



The American Dialect Society

Social Class Groupings in Sociolinguistic Research

Author(s): John R. Rickford

Source: *American Speech*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (Autumn, 1987), pp. 281-285

Published by: [Duke University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/454812>

Accessed: 16/05/2011 16:40

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=duke>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The American Dialect Society and Duke University Press are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to American Speech.

<http://www.jstor.org>

castellano e hispánico (Madrid: Gredos, 1980). They write that “la acepción más común en la literatura clásica se refiere a las primeras campañas que hacían los caballeros jóvenes de Malta y de San Juan en persecución de las caravanas navales musulmanas, requisito necesario para profesar en estas órdenes [in Classical Spanish literature, the word most often refers to one of several campaigns against Muslim naval caravans which young men who wanted to become Knights of Malta or of St. John had to carry out, this being one of the requirements for entering these orders].” Corominas and Pascual write further that this Classical Spanish meaning was the basis for the idiom *correr la caravana*, which they gloss as ‘hacer algo peligroso (como un ataque marítimo) [to do something dangerous, like carry out a naval attack]’—the literal meaning of this idiom is ‘to run the caravan’. From *correr la caravana* Corominas and Pascual derive several regional senses of Spanish *caravana*, the last of them being the Cuban one. Supposedly, then, they see setting a trap for a bird as similar to setting one for a naval caravan. Corominas and Pascual are not aware of the related forms in other Caribbean lects, just as Cassidy is not aware of their explanation. He is well aware of the Cuban sense, but does not see Cuban *caravana* as the etymon of the other Caribbean forms.

One further note: I believe that Cassidy is in error in labelling (303) as “dictionaries of Arawak” de Augusta’s *Diccionario araucano-español* (1916) and Erize’s *Diccionario comentado Mapuche-Español* (1960). Araucanian (Spanish *araucano*), also called Mapuche, is at best remotely related to Arawak. Arawak, now spoken only in Guyana, was, as Cassidy notes, the language of “bands . . . native to the Caribbean islands at the time of the European conquest.” Araucanian/Mapuche, however, is a language of Chile and Argentina.

To summarize: the Portuguese and Cuban Spanish explanations have their strong and weak points. With the evidence on hand, I see no way of deciding between them.

DAVID L. GOLD
University of Haifa

SOCIAL CLASS GROUPINGS IN SOCIOLINGUISTIC RESEARCH

Lawrence M. Davis has done sociolinguistic and dialectological research a service by drawing attention to a recurrent problem (“The Problem of Social Class Grouping in Sociolinguistic Research,” *AS* 60[1985]: 214–21): how to group individual subjects into social classes.

Typically, individual subjects are first ranked on quantitative multi-index scores (combining scores on occupation, education, and other scales) which are relatively continuous, in the sense that they cover a broad range—for instance from 30 to 205 in the hypothetical example which Davis introduces (216). It is at the next stage, when researchers try to convert this continuum of ranked subjects into a smaller number of relatively discrete social classes (four in Davis's example, 216) that the problem of indeterminacy arises, since "there is more than one perfectly logical and defensible way to divide subjects into groups, and the decision on the groupings themselves can and does determine results" (219).

One might quibble about some of the grouping methods which Davis suggests—sequentially dividing the list of subjects in his table 3 into four equal groups without regard to within-group similarities or across-group differences seems rather arbitrary—but the existence of a general grouping problem is indisputable.

It is important to note, however, that this problem is to some extent the result of a tendency among researchers to approach the analysis of social class as though it were entirely an artifact of their own deliberations and machinations, with no reality out there in the community. The tendency is reflected in the many references in Davis's paper to what "we" as researchers think and do (e.g., 214, "Assuming that we have already decided on four classes, we could divide the subjects . . .") and the absence of any reference to the class consciousness and analysis of the members of the community themselves. Davis's paper is, in this respect, characteristic of most sociolinguistic and dialectological research.

A very different approach, characteristic of some of the best-known work in sociology, is to depend for the ranking and grouping of individuals on what "they"—community members—say and do. Warner, Meeker, and Eells (1949), for instance, insisted that (xii–xiv)

these social levels [classes] are not categories invented by social scientists to help explain what they have to say; they are groups recognized by the people of the community as being higher or lower in the life of the city. . . . The designations of social levels are distinctions made by the people themselves in referring to each other.

The ranking and status group classification of the residents of Yankee City which Warner and his colleagues presented depended to a considerable extent (not entirely, as Gilbert and Kahl 1982, 28 point out) on the method of EVALUATED PARTICIPATION, involving the evaluation of individual families by other members of the community. In his study of the social stratification of "Elmtown," Hollingshead (1949) used a method which was less time-consuming than EVALUATED PARTICIPATION, but sim-

ilar to that of the Warner group in its ethnographic spirit and its sensitivity to community evaluation. On the basis of robust classifications of thirty families into equivalent strata by community members, Hollingshead was able to establish a control list against which several hundred other families could fairly confidently be located in the class structure of the community. Interestingly enough, the five-class analysis of Elmtown which Hollingshead came up with using this method was almost identical to that which the Warner group uncovered in the same town (which they called "Jonesville") using their methods (Gilbert and Kahl 1982, 34), thus demonstrating that the indeterminacy problem to which Davis refers need not be regarded as insurmountable. Other sociological studies of people's subjective perceptions of social class and occupational prestige (e.g., Centers 1949, Kahl and Davis 1955, Coleman and Rainwater 1978, Jackman 1979) vary somewhat in their methods and the degree of uniformity which they discover (Gilbert and Kahl 1982, 34–53, Kerbo 1983, 186–88), but all reveal that people do have conceptions of social stratification out there, and suggest that we complicate, maybe even invalidate, our work by ignoring them. At least two sociolinguistic studies (Macaulay 1976, Rickford 1986) decry the tendency among sociolinguists to use supposedly objective multi-index scales for their analysis of social class without investigating the SUBJECTIVE perspective of members of the local community. These studies also use the verbalized perceptions of community members to support three- and two-class analyses of their respective communities and to investigate sociolinguistic variation therein.

It should also be noted that the grouping problem to which Davis refers is to some extent a function of the tendency among sociolinguists to adopt functional or order models of social stratification rather than conflict models (see Kerbo 1983, 88ff., 173ff., Rickford 1986 for further discussion). The categories of conflict theorists, for instance Marx's (1906) *bourgeoisie* (those who own the means of production or capital) and *proletariat* (the workers), or Dahrendorf's (1959) *superordinate* (command) and *subordinate* (obey) classes, are qualitatively distinct and discrete, and to the extent that sociolinguists begin to employ them in their analyses, the grouping problem will be minimized.¹

Having noted two potential solutions to the grouping problem, I wish to offer some closing comments on the solution which Davis (220) proposes—that we not group subjects into social classes based on quantitative scales, but merely calculate the coefficient of correlation between subjects' scores on such scales and their relative use of linguistic variables. This proposal may prove particularly useful where ethnographic

investigation of community views reveals little uniformity or where qualitative conflict models seem inappropriate, but it is not without its drawbacks. One is the fact that there are limitations on the use and interpretation of the (Pearson Product Moment) correlation coefficient which make it less than ideal in certain situations, for instance when the relationship between social rank and language use is nonlinear, or when the variability in the range of scores on either measure is relatively narrow (see Roscoe 1975, 99–103). Other statistical tests could conceivably be introduced in these situations, however. More serious is the fact that the proposal implies or assumes either that social class never has any reality out there in the community, and/or that community members really can and do perceive each other in terms of the finely divided ranking scales which sociolinguists use (ranging over 175 points in Davis' hypothetical table 3). We have already shown that the former assumption is unjustified (community members often do have robust conceptions of a small number of relatively discrete classes); the latter assumption is intrinsically implausible and would unnecessarily complicate the task of sociolinguistic research. We know from the work of Labov (1972), Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985), and others that social evaluation and identification processes are constantly involved in linguistic variation and change, but it is theoretically implausible (and counterintuitive) to assume that such processes can operate successfully over such a broad range of social categories. Imagine individuals, in Le Page and Tabouret-Keller's framework, attempting to regulate their language use to reflect identification with or disassociation from nearly two hundred categories of social rank, in addition to intersecting categories of ethnicity, sex, regional origin, and so on! In the interests of theoretical simplicity, cognitive plausibility, and social realism, we ought to avoid models which permit limitless continua of social rank.

NOTE

1. Although self-rating approaches have principally been used in the past by functionalists whose work has been criticized by conflict theorists, there is no inherent contradiction in the adoption of a self-rating approach and a conflict model. Having elicited community members' social class rankings and groupings, the researcher is still free to interpret and discuss them in conflict-model terms. And, as in the interesting case of Cane Walk, Guyana (see Rickford 1986), community members of one class might espouse and act in accordance with an essentially functionalist model of the social order while community members of another class espouse and act in accordance with a conflict model (for some Cane Walk Estate Class members, an explicitly Marxist model).

REFERENCES

- Centers, Richard. 1949. *The Psychology of Social Classes: A Study of Class Consciousness*. Princeton: Princeton UP.
- Coleman, Richard P., and Lee Rainwater, with Kent A. McClelland. 1978. *Social Standing in America: New Dimensions of Class*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.
- Dahrendorf, Ralf. 1959. *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*. Stanford: Stanford UP.
- Gilbert, Dennis, and Joseph A. Kahl. 1982. *The American Class Structure*. Homewood, IL: Dorsey.
- Hollingshead, August B. 1949. *Elmtown's Youth*. New York: Wiley.
- Jackman, Mary. 1979. "The Subjective Meaning of Social Class Identification in the United States." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 43: 443–62.
- Kahl, Joseph A., and James A. Davis. 1955. "A Comparison of Indexes of Socio-economic Status." *American Sociological Review* 20: 317–25.
- Kerbo, Harold R. 1983. *Social Stratification and Inequality*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Labov, William. 1972. *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P.
- Le Page, Robert B., and Andrée Tabouret-Keller. 1985. *Acts of Identity: Creole-based Approaches to Language and Ethnicity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Macaulay, Ronald K.S. 1976. "Social Class and Language in Glasgow." *Language in Society* 5: 173–88.
- Marx, Karl. 1906. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. New York: Random.
- Rickford, John R. 1986. "The Need for New Approaches to Social Class Analysis in Sociolinguistics." *Language and Communication* 6: 215–21.
- Roscoe, John T. 1975. *Fundamental Research Statistics for the Behavioral Sciences*. New York: Holt.
- Warner, W. Lloyd, Marcia Meeker, and Kenneth Eells. 1949. *Social Class in America*. Chicago: Science Research Associates.

JOHN R. RICKFORD
Stanford University

REDD UP 'CLEAN'

M.R. Dressman (*American Speech* 54 [1979]: 141–45) stresses the Scottish connection for *redd up*; as the term is found in states with some Scandinavian influence, to point to a possible origin from that area may not be out of the place: compare Norwegian, Danish *rydde (op)* 'clear (away, off)'.

W.W. SCHUHMACHER
Gadstrup, Denmark