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COGNITION AND LANGUAGE

A Series in Psycholinguistics • Series Editor: R. W. Rieber

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The Use of  
Words  
in  
Context  
The Vocabulary  
of College Students

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John W. Black • Cleavonne S. Stratton  
Alan C. Nichols • Marian Ausherman Chavez

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# **The Use of Words in Context**

## **The Vocabulary of College Students**

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The late Sheila Graham Goff was to have been a coauthor. Through this dedication we gratefully acknowledge her enthusiasm for this project and her contributions, especially to Section 5.

## FOREWORD

The Speech Situation is a term worn with age in the teaching of public speaking in America. That it is comprised of occasion, speaker, and topic is a gross oversimplification. It also includes challenge, anxiety, emotion, fear, responsibility, faults of memory, and instants of pride. Out of the circumstances arise an increase in heart rate, a change in blood pressure, an abnormal pattern of breathing, a noticeable build-up in perspiration, and an ongoing evaluation. For students this may be merely a grade or perhaps a series of evaluative remarks, possibly addressed both to the speaker and the other participants, the audience. It may entail a replaying of a record of the speech, indeed a videotape. Most important is the lasting impression that remains with all of the participants.

What of the vocabulary of the speaker under the circumstances of the speech situation? This speaker - in the major portions of this work we may say, "this young man" - has spent time seeking an appropriate topic. He has outlined a composition around a central idea or thesis. He has marshaled evidence, details. He has framed an opening paragraph. He has been admonished not to give an essay, but to strive for audience contact, interpersonal communication. He makes his audible approach through his vocabulary and accompanying phonology.

Under the tension, the speaker repeats; he adds meaningless vocalizations in periods that might logically be pauses. There are slips of the tongue. At worst, failing, he withdraws to await another day.

The vocabulary? One item cannot be overlooked; this is a relatively formal presentation. Even the least inhibited individualist will avoid the rough and ready language of the playfield. The situation brings out the half-remembered word, the one that goes with a special occasion. In short, the language is considered by the speaker to be formal. It resembles "What I hope I can say in twenty years when I explain my delicate surgery to a luncheon club, or what I hope to be able to say to a jury; it is better than the ordinary approach I shall make to a customer. This is my best college-age vocabulary and I put it to use in purposeful oral communication."

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CONTENTS

List of Tables . . . . . xi

Section 1. Some Milestones in Tallies of American English Vocabularies . . . . . 1

Section 2. The Present Sample: A Comparison of Classroom Vocabularies of 1943-45 and 1979-81 . . . . . 29

Section 3. Further Clues Held by Samples of Vocabularies 47

Section 4. Samples of the Vocabularies of Black and White Students in Classroom Speaking . . . . 63

Section 5. An Application of a Vocabulary Tally . . . . 73

Appendix I. The Vocabularies of Students' Speeches of 1943-45 and 1979-81, Arranged Alphabetically, and the Number of Occurrences of Each Word . 79

Appendix II. The Words of a Subsample of Recent Speeches of Appendix I and an Equal Sample of Words from Orations of College Students, Delivered at Least 50 Years Earlier . . . . . 161

Appendix III. Words Used in Eight Hours of Classroom Speeches of Students in Predominantly Black Colleges and in Eight Hours of Speeches in a Predominantly White College, and the Number of Occurrences of Each Word . . . . . 209

References . . . . . 259

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.	The Words of Speeches of 1979-81 Arranged in the Order of the Number of Occurrences . . . .	11
Table 2.	Words Unique to a Period . . . . .	33
	Part 1: Words of the 1943-45 Speeches That Did Not Occur in the 1979-81 Speeches . . .	33
	Part 2: Words of the 1979-81 Speeches That Did Not Occur in the 1943-45 Speeches . . .	38
Table 3.	Words of Periods and Occasions . . . . .	53
	Part 1: Words That Were Used in the Sample of College Orations That Were Delivered before 1932 and That Did Not Occur in a Sample of the Same Length of Contemporary Classroom Speeches . . . . .	53
	Part 2: Words That Occurred in a Sample of 72,000 Words of Contemporary Classroom Speeches and That Did Not Occur in a Sample of College Orations Delivered before 1932 . . . . .	57
Table 4.	Screened Words Used by Two Ethnic Groups of Speakers . . . . .	67
	Group A: Words Used Only by White Speakers . .	67
	Group B: Words Used Only by Black Speakers . .	67
Table 5.	A Test of Immediate Recall . . . . .	68
	Sentences of Least Difficulty	
	A. Vocabulary I, Naturalness 1 . . . . .	68
	B. Vocabulary I, Naturalness 2 . . . . .	68
	Sentences of Medium Difficulty	
	C. Vocabulary II, Naturalness 1 . . . . .	69
	D. Vocabulary II, Naturalness 2 . . . . .	70
	Sentences of Greatest Difficulty	
	E. Vocabulary III, Naturalness 1 . . . . .	70
	F. Vocabulary III, Naturalness 2 . . . . .	71

## Section 1

### SOME MILESTONES IN TALLIES OF AMERICAN ENGLISH VOCABULARIES

Priorities among the many workers who have tallied the words that we use are hard to assign, in part because of the lag between an extended period of preparation and the publication of a completed work. The decade of the twenties was an especially fruitful one. We mean the nineteen hundred twenties and do not discount the probabilities that Noah Webster was counting words in the eighteen hundred twenties, and that generations of word counters both preceded and followed him.

The tallies of our twenties contributed to different applications. Thorndike (1921, 1931, and with Lorge 1944), Horn (1926), and Gates (1935) were among those who worked for school teachers and their pupils. The immediate targets were elementary school readers and spelling lists. The "free" vocabularies of the school books at the turn of the century were bridled by emphasizing the most frequently used words of the children's culture. The approach was extended to an earlier age group by Dolch (1948). The movement led to a generalized application, "A Formula for Predicting Readability," by Dale and Chall (1943). Publishers of collegiate textbooks gave both editors and authors appropriate instructions for applying the implicit rule, "Use the most common available word."

Dewey (1923) set his sights on another application, ease and speed in writing shorthand. His tally of words was largely of secondary interest. He was searching for the sounds and syllables of English. Of course he would use the most frequent words, too. The most frequent events in talking would be assigned characters that could be written with a minimum of motion and still be secure from orthographic ambiguity.

A third motivation that contributed to the richness of the "nineteen twenties" in tallies of words emerged from telephony. The country was full of independent and competing telephone companies, sometimes more than one system in the same town. From this competition the Bell Telephone Laboratories emerged staffed with eminent physicists and other support scientists and engineers. Necessity led some of them to double as linguists and speech scientists. A tally was made of the