

Chapter X. Language and social class¹

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1. Introduction

In the Preface to *Pygmalion* (1913), George Bernard Shaw wrote: ‘It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman hate or despise him’. This was stated in the context of the famous play, in which a phonetics professor, Henry Higgins, trains Eliza Doolittle, a young Cockney (or working-class Londoner), to use what would today be known as Received Pronunciation (RP). Under some protest, Eliza acquiesces to this because she sees the tremendous social advantage of a middle- or upper-class accent. But the play is about more than accent. Eliza has to use ‘correct’ grammar and she mustn’t swear. And she has to dress and comport herself in a way befitting a lady.

What underlies all the changes Eliza undertakes is the notion that society is stratified (layered) and, moreover, that there is a direct correspondence between this stratification and all levels of language and language use (grammar, pronunciation, pragmatics, even which language is used). Stratification is not neutral: it implies inequality, and Eliza reluctantly sacrifices her social identity as a working-class Londoner in order to gain what she perceives as the advantages of a higher social class.

All human societies – not just London’s – are internally differentiated, whether by gender, age, ethnicity, caste or class. These are all at a ‘macro’ level, that is, broad groups into which people can be categorized. Categorization may appear straightforward, as with gender and age, which correspond to a biological distinction (sex) or to something inexorable (time). Yet even these divisions turn out to vary between societies and across different eras: gender roles change rapidly, gay identities are accepted as alternatives, and ‘adolescence’ as a distinct life-stage is recent in western societies and is not shared across the globe. As we shall see, for class there is no single obvious external measure, like sex or time, which can be used as a defining principle. Even so, social stratification based on some concept of ‘class’ is pervasive, and a great deal of sociolinguistic research has been focused on it.

2. Feudalism, caste and class: the importance of mobility

Historically, ‘social class’ is recent: in the Middle Ages in Europe, notions of rank were paramount (aristocracy, free men and serfs). Property, but not (financial) capital, was strongly tied to rank. Political power was vested in royal and aristocratic lineages. Linguistically, this was reflected most obviously in the rise of pronoun systems in Europe where unequal rank was explicitly signalled; thus, in English, the second-person plural pronoun *you* was enlisted as the ‘polite’ pronoun, used by a socially inferior person when addressing a higher ranking individual, who in turn would address the lower ranking person with the singular *thou* (see Trudgill 2000: 92 on how this pattern emerged in other European languages). In Hindu society, caste is an organizing principle affecting what types of occupation are permitted and who can speak to whom (Coulmas 2005: 25). In some places, this is even reflected in the

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¹ This chapter is substantially modified from Kerswill (2007a).

maintenance of separate languages by members of different castes (Gumperz and Wilson 1971).

Neither caste nor rank systems permit social mobility: you are born into your social position, and only radical social change – or your own migration – can allow you to step outside it. On the other hand, social mobility is a defining characteristic of class systems. This means that your social position can rapidly change upwards or downwards during your lifetime, or between generations of the same family. The fact that mobility is possible means that people strive to improve themselves, or their children's prospects, through their own actions. Acquiring new ways of speaking is one such action.

ILLUSTRATION BOX: Social class differences in English pronunciation

English pronunciation varies strongly between and within English-speaking countries. Some of this variation tells us which territory a person comes from – Canada, Scotland, etc. – as well as the location within the territory – e.g., Newfoundland, Glasgow. It turns out that the features which are most diagnostic of location are also those which are associated with a low social status. Thus, people with strong Glaswegian or Cockney accents are very easy to identify, and they very likely to be 'working class'. (Later, we will consider Trudgill's model summarizing this insight.) The same holds true for grammatical differences, but these are far fewer in number, both within and across countries, so it is more difficult to be particularly precise about where somebody comes from. As a consequence, the link between grammar and class is less subtle, and may in fact be gross (see Section 5).

Consonants

/t/ between vowels, as in *butter*:

/bʌtə/ vs. /bʌʔə/ (Britain)

/bʌtə/ vs. /bʌrə/ (Australia and New Zealand)

Comment: in all three countries the right-hand pronunciation is increasingly regarded simply as informal, losing its class connotations. In Australia and New Zealand, the left-hand pronunciation is nowadays regarded as rather stilted.

Initial /h/:

In most of the English-speaking world, initial /h/ is pronounced by members of all social classes in words like *hospital*, *house* and *hedge*. However, in England and Wales, with the exception of much of the north-east and parts of Norfolk and Somerset, word-initial /h/ is missing in most working-class speech – a feature known as *h-dropping* – but present in middle-class speech. Thus, people typically pronounce *home* as /əʊm/. Note that /h/ in unstressed pronouns, such as *his*, is often absent in all accents. Interestingly, there has been a dramatic change in this feature in the south of England, where /h/ has largely been reinstated by younger people. Among broadly working-class young speakers, those with the highest use of /h/ are Londoners with an inner-city and ethnic minority background, as well as people living in areas of generally high mobility, such as new towns (See Kerswill and Williams 1999; Cheshire, Fox, Kerswill and Torgersen 2008). By contrast, the north of England remains solidly h-dropping.

Vowels

As in all languages, the vowel phonemes of English are subject to a vast range of nuances. Much of this variation is linked to class differences, for example in the south-east of England, we can observe the following variations:

Vowel of FACE: [feɪs] vs. [fæɪs]

Vowel of GOAT: [gəʊt] vs. [gɔ:t]

Comment: The left-hand pronunciations approximate to RP, the right-hand ones traditional Cockney. For both of these phonemes, RP has a *narrow* diphthong, Cockney a *wide* diphthong, with a greater difference between the beginning and end of the vowel. It is a fact that most RP speakers are middle or upper middle class, while Cockney speakers are likely to be working class. However, as with the loss of *h*-dropping, recent changes have blurred the class dimension: many young working-class Londoners are now producing narrow diphthongs, or even monophthongs, such as [fe:s] and [gɔ:t]. The people who do this the most have a **minority ethnic background**, but it is spreading to other groups and other locations. (See Cheshire et al. 2008 on London, and Foulkes & Docherty 2007 for details of phonetic variation more generally.)

Comment [GH2]: no difference?

Comment [p3]: yes they are different!

Comment [GH4]: word order?

Comment [p5]: Yes, this is correct (it's right-on these days to say it this way round – no idea why.)

ILLUSTRATION BOX: Social class differences in English grammar

In a Great Britain-wide survey conducted in the 1980s, Jenny Cheshire and her colleagues found that the following non-standard grammatical features were reported by at least 80% of schools participating in the study:

them as demonstrative adjective, e.g., *Look at them big spiders*

Absence of plural marking in words expressing measurements, e.g., *Two pound of flour*

what as a relative pronoun, e.g., *The film what was on last night was good*

never as past tense negator, e.g., *No, I never broke that*

Participle *sat*, e.g., *She was sat over there looking at her car*

Adverbial *quick*, e.g., *I like pasta. It cooks really quick*

ain't/in't for *haven't, hasn't, aren't, isn't*, e.g., *That ain't working*

Participle *stood*, e.g., *And he was stood in the corner looking at it*

Non-standard *was*, e.g., *We was singing*

(adapted from Cheshire, Edwards & Whittle 1993: 64–5)

The authors add multiple negation, as in *I don't want none*, to this list of geographically widespread features. Unlike pronunciation features, there are relatively few grammatical features which are only found in working-class speech in a single region. A good example is the present tense *-s* in the verb, e.g., *I likes, you likes, she likes, we likes, they likes*, in the south and south-west of England. There are virtually no grammatical features used only in a small area.

Variation in working-class speech in Britain is covered in much more detail in Chapter 10.

3. Social class

As we have seen, there is no ‘natural’ way of defining social class. Scholars who have investigated class agree that a hierarchy exists, but disagree on the relative emphasis that should be placed on economic factors and more broadly cultural factors in defining it. The first class theorist was Karl Marx (1818–1883), who related social structure to the position of individuals in relation to the means of production. *Capitalists* own the means of production, while the *proletariat* sell their labour to the capitalists (Giddens 2006: 301). This theory is grounded in the circumstances of mid-Victorian industrial Britain, with its extremes of exploitation and control by capitalists. Growing class segregation in Britain led to a divergence in speech at the level of dialect and accent. The new urban vernaculars which emerged in places like Manchester and Leeds had powerful working-class connotations. Alongside them, there was the increasingly uniform ‘Received Pronunciation’ of the elite, which consisted not only of the capitalists, but also traditional landowners, senior managers and civil servants, and the aristocracy. (See Chapter 34. Mugglestone 2003 is an excellent account of this process; see also Kerswill 2007b.) Nineteenth-century British English was therefore not only split up into regional dialects, but also social dialects or ‘sociolects’.

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3.1 Social status and functionalism: Weber and Parsons

The Marxian approach is the classic ‘conflict’ model, with class struggle at its core. However, it quickly acquired critics, not least because, by the beginning of the twentieth century, western society was changing: there were increasing numbers of people in the ‘middle classes’, including managers and bureaucrats, whose wealth was not linked to capital or property. Max Weber (1864–1920) took an approach which allowed for greater complexity in modern societies. According to Giddens, Weber agreed with Marx in seeing class as ‘founded on objectively given economic conditions’, though class divisions ‘derive not only from control or lack of control of the means of production, but from economic differences which have nothing directly to do with property’ (Giddens 2006: 302). Weber saw people as having differing ‘life chances’ because of differences in skills, education and qualifications. In a capitalist society, it is necessary to recognise that social **status**, independent of Marxian ‘class’, might in fact be relevant to stratification in society. Status differences lead to differences in ‘styles of life’ (Weber; Giddens 2006: 303), marked by such things as ‘housing, dress, manner of speech, and occupation’ (Giddens 2006: 303). This is, of course, very close to what we nowadays label ‘lifestyle’ (see Section 4.1).

Weber’s work is very much the precursor of contemporary, composite models combining a number of criteria – and we return to these below (Section 4.1). However, we need to consider a third scholar, whose work turned out directly to influence sociolinguists of the 1960s and 70s: Talcott Parsons (1902–1979). Parsons focused on the idea of status, and transformed this into a hierarchy in which all elements interlocked. This is the theory of functionalism, which Holborn & Haralambos (2000: 9) summarize as follows:

To understand any part of society, such as family or religion, the part must be seen in relation to society as a whole (...) The functionalist will examine a part of society, such as the family, in terms of its contribution to the maintenance of the social system.

‘Class’ is a major factor in this jigsaw. It is a hierarchy of esteem or status – a doctor is higher on the scale than a nurse – and is only indirectly connected to a person’s income or whether or not they are themselves capitalists. A perceived occupational ranking is central to this functional approach, and in some countries surveys have been carried out to find out what precisely the ‘pecking order’ of occupations is (we mention an example below).

In the 1960s and 70s, sociolinguists such as William Labov (1966), Walt Wolfram and Peter Trudgill adopted just such a hierarchical model in their early studies of language and class in US and British cities. It is easy to see the appeal of this approach: it is possible to look for a relationship between people’s level of use of certain linguistic features, such as the ones listed in the Illustration box above, and their position in the social class hierarchy.

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- Comment [GH7]: capitalization?
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4. Class and stratification in contemporary western societies

4.1 Integrated models

Since the 1970s, purely functionalist models have largely been replaced by models which combine status (that is, hierarchy), income, wealth, a person’s prospects, security and autonomy at work, and cultural elements (such as choice of newspapers or decisions about children’s education). Arguably, this is a return to a Weberian view, but it also adds a strong element of lifestyle choice. That is, in our affluent, consumer society, we are now faced with a menu of possible lifestyles and are (relatively) free to select from it. An example is many young people’s enjoyment of particular styles of popular music, along with the clothing fashions and modes of behaviour associated with them. These alignments are to some extent correlated with the parents’ social class (measured, for instance, by occupation), but often the correlation is far from categorical and the issue seems to be as much a matter of personal choice. This is what the anthropologist and sociolinguist, Penelope Eckert, found in her study of a Detroit high school (1989; 2000). (See Giddens 2006: 321–4 for further discussion.)

A view which extends the Marxian idea of capital to both culture and language is that of the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1988). Cultural capital gives us advantages over other people: we may ‘inherit’ wealth and tastes, and we ‘invest’ in education and in lifestyle choices. Bourdieu sees this investment as favouring the dominant class. He in fact sees language as central to this form of capital: linguistic capital is embodied by socially highly valued language forms, such as (in Great Britain) Standard English and Received Pronunciation (see Chapter 34). Milroy and Gordon (2003: 97) have put it this way: ‘language constitutes symbolic capital which is potentially convertible into economic capital, and some kinds of job (such as a business executive’s personal assistant) require more than others (such as a chemical engineer) the employee’s control of a widely marketable standard language variety’. In addition to cultural capital, Bourdieu refers to social capital, which is the network of long-term social contacts an individual has, and symbolic capital, which concerns

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the standing, reputation and status of an individual (see Giddens 2006: 322 for a further explanation of ‘capital’ in Bourdieu’s sense).

4.2 How many classes?

Before we look at a particular scheme of social stratification, I will consider the subjective side of social class – the perception of class that we share as members of our society.

In many parts of the western world, there is only a weak ‘discourse’ of class. In the Scandinavian countries, a viewpoint held by the majority of the population is that their societies are not divided by ‘class’, and hence do not exhibit sharp differences in wealth and lifestyle. As early as the 1950s, the British sociologist John Barnes discovered an ‘egalitarian dogma’ in Norway which meant that people regarded almost everybody else as being of the same class, despite differences in ‘income, upbringing, interests and occupation’ (Barnes 1954: 47). In Canada, a study argued that ‘[m]ore than 85 per cent of the population is ... middle-class, sharing to a greater or lesser extent their values, aspirations, living standards, and ... speech standards’ (Chambers 1991: 90), and, according to Chambers, this is made possible by ‘social egalitarianism and freedom of movement and social mobility on a scale unknown in the colonising nations’ (Chambers 1991: 90). In the USA, the main cleavage is felt to be race, and not class (Milroy 1997; 2000), no doubt reflecting the fact that African Americans and other minority ethnic groups are over-represented among the less privileged.

By contrast, In Britain, a survey found that thirty-six per cent of adults considered themselves ‘middle class’, while forty-six per cent viewed themselves as ‘working class’, reflecting a relatively polarized view (Argyle 1994: 4, citing Reid 1989; cited in Macaulay 2005: 36). Thus, it is not surprising that these terms (‘middle class’ and ‘working class’) are routinely used without explanation by the media. Their ability to do so is doubtless grounded in what Cannadine (1998: 161) calls ‘the language of class’, which is employed by lay people, politicians and social commentators alike. It is doubtless this which gives rise to the survey statistics, rather than any objective socio-economic differences between Britain and other western countries. It is arguably a matter of perception, an ideology – an interpretation supported by the fact that ‘the “class consciousness” of the majority of people is characterized by its complexity, ambivalence and occasional contradictions. It does not reflect a rigorously consistent interpretation of the world’ (Cannadine, quoting Marshall *et al.* 1988: 187).

ADVANCES BOX: Gender and class

Until the 1980s, research on stratification was ‘gender blind’ (Giddens 2006: 324), that is, ‘it was written as though women did not exist, or ... for the purposes of analysing divisions of power, wealth and prestige ... were unimportant ...’ (ibid.). This was because they were simply seen as economically dependent on their husbands (ibid.). With the huge increase in women’s participation in the economy, Giddens sees this position as untenable, and modern stratification schemes now include the main breadwinner in a household or a combination of both breadwinners. I would add that the position also fails to take into account how women and men may evaluate prestige and hierarchy in different ways – a point which chimes with Marshall’s comment in the paragraph above, and which is not addressed by any purely socio-economic

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classification scheme. This issue is crucial to the discussion of language and class, because it affects how we interpret the fact that men and women within a single class grouping differ in their language use. (see Milroy and Gordon 2003: 101–3).

A possible explanation for these linguistic differences lies in differences in cultural, social and symbolic capital between working-class women and men (see Section 4.1 for an explanation of these forms of capital). Skeggs (1997; cited in Giddens 2006: 323) describes how women from this class find they have less of these non-economic forms of capital, as well as less economic capital, than men. This led them to be reluctant to label themselves as working class, because of a fear of jibes about ‘white stilettos’, ‘Sharons’ and ‘Traceys’. Working-class men, on the other hand, can, according to Skeggs, achieve positive identities by, for example, being active in the trade union movement. The women in Skeggs’s study claimed they were not working class, and that class was marginal in their lives. Yet the way they distanced themselves from ‘class’ was, she writes, central to their lives, and this actually ensured that class was important. As we shall see below, women use slightly more ‘standard’ or ‘prestige’ features than men in their own social class grouping. It seems probable that part of working-class women’s striving to dissociate themselves from the working class lies in their adoption of language features characteristic of a higher class. Gender and language are discussed further in Chapter 24 [Sunderland].

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4.3 Inequality and mobility

Giddens states that, ‘[a]lthough the traditional hold of class is most certainly weakening in some ways, particularly in terms of people’s identities, class divisions remain at the heart of core economic inequalities in modern societies’ (Giddens 2006: 333). Although class-based culture, in terms of values, tastes and ‘ways of doing things’ exist, it is misleading to say that these are simply ‘different’ without recognizing the inequality which gives rise to them. Similarly, a functional model of society, where the classes slot into their pre-allocated places, cannot easily accommodate the potential for conflict which exists wherever there is inequality. Sociolinguists have been able to use these insights in their interpretation of linguistic differences, as we shall see.

It follows from both the notion of ‘hierarchy’ (with a ‘top’ and a ‘bottom’), as well as from the more conflictual view of class, that individuals will strive to ‘better’ themselves by moving ‘up’ the class ladder. This is known as (upward) social mobility, which is a feature of all class societies. Such mobility can be **intergenerational**, where a second generation is of a higher class than the first.

Intragenerational mobility refers to mobility within an individual’s lifetime. (See Giddens 2006: 327–331 for further discussion.) Social mobility potentially leads to a sense of conflict or ‘dissonance’ within the individual, who sees a contradiction between her former lifestyle and culture and her present one, or senses this between her parents and herself. Linguistically, the effect is obvious and sometimes uncomfortable: with social mobility, many English speakers, particularly in the UK, feel the need to change their accent, and in doing so they may feel they are betraying their roots. Yet, for many, other people’s negative attitudes are too high a price to pay for keeping their working-class accent, and the effort of acquiring another accent reaps sufficient **rewards**.

Comment [GH14]: (as opposed to inter-)?

Comment [p15R14]: OK, if you think it’s clearer – I’ve been reading this so many times!

Comment [GH16]: reminded me of broad and narrow ‘a’, as per Eric Morecambe (!), and Raymond Williams: ‘The broad “a”, in such words as “class”, is now taken as the mark of an “educated person”, although till the eighteenth century it was mainly a rustic habit, and as such despised.’ (Raymond Williams: Culture & Society: 1780-1950).

Comment [p17R16]: Interesting!

ILLUSTRATION BOX: Attitudes to working-class accents

Former British Home Secretary John Reid, who speaks with a Glasgow accent, once said in an interview: ‘If you’re a PhD with a middle-class accent, you’re an intellectual; and if you’re a PhD from Glasgow with a working-class accent, then you’re a thug’. (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2006/sep/23/labour.uk>, accessed 12/2/08). Here, Reid, as a ‘powerful’ figure, is using the supposed perception of Glaswegians with working-class accents as ‘thugs’ to his own advantage, by creating a ‘tough’ image for himself.

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However, for the less powerful, this is often not an option. A 2007 survey by the insurance company Combined Insurance found a high proportion of British parents believing that children should be discouraged from speaking with regional accents:

‘One in two British parents (51%) discourage their children to speak [sic] with their regional accent because they fear it will go against them in later life ...

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In fact, one in three British parents (33%) are actually encouraging their children to speak the Queen’s English in favour of their local dialect.

Over one in four (27%) parents living in the West Country are worried that their child might be teased and bullied in their future job for having a local accent. They also thought that by having a local accent their child may be considered to be not very bright (26%).’

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There were strong regional variations:

‘In contrast, only 3% of people living in Lancashire think their child might be bullied or teased by workmates due to their accent, and only one in 20 (5%) of East Anglian parents think their child would be viewed as not very bright because of their local accent.’

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(quotes taken from http://www.combinedinsurance.co.uk/regional_accents.html, accessed 12/2/08)

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This survey shows the persistence of negative attitudes to working-class accents and people’s anxiety that they might inhibit social mobility. The regional differences may reflect a stronger sense of local identity in northern England than in the south. The northern identity tends to be constructed in opposition to the south, and also as a working-class identity. This is shown by Joan Beal’s analysis of ‘Word for Northerners’ (Beal 2006: 16–26), a spoof advertisement for a supposed new version of the popular word-processing package. Commands are ‘translated’ into Yorkshire dialect and peppered with obscenities, while the surrounding text makes much of the putative working-class culture of the north.

4.4 A hierarchical model of class: The 2001 UK Socio-Economic Classification

Since the beginning of the last century, governments have published lists of occupations ranked according to either assumed status or position within the socio-economic system – or a combination. In the UK, the first was the Registrar General’s Social Classes (1913). In Canada, a system has been developed combining a subjective ranking of 320 occupations with the income and educational level of typical people in that occupation (see Chambers 2003: 47–8). In 2001, the UK government introduced the scheme in Table 1. The scheme combines ‘different labour

market situations and work situations’ (Office for National Statistics 2001) in terms of income and security. Unlike the Canadian scheme, it does not include a subjective evaluation element, although it probably corresponds quite closely to British people’s perceptions of the matter.

Table 1. The National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification Analytic Classes (Office for National Statistics 2001)

1	Higher managerial and professional occupations	
	1.1	Large employers and higher managerial occupations
	1.2	Higher professional occupations
2	Lower managerial and professional occupations	
3	Intermediate occupations	
4	Small employers and own account workers	
5	Lower supervisory and technical occupations	
6	Semi-routine occupations	
7	Routine occupations	
8	Never worked and long-term unemployed	

Comment [GH20]: no self-employed?

Comment [p21R20]: I think these are included, but can't remember where

Sociolinguists investigating social class differences use schemes similar to this, though usually with the addition of education and ‘status’ factors such as housing type or neighbourhood.

5. Trudgill’s model of social class and language variation in Great Britain

An influential conceptualisation of the relationship between regional and social variation in British English is that of Peter Trudgill (2000, but first proposed in the first, 1974 edition). It is shown in Figure 1, which represents variation in phonetics (a similar diagram exists for grammatical variation).

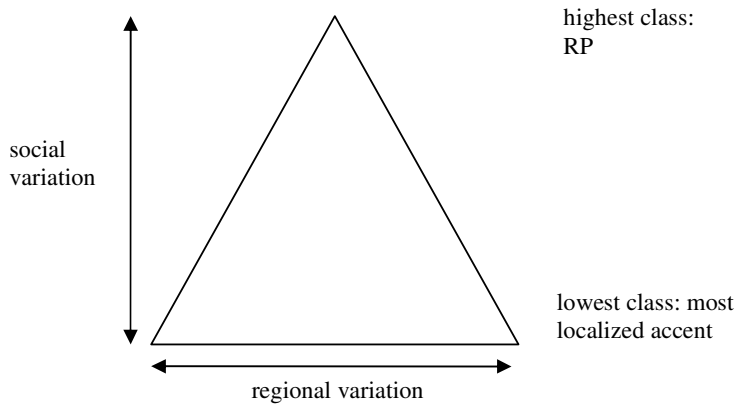


Figure 1. Social and regional accent variation (Trudgill 2000: 32)

It recognises the fact that the amount of regional variation in English is much greater among people of lower social status than higher. This means that it is possible to tell more precisely where someone comes from if they are working class rather than middle class. It also shows that people in the middle of the hierarchy sound more alike across the country than do people at the bottom. Turning to people at the very top, we see that many of them speak a variety which, by definition, shows no regional variation at all: Received Pronunciation (RP). In Chapter 34, we look more closely at RP and Standard English'.

Comment [GH22]:

Trudgill's model works poorly in other English-speaking countries, notably Australia and New Zealand where there is little regional differentiation, class differentiation being relatively more prominent (Gramley & Pätzold 1992: 396, 405). This is true also of those parts of Canada and the USA where European settlement has been relatively recent, say, from the middle of the nineteenth century. Areas along the eastern and southern seaboard, from Newfoundland to Texas, were settled earlier and show much more regional variation in working-class speech, partly reflecting differences among the original English-speaking settlers, but also differences which have arisen in the mean time (see e.g. Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1998: 105).

5. Language and the social class hierarchy

The founder of systematic studies of language and class is William Labov (1927–). Here I present an example from the work of the first British linguist to adopt Labov's methods, Peter Trudgill (1943–). Trudgill (1974) obtained a random sample of 60 inhabitants of Norwich, dividing them up into social class groups based on a composite score combining occupational status, income, education, locality and housing type. He interviewed these people in different 'styles', from formal to informal, and calculated frequency indexes for the particular features he was investigating. One of these is /t/ between vowels, which as we have seen varies between [t] and [ʔ] in much of Britain. In Norwich, there is an intermediate form, combining [t] and [ʔ], which Trudgill gives an intermediate score. Figure 2 shows the score for this feature, where 0 = full use of [t] and 200 = full use of [ʔ]. The classes are: Lower Working Class (LWC), Middle Working Class (MWC), Upper Working

Class (UWC), Lower Middle Class (LMC) and Middle Middle Class (MMC), while the styles (along the bottom axis) are Word List, Reading Passage, Formal and Casual Styles. As can clearly be seen, the classes are ranked perfectly, and each class also increases its use of [ʔ] with increasing informality. This is an extremely strong vindication of the decision to use this hierarchical model.

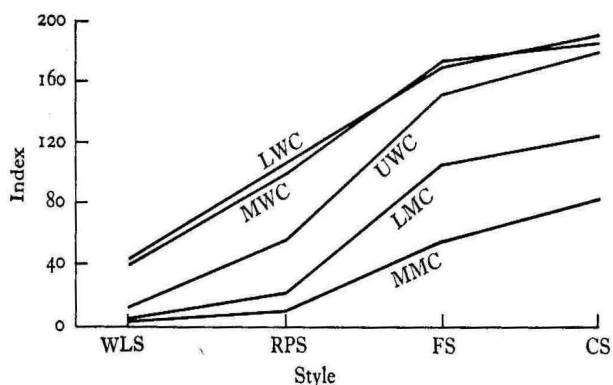


Figure 2. The variable (t) by class and style in Norwich (Trudgill 1974: 96; see text for explanation)

However, many sociolinguists see social class differentiation from the perspective of a conflict model. Milroy and Gordon (2003: 96) point to studies which show ‘bipolar’ variation, for example in the speech of villagers on a plantation in Guyana, where a social divide is reflected linguistically (Rickford 1986). It is apparent, too, that a gradient (gradual) scale of variation in one part of the language – typically phonetics, at least in English – is not matched by gradience in another, say, the grammar. This turned out to be the case in a comparative study of two medium-sized towns in the south of England, Reading (an old, well-established town) and Milton Keynes (a new town dating from 1967) (Cheshire et al. 2005; Kerswill and Williams 2000a, b, 2005). Adolescents were selected from schools whose catchments were either mostly working class or mostly middle class. Figure 3 shows the scores for the use of the glottal stop [ʔ] for /t/ between vowels as in *letter*, the use of [f] for ‘th’ as in *thin*, and [v] for ‘th’ as in *brother*.

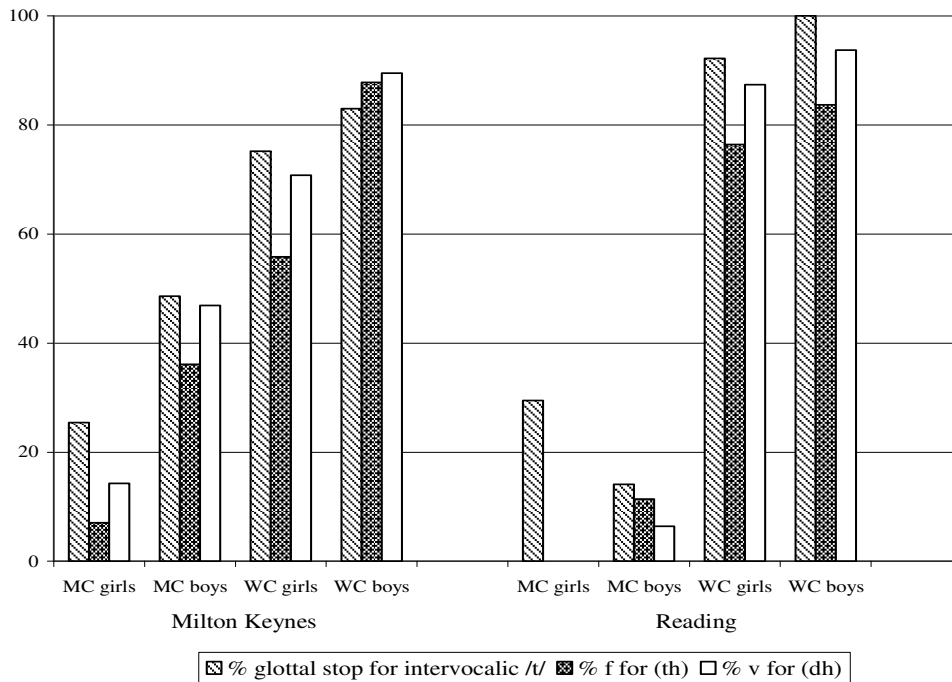


Figure 3. Percent use of non-standard forms of three consonantal variables among adolescents in Milton Keynes and Reading (adapted from Cheshire et al. 2005: 146)
Key: MC = middle class, WC = working class

The 'middle class' use considerably less of the non-standard forms than do the 'working class'. This effect is much stronger in the old town of Reading, where polarization exists in a way not found in the socially fluid new town: the two classes show extreme divergence. However, even in Milton Keynes it turns out that there is an almost categorical class divide in the use of non-standard grammatical features. Figure 4 shows the use of the following eight variables:

- negative concord – e.g. 'I don't want none'
- non-standard *was* – e.g. 'we was'
- non-standard *were* – e.g. 'she weren't'
- non-standard *don't* – e.g. 'he don't'
- preterit *come* – e.g. 'he come here yesterday'
- preterit *done* – e.g. 'we done that yesterday'
- non-standard relatives – e.g. 'the man what we saw'
- non-standard *them* – e.g. 'look at them houses'

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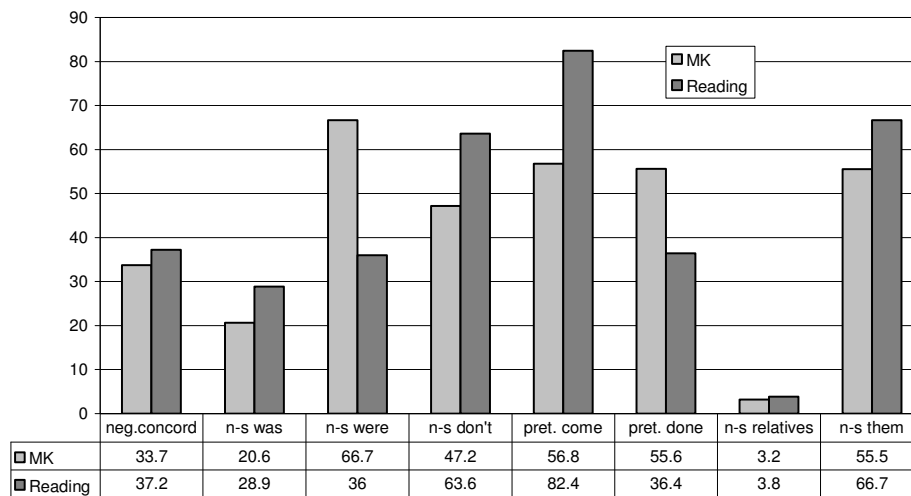


Figure 4. Non-standard grammatical features used by working-class adolescents in Milton Keynes and Reading (per cent) (from Kerswill and Williams 2005: 1041)

The figure shows that neither town has the ‘advantage’ over the other, and that working-class speakers in both use the features frequently. However, in the middle-class speakers the usage was so rare as to be negligible. We interpreted this result as showing that, despite the more ‘standard’ phonologies of the Milton Keynes working-class adolescents and the highly mobile society in which they lived, there was still a powerful class awareness, with strongly negative views expressed about ‘posh’ people (Kerswill and Williams 1997, 2000b: 11). Polarization, and with it a Marxian social analysis, can apparently live alongside what appears to be a more hierarchical structure.

6. Social class differences in discourse

Since the late 1950s, a parallel track within sociolinguistics has investigated social differences in the way talk is organized. The most prominent figure is Basil Bernstein (1924–2000), who in 1958 suggested that educational failure among working-class (WC) children may be due to their use of what Bernstein later called a ‘restricted code’. Bernstein’s main contention is that, because of supposedly ‘relational’ family structures where roles are implicit rather than negotiated, WC children use a much more implicit type of language, lacking in adjectives and adverbs, using stereotyped phrases, not clearly differentiating cause and effect, using commands and questions, and using ‘sympathetic circularity’ shown by phrases like ‘It’s only natural, isn’t it?’ (Bernstein 1971, cited in Macaulay 2005: 41). Middle-class (MC) children can use an ‘elaborated code’, which does not contain the implied deficiencies of the restricted code. (The characteristics of the codes are cited in full in Macaulay 2005: 41 and usefully paraphrased in Stockwell 2002: 56.) Bernstein has been roundly criticized, not least because of the ‘deficit’ that his theory implies, but also because of the weak empirical basis for it (Macaulay 2005: 40–44; Montgomery 1995: 134–146).

Is there any evidence for Bernstein’s contention? Wodak (1996: 116–20) used the technique of oral retelling of news stories as a means to find out. She found that MC people would focus on accuracy, backgrounding their own stance, while WC

people often incorporated the news report into their own world-view, with comments like ‘You can’t do anything about it anyway’. Wodak (1996: 119) found statistically significant class effects, but no sex or age effects. She attributes this to the MC speakers’ years of socialisation, through schooling, into producing ‘oversophisticated’, fact-orientated summaries, rather than the more ‘natural’ mode of telling narratives used by the working-class respondents. These differences are consistent with Bernstein’s view, and have the potential to lead to discrimination.

Comment [GH24]: gender?

Comment [p25R24]: no, this isn’t the social construct ‘gender’, but simply men and women, so I’d prefer to keep sex.

While some experimental studies (e.g. Bedisti 2004) have supported some of Bernstein’s claims, other studies have tended to disconfirm them, and the trend now is to look beyond them and focus instead on class differences in how conversations are managed, doing away with any ‘deficit’ notion, while focusing also on the way gender interacts with class. Macaulay (2002) indeed finds a much greater use of adverbs by MC speakers – as Bernstein predicts – but fails to find any evidence that they are being used to make reference more explicit. Instead, they use them ‘to make emphatic statements, making quite clear their opinions and their attitudes’ (Macaulay 2002: 415). This appears to contradict Wodak’s finding that it is WC speakers who relate events to their own world-view. However, Macaulay’s MC subjects are being speaker- (i.e., self-) oriented, wanting to make their opinions clear. Wodak’s WC speakers appear, from the transcripts, to be struggling to reconstruct the gist of what they have heard by relating it to their own experience, rather than reproducing the story in a disinterested way in a manner they are not trained to do.

7. Conclusion

Western societies are characterized by structured inequality expressed through a class system which is both hierarchical (functional) and potentially conflictual. In language use, we find both grading by social class and also a tendency for differences to be polarized. Class interacts with gender, and men’s and women’s usages differ in systematic ways even within a class. Language use, both in terms of features (like consonants) which we can count and those (especially discourse features) which we cannot, proves to be extremely sensitive to class differences. Language use therefore has the power to tell us about social structures themselves.

Recommended readings

Certainly the most accessible and up to date account of social class is to be found in Giddens (2006). Although he makes no mention of language, a great deal of what he writes can be related to it. So far, the only single-chapter account of social class in sociolinguistics is by Ash (2002), though this is limited to the so-called *variationist* work of Labov and others, mainly in the USA. Chapter 2 of Chambers (2003) covers similar ground. Pages 40–48 and 95–103 in Milroy and Gordon (2003) provide a more advanced discussion. Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998) have a good section on language and class in the USA.

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