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THE NEED FOR NEW APPROACHES TO SOCIAL CLASS ANALYSIS IN SOCIOLINGUISTICS

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Sociolinguists take factors like social class, ethnicity and network into account—despite the mainstream view that language should be studied as an autonomous system—because we believe that such variables offer important insights into processes of linguistic variation and change. The validity of this approach has been established in numerous sociolinguistics studies over the past quarter century, but I fear that some of the insights which such variables have to offer may have been left standing in the fields, unharvested, because of the limitations of our analytical machinery.

This is particularly true of social class, which students of social dialects have generally approached in one of three ways:

(1) Ignoring it, or minimizing its importance;

(2) Taking it into account, but in simplistic, informal terms;

(3) Studying it substantially, with the help of multi-index scales in which informant scores on scales like occupation, income and education are combined.

The first approach is associated with the regional dialectologists of yesteryear. But even Milroy (1980), in the course of discussing the significance of network differences within working class groups in Belfast, suggests that social class might be too abstract (p. 14) or ethnocentric (p. 174) to be of general utility in sociolinguistics. And other sociolinguistics highlighting the importance of ethnicity or individual behavior have made similar claims. However, variables like social class, network, gender and ethnicity are often interrelated (Nichols, 1984), and it should not be necessary to deny the relevance of one to emphasize the importance of another. Although the nature and significance of social stratification may vary from one community to another, it is too ubiquitous a variable (Kerbo, 1983, pp. 15–24) to be disregarded as a matter of general principle.

The second approach is also associated with the regional dialectologists of yesteryear—for instance Kurath (1939) with his Type I, II and III informants. Pickford (1956) and Trudgill (1974, p. 35) have pointed out the sociological limitations of dialect atlas studies cast in this mold, but there are more recent sociolinguistics studies—such as Akers (1981)—which provide quantitative data on the distribution of linguistic features among 'Lower', 'Middle' and 'Upper' Class speakers (p. 84) without justifying or explaining such classifications. The reliability, replicability and validity of data derived by this approach must remain open to serious question.

The third approach is the most common one among sociolinguists (for instance, Labov, 1966; Wolfram, 1969; Fasold, 1972; Trudgill, 1974; Feagin, 1979), who have drawn for their social class analysis on multi-index scales devised by Warner *et al.* (1949), Hollingshead

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and Redlich (1958) and others. This approach is considerably more sophisticated than the preceding ones, and has proven extremely valuable to sociolinguists over the years, as much for the information it has provided about sociolinguistic stratification in specific communities, as for the general principles it has inspired about this relation between social stratification and linguistic change. However, despite its strengths, the multi-index scale approach is limited in at least two respects.

One is the fact that Warner, Hollingshead and similar scales are usually not tailored to the local speech community,[1] and might miss or misrepresent the realities of social stratification therein. Among sociolinguists, only Macaulay (1976, p. 185) seems to have recognized this point, arguing that the accuracy of multi-index scales in a local situation cannot be 'taken for granted on the basis of precedents in totally unrelated situations'. And it is interesting to note, when we consult the sociological literature, that Warner's multi-index scale was only a shortcut for the logically prior and more time consuming ethnographic method of 'Evaluated Participation', by which Warner and his colleagues attempted to discover, through interviews with the local population, 'the groups recognized by the community . . . [the] distinctions made by the people themselves' (Warner and Lunt, 1942, p. 90). To apply a Warner, Hollingshead or similar scale indiscriminately to any and every community, without doing the local ethnographic footwork, is to misuse it, and to leave oneself open to other problems, such as where to draw the lines between social groups [see Davis (1985) for discussion].

Even if we were to adopt the Warner method in its full ethnographic richness, we would still be open to the criticisms which Warner and his colleagues received (see, for instance, Mills, 1942; Pfautz and Duncan, 1950, p. 213; Kerbo, 1983, p. 178) for attending overly to status or prestige and failing to take the economic relations and power asymmetries between classes into account. This is the second limitation of the multi-index scale approach, noted in the sociolinguistic literature to date only by Nichols (1984, p. 35).[2] The multi-index approach is commonly associated with a functional or order paradigm (Davis and Moore, 1945; Warner *et al.*, 1949; Durkheim, 1964; Parsons, 1964) which focuses on society as an integrated system, its various parts (classes) performing different functions and receiving differential rewards according to the importance of their functions to the system and the level of education or skill which they require. By contrast, conflict theorists like Marx (1906), Weber (1947), Dahrendorf (1959) and Collins (1975) tend to focus on the schisms within society rather than the whole, stressing divergences in interests and values between classes rather than commonalities, and seeing change as the product of class struggle, or the transformation of society as a whole, rather than individual effort.

Now functional models are not necessarily wrong, but conflict models have been more influential in sociology, and their almost total neglect within sociolinguistics is quite striking. Part of the reason may be ignorance of the theoretical issues which lie behind the operational tools we borrow from sociology. Another may be the close parallel between the functionalist view of society and the structuralist view of language as an integrated system which has dominated twentieth century linguistics. In any case, rather than pursuing further explanations for the neglect of ethnographic and conflict perspectives within sociolinguistics, I will try to show instead the value of incorporating them in sociolinguistic work.

Several years ago, I began fieldwork in the village of Cane Walk, Guyana,[3] to study creole/standard variation in the pronoun system. From the outset, it was clear that a Warner or Hollingshead scale would have been inappropriate for this non-American, East Indian,

sugar-estate community. But this misfortune turned out to be a blessing, for it forced me to discover the local stratification system over a two-year period of participant observation, historical research, and interviews with local residents which included questions about the number and nature of social class distinctions in Cane Walk.

In brief, what these sources convergently indicated was that the local stratification system involved only two primary groups,[4] which I have labelled, building on local usage, Estate and Non-Estate Class. The Estate Class (EC) is composed entirely of fieldworkers on the sugar estate: cane-cutters, weeders, shovelmen, etc., the people who occupy the bottom rung of the estate hierarchy and were housed in inhospitable logies or barracks up until the 1950s. The Non-Estate Class (NEC) includes drivers and field-foremen on the sugar estate, and clerks, shopowners, and skilled tradesmen who may have little if anything to do with the sugar estate. This group is similar to but not identical with the sugar industry's 'Junior Staff' (Jayawardena, 1962). The top rung of the estate's occupational hierarchy—the managerial or 'Senior Staff'—is not represented in Cane Walk; they live in exclusive areas elsewhere.

The sociological model which comes closest to capturing the local distinction is that of Max Weber, for whom social classes are aggregates of 'people with common economic 'life chances' determined largely by market relations' (Wright and Perrone, 1977, p. 33).[5] The EC group corresponds to Weber's 'Working Class', and the NEC includes both his 'petty bourgeoisie' and 'propertyless intelligentsia and specialists'. Even though both local groups are the descendants of 'bound coolies' who were brought as indentured laborers from India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and even though the older members of both groups were all fieldworkers twenty or thirty years ago, the EC members are more tightly bound to their inherited economic and social role than the NEC members. NEC members usually have bigger and more stable incomes than EC members, and have better opportunities for educational and social mobility.

There are also dramatic differences between the two social classes in language use. Figure 1 shows the frequency of standard English variants (for instance *ai* instead of *mi* as first singular subject) in nine singular pronoun subcategories in the speech of twelve EC and twelve NEC members, representing nearly twelve thousand recorded pronoun tokens. Although there are individuals whose network associations make them somewhat atypical of their respective classes (see Rickford, 1979, p. 349 for further discussion), the two groups occupy entirely different regions of the scale. The EC members use standard English variants only 18% of the time, while the NEC members use such variants 83% of the time. Data from other subsystems ~~confirm such variants 83% of the time. Data from other subsystems~~ confirm the indications of Fig. 1 that the speech of EC members is overwhelmingly creole (basilectal and lower mesolectal) while the speech of NEC members is much closer to standard English (mid to upper mesolectal).

If we assume in functionalist terms that both groups share a common set of values about language and social mobility, we are hard put to explain this dramatic sociolinguistic difference, especially since their responses on a matched guise test indicate that both groups associate the most creole speech with the lowest status jobs and the most standard speech with the highest (Rickford, 1979, p. 176). However, a separate question about whether speaking good English helps one to get ahead reveals sharp differences between the groups about the *nature* of the association between language and occupation. The NEC members essentially share a functionalist view, seeing use of the standard variants as leading to

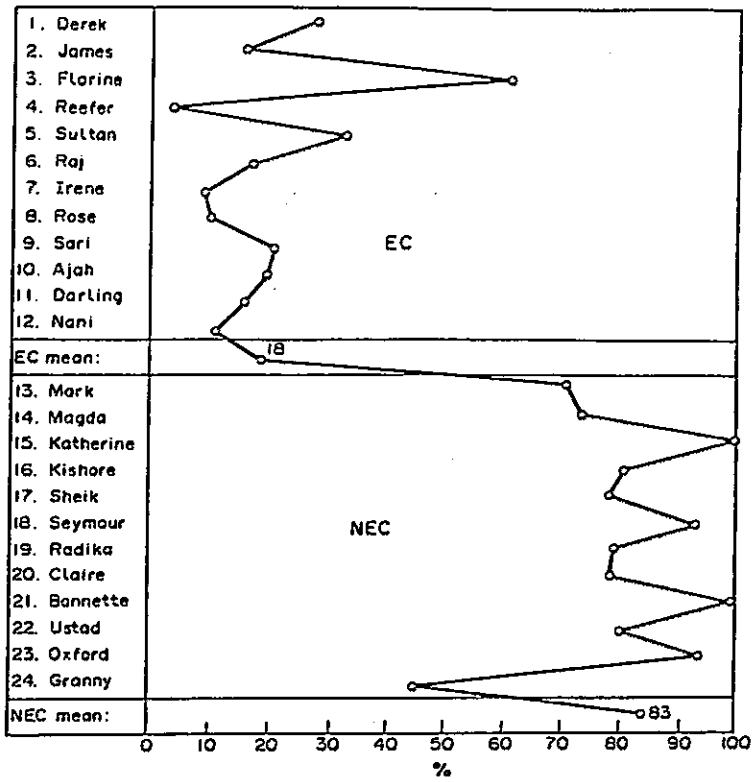

Fig. 1. Relative frequencies of standard English (acrolectal) variants in singular pronoun subcategories among 24 Cane Walkers.

increments of economic position, political power, and social status. For the EC members, however, whose efforts to move upwards within the sugar estate hierarchy (and even outside of it) have rarely been successful,[6] the social order is seen as too rigidly organized in favor of the haves for individual adjustments in language use by the have nots to make much difference. These fieldworkers essentially share a Marxist view of society—some of them explicitly identify it as such—seeing the assigned value of English as just another aspect of ruling class ideology, and aspiring to socioeconomic improvement through class struggle and change in the social order itself. (They are constantly involved in strikes against and industrial disputes with the estate management). Contrary to what a thoroughly functionalist view might have to assume—that the EC speakers don't use standard English because they can't (through limited education, contact with standard speakers, and so on)—many EC speakers use creole rather than standard English as a matter of choice, as a revolutionary act, as a means of emphasizing social solidarity over individual self-advancement and communicating political militancy rather than accommodation.[7]

The contrast between the sociopolitical values of these two groups—related in turn to differences between them in power and economics—helps to explain the linguistic differences between them. And I am convinced that adoption of ethnographic and conflict perspectives could be more generally useful in sociolinguistics, for instance, in helping to account for the sharp linguistic disjunction between blacks and whites in Philadelphia (Labov, 1983), for the differences in vowel quality between high school jocks and burnouts (Eckert, 1984), and for the general issue of why low-prestige non-standard varieties persist (Ryan, 1979).

Pronounced internal linguistic differences like these challenge our more general characterization of speech communities as systems of shared norms (see Gumperz, 1982, p. 26; Rickford, 1985), and force us to come up with alternative conceptualizations which better account for their common and persistent heterogeneity.

The neglect of ethnographic and conflict perspectives in sociolinguistics is only one of several indications that we have not taken the 'socio' side of sociolinguistics seriously enough, and have only just begun to recognize the theoretical riches which the social sciences have to offer. It is only with Gal (1979) and Milroy (1980) that we began to draw on network theory, which had been around since the mid-1950s; only with Trudgill (1974) that we began to take advantage of cultural diffusion models which had been around since the early 1950s; only with Cooper (1982) that we began to discover that the S-curve model of language spread and linguistic change (compare Bailey, 1973) had been familiar to students of other kinds of social innovation since the turn of the century (see Tarde, 1903; Rogers, 1983, p. 41). I am not suggesting that we should uncritically adopt anything and everything which our colleagues in the social sciences have to offer. But if we continue to create our own sociology, anthropology, psychology and geography as we go along [to paraphrase and extend the opening remarks of Labov (1983)], we will be constantly reinventing the wheel, and sometimes missing it completely. To harvest more of the insights on linguistic variation and change which social variables provide, we need to draw and build more heavily on theoretical machinery which is already available in neighbouring social sciences.[8]

NOTES

[1] The multi-index scales used by Labov (1966) and Trudgill (1974) were, however, specifically designed for their respective communities.

[2] Nichols' critique of functionalism in sociolinguistics is directed primarily at Labov (1966). Labov's discussion of social class is based almost entirely on the earlier analysis which Michael (1962) provided for the Mobilization for Youth Survey of the Lower East Side in NYC. While Michael's work might be characterized as functionalist in some respects, it seems particularly Weberian in others, such as its assignment of class position on the basis of productive rather than consumptive aspects of social rank. Similarly, Trudgill (1974, p. 32) draws on earlier definitions of social class which could also be described as functionalist, but his description of classes as 'aggregates of people with similar economic characteristics' is similar to Weber's.

[3] Cane Walk is a pseudonym for a village on the East Coast, Demerara, located within ten miles of the capital city, Georgetown.

[4] The two-class view was the majority but not the only analysis provided by Cane Walkers. Gilbert and Kahl (1982, pp. 28–29) suggest that the absence of 'complete consensus' makes it difficult for the ethnographically-oriented analyst to argue that his or her 'mental operations are exact reflections of the ratiocinations of the subjects'. However, Kahl and Davis (1955) had found a viable 'core of consensus' in the responses which their Cambridge, MA respondents gave to questions about social class in their city, and I also found this to be true in Cane Walk. Minority one- and three-class analyses are readily reconcilable with the majority two-class view (Rickford, 1979, pp. 116–120).

[5] In Weber's model, *class* is economically determined, and distinguished from *status* and *party* (or power). The latter categories are also relevant to a full discussion of the social stratification system in Cane Walk. For instance, although NEC members hold more powerful positions on the village council and in the local religious organizations than the EC members do, the EC members' numbers and strikecalling capacities do not leave them nakedly powerless in the political and industrial marketplace. Furthermore, some EC individuals like Reefer have authority positions within the unions and political parties which set them above other EC and NEC members.

[6] Cane Walkers of both classes gave me many examples of how difficult it is to move upwards in the estate's occupational hierarchy or to find and keep non-estate class jobs outside of it. For instance, both Sultan and Raj had tried their hands at non-estate jobs in the past—Sultan as a gold and diamond prospector in the interior, Raj as a security-guard at suburban residences—but had been forced by economic hardships to return to cane-cutting, to 'walk pon God land again', as Raj expressively put it.

[7]There is a parallel here with the accommodation model of Giles *et al.* (1977), which would predict that a subordinate group which perceives the possibility of change in the social order would tend towards divergence from the language of the dominant group in social situations.

[8]While I agree with Romaine (1984, p. 36) that it is important 'for linguists to develop interpretive strategies in order to understand language variation', her view that 'Sociology has no solutions to offer to our problems' is perhaps overstated.

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