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language, life, and work in communities and classrooms

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Acknowledgments

Those to whom the greatest acknowledgment of gratitude is due for help with this book are the community members of Roadville and Trackton, and the school, mill, and business personnel of the Piedmont Carolinas with whom I lived and worked for nearly a decade. They cannot be mentioned by name, but they all know who they are, and they will recognize their contributions to this book. Each will, I hope, enjoy the secret pleasure of knowing his or her particular contribution. Students at Winthrop College, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and the University of South Carolina contributed in many ways to both the content of this work and to the interpretations given here of two communities similar to those from which some of them had come.

This book could not have been written except in response to the influence of many professional associates, though I am, as is any scholar-author, solely responsible for any errors of fact or judgment.

Dell H. Hymes is behind this book more than any other single individual. His scholarly concerns are evident throughout. His personal faith in and support of my work, and his patience in waiting for me to decide when this book was ready for publication have been very important. Both his theoretical approach to the study of language in human life and his commitment on a personal level to making anthropology and linguistics relevant to educational practice have influenced the interpretations on nearly every page of this book.

The encouragement and criticism necessary to interpret nearly a decade of data recorded in a sometimes painful and rapidly changing time have come from numerous colleagues. Marjorie Martus was the first of these colleagues to encourage me to bring the data together for a book; throughout the final years of data collection and the months of writing, she kept reminding me of the need to speak to teachers as well as researchers. She repeatedly

called for clarification when she felt practitioners would not find the discussion clear. Courtney Cazden was also an early promoter of my attempts to write the stories of Trackton and Roadville for a wide readership, and she responded to early drafts with important questions on both the focus and content of the book. In similar ways, my colleagues at Stanford, Robert Calfee and David Tyack, helped me clarify the goals and the organization of the book. Gordon Wells kindly interpreted the book from the point of view of an outsider to the United States educational system. Tom James and Allison Read deserve special mention for their detailed and repeated readings of the manuscript, and I am especially grateful for their willingness to debate with me in the midst of their own busy months of preparing their dissertation proposals.

Bambi Schieffelin and Elinor Ochs, whose fieldwork in, respectively, a Papua New Guinea and Western Samoan village parallels some of the methods and types of data collected in Roadville and Trackton, offered advice born out of their experience. Numerous discussions with them about the implications of our fieldwork for language learning theories are reflected in many sections of this book. Ann Peters, whose research on units of acquisition informs many portions of the early chapters here, gave valuable comments on several troublesome areas of interpretation. Patricia Causey Nichols, a fellow Carolinian and researcher in her own home territory, has for many years discussed parts of this book with me. Her fieldwork in the Carolinas and her publications complement this study in many ways. Jay Lemke generously gave his advice as a science educator on portions of the second section of the book.

I wish to give special recognition to Charles A. Ferguson who tolerated my challenge of his proposals for universals of child language input. He has encouraged me in the completion of this book, and he has been extremely tolerant of the repeated tales of each child whose story appears here. He has, to my benefit and that of our many common interests in the study of language and culture at micro and macro levels, been a provocative influence.

Joel Nichols of Winthrop College endured numerous sessions with me while he tried to capture in photography what I hoped to capture in text. Amanda Branscombe gave helpful advice in the selection of photographs. Brice Heath and Shannon Heath were

over the years partners in this study, for they spent much time in Trackton and Roadville, still maintain associations there, and came to know some of the ways of living of these communities as their own. They were unique research associates since they were able to become a part of the child life of Trackton and Roadville. In more recent years, they have listened to my interpretations from fieldnotes, added their own, and discussed with me the implications of reporting life in Trackton and Roadville. In particular, they have been keenly sensitive to the fear that publication might reveal the identity of their friends in the communities and schools.

I owe a deep debt to Frederick M. Heath, who not only helped stimulate some of the interpretations offered here, but facilitated my work for many years. It was under his tutelage that I first learned the important contribution social history can make to ethnography; as an historian, he first called to my attention the fallacy of the ethnographic present.

Penny Carter, of Cambridge University Press, assumed editorial responsibility for this volume. With her usual thoughtful and concerned handling of details, she contributed in many ways to its final form. I am grateful to her.

Several institutions have facilitated this work. Research for chapter 1 was carried out in the archives of Winthrop College and the Caroliniana Library of the University of South Carolina. Ron Chepesiuk, archivist, and Shirley Tarleton, head librarian, of Winthrop College, took an active interest in this research and went out of their way on numerous occasions to be helpful. Allan Stokes of the Caroliniana Library willingly helped me search out obscure sources and put me in touch with other historians of textile mills in the Piedmont. The Ford Foundation provided a travel-study grant in 1978 which allowed me to begin to organize my fieldnotes and to maintain on-going interactions with teachers in the region. The Department of Linguistics of Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, especially through its chairman, Göran Hammarström, provided a setting in which I could distance myself from the usual responsibilities of teaching and from the field site itself.

In a manner rarely shown an outsider, black churches allowed me the unique privilege of being in their midst as worshiper and as sometime preacher. Their members heard before any others, aside from students in my courses, portions of this book and

discussions of its purposes. On occasion, the Biblical text which introduces this book was the stimulus for serious talk about differences in language uses, oral and written, and their meanings in daily life as we compare and measure ourselves against others.

Berlin
November 17, 1982
Buß- und Bettag

For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.

II Corinthians 10:12

Though it is customary for reprintings of books that remain favorites to carry an updated prologue, I have chosen instead to extend the initial epilogue. Believing that readers do not easily drop an interest in where and how characters, places, and methods go beyond the final page, I have added further steps to the outset of all these set forth in Ways with Words. *Then as now, national events shape life and work in communities and classrooms as well as how researchers pursue their questions and teachers and students work together on strategies of learning.*

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Photographs *between pages 262 and 263*

By Joel H. Nichols, Jr., Winthrop College

A native and longtime resident of the South, Joel H. Nichols, Jr., has been the staff photographer of Winthrop College for the past twenty years. He has followed his father and grandfather into professional photography and has a special interest in depicting lifestyles of the Southeast.

Maps

Figures

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Prologue

In the late 1960s, school desegregation in the southern United States became a legislative mandate and a fact of daily life. Academic questions about how children talk when they come to school and what educators should know and do about oral and written language were echoed in practical pleas of teachers who asked: "What do I do in my classroom on Monday morning?"

In the massive reshuffling of students and teachers during desegregation in the South, I became a part of the communities and schools described in this book. I was both ethnographer of communication focusing on child language and teacher-trainer attempting to determine whether or not academic questions could lead to answers appropriate for meeting the needs of children and educators in that regional setting. Described here are two communities – Roadville and Trackton – only a few miles apart in the Piedmont Carolinas. Roadville is a white working-class community of families steeped for four generations in the life of the textile mills. Trackton is a black working-class community whose older generations grew up farming the land, but whose current members work in the mills. Both communities define their lives primarily in terms of their communities and their jobs, yet both are tied in countless ways to the commercial, political, and educational interests of the townspeople – mainstream blacks and whites of the region. The townspeople are school-oriented, and they identify not so much with their immediate neighborhoods as with networks of voluntary associations and institutions whose activities link their common interests across the region.

I was a part-time instructor in anthropology and linguistics at a state university which had an excellent local reputation for teacher-training. Black and white teachers, business leaders, ministers, and mill personnel were in my graduate courses, and with many of them I developed a research-partner relationship. Pres-

sures from desegregation, nationwide condemnation of the Carolinas' low performance in public education, and the general shifting of social and work opportunities for blacks during this period helped create an atmosphere in which individual teachers, businessmen, and mill foremen could initiate changes in their usual practices. Once desegregation began for schools and mills alike, white children went to schools with black teachers and classmates; black teachers faced black and white students; white foremen supervised black mill workers. For the first time, black and white worked side-by-side in the mills, and white foremen, mostly males, worried about ways to instruct black workers, male and female. Communication was a central concern of black and white teachers, parents, and mill personnel who felt the need to know more about how others communicated: why students and teachers often could not understand each other, why questions were sometimes not answered, and why habitual ways of talking and listening did not always seem to work.

In my university courses on anthropology and education and language and culture were teachers, who came to advance their degrees and pay levels, and businessmen and mill personnel, who came either to accompany their teacher-wives or to experience college classroom life again. They brought a central question: What were the effects of preschool home and community environments on the learning of those language structures and uses which were needed in classrooms and job settings? Answers to this question were important for black and white children who were unsuccessful in school, and for their parents who were frustrated in their interactions in credit union agencies (cooperative savings institutions of millworkers), employment offices, and elsewhere as they negotiated for critical goods and services. In my courses, I talked about published research on language differences among black and white children and adults of different socioeconomic classes across the United States. The students in my courses debated the practical applications of this research as well as its appropriateness to the local populations. They pointed out that the vast majority of research on child language had not treated the issue of the community or cultural background of the children studied. In this geographic region, where far more than half of the families qualified for in-state social services on the basis of income, socioeconomic differences among children seemed useless as a

variable against which to set their language differences. Ascribing Black, Southern, or Standard English to speakers by racial membership was also not satisfactory to these students, for almost all of them, black and white, could shift among these varieties as occasion demanded. To categorize children and their families on the basis of either socioeconomic class or race and then to link these categories to discrete language differences was to ignore the realities of the communicative patterns of the region.

As long-time residents of the area, the teachers, businessmen, and mill personnel in my classes had observed differences in the language use and general behavior patterns of children and adults from certain communities or cultural groups. They had an endless store of anecdotes about children learning to use language across and within groups of the region, and they asked why researchers did not describe children learning language as they grew up in their own community cultures. Their questions set the stage for me to encourage them to examine their own ways of using language with their children at home and to record language interactions as thoroughly and accurately as possible, without preconceived judgments about what was happening in the exchanges in which they observed and participated. For those members of my classes for whom such descriptions became a serious objective, their initial focus was on their interactions with their own children; subsequently, they gave attention to communicative situations in their classrooms and the textile mills.

It was, however, not enough to enable these townspeople – mainstream blacks and whites – to strive to become objective and accurate recorders of the language habits of their own interactions. Their questions pointed to the need for a full description of the primary face-to-face interactions of children from community cultures other than their own mainstream one. The ways of living, eating, sleeping, worshiping, using space, and filling time which surrounded these language learners would have to be accounted for as part of the milieu in which the processes of language learning took place. Though I did not then set out to do so, my next years were to be spent recording and interpreting the language learning habits of the children of Roadville and Trackton. With these accounts of worlds about which the townspeople actually knew very little, cross-cultural comparisons of the variations of language socialization in the predominant groups of the

region would be possible. Using detailed facts on the interactions of the townspeople, and my ethnographies of communication in the communities of Roadville and Trackton, we could then move to answer the central question: For each of these groups, what were the effects of the preschool home and community environment on the learning of those language structures and uses which were needed in classrooms and job settings?

The townspeople in my courses studied their own mainstream ways of teaching, modeling, and using language with their children and with those with whom they worked in classrooms or the mills. They then compared these ways with those described in both the research literature and my accounts of Roadville and Trackton, communities similar to those from which most millworkers and about 70 percent of the students in the local schools came. Mill foremen agreed to teach me about a world of learning very different from that of school classrooms. With their help, I was able to spend part of my time in the textile mills, learning about the varieties of language uses adults from Roadville and Trackton met there, from the weaving rooms to the credit union offices. In addition, teachers welcomed me as teacher-aide or co-teacher in their classrooms. Together, we took fieldnotes, identified patterns of communicative interactions, and delineated what the school and the mill defined as "communication problems." We searched for solutions, wrote curricula, and tried new methods, materials, and motivations to help working-class black and white children learn more effectively than they had in the past. Fifteen of the teachers had preschool children, and this cluster and their families form one portion of the group referred to in this book as the townspeople. This cluster recorded, analyzed, and compared their own habits of interacting with their young children with those of Roadville and Trackton. As associate, colleague, aide, and sometime-co-author of curricular materials, I became a part of the home lives, classrooms, and workplaces of many of the townspeople. They came to recognize that in schools, commercial establishments, and mills, mainstream language values and skills were the expected norm, and individuals from communities such as Roadville and Trackton brought different language values and skills to these situations. The story of these townspeople, especially the teachers, as learning researchers fills the final chapters of this book.