

SOCIAL FACTORS AND SOCIAL DIMENSIONS IN MEAN GIRLS (2004) MOVIE: SOCIOLINGUISTICS STUDY

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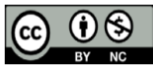
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Abstract

This research entitled “Social Factors and Social Dimensions in Mean Girls (2004) Movie: Sociolinguistics Study” analyzes sociolinguistic aspects of the film Mean Girls (2004) directed by Mark Waters, focusing on social factors and social dimensions in character conversations. Using a descriptive qualitative method, and the study analyzes purposively selected dialogues based on Holmes’ (2001) theory, which includes participants, setting, topic, and function, as well as the social distance scale, status scale, formality scale, and two functional scale. From 31 data samples, the findings show that all social factors consistently appear, with dominant participants being the main characters; Cady, Regina, Janis, Gretchen, Karen, and Damian, while conversations mainly occur in school settings and revolve around friendship, gossip, romance, reputation, and teenage social hierarchy. Utterances function to build, negotiate, maintain, or damage relationships while expressing solidarity, power, and conflict. All four social dimensions were identified, with the social distance scale as the most dominant with 13 data (42%), followed by status scale with 3 data (10%), formality scale with 5 data (16%), and two functional scale with 10 data (32%). Overall, the study concludes that language in Mean Girls functions not only as communication but also as a representation of social relationships, closeness, and status structures in teenage social interactions.



Keywords: sociolinguistics, social factors, social dimensions, movie

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INTRODUCTION

In everyday social life, language is not only a communication tool but also reflects identity, relationships, and social position. People speak differently depending on whom they talk to and the situation they are in. Holmes (2001) states that “Language provides a variety of ways of saying the same thing — addressing and greeting others, describe things, paying compliments.” This shows that speakers adjust language choices based on social context and communicative goals.

Tagliamonte (2006) explains: “Language is used for transmitting information from one person to another, but at the same time a speaker is using language to make statements about who she is, what her group loyalties are, how she perceives her

relationship to her hearers, and what sort of speech event she considers herself to be engaged in.” This highlights that language also expresses identity, social affiliation, and the speaker’s relationship with others.

Popular media, especially film, provides a useful way to explore these phenomena. The teen film *Mean Girls* (2004), directed by Mark Waters, portrays high school social hierarchy, exclusion, and complex communication strategies, making it suitable for sociolinguistic analysis.

The movie tells the story of Cady Heron, a newcomer adjusting to American high school life who becomes involved with The Plastics, led by Regina George. Through friendship, conflict, and manipulation, the film presents varied conversations that reflect teenage social dynamics and language use.

In sociolinguistics, language is influenced by social factors and social dimensions. Holmes (2001) identifies participants, setting, topic, and function, along with social distance, status, formality, and functional scales. This study addresses two main questions:

1. What social factors appear in *Mean Girls* conversations?
2. What social dimensions are represented in them?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics is a branch of linguistics that studies the relationship between language and society. It goes beyond language structure by examining how language is used in social life and how social factors influence language variation, including dialect, register, speaking style, and word choice depending on participants, context, and communicative purpose. Language reflects social identity, power relations, and solidarity among speakers. Radford (1999:20) states, “Sociolinguistics is the study of the relationship between language use and the structure of society,” emphasizing that language use is closely connected to social structures such as class, gender, age, education, and occupation.

Similarly, Holmes (2001:1) explains: “Sociolinguistics study the relationship between language and society. They are interested in explaining why we speak differently in different social context, and they are concerned with identifying the social functions of language and the ways it is used to convey social meaning.” This highlights that sociolinguistics seeks to understand why people speak differently across situations and how language conveys social meaning, for example when speakers use formal language in academic settings but more casual language with peers.

Social Factors

Social factor is an important concept in sociolinguistics that explains how language use is shaped by social interaction. As social beings, humans constantly communicate using different language variations depending on interactional needs, and these choices are influenced by social conditions surrounding the speakers. Holmes (2001:8) explains the components of social factors as follows:

“Not all factors are relevant any particular context but they can be grouped in ways which are helpful. In any situation linguistic choices will generally reflect the influence of one or more the following components:

- (1) The participants: who is speaking and who are they speaking to?
- (2) The setting or social context of the interaction: where are they speaking?
- (3) The topic: what is being talked about?
- (4) The function: why are they speaking?"

These elements help analyze how language varies according to communication context. Holmes further emphasizes that people do not speak in the same way in every situation because speech style changes depending on context.

The Participants

The participants are the speakers and hearers involved in a conversation, as explained by Holmes (2001:8). Their identities and social roles, such as teacher, doctor, student, or customer, influence how messages are delivered and interpreted. Differences in status, social roles, and relational closeness shape language choice, style, and interaction dynamics.

Participants also influence the level of politeness, tone, and vocabulary used during communication. For instance, interactions between close friends tend to involve informal language, slang, and direct expressions because the relationship allows greater familiarity. In contrast, conversations between individuals with unequal status, such as a student and a teacher, often require more respectful forms of address and careful word choice. Age, social background, and authority also shape how speakers express themselves and how listeners interpret meaning. Therefore, understanding who the participants are helps explain why certain linguistic forms are selected and how social relationships influence communication patterns in everyday interactions.

The Setting

The setting is the place and social situation where communication occurs, as described by Holmes (2001:8). Time, location, and atmosphere influence language choice, with formal environments encouraging structured and polite speech, while informal settings allow more casual and relaxed communication styles.

In addition to physical location, the social context of a setting also shapes communicative behavior. For example, conversations in institutions such as schools, offices, or government buildings typically require more formal language, organized discourse, and adherence to social norms. Meanwhile, interactions in relaxed spaces such as homes, cafeterias, or shopping centers often involve spontaneous speech, humor, and colloquial expressions. The presence of other people can also affect how individuals speak, since speakers may adjust their language to maintain social image or respect social expectations. Thus, the setting provides an important framework that guides how language is produced and interpreted in different situations.

The Topic

The topic is the subject being discussed in an interaction, as defined by Holmes (2001:8). Different topics influence vocabulary, tone, and speaking style, where formal or technical subjects encourage more serious language, while casual topics lead to more relaxed and emotional communication.

The topic also determines the level of detail, complexity, and emotional involvement within a conversation. Discussions about academic, professional, or

institutional matters usually require precise vocabulary and structured explanations to ensure clarity and accuracy. On the other hand, topics related to personal experiences, relationships, or daily activities often allow speakers to express opinions, feelings, and humor more freely. Sensitive or controversial topics may also influence speakers to choose their words more carefully in order to avoid conflict or misunderstanding. Therefore, analyzing the topic of a conversation helps reveal why certain linguistic choices are made and how speakers adapt their communication to match the subject being discussed.

The Function

The function is the purpose behind a conversation, as explained by Holmes (2001:8). Speakers communicate to inform, persuade, advise, or build social relationships, meaning that understanding the communicative goal helps reveal the intended meaning of an utterance.

Language functions can vary depending on the situation and the relationship between speakers. In some cases, the primary function is informational, where speakers aim to share knowledge, provide explanations, or clarify facts. In other situations, the function may be interpersonal, focusing on maintaining relationships, expressing emotions, or strengthening social bonds. Speakers may also use language strategically to influence others, give instructions, or negotiate social positions within a group. Because a single utterance can serve multiple purposes simultaneously, identifying the function of communication is essential for understanding both the literal meaning and the underlying intention of the speaker.

Social Dimensions

Social dimensions refer to sociolinguistic aspects that explain how language varies according to social factors and communication contexts. Sociolinguistics examines how language changes within social groups and how social structures influence language use. Holmes (2001:9) states:

“In addition to these components it is useful to take account of four different dimension for analysis which relate to the factors above and which have been only implicit in the discussion so far. These are:

- (1) A social distance scale concerned with participant relationships.
- (2) A status scale concerned with participant relationships.
- (3) A formality scale relating to the setting or type of interaction.
- (4) Two functional scale relating to the purpose or topic of interaction.”

These four dimensions play an important role in shaping communication patterns across social contexts, showing how relationships and social structures are reflected through linguistic behaviour.

Social Distance Scale

Social distance scale measures the level of closeness or distance between speakers in interaction, influencing language choice and formality. This dimension shows that closer relationships tend to produce more informal language, while distant relationships encourage more formal and careful communication.

The social distance scale consists of four categories: intimate, which reflects close and personal relationships characterized by informal language and affectionate

address terms; distance, which indicates greater social separation marked by more formal and careful language use; high solidarity, referring to strong mutual closeness, support, and shared connection between speakers; and low solidarity, describing limited familiarity and emotional connection, resulting in more formal and less personal interaction.

Status Scale

The status scale examines how social hierarchy and power relations influence language use, considering factors such as economic status, professional position, and social prestige. Differences in status affect communication styles and reflect how societies evaluate professions based on income and social respect, showing that social status is socially constructed and may vary across communities depending on societal values and perceptions.

The status scale includes four categories: superior, referring to individuals with higher position, authority, age, or social importance who are typically addressed using more formal and respectful language; subordinate, describing individuals with lower position or status who are usually addressed in a more casual and informal manner; high status, indicating people with significant social prestige or influence who receive greater respect and formality in interaction; and low status, referring to individuals with less social power or influence, often reflected in less formal communication styles.

Formality Scale

The status scale examines how social hierarchy and power relations influence language use, considering factors such as economic status, professional position, and social prestige. Differences in status affect communication styles and reflect how societies evaluate professions based on income and social respect, showing that social status is socially constructed and may vary across communities depending on societal values and perceptions.

The formality scale consists of four categories: formal, referring to official situations that require standard grammar, polite vocabulary, and respectful address forms; informal, describing relaxed interactions using casual language and familiar address terms; high formality, indicating highly respectful and ceremonial communication used in important or ritual contexts; and low formality, referring to everyday casual communication characterized by flexible, simple, and less structured language use.

Two Functional Scale

The functional scale categorizes language use based on communicative purpose and intention. Holmes (2001:10) identifies two main types: the referential function, which focuses on conveying information and facts, and the affective function, which emphasizes emotional expression and interpersonal relationships in communication.

Two functional scale includes referential and affective categories: referential focuses on information exchange, consisting of high information content (important facts or meaningful data) and low information content (light conversation or small talk), while affective emphasizes emotional and relational purposes, including low affective content (limited emotional involvement and greater social distance) and high

affective content (close relationships marked by openness, warmth, and personal sharing).

METHODS

This study applies a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze dialogues in Mean Girls (2004) movie, aiming to explore social meanings reflected in characters' language use. The approach focuses on understanding the relationship between language and social structure through naturally occurring conversations without manipulating data.

Data were collected from selected movie dialogues and analyzed using qualitative content analysis to interpret linguistic meaning within social contexts. As stated by Gerring (2017), "Qualitative work is often focused on particular individuals, events, and contexts, lending itself to an idiographic style of analysis," emphasizing in-depth and contextual understanding rather than generalization.

The analysis followed descriptive principles to identify patterns of social factors and social dimensions appearing in conversations. Trochim (2006:23) explains, "Descriptive are used to describe the basic features of the data in a study... With descriptive analysis you are simply describing what is, what data shows," highlighting the role of systematic description before interpretation.

Data analysis involved classifying dialogues based on Holmes' sociolinguistic framework, interpreting linguistic choices alongside contextual elements such as setting, interaction, and character relationships. The results were then summarized quantitatively to support clearer comparison and interpretation of qualitative findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Based on the research findings, a total of 31 dialogue data from the Mean Girls movie were identified. The four social factors identified in Mean Girls dialogues are participants, setting, topic, and function, all consistently appearing in the analyzed conversations. The dominant participants are the main characters; Cady, Regina, Janis, Gretchen, Karen, and Damian, with Cady as the central figure. Most interactions occur in school settings, while topics mainly involve friendship, teenage gossip, romance, reputation, and social hierarchy. The functions of the utterances generally serve to build, negotiate, maintain, or damage social relationships, while expressing solidarity, power, and conflict among teenagers.

In term of social dimensions, the social distance scale dominates with 13 data (42%), 7 intimate/high solidarity and 6 distance/low solidarity. The status scale includes 3 data (10%) in superior/high status, the formality scale has 5 data (16%), 1 formal/high formality and 4 informal/low formality, and the two functional scale contains 10 data (32%), 8 high information/high affective and 2 low information/low affective. Therefore, the most dominant dimension related to social factors is the social distance scale with 13 data (42%).

Table 1. Types of Social Dimensions found in Mean Girls (2004) Movie

NO	SOCIAL DIMENSIONS	TYPES	AMOUNT	PERCENTAGE (%)
1	Social Distance	Intimate and High Solidarity	7	42%
		Distance dan Low Solidarity	6	
2	Status	Superior dan High Status	3	10%
		Formal dan High Formality	1	
3	Formality	Informal dan Low Formality	4	16%
4	Two Functional Scale	High Information Content dan High Affective Content	8	32%
		Low Information Content dan Low Affective Content	2	
Total			31	100%

Discussion

This section discusses the research findings by providing one representative example for each type of social dimension. The analysis explains how these dimensions are reflected in the Mean Girls movie and how they function within the context of social relationships and communication.

Social Distance Scale

Intimate and High Solidarity

Data 1

DAMIAN: **“Is that your natural hair color?”**

CADY: **“Yeah.”**

DAMIAN: **“It’s gorgeous.”**

CADY: “Thank you.”

DAMIAN: **“See, this is the color I want.”**

JANIS: **“This is Damian. He’s almost too gay to function.”**

CADY: “Nice to meet you.”

The social factors appear in an introductory interaction between Damian and Janis, established students, and Cady as a new student. The participants are Damian, Janis, and Cady; the setting is a classroom as a semi-formal environment; the topic shifts from Cady’s hair color to Damian’s identity; and the function serves as social initiation. Damian uses compliments to build rapport, while Janis defines group identity and informally tests Cady’s suitability to join their social circle.

The social dimensions show a rapid shift in relationships between Janis and Damian with Cady. The interaction reflects the social distance scale through intimate and high solidarity, shown in Janis’s blunt statement “He’s almost too gay to function.” The word “gay” here functions as an in-group expression rather than an insult; Janis uses it humorously and openly to describe Damian, and his acceptance of the term signals closeness, mutual trust, and shared understanding. The highly informal language lowers interpersonal distance and helps establish group intimacy during the interaction.

Distance and Low Solidarity

Data 8

CADY: “Hi. I don’t know if anyone told you about me. **I’m a new student here. My name is Cady Heron.**”

CLASSMATE: **“Talk to me again and I’ll kick your ass.”**

The social factors appear in a tense self-introduction between Cady as a new student and an established classmate. Cady initiates interaction politely with “I’m a new student here. My name is Cady Heron,” intending to build social connection, but the classroom setting that although semi-formal but it contains strong informal hierarchies among students. The topic of introduction shifts function from social bonding to boundary enforcement, as the senior student responds aggressively, turning the interaction into an act of exclusion rather than relationship building.

The social dimension reflects social distance scale, specifically distance and low solidarity. The threat “Talk to me again and I’ll kick your ass” creates explicit emotional and social separation, using violent language to reject closeness and protect existing social territory. Despite the classroom context, the harsh wording signals intimidation, unequal positioning, and a lack of acceptance toward Cady, emphasizing rejection and minimal social solidarity.

Status Scale

Superior and High Status

Data 15

BETSY: **“Everybody done?”**

(Betsy takes Cady's plate while she's still eating from it)

CADY: **“No. Mom. I didn’t do it.”**

BETSY: **“I don’t know what to believe anymore.”**

CADY: **“Mom, believe me. I’m your daughter.”**

The social factors are reflected in an emotional family conflict between a mother and her child. The participants are Betsy as the mother and Cady as the daughter, reflecting a parent–child interaction. The setting takes place at the family dining table in the kitchen, a space usually associated with warmth but turned tense in this context. The topic centres on distrust following a social incident at school, while the function of the conversation is to express disappointment, seek clarification, and restore trust within the family relationship.

The social dimension shown in this interaction is the status scale, specifically superior and high status. Betsy holds authority as the parent, expressing emotional dominance through “I don’t know what to believe anymore,” while Cady’s repeated use of “Mom” signals respect and a plea for trust. This highlights the unequal power relationship, where Betsy occupies the dominant familial role and Cady must defend her integrity.

Formality Scale

Formal and High Formality

Data 17

(Regina cries as Mr. Duvall read the book)

REGINA: **"I found it in the girls' bathroom. It's so mean, Mr. Duvall."**

MR. DUVALL: "Is this true? Trang Pak made out with Coach Carr? Good lord. What's that say? Kaitlyn Caussin is a...?"

REGINA: **"Fat whore."**

(Regina continues pretending to cry)

MR. DUVALL: **"Okay, calm down, Miss George."**

REGINA: **"Why would someone write that? That's just so mean."**

MR. DUVALL: "Don't worry we're gonna find out who did it."

REGINA: **"There's only three girls in the whole school who aren't in it."**

Social factors are visible from the investigative moments that are full of manipulation in an institutional context. The participants are Regina George as the speaker and Mr. Duvall as the principal, representing a student–authority interaction. The setting takes place in the principal's office, a formal institutional space. The topic focuses on the investigation of the Burn Book, while the function of the conversation is manipulation, as Regina pretends to be a victim to influence the authority's perception and shift blame onto others.

The social dimension reflected in this interaction is the formality scale, specifically formal and high formality. Regina uses polite language and formal address such as "Mr. Duvall" to maintain respect and social distance, aligning with institutional norms. Likewise, Mr. Duvall's response, "Calm down, Miss George," reinforces hierarchy and professionalism, highlighting the clear status difference between student and school authority. However, Regina's use of the insult "fat whore" appears strategically within this formal context, functioning as a rhetorical device to intensify emotional impact and strengthen her performance as a victim, rather than breaking the overall high level of formality in the interaction.

Informal and Low Formality

Data 18

JASON MANDARINO: **"Hi, we're doing a survey of new students. Can you answer a few questions?"**

CADY: "Um, okay."

JASON MANDARINO: **"Is your muffin buttered?"**

CADY: "What?"

JASON MANDARINO: **"Would you like us to assign someone to butter your muffin?"**

CADY: "My what?"

REGINA: **"Is he bothering you? Jason, why are you such a skeez?"**

JASON: "I'm just being friendly."

GRETCHEN: "You were supposed to call me last night."

REGINA: "Jason. You do not come to a party at my house with Gretchen and then scam on some poor, innocent girl in front of us three days later. She's not interested.

Do you wanna have sex with him?"

CADY: "No, thank you."

Social factors are seen from interactions that show the social dynamics typical of the adolescent environment at school. The participants are Jason and Regina as main speakers, with Cady and Gretchen as addressees, reflecting teenage social dynamics at school. The setting is the school cafeteria, an informal public space. The topic centers on Jason's suggestive joke toward Cady, while the function of the conversation shifts from humor to social control, as Regina intervenes to assert dominance and regulate social boundaries.

The social dimension shown is the formality scale, specifically informal and low formality. This is evident in Jason's sexual humor, such as "Would you like us to assign someone to butter your muffin?", which ignores polite norms and reflects casual teenage speech. According to Urban Dictionary, the phrase "butter your muffin" is generally understood as a sexual metaphor referring to unprotected sex, where "butter" implies ejaculation and "muffin" refers to female genitalia. Regina's direct question, "Do you wanna have sex with him?", further reinforces the relaxed and spontaneous communication style, highlighting a low level of formality and a highly casual interaction among students.

Two Functional Scales

High Information Content and High Affective Content

Data 24

REGINA: "**Could you give us some privacy for, like, one second?**"

CADY: "Yeah, sure."

(Regina, Gretchen, and Karen whisper to each other then turn back to Cady)

REGINA: "**Okay, you should just know that we don't do this a lot, so this is, like, a huge deal.**"

GRETCHEN: "**We want to invite you to have lunch with us every day for the rest of the week.**"

CADY: "Oh.. I-It's okay-"

REGINA: "Coolness. So we'll see you tomorrow."

KAREN: "**On Tuesdays we wear pink.**"

Social factors are reflected from the social moments that serve as the initial stage of Cady's acceptance process into the most popular and influential gang at school, namely The Plastics. The participants are Regina, Gretchen, and Karen act as dominant speakers, while Cady is the new addressee being evaluated for inclusion. The interaction takes place in the school cafeteria, a semi-formal social space. The topic centers on inviting Cady to join The Plastics, and the function of the conversation is to negotiate social acceptance while reinforcing the group's exclusivity and status hierarchy.

The social dimension reflects two functional scale, specifically high information content and high affective content. Statements such as "We want to invite you to have lunch with us" and "On Tuesdays we wear pink" deliver clear group rules (informational) while simultaneously expressing emotional inclusion and exclusivity (affective). Regina's phrase "a huge deal" emphasizes emotional value and prestige,

showing how information and emotion work together to construct social bonding while maintaining hierarchy.

Low Information Content and Low Affective Content

Data 31

REGINA: “So how do you like North Shore?”

CADY: “It’s good. **I think i’m joining the Mathletes.**”

REGINA: “**No, you cannot do that. That is social suicide.** Damn, you are so lucky you have us to guide you.”

(Cady doesn't answer and they continue their shopping)

Social factors are reflected in moments of interaction that show inequality in social status. The participants are Regina acts as the dominant speaker while Cady is the new member adjusting to the school’s social norms. The interaction takes place at Old Orchard Mall, a setting associated with lifestyle and social status. The topic begins with Cady’s school experience but shifts toward regulating her behavior, and the function of the conversation is to guide and control Cady’s social alignment within the hierarchy.

The social dimension reflects the functional scale, specifically low information content and low affective content. Regina’s statement, “No, you cannot do that. That is social suicide,” provides subjective social judgment rather than factual information, while Cady’s remark “I think I’m joining the Mathletes.” functions only as small talk that triggers Regina’s response. The utterance lacks empathy and emotional warmth, showing dominance through instruction rather than emotional connection.

CONCLUSION

This research examined the use of language through social factors and social dimensions in Mean Girls by applying Holmes’ (2001) sociolinguistic framework. The analysis shows that the dialogues in the film reflect how language functions beyond information exchange, serving as a medium for constructing relationships, negotiating social identity, and expressing power dynamics within adolescent social life. The conversations illustrate that meaning in communication is closely shaped by context, participant roles, and communicative intentions rather than by linguistic form alone. By understanding social factors and social dimensions, this study shows that language choices are rarely random; they help explain why a speaker chooses to say one expression instead of another in a particular situation. This awareness allows individuals to interpret speech more contextually, reducing the tendency to take utterances personally or become easily offended. Instead, it encourages greater empathy and mutual understanding in social interaction, as people learn to recognize how social roles, relationships, and settings influence communication styles.

From the analysis of thirty-one dialogue data points, four major social factors were consistently identified: the participants, the setting, the topic, and the function. The participants were predominantly central characters such as Cady, Regina, Janis, Gretchen, Karen, and Damian, with Cady frequently positioned as the focal point of interaction. Most conversations occurred in school-related environments, including classrooms, hallways, cafeterias, and institutional spaces, which influenced the tone and language choices used. The topics commonly revolved around friendship, social

reputation, romantic interest, group identity, and teenage hierarchy, while the communicative functions varied from initiating relationships and negotiating acceptance to asserting dominance, maintaining solidarity, or enforcing exclusion.

In terms of social dimensions, the findings reveal shifting patterns of solidarity, distance, formality, and communicative purpose depending on interactional context. Informal peer conversations often displayed intimacy and high solidarity through direct or humorous expressions, while confrontational exchanges created social distance and low solidarity through insults with tension, threats, or rejection. Institutional interactions demonstrated higher levels of formality marked by polite address forms and controlled language, whereas family conversations reflected authority and emotional negotiation. Functional scales also varied, showing combinations of informational and affective purposes, where some dialogues balanced emotional bonding with rule-setting, while others primarily reinforced social norms with minimal emotional engagement.

Overall, this study highlights how film dialogue can represent authentic sociolinguistic behavior, particularly within teenage social environments where identity and status are continuously negotiated through language. The findings contribute to sociolinguistic research by demonstrating the relevance of functional and social dimensions in analyzing scripted conversations as reflections of real social interaction. Future studies may extend this research by comparing similar themes across different films, exploring cross-cultural representations of teenage communication, or incorporating multimodal analysis such as tone, gesture, and visual context to further understand how social meaning is constructed in audiovisual media.

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