

## *Language and social class*

If you are an English-speaker you will be able to estimate the relative social status of the following speakers solely on the basis of the linguistic evidence given here:

Speaker A	Speaker B
<i>I done it yesterday</i>	<i>I did it yesterday</i>
<i>He ain't got it</i>	<i>He hasn't got it</i>
<i>It was her what said it</i>	<i>It was her that said it</i>

If you heard these speakers say these things you would guess that B was of higher social status than A, and you would almost certainly be right. How is it that we are able to do this sort of thing?

The answer lies in the existence of varieties of language which have come to be called *social-class dialects*. There are grammatical differences between the speech of these two speakers which give us clues about their social backgrounds. It is also probable, although this is not indicated on the printed page, that these differences will be accompanied by phonetic and phonological differences — that is to say, there are also different *social-class accents*. The internal differentiation of human societies is reflected in their languages. Different social groups use different linguistic varieties, and as experienced members of a speech community we [...] have learnt to classify speakers accordingly. Why does social differentiation have this effect on language?

We may note parallels between the development of these social varieties and the development of regional varieties: in both cases *barriers* and *distance* appear to be relevant. Dialectologists have found that regional-dialect boundaries often coincide with *geographical* barriers, such as mountains, swamps or rivers: for example, all local-dialect speakers in the areas of Britain north of the river Humber (between Lincolnshire and Yorkshire) still have a monophthong in words like *house* ('*hoose*' [hu:s], whereas speakers south of the river have had some kind of [haus]-type diphthong for several hundred years. It also seems to be the case that the greater the geographical distance between two dialects the more dissimilar they are linguistically: for instance, those regional varieties of British English which are most unlike the speech of London are undoubtedly those of the north-east of Scotland — Buchan, for example. The development of social varieties can perhaps be explained in the same sort of way — in terms of *social* barriers and *social* distance. The diffusion of a linguistic feature through a society may be halted by barriers of social class, age, race, religion or other factors. And social distance may have the same sort of effect as geographical distance: a linguistic innovation that begins amongst, say, the highest social group will affect the lowest social group last, if at all. (We must be careful, however, not to explain all social differences

of language in these entirely mechanical terms since, as we saw in Chapter 1, *attitudes* to language clearly play an important role in preserving or removing dialect differences.)

35 Of the many forms of social differentiation, for example, by class, age, sex, race or religion, we shall concentrate in this chapter on the particular type of social differentiation illustrated in the examples of speakers A and B — *social stratification*. Social stratification is a term used to refer to any hierarchical ordering of groups within a society. In the industrialized societies of the West this takes the form of stratification into social classes, and gives rise linguistically to social-class  
40 dialects. (The whole question of social class is in fact somewhat controversial, especially since sociologists are not agreed as to the exact nature, definition or existence of social classes [...].)

Social-class stratification is not universal, however. In India, for example, society is stratified into different *castes*. As far as the linguist is concerned, *caste dialects* are in some ways easier to study and describe than social-class dialects. This is because castes are stable, clearly named  
45 groups, rigidly separated from each other, with hereditary membership and with little possibility of movement from one caste to another. [...].

In the class societies of the English-speaking world the social situation is much more fluid, and the linguistic situation is therefore rather more complex, at least in certain respects. Social classes are not clearly defined or labelled entities but simply aggregates of people with similar social and economic characteristics; and social mobility — movement up or down the social hierarchy — is  
50 perfectly possible. This makes things much more difficult for any linguist who wishes to describe a particular variety — the more heterogeneous a society is, the more heterogeneous is its language.

For many years the linguist's reaction to this complexity was generally to ignore it — in two rather different ways. Many linguists concentrated their studies on the *idiolect* — the speech of one person at one time in one style — which was thought (largely erroneously [...]) to be more regular  
55 than the speech of the community as a whole. Dialectologists, on the other hand, concentrated on the speech of rural informants, and in particular on that of elderly people of little education or travel experience, in small isolated villages, [...mainly because] there was a feeling that hidden somewhere in the speech of older, uneducated people were the 'real' or 'pure' dialects which were steadily being corrupted by the standard variety [...] (It turns out that the 'pure' homogeneous  
60 dialect is also largely a mythical concept: all language is subject to stylistic and social differentiation, because all human communities are functionally differentiated and heterogeneous to varying degrees. All language varieties are subject to change. There is, therefore, an element of differentiation even in the most isolated conservative rural dialect.)

From: c. 2 in P. Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics. An Introduction to Language and Society*,  
London, Penguin, 1983 (rev. ed.), pp. 34-35.

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Nome e cognome: \_\_\_\_\_

**Read the attached text (“Language and social class”) and do the exercises below.**

**Part A: Approaching the text**

**Exercise 1:** *In the attached text there are 7 indented paragraphs. Match each thematic section below (1., 2., 3., 4.) with the paragraph(s) which is / are conceptually related to it.*

Ex. 1. Native speakers’ language awareness (par. \_\_No. 6-7\_\_)

**DO NOT INSERT THE SAME PARAGRAPH INTO MORE THAN ONE SUB-HEADING**

- |   |               |
|---|---------------|
| 1. Native speakers’ language awareness                        | (par. _____ ) |
| 2. Effects of social differentiation on grammar and phonology | (par. _____ ) |
| 3. Analogies between regional and social dialects             | (par. _____ ) |
| 4. Social-class dialects: relativity and complexity           | (par. _____ ) |

**Exercise 2:** *Match each connective below with the function it performs in the text by filling the corresponding blank with either*

- a** (for Additive)  
**b** (for Concessive)  
**c** (for Causal)  
or **d** (for Contrastive).

**(PAY ATTENTION TO THE REFERENCE LINE IN BRACKETS AND WRITE ONLY ONE LETTER IN EACH BLANK)**

- |                              |       |
|------------------------------|-------|
| 1. although (l. 11)          | _____ |
| 2. for example (l. 20)       | _____ |
| 3. whereas (l. 22)           | _____ |
| 4. also (l. 23)              | _____ |
| 5. however (l. 31)           | _____ |
| 6. since (l. 39)             | _____ |
| 7. on the other hand (l. 55) | _____ |
| 8. therefore (l. 62)         | _____ |

**Part B: Intensive reading**

**Exercise 3:** *Read the text carefully and tick ( ) the appropriate answer:*

- What is the overall function of the chapter from which this excerpt has been taken?
  - to put forward a new theory to explain the development of linguistic varieties
  - to investigate the influence of social stratification on language use
  - to explore the relationships between social accents and social dialects
- This text is an extract from a textbook called *Sociolinguistics. An Introduction to Language and Society*. Can you guess which of the following topics is NOT likely to be dealt with systematically in the book?

How Languages Are Learned

Language and Context

Language and Ethnic Group

**Exercise 4:** Making reference to the text, decide whether the following statements are **TRUE (T)**, or **FALSE (F)**, or **INCOMPLETE (I)** paraphrases of the information conveyed in the text (**N.B.:** the various statements appear in the order in which the information is presented in the text):

- According to the author, social-class accents distinguish social differences in spoken language ( \_\_\_ )
- Social differences of language may be determined by social barriers and social distance ( \_\_\_ )
- Social stratification in the West can be compared to caste society in the East, each having its own characteristic traits ( \_\_\_ )
- For many years a lot of linguists wrongly considered the *idiolect* to be less subject to change than the speech of the community as a whole ( \_\_\_ )
- According to the author, original, uncorrupted dialect forms can be found amongst the most elderly and isolated segment of a population ( \_\_\_ )

**Exercise 5:** The following is a list of synonyms for words/expressions which appear in the text in the paragraph indicated in brackets and in the order given on the list. Find the corresponding words/expressions and write them down, together with their respective line number:

- assess [verb] (par. 1) \_\_\_\_\_ (line \_\_\_)
- indications / signs / hints (par. 2) \_\_\_\_\_ (line \_\_\_)
- skilled / knowledgeable [adj.] (par.2) \_\_\_\_\_ (line \_\_\_)
- consequently / as a result of this (par. 2) \_\_\_\_\_ (line \_\_\_)
- pertinent (par. 3) \_\_\_\_\_ (line \_\_\_)
- borders [pl. noun] (par. 3) \_\_\_\_\_ (line \_\_\_)
- marsh / wet land (par. 3) \_\_\_\_\_ (line \_\_\_)
- circulation (par. 3) \_\_\_\_\_ (line \_\_\_)
- stopped (*past participle*) (par. 3) \_\_\_\_\_ (line \_\_\_)
- influence [verb] (par. 3) \_\_\_\_\_ (line \_\_\_)
- debatable (par. 4) \_\_\_\_\_ (line \_\_\_)
- unchanging (par. 5) \_\_\_\_\_ (line \_\_\_)

- |   |       |             |
|---|-------|-------------|
| 13. variable [adj.] (par. 6)            | _____ | (line ___ ) |
| 14. scale (par. 6)                      | _____ | (line ___ ) |
| 15. disregard / neglect [verb] (par. 7) | _____ | (line ___ ) |
| 16. illiterate [adj.] (par. 7)          | _____ | (line ___ ) |
| 17. constantly / progressively (par. 7) | _____ | (line ___ ) |

### Part C: Guided writing

**Exercise 6:** *Re-read the text's lines indicated in brackets and then complete the following paraphrases by circling ONE word/expression for each missing item:*

- (ll. 14-16) Sociolinguistic competence involves being able to classify speakers (like / as) belonging to different social groups on the grounds of the linguistic variety they use
- (ll. 27-29) Social class, age, race and religion, (among / between) other factors, may prove to be powerful barriers (who / which) prevent the diffusion of a linguistic feature through society.
- (ll. 52-53) For many years there (has been / was) a general tendency to ignore language variation.

**Exercise 7:** *What follows is an extract (pp. 39-40) from the follow-up of the text "Language and Social Class". It describes the results of a large-scale survey of the speech of New York conducted by the American linguist William Labov in 1966 and evaluates them against previously- held views. Complete the extract by choosing one option for each missing item from the list below:*

(1) developed by Labov have proved to be very significant for the study of social-class dialects and accents. The methods of traditional dialectology (2) be adequate for the description of caste dialects (though even this is (3)) since (4) individual, however selected, stands a fair chance of (5) not too different from the caste group as a whole. But it is not possible to select any single speaker and to generalize from (6) to the rest of the speakers in his social-class group. This was an important point (7) was demonstrated (8) Labov.

The speech of a single speaker (his idiolect) may differ considerably from those of (9) like him. (10), it may also be internally very inconsistent. The speech of (11) New Yorkers appeared to vary in a completely random and unpredictable manner. [...] Sometimes they would say *beard* and *bad* in the same way, sometimes they would (12) a difference. Linguists have traditionally called this 'free variation'. Labov (13), however, that the variation is not free. Viewed against the background of the speech community as a whole the variation was not random but determined by extralinguistic factors in (14) predictable way. That is, the researcher could not predict on any one occasion (15) an individual would say *cah* or *car*, but he could show that, if he was of a certain social class, age and sex, he (16) one or other variant approximately *x* per cent of the time, on average, in a given situation. The idiolect might appear random, but the speech community was quite predictable.

- |     |                |             |             |
|-----|----------------|-------------|-------------|
| (1) | a. The methods | b. Methods  | c. A method |
| (2) | a. will        | b. may      | c. need to  |
| (3) | a. doubtless   | b. doubting | c. doubtful |
| (4) | a. any         | b. some     | c. no       |
| (5) | a. being       | b. be       | c. to be    |
| (6) | a. his         | b. he       | c. him      |

- |      |              |              |                    |
|------|--------------|--------------|--------------------|
| (7)  | a. who       | b. whom      | c. that            |
| (8)  | a. by        | b. from      | c. since           |
| (9)  | a. other     | b. the other | c. others          |
| (10) | a. Therefore | b. Moreover  | c. Nevertheless    |
| (11) | a. most      | b. the most  | c. most of         |
| (12) | a. do        | b. make      | c. cause           |
| (13) | a. show      | b. shown     | c. showed          |
| (14) | a. a quite   | b. quite a   | c. quite           |
| (15) | a. that      | b. how       | c. whether         |
| (16) | a. used      | b. would use | c. would have used |

**Exercise 8:** *Given that "all language is subject to stylistic and social differentiation, because all human communities are functionally differentiated and heterogeneous to varying degrees", DISCUSS (in approx. 200 words) the impact of globalisation on language from a sociolinguistic point of view. Use the space below.*