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Linguistics

VARIATIONIST SOCIOLINGUISTICS: LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL CLASS

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Class is a boring topic to write about. Big divides are not what people are interested in, but it's the most pressing concern – because other things spring out of it, like terrorism and instability.

(Aravind Aginda, Man Booker Prize winner 2008,
The Guardian, 14 October 2008)

Key words: language variation, linguistic norms of prestige, Sociolinguistics, language change, social class, gender and speech, regional accent, speech community, extra linguistic, conscious speech

Ключевые слова: языковые подвиды, лингвистические нормы престижа, социолингвистика, языковые изменения, социальный класс, гендер и язык, региональный акцент, языковое сообщество, экстралингвистический, осознанная речь.

Բանալի բառեր: լեզվաենթատեսակ, լեզվական հեղինակության նորմերը, հանրալեզվաբանություն, լեզվի փոփոխում, սոցիալական խավ, սեռ եւ լեզու, տարածաշրջանային, լեզվական համայնք, արտալեզուական, գիտակից խոսք.

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Вариативная социолингвистика. Язык и социальный класс

В статье обсуждаются вопросы отличий речи в зависимости от социального класса. В результате обзора некоторых языковых экспериментов, проведенных ведущими социолингвистами, выявлены ключевые факторы, влияющие на речь и воздействующие как на фонологическом, так и на семантическом уровне. Это – социальный статус, пол, возраст.

Ն. Հայրիյան

Հանրալեզվաբանական լեզվատեսակներ՝ լեզու և սոցիալական խավ

Հոդվածում քննարկում են լեզվի եւ սոցիալական դասի տարբերությունները: Առաջատար հանրալեզվաբանների կողմից իրականացված որոշ լեզվական փորձերի հիման վրա, բացահայտված են հիմնական գործոնները, որոնք ազդում են խոսքի վրա եւ ազդեցություն են կրում եւ հնչյունաբանական եւ իմաստային մակարդակի վրա՝ սոցիալական կարգավիճակը, սեռը, տարիքը:

The article examines the issues of language and social class differences. Some experimental data of scholars in the field of Sociolinguistics are studied and brought to the key idea of direct influence of social status, gender, age on the way people speak on both phonological and semantic levels.

Social class is a central concept in sociolinguistic research, one of the small numbers of social variables by which speech communities are stratified. Trudgill¹ states that “most members of our society have some kind of idea, intuitive or otherwise, of what social class is,” and most people, both specialists and laypeople, would probably agree with this. It is ironic, then, that social class is often defined in studies of linguistic variation and change, and linguists do not frequently take advantage of the findings of disciplines that make it their business to examine social class, particularly sociology, to inform their work. Still, social class is uniformly included as a variable in sociolinguistic studies, and individuals are placed in a social hierarchy despite the lack of a consensus as to what concrete, quantifiable independent variables contribute to determining social class. To add to the irony, not only is social class uniformly included as an important variable in studies of linguistic variation, but it regularly produces valuable insights into the nature of linguistic variation and change. Thus, this variable is universally used and extremely productive, although linguists can lay little claim to understanding it.²

In reconstructing the past, sociolinguists have to rely on concepts that will adequately describe historical realities and, most importantly, capture the complex relationships between language and society, without falsely assuming that for any historical period those relationships are comparable to those of the

¹ Trudgill, Peter, & Jenny Cheshire, eds. 1998. *The Sociolinguistics Reader: Volume 1: Multilingualism and Variation*. Arnold: p.21.

² Coupland, Garrett, Peter, Nikolas & Angie Williams. 2003. *Investigating language attitudes: Social meanings of dialect, ethnicity and performance*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press: p.46.

present day. In other words, present-day descriptions and understandings of social variables and relations should not be too readily taken as valid for historical periods. Instead, the meaning of a variable has to be recovered from the historical text that is the subject of linguistic analysis, as well as from the background writings of the historical period under study. Social variables such as social class, gender, and age, commonly referred to in sociolinguistic accounts of language variation as components of speaker characteristics and important aspects of social context, should not be flattened and distorted by looking at them through a modern lens. To further the study of historical sociolinguistic variation it is important to add socio-historical depth to flat demographic dimensions, increase awareness of the social aspects of these dimensions, and make students of language understand that it is indeed these aspects that have consequences for language use patterns.

In all human societies, individuals will differ from one another in the way they speak. Some of these differences are idiosyncratic, but others are systematically associated with particular groups of people. The most obvious of these are associated with sex and developmental level: women speak differently from men, and children from adults. These two dimensions of social variation in language are in part biologically determined (e.g. differences in laryngeal size producing different pitch levels for adult men and women), but in most societies they go beyond this to become conventional and socially symbolic. Thus, men and women differ by far more in language use than mere pitch. (In fact, even their pitch differences are more pronounced than can be anatomically explained.) Such sociosymbolic aspects of language use serve an emblematic function: they identify the speaker as belonging to a particular group, or having a particular social identity.¹

In many societies some of the most important of these sociolinguistic divisions are associated with differences in social prestige, wealth, and power. Bankers clearly do not talk the same as busboys, and professors don't sound like plumbers. They signal the social differences between them by features of their phonology, grammar, and lexical choice, just as they do extra linguistically by their choices in clothing, cars, and so on. The social groups at issue here may be harder to define than groups like "men" or "women," but they are just as real. They are the divisions of a society along lines of *social class*.

While individual occupations have reallocated to different classes, the overall shape of these indices and measures for local conditions when the system is used in other industrialized societies, but otherwise they offer a set of procedures that sociolinguists can rely on to place an individual speaker in the social hierarchy.² Traditionally, the term *social class* has been used to define and analyze identities and relations between groups located at different levels of the socio-economic hierarchy. The notion of class links together and summarizes many aspects of an individual's life; main source of income, educational and social background, which may influence cultural tastes and political associations, speech, manners and so on.

William Labov looked at change in language and how different social factors effected language change, ranging from age to social class to gender. He found language change was either conscious or unconscious, unconscious being when people change their language without noticing, and conscious being when people realize they are changing the way they speak, and actively encourage it. This investigation looks at *conscious* speech change and uses the example of Labov's New York Department Store study with the involvement of *prestige*.

Prestige can be separated into 'overt prestige' and 'covert prestige'. Both are used when changing speech to gain prestige – appearing to have a high reputation/standing/success etc- but do so in different ways. If someone uses 'overt prestige' they put on an accent that is generally widely recognized as being used but the 'culturally dominant group'.³ In England this would be R.P, so putting on a more 'posh' accent than their regional one would be using overt prestige, to fit with the 'dominant group'. This is the traditional definition, although with the rise of other accents such as Estuary English it may be questioned. 'Covert prestige' is the opposite, as 'covert' means secret. Therefore it means to put on an accent to show membership to an 'exclusive community' in the area, rather than to fit with the 'dominant culture group'. Using covert prestige would therefore be putting on a more 'street cred' accent rather than R.P, and even though the 'dominant culture group' generally sees it as being inferior, using language fitting with the local community would lead to earning respect with those also in the community.⁴

In 1966 Labov completed the "New York department store study" which examined overt_prestige involving both class and gender. Labov investigated the pronunciation of the 'post-vocalic' /r/ sound in

¹ Hudson, Richard. 1996, 2nd ed. *Sociolinguistics*. Cambridge University Press: p.67.

² Labov, William. 1994. *Principles of linguistic change, Vol 1: Internal factors*. Blackwell: p.120.

³ Trudgill, Peter. 1983. Sex and covert prestige. In P Trudgill, *On Dialect*, Chap. 10. [Revision of original 1972 article in *Language in Society* 1; excerpt in J Coates 1998 *Language & Gender*: pp. 21-28

⁴ Labov, William. 1994. *Principles of linguistic change, Vol 1: Internal factors*. Blackwell: p.79.

American speech, which is the /r/ sound that comes directly after a vowel in words such as the middle of the word ‘fourth’ and the end of the word ‘floor’. Labov carried out his experiment by walking into 3 different department stores in New York representing different social classes, being Saks (upper class), Macy’s (middle class) and S. Klein (lower class). He went on to ask shop assistants where the location of departments were that he knew were on the fourth floor, to allow them to spontaneously say the words ‘fourth floor’ which includes the /r/ pronunciation. Furthermore as an added factor he then pretended he had not heard the assistant, making them repeat their answer of ‘fourth floor’ to see if their pronunciation had now changed, as their speech had become *careful* rather than *spontaneous*.¹

His findings were that the sales assistants from Saks used the /r/ sound most, showing that the current overt prestige form in New York was to pronounce the /r/. Those from Klein’s used it least as they would have used more covert prestige, so would not have pronounced the /r/ sound, and said an utterance along the lines of “flaw”. Finally those from Macy’s showed the greatest upward shift of pronouncing “floor” rather than “flaw” when they were asked to repeat their utterance.

Therefore Labov found that the pronunciation of /r/ increased as the class of the store increased, as well as an increase of /r/ in careful speech, and concluded that the more careful the speech was the more likely the /r/ was to be pronounced. Labov found the overuse of /r/, known as *hypercorrection*, was most common in the lower middle class (Macy’s), as they were most likely to be aware of which speech forms are ‘classy’ and would use these forms in careful speech to improve prestige and appear to belong to the higher middle class. Labov also found hypercorrectness to be strongest in the language conscious middle class women, showing that **overt prestige seemed more common in women than men**, the factor that we chose to investigate in the experiment.² When evaluating this investigation several issues need to be addressed. As explained in the conclusion of results there are other outside variables, suggesting the experiment was not a ‘fair test’. Although the people involved in the experiment were all from the same location, they did not all have the same background, i.e. some people spent large majorities of their childhood in different areas. This suggests their accent may not have fit to the typical ‘regional accent’ and made them appear to be speaking in R.P. and using overt prestige, when they were not at all, therefore skewing the results.³ Other added factors were that the people were not all from the same class, they were of different ages, and the relationship with most of them was one that may have meant speakers were unlikely to feel the need to include prestige of any sort in their speech. The data was only collected from 20 members of each sex and, as there were added factors besides prestige, it meant anomalies would have highly effected the overall conclusions. To improve reliability of the data we would increase the number of people asked, and possibly have a larger number of words to test, to leave room to discard anomaly results. We would also consider the words selected more carefully.

Peter Trudgill in 1974 Norwich Study investigated how gender affects dialect in each social class.⁴ Subjects were given to two terms of a variable (e.g. yod-dropping in ‘tune’) and they were asked to pick the variant that they normally used. The self-evaluation results can then be measured against what the speakers actually use. ‘Over-reporting’ is when the subjects say they use the standard form more than they actually do. ‘Under-reporting’ is when subjects say they use the non-standard form more than they actually do. Trudgill’s study of Norwich found clear social stratification (by ‘class’) of variables including dropping of final –s in third-person verbs, –in instead of –ing, glottal stops instead of /t/, h-dropping, and vowel qualities in ‘pass’, ‘part’ (1983: 43-48; Wardhaugh 19).

It would be possible to see these features as the mixing of two distinct dialects—the local and the standard—just as s-dropping in Detroit are seen as the mixing of pure Black English with pure American Standard. Trudgill argues, however, that the variation is internal to the one variety, since the same speakers use both terms of the variables depending on the occasion and speech style.

– Looking at “walking” & “talking” as the standard form and *walkin*, *talkin* as the non-standard form peculiar to the local accent. Also considering at the presence or absence of the third person –s ending, as in *he go to the shop* or *he goes to the shop*;

¹ Labov, William. 1990. *The intersection of sex and social class in the course of linguistic change*. Language Variation and Change 2: pp. 205-254

² Labov, William. 1990. *The intersection of sex and social class in the course of linguistic change*. Language Variation and Change: p.87.

³ Eckert, P. 1998. *Gender and sociolinguistic variation*. In J Coates ed. 1998, *Language & Gender: A reader*: pp. 64-75.

⁴ Trudgill, Peter. 1983. *Sex and covert prestige*. In P Trudgill, *On Dialect*, Chap. 10. Revision of original 1972 article in *Language in Society* 1; excerpt in J Coates 1998 *Language & Gender*: pp. 21-28.

- differentiated between relaxed and careful speech in order to assess participants awareness of their own accents as well as how they wished to sound – which saw the non-standard pronunciation quickly decline;
- Found that class is more of a determiner of non-standard usage than gender, though women in all social classes are more likely to use the overt prestige or RP form;
- Men over-reported their non-standard usage – implying that men wished to sound more non-standard, assuming that they used more of the covert prestige forms;
- Women over-reported their standard usage – implying that women wished to sound more standard, assuming that they used more of the overt prestige forms;
- Concluded that women are more susceptible to overt prestige than men (and men more susceptible to covert prestige);
- In the “lower middle class” and the “upper working class” the differences between men’s and women’s usage of the standard forms were greatest in formal speech, thereby identifying these classes as most susceptible to the prestige of the RP form, with women leading the way on this front.

Jenny Cheshire in 1982 in her Reading Study examined relationship between use of non-standard variables and adherence to peer group norms.¹ Within the framework of the observation she identified 11 non-standard features and measured their frequency of use in boys and girls in a Reading playground, differentiating between those who approved or disapproved of minor criminal activities

“They calls me names.”

“You just has to do what the teacher says.”

“You was with me, wasn’t you?”

“It ain’t got no pedigree or nothing.”

“I never went to school today.”

“Are you the ones what hit him?”

“I come down here yesterday.”

“You ain’t no boss.”

- All children who approved of peer group criminal activities were more likely to use non-standard forms, but boys more so;
- All children who disapproved of such activities use non-standard forms less frequently, but the difference between the groupings of girls was more stark;
- Suggests that variation in dialect is a conscious choice, influenced by (declared) social attitude;
- Males are more susceptible to covert prestige, but social attitude is more of a determining factor than gender;
- A more negative attitude to the peer group’s criminal activities can be seen as aspirational, and therefore those children would be less susceptible to the covert prestige forms (and more susceptible to the overt prestige of standard forms).² Milroy’s Belfast Study -Members of a speech community are connected to each other in social networks which may be relatively ‘closed’ or ‘open’.³– A person whose personal contacts all knows each other belong to a **closed network**. An individual whose contacts tend not to know each other belong to an **open network**. Closed networks are said to be of high density: open networks are said to be of low density. Moreover, the links between people may be of different kinds: people can relate to each other as relatives, as neighbors, as workmates, as friends. Where individuals are linked in several ways, e.g. by job, family and leisure activities, then the network ties are said to be multiplex. Relatively dense networks, it is claimed, function as norm-enforcement mechanisms. In the case of language, this means that a closely-knit group will have the capacity to enforce linguistic norms. She investigated the correlation between the integration of individuals in the community and the way those individuals speak. To do this she gave each individual she studied a Network Strength Score based on the person’s knowledge of other people in the community, the workplace and at leisure activities to give a score of 1 to 5, where 5 is the highest Network Strength Score. Then she measured each person’s use of several linguistic variables, including, for example, (th) as in mother and (a) as in hat, which had both standard and non-standard forms. What she

¹ Cheshire, J., 2002., *Sex and gender in variationist research*. In JK Chambers, P Trudgill & N Schilling-Estes, eds., *Handbook of Language Variation and Change*, pp. 423-443.

² Cheshire, J. 1982., *Linguistic variation and social function*. In S Romaine, ed. 1982, *Sociolinguistic variation in speech communities* [excerpt in J Coates ed 1998 *Language & Gender*:29-41], pp.21-27.

³ Milroy, Lesley. 1992. *New perspectives in the analysis of sex differentiation in language*. In K Bolton, ed. 1992, *Sociolinguistics today: International perspectives*, pp.163-179.

found was that a high Network Strength Score was correlated with the use of vernacular or non-standard forms.¹

In most cases this meant that men whose speech revealed high usage of vernacular or non-standard forms were also found to belong to tight-knit social networks. Conversely, vernacular or non-standard forms are less evident in women's speech because the women belong to less dense social networks. However, for some variables, the pattern of men using non-standard and women using standard forms was reversed. In the Hammer and the Clonard, for example, more women than expected tended to use the non-standard form of (a) as in hat. Milroy's explanation for this finding is based on the social pressures operating in the communities. The Hammer and the Clonard both had unemployment rates of around 35 per cent, which clearly affected social relationships. Men from these areas were forced to look for work outside the community, and also shared more in domestic tasks (with consequent blurring of sex roles). The women in these areas went out to work and, in the case of the young Clonard women, all worked together. This meant that the young Clonard women belonged to a dense and multiplex network; they lived, worked and amused themselves together. The tight-knit network to which the young Clonard women belong clearly exerts pressure on its members, who are *linguistically homogeneous*. Over and above gender differences or class differences, Milroy discovered that it was how closely or loosely knit a social group a person belonged to that determined their use of the local dialect forms. The *covert prestige* of such forms works in a more complicated way than previously thought. The idea of *closed and open networks* can be usefully applied to any case of language variation – e.g. the spread of MLE. Whereas in the past working class London children might have belonged to very closed networks, because of changes to society such as high levels of immigration, exposure to the media and greater sense of identity as teenagers as opposed to class.

Rather than distinguishing between Standard English and Regional Dialect, a distinction which carries an inherent bias towards the former, Bernstein wanted to look at language variation in a different way.² Bernstein came up with the terms Restricted code and Elaborated code in order to distinguish between what he saw as two distinct ways of using language as opposed to the two distinct dialects of Standard English and the Regional Dialect.³ The Elaborated code has a more formally correct syntax, having more subordinate clauses and fewer unfinished sentences. There are also more logical connectives like "if" and "unless", as well as more originality and more explicit reference. The restricted code has a looser syntax, uses more words of simple coordination like "and" and "but", there are more clichés, and more implicit reference so there are a greater number of pronouns than the elaborated code. The codes should not be confused with social dialects because there is nothing in a dialect to inhibit explicit statements of individual feeling or opinion. While dialects are identified by their formal features, and by whom their speakers are, codes are identified by the kinds of meaning they transmit and by what the words are used to do. An elaborated code arises where there is a gap or boundary between speaker and listener which can only be crossed by explicit speech. A restricted code arises when speech is exchanged against a background of shared experience and shared definitions of that experience; it realizes meanings that are already shared rather than newly created, communal rather than individual. The speech is "context dependent" because participants rely on their background knowledge to supply information not carried by the actual words they use. Whilst the elaborated code is used to convey facts and abstract ideas, the restricted code is used to convey attitude and feeling. The elaborated code is the one which, in the adult language, would be generally associated with formal situations, the restricted code that associated with informal situations. E.g. Two five-year-old children, one working-class and one middle-class, were shown a series of three pictures, which involved boys playing football and breaking a window. They described the events involved as follows:

(1) Three boys are playing football and one boy kicks the ball and it goes through the window and the ball breaks the window and the boys are looking at it and a man comes out and shouts at them because they've broken the window so they run away and then that lady looks out of her window and she tells the boys off.

¹ Milroy, Lesley. 2002. *Social networks*. In JK Chambers, P Trudgill & N Schilling-Estes, eds., *Handbook of Language Variation and Change*, pp. 549-572.

² Atkinson, P. 1985, *Language, Structure and Reproduction: An introduction to the sociology of Basil Bernstein*. London, Methuen, p.42.

³ Moore, R. & Maton, K., 2001, Founding the sociology of knowledge: Basil Bernstein, intellectual fields and the epistemic device, in Morais, A., Neves, I., Davies, B. & Daniels, H. (Eds.) "Towards a Sociology of Pedagogy". New York, Peter Lang, 153-182.

(2) They're playing football and he kicks it and it goes through there it breaks the window and they're looking at it and he comes out and shouts at them because they've broken it so they run away and then she looks out and she tells them off.

It was implied that middle-class children generally use the elaborated code (although they might sometimes use the restricted code), whereas working-class children have only the restricted code. But Bernstein later modified this viewpoint to say that even working-class children might sometimes use the elaborated code; the difference between the classes is said to lie rather in the occasions on which they can use the codes (e.g. working-class children certainly have difficulty in using the elaborated code in school). Moreover, *all children can understand both codes when spoken to them*.

As well as avoiding the negative and positive stereotypes associated with regional dialect and Standard English, Bernstein wanted to understand when either code would be used as well as the advantages conferred on the speakers through using one or other of the codes.

In situations where you don't know the person you are speaking to and there is little shared knowledge, most speakers, regardless of class or level of education, will default to a variety of the **elaborated code**, as it is necessary to getting the message across. However, where there is a lot of shared knowledge between interlocutors who are known to each other, the **restricted code** is far more efficient, eliding unnecessary grammatical constructions and logical connectives as well as the tiresome formulations of "polite conversation". The question is then: when to use the elaborated code? Is it that middle class children are better judges of when to use which code, or that they are trained to automatically default to the elaborated code? Or is it the case that Working Class children aren't fully comfortable with or knowledgeable of the elaborated code? However, if both codes have a neutral value but are used without prejudice in different contexts by all levels of society and all ages, how can we account for society's use of how people speak to label them and subjugate them? The speaker is here setting out 'a complex set of interdependent propositions'; 'he can sum up a complex argument in a few words, and the full force of his opinions comes through without qualification or reservation'.

In addition Labov notes the common faults of so-called middle-class speech: 'Our work in the speech community makes it painfully obvious that in many ways working-class speakers are more effective narrators, reasoners, and debaters than many middle-class speakers who temporize, qualify, and lose their argument in a mass of irrelevant detail.' There is no clear relationship between language and logical thought.¹ Cazden showed that lower class 10 year olds needed much more prompting to give sufficient information for the interviewer to identify a picture from among a selection. The lack of explicit speech, giving clear information, seemed to support Bernstein's theory.² Bernstein says that lower working class children do not use elaborated speech at all, whereas others prefer to say that differences lie in the degree to which elaborated language is used.³ Also it is unclear that the ability to use elaborated speech in one type of situation guarantees its successful usage in other types.

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¹ Labov, William. 2001. *Principles of linguistic change, Vol 2: Social factors*. Blackwell.p. 124.

² Davis, Lawrence. 1985. The problem of social class grouping in sociolinguistic research. *American Speech* 60(3): pp. 214-221.

³ Moore, R.& Maton, K(2001) Founding the sociology of knowledge: Basil Bernstein, intellectual fields and theepistemic device, in Morais, A., Neves, I., Davies, B. & Daniels, H. (Eds.) "Towards a Sociology of Pedagogy". NewYork, Peter Lang, pp.153-182.