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# Sociolinguistics and modes of social class signalling: African perspectives*

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**Abstract**

The paper evaluates spatial, behavioural, and material signalling of social class in African contexts, focusing on Kenya and Zambia. In particular, it draws on notions of mode of class signalling and intersectionality and a vignette of an interaction between urban-based Western educated development agents and local participants in rural Kenya to illustrate how social class is implicated in interactions. The paper shows how significant features of class and dimensions of social inequality may be perceived intersectionally so that positionalities in class structures are negotiated in contexts of interaction, thus illustrating how structural conditions of class may be challenged and questioned. The paper concludes that sociolinguistics needs to identify the various ways in which the marginalized challenge social structures of inequality. Otherwise there is a risk that sociolinguistics will work to validate inequalities as permanent and fixed, and victims of unequal treatment as permanently condemned and never able to rise against oppressive social structures that tyrannize them.

Kutenga zitsanzo m'maiko ya Kenya ndi Zambia, pepalayi yaunika malo, macitidwe, zinthu zakuthupi ndi zipangizo zomwe zisonyeza zamakalasi apamwamba ndi apansi. Makamaka, pepalayi yatengela malingalilo amacitidwe osiyanitsa anthu m'makalasi, pakati pa ophunzitsidwa bwino azacitukuko ocokela m'matauni ndi omwe akutenga

nawo mbali kumidzi yaku Kenya, kuti ifotokoze momwe magulu ya makalasi osiyana amakhudzila zocitika. Pepala yawonetsa kuti kusiyana kwa magawano m'makalasi ndi kusalingana kwa cikhalidwe zili muzokambilana za anthu. Ici cionetsa kuti magawano m'makalasi angatsutsidwe komanso kufunsidwa munkhani zokambilana. Pepalayi imaliza ndi kuti, akatswili azilankulo ayenela kudziwa ndi kuunikila njila zosiyanasiyana zomwe makalasi omwe ali ozunzidwa amapeza kuti angonjetsa zisankho. Kupanda kutelo pali ciopsezo kuti akatswili azilankhulo azakhalila a umboni wazabodza kuti anthu ozunzidwa sangathe kulimbana ndi kugonjetsa zinthu zopondeleza ndi omwe amawapondeleza.

# 1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper problematizes the complexities of class in African contexts in which Western class systems and traditional African social structures are sometimes found existing side-by-side or merged in space and interactions. Emergent African leaders at the dawn of independence from colonial powers claimed that Africa had a classless society before the colonial era. Kenneth Kaunda's African Humanism, Julius Nyerere's Ujamaa, and Sekou Toure's *Communaucratique* are premised on pre-colonial Africa being classless (Cohen, 1972; Mbiti, 1982). Cohen (1972) quotes Nyerere, who said that there was no terminology in any indigenous African language to capture the term "class": "Indeed, I doubt if the equivalent for the word 'class' exists in any indigenous African language; for language describes the ideas of those who speak it, and the idea of 'class' or 'caste' was non-existent in African society" (p. 231). These sentiments are framed around the *Ubuntu* ideology, which was (and is) said to underpin African society's socio-cultural and economic endeavours, and described as working to counteract class formations by encouraging kinship solidarity with other human kinds (Ejeolo, 2014; Mbiti, 1982).

However, discussions around classless pre-colonial African societies should not be reason to ignore various forms of inequality and social stratification seen along dimensions of age, gender, ethnicity, chieftaincy, and status groups (such as those with ritual and specialized skills). Young (1986) gives the presence of slavery in some West African kingdoms, the subjugation of the Hutu by the Tutsi, the caste system in Senegal, and rankings among the Swazi through ancestry as evidence of social stratification. Both Nyerere and Senghor counter-argued that the caste system seen in some African societies was a result of the Arab-Berber influence (Young, 1986). The issue is that, even if the emergent class systems are a result of external influences, this does not nullify their existence. In any case, forms of inequalities and social stratification were made much more complex and sometimes more difficult to discern considering religious and *Ubuntu* ideology influences on African society. Both appear designed to discourage class-based socioeconomic hierarchies. However, even if African

societies were classes, considering their colonial history and current place in the modern world, the argument of classless society is difficult to maintain.

If anything, the combination of Western class systems, African traditional social stratification, the *Ubuntu* ideology, and religious and colonial value systems makes the study of class a very complex topic. This in part explains why, as illustrated below, Western models of class do not adequately account for these socio-historically grounded complexities effectively.

The purpose of the paper is not just to illustrate how social class is signalled in time and space in African contexts, but more so to highlight how structural conditions of class are mediated, negotiated, challenged, and questioned in interactions. The latter is illustrated through an analysis of specific interactions between development workers and rural villagers. It is hoped this will offer useful insights for the sociolinguistic study of class generally.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: the next section builds from this section to show why Western models of class do not adequately capture the formations of class structures in Africa; it is followed by a section outlining the theoretical and analytical framework combining notions of mode of social class signalling and intersectionality, and methodological issues. The next section focuses on the contrasting modes of social class signals to provide a background for the following section, which analyses an interactional event in a development workshop in Kenya. This analysis not only demonstrates how class is signalled in interactions between Western-educated, urban-based development agents and rural participants, but more significantly, how structural conditions of class may be challenged and questioned in that process, thus offering useful insights for the sociolinguistic study of class elsewhere. The last section summarizes and concludes the paper.

## 2 | CLASS FORMATIONS IN AFRICA

### 2.1 | Problem of conceptualizing class

Literature suggests the term "class" is difficult to conceptualize and operationalize in African contexts (Cohen, 1972; Southall, 2016, 2018; Young, 1986). One reason is that the notion of class has been heavily influenced either by rigid Western sociological theories that posit structurally determined class categories or by classificatory discourses of international financial institutions. Social and materialist theories tend to package classes into autonomous categories such as the upper, the middle, and the lower classes. However, in African contexts, the boundaries between social classes are not always clearly demarcated, as traditional roles and statuses and even the *Ubuntu* ideologies often blur such boundaries.

International financial organizations such as the African Development Bank, the IMF, and the World Bank have defined the African middle class as those spending US$2–US$20 per day (Southall, 2018; Wambui, 2018). Questions can be asked about whether US$2 is enough for one to survive on, and whether "middle class" means the same thing in South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, and so on. It is thus not surprising that recent studies on the middle class in different African countries such as South Africa (Southall, 2016, 2018), Angola (Schubert, 2016), Mozambique (Sumich, 2016), Kenya (Neubert, 2016; Spronk, 2014), and Ghana (Hamidu, 2015) have come up with different indices on what constitutes the middle class.

Southall (2018) has argued that applying in African countries class structure as ascertained in European contexts is problematic. First, it does not do justice to the lifestyles and social conditions operating on the continent. Second, using specific criteria set up by international financial organizations, for example, to link a person spending US$2–US$20 a day to the "middle class" could be problematic,

as an individual's income may be as a result of a combination of several sources: for example, one can be a professional white-collar worker, an urban vendor, while at the same time having a farm in the rural area for vegetables, maize, or cattle farming overseen by "low class" relatives.

Southall (2018, p. 473) summarizes the African "middle class" thus: "If 'middle' means anything, it means that 'middle-class' Africans are pulled this way and that way by different social forces." From the foregoing, Wambui's (2018) characterization of the social structure in Kenya into two broad categories with fuzzy boundaries, as described below, becomes pertinent.

## 2.2 | Classifying "those on top" and "those at the bottom": *Wabenzi* and *Wananchi*

Wambui (2018) suggests a two-tier class system which consists of (1) what can be called the upper-middle class "for whom richness, or being a part of the upper class is just around the corner" (p. 1), and (2) the lower-middle class, the majority of whom is essentially part of the lower and working class. This definition is similar to Sobania's (2003) demarcation of classes into two: the upper class and the second comprising the lower and middle working classes, the jobless and underemployed. This essentially aligns classes into two as in contemporary African discourse. For example, in Kenya, there are the haves called the *Wabenzi* and the have-nots called the *Wananchi* (Sobania, 2003). *Wabenzi* was originally from colloquial Kiswahili meaning "those who own Mercedes-Benz cars," a reference to the luxurious and expensive Mercedes-Benz car, a symbol of wealth and status. The name came about because the Mercedes-Benz limousine was the car of choice for the emergent African politicians and elite at the time of independence for most African countries in the 1960s and 1970s.

Although initially used in Kenya to describe politicians and the emerging African elites, the word *Wabenzi* is now used across sub-Saharan Africa. Speakers of any Bantu language will easily decipher the word because of its Bantu morphological make up, made up of the prefix morpheme *wa-* ("of" or "owner of" or "having characteristics of"), which is affixed to the root –*benz* (phonologized to –*benzi* to account for Bantu syllable structure). The *Wabenzi* includes those who drive any expensive vehicles, including Sports Utility Vehicles (SUVs), favoured by the rich and famous and development agents in Africa, who are the subject of this paper. *Wananchi* (singular = *mu-nanchi*) is also a Swahili word meaning "ordinary persons/people." This simplified characterization is convenient for the present paper, as it aligns with how ordinary people characterize the haves and have-nots in African countries. For instance, the alternatives for the *Wabenzi* and *Wananchi* in Zambia and Malawi, in the local language Nyanja/Chewa, are *apamwamba* "those on top" and *apansi* "those at the bottom." There is no word in the local language denoting the middle class. As for the neighbourhoods, the *apamwamba* live *ku mayadi* "at the yards" and the rest of the ordinary people live *ku komboni* "the compound."

Therefore, even though these labels are just as simplistic as the three-way classification of upper, middle, and lower class, they offer a glimpse of how the nature and tensions of class are seen on the ground.

## 3 | SOCIAL CLASS SIGNALLING, INTERSECTIONALITY, AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Kraus, Park, and Tan (2017) suggest that rather than merely defining social class, it is much more productive to account for how the intersections in dimensions such as place of residence, income, education attainment, and employment prestige (or lack of) shape and position the experiences of a specific

social class. They maintain that social class should thus be conceptualized "as a 'bundle of sticks' that can be disaggregated and studied based on its specific elements" (p. 423). Aligned to the present paper, the authors theorize that studies on class should account for signalling, that is, how social class signals in interactions and space and time create perceptions and experiences of class boundaries, and of self and other socioeconomic statuses in society. In this framework, socioeconomic inequality is studied through observable elements and "the dynamic observation of observable behaviours that signal social class" (p. 423). This semiotic indexing of class is an area in which sociolinguistics can contribute to the study of local conceptions of class.

Social class signals, that is, lifestyle statuses (e.g. residing in an upmarket neighbourhood and owning expensive SUVs) and behaviours (e.g. standard speech forms) can provide information about an individual's earnings, career or employment status, and other dimensions of social class (Kraus & Keltner, 2009; Kraus et al., 2017). Labov's studies (1972, 2006) on linguistic cues and social stratification have been used to show how language, occupation, level of education, neighbourhoods, and house values can individually and intersectionally signal the social class implicated.

The idea of class signalling extends previous sociolinguistic work, including that of Labov, and more generally the work on indexicality that considers linguistic and behavioural signs as both reflecting and constituting identities. In this paper's conceptualization, semiotic indexing of class is multimodal and multidimensional. It can be said to be constituted by a constellation of linguistic, cultural, and overt and covert displays of semiotic practices and objects, intersecting with social categories such as gender, ethnicity, age, religion, and region, to create different positions, stances, alignments, and misalignments in constructions of personae in interactions and society. The sociolinguistic focus is thus not merely on the patterns of linguistic variations; it is more on the multimodal production of signals of class in time, space, and discourse to construct specific social groups. How constructed social groups perceive and react to displayed semiotic indexes of class is equally important.

Social groups are not always clearly defined and socially specifiable, a priori, as they are determined by a cluster of coinciding and intersecting symbolic forms and social categories in time and space, and in interactions. This paper emphasizes the need to move our understanding of class beyond rigid social structuring emphasized in sociolinguistic and international financial institutions' literature reviewed above, to intersected signs of social class as a way to understand how people position themselves and others in terms of social class in society. Unlike Kraus et al.'s (2017) study and other studies which focused on how class signals structure and perpetuated class boundaries and socioeconomic inequalities, the present paper not only looks at the manifestations of class; it also considers how the negative effects of class formations and socioeconomic inequalities may be reversed and counteracted. The assumption is that the marginalized do not just accept their low status as a perpetually hopeless situation without the possibility for social mobility in terms of status. Some of the observable class signals include physical appearance, segments of behaviour, and speech styles, which may intersect with other symbols of status in society mentioned above, such as income, place of residence, education attainment, and employment prestige, to signal dominance or deprivation. Such indexical resources not only index class, but may also be used as tools to negotiate class relations, including reversing and counteracting inequalities.

To account for the fact that class indicators may affect individual members of a social class differently, I shall also draw on the notion of intersectionality, which grew out of feminist theory. Crenshaw (1989) came up with the notion of intersectionality as a way to counter the single axis analysis of the marginalization of women. Noting that the intersection of race and gender has a more negative impact on black women than white women in the United States of America, she argued that efforts to remediate race and sex discrimination often erases the experiences of the less privileged of the marginalized group. By focusing on the more privileged of the marginalized group, there is a risk that inequality

experiences are restricted to a subset of the group and also to the subset of sources of discrimination, and thereby obscure what is a complex phenomenon (Crenshaw, 1989).

In recent years, there has been increased interest in the notion in the humanities and social sciences. The lens of intersectionality has been used to frame and account for interrelations in complex identity options and power relations in everyday life (Block & Corona, 2016; Davis, 2008). It has also been used to account for the intersections between gender, language, and transnationalism on the one hand, and linguistic ideologies and practices on the other; the roles of contexts in the social production of health inequalities (Evans, 2019; Persmark et al., 2019), and the interaction of power relationships, social characteristics (e.g. gender, race, ethnicity, class, location, and age), and context-specific experiences of climate hazards (Walker, Culham, Fletcher, & Reed, 2019).

Mindful that there is no agreement on what exactly intersectionality means and that it is conceptualized differently by scholars, we shall follow Collins' (2015) general conceptualization: "The term intersectionality references the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities" (p. 2). In essence, the notion highlights that social inequality is produced by a multitude of intersecting social phenomena, locations, and systems of power, and not by a single factor (Collins, 2015; Walker et al., 2019). Aligned to the present paper, intersectionality provides an important vehicle for describing complex contexts, specific inequalities across specified spaces, social settings and interactions, as a way to furthering anti-subservience efforts towards social transformation and the building of equitable societies (Walker et al., 2019).

The interactions analysed below took place in a Dholuo-speaking rural area in Nyanza province, which the UNDP (2005) report characterized as one of the most poverty-stricken areas in Kenya. The main data set is from recordings of community development workshops in a rural area of Nyanza Province in Kenya, which involved communication between English-speaking, urban-based development agents and rural Dholuo mother tongue speakers in rural Nyanza Province (Banda & Oketch, 2009). The analysis focuses on modes of social class signals in the interactional event between the development agents and Dholuo mother tongue speakers considering how such indexes of class may both shape the interaction and also serve as a site for contesting class relations themselves.

Before we move into the analysis of the interaction, the next section presents a sample of semiotic resources that may be employed in social class signalling in African contexts. Some of the arguments are drawn from interviews with two academics: one from Kenya and the other from Zambia.

# 4 | MODES OF SOCIAL CLASS SIGNALLING IN SOCIETY

In contemporary Africa, one important signal of social class is where one resides. This is because the place of residence might also give an indication of other intersecting social class dimensions, such as a person's occupation and earnings. If one lives in suburbs such as Muthaiga and Langata in Nairobi, Kenya, or Ibex Hill and Kabulonga in Lusaka, one is immediately positioned as *apamwamba* "upper class." On the other hand, if one lives in Kibera in Nairobi, one of Africa's largest slums, or Kalingalinga or kwa-George ("George compound") in Lusaka, one is associated with the poor and working-class people.

The differences in classes between where the upper and lower classes reside are captured in the collective names given to neighbourhoods. In Zambia and Malawi, living in a *komboni* "compound" identifies and positions one as belonging to the lower classes. On the other hand, living *kumayadi* "lit. living in a yard" identifies and positions one as belonging to the upper class. The etymology of the two contrasting words can be traced to the colonial era. The colonial government and councils

built big houses on large pieces of land for white government officials, while Africans working for the government as porters, messenger, clerks, etc. were built small houses in cramped spaces called "compounds." In the urban areas of Africa, the arrangement has continued—the difference being that the African upper-middle class has replaced the white people.

From the Western characterization of development, rural areas of Africa have remained "undeveloped" or "un-modernized." The upper class is said to be mostly urban-based, while the rural areas are mainly populated by the poor and those in need of "aid"—that is, the lower class. In colonial times in particular, Africans who went to live or had relatives living in urban areas were often seen as *apamwamba*, even though they lived in squalid *kombonis* in towns. The general characterization of urban Africa as the hub of the upper class and rural areas as mostly inhabited by the poor and low class has continued to date.

Education attainment has been lauded as one of the most important indicators of social class and is perceived to bridge the gap in equality between those born in a rich family and those from a poor family background. Moreover, if Labov's (1972) study is anything to go by, education would enable one to acquire and use speech forms that allow one to inhabit high earning occupations and fuse in high status locations. Wambui (2018) describes the Kenyan *Wabenzi* as taking their children to private schools locally or abroad, rather than government schools. In Kenya, there is a question that people sometimes ask to illustrate the choice of school as a signal of social class: "Did you go to school to the Group of Schools, or did you go to school in groups?" The Group of Schools refers to exclusive private local and international schools, some of which offer the British curriculum. Guardians of children that go to the Group of Schools can afford a chauffeur or drive their child to school, while the *Wananchi* walk in groups or get into overcrowded *matatus* "privately owned mini buses," hence in a group, to reach the school. Where one takes one's children for education is sometimes a more critical factor.

Those who work for international organizations such as UNESCO, JICA (The Japan International Cooperation Agency), and SIDA (The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency), and international NGOs are perceived to be in the upper social group. As one of the academics interviewed for this study comments:

**Extract 1**

The organization you work for and the job you do … When people say I work for ZRA, Zambia Revenue Agency … the UN agency, it can be UNESCO, USAID or NGOs something like that, people will say "Oh my God!" These are people with money, getting in Dollars. They do nothing but talk and get a lot of money.

It is not just that they are often seen in agency-branded 4x4s and SUVs, their salaries are thought to be very high and they are paid in stable international currency, which remains strong or even stronger when converted to unstable and weakening local currencies.

It is noteworthy that development agents are often drawn from college and university academics or highly skilled civil servants, who "rent" out their "skills" to donor agents. Their occupation as academics and the English or French speech forms they have mastered are signals of class. That they successfully manipulate English or French, the languages in which donor agencies ask development proposals to be written to allow them to access funds, only serves to augment their upper-class signals. Donor agencies not accepting proposals written in African languages signals that knowledge or education in African languages are inconsequential, and hence representing the lower class. That some of the development agents do not even speak the local languages does not disqualify them from accessing donor funds or doing developmental work. Instead, they drive expensive cars, wear expensive clothes, and use English, which they use to mark their class.

One of the interviewees remarked that some of the *apamwambas* use their class credentials as a license to talk down in English to those that speak an African language as the language of everyday interaction. This essentially is done to elevate their status higher while further lowering the class status of those that do not understand them.

Some of the signals of class described above, and the idea of English signalling upper-class status, which in turn sanctions use of English to speak down to those who speak little or no English, is interesting, as it speaks to the issues and tensions that are critical in understanding the different positionings and the role that class plays in negotiations in the next section.

## 5 | MODES OF SOCIAL CLASS SIGNALLING IN INTERACTIONS

To account for the class positionings and unequal power play constructed in interactions between the local people and the development agents, we need to consider the identities, not just of the villagers, but more so of the agents; what and who they represent, especially from the perspective of the local people. In rural areas, class distinctions are not as marked as they are in urban areas. The rural population of Africa is made up of formally (Western) and not-so-formally educated people, retired civil servants, and retired corporate workers, all sharing the same spaces. They also all fall under traditional chiefs and follow traditional authority and speak mostly the local languages and practise African culture. The retirees may have used English in their places of work in urban areas, but once living in rural areas they revert to using local African languages like other villagers.

The development agents are typically Western educated, with a minimum of a bachelor's degree, but those with a master's or doctoral degree are preferred by international NGOs and donor agencies (Banda & Oketch, 2009). Their Western education has equipped them with the knowledge of how to write proposals in the style and language "acceptable" to international donor agencies to access funds to organize development workshops in rural areas. Transcripts of degree certification and written evidence of knowledge in stylistic and design features of proposals are critical ingredients in determining whether funding will be granted or denied. Banda and Oketch (2009) and Savage (1997) have called development agents "special activists," for they belong to a special class of individuals able to translate mostly English-based donor discourse into the language and discourse palatable to local participants and communities. They are not neutral brokers as they represent and carry the ideology of the NGOs and international donor agencies and countries. They also represent the *apamwamba* of the country. Leading from this, the unequal power relations between development agents and the local participants are all also too apparent. Crack, Footitt, and Tessur (2019) have stated that many development agents do not speak local languages spoken in the communities they serve, which has a negative effect on their ability to disseminate development information.

As illustrated above, the mere choice of using English is seen as a signal of upper-class status. In rural areas where the language is hardly used, its use is particularly marked as it is seen as constructing particular class positions, which intersect with other dimensions of social inequalities outlined above. Footitt, Crack, and Tessur (2018) report that using high status language to people who do not speak the language makes them feel demeaned and "may create a 'barrier' between themselves and the community if it is perceived as being disrespectful" (p. 24). This is illustrated in the extract below. Participants are expressing their views on the workshop that had just finished on a development issue. They were responding to the development agent who wanted feedback from participants on the training session he had just completed. They explain that the training session failed because they could not understand the "academic" English used during the session.

However, a closer scrutiny of the participants' response shows that it is more than just being unable to comprehend what the development agent is saying. The participants seem to be also responding to and contesting the inequalities of class as signalled by the development agent's appearance, behaviour, and language use. The participants find themselves denied of voice and hence in a marginalized position, unable to comprehend and engage meaningfully with topics and issues on account of choice of unfamiliar language.

**Extract 2**

Speaker 1*: Giruni ber to en too academic made iketnwago e yo mayot nikech jomoko kuomwa o lal chon!*

"This training is good but is too academic I wish you had some simpler way of doing it because many of us are now lost!"

Speaker 2: *Puoj ema oremowa ok ni gigi tek to jopuojwa be ok tugnwa tiendgi madi mi wawinj gigi e yo mayot.*

"We are just ignorant it is not that these things are difficult and our teachers have also not made them simple for us to grasp."

Speaker 3:  This thing is looking good but I wish you would put it in Dholuo or even some broken Kiswahili then we can benefit a bit.

(Source: Banda & Oketch, 2009, p. 177)

The use of technical language and acronyms by development agents in training and information sharing workshops has been identified as a major stumbling block in the development programme (Footitt et al., 2018). It has social structuring and mystifying effects on the workshop in which the agent is constructed as belonging to a knowledgeable class, while the "confused" participants are constructed as "ignorant" on issues that they would otherwise understand and discuss without difficulties with an appropriate choice of language. It is clear from Speaker 3's speech form that some of the participants speak English quite well. But the kind of English used by the development agent has made difficult a subject which would easily have been addressed more efficiently in the local language, Dholuo, or another African language, Kiswahili, even "broken" Kiswahili.

In addition to creating a comprehension barrier between the participants and the topic at hand, the use of English created a class structure, which would have been avoided or revoked, and renegotiated, had Dholuo and "broken" Kiswahili been used. Kiswahili is a language that has no ethnic affiliations, and as such it is a language of choice for East Africans who do not speak and understand the same ethnic language, or do not want to evoke ethnic-based status structures. On the other hand, in Kenya, "standard" Kiswahili is mainly learnt through the school system. Thus, the use of "standard" Kiswahili would also have signalled upper-class status and a knowledge gap.

"Broken" Kiswahili is not just the language of the masses or low class, informal traders, the young, and the hip; it is also the language of choice to renegotiate, blur, and counteract the negative effects of class and status inequalities resulting from dimensions of social structure, such as the urban–rural divide and socioeconomic, education and ethnic differences. Although the design

features of "broken" Kiswahili can be said to align it with the low class and the young, it is also a language that high-status people use to express solidarity and renegotiate (social) role structure differences with the masses and thus cushion and refigure the asymmetrical power effects of class-based inequalities.

During a speech on his first official visit to Kenya in 2015, President Obama appears to have been well aware of this. He greeted the people in "standard" English, "standard" Kiswahili, and "broken" Kiswahili (called Sheng in Kenya). It was his use of "broken" Kiswahili that got him the applause, allowing him to connect with Kenyans in the way he could not in English or "standard" Kiswahili. This is reminiscent of the often-quoted wisdom from Nelson Mandela: "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart." Though just a greeting, Obama used a language that Kenyans understood, but which was also at the heart of their everyday languaging practices. Thus, he used non-standard Kiswahili to renegotiate the power (and class) relations between himself as then President of the USA and Kenyans, and to reposition himself as an African just like the Kenyan audience by virtue of his father, who was Kenyan. Thus, when he later talked about his Kenyan heritage and about his sisters, brothers, and relatives in Kenya, it did not sound hollow. From the Kenyans' perspective, he was one of them.

On the other hand, the use of English only by development agents forced people into class and other positionalities in a manner that Dholuo and "broken" Kiswahili would not. In particular, it positions those that do understand English as "ignorant" on issues that they could easily comprehend if Dholuo or "broken" Kiswahili were used.

It is also noteworthy that "broken" Kiswahili has unrestricted syntax (grammar) and an extended vocabulary because it borrows and renovates from English and other European languages, and from Dholuo and other Kenyan and African languages. It is the language that local people use to translate, interpret, and understand new technological innovations and knowledge, and terminology and complex concepts that are difficult to express in the limited vocabulary offered in "standard" African languages and the complexities in the "foreign" and rigidly structured English.

In the above extract, the locals pointing out that Dholuo or even "broken" Kiswahili could have been more effective languages for communication of the development agenda means the local participants lay claim to how to do development discourse. They come through as more knowledgeable than the development agent by teaching the "teacher" what he should have known and done. By extension, it also contests the unequal power relationships between development agents and local participants, and thus functions to renegotiate class relationships and positions. The contestation can be said to be a form of what May (2014, p. 95) calls, in her elaboration of intersectionality, "resistant speech and action [that] are not only frequently misunderstood, but often take unconventional forms …" Stating that the agent should use Dholuo and "broken Kiswahili" is to turn to the unconventional forms of speech and action, which in reality reverses the asymmetrical power in favour of the local participants.

The renegotiation of class relationships and positions are evident in the participants' linguistic choices: "This training is good but is too academic," "it is not that these things are difficult," and "I wish you would put it in Dholuo or even some broken Kiswahili," which indicate that they are more knowledgeable about how to conduct development discourse in a rural area than the development agent. This counteracts the class structuring resulting from or indexed by the agent's English use.

As illustrated in the previous section, working for an international donor agency or an NGO is seen as a sign of membership to the middle class and English is an important ingredient in the construction of this class. Footitt et al. (2018) decry the fact that international donor agencies and NGOs only invite applications for funding in English, and not local languages. The development

agents in the extract above using English can thus be seen as their representing transnational organizations, a privilege not accorded to the local Dholuo speaking people. The development agents are thus implicated in the globally shaped local social structures, which marginalize local communities. Like the Philippine and Indian English-speaking call centre agents described by Tupas (2019), the development agents can also be said to be implicated in the "local colonially induced class-based relations" (p. 537).

It is noteworthy that it is the case that the topics and talking points and the materials used by development agents are determined and pre-prepared in urban areas and the headquarters of the donor agency. Although it is clear that some of the local participants could have done a better job than the development agent—that is, through using the appropriate local language, either Dholuo or Kiswahili, to disseminate the development message—they do not belong to the "special activist" class. This means they may have excellent ideas on how to enhance development in their communities, but because donors do not allow proposals in their languages (including "broken" Kiswahili), they have no access to funding opportunities. In other words, only a particular class has access to funding opportunities, and those that cannot present what they want to say in English preferred by donor agencies get no funding (Crack et al., 2019).

However, the argument is that directly confronting the development agent and lecturing him on how he should have handled the training session illustrates a renegotiation in power dynamics, with the local people taking the upper hand, however momentarily. Aligned to this argument, Banda and Oketch (2009, p. 178) describe another community development workshop in a Kenyan rural area, in which some female participants perceived an urban-based female consultant to be looking down on them by the way she held a felt pen and wrote on a flip chart, as another mode of class signalling. This resulted in comments in Dholuo: "Who is she showing off to? She thinks we don't know how to write on a flipchart? Mmmh! We live whether she is there or not!" (Banda & Oketch, 2009, p. 178). This illustrates the rural female participants' contestation of what they perceive as the consultant's performance of urban/modern and Western-educated identity, designed to position the rural participants as "illiterate" and uninformed of Western material affordances. The argument is that living in a rural area and, perhaps, practising "traditional" African lifestyles does not necessarily equate to wholesale "illiteracy" and ignorance of modern gadgetry and how to use them.

Therefore, it can be argued that participants identify the semiotic indexes of class as displayed by development agents not simply as a reflection of existing class relations but also as an act of reproducing those relations. These semiotic indexes are seen as symbolic acts of violence against their way of life. They assert their independence, and achieve power by rejecting the values, the materialities, and the class identities she represents, which they say they can live without. Thereafter, the female participants refused to take part in the discussion when prompted by the consultant. Instead, they countered in Dholuo: "What can we say you are the teacher just teach us" (Banda & Oketch, 2009, p. 178). These rural women can be said to reverse what they perceived as unjustified power performed by her body kinesics. They showed their power and voice by not participating any further in the discussion.

## 6 | SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The paper showed modes of social class signalling, such as place of residence, (types of) vehicles, lifestyle activities, food that one partakes in, education attainment, occupation, and so on, may individually or collectively intersect among themselves or with other dimensions such as gender, age, and the rural–urban dimensions to create differential effects within and across social class experiences. It

is the case that those residing *ku mayadi* "up market neighbourhoods" have more material resources and opportunities than those from *ku komboni* "low class compounds."

The participants contesting the use of what is supposed to be the prestigious code and speech form, elite English, for Dholuo or non-standard Kiswahili goes against rigid structuralist sociolinguistics as advocated in Labov (1972, 2006). The participants rebuke the development agent for the violence and interpretive silence they suffered due to the English used. They were muted and voiceless "not because they … had nothing to say, but because they [were] denied self-representation and [were] wilfully misunderstood" (May, 2014, p. 97).

Following May (2014), we see the workshop as a site at which class-based asymmetrical power differences converged. It is thus a site of marginalization, violence, and class contestations. In this regard, the paper suggests that, although the body (kinesics) behaviour of the female agent, for example, was marked as signalling social class, there were in fact other underlying and intersecting dimensions of social stratification in play. The expensive urban clothing she was wearing, the expensive SUV she drove to the workshop, and the elite English she used were all being experienced as signals of social class that were asymmetrically dominating their own. These intersected with other symbols of social status, such as the "flipcharts" and "writing," all of which were experienced by the local participants as positioning them as the "Other," "ignorant," and "illiterate" lower class—a marginalized status they were unprepared to accept. Thus, they resisted. This was seen in their only commenting in Dholuo and refusing to respond to questions asked in English.

From the foregoing, the paper suggests that sociolinguistics needs to identify the strategies that the marginalized use to challenge social structures of inequality. Otherwise there is a risk that sociolinguistics will characterize inequalities as permanent and fixed, and victims of unequal treatment as perpetually condemned and never able to rise against the structures that oppress them. Sociolinguistic scholarship hazards reinforcing and validating inequalities and marginalization as natural consequences of societal norms, instead of addressing them as problems that have to be addressed to restructure and remake the world (Crenshaw, 1989). This could include pointing out breaches and cracks in social structures, and identifying strategies that can be used to overcome inequalities and marginalization. Although based on a specific context in Africa, it is hoped that this paper can provide lessons for sociolinguistic research on class elsewhere.

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