LANGUAGE AND POWER : A STUDY OF CLASS-BASED LINGUISTIC VARIATION IN KERINCI

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between language and social class in the Kerinci community, focusing on how linguistic variation reflects and reinforces social power. Using a qualitative sociolinguistic approach, the research draws on observations, interviews, and discourse samples from speakers of different social backgrounds—such as community leaders, teachers, traders, and farmers—to explore how language is used to negotiate authority and identity. The analysis shows that linguistic choices in Kerinci function as social markers that distinguish class hierarchies and indicate varying levels of prestige and legitimacy. The findings reveal that class-based linguistic patterns not only signal social status but also serve as strategic tools for asserting influence, maintaining relationships, and navigating social expectations. This study contributes to sociolinguistic research by providing empirical insights into the intersection of language, class, and power within a local Indonesian context.

Keywords : *Language, Power, Linguistic Variation, Kerinci*

INTRODUCTION

Language is deeply intertwined with social structures and plays a crucial role in shaping social identities, relationships, and power dynamics. As Holmes (2013) explains, linguistic choices are not merely communicative practices but symbolic actions that reflect social positioning and cultural expectations. In many communities, including Kerinci, language functions as an index of prestige, access, and social categorization. Differences in speech patterns—ranging from lexical choice to levels of formality—often reflect the social background of speakers and their relative positions within a hierarchical structure. These variations demonstrate that language operates not only as a tool for communication but also as a medium through which power is exercised and negotiated.

Kerinci, a linguistically rich region in Indonesia, offers a compelling context for examining the relationship between language use and social class. Traditional cultural hierarchies exist alongside modern social institutions, creating a dynamic sociolinguistic environment. Within this setting, speakers from higher social classes, such as community leaders and educated professionals, typically demonstrate greater proficiency in formal Indonesian, which is associated with institutional authority and symbolic power. In contrast, speakers from working-class backgrounds—farmers, traders, and laborers—tend to use localized Kerinci dialects that express solidarity, intimacy, and cultural rootedness. Such linguistic differences highlight how language choices reflect broader cultural frameworks that govern communication and social interaction (Fairclough, 2015).

The concept of linguistic capital, introduced by Bourdieu (1991), provides a useful lens through which to understand these dynamics in Kerinci. According to this theory, mastery of certain linguistic forms—particularly those deemed prestigious—grants individuals access to social legitimacy and recognition. In the Kerinci context, the ability to use formal Indonesian with fluency often signals educational attainment and elevated social standing. Conversely, frequent reliance on local dialects may index communal identity, cultural pride, or limited institutional access. These contrasting linguistic practices illuminate how language can simultaneously reinforce social inequalities and serve as a site of resistance to dominant social norms.

Although linguistic variation in Indonesia has been widely studied, research specifically addressing the interplay between language, class, and power in Kerinci remains limited. Most existing scholarship focuses on multilingualism, dialectology, or language maintenance, leaving a gap in understanding how social hierarchies are encoded and reproduced through everyday linguistic practices. Documenting class-based linguistic variation in Kerinci is therefore essential for capturing the nuanced ways local communities interpret linguistic differences as markers of authority, prestige, or resistance. Such research is not merely descriptive but contributes to broader discussions about inequality, identity, and social mobility within multilingual societies.

In response to these gaps, this study aims to examine how linguistic variation among different social classes in Kerinci reflects and negotiates power relations. Specifically, this research seeks to answer the following questions: (1) How does linguistic variation reflect class-based distinctions in Kerinci? (2) What linguistic features are associated with social prestige or authority? and (3) How do speakers use language to affirm or challenge existing social hierarchies? By addressing these questions, the study provides empirical insights into the complex relationship between language, class, and power, while contributing to the sociolinguistic understanding of local Indonesian contexts within a broader theoretical framework.

Language and society are inseparable domains in sociolinguistics, where linguistic behavior both shapes and is shaped by social structures. Scholars have long recognized that language reflects social identities, group membership, and class-based distinctions. Holmes (2013) emphasizes that variations in speech—such as vocabulary choices, pronunciation differences, or shifts in register—are manifestations of social organization and cultural expectations. In many communities, these variations correspond to differences in social class, revealing how language operates as a symbolic marker of status, authority, and education. Social class influences not only how individuals speak but also how their speech is evaluated, interpreted, and socially rewarded or sanctioned.

In multilingual regions, class-based linguistic variation becomes even more pronounced. Speakers with greater access to formal education tend to acquire prestigious linguistic varieties, while those in working-class environments often maintain local or non-standard dialects that index solidarity and cultural rootedness. This dynamic underscores the interplay between linguistic variation and the distribution of social power, which is central to understanding the communicative behavior observed in Kerinci.

Linguistic Capital and Symbolic Power

The relationship between language and power is deeply informed by Bourdieu's (1991) concept of *linguistic capital*. According to this framework, linguistic forms associated with prestige—such as standardized national languages or formal registers—act as symbolic resources that grant their speakers legitimacy and authority. Individuals who possess these resources can more easily navigate institutions, assert influence, and obtain social recognition. Conversely, speakers who rely on local dialects or informal varieties may be relegated to lower social positions, not because of linguistic deficiency but due to unequal social valuation of different speech forms.

In the Indonesian context, formal Indonesian often functions as a marker of educational attainment and institutional access, while regional dialects embody cultural identity and community belonging. This duality also exists in Kerinci, where fluency in formal Indonesian is frequently associated with administrative power, leadership roles, and professional achievement. The Kerinci dialect, meanwhile, symbolizes local values, tradition, and interpersonal intimacy. Understanding how linguistic capital operates in Kerinci provides insight into how speakers use language strategically to position themselves within social hierarchies.

Language, Power, and Ideology

Fairclough's (2015) framework of language and power offers another critical perspective for analyzing class-based linguistic variation. Fairclough argues that language is not a neutral tool but a medium through which social control, ideology, and dominance are enacted. In everyday interactions, speakers draw upon linguistic forms to impose authority, negotiate meaning, or resist established norms. Power relations become observable through differences in turn-taking, levels of formality, politeness strategies, and the adoption of authoritative or deferential styles.

In Kerinci, power is manifested through linguistic choices that align with traditional hierarchies, cultural expectations, and modern discourses of professionalism. For example, community leaders may adopt formal linguistic styles to assert authority during official gatherings, while traders or farmers may rely on localized speech patterns that reinforce solidarity and shared identity. These patterns illustrate how language participates in the maintenance of social order while also offering opportunities for contestation.

Class-Based Linguistic Variation in Local Contexts

Studies on Indonesian sociolinguistics have documented language maintenance, dialect variation, and code-switching across various regions. However, specific research on the intersection of class and linguistic variation remains limited, especially in local contexts such as Kerinci. Existing studies often focus on language shift, regional dialect preservation, or bilingual practices, leaving a gap in understanding how class-based distinctions emerge through everyday linguistic behavior.

Kerinci presents a unique sociolinguistic landscape where traditional authority structures coexist with modern institutions such as schools, government offices, and religious organizations. This coexistence shapes how linguistic forms are valued and used across different social groups. As a result, an examination of class-based linguistic variation in Kerinci provides an important contribution to understanding sociolinguistic diversity in Indonesia, particularly how language becomes a vehicle for expressing prestige, negotiating identity, and reinforcing or challenging social hierarchies.

Research Gap

Although theoretical frameworks on language, class, and power are widely established, their application to the Kerinci context remains understudied. Very few empirical investigations document how speakers from different social strata use language to assert influence, build identity, and navigate social expectations in Kerinci. This gap highlights the need for research that integrates linguistic analysis with sociocultural observation to reveal how class and power are enacted through everyday speech patterns.

The present study responds to this gap by examining class-based linguistic variation in Kerinci through a qualitative sociolinguistic lens, focusing on how language serves both communicative and symbolic functions in the negotiation of social power.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative sociolinguistic approach designed to explore how linguistic practices reflect and negotiate class-based power relations within the Kerinci community. A qualitative design is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth examination of natural speech, social interaction, and the meanings that speakers attach to their linguistic choices. The research focuses on identifying patterns of class-based linguistic variation and interpreting how these patterns contribute to the construction of social identity and symbolic power.

The study was conducted in various social settings across Sungai Penuh and surrounding villages, which represent the cultural and administrative centers of Kerinci. These settings were purposefully selected to capture linguistic practices across different domains of social life. The chosen research locations included traditional markets, schools, village meeting halls, government offices, and local community gatherings.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation from diverse social strata. The sample consisted of four main groups:

(1) community leaders and village officials,
(2) educators and school staff,
(3) traders and market sellers, and
(4) farmers and agricultural laborers.

This selection reflects a broad spectrum of social class categories, enabling the study to compare linguistic behaviors across groups with varying levels of socioeconomic influence, educational background, and access to institutional power.

Data were collected over several weeks using multiple qualitative methods to ensure the richness and validity of the findings. The primary techniques included:

Participant Observation

The researcher observed naturally occurring interactions in public spaces, paying attention to patterns of dialect use, levels of formality, honorific expressions, and speech accommodation strategies across different social contexts.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were conducted with selected participants to explore their perceptions of language use, social class, politeness norms, and community expectations. The flexible format allowed participants to express their experiences and interpretations while providing the researcher with deeper contextual understanding.

Audio Recordings of Natural Speech

Spontaneous conversations and everyday interactions were recorded— with participants' consent—to capture authentic linguistic behavior. These recordings served as the primary linguistic corpus for analyzing dialectal features, lexical choices, politeness markers, and speech styles associated with social stratification.

Moreover, the analysis combined elements of Labovian variationist analysis and Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) to provide a comprehensive interpretation of linguistic variation and power relations.

Variationist Analysis

This component focused on identifying linguistic variables such as dialect choice, code-switching frequency, honorific forms, politeness markers, and lexical selection. These features were compared across social groups to determine how they correlate with class-based identities and social roles.

Critical Discourse Analysis

CDA was used to interpret how linguistic choices express, maintain, or challenge power relations. Attention was given to discursive strategies such as the use of authoritative language by community leaders, deferential speech patterns among lower-status speakers, and shifts in linguistic style depending on audience or context.

Integrating these approaches allowed the study to examine not only the structural features of linguistic variation but also their symbolic and ideological functions in everyday social interaction.

Trustworthiness of the Data

- To ensure the validity and rigor of this sociolinguistic investigation on class-based linguistic variation in Kerinci, the trustworthiness of the data was established using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria were applied in ways that align with the unique sociocultural and linguistic dynamics of the Kerinci community, where power, class identity, and language choice are deeply intertwined.

- Credibility was achieved through prolonged and immersive engagement in various Kerinci social environments—local markets, schools, village meetings, and government offices—where class-related linguistic differences are most visible. This extended field presence allowed the researcher to observe naturally occurring speech, especially how speakers modulate their dialect use, politeness markers, and honorific terms when interacting with individuals of different social statuses.
- Triangulation also strengthened credibility. Data were gathered through three complementary methods—participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and audio recordings of natural conversation—ensuring that patterns identified in one source were consistent across others. Member checking was conducted specifically with community leaders, teachers, and traders, who confirmed that the interpretations accurately reflected how linguistic forms are used in Kerinci to display respect, assert authority, or signal solidarity.
- To support transferability, thick descriptions of the Kerinci context were provided, including detailed accounts of the local social hierarchy, patterns of intergenerational language transmission, and the symbolic value attached to different linguistic codes such as Indonesian, the Kerinci dialect variants, and mixed registers. These contextual explanations enable readers and future researchers to determine whether the sociolinguistic patterns identified—such as the association of standard Indonesian with prestige and the use of local dialects with solidarity—may also be applicable in other multilingual Indonesian regions with similar socio-economic structures.
- Dependability was ensured by maintaining consistent and transparent procedures throughout the research. Clear documentation exists for sampling decisions, interview prompts, fieldnote formats, and coding procedures. Since linguistic behavior in Kerinci shifts depending on social setting and interlocutor, consistency in recording and observing these shifts was essential.

Peer debriefing sessions with sociolinguistics colleagues were carried out to review the coding of linguistic variables—such as honorific use, lexical choices, and dialect selection—to ensure that interpretations were stable and grounded in the data rather than in the researcher's assumptions.

- Confirmability was achieved by ensuring that the findings reflect the voices and linguistic experiences of Kerinci speakers rather than researcher bias. Verbatim quotations from participants were incorporated into the analysis to preserve the authenticity of the data, especially when illustrating how speakers adjust their language when interacting with individuals from different social classes.

A reflexive journal was maintained to monitor the researcher's positionality, recognizing that the study involves sensitive themes such as power relations, class inequality, and social prestige. An audit trail—including raw audio files, transcriptions, analytic memos, and coding matrices—was kept to guarantee transparency and allow future researchers to trace the process through which conclusions were drawn about the relationship between language and class-based power.

From the researcher's viewpoint, establishing trustworthiness was critical because the topic of language and power in Kerinci involves social sensitivities, particularly regarding how certain speech forms are valued more highly than others. Ensuring credibility, dependability, and confirmability allowed the researcher to represent all social groups fairly, including farmers and traders whose voices and linguistic practices are often marginalized in formal research.

By applying rigorous validation techniques, the study is able to offer a more accurate and ethical portrayal of how language functions as symbolic capital in Kerinci—how it elevates certain speakers, constrains others, and ultimately shapes everyday power dynamics within the community.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Linguistic Variation Across Social Classes

Analysis of speech recordings and observations shows clear patterns of linguistic divergence across four identified social groups. Higher-status speakers (community leaders and educators) demonstrate significantly higher use of formal Indonesian compared to traders and farmers.

Their preference for standard forms is reflected in lexical choices, articulateness, and reduced reliance on dialectal markers. One village leader explained:

"When we speak Indonesian, people listen more seriously. It shows that we are prepared and educated."

(Interview, Community Leader, SP-04)

Meanwhile, traders and farmers relied heavily on the Kerinci dialect during daily interactions. A farmer from Koto Baru explained:

"Using Kerinci feels natural. Indonesian is only for dealing with officials or outsiders."

(Interview, Farmer, KB-07)

Table 1. Frequency of Dialect vs. Indonesian Use by Social Class

Social Class	Dialect Use (%)	Indonesian Use (%)	Contexts Dominantly Used
Community Leaders	35%	65%	Meetings, announcements, ceremonies
Educators	40%	60%	Schools, public speaking, formal events
Traders	75%	25%	Markets, informal transactions
Farmers	82%	18%	Fields, home settings, community chats

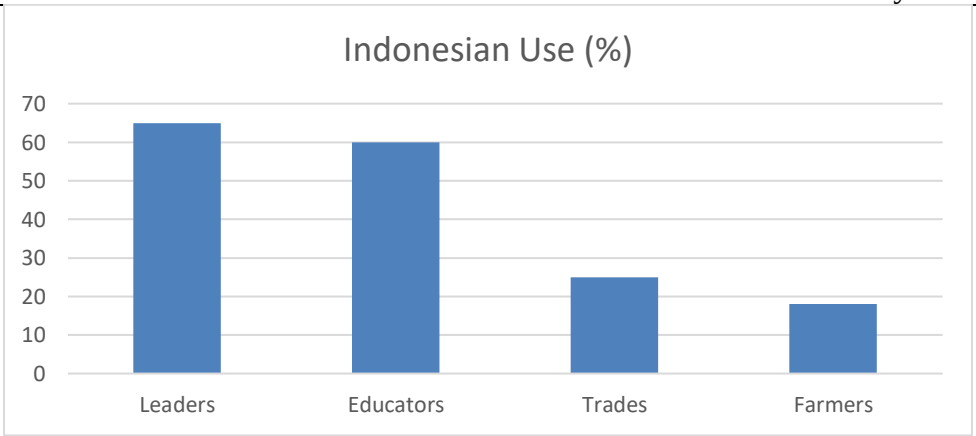


Figure 1. Linguistic Variety Distribution Across Social Classes

The distribution shows a clear hierarchy: the higher the social class, the higher the use of formal Indonesian.

2. Politeness Strategies and Power Negotiation

Politeness markers showed strong stratification. Leaders and educators frequently used honorifics, mitigated directives, and indirect commands. Example from a school principal:

"Perhaps we could discuss this again tomorrow, if everyone agrees."
(Interview, Educator, SP-12)

Lower-status speakers employed deference strategies such as softening particles (*la*, *do*, *yo*) and indirect questioning when speaking to higher-status individuals:

"Bak, if possible, maybe I can take the fertilizer tomorrow… if allowed."
(Interview, Farmer, AR-09)

However, among peers, traders and farmers used direct forms, sometimes dropping politeness altogether:

"Take it first. Pay later."
(Conversation, Trader–Trader Interaction, MK-02)

Table 2. Politeness Markers Observed in Speech

Group	Honorifics	Indirect Requests	Softening Particles	Directives
Leaders	High	High	Low	Low
Educators	High	Medium	Low	Low
Traders	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium
Farmers	Low	Medium	High	High (peer context)

These patterns reflect how politeness is strategically shaped by social status and interaction type.

3. Code-Switching as Symbolic Capital

Code-switching appeared consistently across contexts but with different motivations.

Leaders and educators code-switched to Indonesian in public events to project professionalism:

"Kami berharap semua masyarakat dapat hadir… besok kite sambung lagi."
(Public Speech, Leader, SP-03)

Here, the mid-sentence shift signals both authority (Indonesian) and solidarity (Kerinci).

Traders and farmers code-switched mainly when interacting with higher-status individuals:

"Iyo Pak, tomorrow I will come again."
(Conversation, Trader with Official, MK-11)

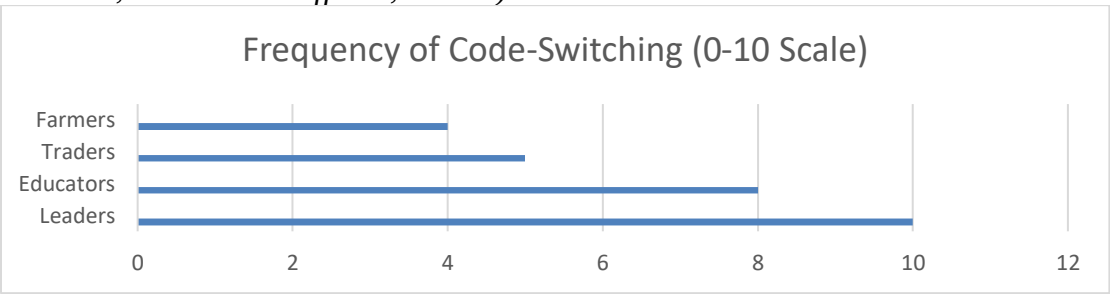


Figure 2. Code-Switching Patterns by Social Class

This confirms that higher-status speakers hold more linguistic flexibility, which functions as symbolic capital.

Ideological Perceptions of Language and Class

Interviews reveal strong ideologies linking language to identity and mobility.

A teacher explained:

"Students who master Indonesian usually get better jobs. It opens doors." *(Interview, Teacher, SP-14)*

Conversely, a trader emphasized cultural identity:

"Speaking Kerinci means we are Kerinci people. If we lose it, we lose who we are." *(Interview, Trader, MK-05)*

This ideological tension suggests a dual valuation system:

- Indonesian = prestige, education, upward mobility
- Kerinci dialect = identity, belonging, authenticity

Table 3. Ideological Themes Identified from Interviews

Emerging Ideology	Description	Social Groups Mentioning It
Indonesian as prestige	Language of education and authority	Leaders, Educators
Dialect as identity	Cultural marker of belonging	Traders, Farmers, Some Educators
Indonesian as barrier	Feelings of insecurity when using Indonesian	Farmers, Traders
Dialect as solidarity	Builds trust and intimacy	All groups

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that linguistic variation in Kerinci is inseparable from the community's social structure and the power relations embedded within it. The findings demonstrate that language practices—particularly the use of dialects, formal Indonesian, politeness strategies, and code-switching—serve not only as communicative tools but also as symbolic resources for constructing and negotiating social identity and hierarchy.

A clear pattern emerges in how different social classes select linguistic varieties. Higher-status groups, such as community leaders and educators, predominantly employ formal Indonesian in public and institutional settings. This preference reflects broader national ideologies that associate standard language with prestige, professionalism, and institutional legitimacy. Their elevated use of Indonesian (60–65%) signifies that language choice functions ideologically, reinforcing their social authority within the Kerinci community. In this sense, Indonesian operates as a form of linguistic capital that indexes education, mobility, and access to power.

Conversely, traders and farmers show significantly higher rates of Kerinci dialect use (75–82%), revealing a strong attachment to local identity, cultural heritage, and community belonging. The dialect is not merely a communication medium—it embodies symbolic value and fosters interpersonal solidarity. Yet, the strategic code-switching observed among these groups, especially when addressing higher-status individuals, demonstrates an awareness of social hierarchies. Their ability to adjust speech patterns highlights the existence of a linguistic marketplace in which Indonesian symbolizes authority and the Kerinci dialect symbolizes intimacy and shared identity.

Politeness strategies further illuminate the subtle mechanisms through which power is negotiated. Higher-status speakers use indirect directives, honorifics, and mitigation devices to maintain authority while preserving institutional decorum. Lower-status speakers employ deferential forms and softened expressions when interacting with elites, shifting to more direct and informal speech among peers. These patterns confirm that politeness is deeply indexical of social relations and that linguistic behavior is shaped by the perceived power of interlocutors.

Code-switching plays a central and dynamic role in this sociolinguistic landscape. For high-status individuals, code-switching operates as a flexible resource that blends authority with cultural affiliation, reinforcing multidimensional identities. For lower-status speakers, however, code-switching serves more as a defensive or accommodating practice, often used to display respect and avoid conflict. This asymmetry reflects unequal access to linguistic resources and underscores how language can reproduce social inequalities.

The ideological tensions identified in this study—between Indonesian as a marker of opportunity and the Kerinci dialect as a symbol of heritage—further highlight the complexity of multilingual life in the region. While many participants view Indonesian as a pathway to upward mobility, others experience linguistic insecurity or feel disconnected from formal linguistic norms. These perceptions indicate that language operates as a gatekeeper within educational and institutional domains, shaping who has access to social mobility and who remains marginalized.

Overall, this research contributes to the broader sociolinguistic understanding of how language, class, and power intersect in multilingual settings. It demonstrates that linguistic variation in Kerinci is neither random nor purely functional; rather, it is a structured and socially meaningful practice that reflects and reinforces class hierarchies. Language acts simultaneously as a marker of social identity, a mechanism of power negotiation, and an essential component of community cohesion.

Future research may expand upon these findings by exploring generational differences in linguistic behavior, examining language use in digital communication, or investigating the role of education in shaping linguistic ideologies and opportunities. Such studies would further deepen the understanding of how linguistic capital continues to evolve within Kerinci's rapidly changing sociocultural environment.

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