Social class has been a central concept in sociolinguistic research. Variationist sociolinguists continue to debate, however, in research and in calling for methodological advancement of the subfield (Rickford 1986, 2001; Ash 2002; Eckert 2003), how best to categorize speakers by an objectively operationalized social class variable in studies of language variation. Rickford (2001: 200) suggests that explanations for quantitative patterns in language variation that correlate with social class are best accounted for in the sociological and anthropological literature. Yet, class has been less often and less systematically investigated in anthropological research than have race, gender, sexuality, and other structures, while best practices for the operationalization and measurement of social class as a variable have long been debated in sociology. These interdisciplinary disconnects hinder analyses of the social distinctions based on class, status, and stratification that emerge in sociolinguistic field studies.

In this paper, I approach the endeavor of revisiting the familiar categories of class, status, and stratification in sociolinguistic field research by presenting findings from a study of variation between two women’s groups in a small black Appalachian community. Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection and analysis that are familiar to both linguistic anthropologists and variationist sociolinguists, I investigate the language and habits of the two groups. In addition to status differences in lifestyle and presentation, variationist analyses uncover significant differences in the two groups’ use of diagnostic regional and ethnic morphosyntactic, syntactic, and lexical structures, such as copula absence, habitual be, and expletive use. The two groups’ divergent linguistic practice, language ideologies, and social habits distinguish them as discrete social groups, who espouse different language ideologies as well as religious norms of morality, middle-class notions of feminine decorum, and educational standards.

The combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques of data collection and analysis familiar to anthropologists, linguistic anthropologists, and variationist sociolinguists provide, in this analysis, a more nuanced view of how individuals and groups draw upon social and linguistic symbols to construct identities, boundaries, and statuses. Much like Nichols’ (1979) research on 16 lower-class black women and men in rural, coastal South Carolina, this study indicates that “objective” measures of social class that center on income, wealth, education, and occupation may have less meaning in some communities. Meanwhile, less overt status distinctions may be as relevant or more as individuals and groups establish linguistic and social boundaries. Cultural capital and social status, in particular, may intersect with gender, age, religion, ethnic identity, and region, in a variety of locally defined ways, to affect language variation across and within communities. A triangulation of theoretical, methodological, and analytic frameworks that draw from sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, sociology, and anthropology may best uncover relevant local linguistic and social practices that are also grounded in broader power...
relations. Cross-disciplinary approaches to class, status, and stratification may thus productively reconnect the fields of variationist sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, sociology, and anthropology, in ways that strengthen each field while furthering interdisciplinary collaboration.

References