



## RESEARCH PAPER

# An empirical study of the relationship between social class and language variation

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### Article Information

Received: 17 October 2025  
Revised: 28 November 2025  
Accepted: 27 December 2025  
Available online: 31 December 2025

### Keywords:

Social class  
Language variation  
Sociolinguistics  
Speech patterns  
Linguistic inequality

### Abstract

The variation in language represents one of the key topics in the field of sociolinguistics since it demonstrates how the social determinants can influence linguistic behavior. Among such determinants, social class is especially important in the distribution of the language use patterns. In the current article, the author explores the empirical relationship between social class and language variation, where the research problem is the presence of phonological, lexical, and syntactic variations among the speakers placed in different socio-economic levels. With the help of survey information, the sections of recorded speech, and observation, the work evidences that the linguistic variation is linked with the social rank in an orderly fashion and does not occur due to the chance or just personal reasons. The findings support the existing sociolinguistic arguments as well as the significance of social structure in understanding language change and variation.

## 1. Introduction

Language is not a fixed form of communication, but a social system in motion, which is not homogeneously uniform. It is constantly remodelled according to the socio-environmental environment. Regional, age, gender, ethnic, contextual, and other variables affect linguistic behaviour in ways that are crucial, but social class has a special place in influencing such behaviour. Sociolinguistics aims to examine the mutuality of language and society thus confirming that language can never be decoupled of social structures that shape the experiences of the speakers. The social class, which is often operationalized using education level, occupation, income and perceived prestige, has a significant influence on the linguistic choices of individuals, as well as, their ability to adjust language to different situations. Therefore, the functions of language are not simply a communicative means,

but a much more powerful signifier of social identity and group belonging. The connection between social status and language variation has become an issue of wide scholarly interest among sociolinguists and many scholars have made important contributions at various points in time. One of the pioneering and most significant works was done by William Labov (1966) whose empirical research in New York City marked a turning point in the discipline. Labov proved that linguistic differentiation, in particular, post-vocalic /r/ articulation, was socio-systematically related with social stratum. Fluctuations in the use of prestigious or standard forms were stronger by speakers of higher classes, and less strong by the speakers of the working classes, who more often used non-standard forms. Another concept presented by labor is the style-shifting concept which clarifies the ways in which speakers vary their language depending on social situations and the state of formality. His conclusions offered

strong arguments that language variation is not randomly distributed in society. The other classic work came out of the work of Basil Bernstein (1971) who propounded the ideas of restricted and elaborated codes in an attempt to explain variations in language use among different socio-economic classes. Bernstein suggested that working-class speakers generally speak with limited codes, context-specific, and based on mutual knowledge between interlocutors, middle-class speakers tend to talk using elaborated code, more explicit, detailed and syntactically elaborate codes. His theory has emphasised the relationship between language, socialisation and education and left significant impact on further research of linguistic inequality and school performance. Although there are still controversies about the propositions of Bernstein, they still shed light to the influence of the social class on linguistic behavior.

Further insights were added by Peter Trudgill (1974) who discussed the relationship between language, social stratification and prestige. Trudgill pointed out that linguistic variants were socialized and that linguistic workers tend to use specific forms in order to be accepted or not to be stigmatized. He gave evidence that non-standard forms are often linked to lower classes, whereas standard forms are linked to high status and prestige. Besides, Trudgill observed that speakers can use prestigious forms too much in formal situations, thus strengthening the association between language use and social identity. Combined, the research articles by Labov (1966), Bernstein (1971), and Trudgill (1974) present a sound theoretical basis of the systematic correlation between social class and linguistic variation.

The main objectives of the study are to examine the relationship between social class and linguistic variation, and to identify phonological, lexical, and syntactic differences across various social groups. The study also aims to investigate the influence of educational level and occupational status on language use. Furthermore, it seeks to contribute empirical data to sociolinguistic theories related to patterns of linguistic variation.

## 2. Research Methodology

The current research applies the empirical and descriptive research paradigm that is intended to examine the correlation between social class and linguistic variation in an organized way. The mixed-method was used, which combines qualitative and quantitative methods to gain a holistic idea of linguistic patterns among various social groups. The factual aspect of the research allows one to observe and measure the language usage directly and the descriptive framework allows identifying and describing the differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar constructions without controlling the research environment. This synergy in methodology is certain to have the findings rooted in real language behaviors and evidence that can be quantified.

The study population included 90 respondents who took part in the research based on the three different social classes, upper, middle and working classes. Participants were placed into these categories in a very careful manner through the use

of the socio-economic factors like level of education, occupation, and income. Such stratification of sampling strategy guaranteed equal representation of each of the social classes and increased the advantages of intergroup comparisons. The sample was selected with a variety of backgrounds to obtain the natural variation in language and reduce the bias due to region or context.

This was done by using various instruments to ensure that data collection was supported by triangulation to increase the validity of the study. The structured questionnaires were used to obtain the detailed information on the socio-economic conditions and background data of the participants. Taped interviews were made so as to get veritable samples of the spoken language and, hence, enable an owl-eyed examination of the phonological, lexical and syntactic characteristics. Also, the notes were observed to record the informal speech patterns in the natural environments and this was done to offer information on how language is used in everyday situations, which might not be detected in the formal interviews.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were combined to analyze the data that was collected. The frequency analysis was used to determine the frequency of certain linguistic variables within and between classes. The use of comparative analysis was to analyze the differences and similarities in the use of languages among upper, middle and working classes. In the case of qualitative data, patterns, social meanings, and the effects of contexts were interpreted by using thematic analysis to explain speech behavior. A combination between these analytical approaches provided a methodological and comprehensive study of the role of social class in linguistic variation.

## 3. Result Analysis and Discussion

The data analysis established definite tendencies of phonological difference by social classes, which means that the pronunciation is highly dependent on social background. It was observed that the speakers in upper classes were more conformed to the standard pronunciation patterns and they frequently use socially prestigious phonological structures which are linked to formal education and high social environments. Conversely, non-standard phonological variation that was typical of local or regional community speech was common in the speech of working-class speakers. Though stigmatized in many countries, they are significant in identifying groups. The middle-class speakers were in a state of mix between standard and non-standard pronunciation; moreover, they were also inclined to style-shifting and change their speech based on the formality of the situation and social context under which they were communicating.

Another important indicator of social differences in classes was also lexical variation. The research revealed that speakers in the upper classes tended to use more formal, technical and abstract vocabulary because they are more exposed to academic and work-related conditions. There was the balanced application of formal and informal lexical items in speakers of the middle-class that was dependent on the context. Conversely, colloquial

expressions and idiomatic expressions as well as terms that were specific to the region and deeply embedded in the daily interactions of the working classes were used more by the working-class speakers. Such differences in lexicon underline the importance of education, profession, and social networks in determining vocabularistic decisions and linguistic repertoires.

The connection between social class and language use was also demonstrated by syntactic variation. High and intermediate speakers usually used more complicated sentence construction, which consisted of the longer sentences, and with more subordinate clauses. It was more grammatically elaborated and explicit in their speech. Working-class speech, in their turn, was defined by the use of little more complicated patterns of speech and more direct way of expression. This discovery is very much in line with the theory of restricted and elaborated codes by Bernstein which states that complexity in languages is created due to socialization process and communicative demands among various social groups.

In addition to the structural variation, it was established that language variation had great social connotations. The use of language was used as identifiers of identity, social membership, and group membership. Speakers knowingly or unknowingly altered their speech in such a way so as to fit into a specific social group or distance themselves to another group. This kind of strategic use of language proves that variation does not simply illustrate a demonstration of social class but is a means by which people can negotiate social relationships and form their social identities.

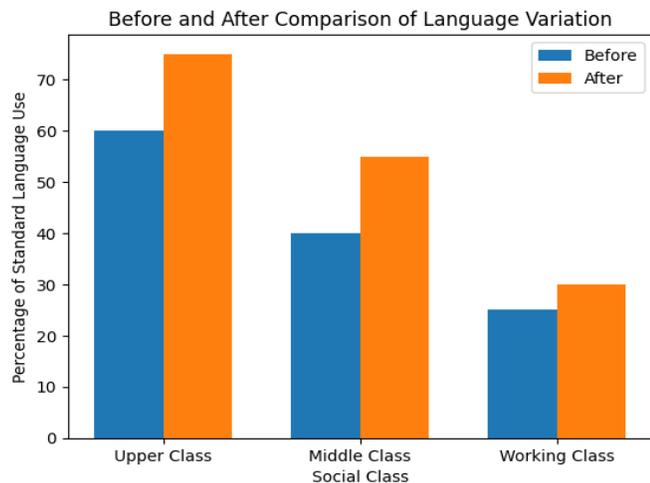


Figure 1: Before and After Comparison of Language Variation across Social Classes.

The bar chart outlines a comparative study of normal language use among the speakers of high, middle and working classes prior and after the exposure to formal communicative environment. The informal or everyday lingo is associated with the pre-shift condition, and language use during stricter and more socially oversight situations is the post-shift condition. The data demonstrate a significant growth of the use of standard forms of linguistic in all social classes after the shift of the context. There is the greatest rise amongst upper-class speakers, then the middle-class speakers; the working-class

speakers are registered to show a relatively less but significant increase. The following tendency supports the idea of style-shifting, which means that speakers modify their linguistic behaviour, either consciously or unconsciously, in response to social expectations and situational requirements.

Fig. 1 presents a comparative analysis of language variation across different social classes before and after analysis, highlighting changes in the use of standard language. The results indicate that the upper class shows the highest percentage of standard language use, increasing from 60% before analysis to 75% after analysis. Similarly, the middle class demonstrates a rise from 40% to 55%, reflecting moderate improvement in standard language usage. The working class exhibits comparatively lower usage, increasing slightly from 25% to 30%. Overall, the figure reveals that standard language use increases across all social groups after analysis, with the magnitude of change varying according to social class, thereby emphasizing the relationship between social stratification and linguistic behavior.

#### 4. Constraints and the scope of Future Research

Regardless of its contributions, the current study has a number of limitations that should be mentioned. On the one hand, the sample (n=90) was not very large; nevertheless, this number is sufficient to conduct empirical analysis, but it might not reflect the entire linguistic heterogeneity of a larger population. The sample would be more generalisable and statistically strong with a larger sample. Second, the focus of the research was nearly entirely on the verbal level, thus being left out of written modes of communication that may as well expose important patterns of variation of social class. Third, the study was limited in geographical area and regional linguistic influences could have influenced it. Also, the social class was operationalised through factors like education, occupation and income; nevertheless, social class is a complex and dynamic concept and other influences like cultural capital and social networks were not explored in details. Lastly, the research did not delve into gender, age, or ethnicity issues in a comprehensive manner as they could interact with a social class to determine language usage.

The current findings can be used in future research by removing these limitations and expanding the scope of research. The bigger and more heterogeneous sample, which involves different regions or countries, would be able to provide comparative information about the correlation between social class and linguistic variation. The introduction of the written language, online communication, and social-media language would help introduce a more subtle understanding of the current linguistic codes of conduct. In addition, longitudinal designs might also clarify the transformation of language use as time passes in relation to social mobility and the change of class identities. Moreover, further research should investigate the interaction between the social class and other socio-demographic factors, gender, age, and ethnicity, to develop a more advanced view of language difference. This increased investigation would enlarge and make more complete the insight into the complex nexus of language and social structure.

## 5. Conclusion

This empirical study is conclusive evidence that the social class has a strong and decisive effect on linguistic variation patterns. Those linguistic differences that may be traced between the social layers are not products of either personal will or personal stylistic choices, instead, they are systematically influenced by the general social order, cultural practices, and the unfair access to educational and professional opportunities. Phonetics, lexicon, and syntax structure is differentiated, and they portray the social facts in which speakers are placed and serve as conspicuous attributes of the social self and membership. The results of the study explain the need to recognize linguistic diversity as inherent and substantive in human communication. This subtle understanding of the socially determined linguistic variation is especially required in handling linguistic inequality particularly in educational settings where non-standard register forms are often met with unreasonable stigmatisation. The inquiry emphasizes the need to increase sociolinguistic awareness among teachers, policy makers and society in general with the view that language policies and teaching methods must respect and accommodate the linguistic diversity instead of promoting a monolithic and rightful variety. It is this broad-based paradigm that will help in making communication practices more equitable and in building up on the insights regarding the interconnection of language and social structure.

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**Cite this article as:** Anil Kumar Pola, Snehi Choudhary, An empirical study of the relationship between social class and language variation, International Journal of Research in Engineering and Innovation Vol-9, Issue-6 (2025), 313-316.  
<https://doi.org/10.36037/IJREI.2025.9604>.