

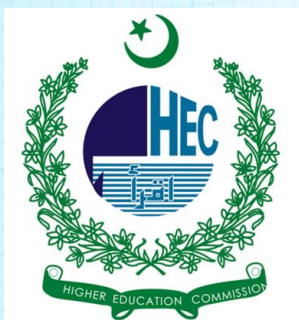
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**The Role of Language in Social Stratification: Examining
How Language Affects Social Identity**



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Abstract

In this study, the researcher has explored the role of language in shaping social class divisions and how language, through accents, dialects, and vocabulary choices, influences perceptions of class status in modern societies. Based on Identity Negotiation Theory of Ting-Toomey, (2015), this research investigates how individuals use language as a tool for negotiating social identity, managing power dynamics and sometimes social hierarchy in everyday interactions. In addition to it, the study aims to answer two research questions: (1) What role does language play in the creation and maintenance of social class divisions in modern societies? and (2) How do accents, dialects, and vocabulary choices influence perceptions of class status? Moreover, data for this study was gathered through interviews with a diverse sample of individuals from different social classes, that provided a rich source of real-life examples of social stratification. The findings showed that language significantly contributes to social stratification, with accents and dialects work as markers of social class. The study also shows how individuals modify their language on the basis of context, such as shifting from formal speech in professional settings to informal language with friends. The research also highlights the continuing power of language in reinforcing class distinctions. It suggests that some individuals influenced by cultural, social, and educational factors, strive to change their language to align themselves with higher social classes. Furthermore, this paper actually contributes to the current discourse on language and social stratification and offer insights into how language shapes our understanding of class identity in both local and global contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Language is not just a tool for communication but rather, it is more than that; it plays a key role in shaping how individuals perceive themselves and how they are being perceived by others in society. According to Koka, (2014) in every society, language reflects differences in class, education, culture, and power. Further, Macaulay, (1977) is of the view that our way of speaking, the words we are using, and even our accents can hold a strong social meanings that can either include us in certain groups or

exclude us from them. Rahu et al., (2023) have stated that individuals most often adjust their language based on who they are communicating with and in which setting. For example, someone in formal setting like in job interview may use formal language but switch to a casual style or local/regional dialect when speaking with a friend. Such type of language switching is not random but it often reflects deeper attempts to fit oneself in, gain respect, or protect one's identity. Such cases are particularly evident in societies where social class, status or social identity significantly influences daily interactions and communications.

Furthermore, in many societies and contexts, people with certain accents, dialects or vocabulary may be viewed as more educated, wealthy, or respectable, while others having no prestigious accent or dialects may face exclusion, prejudice or assumptions about their background. For example, as Den Ouden, (1979) has stated that speakers of standard dialects or elite varieties are often treated as more qualified, educated, competent or higher-class, whereas people, who speak in local, regional or less sophisticated dialects or working-class accents may be judged not positively but opposite. These are actually the perceptions that contribute to the creation as well as maintenance of social class divisions.

Using Identity Negotiation Theory, developed by Stella Ting Toomey, this study focuses on the role of language in social stratification and tends to find out how individuals use language to negotiate their social identity and how they deal with power differences and stereotypes in society especially through accents, dialects, and certain vocabulary usage.

Statement of the Problem

In every society, one can find out class differences not just on the basis of wealth or lifestyle, but also on the basis of how people speak. Language actually plays a key role in reflecting which social group someone belongs to even if we don't always notice it. People often make quick judgments based on accents or word choices. Someone who speaks in a proper accent, vocabulary and professional way might be seen as smart or professional while someone with regional or working-class accents might be negatively or perceived in modern society and such ideas can affect things like job chances or social respect. Even today, language quietly shapes how we see class as many people change how they talk depending on who they are talking to and

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who are around them and it happens sometimes or often without even realizing it. Studies have already been conducted in this area, however, there is still a need to explore how this process works in real-life settings and how people use language to position themselves in society. By using Identity Negotiation Theory, this study aims to understand how language contributes to social stratification and how individuals navigate their social identity through everyday communication.

Research Questions

1. What role does language play in the creation and maintenance of social class divisions in modern societies?
2. How do accents, dialects, and vocabulary choices influence perceptions of class status?

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the role of language in creating and maintaining social class divisions.
2. To examine how accents, dialects, and vocabulary choices affect perceptions of class status.

Significance of the Study

This research is significant because it shows that language is not just a means of communication, but a symbol of identity, status, or class. Very often, people are judged not based on their talent or character but on their way of speaking. These evaluations can limit their access to schools, occupations, and society. Moreover, by studying how language relates to social class, this research reveals the nuanced yet strong ways language shapes our everyday lives. It helps us see how people adapt their speech for respect and to avoid disrespect from the people. Additionally, this research will be valuable for teachers, employers, policymakers and anyone who deals with people from different backgrounds. It will help people avoid discriminatory behaviors towards people with other ways of speaking. Subsequently, this study contributes to academic discussions about language and identity. By approach of Identity Negotiation Theory, it provides a useful lens through which to understand how people use language to negotiate their social identities today.

Delimitations of the Study

This paper does not explore other aspects of identity, including gender, ethnicity, or religion; it is focused solely on the ways in which language defines the social class. It

examines how the lexical choices, regional variety, and pronunciation affect how others perceive one's social status. This study is executed on language within society without restrictions by area of living, nature of work or age. As such, rather than focusing on any specific neighborhood, a certain percentage that represents general economic trends is calculated. In order to understand different participants' perspectives regarding the relationship between language and perception of class, the participants were also queried in real time. These interviews are an excellent source of qualitative data that inform us about language in use and how it impacts identities in interpersonal communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language played a critical role in determining how people interact in the society or how they are seen by other people. Limberg has stated that international scholars have carried out extensive research with an aim of finding out the extent to which language variations such as accents and dialects, as well as the choice of parlance characterize the social stratification and influence class differences.

There has been a crucial focus on the aspect of language and social class in the study of sociolinguistics. Labov (1966) did a classic study in New York City department stores, in which he made certain key findings that relate phonological variation to social stratification. His studies revealed that it is not only a tool of instrumental communication but also a sign of social class stratification. Further, Bernstein (1971) put forward two code theory which includes restricted and elaborated codes. According to this, restricted codes are formal and context dependent language use preferred by working-class speakers while elaborated codes are expressive and complex which are used by the middle-class speakers. These differences may influence participation and performance in education as well as employment opportunities. Additionally, Rahman (2002) pointed out that English is considered a language of power while local languages represent low power. His work outlines how the continued use of English in Pakistan perpetuates social injustice and hinders those who are not articulate in English from getting promotions. Likewise, Mansoor (2004) pointed out that language medium contributes to class differentiation as English medium schools are reserved for the affluent, while Urdu and regional language mediums are associated with low income middle class families of the

society.

However, accents and dialects are another significant aspect of languages that go a long way in determining how people are perceived in society. In a matched-guise study Giles and Powesland (1975) established that listeners rated speakers differently depending on the accent as standard particles were seen as intelligence and authority while regional ones associated with poor competence. This phenomenon is not exclusive to western societies alone but is also evident in other cultures as well. However, Ahmad and Asghar (2014) recently examined how individuals using regional languages like Punjabi or Pashto are discriminated in organizational or professional settings when standard Urdu or English is required. The study established that language discrimination reinforces social inequalities and influences identity regulation in micro interactions.

Furthermore, language is not a static construct, as Bucholtz and Hall pointed out that language constructs identities and speakers continuously switch codes based on context, a practice that is known as code-switching. Individuals may code-switch, that is change the language or manner of speaking with the intention of assimilate into a certain culture or to gain acceptance, obtain employment or recognition, or to escape discrimination. Khan (2013) also noticed that many young professionals in business sectors interact in between Urdu and English in order to develop a sense of proficiency and education. This intentional alternation of the register also shows how language is used to manage one's identity in regard to the perceived class culture.

Besides, the Identity Negotiation Theory proposed by Ting-Toomey in 2005 is useful for identifying how language construct social class identities. In accordance with the theory, people manage their identities in interactions with others to be accepted and treated as wanted. With regard to class, this negotiation may involve shifting modes and ways of speaking, choice of words as well as accent to fit the class they want to portray. Building on this idea, Jamil and Anjum (2019) employed it with the purpose of examining the code-switching practices of university students originating from rural areas when interacting with students from metropolitan, English-speaking backgrounds. The study found that these students often switch their accent or language possibly to avoid being typed as 'less educated,' illustrating the tendency of acting linguistically in class-diverse.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodology used in conducting the study in order to establish the role of language in constructing social class identity. As such, it highlights the research design and framework, participants, data collection methods, as well as the approach used in analyzing the information acquired through interviews.

Research Design

This research adopted the qualitative research methodology since it is appropriate for discovering one's experiences, perceptions, and pattern of social behavior. Qualitative methods of research are more suitable to the study because the study focuses on how the use of language influences perceptions of class, thus examining the experience or communication of identity.

Participants

This investigation involved selecting participants from diverse social backgrounds to make sure that they use different forms of language most of the time. Some of them were university students while others were businesspersons, and others were just individuals from different parts of towns or from the countryside. Overall ten people were interviewed. Selection of the participants was done through convenience sampling because it made it easier to access people ready to give their views on language and social class.

Data Collection Tool

The data was obtained from interviews. These include questions that elicited qualitative information in that the participants were free to expand on their responses. The questions aimed at discovering subjects' views on language in their everyday life, their attitudes towards certain accents or terms, and whether language determines others' perception of the subject's status.

Data Collection Procedure

The interviews were face-to-face or via phone depending on participants' preference and convenience of each participant. Interviews ranged between 15-20 minutes on average. Participants were told about the objective of the research before they began and assured that the data collected would not disclose their identity. Their responses were received with their permission and later written down verbally in their own words.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is rooted in Identity Negotiation Theory developed by Stella Ting-Toomey in 1993 which postulates the ways in which individuals regulate identities through talk. It makes it easier for us to understand why people change the way they speak as if switching from formal to informal or changing the accent depending on the person they are talking to or region they are in. In the context of this study, the theory deals with the fact that language choices are associated with social identity and class. For instance, speaking with the boss, at a job interview, one may use more standard or distinguished speech to sound more professional. All of these are not done by coincidence; they have agendas of wanting to belong, being accepted, or wishing to remain unique. This model can assist the exploration of how people in research employ language to address issues so class and related representations in daily life.

Data Analysis

At the end of all the interviews were conducted, the data collected were analyzed and coded.. Some of the similarities that emerged include how people felt when they were being bullied for accents or dialect, how others switched their language, and so on. These were tied back to the concepts drawn from the literature study, especially Identity Negotiation Theory, in order to understand the seemingly concealed meanings of language use and class identity.

DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter highlights the results of interviews done with people from various social and linguistic backgrounds. The study was to look into how language promotes social class distinctions, as well as how accents, dialects, and word choices determine perceptions of class. The replies were organized into topics based on the two study questions.

Findings for Research Question one: What role does language play in the creation and maintenance of social class divisions in modern societies?

Language as a Marker of Status

Many participants felt that how a person speaks indicates their social standing. Kashif, a university student from Malakand, shared; when someone speaks fluent English, especially with a British or American accent, people automatically assume they are from an educated and wealthy background.” This demonstrates how English,

especially in Pakistan, is considered as a class symbol. Several interviewees mentioned that adopting Urdu or regional languages in formal situations is not always linked with higher status.

Language and Social Judgment

Most interviewees stated that people are frequently judged by how they communicate. Sediqa, a lecturer from Buner, shared: “In my college, people who struggle with English are seen as less competent, even if they are good at their job.” This statement gives support to the notion that linguistic competence, particularly in prestigious languages, influences social acceptance and advancement.

Linguistic Discrimination in Opportunities

Participants also noted that speaking in a certain style can lead to opportunities in education and work. Noman, a private school instructor, explained: “I have seen candidates with poor English rejected in interviews, even though their qualifications were better.” This shows that how language helps to maintain class hierarchies, particularly in competitive areas.

Personal Experiences of Discrimination

Several individuals described real-life situations in which they were treated differently because of their speech. Gulalai, a college student from Buner, recalled: “During my first semester, some classmates made fun of my accent. I started avoiding speaking in class because I was embarrassed. This emphasizes the psychological impact of linguistic discrimination and its role in perpetuating class differences.

Language as a Tool for Class Mobility

Participants stated that using the elite category speech patterns might change how someone is seen. Nasir, a call center agent from Rawalpindi stated: “After training to speak in an American accent, people at work began treating me more respectfully.” Several respondents claimed attempting to sound upper-class through using English phrases or modifying their regional accent to fit in at school or work.

Findings for RQ2: How do accents, dialects, and vocabulary choices influence perceptions of class status?

First Impressions Based on Speech

When asked what they noticed first about someone's speech, the majority of participants mentioned accent and vocabulary. Nihar, a university student, explained: "If someone uses heavy regional words or grammar mistakes, I assume they are from a village or haven't studied much." This reaction demonstrates how deeply rooted social class assumptions are in linguistic perception.

Discrimination Against Regional Accents

Many people agreed that strong local dialects are biased. Hussain, a government employee in Swat, said that in job interviews, I felt people didn't take me seriously because of my local accent." Other participants also told how urban speakers frequently look down on rural accents.

Vocabulary as a Class Signal

Several participants saw formal or complicated vocabulary as an indicator of education and status. Sara, a researcher, said that people who use advanced words are often seen as smart, even if they're just showing off. This increases the relationship between language competence and perceived class.

Media Influence

The role of the media in shaping opinions was also clear. Imran, a younger journalist, explained that TV anchors and news readers use a neutral, polished accent. That becomes the standard of intelligence and class for many viewers. This demonstrates how the mainstream media reinforces certain linguistic conventions over others.

Code-Switching and Language Adaptation

Participants noted that people frequently adjust their speech depending on the listener's status. Anisa, a university lecturer, explained that I communicate differently with my students than at academic conferences. It's natural to adjust to your audience. The ability to switch accents or terminology is sometimes interpreted as a sign of education or upper-class identification.

Globalization and Change

Interestingly, some younger participants believed that globalization and social media were reducing the importance of accents on class. According to Aqib, a content

creator, TikTok and YouTube allow individuals from diverse backgrounds to gain popularity. Now, it's about confidence and message rather than accent. While traditional class biases exist, these viewpoints indicate a shift among the younger generations.

DISCUSSION

This chapter highlights the study's main conclusions based on the interview data collected. It connects the participants' replies to the theoretical framework (Identity Negotiation Theory) and the researched literature. The goal is to have a better understanding of how language use forms social identity and contributes to class differences in society.

Language and Social Class Divisions

The data significantly supported the belief that language plays a significant role in creating and maintaining class obstacles. Participants clearly stated that how a person speaks whether through fluency in English, pronunciation, or tone can influence how others perceive their social class. For example, one participant described how switching to English in public places caused people to treat them more respectfully. This is matching with Ting-Toomey's Identity Negotiation Theory, which emphasizes how people negotiate their identities through communication, particularly to achieve approval from society.

Moreover, several participants noted that "good English" or a "polished accent" are frequently associated with intelligence, professionalism, and higher education. This view helps class hierarchies, where individuals who talk in a more "refined" style are often seen as more respectable or deserving of opportunities. It represents how language acts as a form of social wealth, in the same manner that Bourdieu (1991) defined linguistic competence as a type of cultural wealth that assists individuals in negotiating social institutions.

Accents, Dialects, and Perceived Class Identity

The data from RQ2 showed that accents and dialects had significant impact on society. Some participants stated that they felt less confident speaking in their local dialects in formal settings, worried that they would be criticized. Others reported being looked down upon or even laughed at because of their accent. This again relates to identity negotiation. Many people feel compelled to speak differently in academic or

professional settings, not because they enjoy it, but because they believe it will result in better treatment. These experiences are not exclusive to Pakistan; global inquiries have revealed similar patterns. Khan (2021) observed that in urban Pakistan, code-switching and accent shifting are popular methods used by persons seeking upward mobility.

Participants also noted that the media plays an important role in promoting these biases. People with standard or British-like accents are frequently portrayed as more professional or clever on television and in films, whereas those with strong local accents are seen as less educated or amusing. This promotes prejudices and increases the pressure to change one's natural way of speech.

The Role of Institutions

Schools, universities, and workplaces were identified as settings where language requirements are quietly imposed. Many interviewees stated that they had to adapt their communication style in order to be taken seriously or to fit in with colleagues or peers. Some claimed to have been directly corrected or discouraged from using their local dialect. These settings become battlefields for identity negotiation. People learn what is considered acceptable or professional, and they gradually adopt these standards, frequently at the expense of their own linguistic uniqueness.

Class Mobility through Language

Surprisingly, several individuals indicated hope. They believed that learning to speak in a more accepted or "higher-class" manner enabled them to access greater chances. They saw language not only as a barrier, but also as an opportunity to a better life. This reflects one of the strengths of Identity Negotiation Theory: while communication might reinforce social limits, it can also allow people to modify their identities and move forward.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study attempted to investigate the powerful relationship between language and social identity, specifically how language use leads to social class inequalities in society. The perspectives of actual individuals expressed in the interviews demonstrated that language is more than just a tool for communication; it has an unbreakable connection to how we see ourselves and how others see us. The replies

proved that in today's society, people can be judged by the way they speak, accent, the choice of words, mannerism, and fluency in English and other 'posh' languages. Most respondents explained how such assessments affected their education, work, and social encounters in different ways. Specifically, it was evident that the people often try to change or "beautify" the way of speaking in order to be liked by or gain appreciation from others.

This study is useful for the theory that language is not only a sign of social stratification but also a stratifying factor. It is easier to get a chance if one speaks in a specific way, but having a regional accent or using very informal language may lead to prejudice or even racism. The media, education and the workplace were established as having these patterns. We identified identity negotiation theory, through which it was found that individuals are always adjusting their language with an aim of defining themselves and their place in society. Though there are winners who aim at mastering language in order to climb the social ladder, others believe that altering their speech pattern is a compromise in their nature.

In short, language is not neutral; it reflects power, class, and social identity. It causes divisions, but it may also be a force for change if society becomes more open and welcoming for different languages.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- 1. Promote language tolerance in education.** Teachers and institutions should encourage learners to express themselves freely without criticism. Respect for local dialects and accents should be promoted, and the notion that "good English" implies intelligence should be questioned.
- 2. Promote awareness through media.** Media sources should portray a broader range of accents and dialects in a positive manner. This can assist to erase biases and normalize language diversity across all socioeconomic classes.
- 3. Ensure workplace training and inclusion.** Organizations should provide staff training that focuses on comprehending and accepting linguistic diversity. Communication should be viewed as a bridge, not a barrier, to inclusion.
- 4. Conduct additional research on class and language in Pakistan.** While this study concentrated on general social experiences, future research could dive deep into

specific sectors such as education, business, or media to investigate how language and class interact in various settings.

5. Empower people with language instruction. Language learning should be made more accessible, particularly in poor areas, while promoting the use of native or regional languages. People should be proud of their language heritage, not ashamed. This research represents a small but significant step toward understanding how language can silently influence our lives. By listening to others' stories and reflecting on our own linguistic attitudes, we can begin to create a society that prioritizes communication over class and variety over conformity.

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