Class\(^1\) in language and identity research

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Introduction

Great British Class Survey finds seven social classes in UK.
Old model of working, middle and upper classes makes way for tiers ranging from ‘precariat’ to ‘elite’ based on economic, social and cultural indicators.

(Jones 2013)

This is the title and lead of an article appearing in the Guardian online in April 2013. The article is about the results of the Great British Class Survey (GBCS), which was launched on the BBC website in January 2011. The survey captured the attention of the public in the UK beyond the 161,400 individuals who eventually participated in it and it was extensively reported on in both print and audio-visual media, Jones’s article being just one example. Designed by Savage, Devine and their collaborators (see Savage et al. 2013), the GBCS followed several earlier class surveys in Britain, such as the UK National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC), which distributed the 2001 British population across multiple class positions according to their occupation and employment status, and the more recent Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion (CCSE) survey, which led to the 2009 publication *Culture, class, distinction* (Bennett et al. 2009).

Like the 2001 NS-SEC survey, the GBCS put respondents into general occupational categories, in this case seven. These categories, along with their estimated proportions in the population at large (this, according to an independent survey carried out in 2011 by GfK, a survey firm), are as follows:

- Elite (e.g. high-level systems managers, lawyers, doctors, dentists) (6 per cent);
- Established middle class (e.g. electrical engineers, occupational therapists, teachers) (25 per cent);
- Technical middle class (e.g. pilots, pharmacists, higher education teachers, natural and social sciences professionals, physical scientists) (6 per cent);
- New affluent workers (e.g. electricians, plumbers, sales and retail assistants, postal workers) (15 per cent);
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- Traditional working class (e.g. secretaries, van drivers, electricians, care workers) (14 per cent);
- Emergent service workers (e.g. bar staff, nursing auxiliaries, routine operatives, customer service workers) (19 per cent);
- The precariat (jobs from the previous three categories, but with discontinuities and a lack of security) (15 per cent).

Importantly, the GBCS survey was based on a more ambitious view of what constitutes class, one which draws on and updates Bourdieu’s (1984) capitals: economic (income, savings, possessions, property), social (friends, acquaintances, work associates) and cultural (education level and cultural consumption patterns). There will be further discussion of this view of class below.

The work of Savage et al. (2013) is also important because it further updates understandings of what constitutes class in Britain, with resonances to societies around the world. Its popularity and the commentary that it inspired in the British media says something about the enduring relevance of class, even in countries where those in power have done their utmost to convince the general public that class is no longer relevant in the so-called ‘new economy’. Indeed, there is much in Savage et al.’s work that resonates with the current general preoccupation with rising inequality around the world, the success of Piketty’s (2014) Capital in the twenty-first century and the rise of alter-system parties in countries such as Greece (Syriza) and Spain (Podemos) being just two examples. Following authors such as Duménil and Lévy (2011) and Harvey (2014), we see how over 30 years of neoliberal policy and practice have constituted a form of class warfare, whereby the top 1 per cent, aided and abetted by the next 2–10 per cent, have accumulated wealth and property on the back of the remaining 90 per cent via the latter’s stagnated salaries and wages, bank-induced debt and mortgage defaults (just to mention three emblematic examples of the collateral damage of neoliberalism) (Block forthcoming).

With this backdrop in mind, this chapter aims to explore how class has (and has not) figured as a construct in language and identity research. Specifically, it will examine and make the case for class as a key prism through which researchers in applied linguistics can better understand language and identity issues arising in a broad range of contexts. It will do so based on the premise that class exists in different societies around the world, although it should be noted that it plays itself out as a social phenomenon and mediator of activity in very different ways and is therefore contingent on local circumstances. This premise is based on and supported by a long list of publications focusing on class in societies as diverse as Chile (Han 2012), China (Chen 2013), Egypt (Masoud 2013), India (Ganguly-Scrace and Scrace 2010), Japan (Ishida and Slater 2010) and Spain (Subirats 2012).

The chapter begins with an examination of what is meant by class, exploring the historical development of the construct as well as current understandings that see it as multidimensional and multilevelled. This discussion includes a challenge to the notion that class is somehow not a relevant construct for social scientists today, as well as a consideration of how it is different from other identity dimensions such as gender, ethnicity, race and nationality: in Nancy Fraser’s terms, the former is more about distribution issues while the latter are more about recognition issues. The chapter then moves to an examination and critique of how class has (or has not) been a key construct in research on language and identity in recent years, before closing with some future challenges. It should be noted that this chapter does not include a great deal of research that has dealt with class in applied linguistics writ large. Thus it does not cover the early variationist work of Labov (1966), which put class on the map in sociolinguistics; Bernstein’s (1971) work on links between class positions and codes; or later ethnographic work such as
Eckert (1989), where social groups in an American high school (the institution and system-oriented ‘jocks’ and the counter-system ‘burnouts’) corresponded to broadly middle-class and working-class positions in society at large. These omissions are due primarily to space limitations. However, they are also attributable to my interest in narrowing the focus of this chapter to the specific area of language and identity research. This body of research arguably began with Norton Peirce’s (1995) oft-cited call for ‘a comprehensive theory of social identity that integrates the language learner and the language learning context’ (Norton Peirce 1995: 12), and it has become an important sub-area of applied linguistics over the past two decades. Indeed, so large is language and identity research today that many readers will find the few studies which I am able to include in my critique to be a partial or even poor representation of the field. I refer these readers to Block (2014) for more thorough coverage of a larger sample of studies in which class has been a key construct.

Overview

Marx (1981 [1894], 1990 [1867]) is often looked to as the starting point for any discussion of class, despite the fact that he never provided an explicit definition of the construct in his work. It has therefore been left to scholars who succeeded him to attempt to capture the essence of his view of class. One such scholar in recent times is Wright (2005), who identifies five key concepts in Marxist class analysis that are relevant to Marx’s understanding of class and his sense of purpose. These are:

1. Class interests, or the material interests that people derive from their lived class experiences;
2. Class consciousness, or ‘the subjective awareness people have of their class interests and conditions for advancing them’ (ibid.: 22);
3. Class practices, or the activities people engage in, in pursuit of class interests;
4. Class formations, or organisations and associations which serve to defend class interests (e.g. trade unions);
5. Class struggle, or the conflicts arising when individuals and collectives pursue divergent class interests.

The first two concepts cited by Wright are vital to any understanding of class as lived materially and lived in the mind and body, respectively. Following this reasoning and with a view to historicising class, Thompson (1980 [1963]) argued that the study of class was not a question of putting individuals into static categories but one of documenting their experiences in the material world – their relationships to the means of production – and then examining how these experiences contributed to the construction of class positions in societies as lived experiences. In this sense, his work parallels that of Polanyi (2001 [1944]), who focused on how human beings fashion history via the social circumstances in which they live. Thompson was interested in what Marx understood as two sides to class: (1) ‘class in itself’, that is, class as an objective reality independent of the actions or thoughts of individuals, ‘as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships’ (Thompson 1980 [1963]: 8), and (2) ‘class for itself’, that is, how people ‘as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other … [people] whose interests are different from (and generally opposed to) theirs’ (ibid.: 8–9).

A range of more recent scholars have noted that any conceptualisation of the construct must be consonant with the increasing complexification of societies since Marx’s death some 130
years ago. Writing in the early twentieth century, Weber (1968 [1922]) believed that the class positions of individuals and groups in industrial societies derived from the economic order in these societies. Also like Marx, he understood class and class positions to be relational phenomena arising during the course of interaction among individuals and groups engaged in social activity. Where Weber differed from Marx was in taking a more culturally sensitive view of society than that formulated by Marx (even if it would be an error to see Marxism as devoid of a cultural dimension; see Block 2014), introducing notions such as status, honour, prestige and style. Drawing on Marx, Weber and other scholars, Bourdieu crafted a version of class attuned to a French society heading towards the end of the twentieth century, a version that has been adapted to many other societies since. He saw class not only in material terms but also as a cultural activity, as he developed a sophisticated collection of metaphors that have become common currency in the discourse of many researchers in the social sciences and humanities today.

Central to Bourdieu’s theory of class are the capitals cited above in the discussion of the GBSC survey – economic, social and cultural – which can be understood in terms of degrees and volumes, ‘as the set of actually usable resources and powers’ (Bourdieu 1984: 114) that individuals draw on as they engage in practices in ‘fields’ or domains of social practices constituted and shaped by particular ways of thinking and acting (e.g. education, football, cinema, etc.). Class is thus framed as a social relation and as emergent in the day-to-day activities of human beings and it becomes embodied in the individual, forming a class ‘habitus’, which is an ever-evolving set of internalised dispositions, formulated out of engagement in situated social practices taking place in fields and shaped by institutions as well as larger social structures, such as global economic forces. Elsewhere, I sum up this approach as follows:

[Class] has become a convenient working label in the social sciences (as well as in society in general) for a number of dimensions. These include: wealth (an individual’s possessions and disposable money); occupation (manual labour, unskilled service jobs, low-level information based jobs, professional labour, etc.); place of residence (a working class neighbourhood, a middle class neighbourhood, an area in process of gentrification); education (the educational level attained by an individual by early adulthood); social networking (middle class people tend to socialise with middle class people, working class people with working class people, and so on); consumption patterns (buying food at a supermarket that positions itself as ‘cost-cutting’ vs. buying food at one that sells ‘healthy’ and organic products); and symbolic behaviour (e.g. how one moves one’s body, the clothes one wears, the way one speaks, how one eats, the kinds of pastimes one engages in, etc.).

(Block 2012: 80–81)

Whether class is understood in more basic terms (e.g. around income and occupation) or more complex ones (see my definition above), its demise has been a common trope in sociology in the late twentieth century (and now early twenty-first century). This has been the case because societies have changed so much since Marx, Weber, Durkheim and others were writing. And Bourdieu’s updated version of class notwithstanding, many authors (e.g. Gorz 1982; Pakulski and Waters 1996; Touraine 2007) have painted a picture whereby the construct simply does not make sense either as ‘class in itself’, given that society today is very different from what it was 100 years ago, or ‘class for itself’, given that a large proportion of the population ‘dis-identify’ with class, preferring recognition markers such as race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, religion and so on when talking about themselves (Savage et al. 2010). Authors who question the relevance of class in contemporary societies are no doubt right to point out how these
societies have become more complex over the last century. However, in my view they exaggerate the extent to which conditions have changed dramatically for the majority of people in the world today. They do not, for example, devote enough attention to the billions of people living outside the digitised economy and society – people living in poverty who do not have mobile phones, CVs showing their flexibility or access to shopping malls full of consumer items. In addition, they fail to take on board how the increasing complexification of life conditions in many parts of the world does not, in and of itself, mean that class and class conflict have disappeared in recent decades. In contexts in which there has been a shift from manufacturing-based economic activity and skilled manual labour, to more service-based activity and digitised labour, inequality has not disappeared, nor have the exploitation and alienation of the workforce (Fuchs 2014).

One final issue that needs to be addressed is the relationship between class and identity. Is class an identity dimension, much like race, gender or nationality? Or is it different? As I note elsewhere (Block 2013), applied linguists have in general followed trends in the social sciences as regards the study of identity and they have therefore adopted what might be termed a culturalist approach. This approach has arisen above all in the economically advanced nation states of the world (and particularly in the Anglophone world) and it is connected with the rise of what some call ‘identity politics’ and what Fraser (1995; Fraser and Honneth 2003) sees as struggles related to ‘recognition’, a term she borrows from Taylor (1994). Recognition is about respect for others and ‘an ideal reciprocal relationship between subjects in which each sees the other as an equal and also separate from it’ (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 10). The focus is generally on key identity markers such as nationality, gender, race, ethnicity, religion and sexuality and the relationship of the individual with society at large, both as an individual and as a member of a community. Recognition may be seen as either in conflict with, or as articulated with, what Fraser (1995) calls ‘redistribution’, which is concerned with the material bases of the life experiences of ‘collective subjects of injustice [who] are classes or class-like collectives, which are defined economically by a distinctive relation to the market or the means of production’ (ibid.: 14). Fraser articulates a kind of philosophical dilemma when she laments how ‘[t]he discourse of social justice, once centered on distribution, is now increasingly divided between claims for distribution, on the one hand, and claims for recognition, on the other’ (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 7–8), attributing this shift to developments such as the demise of communism (both as a material and discursive alternative to capitalism), the rise to dominant doxa of neoliberal economic ideology and the aforementioned rise of identity politics.

Fraser’s way through the potential conflict between recognition claims and redistribution claims is to explore how the former interrelate with inequalities arising from the material bases of society (i.e. a Marxist perspective). For Fraser, recognition and redistribution claims may be satisfied in very different ways. On the one hand, action taken can be ‘affirmative’, providing ‘remedies aimed at inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them’ (Fraser 2008: 28). This is what happens when, in response to recognition claims, diversity and difference are supported and even promoted in multicultural societies as a defence against xenophobic, racist, sexist, homophobic and religion-based attacks (anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, anti-Christian, etc.). In response to redistribution claims, this is what happens when the state collects taxes and then provides resources to the most needy. It is worth noting that, in both examples of affirmative action, little or nothing is done to deal with underlying conditions that lead to reactive politics and inequality in the first place. So the question that arises is whether or not affirmation is enough if we wish to explore the roots of these problems in society. For Fraser, the answer is ‘no’, and she argues that actions taken in favour
of recognition and redistribution need to be ‘transformative’, providing ‘remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework’ (ibid.). Transformative recognition means problematising group differentiations, such as black vs. white, or male vs. female, or straight vs. gay/lesbian, and so on. Meanwhile, transformative redistribution means the arrival of socialism, as a deep restructuring of the political economy of a nation state.

The principal point to be derived from Fraser’s discussion is, as I stated above, that class is not an identity dimension of the same type as race, ethnicity, gender, nationality or sexuality because it is first and foremost in the realm of distribution and redistribution of material resources and it is not about respect and recognition, at least not in its origins. As Fraser (1995) and Sayer (2002, 2005) note, the solution to societal ills like racism and sexism is for people to stop being racist and sexist, to accept diversity and to respect others as equals. These remedies do not work when it comes to class and class-based inequality, as accepting another’s relative poverty, and respecting the position in society that it affords, does not do anything to overturn material-based inequality. This problematised view of the interrelationship between class and identity dimensions like race, gender and nationality will be a running theme in the remainder of this chapter.

Issues and ongoing debates

A close examination of a range of publications on language and identity in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics over the past three decades reveals several approaches to class:

1. Outright erasure (class is not mentioned at all);
2. What we might call ‘class in passing’ (class is mentioned and discussed only briefly and then disappears);
3. Partial class-based analysis (class is discussed explicitly as a factor but it is not theorised or dealt with in any depth as a concept);
4. Fuller class-based analysis (which entails a discussion of what the construct actually means).

The first approach is typical of the numerous publications dealing with one or more of the traditional (or, following Fraser, recognition-based) identity dimensions: these make no mention whatsoever of class, which therefore undergoes a form of erasure. There is obviously nothing wrong with taking on this topic in this way as researchers are free to focus on whatever aspect or angle on identity serves their research interests and purposes. Thus, in one of the better monographs on the topic to date, Edwards’s (2009) Language and identity, the author never really brings class into his multi-level and nuanced discussion of the interrelationship between language forms and uses and collective and individual senses of self. The same applies to other excellent monographs on language and identity that have appeared over the past 15 years (e.g. Joseph 2004; Benwell and Stokoe 2006; Riley 2007), to say nothing of the vast majority of journal articles and book chapters on the topic. Of course, if authors who research language and identity in this way are working according to the distinction developed by Fraser, between class (as a redistribution issue) and traditional identity dimensions (as a recognition issue), then perhaps they are only making a choice about what is important in favour of the latter over the former. However, the same researchers who practise class erasure in this way do not seem to be working according to such logic, or in any case they do not position themselves according to Fraser’s distinction; rather, it seems more likely the case that class is simply not on their radar.
The second approach to class is to mention it in passing, as just another identity dimension, but with no further discussion. Thus class might appear on the tail end of a list of identity dimensions that are considered important in a given context. In this case, class is considered as a social variable, and even worthy of mention, but not, it would seem, worthy of any kind of discussion.

The third approach is to bring class into a discussion of language and identity fleetingly before letting it fade away. A good example of this approach appears in Doran’s (2004) excellent account of the uses of Verlan among the children of working-class immigrants in Paris. Verlan is a variety of French that has arisen among French minority youth, incorporating vocabulary from a wide range of immigrant languages (from Arabic to Romani to English) and other features such as syllabic inversion (the term derives from the inversion of syllables in the French word for backwards, *l’envers*). Doran found that Verlan acted as an important in-group identity marker among immigrant minority youth, and at one point in her analysis she introduces the class position of its speakers as significant. She writes about how:

> for many of these minority youths, their sense of difference from ‘les Francais’ was not simply about a difference in skin color, but also about a relation of alterity to the class status and value system of ‘le bourgeois’, the idealized figure of the French ‘citoyen’.

*(Ibid.: 114)*

Several quotes taken from her contacts with informants make the point well that the use of more standard (or ‘elevated’) French not only means selling out to dominant French values, but it also constitutes ‘showing off’ or ‘acting bourgeois’ (ibid.: 115), and ultimately is a form of class betrayal.

Doran concludes her two-page discussion of class as a factor in the use of Verlan by returning to the notion that the variety serves as ‘a means of asserting group identity and solidarity, and simultaneously resisting the authority (and hegemonic ideology) of the dominant ideology’ (ibid.). However, she does not delve deeply into the class angle, which means for example that she does not make connections between the working-class behaviour of the young people in her study and the working-class behaviour of young people who might be classified as autochthonous French. The issue is worth exploring because it is difficult to imagine that for the latter group speaking ‘elevated French’ would be an acceptable option in a conversation. There is thus space for exploring working-class masculinity as a phenomenon that cuts across the minority or non-minority condition of young men in France, and indeed in any other contexts around the world (Block and Corona 2014, this volume).

Elsewhere, in her groundbreaking book *Identity and language learning: gender, ethnicity and educational change*, Norton (2000) exemplifies what might be seen as a fourth approach to class, as she invokes the construct more explicitly and in more detail than Doran and others in her study of five immigrant women in Canada in 1989–1990 and their relative and variable access to English in classroom and naturalistic settings. This occurs above all in two cases discussed in the book: Katarina, a Polish woman in her mid-thirties, and Felicia, a Peruvian woman in her mid-forties. The former had recently immigrated with her husband and, despite having an MA in Biology and self-reported proficiency in Czech, Slovak, Russian and German, she had to take a job as a kitchen help in a German restaurant due to her low English language proficiency. This was a position far below what she had been accustomed to in Poland, where her academic qualifications and multilingualism counted for something. Katarina was all too aware that her effective ‘declassing’ (and ‘reclassing’) was to a great extent due to her limited English and, as
Norton notes, ‘she was very eager to learn it so that she would become part of a social network of people who would value the professional status she had acquired in Poland’ (ibid.: 92). To make matters worse, Katarina’s husband was in a similar position, as a professional ‘declassed’ by his lack of English language competence. In Katarina’s recounted experiences we see elements of what Sennett and Cobb (1972) long ago termed the ‘hidden injuries of class’, that is, the personal anguish, disappointment and shame felt by people who have not achieved as much as they might have in life in terms of material wealth, education, housing and a long list of class indexicals. The difference is that in this case we are talking about the hidden injuries of ‘declassing’ (and ‘reclassing’) that come with migration experience.

Meanwhile, Felicia made clear to Norton from the start that she and her family had left behind in Peru a home in an exclusive neighbourhood in Lima, a second home at the beach, extensive holiday travel and private schools for their three children, all of which had been provided by her husband, who was described as ‘a successful businessman’. The reason for the family’s move to Canada was a fear of ‘terrorism’ even if, in her contacts with Norton, Felicia often presented her past life in Peru as a relaxing idyll. Indeed, Felicia was a conflicted individual, struggling to establish and maintain a coherent narrative as an upper-class woman in a country and local context in which she worked as a babysitter and delivered newspapers, while her husband struggled to secure a stable job. For Felicia the hidden injuries of declassing made her bitter as she oscillated between trying to present herself to others as someone to be reckoned with, for example by talking about property that she and her husband had in Peru or by criticising the way Canada treated more privileged immigrants like herself who ‘lose a lot coming to Canada’ (Norton 2000: 56).

Katarina and Felicia were very different people: the former was perhaps more middle class in Poland in educational and occupational terms, while the latter was more upper class in Peru in economic and consumer terms, her class position deriving above all from her husband’s occupation and income. However, the two women shared a certain feeling of shame that derived from the feeling of having had income, possessions, status and recognition in their home countries and of having none of these things to a sufficient degree in their adopted home, Canada. It should be added here that Norton does not really explore class along these lines, although she does bring into her discussion the notion of ‘legitimacy’ derived from her readings of Bourdieu, challenging what she sees as a common assumption in studies of language and identity migration contexts, that ‘those who speak regard those who listen as worthy to listen, and that those who listen regard those who speak as worthy to speak’ (ibid.: 8).

Such legitimising (and de-legitimising) processes are obviously embedded in relations of power, and Norton in particular follows the Foucauldian notion of micro-level power to complement macro-level institutional power, noting how ‘power does not operate only at the macro level of powerful institutions such as legal systems, the education system and the social welfare system, but also at the micro level of everyday social encounters between people with differential access to symbolic and material resources’ (ibid.: 7). However, beyond drawing on Bourdieu and Foucault somewhat selectively, Norton only devotes a paragraph to class as a construct (ibid.: 13). It should be noted, however, that Norton’s intention was always to focus primarily on ethnicity and gender, as the title of her book suggests.

In research similarly attuned to class (but again, without an in-depth treatment of it as a theoretical construct), Pichler (2009) focuses on the construction of gendered identities among female secondary-school students in London and how these gendered identities intersect with class and race. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Skeggs (e.g. 1997), she focuses on three cohorts: ‘cool and socially aware private-school girls’; ‘sheltered but independent East End girls’;
and ‘tough and respectable British-Bangladeshi girls’. While the first group was made up of four distinctly upper middle-class girls, the latter two groups were working class in composition in terms of family income, family dwelling, neighbourhood, parenting at home, the kinds of activities that they engaged in and the kind of talk that they produced.

The private-school girls positioned themselves in multiple domains of activities ranging from their studies to music and sex. Pichler found these girls to be more overtly aware of class than the girls in the other two cohorts as in their talk they made distinctions between state schools and private schools; they talked about university study as a given in their future lives; and they oriented to youth culture from an elite perspective, as nascent cultural omnivores (Warde et al. 2007) who could effortlessly consume at ‘high’, ‘middle’ and ‘low’ levels. Meanwhile, the sheltered girls manifested ‘an (unexpressed) awareness of a range of pathologizing discourses about working-class adolescents and families, especially about single mothers’ (Pichler 2009: 65), which they ‘disidentified’ with. Instead, they positioned themselves as ‘respectable’ and further to this, ‘sheltered’, that is, as living under the constant vigilance and care of their single mothers (and, as Pichler notes, their absent fathers). Ultimately, they came across as ‘responsible with regard to their schooling/education, boyfriends and sexual experiences and as compliant with the mostly strict but loving parenting they experience at home’ (ibid.). Finally, the third cohort, the Bangladeshi girls, navigated their ways through family expectations about being ‘good’ girls and a prototypically working-class toughness via a generally anti-school stance, combined with ‘verbal challenges and insults in the form of teasing and boasting’ (ibid.: 109), which were ‘influenced by ideologies of and norms of British lad(ette)/working class culture’ (ibid.: 147).

Still more recently, Shin (2014) discusses her research on the experiences of young Koreans whose families move them to countries such as the Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Canada so that they can receive a part of their primary and secondary education in English. Here we see how her middle-class informants suffered a degree of declassing, along with racism and social exclusion both inside and outside of school. Their reaction was to shift ground, moving to a heightened sense of Korean cosmopolitanism and middle-class entitlement, ‘distinguishing themselves from both long-term immigrants in local Korean diasporic communities and Canadians by deploying (as stylistic resources) revalued varieties of Korean language and culture in the globalized new economy’ (ibid.: 101). These resources included living in upmarket high-rises in a posh part of Toronto (as opposed to living in Koreatown), keeping up with fashion trends in Korea, frequenting Korean restaurants and karaoke bars, keeping up with K-pop and texting friends using Korean slang.

Shin does a good job of including several of the class indexicals cited in the section above devoted to class. We understand that the Korean families in the study are headed by well-educated professionals with high incomes and that they are accustomed to a certain standard of living in South Korea in terms of housing and consumption patterns. Added to this situation, however, is a very important lifestyle shift for the children of these families, one that relates to social networking, cultural consumption and, above all, symbolic behaviour. In the midst of a hostile English-speaking environment, they find a way to impose cosmopolitanism and Korean-ness onto their otherwise negative and undermining experiences and this allows them to inhabit a higher status and position themselves as superior to their tormentors. They associate with people like themselves (fellow young Korean cosmopolitans) with whom there is a common cultural consumption and above all symbolic behaviour around the body, clothes, speech, food and pastimes. As Shin notes, there is a certain irony in all of this, as the learning of English – the whole point of the family’s move in the first place – is relegated to the background. This means
that what was to be the acquisition of English as a middle-class marker in South Korea gives way to the display of a Korean-ness as a middle-class marker in Canada.

While Shin’s research is certainly a big step towards what I refer to above as fuller class-based analysis, it is really only in Rampton’s (2006, 2010) work that we encounter a good example of this approach. In *Language in late modernity*, Rampton (2006) devotes considerable space to an in-depth discussion of class as a construct, and this discussion is intermeshed with his analysis of the everyday interactions of students attending a London secondary school. Rampton’s informants speak ‘multicultural London English’ (Cheshire et al. 2011), a dynamic emerging variety that draws on traditional Cockney, as well as the Englishes of the Caribbean, South Asia and the United States, and Rampton focuses on the Cockney features in their speech. He freeze-frames for analysis the instances in which the Cockney is ‘mock’ (i.e. exaggerated and put on) and stands in contrast to imitations of how middle-class and wealthy people in Britain are supposed to talk – ‘mock posh’.

Rampton argues that the production of Cockney, both in unmonitored and ‘mock’ form, is constitutive of working-class subjectivities, as is ‘mock posh’, which positions the middle and upper-class ‘other’ as what these adolescents *are not*. In effect, Rampton is suggesting that the students in his study are doing class in the ways that they use language, an example of ‘class in itself’ (see discussion above) that contrasts with the same students’ reluctance to talk about themselves (and presumably see themselves) as working class in a socio-economically stratified society. Rampton’s informants thus display little that could be qualified as ‘class for itself’ and instead orient to gender, race and ethnicity as markers of who they are, that is, they construct themselves in terms of recognition as opposed to redistribution (Fraser 1995). This occurs despite the fact that the educational equalities wrought by the neoliberal policies enacted by British governments from the early 1980s onwards are clearly in evidence. We thus have the enduring material-based presence of class in contemporary societies, standing in marked contrast to its denial and erasure on the part of those living it. Rampton does not present matters in these exact terms, but it is a strength of his book that it allows the reader to observe how such realities play out and are constructed in the ongoing activity of both teachers and students. Indeed, I am only able to make such a statement because Rampton does the groundwork, combining an in-depth and incisive discussion of class with the careful collection, preparation and presentation of data.

**Summary**

In this chapter I have attempted to clarify what class means as a construct for language and identity researchers in applied linguistics, covering some of the principal theoretical bases ranging from Marx to Bourdieu. I have also commented on a select few publications (five) that I consider to be representative of different approaches to class in language and identity research over the years, pinpointing what I think they can offer and where I find them lacking. There is, to be sure, a great deal of work to be done. Among other things, researchers would help matters if they actually explained what they mean by class, as we see done in Rampton’s work (see also Vandrick 2014). This applies both to applied linguistics as a whole and to research that focuses specifically on language and identity. One problem is that most researchers seem not to have read beyond Bourdieu on the topic and this limits the ways in which they might conceptualise class in their work.

Taking on class in a more explicit manner leads to a second issue: Fraser’s important work on the interrelationship between recognition and redistribution. I must say that in recent years
when I have spoken to groups of fellow academics and graduate students about class, I have often found a reluctance to engage with the idea that class might be a different sort of aspect of human experience from gender, race, nationality and other dimensions of identity, what Sayer (2005: 87) calls ‘identity-neutral’ in contrast to ‘identity-sensitive’ mechanisms (although he does argue for the ‘contingent co-presence’ of the two). I have also encountered an averseness to the possibility that class might be a central (and indeed, the most important) mediator of people’s lives, lest this mean abandoning or lessening the importance of more valued constructs such as race and gender. If we are to move forward with class in language and identity research, scholars in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics will need to think deeply about the issues Fraser raises, which in turn will surely mean a good deal of self-critique and (quite possibly) letting go of some cherished, doxa-like ways of thinking. It should be noted that situating class front and centre in one’s research does not mean an abandonment of key identity dimensions such as gender and race; rather, it is an opportunity to explore the ways in which different dimensions of identity, along with class, intersect (see Block and Corona, this volume, for a discussion of intersectionality; see Fraser 2013 for a broader discussion).

Finally, I would like to acknowledge that there are a good number of important issues that I have not been able to cover in this chapter – how to research class in language and identity being a significant one. On the one hand, there is the question of survey-based research on class, such as the work of Savage et al. (2013) cited at the beginning of this chapter, which is often juxtaposed to more experientially based research. Researchers need to explore ways of working in a multi-method way when dealing with class, combining surveys with more ideographic methodologies. There is also on the experiential side a certain tension between working at the micro-level of interaction (class emergent in interaction), working with personal narratives of class-based experiences (talk about class) and bringing macro-level political economy perspectives to bear on analysis; for example, examining how the shift from Keynesian economic policies to neoliberal economic policies in Europe over the past four decades has led to a realignment of class politics and practice (Duménil and Levy 2011). Tensions need to be resolved, and the way forward is a multilevelled approach that takes on all of the elements mentioned above (see Buruwoy 2009).

Another issue is the geographical location of research. The five studies highlighted above were based in France (1), Canada (2) and the UK (2). In Block (2014), while I discuss a great deal of work from the Anglophone world, I also manage to include work from India (Ramanathan 2005), South Africa (Blommaert and Makoe 2011), Colombia (de Mejia 2002) and other countries. A key argument in this chapter is that there is a need for a more prominent class angle in language and identity research, and it is worth adding that there is also a need for a more global perspective in this research. As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, the number of publications focusing on class in countries around the world is on the rise. A similar rise is needed in applied linguistics as a whole and specifically in language and identity research.

To conclude, class is a difficult construct, both in conceptual and research terms. However, it holds the promise of helping us develop better understandings of a range of issues related to language and identity in the midst of the current crisis of capitalism, which engulfs and affects us all, albeit in very different and unequal ways. And that is something for all language and identity researchers to bear in mind.

**Related topics**

Positioning language and identity: poststructuralist perspectives; Critical discourse analysis and identity; An identity transformation? Social class, language prejudice and the erasure of
multilingual capital in higher education; Construction of heritage language and cultural identities: a case study of two young British-Bangladeshis in London; Intersectionality in language and identity research; Exploring neoliberal language, discourses and identities; Identity in language learning and teaching: research agendas for the future.

Further reading

Block, D. (2014). Social class in applied linguistics. London: Routledge. (This book contains an in-depth theoretical discussion of class: an exploration of the extent to which class has been a key construct in three general areas of applied linguistics – sociolinguistics, bi/multilingualism and second language acquisition and learning research.)

Block, D., Gray, J. and Holborow, M. (2012). Neoliberalism and applied linguistics. London: Routledge. (This is the most explicit integration of political economy with applied linguistics to date and it contains multiple references to class, including Chapter 4, which is entirely about class.)

Kanno, Y. (guest ed.) (2014). ‘Special issue. Social class in language learning and teaching’, Journal of Language, Identity, and Education, 13(2). (This forum contains five principal papers plus a commentary piece, all of which focus on class as a mediating construct in research on identity in language learning and teaching.)

Rampton, B. (2006). Language in late modernity: interaction in an urban school. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (This book is primarily about linguistic ethnographic approaches to interaction taking place in urban school settings in London, but it also contains four lengthy chapters (6–9) on class that constitute the best discussion of the construct for interactional data analysis published to date.)

Notes

1 In this chapter I will use ‘class’ and not ‘social class’. I do so while acknowledging that both terms are used interchangeably in many publications, including Savage et al. (2013), cited in the introduction to this chapter, and my own work (e.g. Block 2014). ‘Class’ has the advantage of being shorter and of working better in adjectival form than ‘social class’.

2 ‘While declassing refers to changes in one’s life conditions and reference points, specifically the loss of the economic power and prestige and status which previously marked one’s class position, reclassing is about the reconfiguration and realignment of class position in society due to changes in one’s life conditions’ (Block 2016: see also Block 2014).

References


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