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Sociolinguistic insights into chick lit: Constructing the social class of elegant poverty[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Aiming at suggesting ways whereby the sociolinguistic paradigm can benefit from the analysis of chick lit, this paper explores the ways through which the social class of “elegant poverty” is stylistically constructed in Modern Greek chick lit texts. Although chick lit has been analyzed primarily in terms of gender identity construction, I argue that it can be also seen as a goldmine of styles pertinent to social class due to its rather extravagant but meticulous treatment of social class cultural models and the caustic stylistic representation thereof, both of which aim at increasing the sales of chick lit. More specifically, chick lit offers analytical insights into social classes that are powerful but are traditionally hard to get ethnographic access to, such as elegant poverty in Athens. Relatively recently formed, elegant poverty consists of primarily former wealthy northern Athenian suburbanites who due to the financial recession are characterized by the ownership of estate but absolute lack of cash. Drawing on excerpts from chick lit authored by Pavlina Nasioutzik, it is argued that in chick lit elegant poverty is represented as the amalgam of socioeconomic and cultural models, which are styled through irony, satire and code-switching.

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1. Introduction

A common thread that runs through socioculturally-minded linguistics (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005) is an orientation to non-fictional data, in the sense that the analysis of linguistic conduct must be based on authentic data (cf. Bucholtz, 2003; Coupland, 2007a: 25–6; Johnstone, 2013; chapters in Lacoste et al., 2014) from actual people and not fictional characters. Broadly speaking, these include natural(istic) data collected through observation and recording, as opposed to data gathered from fiction or data constructed on the basis of sociolinguists’ introspection. It is usually the case that the data collected in the field represent the way speakers actually use language, so any analysis thereof would yield findings relevant to the use of natural, i.e. unmonitored and unedited, casual and everyday language. On the other hand, fictional data, namely data from fiction, are not usually considered in the context of sociolinguistics due to an alleged lack of authenticity, as has been recently argued (Lillis, 2013: Chapter 1; Lillis and McKinney, 2013: 432).

Nonetheless, I argue that this type of data should be incorporated into the sociolinguistic agenda, even though their

naturalness may be sometimes challenged, because they are the performative product of social actors (cf. Bell and Gibson, 2011), the authors, who live and work in a given society reproducing the lifestyle and linguistic practices found within that society. In fact, Stamou (2014: 123) has argued that fiction “constructs a particular version of language and the world”. In addition, the authors provide their reader with their reflections on society, including its sociolinguistic and lifestyle diversity, through their fictional texts. In this way, fictional data can be seen as not only reflecting the society, in which they are created, but also to a certain extent as having an impact on that society (cf. de Certeau, 1984). Quantitatively speaking, this impact is evident in their popularity indexed through the sales of the fictional texts (e.g. the best-selling books of Sophie Kinsella, including *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, and Helen Fielding’s best selling novels *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*, to name just some examples from the UK) and qualitatively speaking the impact is seen in the number of comments and types of readers’ feedback on these fictional texts in both face-to-face and online discussions,¹ whose analysis, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. In light of this, fiction is a commodity that awaits to be consumed and evaluated. Inasmuch as it involves linguistic production by social actors addressing social actors as consumers, readers and evaluators, its

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¹ For example, http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/884776.Bridget_Jones_s_Diary_and_Bridget_Jones (accessed on 21/5/2017).

texts fall under the scope of the relationship between language and society and hence should be treated as (socio)linguistic material that merits to be considered for analysis.

Such take on chick lit is also in alignment with a relatively recent turn of sociolinguistic inquiry into the investigation of writing (papers in [Lillis and McKinney, 2013](#)) as a legitimate token of sociolinguistic practice, in order to achieve a “complete” sociolinguistics ([Blommaert, 2013: 442](#)). The latter translates into a sociolinguistics that constructs its theoretical and methodological apparatus through the investigation of not only oral speech but also writing in all its diverse forms, ranging from new (digital) literacies (e.g. [Prinsloo, 2005](#)) to linguistic (e.g. chapters in [Shohamy and Gorter, 2009](#)) and wider semiotic landscapes (e.g. chapters in [Jaworski and Thurlow, 2011](#)).

Literature in general and chick lit in particular can be seen, I argue, as an equally legitimate candidate that can contribute toward the aforementioned sociolinguistic agenda, inasmuch as it is an example of writing as an ideological object (cf. [Maybin, 2013: 549ff.](#)). What this means is that the genre of chick lit, to which incidentally all of the aforementioned examples of Sophie Kinsella’s and Helen Fielding’s fictional novels also belong and which is discussed immediately below, can be dealt with as containing language that not only carries but also contributes toward the creation of certain types of identities, including gender and social class, as well as the establishment of certain political, social, cultural and, of course, linguistic ideologies.

Against this backdrop, the following section discusses chick lit by linking it to issues of social class, which is the focus of this paper.

2. Chick lit and social class

Chick lit is a form of contemporary popular fiction, very popular primarily in the Western world (e.g. [Donadio, 2006](#)), which includes novels written primarily by women (see, however, [Montoro, 2012: 2](#)), and (largely) for women, depicting “the life, loves, trials and tribulations of their predominantly (but not exclusively) young, single, urban, female protagonists” ([Gormley, 2009: 1st paragraph](#)).

The term “chick”, when applied to women, originally meant a child, but it is also drawn from the chicken metaphor: the term denotes the fluffy “offspring of a species not known for its great intelligence” ([Mills, 1989: 47](#)). Hence, employed to refer to the writer and reader of chick lit, the term “chick” implies women “who are not intellectual, who are child-like, and are concerned with trivialities; women who are defined according to youth, sexual status and attractiveness” ([Gormley, 2009: 4th paragraph](#)). In light of this, chick lit emphasizes its relation to popularized narratives instead of the literary or canonical ones.

Against this backdrop, a variety of styles and voices along with their social meanings are enregistered through chick lit, namely they “come to be recognized in a particular cultural setting” ([Coupland, 2013: 292](#)). The particular cultural setting, in the case of chick lit, is the genre itself, which is indexed visually (for example, through the covers of chick lit novels, which usually have light (primarily various tones of pink or lilac) colours and portray female figures engaging in consumerist practices), spatially (chick lit novels are usually found in best-seller title bookshelves in central bookstores in major cities and airports), and, as is going to be shown, linguistically as well.

Although chick lit can be seen as a primarily “gendered sphere” (cf. [Gormley, 2009: 5th paragraph](#); [Gormley, 2013](#)), issues of gender in chick lit (cf. [Pérez-Serrano, 2009](#)) are intricately interwoven with issues of social class. This becomes evident if one looks into the structure of chick lit. The latter can be internally defined by the structure of a female central character “seeking personal fulfilment in a romance-consumer-comedic vein” ([Knowles, 2004: 2](#)).

What this means is that consumerist practices feature prominently in the narration and the author’s reflections on social classes found in chick lit, so given the tight connection between consumerism, which creates inequality in the purchasing power of people, and social class, it makes sense to treat chick lit novels in general as “dramas of social class, not love stories” ([Campbell, 2006](#)). The consumer-oriented dimension of the chick lit structure translates into lifestyle discourses indexing social class, which are analyzed in this paper. Gender analysis is beyond the scope of this paper due to space restrictions.

Social class is viewed here as an identity inscription relevant to the “subjectively experienced” ([Block, 2014: 58](#)) material and cultural stylistic circumstances of the characters of the Greek chick lit novels, described below, which are articulated stylistically by the author. In the socially-minded linguistic scholarship, despite its pervasiveness in the variationist sociolinguistic paradigm² social class has only very recently received attention as a constructed category (e.g. [Theodoropoulou, 2014](#); for an overview of the relevant scholarship, see [Block, 2014: Chapter 3](#)), and it has been dealt with as such primarily by scholars working with data from the United Kingdom, such as [Rampton \(2003, 2006\)](#), [Coupland \(2007b\)](#), and [Snell \(2010\)](#). The reasons behind this narrow, in terms of the range of languages that have been analyzed so far, body of work on social class in the social constructivist paradigm may be that due to its vast number of different distinctions and labels used in different countries according to the various socioeconomic hierarchies, social class is notoriously hard to pinpoint as a distinctive analytical category. Another reason may be that, due to the fact that the majority of linguists who conduct this type of research are indeed members of the middle-class, they take social class for granted, hence they have not felt the need to delve into it analytically until now ([Block, 2014: 170-1](#)).

In Greek socially-minded linguistic scholarship, in which this study is specifically embedded, there is a recent study by [Stamou \(2011\)](#) that has investigated social class as a constructed category in the Greek TV comedy series *Konstantinou kai Elenis* and has found that, even though it seems that Greek television, as represented by this particular TV product, promotes a discourse of social class stratification through associating upper and lower classes with stereotypical linguistic repertoires, eventually it deconstructs this social class hierarchy by promoting a post-modern discourse of classlessness (cf. [Coupland, 2007b: 63](#), who talks about the waning of implications of class).

Although classlessness may be the dominant discourse constructed and projected through the aforementioned TV series, my personal experience with Greek popular culture and, more specifically, with Greek chick lit has shown me that there are a number of fictional texts, primarily by the author Pavlina Nasioutzik, which index a social class-sensitized society in Athens on the basis of making reference to the world, culture and, needless to say, language of the leafy Northern Suburbs (Voreia Proastia, henceforth VP).³ In fact, there are a number of studies from both the real (e.g. [Kailoglou, 2010, 2014](#); [Theodoropoulou, 2013](#)) and the fictional world (primarily analyses of data from popular culture, including TV series and hip hop songs; see e.g. [Theodoropoulou, 2014: Chapter 3](#)), which have also pointed toward class sensitivity in Athenian society.

In addition, the recent financial crisis that has hit Greece has inevitably led to a complete restructuring of the social order in Greece (see papers in [Wodak and Angouri, 2014](#) and papers in

² For an overview, see [Labov \(2006: 380–403\)](#).

³ Athenian VP, as some of the most expensive areas in the prefecture of Attica, host primarily upper middle and upper class people and, as such, they are stereotypically associated with behaviors and norms that pertain to excessive wealth, which are discussed in this paper.

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