So how do we talk about social class? Language, identity and the expression of class judgements in British culture

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Although measures of social class have changed in recent years, the UK remains a class-bound society where social class influences one’s life chances by shaping opportunities in education and employment. Class, along with gender and ethnicity, is an integral part of identity yet we struggle to talk about our own social class and feel uncomfortable in expressing judgements on the social class of others. Talking about social class is problematic because it revolves around the relative worth and economic value of individuals and is a source of both status and stigma (Sayer 2002). Indeed, although sentiments around class have not changed, the language and explicit naming of class has all but disappeared from social and political discourse (Skeggs 2005).

This paper explores how individuals in research interviews negotiate the linguistic expression of social class judgements while simultaneously managing their own class identity. The analysis focuses on moments of difficulty (van der Bom and Mills 2015) where speakers struggle to express their experiences of class, in order to identify the linguistic strategies used to negotiate class talk. These strategies are discussed by drawing on social models of politeness as the “active expression of that person’s social positioning in relation to others” (Eelen, 2001, 224) as well as the evolving sociological understanding of class identity.

The findings suggest that speakers are caught in a delicate balancing act in which they strive to maintain the conversational contract of the interview while adhering to cultural expectations of acceptable talk. This involves a complicated process of identity protection in which the speaker’s knowledge of what is considered culturally acceptable/unacceptable discourse at the macro level of British culture works with their understanding of the etiquette of the interview as an interactional context to constrain what is ‘sayable’ about social class at the micro level.


