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LINGUISTIC CLASS CODES

One cannot talk about English conversation codes without talking about class. And one cannot talk at all without immediately revealing one's own social class. This may to some extent apply internationally, but the most frequently quoted comments on the issue are English – from Ben Jonson's 'Language most shows a man. Speak that I may see thee' to George Bernard Shaw's rather more explicitly class-related: 'It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman hate him or despise him'. We may like to think that we have become less class-obsessed in recent times, but Shaw's observation is as pertinent now as it ever was. All English people, whether they admit it or not, are fitted with a sort of social Global Positioning Satellite computer that tells us a person's position on the class map as soon as he or she begins to speak.

There are two main factors involved in the calculation of this position: terminology and pronunciation – the words you use and how you say them. Pronunciation is a more reliable indicator (it is relatively easy to learn the terminology of a different class), so I'll start with that.

THE VOWELS VS CONSONANTS RULE

The first class indicator concerns which type of letter you favour in your pronunciation – or rather, which type you fail to pronounce. Those at the top of the social scale like to think that their way of speaking is 'correct', as it is clear and intelligible and accurate, while lower-class speech is 'incorrect', a 'lazy' way of talking – unclear, often unintelligible, and just plain wrong. Exhibit A in this argument is the lower-class failure to pronounce consonants, in particular the glottal stop – the omission (swallowing, dropping) of 't's – and the dropping of 'h's.

But this is a case of the pot calling the kettle (or ke'le, if you prefer) black. The lower ranks may drop their consonants, but the upper class are equally guilty of dropping their vowels. If you ask them the time, for example, the lower classes may tell you it is ''alf past ten' but the upper class will say 'hpstn'. A handkerchief in working-class speech is ''ankercheef', but in upper-class pronunciation becomes 'hnkrchf'.

Upper-class vowel-dropping may be frightfully smart, but it still sounds like a mobile-phone text message, and unless you are used to this clipped, abbreviated way of talking, it is no more intelligible than lower-class consonant-dropping. The only advantage of this SMS-speak is that it can be done without moving the mouth very much, allowing the speaker to maintain an aloof, deadpan expression and a stiff upper lip.

The upper class, and the upper-middle and middle-middle classes, do at least pronounce their consonants correctly – well, you'd better, if you're going to leave out half of your vowels – whereas the lower classes often pronounce 'th' as 'f' ('teeth' becomes 'teef', 'thing' becomes 'fing') or sometimes as 'v' ('that' becomes 'vat', 'Worthing' is 'Worving'). Final 'g's can become 'k's, as in 'somefink' and 'nuffink'. Pronunciation of vowels is also a helpful class indicator. Lower-class 'a's are often pronounced as long 'i's – Dive for Dave, Tricey for Tracey. (Working-class Northerners tend to elongate the 'a's, and might also reveal their class by saying '*Our* Daaave' and '*Our* Traaacey'.) Working class 'i's, in turn, may be pronounced 'oi', while some very upper-class 'o's become 'or's, as in 'naff orf'. But the upper class don't say 'I' at all if they can help it: one prefers to refer to oneself as 'one'. In fact, they are not too keen on pronouns in general, omitting them, along with articles and conjunctions, wherever possible – as though they were sending a frightfully expensive telegram. Despite all these peculiarities, the upper classes remain convinced that their way of speaking is the only proper way: their speech is the norm, everyone else's is 'an accent' – and when the upper classes say that someone speaks with 'an accent', what they mean is a working-class accent.

Although upper-class speech as a whole is not necessarily any more intelligible than lower-class speech, it must be said that mispronunciation of certain words is often a lower-class signal, indicating a less-educated speaker. For example: saying 'nucular' instead of 'nuclear', and 'prostrate gland' for 'prostate gland', are common mistakes, in both senses of the word 'common'. There is, however, a distinction between upper-class

speech and 'educated' speech – they are not necessarily the same thing. What you may hear referred to as 'BBC English' or 'Oxford English' is a kind of 'educated' speech – but it is more upper-middle than upper: it lacks the haw-haw tones, vowel swallowing and pronoun-phobia of upper-class speech, and is certainly more intelligible to the uninitiated.

While mispronunciations are generally seen as lower-class indicators, and this includes mispronunciation of foreign words and names, attempts at overly *foreign* pronunciation of frequently used foreign expressions and place-names are a different matter. Trying to do a throaty French 'r' in '*en route*', for example, or saying 'Barthelona' with a lispy Spanish 'c', or telling everyone that you are going to Firenze rather than Florence – even if you pronounce them correctly – is affected and pretentious, which almost invariably means lower-middle or middle-middle class. The upper-middle, upper and working classes usually do not feel the need to show off in this way. If you are a fluent speaker of the language in question, you might just, perhaps, be forgiven for lapsing into correct foreign pronunciation of these words – although it would be far more English and modest of you to avoid exhibiting your skill.

We are frequently told that regional accents have become much more acceptable nowadays – even desirable, if you want a career in broadcasting – and that a person with, say, a Yorkshire, Scouse, Geordie or West Country accent is no longer looked down upon as automatically lower class. Yes, well, maybe. I am not convinced. The fact that many presenters of popular television and radio programmes now have regional accents may well indicate that people find these accents attractive, but it does not prove that the class associations of regional accents have somehow disappeared. We may like a regional accent, and even find it delightful, melodious and charming, while still recognising it as clearly working class. If what is really meant is that being working class has become more acceptable in many formerly snobby occupations, then this is what should be said, rather than a lot of mealy-mouthed polite euphemisms about regional accents.

TERMINOLOGY RULES – U AND NON-U REVISITED

Nancy Mitford coined the phrase 'U and Non-U' – referring to upper-class and non-upper-class words – in an article in *Encounter* in 1955, and although some of her class-indicator words are now outdated, the

principle remains. Some of the shibboleths may have changed, but there are still plenty of them, and we still judge your class on whether, for example, you call the midday meal 'lunch' or 'dinner'.

Mitford's simple binary model is not, however, quite subtle enough for my purposes: some shibboleths may simply separate the upper class from the rest, but others more specifically separate the working class from the lower-middle, or the middle-middle from the upper-middle. In a few cases, working-class and upper-class usage is remarkably similar, and differs significantly from the classes in between.

The Seven Deadly Sins

There are, however, seven words that the English uppers and upper-middles regard as infallible shibboleths. Utter any one of these 'seven deadly sins' in the presence of these higher classes, and their on-board class-radar devices will start bleeping and flashing: you will immediately be demoted to middle-middle class, at best, probably lower – and in some cases automatically classified as working class.

Pardon

This word is the most notorious pet hate of the upper and upper-middle classes. Jilly Cooper recalls overhearing her son telling a friend 'Mummy says that "pardon" is a much worse word than "fuck"'. He was quite right: to the uppers and upper-middles, using such an unmistakably lower-class term is worse than swearing. Some even refer to lower-middle-class suburbs as 'Pardonia'. Here is a good class-test you can try: when talking to an English person, deliberately say something too quietly for them to hear you properly. A lower-middle or middle-middle person will say 'Pardon?'; an upper-middle will say 'Sorry?' (or perhaps 'Sorry – what?' or 'What – sorry?'); but an upper-class and a working-class person will both just say 'What?' The working-class person may drop the 't' – 'Wha'?' – but this will be the only difference. Some upper-working-class people with middle-class aspirations might say 'pardon', in a misguided attempt to sound 'posh'.

Toilet

'Toilet' is another word that makes the higher classes flinch – or exchange knowing looks, if it is uttered by a would-be social climber.

The correct upper-middle/upper term is 'loo' or 'lavatory' (pronounced lavuhtry, with the accent on the first syllable). 'Bog' is occasionally acceptable, but only if it is said in an obviously ironic-jocular manner, as though in quotes. The working classes all say 'toilet', as do most lower-middles and middle-middles, the only difference being the working-class omission of the final 't'. (The working classes may also sometimes say 'bog', but without the ironic quotation marks.) Those lower- and middle-middles with pretensions or aspirations, however, may eschew 'toilet' in favour of suburban-genteel euphemisms such as 'gents', 'ladies', 'bathroom', 'powder room', 'facilities' and 'convenience'; or jokey euphemisms such as 'latrines', 'heads' and 'privy' (females tend to use the former, males the latter).

Serviette

A 'serviette' is what the inhabitants of Pardonia call a napkin. This is another example of a 'genteelism', in this case a misguided attempt to enhance one's status by using a fancy French word rather than a plain old English one. It has been suggested that 'serviette' was taken up by squeamish lower-middles who found 'napkin' a bit too close to 'nappy', and wanted something that sounded a bit more refined. Whatever its origins, 'serviette' is now regarded as irredeemably lower class. Upper-middle and upper-class mothers get very upset when their children learn to say 'serviette' from well-meaning lower-class nannies, and have to be painstakingly retrained to say 'napkin'.

Dinner

There is nothing wrong with the word 'dinner' in itself: it is only a working-class hallmark if you use it to refer to the midday meal, which should be called 'lunch'. Calling your evening meal 'tea' is also a working-class indicator: the higher echelons call this meal 'dinner' or 'supper'. (Technically, a dinner is a somewhat grander meal than a supper: if you are invited to 'supper', this is likely to be an informal family meal, eaten in the kitchen – sometimes this is made explicit, as in 'family supper' or 'kitchen supper'. The uppers and upper-middles use the term 'supper' more than the middle- and lower-middles). 'Tea', for the higher classes, is taken at around four o'clock, and consists of tea and cakes or scones (which they pronounce with a short 'o'), and

perhaps little sandwiches (pronounced 'sanwidges', not 'sand-witches'). The lower classes call this 'afternoon tea'. All this can pose a few problems for foreign visitors: if you are invited to 'dinner', should you turn up at midday or in the evening? Does 'come for tea' mean four o'clock or seven o'clock? To be safe, you will have to ask what time you are expected. The answer will help you to place your hosts on the social scale.

Settee

Or you could ask your hosts what they call their furniture. If an upholstered seat for two or more people is called a settee or a couch, they are no higher than middle-middle. If it is a sofa, they are upper-middle or above. There are occasional exceptions to this rule, which is not quite as accurate a class indicator as 'pardon'. Some younger upper-middles, influenced by American films and television programmes, might say 'couch' – although they are unlikely to say 'settee', except as a joke or to annoy their class-anxious parents. If you like, you can amuse yourself by making predictions based on correlations with other class indicators such as those covered later in the chapter on Home Rules. For example: if the item in question is part of a brand-new matching three-piece suite, which also matches the curtains, its owners are likely to call it a settee.

Lounge

And what do they call the room in which the settee/sofa is to be found? Settees are found in 'lounges' or 'living rooms', sofas in 'sitting rooms' or 'drawing rooms'. 'Drawing room' (short for 'withdrawing room') used to be the only 'correct' term, but many upper-middles and uppers feel it is bit silly and pretentious to call, say, a small room in an ordinary terraced house the 'drawing room', so 'sitting room' has become acceptable. You may occasionally hear an upper-middle-class person say 'living room', although this is frowned upon, but only middle-middles and below say 'lounge'. This is a particularly useful word for spotting middle-middle social climbers trying to pass as upper-middle: they may have learnt not to say 'pardon' and 'toilet', but they are often not aware that 'lounge' is also a deadly sin.

Sweet

Like 'dinner', this word is not in itself a class indicator, but it becomes one when misapplied. The upper-middle and upper classes insist that the sweet course at the end of a meal is called the 'pudding' – never the 'sweet', or 'afters', or 'dessert', all of which are déclassé, unacceptable words. 'Sweet' can be used freely as an adjective, but as a noun it is piece of confectionary – what the Americans call 'candy' – and nothing else. The course at the end of the meal is always 'pudding', whatever it consists of: a slice of cake is 'pudding', so is a lemon sorbet. Asking: 'Does anyone want a sweet?' at the end of a meal will get you immediately classified as middle-middle or below. 'Afters' will also activate the class-radar and get you demoted. Some American-influenced young upper-middles are starting to say 'dessert', and this is therefore the least offensive of the three – and the least reliable as a class indicator. It can also cause confusion as, to the upper classes, 'dessert' traditionally means a selection of fresh fruit, served right at the end of a dinner, after the pudding, and eaten with a knife and fork.

'Smart' and 'Common' Rules

The 'seven deadly sins' are the most obvious and reliable class indicators, but a number of other terms will also register on our highly sensitive class-radar devices. If you want to 'talk posh', you will have to stop using the term 'posh', for a start: the correct upper-class word is 'smart'. In upper-middle and upper-class circles, 'posh' can only be used ironically, in a jokey tone of voice to show that you know it is a low-class word.

The opposite of 'smart' is what everyone from the middle-middles upwards calls 'common' – a snobbish euphemism for 'working class'. But beware: using this term too often is a sure sign of middle-middle class-anxiety. Calling things and people 'common' all the time is protesting too much, trying too hard to distance yourself from the lower classes. Only the insecure wear their snobbery on their sleeve in this way. 'Naff' is a better option, as it is a more ambiguous term, which can mean the same as 'common', but can also just mean 'tacky' or 'in bad taste'. It has become a generic, all-purpose expression of disapproval/dislike: teenagers often use 'naff' more or less interchangeably with 'uncool' and 'mainstream', their favourite dire insults.

If they are 'common', these young people will call their parents Mum

and Dad; 'smart' children say Mummy and Daddy (some used to say Ma and Pa, but these are now seen as very old-fashioned). When talking about their parents, common children refer to them as 'my Mum' and 'my Dad' (or 'me Mam' and 'me Dad'), while smart children say 'my mother' and 'my father'. These are not infallible indicators, as some higher-class children now say Mum and Dad, and some very young working-class children might say Mummy and Daddy; but if the child is over the age of ten, maybe twelve to be safe, still calling his or her mother Mummy is a fairly reliable higher-class indicator. Grown-ups who still say Mummy and Daddy are almost certainly upper-middle or above.

Mothers who are called Mum carry a 'handbag'; mothers called Mummy just call it a 'bag'. Mums wear 'perfume'; Mummies call it 'scent'. Parents called Mum and Dad go 'horseracing'; smart Mummies and Daddies call it 'racing'. Common people go to a 'do'; middle-middles might call it a 'function'; smart people just call it a party. 'Refreshments' are served at middle-class 'functions'; the higher echelons' parties just have food and drink. Lower- and middle-middles eat their food in 'portions'; upper-middles and above have 'helpings'. Common people have a 'starter'; smart people have a 'first course' (although this one is rather less reliable).

Lower- and middle-middles talk about their 'home' or 'property'; upper-middles and above say 'house'. Common people's homes have 'patios'; smart people's houses have 'terraces'. Working-class people say 'indoors' when they mean 'at home' (as in 'I left it indoors' and ''er indoors' meaning 'my wife'). This is by no means an exhaustive list: class pervades every aspect of English life, and you will find yet more verbal class indicators in almost every chapter of this book – as well as dozens of non-verbal class signals.

Class-denial Rules

We are clearly as acutely class-conscious as we have ever been, but in these 'politically correct' times, many of us are increasingly embarrassed about our class-consciousness, and do our best to deny or disguise it. The middle classes are particularly uncomfortable about class, and well-meaning upper-middles are the most squeamish of all. They will go to great lengths to avoid calling anyone or anything 'working class' – resorting to polite euphemisms such as 'low-income groups', 'less

privileged', 'ordinary people', 'less educated', 'the man in the street', 'tabloid readers', 'blue collar', 'state school', 'council estate', 'popular' (or sometimes, among themselves, less polite euphemisms such as 'Sharon and Tracey', 'Kevins', 'Essex Man' and 'Mondeo Man').

These over-tactful upper-middles may even try to avoid using the word 'class' at all, carefully talking about someone's 'background' instead – which always makes me imagine the person emerging from either a Lowry street scene or a Gainsborough or Reynolds country-manor portrait, depending on the class to which 'background' is intended to refer. (This is always obvious from the context: 'Well, with that sort of *background*, you have to make allowances . . .' is Lowry; 'We prefer Saskia and Fiona to mix with girls from the same *background* . . .' is Gainsborough/Reynolds.)

All this diplomatic euphemising is quite unnecessary, though, as working-class English people generally do not have a problem with the c-word, and are quite happy to call themselves working class. Upper-class English people are also often rather blunt and no-nonsense about class. It is not that these top and bottom classes are any less class-conscious than the middle ranks; they just tend to be less angst-ridden and embarrassed about it all. Their class-consciousness is also, in many cases, rather less subtle and complex than that of the middle classes: they tend not to perceive as many layers or delicate distinctions. Their class-radar recognizes at the most three classes: working, middle and upper; and sometimes only two, with the working class dividing the world into 'us and the posh', and the upper class seeing only 'us and the plebs'.

Nancy Mitford is a good example, with her simple binary division of society into 'U and non-U', which takes no account of the fine gradations between lower-middle, middle-middle and upper-middle – let alone the even more microscopic nuances distinguishing, say, 'secure, established upper-middle' from 'anxious, borderline upper-middle' that are only of interest to the tortured middle classes. And to nosey social anthropologists.

LINGUISTIC CLASS CODES AND ENGLISHNESS

So, what do these linguistic class codes tell us about Englishness? All cultures have a social hierarchy and methods of signalling social status:

what, apart from our perhaps disproportionate class-consciousness, is distinctive about the English class system and its signals?

For a start, the linguistic codes we have identified indicate that class in England has nothing to do with money, and very little to do with occupation. Speech is all-important. A person with an upper-class accent, using upper-class terminology, will be recognized as upper class even if he or she is earning poverty-line wages, doing grubby menial work and living in a run-down council flat. Or even unemployed, destitute and homeless. Equally, a person with working-class pronunciation, who calls his sofa a settee, and his midday meal 'dinner', will be identified as working class even if he is a multi-millionaire living in a grand country house. There are other class indicators – such as one's taste in clothes, furniture, decoration, cars, pets, books, hobbies, food and drink – but speech is the most immediate and most obvious.

The importance of speech in this context may point to another English characteristic: our love of words. It has often been said that the English are very much a verbal rather than a visual culture, considerably more noted for our literature than for our art – or indeed music. We are also not particularly 'tactile' or physically expressive, not given to much touching or gesticulating, relying more on verbal than non-verbal communication. Words are our preferred medium, so it is perhaps significant that they should be our primary means of signalling and recognising social status.

This reliance on linguistic signals, and the irrelevance of wealth and occupation as class indicators, also reminds us that our culture is not a meritocracy. Your accent and terminology reveal the class you were born into and raised in, not anything you have achieved through your own talents or efforts. And whatever you do accomplish, your position on the class scale will always be identifiable by your speech, unless you painstakingly train yourself to use the pronunciation and vocabulary of a different class.

The sheer complexity of the linguistic rules reveals something of the intricate, convoluted nature of the English class system – all those layers, all those fine distinctions; the snakes-and-ladders game of social climbing. And the class-denial rules give us a hint of a peculiarly English squeamishness about class. This unease may be more pronounced among the middle classes, but most of us suffer from it to some degree

– most of us would rather pretend that class differences do not exist, or are no longer important, or at least that we personally have no class-related prejudices.

Which brings me to another English characteristic: hypocrisy. Not that our pious denial of our class-obsessions is specifically intended to mislead – it seems to be more a matter of self-deception than any deliberate deception of others; a kind of collective self-deception, perhaps? I have a hunch that this distinctively English brand of hypocrisy will come up again, and might even turn out to be one of the 'defining characteristics' we are looking for.