III. LATENT LEARNING CAPACITIES

...a raid on the inarticulate with shabby equipments always deteriorating in the general mess of imprecisions of feeling undisciplined squads of emotion.

T.S. Eliot.

In the preceding chapter we have reviewed the Genetic Endowment, Deficit and Deprivation theories and found their explanatory power of accounting for educational disadvantage paltry and inadequate. It is of interest, however, that all these theories point to a socio-economic and cultural strain underlying disadvantagedness. The other two theories, namely Institutional Bias theory and the Difference theory interestingly point in the same direction. Though the specific manifestations of this societal substratum highlighted by the different theories might appear inadequate, nevertheless a strong socio-cultural origin of the learning problems of the disadvantaged community underscored by these different theories cannot be easily dismissed. The
problem of disadvantagedness, it can now be safely asserted is the result of different causes, yet underlying them all is a strong societal factor. In short, these varied factors collectively act as part of a complex train of disadvantaging circumstances rather than as isolated stressors. To a considerable extent their disadvantage is the result of their lack of exposure to the type of language favoured by the educational institutions and the preferred process of constructing and construing meaning. Thus these different perspectives do not constitute alternative causalities but rather the different dimensions of the same problem. We have no clue as yet, as to what combination of these societal factors and in what intensity are needed to make one educationally disadvantaged. It might be profitable then, instead of witch-hunting as to which of the socio-cultural factors need to be burnt at the stake, to look rather, for the concrete shape they take in retarding the learning processes of the disadvantaged learners.
A. Remote Causes.

What interests us in the Institutional Bias theory, in substance, is the suggestion that academic achievement calls for a socio-economically determined middle-class, mainstream behaviour rather than any generic capacity to learn. In other words, it suggests that the disadvantaged learners are socialized in a way that leads to a different way of cutting meaning, processing information, and a preferred way of expressing oneself and communicating information. And so those who are socialized in these behaviours tend to perform poorly in an educational institution "which requires mainstream behaviours and heuristic styles than do lower-class children, who have learnt something else". (Baratz and Baratz 1972:193). This is what precludes, a priori the disadvantaged child from succeeding in the educational institutions. Studies by Palinscar and Brown (1984), Bereiter and Scaradamalia (1982), Bruner (1984) etc. also seem to corroborate the fact that the thought processes of social groups have their genesis in the milieu they were nurtured in. The difference in nurturing then, would result for the disadvantaged community in a thought process that is neither valued nor promoted by the middle class
educational institutions. And one obvious corrective to such a problem is to find,

as quickly and intensively as possible by providing the assumedly appropriate experiences, cultural enrichment, and training in basic skills of the kind presumably possessed by middle-class "majority" children of the same age. (in Moss 1975:27).

The crucial factor therefore seems to be the approaches to learning inculcated by the disadvantaging socio-cultural environment.

Similarly, one could read into the Difference theory a similar trend of thought, and argue that there is between the disadvantaged and the middle class groups, besides other differences, a difference in the cognitive faculties employed in the process of learning. In addition, it points to the explanatory power of the socio-cultural features in accounting for their disadvantage. At the face of it, the theory seems to suggest that the disadvantaged learners are educationally disadvantaged because they are socially disadvantaged. What we need to tease out of this
position is the nature of the relationship between these sociological factors and educability, and through what instrumentation the learning process stands affected. Implied in that statement is also the assumption that since the learners in question continue to be socio-culturally disadvantaged they are bound to remain educationally disadvantaged as well. Because even if the influence of the adverse socio-economic and cultural reality can be currently reduced, the residual ill-effects of their onslaught in the past would linger on continually affecting the learner in the present. That leaves us helplessly close to the philosophical position of pre-determinism.

B. Proximate Causes

It is truistic to say that there is a difference in the educational attainment of the middle class and the disadvantaged community. But, we also know, both intuitively and empirically that the disadvantaged can and have succeeded in the educational enterprise, even while continuing to be part of the same disadvantaging environment. It follows that the adverse socio-economic conditions notwithstanding, a learner can succeed in the educational enterprise. Then, rather than the
socio-cultural environment as such, the mark they leave on the process of learning may be directly responsible for the difference in question. This leads us to posit another reality not unconnected with the socio-cultural reality and potent enough to cause real harm. That reality must be a product of the socio-cultural factors but at the same time independent of them, in that it is amenable to corrective intervention. So if we agree that the socio-cultural factors *per se* are only immediately responsible, the disadvantaging factor must be traced to immediate causes, to how they leave the learner affected here and now, rather than in what combination and intensity they affect them.

It appears that though the Difference theory rightly traces the educational problems of the disadvantaged to socio-cultural causation, it seems too deeply entrenched in the plethora of sociological problems associated with the learner that it lacks a clear focus and thus explanatory adequacy as well. The insight of this school, then needs further refinement and clearer enunciation. Our task then would be to identify and locate the possible residual ill-effects
of their socio-cultural upbringing, as also to work out a process of corrective intervention.


Our hunch is that the answer lies in the direction of the intellectual formation and the development of cognition resulting from the above socio-cultural factors. Taking such a stand is not to deny the political, psychological, cultural and other similar causalities, rather we are trying to isolate and focus on the crucial factor impinging on language learning here and now, that accrues from the remote social factors.

It is hypothesized that the disadvantaged are socialized into a behaviour which do not favour the development of certain learning capacities considered essential in the educational institutions. In other words, their disadvantage is the result of what information processing and learning patterns are valued and promoted in their given culture. We believe that the disadvantaged learners because of the special circumstances of their socio-cultural reality have little occasion to use or develop certain mental
capacities that are essential to language acquisition in a middle class set up.

The socio-cultural factors, according to our new thinking are not the direct determiners of learning disadvantage; the approaches to learning promoted by them rather cause certain cognitive capacities to be left undeveloped or under-developed. Feuerstein and Rand (1975), for example posit an intervening mechanism between the ultimate cause and its concrete effect; they distinguish between,

factors causally associated to a given end-product, but to a certain extent, in a distant way since their effects cannot be produced without the intervention of another factor, a closer one whose presence may turn the more remote factor into an active determinant (p.10).

The first, they term 'distal etiological factors' and the other 'proximal etiological factors'. So we might call the socio-cultural factors distal and the latent learning capacities proximal factors.
This leads us to propose what we shall term 'The Theory of Latent Learning Capacities.' Rather than the socio-cultural factors themselves the formation of the cognitive faculty that results from them is responsible for the skewed performance of the disadvantaged learners, and calls for special attention. We stoutly deny that the disadvantaged learners are not genetically endowed with these types of capacities; it is rather the exigencies of their particular circumstances that have not favoured these types of thinkings.

D. Supporting Evidences.

It is interesting to note that independent studies in related fields like cognitive psychology, though from varied perspectives and for different purposes, have thrown up results that lend credence to our hunch that the disadvantaged deploy a different set of cognitive strategies in the act of learning. For example, we find that, Hess and Shipman (1972) conducted a research to ascertain the effects of early socialisation on the growth of cognitive processes, with a group of 163 Negro (Sic.) mothers and their 4-year-old children. In the disadvantaged family contexts, they argue that early socialization patterns
develop "modes for dealing with stimuli and with problems which are impulsive rather than reflective, which deal with the immediate rather than the future, and which are disconnected rather than sequential". (p.170). And, Ken Willing (1989:6), points to a body of evidence suggesting that a certain combination of psychological traits and learning behaviour do tend to appear in a given type of learners. He suggests that certain socio-cultural features give rise to a lack of a "specific mental procedure for gathering, processing, associating, categorizing, rehearsing and retrieving information or patterned skills". Jensen comes rather close to our angle of thinking when he states that,

...those children of ethnic minorities and the economically poor who achieve 'below average' in school do so mainly because they begin lacking certain crucial experiences which are prerequisites for school learning--perceptual, attentional, and verbal skills,...(in Moss 1975:27)

Loretan and Umans (1966) suggest that most tasks undertaken by the disadvantaged group are 'motoric' and
have a short time span and this is what causes difficulties when they move into realms of conceptualization and abstract thinking; And among the other researchers on cognition we might cite Palinscar and Brown (1984), Bereiter and Scardamalia (1982) and others who convincingly argue that individual thought processes are the product of the social milieu they were nurtured in.

Our next task is to explore (i) if the disadvantaged learners have a different approach to the use of language and (ii) if so, in what practical ways does it not promote the development of certain cognitive capacities. Our hunch as hinted at earlier is that the disadvantaged learners' non-abstracting, context-embedded thinking patterns and little capacity for conceptual learning and logical thought inculcated by their environment, predisposes them to educational failure. Their socio-cultural environment has curtailed the occasions for them to learn the higher functions of language, i.e., synthesizing, predicting, reasoning and abstracting. These experiences, or their lack, it is argued, are crucial to L2 learning as they in turn are responsible for the shaping of thought, cognitive styles and the problem solving mechanisms. The
information processing strategies thus acquired in early environment result in dearth of linguistic and in general educational proficiency.

As a result it is felt that it would not be easy for them to deploy language for the functions Tough (in Peagans 1982:6) lists, i.e. to analyse and reflect on present and past experiences, to reason, to justify to predict and consider alternative possibilities, to talk about events in the future, to project into the lives and feelings of others, to build up scenes, events and stories in imagination. In the interactive mode, however, as Labov (1976) convincingly argues, especially with regard to 'ritual abuse', they have remarkable facility but that is not the type of thinking and expression that might facilitate foreign language learning in a formal set up. It is this difference that might have the clue to what afflicts the educational attainment of the class of learners in question. It needs to be stressed throughout that it is not the absence of potential but the lack of familiarity and training in the use of cognitive capacities like discursive thinking, patterns of conceptualizations etc. that is at the root of the problem.
E. Explaining Cognitive Differences

Turning now to what causes these problems for the disadvantaged, we might look to the sociological explanations suggested, for a different context, by Lewis and a semogenetic theory offered by Halliday. For Oscar Lewis (1968) socio-economic reality is more than a mere statistical variable; it is the substratum which evolves into a whole way of life. Terming this phenomenon as 'the culture of poverty', Lewis explains it as a structure or a rationale the poor people develop in order to cope with the myriad problems facing them. This distinct culture that their situation gives rise to is a local solution developed to reduce dependence on the outside world and brace themselves against the alienation arising from the social, economic and political factors. With the passage of time, Lewis suggests this system of defence mechanism gets institutionalized and is self-perpetuating. The result is a distinct system of thought and behaviour which are not always conducive to the development of the perceptual and attitudinal capacities required for educational attainment. Sir Keith Joseph (Rutter and Madge 1977:3) speaks of a resulting 'cycle of deprivation' by which he suggests that the process
reproduces itself from generation to generation and deeply entrenches the members in them.

Halliday (1990) on the other hand, makes an illuminating study of the diachronic evolution of language, showing how the major upheavals in human history are also linguistic upheavals. The high watermarks of human history, Halliday represents as:

i) the age of settlement,
ii) the iron age,
iii) the Renaissance and
iv) the age of information.

He goes on to show how corresponding to these ages there has been a parallel semogenesis, an evolution of language. Thus in the settlement age was born writing, the iconically constructed semiotic mode of communication. Experience, at this stage began to be classified into classes and subclasses and abstract meaning had shifted from interpersonal to ideational forms. Then came the iron age, the period of objectification where experience began to get modelled on things. And following techniques which evolved into technologies, discourse too became technical. In the final stage, the metaphorical upheaval of the
Renaissance caused language to become learned, bureaucratic, and finally the age of information had ushered in an elaborated tertiary style.

Although, such a semohistory reveals experience being "ongoingly reconstructed in seemingly more abstract and objectified terms" (p.10), Halliday agrees that the change was not absolute nor the transition definitive. It stands to reason therefore that at any given time one or more of these different stages of language development are used by different sociological groups. The choice being, often pragmatic and social. Thus in our own time academic institutions employ the industrialized urban semantic pattern while the working classes use the settled-but-not-urbanised agricultural mode of communication. There is a wide chasm separating the meaning styles of a learner coming from a subculture adopting a non-urbanised speech style and the one in use in academic circles which has developed a particular repertoire of lexis, structures and rhetoric to suit its particular needs. And if our learner from a given sub-culture has to succeed in an educational institution he/she has to learn a 'distinct and different way of organizing experience'. (Loveday 1982)—the language of the academic institution. And
like the choice of the standard variety of a language, it is through socio-political decisions that the urbanized mode comes today to be performing the major political functions of our culture -- those for example dealing with education, religion, literature, law, business and government.

The form of language used in the academic circles has selected different probabilities of the same system of grammar and in effect constructs different models of experience. While there is nothing superior about it that causes it to rise "to the surface quite naturally --like cream-- because of intrinsic qualities" (Kramarae 1984:17), it calls for different intellectual capacities to acquire it.

F. Interactive Vs. Discursive Use of Language.

In the following paragraphs we shall attempt to trace occasions where possible development of the analytical capacities are ignored and by-passed. Learning, as Bruner (1986) affirms is culture specific. "I have come increasingly to believe that most learning in most settings is a communal activity, a sharing of the culture" (1986:127). Thus whether a speaker acquires a discursive or interactive mode of language
largely depends on their use by the speech community he belongs to. And one's approach to reality is coloured by the way it is perceived in a given culture; and the approach to learning is modelled after the way that community does.

Thus Robinson and Rackstraw (in Wardhaugh 1986:319-320) give concrete examples of how the lower class mothers deprive their children of opportunity of learning logical reasoning. The mothers from the disadvantaged sector, they say, answer Wh-questions, i.e. information seeking questions, with answers like 'because I say so'. or 'because they do', while the middle class mothers offer genuine explanations that involve cause, consequences, analogies and so on.

Tough (in Feagans 1982) says a disadvantaged child finding that another child is playing with his toy car would say,

I want it. It's mine. Give me it. (sic)

while a middle class boy in a similar situation would say:

Can I have my car, because I brought it from home this morning and I want to play with it now.
Tough further argues that though both children had established similar knowledge about the language system, they had different orientation towards the use of language which accounts for the difference in language performance.

Their early socialization trains the disadvantaged child for simple mental responses that leave no scope for the child to reflect or make mental discrimination. In this model simple compliance rather than the rationale underlying the command is stressed. The cognitive environment provided by such families is one in which behaviour is controlled by status rules, in which behaviour is not mediated by verbal cues or by instructions that relate one event with another and the present to the future.

In the middle class family, on the other hand, such socializations are modified by an appeal to the youngster on the effect of a given behaviour on others, relate his/her behaviour to a time dimension and more importantly by mediating meaning through participation in concepts and shared ideas of the elders.

It may be through this type of verbal interaction that the child learns to
look for action sequences in his own and others' behaviour. Perhaps through these intent-oriented statements the child comes to see the world as others see it and learns to take the role of others in viewing himself and his actions. (Hess and Shipman 1972:171)

We might affirm with Henderson that "the genesis of educational failure, according to our findings may well be found in the pattern of communication and control which are realisations and thus transmitters of specific subcultures". (in Wardhaugh 1986:318). The disadvantaged are attuned to culturally defined thought processes just as they are moulded on culturally different linguistic and paralinguistic processes, all of which though normal and appropriate in a pluralistic society, are not, however, equally favoured in today's middle class educational institutions.

Another reason for the poor performance of the disadvantaged children, it is suggested, is because their parents do not read books to them as do the middle class parents. Snow et al.(in Feagans et al.
1982) aver that reading books to children helps stimulate complex speech.

...the predominant benefit is due to the stimulation given to language development by their attempts to deal with complex ideas presented in books, through talks with the adult. (p.8)

And Wells (in Rivera 1984:64) shows how reading bed-time stories to the children makes them familiar with 'decontextualized' language (i.e. referring to objects, people, situation not observable in conversational contexts) and equips them thus for the literate mode of language used in schools. (see also Heath S. 1986.)

Also, the middle class mothers are seen to use negotiating strategies to influence their children's behaviour, while the working class mothers try to make their children confirm by using discipline. And when mothers use categorical statements the children's range of language use, Senstini points out (in Feagans et al 1982) is rather low; and when her talk is characterized by reflexiveness, the children exhibit great complexity and a wide range in their language use.
To summarize,

Parents who are disposed to reason with the children about their behaviour, who share their interest with them -- expressing ideas about particular activities and encouraging children to think about their experiences, who are responding to their children's interest in various aspects of the world around -- helping them to observe, to compare and to understand, are offering the children experiences of the way in which parents think. Children who are drawn into the experiences of thinking through the talk in which they are involved with their parents gradually come to use language in these ways spontaneously.

(Tough in Feagans et al 1982:18)

G. Learning Capacities Specific to L2

At this stage it may be valid to anticipate an objection to our theory of latent learning capacities. If it is true, one might ask, that certain vital language learning capacities are latent in these
learners, how could they pick up their mother tongue and be near proficient it? The answer must remain largely in the realm of speculation and conjecture.

Mother tongue is the result of natural acquisition as opposed to formal learning. And as Howatt (1984:295) suggests it is learnt naturally "by living, working, and interacting with other people who speak it as their mother tongue". As H.E. Palmer (1922:44) suggests the process involves "capacities for retaining unconsciously what he (sic.) may happen to hear (or read)" (in Prabhu 1982) and these unanalysed chunks of language which he calls "ergons" form the basic working units or building blocks with which he engages in 'ergonic constructions' as opposed to a more rule based grammatical construction. Stern (1984:20) considers natural acquisition as a situation where "no formal provision is made through teaching". Krashen (1982) considers learning without focus on linguistic forms natural acquisition and also avers that the way a child learns language is qualitatively different from the way language is learnt in the classroom. Fleishmann (1957) interestingly, finds that qualitatively different skills, not merely different degrees of the same skill seem to be involved in the classroom situations.
In Jerome Bruner's phrase, FL learning needs 'analytic competence' i.e. the prolonged operation of thought process on linguistic presentation. In the automatized process that characterizes mother tongue learning, the learner need not have the metacognitive awareness of the process of acquiring the rules of syntax. According to Shiffrin and Schneider (in McLaughlin 1982:222) automatic processing involves activation of a learnt response that has been built up through consistent mapping of the same input to the same pattern of activation over many trials. The learning capacities called into play for acquiring the mother tongue thus seems to be different from those for L2 learning, which uses a conscious rather than an automatized process (see also Bialystok 1982:183) of data analysis, anchoring of rules, reflection on performance and the feedback as also the ability to notice the reason for and nature of divergence in their own productions.

Again from a pragmatic stand point too, we see the exigencies of foreign language acquisition are such that within a very limited time and range of field and tenor the learner is required to abstract the system of that language. (See Flanders 1970 also Stubbs 1976 for
graphic description of the difference in the quality and quantity of language exposure for the FL and MT learners.) C.J. Dodson, in the same volume (p.205) goes on painstakingly to prove how one year's contact with the foreign language in a school situation corresponds to a week of contact in the natural MT environment. Further, as I.G. Mattingly suggests (p.51) when there is dearth of the receptive activities of language i.e. speaking, listening, the productive activities of reading and writing become harder.

An appallingly restricted period of at most a single hour a day is all that is available as exposure to the target language, and so in Krashen's sense there is little possibility for relaxed or automated 'acquisition' to take place. Therefore, 'learning', that too insight learning rather than trial and error approach to the target language is what would be needed in an FL context. The distinctions made, such as incidental and intentional learning, insight learning - trial and error learning, etc. seem to suggest different ways of learning depending largely on the exposure to strategies in the context of learning.
In learning one's MT unlike in FL learning, our learner need not necessarily have a metacognitive awareness of what he/she does in the process of learning. The language input in an MT context, is an extralinguistic stimulus leading through temporal contiguity to a particular linguistic response, thus making learning associative (in the sense of Jensen) rather than cognitive. That is one reason why native speakers have a 'declarative' knowledge of the grammar while their knowledge of L2 grammar is 'procedural'. That is, though L1 is a rule-based system, over repeated opportunities for cued practice, it becomes proceduralized without being clearly enunciated as declarative knowledge.

Furthermore, he/she has a communicative urge, rather a compulsion, for sheer survival purpose to deploy his interlanguage, which is visibly absent for the FL learner, and with that he/she misses the chance to form and test hypothesis pertaining to the target language. For, the process of foreign language acquisition, as Bloomfield (1961) says, demands that the learner manipulate linguistic data to identify materials occurring in the same positions within utterances and classify them according to their
distributional properties under grammatical labels. For Bloomfield this process of inductive generalisations and a set of discovery procedures by which the learner forms these 'analogies', constitute learning. Though Chomsky (1968) contends that the learner cannot arrive at the correct grammatical form, by guessing inductively from a finite corpus of data, he too stresses the need for a mental capacity that can master the rules of generative grammar. In review, Chomsky suggests that language learning depends on how the learners organise input and how they represent input to themselves. It is thus clear that though the disadvantaged learners are adept in their mother tongues, they would not for that reason alone be able to master a foreign language with the same consummate ease.

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