From Class to Culture: Restricted/Elaborated Codes vs. High/Low-context Communication in Basil Bernstein and Edward T. Hall

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Abstract

American anthropologist Edward T. Hall's (1914-2009) notion of high-context and low-context communication bears a strong resemblance to British sociolinguist Basil Bernstein's (1924-2000) earlier distinction between restricted and elaborated codes. Both sets of terms concern the degree of explicitness used in encoding messages, particularly in spoken discourse, and both have been widely known and influential in certain academic and professional circles. While Hall may or may not have drawn upon Bernstein's work in formulating his notion of context, this paper examines a key conceptual shift from social class in Bernstein's work to culture in Hall's, whereby the turn to culture in Hall was at the same time a retreat from society.

Introduction

Regarded by many as the father of intercultural communication as an area of academic inquiry, due in large part to his writings on culture and communication, American anthropologist Edward T. Hall (1914-2009) bequeathed to his readers a number of conceptual tools for looking at cultural and communicative processes. These included, for instance, the idea that "culture is communication," his notion of the "primary message systems" of culture, and "proxemics" as the spatial dimension of behavior (Hall 1959; 1966). But that which has undoubtedly been most influential is his notion of low-context and high-context communication, with the former referring to communicative interchange between participants that is highly explicit in nature, and the latter to communication marked instead by a high degree of reliance upon "context" in providing meaning to participants. This notion of context, propounded by Hall four decades ago in his book *Beyond Culture* (Hall 1976), has been influential among academic specialists in intercultural communication, in fields of practice such as intercultural training (Oliver 2006), and in interculturalist discourse more generally.

By contrast, much less attention has been paid in interculturalist discourse and practice to the work of British sociolinguist Basil Bernstein (1924-2000), described in one obituary as "the most interesting and important British sociologist of recent times" (Davies 2000, 485). In the late 1950s, Bernstein was in the process of working out a scheme for describing what he saw as two contrasting modes of using language, particularly in spoken discourse. These he initially referred to as "public language" and "formal language" (Bernstein 1959; see also 1958) and then later redubbed "restricted code" and "elaborated code" (e.g., Bernstein 1964; Bernstein 1966). Bernstein's notions of restricted and elaborated codes bear a striking resemblance, in some ways, to high- and low-context communication as depicted by Hall, and became widely influential in their own right in sociolinguistics, sociology, and education. Given that a number of Bernstein's writings on the subject preceded Hall's exposition of high- and low-context communication by more than a decade, one may wonder to what extent they provided inspiration—if not a conceptual template—for Hall's subsequent work on context.

In this paper, my aim is not to consider possible reasons for why Bernstein's writings have garnered so little attention in interculturalist discourse, but instead to examine a key conceptual shift apparent from Bernstein's writings on code to Hall's work on context. Drawing upon text-artifacts associated with Bernstein and Hall—including scholarly and middle-brow publications by Bernstein and Hall themselves, as well as reviews and commentaries by others, dating from the late 1950s—I consider "code" and "context," as formulated by Bernstein and Hall, as ideational constructs of linguistic and communicative practice. In this regard, I approach both under the umbrella of linguistic ideology or ideology of language (e.g., Silverstein 1979; Woolard 1998; Kroskrity 2000; Gal 2005), or what might be described somewhat more broadly as ideology of communication. As a preliminary study, this paper suggests that while there is much in common between Bernstein's notion of code and Hall's idea of context, there is a crucial shift between them from social class to culture, and along the way a certain diminishing of the *social* nature of communication.

Hall on context

As his autobiography and other documents make clear, Edward T. Hall's interests and outlook as an anthropologist were shaped in no small part by his experiences prior to and outside of academia. These included his experiences outside of university contexts of having worked closely—and often in a supervisory capacity, such as a construction

foreman—with people from ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds different from his own, including Navajo and Hopi Indians, African-Americans, and Micronesians. He earned his Ph.D. in anthropology from Columbia University in 1942, and as a postdoc there several years later, partook in a "culture and personality" seminar led by Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Clyde Kluckhohn, and others. A position at the U.S. Department of State's Foreign Service Institute, 1950-55, helped Hall work out lines of inquiry that informed some of his later writings on intercultural communication (see Hall 1992; Rogers, Hart, and Miike 2002; Leeds-Hurwitz 1990; Oliver 2009). His first book, *The Silent Language* (1959), set the stylistic tone for his subsequent major publications: rather than a scholarly text written for anthropologists or other academics, it was aimed at a broader reading public and written in an accessible style, largely free of impenetrable technical jargon, details about methodological approach, and other typical accoutrements of academic publications.[1]

It was in his second book, *Beyond Culture* (1976), that Hall put forth his distinction between high-context and low-context communication. He defines the terms as follows: "A high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low-context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code" (1976, p. 91). As described by Hall, high-context communication is characteristic of cultures in which people are "deeply involved" with one another and information is widely shared among them, allowing for a preponderance of relatively simple messages—simple, that is, at the level of overt content–that can have deep meaning (Hall 1976, 39). Or, as he puts it elsewhere in the same book, instances of high-context communication "feature preprogrammed information that is in the receiver and in the setting, with only minimal information in the transmitted [explicitly encoded] message" (Hall 1976, 101). Accordingly, says Hall, people who are more accustomed to using high-context communication will tend to expect others to understand them without having to express everything explicitly: "When talking about something they have on their minds, a high-context individual will expect others to know what's bothering him, so that he doesn't have to be specific" (Hall 1976, 113).

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1   While Hall did publish some more strictly academic articles, aimed at anthropological readers (e.g., Hall 1963; Hall 1964; Hall 1968), his books aimed at general readers—particularly those published between 1959 and 1976—have had far greater lasting impact. This has been particularly so outside of anthropology rather than within it (Oliver 2009).

In contrast to communication in cultures with such closely integrated webs of social relations and high degree of information held in common by people, low-context communication is said by Hall to be characteristic of "highly individualized, somewhat alienated, fragmented cultures" (Hall 1976, 39). Thus, whereas high-context messages can be verbally abbreviated and compact, low-context messages involve a greater use of explicit code to provide the conveyance of meaning. Precisely because there is less "pre-programmed" information shared between participants in low-context communication, most of the information "*must* be [encoded] in the transmitted message in order to make up for what is missing in the context" (Hall 1976, 101; emphasis added).

The illustrative examples given by Hall make clear that a given culture can include both high- and low-context messages—e.g., Japanese people can be routinely high-context in their communication with one another but at times switch to a pointedly low-context mode (see Hall 1976, 66)—in ways that may confound outsiders. Yet, Hall's stance is that the terms high-context and low-context are applicable not only to individual *messages* or occasions of message-sending but to entire *cultures* as well, such that a given culture can be said to have a general predilection for communication that is more or less high- or low-context. Cultures on the high end of the context spectrum, according to Hall, include Japanese, Chinese, and American Indian; low-context cultures include American, German, and Scandinavian. In this way, "context" often serves not so much as a conceptual tool with which to consider particular messages or genres of talk within the complex communicative repertoire of a given society, but more as a shorthand for a purportedly general communicative style of a culture.

Bernstein on code

In Hall's discussion of context, Basil Bernstein is briefly mentioned as providing yet another example of the high- and low-context distinction articulated by Hall in the preceding pages of his book. Although, as noted earlier, Bernstein had been formulating his ideas on restricted and elaborated codes as early as the late 1950s, it is beyond the scope of this paper to suggest precisely when Hall may have been exposed to Bernstein's writings or how extensively he may have read them. Whereas in the early years Bernstein often published in British sociological journals, from at least the mid-1960s he was clearly finding an audience as well among American anthropologists, sociolinguists, and others concerned with communication-related issues. This is evidenced by his 1964 article in *American Anthropologist*—the flagship journal of the American

Anthropological Association—entitled "Elaborated and Restricted Codes: Their Social Origins and Some Consequences." Likewise, a chapter by Bernstein also dealing with restricted and elaborated codes appeared in the influential 1972 volume *Directions in Sociolinguistics: the Ethnography of Communication*, edited by John Gumperz and Dell Hymes (Bernstein 1986 [orig. 1972]).

Although Hall himself does not elaborate in *Beyond Culture* on how Bernstein's work might have influenced his own, he was certainly aware of Bernstein's 1964 article, as it was cited in an endnote and merited a brief mention in his discussion of high- and low-context communication:

> Recent studies in sociolinguistics have demonstrated how context-dependent the language code really is. There is an excellent example of this in the work of the linguist Bernstein, who has identified what he terms "restricted" (HC) and "elaborated" (LC) codes in which vocabulary, syntax, and sounds are all altered: In the restricted intimacy of the home, words and sentences collapse and are shortened. This even applies to the phonemic structure of the language. The individual sounds begin to merge, as does the vocabulary, whereas in the highly articulated, highly specific, elaborated code of the classroom, law, or diplomacy, more accurate distinctions are made on all levels. (Hall 1976, 92)

In Bernstein's article, there is indeed an example that suggests the manner in which, in restricted code, sounds and vocabulary may "begin to merge." In explaining what he sees as one variant of restricted code, Bernstein gives the example of an interaction occurring at a dance hall, where a boy initiates a conversation to ask a girl to dance. The communication between them, says Bernstein (1964, 59), may include utterances such as these:

> "Bit crowded-n'it?"
> "S'nice floor?"

Though this example does not concern the "restricted intimacy of the home," as Hall put it, it does suggest the merging of sounds and words as noted by Hall. As Hall apparently saw it, Bernstein's notion of restricted and elaborated codes closely paralleled Hall's own conceptual scheme to the extent that the labels HC (high context) and LC (low context) could simply be shoehorned in alongside Bernstein's terms.

Yet, more than merely providing an "excellent example" of the way in which the verbal element in high-context messages can be compact or compressed, Bernstein's article provided a conceptual framework that in some ways was a mirror image of Hall's own explanation of high- and low-context communication. Or, rather, given that this particular publication by Bernstein appeared in print more than a decade prior to Hall's book, it would be more accurate to say that Hall's high/low-context distinction mirrored Bernstein's notion of restricted and elaborated codes.

In his 1964 *American Anthropologist* article, Bernstein presents restricted code in the following terms:

> In the case of a restricted code (structural prediction), the speech is played out against a backdrop of assumptions common to the speakers, against a set of closely shared interests and identifications, against a system of shared expectations; in short, it presupposes a local cultural identity which reduces the need for the speakers to elaborate their intent verbally and to make it explicit. In one sentence the extent to which the intent of the other person may be taken for granted, the more likely that the structure of the speech will be simplified and the vocabulary drawn from a narrow range. (Bernstein 1964, 60–61)

While the precise terminologies used by Hall and Bernstein differ, similarities between the two sets of conceptions are clearly apparent. High-context communication as involving relatively little content "in the [linguistically] coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message," whereby messages may be compact in terms of their linguistic component, as noted earlier, is parallel to restricted code as involving a reduced need "for the speakers to elaborate their intent verbally and to make it explicit," whereby "the intent of the other person may be taken for granted." Likewise, Hall's assertion that high-context communication is characteristic of cultures whose members are "deeply involved" with one another, with information widely shared among them, parallels the manner in which restricted code is described by Bernstein as occurring in situations marked by common assumptions, closely shared interests and identifications, and shared expectations among speakers.

The same sorts of parallels exist between Hall's low-context communication and Bernstein's elaborated code. With elaborated code, according to Bernstein, relations between participants in communication rely less upon shared expectations than is the case with restricted code. Indeed, with elaborated code the "orientation of the speaker

is based upon the expectation of psychological difference—his own and that of others"
(1964, 64), much as how Hall sees low-context communication as associated with
individualized, alienated, fragmented cultures. Lacking the basis of shared expectations
associated with restricted code, explains Bernstein, "[w]ith an elaborated code, the
listener is dependent upon the *verbal elaboration of meaning*" (1964, 63; emphasis
in the original). Thus, much as in Hall's vision of low-context communication, where
most of the information communicated is "vested in the explicit code," elaborated code
denotes a mode of communication marked by a higher degree of individualized linguistic
explicitness:

> An elaborated code, or at least an orientation towards this code, will develop to the
> extent that the discrete intent of the other person may not be taken for granted.
> Inasmuch as the other person's intent may not be taken for granted, then the speaker
> is forced to expand and elaborate his meanings, with the consequence that he chooses
> more carefully among syntactic and vocabulary options. (Bernstein 1964, 63)

As with the similarities between restricted code and high-context communication, in key
ways Bernstein's concept of elaborated code likewise resembles what Hall referred to as
low-context communication.

Code vs. context in relation to society

While there is a marked resemblance between high/low-context communication
and restricted/elaborated codes, there are significant points of departure as well.
One concerns the manner in which Hall and Bernstein locate their subject matter in
relation to society. In Bernstein's work, restricted and elaborated codes were from the
outset explained in relation to social structure. As the opening sentence of his 1964
article plainly states: "This paper represents an attempt to discuss some aspects of
the interrelationships between social structure, forms of speech, and the subsequent
regulation of behavior" (1964, 55). More specifically, it was his view that different
social structures generate different types of linguistic codes, and he persistently argued
that restricted and elaborated codes be seen in relation to social class. While "closed
communities" such as combat units of the armed services, as well as peer groups of
adolescents, provide the conditions that give rise to particular restricted codes, Bernstein
states, in a more general sense "a restricted code is available to *all* members of society as

the social conditions which generate it are universal. But it may be that a considerable section of our society has access to only this code by virtue of the implications of class background" (1964, 62; emphasis in original).

In this view, as a person's capacity in or orientation toward elaborated code is, to no small degree, a product of socialization and education, elaborated code can be considered a class-related attainment, more available to members of some strata of society than others. As Bernstein put it:

> Very broadly, then, children socialized within middle-class and associated strata can be expected to possess both an elaborated and a restricted code while children socialized within some sections of the working-class strata, particularly the lower working-class, can be expected to be limited to a restricted code. As a child progresses through a school it becomes critical for him to possess, or at least to be oriented toward, an elaborated code if he is to succeed. (Bernstein 1964, 66–67)

While Bernstein was careful to note that no code is inherently better than another— "each possesses its own esthetic, its own possibilities" (1964, 66)—he also pointed out that society itself may assign differing values to them. Thus, "code" for Bernstein is not merely a descriptive, analytical term; as codes are differentially invested with value by society, unequal access to elaborated code has class implications and social significance. Bernstein's framing of code in terms of class is, in a broader sense, part and parcel of how he was "committed to equity and social justice, or in his own words, 'preventing the wastage of working class educational potential'" (Sadovnik 2001, 607).

In Hall's discussion, by contrast, although high- and low-context communication are depicted in relation to culture, little actual significance is assigned to social class, social relations, or even society. Quite unlike Bernstein, for whom society-internal differentiation—namely, how restricted and elaborated codes are mapped onto different groups or strata within society—is essential, Hall treats a "culture" as having a generalizable orientation toward "context": as noted previously, for Hall a culture can be more or less low- or high-context in its orientation to communication. Socially internal differences—such as class, ethnic, gender, regional, or subcultural differences— regarding context do not figure meaningfully in Hall's discussion.

In Hall's work, culture is routinely demarcated in terms of nation. This tendency is exhibited not only in *Beyond Culture*, but also in Hall's other books aimed at a broad reading public and even in his publications aimed at academic anthropologists. Indeed,

this was occasionally a point of criticism in anthropological reviews of Hall's works. One commenter on Hall's 1968 article in *Current Anthropology*, for instance, wrote that he wished Hall would "give us fewer undifferentiated 'Americans,' 'Arabs,' and 'Greeks.' General categories such as the latter are justifiable, and even inevitable, in the early stages of any intercultural research, but I would like to see greater attention now to those status and regional distinctions of which Hall is so clearly aware" (Birdwhistell et al. 1968, 102). To be sure, Hall's tendency in his writings to refer to culture in undifferentiated national terms ("Japanese culture," "American culture," and so on) was oddly reminiscent of the wartime "national character" studies of the 1930s and 40s, which had fallen out of favor among anthropologists even by the time Hall's book *The Silent Language* came out in 1959 (see Oliver 2009). Hall's depicting of context in relation to "culture," as such, comes at the expense of careful attention to socially internal differentiation and, more generally, to society itself. Whereas Bernstein endeavored to show how restricted and elaborated codes were tied to social class and unequally available in society, Hall instead worked to raise awareness of the general matter of high- and low-context communication as something that can vary by culture, without delving into the complexities of how to untangle culture from nation or to meaningfully include society in the picture.

Conclusion

It would be tempting to read this diminishing of the social in Hall's work in terms of the traditional differences in emphasis on culture and society between American "cultural anthropology" and British "social anthropology" (Goodenough 1969; Watson 1984) but there is more to it than that. Just as how Bernstein's sustained focus upon social class in his analyses of restricted and elaborated codes was aligned with his longstanding interest in social justice, as mentioned previously, Hall's approach to the understanding of context would seem to have been informed by his own convictions regarding culture. Unlike those anthropologists who regarded human beings as living *in* culture, with culture providing to people intricate webs of meaning with which to orient themselves and make sense of experiences and events, Hall saw culture as potentially "dictatorial" and was wary of being trapped or imprisoned by culture (Hall 1976, 282; 1959, 166). He thus regarded the attainment of greater awareness of culture and its hidden mechanisms as a key to freeing ourselves from it.

For Hall, this seems to have been a deeply held, psychoanalytically inspired outlook

and endeavor, inwardly oriented and aimed more at understanding one's own culture than at understanding others: "Years of study have convinced me that the real job is not to understand foreign culture but our own. …The ultimate reason for [studying foreign cultures] is to learn more about how one's own system works" (1959, 39). Given this professed prioritizing of the awareness of the workings of culture over the understanding of others, it is perhaps little wonder that Hall devoted himself primarily to explicating the general characteristics of high- and low-context communication rather than the societal production of particular modes of communication and the distribution of those modes in society, as did Bernstein. It might well be asked, however, just how efficaciously one might expect to move "beyond" culture—as Hall's 1976 book title would have it—while simultaneously retreating from society.

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