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Social Class in the Simpsons

"It's like they saw our lives and put it up on screen."

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Title: Social Class in the Simpsons

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Abstract: Since the media's representation of language and social class can maintain and reinforce attitudes and values in society, the purpose of this essay is to describe how social class is depicted in selected episodes of *The Simpsons*, which is the longest-running sitcom in television history. By using ad hoc analysis on judgment samples of transcripts of two episodes of *The Simpsons*, this essay may claim to be an empirical, qualitative essay with a hermeneutical approach. Based on the assumption that social class is "the most linguistically marked aspect of our social being" (Chambers 2003:43), a person's choice of language creates identity for the individual as well as for the group, and thereby also signals belonging to different social classes in society. This means that linguistic variations are related to language in use and influenced by social features that are important for the individual, in this essay exemplified by Cletus and Side Show Bob. The results of the characters' linguistic features are in accordance with their belonging to different social classes and by that also in accordance with how the different social classes can be depicted in the media.

Description: Taken together, depiction of social class in the media touches upon prejudices about differences in society at the same time as it contributes to the ongoing process of creating society. Society influences media, whereas media influences society, reinforcing and maintaining language features correlated to social class.

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1. Introduction

This study investigates the use of language in a popular culture TV show, *The Simpsons*, which is the longest-running comedy in television history (Fox Broadcasting Company [FOX] 2010). The essence of the show, leaning on a subversive wittiness, is depiction of everyday life of a working class family and the members of the fictive town Springfield. Using examples of the language in this TV show as a platform, this essay will focus on how the media represent social class which, considering the immense popularity of the program, is relevant for how people look at and refer to social class in general.

1.1. Organization of the present study

This introduction precedes a brief section of definitions and terms, which is followed by the theoretical framework and purpose of the essay. In section 2, previous research is presented, before method and materials are surveyed in section 3. Next, in section 4, there are linguistic results and discussions. Finally, in section 5, there is a short conclusion.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

Historically, the epithet *working class* [WC] refers to manual workers while *middle class* [MC] is the label for non-manual workers. Given this, the middle class epithet is often accompanied by a background of education and higher wages than the working class. Furthermore, the social classes of working, middle and *upper classes* [UC] are divided into sub-classes such as *low, middle and upper* (Chambers 2003:43). Nevertheless, all people are members of one or more different *networks,* which is one of the most prominent features affecting language at the same time as they function as norm enforcement units. Networks can be seen as small units within a society, based on mutual interests and relationships i.e. family, neighborhoods, sports or politics. According to Chambers (2003:64,134) membership in different networks is also affected by *mobility*, which is a variable that on the one hand concerns people working in places far from home, moving or traveling, and on the other hand concerns people moving upwards or downwards on the social scale, i.e. changing social classes.

Social class, along with networks and degree of mobility, all affect a person's choice of language and contribute to linguistic diversities and dialects. In comparison, there is *Standard English*, the dialect taught in school and to foreigners, and traditionally also heard on radio

and TV. Standard English originates from dialects spoken in and around areas populated by scientists, politicians and other well-educated people with power and high status in society Trudgill (2000:17f). It can be pronounced according to regional accents, but since language is tightly connected to social structures, Standard English is more often used by MC than for example by WC members. Trudgill (2000:20) points out that research has shown no dialect to be linguistically better than another. Therefore, different dialects should have equal prestige, which is not the case. Dialects typically used by people from lower classes tend to have low prestige, which is directly connected to their social status in society.

The distinction between groups, i.e. social classes in society, is a culturally-influenced social construction, based on the apprehension of differences, values and patterns of behavior. The belonging and identity of a social class brings a sense of likeness to other people who have the same experiences of the socialization process. Objective and subjective belonging to social classes are based on what the individual feels and what other people think respectively. According to Wellros (1998:161) the purpose of the categorization into groups can be seen as a way of creating order and confidence, which brings about consequences such as creation and reinforcement of stereotypes as well as preserving differences. Cultural differences and discourse rules which regularly are "understood thoroughly by natives and often misunderstood by foreigners" (Tannen in Chambers 2003:9), also apply to differences between the social classes.

Social differences are changeable factors known to affect language even more than the non-changeable factors of sex and age. Linguistic variations correlate with social features such as social class, networks and mobility, which affect vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar as well as choice of rhetorical devices. Looking at the social features, there is mobility as well as the opposite, isolation, whereas "mobility causes people to speak and sound more like people from other places" yet "isolation causes people to speak and sound less like people from other places" (Chambers 2003:73). Furthermore, Eckert's (2000) research puts networks and social class as parallel but yet overlapping social units. Networks affect language and people's preferences in the same way as social class and even more, since networks are more tightly related and closer to the individual than social class. There are, however, differences between the social classes regarding networks since WC and UC have more tight ties than MC, which relates to the fact that MC is more mobile, less willing to stay where they are born, and participate in more networks (Chambers 2003).

From this pragmatic view, social class is "the most linguistically marked aspect of our social being" (Chambers 2003:43). At the same time the language of a conversation, with its

intonations and subtle signals can show how the speakers both consciously and subconsciously agree or disagree on the topic as well as on unspoken features such as body language, dress and opinions. This implies that language is a marker of the structure and social values preferred in a society or network at a specific time.

People may be part of more than one group, which thereby influences their language in different ways at the same time as a person's choice of style of language differs due to the degree of formality which stands "in direct proportion to the number of social differences between the participants" (Chambers 2003:4).

1.3. Purpose

Social class relates to occupational, educational and status differences, which are associated with features such as style of people's clothing, manners, recreation and preferences. This influences language both implicitly and explicitly, which means that it should be possible to find linguistic features in transcripts of *The Simpsons*, which can show how social class is depicted in the show. This is relevant since the media's representation of language and social class, can maintain and reinforce attitudes and values in society. Thus, the purpose of this essay is to describe how social class is depicted in selected episodes of *The Simpsons*.

2. Previous research

Within the sociolinguistic field, studies have revealed linguistic variations, which initially could not be explained other than being characterized as random or inconsistent usages (Heath 1980:51). Researchers started to investigate the variations and found that they were related to language in use, influenced by social features that are important for the individual. Wardhaugh (2002:113) adds that choices and use of language and linguistic features are a part of creating identity as well as establishing relations in groups and in society. People may accordingly use this *accommodation* in different contexts and for different purposes. One example is Labov's study of Martha's Vineyard (for a textbook summary of this study, see Chambers 2003:16, 86), where language served as identification and a marker of group membership. The distinction between groups is often very important and if there is pressure from outsiders, they can increase their dialectal use in order to further establish the differences and kinship within the group. This example pinpoints networks and social class as important factors affecting language variation.

The latter category, social class, can, in general terms, be related to political issues and beliefs, where divergence is obvious. Nevertheless, in the context of sociolinguistics, social classes and barriers between them do exist, where social distance has a greater influence than geographical. According to Labov (in Chambers 2003:77), it is possible to detect similarity to other LC members/groups without geographical closeness, since they have sociological features like attitudes, values and vernacular culture in common. Therefore differences between the classes can be seen as depending on choices of life-styles, values and beliefs, rather than based on the class system itself. The definition of a class system and interpretation of social class varies among communities and countries. Labov (2001) argues that social class relates to education, occupation and income, while Thompson and Halsey (in Milroy & Gordon 2003:44) state that occupational groups overlap with status groups where class can be used as a general term to cover both. A third approach is Butsch (1992), who studied television sitcom depictions of class and linked it to male versus female appearances as a gender based connotation. This has been further explored in one of the most recent studies on *The Simpsons* (Mattson 2009), however gender correlations will not be focused in this essay, since the two chosen characters are men.

Apart from linguistic differences, there is also homogeneity, which according to Labov (in Milroy & Gordon 2003), is not to be interpreted as structure, but rather as people gaining some advantage or 'profit' from using similar language features. Bourdieu (1991) further explains that language represents *symbolic capital*, which potentially may be exchangeable into profitable resources. Therefore, the main approach nowadays is the idea of language variation being socially and linguistically relevant for the speaker and his or her socioeconomic life and participation in different networks, since linguistic variables are mostly related to the influence of local norms and local practices.

3. Method and Material

First, in section 3.1, methods for gathering data are presented, which is followed by section 3.2, in which the methods for analyzing data are discussed. In section 3.2.1 reliability and validity are considered. Section 3.3 deals with materials and 3.3.1 with the transcripts. The last section, 3.4, sketches out the backgrounds of the two characters examined in the present study.

3.1. Methods for gathering data

With the purpose of finding out how social class is depicted in *The Simpsons*, dialogues of two episodes have been transcribed. The chosen episodes feature characters believed to give relevant examples for this study. To choose episodes instead of randomly picking two, may be questioned, but previous research proves *judgment samples* to be the most reliable method (Chambers 2003:44). Sociolinguistic research is mainly based on judgment samples since random samples provide a too large basis, which makes the data impossible to work with and thereby gives a less reliable result. Judgment samples are, according to Milroy & Gordon (2003:30), based on the researcher's experience of the subject, thus the samples are chosen according to the premise of being relevant for the question of the study. The judgment samples are in this case supported by the broadcasting company's statement about *The Simpsons* family being working class (FOX 2010) as well as by previous research (Butsch 1992).

3.2. Methods for analyzing data

There are different ways of studying linguistic features in relation to social class. It is possible to either group people according to linguistic resemblance, or to establish which social class the informants belong to, and after that link linguistic data to each class. This choice affects the research process since the initial thought either has a specific hypothesis as a starting point, or is focused on *post hoc* analysis. In this essay, the main question is based on the theory that language representation in the media affects attitudes and values in society and vice versa, which implicitly selects *ad hoc* analysis of the transcripts. Therefore in this study, the social class of the informants was established first, and after that linked to the linguistic data found in the transcripts. The transcripts provided data which could be categorized regarding the linguistic areas of vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar and choice of rhetorical devices, which are relevant since they correlate with social class. The correlation was then interpreted in the light of how the media represent social class through language in *The Simpsons*.

Looking at the interpretations, one of the forerunners of sociology, Weber, said that social matters should be examined through intuition and empathy, since social actions must be considered in the view of the actors as they behave according to what they experience and have experienced. This means that research within this field is a process of interpretations and

comprehension used to create meaning of an object aiming to form new meaningful significations (Weber in Taylor 1985).

When it comes to the process of interpretations, there is pluralism in analyses and some interpretations may seem arbitrary. In order to prevent or reduce accusations of arbitrariness, Gadamer (1981) suggests a holistic view of inner connections or coherence to make parts and entirety of the text agree. However, he does not advise on how to choose between similar interpretations. Another problem that might arise is that all texts are not totally coherent due to the intentions of the author. On this, Skinner (1988) proposes that if the intentions of the author and the interpretations of the examiner agree, the results of the study can be verified as true. Even so, an obstacle occurs, since the examiner is never able to fully understand the intentions of the author, which leads back to the fact that all interpretations only are interpretations and must be regarded as such.

Considering the discussion above, this essay aims to be an empirical, qualitative study with a hermeneutical process and a phenomenological view, which endeavors to understand different phenomena in context (cf. Kvale 1997).

3.2.1. Reliability and Validity

Reliability concerns the authenticity of the planning, carrying through and results of the study. Despite several readings, there is always a possibility that former experiences of the context and preconceived understandings might influence the analysis of the transcripts (Denscombe 2000). Looking at the transcripts, official subtitles have been used for comparison, which serves to improve the reliability. In addition, it is important to be aware of the quality of the primary and secondary sources, which can be normative/prescriptive, i.e. describe how something should be, or they may be cognitive/descriptive, i.e. describe how something appears to be. Furthermore, validity, according to Kvale (1997), is a process more than a conception, which implies that it is valuable to withhold a critical attitude through all stages of the essay in order to decrease the risk of confirmation bias. The purpose is to avoid misconceptions, deviations and thereby increase the 'credibility, justness and reliability' (Kvale 1997:219).

3.3. Materials

Looking at the depiction of social class in a popular culture show as *The Simpsons* is important due to the established assumption of the media's representation of language having

effect on how people speak, appear and act, exemplified by Trotta (2003) who argues that representation also may reveal the media's impact on language in general.

In *The Simpsons*, the classes are already defined by the authors of the show who, through a seemingly average family, give the viewer a satirical picture of the typical American society. They hint at a stereotypical picture of social class with a working class family in the center. A number of characters appear and contribute with diverse perspectives on the same society. Among these characters, Cletus Delroy Spuckler [Cletus] and Sideshow Bob stand out as representing low working class and middle class respectively, this makes them relevant objects for this study of how social class is depicted in popular culture, albeit through selected examples of this particular TV show.

Simultaneously, these definitions are influenced by my own assumptions of social class, which in turn are influenced by the media and vice versa. There is however awareness about social factors not being the only factors affecting language since sex and age also are influential, which can be disregarded in this paper since the objects of study are both middle-aged men.

3.3.1. Transcripts

The chosen transcripts and subtitles are taken from *The Simpsons* episodes; *The Black Widower*, number 321 (1992) and *Rednecks and Broomsticks*, number 448 (2009), see appendix for full transcripts.

3.4. Character backgrounds

According to *the Wikipedia* (*Cletus_Spuckler* 2010 [online]), Cletus is a hillbilly with low intelligence due to inbreeding or mercury poisoning. He dresses in singlet and blue jeans, has a tattoo, crooked carriage, straggly hair and is unshaved. He has got several children who do not have full sets of teeth and wear worn out clothes in the wrong size, which are both markers of low social status. Cletus and his family believe in the magic of nature and call themselves outsiders, independent outsiders. Cletus keeps weapons and army gear at home. In addition, when Cletus appears, background music is played, which originates from the countryside or backwoods, i.e. bluegrass on a banjo.

Side Show Bob is well-dressed, shaved, and acts like a gentleman. He is a self-proclaimed genius, well-educated and has got one child (who appears later in the series). Side Show Bob is a conservative republican, musically talented and proclaims that high culture

will improve children's life, which is why he fights Bart since he considers Bart a "product of mass culture upbringing" (Arnold 2003). His goofy appearance is somewhat contradictory as he speaks in a refined voice, which has been described by Adam Finley (2006): "that baritone voice, the Shakespearian delivery, calm and collected and the ability to go from calm and collected to stark raving mad within the same second". Side Show Bob is eloquent and cherishes high culture and the habits of upper classes. In contrast, he shows contempt towards regular people, i.e. lower social classes. Bob's contempt is often expressed explicitly, for example when he calls the bellboy "brainless luggage monkey", see further in section 5.

4. Linguistic results

This section presents linguistic results for Cletus and Side Show Bob. After each subheading, (grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary and other), there are brief discussions regarding the examples.

4.1. Grammar (Cletus)
Grammatically, Cletus often chooses non-standard forms.

1. "this here's"
2. "So, what y'all think?"
3. "Now, you's had a rough day"
4. "He's gonna shoot those google earth folks what caught me with my breeches down."

When Cletus is going to show Homer his home-distilling device, he uses "this here's" (1) instead of the grammatically correct "this is". Cletus extends the phrase with 'here', which is remarkable since most of his utterances are shortened standard forms, elisions or omissions of elements, for example the sentence "So, what y'all think?" (2), which has an elision as well as lacking the verb 'do'. According to traditional prescriptive grammar, the correct concord in number three would be 'have' in "you have had", whereas Cletus uses 'has' in "you's had" (3). Furthermore, in example four, the proper relative pronoun would be "that" (or "who") instead of "what" (4), which is associated with substandard language.

Cletus and his family and friends use vernacular forms and disregard prescriptive grammar rules in favor of using words and linguistic features well suited for the purpose of

communication within the group, his network. At the same time choice of language creates identity for the individual as well as for the group, and thereby also signals belonging to different social classes in society.

4.2. Pronunciation (Cletus)

Looking at the pronunciation results, Cletus uses colloquial speech, as in the following:

5. "That's smart <u>thinkin</u>'!"
6. "Guess I'll have to dig it for <u>ya</u>."
7. "I <u>kinda</u> feel sorry for them."
8. "That jug was <u>fo</u>' pa."
9. '<u>ol</u> Betsy

These examples of pronunciation are not particularly extreme, yet relevant in this context. The vernacular form 'thinkin' (5) is according to Fisher (1958:49) found in informal speech rather than in formal speech. Trudgill (in Chambers 2003:124) found a clear correlation between the pronunciation of the ng-variable in formal speech, where the working class mostly used [ən] and the middle class mostly used [iŋ]. These findings would be in accordance to Cletus belonging to low social class, using non-standard language features such as [ən] in an informal context. The next case, 'ya' (6) is an example of colloquial speech pronunciation, where the vowel sound is changed and shortened. Number three, 'kinda' (7), is an elision of the two words 'kind of', which also involves omission of the [v]-sound in 'of'. Furthermore, the following two examples 'fo' pa' and 'ol Betsy' (8, 9) are similar to the previous 'kinda' (7), in the sense of leaving out the last sound making the pronunciation of the two words continuous instead of separate. This permits a both quicker and easier pronunciation, which may be associated with the perception of the lower classes' choice of a somewhat sloppy (and choppy) pronunciation.

4.3. Vocabulary (Cletus)

A lot of Cletus's vocabulary is related to alcohol and weapons, which is exemplified by number ten and eleven below. His vocabulary is also represented through the way he presents his children.

10. "[…] with my latest batch of <u>whoopee water</u>."

11. "Where's the <u>bazook</u>?"

12. "One, two, backwards 'e', one-legged triangle, banana hot dog, double banana hot dog, 60 corncob two."

Weapons and home distilled liquor seem to feature Cletus's ordinary vocabulary (10-11), which can be related to his life outside the city and within the group of hillbillies, who appear to form their own way of living in the woods. Furthermore, the children cannot count (12), which can be related to low intelligence or no school. A possible explanation could be that Cletus does not consider it important to send his children to school or for them being able to count.

4.4. Other examples (Cletus)

As mentioned above, Cletus, his family and friends, speak of features related to the backwoods, in opposite of the city- life. This can be seen as examples of the hillbillies being outsiders.

13. "Let the possum work its magic."
"Possum?!"
"Don't worry, we don't kill it. We just dip it."

14. "So, you guys have any video games?"

"Nope, but my mama brought some of these boom potatoes from Iraq."

15. "It angrys up my fists."
"I just remembered my feud with this here tree."

Dialogue number one (13), shows how Cletus's family interpret Lisa's reaction in a way which reveals preconceived opinions about people living close to nature and how the 'city folks', do not understand how things work in that part of society. This implicitly reinforces an assumption about the different social classes finding the other one more or less stupid. At the same time the dialogues in (13-15) give a picture of the hillbillies being odd or of low intelligence.

4.5. Grammar (Side Show Bob)

Side Show Bob uses typically Standard English without vernacular forms; consider example 16 below:

    16. "I'm going to miss you most of all."

Even in prison, talking to his friend Snake, he uses the grammatically correct 'going to', instead of the common elision 'gonna'.

4.6. Pronunciation (Side Show Bob)

Side Show Bob pronounces words carefully with a sense of subtle emphasis.

    17. "You're forgetting the two noble truths of Buddha."

All syllables are fully pronounced, which can be seen as an example of hypercorrection. Hypercorrection can, according to Chambers (2003:65), be a token of upwards mobility, i.e. a person trying to become a member of a higher social class than he or she was born into. This is in accordance with Side Show Bob's character, since he strives for perfection and superciliously delivers his utterances in a sophisticated tone.

4.7. Vocabulary (Side Show Bob)

The vocabulary of Side Show Bob tends to focus on words and phrases seldom used in colloquial speech.

    18. "eradicator"
    19. "shamus"
    20. "I bade farewell..."
    21. "I'll take a vigorous constitutional"

Side Show Bob uses few or no short forms and little slang. His words are highfaluting, and his choice of language is pretentious, which can be related to him cherishing high culture and its related values.

4.8. Rhetorical devices (Side Show Bob)

Side Show Bob uses religious allusions, metaphors and quotes in foreign languages to define himself as belonging to upper middle class. Lower classes in general, do not have the same opportunities to travel or go to school, as middle or upper classes do, which is why Side Show Bob's knowledge of other languages can be seen as a token of high education, which in turn would relate to higher social class.

Religious allusions

22. "But kismet be kind, well as cruel."
23. "God took 168 pounds of clay, and he made me a woman...and for that, I thank him."
24. "Scourge of Prometheus [...]"

Metaphors

25. "Seething cauldron"
26. "Ah, my lowest ebb"
27. "You seized the wheel of my slow boat to hell, and pointed it towards the sunny shores of Selma."
28. [...] untangle my web

Knowledge of other languages

29. "Avec plaisir!" (French)
30. "Son pieds sentit beau" (French)
31. "Voy a matar usted." (Spanish)
32. "[...] gang agley" (Old Scottish)

5. Conclusion

The depiction of social class touches upon prejudices about differences in society at the same time as it contributes to the ongoing process of creating society. On this, Labov (in Milroy & Gordon 2003:96) states that "shared norms and common evaluation on the very linguistic variable that differentiate speakers, embodies a view of the community as fundamentally cohesive and self regulating". Elaborated further, language can determine social relations, which in this essay are exemplified by Cletus and Side Show Bob.

Since Cletus and Side Show Bob do not appear together in the two chosen episodes, the comparisons between choices of linguistic aspects also concern other characters featured in the episodes. Homer, for one, is the main character of *The Simpsons* family, and by that he is defined as a member of the working class. In *Rednecks and Broomsticks*, Homer appears cleverer than in *The Black Widower*, which could be since he is compared to two different people, Cletus and Sideshow Bob respectively. He uses his sociolect to fit into the network of the hillbillies, yet uses eloquence which marks him being different. At the same time his metaphors feature words attributed to Cletus's network, whereas he elaborates a transition between the classes, which can be seen as an example of speech accommodation.

Cletus's network uses a style of language focused on communication, ignoring prescriptive grammatical rules with the purpose of simplifying the language, but at the same time creating a spirit of community, which is supported by Cletus's utterances regarding their independence "This here country is home to over 300 family owned stills […] independent hooch", and Homer being an outsider; "What's your take, city boy?". At the same time, Cletus mostly socializes with others who speak like him, lacking social and occupational mobility, which leads to reinforced linguistic features, which remain unaffected.

Comparing Cletus's style of language to Side Show Bob's, the latter reveals a desire to be a part of a higher social class than the working class he is socializing with. Cletus, on the other hand, shows pride in the network, i.e. the class he is a part of. Side Show Bob not only strives for upwards mobility, but also demeans lower classes.

When Side Show Bob and Homer discuss Bart framing Krusty for theft, Homer (in an upset voice) talks about violent retaliation and refers to Bart as being a "snot-nosed kid", while Side Show Bob calmly retorts with a religious allusion, simultaneously belittling Homer. Further in the same conversation, Side Show Bob refers to his time in prison as "we became little more than beasts", again disparaging people believed to be of lower class. Side Show Bob's contempt towards lower classes reinforces the gap between the classes and the only reason for Side Show Bob to mix with the working class, i.e. Selma, is that he wants her money. He patronizes her and keeps a distance, for example through his Spanish utterance where uses the polite form, addressing his wife "usted" when the natural would have been "tu".

To sum up, as the introductory paragraphs implies, the answer to this essay's main question reveals that society influences media, whereas media influences society, reinforcing and maintaining language features correlated to social class. Or, as Lisa Simpson puts it "It's like they saw our lives and put it up on screen."

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