

Anthropology 350: Language, Ethnicity & Social Stratification

[Man]: Different languages, different worlds.

[Professor Nancy McKee]: Well, hello again. This is segment number eight and it's a Friday where I am. Who knows where it is where you are, so I'm feeling very chipper, very glad to be doing this. So let's take a look at our contents for today and what we're going to be talking about. Okay, we're going to be talking about societal segmentation. That is, different groupings within society and how they relate to language. Usually, this kind of topic is referred to as language, ethnicity, and social stratification. We already know what language is. Ethnicity has to do with the specific cultural or geographical or racial group you belong to, and social stratification has to do with the way an individual society breaks people up. And I'll talk about that here in just a minute. We're also going to talk about Black English. We're going to talk about what it is, how it got to be the way it is, and I'll mention a few things about its structure, but I think your textbook's very good on that topic. And then I want to talk about pidgins and creoles, which if you don't know anything about them, just look like—just collections of sounds. But they're interesting kinds of languages, and I want to talk about how they get to be what they are, and all this will lead us into our next video in which we'll talk about the two articles that are assigned for this section. One of those two articles is pretty tough to read, and I think it'll be helpful if you have me going through it not only in your course guide but also on the video.

Alright, so let's start—let's just begin—let's just take a look at the first thing that chapter six shows you. As I remember, the first specific data in that chapter have to do with pronunciation of particular phones in North India—in Caliper in North India. What your author is showing you is the same kind of stuff that we were looking at ourselves when we were taking a look at Labov's work in New York City. She's showing us how the pronunciations of particular phones and particular words distinguishes untouchables. Untouchables are people in India who are below—who are outside of the cast system. The term itself, and the treatment of untouchables, has been greatly altered by government regulations. Well, at least the regulations alter the way people are supposed to behave toward untouchables, but in the countryside, in fact, untouchables still have pretty terrible lives and are cut off from a great many of the services, like well water, that other people in the community may take for granted. So even though this is an exotic culture to us, we're looking at exactly the same phenomenon we've looked at before, except that this time, it looks crazy. We look at those collection of words. We have the pronunciation of sweepers. Sweepers are a group within the larger untouchable cast. We look at sweepers and we look at other people and we see that sweepers pronounce certain words somewhat differently. And really, we're just talking about one vowel. And we say to ourselves, "So? So what? So they pronounce one vowel a tiny bit differently. So what, who cares?" The reason that I think this is such a great example is that when we look at a system that we don't know anything about, and we look at the pronunciation of one tiny little speech sound, and we see that it's considered an indicator of extraordinarily low social status, it seems crazy to us. On the other hand, if we look at the pronunciation of some other insignificant phone within our own system, then we can understand that. That makes perfect sense to us. And if we compare our system to the Indian system, we realize how completely insignificant all of this is, and yet they're tremendously

important for assigning social status. When you were a child, you may remember your mother or your father hassling you not to drop your Gs, and they may have said, "Oh, it makes you sound trashy," or something like that, to say goin'. "I'm goin' out now, ma," instead of, "I'm going out." Is that a big deal, whether you pronounce one phone or another one very much like it? It seems important to us, it seems to us an indicator of undesirable status. But when we look at the same phenomenon in another culture, we see—not that it's not powerful, but we see how trivial the considerations are on which the notion of trashy or low status are based. That's why I really like that example, and that's one of the things I like best about this book, is that your author always remembers to give us plenty of examples from languages and cultures other than English.

Okay, now, in order to understand what is going on here—maybe I should've talked about this first—we need to know the difference between class and cast. They're really pretty similar, except one's a lot tighter than the other. All state level societies, like the one we live in, like India—like India four, five thousand years. Any state level society has what anthropologists call social stratification. That's, society is ranked or graded according to several different criteria. Originally, probably, the one criterion was occupation and in India, cast is still primarily based on occupation. What a social stratum, a social level, is is a grouping of people who are set off from other people in society in some ways, but not in others, and whose access to the good stuff in society has to do with their particular place in it. Okay, so people who belong to a high social stratum, a high social level—that's all stratum is, is Latin for level—people who belong to a high social level have enormous access to the good stuff, to goods, services, you know, food, shelter, fancy china, whatever it is you think is important in your society. People at the bottom have very restricted access to the good things in society. Originally, as I said, the basis for this was probably occupation. In India, it's still primarily occupation, and those different ranks, those different strata are named and they're called casts. Casts—there are four named casts and under that, under those named casts, a whole mass of people who do the least desirable things that society wants done, and they're to a great extent beyond the cast system all together. Now, this might sound to you a lot like the social class system, and it is, in fact, the social class system probably derives from a dead cast system. The difference—I guess there are two big differences—the first is that a cast is named and acknowledged and everybody says, "Oh yeah, he's a member of the x cast." People might jockey a little bit within those casts—there actually—within those four, there are actually hundreds of kind of sub casts, and people might jockey around within them. But casts are named and identified by everybody. It's very clear what cast someone belongs to. The other big thing about cast is that you can't get out of it. You can never get out of it. No matter how rich you are or poor you are, no matter how rich you become or how poor you become, you can never leave. You can never join a higher cast, you can never sink to a lower cast. Unless you do something so horrible that they throw you out of the system altogether, and then you become untouchable. Okay, so that's how casts differ from classes. Classes are much more—well they're much mushier. They're much less clearly defined and they're not clearly named. I couldn't say to you, "Hi, my name is Nancy McKee. I'm a member of the x class," because, oh, well, it's hard to say. You may disagree with me. By income, I might belong to the very bottom of the middle class, maybe the top of the lower class. By education, I might be somewhat higher. But classes are just kind of a bigger mess. We've got them and we have criteria by which we judge them, but people just never agree very well about

what a social class is. So that's one way in which class differ from cast. The other thing is that class mobility is possible. We like to believe class mobility is very common. It isn't. Mostly people marry within the same social class they're born into and they die there too, but it certainly is possible. So that's the other big difference. One of the things we're going to be talking about in this segment and the next segment, or this episode and the next episode—it makes me feel as though we're running some kind of adventure film if I talk about episodes—is social class and how it reflects language use and also how language use helps to perpetuate social class, which is something you might not think too much about.

Okay. The other thing we're going to talk about is ethnicity. That is, how the ethnic group you belong to is reflected in the way you talk. And also how you talk maintains ethnic boundaries. I think your book does a pretty wonderful job talking about social class variation among European groups. Basically what it points out is that syntactic elaboration, that is, syntactic complexity, grammatical complexity, of language is greater among higher social classes. It's simpler among lower social classes. And also that there is more difference in the speech of upper class speakers than lower class speakers according to the situations they find themselves in. That's, upper—and upper middle class speakers—are inclined to vary the complexity of the way they're talking according to the situations they find themselves in and according to the people they're talking to, much more than lower class speakers do. You can think about why that might be the case. I don't think there's a lot of explanation. I don't think people have thought carefully about why that's likely to be the case. You can think yourself about what reasons might cause that kind of thing. You also might try to think about your own social class and the way you use language. As I said before, Americans, and other people as well, tend to overestimate the height of their social class. That is, people tend to feel they belong to a higher social class than other observers do. So you can guess what social class you belong to, not that there's any divinely correct answer, but think about it. Think about the extent to which you vary the complexity of what you're saying yourself. Think about other people you know, make a guess as to their social class, and then see if you can gauge the extent to which they alter the complexity of the way they talk. When you're thinking about social class, what kinds of issues, what kind of phenomena are you going to consider? Income? That's a good one, especially in the United States. Occupation? What if you're a garage mechanic and you own your own shop and you're the best for miles around and people come to you with all their complex automotive problems and you make a pile of money? And then think about—in fact, I know a guy—I don't know him, I have an uncle who worked for a guy like that. He actually invented some magical kind of automotive repair element and became a multimillionaire and hired all kinds of domestic servants to take care of his grounds, to protect him. He actually had a body guard. His body guard was my uncle. He had housekeepers and cooks and nannies for his children. Did he belong to the upper class? Well, I don't know. What about my friend Jocelyne's aunt? She was born into a very, very, very rich New England family, but unfortunately the very rich New England family forgot to protect its investments and pretty soon, they were a formerly very rich New England family, now scraping along on about, I don't know, fifty thousand dollars a year. And it's hard to pay private school bills on fifty thou a year. Were they members of the upper class? Their income certainly didn't qualify them. So, there's more involved than income. There's also occupation. There's also education. There's also family history. Think about all of those things before you assume that everybody who can pay