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Articles

Language use and social class: Re-interpreting Basil Bernstein's theories of language in 'classless' Japan, and the ramifications for tertiary education 7

A. R. Woollock

Haruki Murakami: The cosmopolitan Japanese writer 14

Sarara Momokawa

Calligraphic reading, and the misadventures therein: *Preface to the Lanting Gathering* [J. Rantei-jō] by Ōgishi (Wang Xizhi) 22

Jeroen Bode

Language Learning and Teaching

The use of comic books as a teaching tool: A descriptive study 37

Ron Crosby

International education for youth development: Report on a collaboration program between Athena Eikaiwa and Little Oranges 44

Tanya Saga, Naoko Hino, JoAnn Hayashi, and Karen Pullupaxi

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Language Use and Social Class: Re-interpreting Basil Bernstein's Theories of Language in 'classless' Japan, and the Ramifications for Tertiary Education

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Abstract: バジル・バーンステインは、英語の社会階級における言語使用が、階級間で異なるだけでなく、階級の内と外を示すなど、多くの基本的な社会的機能も果たすと主張した。バーンステインはまた、そのような言語使用が、特に公教育の構造と内容とに結びついたとき、階級の境界を維持する機能を持つと主張した。バーンステインはさらに、同じ階級内での言語使用は、特定の階級の一員としてのステータスを示すこととなり、その話者の発言権を強めることを示唆した。さらに教育に携わる人にとって興味深いことに、その言語使用は、拙い言葉遣いにより外部から知能が低いと認識された下位労働者階級の話者を意のままに操る機能をも有していた。このバーンステインの理論を、階級のない日本の日本人英語学習者に当てはめると様々なことが理解できる。バーンステインが分析した下位労働者階級の英語の言語使用と、日本のEFL（外国語としての英語）を学ぶ学生のそれとの間には多くの顕著な類似点があるのだ。本稿は、バーンステインの先駆的な論文である *Social Structure, Language and Learning* (1961)を詳しく解釈することで、その類似点を論証し、日本での成人教育の改革の実施に役立つ証拠を提供することを目的とする
キーワード：バジル・バーンステイン, 高等教育, 日本, 社会階級

Basil Bernstein postulated that language use amongst the English social classes not only varied between groups, but that it also performed a number of rudimentary social functions such as indicating in-group/out-group. He also argued that, perhaps, most importantly it helped to maintain class boundaries especially when coupled with the structure and content of state education. Bernstein further suggested that language use within a stratum of class simultaneously empowered the user (by demonstrating their status as a member of a given group), but also, and more interestingly for those working in the field of education, that language use helped subjugate lower-working class users who were perceived by outsiders as being less intelligent (due to

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modes of speech). Interestingly when mapped to Japanese learners in ‘classless’ Japan, Bernstein’s theories are both prophetic and luminary. Sidestepping, for a moment, the focus on social class and instead viewing only his core thesis, one finds that there are many striking similarities between language use amongst Bernstein’s lower working class English sample, and Japanese tertiary students undertaking EFL courses. Through a close reading of Bernstein’s seminal text *Social Structure, Language and Learning* (1961). This research aims to demonstrate this assimilation and provide evidence which it is hoped, may be used to implement andragogical reform in Japan.

Keywords: ELT presentations, professional development, Basil Bernstein, higher education, Japan, social classes

In his paper, *Social Structure, Language and Learning* (1961), English philosopher and educational theorist Basil Bernstein¹ (1924-2000) delivered a hypothesis which postulated that language use amongst the English classes differed substantially, and perhaps more damningly, that (despite forming approximately 29% of the population) ‘there is little sign that an educational programme has been systematically thought through for the pupil whose origins are lower working class’ (1961, p. 163). His England-centric theory was largely drawn from the ideas of social interaction (often parent-child), and employment—how, in post-war England, an array of languages were used across employment sectors, from blue to white-collar, and how these were vehicles (both passive and active) for manifesting and maintaining the class system. Bernstein argued a position which now, thanks to the work of progressive educational theorists like Apple, Freire, Giroux, and McLaren et al., is widely agreed upon (if largely passively observed or ignored), that being, state education, regardless of tier, is a mechanism of social control. In Foucauldian Terms this works not only at the macro level (governmental dictate cascaded through a Ministry of Education), but perhaps more potently at the micro level. It is in this sphere where parents inculcate their children with group/class norms potentially inhibiting class transition or social migration, and peer or in-group pressures apply to maintain class/linguistic boundaries by ensuring any deviations from expected linguistic/behavioural norms are rigorously checked by a variety of mechanisms including ridicule, shaming, humour, and parody.

In the context of Japanese EFL (JEFL) Bernstein’s observation appear to be extremely pertinent, and whilst it is not the function of this paper to delve too deeply into the root causes of this apparent assimilation, the author argues that the ideas presented herein possess merit for language/content teachers in Japan who can often face confusion about the apparent inadequacies or deficiencies of their student-learners. Perhaps, by the application of a frame which has closer cultural resonance, it may be possible for the Western educator to transpose at least an emotional understanding to their Japanese students. Furthermore by being able to draw from Bernstein et al.’s considerable body of educational research on the subject, it is hoped that a contribution can be made to educational theory and practice in the Japanese tertiary sector.

Bernstein’s Theory of Language: Parallels between English and Japanese Society

Bernstein argued that when language use is examined in regard to the English class system, there is marked difference in use between the working classes and the middle classes. He further argues that communication which occurs between interlocutors in both verbal and non-verbal forms have their own relative complexities and serve differing functions (both social and linguistic). In respect of middle-class learners he observes that the “linguistic relationship is a pressure to verbalise feeling in a relatively individual manner” (1961, p. 167; emphasis added) a function which stands diametric to the lower working class pupil, “who learns a form or language which symbolises the normative arrangements of a local group rather than the individuated experience of each of its members [emphasis added].” As a result of this collective nature, the working-class student’s language use largely functions at the level of general or minimal expression where “communication goes forward against a backcloth of closely shared identification [...] which removes the need for elaborate verbal expression²” (p. 166), “where the form of the com-

¹Professor of Education, Institute of Education, University College London.

²Real or not, in Japan there are many phrases which express a sense of shared or mutual understanding based on non-

munication reinforces the pattern of social relationships but fails to induce in the child a need to create speech which uniquely fits his experience” (p. 168). In Japan too, one reason why such use mirrors the English working-class may be due in part to the agrarian past (Japanese: mura-shakai, 村社会, むらしゃかい) where people lived in small, close-knit villages bound by family or filial obligations. This past undoubtedly helped form the way in which the Japanese language evolved and is used, that is, with much ambiguity, assumption, indirectness, and a sense of co-constructed meaning. Such use has become the *modus operandi* du jour in Japan, and is a cultural phenomenon which manifests itself in the (tertiary) classroom regardless of subject. In this regard, the Japanese learner shares with the English working-class a similarity of character, and thus, language use. Derived in part from their Protestant upbringing, the English working-class (perhaps like the Japanese) are, for a number of reasons historically renowned for both their stoicism³ and not being overly verbose. This is partly attributable to the fact that historically, in English working-class/industrial cities or regions, it was customary for a limited number of words or short phrases to convey a multitude of meanings depending on context or intonation. Examples of this include phrases such as ‘way aye’ in Tyne and Weir, ‘oh aye’ in Yorkshire, and ‘nice one’ in London. Whilst these examples function as a phrase, they also function as a kind of linguistic ‘marker’ which interlocutors give out to acknowledge understanding during their inactive part of a conversation. Again, this use provides us with similarities in the Japanese language which has a very highly developed system of oral acknowledgments called *aizuchi* (相槌、あいづち), which are sounds used as markers in conversation largely devoid of actual meaning. Extending this, it should be further acknowledged that the Japanese language has a significant number of homonyms e.g. hi (日- day, Japan 火 - fire, blaze 非 - mistake, fault 灯 - light, lamp) or mi (見- see, look 三 - three, tri 身 - body, oneself 未 - not yet, un 美- beauty, beautiful). The point to reinforce here is that perhaps like the English working-class student, the Japanese student too is adept at communicating with a limited linguistic toolbox and is adept at a veritable *discursive ambiguity*.

Mapping Specifics Back to Japan

‘Social Structure and Language Learning’ provided a platform for Bernstein to share some pertinent observations in regard to the use of language by English working-class pupils. He indicates the existence of a number of behavioural and linguistic patterns which show a remarkable parallel to Japanese EFL learners. He notes that, ‘their thinking will be rigid [...] their curiosity is limited [...] they tend to require a very clear-cut educational experience with little ambiguity in direction’ (p. 164). He further notes that ‘they are highly suspicious of anything which does not look like education and they traditionally conceive it’ (p. 165) and that “[working-class] communication reinforces the patterns of social relationships but fails to induce in the child a need to create speech which uniquely fits their experience’ (p. 168). These observations, through derived from the English class system cannot fail to resonate with any educator who has worked within the Japanese tertiary sector, especially those who have attempted to use non linear or multivariate models of andragogy⁴ such as experiential or inquiry-based learning.

Because of the way Japanese learners have been taught thus far in their educational careers, a mixture of rote memorisation (Japanese maru-anki, 丸暗記ま, るあんき), line-by-line translation (Japanese: yaku-doku, 訳読, やくどく), focus on form rather than function (Japanese: kata, 型, かた), and repetitive practice⁵ (Japanese: ren-shuu, 練習, れんしゅう) they have been conditioned to exhibit a tendency towards convergent thinking with a focus on “standardised reactions” (Bernstein, 1961, p. 165) i.e., what should go where and when for a ‘license⁶’ or test⁷, the “means and ends of education” (ibid). The sum of these practices results in what Bernstein (1961: 165) describes as “a general flatness in their over-all edu-

verbal communication derived from being part of a homogeneous group or race (Japanese: tan-itu-min-zoku, 単一民族, たんいつみんぞく), phrases such as ‘to read the air/atmosphere’ (Japanese: ku-ki wo yo-mu, 空気を読む, くうきをよむ) or a kind of telepathic understanding (Japanese: i-shin-den-shin, 以心伝心, いしんでんしん).

³Working-class (Protestant) stoicism manifests itself in the middle-class idea of the ‘stiff upper lip,’ a quintessential characteristic of Englishness amongst the ruling and middle-classes.

⁴Andragogy refers to the teaching of adults, unlike pedagogy which refers to the teaching of children.

⁵When asked, Japanese students will invariably couple the verb ‘practice’ to English rather than other alternatives such as ‘use,’ ‘communicate’ or ‘express’.

⁶It is not unjust to claim that Japan has a deep-rooted fixation with paper qualifications, colloquially referred to as

cational achievements [resulting in being] restricted to concrete operations.” As was noted elsewhere (Woollock, 2019), significant and pervasive levels of cognitive poverty are prevalent amongst the Japanese tertiary study body—regardless of gender or geographical locale, something Bernstein calls ‘cognitive impoverishment’ (1961, p. 166), noting it “affects the length and type of the completed thought” (ibid, 170)

When asked, Japanese students will invariably couple the verb ‘practice’ to English rather than other alternatives such as ‘use,’ ‘communicate’ or ‘express’.

It is not unjust to claim that Japan has a deep-rooted fixation with paper qualifications, colloquially referred to as ‘licenses.’ These qualifications are primarily acquired after studying from a prescribed handbook and sitting regurgitative memory tests. The content and nature of these tests is invariably based upon a given institution, group, or organisation’s mandate, modus operandi or corpus of knowledge which they are desirous of transmitting. The motivation for creating the license appears to have less to do with genuine acquisition of knowledge and more to do with compliance and conformity.

Although not specifically within the scope of this research per se, simple examples of this cognitive poverty are evident on a daily basis in the Japanese tertiary classroom and have been observed longitudinally by the author at a wide range of Higher Education (HE) establishments throughout Japan. That is not to infer that students⁸ are ‘stupid,’ they certainly are not, but the parameters of their intelligences are clearly delineated. Thus, a seemingly simple task for Japanese young adults engaged in tertiary education, which involves, e.g., extrapolation, assimilation, synthesis, creativity or abstract correlation can often be difficult to complete or accomplish without numerous examples or an inappropriate level of explanation. Likewise providing complex motivation or rationale for their choices, moral dilemmas, advanced reasoning, and ambiguity proves difficult, if not near impossible on any meaningful level. The Japanese tertiary student like their English working-class counterpart is suffering from poverty in higher-order thinking skills (HOTS), meaning skills which should be prevalent in the tertiary classroom are notably absent⁹. Because of a proclivity towards this linear intelligence, it is often noted that the Japanese have a limited propensity for original idea generation and conception. Conversely, however, they demonstrate a remarkable ability for taking something which is already in existence, deconstructing it and reproducing it at a significantly higher level—electrical goods and vehicles are prime examples of this ability¹⁰. It could be inferred that these competing or multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1987) are reflected in the poor number of wholly Japanese Nobel awards¹¹, and its poor standing in the last Global Creativity Index (2015), yet its high rate of patent application (WPO, 2019). For the tertiary educator this situation should be noted especially when considering materials and methods of delivery.

Explanations for this honing of certain intelligences and absence of others may be likened to the conditioned English working-class student who focuses on the ‘here and now’, the tangible, and the concrete.

probability/frequency of test appearance, and test-taking skills designed to ensure students will be able to successfully navigate the entrance exam and gain entry into a ‘prestigious’ university - none of which has anything to do with the original purpose of education (derived from the Latin *educatus* meaning ‘to bring up,’ ‘rise up’ or ‘nourish’), which is also present in the kan-ji compound for education; Japanese, *kyou-iku* (教育、きょういく). The second kan-ji, *iku* (育、いく) can also be read as *soda-tu* (育つ、そだ・つ) which means to nurture, raise, or bring up.

⁸For those not au fait with Japanese society and education, such a generic statement may seem unwise or unfounded; this is, however, not the case. In Japan all strata of education whether public or private are tightly regulated and controlled by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). Every step of the Japanese education process is minutely managed and regulated to the degree that almost every school has a cherry blossom near the gate, will celebrate school festivals on the same date in the same way, and will provide education in very similar buildings of similar colour and design. MEXT regulates Japanese students on behalf of the Japanese government who want to raise compliant workers who will maintain social order and work unquestioningly towards the economic and social stability of the nation state. Education, therefore removes citizens’ ‘edges’ makes them compliant, malleable and cognitively docile. An employee who demonstrates originality, questions or challenges authority is not considered a good employee in Japan.; employees who unquestioningly follow rules are.

⁹In actuality Japanese ‘higher education’ (HE) is more similar in purpose and function to Western standards in ‘further education’ (FE), a tier lower than HE. The distinction being that FE is not bona fide tertiary education per se because its principle focus is not scholastic. It is not primarily concerned with HOTS, nor does it feed academia in the philosophical sense. FE’s main purpose can be described as being to furnish students with skills for future employment being derived from the advent of industrialised societies.

¹⁰The Japanese word *kai-zen* (改善、かいぜん), meaning ‘continual improvement’ aptly describes this ability.

¹¹The Nobel Foundation. (2019): All Nobel Prizes. Retrieved June 19, 2019, from <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/lists/all-nobel-prizes/>

Other reasons may be due to the pedagogies/training students have encountered in Japanese primary and secondary schooling. In addition to this, and of greater concern is that which has previously been noted and critiqued by the author (Woollock, 2020), elsewhere. That being due entirely to prior conditioning at the primary and secondary levels, but actually within the tertiary classroom too, where outdated or inappropriate teaching methods coupled with the ‘performative’ or perfunctory nature of staged discourse in JEFLL is a likely contributing factor to this cognitive stultification. In this arena, the overuse of poor quality and impersonal learning materials and textbooks is noticeable. Materials often appear to be focused more on drilling a particular phrase or sentence pattern than they are about eliciting intrinsic and meaningful discourse between interlocutors. In addition to these observations, Bernstein’s theory also draws parallels to the prevailing situation in Japan, whereby English language education, throughout the spectrum of levels, is heavily controlled and administered by non-native speakers. The net result of such control is that students are just not au fait with these non-linear, less regimented cognitive processes or well practiced in using these types of approaches to solve problems. In respect of English working-class students, Bernstein (1961, p. 167) observed something similar when he noted that:

These restricted formal strategies, for the sustained organisation of verbal meaning, are capable of solving a comparatively small number of linguistic problems yet, for this social group they are the *only* means of solving all and every verbal problem requiring a sustained response. [emphasis in original]

Formal and Public Language

Whether due to cognitive poverty, second language use in a monolingual society, or other social factors and attributes, Bernstein’s theory of language as formal or public, offers further insight to the situation in Japan. It is clear that public language (which is associated with the lower-working class) has significant correlation with English use in the Japanese tertiary classroom. Bernstein states that

public language is a form of language use which can be marked off from other forms by the rigidity of its syntax and the restricted use of formal possibilities for verbal organisation. It is a form of relatively condensed speech in which certain *meanings* are restricted and the possibility of elaboration reduced. (1961, p 169; emphasis in original)

He defines the characteristics of public language as having the following attributes: short, grammatically simple, simple and repetitive, little use of subordinate clause, rigid and limited use of adjectives and adverbs, infrequent use of impersonal pronouns, and frequent use of categoric statement. He further argues that

A *public* language focuses upon the inhibiting functions of speech by directing attention (the attention of the observer) towards potential referents which carry no stimulus value for the speaker. In as much as public language induces in the user a sensitivity towards the concrete here and now—towards the direct, immediate, the descriptive.” (p. 172; emphasis in original)

Again, any facilitator who has taught in the Japanese tertiary sector, whether content-focused English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) or language-focused either Content-based Instruction (CBI) or some form of English as a foreign language (EFL) will recognise in the above quotations and associated attributes, striking parallels between the English working-class and the Japanese learner.

In contrast to the parameters and function of the working-class public language, Bernstein posits that its counter, *formal language*, which was used by the middle-classes, includes among its defining characteristics,

logical modification [...] discriminative selection from a range of adjectives and adverbs [...] expressive symbolism [...], and language use which points to the possibilities inherent in a complex conceptual hierarchy for the organisation of experience. ” (p. 170)

What is noteworthy about these qualities is how they map to generic HOTS and also to Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy and Anderson and Krathwohl’s (2001) later revision, both of which pertain to the distribution of skills and cognitive functions which progress from lower to higher as the educand also gains maturity and moves from childhood (pedagogy) to adulthood (andragogy).

The final point to reiterate here is that the English working-class student, like the Japanese tertiary student, is likely not functioning at a higher level of cognition because of training and conditioning, which is

“not necessarily the result of a deficiency in intelligence but comes about as a *consequence* of the social relationship acting through the linguistic medium” (1961, p. 168; emphasis in original). That is to infer that both groups are functioning on a level which allows them to realise the purpose of their interaction/engagement at the most basic level; a kind of ‘no frills’ approach to learning and communication. Bernstein continues, “a *public* language is a vehicle for expressing and receiving concrete, global, descriptive relationships organised within a relatively low level of conceptualisation” (p. 171; emphasis in original).

Discussion

Bernstein’s research interests lay not in the abstract, scholarly or academic functions of language and class, but rather, a deep and profound questioning of the pedagogy and functions thereof, employed in England’s formal education systems (primary, secondary, and tertiary). Furthermore, testing, he believed, helped in part propagate the class distinctions present in England; that in effect education was (and still remains to this day) a method of social control. He observed it was no coincidence that it favours a given section of society (those with the financial resources to procure high value education) and discriminates against another (those without either the financial or social capital to enter into or challenge the dominant system). From a slightly wider perspective of maintaining economic and social stability Bernstein offered an observation which strongly resonates with Japanese society and thus perhaps alludes to other reasons why Japanese tertiary education is systematically configured to produce the results it does, concluding that public language “fosters a form of social relationship which maximises identifications with the aim and principles of a local group rather than the complex differentiated aims of the wider society” (1961, p. 174). If read from the standpoint that ‘local’ means national and ‘wider society’ means global, this statement is telling.

Bernstein’s research found that working-class pupils in England use language for specific, concrete purposes and that their language use has little flair or ‘excess.’ Because the working-class pupil has less need for what one might call ‘excessive’ language their interest in language (and education) tends to be truncated at a point of ‘usefulness.’ He asserted that working-class students were “limited to a form of language use [...] which discourages the speaker from verbally elaborating subjective intent and progressively orients the user to descriptive, rather than abstract concepts” (1960, p. 271). What is startling about these statements is that if we replace ‘working-class’ with ‘Japanese’ and we transpose this observation to the Japanese tertiary EFL classroom, the observations concur. Extending this he hypothesised that whilst middle-class students had access to both formal and public language, working-class pupils were limited to access and discourse through public language, he notes that “middle-class children will have access to both forms which will be used according to the social context” (1961, p. 170). What is of interest in this observation, is that if we again switch frames of reference and replace middle-class with ‘native speaker of English’ and working-class with Japanese EFL student, the argument still holds. Through longitudinal observations in the field it has been noted by the author that Japanese EFL students like working-class native speakers are generally limited in their language use to the kinds of functions noted earlier. Whilst some reasons for this have been discussed in the previous sections, it is not within the specific scope of this paper to deconstruct this phenomenon further. It is recommended that this be addressed by those who can move this beyond the observational to something which can be tested.

Conclusion

Whilst the argument presented here is a re-interpretation of Bernstein’s theory and thus largely subjective in nature (as all theories inherently are), when applied in this way it can be demonstrated to be equally as relevant to apparently ‘classless’ Japan, as it does to a heavily class-orientated society like England. What is of interest here, however, is not the notion of specific language trends amongst different classes per se, rather it is the extrapolated re-application of the theory in a different time (contemporary society) and space (Japan). That Bernstein’s theory could map so well onto an entirely different culture in a new millennium not only serves to demonstrate the prophetic nature of Bernstein’s work, but also points us towards a need to reconsider the theories which govern and dominate our academic disciplines; how, in the post-postmodern epoch we should be more open to working across academic disciplines in order to find holistic and multiplicitous answers to a range of increasingly complex questions and problems. Furthermore, if modes and methods of learner engagement, intrinsic motivation, and pragmatics aimed at developing both the cognitive potential and linguistic functions of English working-class students could be systematically applied to the Japanese (tertiary) educand, then we may yet see advancement in their lan-

guage use and cognitive power. Of course, such an idea remains arbitrary unless, as in the case of English educational reform from the 1960¹² and social reform during the 1980s¹³ there is a genuine desire to increase the social capital of the working-class. To instigate such reform indicates that the government (any government) not only wishes to build a more cognizant citizenry, but, by default, a more critical one too—something most governments would shy away from.

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¹²Desirous of dismantling the English class system, the English government under Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson embarked on a series of educational reforms to that aim, notably the Circular 10/65 issued in 1965 and the Education Act of 1976. These mandates eliminated grammar schools (usually attended by middle-class students) and replaced them with more inclusive secondary modern, or comprehensive schools thus largely eradicated the two-tier state education system and with it the cornerstone of class discrimination in England.

¹³In the 1980s, English Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher invoked a series of social reforms aimed at creating a more classless and egalitarian society. Her measures such as Council House sales, and the privatisation of former State assets and utilities meant that for the first time in English history, working class people not only could afford to buy their own home, but were given access to financial markets previously the domain of the middle-class.