates. For example, Cameron (1995; 2012) thoroughly documents the struggle between liberals and traditionalists that followed the publication of the Cox report on the teaching of English- and in particular grammar – in the British National Curriculum. The struggle was a political and ideological one, in which 'correct grammar' was equated with authority and morality and which was taken up enthusiastically by the press. In fact, Cameron (1995;2012) argues that the debate took on the characteristics of a moral panic and that 'because of the form of media coverage had taken...contributions from anyone with either specialist knowledge or direct experience had effectively been discredited before they were even made' (89). Cameron convincingly argues that the argument was not merely about language education, it was about standards of civilised behaviour, and that left-wing social scientists provided a useful scapegoat for what Conservatives perceived as society's problems: 'ideologues of the Right identified 2 of the few remaining strongholds in Britain for leftist or liberal ideology, and set out to discredit them. In a sense, the panic helped neutralise a perceived external threat.' (112). The upshot of this struggle was that the recommendations of the Cox committee were reviewed (DFE 1993) and essentially discarded in favour of a more 'traditional' focus on spelling, grammar and spoken standard English (Cameron 1995; 2012, 90).

British language education has remained in the essentially 'traditional' mould ever since, despite several changes of Government. With the traditionalists appeased, and the left-wing social scientists gagged, the debate around language in schools has gone quiet – that is, until recently. As we shall see in the following sections, concern with deprivation, poverty and educational under-achievement in post-Thatcher Britain has led some policy-makers to suggest, yet again, that poor children's language use should be both the focus of the blame for, and the solution to, their plight. To illustrate this, I discuss the contents of 2 major think-tank reports on education that have been published in recent years and that have received

significant press attention. One report is the 'Getting in Early' (henceforth GIE) report published in 2008 by The Smith Institute and The Centre for Social Justice. The other is the 'Why Can't They Read?' (henceforth WCTR) report, published in July 2010.

The GIE report is an 88 page document produced by the Smith Institute (left wing) and The Centre for Social Justice (right wing). It follows on from 2 previous reports, published earlier in the same year: the Bercow Report, a (Labour) Government-commissioned review of essential services for children with speech and language pathologies, and a think-tank report called 'Early intervention: Good parents, great kids, better citizens', also published jointly by the Smith Institute and Centre for Social Justice and concerned with how to raise attainment through early educational intervention. In this context, then, the purpose of the GIE report was to 'offer further evidence of how early intervention, followed through from pre-school years to primary school years, can break the intergenerational cycle of under-achievement and multiple deprivation.' (1). The WCTR report is shorter (38 pages) and more locally focused, being commissioned by Boris Johnson, the mayor of London, as an investigation into illiteracy in London school children. It was produced by the Centre for Policy Studies.

These think-tank reports are worrying on 2 major levels: first in terms of the scholarship and middle-class bias of their content, and secondly in terms of the influence they may have on both public opinion and educational policy concerned with correcting 'bad language'. The think-tank reports themselves, as well as their treatment in the media, reflect a dominant ideology of language (Milroy 2004) that automatically sees a causal relationship between linguistic competence and social success. This then coincides with an increasing tendency to blame the poor for their own inadequacies (Jones 2011). It is therefore important for sociolinguists, once again, to tackle these misconceptions. This paper is one attempt to do this by firstly outlining what is sociolinguistically, and indeed morally, objectionable in these reports, and then briefly discussing the role of the press in disseminating their findings.

Scholarship and vested interests

While there is no doubt that both reports have laudable aims in attempting to tackle the very real problems of educational under-achievement in poorer children, the claims they make about working class language and parenting are highly questionable on the grounds that their findings and claims are not well-researched, and, where academic sources are cited, these tend to be from disciplines that have a therapeutic interest in language and

communication. Furthermore, when one examines the authorship, sponsorship and recommendations of these reports, it begins to look as if, far from being a well-balanced and informed discussion of the issues, they are biased in the direction of certain pre-existing views and interests. It would be overly cynical to suggest that they were written with the sole aim of promoting the interests of certain professional groups, charities and companies. Nevertheless, it is a worrying feature of these reports that their arguments for intervening in educational practice rely heavily on evidence produced by bodies which stand to gain from the pathologisation of working class language and parenting practices.

The larger report, GIE, comprises several chapters and has multiple authors who are, variously, academics, politicians and the heads of charitable organisations. Only 2 of the substantive chapters (out of seven) of GIE are written by academic experts in a relevant field. These are: chapter four on 'Developing social and emotional skills in schools to help combat disadvantage' written by Katherine Weare, emeritus professor of education at Southampton University, and chapter five on 'Effective parenting interventions – breaking the cycle of disadvantage by helping troubled families', by Frances Gardner, Professor of child psychology at Oxford University. However, the chapters that have the most to say about the link between social disadvantage and language are written by a combination of senior representatives of communication charities and a Labour politician. Thus, the chapter on 'How speech, language and communication are linked to social disadvantage', is authored by John Bercow MP, as well as Virginia Beardshaw and Anita Kerwin-Nye, both of I CAN (children's communication charity). The chapter on 'The need for a focus on literacy and numeracy', is authored by Jean Gross¹, who is also the editor of the entire report and Director of The Every Child a Chance Trust², an educational charity. While these people are unquestionably highly accomplished, none of them appears to have any professional expertise in sociolinguistic matters. This is despite the fact that the content of these chapters purports to be about the link between language and society - the very essence of sociolinguistic studies. This would not matter if appropriate scholarly studies had been consulted in order to compile the report. However, what we find when we look at works cited is that academic support for

¹ Jean Gross was subsequently appointed to the position of National 'Communication Champion' by the Labour Government at the time. She held this position until March 2012, when funding was withdrawn by the next (Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition) government.

² The **Every Child a Chance Trust** aims to unlock the educational potential of socially disadvantaged children through the development and promotion of evidence-based, early intervention programmes. (www.everychildachancetrust.org)

the views and claims put forward in the chapter is in short supply, and sociolinguistic evidence, completely absent.

In chapter 2 ('How speech, language and communication are linked to social disadvantage'), for example, only 3 of the 9 references could be considered to be from academically credible sources that have undergone peer review. Of these, 2 are from the *Journal of Communication and Language Disorders* and the third is a book by Hart and Risley (1995), which reports on a study carried out in the United States over 15 years ago. Of the remaining references, three are to reports published by various government departments, including the one which Bercow himself headed up (Bercow 2008). One reference is to a paper published by I CAN³ and a further two references are to the I CAN website and to a website that concerns the work of 'a multi-agency project to look at the issues underlying children's language deficits in the UK city of Stoke on Trent (www.stokespeaksout.co.uk). Furthermore, a good deal of 'evidence' is merely anecdotal, appearing to take the word of teachers' impressions as if they were truth. For example, in GIE Gross states that 'Head teachers speak of increasing numbers of children who hear little language at home beyond the 'daily grunt'. As a result, it is estimated that one in 10 children start school unable to talk in sentences or understand simple instructions'. (23) This is a remarkably strong claim to make on the basis of anecdotal evidence from head teachers.

Chapter three is similarly lacking in academically adequate evidence. Out of 14 references, only two are from peer reviewed journals. The remainder are a collection of reviews and reports produced by government departments and charitable organisations. None of the references in chapters two and three, or indeed in the whole report, are from sociolinguistic or sociological studies, despite the report's clear aims to address *social* issues through linguistic and educational practices.

To be fair,, references to academic literature are not completely absent in the GIE report. However, their findings are rather selectively used. Both Gross (chapter three) and Bercow et al. (chapter two) refer to the Hart and Risley (1995) study which is an impressive longitudinal study in which the linguistic behaviours of 42 US families were observed over a period of 30 months. One of the findings of this study is that the children of parents on

³ Cross, M *Language & Social Exclusion*, I CAN Talk series issue 4 (I CAN, 2007)

benefits were exposed to less than half the number of words per hour (600) than the children of professional parents (1500 words). This single numerical finding is trotted out by both Gross and Bercow et al. as if it necessarily supports the idea that socially deprived children are also linguistically deprived. A second oft-cited study is by Locke et al. (2002) who found that in a study of 240 children at four nursery schools in socially deprived areas of Sheffield (UK), approximately 50% of children were 'language delayed'. From this, the authors of the GIE report extrapolate that 'children are starting at their primary school without the speech, language and communication skills that they need in order to learn, achieve, make friends and interact with the world around them' (26). These two particular findings of Hart and Risley (1995) and Locke et al. (2002) do not, by themselves, demonstrate that young children from deprived backgrounds are communicatively incompetent, and yet they are used repeatedly in the report as well as in a number of public media (for example, newspaper reports⁴ and websites of organisations addressing communication problems in children, such as Stokespeaksout; ICAN, ESCAL⁵) to justify intervention. This is not to say that their findings are not accurate, but the way they are used is misleading and their value as scientific evidence is limited⁶.

Thus, when one looks at the few academic sources that are cited, it becomes clear that there is a disciplinary bias in favour of speech and language pathology and psychology. The assumption seems to be that the alleged lack of communicative skill in poor children is a pathology, rather than anything to do with social structures, processes and attitudes. Furthermore, as a source of information, the communication charity I CAN is fairly heavily represented in GIE. The report is partly written by two of its top representatives (Virginia Beardshaw and Anita Kerwin-Nye) and many of the charity's reports are referenced. This charity doubtless provides a valuable service, however, it describes itself as providing help for children with communication *difficulties* 'that require specialist help' (www.ican.org.uk). This seems odd, given that, unlike the previous Bercow report on 'Early Intervention', the GIE report claims that 'children whose speech, language and communication needs are

⁴ for example, 'In stories anything can happen' Jerome Monahan, The Guardian 14/04/09

⁵ Every Child Articulate and Literate, Sheffield City Council

⁶ Such disregard for real knowledge and expertise is far from unknown in other think-tank reports and Government policy-making. Derbyshire (2011) complains that recent reports on the link between parenting and social disadvantage, such as 'Parenting Matters: Early Years and Social Mobility', use science (in this case neuroscience) in a 'dishonest' way to convince the reader that normal families are, in fact, pathological.

linked to impairment or disability are not the focus of this essay.' (27). Despite this, the linguistic behaviour of large percentages of children in deprived areas is described as 'inadequate' (27) a 'struggle' (27) and likened to 'a public health challenge' (29). Furthermore, by referring mainly to speech and language pathology and psychological studies, this approach tends to medicalise what could in fact be normal (i.e. most commonly occurring) behaviour. For example, Locke et al. (2002), mentioned above as one of the few academic sources in the GIE report, mixes quite medicalised vocabulary (they talk of children being 'diagnosed' with language delay) with social work discourse (children are said to be 'at risk' of slow development and educational failure). Thus, without any sociological and sociolinguistic perspectives on language variation, it is easy to give the impression that speech and language therapists need to become involved in interventions for ordinary working-class children. Indeed, this is what language researchers such as Locke et al., as well as the ICAN organisation, seem to be advocating. Furthermore, for a report about early years language education to rely so heavily on expertise that is allied to the therapeutic professions is to start out with the presumption that poor children and their families are linguistically deficient. This should not then be seen as an objective treatment of the issues in question since it is in the interests of these professions and organisations to justify their continued funding and existence.

In terms of scholarship, the WCTR report is even more dubious than the GIE one. It only has one author, Miriam Gross, but, similarly, it is not at all clear what qualifies her for such a role. She is described in the report as a journalist and writer (she is in fact a successful literary editor for well known British newspapers), with a degree in literature from Oxford and has done some volunteer teaching in schools. Thus, although she clearly is highly literate herself, she would seem to have little or no expertise in how literacy is acquired, or in language education in general. As with GIE, this in itself would be excusable if the report she produced consisted of a synthesis of research by those who *are* experts. However, much of the report has the status of opinion and there is very little solid evidence at all for the claims it makes about language and literacy. Any 'evidence' its recommendations are based on, consists of interviews with teachers, teaching assistants, student teachers, some government reports and news articles.

Perhaps worse than this, the WCTR report seems to unashamedly promote a method of teaching reading whose materials and training packages are provided by a private, for-

profit company. In its foreword, Boris Johnson claims that the report provides 'an invaluable public service' and that 'We need to urgently chase down the causes of this slow motion disaster [illiteracy]'. And yet, the references to 'literacy experts', who in fact sell their own materials based on the 'synthetic phonics' method, would seem to suggest that the problem and the solution have already been decided.

Ruth Miskin, for example, is cited by Gross as 'one of the UK's leading experts on literacy' (18), yet it turns out that Miskin was once a head teacher and now runs a company called 'Read,Write Inc.' that sells synthetic phonics materials and training for teachers. Gross also cites Irina Tyk who is head teacher of a private primary school and who also writes books and materials based on the synthetic phonics method. Far from being experts on literacy, then, these two women have a vested interest in criticising existing teaching methods and so their testimony should be treated with suspicion. In the entire WCTR report, there is only one reference to academic research: Henrietta Dombey, Professor of Literacy at Brighton University. Far from providing support for Gross's findings, however, Dombey's work *disputes* any claims made for the superiority of synthetic phonics as a method of teaching reading.

In sum, then, the views and findings expressed in these reports are badly researched. Evidence is provided of a sort, but it is limited both in quantity and in quality. Where peer-reviewed research studies are cited, these few studies are repeatedly and heavily relied on as a basis for recommendations and foregone conclusions about the education of young children from socially deprived backgrounds. Furthermore, policy reports such as these can be seen as a type of benevolent philanthropy (wherein teachers and speech therapists save the working classes from themselves) which serves the interests of the middle classes generally, and certain professions specifically, by creating and extending the need for their services. In the next section I show how these preconceptions are founded on the assumption that whatever the middle-classes do (and however they use language) is necessarily superior to the practices (including language) of the working classes.

Middle-class bias

Many claims about linguistic competence contained within these reports reflect not just a disciplinary bias, but also disciplinary ignorance: they are based on erroneous, unexplored assumptions about the nature of language and how it operates in social contexts. Furthermore, the narrative of the reports is infused with a clear middle-class bias,

masquerading as a concern for social justice. The journalist Owen Jones convincingly argues in his book 'Chavs' (2011) that 'the British working class has become an object of fear and ridicule' (back cover) and that the increasingly dominant political and journalistic discourse takes the position that 'those at the bottom only had themselves to blame' (249). Jones claims that, Iain Duncan Smith, chairman of the Centre for Social Justice and Tory MP, professes that 'poverty is not about lacking money: it is due to problems like lack of discipline, family break-up, and substance abuse' (Jones 2011, 77). It is perhaps not surprising, then, to find that these very attitudes come through in the GIE and WCTR reports, which have strong links with the Centre for Social Justice. However, the GIE report is careful to avoid use of the term 'working-class' and in chapter six, Lee Elliott Major (research director of the Sutton Trust) even asserts a desire to 'avoid negative stereotypes of working-class culture, or value judgments about those living in poverty' (70). Instead, the authors refer to 'disadvantaged', 'deprived' and 'poor' communities, families and children. These are then contrasted with middle-class behaviours and values so that, by implication, anything non-middle- class is problematic and needs to be improved. For example, in chapter one, 'Why we need to target four to eight year olds', Jean Gross writes 'Even where families live in poverty, children can achieve well where parents are helped to be responsive to their children and committed to their education' (22). And in the chapter on 'Educational mobility', Major says that one of the SuttonTrust's projects 'offers the sort of academic and pastoral support that children with middle-class parents take for granted.' and that ' The scheme provides out-of-school support for children from age seven upwards, building confidence, motivation and self-esteem, and raising aspirations to go on to university' (71). In these quotes we can see an assumption that children living in poverty do not succeed in education because their parents are not 'responsive' and 'committed' to their education. This attitude is expressed more explicitly in the WCTR report, in which Miriam Gross states quite baldly that 'white working-class parents often seem to be indifferent to their children's education.'(25).

In the GIE report, poor parents are not only represented as uninvolved with the education of their children, but, incredibly, they are also thought to be unlikely to be able to love their children, as the following quote from chapter four ('Developing social and emotional skills') shows:

'Parents in deprived conditions may find it difficult to give the positive attention that is needed to build attachments with their children. They may feel alienated from a

child they did not want, be depressed by their circumstances or not be functioning socially and emotionally because of drugs or alcohol.' (Getting in Early, 49).

Somewhat paradoxically, these emotionally switched off parents are then thought to *more* emotional when it comes to discipline:

'Parents from more disadvantaged backgrounds are particularly unlikely to be able to help their children manage their feelings in calm, positive, rational ways. They are likely to use punitive, inconsistent and aggressive approaches to discipline, based on shouting, slapping and even violence.' (Getting in Early, 49-50).

There is, no doubt, some truth to the view that people living in poverty are more prone to mental health problems, but by making such sweeping statements that may then be linked with claims elsewhere in the report of 50% of children starting school with language difficulties (see above), the report gives the impression that neglect and abuse of children is the norm, not the exception, in these non-middle-class communities. Not only are such claims by the author (Katherine Weare, Professor of Education) unsubstantiated, but the implication is that middle-class parents are much more likely to teach their children behaviours that she considers to be preferable, such as being 'calm' and 'rational' (50). The behaviour of people living on council estates and in disadvantaged areas, on the other hand, becomes pathologised. In a swathing attack on other recent think-tank reports on parenting, the psychologist Stuart Derbyshire (2011) makes a similar point: 'The numerous reports advocating enriched parenting extrapolate from the consequences of severe neglect to normal households via a number of deft, and dishonest, manoeuvres. Very often the authors will elide severe neglect with normal problems and oversights...'

It might be said that Weare does, at least, show some awareness of, and sympathy with, the difficulties of living in poverty when she says 'In these straitened conditions, people find it hard to experience a sense of empathy or concern for others; they are too busy surviving '(50). However, this leaves me wondering why the solution to these problems is not to attempt to alleviate the poverty itself, rather than to propose to 'develop emotional and social skills learning in schools'⁷. Even if one were to accept the condescending premise that poor parents and children are deficient in the necessary social, linguistic and parenting skills, this solution would seem to be only tinkering with the symptoms of deprivation, not its causes. Derbyshire (2011) puts it like this:

⁷ It seems the proposals for teaching empathy contained in the GIE report may be being taken up by some schools. The UK broadsheet, *The Guardian*, published a blog by Vinciane Ryecroft called 'Nothing is more important than teaching compassion'. guardian.co.uk, 13/04.12.

'The current obsession with parenting and early-years intervention is not science-based, but is another example of the tendency to individualise social problems that may then be addressed through lifestyle interventions such as parenting classes. The science is being manipulated and invented to justify a policy that is already active. This is a direct abuse of science to hide the paucity of vision and imagination to tackle social problems and to provide an authority to deliver policy recommendations that would otherwise be seen as draconian and contemptuous of normal parental life.'

On the topic of language specifically, Jean Gross (GIE) claims that 'Head teachers speak of increasing numbers of children who hear little language at home beyond the 'daily grunt'. As a result, it is estimated that one in 10 children start school unable to talk in sentences or understand simple instructions.' (23). In this way, Gross is not only reflecting her own middle-class bias, but also that of head teachers, whose opinion she appears to take unquestioningly as evidence. At the same time, she demonstrates her ignorance of the way spoken language normally operates in assuming that it should contain 'sentences'. Underlying this assumption is the 'scriptivist' (Jones, this issue) fallacy that whatever occurs in writing must also be 'correct' in speech.

Bercow et al., in the chapter on speech and language, explicitly identify middle-class families as the model that should be followed: 'Middle-class families tend actively to 'cultivate' their children and to teach them language, reasoning and negotiation skills, which other children may lack.' (28). A few lines later, it is stated that 'parents who have not themselves experienced a responsive, language rich environment, who did not achieve at school and who perhaps have poor literacy are not in a good position to provide positive communication opportunities for their children.' Thus, without mentioning the working-class specifically, a clear contrast is set up between the middle-class and the remainder of the population who lack the requisite parenting skills. Although the authors may not realise it, there are echoes here of Bernstein's (1972) notion of 'elaborated' and 'restricted' codes, so roundly condemned a generation ago by Labov (1972) as being biased against the working-class.

The newsworthiness of language deficit.

Until now, I have been discussing the bias and questionable evidence-base of the reports themselves, However, one of the most worrying aspects of the GIE and WCTR

reports is the way the British media seems particularly keen to report on perceived deficits in the spoken language of poor children. Despite the fact that both the think-tank reports address a number of issues to do with education (not just language), it is mainly their claims about linguistic deficit that found their way into the newspapers and on to the air-waves. GIE has one 10 page chapter (out of 88 pages) on speech, language and communication and yet, this is the focus of an article that appeared in the British left-of-centre broadsheet, The Guardian on 2nd December 2008. The Guardian had the headline 'State urged to help deprived children communicate' and asserted in the second paragraph that 'Pupils starting primary school increasingly need to be taught to speak because they have heard little language at home beyond the 'daily grunt' from their parents'. This quite sensationalist (and anecdotal) claim is made more believable because the report is said to contain 'research' and contributions from 'academic and educational experts'. In July 2010 The Guardian and The Metro (a free UK tabloid paper that is distributed nationally on buses and trains) both also reported on the WCTR report, again focussing exclusively on its claims about spoken language, (that 'street language' is 'breeding illiteracy'), despite the fact that just under one page is devoted to the question of 'street' language.

Clearly, then, stories about linguistic deficit are considered to be newsworthy and have a wide appeal. Cameron (1995; 2012) claims that in the 1990s, because of a 'perceived external threat' (112) (from the political left) media coverage of the debate about standard English in the curriculum reached the proportions of a moral panic. With the election of Blair's New Labour government in 1997, the threat perhaps ebbed away again. However, the reporting of these think-tanks reports on education seems to have heralded a renewed public interest in matters of linguistic 'correctness'. In these times of increasing polarisation of rich and poor and of government-imposed austerity measures, there is perhaps a renewed need for scapegoating disadvantaged groups in society and presenting them as a threat to the status quo.

Certainly, press reports of linguistic deficit in the socially disadvantaged seem to be getting more frequent. In December 2009, BBC Radio 4 aired a programme called 'Mind Your Slangue' in which they reported on a Manchester school's decision to ban 'slang'. This same phenomenon was reported in the local media when a Sheffield school (run by the same organisation as the Manchester school) also decided to ban local varieties of English on the school premises (The Sheffield Star, 15.02.2012). On 28th July 2011, it was reported by the BBC that a Manchester head teacher was claiming that some children are coming to

school not knowing their own name. This was thought to be such a newsworthy item that the prime time BBC Radio news programme, Today, interviewed Jean Gross (who by then had been appointed 'Communication Champion by the Government) about it. Gross, when asked if it could be true that some children did not know their name said that there was, indeed, anecdotal evidence that 'we do have a problem' and teachers were increasingly concerned that it was 'getting worse'. Rather than attempting to give a balanced view of the issue, then, Gross seemed content to fan the flames of the sensationalism of the media.

The fact that the GIE and WCTR reports, supplemented by the off-the-cuff remarks of head teachers, achieve such mass coverage in the press is just as much a cause for concern as the reports themselves, since the media have a much greater potential for reaching and influencing public opinion (this is, of course, why the think-tanks issue press releases about their work). Not only are the think-tank reports ill-informed and biased, but the media then distils out the most reactionary 'findings' on language and social deprivation, foregrounds them and presents them as well-researched facts.

Conclusion and the future.

When critiquing an approach to educational policy that attempts to address under-achievement it is sometimes difficult to avoid the accusation that one is undermining attempts to benefit disadvantaged groups in society. This, of course, is why the 'compensatory education' (Bernstein 1972) recommended in the GIE and WCTR reports has such wide appeal, and crosses party-political boundaries. Those on the political left regard such initiatives as a way of levelling out social inequality, while those on the right see them as a way of upholding 'common sense' notions of tradition and civilised standards. What the sociolinguist must do, then, is to argue what is essentially quite a complex (and therefore not media-friendly) position. The argument is not that economic deprivation and educational under-achievement are unrelated, nor that it is wrong to attempt to address such under-achievement. Neither would most of us argue that young children's linguistic skills should not be fostered and encouraged from an early age. Rather, the complaint from sociolinguistics is that educational initiatives which *start from* an assumption of linguistic and cultural deficit (indeed, pathology) in poor children are likely to do more harm than good (see Snell, this issue). Hence, before valuable resources are invested in compensatory programmes such as synthetic phonics, and before teachers are encouraged to clamp down on pupils' non-standard dialect use, advisors to the policy-makers should make sure they are

properly and independently informed by social-scientific research. Such research should include significant contributions from those scientists who specialise in examining how society works, and how language works in society. Only then can the issues of educational under-achievement, language delay and low levels of literacy be tackled in a responsible way.

In the rarefied world of academia, such an approach seems logical. However, the misleading information in the press and think-tank reports discussed here is not just a matter of ignorance, as Labov (1972) seemed to assume, it is a cynical attempt to focus the problem in the wrong place. In the worlds of public opinion and neo-liberal politics, where education is just another market-place, we have to contend with a number of vested interests. It is in the interests of politicians, as well as certain professionals, charities and businesses, to individualise and pathologise the normal behaviours of working-class people. It is far easier and far less threatening to put the blame for poverty on the poor themselves (Jones 2011), than to ask deep and searching questions about the nature of the education system and how and why it seems to perpetuate the increasing gap between rich and poor. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Smith Institute and the Centre for Social Justice do not seek out the views of sociologists and sociolinguists, for we are likely to tell them what they do not want to hear. In that case, then, we need to shout louder. We need to carry on doing and publishing our research, but we also need to insist on being involved in the public debates.

6554 words.

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