Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms* – Part 1

Shirley Brice Heath, an American linguistic anthropologist and Professor Emerita at Stanford University, is best known for her ethnographic research she published in *Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms* (Stanford University Faculty Search).

From 1969 to 1978 Heath lived, worked, and interacted with the families in two communities, Roadville and Trackton, within the Piedmont. The Piedmont spanned across the South and North Carolina state line, which was located below the Application Mountains, right above Georgia (Heath, "Prologue," pp. 5-6).

Heath divides her text into two parts, "Ethnographer learning" and "Ethnographer doing," in which she approaches each of the communities first as an active participant and then as a researcher, providing the history and daily life of the people in those two communities (p. 13).

Ethnography is the systematic study of a people and their culture. The researcher enters a community with a particular goal and purpose, gains the trust of individuals within the community, and observes and records their behavior, which includes, but are not limited to, daily activities, habits, beliefs, rituals, or use of language with the goal of describing them to the larger community in a credible way (Geertz, pp. 5-10; Heath, pp. 9-10; Sanjek, pp. 193-98).

Depending on the discipline the ethnographer is approaching a community, they might seek to identify patterns or themes within that community in order to understand how individuals function as group.

Heath's approach in *Ways with words* is that of a linguistic anthropologist, in which she focuses on how individuals were educated, work together, communicate, and use language (pp. 9-11).

In this sense, Heath's text is a narrative, "an unfinished story, in which the characters were real people whose lives go on beyond the decade covered in this book, and for whom we cannot, within these pages, either resolve the plot or complete the story" (Heath, p. 13).

In her "Prologue," Heath states, "The book is written for what I [she] call[s] 'learning researchers,' non-academics and academics alike" (p. 13). She presents the history of the region by detailing the social and economic factors that the people were driven by and experienced as they learned to live and work together (pp. 19-28).

Roadville was mostly composed of working class white families that had spent generations working in the local textile mills (pp. 28-31). Families in Roadville were tightly knit and had a functional view of education, which included learning things that helped them in their work life (p. 47).

Trackton was mainly working class black families. While some of the families were sometimes split up into different households, they would still come together in providing for the children.

Community was important in Trackton and everyone had a role to play. Education played an important role in their lives in the sense that "changin' times" required children and adults to learn new skills.

In terms of perspectives on education, Roadville was divided into three groups, the "old-timers," the "young folks," and "those who moved away" (pp. 35-37).

The old-timers focused on hard work and family recreation, the young folks tended to concentrate on their children's future and their life beyond the mill, and those that moved away were seen by the young folks as a way to connect their upbringing in Roadville and their life in another community (p. 37).

Work was a way of life in Roadville and adjustments were made by families in order to maintain a respectable image by being industrious, such as women sewing their own dresses and canning, using credit to buy furniture and appliances, and allotting money toward family vacations and outings in the form of fishing and hunting (pp. 40-46).

In Roadville, children were not expected "to find outside jobs beyond their school hours" since it might distract from their education (p. 41). Parents took on extra jobs and worked longer hours in order to buy "expensive TV-advertised toys" for their children and to continue activities such as "movies and family trips in the camper" (p. 41).

Heath says, "Beyond the toddler stage, play and social activities were strictly sex-segregated (and age-graded when possible)" (p. 44).

Although parents did not necessarily agree with the way education had changed since they went to school, they "[made] sure that their children [attended] regularly, [did] their schoolwork, and [kept] out of trouble" (p. 45).

Some of the women in Roadville attended adult education classes in order to "seek out the secrets of the educated middle-class townspeople" so to benefit their families, particularly their children (pp. 45-46).

Trackton's residents were comprised of different families that "[viewed] their stay in Trackton as temporary and choose not to spend money and effort on their present homes" (p. 57).

The "respectables" in Trackton, those that "'[lived] right,' [minded] their affairs and their children, and '[didn't] make no trouble' for others. They [did] for themselves and '[din't] 'spec nut'n off nobody.' They either [had] regular jobs or [received] benefits to which everyone [agreed] they were entitled because they truly [could not] work. They [spent] their money on their children, household furnishings, food, and they [allotted] a 'reasonable amount' for clothes" (p. 52).

They had plans to own a house "someday," but many that moved to "Trackton stayed on, dreaming for a 'someday house'" (p. 52). The residents of Trackton did not "consider themselves poor [but] they [lived] in a rundown neighborhood" (pp. 52-54).

The respectables in Trackton viewed themselves as "'risin,' 'comin' up in dis world,' both because of 'changin' times' and because they were willing to work to take advantage of these times" (p. 57).

Heath states, "Children were valued as children, not as the offspring of a combination of particular individuals" (p. 69). There was an importance placed on sons in the Trackton community since parents had to be constantly worrying about girls getting pregnant (p. 69).

Fridays were a lively time in Trackton because it was a time of the week when parents brought home their paychecks as well as "goodies to be distributed" among the children, such as food, candy, and toys (p. 71). In this sense, individuals came together and celebrated their meager earnings as a community where all were in the joyous event in some form or fashion.

One of the key elements among Trackton residents was that individuals should improve themselves and be responsible and take care of their own problems.

The role of church in Trackton was not as strong as "they were in the old communities." Heath says, "Some Trackton residents [had] tried town churches which were populated by 'town blacks,' mainstream middle-class families. But Trackton residents were too marginal to this culture to feel comfortable in church with mainstreamers" (p. 61).

Although church did not play as important a role in their everyday lives, the young folks in Roadville continued to participate in "church and religious activities" (pp. 36-37).

Roadville residents also connected a "to do for oneself—to garden, sew, can, do woodworking, and maintain their homes—to moral qualities: thriftiness, industry, independence, and a proper use of "God-given talents" (pp. 36-37).

When it came to learning how to talk in Trackton, babies were around while adults were talking to one another and were commonly seen as "playthings" by family members and the community (pp. 73-74).

Heath states, "Everyone [talked] *about* the baby, but rarely *to* the baby" (p. 75). When young children [started] to make sounds, such as "cooing or babbling sounds," adults talked about it as "'noise'" (p. 75).

From early on, family and community members gave babies and children nicknames, which usually "[characterized] the physical and behavioral features the child began to exhibit consistently by the time of the first birthday" (p. 78).

Males were given a "special status" on Trackton's main stage, which was the "plaza in the midst of their community." This emphasized the idea that "[c]ommunication [was] the measurement of involvement" in Trackton (p. 79).

While females were allowed to participate in the community, they were "rarely given parts to play and almost never full-stage performance opportunities" (p. 79).

Children learned early through the adults' display of nonverbal cues, and "[o]nce out of the lap and at the knee or feet of those who were talking, children [had] hours of listening and watching" adults in their everyday conversations (p. 82).

Through a "process of challenge, interaction, and unpredictable feedback, little boys had to learn such specific skills as how to [perform a] handshake," which entailed anticipating the "timing and height" and the "type of handshake" with repetition as part of the process until "the boys had performed a satisfactory one" (p. 85).

Heath states, "Trackton adults do not see babies or young children as suitable partners for regular conversation." In this sense, "[c]hildren were not expected to *be* information-givers; they were expected to *become* information-knowers by 'being keen,' and by taking in the numerous lessons going on in their noisy multi-channeled communicative environments" (p. 86)

During the "first stage … the repetition stage, they [picked] up and [repeated] chunks (usually the ends) of phrasal and clausal utterances of speakers around them" (p. 91).

Trackton children learned during the "second stage, repetition with variation," how to "manipulate pieces of information they [picked] up; they [continued] their own discourse, playing the topic on a particular theme and sometimes creating a monologue parallel to the dialogue or multi-party going on about them" (pp. 91-92).

At the "third stage, participation," which can be a part of the second stage, "children [became] conversationalists" (p. 93).

There were different starting times for boys and girls in terms of participation and contributing to a conversation (p. 95). Trackton girls created "pretend-play monologues and dialogues," essentially "their own practice-interaction sessions" by talking into mirrors (p. 96).

Trackton girls "between the ages of six and thirteen years" engaged in an activity called "fussing," which was "often used to characterize women's talk" (p. 97-98). Girls of various ages and "status relations" would "fuss at and with each other in a series of assertions and counter-assertions related to a specific incident or personality" (p. 97).

Another way Trackton girls participated in the community was through "playsong games," which included things such as jump-rope songs, handclap songs as well as 'made up' playsongs which accompany a wide variety of activities, such as just sitting around, play-dancing, washing dishes, and pretending to be cheerleaders" (pp. 99-101).

Adults in Trackton used "questions" with children in order to tell how well they understood what "a particular utterance [meant] to the speaker and what the speaker [intended] the hearer to interpret" (pp. 103-12).

Heath states, “Analogy questions test children’s abilities to see things which were similar in their environment, and the prevalence of these questions in adult-child interactions may perhaps point to the importance Trackton adults give to this ability” (p. 105).

In Roadville, the father and mother’s family played certain roles in providing for a newborn in terms of supplies, clothes, and furniture. At baby showers, toys and other necessities were given to the expecting mother by family and friends. Some items, such as “cribs and rocking chairs,” were passed down through generations (p. 113-17).

Families and friends interacted with a newborn through “baby talk,” which involved multiple ways of asking the baby questions, using pronouns and switching between first and third person usages (pp. 119-21).

Heath says, “Children’s language play alone or with siblings or other playmates was encouraged, and adults often intervene to offer reinforcement unless the words were dirty or the children were making too much ‘racket’” (pp. 122-23).

In Roadville, “[a]dults [helped] children focus their attention on the names and features of particular events” (pp. 127-28). They believed that there were two “major types communicative abilities,” the first one being that children “must learn to communicate their own needs and desires, so that if mothers stay attuned to children’s communications, they can determine what these [were]” (pp.127-28).

The second type was that “children must learn to be communicative partners in a certain mold,” which involved children understanding “how to talk and how to learn about the world” (p. 127).

The use of “question-statements” was important in Roadville, and they were “used predominantly with children in the first eight months and often [carried] a message not to the baby, but to the others present” (p. 129-32). Heath claims, “These question-statements [served] another function, however; they often [expressed] the needs and desires of the child” (p. 129).

Roadville boys and girls were “sex-segregated” and “[received] educational toys” that favored their respective genders (p. 133). Depending on the age of the baby or child, parents engaged in various games with them (pp. 133-38).

The role of church and the Bible were integral aspects in Roadville. Heath states, “Religious knowledge in the church and church-related activities [were] fixed, and the emphasis in all transmission activities [was] conversational, relying on the finite nature of religious knowledge” (pp. 138-40).

In Roadville, families were “‘bringin’ up’ their children” where “infants [lived] within predictable physical and time limits, which their families [watched] over as they [narrated] to them the objects and events to which they should attend” (pp. 144-46).

Church played a central role integrating the young into the community in Roadville and Trackton (p.147-148). Heath says, “Roadville churches [provided] special materials, places, and occasion for the participation of the young,” in which “they [were] read to, asked to remember characters and events, and [began] an initial linkage of these to the Bible” (p. 147). The churches families attended in Roadville emphasized “[knowing] their weakness, to struggle to acquire more strengths, to rejoice over their blessings , and to keep striving to be worthy of the gifts of grace” (pp. 147-48).

In Trackton, preachers “[stressed] feeling and being, as well as living one’s life with a spirit of acceptance of what cannot be helped, joy over blessings of the past and present, and great hopes and responsibilities for the future” (pp. 147-48).

References

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