

Social Status

(textbook chapter 4)

Overview

- ▶ Class and status
- ▶ Determining class
- ▶ Class and speech style
- ▶ Social mobility
- ▶ Status and standards

Class and language - the basics

- ▶ Societies are divided into multiple groups
- ▶ Some groups have higher status or prestige
- ▶ Language use is variable
 - ▶ Particular variants become associated with prestige groups...
 - ▶ ... and thus behave in particular ways
 - ▶ Higher status people use more prestige variants
 - ▶ Everybody uses more prestige variants in more formal situations

Class

- ▶ Marx and Engels 1848
 - ▶ Capitalists vs. proletariat
- ▶ Sociologists
 - ▶ Lifestyles, life chances

What “class” *doesn't* mean

- ▶ **Income**

- ▶ Higher class than income: teachers, artists, writers
- ▶ Higher income than class: dope dealers?

- ▶ **Sophistication**

- ▶ “You got no class!”
- ▶ ... although upper-class behaviors often become *seen* as more sophisticated, at least until lower-class people adopt them
 - ▶ Preppy clothing brands, Courvoisier

Determining class

- ▶ (In order to do studies correlating class and linguistic behavior)
- ▶ You can use a complex scorecard (Trudgill)
 - ▶ Type of home, neighborhood, income, occupational prestige
- ▶ ... or something simpler
 - ▶ Occupational prestige alone
 - ▶ Very high levels of agreement about which jobs are considered higher or lower prestige

Discussion

- ▶ Compare how people online define *white trash*, *chav*, *bogan*, *ned*, and *wigger*. How many definitions overtly mention class? How many discuss language features?

TPS: give each job a “prestige score” 0 = very low,
100 = very high

- ▶ Priest
- ▶ Barber
- ▶ Dentist
- ▶ Symphony orchestra musician
- ▶ Coal miner

(1963) Survey says...

- ▶ Priest: **86**
- ▶ Barber: **63**
- ▶ Dentist: **88**
- ▶ Symphony orchestra musician: **78**
- ▶ Coal miner: **50**

More subtle: *borrowed prestige*

- ▶ Our setting and the role we're playing affect how we speak
- ▶ Employees in “fancy” stores use higher prestige language forms than those in less fancy stores
 - ▶ Even though their actual occupations and income are the same
- ▶ Details in Labov' study

Discussion

- ▶ Have you ever been in a situation where you worried that your speech wasn't “fancy” enough? What happened?

Social aspirations

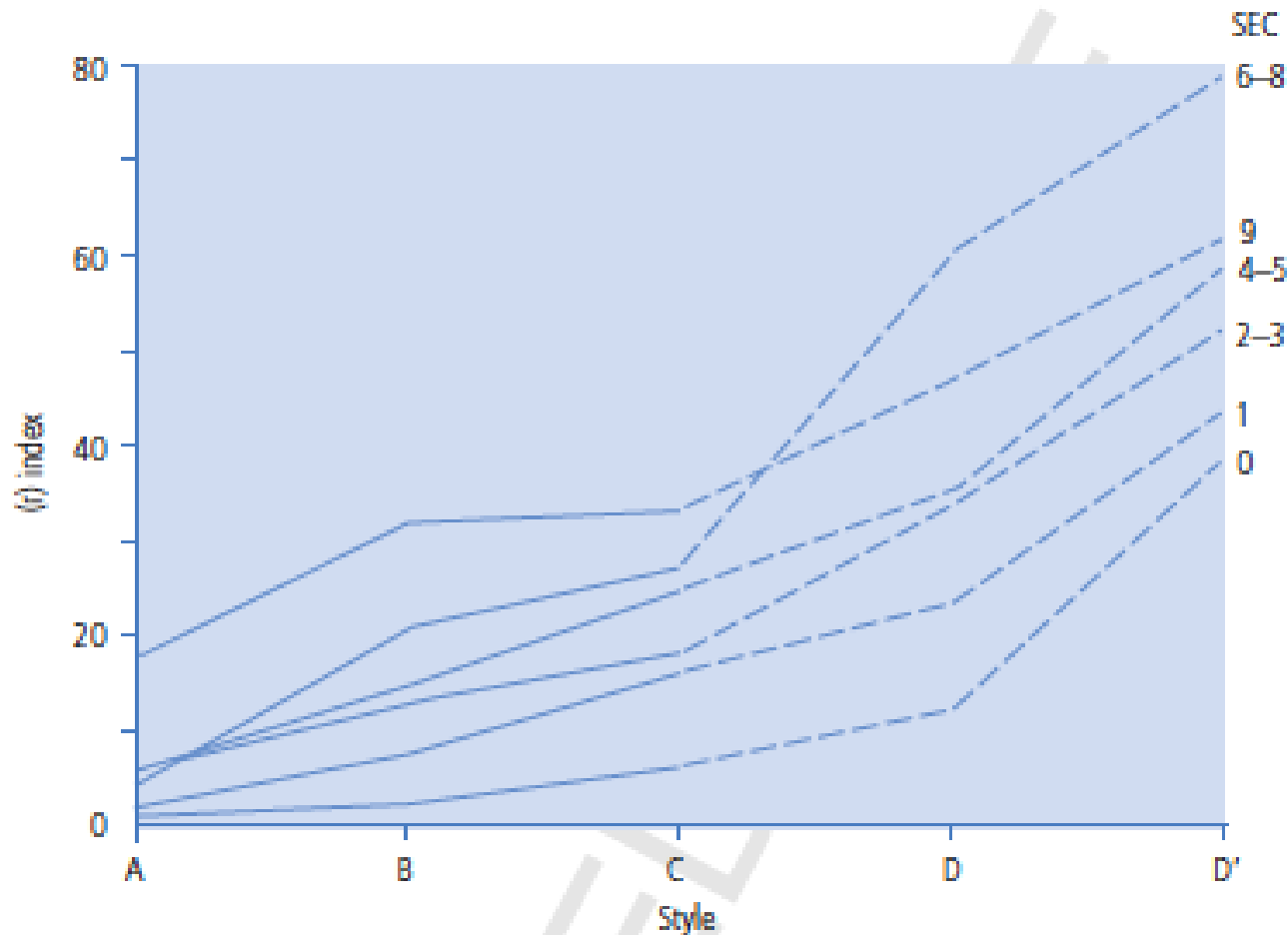
- ▶ We talk like who we want to be
 - ▶ Chambers (1995)

Class and speech style

- ▶ In more formal situations, we change our speech to sound more like the classes above us
- ▶ “A careful pipe-fitter spoke like a casual salesman” (Labov)

Class and speech style

(from Labov 1972, textbook page 50)



Crossover effect

- ▶ Perfect correlation of classes and styles
 - ▶ Higher class = higher use of prestige forms
 - ▶ More formal style = higher use of prestige forms
- ▶ Exception: the second-highest class uses even more prestige forms than the highest, in very formal styles
- ▶ **Social hypercorrection:** they overdo the requirements of the situation
- ▶ This pattern has been found in many studies

Hypercorrection...

- ▶ Hypercorrection is a pronunciation, word form, or grammatical construction produced by mistaken analogy with standard usage out of a desire to be linguistically correct.
- ▶ It mainly results from over-application of a perceived rule of grammar.

Why does this happen?

- ▶ Maybe *linguistic insecurity* - people trying to move up the social scale “play it safe”
 - ▶ At least when they’re paying attention to their speech
- ▶ Maybe *linguistic market effects*
 - ▶ It’s not just your class that matters, but whether your job requires a lot of standard language

What kind of linguistic forms are involved in style/class differences?

- ▶ Things that people notice and associate with a particular class
 - ▶ **Sociolinguistic markers:** noticed, involved in style shifting
 - ▶ **Stereotypes:** “super-markers,” very noticed, talked about
- ▶ Things that people don’t notice, but that are used more by one class or social group
 - ▶ **Sociolinguistic indicators:** not involved in style shifting

Discussion

- ▶ Has your computer's automatic grammar checker ever flagged something that you're sure was completely fine?

Discussion

- ▶ Are there any concepts discussed in the chapter on **place** that can usefully be applied to a discussion of **social status**? What do isolation, contact, migration, or choice mean in this context?

Social mobility

- ▶ How hard is it to move between classes in your society?

(Almost) no mobility

- ▶ If moving between classes is almost impossible, the groups are often known as **castes rather than classes**
 - ▶ Example: traditional Indian Hindu culture
 - ▶ Very different language features very tightly linked to each class

Limited mobility (1)

- ▶ England, 19th century
- ▶ People moving up the social ladder desperately try to learn speech features of higher classes (or avoid lower features)
- ▶ Many *prescriptive* language guidebooks and grammars published at this time
- ▶ Authors competed to see who could come up with the strictest rules!

Limited mobility (2)

- ▶ 20th century England: “U vs. non-U” speech (Mitford, Ross)

U	Non-U
Graveyard	Cemetery
Die	Pass on
Rich	Wealthy
What?	Pardon?

Greater mobility

- ▶ More exposure to the language of different classes
- ▶ If a social group gains status, their language can, too
 - ▶ For example, Hungarian working-class features (Kontra)

Discussion

- ▶ Consider the U and non-U words listed in table 4.3 (you can find more online). Why do you think the speech of the higher classes is more direct and less euphemistic?

Status and standards

- ▶ The language of the higher social groups usually becomes the *standard* language of the community, the thing taught in schools and heard in the media
 - ▶ “Correct” language
- ▶ ... but there’s nothing in the language itself that makes it correct
 - ▶ It’s all about attitudes and assumptions

Class and education

- ▶ Bernstein (1961a) suggested that middle-class and working-class kids used language in different ways and thus *thought* differently
 - ▶ **Elaborated code:** middle-class, more like school
 - ▶ **Restricted code:** working-class, not useful for school
- ▶ More on this in chapter 14 (education)

Covert and overt prestige

- ▶ Trudgill
- ▶ **Overt prestige:** “official” prestige, status
 - ▶ Talking posh, fancy, grand
 - ▶ Language features associated with school, media
- ▶ **Covert prestige:** “street credibility,” unofficial prestige
 - ▶ Street talk, local speech

Class and region

- ▶ The higher the class, the smaller the regional differences
- ▶ For example, lawyers or university professors from different places sound more alike than security guards or bus drivers from different places

Class categories aren't the same everywhere

- ▶ Limited class differences in rural villages
- ▶ In some societies, working-class vs. middle-class isn't the relevant distinction
 - ▶ Guyana, “Cane Walk”: what mattered was whether you worked in the sugar fields or not (Rickford)

Discussion

- ▶ Students sometimes have trouble distinguishing between wealth and class/status, especially students who live in fairly mobile societies. Can you think of people/professions who earn a lot of money, but aren't seen as members of the upper classes? Or, conversely, people/professions that are respected, but don't pay all that well?

Discussion

- ▶ The textbook mentions *chav* and *trash*. Can you think of any terms that work the other way around - derogatory terms for people with money, or the ways that they behave? Do any of those terms distinguish between “new money” and “old money”?

Exercise (text Ch. 4, no. 3)

- ▶ Identify which of the following non-standard forms you hear people use where you come from:
 - ▶ *Ain't*
 - ▶ *I seen it*
 - ▶ *I done it*
 - ▶ *I can't see nothing*
 - ▶ *Him and me are going*

Exercise (text Ch. 4, no. 5)

- ▶ Go back to table 4.2 in the chapter, which lists occupational prestige scores. Ask a bunch of people to give scores to the same jobs today, from 0 for very low prestige to 100 for very high prestige (ideally, you should present the jobs in a different order)
- ▶ Find the average score for each occupation
- ▶ Are the rankings similar to the earlier studies (and to each other)?
- ▶ Did any of your respondents offer explanations for the scores they gave?
- ▶ What explanations can you offer for any differences?