English as a Socio- economic Marker in the Libyan Society

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ABSTRACT

This paper aimed to discover the capability and effectiveness of a language particularly the English language in establishing a social hierarchy in the Libyan society. It is mainly to examine how English language proficiency affects the formation of social hierarchy from the prospective of English language teachers and students at the English Language Department – University of Tripoli, as well as a group of parents. In addition, it highlights the distinctive linguistic features, which are, considered as socio-economic indicators. The paper used a descriptive qualitative approach by using a small-scale semi-structured interview, which was held in an informal settings as well as on-line responses. The analysis of the data showed similar perspectives upon the language capability to identify the social class of its speakers. Furthermore, the respondents shed the light on the linguistic behaviours that are considered markers of the social class of its users. The findings of this paper are considerably beneficial in the field of sociology and human development sections in the modernized Libyan society, as well as to the Ministry of Education to direct the curricula towards the Communicative Approach in order to transfer the prospective of English from a minority prestigious high-class language to be a quality life style feature for the whole multi-layered society.

الملخص

هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى اكتشاف قدرة وفعالية اللغة وخاصة اللغة الإنجليزية في تشكيل التسلسل الاجتماعي في المجتمع الليبي. تهدف بشكل أساسي إلى دراسة كيفية تأثير إتقان اللغة الإنجليزية على تكوين التسلسل الهرمي الاجتماعي من وجهة نظر معلمي وطلاب اللغة الإنجليزية في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية –جامعة طرابلس، بالإضافة إلى

مجموعة من أولياء الأمور. بالإضافة إلى إبراز السمات اللغوية المميزة التي تعتبر مؤشرات اجتماعية واقتصادية. استخدمت الورقة منهجًا وصفيًا نوعيًا باستخدام المقابلة شبه منظمة بمقاييس موافقة بسيطة، وقد تم إجراء المقابلات في أماكن غير رسمية بالإضافة إلى بعض المقابلات والنقاشات عبر الإنترنت. أظهر تحليل البيانات وجهات نظر مماثلة حول قدرة اللغة، وخاصة اللغة الإنجليزية على تحديد الطبقة الاجتماعية لمتحدثيها. كما سلط أفراد العينة الضوء على السلوكيات اللغوية التي تعتبر مؤشرات للطبقة الاجتماعية لمستخدميها. إن نتائج هذه الورقة مفيدة بشكل كبير في مجال علم الاجتماع وأقسام التنمية البشرية في المجتمع الليبي الحديث وكذلك لوزارة التربية والتعليم لتوجيه المناهج الدراسية نحو المنهج التواصلي من أجل نقل مستقبل اللغة الإنجليزية من لغة أقلية رفيعة المستوى لتكون سمة من سمات أسلوب الحياة المرموقة لكافة طبقات المجتمع.

KEYWORDS: Language -socioeconomic status - social class - social hierarchy- language proficiency - EFL

Introduction

Speaking, writing and reading are integral to everyday life, where language is the primary tool for expression and communication. Studying how people use language – what words and phrases they unconsciously choose and combine – can help us to have better understanding of ourselves and why we behave the way we do. (Shashkevich, 2019). Linguistics scholars seek to determine what is unique and universal about the language we use, how it is acquired and the ways it changes over time. They consider language as a cultural, social and psychological phenomenon. There are approximately 7,000 languages spoken worldwide and certain similarities may exist; yet, each language represents a unique form of human communication representing the culture and the identity of its speakers. Our way of speaking and pronouncing languages or even dialects of the same language is considered a significant marker of our identity, gender, residence, origin, and even our social class.

People can indicate social class by the way they speak. The closer to the standard version their dialect is, the more they are seen as a member of a higher social class because the dialect reflects a higher level of education. This capability of language has been manipulated by the speech community in order to gain their motive especially in establishing a superior social hierarchy. For example ; the American culture, social class is defined primarily by income and net worth, and it is difficult (but not impossible) to acquire wealth without a high level of education. (Light, 2020). Libya as an Arabic speaking country has witnessed such classification among Arabic Libyan dialects. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of dividing and classifying the Libyan society to different social classes and establishing a social hierarchy according to a second language proficiency (such as English (ESL)) among speakers is overlooked and nearly neglected despite its spread in the recent years. To the researcher's best knowledge, there is no single study that has approached this phenomenon within the Libyan society.

Thus, this paper aims to discover the capability and effectiveness of a language particularly the English language in establishing a social hierarchy in the Libyan society. It is mainly to examine how English language proficiency affects the formation of social hierarchy from the prospective of English language teachers and students at the English Language Department - University of Tripoli, as well as parents of students.

Research Questions
In relation to this issue concerning English language speakers as a foreign language in the Libyan society, the paper attempts an investigation to answer the following questions:
- To what extent does English language have the capability to establish a social hierarchy between speakers in the Libyan society?

- •   Is there any significant proficiency adequacy adopted by the speakers of the Libyan society in their interaction to shape the social hierarchy?
- • What are the significant proficiencies adequacy adopted by the speakers of the Libyan society in their interaction to shape the social hierarchy?

Literature review

- • **Language**
  In any speech event, it is known clearly that language is an effective act in the process of meaning-making. It is both situated and contested methods of comprehending encompassing several, overlapping and/or contradictory voices, languages and discourses which are differentially valued in challenging and struggling sociocultural, economic and political systems.

  Van Dijk (2005) mentioned that language both shapes and is shaped by the society. Widdowson (2004) claimed that discourse involves creation of meaning negotiation and text is produced as the product in a language. Chilton (2004) supported the idea of discourse by mentioning that language as well as discourses is together the same in their line. Yet, Fairclough and Wodak (1997) claim that language use in speech and writing is assumed to be "socially constitutive" and "socially shaped". It is supported by Wodak and Meyer (2009). Furthermore, Van Dijk (2005) has emphasized on the control of discourse as mean to gain access of power.

  Former studies by Numanbayraktaroglu (2010), Thompson (2006) and Kawai (2004) stated that speakers with similar socio-historical backgrounds shared evaluative orientations, attitudes as well as styles. These results point to the significance of discourse genres as stable ways of speaking for presentation (because they indexically mark social backgrounds) and for the constitution of the self. One who shared analogous socio-economic, educational, generational,

and social backgrounds held similar perspectives. Etzol (2008) mentioned that the language has influence in terms of social aspects and its effects on power in organizations.

- **Language and Social Class**

Moving from the definition of language to the relation between language and social class, this part of the literature goes on to discuss the implications of language on establishing and maintaining a social structure. The way language can distinguish the high, low and in between social classes from each other, and how it influences the relationships between classes. However ; it is quite difficult to separate the influence of language from the historical, political, and economic factors that also play a role in the creation of a social structure. This is due to the fact that language is a reflection of a society's culture and its various ways of life.

In Weber's book "the theory of social and economic organization." the writer delved into the realm of social and economic organization, exploring the structure and workings of diverse societies. He proposes that social class is determined by a combination of elements, including wealth, occupation, and social status. Weber's seminal work is highly regarded in the field of sociology and has significantly influenced subsequent research on social class.

Gumperz (1967) discussed the verbal hygiene, language purification and suppression also provides an indication of the power relations between the users of certain forms of language in multilingual societies. He cites an example in which the Indian government made attempts to suppress English and promote the Hindi Language , believing that the former was hindering social and economic development.This suggests that the English language was associated with the upper strata and that it was holding the country back from progression to modernity. The assumption that a language change would further the social

mobility of the lower classes presents a clear stereotype regarding the capabilities of different languages and their speakers.

Labov (1973) investigates the relationship between language variation and social factors. Labov meticulously analyzes linguistic patterns across diverse social groups, unveiling how language usage reflects social identity and social class. His research significantly contributes to our comprehension of the social dimensions of language and the role of variation in effective communication.

Bourdieu (1984) explored the connection between social class and cultural preferences. He argues that an individual's social class shapes their cultural tastes, providing a means of distinguishing between different social groups. Bourdieu's work illuminates the profound influence of social class on an individual's preferences and consumption choices.

Duranti and Goodwin (1992) delved into the critical role of context in language use and communication. Contributors within this book explore the influence of social, cultural, and situational factors on language, underscoring how language, in turn, shapes social interactions. Emphasizing the interactive nature of language, this work emphasizes the essentiality of context in comprehending linguistic behaviour.

Myers-Scotton's (1997) in her book, "Duelling languages: Grammatical structure in codeswitching." explored the intriguing phenomenon of codeswitching, where speakers alternate between different languages or dialects in conversation. She carefully analyzes the grammatical structures utilized in codeswitching and discusses the social and cognitive factors that influence language choice. This work provides valuable insights into the intricate nature of bilingualism and language variation.

For Marx & Engels (1998), social class is an amorphous term, but can generally be defined as an unofficial hierarchical stratification of people in a given society, who are ranked according to their social, economic, occupational, and educational statuses. The

systems of categorization vary, from Marx's bourgeoisie versus proletariat.

Finally, a research paper titled, "A new model of social class: Findings from the BBC's Great British Class Survey experiment" by Savage et al. (2013) introduced a fresh perspective on social class, drawing from data collected through the Great British Class Survey experiment conducted by the BBC. The authors delve into the various factors that contribute to one's social class, such as occupation, education, and cultural preferences. Further, they tested the intricate connections between these factors, shedding light on their influence in shaping social class within modern society.

- **English Language in the Libyan context**
  The Libyan education system is a "bilingual "where subjects are taught in both Arabic and English. The decision to teach English in Libya was made by King Idris Al-Senussi. This was in order to promote cultural relations with England and to create a generation capable of taking over the government and administration in the united Libya and to interact effectively with the global community. This policy was implemented with the assumption that the English language would eventually replace Italian as the second language. However, this English learning requirement wasn't popular and found to be difficult for nationalist students. It was eventually dropped after the imposition of Gadaffi's "cultural revolution" in 1973.However, as an indicator of its value, English has become again a requirement for entrance to tertiary education, and this decision was made with the intention to rid Libya of reliance on foreign, especially Western, educators and to attract English-speaking expatriates to teach in Libya.

Since the lifting of economic sanctions in 1999, English has been propelled into a position as an economic requirement for Libyans. Globalization and increased foreign investment have increased the

need for Libyans to engage in business relations with other countries, causing it to be seen as a requirement for the modern Libyan, especially those involved in business.

Methodology

The research has its importance on providing sufficient knowledge to the relevant parties and provide answers to the research questions. In relation to investigation of the English language as a class marker in Libyan society, the research started by covering sociolinguistics studies which involved the systematic study of the social uses of language. The research also used interviews and focused group individuals as a form of data collection in order to investigate the people's use of the English language. This was important due to the fact that English is a second language in Libya and many people from different ethnicities and social classes use it for different purposes. By using these methods of data collection, the research was able to gather specific knowledge about English language variation, that includes features such as phonology, syntact, morphology and lexical features.

Research design and Procedure

This paper is adopting a qualitative descriptive research procedure. This is mainly due to the close involvement of the researcher. The researcher gained an insider view of the field due to the comprehension of the linguistic behaviour as well as the socio-economic background. Qualitative descriptions also can play the important role of suggesting possible relationships, causes, effects and dynamic processes as it uses a more descriptive, narrative style. Thus, this research might be of particular benefit to the practitioner as she or he could turn to qualitative reports in order to examine forms of knowledge that might otherwise be unavailable, thereby gaining new insight (Gilbert, 1987)

The aim of the present study is to analyze the role of English language as a tool for social marker in the Libyan society. The method adopted is mainly of qualitative nature consisting of triangulation of data collection methods such as in-depth interviews, and informal discussions and conversations. For the analysis, two main means in analyzing and investigating data were employed:

i.   A field study using (Hymes, 1996) Speaking Model . In general, it is a descriptive study of a particular human society, and it is meant to capture the social meanings and ordinary activities of people in natural occurring settings. Traditionally, it is meant to focus attention on the chosen community, selecting knowledgeable informants who know the activity of community well.

ii.   Interactional sociolinguistic : The analysis focuses not only on linguistic forms such as words and sentences, but also on subtle "cues" such as prosody and register that give signal of contextual presupposition. These cues are culturally specific and usually unconscious. When participants in a conversation come from different social class backgrounds, they may not recognize these subtle cues in one another's speech and might leading to misunderstanding.

Participants
The sample of the study was a focused group consisted of 10 English language teachers and 13students at the English Language Department – University of Tripoli, as well as some parents of students whom were contacted via social media tools.
The site chosen was the English language department – University of Tripoli. The reason for selecting this public department is the easy availability of students from diverse backgrounds and socio-economic status, which were relevant to the study. Another factor that influenced this decision was the ease of access to various English language interactions; it was easier to collect relevant data

with respect to the use of English language, behavior of its users and socio-economic background of the informants.

Data Collection
For this study, a small scale semi-structure interview sessions were conducted by using lists of open ended questions. The domain was informal situation as well as during interaction via Messenger, WhatsApp and Viber. The type of interaction mostly happened in the faculty hall or the staff room, as well as private messages or public discussions on social media tools.

Findings
From all the respondents, it is find out that regardless of gender, age and occupation, all of them have almost the same perspectives regarding language and the capability of English language as a measurement tool in establishing social hierarchy in the Libyan society particularly in the recent years. The majority of the respondents agree that learning English language is necessary especially in the modernized Libyan society setting.

There are also significant results in describing the features established in their positioning within a society. It is the language used in terms of their lexical, syntactical and phonological choice as well as the appearance of a speaker will affect the speaker's judgment especially in identifying a person social class in a certain settings. They significantly mentioned that it is either by examining the language used by a speaker in terms of lexical choice especially the vocabulary choices, phonological level especially pronunciation, the speaker appearance, and the speaker's educational background.

Some of the findings were classified in the following diagram:

The significant langauge feature used in describing social classes
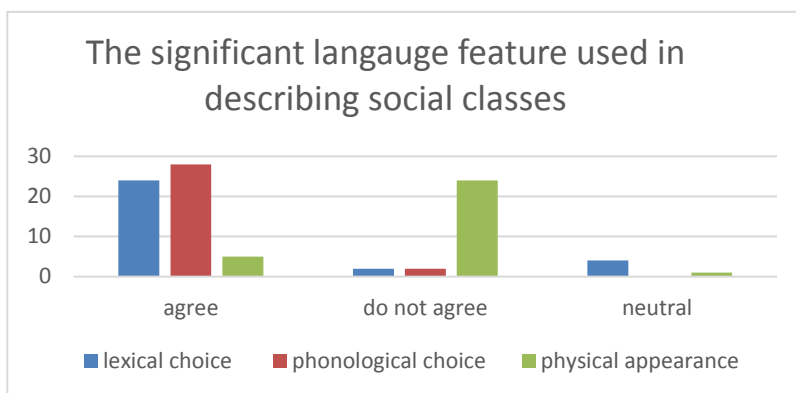
Diagram (1)

Lastly, regarding the use of language as a measurement tool in identifying and recognizing a social class, most of them agree. However, it is mentioned that language is not the only ultimate factor used in recognizing a speaker status in a social class. Language is considered as one of the features used in identifying a person social status and a speaker should not be judged critically in terms of their social class by looking at this factor only as a social class is different in terms of the economy and education manipulation.

Discussion

In overall, the paper confirms that as stated by Numanbayraktaroglu (2010), Thompson (2006) and Kawai (2004), speakers with similar socio-historical backgrounds shared evaluative orientations, attitudes as well as styles. These results point to the significance of discourse genres as stable ways of speaking for presentation (because they *indexically mark social backgrounds*) and for the constitution of the self. One who shared

analogous socio-economic, educational, generational, and social backgrounds held similar perspectives.

This phenomena answers the first proposed question; it can be observed throughout the interview as the majority respondents of the teachers. They held almost similar perspectives upon the language capability to identify the social class of its speakers; as most of them stated; they learned how to speak in that particular way because that it is how they learn to. Thus, they become familiar with it in their approach and communication. They are taught to distinguish between classes via the usage of the language. For example, they had this idea of distinguishing speakers from the upper class as they identify them from distinctive features such as lexical choice and pronunciation as well as in some cases from the appearance. In the beginning, students have been regarded as the superior class and there are particular ways to behave and to conduct when communicating with them.

In terms of the significant features of the language that can marker the social class of the speakers; teachers showed a considerable attention to the phonological aspect of the language as they place students with RP in a higher socio-economic status, which goes parallel with Trudgill's model of social class and language variation in Great Britain. Trudgill (2000). Furthermore; native like pronunciation "nativeness" is sought to be an important indicator of the speaker's social class, due to a dominant factor that it is becoming increasingly common for Libyan parents to push their children from a very young age (3-4 years) into English medium education in order to acquire the nativeness and improve their future prospects of the language. This can be seen in the higher enrollment of students in private schools offering English medium education, despite the fact that public education is free in Libya. This is causing social stratification within Libyan society. Those

who can afford to send their children into English medium education or into a foreign country to study are consequently belonging to a high socio-economic class.
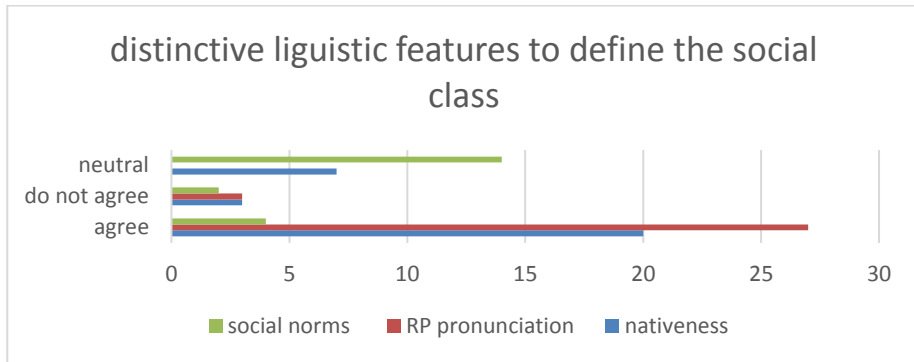

Diagram (2)
The most proposed linguistic features in defining the social class among speakers of English.

In the perspectives of identifying language as a marker within social classes in a society, the majority of the students did not identify language as a social class separation tool. They argue that in order to learn better in acquiring knowledge, learning through their mother tongue is the best methodology in order to gain comprehensive comprehension. They argue that a person can learn almost any language preferred. Yet, the social class stratification and justification cannot be measured by only using language. This is due to the fact that even within a social class, it has different background of interpretation on its economic as well as education stratification. A person with greater wealth in the upper class may not have a better education background or achievement as compared to the middle class. This has become another issue to be comprehended and explored in a multilayered society.

However, there is more significant number of the on-line respondents who agree with the perception that language is a measurement tool of a speaker in determining his or her social class. According to those respondents: the Libyan society is divided into various social classes, and this division is reflected in the use of the English language. Other than social class, the extent of Libyan exposure to Western culture and education is also related to the use of English. The Libyan social structure is extremely complicated and is hardly linear, however for the sake of simplicity it could be said to range from upper, middle to lower classes. There is also a small elite and upper class that has connections with the West and/or has been educated abroad. Members of this class are usually bi- or multilingual and may use English mixed with Libyan Arabic in specific contexts. They may also use English when speaking to those lower on the social scale who are of a different nationality. The extensive use of English by this class and the language habits of their children will be the most important factor needed in order to build some kind of platform in creating distinction between the social classes. It is also due to the reason that it is relevant in order to create a system on how to speak according to selected classes which are the upper, middle and lower classes. Elite class that belongs under the upper class is seen as the class control upon the other because they either own a better place in job or get a better economic status in a society. Indirectly, this perception gives the power to control and manipulate other classes.

A number of respondents has perceived English language as the commonly used language all over the world; also, it is regarded as the international language in their communication. Thus, an emphasis has been made on its requirements over the job placement in a modernized society. Most of them are aware that if they learn or acquire better English, they will get better opportunity in job and higher salary payment await them.

Accordingly, the massive majority of the parents respondents aspire for their children to attain a high level of English proficiency, as   English is often associated with being the "key to success". In today's world, this usually means a well-paid job and a higher social status.

Conclusion

In nutshell, the paper attempted to provide additional modes for understanding the social class language practices of speakers in the Libyan society setting. It also attempts to find consensus within the micro-level situational goals, constraints, and possibilities of the social classes. Given the conspicuousness of the method of the language choice as an inequality marker and considering the fact that in the Libyan society the mastery of the English language is highly exclusive, the findings in this study tell a very interesting story. It can be concluded, then, that Libyans who have spent a considerable duration of residency in a native English-speaking country effectively or would have a high level of English have experienced some degree of role mobility, be it upward or downward. An overwhelming majority of the respondents agreed to the fact that English is a source of status and power, particularly in the education and employment sectors. What is most revealing, though, is that some respondents, particularly ones that have not had the opportunity to learn English, expressed feelings of inferiority and self-doubt. This echoes the social rank hypothesis, with the respondents recognizing the fact that they are being placed in a less favorable position due to their English language proficiency. Yet, a most compelling instance of language as an inequality marker is a respondent's explanation of code switching between Arabic and English. He states that "when you are of high social rank you want to show people that you are educated and have a good job. You would speak English to show this. But when I go out with my friends or to a place where there are low social rank people, I

would speak Arabic because I don't want others to think that I am better than them." This respondent is alluding to the practice of language pattern manipulation in order to identify or disassociate with particular social groups and whether a person would like to acknowledge it or not, there is always going to be an underlying desire to be associated with the more positive social groups.

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