

## A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF *FREEDOM WRITERS* MOVIE

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### **Abstract**

Language and society may influence each other. Study regarding the relationship between these two has always been interesting to conduct. This current research aims to see the use of language in its relation to social context used in a movie entitled “Freedom Writers” and the factors behind it. This study used a descriptive qualitative method. The data were obtained from Freedom Writers’ movie script which was taken from [www.imsdb.com](http://www.imsdb.com) *Freedom Writers Script – Transcript from the Screenplay and/or the Hillary Swank Movie*. First, the utterances by the characters were classified based on some linguistic features; phonology, morphology, syntax, as well as vocabulary. Then, they were analyzed to see how the characters, the white and the colored-people, used different versions of English to mark the identity of their social status in the society. The results show that there are some differences of linguistic features used by different groups of people based on their status in the society. These differences are caused by some factors. Apart from race, education level and social background are the factors that influence the forming of language styles used by a person.

**Keywords:** Sociolinguistic, Syntax, Morphology, Phonology, *Freedom Writers* Movie.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Language is simply defined as a tool for communication. Hudson (1980: 73) says that people use language in order to interact and socialize with their social community. Social community itself can be categorized as any group of people who are drawn together for a certain purpose or purposes, while language is what the member of that particular society speaks (Wardhaugh, 2006: 1). From this definition, it can be seen that language plays a crucial role in the process of human interaction. Human are able to work together and build

relationship with any other people all over the world by making use of language. People utilize language to share ideas, thoughts, and views in order to be heard, understood, and accepted in community.

The relationship between language and society has been being the object of linguistic study for long time. Scholars argue on how language and society are related. Wardhaugh in his book *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (2006: 10 – 11) says that there is a variety of possible relationships between language and society. He gives four

possibilities on how these two aspects relate each other. First is that social structure may either influence or determine linguistic structure or behavior. Certain evidence may be drawn from the age-grading phenomenon, whereby young children speak differently from older children, and in turn, children speak differently from mature adults. This variety of language is determined by certain social requirements. The second possible relationship is directly opposed the first, that linguistic structure or behavior may either influence or determine social structure. The next possible relationship is that the influence is bi-directional, that language and society may influence each other as Dittmar (in Wardhaugh, 2006: 10) claims that speech behavior and social behavior are in state of constant interaction. The last possibility is to assume that there is no relationship at all between language structure and social structure and that each is independent of the other.

One thing for sure is that language is surely beneficial to identify people's cultural background. It reflects the identity of a community or a race. The process of producing language is not merely about making some certain

sounds or arranging some chain of words to form a meaningful complex sentence but it involves many other aspects related to the usage of language in society. Realized or not, one produces language by considering some social aspects such as speaking participant, setting, topic, aim, and function of conversation, even the prestigious thing they get when uttering an utterance (Holmes, 1997: 12). Language indirectly shows someone's identity when they are speaking. Thus, the speaking partner will directly recognize the origin, the educational background, even the language society of a speaker due to language style he uses in communication (Holmes, 2007: 133).

This present research, therefore, tries to see the relationship between language and society found in Freedom Writers' movie. This movie was selected because it clearly shows the difference of language usage based on different social status of the speakers. It is aimed to figure out how social factors distinguish people's language structure, such as phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Since 1960s, linguists have developed a new way of seeing language which is away different from those structural views. They started to consider language from its usage in social context. This new field is known as sociolinguistics. Yule (2006: 205) says that sociolinguistics is used generally for the study of the relationship between language and society. This is a broad area of investigation that developed through interaction of linguistics with a number of other academic disciplines. It has strong connections with anthropology through the study of language and culture, and with sociology through the investigation of the role language plays in the organization of social groups and institution. It is also tied to social psychology, particularly with regard to how attitudes and perceptions are expressed and how in-group and out-group behaviors are identified. People use these connections when they try to analyze language from a social perspective.

Holmes (1997: 1) states that sociolinguists are interested in explaining why people speak differently in different social contexts, and they are concerned with indentifying the social functions of language and the way it is

used to convey social meaning. Examining the way they use language in different social contexts provides a wealth of information about the way language works, as well as about the social relationship in community because the way people talk is surely influenced by the social context in which they are talking. In short, sociolinguistics is concerned with the relationship between language and the context in which it is used.

He also adds that certain social factors have been relevant in accounting for the particular variety used. In any situation linguistic choices will generally reflect the influence of some components, such as the participants, the settings, the topics, and the functions of conversation. Some factors also affect language variation chosen by people when they are talking, such as age, sex, educational background, ethnic group, and social status in community (Holmes, 1997: 11 – 12).

Moreover, Gumperz in Wardhaugh (2006: 11) shares the same idea that sociolinguistics is an attempt to find correlations between social structure and linguistic structure and to observe any changes that occur. Social structure itself may be measured by reference to

such factors as social class and educational background, and verbal behavior and performance may be related to these factors. The way people speak will be influenced by context involved in the conversation, which creates various language styles depend on that context.

According to Crane et al (1981: 175), sociolinguistics can be seen as a study which focuses on analyzing the diversity of language. There are many ways of describing the diversity of it. One can look at changes over geographical areas, at the various dialect of a language, at special forms of language such as pidgin, and at slang. However, sociolinguistics is concerned not only with the description of such diversity but also with the analysis of how linguistic differences are related to sociological differences among individuals because as individual social characteristics vary, so does their language.

On the other hand, Parker (1986: 121) sees sociolinguistics as the field of interrelationship between socioeconomic status of a group of speakers and the characteristics of the dialect they speak. He gives example on how the English of upper middle-class New Yorkers differs

from the lower working-class New Yorkers. This definition raises an interest in standard and nonstandard dialect. In sociolinguistic point of view, a standard dialect is the dialect used by many leaders of government, business, and education and heard over most of national broadcast media. It draws no negative attention to itself, that is, educated people would not judge a person speaking such a dialect as socially inferior and lacking education. On the other hand, a nonstandard dialect is simply different from the standard one. It draws negative attention to itself. Each nonstandard dialect in each language is as logical, legitimate, and linguistically sophisticated as the standard dialect but not as socially acceptable. However, it is important to note that identifying a dialect as standard or nonstandard is a sociological judgment, not linguistics judgment (Crane et. al, 1981: 179 – 180 and Parker, 1986: 122).

An example of the difference between standard and nonstandard dialect can be taken from Black English phenomenon. In the United States, Black English, or the speech of the lower-middle class resident of Brooklyn are treated as example of nonstandard

dialect which differ from the standard one. The differences can be seen from phonological side, such as ‘nice’ in Standard English will be pronounced [nays] while Black English [na:s]; morphological side, such as Standard English says *she walks* while Black English says *she walk*; and syntactical side, such as in Standard English has *I’m going to take a walk* while in Black English it becomes *I’m a take a walk*. Moreover, those who speak this kind of dialect also use some different lexicons that cannot be found in the standard form of English (Crane et. al, 1981: 180 and Parker, 1986: 123 – 136). Those previous examples show that one aspect which creates language variety is the different social factors that grow in human’s life.

From this explanation, it can be concluded that sociolinguistics concerns on how language and society relate each other and create some variety on language people use in communication. This variety is caused by some factors such as age, sex, ethnic group, education background, or social status in community. It can be seen through phonology, morphology, syntax and vocabulary.

### **3. ABOUT THE MOVIE: *FREEDOM WRITERS (2007)***

This is a based-on-true-story movie about Erin Gruwell, a new excited school teacher who left the safety of her hometown, Newport Beach, to teach at Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, a formerly high school which two years earlier implemented a voluntary integration program. Her enthusiasm was quickly challenged when she found out that her class was all at-risk students, known as “unteachables”. Erin was unprepared for the nature of her classroom whose students lived by generations of strict moral codes of protecting their own at all cost. Many were in gangs and almost all knew somebody that had been killed by gang violence. The Latinos hated the Cambodians who hated the black and so on. The only person the students hated more was Ms. Gruwell. It was not until Erin held an unsanctioned discussion about a recent drive-by shooting death that she fully began to understand what she was up against. She, then, provided an assignment of writing a daily journal telling about the students’ life that the students began to open up to her. At the end of the story, the journals were

compiled and named *The Freedom Writers Diary*.

Directed by Richard LaGravense, this movie is starred Hillary Swank as Erin Gruwell and some other multi-ethnic young actresses and actors. The storyline took place around 1992 – 1995 when the issue of gang violence was still in every Americans' minds. This movie shows a great difference in language variation used by the Erin Gruwell and some other white, educated teachers and those lower class and less-educated young multi-ethnic students. Therefore, this present research will try to analyze the language differences that occur in this movie.

#### **4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research can be classified into a descriptive qualitative research since it describes, interprets, and overcomes the problems clearly based on the accurate data. The object of this research is those utterances which fit language variation uttered by both white and colored-people in the movie. Those data were obtained from Freedom Writers' movie script taken from [www.imsdb.com](http://www.imsdb.com) *Freedom Writers Script – Transcript from the Screenplay*

*and/or the Hillary Swank Movie*. In the process of research, the utterance was classified and analyzed based on some linguistic features, such as phonology, morphology, syntax, as well as vocabulary. The data were analyzed by comparing the standard and nonstandard version of the language used by both white and colored-people.

#### **5. DISCUSSION**

*Freedom Writers* is a perfect description of sociolinguistics phenomenon arises in a multicultural society. It clearly describes the difference usage of language based on speaker's social background. It can be seen here that the variation of language is affected by different social factors involve when conversation takes place. Those social factors underlined in this movie are race, color, social background, family and the education level of the speaker. Focused on Los Angeles life style, this movie stresses the difference between white – who belongs to upper middle-class society, and colored Americans – who belongs to lower class one. White Americans are those who get high level of education and well-built social life, while coloured Americans belong to suburban societies with low

level of education and never ending gang war and violence. They consist of multi ethnic immigrants such as Asian, South American, Latino, and African-American.

Example 1:

*Marcus : ..... because we ain't afraid to **die** [da] protecting our own. At least when you die [da] for your own, you **die** [da] with respect, you **die** [da] a warrior.*

*Erin : So, when you're dead, you'll get respect? Is that what you think? You know what's going to happen when you **die** [daI]?*

The conversation takes place in the classroom. Marcus, a black African-American student, debates his teacher, Erin Gruwell, about his gangster life. In the first example, there is different pronunciation of the word **die** from both speakers with different social backgrounds. An African-American who comes from troubled-society and has low level of education tends to spell word **die** with [da] while white American, with high social class, tends to use the formal form from the word **die** [dal]. Pronouncing die with [da] breaks the rule of Standard English phonological

system, therefore this way of pronunciation is considered to be informal and nonstandard.

Another example can be seen when Erin Gruwell pronounces the word 'Eva'. American English phonological system spells the sound /e/ with [i], while Latino pronounces it with original [e]. It is influenced by the the phonological system of their mother language. Thus, this difference leads to misspelling the name 'Eva' becomes [eiva] which is originally just [eva].

Example 2:

*Erin : Eva [eiva] Benitez.*

*Eva : It's Eva [eva], not [eiva].*

Besides phonological varieties, this movie shows the difference in morphological side as well. Example 3 gives an example of morphological crime of Standard English done by an African-American student. He performs a substandard way of saying 'you all' by combining these two free morphemes into single morpheme 'y'all' which is considered to be informal.

Example 3:

*Jamal : Get your ass back to China, all of y'all.*

Another example shows the contra side of these words ‘you all’. These words were said differently by white and well-educated Erin Gruwell with ‘all of you’.

Example 4:

*Erin : Wait! Wait! Please stay in your seats! All of you stay in your seats, please!*

This movie also provides us with lots of examples of syntactical crime done by those colored students. This syntactical crime range variously, for example omitting the copula of a sentence. Those colored students prefer to neglect grammatical concepts of Standard English and create their own language styles, such as the use of lexicon *ain’t* (to express negative sentences), *gonna* (going to), and *coz*, (because). The examples below show many grammatical errors committed when colored people speak nonstandard version of American English.

Example 5:

*Andre : I gotta get out of here. (= I am going to get out of here)*

Example 6:

*Jamal : Man, I know you ain’t talking to me! (= Man, I know you are not talking to me!)*

Example 7:

*Jamal : Ain’t nobody touched your damn bag. (= Nobody touched your damn bag)*

Example 8:

*Marcus : I talking to ya. (= I am talking to you)*

Example 9:

*Sindy : Whadap? (= What’s up?)*

Example 10:

*Eva : You looking kinda pale, was it the ale? Oh, pops was wrong. (= You looked kind of pale, was it the ale? Oh, father was wrong.)*

Example 11:

*Tito : You don’t know nothing about us. (= You know nothing about us or You don’t know anything about us.)*

From some examples described above, it can be seen that the minority class has a tendency to neglect the standard grammar of English and create their own language styles. However,



since it has been generally used, this language style can be understood and does not cause any ambiguity effect among the speakers.

The last language variation found in this movie relates to the choice of vocabularies or lexicon. Erin Gruwell as a teacher who is an educated person tends to use standard vocabularies. She also often uses scientific and political terms, such as *retaliation* rather than *revenge*. On the other hand, the students tend to use non-standard vocabularies, slang and other vocabularies that tend to be uneducated, such as *bitch*, *damn*, *ass*, *dumb*, *dumbass*, *goddamn*, *bullshit*, and *shit*. It is caused by their social life in the suburb of Los Angeles where the majority of the societies are from the same race with the low level education and economy. It can be seen from the examples below:

Example 12:

*Jamal : I give this **bitch** a week.*

Example 13:

*Jamal : Yeah, and that's some **bullshit**.  
It's the **dumb** class, coz.*

Example 14:

*Jamal : Sit your **punk ass** down,  
homeboy!*

Example 15:

*Gloria : Ms. G, he just took my **damn**  
bag!*

On the example 15, Gloria, one of students coming from Latin America, calls Erin Gruwell as *Ms. G*. This informal call generally used by the minority people of America. It can be compared with the formal call addressed to Erin Gruwell by another student who are originally American, who calls Erin as *Ms. Gruwell*.

Example 16:

*Ben : **Ms. Gruwell**, can I read  
something from my journal?*

Despite of using English as their main language, those multicultural ethnic members still maintain their mother language when they communicate with their own members. It can be seen from the way they give their kinship terms. Instead of using English to refer 'my father', a Latino will use the word *mi papa*, *mi amigos* for my friends, and *moms* and *pops* to call father and mother.

From all explanations and examples given above, it is clearly seen that social factors such as ethnic group, race, and even education give influence on language varieties. The language people use to communicate will be affected by those social factors and draw certain uniqueness for each language or dialect which distinguish it from other varieties. On the other hand, linguistic variation itself can provide social information. The background of a speaker can be easily determined by the language he uses in communication.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The sociolinguistics explanation and analysis applied on the *Freedom Writers* film gives a review about the language process occurred among groups of people living in multicultural environment. Apart from the difference of race, education level and social background are the factors that influence in forming a language styles used by a person. It can be concluded that a person who has a high education level and

comes from honoured social environment chooses to use standard grammar and vocabularies. On the other hand, a person who comes from minority and marginalized class tends to emphasize their difference by using slang language style, a non-standard language.

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