

Speaking Status: Social Class and Linguistic Variety in Kevin Kwan's *Lies and Weddings*

1.Dr. Tarik Gulcu, 2.Tutova E. V.3, Ebzeeva Y. N.4, Smirnova Y. B.

1 – Ankara University, Ankara, Turkey

2,3,4,5 – RUDN University named after Patrice Lumumba, Moscow

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Received: 17 Dec 2024

Revised: 20 Feb 2025

Accepted: 28 Feb 2025

This paper explores the relationship between social class and linguistic variety in Kevin Kwan's 2024 novel, **Lies and Weddings**. Using a qualitative discourse analysis approach, the study focuses on how code-switching and multilingual stylization among characters—particularly involving English, Mandarin, Cantonese, and Hawaiian Pidgin—serve as indicators of prestige, power, and cultural identity. Drawing upon theories of linguistic capital and performance, the research demonstrates that language in the novel functions not only as a communicative tool but also as a symbolic resource that defines social boundaries. Characters' linguistic choices reveal their social positioning, heritage, and aspirations, while Kwan's use of satire highlights the performative nature of elite status. The findings suggest that language in **Lies and Weddings** operates as a nuanced mechanism of critique, reflecting and challenging the constructed identities of the global upper class.

Keywords: nuanced, constructed, communicative, indicators

Acknowledgements: This publication has been supported by the RUDN University Scientific Projects Grant System, project no. 050738-O-000

1. Introduction

As a contemporary author, Kevin Kwan critically elaborates on the lifestyle of the extremely wealthy characters in terms of their behaviour, deeds and habits of consumption. The novels included in his trilogy, i.e. *Crazy Rich Asians* (2013), *China Rich Girlfriend* (2015) and *Rich People Problems* (2017) best illustrate Kwan's critical approach to the ostentation of the characters in these works. Discussing the luxurious life of the characters in Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians* in relation to the issue of hedonism, Firdaus (2023)'s following summary of the plot arguably explain Kwan's criticism for the lives of the ultra rich characters: "Nick prefers Rachel Chu and spends time with her girlfriend in the United States. Nick proposed to Rachel and asked Rachel to be his wife without the approval of Nick's extended family in Singapore, especially his mother Eleanor. [...]. After Nick married Rachel, Nick and Rachel spend time and have fun with Carlton and Collete in the sparkling and luxurious life of Shanghai" (Firdaus, p. 750). Similarly, *Sex and Vanity* elaborates on the characters' pride in their social status, representing Kwan's critical approach to the extremely wealthy people in social area. Discussing Kevin Kwan's critical outlook on the luxury of the extremely wealthy class, Tutova et.al (2020)'s emphasis on the novel as a work "about elite high society in Asia and America" (Tutova et.al, p. 14) reinforces the author's criticism for the ostentatious lifestyle of the elite high society. However, along with the deeds and the lifestyle of the characters, the language they use also contribute to the representation of their social status. At this point, the present article explores language varieties, i.e. Mandarin, Cantonese, and Hawaiian pidgin as a means of reflection of and satire for the ostentatious lifestyle of ultra wealthy social class with reference to Kevin Kwan's *Lies and Weddings* (2024). Language in *Lies and Weddings* function not only as a means of communication, but it also represents a sense of belonging to elite class and it demonstrates power in socioeconomic sense. The research

employs a qualitative approach and follows a framework on the basis of discourse analysis. Making a textual analysis in relation to the examples of code-switching in the dialogues among the characters as well as the authorial commentary in socio-economic terms, Kevin Kwan's novel invites readers to explore how linguistic choices, i.e. code-switching reflect(s) broader social structures and identity dynamics.

2. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design, utilizing discourse analysis as its primary methodological approach. The main objective is to examine how linguistic varieties, specifically Mandarin, Cantonese, and Hawaiian Pidgin, function as markers of social class and reflect the prestige, power, and exclusivity of the ultra-wealthy characters in Kevin Kwan's *Lies and Weddings* (2024).

The research is text-based and involves a close reading of selected passages where code-switching, multilingual references, and sociolects appear in dialogue and narrative commentary. Purposive sampling is employed to select these excerpts, focusing on conversations that:

- Feature multilingual interaction between characters of differing or similar socioeconomic backgrounds,
- Involve explicit or implicit references to social status, prestige, or cultural capital,
- Highlight the use of language as a tool of social distinction or satire.

The framework is informed by sociolinguistic theories on code-switching and language and identity, particularly as they relate to social stratification and symbolic power. These theories include concepts from Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital, and Gumperz's interactional sociolinguistics, which support the analysis of how language choices reinforce or subvert existing social hierarchies.

Furthermore, authorial commentary and third-person omniscient narration are also examined to understand how Kevin Kwan mediates and critiques his characters' linguistic performances. Particular attention is paid to how language is stylized to exaggerate, mock, or emphasize the cultural excesses of the elite. By correlating linguistic patterns with character backgrounds and narrative context, the study aims to uncover how language operates as both a mirror and a critique of elite identity in the novel. Secondary literature on Kwan's previous works (e.g., *Crazy Rich Asians*, *Sex and Vanity*) and relevant sociolinguistic scholarship provide additional context for interpreting the findings.

3. Results

The analysis of *Lies and Weddings* yields three major findings regarding the use of linguistic variety as a social signifier:

3.1 Code-Switching as a Marker of Prestige and Belonging Characters in the novel frequently switch between English, Mandarin, Cantonese, and Hawaiian Pidgin. This code-switching is not arbitrary; rather, it functions as a marker of social distinction and cultural belonging. For instance, characters from traditional elite Chinese families often use Cantonese in private, reinforcing intra-group solidarity and signaling generational prestige. Mandarin appears more frequently among characters with newly acquired wealth, suggesting its association with contemporary economic power. Hawaiian Pidgin, by contrast, is used to reflect cultural authenticity and regional identity. In each case, language demarcates social boundaries and reinforces group exclusivity.

3.2 Stylized Language as a Vehicle of Satire Kwan uses stylized and exaggerated language to satirize the performative nature of elite identity. Characters adopt unnecessarily elaborate phrases in multiple languages, such as French or Italian, during social gatherings or public displays. These linguistic performances highlight the artificiality and vanity of the elite class. In certain scenes, abrupt shifts between languages are used not for comprehension but for emphasis and control, as when Mandarin is used in confrontations to signal authority. Through this hyper-stylization, language becomes a tool for mocking the elite's obsession with appearance and power.

3.3 Language as Social Capital The ability to shift fluently between linguistic registers and languages correlates with a character's social mobility and symbolic capital. Characters who demonstrate such linguistic fluidity are portrayed as more competent, respected, and socially adept. For example, the protagonist's code-switching between Hawaiian Pidgin and Standard English allows him to maintain cultural authenticity while navigating elite spaces. On the other hand, characters who misapply or overuse foreign words appear insecure or comical, exposing the superficiality of their social climbing efforts. These findings illustrate that language in *Lies and Weddings* is more than a communicative tool—it is a strategic social instrument. Kevin Kwan employs multilingualism and stylistic exaggeration not only to depict but also to critique the hierarchies and affectations of the ultra-wealthy class.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate how Kevin Kwan strategically deploys linguistic variety in **Lies and Weddings** (2024) to portray and critique the performative nature of elite social identity. Through code-switching, stylized multilingualism, and language as a form of symbolic capital, Kwan does not merely illustrate the extravagance of the ultra-wealthy class but also underscores its superficiality and inherent insecurity. The implications of these linguistic choices are significant, both in terms of character development and broader sociocultural commentary. Firstly, the use of code-switching as a marker of prestige and in-group identity reinforces Pierre Bourdieu's notion of linguistic capital. In Kwan's narrative world, language operates as currency—those who are fluent in multiple codes can more easily navigate complex social hierarchies. For instance, when characters employ Cantonese in private moments, it signals their rootedness in traditional forms of wealth and respectability. Mandarin, in contrast, is often used by characters with newly acquired wealth, reflecting the rise of mainland Chinese economic influence in global luxury culture. These linguistic choices are not neutral; they are charged with meaning, mapping onto broader geopolitical and socio-economic structures.

Moreover, the novel reveals how characters deploy language performatively. Language is not just a medium for communication—it is a performance of taste, education, and distinction. This aligns with Erving Goffman's theory of social performance, where individuals present themselves in ways that conform to expected norms within specific social contexts. The overuse of European phrases, such as French or Italian expressions during social events, is not coincidental. These insertions are used as markers of cosmopolitan identity and elite taste, yet they often appear forced or exaggerated, thereby inviting satire. Kwan uses such performances to mock the elite's obsession with status and exclusivity. These scenes mirror real-world examples of cultural appropriation and linguistic vanity among global elites who adopt languages and symbols without understanding their context.

Another important dimension explored in the novel is the relationship between language and authenticity. Hawaiian Pidgin, in particular, is presented as a contrast to the stylized and affected discourse of the global elite. When characters use Pidgin, it signifies cultural rootedness and authenticity. This is especially true for the protagonist, who navigates between worlds—both geographically and linguistically. His ability to code-switch from Pidgin to polished English represents a dual identity that is both grounded and globally competent. In this sense, Kwan elevates multilingualism not merely as a social tool but as a symbol of hybridity and resistance against homogenized elite culture. This duality challenges the monolithic representation of the wealthy in contemporary literature. While many characters in Kwan's novel are ridiculed for their linguistic excesses, some are portrayed with nuance. This suggests that linguistic variety can also be a site of negotiation and transformation. Characters who demonstrate linguistic sensitivity and self-awareness often emerge as more sympathetic or morally grounded. They contrast sharply with those who use language to exclude or perform superiority. From a methodological perspective, the use of discourse analysis proves effective in uncovering these layers of meaning. By examining not just what characters say but how they say it—and in what language—the study highlights the intricate relationship between language and social identity. The qualitative approach allows for a deeper exploration of

character dynamics, narrative tone, and authorial intent. Furthermore, this approach validates the importance of language studies in understanding contemporary fiction, particularly works that engage with themes of globalization, identity, and power. These insights also contribute to ongoing debates in sociolinguistics and cultural studies. The portrayal of multilingualism in **Lies and Weddings** supports the idea that language is not simply a reflection of identity but an active constructor of it. This aligns with post-structuralist theories, which argue that language is central to the formation of subjectivity and social relations. Kwan's use of linguistic variety, then, can be seen as a narrative strategy that both reflects and critiques the fragmented, performance-driven identities of the global elite.

Finally, this study suggests that future research might explore similar linguistic strategies in other contemporary multicultural novels. Comparative analyses could yield new insights into how language functions across different socio-political and cultural contexts. Furthermore, it may be valuable to investigate how readers perceive and interpret such linguistic performances—do they recognize the satire, or do they view multilingualism as aspirational? These questions open new pathways for understanding the reception and impact of linguistic variety in fiction.

In conclusion, Kevin Kwan's **Lies and Weddings** is not just a narrative of wealth and romance—it is a complex sociolinguistic landscape that uses language as a key tool for social commentary. Through discourse analysis, this paper has demonstrated that linguistic variety serves multiple roles: it constructs social identity, signals power and belonging, and ultimately acts as a form of satire that challenges the very systems it portrays.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined the sociolinguistic dynamics in Kevin Kwan's **Lies and Weddings**, focusing on the intersection of language, social class, and identity. Through the qualitative method of discourse analysis, the study has revealed that linguistic variety in the form of code-switching, multilingual stylization, and regional dialects functions as more than a narrative device—it becomes a powerful instrument for articulating and critiquing elite social structures.

Kwan's strategic use of Mandarin, Cantonese, and Hawaiian Pidgin demonstrates how language can simultaneously reflect cultural belonging and act as a marker of socio-economic capital. Characters' ability or inability to code-switch fluently signals their level of social integration, authenticity, or pretension. In particular, the contrast between performative multilingualism and authentic cultural expression underscores the author's critical lens toward the global elite's obsession with status and image.

Moreover, the study shows that language is a medium through which Kwan invites readers to interrogate systems of privilege, power, and performativity. The satire embedded in linguistic exaggerations exposes the artificiality of elite identities, while characters with linguistic flexibility and self-awareness emerge as more authentic and relatable. Ultimately, **Lies and Weddings** serves as a rich case study in how contemporary fiction uses language not only to portray characters but to engage with broader questions of globalization, cultural hybridity, and class performance. Future research might extend these findings by examining similar patterns in other transnational novels, exploring reader reception, or integrating quantitative linguistic analysis.

In sum, Kevin Kwan's work reinforces the idea that language is never neutral. It is always embedded in power relations, and when used deliberately—as in **Lies and Weddings**—it becomes a potent tool for social critique and narrative complexity.

6. References

- [1] Firdaus, T. I. (2023). Representation of the hedonism of the main character in the Chinese novel *Rich Girlfriend* by Kevin Kwan. **Journal Syntax Idea**, 5(7), 747–758.

- [2] Tutova, E.V., Yurieva, Y., Ebzeeva, Y., & Gishkaeva, L. (2021). Code-switching from English to Mandarin and Cantonese in Kevin Kwan's books. *EDSS 2021 Conference Proceedings*. Retrieved from https://heaig.org/images/proceedings_pdf/ED06221017.pdf
- [3] Djingga, Z., Loebis, R. A. A., & Perangin-angin, A. B. (2021). Code Switching in Novel Entitled 'China Rich Girlfriend' by Kevin Kwan. *BAHAS*, 32(4), 307–343. Retrieved from <https://jurnal.unimed.ac.id/2012/index.php/bahas/article/download/30541/17193>
- [4] Budi, L. A., Sili, S., & Asanti, C. (2021). Code Switching and Code Mixing on China Rich Girlfriend Novel by Kevin Kwan. *Journal of Business, Social Sciences and Humanities*, 5(2), 432–448. Retrieved from <https://e-journals.unmul.ac.id/index.php/JBSSB/article/download/4045/3487>
- [5] Nasution, A. U., Nasution, S. N., & Pohan, R. A. R. (2021). An Analysis of Social Classes and its Impact in Crazy Rich Asian Novel by Kevin Kwan. *LingPoet: Journal of Linguistics and Literary Research*, 2(1), 72–85. Retrieved from <https://talenta.usu.ac.id/lingpoet/article/download/4808/3596/18723>
- [6] Dewi, M. A., & Suryaman, M. (2019). Social Conflicts on Crazy Rich Asians by Kevin Kwan. *Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on Social Sciences (ICSS 2019)*. Retrieved from <https://www.atlantis-press.com/article/125942917.pdf>
- [7] Bayard, L. (2024). Review of Kevin Kwan's new novel, 'Lies and Weddings'. *The Washington Post*, May 18, 2024. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/books/2024/05/18/kevin-kwan-lies-weddings-book-review/>
- [8] Kaufman, J. (2024). 'Lies and Weddings' Review: Never Rich Enough For Mom. *The Wall Street Journal*, May 24, 2024. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/arts-culture/books/lies-and-weddings-review-never-rich-enough-for-mom-8c269b2b>
- [9] TIME Editors. (2024). Lies and Weddings. *TIME Magazine*, November 13, 2024. Retrieved from <https://time.com/7172895/lies-and-weddings/>