

## Language and Social Class

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### What is Social Class?

- Social class involves grouping people together and according them status within society according to the groups they belong to.

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### What is Social Class?

- A number of modern thinkers have tried to define what makes a particular “social class.”
  - Is it accent?
  - ...neighborhood?
  - ...occupation?
  - ...income?
  - ...wealth?

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## Variables of Social Class

- Power
  - The degree to which a person can control other people
- Wealth
  - Objects or symbols owned by people which have value attached to them
- Prestige
  - The degree of respect, favorable regard, or importance accorded to a person by members of society

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The New York Times



<http://www.nytimes.com/pages/national/class/index.html>

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## Determinants of Social Class

- One way to think of a person's position in society is to imagine a hand of cards. Everyone is dealt four cards, one from each suit: education, income, occupation and wealth, the four commonly used criteria for gauging class. Face cards in a few categories may land a player in the upper middle class. At first, a person's class is his parents' class. Later, he may pick up a new hand of his own; it is likely to resemble that of his parents, but not always.

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Where do you fit in?



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### Defining Social Class

- In the **feudal system** of land ownership, the nobility of land owners, with its sense of family tradition, privilege, and knightly conduct became the dominant ruling group.
- In most modern industrial societies, the system of social stratification is much more fluid. We experience a good deal of **social mobility**— people, through generations or perhaps in their own lifetime, moving up or down the social scale.

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The United States of America is a classless and egalitarian society

Do you agree or disagree?

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### Class Structure in the U.S.

- Two upper classes
  - Upper upper : Old money
  - Lower upper : New money
- Three middle classes
  - Upper middle : Professional
  - Middle class : White collar and entrepreneurs
  - Working class : Blue collar
- Two lower classes
  - Upper lower : Unskilled laborers
  - Lower lower : Socially and economically disadvantaged

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### The American Dream

Has your chance to move up from one class to another increased or decreased over the last 30 years?

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### The American Dream

- Has your chance to move up from one class to another increased or decreased over the last 30 years?
  - 40% of Americans believe that it has increased.
  - 35% believe that there has been no change.
  - 23% believe that it has decreased.

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### The American Dream

- “I think the system is as fair as you can make it,” Ernie Frazier, a 65-year-old real estate investor in Houston. “I don’t think life is necessarily fair. But if you persevere, you can overcome adversity. It has to do with a person’s willingness to work hard, and I think it’s always been that way.”

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### The American Dream

- “They call it the land of opportunity, and I don’t think that’s changed much,” said Diana Lackey, a 60-year-old homemaker and wife of a retired contractor in Fulton, N.Y., near Syracuse. “Times are much, much harder with all the downsizing, but we’re still a wonderful country.”

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### The American Dream?

- One study found that fewer families moved from one quintile, or fifth, of the income ladder to another during the 1980’s than during the 1970’s and that still fewer moved in the 90’s than in the 80’s.
- A study by the Bureau of Labor Statistics also found that mobility declined from the 80’s to the 90’s.
- The incomes of brothers born around 1960 have followed a more similar path than the incomes of brothers born in the late 1940’s. Whatever children inherit from their parents - habits, skills, genes, contacts, money - seems to matter more today.

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## The American Dream?

- Social mobility is not higher in the United States than in Britain or France. It is lower here than in Canada and some Scandinavian countries but not as low as in developing countries like Brazil, where escape from poverty is so difficult that the lower class is all but frozen in place.
- Those comparisons may seem hard to believe. Britain and France had hereditary nobilities; Britain still has a queen. The founding document of the United States proclaims all men to be created equal. The American economy has also grown more quickly than Europe's in recent decades, leaving an impression of boundless opportunity.
- But the United States differs from Europe in ways that can gum up the mobility machine. Because income inequality is greater here, there is a wider disparity between what rich and poor parents can invest in their children. Perhaps as a result, a child's economic background is a better predictor of school performance in the United States than in Denmark, the Netherlands or France.

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## The American Dream?

- "Being born in the elite in the U.S. gives you a constellation of privileges that very few people in the world have ever experienced."
- "Being born poor in the U.S. gives you disadvantages unlike anything in Western Europe and Japan and Canada."

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## Indexes of Social Class

- How you look
- How you dress
- How you talk
- What you like to do
- Where you live
- What your house looks like
- What you eat

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### How do you identify social class?

- Describe the features of the speaker's looks, dress, talk, and actions that help you to identify the speaker's social class.
  - [Tour of the House](#)
  - [Tuscan Kitchen](#)
  - [Mitsubishi TV](#)
  - [Garden Party](#)
- How would you describe the social class of the speaker?
  - [Bougie Girls](#)
  - [Tammy's Story](#)
  - [Bill and the Suits](#)

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### How does social class affect language?

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### William Labov's Department Store Study

- Saks Fifth Avenue
  - At 50<sup>th</sup> Street and 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, near the center of the high fashion shopping district
- Macy's
  - Herald Square. 34<sup>th</sup> Street and Sixth Avenue, near the garment district
- S. Klein
  - Union Square. 14<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway, not far from the Lower East Side

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**William Labov's  
Department Store Study**

- The three stores are classified by
  - Their location
  - The number of pages of advertising in The New York Times and in The Daily News
  - The prices of comparable items (e.g., in 1962, women's coats averaged \$90 in Sacks, \$79.95 in Macy's, and \$23 in Klein's)
  - The size and layout of the store

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**William Labov's  
Department Store Study**

The interviewer asked:

- Excuse me, where are the (women's shoes)?

The salesperson answered:

- Fourth floor.

The interviewer then leaned forward and said:

- Excuse me?

The salesperson answered:

- Fourth floor.

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**William Labov's  
Department Store Study**

- In New York City the pronunciation of postvocalic (r) in words like "fourth" and "floor" is variable.
- William Labov hypothesized: Salespeople in the highest ranked stores will have the most (r), those in the middle ranked store will have an intermediate value, and those in the lowest ranked store will have the least.

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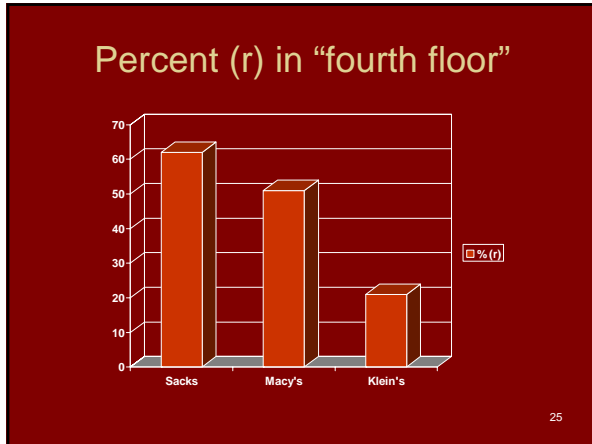
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### William Labov's Department Store Study

- The pronunciation of postvocalic (r) varies according to its position in a word.
  - Before a consonant: fourth
  - At the end of a word: floor

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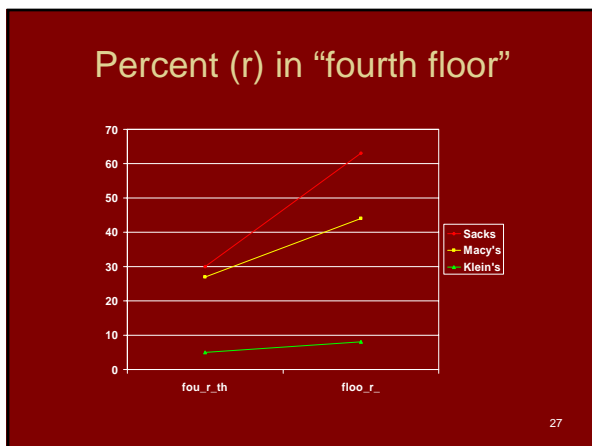
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### William Labov's Department Store Study

- The pronunciation of postvocalic (r) varies according to how much attention the speaker pays to what she is saying.
  - First mention of “fourth floor”
  - Emphatic repeat of “fourth floor”

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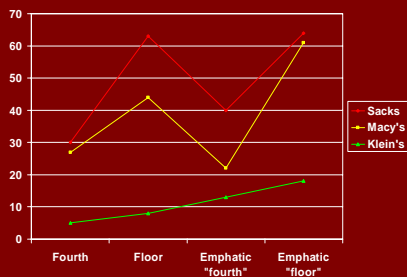
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### Percent (r) in “fourth floor”



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### Different Speech Communities

- The same linguistic variable is likely to have different values in different speech communities.
- In New York City, (r) is pronounced more by higher social classes.
- But in Reading, England, (r) is pronounced less by higher social classes.

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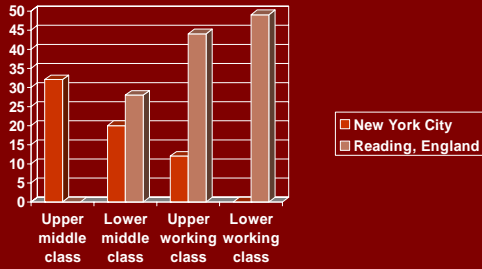
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(r) has Different Values in Different Communities



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Social Class and Speech Style

- Peter Trudgill studied variation in word-final *-ing* in words like running (runnin') and swimming (swimmin') in Norwich, England.
- Four speech styles
  - Reading aloud of word lists
  - Reading aloud of text
  - Formal speech
  - Casual speech
- Trudgill found that variation across speech styles parallels variation across social class.

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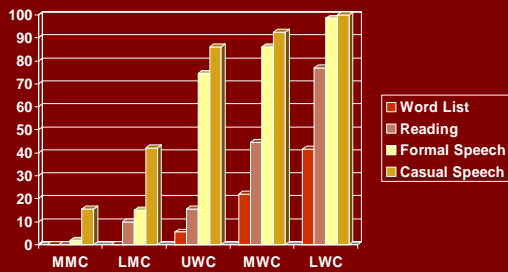
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% [ɪn] for *-ing* by Class and Speech Style in Norwich, England



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## Gender and Language Variation

- Trudgill also studied the effect of gender on variation in word-final *-ing* in words like running (runnin') and swimming (swimmin').
- He found that women tend to use more standard language features than men.
- And men tend to use more vernacular forms in their speech.

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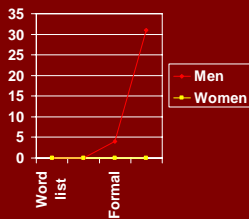
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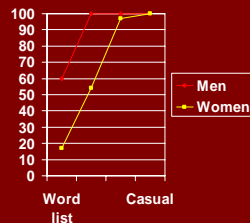
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## % [in] for *-ing* by Gender in Norwich, England

Middle Middle Class



Lower Working Class



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## Hypercorrection

- Lower Middle Class speakers sometimes use prestige features at a greater rate than Upper Middle Class speakers.
- And LMC speakers use stigmatized features at a lower rate than the UMC.
- Because the LMC wish to achieve the next higher level of status, they attempt to talk like members of the next higher class, but they go too far.

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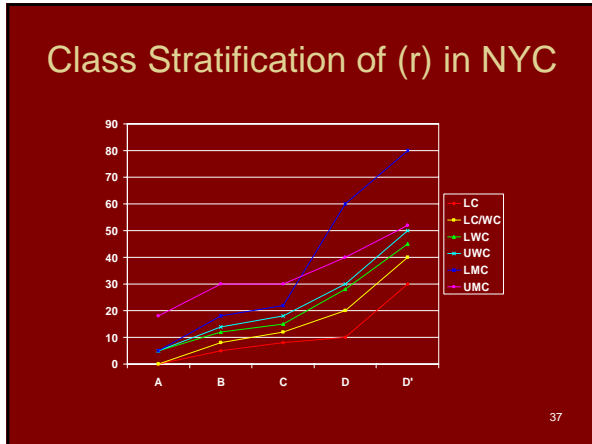
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- ### Video Analysis of Clips from People Like Us
- These are seven clips from the movie People like us: Social class in America.
    - Tour of the House
    - Tuscan Kitchen
    - Mitsubishi TV
    - Garden Party
    - Bougie Girls
    - Tammy's Story
    - Bill and the Suits
  - Choose three of these seven clips. For each of the three clips, ...
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- ### Video Analysis of Clips from People Like Us
1. What is the title of the clip?
  2. Transcribe the speech in each clip using the conventions of Conversation Analysis outlined in chapter 5 of Everyday Talk.
  3. Describe the features of the speaker's looks, dress, talk, and actions that help you to identify the speaker's social class.
  4. How would you describe the social class of the speaker?
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