

## LANGUAGE, POWER, AND CLASS: EXPLORING UNEQUAL DISTRIBUTION OF LINGUISTIC CAPITAL IN THOMAS HARDY'S TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES

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### Abstract

*This study uses Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theory to analyse the unequal distribution of linguistic capital in Thomas Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles (1891). By using a qualitative textual analysis methodology, the study explores how language reinforces class and gender hierarchies in Victorian England by serving as a vehicle of social stratification. The study focusses on the speech patterns, dialects, and access to "legitimate" language of the characters, exposing glaring differences: Tess Durbeyfield's rustic accent identifies her as socially marginalised, while characters like Angel Clare and Alec d'Urberville employ standard English to establish dominance. Tess continues to be linguistically disempowered despite her efforts to speak more elegantly, which is indicative of structural obstacles to social mobility. In addition to examining instances of resistance through Tess's quiet agency and the novel's sympathetic narrative voice, the research emphasises Hardy's criticism of Victorian society systems, particularly the moral hypocrisy and inflexible class system. Results highlight language's symbolic importance as a tool for subtly resisting injustice. This study adds a new sociolinguistic dimension to the body of literary criticism on Hardy's work by fusing feminist and sociolinguistic viewpoints with Bourdieu's theory. It highlights the ways in which class, gender, and linguistic capital intersect to shape opportunity and identity. In order to better understand the nuances of linguistic inequality in literature and culture, the study ends with recommendations for future research that emphasise multidisciplinary approaches.*

**Keywords:** Linguistic capital, Class hierarchies, Gender inequality, Symbolic power, Narrative voice, Victorian society.

### Introduction

Linguistic capital is a concept derived from sociolinguistics and the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. It refers to the value and power connected with certain forms of language, dialects, or ways of speaking within a given society.

Linguistic capital is a form of social power that reflects and reinforces existing hierarchies. It points out that how language is not just a tool for communication but also the tool of social stratification. In literature, such as Tess of the d'Urbervilles, linguistic capital is often used to explore themes of class, power, and inequality, demonstrating how language shapes identity and opportunity in society.

Thomas Hardy published his novel Tess of the d'Urbervilles in 1891. Set in a rural England during the Victorian era, the story of the novel follows the life of Tess Durbeyfield, a young woman from a poor background who discovers that her family may be descended from the aristocratic d'Urbervilles. Despite this connection, Tess's life is marked by hardship, exploitation, and tragedy as she navigates the rigid social and moral expectations of her time. The novel begins with Tess's father learning of their supposed noble lineage, which leads to a series of events that profoundly impact Tess's life. She is sent to work for the wealthy d'Urberville family, where she encounters Alec d'Urberville, a manipulative and predatory man who takes advantage of her. After suffering a great personal loss, Tess tries to rebuild her life and falls in love with Angel Clare, a kind but idealistic man. However, societal prejudices and Angel's own moral rigidity lead to further suffering for Tess.

This research work investigates the unequal distribution of linguistic capital in Thomas Hardy's novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, using Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theory of linguistic capital as a background. It analyses how language functions as a tool of social agility and omission, particularly focusing on how characters' speech patterns, dialects, and command of 'legitimate' language reflect and reinforce class divisions. The study reveals that Tess's linguistic positioning both highlights her social banishment and highlights the broader cultural hierarchies of Victorian England.

Language is a powerful vehicle of identity and social differentiation. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Hardy crafts a social world where language not merely a mean of communication but marker of a class, education, and moral worth. Drawing from Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital, which suggests that language varieties carry different social values.

This thesis explores how characters in the novel possess and deploy linguistic capital unequally, shaping their social trajectories. By focusing on Tess Durbeyfield's linguistic representation, this study highlights how her sociolect reflects her subaltern position and how Hardy critiques the socio-linguistic hierarchies of his time. Linguistic capital refers to the mastery of and access to socially valued language forms, which confer power and validity within specific fields. Bourdieu's work shows how institutions, including schools and literary norms, legalize certain speech patterns while marginalizing others. Applying this theory to Hardy's novel allows for a nuanced understanding of how language mediates social power.

Hardy's novel is a notable critique of Victorian society, particularly its treatment of women, the hypocrisy of moral standards, and the rigid class system. Tess, portrayed as a symbol of purity and resilience, becomes a victim of the societal forces that exploit and judge her. The novel is celebrated for its rich portrayal of rural life, its complex characters, and its investigation of themes such as fate, injustice, and the human condition.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The researcher undertake the study entitled "To explore the unequal distribution of linguistic capitals in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy.

### **Objectives of the study**

1. To examine how linguistic capital is distributed among characters in the *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*
2. To analyse how linguistic capital influences power dynamics, social mobility, and relationships in the novel.
3. To explore how Thomas Hardy uses language to critique Victorian societal structures, particularly class and gender inequalities.
4. To investigate the different linguistic varieties used by the characters to distinguish the social class and their position in the society.
5. To explore the Thomas Hardy's narrative voice in presenting the Tess's identity and shaping the reader's perspective.

### **Significance of the Study**

By the analysis of unequal distribution of linguistic capital in Thomas Hardy's novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* following types of advantages will be available both for the teachers and students of English literature.

Firstly, this study will contribute to the existing body of literary criticism on *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* by offering a sociolinguistic perspective on the novel.

Secondly, it will highlight the role of language in shaping social identity and power dynamics, providing a fresh lens through which to understand Hardy's critique of Victorian society.

Thirdly, it will provide the literary vision about the different linguistic verities used by the characters of the novel to distinguish the social class and their position in Victorian Society. Fourthly, This research work explores how Hardy's use of language depicts and critiques the unequal distribution of power and opportunity in Victorian society.

Fifthly, This study will examine the linguistic disparities among the characters and highlight how language functions as a tool of repression and cruelty.

Additionally, it will underscore the relevance of Bourdieu's theories in analysing literary texts.

### Research Questions

1. How do characters in the novel differ in their use of language, and what does this reveal about their social status?
2. How does linguistic capital empower or disempower characters in the novel?
3. In what ways does Hardy use linguistic inequality to highlight broader themes of class and gender oppression?
4. How does the tragic character of Tess portray Hardy's narrative style and language?
5. In what way does Thomas Hardy's linguistic choice capture the social setting of Victorian England addressing gender and status concerns?

### Review of the Literature

*Tess of the d'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy (1891) is a great work of social criticism, particularly about power dynamics, gender inequality and class differences. The concept of linguistic capital deeply rooted in Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital is explored in this novel. Linguistic capital is a term deeply associated with power and privilege which are linked with certain forms of language use. These language forms reflect and reinforce social hierarchies.

The disparities in linguistic capital between the characters such as Tess, Angel Clare, and Alec d'Urbervilles highlight broader issues and gender inequality in Victorian society. The theory of linguistic capital by Pierre Bourdieu provides a background for understanding how language operates as a form of power. Bourdieu argues that linguistic competence is not just a natural skill but a form of power that can be used to maintain or challenge social hierarchies. *Language and Symbolic power* (1991).

The theory of linguistic capital is highly applicable to *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. The characters like Angel Clare, who is well educated and speaks Standard English, exercise linguistic capital to proclaim dominance over Tess, whose rural dialect marks her as lower class. The use of language as a marker of class in Victorian literature has been analysed by many scholars. In *The Country and the City* (1973) Raymond Williams discussed how rural and urban dialects are used to create a class difference among the Victorian society. The contrast between Tess's dialect and limited access to formal education and Angel's polished speech reflects the broader societal inequalities of the time.

Furthermore, Patricia Ingham examines how Thomas Hardy critiques the marginalisation of women and the working class through language in *Thomas Hardy: Feminist Reading* (1989). Since Tess lacks the use of linguistic ability to protect herself from the oppressive system in her culture, he argues that her linguistic vulnerability is the primary cause of her persecution. (Ingham, 2002).

The connection between linguistic capital and gender in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* has been emphasised by feminist critics. In *The Female Malady* (1985), Elaine Showalter explores how language frequently silences or marginalises women in Victorian literature. Tess's lack of linguistic capital is highlighted by her incapacity to express her desires and experiences in a way that the males in her life can value. In a similar vein, Penny Boumelha contends in

Thomas Hardy and *Women* (1982) that Tess's increased social disenfranchisement is reflected in her language disempowerment.

The book also looks at the connection between linguistic capital and cultural and moral authority. Alec d'Urberville lures and persuades Tess by linguistic manipulation, and Angel Clare asserts his moral authority with his education and oratory. The moral hypocrisy of characters who deploy their control of language to rationalise their conduct, even if it is exploitative is a trait identified by critics such as John Goode, in *Thomas Hardy: The Offensive Truth* (1988)

Characters such as Angel Clare and Alec d'Urberville wield a form of linguistic capital that reflects their social privilege. Angel, educated and idealistic, speaks in a manner imbued with moral and philosophical overtones, while Alec manipulates language for seduction and control. This chapter analyses how their speech acts function as tools of persuasion and dominance, contrasting with Tess's more passive or reactive linguistic role. The novel's narrative voice, with its oscillation between standard English and regional dialect, also participates in this power dynamic. And social standards

In the book, this dichotomy of male attitude to females is illustrated through the characters of Alec and Angel. Alec sees women as sex objects, Angel puts women on pedestals by ignoring their sex. This divided figure is reflected in many Victorian novels in which the male hero is vying with a rake or other male who has repugnant (though apparently successful) relationships with women. Tess is perhaps the most satisfying of all Hardy's heroines. She's not a vapid retard like some of them, but a jolly heathen, brimming with humanity and imagination. But, like her sisters, Tess is crippled by a lack of resolve and a deadly indecision at key points. (Chaudhry, 2024)

Although the bulk of the criticism of Tess centres on her disempowerment as a speaker, several critics have examined how she challenges the tyranny of dominant linguistic conventions. One critic, J Hillis Miller tells us in *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (1970), believes that Tess's silence and her language of silences represent in many cases an exceeding of, the refusal even, of the silence of the rape - a refusal of both her enforced silence and his, a refusal of any empty and impotent noise or violence masking as 'manly' speech. This approach indicates that, while Tess may not have linguistic capital like Angel, she nonetheless has agency. Tess was labouring for "status and self-definition" (Zhang & Li, 2020, p. 988)

Tess and her family speak Dorset dialect, which reflects their status as working-class, illiterate peasants. Hardy uses regional dialect to highlight rural identity and social degradation. Their social mobility is restricted by the dialect, which identifies them as outsiders to urban or educated culture. Characters such as Alec d'Urbervilles and Angle Clare, on the other hand, indicate their higher social status and level of education by speaking in standard English. Despite coming from a good family, Angel chooses to live the "authentic" life of the rural poor over the clerical life. He romanticises Tess's speech as well as her innocence and rustic simplicity.

Angel's response, however, demonstrates the confines of his tolerance when Tess discloses her history; he only appreciates her idealised country identity within certain, constrained parameters. Despite his affectations, his own language and intellectualism show a detachment from the realities of the peasant class. Throughout the book, Tess's vocabulary changes subtly. Her attempts to speak more correctly reveal her drive for self-improvement and upward mobility. However, Hardy never gives her complete access to the language capital that would enable



her to alter her destiny or class. Class-based presumptions about language and value are challenged by her eloquent moments (such as when she defends herself)

## Research Methodology

This study is of descriptive nature and it is concerned with the Analysis of the linguistic capital in Thomas Hardy's novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891). This study adopts a qualitative research design with a textual analysis approach, integrating Pierre Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital from *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991). The research focuses on close reading and discourse analysis to examine how linguistic inequality is represented in the novel.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital serves as the main analytical foundation for this interpretative study. Using Bourdieu's ideas of habitus, field, and capital, the use of language in the narrative as a signifier of social class and symbolic power is examined.

### 1. Textual Analysis

The foundation of the analysis is a close reading of the book. The use of language, dialogue, narrative voice, and stylistic choices are examined in a few selected passages featuring important characters, including Tess, Alec d'Urberville, Angel Clare, and the rural community. The analysis reveals how Hardy uses language to create social hierarchies by identifying variations in speech patterns, vocabulary, and linguistic registers.

### 2. Theoretical Framework

**Bourdieu's Theory of Linguistic Capital:** Pierre Bourdieu's idea of linguistic capital, which is a subset of his larger theory of cultural capital as presented in *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991), serves as the foundation for this study. According to Bourdieu, language serves as a medium for the enactment and reproduction of power, authority, and class inequalities in addition to being a tool for communication. Mastery of and access to the dominant language or dialect, which confers social legitimacy and authority within a certain area, is referred to as linguistic capital. The characters' speech patterns, dialects, and communication skills in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* reflect the unequal distribution of linguistic capital, which in turn shapes their social trajectories and signals their social standing. The characters' speech patterns, dialects, and communication skills in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* reflect the unequal distribution of linguistic capital, which in turn shapes their social trajectories and signals their social standing. In a patriarchal and class-stratified Victorian society, Tess's use of regional dialect and her limited proficiency of the "legitimate" or prestigious linguistic forms serve as indicators of her lower-class background and add to the structural disadvantages she experiences.

The symbolic violence employed by language—how Tess is silenced, misunderstood, or excluded because of her linguistic habitus—has been examined in this study. The novel's language is not neutral; rather, it is a place of power negotiation that upholds gendered oppression and socioeconomic inequality. This study has critically examined how Hardy incorporates language disparities into his story and how these distinctions impact the agency, identity, and social mobility of his characters using Bourdieu's framework.

- **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA):** to investigate how language serves ideological purposes in sustaining oppression based on gender and class.

### 3. Contextualisation in History and Society

Victorian England's historical background, which emphasises gender roles, education, and class division, supports the linguistic interpretation. Interpreting how the characters' language capital is influenced by and functions within the larger social framework of the times is made easier by this contextual grounding.

#### 4. Secondary Sources

To support the analysis and place the research within the current academic debate, scholarly publications, articles, and critical essays on Hardy's work, Victorian literature, and sociolinguistics are reviewed. Studies that look at language, gender, and class in English literature from the 19th century receive special attention.

#### Findings

##### Language as a Social Hierarchy Marker

Language's role as a class divider in Victorian society is amply demonstrated in the novel. While Angel Clare and Alec d'Urberville's Standard English denotes education, moral authority, and class advantage, Tess's rustic dialect labels her as lower-class and limits her social mobility. This discrepancy bolsters Bourdieu's argument that language is a type of symbolic capital linked to power relations rather than being neutral.

##### Gender Inequality and Linguistic Capital

The wider gender inequality in Victorian England is reflected in Tess's restricted linguistic agency. According to feminist critics, Tess is susceptible to being taken advantage of by male characters because she is unable to express her feelings and experiences in a way that is acceptable in society. Patriarchal power is reinforced by using her speech—or lack thereof—to silence her.

**Using Language as a Persuasion and Domination Tool**  
Male characters like Alec and Angel employ their linguistic capital differently; Alec manipulates through persuasive speech, while Angel moralises through intellectualised language. Tess is controlled by both types of discourse, demonstrating how language may be used as a tool for subtle social violence.

##### Resistance via Silence

J. Hillis Miller and other critics contend that Tess's quiet is a kind of resistance rather than just weakness. It is possible to see her failure to engage with dominant linguistic frameworks as a rejection of her oppressors' language, providing a nuanced type of agency.

**Romanticisation and Tolerance Boundaries**  
Tess's speech and rustic simplicity are romanticised by Angel Clare, but his admiration is only conditional. His rejection of Tess, who challenges his idealised vision by disclosing her background, highlights the flimsiness of his liberal ideals and the persistent influence of linguistic conventions in establishing social and moral value.

##### Power Dynamics and Narrative Voice

By alternating between normal English and regional accent, Hardy's storytelling technique actively reinforces or challenges societal hierarchies. Tess is periodically given linguistic elevation by the narrator's voice, but not frequently enough to counteract the overall power disparity.

##### Language Development Restraints Based on Class

Although Tess's English improves over the course of the book, it is ultimately insufficient to get beyond the class-based obstacles that dictate her destiny. Although her articulate moments are moving, they are not very effective in altering her fate or social standing.

These results show how Hardy critically examines class, gender, and power through language in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, not just as a stylistic device. They also demonstrate how the novel's critique of Victorian society revolves around linguistic capital, or who gets to talk, how they speak, and who is heard. Although the literature now in publication offers insightful analysis of the function of language in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, a more concentrated investigation of the novel's use of linguistic capital as a tool for inequality is required. In particular, the following fields are still not well studied: the novel's examination

of the relationship between linguistic capital and other types of capital, such as economic and social capital.

The influence of regional speech and dialect on the identities and opportunities of characters. How Hardy's use of free indirect discourse and narrative style support the criticism of linguistic inequality

### Discussion

The linguistic capital in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* functions as a symbol of Tess's tragic struggle, an instrument for social critique, and a marker of class. The rigid social hierarchies of Victorian England are both reinforced and questioned by Hardy's use of *la Thomas Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, with its complex depiction of language, class, gender, and fate, offers a potent critique of Victorian society. The book illustrates how language serves as a sort of symbolic power that shapes social identity, moral authority, and access to opportunities by drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital. The inflexible gender norms and social hierarchies of the age are highlighted by the speech differences between characters like Tess, Angel Clare, and Alec d'Urberville. Tess's path from innocence to victimhood is influenced by abuse, desertion, and a culture that penalises rather than shields its weakest citizens.

Hardy's use of literary language to elevate Tess's thoughts and emotions functions as a subtle act of resistance against Victorian social norms. Tess was struggling for "status and self-identity. Hardy does not, however, completely silence Tess. He challenges the very conventions that repress her by giving her intelligence, emotional complexity, and dignity through the elevated and sympathetic narrative voice. By highlighting Tess's inner strength and humanity through literary language, Hardy discreetly challenges the social systems of his era.

In contrast to the rustic vernacular of many of his characters, Hardy himself writes in an elevated, frequently satirical tone. This results in: a feeling of disengagement and criticism of the social systems that constrain Tess. implicit empathy for Tess since, despite society's devaluation of her, Hardy uses literary language to highlight her inner reality.

### Conclusion

The unexplored topic of the unequal distribution of linguistic capital in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* presents new insights into Hardy's critique of Victorian society. In the end, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* shows how language may be used as a means of resistance as well as an instrument of oppression. The work is a powerful commentary on the human cost of inequality in Victorian England because of Hardy's depiction of language struggle, which mirrors the greater societal battles of class, gender, and fate.

Through an analysis of the novel's use of language as an instrument of oppression and power, this research will contribute to broader discussions regarding the significance of linguistic capital in society and literature. Future research could utilise Bourdieu's theories, feminist criticism, and sociolinguistic approaches to enhance our comprehension of this critical aspect of Hardy's work.

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