

It All Boils Down to Coffee: American Classicism in the film “Working Girl”

Final Project for Sociolinguistics

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America might be the “land of the free, home of the brave,” but it has not shaken the classism that so riddled its original motherland of England. While other countries like Egypt and India are often criticized respectively for having rigid “class” or even “caste” systems, America also has a definite social structure that while not impossible to defeat, can be very difficult to successfully navigate. These reasons are exemplified at least partially in linguistic terms. Anyone who has heard the accent of Boston (the city name alternately pronounced “Baastin” and “Bohston” depending on whether you’re a “Southie” or a Backbay Bostonian) knows that how you speak might just determine how likely it is that you went to Boston University or Harvard. Both are good schools, but Harvard is a great school.

With New York City as its location, this paper uses social class as an independent variable and use of the letter “o” as dependent variable. This dependent variable is also linked to occupation, status, social mobility, and community of practice. The critically acclaimed and popular 1998 film “Working Girl,” exemplifies widely held but rarely officially recognized classism in New York City. The reason that critical and commercial success are important is that the film struck both critics and the public alike. Films rarely do well with both groups, and it was cited for its accuracy of its portrayals of social and business life at the

time as well as for the “look” and “sound” of the women whose real-life counterparts stood as the film’s inspiration.

In 1988, the U.S. was in a business boom, but as is often the case, those who benefitted the most were supported by those who benefitted the least. Still not quite out of a dominant sexist mentality that had only been challenged starting in the late 60s, the business world typically relegated women to the administrative position known as “secretary” (now widely known as an “assistant” or an “admin”) while their bosses were usually men. This film illustrates several reasons *why* that failure of the lower class to advance professionally occurred for linguistically significant reasons (or to some extent occurs) and *how* it is so easy to enforce upper-class domination through the basic linguistic variable of dialect, but in particular the letter “o.”

The interesting part of the research is that the ethnographic work of Labov, followed by the Milroy’s adaptive social network studies of his work, and Eckert’s expansive work with teenagers and the extra-linguistic features of communities of practice is not in competition theoretically, but rather validated and through the film’s depiction of linguistic features like speech and extra-linguistic features like style in two socially separate groups of women. These two groups are represented by two opposing characters in the film; one the hero, and one the villain. Having lived in NY for ten years just after the film was made, this writer can attest to the film’s accuracy in its depiction of key phenomena involving not only speech, but also hair, clothing, make-up, jewelry, social roles, locality, and occupational mobility. In short, the girls with big hair, and tennis shoes coming in

on the ferries did not stand a chance against the Chanel-wearing Ivy Leaguers who took cabs downtown from their Upper West Side condos. In a hypothetical situation where two women were purposefully styled exactly the same for an interview, they could still be discerned from each other by one letter: the “o” in word “coffee.” Women who say “c[ɔ]ffee” with an “[ɔ]” end up working for the women who don’t.

Rather than the theorists’ works competing, they complement each other by deepening and resonating the complexity and interrelatedness of things as seemingly disparate as class (under Labov), and locality and personal style (under Eckert). This is further proven by the applicability of the work of Cheshire, Fought, and Milroy on core and peripheral group membership for example. Though the main character’s boyfriend and best friend consider her to be a part of their community, she herself does not. She doesn’t just eye Manhattan as her goal, she also “speaks it” too.

The film’s setting is the working and domestic worlds of New York City, in particular, three areas and two boroughs (the five large areas that make up New York City are called boroughs). The main character is named Tess McGill. She lives on Staten Island and works on Wall Street. Her boss is named Katherine Parker, and she lives on Central Park. Even their support the theory of classism, and reinforce classist roles with McGill being the surname of probably Irish Immigrants, while Parker is the name of probably earlier, more powerful English immigrants. Historically the Irish served the English, and the Irish were long-time second-class citizens in New York until the Italians came after them. Katherine’s

address is “on” Central Park, while Tess’s is “on” Staten Island. Central Park is one of the world’s most recognized landmarks and has not only great figurative prestige, but actual wealth in both real estate and the cash and value holdings of its residents, some of them themselves world famous.

Staten Island on the other hand bears the brunt of constant jokes for being “bridge and tunnel,” (which automatically means any other borough) since they require a bridge or a tunnel to reach the “real” destination of Manhattan. The difference between the two women (who, we learn, are only one week apart in age) is represented by the accents of their worlds. Tess McGill and her community of practice speak in a typical Staten Island accent of dropped “r,” broad “o” and high, nasal “a,” typically joked about by saying “Hey, can I getta cuppa c[ɔ]ffee?”

Katherine speaks in the polished tones of an upper class Ivy League college graduate. In fact, the actress playing the part of Katherine Parker is Sigourney Weaver (whose father Pat Weaver ran the US television network NBC) grew up wealthy and is from Manhattan “society,” and is indeed an Ivy League graduate (Stanford and Yale). She didn’t have to play a part so much as play a version of herself, especially linguistically.

The more interesting linguistic role fell to the actress Melanie Griffith who did not go to college (like her character), and also grew up in New York (Los Angeles). In the film, her character Tess McGill speaks with a much less typical accent than her community of practice. This is true to her character who is trying to break out of world where night school and a knack for business (compared to

an Ivy League diploma) cannot seem to get her a break. The milder atypical accent also serves the purpose of contrast when she has to play both class roles: she plays a version of herself as a high-powered member of her boss Katherine's circle, and her own secretary who speaks in a stereotypical "New York" working-class accent.

This risky linguistic/social venture is made possible when her boss Katherine is taken out of the commission (and out of the office) after breaking her leg in a skiing accident. Because of apartment access Tess gains to pick up the mail, etc., Tess discovers that her boss was going to steal an ingenious business proposal. And this was after having offered Tess a "two way street" office pep talk supposedly to make the socially junior secretary feel as if the playing field were even. Her boss's fraudulent plan is innocently discovered when Tess is using her boss's mini-recorder to try to imitate her boss's upper class stress, intonation, and emphasis when she discovers the intellectual theft. Contained among strong examples of class linguistic and social differences involving the recitation of letters and gift-reply notes is the outline to steal from her own secretary.

Moving swiftly, Tess uses her boss's office, home address, and business invitations to insinuate herself into a position parallel to her boss's. Fundamental to this identity masking/re-creating the telephone by which she can use the stereotypical accent as an unnamed secretary calling '[o]n behalf [o]f Tess McGill.' She then adopts an accent she's developed from practicing her boss's speech patterns to completely eliminate her own accent and pass herself off as

someone of the upper class. It is through this change that she gains access to colleagues who can make her business idea a reality.

This change in accent is accompanied by a change in clothing, make-up, hairstyle and jewelry which reflects theories developed by Penny Eckert in her studies of Detroit teenagers' linguistic and non-linguistic changes to reflect shifts in identity and community of practice. Tess's change is further contrasted by a member of her own community of practice — Cyn, her best friend — who typifies the “bridge and tunnel” look with her huge hair, two-tone eye-shadow, gigantic earrings, and broad New York accent. The two function as a pair to illustrate Tess' evolution from one personal and linguistic style to another. A visceral example of this persona difference is when Tess has Cyn cut her bridge-and-tunnel hair off to make it more ‘serious.’

The word “coffee” plays a large part of this change, and in a larger comment on the world of business itself. Typically coffee is the beverage of business. It means morning, late nights, and meetings. It also symbolizes status: the person who gets the coffee is always junior in status.

In the first scene that Katherine and Tess meet, after a brief introduction, Katherine invites Tess into her office: *Why don't you pour us a couple coffees and come on inside. I'm light, no sugar.* Katherine participating in a traditional power demonstration, notable because it is rarely a conscious demonstration. It is an accepted role of the subordinate to sometimes provide food or beverage for the person of greater status. This is especially important in historical context because

the late 80s was the last time of the 20th Century in which a boss could make such a request without it raising the eyebrow of political correctness.

Later, as Tess joins a team of business to make her first proposal, she's invited to the table and one of her colleagues says "Coffee?" to which she responds by getting to her feet (to get the coffee). A waiting secretary asks "Cream or sugar," to which Tess realizes she's being offered coffee, not being told to get it. It's a bit of comedy, but reveals the power of this single word, the social role it invokes, and the accent that often verifies the speaker's status.

In the very next scene, Tess must beg her own best friend Cyn to stand in as a secretary to keep the charade to conduct a meeting in her own office. Cyn stands in stark contrast to the now elegant, office-holding Tess. Cyn offers the visiting business man c[ɔ]ffee in the thickest, most deferential way possible, drawing a clear divide between the inner offices of the secretarial pool, and the outer windowed office of her "boss."

In the end of the film, Tess no longer needs the broad pendulum of the different social classes, and her speech resumes its medium New York accent. And coffee comes into play one last time. After succeeding through quite a trial-by-fire, Tess wins a promotion and her own office with a window. Her own assistant offers to get coffee, this time with no stereotypical accent. The actress (Amy Aquino) playing the secretary was also raised in the New York area and speaks with a flatter accent than the stereotypical New Yorker. More in line with the experience of both the character Katherine Parker, and the actress playing her (Sigourney Weaver), Ms. Aquino attended Harvard for a Biology

undergraduate degree followed by Yale Drama. This “dual” identity as secretary/Harvard graduate is important in the context of both film and life since films are often judged for using unauthentic speech. All three actresses in these principle scenes have New York roots and though, may amplify aspects of dialect to bring their characters into high contrast against each other, naturally imbue their performances with authentic life experience in the dialect they portray. It is notable that Sigourney Weaver won a Golden Globe for Best Supporting actress in her role, and both she and Melanie Griffith were nominated for Academy Awards for their respective roles. This lends credibility to the film’s portrayal of character as being valid because it was recognized in awards competitions involved at the highest level in English-speaking productions.

In this last ‘coffee’ scene, the secretary tersely asks ‘what will be expected, after a bit of an awkward start in which the new secretary is found with her feet up on Tess’s desk. Rather than being the back-stabbing classist villain her own boss was, Tess just says that they will “make it up as they go along.” This ending suggests linguistically that there is both a fluidity to the use of variables like [ɔ] and [r], but also as it is tied to identity, community of practice, and class. As the accent becomes flattened, so do the divisions between the women in terms of attitude, expected roles, subordination, class, and career opportunity. Tess was always Katherine’s inferior, except for morally and ethically. Tess’ own secretary it seems, will be respected as an “assistant,” with or without c[ɔ]ffee.



