

The Implications of Bernstein's Theory of Codes on Contemporary Chinese Education

ZHAO Wei^{[a],*}

^[a]School of Foreign Languages & Literature Shandong Normal University, Jinan, China.

*Corresponding author.

Supported by Shandong Social Science Planning Office Project (11BWZJ03).

Received 2 March 2014; accepted 8 July 2014
Published online 31 August 2014

Abstract

The Theory of Codes proposed by the famous English educational sociologist Basil Bernstein is one of the most influential theories both in educational and linguistic academia, especially functional linguistics. It serves as a guideline to explain contemporary Chinese educational issues. This paper aims to make a detailed analysis of some misconceptions about the Theory of Codes from a functional linguistic perspective: (a) the Chinese and Western class bases of code demarcation; (b) the misconception of language as social dialect; (c) the attribution of educational failure to language failure; (d) social value assignment to codes; (e) the misunderstanding of the Theory of Codes due to convergence between urban and rural areas. The theory's applicability in Chinese educational context is further explored and some implications are drawn to help interpret and solve educational issues in China.

Key words: Bernstein; Functional linguistic perspective; The theory of codes; Misconceptions

Zhao, W. (2014). The Implications of Bernstein's Theory of Codes on Contemporary Chinese Education. *Canadian Social Science*, 10(6), 99-103. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/5275>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/5275>

INTRODUCTION

The Theory of Codes proposed by the famous English educational sociologist Basil Bernstein is one of the most

influential theories both in educational and linguistic academia, especially functional linguistics. Halliday (1995) has ever pointed out that from a linguistic perspective Bernstein seems unique among sociologists in emphasizing the key role of language in social processes, especially in socialization and cultural transmissions. Bernstein can be viewed as one of the leading figures who have exerted great impact upon our thinking about language outside the linguistics circle. Bernstein's Theory of Codes provides a richer view of the processes of meaning, which is of great significance for contemporary Chinese education. In China, there is still scant research on this theory, devoted mainly to a few introductory and empirical ones (Chen, 2011; Cheng & Wei, 2011; Lei, 2007; Lu, 2011; Zhao & Liu, 2011; Zhu, 2011). When the Theory of Codes is applied to the analysis of issues emerging in contemporary Chinese education, some parts of it have been misinterpreted. Therefore, this paper aims to examine various misinterpretations of the Theory of Codes from the perspective of functional linguistics, and further explores the applicability of the theory to contemporary Chinese education and some implications may be drawn to enlighten the resolution of issues emerging in the Chinese education.

1. BERNSTEIN'S THEORY OF CODES

The Theory of Codes is derived from the account of educational crisis in western countries in 1960s Bernstein takes into. That is, considering (a) native wit is not determined by social class; (b) all children receive equal basic schooling, why are low achievers in education almost all from the lower class.

Bernstein (1971, p.30) argued what differed in language use between the middle class and the working class "was not the formal properties of the language, such as extent of vocabulary, but the "mode of language use": The middle class' personal qualifications and

differentiation of experience, contrasted with the working class "immediacy of communication, an expressive symbolism with few personal qualifications". Bernstein viewed the two modes as "formal language" and "public language". The formal language concerns the relations of causality, explicit representation of space, time and social relationships, whereas the public language was characterized by "fragmentation and logical simplicity", few causal connections, and immediacy of referencing. Bernstein held that a middle-class child deploys both forms of language, while a working-class child may employ only the public language.

Bernstein (1971, p.78) used the elaborated code and restricted code to replace the formal and public languages, "The restricted code is fluent, well organized and unplanned—that is, not under attention as the speaker goes along; its major function is "to reinforce the form of the social relationship by restricting the verbal signaling of individuated responses." The elaborated code is explicit and individuated; there is a high degree of verbal planning, and the listener's intent is not taken for granted."

Bernstein (1971, pp.123-124) further formulated the relation between codes and social structures,

the particular form a social relation takes acts selectively on what is said, when it is said and how it is said. The form of the social relation regulates the options which speakers take up at both syntactic and lexical levels.

Hence "as the child learns his speech or, in terms used here, learns specific codes which regulate his verbal acts, he learns the requirements of his social structure". Speech is "the process by which a child comes to acquire a specific social identity", the "constellation of shared learned meanings through which he enters into interaction with others".

Briefly speaking, Bernstein's Theory of Codes offers a new perspective to explore educational issues in modern China. The paper is intended to address whether the Theory of Codes is applicable to the explanation of Chinese education issues, whether the theory differs across nations, and whether there exist misinterpretations of the theory. Below are discussions about these questions in five aspects.

2. MISINTERPRETATIONS OF THE THEORY OF CODES

2.1 The Class Basis of Code Demarcation—Misinterpretation Induced by National Differences

In terms of Chinese complex class stratum, Bernstein's code demarcation seems over-simple and unilateral. The distinction between the elaborated code and the restricted code is made according to class stratum of western countries, that is, the characteristics of language use by

the middle class and the working class. The definition of the middle class per se is a seemingly clear, but actually has vague connotations across nations. The middle class is defined against two criteria: (a) professions; (b) average income and family income. There is a lot of controversy over the professional criterion. For example, as government officials, it is obvious that the director of the Bureau, the division head and the staff can not be taken equally middle class. Economists are inclined to use income as a major criterion to define middle class, which still has quantitative uncertainties. Take America for example, it is said that the group of people who have annual income about 30-100 thousand dollars is classified as middle class, according to which, over 95% Americans can be counted as such. Whereas some hold that an annual income of 40-250 thousand dollars is more proper, against which the middle class accounts for 80% of the American population. In America, the middle class is positioned depending on educational status, profession, economic status and social influence. Upper middle class who holds white-collar professions, has received higher education and been mainly engaged with science technology, medicine, education, mass media and engineering.

In the case of China, the concept of the middle class has unique socialist features, which are closely related to "white collar", "higher income", "higher consumption" and "highly educated". Moreover, it is acknowledged that Chinese middle class mainly comprises several types of people: (a) private enterprise owners after opening-up policy; (b) foreign company and joint venture employees; (c) teachers, engineers and senior technical personnel; (d) state-owned enterprise and monopoly industry CEOs; (e) the big wheels in the mass media, show business, and sports circles. Such motley of people may result in differences in educational status, cultural cultivation, social ethics, etc.. The great discrepancy of the definition of the middle class between China and western countries may contribute to the complexity and even deviation in China from the Theory of Codes derived from western countries.

Thus, Chinese teachers may encounter such phenomena: middle-class children who use the elaborated code may not achieve success in education, whereas working-class children who use the restricted code may be otherwise. For example, according to questionnaires and interviews, 85% of non-English-major college students of fine arts and musicology from wealthy families tend to identify themselves or be identified as low achievers. Whereas 78% of non-English-major college students of such majors as psychology and pedagogy, etc. from lower working class are commonly identified as high achievers. Therefore, educational success cannot be simply determined by codes, which merely reflect social structures. So we can say whether students are high achievers or not is in large measure motivated by social structures.

2.2 Language Misconstrued as Dialect While Educational Failure as Language Failure

Bernstein has mentioned many times that codes are not related to social dialect. His theory of codes explains the mechanism by which language comes to function in this way, constructing a reality based on social class. The codes “essentially transmit the culture and constrain behavior” (Bernstein, 1971, p.122). He didn’t attribute educational failure to social dialect, but locate codes on a higher abstract level than dialects.

As for the differences of codes from register and from social dialect, Hasan (1973) pointed out that the main difference between codes and dialects lay in that their distinctive properties were semantic, not formal and expressive, and that their tie to extra-linguistic factors was causal not incidental. Whereas codes differed from registers in that their semantic properties correlate with generalized role systems rather than with specific factors of a particular context of situation. It can be concluded that the code is a variant of language which differs from dialect. Halliday (1975, p.94) maintained that

the notion of a defective dialect is in any case self-contradictory. But if children are failing because they speak a dialect that is different, they can certainly learn a second one, as children do in many cultures the world over.

In our educational practices, it can be discerned that middle-class children are adept at using formal language, and can easily establish and maintain personal relationship with teachers and make use of previous experiences to interpret new ones. Working-class children have to face the transition, shift and restructuring of codes, they feel impotent when solving new issues by using the previous code. Hence teacher and pupil tend to disvalue one another. In the long run, “a great deal of potential ability is being lost.” (Bernstein, 1971, p. 31) Zhao (2011) holds that in Chinese public school, dialect is subdued as a symbol of inferiority. It is cited as a kind of language expelled out of elite society. Dialect is considered as non-standard or sub-standard, often imbued with a range of inferiority, which may be conveyed to its speakers.

Seen from above, code may be one of many factors which lead to educational failure. However, if the code is viewed as mixed with dialect, language is misconstrued as dialect while educational failure as language failure, a superficial misinterpretation out of its context on the theory of codes may emerge. The claim that educational failure is attributed to social dialect is misleading in that the excessive attention given to social dialect may result in ignoring other factors that induce educational failure.

2.3 Misinterpretation of Attribution of Educational Failure to Language Failure

Education as a complex systematic project, it is constrained by societal, cultural and economic factors viewed from a macro-perspective, whereas it is regulated

by educational systems, social structures, class strata and individual differences from a micro-perspective. The success of education is a dynamic process of these interactive factors in continuous operation. For instance, Li (2008) made an attribution analysis of low achievers of migrant workers’ children. She suggested that their educational failures might be derived from three reasons: first, lack of an elite cultural family background is one of the most important incentives; second, difficulty in communication between teachers and students, between schools and families due to linguistic and cultural typological differences exacerbates the problem that migrant workers’ children tend not to adapt themselves to the school life; third, the social status division and hierarchical management in modern educational system naturally result in the low achievements of migrant workers’ children. Hence, the claim that educational failure is attributed to language failure is really misleading. Halliday (1973) pointed out that “the theory of educational failure” is misleading, and that Bernstein’s theory of education is both beyond and not enough to be called the theory of educational failure. Why beyond? The reason is that this theory focusing on the way society sustains and changes, concerns the nature and process of cultural transmission and the role language plays in this process. Education is one of many forms of cultural transmission, which functions as the major channel of social sustained growth. However, education is derived from social structures, besides which there are still other channels worthy of notice. As a matter of fact, Bernstein gave great emphasis to those channels in his research. Why not enough? The reason is that the theory doesn’t offer a fuller explanation of what causes the educational failure, but points out one of them that the distribution of educational failure follows some known and predictable pattern rather than a random one. This is one of problems working-class children in big cities cannot afford to avoid. What Bernstein has done is only to figure out the important relations among a series of relevant factors other people ignore.

In a nutshell, Bernstein’s theory of codes cannot be construed without its historical, situational and linguistic context. His original idea is reflected in the two points below: Firstly, language and social class are closely tied. That is, social class determines language, language represents social class; secondly, whether education can achieve success or not is significantly correlated with codes. These two factors are what other educational sociologists and sociolinguists have not paid much attention to. Codes are a feature of a class society which refracts, symbolizes, transmits and recreates the social order all the time. From this perspective it is obvious that “education cannot compensate for society”. The only way to intervene is to bring about “changes in the social structure of educational institutions.” (1971, p.136)

In terms of Chinese educational reality, the theory of codes provides a new perspective for the interpretation of

urban and rural education differences. Chen (2011) carried out an interesting empirical research under the Theory of Codes, which explored language differences in urban and rural preschool children. The research found out that there exist significant differences between urban and rural preschool children in linguistic systematicness, logicity, literalness and cultural literacy of their language use. The use of Codes is severely stratified. He concluded that both parents and kindergarten teachers should use the elaborated code to educate their children. However, language is just a social semiotic. Code as a representation of social structures only offers an explicit clue to discern social structures, but by no means a panacea for all educational issues.

2.4 Socially-Valued Code: Standard Chinese Equals the Elaborated Code? Dialect Equals the Restricted Code?

Bernstein holds that the restricted code and the elaborated code are not different from each other in value and status. He (1971, p.135) further point out that “clearly, one code is not better than another; each possesses its own aesthetic, its own possibilities. Society, however, may place different values on the orders of experience elicited...through the different coding systems”. Although the elaborated code is used in school education, two kinds of codes are indispensable to educational success of children. Nevertheless, misunderstandings still emerge towards codes. (a) Some children use the elaborated code while some use the restricted code; (b) The restricted code is inferior, the user of which might not get higher scores; (c) the elaborated code is the standard language while the restricted code is not.

As to the misunderstandings of codes, two points need to be borne in mind. First, it is essential to understand the key role codes play in the educational failure of children. There is no one-to-one correspondence between types of codes and the standard. Second, the value of codes assigned by society is supposed to be taken into consideration. Codes itself is without values. However, when they are placed values by social experiences, they bear the imprint of society, culture, ideology and ways of thinking. Codes reflect social strata. Put differently, a study of codes is in effect that of social class indirectly.

In China, standard Chinese as a code used in school education is very popular all over the country because of the intervention of the Chinese government, mass media, survival and professional pressures. China boasts a wide range of dialects, which has to, however, play second fiddle. When the Theory of Codes is employed to analyze educational failure cases in China, it is not advisable to match standard Chinese with the elaborated code, dialect with the restricted code. Standard Chinese is defined at the national reform of the writing system and modern Chinese syntax specification conference as the standard pronunciation of Putonghua in Beijing, the northern

dialect as the basis of dialect, to work as a model of the modern vernacular syntax specification, which clarifies the features of standard Chinese in terms of pronunciation, lexicon and syntax. Compared with the distinction between the restricted code and the elaborated code, which are concerned with social class, the distinction between standard Chinese and dialect is more concerned with language system. Therefore, standard Chinese can be called official code, while dialect individual code.

2.5 Misinterpretation Induced by Code Convergence in Urbanization

The code differences tend to diminish in the process of urbanization. In the current educational system, kindergartens have evolved into the preparatory school for primary school, whose function and language used are integrated into the whole educational system just like primary school, secondary school and university. There exist only differences between teaching contents and complexity. In urban kindergartens, migrant workers' children and middle-class children normally receive formal education together. The language development of migrant workers' children is to a great degree affected by kindergarten teachers' language. Chen and Wei (2011) made an empirical study on test papers of Chinese for college entrance examination in 2005, from which 2138 test papers are randomly chosen with 951 urban examinees and 1,187 rural examinees. All data were processed by SPSS, through which variance analysis and *T*-Test were used for analysis. The findings showed that Chinese composition scores for college entrance examination didn't differ across places students came from. There exist no significant differences in Chinese composition scores between urban and rural examinees. That is, the language they encode is the same, with no distinction between the restricted code and the elaborated code. This study has testified to the validity and explanatory power of the Theory of Codes from the opposite angle.

Just as Halliday (1995) states that if to attain social equality rests with being educated, you have to employ a particular code to be educated, then those who gain no access to that code may be denied social justice. Two ways to go are either to master the code by all means or to change the processes of education. To minimize the differences between urban and rural children in terms of culture, economics and education, to provide equal education opportunities for migrant workers' children and urban children, and to offer them access to the elaborated code are essential to addressing educational failure of working-class children.

CONCLUSION

Although the emergence and applicability of the theory of codes are closely related to its historical, social and cultural background, its vitality lies in its sufficient

explanatory power for some educational and language phenomena across social and cultural differences. Despite the fact that some deviations emerge due to such constraints as social class strata and definition of codes, Chinese educational phenomena still can verify its explanatory and predictive power. What deviates from the reality can not be the excuse for denial of the theory. Zhu (2011) has pointed out that the mission of linguists is not limited to hypothesis-making, but should be aware of their responsibilities. Under current educational status quo, it is the fundamental humanistic concern and social responsibility every language worker should be equipped with to clarify various misconceptions about the theory of codes, and apply it to analyzing Chinese educational practices.

REFERENCES

- Bernstein, B. (1971). *Class, code and control, Volume 1: Theoretical studies towards a sociology of language*. London, England: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Chen, L. C. (2011). Reflections on the differences of expressions among pre-school children in the urban and rural from the language code theory. *Journal of Sichuan Vocational and Technical College*, 2, 84-86.
- Chen, L. Y., & Wei, Y. L. (2011). Can language code theory account for contemporary Chinese educational issues? *Shanghai Education and Research*, 2, 24-27.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1975). Language as social semiotic: Towards a general sociolinguistic theory. In A. Makkai & V. B. Makkai (Eds.). *The First LACUS Forum*. Californian: Hornbeam Press.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1995). Language and the theory of codes. In A. Sadovnik (Ed.). *Knowledge and pedagogy: The sociology of basil bernstein*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Hasan, R. (1973). Code, register and social dialect. In B. Bernstein (Ed.). *Class, code and control, Volume 2* (pp. 253-292). London, England: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Lei, B. Y. (2007) Educational inequality under Bernstein's theory of code. *Southeast Communication*, 6, 99-101.
- Li, H. T. (2008). The anthropologic interpretation of the low academic achievement of children of farmer workers—On the current situation investigation and attribution analysis of low academic achievement of children of farmer workers in A city. *Journal of Educational Science of Hunan Normal University*, 3, 23-26.
- Lu, N. N. (2011) A review of Bernstein's theory of code—Implications to Chinese educational equality. *Basic Education Research*, 1, 6-7.
- Zhao, C. L. (2011). A survey of spiritual homeland construction of migrant workers' children in urban schools from the perspective of language equality. *Education Research and Experiment*, 2, 65-69.
- Zhao, J., & Liu, Y. B. (2011). On language, utterance and society—A study of Bernstein's language view from a social-cultural perspective. *Journal of Northeast Normal University*, 4, 149-152.
- Zhao, J., & Liu, Y. B. (2011). On Bernstein's language competence. *Study and Exploration*, 5, 198-199.
- Zhu, Y. S. (2011). The influence of Bernstein's theory of educational sociology on the systemic functional linguistics. *Foreign Language Education*, 4, 6-12.