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Basil Bernstein's Codes Recontextualized

In 1958 Basil Bernstein published 'Some sociological perceptions of perception', the first of his papers on coding orientation theory. The fifty years since have been marked by a fruitful dialogue with linguists in Europe and Australia (e.g. Bernstein, 1990, ch.3; Christie, 2000; Hasan, 2005; Williams, 2005 for a review), indicating the value of a 'metadialogue' (Hasan, 2005) between sociological and linguistic theory. In contrast, in North America Bernstein is still often thought to have been merely a deficit theorist, following Labov (1969). Little attention is given to the critiques of Labov's paper, including Bernstein's rebuttal (e.g. Bernstein, 1990).) In this paper I review key features of Bernstein's interaction with systemic functional linguistics, including methodological developments. I then argue that his proposal of a 'pedagogic device' (Bernstein, 1990) creates interesting research possibilities in applied linguistics, particularly for analyses of social positioning effects on students' learning. Because it proposes general 'rules' through which all pedagogic discourse is produced, the pedagogic device enables analyses of movements of discourse from sites of initial production (such as universities or families) into official pedagogic contexts, and resulting invidious distributions of knowledge.

This proposal is not so well-known as Bernstein's earlier work on coding orientation, but I argue that it is equally significant to code theory, as well as being closely integrated with it. Of particular interest is Bernstein's analysis of *recontextualization* (Bernstein, 1990: 195ff.). The argument is developed through a report of analyses on casual conversation in families (3:5 years c.a.). While earlier papers have discussed configurations of language features implicated in different coding orientations, in this paper I argue that analyzing recontextualization practices in everyday discourse might assist us to see how knowledge structures begin to evolve ontogenetically, how recontextualization might vary, and how early schooling might be able to respond to this variation positively.