

Different Language Variants and Social Class

Yimin Zhang*, Ye Liang

Rocket Force University of Engineering, Xi'an, China

Abstract: This paper explains the relationship between the language and social class. Different people from different social class speak in a different way, and language is the representation of people's social status. The purpose of this paper is to find these differences and their causes, then try to make clear the relationship between linguistic variables and social class. At last, this paper advocates that we should avoid language prejudices on the language variants which lower-class people use.

Keywords: Language; Social Class; Language Variants.

1. Introduction

"Once you open your mouth, you are placed". This is a famous sentence in the play *Pygmalion*, which means that people can read a lot about somebody from his or her words. "your speech contains a lot of information about yourself-education, birth of place... language and social class are closely related" [7] (Liu & Wen, 2006, p.196).

Language and social class are always the kernel study of the social factor that influences the language choice. People all know that language is not merely a means of communication, it also represents the social classification and stratification. "One person can draw conclusions about another person's character and abilities simply on the basis of how that person speaks, regardless of the content of what they say" [1](Hudson, 2000, p.206). Hudson's analysis suggested that language could not only reflect one's personality and social status, but also reflect the social prejudices on those who spoke 'lower-class language'.

Different social groups use different linguistic variables which includes grammatical, phonetic differences. Upper social-class people's languages are always regarded as prestigious and standard, while the lower social-class people's languages are treated as non-standard or inferior. These are the phenomena of sociolinguistics, and worth discussing and analyzing.

There exists a discussion which says that if people want to study the language variations, the first thing that needs to pay attention is the social class. Social class is an important factor that influences the linguistic behaviors or language choices. Therefore, this study mainly focuses on the language choices and social class.

This paper will first discuss the William Labov's Department Store Study and Peter Trudgill's study of language and social class. Then it goes to the discussion of different linguistic variables related to different social classes and their causes. The purpose of this paper is to find these differences and their causes, then try to make clear the relationship between linguistic variables and social class. At last, this paper advocates that we should avoid language prejudices on the language variants which lower-class people use.

2. William Labov's Department Store study and Peter Trudgill's study

In the study of language and social class, William Labov

and Peter Trudgill are two famous sociolinguists who made great achievements. Labov's Department Store Study and Trudgill's study of variants of 'scarecrow' and varied pronunciations in different regions and social classes of Britain all reveal that social class and linguistic variables are closely related.

The paper first discusses here is the Labov's well-known test of the presence and absence of the pronunciation of postvocalic (r) in words like "fourth" "floor" in New York City. And he chose three stores: Sacks, Macy's and Klein's. He first hypothesized that the New York City speakers vary with their pronunciation (r) according to their social status. He interviewed the salespeople by asking them a question that would elicit the answer "fourth floor."

William Labov found that Salespeople, who were influenced by their customers, spoke with the postvocalic (r) differently. Salespeople in the highest ranked stores had the most (r), those in the middle-ranked store had an intermediate (r), and those in the lowest ranked store had the least (r). Labov's study suggests that the pronunciation (r) in New York City is correlated, at least loosely, with social stratification of the speakers. [4](1972, Labov) Therefore, it can be concluded that people in different socio-economic backgrounds speaks differently and with different accents.

Labov explicitly delineated: "the patterns of stratification by class and style and, more importantly, successfully introduced class as an indispensable sociolinguistic variable" [6](Hu, 2010, p.158). Labov's study presents us with a picture that shows hierarchical social classes and the different accents associated with the social classes. The same things also happen in other countries. In China, for example, people who speak Mandarin Chinese are always considered higher social class in the society than those with dialects.

Peter Trudgill, another great sociolinguist also analyzed the relationships between language and social class. He contended that in British rural areas, where people are always considered lower-class in society, they spoke their regional dialects. While higher-class spoke a dialect which we call it standard English. In standard English, there is only one word 'scarecrow', while in other regions people have other kinds of name for it: bogle, flay-crow, mawpin, mawkin, bird-scarer, moggy, shay, guy, bogeyman, shuft, rook-scarer and several others [5] (Trudgill, 2000).

In case of accent, there are differences in Great Britain. The below chart shows the different pronunciation of 'home' in different British cities and among varied social classes.

	Edinburgh	Newcastle	Liverpool	Bradford	Dudley	Norwich	London
RP	həʊm	həʊm	həʊm	həʊm	həʊm	həʊm	həʊm
middle class	ho:m	ho:m	houm	houm	houm	hu:m	haʊm
	ho:m	huom	ho:m	ho:m	ɔʊm	hum	ʌʊm
lower class	he:m	hiem	o:m	ɔ:m	wum	um	æʊm
		jem					

Figure 1. Different pronunciation in different regions of the UK (Trudgill, 2000)

From the above chart, RP (Received Pronunciation) is the same for all the upper social class in different cities, for middle or lower class, the accents vary dramatically in those cities. Regional differences mainly manifest in the middle and lower class. It is clear that in different regions of Britain, people from different social class often speak with different accents. Regional dialect is also an important consideration in studying the language and social class.

Both Labov's and Trudgill's studies show that social class and different linguistic variables have close relationship. In order to get a more vivid picture of the whole linguistic environment and better understand the social factor that affects the linguistic variables, it is a necessity to concentrate on the study of language and social class

Language use may differ in accordance with the people's socio-economic backgrounds. Socio-economic backgrounds always play a vital role in choosing different dialects. It can be seen that higher-class people always have higher social status, they try to speak in a standard or respected ways to show their social positions. In China, the wealthy people or other high social class speak mandarin in public. For example, the president of school speaks standard mandarin on the formal occasions; or the executive of a company also speaks standard mandarin in public places instead of dialect. On the contrary, the lower-middle classes use more dialects in their lives. Here the socio-economic background affects the language variants people choose to communicate to a large extent (Wang, 1999). And of course, the accents people have in different socio-economic backgrounds are different as well. Just as what Labov's study suggests, the upper-class people in the New York City have the most postvocalic (r), while the middle class have the intermediate and the lower class have the least. All these reflect the importance of the socio-economic background on the dialect people choose to speak.

Another significant influence on linguistic variables is the educational background. Different languages people use may be related to people's varied degrees of education. Usually,

well-educated people use more standard languages, less-educated people use more dialects or non-standard languages. When running cross the sentences like "I can't nothing" "He like eating" "He don't know it, do he?" or any other expression like these, people may first think that people who speak like this are less educated or uneducated. For an educated person, sentences like "I can't nothing" "He like eating" are regarded grammatically wrong. While the lower-class people would think that they are correct. And in case of the accent, there are many differences for people from different educational backgrounds. Just as what mentioned above, in the United Kingdom, educated people often speak RP (Received Pronunciation) in nearly all the regions in these cities, while those who live in countryside are often regarded as uneducated people, they speak other dialects [5] (Trudgill, 2000). Therefore, the educational background is another important factor that influences the language choice and accents among different social groups.

Gender is also an influential factor that has an effect on linguistic choices and pronunciations. It is known to all that women's social class is lower than that of men, so this makes women speak a language in a different way from their male fellows. In women's language register, women tend to use more different expressions compared with men's. Just as Robin Lakoff suggests that it is not the language itself but women's place in society that makes people linguistically behave in that way (1975). Lakoff's study denotes that women's place in the society is relatively lower, and women's voice is always weak and not as powerful as men. Women often adopt more polite and indirect linguistic behavior than men. For example, women may use the tag question to put up a plan, give an advice or seek confirmation. And women like use the statement with a rising tone in the end, for example, a wife may ask her husband "Dinner will be ready at seven o'clock?" [6](Hu, 2010). Therefore, the women's social class and is another reason that makes people choose language differently.

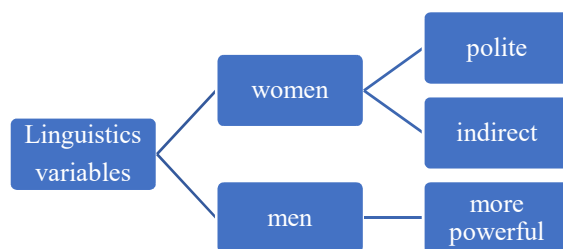


Figure 2. Gender difference in men's and women's talk

Regional difference is another significant reason that affects linguistic variables. It is known to us all that people in cities or in the capital areas may speak standard variants or,

standard language. While those who live in the remote areas or villages always speak other language variables, people usually call it non-standard language or dialects. In China,

people live in cities like Beijing always speak Mandarin, but those who live in villages or other remote areas like Guangxi always speak their own dialect. In today's society, if you speak a regional dialect while others speak standard language, people may think the former may have a higher social class, while the latter may be considered poor and comes from the lower class.

3. Linguistic Variables and Reasons

Trudgill announced that people in different regions in Britain speak differently, and these differences always represent the different social classes. For example, the difference between RP and other dialects. The RP users are thought of as the upper class, they have standard language variant and standard accent. But different regional dialects are often considered as middle or lower social class with other language variants or accents.

It is a quite interesting topic to discover something about the language and social class and the way different classes speak their own unique language variables. Sometimes this topic can be more dangerous because it contains the social discrimination towards those lower-class citizens. People should bear in mind that avoiding language "linguistic sexism" or language violence is quintessential to make a harmonious society.

4. Conclusion

Language is not only a means of communication, but also a reflection of social class. From Labov's and Trudgill's studies, it is obvious that language and social class are closely related to each other. Social class always has an impact on the language choices and accents and the linguistic variables are also the reflection of social class. Social class and linguistic variables have been a heated discussion for a long time. The reason why people should concentrate on this issue is that it can promote our awareness of the language use in the society and avoid social bias on the people who speak a dialect. And this phenomenon is widespread in nearly every country of the world.

To some degree, the social class determines the choice of

accents or dialects. Just like what are mentioned above. At the same time, the accents or dialects reflects people's social status or social class as well. These two factors are closely related to each other. Then the most important thing is that everyone in the society should be aware of the issue and have right opinions on it.

When it comes to the language prejudices, many people in society have bias against those who speak another dialect or with different accents. Obviously, this is a wrong behavior that people have to abandon. Every one of us ought to respect linguistic variables. In other words, people should pay respect to those who have different accents or dialects. A world without other languages or a society without other dialects are less colorful and lack creativity. In addition to standard language, these varieties or dialects are also part of the whole picture of linguistic environment.

Aiming to make us understand more about this sociolinguistic topic and language prejudices and to keep a harmonious relationship in daily life, this paper mainly discusses the relationship between social class and linguistic variables.

"Don't judge a person by appearance" should be replaced as "Don't judge a person by accent and language variables."

References

- [1] Hudson, R. A. (2000). *Sociolinguistics* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [2] Hong, C. (1999). Language and social class. *Journal of Huangshan college*, 1(3), 60-61.
- [3] Labov, W. (1966). *The social stratification of English in New York City*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- [4] Lakoff, R. (1975). *Language and Woman's Place*. New York: Harper & Row.
- [5] Trudgill, P. (2000). *Sociolinguistics: An introduction to language and society*. (4th ed.). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- [6] Zhuanglin Hu (2010). *Linguistics: A Course Book*, Beijing: Pekin University Press.
- [7] Runqing Liu, Xu Wen (2006). *Linguistics: A New Course Book*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.