

LEXICAL VARIATION ON SOCIAL CLASS DIFFERENCES IN *12 YEARS A SLAVE* MOVIE

I Made Sanjay Mulyadi Pramana¹, Ketut Artawa², Ni Luh Nyoman Seri Malini³

^{1,2,3}English Department Faculty of Humanities, Udayana University

Email: sanjaymulyadi27@gmail.com¹, ketutartawa@unud.ac.id², seri.malini@unud.ac.id³

Abstrak: Penelitian ini berjudul Variasi Leksikal Perbedaan Kelas Sosial dalam Film Budak 12 Tahun. Hal ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi variasi leksikal yang digunakan para tokoh dan menganalisis pengaruh dinamika kelas sosial terhadap variasi leksikal tokoh dalam film. Penelitian ini menggunakan film *12 Years a Slave* sebagai sumber datanya. Pengumpulan data dilakukan dengan metode dokumentasi, yaitu pengumpulan data melalui menonton film dan kemudian membubuhi keterangan pada ucapan para tokoh. Selanjutnya data dianalisis dengan metode kualitatif dan disajikan dengan metode informal. Analisis tersebut didukung oleh dua teori. Penelitian ini mencakup variasi bahasa yang dikemukakan oleh Labov dengan menggunakan dua dialek Inggris Amerika Utara dan didukung oleh hubungan bahasa dan kekuasaan yang dikemukakan oleh Fairclough. Temuan ini mengungkap total 3 fitur Bahasa Inggris Amerika Selatan dan total 4 fitur Bahasa Inggris Vernakular Afrika Amerika yang digunakan oleh karakter dalam film. Dinamika kelas sosial berperan penting dalam membentuk pilihan linguistik karakter karena bahasa yang menunjukkan kekuasaan dapat dipengaruhi oleh faktor sosial, seperti kelas sosial. Pengaruh ini terlihat dari cara pemilik budak, kelas sosial yang lebih tinggi berkomunikasi dengan budaknya. Pemilik budak menganggap budaknya sebagai harta miliknya yang menyebabkan beberapa pilihan kata menunjukkan kekuasaan yang berlebihan terhadap budaknya. Para budak memanggil budaknya dengan sebutan tuan dan nyonya karena takut. Namun, masyarakat dengan kelas sosial yang lebih tinggi tidak selalu menunjukkan kekuasaannya kepada mereka yang memiliki kelas sosial lebih rendah. Pemilik budak dapat berkomunikasi menggunakan bahasa yang beradab dan penuh hormat dengan budaknya.

Kata Kunci: Variasi Leksikal, Kelas Sosial, 12 Tahun Menjadi Budak.

Abstract: This study is entitled *Lexical Variation on Social Class Differences in 12 Years a Slave Movie*. It aims to identify the lexical variation used by the characters and analyze the influence of social class dynamics on lexical variation of the characters in the movie. This study used the *12 Years a Slave* movie as the data source. The data was gathered using the documentation method, which involved collecting data through watching the movie and then annotating the characters' utterances. Moreover, the data were analyzed using a qualitative method and presented using an informal method. The analysis was supported by two theories. The research encompasses the language variation proposed by Labov using two North American English dialects and is supported by the relation of language and power posited by Fairclough. The findings unveiled a total of 3 Southern American English features and a total of 4 African American Vernacular English features used by the characters in the movie. Social class dynamics play a significant role in shaping the character's linguistic choice since language that demonstrates power can be influenced by social factors, such as social class. This influence can be seen in how the slave owners, a higher social class communicate with their slaves. Slave owners considered their slaves as property they owned which led to some of the word choices indicating excessive power over their slaves. The slaves address their slavers as sir and madam due to fear. However, people with a higher social class do not always show their power to those with a lower social class. The slave owners can communicate using a civilized and respectful language with their slaves.

Keywords: Lexical Variation, Social Class, *12 Years a Slave*.

INTRODUCTION

The creation of sociolinguistics is aimed at studying the impact of language used in a community and the social context in which the language is used. According to Wardhaugh (2015), sociolinguistics deals with how language works in casual conversations and how media we are exposed to. It is a field that concerns itself with the role language plays in maintaining social roles in a community. Language, far from being a static thing, is alive with change, evolving in response to social, cultural, and historical factors. Sociolinguistics investigates how these linguistic patterns diverge among various social groups, resulting in language variation.

Language variation, as a fundamental concept in sociolinguistics, encompasses the study of dialects, accents, vocabulary choices, and grammatical structures that differ among speakers. Language variation offers society a variety of linguistic idioms to employ in various situations. This variation, often rooted in social, economic, and educational backgrounds, offers a profound window into the intricate interplay between language and society. One aspect in particular is social class. Social class, encompassing economic, educational, and occupational factors, significantly influences linguistic choices. Speakers from different social classes often exhibit distinct vocabulary, pronunciation, and language use patterns.

In the context of this study, the goal is to unravel the nuances of language variation, specifically focusing on lexical variation in the cinematic area. In the film “12 Years a Slave,” the character Edwin Epps speaks with strong Southern American English dialect as well as some African American Vernacular English features reflecting his origins as a southerner and his status as a powerful slave owner despite being non-African American himself. This research investigates whether social class differences play a role in lexical variations in social context. It utilizes Steve McQueen’s movie 12 Years a Slave as a case study. Thus, the primary goal of this study is to examine the influence of social class differences in lexical variations by the characters in Steve McQueen’s movie 12 Years a Slave.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research focuses on analyzing the application of lexical variation by the slave and slaveowners in 12 Years a Slave movie. The data source in this study is a movie entitled 12 Years a Slave by Steve McQueen. The genre of this movie is a biographical drama based on the 1853 slave memoir by Solomon Northup. The data obtained were in the form of character utterances.

In this study, two primary methods of data collecting were used in qualitative research: documentation, and observation (Creswell, 2018). The method used to collect the data was documentation through watching the movie 12 Years a Slave. Then, note-taking was used as a data collection technique. After the data were collected, it was analyzed using the qualitative method and descriptive analysis technique, in which the data was explained according to the applied theories. The data were analyzed using the theory from Labov (2010) to determine the language variation. Supporting theory was used to examine the relation of language and power using a theory proposed by Fairclough (1989) based on the analysis. The presented data applied the informal method by Sudaryanto (2015). The informal method was used in this study because the result of the analysis was delivered in the form of a verbal statement or description using the descriptive technique. It enhances understanding and insight by providing context, examples, and relevant details.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the analysis of the data that has been selected previously. It focused on two main points. First, focused on lexical variation of Southern American English and African American Vernacular English shown by the characters using the theory of language variation by Labov (2010). The second is to investigate the social class dynamics to influence the linguistic choice of the characters through their conversation using the theory of language and power by Fairclough (1989).

Lexical Variation in Southern American English and African American Vernacular English

In this section, the study undertakes an analysis of the lexical variation of two different dialects in the United States of America. It dives into the linguistic features of these dialects. By examining these features, the study aims to show the lexical variation throughout different characters.

1. Southern American English

Southern American English is a dialect of American English that is predominantly spoken in the southern part of the United States. There are three features from the Southern American English found in the movie.

a. Southern Drawl

Southern American English is often characterized by a slow, drawling speech pattern with elongated vowels known as southern drawl. This can result in lengthened vowel sounds, like the utterances below.

Data (1)

Mistress. Epps : This is a list of goods and sundries. You will take it to be filled and return immediately. Take your **tag**.

The data above shows a dialogue between Mistress Epps and Solomon Northup (Platt). Mistress Epps or Mary Epps is the wife of Edwin Epps, a plantation master and slave owner. She is quite proud of her status as a woman of great society. Mary is a racist who abuses their slaves with brutality and mockery because she thinks they are inferior to humans. In the utterance, Mistress Epps uses a southern drawl when pronouncing the word “tag.” Tag means a small piece of paper with information on it, tied or stuck onto something larger. Mistress Epps pronounced the word [tæg] as [tæ-g]. She pronounced it slowly and lengthened the “a” sound. In standard English, the word [tæg] would be pronounced normally without the needs of lengthened the “a” sound.

Data (2)

Judge Turner : What you earn is yours to keep. Mind yourself, **Platt**.

The data above shows a dialogue between Judge Turner and Solomon Northup (Platt). Judge Turner is Solomon’s third master and arguably his most respected master. Judge Turner became his third master due to the drought in Edwin Epp's cotton plantation. Judge Turner uses a southern drawl to pronounce the word [plæt]. He pronounces the word [plæt] as [plæ-t] as he lengthens the “a” sound.

Based on the data above, some patterns show the use of southern drawl features in the movie. In the movie, the southern drawl feature is used by white characters, namely Mistress Epps, and Judge Turner. The two characters have similar backgrounds which are people from the South of America so they can use the feature which is one of the dialect characteristics where they grew up. Another similarity is that they are characters with a higher social class than the slaves and they were communicating with the slaves at the time. This could indicate that the white characters used a southern drawl to emphasize their commands or speech to the slaves.

b. Monophthongization

Monophthongization is a process of vowel shift changing the pronunciation from a diphthong to a monophthong. Such as the pronunciation of the words five [faɪv] into [fa:v]. It masked the “e” sound and elongated the “ah” sound. Like to utterances below.

Data (3)

Clemens: If you want to **survive**, do and say as little as possible.

The data above shows a dialogue between Clemens and Solomon, a slave-to-slave conversation. Clemens is a slave, who lived in New Orleans, Louisiana under his master Jonas Ray. It takes place on a ship transporting a large group of slaves from the north to the southern United States. Clemens uses monophthongization to pronounce the word “survive.” Therefore, instead of pronouncing it as [səvaɪv], he pronounces the word as [səva-v]. He used monophthongization probably because he had been a slave for many years in New Orleans, a southern state of America. Therefore, he might learn it from people in that region.

Data (4)

Master Ford : I hope it brings us both much joy over the **years**.

The data above shows a dialogue between Master Ford and Solomon Northup. Master Ford or William Ford is Solomon’s first owners and probably kinder than the second owner. Master Ford uses monophthongization to pronounce the word “years.” Hence, he pronounces it as [jɪ-z] instead of [jɪəz].

Based on the data above, monophthongization in the movie shows the language acquisition made by the slaves. The slaves who were mostly black people, used this feature most likely because they often heard their masters use it. Gradually, they started using the feature in their daily conversations due to familiarity. This matter is also supported by Chomsky’s Universal Grammar theory suggests exposure to any language allows individuals to recognize its underlying grammatical structures.

c. Distinct Vocabulary

Southern American English features some distinct vocabulary from other English variants. Some of the Southern American English vocabulary are portrayed in the utterances below.

Data (5)

Solomon: I **reckon** them at more than 12 feet at their most narrow.

Data (5) shows a dialogue between Master Ford, Tibeats, and Solomon, a three-way conversation among slave owners, workers, and slaves. In the utterance, Solomon used the word “**reckon**” to substitute “suppose” as in the example. The term “reckon” has become a distinct vocabulary item SAE primarily due to its historical usage and preservation within Southern dialects. Its origins can be traced back to Middle English and Old English, where it was used to mean “to give an account” or “to calculate.”

Data (6)

John : For **y'all**, there ain't nothing but that. But, John wasn't kidnapped. John's just being held as debt, that's all.

The data above shows a dialogue among slaves shortly after Solomon's being kidnapped. It takes place in the backyard of the prison, where Solomon was held and tortured after being kidnapped. In the utterance, John uses the contraction of “you” and “all” and is used as a second-person plural pronoun, like “you guys” or “you all” in other English varieties. It provides a convenient and efficient way to address or refer to a group of people and facilitates smoother interpersonal interactions.

2. African American Vernacular English

One variety of American English dialects is African American Vernacular English. AAVE is spoken by most of the African American community. Yule (2010) states AAVE is also called Ebonics. There are several features from the African American Vernacular English found in the movie.

a. Non-rhotic Speech

Non-rhoticity means an “r” sound is not retained before consonants and at the end of a word. Non-rhotic is also known as r-dropping. Some examples of r-dropping found in the movie are as follows.

Data (7)

John : **Massa** pay his debt and John be redeemed.

The utterance above shows a dialogue among slaves between Solomon, Clemens, and John. In the utterance, John use non-rhotic speech or r-dropping when pronouncing the word

“master.” He removes the “r” sound; therefore he pronounces it as [ˈmæsə]. In standard English, the word [ˈmæstə] would be pronounced normally without removing the “r” sound.

Non-rhotic speech known as r-dropping is believed to have originated from various English dialects, including African American Vernacular English. It may have developed due to a combination of various factors, including influence from West African languages where final “r” sounds are often dropped. This indicates that the slaves may have been brought from West Africa and then enslaved in the Americas. They then combined features of their mother tongue from West Africa with English.

b. Consonant Cluster Simplification

Consonant cluster simplification is a process of eliminating a stop consonant when the second consonant in a cluster is a stop consonant. It becomes a unique feature because African American Vernacular English removes the stop consonant even when it comes after a vowel. Like the utterances below.

Data (8)

Patsey : I have a request. An **act** of kindness.

Data (8) shows a dialogue between Patsey and Solomon, a conversation among slaves. Patsey asked Solomon to end her life that night as an act of kindness since she was constantly abused by Epps. Patsey uses consonant cluster simplification when pronouncing the word [ˈækt]. She eliminates the stop consonant “t” when it is followed by a vowel “o” Therefore, she pronounces the sentence as “An [ˈæk] of kindness.”

c. Multiple Negation

Multiple negations occur when two negative words are in one sentence, but the sentence still has a positive meaning. Some examples of multiple negations found in the movie are as follows.

Data (9)

Clemens: Three can’t go against the whole crew. The rest here are niggers. Born and bred slaves. Niggers **ain’t** got **no** stomach for a fight. Not a damn one.

The utterance above shows a dialogue among slaves between Clemens, Solomon, and other slaves. It takes place on the ship transporting the slaves into the South when the slaves discuss their plan to attack the crew and hijack the ship then free themselves. In the utterance,

Clemens uses multiple negations and the use of “ain’t” to replace “have not” or “haven’t” in standard English. Multiple negations in the data occur when Clemens use double negative words, which is “ain’t” and “no” in one single sentence. In standard English, the sentence would be “Niggers have no stomach for a fight.”

Data (10)

Patsey : How can you not know? I **ain’t** got **no** comfort in this life.

The data above shows a dialogue between Patsey and Solomon when she begged Solomon to end her life. In the utterance, Patsey use multiple negation and the use of “ain’t” to replace “haven’t” in standard English. Multiple negations in the data occur when Patsey use double negative words, which is “ain’t” and “no” in one single sentence. In standard English, the sentence would be “I have no comfort in this life.”

In African American Vernacular English, multiple negations are commonly used for emphasis or to convey a stronger negation. Multiple negations can be traced back to African linguistic influences. In many West African languages, such as Ewe and Yoruba, double negatives can be used for emphasis or to indicate a stronger denial.

d. The Use of *Ain’t*

Ain’t is used as the general negation mark in African American Vernacular English. Ain’t is typically used in replacing auxiliary forms like *be* and *do* in present or past tenses and present perfect *have not*. Like the utterances below.

Data (11)

Edwin Epps : **Ain’t** I owed a minute to luxuriate on the work Patsey done?

The data above shows a dialogue between Epps and Treach, a conversation between plantation master and overseer. It takes place at Epps’s cotton sorting barn after the slaves worked hard picking as much cotton as possible to avoid being whipped in the back.

Ain’t is a commonly used contraction in African American Vernacular English. In AAVE, “ain’t” is often used as a replacement for “am not,” “is not,” “are not,” “have not,” and “has not.” It is a versatile word that serves various functions in AAVE, including negation, question formation, and emphasis. Although ain’t is a typical AAVE feature, in the movie there are white character who use this feature even though they are not part of the black community.

This is likely because the white character is using it to show their power over the language that the slaves are using. The white character wanted to insult the slaves through their language.

The Reason Social Class Influences Characters Linguistic Choice

From the data collection, the researcher found some reasons how social class can influence a character's linguistic choice. The slave owners mainly use Southern American English since the movie itself is set in the Southern United States, supposedly New Orleans as it is known as The Slave State at the time. The slaves were mostly African Americans who spoke African American Vernacular English. The slave owners, a higher social class considered their slaves as property they owned, not as free human beings. This led to some of the word choices used by slave owners indicating excessive power over their slaves.

The significantly different social classes also force people with lower social classes to address those with higher social classes with titles, such as sir and madam. This phenomenon can even be found in modern times; however, it is not the case if it is done out of fear.

However, people with a higher social class do not always show their power to those with a lower social class. They can communicate using a civilized and respectful language with their slaves.

The present study aligns with Fairclough's theory of language and power to some extent. Fairclough propose that those who control language have the ability to shape perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors, thus exerting power over others. In the findings, higher social class, in this case, the slave owner, used language as a tool to demonstrate their power over the lower classes, which the slaves. The slave owners using the terms like "my nigger" and the slaves addressing their slavers as "Master" or "Mistress" aligns with Fairclough's idea of language can be used to exert power over others.

However, the present study also suggests that people with higher social class do not always show their power to the lower class. They are also able to communicate equally using respectful language. This indicates that Fairclough's theory does not apply in all situations and contexts. The use of language as a tool to demonstrate power requires individuals and situations that are compatible with each other.

CONCLUSION

This study has delved into two primary aspects: the categorization of Southern American English and African American Vernacular English by the characters and the influence of social class dynamics on the character's linguistic choices. From the Southern American English features used by the characters in this movie are southern drawl speech, monophthongization, and some distinct vocabulary. These features appeared sixteen times in the utterances of eight characters. In the African American Vernacular English, the study found four features such as non-rhoticity, consonant cluster simplification, multiple negation, and the use of *ain't*.

Social class has influenced the character's linguistic choice, as a language that demonstrates power can be influenced by social class. The slave owner used the term “my nigger” and the slaves address their slavers as “Master” or “Mistress.” They exert power over others by using language as their tool. They also used the language features of the slaves to insult the slaves that not only did they master the slaves’ lives, but they also mastered the language that the slaves spoke. However, this is not always the case since some slave owners can respectably communicate with their slaves.

REFERENCES

- Creswell, J., Creswell, D., 2018. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods*. New York: Sage Publications.
- Fairclough, N., 1989. *Language and Power*. United Kingdom: Pearson Education.
- Labov, W., 2010. *Principles of Linguistic Change Volume III*. United Kingdom: Willey Blackwell.
- Wardhaugh, R., Janet, F., 2015. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics Seventh Edition*. United Kingdom: Willey Blackwell.
- Yule, G. 2010. *The Study of Language Fourth Edition*. United States: Cambridge University Press