

Are there class-linked differences in semantic acquisition?

Evidence from working- and middle-class children's responses on a picture labeling task

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The purpose of this study was twofold: to examine child attempts at categorizing unfamiliar referents and to determine whether children from varying socio-economic environments approach linguistic categorization differently. Specifically, the study focused on whether there are universal trends in the development of categorization or if cultural factors play a role in children's criteria for labeling unfamiliar referents. In addition, variations in the linguistic strategies used by children for the naming of novel referents according to class were examined.

Previous work has suggested that in determining category membership, children and adults rely on different criteria (e.g. shape vs. function). However, the majority of these studies have been restricted to narrow age limits and homogeneous populations that leave questions concerning the impact of culture on developmental trends in categorization. Studies in education have shown that poor and minority children are often out-performed scholastically by their European American and middle-to-upper-class peers (Anastasiow, Hanes & Hanes, 1982; Neisser, 1986). It has also been established that there is a correlation between parenting behaviors that differ across class and race lines and children's abilities in school (Hart & Risley, 1995; Ninio, 1990). In the few studies done on socio-economic differences in naming behavior, it has been demonstrated that when naming unfamiliar objects, middle-class children out-perform working-class subjects (Whittesley & Shipley, 1999; Lawrence, 1997; Lawrence & Shipley, 1996).

The current study involved an experiment that forced categorization of problematic referents among subjects aged two through six. Children from working and middle-class backgrounds were shown a series of pictures including "normal" referents (e.g. cat or car), and unfamiliar tokens which were combinations thereof (e.g. a clock with a telephone handset or a frog with rabbit ears). The children were not taught labels for the novel referents as in other studies of this type, but were asked to name both the familiar and the novel items. Results revealed that, in addition to differences found at varying age levels, there were also differences in the responses of the children according to socio-economic class. Significantly, variations in linguistic performance across the classes were found in terms of the number of morphemes and the lexical types each group used to label the unfamiliar referents. The middle-class children consistently used a greater number of morphemes and used more sophisticated linguistic strategies (e.g., compounds and descriptive phrases) than their working-class peers. However, the children did not vary on the basic cognitive properties of naming as there were no class differences in terms of dependence on shape or function for labeling. These disparities suggested not that the children from each class had different criteria for categorization, but that there was a difference in their understanding of the requirements of the task itself, a discrepancy often misconstrued as a socio-economically-linked deficit in achievement or ability, rather than a mismatch in cultural expectations for linguistic development.