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What's class got to do with it?

Social class and language awareness in Newcastle

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WHAT'S CLASS GOT TO DO WITH IT? SOCIAL CLASS AND LANGUAGE AWARENESS IN NEWCASTLE

Investigations of the impact of socio-economic class membership on language use are numerous within the field of sociolinguistics. After decades of research, certain patterns seem have been established when it comes to the use of standard and non-standard forms by members of different socio-economic classes (Ash 2013, Chambers 2003).

But how can socio-economic class best be described? As observed by Ash (2013) there seems to be little consensus among sociolinguistics as to the best ways to operationalize this variable. The consensus only diminishes when looking to sociology and the intricate parameters used within this field. However, one might wonder if speakers are solely products of their social environments? Does a speaker's own definition of him/herself play a larger role than a supposedly objective classification based on income, education, etc.?

A questionnaire study carried out in Newcastle upon Tyne in the summer 2012 forms the foundation for an investigation into Tyneside speakers' awareness of vernacular morphosyntactic forms. Statistical analyses showed interesting patterns with regard to speakers' definition of own social class and their level of education and the different groups' performance on different questionnaire tasks.

In short, there was only a very weak correlation between participants' own definition of social class and that based on their level of education. Furthermore, the group of participants who identified as middle class but were not highly educated performed significantly different on the tasks compared to the rest of the participants.

These results raise questions not only about methodology (e.g. how to operationalize class and the usefulness of this distinction in investigations of language use in the north of England, c.f. Wales (2000) and Lancaster (2005)) but also about speaker agency. The results suggest that perhaps taking into consideration how speakers define themselves in terms of different parameters (e.g. social class) might be a useful way to investigate the socio-cognitive factors which influence language use and perception.

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