

Chapter 3 – Pronouns in Teesside

3.1 Introduction

In their treatment of personal pronouns, grammars usually present a table which differentiates the pronouns of English according to person and case. Table 3.1 represents a prototypical example.

Table 3.1: Prototypical pronoun paradigm (standard English) adapted from Wales (1996:13)

	Personal Pronouns		Possessive Pronouns	
	Subjective	Objective	Determiner	Nominal
1sg	I	me	my	mine
1pl	we	us	our	ours
2sg	you	you	your	yours
2pl	you	you	your	yours
3sg m	he	him	his	his
3sg f	she	her	her	hers
3sg n	it	it	its	its
3pl	they	them	their	theirs

According to such tables, for instance, the standard form for the first person possessive singular, determiner function (hereafter ‘possessive singular’), is ‘my’. As Wales (1996:19) points out, however, such tables belie the diversity that exists throughout the pronoun systems in use across the English speaking world. Following calls from Wales (1996:197-198) that further research on pronouns should take into account non-standard varieties, this thesis aims to explore the diverse range of pronominal choices made by children in Teesside. This chapter will examine two salient pronominal variants: possessive ‘me’ (i.e. the use of ‘me’ for the first person possessive singular) and singular ‘us’ (i.e. the use of ‘us’ for the first person objective singular).

Trudgill and Chambers (1991:7) comment that ‘English dialects demonstrate a considerable amount of variation in their pronominal systems, in form, function and usage’. They consider the ‘standard’ English paradigm and then discuss 8 significant differences between this system and ‘non-standard’ varieties. Possessive ‘me’ and singular ‘us’ emerge in first and second place on this list. Trudgill and Chambers (1991:7) write that possessive ‘me’ (as in *I’ve lost me bike*) is ‘very common in many parts of Britain, and occurs even in colloquial Standard English speech’. Singular ‘us’ (as in *Give us a kiss*) is also felt to be ‘common in colloquial Standard English speech in certain locations’, but ‘in certain regions ... notably the north-east of England, *us* has a much wider function as singular object pronoun (e.g. *He hit us in the face*)’ (Trudgill and Chambers 1991:7).

This brief overview raises a number of questions. The lack of clarity in references like ‘many parts’ and ‘certain regions’ reflects the fact that there has been a lack of empirical work on pronouns in English dialects, and hence accounts such as this one are frustratingly vague (which parts? how widespread? which regions?). Further, Trudgill and Chambers state that both possessive ‘me’ and singular ‘us’ occur in ‘colloquial Standard English speech’, but they do not explain what they mean by ‘colloquial Standard English’, nor do they specify how it is different from ‘non-standard’ English. Hughes et al. (2005:24) also use the term ‘colloquial’ and write that it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish between features of ‘colloquial style’ and features of ‘non-standard dialect’. One of the examples they give is the use of ‘us’ for the first person singular object pronoun (e.g. *Give us a kiss*).

For Beal (1993), the general pattern of pronouns used in the north-east varieties of Tyneside and Northumbria is so unique that it is necessary to set it out in a table of its own (Table 3.2).

Table 3.2: Tyneside pronominal system (Beal 1993: 205)

	Subject		Object		Possessive	
	Standard	Tyneside	Standard	Tyneside	Standard	Tyneside
1sg	I	I	me	us	my	me
1pl	we	us	us	we	our	wor
2sg	you	ye	you	you	your	you
2pl	you	yous	you	yous/yees	your	your
3sg m	he	he	him	him	his	his
3sg f	she	she	her	her	her	her
3sg n	it	it	it	it	its	its
3pl	they	they	them	them	their	their

In Beal's table, 'us' appears as the paradigmatic Tyneside alternative to standard 'me' for the first person objective singular, and 'me' seems to be the form used in Tyneside for the first person possessive singular in opposition to standard 'my'. Beal does, however, caution the reader that this representation is an idealisation: 'the reader is unlikely to encounter anybody who uses all of these features all of the time' (Beal 1993:191). This is a crucial point, and one that helps us to make sense of the ambiguities and uncertainties surrounding Trudgill and Chambers' (1991) and Hughes et al.'s (2005) use of terms such as 'colloquial'. Descriptions of non-standard grammars may maintain a spurious paradigmatic distinction between 'standard' and 'non-standard' pronominal systems. 'Colloquial' is a term which falls awkwardly between the two paradigms: how do we account for the speaker who occasionally uses phrases such as *Give us a kiss?* I adopt a different approach. In this chapter, I will demonstrate that speakers in Teesside make choices within a *single* paradigm that incorporates standard as well as non-standard community-specific pronouns. What we find in Teesside is that all of the standard options described in Table 3.1 exist, but additional options are available. Forms such as

singular ‘us’ and possessive ‘me’ supplement, rather than replace, those that exist in the standard pronoun paradigm. Further, variation within the Teesside system does not simply reflect regional and social distinctions; different pronominal choices index social and pragmatic meanings. My data happens to be from Teesside, but it is, of course, possible that the pattern I describe for Teesside is found more widely. This would account for the difficulties faced by those attempting to discuss the pronouns of regional dialects within a ‘standard’ versus ‘non-standard’ paradigmatic model.

3.2 Objective forms

Table 3.3 shows the variants used by speakers in both schools for the first person objective singular. Unlike the prototypical tables presented in English grammars, this analysis gives the pronunciation variants.

Table 3.3: First person objective singular

	Ironstone				Murrayfield			
	N		%		N		%	
mi	285	0	83.1%		300	0	96.2%	
ʊs/z	10	0	2.9%	} 16.9%	1	0	0.3%	} 3.8%
əs/z	24	(2)	7.0%		5	(4)	1.6%	
(ʊ)s*	24	(1)	7.0%		6	(1)	1.9%	
	343				312			

* Represents contracted forms of ‘us’ realised as /s/ in utterances such as *Let’s have a look*
 NB: numbers in parentheses indicate forms in which there was some doubt as to the classification.

As we might expect, standard ‘me’ ([mi]) is the most common variant of the objective singular for speakers in both schools. The alternative to standard ‘me’ is singular ‘us’ (I here include all realisations of ‘us’: [ʊs], [ʊz], [əs], [əz], [s], [z]).

Singular ‘us’ was used in only 3.8% of all cases of the variable at Murrayfield Primary but was used much more frequently at Ironstone Primary, accounting for 16.9% of all tokens of the objective singular. Section 3.2.1 considers the ways in which singular ‘us’ patterned in the Teesside data and situates its usage in a wider historical and geographical context.

3.2.1 Singular ‘us’

I noted earlier that Hughes et al. (2005:24) identified singular ‘us’ as one of those features that can be variably identified either as part of ‘colloquial style’ or else as a feature of ‘non-standard dialect’. Hughes et al. go on to write in more detail about this feature:

A number of interesting regional and social differences concerning the personal pronouns can be noted. These include the use in north-eastern England and in Scotland of *us* as a first person singular object pronoun, as in *He deliberately tripped us as I was walking down the corridor*. This phenomenon is also commonly found in the colloquial speech of many other parts of Britain, but in these places it is confined to a limited number of locutions, such as *Do us a favour* and *Give us a kiss*. Outside Scotland and north-eastern England, *us* (=me) is otherwise confined to indirect object status.

(Hughes et al. 2005:30)

Like Hughes et al., Beal (2004:117) also singles out the north-east region in her discussion of how this linguistic feature patterns in varieties of northern English. She notes that singular ‘us’ is used as both direct and indirect object in the north-east but that ‘examples from Bolton and West Yorkshire show it only as indirect object’. Within *my* north-east data, however, singular ‘us’ only occurs as indirect object, perhaps reflecting the more southerly location of Teesside within the north-east. Moreover, all 70 examples of singular ‘us’ in the data are part of imperative clauses (e.g. *Pass us that book*; *Give us it*). Type of grammatical construction therefore

appears to be a linguistic constraint on this variant of the objective singular. Further work is required to ascertain whether or not this constraint operates outside of the two communities of practice which form the focus of this study. My data cannot claim to be representative of the north-east as a whole or even of Teesside; I have not collected data from adults in the target communities, for example. Joan Beal (personal communication) found singular ‘us’ in non-imperative contexts in the Newcastle Electronic Corpus of Tyneside English (NECTE) and noted that this feature was particularly common in narratives. This raises the question: is the difference between the two data sets regional, related to genre, or due perhaps to change in progress or, even, age-grading? It is not possible to answer these questions within the current study, but this is certainly an interesting avenue for further research. Even if there is no strict linguistic constraint, an imperative might *predispose* the occurrence of singular ‘us’. This idea will be explored further in Chapter 4.

The use of ‘us’ for the first person objective singular is not restricted to the north of England and Scotland. It is found elsewhere in the British Isles (e.g. in the south-east of England (Anderwald 2004)) and, indeed, elsewhere in the English speaking world (e.g. Australia (Pawley 2004)). This particular usage is so pervasive that it is referred to within the *Cambridge Grammar of English*, which states that ‘*Us* is sometimes used very informally to mean *me*’ (Carter and McCarthy 2006:382). This variant of the objective singular has also been noted historically: the *Survey of English Dialects* shows extensive use of “me” expressed by **us**’ (Upton et al. 1994:486); Wright’s *The English Dialect Grammar* states that ‘[i]n most dialects of Sc.[otland] Irel.[and] and Eng.[land] *us* is used for the indirect object *me*, as *give us a few; send us some of them*’ (Wright 1905b:271); *The English Dialect Dictionary*

further states that ‘us’ could be used as an ‘[u]nemph.[atic] form of the *acc.[usative] sing.[ular] me*’ (Wright 1905a:332). This idea that *us* represents an ‘unemphatic’ form of the objective singular is echoed in *The Concise Scots Dictionary* which states that ‘us’ is used ‘as non-emphatic substitute for *me*’ (Robinson 1985:755).

Overall, the use of ‘us’ for the objective singular tends to be associated with colloquial or dialectal usage, and as such, it sits outside of the mainstream standard English pronoun paradigm. As with many non-standard (or very informal) features, we might expect the frequency of use of singular ‘us’ to pattern with social variables such as socioeconomic class. This expectation is indeed borne out by the data in my study (Table 3.3). But neither social group uses this form categorically or even with a particularly high frequency: 83.0% of the time, the students at Ironstone Primary use ‘me’ in objective singular position. I noted earlier that singular ‘us’ may be subject to internal linguistic constraints. Such constraints, if they exist, would restrict the use of this feature. We might also hypothesise that this particular variant of the objective singular fulfils a particular social and/or pragmatic function and is therefore used discriminately by speakers (i.e. the occasions where ‘us’ *is* used represent a choice on the part of the speaker). Chapter 4 examines the meaning and use of singular ‘us’ in detail and compares its role within imperatives to other forms of directives. The remainder of this chapter will concentrate on an analysis of the forms used by the children for the first person possessive singular.

3.3 Possessive forms

Table 3.4 shows the variants used by speakers in both schools for the possessive singular. Again, this analysis gives the pronunciation variants.

Table 3.4: First person possessive singular

	Ironstone			Murrayfield		
	N		%	N		%
maɪ	98	(1)	22.9%	60	0	24.4%
ma	265	(1)	61.9%	168	(1)	68.3%
mi	30	0	7.0%	3	0	1.2%
mə	29	0	6.8%	15	0	6.1%
auə	6	0	1.4%	0	0	0.0%
	428			246		

NB: numbers in parentheses indicate forms in which there was some doubt as to the classification.

There is one form that I have included in Table 3.4 which should perhaps be dealt with separately. In the Ironstone Primary data there were 6 occurrences of ‘our’ [auə] where standard English would have ‘my’. The *English Dialect Grammar* (Wright 1905b:275) cites this form as occurring throughout England ‘to denote that the person spoken of belongs respectively to the family of the speaker’. It was used in this way in Ironstone Primary: *I know, our mam is as well* (Joanne); *Our Emma’s* [Clare’s sister] *got some but they’re too small for her so she’s give¹ them to me* (Clare); *My mam throws it in the bin. (1.7 seconds) Our mam just goes like that* (Aaron). While ‘our’ is used with singular reference within the immediate speaking context, there is a sense in which it could refer collectively to siblings who are not present and, therefore, is in some sense plural. This ‘familial’ possessive seems to be a special case, distinct both from the singular and plural forms of the possessive. The plural possessive ‘our’ is variously pronounced by the children in this study as [ɑ:]

¹ This is a non-standard form of the past participle that is common in Teesside.

or [aʊə], but the familial possessive only occurs as [aʊə].² Although this form is ‘common throughout the North’ (Beal 2004:130), there is no evidence of its usage in Murrayfield Primary. Within the Ironstone Primary community of practice, the familial possessive is not restricted to the children. One of the teaching assistants, Mrs Moon, for example, is recorded saying *She’s dead funny, our Cindy*, when referring to her two-year-old niece. Mrs Moon also uses a non-standard intensifier ‘dead’ and her utterance displays right dislocation (see Chapter 5). This example shows that it is not safe to assume that teachers and other adults within the school-based community of practice always provide a ‘standard model’. Examples like this one perhaps go some way to ‘demythologizing’ (Cameron 1990) the perception of teachers as being guardians and enforcers of standard English. Because it is not clear whether the familial possessive is singular or plural, [aʊə] will be excluded from the remainder of the analysis.

The most popular variant of the possessive singular in each school is the phonologically reduced form [ma]. Grammatical words are usually pronounced in a reduced form in conversational speech (Wales 1996:13; Ladefoged 2005:70). The majority of the data in this study consists of the children’s casual conversation; it is therefore unsurprising that [ma] is the preferred form. The full form of the pronoun [maɪ] is the second most frequently occurring variant in both schools, being used around 20% of the time. This figure seems high given the point just made about

² Although in a recent spoof of ‘reality’ TV shows such as *Pop Idol* and *X-Factor* written by British comedian Peter Kay, one of the contestants was a teenager from Newcastle whose stage name was ‘R [ɑ:] Wayne’. His name was both an allusion to popstar ‘R Kelly’ and a parody of the way Wayne’s family consistently referred to him as ‘our [ɑ:] Wayne’. The use of the familial possessive is apparently associated in public consciousness with the north-east region, where the pronunciation is not restricted to [aʊə], though as I will show in Section 3.4, folk-linguistic beliefs are not necessarily grounded in sociolinguistic reality.

phonological reduction of grammatical words in conversation. Table 3.5, which differentiates the children's pronoun choice according to phonological environment, provides a partial explanation for the higher than expected frequency of [maɪ].

Table 3.5: Pronoun choice according to following phonological context

	Ironstone Primary			Murrayfield Primary		
	V	C	Total	V	C	Total
maɪ	37	56	93	12	48	60
ma	3	254	257	4	160	164
mi	19	8	27	2	1	3
mə	0	29	29	0	15	15
auə	3	3	6	0	0	0
Total	62	350	412*	18	224	242*

* These totals are different from Table 3.4 because examples which could not be categorised as preceding either a vowel (V) or a consonant (C) (e.g. because the utterance was incomplete: *Where's my-*) were excluded from the analysis. This accounted for 16 tokens in Ironstone Primary (5 [maɪ], 8 [ma], 3 [mi]) and 5 tokens in Murrayfield Primary (1 [maɪ], 4 [ma]).

Table 3.5 shows that where the initial segment of the following noun was a consonant (C), the preferred variant in both schools was [ma]; where the initial segment of the following noun was a vowel (V), the preferred variant was [maɪ]. Overwhelmingly it seems that [ma] was only a valid option for the children before a consonant. There were 7 exceptions, however. In Ironstone Primary, 2 of these exceptions occurred because there was a pause between the pronoun and the following noun: *My: [ma:] (.) elastic band; My [ma] (.) uncle*. In these examples, the phonological environment was effectively neutralised by the pause. In the third Ironstone Primary example, and in all four exceptions in the Murrayfield data, the speaker used a glottal stop as a link between the pronoun and the initial vowel of the following noun. Apart from these special circumstances, the use of [ma] was

restricted to pre-consonantal position. In pre-vocalic position, the speaker had two choices: [maɪ] and [mi]. The use of [mi] will be dealt with separately below.

The phonological tendency which establishes a preference for [maɪ] over [ma] before a vowel helps to explain why the full form occurred relatively frequently in the data despite the competing preference for phonological reduction of grammatical words in connected speech. But [maɪ] also occurred in pre-consonantal position. When these examples were investigated in isolation, it became clear that other factors, in addition to phonological conditioning, were involved. Overall, it seems that the children's use of [maɪ] before a consonant was motivated by three main factors. The pronoun was either:

- 1) uttered as part of a formal activity like reading or answering the teacher's questions;
- 2) uttered as part of a performance (e.g. singing or imitation);
- 3) stressed.

I will take each of these factors in turn.

The radio-microphone recorded reading groups in which the children read aloud to each other and/or to their teacher, as well as elements of whole-class teaching in which the children responded out loud to the teacher's questions. There were also examples in which the children read to themselves from a textbook or from their own work. In each of these situations, the children produced slow, careful, considered utterances in which the full form of the possessive singular [maɪ] was used. This pattern correlates with the classic variationist finding that speakers tend to produce forms that are less vernacular and colloquial when articulating written texts or when paying close attention to speech. 23 (out of 48) occurrences of [maɪ] before

a consonant at Murrayfield Primary and 11 (out of 56) at Ironstone Primary can be accounted for in this way.

A further 13 examples from Ironstone Primary and 9 from Murrayfield Primary fall under the heading of ‘performance’. For instance, the children sometimes sang their utterances into the microphone in the manner of a musical: *Hi Miss Julia Snell. Hi Miss Julia Snell. I can change my voice* (Harry, Ironstone Primary); *I was ali:ve when my dog was ali:ve. He die::d because of someone else. He die:d. Help me. He died. He died. He: die::d. Help me. He died when I was (.) only nine mo:nths o::ld.* (Charlotte, Ironstone Primary); *I’m having my dinner, my dinner, my dinner, my dinner* (Tara, Murrayfield Primary). Such examples were slightly more common (and often more elaborate) in Ironstone Primary than in Murrayfield Primary. The children in the upper juniors at Ironstone Primary are involved in a musical production every year. At the end of Year 4 (July 2007), the production was *My Fair Lady*, and songs and melodies from this musical often spilled over into the children’s interactions both inside and outside of the classroom. Perhaps the children’s experience of this kind of performance encouraged their use of a musical style within their own utterances. The full form of the possessive singular was also evident in another kind of performance, one in which the children imitated a stereotypical persona. The two key points of reference in this respect were ‘posh’ and ‘American’. These ‘performances’ will be discussed in detail in Section 3.6 under the category of ‘stylisation’ (Rampton 1995, 2006; Coupland 2001b).

In the majority of the remaining examples of pre-consonantal [maɪ], the pronoun was stressed. Ladefoged (2006:243) writes that ‘[a] stressed syllable is pronounced with a greater amount of energy than an unstressed syllable and is more prominent in the flow of speech’. We might, therefore, expect the full form [maɪ] to be used in

preference to any of the other variants when the pronoun was stressed. This was not always the case, however. A full and detailed analysis of stress was outside of the scope of this thesis, but it was clear from the data that [ma] as well as [maɪ] could be used when stressed. This is demonstrated in Examples (1) to (4) below.

(1) [maɪ] stressed

- (a) *Oh **my** God.* (Aaron, Ironstone Primary)
- (b) *Kiss **my** butt.* (Ben, Murrayfield Primary)

(2) [maɪ] stressed, tonic stress

- (a) Anonymous: *My wrists- my arms can fit round her wrists.*
 Clare: ***My** hand'll fit.*
 (Ironstone Primary)
- (b) ***My** name's not William you see, it's Henry.* (Henry, Murrayfield Primary)

(3) [ma] stressed

- (a) *Can I borrow **my** rubber?* (Gemma, Ironstone Primary)
- (b) ***My** sister can write Emma and Jim.* (Laura, Murrayfield Primary)

(4) [ma] stressed, tonic stress

- (a) *It's not **my** rubber (.) it's yours hah'* (Danielle, Ironstone Primary-)
- (b) *It's **my** go at writing.* (Daniel, Murrayfield Primary)

In Examples (2) and (4), the pronouns are not only stressed, they have tonic stress. Syllables with tonic stress are especially prominent because the stress accompanies a peak in intonation (Ladefoged 2006:113). What Ladefoged refers to as the 'tonic' stress/syllable has also been called 'nuclear' stress (e.g. by Quirk et al. 1985) or

‘accented’ stress (e.g. by Kreidler 2004). The tonic syllable is the most prominent stressed syllable in the tone unit. Tonic stress generally falls on the last stressed syllable of the last content word. When it falls on an earlier content word or on any function word, we have a marked occurrence of tonic stress (or ‘accent’) (Kreidler 2004). Often this use of tonic stress is contrastive, as in Examples (2a), (4a) and (4b). Notice that in Example (4a) the contrast is evident in the grammar of the utterance as well as in the prosody: *my rubber* is explicitly contrasted with *yours*. In Example (4b), on the other hand, the contrast is implied. The emphasis on ‘my’ makes this pronoun stand out in contrast to some other noun or pronoun that could have filled the same slot. In this case, the possibilities that have been excluded depend on the context. Daniel makes this statement to his partner Ben when they are working together on an IT project. Ben has been doing all of the typing but Daniel thinks that it is *his* turn to have a go. The stressed ‘my’ in Daniel’s utterance therefore contrasts with an implied ‘your’ (i.e. ‘It’s **my** go, not yours’).

While [maɪ] and [ma] could occur in stressed or unstressed position in the data, [mə] and [mi] were always unstressed. [mə] represents the most reduced form of the pronoun and, in line with [ma], occurred only before consonants. This variant occurred relatively infrequently in the data and the difference in the use of this form between the two schools was minimal (Ironstone 6.8%; Murrayfield 6.1%). The difference between the two schools in terms of their use of [mi], however, was much greater (Ironstone 7.0%; Murrayfield 1.2%). [mi] was used in both pre-vocalic and pre-consonantal position, but as Table 3.5 shows, it occurred more often before a vowel than would be predicted given the total ratio of vowels to consonants in the data. Table 3.5 shows that in the Ironstone Primary data 62 of the 412 tokens of the possessive singular were prevocalic, that is, 15.0% of the tokens occurred before a

vowel. In relation to the [mi] variant, however, 19 of the 27 tokens (i.e. 70.3%) occurred before a vowel. There does, therefore, seem to be a phonological tendency for this variant to be used in pre-vocalic position. We could also note, however, that in 17 of the 19 occurrences of prevocalic [mi] at Ironstone Primary, the accompanying noun referred either to body parts (e.g. *arm*, *hands* [ands]) or kinship terms (e.g. *aunty*, *uncle*). Taking their cue from the typological literature on (in)alienability effects,³ Hollmann and Siewierska (2007) demonstrate that phonological reduction is more frequent in the realisation of the possessive singular in the Lancashire dialect in constructions where the noun is a kinship or body-part term than where it is not. If [mi] is considered to be a phonologically reduced form of [mai] (this moot point will be discussed in Section 3.3.1), then (in)alienability effects, rather than (or in combination with) phonological conditioning, could account for the children's use of [mi]. It should be noted, though, that kinship terms and body parts also occurred regularly in the data with other reduced forms of the possessive singular as well as with the full form [mai]. For example, in the Ironstone Primary data, there were 26 occurrences of kinship terms/body parts with [mai], 79 with [ma], and 14 with [mə]. With decontextualised quantitative analysis, the data can be cut in a number of different ways en route to quite different interpretations. And, of course, this is particularly dangerous in situations like this one, where there are so few examples of possessive 'me' to work with. In Section 3.5, therefore, the children's use of [mi] for the possessive singular will be examined qualitatively in order to shed greater light on the factors that influence the speaker's choice of this

³ This literature shows that there is a crosslinguistic tendency for person forms in inalienable possession to be phonologically reduced relative to those found in alienable possession (Hollman & Siewierska 2007:412). Inalienable possession is said to involve a stable relation, over which possessors have little or no control. Inalienable nouns include body parts, kinship terms, and part-whole relations (Hollman & Siewierska 2007:410).

variant. I will argue that phonological tendencies, such as the preference for [mi] to be used (rather than [ma]) before a vowel, link up with other factors such as stylisation, performance and identity work.

The use of [mi] for the possessive singular will be the main focus of this chapter. The status and distribution of this variant will be discussed in Section 3.3.1 and its social and pragmatic functions will be explored in Section 3.5.

3.3.1 Possessive ‘me’

Possessive ‘me’ is widespread throughout the British Isles. *A Handbook of Varieties of English* (Kortmann et al. 2004), which attempts to provide a comprehensive account of the salient phonological and grammatical features of varieties of English around the world, finds possessive ‘me’ in all varieties of British English except Scottish English and Orkney/Shetland. Possessive ‘me’ is also found outside of the British Isles, being noted in around 20 of the 46 varieties of World English surveyed for this study (Kortmann and Szmrecsanyi 2004:1153).

Anderwald (2004) states that the use of ‘me’ for the first person possessive singular is well-attested in the south-east of England. A pilot study conducted by Anderwald using the *Freiburg Corpus of English Dialects* (FRED) suggests that possessive ‘me’ is, in fact, a very frequent feature, with 30% of possessive pronouns being realised as ‘me’ rather than ‘my’. Possessive ‘me’ occurs much less frequently in my recordings (7.0% at Ironstone, 1.2% at Murrayfied), though, clearly, no real comparison can be made between the two sets of data. The data in FRED consists of orthographically (re-)transcribed interviews collected during oral history projects. The speakers, who were born between 1890 and 1920, were recorded in the 1970s and 1980s (Kortmann 2003). Anderwald’s analysis is therefore based on evidence

from a different regional and age group to my own and was collected during an earlier period in time. Hollman and Siewierska (2007) re-examine interviews from the North West Sound Archive (NWSA) in their analysis of possessive constructions in the Lancashire dialect. Their results show that 42% of the 919 possessive pronouns in the corpus were realised as [mi]. Again, possessive 'me' is used much more frequently by the Lancashire speakers than by the children in my study. And, again, there is a difference in the age and regional group to which the informants belong. We might hypothesise, though, that there is something about the nature of the data in FRED and NWSA that is conducive to the use of [mi]. While my data includes long stretches of informal social interaction, both FRED and NWSA are based on interviews. Moreover, these interviews are of a very specific type. Most of the material included in FRED stems from oral history projects where informants have been interviewed to record their life memories. Similarly, the purpose of NWSA is to collect sound recordings relevant to life in the north-west of England. If possessive 'me' is felt to be a salient feature of local dialect and local identity, participants might be primed to use this particular variant in contexts which invite them to talk about the nature of life in that particular locality.

There are different ways to view the use of [mi] for the possessive singular. It could be seen as an extension of the objective form with 'me', as Anderwald (2004) puts it, 'doing double service both as the object form of the personal pronoun and as a possessive form'. I think it is unlikely, however, that the children in this study regard possessive [mi] and objective [mi] as the same word ('me'). The teacher at Ironstone Primary could not recall ever seeing 'my' represented in the children's writing as 'me'; this just is not an error that the children make. A project which investigated the accuracy of pupils' writing in GCSE English examinations found

that '[o]ver two-thirds of all scripts ... offered no examples of non-standard English constructions' (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 1999:19). It seems that users of English are able to separate salient features of their spoken dialect from the variety of English they use in writing (cf. Gupta 1989:36). There is little evidence to suggest, then, that those speakers who use [mi] for the possessive equate this form with objective 'me'.

Hollmann and Siewierska (2007:407) write that it is not clear whether 'the [possessive] form *me* is essentially the same form as the objective personal pronoun' in the speakers' grammars. They note that there would be some evidence for this hypothesis if 'us' was used as the plural form of the possessive, but this is the case for only one speaker in their corpus. In my data 'us' is never used as a possessive, although it *is* used as a possessive in parts of Yorkshire and the West Midlands (Wales 1996:167-168). As Wales (1996:167) suggests, then, the use of 'me' for the possessive could be grouped with this (and other) variants as further evidence of the objective/possessive neutralisation found in many varieties of English (including standard English where there is a formal overlap between the objective and possessive case in the third person feminine 'slot', *her*). From this point of view, [mi] is a non-standard variant of the possessive singular. From an alternative perspective, Anderwald (referring to work by Manfred Krug) suggests that:

it is plausible to regard *me* as a remnant of the Middle English *mi/my* which, as a very frequent and unstressed form, may not have undergone the Great Vowel Shift. Unstressed *mi* would thus have fallen together with a weakened form of the object pronoun *me* /mi/ < ME /me:/, resulting synchronically in this apparently merged form.

(Anderwald 2004:177)

Seen as a phonologically reduced form that just happens to have fallen together with the objective singular, [mi] is no different from other reduced forms such as [ma] or [mə], and therefore, what we have is an instance of informal standard speech, rather than non-standard usage (a feature of accent rather than morphology). But [mi] *is* treated differently from alternative realisations of the possessive singular. As Wales (1996:14) points out, the pronunciations [mə] and [ma] for ‘my’ are ‘widely used and tolerated in informal standard English’ but [mi] ‘is associated with dialect speech and even stigmatised’. The perception of possessive ‘me’ as a non-standard, stigmatised form might explain why this variant occurs so infrequently in Murrayfield Primary – the school set within a more privileged, affluent area – than Ironstone Primary. The distribution between the two schools mirrors the classic sociolinguistic finding that frequency of use of non-standard variants correlates with level of socioeconomic class. Regardless of its origin, then, I would suggest that [mi] is felt to be a special form of the possessive singular by linguists who represent it as part of non-standard pronoun paradigms, by teachers and others who proscribe its use, and by individuals who use, hear and comment on it on a daily basis.

3.4 Folk linguistic representations

As a native speaker of the Teesside dialect, possessive ‘me’ feels to me like a salient feature of the local dialect, but its status within this thesis as a significant form of the possessive singular is not based on my intuitions alone. Other Teessiders engage in metalinguistic discussions about it. For example, there was an interesting discussion between the teachers in the Ironstone Primary school staffroom about the use of both ‘our’ and ‘me’ for the first person possessive singular. One teacher commented that she disapproved of the children’s use of phrases like ‘our mam’. In fact, whenever a child used this form in conversation with her, her stock reply would

be: 'No, she's not *my* mam'. This teacher was clearly sensitive to the singular/plural distinction which is muddled by the use of 'our'. Another teacher, one of the younger, less established women, noted that she would not say 'our mam', she'd say 'me [mi] mam'. She later backtracks, however, stating that actually she would not say 'me' [mi], she'd say 'my' [mai]. This turnaround came after a more senior teacher expressed quite strong views about the use of 'me' for the possessive singular. This teacher clearly felt that possessive 'me' was a non-standard form of the possessive singular which should be avoided. Garrett et al. (1999:345) discuss the influence that teachers' judgements can have on their students:

With their gatekeeping function, teachers are a significant professional group of adults in the lives of young people. The formal and informal judgments they make about students include the social evaluation of linguistic style, even to the point where this can influence formal school assessment outcomes.

It is perhaps significant, then, that none of the occurrences of possessive 'me' (or singular 'us') were part of utterances addressed to teachers, though, as noted in Section 3.3, adults in the school environment do not necessarily always avoid non-standard forms in their conversations with the children. The fact that possessive 'me' was being discussed at all in the staffroom suggests that it was perceived as a salient feature of the local dialect, despite being a geographically widespread linguistic feature.

Features such as possessive 'me' and singular 'us' can also be found in literature produced by Teesside writers. Local poets include Andy Willoughby and John Miles Longden. Andy Willoughby comes from the Grangetown and Eston area of Middlesbrough where Ironstone Primary is located. In his collection, *Tough*, Willoughby (2005) uses possessive 'me' with kinship terms (e.g. *me mam*, *me*

sister) as well as with other nouns (e.g. *me music, me gift*). John Miles Longden was not a native of Teesside; he was born in London and moved to Middlesbrough as a child of 10. He spent much of his life there, however, and was ‘one of Teesside’s best-loved eccentrics’ (Croft 1995:7). A collection of his poems, *LPs & Singles*, was published posthumously by Mudfog, a publisher set up to support Teesside writers. Longden preferred to write in a ‘Northern English style’ (Longden 1995:13). Since he was heavily involved in the Teesside literary scene from the late 1960s to his death in 1993, we might expect this Northern style to be influenced by Teesside English. Longden used possessive ‘me’ categorically in his poetry: *me voice, me life, me eyes, me back, me enemy, me pension book, me mother, me life’s work* (Longden 1995). He also used the familial possessive ‘our’ in phrases such as *our lass, our brother*. Singular ‘us’ is more difficult to identify in poetry, since it is not always possible to decide whether the reference of the pronoun is singular or plural. The following examples, however, also from *LPs & Singles*, appear to qualify: *looks at me sketches, wants us to draw im some time, all me life this top specialist treats us free, e’s the authority, I’m is patient like, sorts us out, regler e’s the best, keeps us well, The firm giz us day release to regrind me previous degree, Giz five quid*. These examples also demonstrate another feature of Longden’s ‘Northern English style’: it is ‘free of the redundant letter H’ (Longden 1995:14). H-dropping is characteristic of the Teesside accent (and is evident in the data from this study). Like possessive ‘me’ and singular ‘us’, though, h-dropping is a geographically diffuse feature. It is perhaps worth noting, however, that h-dropping distinguishes the Teesside accent from its Tyneside neighbour (Beal 2008a:137-138).

Novels and other prose fiction set in Teesside make use of salient features of the Teesside dialect in their representation of character. Pat Barker’s (1982) *Union*

Street is set in 1970s Middlesbrough. Possessive ‘me’ is used almost categorically in the speech of the fictional characters throughout this novel, occurring before both vowels and consonants and with a variety of noun phrases: kinship terms (*me mam, me dad, me sister, me aunty, me granddad, me husband*); body parts (*me back, me stomach, me belly*); and generic noun phrases (*me jumper, me proper food, me bait, me scissors, me own money, me doubts, me life*). The full form of the pronoun ‘my’ is used sparingly and for stylistic effect. For example, when it is suggested to pregnant Joanne Wilson that her mother has a right to know the name of the baby’s father, Joanne replies: *She’s no right at all. Good God, she hasn’t told me who **my** father was yet* (Barker 1982:76). Elsewhere in the novel Joanna uses possessive ‘me’, but here, her use of ‘my’ suggests emphatic stress for contrast. In the following example, the matriarch of the street, Iris King, is involved in a heated argument with her pregnant teenage daughter. Iris, who elsewhere uses possessive ‘me’, uses ‘my’ for emphasis:

What about when it starts yelling and you’re up all night and you still have to turn out to work in the morning? Because don’t think your father’s going to keep it, **my** girl, he isn’t. And don’t run away with the idea I’m giving up **my** job to look after it because I’m bloody not. I’ve done **my** share.

(Barker 1982:203)

I noticed only one example of singular ‘us’ in the novel: *Give us time to get me stitches out and I’ll join you.*

Richard Milward is a young writer from Teesside whose debut novel, *Apples*, is set in Middlesbrough. The novel’s teenage characters use singular ‘us’ in a variety of contexts: *Can you pass us a mint, love? Can you pass **us** the Bella?; he used to babysit **us**; He pulled out a pack of MedusaHeads and passed **us** one; Abi just phoned **us** up; Can you pass **us** that?* (Milward 2007). In these examples, singular

‘us’ occurs as both direct and indirect object and is part of declarative as well as interrogative clauses. In my data, however, singular ‘us’ is used only as indirect object and is restricted to imperative clauses (Section 3.2.1). As Agha (2003:255) points out, literary depictions of speech do not necessarily ‘represent the realities of social life’. Features such as singular ‘us’ and possessive ‘me’ appear in a wider range of grammatical contexts in literature than in actual usage, and are often depicted as being used far more frequently (even categorically) than in reality.

An interview with Richard Milward appeared in *The Times* in April 2007 (Betts 2007). The journalist represents Milward’s speech in a relatively standard fashion. Despite commenting on the ‘emphatic’ nature of Milward’s accent, there is no attempt to represent it using non-standard orthography. The journalist does, however, consistently represent the first person possessive singular pronoun as ‘me’: *All me writing in a way...; It was crazy when me Mam read it; That’s what I love about me life*. The only other dialectal feature represented in Milward’s speech is the second person plural ‘yous’: *I know something that yous don’t*. This is another shibboleth of the Teesside dialect, which Milward uses frequently in the speech of his characters: *What youse up to?; See youse later; So youse going out tonight?* (Milward 2007). I have not examined the children’s use of ‘yous’ for the second person plural as part of this study but it may be a feature that is worth investigating in the future. My data shows that the children use this form frequently (though not categorically), and it appears in a number of the examples presented in this thesis. A teacher from Murrayfield Primary, Mrs Young (who was originally from West Yorkshire), commented that ‘yous’ was a ‘Teesside thing’ and told the children that it was okay to use it in their speech but that they should not use it in their writing. Again, though, this form is not unique to Teesside; it occurs in a number of urban dialects

of British English (e.g. Liverpool, Newcastle) and in Irish English, where speakers are making a grammatical distinction (singular vs. plural) that they are currently unable to make in standard English. Varieties of US English have also developed a number of strategies to mark this difference: *y'all*,⁴ *youse*, *yinz*. Pittsburghers, for example, use *yinz* [jinz] (derived from *you'uns*) for the second person plural (Johnstone et al. 2006). Johnstone et al. report that while some Pittsburghers might suggest that theirs is the only USA community that uses [jinz], the form is probably more widespread. It seems that alternative pronominal forms are particularly significant features for dialect users, and locals may claim ownership of such forms despite them having a potentially widespread geographical distribution.

Speakers are perhaps more likely to identify pan-dialectal forms as being significant to their locale if their own dialect lacks a definite identity. Teesside is situated in between two regions, Yorkshire and Tyneside, which have strong local identities and easily identifiable dialects. As a result, there is a sense in which Teesside, and the variety of English spoken there, lacks a strong identity of its own. Llamas (e.g. 2001; 2007) has studied the connection between language and place identity in Middlesbrough. Beal (1993) writes that Tynesiders' pride in their local dialect is evident from the number of popular publications on and in 'Geordie' available in Newcastle bookshops. Beal (2000) surveys one such publication, *Larn Yersel Geordie*, along with a variety of local songs and newspaper cartoons, and identifies a repertoire of 'Geordie' features that have changed little since the 19th century. One such feature is the <oo> spelling to represent Geordie /u:/ (for RP /au/) in words such as 'town' and 'brown'. This feature is now relatively rare in the speech of present-day Tynesiders, but it has become lexicalised in a small set of

⁴ Crystal (2004:449) notes that *y'all* can also be used when addressing a single person.

words which have important symbolic status (especially ‘Toon’ to refer to Newcastle or Newcastle United FC, and ‘Broon’ to refer to the local beer). Beal (2000; 2008b) also talks about the commodification of the Geordie dialect in mugs, postcards and other novelty items, as well as in Geordie phrase books and related literature. Unlike its Tyneside neighbour, however, Teesside does not have a dialect with the same kind of well defined identity or marketability. Bookshops in the region stock books on Geordie English and Yorkshire English, but there are no guides on how to speak ‘Teesside’ and no novelty items featuring the Teesside equivalent to the Geordie /u:/ (whatever that might be).

Linguistic variants such as possessive ‘me’ and singular ‘us’ are therefore not specific to Teesside, but it seems reasonable to suggest that, in the absence of more specifically local features, speakers in this region may come to associate such forms with the local dialect. Moreover, as I will demonstrate in Section 3.5, it is the locally specific meanings that are important to speakers: stylistic practice ‘involves adapting linguistic variables available out in the larger world to the construction of social meaning on a local level’ (Eckert 2004:44).

3.5 Possessive ‘me’, dialect style and stylisation

Traditional variationist accounts of style and style-shifting work with high frequency variables and assess stylistic levels according to aggregated frequency data. On this basis, low frequency variants (such as possessive ‘me’ in this data) tend to remain hidden and may even be excluded from analysis. Such an account ignores the contribution these features can make to individual stylistic practice, however. I will argue here that an understanding of the children’s use of possessive ‘me’ lies in an analysis of their linguistic styling, an area within which ‘it has

become increasingly unsafe to read social meaning on the basis of distributional facts alone' (Coupland 2007:176). The following account therefore moves beyond an analysis of the distribution of possessive 'me' across speakers to an examination of the use of this linguistic form in interaction.

3.5.1 Stylistic: examples in context

A common thread among all 33 examples of possessive 'me' in the data is the sense that this linguistic feature marks a departure from the norm: 'a partial and momentary disengagement from the routine flow of unexceptional business' (Rampton 2006:225). In this respect, the use of possessive 'me' has elements of what Rampton (1995; 2006) and Coupland (2001b) have termed 'stylistic', a concept originally associated with the work of Bakhtin (1981).

In Coupland's (2001b:345) terms, stylistic is 'the knowing deployment of culturally familiar styles and identities that are marked as deviating from those predictably associated with the current speaking context'. In his analysis of extracts from *The Roy Noble Show*, broadcast on BBC Radio Wales, Coupland (2001b) examines a range of phonological variables, along with other non-dialectal features of talk, in order to demonstrate how the show's presenters constructed stylised (and knowingly inauthentic) images of Welshness. In doing so, they held up traditional ways of speaking for 'scrutiny' and potentially for 'reevaluation'. While we might expect dialect stylistic to occur within media entertainment genres, such as broadcast radio, where presenters regularly subvert 'reality' and project personae other than their 'true' selves, stylistic can also occur in non-media, non-scripted, face-to-face interaction. In his most recent work with Year 9 pupils at a London comprehensive, Rampton investigates instances of stylised 'posh' and Cockney – varieties at the extremities of his speakers' linguistic repertoire – in order to explore

the ways in which these children experienced social class as a ‘lived reality’. The moments of stylisation, Rampton argues, were moments in which the high-low cultural semantic which structured his participants’ experience at school was foregrounded, offered for public consumption, sometimes resisted but at other times reinforced. In his earlier work on linguistic ‘crossing’, Rampton (1995) describes how speakers in a multi-ethnic school in the south-midlands of England crossed into ‘stylised Asian English’, a marked social style, on ‘occasions when the hold of routine assumptions about the conduct of social life became less certain’ (Rampton 1995:200).

There are sequences involving possessive ‘me’ in my data which echo the stylised performances analysed by Rampton and Coupland. In the first example, the break with reality is obvious.

Extract 3.1

Harry and David are in the playground about 10 minutes after Harry has been given the radio-microphone.

- 1 Harry: Can you get me some Budweiser (0.6 seconds) f- they’re only
- 2 uh tr- uh one pound fifty a pack (.) so get me: ten packs (0.5
- 3 seconds) because I’ve got a Budweiser thing here (.) ((with
- 4 increased volume for the declaration)) **I lo::ve my [mi]** (.)
- 5 **Budweiser** (1 second) ((makes whooping noise into mic)).
- 6 David: I love my [ma] thingies ((laughs)).
- 7 Harry: Stop being- (0.5 seconds) Stop being stupid David.

In Extract 3.1 Harry is being deliberately silly and his use of possessive ‘me’ is part of an exaggerated performance which was perhaps for the benefit of the newly acquired radio-microphone, as well as for his friend David. The fact that Harry has stepped outside of ‘business-as-usual’ is indicated on one level by the subject matter of the utterance. Budweiser is a beer and as such would not usually feature in the

conversation of a 9-year-old child. Budweiser has a tradition of creating humorous television advertisements, however, which have been successful in the UK as well as other English speaking cultures around the world. It is possible (and indeed likely) that Harry would be familiar with this brand via the media and would have come to associate it with joking and with word- or sound-play. During the period of my fieldwork, it was evident that Harry was very much in-touch with popular culture, perhaps owing to the fact that he had an older brother. He sported a trendy hair-cut (which would not have seemed out of place on the lead singer of an indie-rock band) and repeatedly sang bursts from Green Day's⁵ 'American Idiot' into the microphone. In addition to the subject-matter, further clues to the stylised nature of this performance include the increased volume of Harry's declaration, the lengthened vowel sound in *love* and the brief but dramatic pause in between *my* and *Budweiser*. In his analysis of stylised 'posh' and 'Cockney', Rampton (2006:262) notes that stylised utterances were often marked by 'abrupt shifts in some combination of loudness, pitch level, voice quality or speed of delivery'. He goes on to state that '[i]f the audience (or indeed the speaker) subsequently responded by laughing, repeating the utterance, by commenting on it, or by switching into a different kind of non-normal dialect or voice, this could be a final clue'. Harry's 'side-kick', David, does just that. Having clearly appreciated Harry's performance, David laughs and repeats the formulation with slight modification: *I love my thingies*. David does not use possessive 'me' here; he realises the pronoun with the reduced form [ma]. But then, David's performance generally is a rather poor imitation. Being less in-tune with adult popular culture, David substitutes *Budweiser* for the vague *thingies*, and is told by Harry to *Stop being silly*.

⁵ Green Day is an American punk rock band.

In other examples, possessive ‘me’ occurs within a play frame but is part of a less exaggerated performance. In such situations, ‘the stylised utterance constitutes a small, fleeting but foregrounded analysis’ which is ‘offered for public consumption’ (Rampton 2006:225). In Extract 3.2, the girls are involved in a game which involves stealing each other’s shoes. An extended extract from this activity will be discussed at length in Chapter 4.4. In this extract, Hannah’s shoe has been taken by her friend Gemma.

Extract 3.2

- 1 Hannah: ((Shouting across the playground)) **Gemma: my [mi] shoe:**
- 2 Anon: Gemma give us the shoe. Get Gemma’s shoe.
- 3 ((Background noise and inaudible talk -- 57.5 seconds))
- 4 Hannah: **Miss tell Gemma. She’s got my [mi] shoe** (1.3 seconds).
- 5 Gemma.
- 6 ((Background noise -- 3.2 seconds))
- 7 Tina: Howay
- 8 Anon: We got Gemma’s shoe::

Hannah’s utterance in line 1 is a spontaneous reaction to the theft of her shoe. Although it lacks the exuberance of Harry’s fictional declaration of love for Budweiser in Extract 3.1, it is clearly set within the frame of playful performance. The term of address indicates that the utterance is directed towards Gemma, but Hannah’s speech is audible to all bystanders in the playground and is as much an announcement to them of the missing shoe as a bid to get it back. In line 4, Hannah’s use of the vocative *Miss* implies that she is appealing to a teacher or dinner lady for help. It is not clear whether or not there are any adults in the immediate vicinity to hear this appeal, but none answer it. After a brief pause, Hannah again takes matters into her own hands, shouting out Gemma’s name. We might suggest that Hannah’s utterance was not meant for an adult at all but was

intended as a playful warning to Gemma that this kind of behaviour would warrant disciplining from an authority figure. In addition to possessive ‘me’, notice also the use of singular ‘us’ on line 2 and ‘howay’ on line 7. ‘Howay’ is a dialect feature specific to the north-east of England which means something like ‘come on’. The children’s use of singular ‘us’ and ‘howay’ will be discussed in depth in Chapter 4 (though these particular examples are excluded from the analysis since they come from speakers who were not part of the study). For now it is sufficient to note the clustering of non-standard, community-specific features in a situation where issues of group membership, identity and belonging are of paramount importance: Who is aligned with whom in this game? How strong are existing friendship ties? Where do the group boundaries lie?

Extract 3.3 also takes place in the Ironstone Primary School playground. Andrew is wearing the radio-microphone and is play-fighting with some of the girls, in particular, Gemma and Hannah.

Extract 3.3

- 1 Andrew: ((Laughing)) **It hurt all my [mi] hand, all the way down there.**
- 2 ((Play-fight continues -- 7.5 seconds))
- 3 Andrew: **A::h she hurt all my [mi] hand down there.**
- 4 ((Play-fight continues -- 30.7 seconds))
- 5 Andrew: Hannah’s not normally ready
- 6 ((Play-fight continues -- 8.5 seconds))
- 7 Andrew: ((Laughing)) (hhhh) **My [mi] arm.**
- 8 ((Play-fight continues -- 13.6 seconds))
- 9 Andrew: No:::
- 10 ((Background noise -- 6.9 seconds))
- 11 Andrew: **A::h my [mi] arm’s all red.**

In each occurrence of possessive ‘me’ (on lines 1, 3, 7 and 11), Andrew is pointing out something negative, that his hand and arm have been injured, but he does so in a

mock-serious fashion. Andrew seems not only to be able to laugh through the pain (lines 1 and 7) but also to continue with the play-fight. We might suggest that he is overacting here, hamming up his injuries for the benefit of his exclusively female audience. We can compare Andrew's use of possessive 'me' with a similar example from Murrayfield Primary: *Ah a hundred (bullets)- a hundred bolts going through my [mi] finger. Pain, agony electrical current. Ow.* The speaker, Neil, is referring here to the radio-microphone that he is wearing as he runs around the playground with his friends Daniel, Ben and Tim. Neil's utterance is hyperbolic – the radio-microphone did not give out agonising electric shocks – and is meant as an entertaining performance for his friends. As Coupland (2001b:349) points out, in stylising 'we speak "as if this is me," or "as if I owned this voice," or "as if I endorsed what this voice says"' but the speaker leaves their audience to consider 'whether this utterance is "really mine" rather than "me playing" or "me subverting"'.

The potential for stylisation to 'dislocate a speaker from the persona he or she voices' (Coupland 2001b:366) is even more apparent in Extract 3.4 where Helen uses possessive 'me' when she mimics Nathan's utterance.

Extract 3.4

- 1 Mrs Moon: Nathan sit on your bottom please and get on.
- 2 Nathan: I'll just get my [ma] pencil. It's up my [ma] jumper.
- 3 Helen: ((Laughing)) **My [mi] pencil's up my [mi] jumper.**

Helen clearly finds Nathan's comment amusing. Amid laughter, she repeats *My pencil's up my jumper* in such a way as to suggest that this was an unusual comment for Nathan to make. Even though Nathan realises 'my' both times as [ma], Helen uses [mi] in her reformulation. As well as calling attention to the strangeness of

Nathan's utterance, the use of possessive 'me' creates distance between Helen and the utterance she is voicing: these are not her words; she is 'performing' Nathan.

The fact that possessive 'me' occurs in situations where the speaker is being deliberately silly and/or is performing an 'other' identity alerts us to its potential for stylisation. The children also used this feature in less obvious performances, however. In Extracts 3.5 and 3.6, possessive 'me' occurs during instances of 'self-talk', when the speaker is, in effect, performing themselves.

Extract 3.5

The children are discussing the school photographs that were taken earlier that day.

- 1 Caroline: I seen you on the f- on the camera.
2 Clare: Did you? (.) [I looked a mess, didn't I?
3 Caroline: [(xxxxxxxxx)
4 Mrs Trotter: (xxxxxxxxxx)
5 Clare: No I never.
6 Caroline: You had your hair all like that (.) You (shook it off).
7 Clare: Well I- I know- I went-
8 ((Background noise -- 6.6 seconds))
9 Clare: Ugh you minger.
10 ((Background noise -- 3.7 seconds))
11 Clare: The reason I brought a brush to school is because (.hhh) (0.6
12 seconds) ((emphatic stress on 'every' and an increasing
13 speed of delivery)) **every time I have [av] my [mi] hair [ə]**
14 **down it gets really cottery.**⁶

In line 13 Clare uses possessive 'me' to highlight something negative, specifically something unsatisfactory about her own appearance. It is not clear from the recording whether or not this utterance is addressed to anyone in particular; it appears to be an instance of 'self-talk'. But as Goffman (1981:97-98) notes, self-talk is often designed to be overheard, in this case perhaps by Caroline or perhaps by the

⁶ A 'cotter' is a tangle in the hair. The term 'cottery' is a local dialect word to refer to tangled hair.

radio-microphone (and, therefore, by Miss Snell). Following the school photographs, it seems that Clare was already feeling self-conscious about her appearance: *I looked a mess, didn't I?* (line 2). Caroline's comment about Clare's hair on line 6 compounds these feelings and focuses them on one particular aspect of Clare's identity, her hair. Clare publicly acknowledges that her hair is 'cottery', but, by voicing this comment apparently to herself, she downplays the significance of the assertion and therefore the importance she attaches to her own appearance. Clare wants to avoid negative comments from others about her hair by demonstrating an element of self-awareness, but she does not want to appear vain. Clare also justifies the act of bringing a hair brush to school: a hair brush is not an extravagance but a necessity for someone like Clare, whose hair is prone to tangling. Altogether, in her utterance on lines 11-14, Clare styles herself as someone who is aware of the flaws in her own appearance but who, crucially, is not overly concerned with them. The use of possessive 'me', in addition to the intake of breath and pause before stressing *every* and the increase in speed of the latter part of the utterance, lifts this speech outside of the flow of routine activity.

In Extract 3.6, Harry and David are in the Ironstone Primary school playground at lunch time. David had been wearing the radio-microphone but has just passed it on to Harry.

Extract 3.6

- | | | |
|---|--------|--|
| 1 | David: | My [ma] dad nearly shaved my [mi] hair (.) yesterday. |
| 2 | Harry: | ((Laughs)) |
| 3 | David: | Well actually he never. |
| 4 | | ((Background noise 1.6 seconds)) |
| 5 | David: | ((Half to himself. Not clear if he is addressing Harry or |
| 6 | | whether Harry is still listening)) I should've combed my [mi] |
| 7 | | hair this morning. |

The final part of David's utterance on line 1 highlights something exceptional (that he nearly had his hair shaved), and this is marked with the use of possessive 'me'. We sense that David is not really telling the whole truth here; the use of possessive 'me' indicates that he is not fully committed to the content of this utterance. Rather than being a statement of fact, his utterance is designed to make Harry laugh, and the use of possessive 'me' marks out the frivolous nature of the comment. On line 3, David admits that his Dad did not shave his hair, but hair still clearly remains a central concern: *I should've combed my [mi] hair this morning* (lines 6-7). As in Extract 3.5, it looks as though we have another instance of 'self-talk'. Like Clare, David feels self-conscious about his hair. He publicly acknowledges its unkempt state while simultaneously giving a reason for this anomaly in his appearance. In both of these examples, possessive 'me' is involved in overt commentary about the speaker's appearance, where it serves to temper the self-criticism with light-heartedness and a sense of disengagement from the surrounding talk.

In the examples analysed so far, the use of possessive 'me' has indicated a break from the routine flow of interaction. As well as *creating* this sense of dislocation, possessive 'me' may also be used *in response to* some disruption to the social order. In Extract 3.7, it is Miss Snell who subverts the normal order of things and Andrew responds using possessive 'me'.

Extract 3.7

- | | | |
|---|-------------|--|
| 1 | Andrew: | Miss this is getting a bit hot, this (0.8 seconds) at the top. |
| 2 | Miss Snell: | Is it? |
| 3 | Andrew: | Yeah it keeps [going like that. |
| 4 | Miss Snell: | [It's because it's been on all day. |
| 5 | Miss Snell: | It's just like- you know if you have |
| 6 | Andrew: | When I touch it with my [ma] hand it's cold but (when I-) |
| 7 | | when I touch it with my arm [ma harm] it's hot but when |

- 8 I touch it with my [ma] hand it's cold.
 9 Miss Snell: Your arm? Maybe your arm's [warm].
 10 Andrew: [There.
 11 Andrew: **Me [mi] arm's co::ld.**
 12 Miss Snell: That's bizarre.

Ben makes consistent use of [ma] for the first person possessive singular in his utterance on lines 6-8, even pronouncing [arm] as [harm] to avoid the use of [ma] before a vowel. There is a marked change on line 11, however, following Miss Snell's indirect challenge to Ben's assertion that the microphone is hot. Miss Snell suggests (jokingly) that perhaps it is Ben's arm that is warm. Miss Snell's remark is meant as a playful tease, but it appears not to have been received as such. Drew investigates 'po-faced' responses to verbal teasing. In his data,

[t]he overwhelming pattern is ... that recipients treat something about the tease, despite its humour, as requiring a serious response: even when they plainly exhibit their understanding that the teasing remark is not mean to be taken seriously (as when they laugh at, or possibly ignore, it), recipients still almost always PUT THE RECORD STRAIGHT.

(Drew 1987:230)

Ben does indeed 'put the record straight' with an emphatic correction, and in doing so, he uses possessive 'me' accompanied by a lengthened vowel sound and fall-rise intonation on *cold* (which highlights the contrast with Miss Snell's *warm* in line 9). The distinct fall-rise intonation on the tonic syllable in *cold* also indicates Ben's surprise at Miss Snell's suggestion that his arm, rather than the radio-microphone, might be warm (Ladefoged 2006:123).

The children in this study are not 'crossing' into an out-group code, nor are they projecting a more than usually 'really Teesside' persona when they use possessive 'me'. Johnstone (1999:514) writes, however, that "language crossing" and 'styling'

are more complex than is suggested by studies dealing with people's use of languages or varieties that are clearly felt to 'belong' to others'. In relation to the Texan women in her study, Johnstone refers to 'strategic use of an ingroup variety', and perhaps this is a more fitting description of the children's use of possessive 'me' in my study. Possessive 'me' was generally not used as part of a self-conscious, 'knowing' dialect performance (in the manner of DJs Roy Noble and John Dee (Coupland 2001b)), but that is not to suggest that its occurrence was without meaning or motivation. In my data, possessive 'me' is used to index a particular kind of affective stance: one that displays negative affect but is tempered by a lack of seriousness and a degree of jocularly. Possessive 'me' is also used to index a kind of epistemic stance, where it serves to 'dislocate' the speaker not only from the 'immediate speaking context' (Coupland 2001b:350) but also from full commitment to the truth of, or belief in, their proposition. There is a symbiotic relationship between these two kinds of stance. The way in which possessive 'me' (in addition to other semiotic resources) is able to facilitate a break with 'business-as-usual' and distance the speaker from the content of their utterance (epistemic stance) serves to mitigate the stance of negative affect. In my data this happened in a situation where the speaker was down on their own appearance (e.g. Extracts 3.5, 3.6), was apparently feeling physical discomfort (e.g. Extracts 3.3), was making fun of another child (e.g. Extract 3.4) or became the subject of a joke themselves (e.g. Extracts 3.2, 3.7). A similar interpretation could be applied to Coupland's (1985; 1988; 2001a) earlier analysis of a Cardiff local-radio presenter, Frank Hennessy (FH) (Section 1.2.1 and 1.2.5). Coupland found that FH used salient features of the Cardiff dialect to project a humorous and 'strongly dialectized admission of personal incompetence (*I'll have to get me right arm in training*)' (Coupland 2001a:209). Coupland's (1985,

1988, 2001a) analysis focused on phonological variables, but the example to which he draws the reader's attention here also includes possessive 'me'. Of course, I do not have access to the original data and could not possibly make judgements about the frequency with which FH used possessive 'me' in relation to other variants or about the kinds of contexts within which it generally occurred. The fact remains, however, that FH used a 'strongly dialectized' (we might say 'stylised') performance in order to mitigate a show of personal incompetence (i.e. to moderate a stance of negative affect). From a methodological perspective, it is interesting to note how close analysis of one data set can help to interpret or reinterpret analyses performed on other sets of data. This is particularly significant when the two sets of data are so different: the naturally occurring spontaneous speech of children compared to self-conscious broadcast data. As Labov's (1972c:102, 118f) 'principle of convergence' states, 'the value of new data for confirming old data is directly proportional to the differences in the methods used to gather it'. He ends the same paper by pointing out that '[d]ata from a variety of distinct sources and methods, properly interpreted, can be used to converge on the right answers to hard questions' (Labov 1972c:119). The perspective adopted in this thesis is that style should be viewed as social action and, as such, needs to be analysed in its local discursive and ethnographically specific context. This approach calls for detailed case studies of individuals and small groups, but this does not mean that we cannot use such analyses to theorise about language use on a much wider scale. It is important, however, that such theories are built as part of a research community open to a wide range of data, methodologies and interpretations.

In addition to the extracts already examined, I could add the following examples from my data in which possessive ‘me’ occurred in very similar circumstances and served to encode the same kinds of affective and epistemic stance:

- (5) (a) ((Said in a very dramatic and exaggerated manner)) *No:w look. You made me fall and my [mi]- my [mi] microphone fell off.* (Clare, Ironstone Primary)
- (b) *Watch you don’t touch it I’ve got it on my [mi] arm.* (Clare, Ironstone Primary)
- (c) *It’s going cold on my [mi] arm now.* (Andrew, Ironstone Primary)
- (d) *I’ve still got stuff on my [mi] hands* (Helen, Ironstone Primary)
- (e) *I split all the (jug of water) on my [mi] skirt.* (Helen, Ironstone Primary)
- (f) *Ah that knacks [‘hurts’]. Ah my [mi] arm.* (Danielle, Ironstone Primary)
- (g) *A:h my [mi] arm agghhrrrr* (Ben, Murrayfield Primary)
- (h) *Because my [mi] uncle (xxxxxxxxxxx) went over on his ankle so the- and he couldn’t walk.* (Beth, Murrayfield Primary)

Ochs (1996:419-420) proposes that affective and epistemic stances ‘are central meaning components of social acts and social identities’ and further that ‘linguistic structures that index epistemic and affective stances are the basic linguistic resources for constructing/realizing social acts and social identities’. This is an important point and one that will be developed throughout this thesis. The way in which a particular discourse feature, right dislocation, is implicated in the encoding of stance and identity will be explored in Chapter 5.

3.5.2 Frequency, salience and stereotypes

The children in both schools avoided the use of possessive ‘me’ in formal, school-oriented tasks such as reading aloud or answering the teacher’s questions. In fact, the children did not use possessive ‘me’ at all in their interactions with adults in the school environment. There is therefore evidence in the data to suggest that possessive ‘me’ functions as a Labovian ‘marker’ in Teesside; frequency of use of this feature patterns not only with the level of socioeconomic class of the speaker (it is used more by the children in Ironstone Primary) but also with the level of formality of the speaking context. But even in the more informal interactions captured by the radio-microphone, possessive ‘me’ was not a frequently occurring variant, particularly in Murrayfield Primary. One possible explanation for the low frequency of this variant overall is that it has become a Labovian stereotype:

under extreme stigmatization, a form may become the overt object of social comment, and may eventually disappear. It is thus a *stereotype*, which may become increasingly divorced from the forms which are actually used in speech

(Labov 1972a:180).

Possessive ‘me’ may qualify as a stereotype: it is a non-standard linguistic form that is avoided by speakers in formal contexts; it has been the subject of overt social comment (e.g. by the teachers at Ironstone Primary); and it appears to be salient in local consciousness despite a relatively low frequency of actual usage (at least by the children in this study).

Non-standard pronominal forms, such as possessive ‘me’, are prime candidates for the transition from Labovian marker to stereotype. Wales (1996:88) writes that in the ‘context of a prescriptive inheritance of grammars based on formal educated usage, pronoun case forms have come exaggeratedly to be the emotive symbols of

social stigmatisation and acceptability’. While the use of [ma] and [mə], in addition to [maɪ], maintain the contrast between the possessive and objective case, the use of [mi] blurs this distinction and hence is open to the kinds of criticism and stigmatisation that Wales refers to. The issue becomes one of morphology, rather than phonology, and this perspective is reflected in the way in which the [mi] variant of the possessive singular has become lexicalised in written representations of dialect speech with a standard spelling ‘me’. Referring to Trudgill’s (1986) model of salience, Kerswill and Williams (2002:100) state that morphological variables are likely to be salient ‘because they involve different lexical realizations of underlying grammatical categories’.

As a salient and potentially stereotypical non-standard form, possessive ‘me’ was largely avoided by the Murrayfield participants (in the school context at least). In Ironstone Primary, on the other hand, rather than being avoided completely, possessive ‘me’ has gained currency in the performance of local identity. Jocularly and the ability to break with the norm and use humour to temper negative evaluation are important within the Ironstone Primary community of practice, and in these culturally salient contexts, speakers are resisting the diffusion of standard English forms. In fact, as Newbrook (1986:36) points out, ‘some speakers do not recognise the national prestige standard as an infallible source of norms ... such speakers are found amongst people who take more seriously the vernacular culture and traditions of their local area’. In this case, then, the stereotyping of possessive ‘me’ may lead to the preservation of this feature in the Teesside dialect, albeit in restricted social contexts (like the lexicalisation of Geordie /u:/ in words such as ‘Toon’). This of course is merely speculative at this stage. Further work would be required to assess whether possessive ‘me’ is used in similar ways by the speakers included in this

study when they are outside of school and by other speakers in Teesside. I have no systematic data, for example, on how this form is used by adults in the community – is it used more frequently, and if so, does the low frequency amongst the children in this study represent a change in progress? The answers to these questions are outside of the scope of this study, but this analysis perhaps indicates how detailed ethnography and the study of ‘dialect in discourse’ (Coupland 2007:9) has the potential to contribute to an understanding of language variation and change on a much wider scale.

3.6 Stylised ‘posh’ and ‘American’

Section 3.5 argues that the children’s use of possessive ‘me’ is motivated by social and pragmatic considerations; this variant of the possessive singular encodes particular kinds of affective and epistemic stance that can be utilised as part of stylised performances. Possessive ‘me’ was available for stylistic effect because of its associations with the local area and local experience; in other words, because it represented the ‘in-group’. Conversely, standard ‘my’ [maɪ] was sometimes used by the children in their representations of out-group voices: ‘posh’ and ‘American’. The source for ‘American’ is certainly the media and this is probably true for ‘posh’ too. ‘Posh’ would also be salient to the Ironstone Primary children from their performance of *My Fair Lady*.

- (6) (a) *Let’s go* [gəʊ] *in my* [maɪ] *hotel* [həʊtəl] (Jane, Ironstone Primary)
- (b) *My* [ma] *picture. My* [maɪ] *creative work and everything is ruined.* (Mary, Murrayfield Primary)
- (c) *I repeat I’m near* [niə] *a teacher* [ti:tʃə]. *I repeat I’m near* [niə] *a teacher* [ti:tʃə]. *I repeat I’m near* [niə] *a teacher* [ti:tʃə]. (2.2 seconds) *Now she’s watching* [wa:tʃən] *me. She’s*

watching [wa:tʃən] *me* > *with that big thing in my* [maɪ] *pocket* <. (Harry, Ironstone Primary)

- (d) *My* [maɪ] *girls don't have ginger* [dʒɪndʒər] *hair. She got blo::nde* [bla:nd] *hair*. (Rachel, Murrayfield Primary)

Examples (6a) and (6b) appear to be attempts by the speaker to represent a 'posh' persona. In Example (6a), Jane is in the playground trying to organise a group of girls into pairs to practice dances. Her 'hotel' is a particular area of the playground that she has ring-fenced as belonging to her and her dance partner. As she moves over to this area, she beckons her partner with *Let's go* [gəʊ] *in my* [maɪ] *hotel* [həʊtəl]. As well as using the full form for the possessive singular, Jane also modifies the vowel sounds in 'go' and 'hotel', using the diphthong [əʊ] in line with the RP pronunciation rather than the long monophthongal [o:] common to Teesside English and other northern English varieties. Jane also articulates the [h] of hotel, which can be interpreted against her otherwise frequent 'h-dropping'. I would suggest that Jane styles her utterance in this way in order to bestow her directive with a sense of mock authority. RP is not part of the children's normal stylistic repertoire, but utterances such as this one demonstrate that they have an awareness of a particularly prestigious accent which exists somewhere outside of the community. Stylised 'posh' did not always rely on features of accent, however. In Example (6b), for instance, Mary is being deliberately dramatic and adopts a theatrical, aristocratic persona when she proclaims *My creative work and everything is ruined*. The full form of the possessive is used with the phrase *creative work* which replaces the less grandiose *picture*. Notice that the reduced form of the pronoun [ma] is used with *picture*.

Examples (6c) and (6d) may be categorised as stylised American. In Example (6c), Harry is talking directly into the radio-microphone as if it were a walkie-talkie

and he were reporting ‘back to base’. Harry may have seen (American) movies in which police-officers on surveillance would report their movements in this way. In his pronunciation of post-vocalic /r/ in *near* and *teacher*, Harry displays sensitivity to the fact that the rhotic/non-rhotic distinction is one of the salient differences between British and American English (though there are varieties on both sides of the Atlantic which do not fit this pattern). Rachel also emulates the rhotic American accent in her pronunciation of *ginger*. The children also appear to have noticed something different about American vowel sounds, replacing [ɒ] with [a] in *watching* and *blonde*. As with the examples analysed in Section 3.5.1, the stylised nature of these utterances is reinforced by suprasegmental features such as shifts in the speed of delivery of the utterance (6c) and lengthened vowel sounds (6d).

As well as being implicated in stylised ‘posh’ and ‘American’, [maɪ] was used in other kinds of performance such as the sing-song style discussed in Section 3.3. In the following example, however, the speaker is neither singing nor is he obviously performing a stylised ‘posh’ or ‘American’ persona. Further, the utterance refers to something negative but in a mock-serious fashion in a manner similar to examples such as (5f), (5g) and Extract 3.3. So, why does Ben use [maɪ] rather than [mi]?

Extract 3.8

- 1 Ben: O::w my [maɪ] bollocks.
- 2 ((Laughing and background noise))
- 3 Lee: Did she hear?
- 4 Ben: Probably

One explanation is that possessive ‘me’ is generally avoided within the Murrayfield Primary community of practice. Further, while the utterance is not strictly an example of stylised ‘posh’, Ben is being quite dramatic here. He appears to use a

theatrical voice in order to provide a contrast with the taboo nature of the utterance's content. By doing so, Ben creates a humorous effect via the incongruity between a refined speaking style and rather more coarse vocabulary. Ben often demonstrates this kind of sophistication in his use of language (compare the way he uses right dislocation in Chapter 5, Extract 5.4 in order to make a barbed comment about my appearance). In this situation, possessive 'me' would not have contributed to the desired effect.

3.7 Conclusion

I have shown in this chapter that possessive 'me' and singular 'us' are salient features of the Teesside dialect, despite the fact that they have a widespread geographical distribution. Although there is some disagreement as to whether these forms are non-standard or simply part of informal, colloquial speech, there is evidence to suggest that they are not only salient in local consciousness but also stigmatised. Both forms involve different lexical realizations of the underlying grammatical categories they represent (Kerswill and Williams 2002:100), and both may be seen to transgress traditional grammatical boundaries (that of case with possessive 'me' and of number with singular 'us').

Possessive 'me' and singular 'us' were used more frequently by the children at Ironstone Primary than by those at Murrayfield Primary. This finding accords with sociolinguistic studies which have examined the distribution of non-standard/stigmatised linguistic variants in speakers belonging to different social classes. Neither variant was used particularly frequently, however, even within the Ironstone Primary community of practice. I have suggested that possessive 'me' and singular 'us' represent choices within a single pronoun paradigm, and that the

children use these forms sparingly but for stylistic effect. The precise social and pragmatic functions attributed to singular ‘us’ will be discussed in Chapter 4. In this Chapter, I examined the use of possessive ‘me’ in context in order to get closer to the meanings indexed by this form.

The frequency of use of possessive ‘me’ was low, but socially significant dialect variation cannot be understood solely in relation to aggregated frequency data and the analysis of the distribution of linguistic forms. The children in this study were not using possessive ‘me’ because they are from Teesside or because they are working class, as traditional correlation approaches would suggest, nor were they using possessive ‘me’ to directly index a regional or class identity; they were using this feature to do social work that was much more important for them: constructing interactional stances in their daily communication with each other. Stance provides a local explanation of variation in use: it is what speakers actually do with language in real interaction (Eberhardt and Kiesling 2008). Ochs (1996:419-420) states that ‘linguistic structures that index epistemic and affective stances are the basic linguistic resources for constructing/realizing social acts and social identities’. Surely, then, features such as possessive ‘me’ are worthy of study despite their low frequency, and we can only do justice to such features through an analysis of dialect in discourse.

