

Languaging Class

Reflecting on the Linguistic Articulations
of Structural Inequalities

Edited by

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Series in Language and Linguistics



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Class on board! Reflecting on the linguistic articulations of structural inequalities

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Keywords: Social Class, Gramsci, Marx, Structural Inequalities, Language, Subaltern Groups

Class does not coincide with the sign community, i.e., with only the community which is the totality of users of the same set of signs for ideological communication. Thus, various different classes will use one and the same language. As a result, differently oriented accents intersect in every ideological sign. Sign becomes an arena of class struggle.

(V. Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, 1973, p. 23)

Ideas do not exist separately from language.

(K. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 1993b, p.163)

In one of the Green Papers that make up the persisting body of anti-trade union legislation that characterises British industrial relations, the *Green Paper on Trade Union Immunities* (1981), the Conservative Government led by Margaret Thatcher, construes an idea of *national interest* as something that is threatened by class conflict, and consequently by the idea of class itself. The text is one of the instances of neoliberal discourse in which this objective conflict inherent to capitalist societies is substituted by different articulations of the idea of *general interest* (Ortu, 2008, p. 295).

Indeed, the document reads:

A nation's prosperity rests ultimately on the ability of its people to live and work in harmony with each other. *If its industrial relations are marked by conflict rather than cooperation the nation as a whole pays the price* of economic stagnation. [...] The results are apparent in our

poor industrial performance and lower standard of living compared with our major competitors overseas. (Great Britain. Department of Employment 1981, emphasis added)

The Green Paper construes conflict as an opposite of cooperation, which is in turn represented as the only possible approach to securing the greater good of a supposed *national interest*. In the United Kingdom, that was at the forefront of the neoliberal wave, we can identify a pivotal document that more than the *Green Paper* quoted above, had a significant impact on the construal of the new, classless, neoliberal hegemony, i.e., the Conservative Manifesto for the 1979 general elections in which they stated:

In bringing about economic recovery, we should all be on the same side. Government and public, management and unions, employers and employees, all have a common interest in raising productivity and profits. (The Conservative Party 1979)

The elimination of class as a semiotic resource from public debate meant that, as “ideas do not exist separately from language” (Marx 1993b, p. 163), this fundamental concept was also expelled from inventory of the thinkable. This battle for hegemony was unfortunately won and class disappeared as a political concept and a tool for interpreting the reality of the economic system. Nonetheless, class relationships persist and brought us to the dismal situation we are in at the moment.

In order to tackle this problem, starting from a lively debate during the fourth I-Land International Conference in Cagliari¹, we invited scholars to propose their contributions, with the explicit aim of re-igniting an interest in structural inequalities in disciplines and academic fields that, consistently with the neoliberal global *zeitgeist*, had shied away from reflections on such inequalities and, consequently, from the expression that better served to capture them in the past, i.e., Social Class, in favour of studies on ethnic, gender, and cultural identities, in the last decades (Moran 2015; See also Durrenberger 2012). The idea was to take back on board the concept of social class and to engage with it in a novel way but always keeping linguistic facts and their materiality as an entry point to the issue. Indeed, as David Machin and John Richardson stated, “discourses may be variously approached as (often simultaneously) reflecting class structures, as a site of class inequalities, as expressive of class identities or

¹ The bi-annual conference of the I-LanD (*Identity and Language Diversity*) Research Centre based at the University of Naples “L’Orientale” was held from 28th to the 30th of September 2017 at University of Cagliari, Faculty of Humanities.

class consciousness and/or as a constituent part of more performative class action” (Machin and Richardson 2008, p. 284). The chapters in this book explore the issue of social class from the point of view of its linguistic articulations.

The variety of approaches represented in the chapters, that range from the more traditional sociolinguistic one, to social anthropology, to literary and discourse studies, cover the many aspects evoked by Machin and Richardson. The multiplicity of the chapters does not stop there, though. In selecting the contributions to the present volume, we paid attention to the inclusion of distinct cultural settings, indeed we have case studies that come from three different continents, but also to a variety of textual genres, with fictional as well as documental texts, and oral and written language. Moreover, even in the context of the same discipline, we were able to put together different methodologies. Diverse types of observation that shape the textual materials of each study, whether pre-existing or originated from the interaction between the researcher and the “informant”, also in “virtual” fields.

1. Conceptions of the wor(l)d: Class as a relational concept

For the sake of this introduction, we adopt a “relational” definition of Class which resumes the classical approach. Among the many attempts at defining Class, as presented in *Capital*, by scholars and activists working in the wake of Karl Marx’s theorising (i.e., Althusser 1965a, 1965b; Azeri 2015), we recognise a common denominator, i.e. the idea of Class as relational concept. Indeed, Class is a relational concept in the sense that it refers to the relationship of individuals and/or groups towards the means of production.

Consequently, also according to Alex Callinicos and Chris Harman (1987), class has to be looked at as an antagonistic relationship which is formed in the process of production. It is the different position of individuals towards the means of production that determines their position in the class structure. Indeed, we can broadly differentiate between those human beings who own the means of production, the bourgeoisie, and those who are ‘induced or coerced to enter the labour market as waged labour’ (Jessop, 2002, p. 14), the proletariat. From this point of view, anyone who does not possess means of production, nor any other source of income such as rent, and is thus left with the only option of selling their labour power on the market to make a living, belongs to the working class.²

² Indeed, in the third volume of *Capital*, Marx states “The owners merely of labour-power, owners of capital, and land-owners, whose respective sources of income are wages, profit and ground-rent, in other words, wage-labourers, capitalists and land owners, constitute the three big classes of modern society based on the capitalist mode of production” (1993a, p.52).

Such relational definition is wide enough to embrace all the different approaches to class that are used by the authors of the single chapters of this volume.

From the material condition of not possessing any means of production, many other forms of exclusion, dispossession, and oppression arise. This process becomes more complex in connection with “globalization” and the global expansion of neoliberal policies and products as well as with different patterns of representation of the class (Friedman 2015).

At the same time, an equally wide range of forms of oppression ‘intersects’³ with that of class position (intended as position in the production process) as illustrated above. However, if we distinguish between oppression and exploitation, we can see how, although different conditions of oppression coexist in a given person, “‘race’ does not cause racism; gender does not cause sexism; [...] but the ways in which ‘race’ and gender have historically been shaped by the division of labor can and should be understood within the explanatory framework supplied by class analysis” (Foley 2018, p. 272). In our opinion, such complexities are aptly captured by the expansive, quasi-synonym of class introduced by Antonio Gramsci (1992), i.e., that of the subaltern classes or groups (Buttigieg 2018). This Gramscian category has been widely used despite its actual meaning and denotative extension having been a point of heated debate in the field of Gramscian studies.

Indeed, especially among those that don’t have access to the original text in Italian, together with the expression “philosophy of praxis”, “subaltern” has been considered, as a simple synonym of working-class/proletarian, while philosophy of praxis would be a substitute for Marxism (see Frosini 2015). The proponents of such restricted interpretation, justify their position by referring

³ The concept of intersectionality can be dated back to 1989 with Kimberlé Crenshaw’s article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” Here the author proposes the lens of intersectionality as a tool that shows where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. Since then, the concept has also been used as a mobilising tool for social movements who tried to unify the struggles of different social groups so as to create solidarity among individuals who experienced different types of oppression in capitalism. For a history of intersectionality and Marxist critiques see Bohrer 2018. See also the forum ‘Intersectionality’ in *Science & Society* (Eisenstein et al. 2018), and the section ‘On the contrary’, in *New Labor Forum*, (Foley and Bohrer 2019).

to the need for the political prisoner to escape the Fascist censorship.⁴ As with other great thinkers of the twentieth century, Gramsci's legacy runs the risk of being reduced to a few attractive key concepts (Koenlsler 2020). Paradoxically, this very restricted, and orthodox, meaning of the expression finds a parallel in another narrow usage of the word subaltern, which reshapes its meaning to the point of excluding its very core component, i.e. the working class. One case in point being the usage that can be found in a controversial and famous article by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988).

This volume aims at taking social class back into the discussion without simply re-affirming orthodoxies but trying to bring together different academic and political perspectives, looking at the category of subaltern as comprising and expanding that of working class. This is why we paraphrase Spivak's title and use it as a red thread that will guide us through the description of the contents of our volume. To do this, we shall go back to the original use of the word "subaltern" that in Gramsci's notebooks can be found not as a noun but as an adjective that pre-modifies alternatively the plural nouns "classes", "groups", and more rarely other nouns⁵. As the Italian anthropologist Alberto Mario Cirese argued, taking into account Gramsci's observations on folklore, the adjective "subaltern" arises from a complex range of theoretical oppositions. Especially when Gramsci refers to the 'conception of the world' and 'the spontaneous philosophy', these oppositions are quantitative and not qualitative, as a use of the word as a noun would seem to imply. "Subaltern" refers to social classes, in relation and dialectical opposition to "hegemonic", while the conception of the world of the subaltern classes "is not only 'different' or 'very different' from official conceptions of the world but is 'in opposition' or 'in contradiction' or 'in conflict' with them" (Cirese 2022, p. 19; see also Pusceddu and Zerilli 2022).

The departing point in our red thread is the question "How do the subaltern classes speak?" In order to answer this question, the more equipped discipline is that of sociolinguistics, which has traditionally looked at class differences in the use of language.

⁴ Such interpretation, dubbed "The myth of the 'subaltern' censorship thesis" by Marcus E. Green (2011, pp.388-393), has now been disproved for what "subaltern" and "philosophy of praxis" are concerned. Nonetheless, it is not completely without foundation. Indeed, Gramsci actually used pseudonyms to refer to political personalities of the international communist movement, e.g. Stalin is called Bessarione, while Trotsky is referred to as Leone Davidovi, and Lenin is called alternatively Iliič, Ilici,Vilici, and "the greatest modern theoretician of the philosophy of praxis" (see Frosini, 2015, pp.45-46).

⁵ Subaltern as a noun would seem to appear only in reference to the military hierarchy (QVI, VIII, §155; Q8, XXVIII, §141) and in a comment about the theories of the political and literary historian Dmitry Petrovič Svjatopolk-Mirskij (Q2, n.4; Q8, XXVIII, §205).

2. How do the subaltern classes speak? Variationist approaches

The chapters by Carmen Ciancia and Siria Guzzo look at the seemingly inescapable reflection of class identity in orality (thus maybe suggesting an important change in our question, which could be transformed into “How do the subaltern classes sound?”), and they coherently do it in the British context in which language variation is traditionally linked to class position more than to geographical provenance (Foulkes and Docherty 2007).

The chapter “Social Class and Phonological Variation: The Case of T-Glottaling in Cockney” by Carmen Ciancia demonstrates through a quantitative analysis that class is not a major variable in the spread of t-glottaling in British English. This is surprising for a phonological feature that is widely perceived as particularly “classed” in British culture, as it is normally taken as a marker of a working-class accent. We courageously put this study, that seems to go against the whole idea of the book, as an opening chapter to demonstrate that the issue here is to really challenge the concept. The fact that the linguistic marker chosen for the analysis demonstrates a “non-classed” distribution across society can mean different things: indeed, such process of destigmatisation (Straw and Patrick 2007) of t-glottaling and its increased use especially in middle class young persons might be read as “cultural appropriation”, or even “linguistic populism”, especially if we think that, as the article underlines, some young members of the royal family have taken it on board in their public appearances.

What is important to bear in mind is that such studies are inserted in the variationist tradition and that they try to intercept linguistic phenomena that might or might not become established as changes in the language. Indeed, as underlined by Jean Atchinson (2001)

“change, we now know, involves variation. Variation can occur without change, but change cannot occur without variation. The American linguist William Labov was the first to demonstrate this conclusively. He showed that the systematic study of variation could reveal language change in progress” (Atchinson, 2001, p. 95).

With Siria Guzzo’s chapter, “Gender and Social Class: A Variationist Phonological Analysis of Gay Language in London,” we start to see how the many decades of identity politics and analysis do not need to be “denied” in order to get the class component back into the picture, but the loci in which such oppressions intersect should be taken into consideration as an approach that from the context of day-to-day struggles is sometimes fruitfully taken back into the field of social analysis. This is the first intersection that we encounter in our collection: gender and social class. In her study, Guzzo looks

at the community of gay men in London and focusses on audible markers of both gender identity and social class: /t/, /l/ and -ing. Interestingly, the study finds that the stereotyped gay-sounding language used in mainstream representations of gay men, especially in tv series, is not confirmed by the scientific analysis undertaken in relation to the phoneme /t/. When social class comes into the picture, something different happens and the immediate social context in which the exchange takes place starts to play a role, with informants able to switch from the more vernacular to the more standard pronunciation, according to the formality of the setting. Nonetheless, Guzzo shows that for what /t/ and /l/ are concerned, social class appears to be a more unifying factor than gender identity.

3. How are the subaltern classes represented?

If we were to make our red thread re-emerge in this phase, we would have to rephrase our question as “How are the subaltern classes represented?” Indeed, the next three chapters address the perception of the subaltern classes in different contexts and through the study of both documental and fictional texts.

The chapter by Jessica Sierk, “‘Here it’s More of a Get-by’: Social Class as the ‘Bigger Challenge’ of the New Latinx Diaspora,” takes us to “the other side of the pond” and also looks at another intersection of oppressions. The chapter explores the phenomenon of the New Latinx Diaspora (NLD), i.e., the new wave of migration to the US from South American countries in a specific and particularly meaningful setting: public schools. Such institutions are left to deal with this important demographic change with limited resources, both from the point of view of finances and from that of knowledge and specific tools and strategies. Sierk’s study uses an ethnographic methodology to understand how whiteness is construed as a model in two high schools that offer their paramount services in two different NDL communities. Sierk focusses on one of the components of the school communities involved in the study: the teaching component, which arguably represents a middle-class voice on the issue. Teachers are invited to reflect on the social practice that sees them involved for much of their days and that constitutes an important part of their lives and identities. By looking mostly at the semantic choices made by the teachers during their interviews, Sierk finds that their discourse seems to rely on class-based assumptions while trying to promote colour-blindness, thus underplaying the influence of the ethnic and linguistic factor in favour of the “bigger challenge” constituted by the socioeconomic condition of the pupils and their families. Nonetheless, even when such issues are acknowledged, they are not treated as structural problems that need to be

solved, but as instances of an inescapable “culture of poverty,”⁶ that the author inscribes in the tradition of a liberal individualistic ideology.

While Sierk’s study looks at documentary evidence for her analysis, with Lucia Avallone and Claudia Ortu’s chapters we explore the representation of the subaltern classes through the linguistic choices ascribed to working-class characters by authors of fiction and we land on the African continent, respectively in Egypt and in South Africa.

Avallone’s chapter, “New Realism, Language Variation, and Egyptian Society,” looks at the use of standard Arabic as opposed to Arabic Egyptian Vernacular in literary texts that belong to the cultural wave known as New Realism. Indeed, while the use of standard Arabic is normally a proxy for urban, modern, educated, and secular identities, the vernacular is taken to express identities linked to the rural space, a traditional and religious mindset, and a low level of education. By comparing the varieties used for the different characters in various literary texts with the foreseeable linguistic choices in actually occurring oral communication, Avallone demonstrates that many of the choices made by the authors go beyond the quest for adherence to reality. Although this is a legitimate aspiration for any novelist or playwright, in the cases analysed by Avallone, they become tools that, by creating artificial ideal types that are representative of the different communities, allow authors to advance their political agenda of criticism towards governmental choices. This strategy goes together with the promotion of a nationalist agenda that has been part and parcel of the political landscape for decades not only in Egypt but in the whole Arab-speaking world.

Paraphrasing a famous struggle song *Azania* or *From Cape to Cairo*, with Ortu’s chapter on the novel *Coconut* (Matlwa 2008), we move from Cairo to the extreme southern tip of the African continent, along the road that the British colonial empire had dreamt to build but never managed to obtain (Raphael 1936). The song that grants us this passage is the flagship song of the Pan-Africanist movement (Gunner 2015) in its South African articulation in contrast with the nationalist agenda highlighted in Avallone’s analysis.

In her chapter, “The Complex Articulations of Class and Race in a South African Novel: *Coconut* by Kopano Matlwa”, Ortu analyses Matlwa’s coming-of-age novel, that puts together and contrasts the feelings and daily struggles of two young girls in post-apartheid South Africa. The two girls are both black, but what makes them different from one another is their class position: one of them belongs to the new black bourgeoisie, while the other belongs to the

⁶ For a recent review of the anthropological debate about the Culture of Poverty, see Varenne and Scroggins 2015.

great majority of those left behind by the new dispensation. Ortu's analysis applies systemic functional linguistics to the study of the novel and concludes that while, especially if we look at the ideational metafunction, the construal of whiteness as a normative presence is common to the lived experience conveyed by the two fictional characters, the way in which the author gives life and credibility to them through the use of their own peculiar idiolects, creates a classed difference between them. Indeed, Ortu concludes that Matlwa's portrayal of the working-class protagonist of the novel is stereotypical and denounces a middle-class bias from the part of the novelist.

4. How do the subaltern classes act?

Nonetheless, no matter how despised or ignored in the mainstream culture, working class individuals cannot be left out from consumer culture, and its main proponents need to push them to buy their products. In this case, a difference in marketing strategy is very clearly highlighted in Maria Cristina Aiezza's chapter, "The Twitter Crier: A Comparative Discourse Analysis of How British Grocery Retailers Target Their Market Through Microblogging," on the microblogging strategies used by mass retailers in Great Britain. Apart from shedding a light on "How do the subaltern classes act?", Aiezza adds another layer of analysis to the book by looking at multimodal texts that make meaning through the interaction between the verbal and the visual mode. Aiezza's analysis shows how a positive representation of working-class values and habits are not only possible but necessary if an interaction is demanded. Nonetheless, Aiezza's analysis shows that despite the different strategies used, the desires of subaltern classes are not diametrically opposed to those of the middle and upper classes. Our contemporary society and its globalised economy and information systems have created a unified set of general desirables: refinement, elegance, exclusivity, that all classes are brought to aspire to, the only difference that stays is whether different strata of society can afford the real thing or the cheap imitation. And this takes us back to the basic, old fashioned, material conditions of one's existence.

Such material conditions are not limited to the position of the individual towards the means of production; they also comprise the natural environment and urban setting in which human beings live their lives. The environmental crisis and the extreme events that we witness with ever increasing frequency demonstrate that subaltern classes are immensely more subject to pay the price for the senseless depletion of natural resources and pollution, as they live in geographical and urban contexts that are extremely impoverished and thus vulnerable to natural disasters, opening the path to the phenomenon of class dispossession.

One such context is Brindisi, a city in Southern Italy that is now struggling to cope with the environmental disaster and industrial desertification left by the development in the late 1950s of a petrochemical complex that depleted the rich natural resources of the area and, after some decades of production and especially since the financial crisis of 2008, is now in a deep crisis that has inevitable results in the levels of employment and, consequently, income for the inhabitants of the city.

This is the focus of the analysis undertaken by Antonio Maria Pusceddu in the final chapter of this volume, “A Matter of Class? Environmental Conflict and Politics in Southern Italy.” Pusceddu examines how explicit or implicit meanings of class are made relevant (or not) into politically minded responses to the experience of socio-environmental dispossession. With this article we finally see individuals belonging to the subaltern classes speak for themselves with various degrees of class consciousness. Thus, our question can finally be transformed in “How do the subaltern speak of/for themselves?”, i.e., how do they act linguistically?

One of the interesting findings highlighted by Pusceddu is that while in private dialogues with the researcher during the fieldwork, explicit references to class positionality were extremely frequent and the public face of the movement he describes, which in Gramscian terms would be a first attempt at building a “conscious leadership” (*direzione consapevole*), did not make any reference to such issues.

5. Linguaging class

Pusceddu’s findings also confirm the idea that references to class positionality have been expounded from academic as well as from public discourse in the last 40 years. Nonetheless, the fact that the reference is still there in more intimate conversations, shows that the concept of Class still bears explanatory power in the process of making sense of the workings of contemporary societies for those who have no alternative but to sell their labour power to survive.

The different, and at times contradictory, approaches to language and class represented in this volume show that the decades of displacement of social class both from academic circles and political action have had a detrimental impact on our capacity to make sense of society in a meaningful and useful way from the point of view of the social sciences (broadly intended).

When we started this project, that has been significantly delayed by many problems of which the high level of precarity of academic work and workers is just one (see Heatherington and Zerilli 2016, 2017), we really felt as if we were crossing a desert. Despite the presence of promising new waves (Carrier and

Kalb 2015), getting academics to think about class again in our disciplines seemed to be impossible.

In the meantime, the reality of an unjust system has manifested itself again in dramatic ways. The unequivocally unequal distribution of the price for the depletion of natural resources that humanity is having to pay has been made explicit. In the age of Capitalocene (Moore 2016), natural disasters destroy the livelihoods of the subaltern classes while the dominant classes can go on polluting and making profit undisturbed.

The Covid-19 epidemic is just the most recent case in point. Everywhere in the world those who died in disproportionately high numbers were people who could not afford to stay home to avoid getting infected by the deadly virus, and those relying on impoverished national health services did not have the resources and personnel to deal with a crisis of such proportions (Singer and Rylko Bauer 2021). In the Global South (but also in the Global North, see Heuer et al. 2020), were many people make a living through participation in informal markets that rely on physical proximity, the possibility of putting food on the table has been taken from them through the implementation of lockdowns. While through school closures poor pupils in schools have been dispossessed of their opportunity to learn as their families could not afford the devices, connection, nor the possibility of a private physical space for their children. Precarious workers mostly employed in the service sector, in which women, immigrants, and young people are disproportionately represented, lost their jobs (see Griffith 2020). They are part of the subaltern classes and groups that are at the centre of our analyses and, whatever the specific forms of oppression that they experience for their collective and individual identities, what is now hitting them is their subaltern position inside the labour market.

Thus, the question left open by Pusceddu in his contribution finds an answer not in this book but in the brutal reality in which it sees the light.

Yes, it is a matter of class.

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