The Intersection of Language and Class in Literature[1]

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Abstract. Literature serves as an auspicious material for revealing the intersection of language and class. The interplay of language and class in the upper-class characters, as portrayed in literature, has very subtle forms. Upper-class representatives stand out by literariness of their speech acquired in the elite universities and such obvious advantages of classical education as 1) knowledge of foreign languages, 2) skills of abstract and logical thinking, 3) proficiency in playing upon words, and 5) learning reflected in the use of allusions, which all together differentiate them from 'out-group' members and form their own sociolect. Knowledge of foreign languages is revealed in the use of borrowings, which imparts formality to speech and often performs the function of social characterization, distinguishing the upper-class representatives from those of other walks of life. Skills of abstract and logical thinking find their reflection in the use of abstract nouns and phrases, which, often being perceived as weird or alien, perform the function of social distancing or deflecting attention away from serious problems arising in society. The shibboleth reflected in the play upon words reveals the creativity, and often the ingenuity of the upper-class representatives in coining new words and phrases, and in charging the words with irony, mockery, and understatement, the most covert means of expressing attitude. The cultural backdrop includes allusions to the writers, books and theatrical performances, and the names of annual events, clubs, places, associations, etc. which translate their culture and mark upper-class speech.

Keywords: upper class language in modern British literature, literariness, borrowings, abstract nouns, creativity, implicit means of expressing social status

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Пересечение языка и класса в литературе

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Аннотация. Художественная литература является благоприятным фоном, который ярко высвечивает социальные различия языковыми средствами. Взаимодействие языка и класса в образах представителей высших классов имеет особый, на первый взгляд незаметный и тонкий характер, ибо представители привилегированных классов отличаются грамотной речью, поставленной в элитных университетах, и такими очевидными преимуществами классического образования, как 1) знание иностранных языков, 2) навыки абстрактного и логического мышления, 3) умение творчески подходить к использованию языка и 5) начитанность, выражающаяся в ссылках на произведения художественной литературы, отражающих культуру и язык представителей высших классов. Всё это вместе взятое формирует социальный диалект, или социолект, способствующий сохранению высшими классами своего привилегированного положения в обществе и отмежеванию от «других». Знание иностранных языков проявляется как в использовании отдельных фраз и выражений, так и в умении грамотно и уместно употреблять заимствованные слова, что придаёт речи официальный и формальный характер и служит яркой социальной характеристикой, отличающей представителей высших классов от других слоёв общества. Навыки абстрактного и логического мышления находят своё отражение в использовании абстрактных существительных и фраз, которые часто воспринимаются как странные, чуждые и непонятные и выполняют функцию социального дистанцирования или отвлечения внимания от серьёзных проблем, возникающих в обществе. Особенностью речи представителей высших классов является творческий подход к использованию языка, умение играть словами и изобретать новые, что раскрывает творческий потенциал и образованность представителей изучаемого класса, а также более тонкая, не для всех очевидная ирония, сарказм и недосказанность – наиболее скрытые средства выражения отношения. Культурный фон привилегированной части британского общества создаётся литературой, писателями и театральными представлениями, вызывающими дискуссии в своём кругу, а также ежегодными мероприятиями, членством в клубах и ассоциациях, которые отражают интересы и характерную в связи с этим речь представителей высших классов.

Ключевые слова: язык представителей высших классов в современной британской литературе, литературность, заимствования, абстрактные существительные, имплицитные средства выражения социального статуса

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[2] Статья основана на докладе, представленном на конференции «Language, Literature, Intersectionality 2024», которая состоялась на философском факультете Нишского университета в Сербии 27 апреля 2024 года. Она представляет собой расширенную версию доклада с бóльшим объёмом иллюстративного материала из художественной литературы.

1. Introduction

The intersection of language and class is best revealed in the phrase, which has already become a saying, "the way we speak reveals who we are". And it is true as we can easily spot social status of a speaker by the way he/she speaks. But it is not always the case. Neutral, or literary speech, for example, which often serves as the backdrop against which social differences come to the fore, can also contain social indices of a very subtle nature, which are often left unnoticed or lost upon the interlocutor or reader. These social markers are not visible and do not lie on the surface, and to spot them requires familiarity with the language and culture of the upper classes.

2. Methodology and material

The study of social identity, and the intersection of language and class has been in the focus of scholarly interest for a long time and it has been approached from different perspectives: anthropological and sociological [36], [17], [27], [39], [26], [34], [16], [5], [1], [7], [8], [12], [18], [33]; linguistic anthropology [6], [7], [8]; sociolinguistic [26], [17], [22], [23], [24]; discourse analysis [40], [19]; linguistic [38], [10], [19], [31], [14], [18], [2], [25]; semiotic [30], [34]; literary and cultural studies [32], [10], [13], [20].

There is a long list of scholars carrying out research in this field. Still, there is always a room for an in-depth analysis based on literature.

The sociolinguistic research presented in this paper is aimed at 1) tracing socially marked characteristics in upper-class representation, 2) verifying their stability and relevance as well as their indexical nature, 3) determining their functions in literature and 4) arriving at conclusions.

This study is based on modern British novels of the 21st century: Jeffrey Archer's *A Prisoner of Birth* (2008) [4] and *Not a Penny More, Not a Penny Less* (2004) [3], Julian Fellowes's *Past Imperfect* (2012) [15], David Nicholls's *One Day* (2003) [28] and *Us* (2020) [29], Sue Townsend's *Number Ten* (2012) [37], and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989) [21].

3. The analysis of the material

a) Borrowings

Upper-class speech stands out by its literariness acquired in the elite universities and manifested by knowledge of foreign languages (French, Latin and Greek), abstract and logical thinking, debate skills obtained and trained in university clubs and associations, creativity, and knowledge of literature. They all serve as social markers of upper-class speech and form the upper-class sociolect [22].

Knowledge of foreign languages is a prerogative of the upper classes, which is successfully maintained and cultivated by socially privileged layers of society because mastery of foreign languages underpins classical education difficult to emulate if you are devoid of it. It explains why professional journalists oftentimes make mistakes in their articles confusing borrowings by their sound form or spelling. That is the observation Simon Heffer, a former British editor and professor of English, has made in his book, *Strictly English,* adding that oftentimes misuses penetrate into dictionaries and become part of the semantics of a word [20]. Being part and parcel of classical education, borrowings and foreign languages identify upper class representatives who are in their element using them.

The use of a loanword in speech may cause misunderstanding on the part of an interlocutor expressed in the form of a question as to the meaning of a word (1)[3], (2); juxtaposition with a synonymous word of Germanic origin (3), (4); and a misuse of a borrowing (malapropism) (5) [24]. Let us consider some examples.

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[3] Numbers in parentheses refer to examples from literature.

Misunderstandings of words of foreign origin are best revealed in the following extracts from the novel by Jeffrey Archer, *A Prisoner of Birth*, where Danny Cartwright, a low-middle class young man, happened to run into trouble with a group of young aristocrats. His social status is pinpointed by the borrowings, which were novel to him.

> (1) 'Gerald Payne,' said Craig. He's an old friend from my days at Cambridge. We were spending a *convivial* evening together, enjoying a bottle of wine.' …. Danny wanted to ask what the word *convivial* meant [emphasis added] [3, p. 17–18].

> (2) Danny was *rapacious* about his new challenge, without having any idea what the word meant [emphasis added] [3, p. 136].

Social differences are masterfully drawn in literature by juxtaposing formal speech, formal words with colloquial or neutral words at best, ascribing formality to upper-class speakers and colloquial speech constituted by words of Germanic origin to representatives of other walks of life, like in the following examples from Sue Townsend's novel, *Number Ten:*

> (3) 'He's so *sweet*,' whispered Suzanne Nicholson after the Prime Minister had kissed his wife, stroked her hair and left the room, closing the door quietly, almost apologetically, behind him. Adele pulled her thin legs under her and took a sip of her chamomile tea. 'He is sweet but he's not *saccharine*' [emphasis added] [37, p. 18].

The Prime Minister's wife Adele drew a line between herself and Suzanne Nicholson, a journalist who was fishing for the details of the Prime Minister's family life, by using a borrowing of Latin origin *saccharum* (17th c.).

Another extract is taken from Jeffrey Archer's novel, *Not A Penny More, Not A Penny Less,* in which Mrs. Rennick's upper-class status is brought to the fore by the word *perspiration* of French origin (17th c.). Social distance between two characters made Henryk feel awkward in her presence:

> (4) His new shirt was soaked in sweat (Mrs. Rennick would have called it *perspiration*), but he was out in the open and could breathe freely again [3, p. 12].

Borrowings can also serve as social signs when they are misused. This linguistic phenomenon is called malapropism and it is widely used in literature to show social status of a speaker, usually illiterate or not educated enough to use a loan word correctly. In Sue Townsend's novel, *Number Ten,* we find the following passage:

> (5) Phillpot said, "The worst thing a politician can do is to marry a clever wife. My wife's as thick as shit but she looks good on my arm at constituency functions and she keeps me in clean shirts. And as far as I know she hasn't got any opinions about anything, let alone the sanctity or otherwise of *exramural body parts.*' Malcolm Black murmured, 'I think you must mean *extraneous body parts.*' [3, p. 179].

A satirical and critical take on modern politicians is drawn by means of malapropism, the inappropriate use of the word *extramural*. Two borrowings – *extraneous* and *extramural*, both originating from Latin (17th c. and 19th c. respectively) – are confused in this context. Extraneous with the meanings: *1) irrelevant or unrelated to the subject being dealt with; 2) of external origin, b) separate from the object to which it is attached* (ABBYY), is the word Philpot had in his mind. Instead, he uses the adjective *extramural* in this meaning, which is registered in the dictionary as: *1) British (of a course of study), arranged for people who are not full-time members of a university or other educational establishment, additional to one's work or course of study and 2) outside the walls or boundaries of a town or city* (ABBYY). Malcolm Black immediately corrects Philpot. Malapropism, a wrong use of a word, serves to translate

the attitudes of the narrator to modern politicians, their inability to work and take decisions because of the lack of professionalism, proper education and indifference. This example illustrates how a borrowing draws a line between characters in terms of their education, status and attitudes.

Knowledge of foreign languages helps the individuals educated at the elite universities feel the kinship of the alike and, on the other hand, distinguish the "out-group" members. It happens when a borrowing represents upper-class values, moral and ethical principles underlying their culture. The society code has been maintained and cultivated since the 17th – 18th centuries, when in their salons, the French aristocracy decided to establish an ideal as a symbol and model for the nation, an ideal characterized by elegance and courtesy, an ideal that countered the logic of force and the brutality of instinct with an art of living together based on seduction and reciprocal pleasure [13]. It is based on the principles of beauty, charm, elegance, politeness, style, splendor, courtesy, civility, etc., which represent upper-class language and culture. In literature, these society concepts immediately refer the reader to the classes in question. Here are some examples:

> (6) All that stuff about things being 'posh' and my-fat-bum and orthopedic high-heels, the endless, *endless self-deprecation*. Well God save me from comedi*ennes*, he thought, with their *put-downs* and their *smart asides*, their *insecurities* and *self-loathing*. Why couldn't a woman have a bit of *grace and elegance and self-confidence*, instead of *behaving all the time like the chippy stand-up*?
> And *class!* Don't even mention class. He takes her to a great restaurant at his own expense, and it goes the cloth cap! There was a kind of *vanity and self-regard* in that working-class-hero act that sent him crazy [emphasis added] [28, p. 201].

The extract from David Nicholls' novel, *One Day,* presents the inner thoughts of the main character, Dexter, an upper-class young man, who dates Emma, a middle-class young woman, and the confrontations they have on a daily basis because of the cultural and social differences. Their values are contrasted – endless self-deprecation, put-downs, insecurities and self-loathing, vanity and self-regard on the one hand, and grace, elegance, self-confidence and class, on the other. The eternal irritation they evoke in each other because of their differences in everything: attitudes, behavior, tastes, and manners of speaking, manifests social clashes people have in communication. However, politeness as part of the society code is not the sole prerogative of socially privileged society. Julian Fellowes, the author of *Past Imperfect,* writes about the inability of the upper classes to adjust to new times. The following passage in his novel is of interest to a researcher:

> (7) The young are often told, or were in the days when I was a child, that parvenus and other rank outsiders may on occasion be rude, but real ladies and gentlemen are never anything but perfectly polite. This is, of course, complete rubbish. The rude, like the polite, may be found at every level of society, but there is a particular kind of rudeness, when it rests on empty snobbery, on an assumption of superiority made by people who have nothing superior about them, who have nothing about them at all, in fact, that is unique to the upper classes and very hard to swallow [15, p. 425].

Politeness as a category has different socially marked forms of its both verbal and non-verbal manifestation.

This category of borrowings – social concepts – also represents the next group of words: abstract words and phrases.

b) Abstract words and phrases
Skills of abstract and logical thinking acquired and trained at prestigious universities find their reflection in the use of abstract nouns and phrases.

Although abstraction has been studied by scholars of different times, it still causes a lot of arguments remaining unresolved because, as compared with concrete nouns, abstract nouns denote "invisible" objects, the result of sensual and logical thinking, which are at a higher level of people's cognition [25].

Abstract words are more difficult to work with as they are stored in people's mind as a word, a lexical unit and an image, whereas in order to understand and use abstract words, speakers can rely only on their verbal code [11]. According to Schwanenfluge, abstract words do not have a context in its broad sense that is feelings, associations, and emotions linked to a word. Rather, they are based only on our understanding of these concepts [35]. The higher the level of education, the higher and easier the abstraction is [9]. This is the reason why the use of abstract nouns and phrases has turned into an upper-class shibboleth. They create social distance between the speakers and serve to differentiate between 'in-group' and 'out-group' members. Let us turn to literature and adduce some examples proving the point.

A funny episode is found in Sue Townsend's novel, Number Ten, in which the Prime Minister of Great Britain, the main character, disguised as a woman, travels across the country in order to see the real situation in Great Britain at first hand. Below is his talk with James, a low-class person, about education, which was incomprehensible and even foreign to him:

> (8) The Prime Minister said tentatively, 'Well, you know, Mrs Sprat, I kind of think that education is not only about *equipping us with the tools for material gain. A good education should also enhance our lives and enable us to contribute to society, to make a difference'*.
> James said, 'Where were you educated?'
> 'At Cambridge,' said the Prime Minister, lowering his eyes modestly.
> 'Well, it ain't done you much good, has it?' said James.
> 'Look at the state you're in. You ain't a man, you ain't a woman, you ain't no class, what are you?' [emphasis added] [37, p. 282].

'Equipping us with the tools for material gain', 'enhance our lives and enable us to contribute to society', and 'to make a difference' were perceived as weird and bewildering for James. Hence is the reaction of perplexity and confusion.

There is another example from the same novel: a talk between the Prime Minister and his press secretary:

> (9) Alex said, 'Tell you what, Ed, it's perhaps not a good idea to talk about Africa at the moment, not when we're still trying to get the trains to run on time.'
> But Edward was ready for him. 'Africa is a *dark stain on the conscience of the world*. Somebody must *lead the people out of the darkness of dying economics and into a sense of fiscal responsibility*' [emphasis added] [37, p. 12–13].

'Stain', 'conscience', 'darkness', 'dying economics', 'sense of responsibility', and 'fiscal responsibility' – all these words used to avoid any responsibility for the problems in different spheres of life are seen as blabbing. Abstract nouns and phrases often deflect attention away from serious problems arising in society and perform the function of hiding the truth and/or of social distancing.

c) Play upon words

Characterizing French noble society and its key features, an influential Jesuit Pere Bouhours, a priest and neo-classical critic of the 18th century coined the word 'esprit', which means 'quality of being lively, vivacious or witty' (borrowed from Latin *spiritus*). Esprit is "the enemy of work and constraint", and it is an appropriate term to embrace all kinds of play upon words: witticism, jests and puns, humour and understatement. "Humour is our 'default mode', … we obey it automatically, rather in the way we obey the law of gravity" [16]. The British anthropologist writes, "… most English conversations will involve at least some degree of banter, teasing, irony, understatement, humourous deprecation, mockery or just silliness".

In the novel by David Nicholls, *One Day,* there are different scenes in which Dexter, an upper-class young man and his girl friend Emma, a middle-class girl, with whom he has been in love for many years, have playful dialogues. Below is one of them.

(10) Dexter and Emma found each other in the crowd.

'Table five,' said Dexter.

'I'm on table twenty-four,' said Emma. 'Table five's quite near the bride. Twenty-four's out near the chemical loos.'

'You mustn't take it personally.'

'What's the main course?'

'The rumour-mill says salmon.'

'Salmon. Salmon, salmon, salmon, salmon. I eat so much salmon at these weddings, twice a year I get this urge to swim upstream.'

'Come to table five. We'll swap the name cards around.'

'Tamper with the seating plan? They shoot people for less than that. There's a guillotine out back' [37, p. 278].

It is a light, non-abiding and playful talk between two young people who lost a lot of time trying to understand their own feelings and are both suffering from it. This mischievous tone is created by means of a hidden metaphor of a salmon with which Emma associated herself, and a humourous mention of a guillotine as the punishment for swapping the seats at the wedding table. The reader cannot but feel this jesting talk between the two who just met after some years apart.

Esprit, or a light, witty, playful and easy talk is also manifested in Jeffrey Archer's novel, *Not A Penny More, Not A Penny Less,* in the following conversation of friends in misfortune.

(11) 'What a girl our James has gone and married,' said Jean-Pierre.

'You're drunk, you frog,' said Robin.

'How dare you, sir, suggest that a Frenchman could get drunken on champagne. I demand satisfaction. Choose your weapons.'

'Champagne corks.'

'Quiet,' said Stephen. 'You'll give yourselves away' [3, p. 300].

Esprit, the ability to perform witticism, is an art acquired gradually in the family and in the process of education. Stevens, a butler and the main character in the novel *The Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro, remarks there are 'hazards of uttering witticism. By the very nature of a witticism, one is given very little time to access its various possible repercussions before one is called to give voice to it, and one gravely risks uttering all manner of unsuitable things if one has not first acquired the necessary skill and experience' [21, p. 139–140]. It proves its deep roots in culture and family traditions not easy to acquire if one is not born with them.

d) Allusions

Allusions is another class indicator, which 1) often testifies to the wide reading of the speakers and knowledge of literature, theatre and art; 2) reflects the style of life of the uppers and their values; 3) establishes cultural contact and sustains cultural conversation (dialogue) of different generations; and 4) conserves the socio-cultural code.

The characters of the novels and plays, embodying their culture in different manifestations, the names of the clubs and associations to which they belong, annual events for the 'in-group' members, magazines and sports, the fashion they stick to, and the manners in which they dress, behave and speak – all translate their culture and bear the mark of an upper-class rank [22].

In the literature of the 21st century we find socially marked allusions to William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Brontë sisters, Agatha Christie, and Virginia Woolf. In the novels by Julian Fellowes we find allusions to chivalrous literature, John Milton's *Paradise Lost,* poets of Romanticism: Lord Byron and John Keats, and to the literature of the 19th century: Oscar Wilde, and Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion.* Allusions to literature serve as a code for translating information, new meanings, emotions, and attitudes to those who share them.

In Julian Fellowes' *The Past Imperfect* we find the following passage:

(12) There is a moment in *Pride and Prejudice* when Elizabeth Bennet catches sight of her sister who has returned with the dastardly Wickham, rescued from disgrace by the efforts of Mr. Darcy. 'Lydia was Lydia still', she comments. Well, Damian Baxter was Damian still. That is, while the broad and handsome young man with the thick curls and the easy smile had vanished and been replaced by a hunched figure resembling no one but so much as Doctor Manette, I could detect that distinctive, diffident stutter masking a deep and honed sense of superiority, and I recognized at once the old, patronizing arrogance in the flourish with which he held out his bony hand. I smiled. 'How very nice of you,' I said [15, p. 12–13].

The allusion to Jane Austin's character Lydia highlights the pride, aristocratic superiority and patronizing arrogance the main character Damian preserved despite the deathly disease, cancer, which turned him into a hunched figure. And the allusion to Doctor Manette from Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* conveys the destinies both characters shared, their stoicism and death in the end.

Noteworthy are Steven's words (the valet from *The Remains of the Day*): 'Reading books, apart from most elegant phrases, enables you to perfect your language by using adjectives'. Attributes of a superficial and decorative order in your speech are the most difficult part of speech. They are 'like icing on the table', requiring effort to master them. These words emphasize the decorative function of abstract words, to which adjectives also belong.

4. Conclusion

The intersection of language and class may take different forms: from explicit ones when social status of a speaker is revealed conspicuously against the background of literary language, to implicit forms considered in this article where literariness is a social meaning maker. Upper-class speakers, as literature demonstrates, elaborated their own sociolect which rests on education acquired in prestigious universities and its advantages actualized through the use of borrowings, abstract words and phrases, play upon words (esprit) and deep knowledge of literature which translates their values, attitudes and lifestyle. Despite all the changes the world is undergoing, including linguistic changes, social indices of the upper-class speech remain quite stable. So does the interaction of language, culture and class, which always testifies to who we are by the way we speak.

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