Basil Bernstein

Sociology for Education

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Introduction

Basil Bernstein was professor of the Institute of Education of the University of London and director of the Sociological Research Unit. He is among the greatest sociologists of the 20th century. Bernstein showed a constant and very special interest for education, constituting his ideas the most advanced grammar to understand the present educational systems and the changes they have experienced. He inspired several generations of researchers, educators and students all over the world. His legacy will keep modelling the way in which we do research and the way in which we understand the social world (Davies, 2001, p.1).

Bernstein's publications started in 1958 and flowed continuously until 2000. The evolution of his ideas appears fundamentally in five volumes referred to collectively as *Class, Codes and Control, I-V*. The first edition of *Volume I* was published in 1971 and the second edition of the last volume in 2000. Bernstein was a constant reviser of his ideas between editions and books. Looking back at his work, he considers (2001, p.371) four of his papers as the benchmarks of the development of his theory:

1971 – On the classification and framing of educational knowledge

1981 – Codes, modalities and the process of cultural reproduction: A model

1986 – On pedagogic discourse

1999 – Vertical and horizontal discourse: An essay

He says that the early work in the Sociological Research Unit crystallised in the *Classification and Framing* paper, where he was able to free himself of the imperfections of the socio-linguistic theorising, make distinctions between power and control which he thought were absolutely invaluable and necessary and show that one

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[*] This paper contains parts of texts previously published in Morais (2002) and Morais and Neves 2001.

could have modalities of elaborated codes. So the question was what were the principles selecting, why a particular modality was institutionalised for particular groups of children.

Although Bernstein considers this a crucial paper, he thought that the most important paper was the *Codes, Modalities and the Process of Cultural Reproduction: A Model*. It took ten years from classification and framing to the code modality paper. He says that this paper looked back and produced a much more formal and conceptually elegant theorising of codes. The code modality paper attempted to remedy earlier deficiencies with respect to the transmission/acquisition process, the defining of context, and macro-micro translations by the development of what was thought to be a more powerful language of description. This paper looked forward to the pedagogic device. Up to the 1980s the work was directed to an understanding of different principles of pedagogic transmission/acquisition, their generating contexts and change. These principles were conceptualised as code modalities. However, what was transmitted was not in itself analysed apart from the classification and framing of the categories of the curriculum.

In the mid-1980s, what was transmitted became the focus of the analysis. A theory of the construction of pedagogic discourse, its distributive, recontextualising and evaluative rules, and their social basis, was developed: the pedagogic device. The *On Pedagogic Discourse* paper, firstly published in 1986, had a much more elegant version in 1990. There a form of analysis was created which distinguished between class fractions and where it was hypothesised that ideological orientation, interests and modes of cultural reproduction would be related to the functions of the agents (symbolic control or economy), field location and hierarchical position.

However, the *forms* of the discourses, i.e. the internal principles of their construction and their social base, were taken for granted and not analysed. Thus, there was an analysis of modalities of elaborated codes and their generating social contexts, and an analysis of the construction of pedagogic discourse which the modalities of elaborated codes pre-supposed, but no analysis of the discourses subject to pedagogic transformation (1999). This was done in the *Vertical and Horizontal Discourse: An essay* paper.

Bernstein's theory contains two interlinked dimensions, conceptual and methodological,

evident in the following two citations:

> […] it seems to me that sociological theory is very long on metatheory and very short on providing specific principles of description. I shall be concentrating […] to provide and create models, which can generate specific descriptions. It is my belief that, without these specific descriptions, there is no way in which we can understand the way in which knowledge systems become part of consciousness. (Bernstein, 1996, p.17).

> […] we all have models – some are more explicit than others; we all use principles of descriptions – again some are more explicit than others; we all set up criteria to enable us both to produce for ourselves, and to read the descriptions of others – again these criteria may vary in their explicitness. Some of our principles may be quantitative whilst other qualitative. But the problem is fundamentally the same. In the end whose voice is speaking? My preference is to be as explicit as possible. Then at least my voice may be deconstructed. (Bernstein, 1996, p.129).

Without loosing his identity as a great sociologist, Bernstein made constant links with other areas of knowledge such as psychology, linguistics, anthropology and epistemology.

My contention is that this is but one of the many reasons why his theory has been widely used across different areas of knowledge. But it is also one of the reasons why many sociologists have not accepted it easily and have criticised it for so long. Their identities have been formed in strongly classified versions of sociology and its weak grammar, and they reject any attempt at blurring the boundaries between disciplines. Many think that Bernstein's work at which their critique is directed stopped 30 years ago. But I believe that what lies behind this is much related to the fact that his theory departs from other sociological theories in many crucial aspects, with a very strong conceptual structure that places it within horizontal structures of knowledge with strong grammars and even, I would say, in many aspects within a hierarchical structure of knowledge.

The way that Bernstein developed his theory can be seen as having many features in common with the way theories in experimental sciences have developed. Although this may be considered a non-legitimate view, it is extremely interesting to think of it within a rationalist perspective, where a model is first constructed and a methodological approach is defined which opens way for research work, of testing, modification and enlargement. But it is this very feature that is not easily accepted by many sociologists. The power of description, explanation, diagnosis, prediction and transferability that is part of the greatness of Bernstein's theory is a reason for its rejection by many

sociologists who do not share such concerns.

Bernstein's theory opens way to new perspectives in educational research and created an internal language of description that allows sound and fruitful empirical work.

It is not possible in the limits of this talk to cover the richness of Bernstein's work. I chose to concentrate on showing how he created a sociology *for* education through a powerful internal language of description that allowed the development of an external language of description to direct empirical research. I am then concentrating on both the conceptual and methodological aspects of the theory.

To concretise I am referring to the work our research group has developed at the level of both the regulative and instructional discourses, with particular emphasis on science education.

To finalise I will give a short account of Bernstein's last reflections and directions for future research.

Methodological aspects

Our research methodology is greatly based on Bernstein (2000) and rejects both the analysis of the empirical without an underlying theoretical basis and the use of the theory which does not allow for its transformation on the basis of the empirical. We have developed an external language of description where the theoretical and the empirical are viewed in a dialectic way. The theoretical models, the language of description and the empirical analysis interact transformatively to lead to greater depth and precision. Our external language of description focuses on the social relations which constitute pedagogic activity. We aim to make some contribution to achieving order in research in the fields of the sociology of education and of education in general. We believe that the existing 'disorder' has been partially responsible for the rejection of sociological approaches by many educators.

Figure 1 shows these relations between the components of our research schematically. It entails the following conditions:
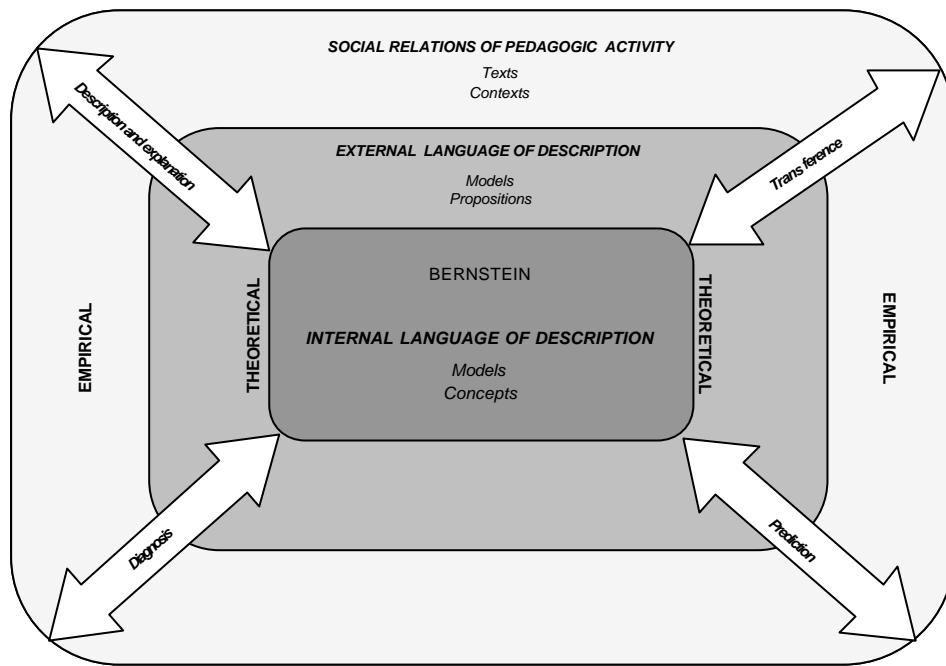
Figure 1 – *Sociological methodology of research (From Morais & Neves, 2001).*

- The internal language of description is constituted by a theory or set of theories (in this case Bernstein's theory) which contain concepts and models of a high level of abstraction.

- The external language of description is constituted by propositions and models derived from the internal language of description, now with a higher degree of applicability. It is the external language of description which activates the internal language of description (Bernstein, 2000).

- The internal and external languages of description constitute the theoretical level of the research methodology.

- The social relations of pedagogic activity refer to pedagogic texts and contexts and constitute the empirical level of the research methodology.

- The arrows in the model intend to represent the dialectical relation between the theoretical and the empirical – the internal language of description directs the external language of description and this directs the practical structuring of research and the analysis and interpretation of results. Inversely, the results

obtained at the various stages of the empirical work lead to changes of the external language of description, so that its degree of precision is increased. In turn, the external language of description, encompassing changes originated by the empirical, leads to changes of the internal language of description. In this way, the three levels constitute active, dynamic instruments that undertake changes in a real research process.

Whereas orthodox quantitative research has placed the focus on theory, orthodox qualitative research has placed the focus on practice/ the empirical. At their extremes, these two research modes are separated by strong classification – quantitative research attributes higher status to theory and qualitative research attributes higher status to practice/ the empirical. The dialectical relation which characterises the research methodology we have followed intends to weaken this classification, considering that theory and practice to be equally important for sound research in education. However, this dialectical process is only possible when the internal language of description is sufficiently strongly conceptualised to contain the power to diagnose, describe, explain, transfer and predict. This aspect is also encompassed by the model.

The science of education is a fundamentally horizontal structure of knowledge characterized by weak grammars, that is, a structure of knowledge characterized by parallel languages, produced by various authors and which contains weak power of conceptualisation. This fact does not allow for educational theories to originate an external language of description and an empirical activity with sound structuring.

We have constructed external languages of description based on internal languages of description provided by authors from fields as distinct as psychology (e.g. Vygotsky), epistemology (e.g. Popper) and sociology (for example Bernstein). However, it is Bernstein's theory which has allowed substantial progress in our research, as a consequence of the power to diagnose, describe, explain, transfer and predict that it contains.

Development of an external language of description

Focusing on the distinctive characteristics which constitute and distinguish the

specialised form of communication which is realised by pedagogic discourse, Bernstein (1990) constructed a model which seeks to show the multiple and complex relations which intervene in the production and reproduction of such discourse.

The model suggests that the production and reproduction of pedagogic discourse involve extremely dynamic processes. On the one hand, the dominant principles which are conveyed by general regulative discourse reflect positions of conflict rather than stable relationships. On the other hand, there are always potential and real sources of conflict, resistance, and inertia among the political and administrative agents of the official recontextualising field, among the various agents of the pedagogic recontextualising field, and between the primary context of the acquirer and the principles and practices of the school. Furthermore, teachers and textbook authors may feel unable or reluctant to reproduce the educational transmission code underlying official pedagogic discourse. It is this dynamism which enables change to take place. According to Bernstein, a pedagogic device which offers greater recontextualising possibilities through a greater number of fields and contexts involved, and/or a society characterised by a pluralistic political regime, can lead to a higher degree of recontextualising and, therefore, to greater space for change.

An important aspect of our research concerns the models constructed in various studies to analyse pedagogic contexts and texts. These models made possible analyses at distinct levels and in many situations of learning and interaction. The models also revealed their potential to guide the planning of pedagogic practices and interactions and to evaluate their outcomes. This was made possible by the strong conceptual structure and explanatory power of the theory on which the research is based. The explanatory power of Bernstein's internal language of description has allowed us to use the same concepts in contexts as diverse as family, school, and teacher education to broaden the relationships studied and conceptualise the results at a higher level.

Through the development of a constructive external language of description, based on the relationship between Bernstein's concepts and the data suggested by empirical analyses, we followed a research methodology which made evident the diagnostic, predictive, descriptive, explanatory, and transferability potential of the theory. For example, it has been possible, on the basis of the concepts and relations suggested by

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the theory, to predict situations of school success or failure both on the basis of continuity or discontinuity of relationships between family and school discourses and practices and also on the basis of the relationship between the characteristics of teachers' pedagogic practice and the acquisition of the recognition and realisation rules needed for the production of the instructional and regulative texts required by the school; describe pedagogic practices in family and school and in teacher training; and explain reasons associated with families and schools for the success or failure of children from the same and different social groups and variations in the family's coding orientation within lower social groups. It has also been possible to explore the transferability of the theory, for example, when we apply to the analysis of family learning and teacher training contexts the concepts and relations used in the analysis of school learning contexts. The external language of description we have developed has contributed to the activation of Bernstein's internal language.

Our research as a whole has shown how specific power and control relations in classrooms and in schools lead to differential access to recognition and realisation rules which regulate the multiple contexts of pedagogic interaction. These relations also lead to differences in socio-affective dispositions.

One of the most important conclusions of the research we have conducted refers to pedagogic practices favourable to children's learning, particularly the disadvantaged.

Contrary to what is argued by many progressive educationalists (e.g., Montessori and Klein, cited in Bernstein, 1977, p. 131), as to the potentialities of a totally invisible pedagogy characterised by weak classifications and framings (as in the case of the open school), our studies so far show that while these weak classifications and framings are an essential condition for learning at the level of pacing, hierarchical rules, knowledge relations (inter-disciplinary, intradisciplinary, academic-non-academic), and relations between spaces, they are less so at the level of selection (at least at the macro level) and, certainly, at the level of evaluation criteria. This conclusion does not support either a return to the traditional education of strong classifications and framings or a total acceptance of progressivism. Rather, it suggests a mixed pedagogy, a prospect suggested by the language of description derived from Bernstein's theory enabling distinction between specific aspects of classroom social contexts, going well beyond the

dichotomies of open/closed school, visible/invisible pedagogies, and discovery learning/reception learning, introducing a dimension of great rigour into research on teachers' pedagogic practices.

We consider that Bernstein's model of pedagogic discourse (Bernstein, 1990, 1996) permits a comprehensive sociological analysis of the processes and relationships which characterise curriculum development at the macro and micro levels. It also allows an exploration of the autonomy which is given to teachers and textbook authors within the educational system. We think that both teachers and authors ought to be aware that the potentialities and limits of their pedagogic intervention, in terms of innovation, depend on the recontextualisations which can occur at the various levels of the educational system. Teachers are not necessarily only reproducers of the curriculum; they can be curriculum constructors. However, if they are to innovate, they must recognise the context and the possible influences to be taken into account in their activity, critically reflecting on the multiple paths open to them.

Bernstein's looking forward

Looking forward, in his last writing for the Symposium *Towards a Sociology of Pedagogy – The Contribution of Basil Bernstein to Research* held in Lisbon in June 2000 (Bernstein, 2001a), and in the videoconference that closed it (2001b), Bernstein makes important considerations about analysis of present educational trends and lines for future research.

Considering the new societal mode – the informational society – Bernstein thinks that we are moving into the second totally pedagogised society (T.P.S.), where the state provides the agents and the universities, especially departments of education, provide the discourses. Here the so-called weak state of the Global Economy is the strong state, for the T.P.S. is state driven and state funded, state focused and state assessed. The state is moving to ensure there is no space or time which is not pedagogised.

The state is making and distributing the possibilities of new pedagogic "knowledges" through a range of formal and informal agencies. There is a circle of pedagogic inflation that does not create autonomy for either trainers or the trained, for both become subject

to the targets set by the state. A new cadre of pedagogues with their research projects, recommendations, new discourses and legitimations is being constructed. This calls out new forms of training and a flood of new journals assist in both professional specialisation and central assessment. Publishing houses are quick to ensure that these new professional discourses are served.

Youngsters are to be positioned in flexible time which translates as being able to be re-positioned whenever and wherever external change requires. The management of short-termism, that is, where a skill, task, area of work, or the like undergoes change, disappearance or replacement, where life experiences cannot be based on stable expectations of the future and one's location in it, translates paradoxically into socialisation into T.P.S., via life long learning. Talking about democracy in education Bernstein says that what we are really doing is replacing the word democracy by the word opportunity.

What is missing in the new discourse is the triumphant silence of the voice of pedagogic discourse. Only by systematically revealing the voice of this silence can we actually make this pedagogy enabling rather than disabling.

Bernstein tells us that he is not against pedagogy itself but he is against the technologising of the pedagogic, he is against the way in which is used in its attempt to control. His opposition to what is going on it is because pedagogy is simply seen as technology, that a group of people can now put together a discourse aimed at producing changes in individual experiences, knowledges and competency in a quite, almost, mechanical way. This pedagogy they produce is completely decontextualised, the teaching practice abstracts from the context in which it is realised.

Pedagogy must be meaningful, not simply relevant. The challenge of pedagogy is to put together relevance and meaningfulness, but this is only possible if the regulative discourse which generates it is made explicit.

Bernstein considers that a sociology for pedagogy does not indicate or suggest the conceptual development necessary to grasp the discursive culture for which we are being prepared and operates at too low a level of abstraction to serve as a macro-micro mediator. Looking forward at research in education, Bernstein says:

What we require today is a conceptually generated systematic description through which the lower levels of past analyses can be integrated and projected on to the wide screen of contemporary change, imaginary and actual. I have lately been attempting what could be called a sociology for the transmission of knowledges.

Such a sociology would focus on the diverse sites, generating both claims for changes in knowledge forms and displacement of and replacement by new forms, creating a new field of knowledge positions, sponsors, designers, and transmitters. (Bernstein, 2001, a)

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