

Patterns hamper children

One mother tells her son, "How nice you are." A second mother says, "Show me your eye," or "The book goes on the table."

These two different uses of language—the social and functional—are learned by children early, but often not equally.

Cultures differ in their use of language. Typically, Americans, for instance, seem inclined to use language for functional or educational reasons. Parents, consciously and unconsciously, train their children to name, define and describe things in words. Puerto Ricans, on the other hand, have a language style that is far more social; words are more a channel for communicating emotion than information.

Consequently, when a Puerto Rican child first reaches the American public school he brings with him a rich social language and a relatively poor functional language. Unaccustomed to using words functionally, he does not answer when the teacher asks what a "stove" is, or if he does respond, he says something irrelevant such as "I want my momma."

To the school, unaware of cultural language styles, the child seems backward. He gets classified as a disadvantaged child with an impoverished language system. From then on, the cultural mismatch between school and child grows—to the very great disadvantage of the child.

This is theory. But it both fits and explains evidence collected on three-year-olds—116 indigenous middle-class and 60 Puerto Rican children—in New York. The Puerto Rican children, though lower-class, came from stable homes. They had no signs of disadvantage, such as crowded or broken homes, poor nutrition or lack of adult attention.

There was at least as much conversation in the Puerto Rican homes as in the other homes, yet the Puerto Rican children were far less likely to answer questions put to them by test examiners. They would string beads or build bridges out of blocks as readily as the other children, but a request to name objects on the table might bring a response such as, "Give me water."

To them, the test situation seemed rather like a social occasion. It was difficult to direct their attention to the test and difficult to regain it after a distraction.

Four New York scientists have been following these two groups of children since infancy. They find that Puerto

Rican homes very much reflect a preponderately social style of language, says Dr. Herbert G. Birch of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine.

The cultural difference has very real consequences for education. Too often a teacher might think the Puerto Rican child is not normal intellectually, says Dr. Alexander Thomas of New York University Medical Center. But once encouraged, the children in this study were able to perform in a completely normal manner.

The investigators and their two colleagues, Drs. Margaret E. Hertzog and Olga Aran Mendez, both of New York University, continue to follow the children. The aim is to find out whether language styles persist and become even

more divergent as the children enter public school.

Evidence that they do comes from a Harvard study of ethnic differences among first-grade children of Jewish, Negro, Chinese and Puerto Rican background (SN: 4/20, p. 390).

Regardless of class differences, the children in each group showed specific ethnic patterns of mental ability. On verbal ability—as reflected in a test—Puerto Rican children ranked last in both the middle-class and lower-class groups. "We knew if we could get into the home, we could probably find an explanation for the ethnic differences," says Dr. Susan Stodolsky, one of the Harvard investigators. The New York work provides one.

CHANGING THE NAME

Hansen's disease over leprosy

The microscope Dr. Gerhard Armauer Hansen used in 1873 to discover the slender rods of *Mycobacterium leprae* was not available to the author of Leviticus, who left leprosy to the discretion of the priest.

The 13th chapter of this Book of ancient laws calls leprosy a plague, and makes it mandatory for the priest to pronounce a leper unclean if he has a sore that is "white reddish in his bald head, or in his bald forehead." The law also makes it mandatory for the leper to go about crying "unclean, unclean."

So leprosy has come down through the centuries with a reputation as a fearful disease that anybody might catch from any contact with a person who has it. In truth it is only mildly communicable; even spouses of victims are often safe.

The late Stanley Stein, who 35 years ago founded the Carville, La., magazine titled THE STAR, began waging a war on the over-dramatic word, leper, and its derivatives. THE STAR is published by patients at the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital in Carville.

The Brazilian state of Sao Paulo now appears to be the first Government to exclude the derogatory term from all official documents.

In Honolulu, meanwhile, THE BEACON published an interview with a former Carville patient named Richard Marks, and titled it "I am a Leper."

Marks knew about the semantics campaign being waged from Carville, but said, "I call myself a leper because I still feel we are treated like lepers."

Dr. Abrahao Rotberg, Sao Paulo State Health Service dermatologist, will no longer be head of the Department of Leprosy Prophylaxis, but of the Department of Sanitary Dermatology.

Dr. Rotberg says flatly, "the signs and symptoms of the mildly communicable disease caused by Hansen's bacillus are not found in The Bible and certainly do not correspond to Tsar'ath as described in the Old Testament."

The official NOMENCLATURE of the Brazilian Society of Dermatology and Syphilology some time ago abandoned "leprosy" in favor of "Morbus Hansen." Prof. F. E. Rabelo, editor of NOMENCLATURE, has informed Dr. Rotberg, however, that the next edition will see a further change to "Hanseniasis" as more euphonious.

Dr. Rotberg is now mailing questionnaires to dermatological and leprological reviews and societies, to professors, researchers and welfare workers in Brazil and abroad, in order to collect opinions on the semantic change and prepare a report for the International Leprosy (sic) Congress to be held in September.

"May the year 1968 finally see the end of a tragic medical mistake," he concludes.

8 june 1968/vol. 93/science news/555