

Language, Society, and Class: A Theoretical ExplorationEmine Akçelik¹, Alkan Üstün²*DOI: 10.59445/ijephss.1780016*

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between language and social class from a theoretical perspective by developing an integrative framework based on theoretical synthesis. Emphasizing the role of linguistic practices in the production and reproduction of social inequalities, the study addresses the relative marginality of class-based analyses within sociological and sociolinguistic research in Türkiye. Drawing on Basil Bernstein's theory of linguistic codes, William Labov's work on sociolinguistic variation, Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of the linguistic market and symbolic power, and Saussurean insights into the relational nature of meaning, the article systematically synthesizes these approaches through an ethnomethodological lens. Rather than treating these theories as parallel explanatory models, the study brings them into analytical dialogue by identifying shared mechanisms that link structural access to linguistic resources, processes of social evaluation, relations of symbolic power, and interactional meaning-making. By conceptualizing class-based linguistic inequality as a relational and context-dependent process, the article advances theoretical synthesis not merely as a methodological choice but as a substantive analytical contribution. While the study does not advance empirical claims, it outlines a theoretically grounded research agenda for future studies on language and class, particularly within the Turkish context, and contributes to broader debates in the sociology of language and social inequality.

Keywords: Sociology of Language, Social Class, Ethnomethodology, Linguistic Inequality.

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1. Introduction

Language functions both as a means of communication and as a domain in which social differentiation and class positions are made visible. Through the words they use, sentence structures, modes of expression, and discursive preferences, individuals express their personal identities while signaling their social affiliations. Accordingly, language serves as a critical indicator for understanding social class positions.

In Türkiye, it can be argued that class debates within the sociological literature have been relatively neglected, which has led to the relationship between language and class remaining in the background. Within the field of linguistics, the focus has predominantly been on structural features, while the social functions of language have often been overlooked (Yılmaz, 1999). By contrast, international literature demonstrates strong connections between individuals' social origins and their linguistic practices. Numerous studies have revealed that class differences are reflected in language, ranging from children's vocabulary to adults' styles of speech (Eells, 1951; Templin, 1957; Hetzer & Reindorf, 1969). More recent work in sociolinguistics and critical discourse studies has further emphasized the role of language in reproducing social inequality through institutional and interactional mechanisms (Blommaert, 2010; Fairclough, 2013).

The aim of this study is to discuss the social function of language particularly within the context of class and to provide a comprehensive evaluation by bringing together different theoretical approaches. Rather than relying on an empirical field study, it seeks to reinterpret Basil Bernstein's deficit theory and distinction of codes, William Labov's theory of variation, Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of the linguistic marketplace and symbolic power, as well as Ferdinand de Saussure's semiological system, through the lens of an ethnomethodological perspective. In this way, the relationship between language and class positions can be addressed both at the macro level (social structure, power relations, cultural capital) and at the micro level (everyday speech practices, context-specific meaning production).

This article argues that class-based linguistic inequality can be more effectively understood through an integrative framework that brings together Bernstein's codes, Labov's sociolinguistic variation, Bourdieu's concept of linguistic market and symbolic power, and Saussurean insights on meaning, all read through an ethnomethodological lens. This article intends to make three main contributions:

It develops an integrative theoretical framework that connects sociolinguistics and sociology of language through shared analytical mechanisms rather than parallel discussions.

It re-conceptualizes class-based linguistic inequality as a relational and context-dependent process shaped by symbolic power, variation, and interactional norms.

It offers a research agenda for studying language and class in the Turkish context, where such integrative sociolinguistic approaches remain limited.

Together, this study positions itself not as a descriptive compilation of established theories but as a theoretically driven sociological intervention. The central contribution of the article lies in demonstrating how class-based linguistic inequality can be analytically understood only when structural access to linguistic resources (Bernstein), processes of sociolinguistic evaluation (Labov), relations of symbolic power and legitimacy (Bourdieu), and the interactional production of meaning (Saussure and ethnomethodology) are examined as interconnected mechanisms rather than isolated dimensions. By placing these approaches in systematic dialogue, the article advances an integrative framework that clarifies how linguistic practices both reflect and reproduce class relations across institutional and everyday contexts.

Rather than providing empirical generalizations, the article contributes by specifying analytical pathways through which future research can examine linguistic inequality in education, bureaucracy, healthcare, and professional communication. In this sense, the study claims its originality not through data production but through theoretical synthesis that renders classed language practices sociologically visible and analytically tractable.

2. Toward an Integrative Framework of Language, Society, and Class

Despite the richness of sociolinguistic and sociological theories addressing the relationship between language and social class, much of the existing literature remains fragmented, with theoretical approaches often developed in parallel rather than in dialogue. As a result, the mechanisms through which linguistic practices both reflect and reproduce class-based inequalities tend to be examined in isolation. This section proposes an integrative analytical framework that brings together key insights from Bernstein, Labov, Bourdieu, and Saussure, interpreted through an ethnomethodological perspective, in order to conceptualize language as a relational, context-dependent, and power-laden social practice.

At the core of this framework lies the assumption that linguistic inequality does not emerge from a single source, such as individual competence or formal education, but from the interaction of structural constraints, social valuation processes, symbolic power relations, and situational meaning-making. Each theoretical tradition contributes a distinct yet complementary analytical mechanism that, when combined, enables a more comprehensive understanding of how classed linguistic practices are produced, evaluated, and legitimized in everyday interactions.

Bernstein's concept of linguistic codes provides the structural foundation of the framework by highlighting how differential access to elaborated and restricted codes is closely tied to social class positions. Linguistic codes operate as patterned forms of expression that are unevenly distributed across social groups and institutionally privileged in formal settings such as education, bureaucracy, and professional communication. Within the integrative framework proposed here, Bernstein's contribution allows for the identification of the structural conditions under which certain linguistic resources become dominant, while others are marginalized or rendered invisible.

Building on this structural dimension, Labov's work on sociolinguistic variation introduces a dynamic perspective on how linguistic forms acquire social value. Variation is not treated as deviation from a linguistic norm but as a socially meaningful resource that indexes class, identity, and belonging. From the standpoint of the integrative framework, Labov's approach elucidates how linguistic differences are evaluated, stigmatized, or legitimized in relation to prevailing social hierarchies. This perspective underscores that class-based linguistic inequality is not only a matter of access to codes but also of how particular ways of speaking are socially interpreted and hierarchically ranked.

Bourdieu's concept of the linguistic market further deepens this analysis by foregrounding the role of symbolic power in the regulation of legitimate speech. In different social fields, specific linguistic practices are recognized as authoritative, credible, or appropriate, while others are devalued or silenced. Within the proposed framework, the linguistic market functions as the arena in which structural constraints and sociolinguistic variation are translated into symbolic domination. Linguistic competence, in this sense, cannot be separated from power relations, as the value of speech is contingent upon the speaker's position within a given social field.

Saussurean insights into the relational nature of meaning, when combined with ethnomethodological principles, add a crucial interactional and contextual layer to the framework. Ethnomethodology emphasizes that meaning is not fixed or inherent in linguistic forms but is continuously produced and negotiated through situated social interaction. From this perspective, classed

linguistic practices become intelligible only when examined in relation to the contexts in which they are enacted, interpreted, and made accountable. This dimension of the framework highlights the reflexive and indexical character of language, showing how class distinctions are not merely imposed from above but are actively reproduced and sometimes contested in everyday encounters.

These four analytical mechanisms, structural distribution of linguistic resources, social valuation of variation, symbolic power of linguistic markets, and interactional production of meaning, form a coherent framework for analyzing language and class as an interconnected social process. Rather than treating linguistic inequality as a static outcome, the integrative framework conceptualizes it as a dynamic configuration shaped by structural conditions, evaluative practices, power relations, and contextual interactions.

By synthesizing these theoretical traditions, the framework moves beyond descriptive comparison and offers a conceptual tool for future empirical research. It provides a basis for examining how class-based linguistic inequalities are produced and sustained across different institutional settings, while also allowing for the identification of moments in which dominant linguistic norms may be challenged or reconfigured. In this sense, the framework does not seek to replace existing theories but to place them in productive dialogue, enabling a more nuanced and relational understanding of language, society, and class.

Despite a growing body of sociological and linguistic research in Türkiye, studies explicitly addressing the relationship between language and social class remain relatively fragmented and theoretically compartmentalized. Existing work has often focused on educational inequality, regional dialects, or institutional language practices without systematically integrating sociolinguistic variation, symbolic power, and interactional meaning-making into a unified analytical framework. The integrative approach proposed in this article offers a conceptual lens through which these dispersed strands of research can be brought into dialogue.

In the Turkish context, linguistic practices are deeply intertwined with class-based distinctions shaped by education, urban–rural divides, institutional hierarchies, and access to cultural capital. Formal institutions such as schools, universities, bureaucratic offices, courts, and healthcare settings tend to privilege standardized forms of language that align closely with elaborated codes and dominant linguistic norms. Individuals whose linguistic repertoires diverge from these norms may experience symbolic exclusion, misrecognition, or diminished authority, even when their communicative competence is functionally adequate. For instance, differences in modes of address, lexical choices, and narrative styles observed in institutional encounters such as hospitals, schools, or bureaucratic offices often reveal implicit class-based expectations regarding “appropriate” language use in Türkiye. Recent studies on educational inequality and cultural capital in Türkiye further indicate that access to institutionally valued linguistic forms remains unevenly distributed along class lines (Atmaca & Aydın, 2020; Aktaş & Engin, 2024).

From the perspective of the integrative framework, these dynamics can be examined through the interaction of four key mechanisms. First, Bernstein’s concept of linguistic codes allows researchers to analyze how access to institutionally valued language is structured along class lines in Türkiye’s education system and professional fields. Second, Labov’s emphasis on sociolinguistic variation provides tools for understanding how regional, colloquial, or non-standard forms of Turkish are socially evaluated and hierarchically positioned. Third, Bourdieu’s notion of the linguistic market highlights how legitimacy, credibility, and symbolic power are unevenly distributed across different social arenas. Finally, ethnomethodological insights draw attention to how classed linguistic distinctions are enacted and negotiated in everyday interactions, rather than merely imposed through formal rules.

The framework also opens new avenues for empirical research in Türkiye by encouraging scholars to move beyond static representations of class and language. Qualitative interviews, institutional discourse analysis, and interactional studies of everyday encounters can be employed to examine how individuals navigate linguistic expectations across different social contexts. Such approaches allow for the exploration of moments in which dominant linguistic norms are reproduced, challenged, or strategically adapted, revealing the relational and dynamic nature of classed language practices.

Table 1. Integrative Analytical Framework of Language, Society, and Class

| Analytical Mechanism | Key Theoretical Source | Core Contribution to the Framework | Level of Analysis |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|------------------------------|
| Structural access to linguistic resources | Basil Bernstein | Demonstrates how access to elaborated and restricted linguistic codes is unevenly distributed across social classes and institutionally privileged in formal settings | Macro / Institutional |
| Social valuation of linguistic variation | William Labov | Shows that linguistic variation is socially evaluated and hierarchically ranked, rather than reflecting linguistic deficiency | Meso / Social Evaluation |
| Symbolic power and linguistic legitimacy | Pierre Bourdieu | Explains how linguistic practices acquire authority and legitimacy within specific social fields through symbolic power | Macro–Meso / Power Relations |
| Interactional production of meaning | Saussurean theory & Ethnomethodology | Highlights how meaning is context-dependent, indexical, and produced through everyday interaction | Micro / Interactional |

3. Methodological Approach: Theoretical Synthesis as Analytical Strategy

This study adopts a theoretical synthesis approach as its primary methodological strategy. Rather than conducting an empirical analysis, the article systematically integrates key sociolinguistic and sociological theories in order to construct a coherent analytical framework for examining the relationship between language, society, and class. The aim of this methodological choice is not to test specific hypotheses but to clarify conceptual linkages, identify shared analytical mechanisms, and develop a structured research agenda for future empirical inquiry.

The process of theoretical synthesis employed in this study unfolds in three interrelated stages. First, theory selection was guided by the capacity of each approach to illuminate a distinct dimension of class-based linguistic inequality. Bernstein’s theory of linguistic codes was selected to address the structural distribution of linguistic resources; Labov’s sociolinguistic variation to account for processes of social evaluation; Bourdieu’s concept of the linguistic market to analyze symbolic power and legitimacy; and Saussurean and ethnomethodological perspectives to capture the relational and interactional production of meaning. These theories span macro-structural, meso-institutional, and micro-interactional levels of analysis.

Second, a comparative analytical reading was conducted to identify points of convergence, tension, and complementarity among these theoretical traditions. Rather than treating each theory as a self-contained explanatory model, the analysis focused on their underlying assumptions regarding language, power, social structure, and meaning. This comparative process enabled the articulation of shared mechanisms, such as access to legitimate language, valuation of linguistic forms, and context-dependent meaning-making, while preserving the distinctive contributions of each approach.

Third, the synthesis phase involved the abstraction and integration of these shared mechanisms into a unified analytical framework. This step moved beyond juxtaposition by systematically linking structural conditions, evaluative practices, symbolic power relations, and interactional processes into a relational model of classed linguistic practices. The resulting framework is designed to be analytically flexible, allowing researchers to trace how linguistic inequality is produced and reproduced across different social contexts without reducing complex social processes to a single causal dimension.

Importantly, the methodological orientation of this study acknowledges the limitations inherent in purely theoretical work. The framework does not claim empirical generalizability; instead, it provides a conceptually grounded tool that can guide future qualitative and quantitative research. By specifying analytical mechanisms and levels of analysis, the framework facilitates the design of empirical studies capable of examining language and class as a dynamic and context-sensitive social phenomenon.

Through this methodological strategy, the article positions theoretical synthesis not as a preliminary or secondary stage of research but as a substantive analytical contribution in its own right. In doing so, it seeks to demonstrate how integrative theoretical work can advance sociological and sociolinguistic debates by clarifying concepts, bridging disciplinary boundaries, and opening new directions for empirical investigation. While outlining positivist, interpretive, and critical approaches, this study is primarily situated within an interpretive and critical tradition, drawing particularly on ethnomethodology to illuminate the everyday reproduction of class-based linguistic distinctions.

4. Background and Conceptual Foundations of Sociolinguistics

4.1. Language, Linguistics, and Sociolinguistics

Language is one of the most fundamental social instruments that enable individuals to live together. Possessing structural, individual, and cultural features, language can be understood as a medium of communication while simultaneously serving as an expression of social identities, relationships, and positions. As Marshall (2009) defines it, language encompasses “forms of verbal or non-verbal communication conducted by humans, animals, and even machines.” From the perspective of the social sciences, however, what is essential is the social functions of language.

Although Chomsky (2007) acknowledges the biological foundations of language, he also draws attention to its social dimension. By virtue of their biological nature, humans are compelled to interact with others and to create a shared social domain (as cited in Çelik, 2017). Thus, language is not merely an individual capacity but the most crucial element of social interaction.

Sociolinguistics, emerging at the intersection of linguistics and sociology, began to rise particularly from the 1960s onwards (İmer, 1990). This field is a hybrid discipline that examines “the relationships between linguistic and social phenomena, their mutual influences, and their variations.” The concept of co-variation refers to the parallel reflection of social attributes in linguistic practices. Consequently, sociolinguistics seeks to answer questions such as: “Who speaks with which linguistic variant, with whom, where, when, about what, and what social consequences emerge from this interaction?” (İmer, 1990).

In the process of communication, individuals transmit meaning while simultaneously signaling their social positions. Numerous factors, such as occupation, residential environment, level of education, income, and cultural capital, not only shape a person’s social standing but also their language use. For this reason, an individual’s style of speech, choice of words, and body language provide important clues regarding class affiliations (König, 1991).

Whereas structural linguistics tends to idealize the individual and often disregards differences, sociolinguistics seeks to understand the individual within the framework of social structures and orders.

As Humboldt famously noted, “people live in this world as their native language introduces it to them” (Humboldt, as cited in Güven, 2012, pp. 60-61). This observation underscores the constitutive role of language in perceiving the social world. Written language often bears a measured, enduring, and institutional form, whereas spoken language, together with elements such as body language, diction, and emotional responses, constitutes a domain in which individual differences are more intensely experienced (Eker, 2007).

4.2. Empirical Research on Sociolinguistics

Although research on the relationship between social class and language in Türkiye is limited (Yılmaz, 1999), numerous empirical studies have been conducted in the international literature. These studies demonstrate that social background plays a decisive role in shaping language structures, vocabulary, and modes of expression from early childhood onward.

Eells (1951) and colleagues, in a study of 5,000 children aged 9-14, found that children from lower-class backgrounds scored lower on verbal intelligence tests compared to their middle-class peers. Similarly, Neff’s (1930) study revealed that the verbal performance of lower-class children declined further as age increased. Gessell’s findings also indicated that linguistic deprivation in the immediate environment negatively affected cognitive development (as cited in Şemin, 1972).

The comparative study by Hetzer and Reindorf (1969) showed that children from academic families demonstrated greater advancement than working-class children in vocabulary diversity, use of subjunctive forms, and naming skills. Their findings revealed an approximate one-year developmental gap between the two groups in terms of language acquisition. Templin (1957) also demonstrated a direct relationship between children’s social class and their sentence length, syntactic accuracy, and modes of expression.

In Loban’s research, the Thorndike–Lorge word list test was administered, revealing that students from lower-class backgrounds had a more limited vocabulary and tended to repeat the same words (as cited in Yılmaz, 1999). Oevermann (1977) similarly demonstrated, through intelligence and vocabulary tests, a direct connection between students’ social backgrounds and their linguistic competencies.

One of the studies conducted in Türkiye examined fifth-grade students in Ankara. The students were asked to write compositions explaining proverbs, and the findings indicated that students from lower-class backgrounds adhered less to the grammatical structure of Turkish, exhibited differences in levels of abstraction, and more frequently employed regional language features (İmer, 1990).

Taking together, these studies clearly reveal the close relationship between language use and individuals’ social backgrounds. From early childhood, social class differences manifest in various aspects of language, ranging from vocabulary and sentence structure to richness of expression and capacity for abstraction. These findings highlight that, from the perspective of sociolinguistics, language functions both as an individual skill and as a crucial indicator of social inequalities.

4.3. Main Approaches Shaping Sociolinguistics

4.3.1. Basil Bernstein: Deficit Theory and Codes

One of the pioneers of sociolinguistic research, Basil Bernstein, argued that language differs according to social class. In his view, the ways in which individuals in the lower and middle classes use language diverge significantly. This divergence is explained through the concepts of “deficit theory” and “codes”.

Bernstein distinguished between vernacular and regulated language, suggesting that the speech of the lower classes was characterized by shorter, simpler, and incomplete sentences, a limited vocabulary, and repetitive conjunctions. In contrast, middle-class language was more grammatically accurate, logically connected, and broad enough to express conceptual hierarchies. This distinction was later systematized through the concepts of “restricted code” and “elaborated code” (Ebneter, 1976; Dittmar, 1980).

Restricted code refers to a mode of communication that relies on limited vocabulary, lacks fully developed logical chains, and often depends on non-verbal elements. Elaborated code, on the other hand, provides the linguistic flexibility necessary to express complex relationships and abstract thoughts. According to Bernstein, this differentiation is directly linked to the process of socialization: family, school, and social environment determine the codes an individual employs. Consequently, language serves as a fundamental mechanism in the reproduction of social stratification (Bernstein, 1971).

Within the integrative framework proposed in this article, Bernstein’s theory constitutes the structural mechanism through which class-based linguistic inequalities are initially organized, forming the conditions under which variation, symbolic power, and interactional meaning-making operate. By demonstrating how access to elaborated and restricted codes is unevenly distributed across social groups, Bernstein provides the foundational conditions under which linguistic practices become stratified. In this sense, linguistic codes function as the structural backdrop against which variation, valuation, and symbolic power, addressed by subsequent theoretical perspectives, operate.

4.3.2. William Labov: Theory of Variation

A major critique of Bernstein’s deficit theory was advanced by William Labov. Labov contended that linguistic variants cannot be hierarchically classified as “better” or “worse.” In his view, the speech of the lower classes is neither deficient nor inadequate; rather, it is functional, systematic, and meaningful within its own social context.

In his field studies in New York, Labov (1966) examined the speech of individuals from different social classes and demonstrated that the non-standard English spoken by lower-class groups also possessed its own logical rules and internal consistency. As a result, linguistic variants came to be understood as expressions of social identities and group memberships.

The theory of variation is significant in that it interprets linguistic diversity not as a marker of deficiency but as an expression of cultural richness. This perspective intersects with the ethnomethodological emphasis on indexicality, since every linguistic expression gains meaning within its specific context, and there is no single generalizable form of “correct” language use (Coulon, 2015).

From the perspective of the integrative framework, Labov’s (1966) theory clarifies how linguistic differences become socially evaluated and hierarchically positioned, linking structural inequality to everyday interaction. Through his New York City department store study, Labov empirically showed how linguistic variation indexes social stratification rather than linguistic inadequacy (Labov, 1966). Linguistic variation becomes meaningful insofar as it is interpreted, ranked, and associated with particular social positions. Thus, Labov’s work bridges structural inequality and everyday interaction by revealing how class distinctions are actively reproduced through judgments of correctness, prestige, and legitimacy in speech.

4.3.3. Pierre Bourdieu: The Linguistic Marketplace and Symbolic Power

Bourdieu emphasized that language is intertwined not simply with grammatical rules but with relations of power. In his view, every linguistic exchange involves the social resources and power

dynamics between speaker and listener (Bourdieu, 2016; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2016). These dynamics are explained through the concept of symbolic power.

Bourdieu's notion of the linguistic marketplace refers to the idea that every utterance is produced within a specific social context and directed toward particular audiences. Linguistic capital acquires value only within this marketplace. For instance, an individual from the lower classes may speak with confidence in their own neighborhood but may fail to demonstrate the same competence in a formal setting. By contrast, a bourgeois individual can more easily take the floor by strategically employing the rules of the marketplace to their advantage. This example illustrates how language functions in the reproduction of class-based relations of domination (Bourdieu, 2016).

Bourdieu's approach intersects with ethnomethodology in the sense that everyday conversational routines are not merely individual choices but reflections of social conditions, historical power relations, and habitus. In this way, language operates both as a vehicle of micro-level interactions and as a medium for macro-level relations of power.

Within the integrative framework, Bourdieu's concept of the linguistic market provides the critical link between linguistic practices and relations of symbolic power. While Bernstein accounts for structural access to linguistic resources and Labov highlights the social valuation of variation, Bourdieu explains how certain forms of speech acquire authority and legitimacy within specific social fields. Linguistic inequality, from this perspective, is not simply a matter of difference but a consequence of power relations that regulate whose speech is recognized as valid and effective.

4.3.4. Ferdinand de Saussure: The System of Signs

Saussure laid the foundations of structural linguistics by defining language as a system of signs. In his view, language rests on the arbitrary relationship between the signifier (sound image) and the signified (concept) (Culler, 1985). This perspective demonstrates that language serves both as a tool of communication and as a fundamental mechanism of social meaning-making.

Saussure also distinguished between *langue* (the linguistic system) and *parole* (speech acts). *Langue* refers to the set of rules collectively shared at the social level, whereas *parole* denotes individual speech practices (Saussure, 1976). This distinction provides sociolinguistics with a crucial reference point for understanding how individual linguistic practices are linked to social structures.

When Saussure's theory is considered alongside Bernstein's and Bourdieu's perspectives on the social functions of language, it becomes possible to grasp both the structural and the social dimensions of language. The ethnomethodological perspective renders this distinction visible within everyday practices by analyzing how individuals articulate social class differences at the level of *parole*.

The integrative framework is completed by Saussurean insights into the relational nature of meaning, interpreted through an ethnomethodological lens that foregrounds interaction and context. This perspective emphasizes that linguistic forms do not carry fixed social meanings but acquire significance through situated practices. By incorporating ethnomethodology, the framework accounts for how classed linguistic distinctions are enacted, negotiated, and occasionally contested in everyday interactions, thereby linking macro-level structures to micro-level meaning-making processes.

Bernstein's theory of linguistic codes, Labov's theory of variation, Bourdieu's analysis of the linguistic marketplace, and Saussure's theory of signs explain the relationship between language and social class positions at different levels. An ethnomethodological outlook contributes to this body of theory by illuminating how the macro-structural or cultural distinctions emphasized in these approaches are concretized in everyday speech practices.

5. Methodological Perspectives: Positivist, Interpretive, and Critical Approaches

Research that seeks to understand social uses of language is shaped by its theoretical framework as well as by the methodological perspective it adopts. In the social sciences, three main approaches are prominent: positivist/naturalist social science, interpretive social science, and critical social science. Each addresses the social dimension of language through a distinct lens and shapes research designs accordingly.

5.1. Positivist Social Science and Sociolinguistics

Positivism developed in the nineteenth century under the leadership of Auguste Comte as an approach that aimed to adapt the methods of the natural sciences to the social sciences. According to this perspective, social reality is objective, governed by unchanging laws, and these laws can be revealed through systematic observation, experimentation, and quantitative measurement (Marshall, 2009; Neuman, 2006).

From a positivist standpoint, sociolinguistics seeks to measure class-based uses of language through objective variables. For instance, it is possible to compare linguistic differences among individuals according to their occupations using quantitative data. In this regard, surveys, scales, and tests are the most frequently used research tools. Bernstein's theory of linguistic codes, for example, could be tested within a positivist framework by means of quantitative measurements: students' compositions were analyzed and criteria such as vocabulary diversity, sentence length, and grammatical accuracy were quantified and correlated with class positions.

A similar research design can also be applied in the Turkish context. Occupational groups representing the lower and middle classes (workers, small tradesmen, doctors, lawyers, teachers, etc.) could be selected, and quantitative data on their language use collected. Participants could be asked both closed-ended questions and short written responses, which would allow analyses of vocabulary, the use of proverbs and idioms, and grammatical accuracy. In this way, class-based foundations of linguistic differences could be statistically demonstrated.

However, the limitation of the positivist approach lies in its neglect of the contextual and subjective dimensions of language. As ethnomethodology emphasizes, the meaning of an utterance is not contained solely in its sentence structure but also in the speaker's intentions, prior experiences, and relationship with the interlocutor (Coulon, 2015). Thus, positivist methods may fail to fully capture the social functions of language.

5.2. Interpretive Social Science and Ethnomethodology

Interpretive social science argues that social reality cannot be understood through objective laws but rather through the subjective meanings and everyday experiences of actors. The intellectual roots of this approach can be traced to Alfred Schutz's phenomenology and symbolic interactionism. From this perspective, language is not a variable to be measured in isolation but a central instrument in the construction of the social world (Poloma, 2012; Slattery, 2010).

Ethnomethodology constitutes one of the most important methodological contributions of interpretive sociology. As Garfinkel (1984) demonstrated, individuals create "meaningful worlds" through the routines and methods they employ in reproducing social reality in their everyday lives. The task of the sociologist, therefore, is to understand from within the linguistic practices that individuals use in daily interactions.

In the context of social class, the interpretive approach can reveal how individuals from lower and middle classes articulate their social positions, which concepts they emphasize, and how they attach

meanings to their everyday speech. Conversation analysis, participant observation, and in-depth interviews are among the methods that can be employed for this purpose.

5.3. Critical Social Science

Critical social science draws upon the Marxist tradition developed by the Frankfurt School. Rejecting the positivist claim of “value neutrality,” it argues that social research should be both explanatory and transformative (Marshall, 2009). The researcher is not merely an observer, but an active participant engaged against social injustices (Neuman, 2006).

From the perspective of language studies, the critical approach interrogates how language functions within power relations and in the reproduction of social inequalities. In this regard, Bourdieu’s concepts of the linguistic marketplace and symbolic power are particularly significant (Bourdieu, 2016). The exposure of lower classes to exclusionary and discriminatory language constitutes one of the mechanisms through which social domination is reproduced.

The critical approach also emphasizes the transformative potential of language. For example, critical race theory demonstrates that by exposing discriminatory language and producing alternative discourses, social change becomes possible (Parker & Lynn, 2002). Similarly, in the context of social class, making exclusionary language visible can contribute to the development of more inclusive and egalitarian forms of social communication.

The critical dimension of this study is evident in its description of class-based exclusionary language and in its theoretical call for reducing such practices. Language is conceived as more than a passive reflection of social relations; it is also a force that can either reinforce or mitigate injustices.

Considered in conjunction, the three approaches highlight distinct dimensions of contribution to sociolinguistic research. The positivist approach highlights class-based linguistic differences through measurable data; the interpretive approach uncovers the subjective meanings of everyday linguistic practices; and the critical approach reveals the role of language within power relations in society.

6. Conclusion

This article sets out to address the persistent fragmentation in studies of language and social class by developing an integrative theoretical framework that brings sociolinguistic and sociological perspectives into systematic dialogue. Rather than approaching linguistic inequality through isolated theoretical lenses, the study has argued for a relational understanding of language as simultaneously structured, evaluated, regulated, and interactionally produced.

By synthesizing Bernstein’s concept of linguistic codes, Labov’s analysis of sociolinguistic variation, Bourdieu’s theory of the linguistic market, and Saussurean and ethnomethodological insights into meaning and interaction, the article has articulated four interrelated analytical mechanisms through which class-based linguistic inequalities can be examined. This integrative framework clarifies how differential access to linguistic resources, social valuation of speech forms, symbolic power relations, and context-dependent meaning-making jointly shape linguistic practices across social contexts.

The contribution of the study lies not in offering empirical generalizations but in providing a conceptually grounded analytical tool capable of guiding future research. By explicitly specifying the mechanisms and levels of analysis involved in the production of linguistic inequality, the framework enables scholars to design empirical studies that move beyond descriptive accounts and toward relational explanations of language and class. In this sense, theoretical synthesis is advanced as a substantive methodological contribution rather than a preliminary stage of inquiry.

Situating this framework within the Turkish context further underscores its relevance. In Türkiye, where linguistic practices are closely intertwined with educational trajectories, institutional hierarchies, and access to cultural capital, the integrative approach offers a structured way of examining how class-based distinctions are reproduced and negotiated in everyday interactions. At the same time, the framework remains analytically flexible, allowing for comparative applications across different national and cultural settings.

The study also acknowledges its limitations. As a theoretical contribution, it does not provide empirical validation of the proposed framework, nor does it claim to capture the full complexity of linguistic practices in any given context. Instead, its value lies in opening a research agenda that encourages empirical investigation, methodological pluralism, and interdisciplinary engagement.

In conclusion, by positioning language as a relational and power-laden social practice, this article seeks to contribute to ongoing debates on social inequality and communication. The integrative framework proposed here invites future research to examine language and class not as separate analytical domains but as mutually constitutive processes embedded in broader social structures and everyday interactions. By foregrounding the relational interplay between language, class, and power, the framework advanced in this study aims to contribute not only to sociolinguistic theory but to broader sociological debates on inequality and social reproduction.

Çatışma Beyanı (Competing Interests)

Çalışmanın yazarları, herhangi bir çıkar çatışması olmadığını beyan etmektedir.

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Etik Beyanı (Ethical Statement)

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It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited.

Araştırmacıların Katkı Oranı (Author's Contributions)

Bu çalışmaya her iki yazar eşit katkıda bulunmuştur.

Both authors contributed equally to this work.

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