

# Week 3: Language and Social Class

## An Advanced Overview

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- 1 Social Stratification and Language
- 2 Key Studies: A Deeper Look
- 3 Theoretical Models
- 4 Discussion and Application

# Defining Social Class

- **Social Class** is a notoriously difficult concept to define. Sociolinguists have used various measures, including:
  - Occupation
  - Income
  - Education
  - Housing
- Early work often treated class as a discrete category (e.g., working class, middle class). More recent work sees it as a continuous variable.
- The choice of measurement can significantly affect the results of a study.

# Prestige: Overt and Covert

- **Overt Prestige:** The prestige associated with the standardized, high-status variety of a language. This is the variety taught in schools and used in formal contexts.
- **Covert Prestige:** The prestige associated with non-standard varieties. It is a marker of group solidarity and authenticity.
- The same speaker may use different variants in different contexts to signal different identities.

# Hypercorrection and Linguistic Insecurity

- **Hypercorrection:** The over-application of a perceived rule of grammar or pronunciation. Often found in the speech of the lower middle class, who are upwardly mobile and linguistically insecure.
- **Linguistic Insecurity:** A speaker's feeling that their own language variety is somehow incorrect or inferior.
- Labov found that the lower middle class in New York City used more post-vocalic /r/ in careful speech than the upper middle class, a classic example of hypercorrection.

# William Labov's New York City Study (1966)

- **Variable:** Post-vocalic /r/ (the pronunciation of /r/ after a vowel).
- **Method:** Rapid and anonymous survey in three department stores of varying prestige (Saks, Macy's, S. Klein).
- **Findings:** The use of /r/ was stratified by social class, with speakers at the higher-prestige stores using more /r/. The use of /r/ also increased in more careful speech styles.
- **Significance:** This study established the quantitative paradigm for sociolinguistics and demonstrated the systematic nature of linguistic variation.

# Peter Trudgill's Norwich Study (1974)

- **Variable:** The (ng) variable, with variants [] (standard) and [n] (non-standard).
- **Method:** Sociolinguistic interviews with a stratified sample of the population.
- **Findings:** The use of [n] was more common in the working class and among men. Men reported using more non-standard forms than they actually did, while women reported using fewer. This points to the different social pressures on men and women.

# The Jocks and Burnouts Study (Eckert, 1989)

- **Setting:** A suburban high school in Detroit.
- **Groups:** "Jocks" (school-oriented, middle class) and "Burnouts" (locally-oriented, working class).
- **Findings:** Eckert found that the Burnouts were leading a number of sound changes (e.g., the Northern Cities Vowel Shift), while the Jocks were resisting them. This was true for both boys and girls.
- **Significance:** This study showed that adolescent social practice, rather than broad social categories like class, can be the primary driver of language change.



# Social Network Theory (Milroy, 1980)

- Focuses on the relationships between individuals in a community.
- A **social network** is the web of social ties that connects people.
- Networks can be characterized by their **density** (how many people know each other) and **multiplexity** (the number of ways in which two people are connected).
- **Finding:** Dense, multiplex networks are effective at enforcing linguistic norms and resisting change.

- A **Community of Practice (CofP)** is a group of people who come together around a shared enterprise.
- Examples: a sports team, a book club, a group of colleagues.
- Language is one of the key resources that members of a CofP use to construct their shared identity.
- This approach allows for a more fine-grained analysis of the relationship between language and social identity than traditional class-based models.

# Linguistic Capital (Bourdieu)

- Pierre Bourdieu's concept of **linguistic capital** refers to the linguistic resources that a person possesses.
- In a given social field, some linguistic varieties are valued more than others. The ability to use the valued variety is a form of capital.
- This capital can be converted into other forms of capital, such as economic capital (e.g., getting a better job) or social capital (e.g., being accepted into a high-status group).

# Advanced Discussion Questions

- ① How has the concept of "social class" in sociolinguistics evolved over time? What are the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches?
- ② In Trudgill's Norwich study, men over-reported their use of non-standard forms, while women under-reported theirs. What does this tell us about the social meaning of these forms?
- ③ How does the concept of a "community of practice" challenge the traditional focus on social class in sociolinguistics?
- ④ Think of a linguistic feature that is currently undergoing change in your language. How might you use the concept of linguistic capital to explain this change?

# Questions?

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# Conclusion

- The relationship between language and social class is complex and multi-faceted.
- Early studies established a clear correlation between linguistic variation and social stratification.
- More recent work has adopted more nuanced models, such as social network theory and communities of practice, to better understand the social meaning of language.