THE CHILDREN OF KAUAI: A BOOK REVIEW

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This book presents in summary and integrated fashion the findings of the Kauai Pregnancy and Child Study Project (henceforth referred to as "the {Kauai} study"), a longitudinal study of child development involving several thousand mothers and their children on the island of Kauai, Hawai'i. Spanning a period of more than ten years from its inception in 1954 to its termination in 1966, the study was conducted by a multidisciplinary team representing maternal and child health, obstetrics, pediatrics, psychology, public health, nursing, sociology, and statistics (p. ix)—but, significantly from the standpoint of this review, not languages and linguistics (hereafter, simply "language" or "languages").

The book contains twelve chapters: "Introduction" (pp. 1-7); "The Island of Kauai" (8-13); "Methodology" (14-23); "Assessment of the Family Environment" (24-28); "The Fetal and Perinatal Periods" (29-45); "The Two-Year Follow-Up" (46-60); "The Ten-Year Follow-Up" (61-76); "Summaries of Illustrative Cases" (77-92); "The Predictive Value of Early Pediatric and Psychological Examinations" (93-102); "Ethnic Differences" (103-23); "Sex Differences in Parent-Child Correlates of Ability" (124-29); and "Summary and Conclusions" (130-41). It also contains a preface (ix-x), four appendices (143-86), a reference section (187-94), and an index (195-99).

Departing from usual practice, this review will be limited to those sections of the book that pertain to language. Since such a restricted evaluation may seem unfair, it must be emphasized that the linguistic content of the book is not irrelevant to the concerns of language students. In fact, the treatment of such topics as "environmental" or cultural (as opposed to "reproductive" or genetic) factors in language development and "action programs" (presumably including a language component) will be of particular interest to those concerned with nonstandard dialects, an area of study which has gained considerable popularity in recent years and which has caused considerable rethinking in both linguistic theory and practice. However, most of the language material under review is treated in an extremely naive and uninformed way. Hence, this review is to be construed as a warning to potential readers of the linguistic shortcomings of the book.

The following are typical examples of questionable statements relating to language that are found in the book:

1. "Only 1.5 percent (two) of the children from homes with 'high' and 'very high' educational stimulation had language problems, in contrast to 9 percent (40) of the children coming from homes with 'low' and 'very low' educational stimulation" (p. 69).

2. "Only about 2 percent (three) of the children from homes rated 'high' and 'very high' in educational stimulation had IQs below 85, in contrast to 18 percent (80) of the children from homes with 'low' and 'very low' educational stimulation" (p. 69).

3. "Hawaiian and Filipino children, though ranking in intermediary positions between the Japanese and Anglo-Caucasians and the Portuguese in measures of mental abilities, received the largest percentage of poor grades in the basic skill subjects" (120-21).

4. "Thus pidgin, with its primitive grammar and word structure, seems to have had a significantly adverse effect on the reading achievement of a sizeable proportion of the Hawaiian, Filipino, and Portuguese children at school" (122).

Although such statements were in all probability meant to be read simply as correlations obtaining between a number of variables (e.g., language ability, intelligence, scholastic achievement, family environment, and race), there is a real
danger that they will be given causal interpretations because cause-and-effect relationships are strongly implied in most of them. Readers are therefore strongly advised to exercise restraint in interpreting all such statements.

In my opinion, however, the basic difficulty with the above quotations, and indeed with the whole approach to language taken in the study, stems from the imposition of middle-class white standards on subjects who did not possess or could not accept such a set of values. I think that these standards are biases which have been built into the various tests (i.e., techniques and instruments) that were used in the study. More specifically, I think that these commonly-used tests are designed to reward subjects for accepting (or at least being familiar with) the middle-class white value system and to penalize them for lack of it. Since the majority of the subjects in the Kauai study lacked this value system, I feel it necessary to question the appropriateness of the tests used and the significance of the results obtained. Further, because of these biases in existing tests and particularly because of the nonexistence of appropriate tests for nonstandard dialect speakers, I feel compelled to question the investigators' laxity in interpreting language data.

These deficiencies in the study are perhaps most evident in the use of the term “language,” as in “language problems,” “language skills,” and “language ability.” In such contexts the term is meaningful only when equated with standard English, one of the pillars of middle-class white culture. I think that the term is then capable of being understood as relative proficiency in the standard dialect, rather than as general language or verbal ability. At any rate, competence in standard English and in Kauai English, the native dialect of most of the subjects, should not be confused. So-called “problems” in oral or spoken language can be explained primarily in terms of differences between the two dialects. Other “problems” in written language (i.e., reading and writing) stem most directly from the fact that written English is derived from or most closely related to oral standard English, rather than to Kauai English or any other nonstandard dialect. I think that most, if not all, of these linguistic “problems” then, can be traced back to the inappropriate use of a particular set of values as codified in the tenets of middle-class white society which places a premium on certain linguistic skills—viz., ability to speak, understand, read, and write in the standard dialect.

In short, what I find most objectionable in the treatment of language in the Kauai study is the unsophisticated approach taken toward the subject, including perpetuation of a number of language myths or misconceptions—e.g., that “language” means only the standard dialect; that a “pidgin” (and by extension a “creole” like the Kauai dialect of English, which is based on a pidgin) is not a language; that written (as opposed to spoken) language is primary; and that “language (i.e., standard English) ability” is a valid and reliable index of general intelligence and scholastic achievement. Consequently, I urge potential users of the book to be extremely skeptical about the linguistic results of the Kauai study. To put it mildly, they are highly suspect from the standpoint of the modern study of languages.

Footnotes

1 In this respect, the present review is similar to the one done by Forman et al. (1973).

2 See Labov (1970) for a stimulating discussion of the importance of cultural factors in language development. For linguistically-oriented “action programs” in Hawai’i, see Nunes (1967) and Petersen (1967).

3 For a more pointed criticism of implications, see Forman et al. (1973:3, 10).

4 Sledd (1969) is a very readable article which essentially espouses the same point of view.

5 The limitations of existing tests are illustrated dramatically in such “tests” as the “Hana-Butta Test” (Kaser 1974). It must be remembered, however, that such tests are merely rough indicators of the verbal abilities of nonstandard dialect speakers and that as yet, they do not encompass the range of language skills (e.g., reading, writing, spelling, and grammar) that the commonly-used tests do. It should also be remembered that the possibility and desirability of developing such “dialect” tests is an open question, even in places like Hawai’i where rapid “decreolization” of the local dialect toward the standard dialect is said to be taking place.

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