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LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL IDENTITY: GENERAL AND PRACTICAL INSIGHTS

Oliwia PESSEL[1*], Maria BANAŚ[2]

[1] oliwiapessel2001@gmail.com, ORCID: 0009-0002-0737-7305
[2] Silesian University of Technology, Department of Applied Linguistics; Maria.Banas@polsl.pl, ORCID: 0000-0003-1519-0903
*Correspondence author

Purpose: This paper explores the relationship between language and social identity by integrating theoretical perspectives with an empirical case study. It examines how linguistic practices and communication styles shape social identities within popular culture through the analysis of a selected mass media text. The study identifies linguistic features that differentiate characters from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and assesses whether speech patterns remain consistent within social groups, with implications for communication management, communication quality, and the effectiveness of social interaction processes contributing to social capital.
Design/methodology/approach: The research combines quantitative analysis of lexical diversity with qualitative examination of the most frequently used vocabulary by the characters. Additionally, extended text fragments were analysed to explore communicative contexts, interactional patterns, and communication processes relevant to communication management. Particular attention was paid to communication effectiveness, consistency, and performance across both homogeneous and heterogeneous social groups.
Findings: The results indicate that differences in language use and communication styles across social groups significantly shape perceptions of class and status, reinforcing social hierarchies within the play. These differences also influence communication performance, perceived communication quality, and the efficiency of communication management processes, thereby affecting access to social capital.
Research limitations/implications: The study is limited to a single literary work, which may not fully reflect the complexity of communication processes and quality-related outcomes in broader social or organisational contexts. Future research could apply this approach to other literary texts, media narratives, or organisational communication settings to further evaluate communication effectiveness and quality under diverse conditions.
Social implications: By demonstrating how language use and communication styles reinforce social class distinctions and affect communication quality and performance, the study raises awareness of linguistic discrimination and its consequences for inclusive and effective communication in society.
Originality/value: The paper contributes to the literature by linking sociolinguistic theory with a quality-oriented analysis of communication practices in popular media. By emphasising communication management, quality, and performance outcomes, it highlights the relevance of sociolinguistic insights for improving communication processes in cultural and organisational

contexts. The study is particularly valuable for scholars in management, quality studies, sociolinguistics, and the social sciences.
Keywords: social identity; style of communication; communication management; quality of communication; communication effectiveness; social capital.
Category of the paper: case study.

Introduction

Language is more than a means of communication—it is a powerful marker of identity and a tool through which social realities are constructed, negotiated, and maintained. The relationship between language and social identity has been the subject of extensive scholarly interest, particularly within the fields of sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and discourse studies. Through language, individuals signal their belonging to particular social groups, express solidarity or distance, and navigate complex networks of power and cultural affiliation.

This paper explores selected theoretical perspectives on the connection between language and social identity, with a particular focus on how linguistic practices both reflect and shape individual and collective identities. Special attention is given to the role of language in constructing social meanings within the context of popular culture, where identity narratives are often reinforced or contested through media discourse.

The empirical part of the paper presents a case study analysis of a selected text of mass culture, illustrating how language functions as a vehicle for social identity construction in a contemporary media context. This case study approach allows for a close examination of concrete linguistic features and their social implications, offering practical insight into the theoretical issues discussed in the first part of the study. This case study aims to analyse the linguistic features that distinguish characters from different socioeconomic backgrounds within the play, shedding light on how these features contribute to the construction of social identities.

Additionally, the paper seeks to explore how these linguistic differences convey and reinforce societal attitudes toward class and inequality. A qualitative research method was primarily used, complemented with qualitative data. This mixed method allowed for a more thorough analysis of language, while also providing an opportunity for interpretation and contextual understanding. Although the case study focuses on a musical, its themes are deeply rooted in reality. Willy Russell wrote ‘Blood Brothers’ through the lens of someone who grew up in Liverpool during that time, having personally experienced the prejudices and inequalities depicted in the story. The play functions as a powerful social commentary, reflecting the realities of class divisions and societal injustices. Analysing the play is important as it offers insight into how language can both mirror and perpetuate societal inequalities, making it an important work for understanding the intersection of language, class, and identity.

Theoretical background

Social identity – definition

As opposed to personal identity, which refers to the idiosyncratic characteristics that make up a person, such as appearance or interests (Ashforth, Mael, 1989), social identity suggests that individuals possess a collective identity shaped by their affiliation with certain groups, such as a racial or occupational identity (Tajfel, Turner, 1986). Social identity theory, formulated by Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner in the 1970s, suggests that people's sense of self-esteem is derived from the status and achievements of the groups they belong to (Tajfel, Turner, 1986).

Social identity theory is closely linked to self-categorisation theory, which describes how belonging to social groups influences our self-perception and the way we perceive others (Abrams, Hogg, 2010). Humans view groups as sets of characteristics (attitudes, behaviours, customs, and so forth) which outline similarities within groups or set them apart from each other. These attributes are represented in one's mind in the form of a *prototype*. If enough people share the same prototype of a group, the prototype ultimately becomes a stereotype (Hogg, 2016)

Language and its role constructing social identity

Language plays a pivotal role in the construction of social identity. As described in the findings of Rakić et al. (2011) and those of Paladino and Mazzurega (2020), language may have a more significant role in social interactions than other markers of social categorisation, such as ethnicity (Champoux-Larsson et al., 2022).

Individuals actively construct their own social identities through the use of language, whilst also being influenced by others in their linguistic environment (Ochs, 1993). The relation between language and social identity is not direct, but rather mediated, meaning that it is influenced by a shared understanding within a community or culture about how language should be used in specific social situations. Social identity is not explicitly encoded in language but rather inferred based on perceived meanings of linguistic acts and stances. When people communicate, they don't usually state their social identity directly; instead, others infer or deduce their social identity by interpreting the meanings conveyed through the way they speak and the attitudes they express (Ochs, 1993).

Sociolinguistic concepts and their application

According to Ochs (1993), the choice of linguistic structures is not random, but linked to cultural expectations. The way people communicate can reveal a lot about their social identity, like their occupation or their role in a family. The way the interlocutor[1] interprets and assigns a person to a specific social identity depends on the interlocutor's understanding of how certain acts and stances encoded by these linguistic structures are linked to certain identities (Ochs, 1993).

It is important to understand that language in relation to social identity is dynamic and not always universal. The way people talk and express themselves can vary from person to person, and the tie between language and social identity is not always clear. Social identities also change over time during social interactions, influenced by how people behave and respond to each other (Ochs, 1993).

As defined by Spolsky, "sociolinguistics is the field that studies the relation between language and society, between the uses of language and the social structures in which the users of language live" (1998, p. 3).

In linguistics, there are many subsets of language. 'Dialect' is a very broad term which involves multiple linguistic domains, such as: lexicon (vocabulary), morphology (word structure), syntax (sentence structure) and phonology/phonetics (pronunciation) (Van Herk, 2012). Examples of different dialects within the English language include estuary English, Sothern American English, Jamaican Patois and many more. These dialects are all different varieties of the same language, but they have their own unique pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and so forth. Whereas the term 'Accent' refers exclusively to pronunciation, often acting as an indicator of the speaker's geographical background or social associations (Wardhaugh, Fuller, 2015). For example, a person who has acquired standard English as a secondary language may exhibit proficiency in the language, yet their pronunciation may reveal their native language.

Language is not just a tool for communication; it's also a reflection of social dynamics. A sociolect is a subset of language unique to a particular a social group (Van Herk, 2012). Interestingly, the language spoken by those in higher socioeconomic groups and by educated individuals is regarded as standard; it is the variety that is taught in classrooms and used by television and radio presenters, the language of literature and documents. As a result of this established standard for "correctness", other language varieties can be regarded as inferior, some more than others (Van Herk, 2012). Similarly, to how sociolects are the language of specific social groups, ethnolects represent the linguistic characteristics of ethnic communities, while idiolects reflect the unique language patterns of individuals (Wardhaugh, Fuller, 2015). The language of the youth is often associated with the use of slang. It concerns only vocabulary – new words or words that have evolved into new meanings, and is often short-lived, quickly going out of style (Van Herk, 2012).

[1] *Interlocutor* refers to the person being spoken to in a conversation.

It is important to distinguish between the different varieties of language, but it is also crucial to understand that language users can change the way they speak depending on the context. They can adopt various *styles*, changing the degree of formality in their speech. The style used by an individual at a job interview contrasts significantly with that used in a casual conversation with friends (Wardhaugh, Fuller, 2015). People also adjust their speech to their interlocutor or to fit a specific purpose by adopting different registers of speaking (Wardhaugh, Fuller, 2015). A register linked to a specific profession or activity often has its own unique vocabulary, or "jargon." For those inside the group, jargon facilitates more efficient communication; however, it can also prevent participation and exclude non-members (Van Herk, 2012). Examples of jargon can be seen everywhere, from the courtroom with terms like "voir dire" or "hearsay", to the football field with terms like "own goal" or "hat-trick".

Gumperz (1968) describes a speech community as a group of people who share both social norms and linguistic traits, which set them apart from other groups. These communities might use the same language or mixture of languages, have the same accent, or use similar vocabulary, etc., within a specific geographical or social context (Van Herk, 2012). Social networks describe the structure within a speech community. They show the relationship that exists between members and how these relationships affect language (Van Herk, 2012). If a person knows and frequently interacts with people who also know and frequently interact with each other, then that person is a part of a dense social network (Fig. 2), as opposed to a loose social network, where they do not frequently interact (Fig. 1). A multiplex social network is one where people within a social community are connected to each other in more than one way, for example, family members that are also co-workers or students that participate in the same extracurricular activates (Fig. 3) (Wardhaugh, Fuller, 2015). According to Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015), dense and multiplex social networks help people identify with one another and foster a sense of community. Conversely, middle-class networks tend to be loose, which results in a weakened sense of identity and solidarity.

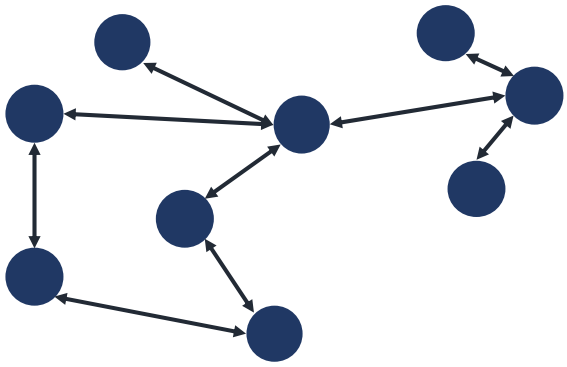

Figure 1. A loose social network.

Source: Adapted from Infectious Ideas: Modelling the Diffusion of Ideas Across Social Networks by: Haggith, Prabhu, Colfer, Ritchie, Thomson, Mudavanhu, 2003, p. 232.

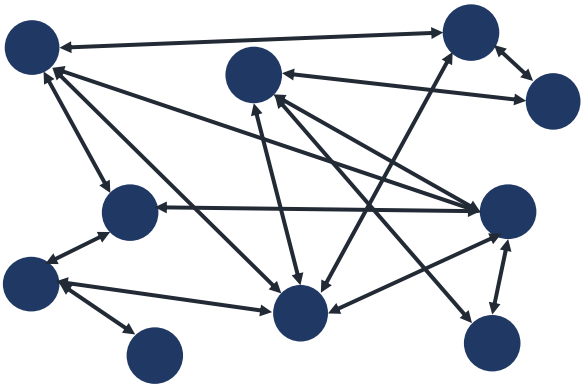

Figure 2. A dense social network.

Source: Adapted from Infectious Ideas: Modelling the Diffusion of Ideas Across Social Networks by: Haggith, Prabhu, Colfer, Ritchie, Thomson, Mudavanhu, 2003, p. 232.

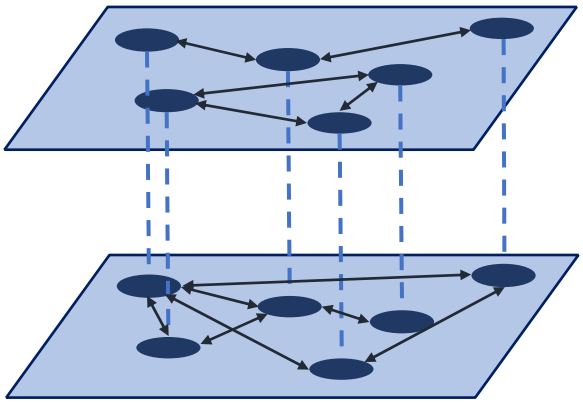

Figure 3. A multiplex social network.

Source: Adapted from: Gomez, Diaz-Guilera, Gómez-Gardeñes, Perez-Vicente, Moreno, Arenas, 2013, p. 1.

Language as a reflection of social hierarchies

In a society, there are noticeable linguistic distinctions across class boundaries (Faizin, 2015). These are further enforced by the fact that certain groups purposefully utilise inferior forms to distance themselves from mainstream society, the same way higher social groups distinguish themselves using language (Faizin, 2015).

As previously mentioned, standard English is universally viewed as "correct" (Van Herk, 2012); but there are other varieties which are also respected and viewed as prestigious, for example, *received pronunciation* (RP). It is important to distinguish between Standard English, a dialect used by educated English speakers around the world, and RP, which is a British accent, associated with a higher educational background or social prestige (Wakelin, 1977).

RP has many distinct characteristics, for example the pronunciation of /juː/ in words like *news* (/njuːz/) or *Tuesday* (/tjuːzdeɪ/) (Mugglestone, 2017). Whereas, certain accents, such as American English, sometimes lose this sound in a process called "yod-dropping" (Wells, 1982). RP pronounces h at the beginning of words, as in *hurt* (/hɜːt/), and avoids it in words like *arm* (/ɑːm/), whereas speakers of the Cockney dialect do the opposite (Nordquist, 2020). Furthermore, RP speakers only pronounce the *r* sound in words that are preceded by a vowel sound, for example, *park* (/pɑːk/) but in words like *proud* (/praʊd/) the r sound is vocalised (Payne, 2024).

Pronunciations that may be held in high regard in one location, may be stigmatised in another (Montgomery, 1995). According to Coupland's research (2007), apart from received pronunciation, British people also value Scottish- and Irish-accented English (Wardhaugh, Fuller, 2015). Coupland's findings (2007) also showed that people tend to show a preference towards their own language varieties, giving them a more generous score compared to how other groups rated them. Additionally, regular downgrading of certain dialects associated with urban areas or ethnic minorities was evident in the collected data (Coupland, 2007). The Birmingham accent, for example, is associated with industrial conurbation and is often disliked, even by a proportion of its users (Montgomery, 1995). As noted by Ochs (1992), language structures become indirectly associated with certain social categories (Bucholtz, Hall, 2004). This can also be seen with Liverpool English, also known as Scouse. Despite being a hub for pop culture in the 60's, Liverpool struggled in the following 20 years and gained a reputation for being a city plagued by crime, unemployment, and poverty (Juskan, 2015).

Liverpool is simply Liverpool. Its people – or at least the uneducated among them – have an accent of their own; a thick, adenoidy, cold-in-the-head accent, very unpleasant to hear. (Priestley, 1934, p. 200).

The Liverpool accent [...] is one of Britain's most recognisable urban accents today, especially the more identifiably working class accent (Grey, Grant, 2007, p. 1, as cited in Boland, 2010, p. 6).

Attitudes towards Scouse are portrayed in the above quotes. Furthermore, Scouse speakers participating in Perini's study (2017), described often having to modify or slow down their speech, sometimes even refraining from using their accent because "English people tend not to like Scousers", or because Scouse can be seen as unprofessional. Evidently, Scouse as well as its speakers experience some prejudice, often being associated with negative stereotypes. However, as times are changing, so is the perception of the Liverpool accent. It is apparent that the accent is less stigmatised nowadays than it was in the past, with many Scousers being "proud" of who they are (Perini, 2017) and the accent even being described as "understanding and friendly" (Barbera, Barth, 2007).

Certain language varieties innately sound more pleasing to people, for example RP, but the sound alone does not ensure prestige; it is rather a question of social attitude. For instance, people who do not speak French cannot differentiate between Parisian French and Canadian

French, let alone show a preference to one or the other, but among French speakers, Parisian French holds more prestige (Montgomery, 1995). As explained by Montgomery (1995), the dominant social group's speech patterns get accepted as the norm within a community, even if this normative pressure is sometimes justified in terms of aesthetic appeal or false concepts of linguistic propriety.

Other linguistic characteristics that may convey one's place in the social hierarchy include pronoun use and even politeness. Studies have shown that the use of first-person pronouns attract attention to the self (e.g., Davis, Brock, 1975). As described in the research of Kacewicz et al. (2013), people in positions of higher prestige tend to be more other-focused, whilst those in positions of lower prestige are more self-focused. This is reflected in their use of personal pronouns – lower status individuals use more first-person singular pronouns (I, me, my, mine), whereas individuals of higher status use more first-person plural pronouns (we, us, our, ourselves). The politeness of one's speech can also be linked to power and status. As presented in Morand's research (1996), low status subjects were more polite when addressing people in higher positions of power. Additionally, the results showed that high power individuals used more positive politeness[2], in comparison to low power individuals. Some politeness strategies include certain types of address forms, indirect speech acts and honorifics[3] (Brown, Levinson, 1987).

The intersectionality of language, class, and culture

Language is a huge part of culture. It reflects culture and is actively shaped by it. Individuals from different cultures might use the same word or phrase, but it can carry different meanings or associations with it (Jiang, 2000). For example, in Western cultures the word family is associated only with intermediate family members such as siblings, parents and children, but in Asian cultures family extends beyond the nuclear unit to include extended relatives and ancestors.

According to Straubhaar (2000), people lean towards things that are of cultural proximity to them. On the example of television, Straubhaar explained that most people prefer TV programs and channels which feature their own language, familiar ethnicity, similar fashion and known actors, as well as humour that is contextually relevant to them, concluding that audiences prefer local and national television over globalised productions. However, it is worth noting that younger individuals were found to be more engaged with global media than older people, for example with their music tastes (Straubhaar, 2000).

[2] Positive politeness, as well as negative politeness, is linked to the concept of positive and negative face. Positive face is the desire for acceptance and appreciation from others, whereas negative face is the need for independence and freedom from imposition. Positive and negative politeness is a matter of attending to people's positive/negative face needs (Brown, Levinson, 1987, pp. 61-62; Eckert, McConnell-Ginet, 2013, p. 122).

[3] Honorifics are linguistic forms used to show respect or esteem, typically toward someone of higher social status. Examples include "Sir" or "Ma'am", or the pronoun "Vous" in French (Brown, 2020).

Social class represents more than just people's material situations. Objective resources (such as income) influence cultural practices and behaviours that reflect social class. These signals shape cultural identities in upper and lower classes, which are based on subjective impressions of social class rank in comparison to others (Kraus et al., 2011).

Methods and procedures

Research aims

The aim of this research paper is to investigate how language use in Willy Russell's 'Blood Brothers' reflects and constructs regional identity, educational background, and social class. This study will use content analysis and case-study methodology to explore how linguistic elements shape social identity within the context of musical theatre. Additionally, it will examine the attitudes toward different social groups that are conveyed through the characters' language.

Research questions and hypothesis

The main objective of this case study is to address the following research questions:

Q1: What linguistic features define the language of characters from different socioeconomic backgrounds?

Q2: Do different characters within a specific social group exhibit similar speech patterns?

Q3: Does the play utilise language to illustrate the social and economic inequalities prevalent in their society?

Hypothesis: Characters within the same social group in 'Blood Brothers' will demonstrate similar speech patterns, including the use of colloquial language and regional dialects, which will reinforce their shared social identity and group belonging.

Research subject – plot summary

The musical 'Blood Bothers' by Willy Russell is set in Liverpool in the 1960s and tells the story of two twin brothers, Mickey, and Edward, who are separated at birth. Mickey remains with his biological mother, Mrs. Johnstone, a single woman struggling in poverty, while Edward is given away to her wealthy employer, Mrs. Lyons, who keeps the adoption secret from her husband. Mrs. Johnstone is promised regular visitations with Edward, but she is soon fired and manipulated by Mrs. Lyons into believing a superstition that the twins will die if they ever learn the truth.

At age seven, the boys unknowingly reunite and become best friends, despite their mothers' attempts to keep them apart. They form a close bond with a girl named Linda and begin causing mischief together. Fearing the consequences of their friendship, Mrs. Lyons relocates her family to separate the boys once more.

As teenagers, Mickey and Edward reconnect and both fall in love with Linda. Their lives take divergent paths: Edward goes to university, while Mickey, after getting Linda pregnant, loses his factory job. In a desperate bid for money, Mickey participates in a bank robbery, resulting in a fatality and a seven-year prison sentence.

Mickey becomes addicted to medication in prison and emerges a changed man. Linda, seeking comfort, turns to Edward, who is now a city councillor, and they begin an affair. Discovering the betrayal, Mickey is consumed with rage and confronts Edward with a gun. In the heated encounter, Mrs. Johnstone reveals the boys' true relationship, which only angers Mickey more as he realises that he could have had Edwards privileged life. The confrontation ends tragically: Mickey accidentally shoots Edward, and the police fatally shoot Mickey, fulfilling the ominous superstition.

Procedure

This case study employs both qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis. This mixed-methods approach will maximise the insights gained from the analysed text.

Quantitative research will provide a clearer, more objective picture of how language varies between the characters from different social groups. Whereas qualitative research will enable a thorough and contextually rich analysis of the language, taking into account factors such as personal experiences and relationships, allowing for accurate results.

To ensure a thorough and manageable analysis, the research will primarily focus on the aspect of socioeconomic status. The study will examine the two protagonists, who represent different social classes, along with two additional secondary characters from each social group (upper-middle class and lower/working class). This selection is narrow enough to allow for detailed analysis while remaining broad enough to identify patterns and predominant linguistic features within these social groups.

Corpus description

The corpus used for this study consists of the full textual script, including both spoken dialogue and lyrical content. This theatrical text, situated within a mid-to-late 20th century Liverpudlian context, offers a stratified linguistic dataset ideal for sociolinguistic analysis. The corpus encompasses interactions among characters from divergent socioeconomic backgrounds, enabling comparative analysis of linguistic variation. Quantitative analysis was

conducted via type-token ratio (TTR) calculations to assess lexical diversity across characters, while qualitative analysis focused on morphosyntactic structures, lexical choices, phonological features (e.g., non-standard contractions and g-dropping), and the presence of sociolectal markers. This multi-modal approach facilitated the examination of how linguistic performance aligns with social identity constructs within a fictional yet socially grounded narrative framework.

Data analysis and discussion

The following section integrates quantitative and qualitative findings to examine how linguistic features in 'Blood Brothers' reflect and construct social identity. By analysing lexical diversity, phonological patterns, and pragmatic usage across characters from distinct socioeconomic backgrounds, the study demonstrates the role of language as a socially indexical resource within the play's class-based narrative structure.

Analysis – distinguishing features of the characters' language

The data presented in Table 1, shows the diversity of vocabulary exhibited by the characters within the play. The table is divided into two sections, separated by a double line – the first, representing working-class characters (Mrs. Johnstone, Mickey, and Sammy) and the second, containing upper-middle-class characters (Mr. and Mrs. Lyons, and Edward). Recognising that language usage evolves with age, the analysed texts have been divided according to the character's ages as they grow throughout the play.

Table 1.
Linguistic Diversity of Characters in 'Blood Brothers' – Type-Token Ratio

Character	Tokens (total number of words)	Types (number of different words)	Type-Token Ratio (TTR)
Mrs. Johnstone	3680	772	0.21
Mickey (child)	1401	385	0.27
Mickey (teenager)	718	262	0.36
Mickey (adult)	870	281	0.32
Mickey	2989	626	0.21
Sammy (child)	215	123	0.57
Sammy (teenager)	46	33	0.72
Sammy (adult)	188	102	0.54
Sammy	449	194	0.43
Mrs. Lyons	1983	475	0.24
Mr. Lyons	595	221	0.37
Edward (child)	629	217	0.34
Edward (teenager)	1070	335	0.31
Edward (adult)	391	163	0.42
Edward	2090	449	0.24

Source: author's own elaboration.

Both high and low TTR scores are seen throughout different age groups and classes, concluding that neither age, nor class influence lexical diversity in the play. However, a factor which may have affected measures of lexical diversity is the inclusion of songs. Songs typically feature repetitive lyrics, which can reduce the variety of vocabulary used by the characters, subsequently lowering the TTR score.

Figure 4. Word cloud of Mickey's Lexicon.

Source: author's own elaboration.

Figure 4 illustrates the fifty most commonly used words voiced by Mickey in 'Blood Brothers,' encompassing both spoken dialogue and song lyrics. The results highlight Mickey's use of colloquial language, characterised by informal contractions and 'g' dropping [4]. Examples of contractions include terms like "wanna" (want to), "'cos" (because), and "y'" (you). 'G' dropping, which is present in words like "nothin'" (nothing), "comin'" (coming) and "lookin'" (looking), reflects a casual, conversational tone and shows a presence of an accent (likely Scouse, considering the setting of the musical). Mickey's usage of "mam" rather than "mum" underscores his local upbringing, as the musical is set in Liverpool, where mothers are addressed as both "mam" and "'ma".

Additionally, his preference for the diminutive "Eddie" over the more formal "Edward" reveals a familiarity and affection in his relationships, indicating a close-knit community where informal, personal connections are emphasised.

This informal and colloquial speech not only defines Mickey's character, but also serves as a marker of his social identity, distinguishing him from characters of different socioeconomic backgrounds within the musical.

[4] The pronunciation of "-ing" in standard English uses a /ŋ/ sound (not /ng/). However, in certain dialects, including Scouse, /ŋ/ tends to get pronounced as /n/. Though the "in'" ending is grammatically incorrect in writing, it effectively captures the character's pronunciation and highlights the presence of the Liverpool dialect in their speech.

Figure 5. Word cloud of Edward's lexicon.

Source: author's own elaboration.

Edward's lexicon, as shown in Figure 5, includes terms like "sorry" and "pardon", indicating a more formal and polite manner of speaking. The presence of honorifics, such as "Sir" and "Mrs", further demonstrates his respect for social norms and hierarchies.

The most frequently used word is "Mickey", highlighting Mickey's significant role in Edward's life. Additionally, the word cloud contains "Linda", "Mrs. Johnstone", and "mummy", reflecting Edward's strong relationships with these characters. Edward's use of "mummy" to refer to Mrs. Lyons, instead of "mum" or "mother", suggests a particular closeness and affection.

Figure 6. Word cloud of Mrs. Johnstone's lexicon.

Source: author's own elaboration.

Similarly to Mickey's word cloud, Mrs. Johnstone's lexicon is characterised by the frequent use of colloquial contractions, such as "an'" (and), "y'" (you), "gonna'" (going to), and 'g' dropping, like "movin'" (moving) and "goin'" (going). These linguistic choices underscore her working-class background and informal speech patterns.

The recurring presence of "Marilyn" and "Monroe" in her lexicon suggests Mrs. Johnstone's fascination with or longing for a glamorous life, contrasting sharply with her own reality. In addition, the words "price" and "pay" serve as both a literal reflection of her financial hardships and a metaphor for the consequences she will have to face for giving away her son.

The honorific "Mrs" is also present on the word cloud, indicating Mrs. Johnstone's acknowledgment and respect of social norms when referring or speaking to someone of a higher status.

Figure 7. Word cloud of Mrs. Lyons' lexicon.

Source: author's own elaboration.

Figure 7 highlights Mrs. Lyons' formal vocabulary, with words such as "shall", "pardon", and "please", as well as her frequent use of the honorific "Mrs". This language underscores her concern with maintaining a certain social image and adhering to societal norms.

The prominence of words like "Edward", "baby", and "children" reflects Mrs. Lyons' deep preoccupation with her adopted son and her intense desire to have a child. This aligns with her character's motivations in the story, where her longing for motherhood drives much of the plot.

Additionally, words like "buy", "money", "want", "wanted", and "need" may suggest her reliance on material wealth and her attempts to fulfil her emotional needs through financial means.

Furthermore, Mrs. Lyons refers to her family members by their full names, as seen with "Edward" and "Richard", in contrast to Mrs. Johnstone or Mickey, who often use diminutive forms, highlighting a difference in how each character expresses affection and familiarity.

Figure 8. Word cloud of Sammy's lexicon.

Source: author's own elaboration.

Sammy's word cloud reflects his use of non-standard grammar and informal contractions, such as "gonna" (going to) and "wanna" (want to). His language is further characterised by British slang and dialectal expressions, like "quid" (British pound), "mam" (instead of "mum"), and "soft", which in Scouse means "stupid". The frequent presence of strong language and profanities, such as "fuck", "bloody", and "friggin'", suggests a rebellious or confrontational attitude. It might also be indicative of the rough environment Sammy is part of, where such language could be a norm. Additionally, words related to crime and violence, such as "robbin'", "shot", and "gun", indicate Sammy's involvement in or familiarity with criminal activities. The inclusion of terms like "dead" and "burial" further underscores the themes of death and mortality that are prevalent in his vocabulary.

Figure 9. Word cloud of Mr. Lyons' lexicon.

Source: author's own elaboration.

Mr. Lyons' word choice avoids informal language and grammar, indicating his use of standard English. The word "Miss" demonstrates his use of honorifics, showing his respect and politeness towards others.

The word cloud also includes "Edward" and "baby", referring to his son, and includes "Jennifer" alongside its diminutive form, "Jen", as well as the affectionate term "darling", suggesting a close, affectionate relationship with his family.

Additionally, words like “work” and “Miss Jones” (his employee) emphasise Mr. Lyons' strong focus on his professional responsibilities.

MRS LYONS: Hello, Mrs Johnstone, how are you? Is the job working out all right for you?

MRS JOHNSTONE: It's, erm, great. Thank you. It's such a lovely house it's a pleasure to clean it.

MRS LYONS: It's a pretty house isn't it? It's a pity it's so big. I'm finding it rather large at present.

MRS JOHNSTONE: Oh. Yeh. With Mr Lyons being away an' that? When does he come back, Mrs Lyons?

MRS LYONS: Oh, it seems such a long time. The Company sent him out there for nine months, so, what's that, he'll be back in about five months' time.

MRS JOHNSTONE: Ah, you'll be glad when he's back won't you? The house won't feel so empty then, will it?

Text fragment 1. Fragment From Act 1 (page 7).

The language used by Mrs. Lyons and Mrs. Johnstone in this extract reveals a clear distinction in their social status. Mrs. Lyons, with her upper-middle-class background, employs a more formal and articulate register. She uses phrases like "It's a pity" and "at present", demonstrating a preference for standard English. Her language reflects her education and upbringing, emphasising her refined and sophisticated demeanour. In contrast, Mrs. Johnstone, a working-class woman, uses a more informal and colloquial style. Her speech is characterised by hesitations ("It's, erm, great") and contractions ("an' that"). Her language reflects her limited education and socioeconomic background, highlighting her working-class identity.

An uneven power dynamic is present not only in terms of socioeconomic status, but also in the employee-employer relationship between the two women. Tag questions[5], such as “won’t you?” and “will it?”, are prevalent in Mrs. Johnstone’s speech, which may indicate insecurity and a search for validation and connection with her boss. Moreover, in this fragment Mrs. Johnstone is adopting a more professional style, compared to her usual speech, by using vocabulary and phrases that are more polite and formal, such as “such a lovely house” and “it’s a pleasure”, further indicating that she is outside her usual speech community, and she is trying to fit in more with her upper-class interlocutor and her work setting.

[5] Tag questions can express uncertainty and request confirmation, clarification, or feedback (Ochs, 1992, p. 335). They can also be used to exhibit control, often asserting more control than other types of questions, like wh-questions or grammatical yes/no questions (Woodbury, 1984, pp. 205-206).

MRS LYONS: How much?

MRS JOHNSTONE: Nothin'! Nothing. (Pause.) You bought me off once before…

MRS LYONS: Thousands… I'm talking about thousands if you want it. And think what you could do with money like that.

MRS JOHNSTONE: I'd spend it. I'd buy more junk and trash; that's all. I don't want your money. I've made a life out here. It's not much of one maybe, but I made it. I'm stayin' here. You move if you want to.

MRS LYONS: I would. But there's no point. You'd just follow me **again** wouldn't you?

MRS JOHNSTONE: Look I'm not followin' anybody.

Text fragment 2. Fragment From Act 2 (page 60) – *Mrs. Lyons is trying to bribe Mrs. Johnstone*.

This fragment reveals a contrast in values and perspectives between Mrs. Lyons and Mrs. Johnstone, further highlighting their social divide. Mrs. Lyons, driven by her upper-class values, attempts to bribe Mrs. Johnstone with "thousands" to leave the neighbourhood. This demonstrates her belief that money can solve any problem, reflecting her privileged upbringing and detachment from the realities of working-class life. The words "you bought me off once before", suggest a history of manipulation and control. However, Mrs. Johnstone's refusal to be manipulated, despite her circumstances, challenges the power dynamics inherent in their social positions. Her language is blunt and defiant, using phrases like "I don't want your money" and "I'm stayin' here". She rejects the idea that money can buy her happiness or security, demonstrating her strong sense of self-worth and independence despite her limited resources. Her use of "junk and trash" to describe her possessions reflects her working-class experience, where material possessions are often seen as less important than personal relationships and community.

FINANCE MAN: Yeh, well y' bloody well shouldn't.

MRS JOHNSTONE *(coming out of her trance; angrily):* I know I shouldn't, you soft get. I've spent all me bleedin' life knowin' I shouldn't. But I do. Now, take y' soddin' wireless and get off.

CATALOGUE MAN: Honest love, I'm sorry.

MRS JOHNSTONE: It's all right lad ... we're used to it. We were in the middle of our tea one night when they arrived for the table. *(She gives a wry laugh.)*

Text fragment 3. Fragment From Act 1 (page 14) – *Mrs. Johnstone is talking with debt collectors.*

Mrs. Johnstone's speech in this fragment showcases a number of linguistic features characteristic of working-class speech. These are much more prominent in this fragment, where she is interacting with someone from a similar background, compared to her interactions with higher status individuals.

Her language is highly informal and colloquial. The use of "y'" instead of "you", and "me" instead of "my" reflects the regional dialect, emphasising her working-class roots and the informal nature of her speech. Additionally, when referring to the men, Mrs. Johnstone does not use honorifics, like she did when talking to Mrs. or Mr. Lyons. Instead, she uses expressions

like “lad” (a friendly term for a young man), and even uses colloquial insults, for example calling the Finance Man a “soft get” (meaning a foolish person). These expressions are specific to a particular geographical area and social group, further emphasising her working-class identity.

In the fragment, Mrs. Johnstone uses expletives, such as “bloody” and “soddin'”, expressing her frustration with the situation. The command, "Now, take y' soddin' wireless and get off", is direct and blunt, highlighting her irritation and weariness, possibly stemming from her difficult socioeconomic circumstances. This shows that she does not feel the need to refrain from using certain language and hold back her frustration, possibly because she is more comfortable speaking openly with people she perceives as being of a similar social status.

Finally, Mrs. Johnstone's use of humour, particularly her wry laugh during the interaction, reveals her resilience and ability to cope with difficult situations. The statement “I've spent all me bleedin' life knowin' I shouldn't”, reflects the long-term struggle with socioeconomic difficulties, and the sentence “It's all right lad ... we're used to it”, further emphasises her resilience and acceptance of her circumstances.

MICKEY: Hi-ya, Ed. Lind.

LINDA: Where've y' been?

MICKEY: I had to do overtime. I hate that soddin' place.

EDWARD: Mickey. I'm going away tomorrow ... to University.

MICKEY: What? Y' didn't say.

EDWARD: I know ... but the thing is I won't be back until Christmas. Three months. Now you wouldn't want me to continue in suspense for all that time would you?

Text fragment 4. Fragment From Act 2 (page 66).

EDWARD: What about the job you had?

MICKEY: It disappeared. (*Pause*.) Y' know somethin', I bleedin' hated that job, standin' there all day never doin' nothin' but put cardboard boxes together. I used to get ... used to get terrified that I'd have to do it for the rest of me life. But, but after three months of nothin', the same answer everywhere, nothin', nothin' down for y', I'd crawl back to that job for half the pay and double the hours. Just ... just makin' up boxes it was. But after bein' fucked off from everywhere, it seems like it was paradise.

Text fragment 5. Fragment From Act 2 (page 70).

Fragments 4 and 5 showcase the contrasting speech patterns of the two main characters – Mickey and Edward. Mickey's vocabulary is often coarse, informal, and occasionally vulgar, as seen in words like “soddin'” and “bleedin'”. His speech is characterised by informal contractions, such as "y'", "nothin'", and "doin'", and he sometimes uses double negatives, like "never doin' nothin'", which can be associated with the working-class Liverpudlian dialect.

Text Fragment 5 shows instances of Mickey repeating himself – “I used to get ... used to get terrified” and “just ... just makin' up boxes it was”. This broken syntax reveals Mickey’s anxiety and uncertainty about his future, which is shaped by the limitations imposed by his working-class background.

In contrast, Edward’s vocabulary and grammar is more refined and polished, reflecting his middle-class upbringing and education.

Analysis – attitudes towards social groups

The POLICEMAN *goes to confront* MRS JOHNSTONE.

POLICEMAN: And he was about to commit a serious crime, love. Now, do you understand that? You don't **wanna** end up in court **again**, do y'?

MRS JOHNSTONE *shakes her head.*

Well, that’s what's gonna happen if I have any more trouble from one of yours. I warned you last time, didn't I, Mrs Johnstone, about your Sammy?

MRS JOHNSTONE *nods.*

Well, there'll be no more bloody warnings from now on. Either you keep them in order, Missis, or it'll be the courts for you, or worse, won't it?

MRS JOHNSTONE *nods*.

Yes, it will.

Text fragment 6. Fragment From Act 1 (page 37) – *Mickey was caught throwing rocks at a window with his friends. The policeman is confronting Mrs. Johnstone about it.*

POLICEMAN: An' er, as I say, it was more of a prank, really,

Mr Lyons. I'd just dock his pocket money if I was you. (*Laughs*). But, one thing I would say, if y' don't mind me sayin', is well, I'm not sure I'd let him mix with the likes of them in the future. Make sure he keeps with his own kind, Mr Lyons. Well, er, thanks for the drink, sir. All the best now. He's a good lad, aren't you Adolph? Goodnight, sir. (*He replaces his helmet*).

The POLICEMAN *leaves*

Text fragment 7. Fragment From Act 1 (page 38) – *The policeman is talking to Mr Lyons about his son (Edward) throwing rocks at a window*

The contrasting interactions between the Policeman and Mrs. Johnstone (Fragment 6) and Mr. Lyons (Fragment 7) starkly reveal the difference in attitudes towards the working and higher classes.

In Fragment 6, the Policeman's language towards Mrs. Johnstone is harsh and threatening. He uses phrases like "bloody warnings", "keep them in order", and "it'll be the courts for you, or worse", demonstrating a clear power imbalance and a lack of respect. The policeman's repeated warnings and threats, coupled with the use of tag questions like “won’t it?”, “do y'?”and “didn’t I”, serve as deliberate intimidation tactics. Mrs. Johnstone’s nods, rather than verbal responses, imply a submissive and powerless position.

In contrast, the Policeman's language towards Mr. Lyons in Fragment 7 is significantly more polite and respectful. He uses phrases like "if y' don't mind me sayin'" and "goodnight, sir", highlighting a clear shift in his tone and demeanour. The Policeman's advice to Mr. Lyons, "I'm not sure I'd let him mix with the likes of them in the future", shows his use of negative politeness. He indirectly suggests that Mr. Lyons should control his son's associations, which subtly imposes on Mr. Lyons' parenting without being overtly confrontational. This difference in language reflects the societal perception of Mr. Lyons as someone of higher status, deserving of respect and courtesy. In addition, the policeman downplays the seriousness of Edward's actions, calling it a harmless "prank", whereas when talking with Mrs. Johnstone, he used the words "serious crime", He even jokes with Mr. Lyons, suggesting a level of understanding that is absent in his interaction with Mrs. Johnstone. This reveals the policeman's double standard and a clear bias towards the higher class.

The Policeman's contrasting interactions with Mrs. Johnstone and Mr. Lyons highlight the societal bias that often favours the higher classes, demonstrating how language can be used to both empower and disempower individuals based on their social status. The Policeman's advice to Mr. Lyons to "make sure he [Edward] keeps with his own kind" further reinforces this class-based prejudice.

MRS LYONS: You see, you see why I don't want you mixing with boys like that! You learn filth from them and behave like this like a, like a horrible little boy, like them. But you are not like them. You are my son, mine, and you won't, you won't ever …

Text fragment 8. Fragment From Act 1 (page 29) – *Mrs. Lyons is talking to Edward about his friendship with Mickey***.**

MR LYONS: Look, Jen. What is this thing you keep talking about getting away from? Mm?

MRS LYONS: It's just ... it's these people ... these people that Edward has started mixing with. Can't you see how he's drawn to them? They're ... they're drawing him away from me.

Text fragment 9. Fragment From Act 1 (page 35*) – Mrs. Lyons is talking to Mr. Lyons about moving houses.*

Text Fragments 8 and 9 not only show Mrs. Lyons' dislike towards Mickey but also reveal her broader prejudice against the lower social class. She uses terms like "boys like that", suggesting a generalisation of lower-class children as "horrible" and associating them with "filth(y)" language. The idea of being "drawn" to the lower class implies that there is something inherently dangerous or seductive about them, something that could lead to Edward's moral or social decline. The repetition of "you see" and "they're" emphasises Mrs. Lyons' sense of urgency and fear, suggesting a belief that the working class has a corrupting influence that could tear her son away from her and her values.

Furthermore, the use of "my" and "mine" by Mrs. Lyons emphasises possession and control, contrasting with the words "them" and "these people", which create a clear 'us vs. them' narrative. This linguistic separation reflects broader social and class divisions.

Answers to research questions

Q1: What linguistic features define the language of characters from different socioeconomic backgrounds?

In the musical 'Blood Brothers', there is a clear distinction between the language used by upper-middle-class characters and that of the working-class characters.

Upper-middle-class characters predominantly use standard English with formal and polite vocabulary, even in informal settings (such as at home, talking with family). Their speech is marked by the use of honorifics and full names, reflecting their respect for social norms and their concern with maintaining a certain social image. Their speech, though polite, can come across as cold and distant, especially when compared to the language of the working-class characters. For instance, the use of full names, even for close family members, contrasts with the more casual diminutive name forms used by working-class characters (Edward's use of "Mickey" instead of "Michael" is an exception influenced by Mickey's own introduction).

In contrast, working-class characters employ colloquial language characterised by informal contractions, 'g' dropping and diminutives, all heavily influenced by the Scouse dialect – a dialect commonly associated with the working class and crime. Regional vocabulary like "lad", along with the casual use of profanities like "bloody" and "soddin'", and terms like "soft get", that are often used in a non-offensive, humorous manner, reflect a sense of camaraderie and openness within the working-class community. The more relaxed and humorous tone of their speech, as seen in Mrs. Johnstone's interaction with the debt collectors, conveys a sense of solidarity and resilience.

It's also worth noting that working-class characters tend to alter their speech when interacting with upper-middle-class individuals, adopting more formal vocabulary, avoiding vulgarities and nicknames, sometimes even showing more hesitations. In contrast, the speech of upper-middle-class characters remains largely unchanged when talking with those of lower status.

Finally, while the size of a character's lexicon does not appear to be determined by class, as suggested by Table 1, the inclusion of song lyrics in the analysis may have influenced these results.

Q2: Do different characters within a specific social group exhibit similar speech patterns?

The characters within specific social groups generally show similar speech patterns. Upper-middle-class speech is more standard, formal, and polite, whereas working-class characters speak with a Liverpool dialect and use more informal vocabulary and phrases. These linguistic characteristics are rather universal throughout the play, as one can easily identify what social group a character belongs to based on their speech.

However, there small nuances within each group. For example, while both Edward and Mrs. Lyons exhibit formal language, Edward's speech sometimes reflects his close relationship with Mickey through his use of less formal terms like "tits" and "ma" (a regional term for "mum"), indicating that language also reflects individual relationships and experiences.

Q3: Does the play utilise language to illustrate the social and economic inequalities prevalent in their society?

'Blood Brothers' effectively uses language to highlight social and economic inequalities.

Firstly, the author deliberately incorporates the Scouse dialect to underscore the characters' working-class status. This dialect, often associated with poverty and unemployment, carries negative connotations and stigma, which are reflected in how working-class characters are perceived and treated within the play.

Secondly, the language used by the characters also reflects their economic realities. For example, Mrs. Johnstone's use of words like "price" and "pay" reflects her financial hardships, while Mrs. Lyons' vocabulary includes terms related to money and material wealth, such as "buy" and "money," highlighting her access to money and reliance on financial means to solve problems. This contrast in language underscores the economic divide between the characters.

Additionally, the characters' vocabulary reflects their education and social background. Higher-status individuals tend to use more formal vocabulary, with words like "pardon" and "perhaps," which contrasts sharply with the more informal and colloquial speech of the working class. Mrs. Lyons' using the words "these people" and "boys like that" further highlight the social divide, showing her contempt for those of lower status.

Finally, the play critiques societal attitudes toward class through juxtaposition, as seen in the contrasting interactions with the police in Text Fragments 6 and 7. The policeman uses negative politeness when speaking to Mr. Lyons, in contrast to his hostile attitude toward Mrs. Johnstone. His advice to Mr. Lyons, "I'm not sure I'd let him mix with the likes of them in the future. Make sure he keeps with his own kind," reinforces these prejudices and the rigid social hierarchy.

Conclusions

In conclusion, 'Blood Brothers' demonstrates that language functions as a socially embedded and indexical resource through which class identity, power relations, and institutional hierarchies are constructed and interpreted. Consistent with Ochs's (1993) perspective, social identity in the play is not directly encoded in linguistic forms but emerges through culturally mediated interpretations of speech patterns, stance, and interactional positioning. Similarly, Bucholtz and Hall's (2004) framework of identity as relational and interactionally achieved is reflected in the way linguistic differences between characters become meaningful only within the broader social and ideological context of class division. The contrast between the standardised, polite, and syntactically controlled speech of upper-middle-class characters and the non-standard, dialectal, and colloquial language of working-

class characters reflects established research on language prestige and linguistic ideology (Montgomery, 1995; Coupland, 2007). The play illustrates how certain varieties are socially legitimised, while others are stigmatised, thereby reinforcing symbolic boundaries between social groups. In this respect, the findings align with the variationist tradition (Labov), which emphasises that non-standard forms are systematic and socially meaningful rather than linguistically deficient.

Institutional interactions within the play, particularly the contrasting treatment of Mrs. Johnstone and Mr. Lyons by the policeman, further exemplify how language indexes power. The differential use of politeness strategies and deference mirrors the theoretical insights of Brown and Levinson (1987) as well as Morand (1996), demonstrating how linguistic behaviour reflects and reproduces structural inequality. Moreover, patterns of stance and pronoun use resonate with findings by Kacewicz et al. (2013), suggesting that linguistic focus can signal social positioning within hierarchies.

The asymmetrical style-shifting observed among working-class characters provides additional support for Gumperz's (1968) concept of accommodation, as well as Kraus et al.'s (2011) view of social class as a culturally shaped system of adaptive behaviour. While lower-status characters adjust their speech in higher-status contexts, upper-middle-class characters remain linguistically stable, highlighting the unequal communicative demands imposed across class lines.

Overall, the study reaffirms central sociolinguistic claims that language is not a neutral medium of communication but a structured social practice deeply intertwined with systems of prestige, stigma, and institutional power. By linking empirical textual analysis with established theoretical frameworks, the research demonstrates that linguistic variation in 'Blood Brothers' does not merely reflect class divisions—it actively participates in sustaining and legitimising them.

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