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**Social Class, Social Status and Stratification:  
Revisiting Familiar Concepts in  
Sociolinguistics**

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# **Social Class, Social Status, and Stratification: Revisiting Familiar Concepts in Sociolinguistics**

Christine Mallinson\*

## **1 Introduction**

In variationist sociolinguistics, the patterned nature of the relationship between social class and language variation has been a longstanding focus, with research questions that typically ask how social class, in relation with other social and stylistic factors, affects language use. When including social class variables in quantitative analyses, many variationists have followed a set of empirical traditions from sociology that determine an individual's position in a discrete social class by using scales that draw upon factors like income, education, and occupation. Yet, such measures and classification schemas may not imply a particular theory of social structures and are often more descriptive than analytical.

Perhaps due to the fact that variationist sociolinguists have employed empirical approaches to class while remaining disengaged from theoretical debates surrounding it, little consensus has been reached over how to theorize or measure class, making it both a conceptual and methodological hurdle. Ash (2002:402) captures this consternation:

Social class is a central concept in sociolinguistic research.... It is ironic, then, that social class is often defined in an ad hoc way in studies of linguistic variation and change, ... and individuals are placed in a social hierarchy despite the lack of a consensus as to what concrete, quantifiable independent variables contribute to determining social class. ... Thus, this variable is universally used and extremely productive, although linguists can lay little claim to understanding it.

As Ash suggests, sociolinguists' insecurities lie in how best to operationalize class as a variable and accurately classify speakers along its dimensions, in order to measure its correlation with language variation. Similar critiques are issued by Rickford (1986, 2001), who recommends that

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sociolinguists working with social class look to theoretical and methodological advancements outside of linguistics: “To adequately account for the quantitative distributions by social class that we observe in local surveys of language use, we need to turn to sociological and anthropological models of social stratification and life mode, but these are quite unfamiliar to the average sociolinguist” (Rickford 2001:220). That is, new theoretical views on social class may provide better interpretations of language variation by class or may help develop new or refined empirical approaches to class—either of which could better illuminate the social class/language variation relationship.

I reengage questions concerning how to conceptualize and analyze class in variationist research. I briefly outline how variationists first used empirical approaches to social class that are traceable to sociological literature on status attainment and social mobility. I discuss some critiques of this approach and then present a contemporary sociological framework of social class proposed by Acker (2006). Applying it to a study of language variation among women in a black Appalachian community, I suggest variationism can benefit from Acker’s approach. I thus propose an avenue for mutual enrichment: Sociological theory can advance variationists’ theoretical and methodological understandings of class, while sociolinguistic data can inform sociological theory about this social construct.

## **2 Social Class in Variationist Sociolinguistics**

In variationist sociolinguistics, many early studies examined the relationship between linguistic variation and major demographic categories within large populations in the urban centers of the US and the UK. To conceptualize and operationalize social class, variationists drew on one advancement in sociology at that time: the socioeconomic index. In Labov’s (1966) study, a respondent was given a score on a socioeconomic index constructed as part of a sociological survey; it accounted for the person’s years of education, the occupation of the family breadwinner, and family income. Wolfram’s (1969) study employed Duncan’s (1961) Socioeconomic Index (SEI).

These and similar indices have found considerable utility in variationism (Ash 2002, Kerswill 2007). Data on individuals’ occupations, income, etc., are easy to obtain. Once these data are transformed into a score that can be used to measure individuals’ places in the occupational hierarchy (and thereby approximate their social class), this information can be correlated with data from other variables and tested statistically. For example, Labov used respondents’ socioeconomic index scores to assign them to one of four social classes and test patterns in the language use of these groups. Thus,

socioeconomic indices are useful in variationist sociolinguistics precisely because they align with and are adaptable to our already established orientation to categoricity and statistically driven methods.

Yet, the use of socioeconomic scales to determine individual's class backgrounds raises theoretical and methodological issues. Grusky (2001: 21–2) notes, “[Despite] [t]he staying power of prestige and socioeconomic scales ... [t]his long run may nonetheless be coming to an end; indeed, while a widely supported alternative to socioeconomic scales has yet to appear, the socioeconomic tradition has been subjected to increasing criticism on various fronts.” One set of critiques focus on measurement issues pertaining to socioeconomic indices, particularly their posited male and Eurocentric biases. For example, in Duncan's (1961) SEI, the man's occupation is taken to be that of the ‘head of household,’ while the focus on paid employment disregards unpaid domestic labor. The validity of such scales may also be confounded, due to the fact that women tend to have higher levels of education than men in the same occupation, while the reverse is true for earnings (Warren, Sheridan, and Hauser 1998). Also, for example, if “middle class” is defined as all white-collar workers excluding service workers, then in 2000, 53% of black workers were in the middle class. But if “middle class” is defined as those in high-income, white collar professions, then only 25% of black workers fall in this group (Fronzcek and Johnson 2003).

Second, critiques center on how indices are used to locate individuals in class schemas. Various sociologists have suggested class schemas (e.g. Warner 1949, Wright 1997). But do they yield “purely nominal entities”? As Grusky (2001:7) posits, “If [class] categories are intended to be meaningful, one would expect class members not only to be aware of their membership (i.e., ‘class awareness’) but also to identify with their class (i.e. ‘class identification’) and occasionally act on its behalf (i.e. ‘class action’).” Yet, subjective class identification is highly variable as a dimension of social stratification, particularly cross-culturally. For example, in 1996, 45% of African Americans identified as middle class, but in 1998, only 31% did so (Tate 1996, Davis, Smith, and Marsden 1998) (see also Stricker 1980, 1982).

Third are critiques of the lack of theory behind how socioeconomic indices are conceived. The occupational structure and the class structure are often referred to as being virtually synonymous, but does occupation determine class, or does class determine occupation (and what processes are involved)? To what extent should education and occupation be taken to assess social standing? Do they have additive and independent effects—and if so, how do they exercise these effects on class orientations? How might class also be multidimensional in ways that include subjective components (attitudes, lifestyle, culture) that still have material and economic effects

(Fraser 2000, Crompton 2003)? And how do contextual factors (like discrimination) or ascribed characteristics (like race or gender) affect education, work, and thus one's class—and the stratification system (Anthias 2001, Crompton 2003)?

Similar questions about what dimensions of class contribute to the effects we attribute to “class” have been raised by variationists, often those working in non-urban, non-white, and non-Western contexts—e.g. Rickford (1986), Nichols (1983), Dayton (1996), Lane (1999), Eckert (2000), Fought (2002). As these and other variationists query, could variation that is often attributed to a speaker's location in a class grouping in fact be obscuring other social processes affecting the sociolinguistic phenomena? In what ways might a host of contextual factors (e.g. regional location, social networks, age, race, gender) shape apparent class-based language differences among speakers in different communities—particularly minority communities?

### **3 Social Class: Other Sociological Frameworks**

In the entry on social class in the (2003) *Encyclopedia of Social Theory*, Erik Olin Wright proclaims that few concepts are more contested in sociological theory than the concept of “class,” and confusion exists over what class means. In general, “class” invokes understandings of economic inequality. Yet, different theoretical approaches to class as economic inequality entail different agendas of class analysis. Wright reviews five such approaches: (1) class as subjective location, (2) class as objective position within distributions, (3) class as the relational explanation of economic life chance, (4) class as a dimension of historical variation in systems of inequality, and (5) class as a foundation of economic oppression and exploitation. Space constraints preclude a discussion of each approach, but the first three agendas have found relevance within variationist sociolinguistic research. I summarize Wright's (2003) synopsis of each, below.

In the first agenda, *class as subjective location* entails an examination of how people locate themselves and others in a social structure of inequality. In this formulation, Wright explains, classes are social categories sharing subjectively salient attributes. As such, class groups are like other status groups, and class is one salient dimension along which to evaluate other people (in both economic and non-economic terms). In this regard, attributes of class vary contextually; class subjectivities may also be highly influenced by perception and even at odds with people's economic standing.

In the second agenda, *class as objective position within distributions* refers to how people are objectively located in distributions of material inequality, typically indexed by income. In this framework, class is a gradational concept, meaning that classes are defined as continuous sets of discrete categories, like rungs on a ladder, with names like “lower class” and “upper class” to designate various locations. Class conceptualized this way relates to other ways people are defined in relation to social structures (e.g. by citizenship or racial status). But it is difficult to construct universalistic class schemes, and objective distinctions focus little on the actual social relations that determine people’s access to economic and material resources.

In the third agenda, *class as the relational explanation of economic life chance*, class is defined by people’s relationships to various income-generating resources or assets. While these locations may relate to people’s subjective class-related tastes and lifestyles (as in the first agenda), it is the relationship to resources that is seen as defining classes and affecting people’s life chances—just like gender, race, citizenship, etc. In sociology, this agenda is taken up by Weber and Bourdieu, who (like Marx) reject gradational definitions of class and instead prefer relational approaches.

Different theoretical and empirical approaches to social class have implications for variationists looking to ascertain which approaches are most productive in studying language variation and how to incorporate them into new research. While the first two approaches have been used in sociolinguistic research, I suggest the third agenda may provide a clearer vision of the social processes through which social class affects language variation—namely, how the competitive hierarchy differentially allocates capitals and access to resources, including linguistic resources. This line of thinking is in keeping with variationist tradition, as Labovian sociolinguistics has long contended that language use is shaped by social forces. For example, Labov (forthcoming) theorizes how dialect divergence between black and white vernaculars is structured by residential segregation, which shapes and constrains access to the valued resource of standard English.

If we adopt this approach, what framework can we use to direct our conceptualization of social class as (a) defined by people’s relationships to various income-generating resources or assets, (b) related to people’s subjective tastes and lifestyles and identities, and (c) determinant of social classes and thus people’s life chances? As noted earlier, the theories of Weber and Bourdieu are two possibilities. Yet, Weber has been criticized for focusing more narrowly on economic life chances (Wright 2003) and for being limited in the extent to which gender and race/ethnicity are taken into account. In contrast, Bourdieu (1997) extends his focus to both cultural and social capital, and also recognizes gender oppression as symbolic violence;

yet he pays little substantial attention to the role of race/ethnicity in structuring social inequalities (Acker 2006:35).

In an approach typical of a current trend in sociology toward integrationist and intersectional theory,<sup>1</sup> feminist sociologist Joan Acker builds on Marx, Bourdieu, and Weber, while also theorizing more specifically how class is constructed in ways that are bound with race and gender. In Acker's (2006) theoretical framework, "'Class' stands for practices and relations that provide differential access to and control over the means of provisioning and survival," to which gender and race affect access (68). Acker's (2006:45–46) four-pronged conceptual and analytical approach to class entails:

first, thinking about social relations and structures as active practices, occurring in specific historical and geographic places; second, beginning the exploration of class from the standpoints of women and men located differently from white male class actors; third, clarifying the meaning of gendering and racializing; and fourth, broadening the understanding of the economic relations that constitute class and extending the analysis of gendering and racializing processes beyond production.

Acker suggests that class-related instantiations of inequality are able to be observed and measured by paying attention to class-related social divisions, just as racializing and gendering practices can be "excavated" (2006:46). She states, "This conceptual move suggests a shift in terminology—we are enmeshed in class relations, not located in class structures" (2006:47).

Following Acker, we can observe and measure class by paying attention to class-related social divisions, which are constituted by norms, lifestyle, status displays, and consumption habits. Second, we can observe and measure how images and symbols (language is included here) also constitute and reinforce these class-related social divisions. Third, we can focus on how these class-related social divisions are created, are gendered and raced (etc.), and change over time. Finally, we can interpret how these class-related divisions connect to what Acker calls "regimes of inequality," or extralocal relations that shape social practice and that are constituted with different bases of inequality, degrees of visibility, legitimacy, hierarchy, participation, and ideology. By specifically recommending how to analyze class, Acker suggests how to empirically test her theory, unlike many other sociological

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<sup>1</sup>Coupland (2001) discusses integrationist theories vis-à-vis sociolinguistics.

theories of class. (For example, Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* can be critiqued on the grounds that he undertheorizes how agents acquire *habitus* and gives researchers little guidance for how to operationalize it.)

Thus, Acker may provide for sociolinguists a theoretically and analytically strong, integrationist and intersectional, relational framework to social class. It incorporates individual and group attitudes, values, lifestyles, and cultures, while centering on how the development of these subjectivities are an outgrowth of differential relationships to economic resources that determine life chances (in ways that also relate to gender, race, etc.). This approach may have more explanatory utility than one that focuses primarily on the means of production, to which it may be more difficult to relate and isolate differences in patterns of linguistic variables.

#### **4 Application: Texana, North Carolina**

I now turn to an application of Acker's approach to examine how language variation may be one of myriad social practices through which the status distinctions that undergird social stratification are maintained. I analyze data from two groups of women in Texana, North Carolina's largest black Appalachian community. It was established around the 1860s by a free black family, and currently has around 150 residents. From May 2002 until June 2005, my colleague Becky Childs and I conducted field research in Texana, observing and interviewing approximately 40 residents. As we spent time in the community, two social groups emerged as being particularly interesting from a sociolinguistic perspective. The first group, a women's devotional group, met formally, once a week; we called them the "church ladies". Another friendship group of women gathered informally most evenings to sit and visit; we called them the "porch sitters". Data suggest that shared social and linguistic resources construct these two groups as distinct communities of practice (CsofP). In this paper, I focus on four core members of each group: from the church ladies, Gail Ann, Zora, Gina, and Joan (ages 48 to 70; mean age = 59); and from the porch sitters, Michelle, Melissa, Debbie, and Emily (ages 41 to 65; mean age = 49). I first present qualitative data on each group's class norms, lifestyle, consumption practices, status displays, and hierarchies and then turn to variationist analyses of their speech patterns.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>For more detail, see Mallinson (2006) and Mallinson and Childs (forthcoming).

#### 4.1 Qualitative data

Three themes emerged during field research with the church ladies and the porch sitters. For each group in turn, I consider how the women establish normative behaviors and engage in status displays that relate to their self-presentation, jobs and work, and lifestyle.

With regard to self-presentation, we first consider the church ladies. These women often used double names (“Gail Ann”) and honorifics (*Mrs.*, *Ms.*) with each other, they wore dresses and skirts (never jeans), often had painted nails, and had straightened or curled hair. In projecting conservative personae, the women policed their offstage behaviors—including smoking. Once, Gail Ann left us with her husband and excused herself to the porch, explaining apologetically, “Girls, I smoke.” She then smoked out of sight but not out of range, and continued to participate in the conversation. In another interview with Zora, her husband tapped out a cigarette for himself and asked her, “Want a smoke?”, to which Zora quickly replied, “No.” The church ladies also apologized for uncleanliness and highlighted their housekeeping. Gail Ann, for example, invariably apologized for her appearance and the state of her house, once saying, “I vacuum just about, I haven’t vacuumed today, but I vacuum EVERY day.” In another conversation, Gina and Gail Ann engaged in repartee in which Gina undercut her own housekeeping ability, while Gail Ann proclaimed to be behind on hers due to laziness—which Gina agreed was unusual for her.

The porch sitters, in contrast, were much more informal. They typically gathered after work in the early evenings on the porch of one of the women’s single-wide mobile home. The women typically sat on plastic furniture and wore t-shirts and sweatpants or windpants; they often went barefoot or wore flip flops; and they wore little jewelry. In contrast to their otherwise casual style, however, three of the four porch sitters wore more elaborate hairstyles in keeping with current fashion—corn rows, long braids, and micro braids—and the fourth kept a short, natural, Jeri-curl hairstyle that was popular in the 1970s and 1980s. The types of hairstyles that are more favored by the porch sitters are typically not available to white women and may suggest a resistance to Eurocentric standards of beauty (Jacobs-Huey 2006). Unlike the church ladies, who use double names and honorifics for each other, the porch sitters all use family nicknames, such as “Ladybug” and “Puff.” These nicknames lend a feeling of informality and also familiarity to their interactions that is qualitatively different from those of the church ladies.

In terms of jobs and work, we see similar differences. All the church ladies and porch sitters finished high school, and none attended a four-year college. One of the church ladies had a nursing certificate, and one of the

porch sitters had attended community college. But although the women had similar educational attainment, their jobs were qualitatively different.

The church ladies have worked in the state's Forest Service office, for the Department of Social Services, for Head Start, and with the developmentally disabled. These jobs do not require advanced degrees, yet they are steady, so-called "pink-collar" jobs that center on service, care work, and education. At one point, Gail Ann told us that her husband, a truck driver, asked her to be his work partner and come on the road with him. However, she declined because it was not the type of work she felt she was fit for. "He wanted me, he said [Gail Ann], he said, well I'll do the backing for you... and I know he probably would have done most of the driving. But I am a WOMAN. And I just did not think that was a woman's job, you know."

Among the porch sitters, at the time most of the fieldwork was conducted, Michelle and Emily worked in the food service industry, Debbie worked at a tool-making plant, and Melissa received government assistance. Debbie was the only woman in our interviews to express personal dissatisfaction with her occupational attainment, which she attributes to the lack of a post-high school degree. With a college degree, she explained, she might not have had to work in the jobs she has held. "I went to Tri-County [Community College] for a while. I told [Tara], I wish I'd kept going. I wouldn't be working at where I'm working now, but no, I quit." When asked what she did after she quit school, Debbie replied, "McDonalds. Ten years there, and 11 up [at the plant] ... I ain't found nothing else." Rural black women are increasingly doing this type of "alienating labor," as they, more than other populations, move out of low-skill blue collar work into service occupations (Gibbs, Kusmin, and Cromartie 2005).

Finally, attitudes about parenting, manners, and demeanor differentiate the two groups. In their interviews, the church ladies lauded "proper" manners, demeanor, and speech. In one interview, Zora commented on boxer Leila Ali: "And she's a lady, she's really a lady, you know? When you see her on talk shows and stuff? She really carries herself well and she speaks well, you know." For Zora, being a good woman—a lady—is connected to speaking well and acting well. The church ladies also talked about the parenting strategies they valued, which resemble what Kohn (1969), Lareau (2002), and others call "concerted cultivation," with a heavy emphasis on manners. They said parents and community members should teach children manners; they also said the decline of the church as a guiding moral force in their community has led to the decline of residents' morals and standards. For example, Joan commented in one interview, "Children get to make too many choices. I see them making at two years old, wearing, eating things

that they're not mature enough to make decisions about. And it carries, it carries on out." To the church ladies, lax parenting and weakening church influence have led to children's and adults' poor choices—drug use, out-of-wedlock and teenage pregnancy, and school attrition.

In contrast, the porch sitters did not say children have degenerated morally and commented that, although they set boundaries for their children, they were occasionally *laissez-faire* in their parenting. Michelle, for example, told how she accompanied her son and his girlfriend to Atlanta to get a piercing and a tattoo. In another quote, Melissa said she "couldn't help but laugh" once when her three-year old grandson cursed. With regard to the behaviors of adults, the porch sitters also said they enjoy partying, to a limit. They occasionally joke about drinking alcohol and say they enjoy sitting on porch as vantage point to observe residents who party across the street.

Data on class-related social divisions thus distinguish the church ladies and porch sitters. The church ladies project a conservative style, hold mostly "pink-collar" jobs, and engage in status displays (such as going to church, talking about manners, dressing more expensively, and talking about housekeeping) that portray themselves as good, middle-class black women. The porch sitters project a more casual style. Their jobs afford them less access to economic, cultural, and social capital, and they communicate little concern about adhering to institutional expectations or norms. In sum, the qualitative data reveal patterns in the social practices of the two CsofP and their group-differentiated standpoints that mark social distinctions.

#### 4.2 Quantitative data

Following the qualitative data on the two CofPs, I also examine their use of vernacular features (3sg. *-s* absence, copula absence with *is*, past tense *be* leveling) and their use of expletives (cursing), with the goal of evaluating language use as a marker of social differentiation and stratification.

The two structures of 3sg. *-s* absence and copula absence are characteristic of African American English and are used much more by the porch sitters than the church ladies. Data show highly significant differences for 3sg. *-s* absence ( $\chi^2 = 71.67$ ;  $df = 1$ ;  $p < .001$ ) as well as for copula deletion—both with *are* ( $\chi^2 = 61.85$ ;  $df = 1$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and *is* ( $\chi^2 = 76.07$ ;  $df = 1$ ;  $p < .001$ ). With regard to past tense *be* leveling—a feature common to most English vernaculars—the difference is highly significant for *was* ( $\chi^2 = 38.81$ ;  $df = 1$ ;  $p < .001$ ) as well as *wasn't* ( $\chi^2 = 6.09$ ;  $df = 1$ ;  $p < .05$ ).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Mallinson (2006) for more detailed analyses of these and other variables.

Variable	Church Ladies		Porch Sitters	
	%	N	%	N
3rd Sg. -s Absence (‘If he move away’)	4.7	6/129	50.3	84/167
<i>is</i> Copula Absence (‘She nice’)	24.2	24/99	84.2	64/76
<i>are</i> Copula Absence (‘They nice’)	.5	1/193	50.3	59/171
Leveling to <i>was</i> (‘We was healthier’)	33.7	29/86	87.3	48/55
Leveling to <i>wasn’t</i> (‘We wasn’t home’)	61.1	11/18	100	12/12
Expletive Use		5		17

Table 1: Use of features by Church Ladies and Porch Sitters

I also examine patterns in expletive use by the two CofP’s. Lakoff (1975) proclaimed that not only do women generally eschew the use of expletives, but the expletives they do use tend to be “weak,” though empirical evidence on this issue is mixed (see Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003). With regard to the church ladies and porch sitters, we see clear differences in the use of expletives. In over 15 hours of speech, the church ladies only used five curse words. In only one instance did a church lady, Gail Ann, report that she had cursed: “And I said, Gina, now I’m going to say some things you might not want to hear. And I said—pardon my French, Joan always says, there goes Mother Gail Ann, speaking French—but I don’t give a damn [whispered, laughing].” In equating *damn* to “French” and asking for pardon, Gail Ann distanced herself from expletives as being foreign; at the same time, Joan’s reported comment suggests an ideological connection between Gail Ann’s status as a woman and mother and her unwillingness to curse. Otherwise, the church ladies only cursed when they were quoting other speakers—and even then, they often whispered the expletives.

In contrast, in the porch sitters’ conversation, they used 15 expletives, with the most frequently used expletive by far being *ass*. Michelle told one story of a man and thugs who “pistol whipped his ass”; Melissa and Michelle recalled that their parents used to beat their asses; and Emily said that when she was growing up black children had to shower first in the community swimming pool, despite the fact that “white kids was already in the pool, swimming they ASS off.” Note the contrast between Emily’s emphatic use of this expletive and the church ladies’ whispered expletives.

The porch sitters' use of cursing seems to fit with their general embrace of casual habits and casual speech, while the church ladies' avoidance and stigmatization of cursing is an integral part of how they construct themselves as women who orient themselves toward religious norms of morality and middle-class notions of feminine decorum and propriety. The lack of cursing or the use of it signifies that the church ladies and porch sitters have learned the identity code and culture of their CsofP in different ways.

In sum, we see that linguistic and other social differences abound for the church ladies and the porch sitters. Both CsofP have differing social orientations that their linguistic repertoire reinforces, which allows them to draw upon a variety of linguistic and other social symbols for identity construction and negotiation. For the church ladies, status distinctions center on acting and talking in ways that are justified by ideologies of femininity, language, and religion. The porch sitters, in contrast, do not espouse or adhere to standard and gendered language ideologies or practices. These differences, based primarily on aspects of lifestyle and presentation, divide the CsofP into discrete groups and serve to reproduce status hierarchies.

## **5 Interdisciplinary Challenges and Possibilities**

Empirical evidence suggests that the social distinctions between the church ladies and porch sitters are based on more than income, education, and occupation. The church ladies and the porch sitters would lie close together on a socioeconomic continuum, and they might or might not be categorized similarly in various class schemas. At the same time the CsofP are also distinguished by other status differences in lifestyle and presentation, and these differences might have been obscured if we had conceptualized and analyzed their social class in a gradational perspective.

In a view that follows Acker's framework, however, we find a way to reconcile these views, by interpreting how the women's class-differentiated lifestyles are intertwined with their access to economic resources and thus have implications for the power they wield as groups. The church ladies hold considerable power in and beyond the community: they serve in church, have reputations as bearers of genealogy and community history, hold jobs with more social capital, and speak a more standard variety of English. The porch sitters hold less power: they talk self-consciously about growing up poor and having less education and job status than they would prefer, do not lead in church or community, and speak more non-standardly. Each of these dimensions of hierarchy is also interrelated with their statuses as black Appalachian women, as the social practices that differentiate the CsofP (including their differential use of gendered, class-stratified, regional, and

ethnolinguistic variables) are not only class-related, but racialized, gendered, and embedded in time and place. In Acker's framework, we thus see language use as one of multivariate, intersecting symbols and practices that construct class-related social divisions within the stratification system.

In this paper, I have suggested the utility of Acker's (2006) theoretical and analytical, integrationist, and intersectional approach to social class for variationist sociolinguistic analyses. At the same time, I suggest that sociolinguistics has much to offer sociological theory, as variationist data may be a particularly useful, though as yet largely untapped, empirical indicator of social class. In future interdisciplinary collaboration, the use of sociolinguistic data may be able to shed light on debates about the nature of the class system and processes of social class formation in ways that will be innovative and applicable to theory building in sociology. Just as fine-grained sociolinguistic data shed light on the applicability of sociological theory on social class and the efficacy of quantitative models of social class analysis, so also can sociological theories and quantitative paradigms for analyzing social class account for aspects of sociolinguistic variation.

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