

COGNITIVE ASPECTS OF SOCIAL STATUS IN LANGUAGE

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Abstract. This study investigates the cognitive dimensions of social status, emphasizing how social hierarchies are mentally conceptualized and linguistically encoded.

Key words: Social status, cognitive aspects, politeness theory, gender, discourse, respectful address, linguistic variation.

The evaluation of social status is not only a sociological phenomenon but also a cognitive process. It involves interpreting cues such as language use, dress, behavior, and social roles to determine an individual's position within a group. Language, in particular, plays a crucial role: through forms of address, politeness strategies, and speech styles, speakers signal and interpret social hierarchies. These linguistic markers of status vary across cultures and languages, offering rich material for cross-linguistic and cognitive comparison.

In essence, the evaluation of social status reflects how individuals mentally structure their social world and how societies maintain order through implicit and explicit markers of rank and respect. The following overview presents key researchers and their contributions, supported with examples.

Brown and Levinson developed Politeness Theory, emphasizing that language choices, such as indirect speech, deferential terms, or honorifics, often reflect power dynamics and social ranking. In many cultures, higher-status individuals are addressed more formally, while lower-status speakers employ strategies of politeness and mitigation. Brown and Levinson explain how politeness strategies in language are influenced by social hierarchies: The greater the social distance and the more powerful the addressee, the more polite the speaker must be¹. This indicates that individuals adjust their language to show deference to those of higher social status.

Tannen observed that men and women often adopt different linguistic strategies reflecting either status or solidarity. For instance, men may focus on asserting dominance or independence, while women may prioritize connection and support, revealing implicit social status structures. Tannen observes gendered communication styles that reflect underlying status dynamics: The chivalrous man who holds a door open or signals a woman to go ahead of him when he's driving is negotiating both status and connection². This illustrates how conversational behaviors can simultaneously express social status and relational intentions.

Van Dijk analyzed how elite discourse in media and politics reproduces social hierarchies. Power is maintained through subtle linguistic structures that favor dominant

¹Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge University Press.

² Tannen, D. (1990). *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. Ballantine Books.

groups and marginalize others, reinforcing societal status distinctions. Van Dijk explores how discourse structures can reflect and perpetuate social inequalities: Those who control public discourse... are able to influence the minds of others in subtle ways³. This underscores the role of language in maintaining the dominance of certain social groups.

When analyzing the cognitive aspects of social status, Construction Grammar serves as a valuable linguistic framework. In this study, the constructive linguistic data used to analyze social status includes various grammatical and lexical constructions that encode politeness, hierarchy, and deference. The methodology consists of selecting, categorizing, and analyzing real-world examples from authentic sources such as spoken corpora, literary texts, and online communication platforms.

1. Politeness Constructions: Would you mind stepping aside for a moment?⁴, Could I possibly get a glass of water?⁵;

2. Deferential Address Forms: Yes, Sir. I understand completely⁶, Excuse me, Ma'am, may I assist you?;

3. Titles and Hierarchical Address Formulae: Your Excellency, we welcome you to the state banquet⁷, The Right Honourable Margaret Thatcher⁸;

4. Passive Constructions: You are hereby requested to vacate the premises.⁹, It has been decided that all staff must attend¹⁰.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that social status is deeply embedded in the cognitive and linguistic practices of societies. Language acts not merely as a communicative tool but as a medium through which social hierarchies are conceptualized, maintained, and negotiated. The works of Brown & Levinson, Tannen, and Van Dijk collectively show how politeness strategies, gendered communication, and elite discourse contribute to the implicit encoding of status. Through the lens of Construction Grammar, the analysis of real-world language use - ranging from polite requests to hierarchical address forms - reveals consistent structural patterns that reflect respect, deference, and authority. Thus, the integration of cognitive theory and linguistic analysis offers a comprehensive understanding of how social status is shaped and signaled through language.

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⁴ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Bloomsbury, 2003, p. 143.

⁵ BBC Interview with Benedict Cumberbatch, April 2015. Transcript published in *The Guardian*, April 7, 2015, paragraph 8.

⁶ *The King's Speech* (film screenplay), Seidler, David, Faber & Faber, 2010, p. 22.

⁷ Remarks by President Barack Obama, White House Archives, State Dinner Speech, March 2014, paragraph 2.

⁸ Hansard, UK Parliament Record, Volume 117, 1987, Column 442.

⁹ Eviction Notice Form 1430, U.S. Court Forms, 2020, Section B, Line 3.

¹⁰ Oxford University Admin Board Memo, March 2021, Document Code: ADM/0319, p. 2.



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