

Language and social class

[Sociology](#), [Identity](#)



Language is known to be arbitrary and paradoxical. It ceases to exist without society and vice versa, as each is left merely as a concept without the other. Various ethnographic studies and examples signify the impact that social class has on language and the role it plays in society as a whole. Through these studies, it is noted that a higher social class status brings about the deviation towards the use of the standard form of a language. This also exemplifies the concept of diglossia and the fact that having a lower-class status causes poor language functioning. Several variations of the same language exist depending on the social status of its speakers, causing one language to take diversified forms.

Thus, the interlacing relationship between social class and language is portrayed through the effect that social class has on speech variation, phonological and morphological differences and the type or form of speech used. Portrayal of How Social Class Affects Speech Variation in New York Social class and the status that one holds in society influences language variation, thus contributing to the different pronunciations people have, in relation to specific words. William Labov's study from 1966 investigated the way that speakers of a language change their speech both consciously and unconsciously according to the situations they face. He carried out his study in three different department stores located in New York: Saks, Macy's and S. Klein, which represented the upper middle-class, lower-middle class and the working-class, respectively (Mather 2012). He examined the way that employees pronounced the term "fourth floor" and their usage/non-usage of the postvocalic /r/ in both spontaneous and careful speech (Mather 2012). Through this investigation, he discovered that those belonging to a higher

social class preferred the use of rhotic /r/, hence those working at Saks used it the most, followed by Macy's and S. Klein's employees, who had the least usage. It was also seen that when asked to repeat the term, employees were more likely to pronounce the /r/, thus tending to a higher prestige speech form. This demonstrates that in careful speech the lower middle class tends to imitate the speech of those with a higher status in society. A direct replica of Labov's study was conducted by Joy Fowler in 2009, which yielded similar results. This reaffirms the point that those identifying with the lower-class status in society tend to use rhoticity far less than those identifying with the upper or middle-class status of society. Both the original study and the replica reiterate the fact that different levels of social class affect what variation of the same language one uses. The Phonological and Morphological Distinctions that Exist due to Class Differences Not only does the grammatical variation of a language depend on one's social class, but also pronunciation and morphology. This is demonstrated in the study conducted by Ronald Macaulay within two towns located in Scotland: Ayr and Glasgow. Two groups of people were chosen from the Ayr town, one was deemed as the middle-class and the other lower-class. In Glasgow, the ethnographic study was performed on the urban working-class and suburban middle-class.

One difference is seen in the use of adverbs by both groups, those identified as middle-class were seen to use derived adverbs with the affix "-ly" more frequently than the working-class (Macaulay 2002). The middle-class group was also noticed to comparatively use more adjectives than both the lower-class and working-class speakers. One significant observation made from

these studies is the fact that the terms “ very” and “ quite” are noted to be middle-class terms as both the working-class and the lower-class do not implement these words in their speech. On the other hand, the working-class uses “ just” far more often than the middle-class. Moreover, the same patterns were also observed in adolescents. Macaulay notes two significant differences between the middle-class and working/lower-class groups. For one, middle-class speakers are more inclined towards using both adjectives and adverbs in order to emphasize their attitudes and opinions (Macaulay 2002). In addition, they tend to use more hedge words in order to alleviate their thoughts and opinions (Macaulay 2002). The working/lower-class do not do this as they wish to provide listeners with the opportunity to form their own meaning of the situation, however, middle-class speech does not allow for this. The data from both Scotland towns exemplifies how phonological and morphological differences of speech can connote one’s social standing in society as well as how their speech is interpreted.

One’s Social Demeanor Affects the Type and Form of Speech Utilized The image that one must maintain in society along with their social stratification also determines the type and form of speech one uses. This was witnessed in the study conducted by Joan Acker in 2006 who analyzed two groups of black women from the Appalachian community. One group was the church ladies who were known to be very polished in terms of looks and speech, belonging to a higher prestige part of society (Mallinson 2007). On the other hand, the porch ladies wore casual clothing and associated themselves with the lower status part of society (Mallinson 2007). While the church ladies were seen to use expletives limitedly, the porch sitters used it much more frequently. In

addition, porch sitters were characterized by their neglecting of copulas (connecting words) and the letter /s/, such as in the phrase, “ if he move away,” (Mallinson 2007). This portrays how the church ladies used speech deemed as high-privileged in order to present themselves as higher status ladies, while the porch sitters were comfortable using more casual speech which was associated with a low-status demeanor. In addition, native speakers of a language may be more inclined towards using the lower prestige form of a language in order to maintain their cultural and social identity.

This is seen on an island known as Martha’s Vineyard, where two different pronunciations of vowel sound of words such as “ house”, “ mouth” and “ loud” exist (Trudgill 1983). One is characterized as the low prestige form, where the pronunciation of diphthongs is stressed upon (Trudgill 1983). The other pronunciation is referred to as the higher American prestige form, in which vowel pronunciations resemble those of received pronunciations (Trudgill 1983). Those living on the island have the tendency to retain the non-standard dialect of the island and refrain from imitating the speech of those with a higher social status. Thus, creating a social and linguistic barrier between the two social classes in order to maintain the image that locals from the island hold. Furthermore, the effects of social stratification on language were also seen in North India, where three different variations of the Hindi language are found. One is the village dialect which differs in every village, the regional dialect and standard Hindi which is used in larger cities, mostly by educated people (Gumperz 1958). In North India, the type of dialect one uses determines how society infers where the person comes from

and their status in society. Thus, it is seen that the affiliation that language has with the image one holds in society also affects how one chooses to talk and which form of language one chooses to use.

Conclusion

Society's social structure and hierarchy impacts the variation, dialect and form of language that one uses. As observed within the ethnographic examples presented, some variations of a language are given high prestige, while others are frowned upon. This occurs due to the fact that not-so-common variations, dialects and forms of a language are associated with those who hold less power in society, are less educated and overall referred to as low status groups. Thus, it becomes easy to infer one's social status and social identity by paying attention to the way one talks. As a result, a single language can take many diversified forms portraying the intertwined relationship of language and social class and the effect they have on one another.