Intersectionality and class, race and gender in sociolinguistics research

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"To focus on the particular arrangements that race or class or gender take in our time and place without seeing these structures as sometimes parallel and sometime interlocking dimensions of the more fundamental relationship of domination and subordination may temporarily ease our consciences. But while such thinking may lead to short term social reforms, it is simply inadequate for the task of bringing about long-term social transformation." (Hill-Collins, 1993: 674)

In this quote Patricia Hill Collins (1993) writes about the political toothlessness of research which takes a divide-and-analyse approach to dimensions of domination and subordination such as race, gender and social class. Hill-Collins’s reference to long term social transformation is an idea going back to Marxism and it is in Marxism where we find class as a key way of understanding the human condition in industrialized societies. Over the past century and a half understandings of class have evolved from a Marxist, economics-based interpretation to the idea that class may also be framed in terms of social and cultural forces. One big challenge facing scholars who situate class at the centre of their research is to work out how it intersects with identity inscriptions such as race and gender, and in sociolinguistics research, how to relate such intersections with language practices of all kinds. In this paper, I start with class as the central construct but then with intersectionality as an epistemological framework in mind, I move to consider how social class interacts with race and gender in society at large and with regard to language practices. Drawing on previous work where intersectionality has been in evidence (e.g. Fought, 2006; Picher, 2009; Skeggs, 2006; Urciuoli, 1996), I move to make suggestions for future work in this vein in sociolinguistics.

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