

Review of Social Class in Applied Linguistics

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Book Title: [Social Class in Applied Linguistics](#)

Book Author: [David Block](#)

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Publisher: [Routledge \(Taylor and Francis\)](#)

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Linguistic Field(s): Applied Linguistics
Sociolinguistics

Book Announcement: [26.398](#)

Review:

Review's Editor: Helen Aristar-Dry

SUMMARY

David Block analyses a key concept in applied linguistic research, i.e. social class, by emphasizing how this category has almost never been completely addressed in this field of research. Thus, the book offers a rigorous examination of this topic, based on the literature and on the personal experience of the author, both fully testified to in the long list of references. The book consists of a prologue, five chapters, an epilogue, and three appendixes.

The prologue provides a preliminary notation on the terminology adopted in the book, that is the two key terms 'social class' and 'applied linguistics'. Block explains that he chooses 'social class' over the almost synonymic 'class', because the latter could present some ambiguities, whereas the first has a long tradition of use dating back to Labov's variationist works. As for applied linguistics, Block follows the definitions provided by Grabe (2002) and Simpson (2011), thus highlighting the multidisciplinary nature of this field of research, and also considering as applied linguistics subfields sociolinguistics, bi/multilingualism research, and second language acquisition and learning (henceforth, SLA/L). The three aforementioned subfields are the focus of chapters three, four, and five respectively.

The first chapter is titled "setting the scene", and this is the final aim of these first pages of the book. The author introduces the notion of social class through the recall of personal experiences, which testify how this notion is not always directly addressed, but how it could be perceived in everyday life. In this chapter the focus is mainly on social class in the US, since it follows the biography of the writer, with some observations also concerning the UK. Then, the author surveys some theories in sociology in order to define what is society, and how economic phenomena influence social class, mainly addressing the problem of globalization and its effect on societies. In discussing these issues, Block stresses that socioeconomic phenomena influence social class organization and perception, and must be addressed in the theoretical reflection in applied linguistics.

The second chapter attempts to answer the main question of “what is social class”. In this respect, the author remarks how in recent years applied linguists are moved to political economy as a “source discipline [...] in the face of an increasingly difficult and complex socioeconomic situation” (p. 25). Thus, in defining social class Block considers not only society, but also the socioeconomic situation characterizing and defining each society. The starting point is basically the hard core of sociology, i.e. the works of Marx, Engels, Durkheim and Weber. As for Marx, in his works there is not an explicit definition of social class, even if the author points out that this meaning “emerges from the ways that the term is used” (p. 27). A central point in Marx’s theory is that social relations and class conflicts are deeply bound to material conditions and interests. On the other hand, Engels provides a list of variables denoting class, such as amount and quality of clothing, food, type of dwelling, and neighborhood. It is worth noting that these same variables were used in the first chapter by Block to define his perception of social class differences during his life and experiences. Durkheim, then, introduces in sociology the crucial notion of “occupational groups”, which is more a cultural than a material definition: specialized occupations lead to specialized cultures, meaning that each group shares different values and behaviors. The author points out that Durkheim’s definition may be closely associated to the applied linguistic key term of “community of practice” (see, for instance, Meyerhoff 2002). Finally, Max Weber’s theory more generally deals with the organization of societies. As for social class, Weber elaborates a list of class position, nowadays a common practice in class theorizing. He also introduces the notion of status, in opposition to class: indeed, while class is basically an economic concept, status also involves a more general cultural sphere (i.e. social activities, relationships, behaviors). The stratification of both class and status groups also follows different dynamics: if classes are stratified according to the economic power of the individual, so to speak, status groups are identified according the different “styles of life”, another key concept introduced in Weber’s theory. The remaining part of the chapter is dedicated to other theories related to class (and social class), with a particular emphasis on Bourdieu’s works. Indeed, Bourdieu introduces the notion of cultural capital as opposed to social capital, the latter being related to networking, recognition from others and the feeling of belonging to a certain group. Moreover, Bourdieu introduces the key notion of “habitus”, which is “structured by past experience and it structures activity in the present and future” (p. 55), thus being embodied in each person. Habitus is a central concept in sociology, and it’s frequently used by Block in his book. After this extensive review of the state of the art concerning social class, the author comes to the conclusion that this is basically an economic notion (p. 56), and points out how the economic aspects must inform applied linguistic research dealing with social class.

The third chapter examines how the notion of social class has been used in sociolinguistics. Firstly, Block points out that with the term sociolinguistics he intends socially informed analysis in general, thus more nearly adopting Dell Hymes’ (1974) perspective of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research than Trudgill’s more narrow view of sociolinguistics (p. 74). The chapter then considers how the notion of social class has been applied by different sociolinguists, starting with Labov (1962). As Block points out, Labov was particularly interested in how language is used and also evaluated by people: in particular, Labov stresses the importance of “social evaluation”, which is how different linguistic features are attached to different social differences and values. However, as has

been emphasized in Rickford (1986), Labov defines individual class position with a set of parameters, thus ignoring the macro level of class categorization. Bernstein (1975) views class as a “theory of socialization” (p. 81), which means that different ways of communication are developed according to our social relations (e.g. family, group of peer, etc.). In his theory, social class position is linked to particular ways of using language to create meaning, with a basic contrast between an “elaborate code”, associated with the middle class, and a “restricted code”, which is more typical of the working class. Milroy and Milroy (1992) moves from considering social class a variable affecting language use, to “a more fluid notion of class as a social marker constituted through the day-to-day practices, including linguistic practices, of individuals who purportedly occupy a particular class position in society” (p. 91). Among the other works there is also Heath’s (1983) ethnographic analysis, and Rampton’s (2010) work on the educational system and school, in which he puts social class at the center of his analysis. Block also discusses some key concepts in sociolinguistic theory such as repertoire, style, and stance, and considers works integrating these concepts with social class analysis (e.g. Snell 2013, Bloommaert and Makoe 2011). In the conclusion of the chapter, Block claims that the notion of social class was at the core of sociolinguistic analysis but has somewhat faded away: even though sociolinguistic research has developed a very technical and detailed terminology, the author emphasizes how social issues must always be taken into account in sociolinguistic research.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to social class in bi/multilingualism research. Block uses the term “bi/multilingualism research” to cover the whole range of studies dealing with people speaking more than one language, thus including works on bilingualism in the narrow sense of the term, works on trilingualism, and works on multilingualism in general. The chapter focuses on how social class emerges in language contact situations when two or more languages are at play. In general, the author points out how in this field of research social class is rarely mentioned, and this is seen as a lack especially in very recent textbooks and collections such as Baker (2011). Even if the term “social class” appears in some texts, it is “never taken on directly in the sense that it is never defined or problematized” (p. 118). It emerges that the question of “how social class intersects with bi/multilingualism” (p. 122) has not been answered yet in this field of research. A partial exception in this respect is represented by Castles and Kosack’s (1973) work on immigrant workers in western Europe, in which they consider the interrelation among different variables, such as language, race, and social class. The remaining part of the chapter is dedicated to what Heller (2002) called “commodification of language”, which is the observed shift from valuing a language for its communicative functions to valuing it as a commodity, in a Marxist interpretation, that is for its value in a globalized market. The author exemplifies this last statement by reporting in detail two cases in South Korea (see Park 2011) and in India (see Ramanathan 2005).

The fifth chapter closely follows the last one, by taking into account how social class is considered in studies dealing with SLA/L. Again, social class is barely considered in this field of research, and no effective discussion is provided, at least in the vast literature reviewed by Block. The author claims that social class has to be considered as part of a more general identity issue, in order to trace the profile of the learners as a whole without limiting the research to the cognitive-linguistic perspective.

Finally, in the epilogue, Block resumes the main content of his book and emphasizes how

social class always has to be considered as a key construct in applied linguistic research. In the author's words, "there is social class in itself and it is inextricably linked with relations of power in society and the life chances of individuals and collectives whose lives are shaped by these relations" (p. 165).

EVALUATION

The main virtue of this book is to have provided an in-deep reflection on social class. As the author points out, this category is used by many scholars in applied linguistics without any discussion of what this label means for them. Block offers not only an historical reconstruction of the theory concerning class and social class, two labels that he precisely explains in the prologue, but he discusses how each works also in an applied way, that is by considering how it could be useful or how it could be applied generally in research dealing with language use. The author stresses the importance of reflection on the concepts and the labels that are used in research, by emphasizing how in many fields there is very poor discussion of such a key topic as social class. This lack is particularly evident in the SLA/L field, but even sociolinguistic studies have barely offered a full discussion of this category, which, on the other hand, has been widely used since the very beginning of the discipline (cfr. Labov 1963).

For these reasons, Block's book is a real milestone, and the reflections presented here will hopefully prompt further detailed discussion of social class in applied linguistics. According to the author, the main wish is that from now on "social class [will] figure as a key construct in research being carried out" (p. 171). In this sense, this book will be extremely useful for scholars at every level of expertise, even if a general knowledge of applied linguistic themes and issues will be needed to fully appreciate the discussion.

There are, however, some potential weaknesses in this work. First of all, there is a bibliographical problem: through the book, and in particular in Chapter Two, Block quotes works from various scholars belonging to different historical periods; the quotes provided in the books were all referenced to modern editions of those texts. This creates strange entries, as for example when Emile Durkheim's work "The division of Labour in Society", which was originally published in 1893, is referred to as Durkheim (1984) at p. 35 and elsewhere. Although it is correct for the author to quote passages from the texts actually at his disposal, it would have been more advisable to give the reader a clear indication of the first edition of the works between square brackets, as is common in other subfields (historical linguistics, philology, and so on), thus printing Durkheim [1895] (1984), as has been done in this review. This would have provided a clear timeline and historical perspective, and it might avoid misunderstandings in readers with poor knowledge of the history of sociology or of applied linguistics.

A more general critique regards the contents of the book, or better what the book doesn't take into account. The title of the work is "Social class in Applied Linguistics", and as a non-Anglophone scholar myself I was thus expecting a chapter, or even a sub-section, dedicated to the use of 'social class' as a category in different applied linguistic traditions. There traditions are indeed very well represented all over the world, for instance with annual conferences and specific national associations (e.g. AItLA for Italy, LiTaKA for

Lithuanian, to cite only two European ones). In these traditions, social class, as well as other labels, is sometimes discussed to understand how it may affect variation in language use. For instance, the Italian applied linguistic tradition has provided important discussions on how linguistic repertoires and language use are affected by many variables, including social class (see for instance Berruto 1980 among others). Moreover, for the Italian context social class seems to be determined more by level of education than by job or goods, thus differing from the Anglophone situation as discussed by Block. In the book there are, indeed, some random references to international works at p. 8; and at pp. 124-125 the author reports Castles and Kosack's (1973) studies situated in Western Europe, which is the only cited work based on non-Anglophone communities and in which English is not the language under investigation. Even given the limits of human knowledge, more international work could've been included, or the lack of it could have been somehow addressed in the preface.

Even with these limits, the book remains an important contribution to the theoretical development of applied linguistics, and it will hopefully inspire more critical reflection on constructs and categories used in linguistic research.

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ABOUT THE REVIEWER:

Chiara Meluzzi has successfully completed her PhD in Linguistics at University of Pavia and Free University of Bozen in January 2014. Her dissertation presented a sociophonetic analysis of dental affricates /ts dz/ realized by Italian speakers in Bozen (South Tyrol, Italy). She is now working on a research project at the Free University of Bozen aiming to create a corpus of spoken Italian. Her main research interests are sociolinguistics, sociophonetics, applied linguistics, pragmatics, and also historical linguistics.