

Social class through language: Stylistic Markers of Statues and lifestyle in Mitchell's Narrative

Marupova Aziza Axtamovna

Samarkand state institute of foreign languages

Senior teacher

Abstract: This article investigates the linguistic means by which Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel *Gone with the Wind* constructs and signals social class membership among its characters. Treating the novel as a literary record of antebellum and Reconstruction-era Southern sociolinguistic variation, the study draws on the sociolinguistics of social stratification, register theory, and literary-dialect scholarship to build a four-level descriptive framework comprising phonological-orthographic, lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic markers. Applying this framework to the represented speech of the novel's principal social groups — the planter aristocracy, the impoverished "poor white" tenant farmers, and the enslaved house servants — the analysis shows that Mitchell encodes a hierarchically organized speech continuum in which orthographic respelling, lexical choice, syntactic complexity, and address terms jointly index a character's class position and lifestyle. The discussion situates these findings within recent scholarship on the ideological consequences of Mitchell's dialect writing, particularly its racialized eye dialect, arguing that literary style in the novel does not merely reflect a pre-existing social order but actively naturalizes it for the reader. The article closes by considering the relevance of these findings for teaching English stylistics, sociolinguistics, and literary translation in an EFL context.

Key words: social class, literary dialect, eye dialect, stylistics, register, sociolinguistics, Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind*.

Introduction

Literary texts that depict stratified societies offer a particularly rich site for the study of how language indexes social position. Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936), set in Georgia before, during, and after the American Civil War, portrays a social order organized around plantation ownership, enslavement, and shifting fortunes during Reconstruction. The narrative world is populated by characters drawn from sharply distinct social strata: the slaveholding planter gentry of the O'Hara, Wilkes, and Hamilton families; impoverished white tenant farmers such as the Slattery family; and an enslaved household staff including Mammy, Pork, Prissy, and Uncle Peter. Because the novel sustains dialogue across this entire social spectrum for more than a thousand pages, it constitutes an unusually extensive corpus for examining how an author uses style — rather than explicit commentary alone — to communicate social class and lifestyle to the reader.

This article asks a single guiding question: through which concrete stylistic devices does Mitchell's narrative encode social class and the lifestyle associated with it? Rather than treating class as a purely thematic or plot-level concern, the analysis approaches it as a property realized at several interacting levels of language — sound and spelling, vocabulary, sentence structure,

and the pragmatics of address and politeness. The article first outlines the theoretical resources that justify this multi-level approach, then describes the analytical method, sketches the social hierarchy represented in the novel, and offers a level-by-level stylistic analysis. It closes with a discussion of the ideological implications of Mitchell's technique and brief remarks on its pedagogical relevance.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Language and Social Stratification

Sociolinguistic research has long established that linguistic variation correlates systematically with social class. Labov's (1966) study of New York City speech showed that the frequency of specific phonological variables rises and falls in step with a speaker's socio-economic position, while Trudgill (2000) extends this observation across English-speaking communities more broadly, arguing that non-standard grammatical features such as multiple negation and non-standard verb agreement are consistently associated with lower social strata. Bernstein's (1971) distinction between an "elaborated" code, characterized by explicit, syntactically complex expression, and a "restricted" code, characterized by context-bound, syntactically simpler expression, has likewise been used to describe how social class shapes habitual ways of speaking. These models, developed from the observation of living speech communities, provide a template against which literary representations of class-marked speech can be compared.

2.2 Register, Tenor, and Style Levels

Where sociolinguistics emphasizes correlations between language and the speaker's permanent social identity, register theory addresses how language varies according to situation. Halliday (1978) treats register as a function of field, tenor, and mode — that is, of subject matter, social relationship between participants, and channel of communication — and proposes that language should be understood as a form of "social semiotic" that construes, rather than merely reports, social reality. Joos's (1961) classic account of style levels, ranging from "frozen" to "intimate," similarly shows that the same speaker shifts register depending on the formality of the relationship and occasion. Both frameworks are relevant to a class-stratified narrative such as *Gone with the Wind*, since tenor — the relative status of speaker and addressee — is precisely what governs the asymmetric speech patterns between, for example, an enslaved servant and a plantation owner's daughter.

2.3 Literary Dialect and the Problem of Eye Dialect

In literary stylistics, the representation of non-standard speech through deliberate departures from conventional spelling and grammar is termed literary dialect (Ives, 1950). A specific sub-type, eye dialect, uses non-standard spelling for words that are in fact pronounced identically to their standard-spelled counterparts; the visual effect of non-standard spelling, rather than any genuine phonetic difference, is what signals "dialect" to the reader. Leech and Short (2007) note that such graphological deviation is one of the most economical means by which an author can imply a character's regional or social background without lengthy narratorial description. At the same time, scholarship on *Gone with the Wind* specifically has shown that the novel's heavy reliance on eye dialect for the speech of enslaved characters has measurable ideological consequences: Hiramoto (2009) and the later study by Trowell and Nambu (2021) both examine how this stylistic choice has been received and translated, observing that the device tends to mark Black characters' speech as a deviation from an implicit white, standard norm. This line of research supplies an important corrective to a purely formal stylistic account, reminding us that style choices in the novel carry social and racial evaluation as well as descriptive information.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, text-based method typical of literary stylistics. Represented dialogue attributed to characters from each of the novel's major social groups — the planter aristocracy, poor white tenant farmers, and enslaved house servants — was examined and classified according to four analytical levels commonly used in stylistic and sociolinguistic description: (1) phonological-orthographic markers, that is, departures from standard spelling intended to suggest pronunciation; (2) lexical markers, that is, vocabulary choices associated with gentility, region, or social register; (3) syntactic markers, that is, sentence length, subordination, and the presence or absence of non-standard grammatical structures; and (4) pragmatic markers, that is, the system of address terms, honorifics, and politeness formulas that regulate interaction between characters of unequal status. Examples discussed below are paraphrased and described rather than quoted at length, in keeping with sound practice for the analysis of literary dialect, and isolated dialect forms are cited only where necessary to illustrate a specific linguistic pattern.

The Social Hierarchy Represented in Mitchell's Narrative World

Gone with the Wind organizes its characters along clearly marked class lines (Wikipedia contributors, 2026). At the top of the hierarchy stands the planter aristocracy, exemplified by the O'Hara family at Tara and the Wilkes family at Twelve Oaks: landowning, slaveholding families whose wealth and leisure rest on cotton cultivation and whose social standing is reinforced by codes of gentility, hospitality, and courtship ritual. Considerably lower on the white social scale are tenant farmers such as the Slaterry family, commonly labelled within the novel's own social vocabulary as "poor white" — free but landless, and regarded by the planter class as socially beneath even some enslaved house servants. Within the system of enslavement itself, the novel distinguishes a hierarchy of its own: house servants such as Mammy, Pork, Prissy, and Uncle Peter occupy what the novel constructs as the highest position among the enslaved, while field hands occupy the lowest (Wikipedia contributors, 2026). The *New Georgia Encyclopedia* entry on the novel notes that Mitchell intended her portrayal of older Black household servants to be more dignified than the comic stock figures of earlier plantation fiction, while also acknowledging that this portrayal remains, by its own design, sharply hierarchical (*New Georgia Encyclopedia*, 2020). After the war, the social map is complicated further by the genteel poverty of the defeated planter families and by the rise of wartime profiteers and Reconstruction-era newcomers, whom Old Guard Atlanta society regards with suspicion. This layered social world supplies the raw material for the stylistic analysis that follows: each group is paired, in Mitchell's narrative, with a recognizably distinct way of speaking.

5. Stylistic Markers of Class and Lifestyle

5.1 Phonological and Orthographic Markers

The most visually conspicuous marker of class difference in the novel is the use of literary dialect in dialogue attributed to enslaved characters and, to a lesser degree, to poor white characters. Speech given to Mammy, Prissy, and Pork is rendered through dense eye-dialect spelling: final consonant clusters are simplified, unstressed syllables and certain consonants are dropped, and grammatical endings are respelled to suggest a non-standard pronunciation (for instance, forms resembling "gwine" for "going to" or "Ah" for "I" recur throughout these characters' lines). By contrast, the speech of the planter-class characters — Scarlett, Ashley, Melanie, even when colloquial or emotional — is rendered in essentially standard orthography. This asymmetry is significant: because eye dialect marks divergence from a spelling norm rather than recording an actual phonetic difference, the device implicitly treats standard orthography, and the social group associated with it, as the unmarked baseline against which all other speech is measured (Ives, 1950; Leech & Short, 2007). Critics have observed that this technique risks reducing Black

characters' speech to the appearance of "misspelled" standard English rather than to an autonomous and internally consistent variety, with the effect of subtly diminishing the characters who speak it (Shmoop Editorial Team, n.d.). Poor white characters such as the Slatterys receive a comparable but lighter degree of phonetic respelling, enough to mark them as socially distinct from the aristocracy without aligning them fully with the orthographic treatment reserved for enslaved characters — an intermediate position that itself indexes their intermediate social status.

5.2 Lexical Markers

Vocabulary choice constitutes a second, closely related level of class marking. The narrator's description of the planter milieu and the dialogue of its members draw on a lexicon of gentility: references to "breeding," "quality folks," good manners, and the proper conduct expected of a "lady" or a "gentleman" recur throughout the early chapters, reflecting a social code in which correct vocabulary itself functions as a credential of status. This is reinforced by occasional French-derived or elevated diction associated with plantation hospitality and courtship. The speech of poor white and enslaved characters, in contrast, draws more heavily on regional, colloquial, and contracted vocabulary suited to everyday plantation labor and domestic routine rather than to the leisured pursuits — visiting, dancing, courting — that dominate the aristocracy's conversational world. A further lexical contrast emerges after the war, when Old Guard Atlanta's vocabulary of genteel restraint is set against the more ostentatious, money-oriented talk of newly enriched profiteers, marking a lifestyle distinction — inherited gentility versus newly acquired wealth — that runs alongside, but is not identical to, the earlier antebellum class divisions.

5.3 Syntactic Markers

At the syntactic level, the narratorial prose describing the planter class tends toward long, periodic sentences with multiple subordinate clauses, mirroring the leisured, elaborated style that Bernstein (1971) associates with higher-status discourse. Dialogue attributed to enslaved and poor white characters, by contrast, is rendered in shorter, paratactic structures, and frequently includes non-standard grammatical features conventionally associated with lower-prestige varieties of English, such as double negation, zero copula, and non-standard verb agreement. This patterning is consistent with Trudgill's (2000) general observation that such features cluster sociolinguistically at the lower end of the social scale, and it allows Mitchell to encode class distinctions even in passages where lexical or orthographic cues are minimal. The syntactic simplicity attributed to lower-status characters should not, however, be mistaken by the reader for simplicity of thought or character: Mammy, in particular, is given syntactically plain but rhetorically forceful speech, through which she repeatedly directs and corrects her social superiors — a tension between grammatical marking and narrative authority that is itself an important stylistic effect of the novel.

5.4 Pragmatic and Address-System Markers

A fourth, pragmatic level of class marking concerns the system of address terms and politeness formulas that regulate interaction across the social hierarchy. Enslaved characters consistently address members of the planter family with honorific titles — "Miss," "Mister," or kin-like deferential forms — while receiving, in return, first names or affectionate diminutives from those same family members. This asymmetric address system is a textbook instance of unequal tenor in Halliday's (1978) sense: the choice of address term itself encodes, on every occurrence, the relative social position of speaker and addressee. A related pragmatic pattern appears in the deference expected of young unmarried women within the planter class: Mammy repeatedly admonishes Scarlett about the modest, indirect manner of speech and demeanor a young lady of

her station is expected to display toward suitors, illustrating how politeness norms in the novel are themselves class- and gender-specific codes that a character must master in order to be read by others as genuinely “quality.” Taken together, these address and politeness patterns show that class in the novel is performed turn by turn in dialogue, not simply assigned once through background description.

6. Discussion: Style as Social Semiotic

The cumulative effect of these four levels of stylistic marking is to make social class audible, and not merely describable, throughout the novel. This supports Halliday’s (1978) broader claim that language functions as a social semiotic: style choices in *Gone with the Wind* do not passively reflect a social order that exists independently of the text but actively construct that order for the reader, turn by turn, as a felt and naturalized reality. Mitchell’s technique is, in this sense, stylistically efficient — a reader infers a character’s class position from a handful of orthographic, lexical, and syntactic cues well before any explicit narratorial statement of that character’s status. At the same time, recent scholarship cautions against treating this efficiency as ideologically neutral. Hiramoto (2009) and Trowell and Nambu (2021) both demonstrate that the heavy eye-dialect marking applied to enslaved characters’ speech has had lasting interpretive consequences, including its influence on how translators in other languages have chosen to render these characters’ speech, often by borrowing the linguistic stereotypes of an unrelated regional dialect. Read in this light, Mitchell’s stylistic stratification of speech is not a transparent sociolinguistic record but an authorial construction that aligns standard orthography with the planter class’s social authority and visibly marks deviation from that standard as inferior. A stylistically informed reading of the novel therefore needs to hold two observations together: the technical sophistication with which Mitchell differentiates her characters’ voices, and the ideological work that this differentiation performs in reinforcing, rather than merely depicting, the racial and class hierarchy of the antebellum South.

7. Pedagogical Implications

Because it sustains class-marked speech across an unusually large cast and narrative span, *Gone with the Wind* offers useful material for teaching English stylistics, sociolinguistics, and literate translation, particularly in EFL settings where learners benefit from concrete, extended examples of register and dialect variation. Excerpts illustrating the four-level framework proposed here — phonological-orthographic, lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic — can be used to train learners to identify how status and lifestyle are encoded in English texts beyond the lexical level alone, while class discussion of the eye-dialect controversy offers a natural bridge to broader conversations about language, representation, and ideology that are increasingly part of contemporary language-teacher education.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* encodes social class and lifestyle through a coordinated set of stylistic devices operating at the phonological-orthographic, lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic levels of language. Read against sociolinguistic theories of class-correlated variation, register theory, and literary-dialect scholarship, the novel emerges as a richly stratified linguistic artifact in which a character’s way of speaking is never socially neutral. The analysis also confirms, in line with recent scholarship on the novel’s eye dialect, that this stratification carries ideological weight, naturalizing rather than simply recording the social hierarchy of its antebellum and Reconstruction-era setting. Future research might extend the present qualitative framework with a corpus-based quantitative count of specific markers across the full text, or compare Mitchell’s technique with the class-marked dialogue of other historical

novels set in stratified societies.

References:

1. Bernstein, B. (1971). *Class, codes and control*, Vol. 1: Theoretical studies towards a sociology of language. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
2. Fairclough, N. (2001). *Language and power* (2nd ed.). Harlow: Longman.
3. Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). *Language as social semiotic: The social interpretation of language and meaning*. London: Edward Arnold.
4. Hiramoto, M. (2009). Slaves speak pseudo-Tōhoku-ben: The representation of minorities in the Japanese translation of *Gone with the Wind*. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 13(2), 249–263.
5. Ives, S. (1950). A theory of literary dialect. *Tulane Studies in English*, 2, 137–182.
6. Joos, M. (1961). *The five clocks*. The Hague: Mouton.
7. Labov, W. (1966). *The social stratification of English in New York City*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.
8. Leech, G., & Short, M. (2007). *Style in fiction: A linguistic introduction to English fictional prose* (2nd ed.). Harlow: Pearson Longman.
9. Mitchell, M. (1936). *Gone with the wind*. New York: Macmillan.
10. New Georgia Encyclopedia. (2020). *Gone with the Wind* (novel). Retrieved from <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/gone-with-the-wind-novel/>
11. Shmoop Editorial Team. (n.d.). *Dialect in Gone with the Wind*. Shmoop. Retrieved from <https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/gone-with-the-wind/dialect-symbol.html>
12. Trowell, H., & Nambu, S. (2021, September 25). ‘Pseudo-dialect’ or ‘role language’? The speech styles of Black enslaved characters in three Japanese translations of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*. Paper presented at Yakuwarigo Kenkyūkai.
13. Trudgill, P. (2000). *Sociolinguistics: An introduction to language and society* (4th ed.). London: Penguin.
14. Wikipedia contributors. (2026). *Gone with the Wind* (novel). In Wikipedia. Retrieved June 25, 2026, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gone_with_the_Wind_\(novel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gone_with_the_Wind_(novel))