

Abstract

This thesis reports the results from an ethnographic study of the language practices of 9-10-year-old children in two socially differentiated primary schools in Teesside, in the north-east of England. The analysis focuses on three salient pronominal features: possessive ‘me’; singular ‘us’; and right dislocated pronoun tags.

Children in *both* schools use *all* of these variants (though with different frequencies) in concert with other variants (such as ‘standard’ ‘my’ for the possessive singular and ‘standard’ ‘me’ for the objective singular). The central question of this thesis is therefore: *why does a speaker who has a range of alternatives choose one particular alternative in a particular context of use, and what effects might this choice have?* In order to answer this question, I explore the processes of meaning-making and identity construction within each school as a distinct community of practice. I show that speaker choice is socially meaningful by examining the contexts within which individuals choose between the different linguistic forms available to them.

Speakers are constrained and influenced by social structures, forces and hierarchies. The social background of the children in this study influences their school as a community of practice, which in turn influences the children’s linguistic practices. Speakers are creative in their language use, however, and they make choices in interaction which orient more to their immediate communicative needs than to membership in abstract social categories (such as social class). An ethnographically sensitive study of how the children use talk-in-action reveals the complex ways in which speakers manipulate their linguistic resources to create

stances, styles and identities in interaction and thus position themselves within a community of practice. At the same time, local stances, styles and identities are (at least partly) constitutive of macro-level social identity categories (such as ‘working-class’). At the heart of this study, then, is the notion that there is a dynamic, bi-directional link between language and society.