

**POWER, CLASS IN COMMUNICATION**

**By**

**George B. Akor**

Department of Mass Communication,  
University of Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria  
[akorgeorge@unical.edu.ng](mailto:akorgeorge@unical.edu.ng)

**Omelagah, Godwin Ekunke**

Department of Mass Communication,  
University of Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria  
[gomelagah@unical.edu.ng](mailto:gomelagah@unical.edu.ng)  
08027620915

**&**

**Boniface Erungworo Odey**

Department of Mass Communication,  
University of Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria  
[odeyboniface@unical.edu.ng](mailto:odeyboniface@unical.edu.ng)

**Abstract**

Human communication is a complex interplay of power and class dynamics that shape how individuals express ideas, share information, and navigate the intricacies of social existence. This paper explores the nuanced relationship between power and class in communication, investigating how they influence and are influenced by language, nonverbal cues, and other facets of human interaction. The paper found that power operates through language and discourse, where those who possess it strategically use language to maintain their authority and influence. Social class is equally pivotal in shaping language choices, with linguistic distinctions reflecting one's class identity and cultural capital. Media representations often perpetuate class-based stereotypes related to language, reinforcing stigmas around particular dialects and accents. The paper also unraveled that nonverbal communication serves as an unspoken language that reflects power and class distinctions. Body language, such as gestures and posture, conveys one's power status, with powerful individuals exhibiting open and confident gestures. Vocal tone and inflection also play a significant role, as individuals with power tend to have lower and more stable vocal pitches. Attire and appearance are additional markers of power and class, where individuals in power often wear clothing that exudes authority, while class backgrounds influence how people present themselves visually.

**Keywords:** *authority, influence, social class, class identity, cultural capital, media representations*

**Introduction**

Communication is the lifeblood of human interaction, the medium through which individuals express ideas, share information, and navigate the complexities of social existence. Yet, beneath the surface of seemingly straightforward conversations and exchanges lies a dynamic interplay of power and class, two fundamental constructs that shape the essence of human communication. This academic paper embarks on an exploration of this intricate relationship, delving into the multifaceted ways in which power and class influence and are influenced by the communicative processes that underpin our society.

From the whispered corridors of political intrigue to the everyday conversations in our neighborhoods, the presence of power is ubiquitous in communication. Those who possess it wield language as a potent instrument, crafting narratives that maintain their authority, advancing their agendas, and influencing the decisions of the many. Power in communication is not solely about overt domination; it often operates subtly, affecting the very words we choose, the tone we adopt, and the nonverbal cues we exhibit. As such, understanding the nuances of power in communication is paramount, as it underscores the dynamics of hierarchies and influence.

In tandem with power, social class also exerts its imperceptible influence upon the dynamics of communication. Socioeconomic class shapes the way we perceive and interact with the world, forging distinct linguistic and nonverbal patterns, and influencing our access to knowledge and information. The communication of individuals from different class backgrounds often reflects not only their economic disparities but also the socio-cultural landscapes within which they are situated.

This paper is an attempt to unravel the intricate web of power and class in communication. It seeks to elucidate how these phenomena are manifest in various facets of human interaction, from the use of language and vocabulary to nonverbal cues, from access to information and decision-making processes to the digital realms of the 21st century. It is an exploration of how media and representation reinforce or challenge power structures, and how class-based prejudices and stereotypes shape our perceptions and treatment of one another.

As we delve into this complex terrain, we recognize the importance of examining the interplay of power and class in communication. In doing so, we aim to shed light on the mechanisms that often remain obscured, fostering a deeper understanding of the forces at work in our exchanges and conversations. Moreover, this exploration prompts us to consider the implications for inclusive, empathetic communication and social equity, acknowledging that recognizing these factors is the first step toward mitigating their negative impacts.

The subsequent sections of this paper will delve into the theoretical foundations of power and class in communication, before embarking on a comprehensive analysis of their roles in shaping the language, nonverbal communication, information access, persuasion, and digital divide. We will also examine the influence of media and stereotypes on discourse, as well as the impact of social hierarchies and prejudices. This academic endeavor is a step toward unveiling the intricate connections between power, class, and communication, with the ultimate goal of fostering informed, equitable, and effective interactions in a diverse and dynamic world.

### **Theoretical Framework: Power and Class in Communication**

Communication, as a multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon, is inherently intertwined with power and class dynamics. Understanding how power and class manifest in communication requires a comprehensive theoretical framework that draws upon the insights of scholars from communication studies, sociology, and related fields. This section will delve into the foundational theoretical concepts and paradigms that underpin the study of power and class in communication.

#### **a) Power in Communication: A Structural Approach**

Power is a pervasive force in communication, shaping the ways in which individuals, groups, and institutions interact and influence one another. To conceptualize power in communication, scholars often draw from structural theories that emphasize the unequal distribution of power resources and its impact on social dynamics. One influential theoretical perspective is Michel Foucault's concept of "discourse" and "power/knowledge."

Foucault (1972) argued that power operates through discourse, the systems of knowledge and language that frame our understanding of reality. Discourse, in this view, is not just a reflection of power but a productive force that constructs and maintains power relations. Foucault's theory underscores the idea that language and communication are not neutral tools but are deeply embedded in systems of power. For example, when a person in authority employs complex vocabulary and rhetorical strategies, they are not merely expressing their thoughts but exercising their power to shape perceptions and control the narrative (Fairclough, 2003).

Similarly, the Critical Theory tradition, stemming from the works of the Frankfurt School, explores how communication can be a tool for social control and domination. This approach, championed by scholars like Herbert Marcuse (1964), emphasizes how media and communication can be used to reinforce the status quo, preserving the interests of those in power. Through the mass media, powerful elites can maintain their dominance by shaping public opinion and stifling dissenting voices (McChesney, 1999).

**b) Class in Communication: A Socio-Cultural Perspective**

In contrast to power, class in communication is often understood through socio-cultural and symbolic interactionist lenses. Social class, while partly based on economic factors, is equally rooted in culture, identity, and social networks. Scholars like Pierre Bourdieu (1984) have contributed to this theoretical framework by emphasizing how class manifests in language, taste, and lifestyle choices. Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital suggests that social class is not just about economic resources but also the accumulation of cultural knowledge and practices.

Language and vocabulary choices are vital aspects of how class distinctions are expressed in communication. Bourdieu (1991) contends that individuals from different class backgrounds adopt distinct linguistic repertoires. For instance, the working class may employ more colloquial and informal language, while the upper class often uses refined and academic language. These linguistic variations are not merely linguistic quirks but are tied to social class identity and the habitus, a concept representing one's class-based dispositions and practices (Bourdieu, 1977).

Symbolic interactionism, another relevant theoretical framework, explores how class identity is constructed through interpersonal interactions and communication. According to Blumer (1969), people engage in a process of "meaning-making" through interaction. This process includes how individuals perceive and present themselves in social contexts, a dynamic that is deeply entwined with class. For example, when individuals from different class backgrounds interact, they may signal their class identity through nonverbal cues, gestures, and the use of specific cultural references (Lamont & Lareau, 1988).

**c) Intersectionality: Bridging Power and Class in Communication**

While power and class are distinct theoretical dimensions, they often intersect and overlap in communication. Intersectionality theory, pioneered by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), offers a framework to understand how multiple social categories, such as race, gender, and class, interact and intersect to shape individuals' experiences and opportunities. In the context of communication, intersectionality highlights the complexity of power and class dynamics.

Intersectionality recognizes that individuals experience power and class differently based on their multiple social identities. For example, a working-class woman of color may experience unique challenges in communication that differ from those of a white, upper-class man. Intersectionality invites scholars to examine how different forms of privilege and disadvantage intersect, producing specific communicative experiences and outcomes (Collins, 2015).

The theoretical framework for understanding power and class in communication is multifaceted, drawing from diverse intellectual traditions. It encompasses structural theories that highlight the role of power in discourse and the mass media, as well as socio-cultural perspectives that examine the expression of class through language and symbolic interaction. Intersectionality theory underscores the need to consider how power and class interact with other social categories.

By embracing these theoretical lenses, scholars can navigate the complex terrain of power and class in communication, unraveling how language, discourse, and social interactions are influenced by and, in turn, reinforce power structures and class distinctions. As the subsequent sections of this paper delve into specific manifestations of power and class in communication, this theoretical framework will serve as a guide for the analysis and interpretation of the intricate dynamics at play in our diverse and dynamic society.

**Language and Vocabulary as Instruments of Power and Class**

Language is not simply a neutral medium for expressing ideas; it is a potent instrument that reflects, reinforces, and perpetuates power and class dynamics within the realm of communication. Those who wield power strategically use language to assert dominance and maintain their authority, while social class often leaves a distinct linguistic imprint on individuals. This section explores how language and vocabulary serve as instruments through which power and class are conveyed and enacted in communication.

**a) Language as a Tool of Power**

In the domain of power dynamics, language assumes a central role in the maintenance of authority and influence. Michel Foucault, a prominent figure in the field of discourse analysis, posited that power operates through language and discourse (Foucault, 1972). He argued that discourse is not merely a means of conveying information but is inextricably linked to systems of power and knowledge. In this view, those in positions of authority are acutely aware of the persuasive potential of language and strategically employ it to shape perceptions, control narratives, and maintain their dominance. This can be readily observed in the arena of politics, where leaders often harness the persuasive power of rhetoric to sway public opinion (McChesney, 1999).

Foucault's theory underscores the idea that language is not a neutral tool but a powerful instrument that constructs and reinforces power relations. Whether through the eloquence of a political figure, the jargon of a professional expert, or the discourse of an influential institution, language plays a pivotal role in shaping the discourse of power. As such, it is imperative to recognize that power operates not only through overt control but also through the way language is wielded to frame and control the narrative (Fairclough, 2003).

**b) Language and Social Class Identity**

In the context of social class, language is a fundamental marker of identity. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital (1984) posits that social class is not solely determined by economic resources but also by cultural knowledge and practices. This extends to the linguistic realm, where one's choice of words, linguistic features, and even accents can be indicative of their class background. For instance, individuals from working-class backgrounds may employ colloquial and informal language, characterized by regional dialects and less complex vocabulary. In contrast, individuals from higher social classes may demonstrate more sophisticated and academic language, characterized by nuanced vocabulary and standardized grammar (Bourdieu, 1991).

Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" is particularly relevant in understanding how language is deeply ingrained in class identity. Habitus refers to the internalized dispositions and practices acquired through socialization within a specific class (Bourdieu, 1977). It guides individuals in their choices, including those related to language. In essence, the linguistic repertoire one possesses is a reflection of their habitus and, by extension, their class background.

Moreover, the impact of class-based linguistic distinctions goes beyond individual interactions. Media representations play a significant role in perpetuating class stereotypes and biases (McChesney, 1999). Media often reinforce the idea that certain language varieties are superior or more desirable, thus contributing to the stigmatization of particular dialects and accents associated with lower social classes.

**c) Media and the Reinforcement of Class-Based Language Stereotypes**

Media representations play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of social class and the associated language choices. This influence is particularly evident in the portrayal of accents and dialects. Media, including television, film, and advertising, have been instrumental in reinforcing class-based stereotypes related to language (Lippi-Green, 2012).

In many media productions, characters from lower social classes are often depicted using regional dialects or non-standard accents. These portrayals can contribute to the stigmatization of these linguistic features, further reinforcing the association between non-standard speech and lower social class. Conversely, characters representing higher social classes are more likely to use standardized language varieties, which are often presented as more prestigious or educated.

For example, in the realm of entertainment, working-class characters are frequently depicted using regional accents or non-standard English. This can perpetuate the stereotype that such speech patterns are less intelligent or less refined. On the other hand, upper-class characters are often portrayed as using standard language, which is associated with education and prestige.

These media depictions have real-world consequences. They influence the way people perceive different social classes and the language associated with them. Such representations contribute to linguistic discrimination and can affect individuals' self-esteem and opportunities. The stigmatization of certain speech patterns can result in linguistic bias, where people are judged or discriminated against based on their accents or dialects (Lippi-Green, 2012).

**d) The Intersection of Power and Class in Language**

Power and class are not isolated constructs but often intersect in communication. In some instances, individuals from higher social classes may leverage their class privilege to assert power through language. They can use their refined vocabulary and eloquent speech to convey authority and establish dominance in various settings. This is evident in formal contexts, such as academia or professional settings, where individuals from privileged backgrounds may use language as a tool to maintain their status (Bourdieu, 1984).

Conversely, individuals from lower social classes may encounter challenges when communicating in environments that favor standardized language. These individuals may face linguistic discrimination when their dialects or accents are stigmatized. In such cases, the intersection of power and class manifests as the power to define and control linguistic norms, which can disadvantage those from lower social classes (Lippi-Green, 2012).

It is important to note that language is a dynamic and evolving entity, and the power and class dynamics within it are subject to change over time. Language can be a site of resistance, where individuals from lower social classes use their linguistic resources to challenge stereotypes and assert their identities. Additionally, language can be a means of solidarity, bringing together individuals who share common linguistic experiences, regardless of class background (Bourdieu, 1991).

The role of language in reflecting and perpetuating power and class dynamics within communication cannot be overstated. It is a multifaceted instrument that operates in complex ways, influencing and being influenced by individuals and institutions. The use of language as a tool of power, as highlighted by Foucault, underscores the strategic manipulation of discourse to maintain authority. Language's role in constructing social class identity, as proposed by Bourdieu, demonstrates how linguistic choices can reflect and reinforce one's class background.

Moreover, media representations further complicate the relationship between language, power, and class by perpetuating stereotypes and biases related to speech patterns. These representations shape public perceptions and contribute to linguistic discrimination.

The intersection of power and class in language adds another layer of complexity to this dynamic. Those in positions of power may leverage their class privilege to assert dominance through language, while individuals from lower social classes may face linguistic discrimination in environments that favor standardized language.

In light of these dynamics, it is crucial to recognize the intricate role of language in reflecting and perpetuating power and class distinctions. Understanding these dynamics allows for more informed and equitable communication practices, where language is not used as a tool of oppression but as a means of connection, expression, and empowerment.

**Nonverbal Communication: Signaling Power and Class**

Nonverbal communication, often thought of as the unspoken language of human interaction, is a rich and intricate domain where subtle cues and signals can convey a wealth of information about an individual, their intentions, and their social positioning. Within this realm, nonverbal communication plays a significant role in signaling power and class distinctions. This section delves into the multifaceted ways in which nonverbal cues reflect and reinforce power dynamics and class hierarchies, spanning from body language and gestures to vocal tone and attire.

**a) Body Language and Power**

One of the primary domains of nonverbal communication is body language, which encompasses gestures, posture, and facial expressions. The way individuals carry themselves and their physical movements can be indicative of their power status. Researchers have noted that powerful individuals often exhibit open and expansive body language. They tend to occupy more physical space, stand taller, and engage in confident gestures (Carney, Cuddy, & Yap, 2010).

In contrast, individuals who lack power or occupy subordinate positions may display closed or constricted body language. They might hunch their shoulders, make themselves physically smaller, and use submissive or self-protective gestures. Such body language can be interpreted as a reflection of their lack of agency or authority (Cuddy, Schultz, & Fosse, 2018).

These nonverbal cues in body language have the potential to influence how others perceive and respond to an individual. When someone conveys powerful body language, they are more likely to be perceived as confident and competent, which can have a cascading effect on their ability to influence others and assert themselves (Tiedens & Fragale, 2003).

In the context of class, body language can also be influenced by social status. Those from higher social classes may have a greater awareness of social norms and etiquette, which can influence their posture and gestures. They may be more likely to adopt formal and composed body language. In contrast, individuals from lower social classes may exhibit less formal body language, which might be perceived as less polished or refined.

**b) Vocal Tone and Inflection**

Nonverbal communication is not limited to the body; vocal tone and inflection are also powerful indicators of power and class distinctions. Vocal characteristics, including pitch, volume, and speech patterns, can convey a wealth of information about an individual's confidence, authority, and social background.

In terms of power, research has shown that individuals with more power often exhibit a lower and more stable vocal pitch (Bargh et al., 2012). A lower-pitched voice is associated with dominance and authority, while a higher-pitched voice can be perceived as less authoritative (Klofstad, Anderson, & Peters, 2012). Additionally, those in positions of power tend to speak more slowly and with greater vocal control, conveying a sense of confidence and composure.

Conversely, individuals who lack power may exhibit more variable pitch and speak at a faster pace. This can be interpreted as nervousness or a lack of control. Such vocal cues can influence how others perceive and respond to them, potentially reinforcing power differentials (Bavelas et al., 2002).

In the context of class, vocal cues can also reflect social background. Individuals from higher social classes may exhibit speech patterns associated with formal education, including clear articulation and a rich vocabulary. Their speech may be characterized by a more "standard" or prestige accent. In contrast, individuals from lower social classes may display speech patterns associated with their regional or local dialects, which may be stigmatized or perceived as less prestigious (Labov, 1966).

**c) Attire and Appearance**

A significant component of nonverbal communication is attire and appearance. What individuals choose to wear and how they present themselves visually can send strong signals about their power and social class.

In terms of power, attire can vary dramatically depending on one's position. Those in positions of power may wear clothing that conveys authority and professionalism. This can include well-tailored suits, formal attire, and accessories that signify status. The way powerful individuals present themselves visually can contribute to their overall impression and influence (Kwon & Nayakankuppam, 2015).

Conversely, individuals in less powerful positions may have more limited choices regarding their attire. They may wear uniforms, casual clothing, or clothing that reflects the expectations of their specific roles. These visual cues can reinforce their subordinate status and may influence how they are perceived in professional or social contexts (Lazarus & Cox, 2014).

Regarding class, attire and appearance are deeply intertwined with social background. Those from higher social classes often have access to resources that enable them to dress in ways that align with societal standards of elegance and sophistication. They may choose clothing and accessories that are associated with luxury brands and high fashion, signaling their class status.

In contrast, individuals from lower social classes may have more limited resources for clothing and grooming. They may wear clothing that is practical and affordable, and their appearance may not conform to traditional standards of high fashion or elegance. These visual cues can lead to judgments and assumptions about an individual's social class and financial status.

### **Conclusion**

A profound comprehension of the interplay between power and class in communication is indispensable for fostering more equitable, well-informed, and empathetic interactions. The intricate web of power and class in communication influences language choices, nonverbal cues, and media portrayals, thereby shaping perceptions and broader social dynamics. Acknowledging these dynamics represents the initial step towards mitigating their adverse consequences and advancing inclusive and equitable communication practices.

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