

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE OF UKRAINE
Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv
Educational and Scientific Institute of Philology
Department of English Philology and Intercultural Communication

Bachelor's thesis

**SOCIAL STATUS FACTOR IN MODERN COMMUNICATION (BASED ON
ENGLISH)**



Valeriia Opanashchenko

4th year student of the Education Program

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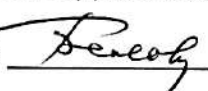
Supervised by:

Professor Olga Yashenkova

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ABSTRACT

**Valeriia Opanashchenko – Social Status Factor in Modern Communication
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This Bachelor's thesis investigates the relationship between language, politeness, and social status, with a particular focus on how hierarchical relations are constructed and reflected in communication. The study applies Discourse Analysis and Politeness Theory to examine how status differentiation is encoded through linguistic choices in traditional, digital, and cinematic contexts.

The first chapter outlines the theoretical framework for the study of social status in linguistics. It explores how language reflects and shapes social hierarchies, drawing on the work of William Labov, whose research on sociolinguistic variation demonstrates how speech patterns signal class and group identity. Gerhard Lenski's theory of social stratification is also considered, linking status to the distribution of resources and authority in society. This perspective is further connected to Van Dijk's analysis of discourse and power, which argues that modern hierarchies are increasingly maintained through the subtle control of language and knowledge. Special attention is given to politeness theory, particularly Brown and Levinson's concept of “face” and politeness strategies. The chapter also examines the relevance of the digital era, highlighting how contemporary forms of communication influence social interaction.

The second chapter focuses on the linguistic representation of social status in cinematic discourse, using the 2022 film *The Menu* as a case study.

It analyzes how social hierarchy is constructed and conveyed through verbal interaction, highlighting the role of language in reflecting power relations and the fluidity of status depending on the context.

The analysis examines the expression of hierarchical distance through dialogue, including lexical choices, forms of address, and levels of directness. It also explores the manifestation of high- and low-context communication styles, as well as the

politeness strategies employed by the characters and their role in maintaining hierarchical structures.

The results demonstrate that social status is not a fixed attribute but a dynamic construct dependent on communicative context. The study shows that traditional hierarchies based on economic or symbolic capital can be destabilized, while power is redistributed through discourse and pragmatic competence.

Keywords: social status, power, politeness strategies, communication context, social hierarchy.

АНОТАЦІЯ

Опанащенко В. Р. – Фактор соціального статусу в сучасній комунікації (на матеріалі англійської мови) – Кваліфікаційна (бакалаврська) робота на здобуття освітньо-кваліфікаційного рівня вищої освіти спеціальності 035 «Філологія» освітньо-професійної програми «Англійська філологія та переклад, дві західноєвропейські мови – Київський національний університет імені Тараса Шевченка, Київ, 2026.

Кваліфікаційна робота бакалавра досліджує взаємозв'язок між мовою, ввічливістю та соціальним статусом, зосереджуючись на тому, як ієрархічні відносини конструюються та відображаються у комунікації. У дослідженні застосовуються методи дискурс-аналізу та теорії ввічливості для вивчення того, яким чином статусна диференціація кодується через мовні засоби у традиційному, цифровому та кінематографічному контекстах.

Перший розділ включає теоретичну основу дослідження соціального статусу в лінгвістиці. У ньому розглядається, як мова відображає та формує соціальні ієрархії, з опорою на праці Вільяма Лабова, чії дослідження соціолінгвістичної варіативності демонструють, як мовленнєві особливості сигналізують про класову та групову належність. Також аналізується теорія соціальної стратифікації Гергарда Ленскі, яка пов'язує статус із розподілом ресурсів і влади в суспільстві. Цей підхід додатково співвідноситься з аналізом дискурсу та влади Теуна ван Дейка, згідно з яким сучасні ієрархії дедалі частіше підтримуються через прихований контроль над мовою та знаннями. Особлива увага приділяється теорії ввічливості, зокрема концепції «обличчя» та стратегіям ввічливості Брауна і Левінсона. У розділі також розглядається значення цифрової епохи, акцентуючи увагу на тому, як сучасні форми комунікації впливають на соціальну взаємодію.

Другий розділ присвячений мовній репрезентації соціального статусу в кінодискурсі на матеріалі фільму «Меню». У ньому аналізується, як соціальна

ієрархія конструюється та передається через вербальну взаємодію, підкреслюючи роль мови у відображенні владних відносин і мінливості статусу залежно від комунікативного контексту.

Аналіз зосереджується на вираженні ієрархічної дистанції через діалоги, зокрема на лексичному виборі, формах звертання та рівнях прямоти висловлювання. Також досліджуються прояви висококонтекстного та низькоконтекстного стилів комунікації, а також стратегії ввічливості, які використовують персонажі, і їхня роль у підтриманні ієрархічних структур.

Результати дослідження демонструють, що соціальний статус є не фіксованою характеристикою, а динамічним конструктом, залежним від комунікативного контексту. Робота показує, що традиційні ієрархії, засновані на економічному чи символічному капіталі, можуть бути дестабілізовані, тоді як влада перерозподіляється через дискурс і прагматичну компетентність.

Ключові слова: соціальний статус, влада, стратегії ввічливості, комунікативний контекст, соціальна ієрархія.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, our understanding of communication has evolved from a linear exchange of information to the recognition of communication as a key determinant of social reality. As Verderber and Verderber note, interaction is a relationship-based process in which identity is forged and power is distributed. In this context, language serves as a tool for structuring social relations and hierarchical levels. William Labov's (2006) sociolinguistic research confirms that speech patterns are not neutral but function as markers of class differentiation.

From a sociolinguistic and pragmatic perspective, social status is closely linked to concepts such as power, politeness and context. Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory provides insight into how speakers manage "face" and use mitigation strategies to navigate social hierarchies and maintain balance in interaction, which is explored in practice in the film "The Menu". Similarly, Teun A. Van Dijk's (2008) work on discourse and power illustrates how dominance in modern societies is maintained through subtle control of communication rather than overt coercion, highlighting the role of language in reproducing inequality.

The importance of social positioning in communication is widely recognized across various cultural contexts. This study examines the evolution of power and hierarchies, as well as the causal relationships through which they have become ingrained in the minds of people and expressions of hierarchy regulation become subconscious. Researchers have demonstrated that differences in status, ethnicity, gender, and cultural background add an extra layer of complexity to interactions, and that linguistic choices such as hedging, honorifics, modality and imperative forms serve as signals of hierarchical relationships.

In addition to real-life communication, the representation of authority relations in modern reality offers valuable insights into how hierarchy is constructed and interpreted. Films, as multimodal texts, combine language, nonverbal elements and social context to depict power dynamics and interpersonal relations. Dialogue, forms of address, and communicative behavior in "The Menu" as a prime example provide a

rich source for analyzing how social status is linguistically encoded and negotiated. By examining theoretical frameworks from scholars such as Verderber and Verderber, Labov, Lenski, Van Dijk and Brown and Levinson, alongside practical examples from film discourse, the research seeks to demonstrate how language operates as a key instrument in maintaining and challenging social hierarchy in contemporary communication.

The object of this study is social status constructed through linguistic means in communication.

The subject of this study is the linguistic markers and pragmatic strategies that reflect, maintain, or challenge social hierarchy in discourse.

The relevance of this study stems from the need to analyze social status in contemporary English through the lens of linguistic markers that determine hierarchical relationships in physical and digital spaces. The focus is on levels of directness and politeness strategies as tools for constructing power relations and social identity. In the context of contemporary digitalization, these mechanisms are becoming increasingly subtle, accompanied by the blurring of traditional status boundaries. Studying these transformations is critical for understanding the dynamics of social stratification in the contemporary communicative environment.

The purpose of this study is to investigate social status from a linguistic perspective, focusing on its manifestation and transformation in mediated communication. It aims to determine which linguistic components most clearly indicate social hierarchy, how they reflect interlocutors' power dynamics and how they work together to structure interaction. Additionally, the study looks at how these factors affect communication behavior in a variety of social contexts.

The objectives of the paper are the following:

1. to define the concept of social status from a linguistic perspective, including its formation, evolution and typology in communication;

2. to examine the relationship between power, hierarchy and interaction, and to identify how these elements shape communicative behavior;

3. to analyze politeness theory as a key framework for understanding how speakers manage or threat other's face and status differences in discourse;

4. to identify and analyze linguistic markers of social status, including forms of address, levels of directness and communicative strategies;

5. to explore the features of modern communication, particularly in the digital sphere, and their impact on the expression and negotiation of social hierarchy;

6. to investigate the representation of social status in cinema, focusing on linguistic and pragmatic features used in film to reflect hierarchical relations.

The methodological basis of the research includes discourse analysis, pragmatic analysis and elements of critical discourse analysis. The methods applied involve qualitative analysis of film dialogue, contextual interpretation of linguistic units and comparative analysis of communicative strategies.

Research material: film *The Menu* (2022), theoretical and scholarly works in the fields of sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis, including politeness theory (Brown & Levinson), high- and low-context communication (Verderber & Verderber), and critical discourse analysis (van Dijk).

Structure of the work: the work consists of an introduction, two chapters, conclusions to each chapter, general conclusion, the list of references, the list of illustrative material, summary.

The practical significance of the study lies in its applicability to discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and communication studies, providing a framework for analyzing how linguistic choices construct and negotiate social hierarchy in real and mediated interactions.

I. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF LINGUISTIC STUDIES ON SOCIAL STATUS

1.1. Linguistic conceptualization of social interactions.

A wide range of genres in society reflects various forms of social interaction between people in different situations. These genres occur across diverse communicative contexts: from strictly structured business meetings and negotiations to public speeches and media discourse; from casual everyday conversations and spontaneous remarks to emotionally charged confessions. Each genre reflects the beliefs and social attitudes of a particular community regarding the expectations and roles of participants.

Under such influence, human behavior is largely shaped by social factors, thus cannot occur randomly. The choice of linguistic means, intonation, and discourse strategy depends on the communicative situation, the status of the interlocutors, the nature of their relationship, and the goals they seek to achieve. Furthermore, speech genres are dynamic, as they may evolve in response to new social or technological processes, and in the process reinforce existing social norms. For example, the emergence of digital platforms has led to the rise of communication via messaging apps, which alter established standards of interaction but do not change attitudes toward specific groups as a whole.

Depending on the combination of various methods and styles of communication, communicativists distinguish between two main types of communication: verbal and non-verbal. Mary R. Key, in her book *The Relationship of Verbal and Nonverbal Communication*, compares this relationship to a game of chess, where each move and component of the "game" is essential for successful interaction. She mentions this idea in the quote: “... *verbal and nonverbal expressions are a means of establishing and maintaining contact or interaction between people and the environment, as well as rejecting and breaking relationship*” [24, p.4].

In general, nonverbal communication serves as a complement to speech, though it is not equivalent to fully developed linguistic systems such as sign languages.

Nonverbal cues support or reinforce spoken language, but they cannot fully replace it. Because of this supporting role, their ability to convey complex concepts is limited in a broader, global context. Nevertheless, the degree of emotional engagement, agreement, or disagreement can be expressed effectively through nonverbal communication. Non-verbal communication can be divided into two main types: static and dynamic. Static elements include stable characteristics that do not change during a conversation, such as clothing, physical appearance, accessories and the surrounding environment. These elements often signal social status, professional identity, or group membership. On the other hand, dynamic aspects are characteristics that shift during conversation, such as bodily movements, tone of voice, eye contact and facial emotions. These signals, which are sometimes impulsive and unconscious, convey sincere attitudes toward the other person, but do not simply signal social status [31].

Verbal communication, on the other hand, consists of spoken or written words used to convey thoughts and intentions in a form that is understandable within a specific linguistic and cultural community. While any language can be used to describe a wide range of situations in text form, such texts contain nuances that are most fully acceptable to native or highly proficient speakers. Communication encompasses dialogue, group discussions, exchanges of views, as well as written forms such as correspondence, reports and texts in the media. In the contemporary digital world, this also includes text messages and social media posts [1].

Cultural differences in communication styles are particularly evident in the distinction between low-context and high-context cultures, a concept explored by Verderber and Verderber. In low-context societies, words are used to convey meaning clearly. Communication is straightforward, and words such as “absolutely” and “exactly” are frequently used; as a result, even silence may be interpreted as communicatively marked and uncomfortable. In such cultural contexts, the ability to speak freely and directly serves as an indicator of social status: the higher the status, the more categorical speech acts can be. In contrast, in high-context cultures, situational elements, shared prior knowledge, and nonverbal cues play an important

role in conveying meaning. Speech is typically indirect and ambiguous, often associated with Grice's Cooperative Principle, which supports indirectness. The ability to use subtle hints, metaphors, and even silence is an indicator of social status in these societies. High status is often associated with the ability to speak "between the lines," which allows for interpretation and demonstrates cultural competence [1; 45; 16].

Disciplines such as sociology and sociolinguistics are crucial for understanding the various aspects of interpersonal relationships. Models of social interaction, which are often perceived as natural, are in fact historically shaped phenomena that have developed over centuries and become ingrained in the collective consciousness. In this study, it is necessary to focus on how sociolinguistics analyzes communication as a key factor in the establishment of a phenomenon such as social status.

In the manual work by Ulrich Ammon, Norbert Dittmar, Klaus J. Mattheier "Sociolinguistics / Soziolinguistik", how sociolinguistics developed its subject matter and definitions. Early scholars like Bright described sociolinguistics as the study of systematic links between social structures and language, aiming to uncover cause-and-effect relationships. This required examining how elements like speakers' and listeners' social standing affect communication [2].

By describing models of language-society interaction, later researchers expanded the field. Joshua Fishman, for example, focused on the practical dimensions of language use, formulating the well-known question 'who speaks what language to whom and under what conditions'. His approach stressed the importance of the fact that the choice of language and speech strategies is closely linked to the social status of participants: language may be a sign of belonging to a group and used for supporting or undermining hierarchy. Allen Grimshaw systematized perspectives, including the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis, which proposes that language shapes or affects how people think and see the world. These perspectives view language as either an object shaped by ideology or a tool for accomplishing social goals, with dominant classes using language practices to embed and reproduce inequality.

William Bright advanced the study of language and society by distinguishing positivist from dialectical approaches. Positivist models emphasize observable correlations between linguistic and social variables – for instance, noting that high-status speakers often use “prestigious” words or pronunciation. Dialectical approaches, by contrast, explore dynamic interaction and ask “why” such patterns emerge. Bright ultimately identified co-variance – the idea that social facts and linguistic facts change together – as the central hypothesis of sociolinguistics, a theory now widely regarded as a persuasive explanation of their interdependence. [2; 5].

Grammatical, phonetic, lexical and syntactic language varieties are used differently by various social groupings. Such variation is socially structured and unconsciously reproduced by native speakers. Lower-class speech is frequently stigmatized as uncommon, while upper-class speech is codified as the esteemed “standard” in many civilizations. Scholars therefore stress social class as a key variable in studying language variation, since it strongly shapes linguistic behavior and choice. Despite being universal, language takes on diverse forms in different civilizations and social groupings, resulting in dialects or jargon that differ in vocabulary, syntax, pronunciation and intonation. For example, in English, a carbonated beverage may be called “*soda*” in one region and “*pop*” in another, while British speakers use the word “*lorry*” where American speakers say “*truck*.” [48; 20].

These differences indicate historical continuity, social belonging and heritage. Although these distinctions may appear regional at first, they serve as identity markers in social interactions, indicating group membership while setting one group apart from another. These characteristics are evaluated according to social status: lower-class speech is frequently viewed negatively, while elite speech is seen as the norm. Even when such perceptions are not substantiated, regional speech can still be subject to stereotypes, such as being lower-class, rural, or less educated or less authoritative. As a result, native speakers who use features associated with the prestigious variety may be perceived as more competent, educated, or professional. This perception can

influence hiring decisions, academic assessment, media representation, and broader social mobility. [48].

For instance, Southern American English functions as a distinctive regional variety and is closely tied to identity and cultural perception. Educated or urban speakers may shift toward standardized American English in professional contexts, while SAE features such as *y'all*, double modals (might could), or the “Southern drawl” of /ai/ (so ride sounds like rahd) and broader vowel shifts remain common in everyday communication. These features are stereotyped as less authoritative in academic or professional settings, despite the fact that they are frequently linked to warmth and hospitality [47].

Moreover, William Labov's well-known study on the pronunciation of post-vocalic /r/ in New York department stores showed that native speakers from higher social classes are more likely to pronounce the /r/ sound in words such as ‘fourth floor’. Native speakers from lower social classes use this feature less often, although more often in more formal contexts. This pattern suggest that speakers demonstrate their own sensitivity to social evaluation. The above-mentioned dialects are also present in the United Kingdom. Standard pronunciation (RP) is traditionally associated with higher education and upper-class status, while regional accents are often associated with local identity and, at times, lower social prestige [26].

Education has a significant impact on one's social standing. These disparities were made worse for centuries by the fact that only the elite could afford to attend universities. Well-educated native speakers tend to use standard grammar, while individuals with a lower level of formal education may be more likely to use non-standard forms, such as ‘I done it’ instead of ‘I did it’. Gender adds another layer. Robin Lakoff argued that women’s historically lower status fostered a more polite, indirect, and cautious speech style, often marked by questions or rising intonation (*e.g., Dinner will be ready at seven o'clock?*) [48]

Internal habits and emotions influence subconscious perceptions of how social groups function within a community. This emphasizes the function of linguistic conceptualization, which is the process by which speakers organize their ideas before putting them into words. It serves as a link between speech and cognition: the mind arranges information into conceptual patterns that produce ideas and associations in addition to conforming to linguistic standards [14].

Modern linguistics has not reached a single universally acceptable, widely recognized definition, so concepts are described in many overlapping ways: as abstract generalizations, mental memory units, symbols, or communicative and cognitive constructs. From a theoretical perspective, linguistic conceptualization is the process of turning unstructured experience into organized mental material that can be communicated through language [14; 33].

Research shows that conceptualization is not universal, but depends on the language system. For example, Markus Guhe demonstrates in his work that native speakers of English often focus on the development of events, since English grammar requires aspectual information (e.g., progressive forms: *she is walking*), while German speakers emphasize results, as aspect is less central. Thus, structurally different languages may present greater challenges, each embedding concepts familiar to native speakers from birth. Bilinguals, however, demonstrate flexibility: they rely on a single adaptable conceptualizer that shifts according to the language in use [14].

Nevertheless, conceptualization depends not only on the structure of language, but also on the social context in which it functions: differences between high- and low-context cultures, as well as the verbal and non-verbal means of communication, gender and level of education add additional dimensions, forming different styles of speech like politeness strategies or maintaining power. As a result, the same individual may be viewed in countless different ways across societies.

1.2. Social status in scientific tradition: formation and typology

Social categorization serves as a key cognitive process, enabling people to generalize experiences and draw conclusions about new situations based on the past –

for example, avoiding expired food after illness or being cautious of heights after a fall [37]. In contrast to conceptualization, which connects perception with speech expression, categorization involves categorizing items or individuals according to common traits, which shapes perceptions of entire groups. Because of this, when encountering a representative of a particular group, people form impressions based on characteristics common to the entire category.

People tend to classify others in social situations, usually based on readily observable indicators like age, gender and ethnicity. These categorizations are neutral and they serve as strong filtering tools that profoundly impact social actions and learning processes. Contradictory information is frequently disregarded, whereas information that fits with preexisting schemas is easier to recollect. In the real world, this kind of internal bias affects relationships, employment choices, political allegiances and even feelings of danger. For example, for a consultant position, they might choose someone with a friendly demeanor, while when recruiting team members for a successful company, they will focus on character traits and the type of person the candidate is [25].

Stereotypes are particularly noticeable in the area of intellectual abilities. In 2008 the European Journal of Social Psychology posted an article about a study led by University of Padua examining the influence of gender stereotypes and the influence on intellectual activity. Men and women of equal skill played online under different conditions: sometimes unaware of their opponent's gender, sometimes told (accurately or not). Results showed that women performed significantly worse when they believed they were playing against men, but their performance improved when the opponent's gender was unknown or presented as female. The researchers explained this phenomenon as the stereotype threat effect – the fear of confirming a negative stereotype reduces confidence and productivity [32].

According to BMC Pediatrics, social status refers to the socially recognized position an individual holds within a structured hierarchy, determining their level of power and access to resources. It is shaped by both ascribed characteristics (such as

gender, age, or ethnicity) and achieved factors (such as education, occupation, and income), and it influences patterns of opportunity within society. According to this theory, "power" refers to an individual's level of action in the public domain, whereas "access to resources" mostly refers to financial capital and acquired wealth. As one study notes, *"Socioeconomic status (SES), as one of the most significant social determinants of health, has attracted increasing attention around the globe. Many studies have suggested that education, income and occupation...have profound impacts on everyone's health"* [28, p.2]. Crucially, researchers stress that subjective SES – a person's perceived social position – may have an even bigger impact on outcomes like health and social mobility and can capture nuanced characteristics of status more accurately than objective markers [28].

As a prism that forms relationships and expectations and makes hierarchy an often-invisible type of inequality, status functions through the organizations to which people belong, such as educational institutions, professions, nations, or genders. Humanity's need for acceptance and a sense of belonging is reflected in these deeply rooted and apparently universal differences. Even while status has existed throughout history, it is still less researched than tangible indicators like wealth, despite the fact that it plays a dual role in both daily interactions and more general power dynamics between communities [38]

It can be challenging to recognize and analyze status as a type of inequality, but in order to comprehend its function in modern society, it is crucial to take into account both how status has evolved historically and how it operates today. Gerhard Lenski's Ecological-Evolutionary theory, which holds that sociocultural change has greatly outpaced biological evolution, provides the theoretical perspective on these phenomena. This acceleration has been made possible by humans' ability to communicate and the reinforced nature of knowledge, which allows information to be transmitted and expanded from generation to generation: *"to the degree that an aggregation of people is politically autonomous and engaged in a broad range of cooperative activities, it can be considered a society"* [27 p. 17; 4].

According to Lenski's concept, technology, which is defined as the collection of knowledge and tools used in order to take advantage of environmental resources, is the primary driving force behind the advancement of humanity. It functions in society similarly to genes in an organism by encoding instructions for survival and continuation. Intersocial selection, which is a social equivalent of “survival of the fittest,” is the foundation of this materialist perspective, according to which cultures with superior technology succeed and conquer their less technologically advanced neighbors [35]. Therefore, accepting innovations and adjusting to the environment are essential for social progress.

Since elites have historically created laws that support their position in an effort to preserve stability and protect their interests, societal inequality is frequently a purposeful result of power structures. However, in the absence of change in interaction regarding advancements in economics, society would still be ruled by absolute monarchy, with education only available to the ruling dynasties [12]. It is crucial to identify the mechanisms by which demographic and technological changes produce stable hierarchies to move beyond general historical trends. In particular, it is important to understand how material conditions of production (how resources are managed and goods are produced) translate into social status and uphold power relations.

The emergence of social status is closely tied to economic transformation and the specialization of labor, beginning with the creation of “surplus” – the accumulation of resources beyond what is necessary for basic survival. Once excess goods appear, they become instruments of power, as their management determines hierarchy [17]. Surplus reduces the need for the entire population to labor in agriculture, opening space for specialists such as craftsmen, warriors, priests and scientists. Yet specialization creates dependencies, since surpluses must be managed and distributed, leading to the rise of a managerial or elite class. These actors mobilize the skills of professionals to expand production, with surpluses consumed or sold to sustain the broader society [38]

Once three main types of human status are identified, demographic pressure intensifies structural inequality. As populations increase, civilizations must increase

productivity, necessitating the use of modern technology. Ironically, professionals' reputation is frequently weakened by this evolution, as their specialized talents become merely survival tools rather than indicators of elite rank. In order to support more people, technology produces more surplus, but this calls for more intricate skill categories and inflexible hierarchies [17].

Although economic theory suggests that professionalism should be rewarded by achievement, in practice, it is filtered through intergroup competition and preconceptions, making status advancement rarely objective. Group membership often predetermines perceptions of ability, shaping evaluations before performance occurs and creating a systemic blind spot in how value is assigned. In theory, the most skilled professional should receive the highest income, yet stereotypes blur recognition of individual talent, overshadowing unique abilities with group reputations. Under such conditions, status functions less as a reward for achievement and more as a control mechanism, distorting human potential and economic rewards through identity-based bias.

Beyond the three main types of status – holders, professionalists and consumerists, competition allows individuals to reshape or overshadow ascribed characteristics, thereby altering their social position. According to the *Academy of Management Journal*, status can be divided into ascribed and achieved forms: ascribed status refers to socially recognized attributes such as gender, ethnicity, or institutional background, functioning as initial signals that shape expectations, while achieved status derives from demonstrated performance, expertise, and accomplishments over time. Crucially, status operates most visibly at their intersection, since individuals situated in the middle of hierarchies often conform more strongly to group norms to secure legitimacy, revealing how both inherited traits and earned achievements interact to structure social evaluation. This understanding will guide the identification of linguistic markers and behavioral features in Charter 2 of this study [36].

1.3. Power and hierarchical interaction

In the context of social status, power plays a central role, giving rise to domination and abuse. While wealth or titles are indicators of rank, power is more abstract and has traditionally been described as a natural characteristic that distinguishes some people. The old idea of the “divine right of kings” – the belief that power is given by God rather than human beings – stays relevant today when society views a revolutionary's accomplishments as only charisma or a leader's success as natural genius. This represents the Fundamental Attribution Error, a psychological prejudice that overemphasizes individual characteristics while losing sight of external circumstances that facilitate influence, as Gary DePaul explains in chapter sixteen. Consequently, social power is often misperceived as natural inner strength, while the structural forces that truly drive collective action remain hidden. [10].

The idea of social power, which is defined as both the actual use of authority and the unconscious ability to act, has long been discussed in politics and sociology, building on psychological views of leadership. According to Weberian theory, power is “power-over,” or the likelihood that one actor can “carry out will despite resistance”. Michel Foucault agreed, stressing that discussions of power imply its use over others. According to this viewpoint, power is an active and visible connection of control that is frequently associated with dominance or force. However, as power can exist as a potential means even if it is never achieved, it does not always require a victim or opposition [46; 15; 23].

Modern approaches increasingly challenge the idea that power is a fixed resource individuals simply possess, instead emphasizing that it is continuously produced and reproduced through language. Critical discourse analysis shows that the way humans speak – through framing, metaphors and word choices – helps normalize authority and keep hierarchies in place. As Van Dijk explains, in large societies power is often exercised through control of discourse rather than direct force, meaning dominance is maintained by shaping how people think and talk about reality. In this sense, *“critical discourse analysis specifically examines the role of discourse in the*

(re)production of social inequality, for instance, by studying text and talk as forms of power abuse” stressing how language itself becomes the mechanism through which power operates and inequality persists. [44, p. 217; 43]

Language plays a crucial role in perpetuating inequality by keeping domination without overt force. This control determines who is at the center of society and who is left out. Media representations frequently portray some groups as strong and powerful while portraying others as helpless or weak. As an example, women and ethnic minorities are often shown as helpless victims, not leaders; e.g., in films, protagonists are white males and villains are minorities (like Ursula in *The Little Mermaid* inspired by drag queens as predatory). By connecting individual characteristics with institutional authority and influencing the categories, narratives and explanations that people use to understand social life, discourse not only reflects society but actively creates and maintains it [44; 40].

Broader views look at power at the level of social systems, suggesting that institutions like history, economics and culture determine how influence spreads, in contrast to previous viewpoints that emphasize individual authority. This systemic perspective moves the focus from individual leaders to how societies are structured to give some people more power than others. Some scholars even contend that power actively shapes and defines individuals rather than just having an impact on them. According to this perspective, power is a system of forces that create the social environment in which people live [42; 17].

Because power permeates human life, it has been studied across sociology, political science, psychology and economics, each discipline offering distinct perspectives. Social psychology, for example, highlights how people often follow leaders due to mental shortcuts rather than actual competence. Experimental work on the leadership heuristic shows that participants frequently accepted a leader's advice, even when irrelevant. Even though the leader had no special knowledge and sometimes gave irrelevant advice, many participants still followed the recommendations. Thus, it reveals that influence often stems from expectations of authority rather than

knowledge. This theoretical framework provides the basis for discourse analysis applied in Chapter 2 [6].

Psychological mechanisms of hierarchy are not unique to humans; similar patterns of influence appear in animal societies. Different species have different survival strategies. For example, the North American moose lives alone since group life is costly due to competition for local resources [19; 29]. Others, like savanna baboons, whose young depend on troop protection, rely on group organization for survival. Elephants obey matriarchs whose authority comes from memory and experience, but chimpanzees frequently rely on dominance [3]. With the aim of survival, the “will to power” lowers risks in dangerous situations, and evolutionary competition benefits those who are better able to gain and hold onto power within social hierarchies. Power is essential to this process [39].

Humans share the same desire for power, with status and authority functioning as advanced forms of the basic survival instinct by providing access to resources and protection. Although human power has shifted from physical force to institutions and hierarchies, its evolutionary roots remain evident. Importantly, research shows that *“disturbances in one’s social safety schemas may be key to understanding abnormal cognitive, emotional, and behavioral patterns that are central to a variety of different psychiatric disorders”* [39, p. 50]. This means that when our sense of safety and social power is disrupted, it can affect not only survival but also mental health. According to Social Safety theory, humans evolved in highly interdependent groups where maintaining social connections was crucial for resource gathering and protection, and the brain continues to monitor the social environment for inclusion or exclusion. Because social isolation once meant a higher chance of death, social status and acceptance became essential survival tools [39].

Recent research admits that defensive and aggressive behaviors can be triggered when social relationships are endangered. Social psychology demonstrates that rejection causes brain reactions similar to physical pain, frequently escalating anger or isolation. According to this viewpoint, extensive exclusion may destabilize groups and

undermine power structures, and hostility can act as border protection when group membership is lost [7]. Although historical dependence on force has firmly ingrained inequality of status in human thinking, contemporary theories further argue that under stable conditions, power and status are essentially relational. Evidence suggests that power is rooted in brain mechanisms that have evolved to protect inclusion and status within groups. Since status is less stable today, changing forms of communication may alter traditional perceptions of authority within interaction [11].

1.4 Politeness theory and its relevance to social status

An important linguistic perspective on social hierarchy can be found in politeness theory, which examines how speakers manage interpersonal relationships through language. Politeness is a central concept in pragmatics, as its use in communication is strongly influenced by social context and the relationship between interlocutors. According to research on politeness, it can be understood as a system through which speakers attempt to meet the expectations of their addressees and maintain harmonious interaction. Dewi K.T., analyzing Brown and Levinson's theory, notes that politeness reflects a speaker's awareness of another person's "face," or their emotional and social sense of self recognized by others, an awareness closely tied to social distance or closeness in communication [9]. In this way, politeness operates like a social grammar that manages power and closeness, with Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) arising whenever requests, criticisms, or disagreements challenge either the listener's freedom or their desire for approval [22].

At the level of pragmatic realization, bald-on-record strategies represent the most direct form of FTA, where the speaker performs the act without mitigation (e.g., orders, commands, or blunt statements). For instance, when a speaker issues an order or request, they restrict the hearer's freedom of choice, thereby threatening negative face. Even seemingly reminders or offers can impose obligations, creating subtle forms of pressure that compromise autonomy. Similarly, compliments may appear positive but can also be face-threatening, since they force the hearer to either accept or reject the praise. Positive face is threatened when disapproval, criticism, or irreverence is

expressed, as these acts signal disregard for the hearer's need to be liked and respected. For example, disagreements or taboo topics can undermine social harmony, while mistakes in forms of address, such as misidentifying a professional's role, can diminish recognition of status. Importantly, FTAs also affect the speaker: apologies threaten the speaker's positive face by admitting fault, while accepting compliments may conflict with norms of modesty. Even bodily breakdowns, such as losing physical control in public, can damage the speaker's image of competence and dignity [18].

To analyze politeness phenomena in English, it is useful to compare how other linguistic systems encode social hierarchy directly into grammar. In many languages, the negotiation of face is embedded in morphological structures such as honorifics or pronominal distinctions. The well-known T–V distinction, derived from Latin *tu* and *vos* and preserved in Romance and Slavic languages, illustrates how speakers signal social distance or closeness through pronoun choice. Shifting from formal to informal address can mark a successful reduction in distance, while a premature shift may be perceived as an assertion of superiority or an unwelcome intruder. English lacks such grammaticalized markers, relying instead on modal verbs, hedging, and indirect phrasing (e.g., *“I was wondering if you could possibly...”*). The use of pragmatic strategies would be further analyzed in the practical part of this research [8].

Linguistic choices are rarely neutral, they reflect an implicit social calculation about power relations and interpersonal distance between speakers. This often leads to indirect speech, where the literal meaning differs from the intended one. For example, saying “Could you pass the salt?” instead of “Pass the salt” gives the listener a sense of choice, even though both know it is really a request [13]. Similarly, modal verbs and hedging terms such as “perhaps”, “slightly”, or “somewhat” in professional and academic contexts reduce the force of disagreement and protect both speaker and hearer from face loss. These strategies reveal that in English, the “how” of communication – tone, modality, and lexical choice – becomes a continuous process of identity negotiation, where every utterance subtly reinforces or redefines social standing within the broader hierarchy [13].

Building upon the foundation of face theory, the focus on the negotiation of interpersonal relations marks a shift from viewing politeness as a static set of rules to seeing it as a discursive negotiation. In this framework, developed significantly by Miriam A. Locher and Richard J. Watts, communication is categorized on a spectrum of "relational work" that ranges from impolite and aggressive to polite and overly formal. Unlike traditional theories that focus primarily on mitigating threats, relational work posits that most of our daily talk is actually politic behavior – language that is neither remarkably polite nor impolite, but simply "appropriate" according to the shared social norms of a specific group [30].

This perspective suggests that “politeness” only becomes visible when a speaker exceeds these shared expectations to be especially supportive or “nice.” Conversely, “impoliteness” is a perceived breach of the social contract. Because these evaluations are rooted in emergent networks, what is considered respectful in a high-stakes corporate boardroom might be viewed as cold or even insulting in a close-knit family setting. Communication therefore becomes a dynamic process in which speakers continually reassess social relations and modify their linguistic strategies accordingly.

In this light, social hierarchy is actively constructed through every “sir,” “mate,” or “hey” used in interaction. Institutional roles – such as those between a professor and a student or a doctor and a patient – provide a baseline for expectations, but the actual relationship is forged in the moment-to-moment linguistic choices. If a supervisor uses an informal tone, they are performing relational work that attempts to minimize power distance; if the subordinate maintains formal address in return, they are signaling a preference for established hierarchy. These “counter-moves” demonstrate that politeness is an active site of social negotiation, where participants use language to either reinforce or subtly challenge their positions within a community of practice [30].

1.5. Social status in communication within digital society

In the digital age, communication has undergone significant changes, shifting from exclusively face-to-face interaction to online environments that operate via the Internet. Even minor changes of this kind of interaction have had a significant impact

on power and social status in general. Due to this shift, there is now a global communication space that is borderless and unaffected by the geographical characteristics that once severely restricted people's capacity to communicate. People interact regardless of cultural or generational differences, using platforms such as social networks and messaging apps. Digital communication can take place asynchronously, with delays, or synchronously, in real time. The latter choice also deviates greatly from natural forms of communication, in which individuals need an instant response to their words or acts. All things considered, media communication has taken center stage in daily life because of its affordability, speed and accessibility.

Humans frequently employ microexpressions, posture adjustments and tone of voice alterations in face-to-face interactions to indicate whether a statement is a sarcastic remark or a sincere inquiry. Digital writing is intrinsically “cold” and easily misunderstood in the absence of this response. People have developed a visual grammar using punctuation and emojis to close this gap. These textual embellishments serve as a digital paralinguistic tool, taking the place of a sympathetic nod or a shrug. A well-timed emoji can serve as a language adjustment, turning what could be interpreted as a harsh order into a courteous request and protecting the recipient from a “negative reaction” [34].

Netiquette, which is just the contemporary application of Politeness Theory to the limitations of the screen, is formed as these digital habits consolidate. Response time is one of the most important parameters controlling this system. In a professional setting, a response that is too quick may suggest impulsiveness or a lack of seriousness, whereas a strategic delay can serve as a telling move that signals the high value of one's own time. Similarly, the number of emojis used serves as an indicator of social distance. An employee may use expressive visual elements to demonstrate respect and support in the form of a “positive face,” while a manager may be sparing in the use of linguistic and visual embellishments to emphasize their professional authority [41].

A high degree of communicative literacy is necessary to navigate the digital world. Grammar rules alone are no longer sufficient in today's world; one also needs

to be aware of the platform's particular standards and the participants' relative position. Effective digital communication requires constant awareness of one's social role: understanding when one is acting as a colleague and when one should adopt the authoritative tone of a leader. Digital empathy becomes a practical requirement in a time when text is unchangeable and permanent and context is easily lost. Through the use of visual clues and verbal softeners like "it seems to me" or "perhaps we could," speakers might lessen the "flaming" and escalation that frequently characterize anonymous or semi-anonymous conversations [41].

However, being rude online shouldn't be seen as unintentional or purely emotional. The use of sarcasm, which is achieved through semantic inversion, and dysphemism, which are purposefully insulting or blunt linguistic choices, function as a calculated challenge to the interlocutor's face. These tactics are intended to heighten social conflict and assessment. Importantly, even highly aggressive forms of communication follow identifiable linguistic patterns, which reduces the disparity in power. In order to maximize the impact of the face-threatening act, they often rely on imperative formulations, direct address, and the methodical removal of pragmatic hedges.

The application of Brown and Levinson's strategies to digital text highlights a highly systematic mapping of intent to form. Positive politeness within the use of abbreviated forms and "in-group" slang serves as a linguistic handshake in order to reduce social distance. As a result of this widespread use, slang has ceased to be the preserve of a narrow circle of people and has instead become a common feature of people from all social circles. Conversely, negative politeness in digital spaces is often realized through "grammatical padding." By wrapping a request in layers of modality ("I was wondering if you might perhaps..."), the speaker creates a digital area that respects the recipient's autonomy.

In general, people naturally focus on certain aspects of social media that they would overlook when speaking. Another factor is the restricted word count. These days, being "fluent" means knowing not only a language's vocabulary but also the

delicate pragmatic weight of a “...” vs a “.” Social media communication frequently relies on simplified syntax, informal lexical choices, and minimal use of politeness markers. When people get used to such patterns of behavior, they replicate them in real-life situations, which can come across as rude or informal, especially in hierarchical interactions. Since the only thing that sets individuals apart in correspondence is the use of emotional words or emojis, people no longer need complex verbal formulations to express respect in writing. Furthermore, the lack of immediate social feedback in online communication reduces sensitivity to the interpersonal impact of their words. In offline settings, when these indicators are crucial for upholding polite and context-appropriate interactions, this loss of pragmatic awareness may persist. For example, people have found it harder to pick up on subtle cues conveyed through pauses in spoken conversation [21].

This illustrates, in part, how social status and its parameters are still changing globally. Since current developments are mostly transient and may experience major shifts in the future, it is challenging to categorize them as wholly positive or wholly bad. Nonetheless, it is evident that power and social standing are progressively losing their sway over contemporary communication, to varying degrees.

CONCLUSIONS TO CHAPTER 1

The first chapter examines how social status is linked to power in society, as expressed through linguistic constructions. The study demonstrates the evolution of social power, which was shaped by various historically determined factors such as surplus or economic dependence in the division of labor and resources, as noted in the contemporary works of authors Henrich, J., & Boyd, R. The economy influenced people's internal associations and interpretations within society, which was directly expressed through grammatical constructions and word choice in everyday life.

The historically shaped linguistic conceptualization of social interaction, as studied by Guhe, M., shows that communication is shaped by social norms, cultural expectations and the roles of participants, which are specific to each individual culture and language. Linguistic and nonverbal behavior alike contribute to status construction, as speakers use vocabulary, modality, intonation, posture, and discourse strategies to negotiate authority and social distance.

The first chapter also examines the concept of power as formulated by Van Dijk, which is viewed as an integral component of social status. The third chapter demonstrates that power manifests itself not only through direct control or authority, but also through discourse and institutional structures. Language serves as a key instrument in maintaining and legitimizing domination, as it shapes knowledge, influences perceptions, and constructs social reality.

Furthermore, politeness theory provides a detailed explanation of how social hierarchy is regulated in everyday communication and how people unconsciously rely on social roles in their lexicon. Through strategies aimed at protecting "face," speakers continuously negotiate power relations and social distance. Linguistic forms such as hedging, indirectness and honorifics function as tools for maintaining balance within hierarchical interactions.

Finally, the analysis of communication in the digital age within modern studies by Suparno, D., Fitriana, I., Nadra, N., Gunawan, F., and Boulahnane, S. demonstrates

that technological transformation has significantly reshaped traditional expressions of status and power. While online environments reduce the role of non-verbal cues, they introduce new mechanisms, such as emojis, response timing, and platform-specific norms, that continue to encode social hierarchy. Thus, digital communication does not eliminate status distinctions but reconfigures them in new and dynamic forms.

An examination of these theories and their analysis from a contemporary perspective will be used to analyze cinematic discourse as an example of how social stratification is conveyed through communication.

2. SOCIAL STATUS DYNAMICS IN A CASE OF MODERN FILM DISCOURSE

2.1 Representation of social status contrast in *The Menu*

To explore in greater depth the characteristics of human speech and behavior as they relate to social hierarchy in contemporary communication, the film *The Menu* provides a useful case for analysis. This dark comedy-thriller by director Mark Mylod unfolds in a contemporary social context that reflects existing class structure and centers on an exclusive gastronomic event organized by renowned chef Julian Slowik on a remote island.

The invited guests, including the main characters Margo and Tyler, represent a narrow circle of wealthy and culturally privileged individuals. Their participation in the meticulously planned gastronomic event known as *The Menu* in itself reflects economic superiority, as access to it serves as a marker of high social status. However, as the film unfolds, these expectations are subverted. First, the plot itself does this when the chef reveals his intentions, thereby destabilizing the hierarchy of power. Second, looking at the characters themselves, it can be inferred that even though they occupy an “above-average” social status, not all individuals occupy equivalent positions within their hierarchy.

From the perspective of contemporary communication theory, the film *The Menu* constructs social status not only through its narrative structure but also through controlled communicative practices concerning the characteristics associated with the digital environment. Although the film’s action unfolds in a physical space, often within a single room, the dynamics of interaction reflect key features of mediated communication, such as an asymmetrical distribution of power, its periodic disregard, a profusion of slang, and ambiguous nonverbal cues. Psychological tension is achieved through prolonged pauses that bring facial expressions to the forefront – especially those of Margo and Julian Slowik.

The film highlights the social inequality between the main group of people and Margot. The contemporary approach to hierarchy is evident here as well, since in *The*

Menu the hierarchy is not merely vertical; it is far more complex. Although the protagonist initially assumes the role of a client, her socioeconomic background and her status as an escort hinder her inclusion in the elite group. Margot's communicative behavior, such as her irony or visible discomfort, points to her marginal status within the group. It is important to note that her status is not self-determined but imposed from the outside, primarily by Slowik, whose authority extends to classifying people within the island's social order.

A social hierarchy exists among the "high-status" guests arriving on the island, who stand out from the crowd through their behavior. The island's staff also occupies a place in the distribution of power. Although they are workers and aware of consumer rights, they occupy a comparatively dominant position of the consumers themselves as the plot unfolds.

From the sociological perspective, the film suggests that the situational context of social status is far more important than the social hierarchy that has emerged in the modern world. Characters also interact to show variations in respect for authority (power distance), behavioral and verbal changes (conceptualization), context awareness, and understanding of politeness (Face-threatening acts).

2.2 High-low context communication in *The Menu*

The essence of linguistic conceptualization serves as an important foundation for understanding how social status is portrayed in the film *The Menu*. As previously mentioned, conceptualization is a cognitive process that is not universal but is contingent on interactional conditions, shaped by social norms and relationships. In the context of modern communication, the hierarchy is disrupted, which breaks down conceptualization. Therefore, at the level of pragmatic realization, it becomes interactionally ambiguous, making it difficult to assign fixed social roles based solely on linguistic behavior. Moreover, the same person may gain the privileges of a member of another group depending on which verbal or nonverbal techniques they employ. Each marker can be examined individually.

2. 2. 1 High-low context communication strategies in *The Menu*

In order to reveal class inequality and power dynamics within elite dining culture, the film constructs a sociolinguistic contrast between high-context communication and low-context communication. The movie represents such a difference particularly in the interactions between Margot and the rest of the community of the island. The atmosphere that Chef Slowik and the luxury dining establishment of Hawthorn have created is dominated by high-context communication. Chef Slowik primarily uses symbols and unwritten rules to communicate meaning indirectly:

CHEF SLOWIK: Over the next few hours, you will ingest fat, salt, sugar, protein, bacteria, fungi, various plants and animals -- at times entire ecosystems. But I have to beg of you one thing. Just one. Do not eat. (dramatic pause)

BRYCE: Is he serious?

CHEF SLOWIK: Taste. Savor. Relish [The Menu, 2022, 16:31].

CHEF SLOWIK: What happens inside this room is meaningless compared to what occurs outside, in nature, in the soil and the water and the air. We are but a frightened nanosecond. Nature is timeless. (warm smile) Enjoy [The Menu, 2022, 18:16]!

In these examples, at the linguistic level, the utterance contains relatively limited explicit information, but from a discourse-pragmatic perspective, meaning is constructed through in the situational context, shared cultural knowledge and nonverbal cues. Chef Slowik's remarks and his philosophical reflections on nature and transience rely heavily on metaphors and abstractions. These statements require an interpreting effort, paying attention to pauses, and familiarity with the traditions of haute cuisine. For example, in the first instance, Bryce, one of the three intermediaries for the island's owner, reveals a discrepancy between his projected and actual status by interrupting the chef, failing to understand the meaning of the metaphor and the pause.

LILLIAN BLOOM: There's a neediness to the plating. Tweezered to fuck. But the flavors are there. Very clean, very... thalassic.

TED: Thalassic?

LILLIAN BLOOM: Oceanic. Thalassa was the Greek primeval spirit of the sea [The Menu, 2022, 19:39].

LILLIAN BLOOM: I do like the sense of it being a sort of biome of culinary ideas.

TED: Right, like it functions like an epicurean salon [The Menu, 2022, 06:38].

Similarly, restaurant critics employ specific vocabulary that function as a marker of exclusivity. At the lexical level, the use terms such as “thalassic” or “epicurean,” requires both linguistic competence of usage of epithets to describe subjects and knowledge of Greek and Roman history. Such details reinforce their high status through linguistic exclusivity. In both cases – with the chef and the critics – the conversational maxims of Manner and Quantity were floated to create ambiguity, additional meanings and to say more than necessary, which corresponds to the Cooperative Principle.

Conversely, because of her upbringing and low social standing, Margot frequently employs low-context communication, which is defined by directness and clarity. For example, she often uses the clarifying word “right” to avoid ambiguity in her sentences or to get her conversation partner to acknowledge that she is correct in her beliefs.

MARGOT: There is food at the end of this, right [The Menu, 2022, 09:02]?

Additionally, Margot might speak plainly, reject directly and disregard the metaphors employed by those in positions of authority.

CHEF SLOWIK: That would not be possible. I've precisely designed the portions to account for that. Please eat. The menu only makes sense if you eat.

MARGOT: But you told us not to eat [The Menu, 2022, 27:25].

TYLER: Without bread, it really focuses you. Are you not gonna try it?

MARGOT: No [The Menu, 2022, 26:39].

In the first situation, in interactional terms, Margot purposefully undermines the anticipated high-status conversation by dismissing her chef's abstract comments. The protagonist makes it clear that she is not a part of this social group. Similarly, nonverbal indicators that indicate a conflict between high- and low-status contexts are used in addition to verbal communication in another example:

ANNE: (to Margot) So you know my husband.

MARGOT: Yeah, I do [The Menu, 2022, 01:03:05].

The tension arises because Anne communicates using hints, expecting her conversation partner to pick up on the underlying meaning, while Margot responds directly and concisely to avoid further insinuations about her relationship with Anne's husband. At the level of pragmatic interaction, this moment illustrates that, without prior questioning, high-context communication carries social meaning (in this case, marital infidelity), whereas low-context communication does not allow for such implicit negotiations, while maintaining emotional distance.

High-status individuals also use low-context communication, thereby slightly diminishing their standing in the eyes of those around them. Unlike Chef Slowik, who can calm those around him with direct remarks when a situation gets out of hand – for example, when Lillian Bloom interrupts him (“You don’t talk”) – a character like Richard demonstrates less communicative control at doing so. In response to the provocation of a drawing of his love affair on a taco, instead of resolving the conflict, he reacts directly and aggressively, undermining his authority in his wife's eyes:

ANNE: And this is you and... Who is that woman?

RICHARD: How the hell should I know? It's faked. Some sort of stupid joke [The Menu, 2022, 34:30].

Finally, by avoiding direct responses and upholding institutional authority through restrained language, Elsa, restaurant manager, regularly exhibits high-context communication. When asked simple inquiries (such requests for bread or explanations), she either completely reframes the topic or gives brief, frequently imprecise responses like “No.” She guides all eruptions, even attempts to flee, back onto the correct path by preserving her dignity and poise in the pursuit of general balance and order.

ELSA: You will eat less than you desire and more than you deserve [The Menu, 2022, 26:20].

SOREN: (Picks up his chair and hurls it at one of the big bay windows, but it bounces right off of the thick pane) GAH!!!

ELSA: Please, let me help you back to your table [The Menu, 2022, 49:06].

The film “The Menu” shows that high-context communication, although often associated with sophistication, can also serve as a tool of control. In contrast, low-context communication, despite being perceived as less refined, turns out to be more grounded in reality and can even level the playing field with a high-status interlocutor.

2.2.2 The role of slang and dialect in modern interactions

Although *The Menu* unfolds primarily through face-to-face interaction, the communicative behavior of its characters reflects broader tendencies characteristic of digital society, including the normalization of slang and the weakening of rigid hierarchical speech conventions. As mentioned earlier, dialectal expressions and slang are not part of standard language usage. They are often associated with informal varieties of language; consequently, jargon is less commonly observed, for example, in the speeches of politicians. Therefore, language in “The Menu” is not neutral; instead it reflects class divisions between elite and non-elite characters.

CHEF SLOWIK (CONT'D): I want to apologize to you all. What you just saw was not originally part of tonight’s menu. We strive for perfection, but there is no such thing [The Menu, 2022, 1:12:39].

CHEF SLOWIK: Bread has existed in some form for over 12,000 years, especially amongst the poor. Flour and water. What could be simpler [The Menu, 2022, 21:56]?

ELSA: Well, I suppose the bacteria might introduce itself to the customer's bloodstream, spreading into their spinal membranes, at which point he or she would become incapacitated and shortly thereafter expire [The Menu, 2022, 07:50]?

In the following examples, the vocabulary of Chef Julian Slowik and his staff is extremely formal and strictly structured. Their speech is characterized by precision, repetition, and the use of standard phrases (such as “Yes, Chef”), while slang is almost entirely absent. In the classical interpretation, the absence of slang corresponds to elite, high-status norms of communication, signaling exclusivity and strengthening the hierarchy.

Margot is portrayed as belonging to a lower-middle social group and may use slang in informal conversations, such as “He is a prick” [The Menu, 2022, 27:54], but generally she adopts a middle-of-the-road stance. In conversations with people from higher social classes, such as her boss Slowik, she avoids slang and dialect.

CHEF SLOWIK: Uh-huh. Specific.

MARGOT: Not really. It's pretty unoriginal. What rattled me was that he told me to tell him he was a good man, and that I was his daughter and that I loved him and then he...[The Menu, 2022, 56:35]

However, it should be noted that the majority of high-status individuals depicted in this film use slang or dialect as a means of elevating their status, or that this is not at all an extraordinary feature of speech, as might previously have been assumed. For example, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, Lila Bloom may use symbolic epithets to emphasize her self-awareness and, by extension, her high standing (“Thalassic” / “The emulsion is broken” / “Wickedly clever conceit”).

The employees of the island's owner, like the movie star, hold high positions in society. However, the 21st century suggests that the constant use of slang does not conflict with one's level of power and status. The popularization of words like “dude,” “bro,” “douche-y” on the internet and in popular culture has made people so accustomed to them that they no longer carry a negative connotation. Therefore, unlike Margot, these characters do not adapt to Slowik and his formal speech, but continue to communicate in their usual manner, since in the modern worldview, it may no longer function as a strong marker of status:

GEORGE: Dude, that guys got some really dark sense of humor, bro [The Menu, 2022, 31:11].

BRYCE: Dude enough. You sound so douche-y [The Menu, 2022, 21:53].

MOVIE STAR: ... then I'm off to South Africa or wherever and I eat goat and talk about how racism is maybe not so cool and bingo bongo there's your show [The Menu, 2022, 20:29].

MOVIE STAR: ... because - and I'm not trying to sound all, whatever here or anything, [The Menu, 2022, 01:14:57].

Consequently, in the film *The Menu*, slang and dialect are not merely stylistic devices, but the primary means of conveying meaning. They reveal hidden social hierarchies and allow us to distinguish authentic identity from imitation. The film is a vivid representation of the transition from a classical perception of jargon to a more free-flowing, contemporary one.

2.3. The construction of power relationships through verbal communication in *The Menu*

In the film “The Menu”, power relations are formed primarily through verbal communication, which serves not only as a tool for interaction aimed at establishing or restructuring control, reinforcing hierarchy or altering social status. Drawing on classical and contemporary theories of power, the film illustrates how power is created

and maintained through discourse, rather than solely through physical force or prior knowledge of a person.

When examining the characters in the film, it can be argued that most of them already possess a certain degree of power based on their background knowledge. For example, the visitors, despite their relatively low level of power (as in the case of Margot) perceive themselves as superior to the staff by virtue of their status as customers:

MARGOT: You're a customer. You're paying him to serve you. It doesn't matter whether he likes you or not [The Menu, 2022, 19:07].

Such remarks reflect a classic customer-centric mindset, according to which the customer pays money to purchase the services provided by the staff. The customer is positioned as empowered because they can buy whatever they want. Other wealthy guests exhibit similar behavior, making dismissive or demanding remarks and dropping the names of influential people, such as the investor Verrick, who owns the island. They are also capable of making threats, flaunting their wealth to get what they want (asking for bread against all odds or escaping the island) and making critical remarks passed off as expert opinions, thereby emphasizing their high social status:

SOREN: I mean, I've had shellfish just as good with my chef at home, Ricardo. You know Ricardo, he's amazing. But whatever. Now we can say we've been here. As my dad used to say, "We're buying an experience." [The Menu, 2022, 20:47].

SOREN: Okay, okay, seriously, how do we stop this? (to Slowik) Just tell us how to stop this!

DAVE: We have money! Obviously, we have money. Just tell us how much and we'll give it to you! [The Menu, 2022, 53:14].

BRYCE: This is all very clever and, I didn't want to play this card, but you know who we are, right?

ELSA: Yes.

SOREN: You do. You know who we are.

ELSA: I know who you are.

SOREN: You know we work with Doug Verrick [The Menu, 2022, 25:46].

Throughout the film, the staff also treats customers as if they were one rank higher by using honorifics (“madam,” “sir”). Once again, by allowing themselves more freedom, guests view the staff as means to an end rather than as individuals. At the restaurant entrance, for example, the movie star does not introduce herself but simply states her name, while Elsa introduces herself and uses the honorific “Mr.” As figures of high authority, guests do not always address the restaurant manager or even Chef Slowik by name, but immediately state their intention. For example, despite the significant difference in status, Margot does not address the chef by his title, while he, in his capacity as a server, addresses her as “madam”:

MOVIE STAR: and Damien Garcia.

ELSA: Mr Diaz, welcome [The Menu, 2022, 04:56].

MARGOT: But you told us not to eat.

CHEF SLOWIK: This is not what I meant, madam. And you know it [The Menu, 2022, 27:31].

ELSA: Can I help you, sir?

BRYCE: What the hell are these?

2.3.1 The distribution of social status and power among the main characters The Menu

To understand how power is distributed and how it is interactionally negotiated in the film “The Menu”, it is first worth identifying the characters’ fixed and stable (at the time of the events) social status. For some characters, the filmmaker provides a clear designation voiced by other characters; for the rest, the viewer must infer their status independently based on their interactions and dialogue.

An earlier analysis of high-low context communication, as well as the characters' tendency to use dialect, helps in the distribution of the characters' roles. Doug Verrick would have the highest level of authority across all categories, yet he did not appear in the story. He is wealthy and owns an island, moreover, those in his inner circle automatically rise in status. However, he was mentioned in conversations among his subordinates, as well as in Chief Slowik's monologue:

BRYCE: It's not your restaurant. But if we're all just being honest tonight, like you say, it's not.

CHEF SLOWIK: You're right. He's right. Doug Verrick is my angel investor. He owns this island and this restaurant. And since Hawthorn's my entire life, Doug Verrick owns me [The Menu, 2022, 52:46].

Next come other important clients, such as Lillian Bloom and Ted, food critics. They employ highly contextual communication and symbolic vocabulary. They also rarely converse with characters of lower status, addressing only the chef. Following the critics are financially important clients such as Richard and his wife Anna. They do not use specific dialects throughout the film, and their number of lines is limited; however, Richard's verbal display of low-context communication underscores his level of authority. Anna shares this aspect with him, as his words serve as cues for her husband. She does not speak directly to the other characters or the restaurant staff, but communicates through her husband:

CHEF SLOWIK: ... Please tell me one dish you ate the last time you were here. Or the time before. One. Please.

ANNE (whispering): Cod.

RICHARD: What?

ANNE: Cod.

RICHARD (to Chef): Cod [The Menu, 2022, 51:54].

Bryce, Dave, and Soren enjoy a high economic and social standing, as they are employed by the island's owner. Furthermore, their colorful slang, in the context of modern communication, does not negatively affect their status. Movie star George Diaz also wields a great deal of power. The fact that Verrick's employees use a great deal of slang does not harm him. He is popular and wealthy and able to delegate his affairs to an assistant. In his case, prior knowledge about him plays a role, which is clearly illustrated at the beginning of the film:

MARGOT: Oh my God, check it out. (She shook her head, not knowing where to look, and then turned away)

MOVIE STAR: (to his accompaniment) hey aren't you supposed to be running interference for me? Make sure people don't bother me then?

Margo: (whispering to Tyler) I watched all his movies when I was a kid [The Menu, 2022, 03:16].

Chef Slowik himself also holds a high position within the administration. His refined, formal speech and his status as a renowned chef elevate him within the hierarchy; however, since he is someone who is paid for his services, he cannot initially exert his full authority. A similar situation is applied to Elsa.

Other characters more clearly demonstrate the fragility of socially constructed status, as they do not occupy very high positions. Felicity occupies a subordinate position despite her education, which underscores the dependency inherent in certain social roles. She uses fillers like "um," "well," "maybe," to make her speech more cautious and dependent on external expertise. Felicity primarily supports her employer and asks about the situation she finds herself in, afraid to hear a negative response:

FELICITY (not quite sure): Um, just developing, so I'd be developing or or helping to develop. Things [The Menu, 2022, 29:24]?

FELICITY: Maybe, it's a joke cause you're friends, right [The Menu, 2022, 33:07].

FELICITY; It's all right. I've been stealing money from you.

MOVIE STAR: I know.

FELICITY: I know you know [The Menu, 2022, 01:05:55].

At a level of character construction, Tyler embodies a desire for status rooted in the consumption of cultural values. His desire to get closer to Chef Slowik and his knowledge of haute cuisine allow him to mimic the elite's discourse, but his lack of genuine authority ultimately undermines his position. He speaks with confidence during his argument with Margot. He echoes Slowik's philosophy (for example, regarding cuisine as a concept), demonstrating his power and ability to pay for service through aggression when others do not share his admiration for the chef. Still, he loses his confidence in the presence of his idol. Tyler clarifies the names of the ingredients with the chef, apologizes, and when he takes a step closer to him and tries his hand at cooking, he completely loses his composure and can't even pronounce the names of the ingredients:

MARGOT Wait, you like this? He's basically insulting you, isn't he?

TYLER: No, no, no, you don't get it. It's a concept [The Menu, 2022, 24:21].

TYLER: ... He's not just a chef. He's a storyteller [The Menu, 2022, 24:29].

TYLER: Is this bergamot I'm getting Chef [The Menu, 2022, 49:44]?

MARGOT: Tyler, you need to apologize to me now. You can't talk to me like...

TYLER: Well, yeah, actually I can. Because – ding dong! – I'm the one who's paying. So, maybe, shut up and eat? [The Menu, 2022, 35:24].

TYLER: L-leeks?

Someone hands Tyler two leeks. Tyler's hands shake as he takes a knife and finds a nearby cutting board.

CHEF SLOWIK What else?

TYLER: Um. Sh-sh-sh [The Menu, 2022, 01:09:48].

Ultimately, Margot has the lowest level of authority. She is straightforward, adhering to low-context communication, and stands out from the crowd by failing to appreciate the chef's cuisine, which is a source of authority for most people. In Margot's case, unlike the movie star or Verrick's employees, her slang isn't ignored because of her status; rather, it underscores it.

2.3.2 The destabilization of traditional power hierarchies in modern communication in *The Menu*

An examination of the power hierarchy among the main characters in "The Menu", based on their verbal cues and background knowledge, made it possible to determine their formal positions within the social structure. However, as discussed in Chapter 1.3, such a distribution is not stable in the context of the modern communicative environment. In this subsection, the focus is on how context influences the transformation of power and in whose hands it ultimately lies, depending on how the dynamics of dialogue can be utilized. The film demonstrates that possessing economic or symbolic capital does not guarantee the maintenance of control over a situation. From a sociological perspective, this indicates that institutional authority can be overridden when control over interactional conditions is transferred.

One of the key aspects of social stratification in the film is the contrast between "givers" and "takers," as defined by Slowik. This division into two main groups can be interpreted as a metaphor for the relationship between service providers and consumers under capitalism. In the traditional understanding of the distribution of power, the takers hold more power because they have the resources to obtain the services of the givers. At the beginning of the film, this is vividly demonstrated by the respectful dialogue between the guests and the staff.

However, in the isolated context of Hawthorne Island, this traditional hierarchy undergoes a radical reversal. Consumers, who initially occupy a dominant position as "recipients," gradually lose their discursive and social authority, becoming subordinates within the system constructed by the head chef. This shift is achieved

through the isolation of the territory, where only the organizers understand how things are arranged and that only they can facilitate an exit from there:

RICHARD: We're leaving.

ELSA: There is no boat to leave on.

RICHARD: Then I'll call a helicopter.

ELSA: That will be difficult without phone service [The Menu, 2022, 43:40].

Furthermore, staff are increasingly less likely to accommodate requests, soften their language, or employ customer-oriented courtesy strategies. Instead, they resort to direct refusals and declarative statements that signal a high degree of authority. Staff remain polite in accordance with their status, yet in this context, they exceed the bounds of acceptable authority. They ignore threats regarding contact with Verrick, requests for bread, and even control guests' emotions by ushering them back to their seats following the shock of the sous chef's death.

CHEF SLOWIK (CONT'D): Please. Please. Sit. Make yourselves at home. Everything's fine. [The Menu, 2022, 41:49].

Chef Slowik now ranks first in this hierarchy. He asserts his authority not only through formal and symbolic speeches but also through more directive statements. He does not allow himself to be interrupted and sternly silences the intense whispering that arises in the room during his speech. He strategically diminishes the status of the clients by comparing them to ingredients, drawing parallels with the presentation of today's cuisine, where guests are merely tools. Furthermore, every member of the staff knows most of the facts about each guest's life, dating back to their school days. Slowik uses this knowledge as a tool for manipulation, asking rhetorical questions so that the "takers" feel his superiority:

TYLER: This is what the guy was fishing for earlier in the...

The room is silent and chef stares right at Tyler.

CHEF: Sorry.

TYLER (CONT'D): Sorry, Chef. [The Menu, 2022, 17:14].

LILLIAN BLOOM: Now, hold on, Chef, I've been very--

CHEF SLOWIK: You don't talk [The Menu, 2022, 50:27].

SOREN: Why ... is this happening?

CHEF SLOWIK: Okay. Well. Think of yourselves as ingredients in a degustation concept. Figuratively speaking. That's the best way to describe it [The Menu, 2022, 50:09].

CHEF SLOWIK: My loyal regulars. How many times have you eaten here in the last five years?

RICHARD: I, I don't know. Six? Seven?

ANNE (under her breath): I think more than that, Dick...

CHEF SLOWIK: Eleven. Eleven times [The Menu, 2022, 51:13].

CHEF SLOWIK (to Felicity): What school did you go to?

FELICITY: Um, Brown?

CHEF SLOWIK: Student loans?

FELICITY: No... [The Menu, 2022, 01:15:59].

An important element in demonstrating Slowik's authority is the clap, which serves as a non-verbal cue to emphasize the following phrase. First and foremost, Slowik's clap serves as a signal for instant coordination. After each clap, the entire team responds in unison: "Yes, Chef!", reflecting absolute hierarchical obedience. Here, Foucault's idea of power as embedded in practices and rituals comes to the fore: the team needs no additional instructions, since the constant and already predictable sound of the clap itself contains the command. Furthermore, the clap serves as a marker of transition between stages of the "performance." Each new course begins precisely

with this gesture. Guests, unlike the staff, do not obey directly; however, over time, they begin to react to the clap as a signal to pay attention, which leads to the following psychological effect. The clap is sharp and unexpected; it interrupts conversations, forcing guests to fall silent and shift their attention to the chef. For example, Margot flinches at one of the claps, demonstrating its effect as a tool for controlling physical reactions.

After all, Slowik is a renowned chef. He recounts his stories in the form of cooking demonstrations, which lends him an air of expertise. In his conversations with Margot, Tyler also speaks of his idol's genius. Slowik's authoritative image contributes to the characters acceptance of his every word, even though the facts around them suggest otherwise – such as the sous chef's death, after which Lillian Bloom believed Slowik's assurance that the situation remains under control:

CHEF SLOWIK: Only 6%. Ancient Greek peasants dipped their stale, measly bread in wine for breakfast. And how did Jesus teach us to pray if not to beg for “our daily bread?” It is, and has always been, the food of the common man. But you, my dear guests, are not the common man. So tonight, you get no bread. [The Menu, 2022, 22:30].

CHEF SLOWIK: There's a saying: “Sometimes all you need is a good cup of tea.” I learned that growing up in Bratislava. [The Menu, 2022, 49:25].

CHEF SLOWIK (CONT'D): Please. Please. Sit. Make yourselves at home. Everything's fine. All part of the menu. All just part of the show.

DAVE: Is he dead? Was - is this real?

LILLIAN BLOOM: No, no, it's theater. It's just – stagecraft. It's part of the menu [The Menu, 2022, 42:32].

As a result, consumers' inability to use their usual verbal strategies to exert influence leads to a loss of their individual authority and forces them to restructure their interactions. Having lost the ability to control the staff, guests increasingly turn

to one another, engaging in a dialogue that transcends class boundaries. For example, tech entrepreneurs, a movie star, and other members of the elite begin to jointly discuss evacuation strategies. Or a conversation among women, after the men were given the opportunity to escape, where everyone sat at the same table and discussed their future fate:

BRYCE: So, so, what's the play here? What are our options?

DAVE: The door is locked and guarded. The windows?

MOVIE STAR: Hey guys. We gotta do something and we can't be cowards [The Menu, 2022, 48:37].

FELICITY: You can tell us. Are we all really dying tonight?

KATHERINE: It doesn't work if you live. The menu. It needs an ending that ties everything together. Otherwise it just tastes good. And who cares.

LILLIAN BLOOM: I mean, you should have your own place [The Menu, 2022, 01:03:38].

At the same time, the film exposes the conditional and often illusory nature of several characters' high status. The previous section examined the specific characteristics of the characters: Felicity's subordinate role as an assistant, as well as Anne, whose words are frequently ignored or overruled by her husband. The film also offers an interesting example of people whose status depends on another figure, where hierarchical position is not solely a matter of personal character. Doug Verrick's associates – Dave, Soren, and Bryce – derive their power not from personal competence, but from their connection to an influential investor. Their constant references to Verrick ("You know we work with Doug Verrick") show that their status depends on external factors.

They try to demonstrate their power by saying they work with the owner of the island, thereby aligning their social status. Such attempts were thwarted by Elsa's additional knowledge about them, which significantly increased her level of power in

the conversation. Moreover, as soon as this connection loses its significance within the restaurant's hierarchy through Verrick's murder, their power crumbles. The trio no longer accepts attempts to demonstrate their status; moreover, they begin to quarrel during a potential escape:

SOREN: You know we work with Doug Verrick.

ELSA: No, you work FOR Mr. Verrick [The Menu, 2022, 25:48].

SOREN: Don't run near me bro. Get away from me [The Menu, 2022, 01:02:38]!

Margo's position particularly illustrates the fluidity of power dynamics. Initially, she occupies the lowest position, being both an outsider and a member of the service staff, devoid of economic or cultural capital. However, her refusal to participate in the expected discourse ("I am perfectly capable of deciding when I eat") challenges the chef's authority on a discursive level. The other guests, though dissatisfied – for example, with the lack of bread on the table – still did not go against the system and ate what was served to them. Margot does not care about others' opinions of her, which allows her to feel at ease around high-status characters:

MARGOT: Thank you for your concern, but I am perfectly capable of deciding when I eat and what [The Menu, 2022, 27:33].

TYLER: ... That's what makes his food so exciting. He's not just a chef. He's a storyteller.

MARGOT: Yeah, well, call me the girl next door but maybe some rules you should give a f**k about. I don't know like, giving people food at a restaurant [The Menu, 2022, 24:36].

Moreover, as the story unfolds, Margot learns more about the Chef's life. In the Chef's office, she discovers a wall covered with photographs and newspaper clippings. Among the many awards, she spots an old photo showing a young and genuinely happy Slowic preparing ordinary burgers at a diner. Margot realizes that Slowic hates that he

has become a creator whose art no longer brings him joy. She uses this knowledge as background information to manipulate him in order to escape the island.

An important detail is that she is the only character among the consumers who was able to use the unbelievable gesture of clapping to redistribute power. Just as in Slovic's case, all attention shifted to the main character, who refused the gourmet meal and asked for a plain cheeseburger, thereby earning her way to freedom:

MARGOT: (Clap) I don't like your food.

CHEF SLOWIK: What did you say?

MARGOT: I said I don't like your food and I want to send it back.

MARGOT: You know what I'd really like?

CHEF SLOWIK: Tell me.

MARGOT: A cheeseburger [The Menu, 2022, 01:30:28].

Thus, the film demonstrates that power is not a fixed attribute tied to wealth or status but a dynamic construct shaped by context and communication. When the conventional rules of interaction are suspended, as on Hawthorn Island, the effectiveness of social status depends entirely on the ability to adapt discursively. Those who rely solely on external markers of power lose their influence, while those who can navigate and challenge the communicative framework are able to renegotiate their position within the hierarchy.

2.4. Politeness strategies as a mechanism of power construction in *The Menu*

Within the framework of politeness theory, Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) constitute a central mechanism through which interpersonal relationships are established. In the film *The Menu*, the characters use deliberate strategies to construct and destabilize power in order to maintain their social status. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's model, which distinguishes between threats to the positive face and the negative face, the film illustrates how the strategic use of politeness reshapes hierarchy within a controlled communicative environment.

Based on the findings of the analysis of the restructuring of the power hierarchy, Julian Slowik stands at the top of this system, and his discourse is characterized by the consistent use of bald-on-record FTAs. His statements, such as “It wasn’t cod, you donkey,” simultaneously attack both the negative and positive aspects of his interlocutors. Slowic limits the client’s ability to object and argue, creating a context in which politeness strategies become ineffective. The absence of mitigating factors (no qualifiers, no modal verbs, no indirectness) must signal absolute power, which corresponds to Weber’s concept of “power over” as the ability to impose one’s will despite resistance:

CHEF SLOWIK: It wasn’t cod, you donkey. It was halibut [The Menu, 2022, 51:58].

CHEF SLOWIK: Sorry. You’re dying [The Menu, 2022, 01:16:02].

TYLER: Chef?

CHEF SLOWIK: Go on. Come with me [The Menu, 2022, 01:08:20].

A more nuanced form of face threat is embodied by Elsa. She embodies a more subtle form of reputational threat; her speech combines formal politeness with subtle coercion. Her communication style often begins within the expected framework of professional politeness (“Is everything to your liking, sir?”) but then abruptly shifts to direct imposition, as in the phrase “No.” This juxtaposition creates what can be characterized as a covert FTA: while surface features, such as the use of honorifics as elements of negative politeness, are maintained, the pragmatic force of the utterance undermines both the autonomy and the dignity of the addressee. From the perspective of relational work (Locher & Watts), Elsa’s speech goes beyond “political behavior.” Elsa consciously ignores the interlocutor’s need for approval or social closeness. Instead, she establishes a rigid hierarchical distance, where formal forms of address only emphasize the inevitability of coercion (“You will eat less than you desire...”):

ELSA: Is everything to your liking, sir?

BRYCE: Well, actually, no (...) But could we please get a little bread? (...)

ELSA: No [The Menu, 2022, 25:26]

DAVE: What happens if you serve it on the 153rd day? All hell breaks loose?

Elsa smiles politely but coldly [The Menu, 2022, 07:39]

In contrast, guests initially use FTA as a means of asserting their perceived superiority within a customer-oriented hierarchy. Statements such as “You know who we are, don’t you?” represent attempts to impose a “negative face” on the staff, which clashes with Elsa’s negative politeness. These assertions are based on the assumption that economic capital legitimizes coercion and the right to privileges. However, in the isolated environment of the island, these FTAs do not yield the expected results.

When the familiar social structure breaks down and social status ceases to function, the guests’ speech changes dramatically. Whereas before they would attack the staff’s “face” to elevate their own, now they stop caring about any “face” at all. The use of profanity (“Just tell us how to stop this!”) and emotionally charged outbursts indicates a shift from calculated rudeness to an uncontrolled reaction to stress. Politeness (or its deliberate violation) is a sign of control. When guests resort to direct outbursts, they lose their status as “agents” and become mere victims of circumstance:

SOREN: Okay, okay, seriously, how do we stop this? (to Slowik) Just tell us how to stop this [The Menu, 2022, 53:06]!

MOVIE STAR: (...) I just - I don’t think it’s really, totally fair, maybe, what’s happening here? So - [The Menu, 2022, 01:15:02]

A particularly significant case is that of Margot Mills. Unlike the guests, whose face-threatening acts are either ineffective or emotionally driven, Margot employs them strategically. This corresponds to the relational-work framework, since she actively renegotiates social relations rather than simply following established politeness conventions. From a discourse pragmatic perspective, within the restaurant system, where guests are expected to be passive consumers, Margot uses a bald-on-

record strategy without any softening language (“I am perfectly capable of deciding when I eat and what”) that challenges hierarchy. Instead of apologizing for the inconvenience (negative politeness), she directly asserts her autonomy. This is an FTA that blocks Slowic’s attempt to impose his will on her.

Her demand to Tyler, “You need to apologize to me now,” is an interesting pragmatic inversion. It places the interlocutor in a position where they are expected to perform an act of politeness (an apology), which automatically puts her in a position of power. This is no longer simply a matter of “rudeness,” but rather the establishment of new rules, where her “face” must take priority. Additionally, the statement “My name is not Margot. It’s Erin” is the most powerful act of threatening Slowic’s positive face and the entire structure of the establishment. By rejecting the name imposed on her by the system, she disrupts the established interactional idea of those who perceive her as a function. This is positive rudeness, aimed at dismantling false social status and increasing power:

MARGOT: Tyler, you need to apologize to me now. You can’t talk to me like...
[The Menu, 2022, 35:20]

MARGOT: My name is not Margot. It’s Erin. I’m from Brockton, Massachusetts
[The Menu, 2022, 01:04:57].

Finally, the interaction involving Katherine introduces a form of controlled resistance within the system. Her public statement, “Julian Slowik tried to f**k me,” constitutes a direct threat to Slowik’s positive face, exposing him in front of others. She brings a private grievance into the public sphere, which is a classic tactic for discrediting someone. What makes this situation unique is that this FTA takes place within the framework of a “ritual” that Slowik himself created. When the victim is allowed to attack the abuser, the attack itself loses its destructive power. While Margo uses FTAs to undermine the system, Catherine uses them within the system. This underscores the highly controlled nature of discourse on the island: the staff controls

not only how guests are to be polite, but also exactly how they are permitted to express their hatred or resentment:

KATHERINE: Good evening, everyone. Three years ago, Julian Slowik tried to f**k me [The Menu, 2022, 58:52].

CONCLUSION TO CHAPTER 2

An analysis of the film *The Menu* through the lens of contemporary communication theory suggests that the effectiveness of social status depends on the ability to control communicative interaction. The study demonstrated that traditional hierarchies based on economic and symbolic capital prove to be relatively unstable when the familiar rules of the social contract are replaced by new discursive norms.

First, a fundamental distinction has been established between high-context and low-context communication as tools of power. While the elite and restaurant staff use complex metaphors, symbolism and professional lexicon to maintain exclusivity and control, the main character, Margot, uses direct, low-context language as a means of deconstructing this absurdity. This demonstrates that in times of crisis, “simple” language proves to be more adaptive and effective for preserving agency.

Second, the transformation of politeness strategies in the film illustrates a power transformation. The path from the guests’ aggressiveness to their complete linguistic helplessness becomes apparent. At the same time, the strategies of the staff (particularly Elsa and Slowik) demonstrate the process of “aggressive formality”: the use of honorifics and commands to systematically suppress interlocutors’ “face”.

Third, communicative flexibility emerges as a key factor in the redistribution of power. Margot doesn't change her social status, but she manages to challenge Slowik’s system by her capacity to recognize manipulative Face-Threatening acts, use background knowledge to reshape the interactional context, and appropriate nonverbal signals of authority to establish her own communicative rules.

Thus, “The Menu” serves as a reflection of modern society, in which power does not necessarily lie with those who possess resources (“takers”), but with those who control the discursive field. The film demonstrates that in the digital and postmodern era, the ability to adapt one’s communicative style, manage context and employ direct politeness strategies at the right moment is a significant factor for survival and social agility.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

Research on social status in the context of contemporary communication highlights the profound influence of discourses on personal identity and social structures on linguistic behavior. Based on the results of this study, there are grounds to draw the following conclusions:

1. Research has been conducted into the origins of a phenomenon such as social status. It emerged as a result of the distribution of resources and the existence of a surplus. Consequently, people were divided into categories depending on how they wished to possess these resources (managers, employees, academics, etc.). Over time, these categories became socially institutionalized and cognitively simplified through the formation of stereotypical associations. Members of particular social groups were no longer evaluated individually but were instead perceived through generalized traits attributed to their category (e.g., wealth, occupation, authority, or lack thereof).
2. Social status should be understood as a discursively constructed and interactionally negotiated phenomenon. In communication, hierarchical relations are continuously reproduced and adjusted through specific linguistic and pragmatic mechanisms, including forms of address (e.g., honorifics or informal address), degrees of directness, politeness strategies (e.g., hedging, imperative mood, modality), and the strategic use of Face-Threatening acts (FTAs).
3. The theoretical analysis shows that this process is grounded in multiple complementary perspectives. From the viewpoint of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, social hierarchy is reflected in the management of positive and negative face, where speakers strategically choose between mitigation, indirectness, or direct imposition. Critical discourse analysis (van Dijk) further explains that power is sustained through control of discourse. High status allows for the use of subtle wording, nonverbal pauses, or a limited

vocabulary filled with symbolism and metaphors (high- and low-context cultures). However, it is precisely this high position in the hierarchy that makes it possible for such people to prove their authority without needing to use any of these tools. At the same time, people of lower status are limited in their lexical expressions of power and tend to speak more directly. Only additional resources, such as background knowledge or social connections, can serve as a means of demonstrating power in society.

4. In modern digital communication, hierarchical distinctions are no longer expressed through traditional markers such as official titles or strict etiquette. Instead, status is conveyed through subtle pragmatic and communicative cues. For example, delays in responses in business correspondence may signal authority and the high value of the interlocutor's time, while instant replies may position the speaker as more subordinate or dependent on approval. The study also demonstrates that modern communication is eroding many traditional linguistic boundaries associated with social hierarchy. Informal vocabulary, slang, and simplified syntax are increasingly appearing even in interactions involving high-status individuals (public figures and representatives of institutions). However, this does not mean that the hierarchy itself is disappearing. Rather, authority is becoming more context-dependent, relying less on explicit status markers and more on control over discourse. As a result, social power in digital environments is becoming more subtly embedded in pragmatic behavior and interaction patterns.
5. The analysis of *The Menu* proves the theoretical framework regarding contemporary communication. At the beginning of the film, wealthy guests such as investors, critics and celebrities hold dominant positions because of their economic and cultural capital. This superiority is reflected linguistically through demanding requests, interruptions, evaluative comments and references to influential individuals (*"You know who we work for."*). Their speech reflects the traditional customer-oriented hierarchy in which financial power legitimizes authority. However, once the communicative environment

changes, these status markers rapidly lose effectiveness. On Hawthorn Island, Chef Slowik determines when guests may speak, what topics are acceptable, and how participants are expected to respond. Through bald-on-record commands (*"You don't talk"*), non-verbal discourse practices (the clap followed by *"Yes, Chef"*), prolonged pauses and psychologically loaded monologues, he restructures the hierarchy. As a result, the guests' economic capital no longer guarantees authority because they no longer control the interactional framework. Margot, despite occupying the lowest social position among the guests, is ultimately the only character capable of destabilizing Slowik's authority. Her use of direct low-context communication (*"I don't like your food"*) and her appropriation of Slowik's own nonverbal symbol of authority (the clap) allow her to temporarily seize discursive control.

Thus, this empirical study of social status in cinematic discourse confirms the theoretical analysis of the academic literature. The study is relevant because it examines the evolution of social status as a subconscious phenomenon that the average person rarely considers. It is significant because it traces the stages of this evolution under the influence of contemporary digital factors and how it manifests itself in the modern world.

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List of illustrative materials

1. *The Menu*. Directed by Mark Mylod, 2022.