

RESEARCH NOTES: You Are What You Speak

Shaw's *Pygmalion* publicized the links between speech patterns - in his case mostly phonetic ones - social status and success. In an important set of studies, Israel Science Foundation (ISF) grantee Dr. Shoshana Blum-Kulka of Hebrew University has documented significant differences in the communication patterns of families headed by poorly educated (mostly working class) and highly educated (mostly professional) parents at home, and the communication skills and success of their children in school.

For example, at dinner time, 62% of the overall conversation in less-educated families concerns personal topics; and 12% concerns non-immediate topics of general interest. The corresponding numbers in better educated families are 45% and 35% respectively, suggesting familial exposure to a richer variety of information. In better educated homes, 95% of all conversation involves information presented without the support of shared experience. In less-educated homes, only 76% of the conversations involved events known to the speaker alone; indeed 10% of all the events discussed were known to at least two other participants (a negligible fraction in better educated families). Thus, children in less-educated homes have less opportunity to learn and practice constructing autonomous texts, although they may share more family-bonding experiences. Members of educated families offer more explanations than those of uneducated families (adults: 8% versus 4%; children :5% versus 3%), and their statements contain more detail. However, members of less-educated families are

far more strict and rigid in demanding, and arguing over, factual evidence (adults: 4.4% versus 1.0%; children: 4.1% versus 2.5%).

The investigators then compared the language skills of children from low-education families with those of particularly "good students" when asked to define ten common nouns. Good students used a formal format ("A sofa is ...") far more often than their peers from less-educated families (72% versus 44.5%), suggesting that the ability to conform to expected linguistic norms is an important predictor of success. A correlation was also found between high "explanation" and "detail" scores in family conversation (see above) and the "formality" and "semantic" scores of their children on the definitions test.

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High ratings for both explanation and detail correlated even more strongly ($p < 0.001$) with overall communicative adequacy. Family verbal interactions, exposures and inputs thus seem to affect and help predict the development of the verbal skills needed for future educational success.

