

## Chapter 4 – Singular ‘us’ and Other Directives

### 4.1 Introduction

The analysis in Chapter 3 provided a full account of the distribution of singular ‘us’, but it did not explain the meaning of this variant. Tentative statements about the usage and meaning of singular ‘us’ have been made by other researchers. In writing about Australian Vernacular English, for example, Pawley (2004:635) notes that singular ‘us’ is used ‘when the speaker makes a request for something to be given to or obtained for him/her, e.g. *Give us a light for me pipe.*’ Carter and McCarthy (2006:382) also suggest that singular ‘us’ ‘is commonly used when making requests, perhaps to soften the force of a request’. Anderwald goes further:

this phenomenon seems to be specific to the first person, and to imperatives. Whether the use of *us* for *me* has its origin in being a mitigating factor in requests has not been investigated yet.

(Anderwald 2004:178)

My aim in this chapter is to conduct such an investigation.

### 4.2 Plural pronouns and politeness

In my data, all 66 occurrences of ‘us’ with singular reference are part of imperative clauses in which the speaker is urging the addressee to do something: *let us see, give us it, pass us that book, show us yours, turn it off for us.* An imperative is an example of what Brown and Levinson (1987) would refer to as a ‘face-threatening act’. A face-threatening act comprises any action that impinges upon a person’s face, where ‘face’ (a term Brown and Levinson borrowed from Goffman (1967)) refers to an individual’s self-esteem, something that ‘must be constantly attended to in interaction’ (Brown and Levinson 1987:61). Face embodies two specific kinds of desires: ‘the desire to be unimpeded in one’s actions (negative

face), and the desire (in some respects) to be approved of (positive face)' (Brown and Levinson 1987:13). An imperative is 'the direct expression of one of the most intrinsically face-threatening speech acts – commanding' (Brown and Levinson 1987:191). Depending upon the situation, then, the speaker might feel that it is necessary to try to mitigate the face-threatening act, and the use of the plural pronoun could be one of the politeness strategies they adopt.

There is extensive evidence for the idea that plural forms can be used with singular reference to express something like politeness in many languages. Head (1978) examines data from more than one hundred languages in order to explore the social meaning of variation of pronominal categories and types of pronouns. He looks at first, second and third person reference, and notes for all that the use of the non-singular in pronominal reference to show greater respect or social distance than the singular appears to be a universal tendency (Head 1978:163). The widespread European development of two second person pronouns for singular addressees appears to have begun in Latin and is still found in languages such as French, German, Spanish and Italian. In Latin, the plural as a form of address to one person is first attested in address to the Roman emperor in the fourth century CE (Brown and Gilman 1960:255). The plural was eventually extended from the emperor to other figures of power, and a set of norms formed around what Brown and Gilman (1960:255) refer to as the 'nonreciprocal power semantic'. According to the 'nonreciprocal power semantic', superiors would use the original singular form to their inferiors and receive the polite plural form in return. A further distinction later developed around what Brown and Gilman (1960:257) refer to as the 'solidarity dimension'. The solidarity dimension provided a means of differentiating address

among equals: the singular form of address signalled a high degree of solidarity or ‘intimacy’ among equals; the plural form signalled low solidarity or ‘formality’.

These dimensions of solidarity and nonreciprocal power were expressed by English with the distinction between THOU and YOU, the direct descendants of the Old English second person singular and plural. In the Middle English period, English used THOU for ‘familiar address to a single person’ and YOU as ‘the singular of reverence and polite distance’, as well as the invariable plural (Brown and Gilman 1960:253). In modern standard English the use of the form YOU now obscures distinctions both of number and power/solidarity, though such distinctions continue to be expressed in a number of varieties outside standard English. Wales (1996:76) notes that ‘in those dialects of English outside the British Isles where singular/plural distinction has been introduced into the 2PP [second person pronoun], there are already signs of a semiotic of “distance” or politeness for singular address becoming formalised in the plural. e.g. *oonu* in Jamaican English’.

#### **4.2.1 Beyond the ‘standard’/‘non-standard’ dichotomy**

As noted in Chapter 3, the use of ‘us’ for the objective singular is associated with informal or dialectal usage; it is a ‘non-standard’ form of the objective singular. It is unsurprising, therefore, that singular ‘us’ occurs more frequently in Ironstone Primary, the school whose participants rank lower on a scale of socioeconomic prestige. However, if the use of singular ‘us’ in imperatives is part of a wider (even universal) phenomenon which links plurality to degrees of respect or social distance, the difference in the frequency of occurrence of this variant between the two schools is significant for reasons beyond the ‘standard’/‘non-standard’ dichotomy. As Coupland (2007:45) points out, the ‘use of “standard” features of speech is *not* limited to marking the speaker’s alignment with the establishment, and “non-

standard” speech can be used and voiced with very different pragmatic goals and effects’. Taking this into account, the difference in frequency of occurrence of singular ‘us’ between the two communities of practice raises further questions. For example, if singular ‘us’ can be used as a strategy to soften imperatives, why does it occur so infrequently at Murrayfield Primary, and what other strategies do the children use in its place? The remainder of this chapter will explore the strategies adopted at both schools for formulating imperatives and other directives, addressing the following questions:

- Is there evidence in the data to suggest that singular ‘us’ is being used as a mitigating factor in imperatives? If so, what kind of social factors motivate the speakers’ choice of singular ‘us’? What meanings does this feature have for the speakers who use it?
- How can we account for the difference between the two schools in terms of frequency of use of singular ‘us’?
- What other strategies do the children adopt to formulate ‘polite’ directives and what kind of social factors influence their choice of one form over another? Are there differences between the two schools in terms of the children’s use of these strategies?

In the first half of the chapter, quantitative methods will be used to investigate the different kinds of strategies that the children in each school adopt when formulating directives. This analysis does not encompass all of the possible forms that a directive could take (such an investigation is beyond the scope of this thesis), but will examine grammatical forms that are strongly associated with the directive function. The quantitative analysis will enable an overall comparison to be made between the

two schools, revealing patterning in the data and highlighting areas of potential interest. Qualitative understandings gained from the ethnography will then be used to illuminate the linguistic patterns which emerge from the quantitative analysis. In the second half of the chapter, I will aim to show that speaker choice is socially meaningful by examining the contexts within which speakers use imperatives with singular ‘us’ and other directives.

### **4.3 Directives: form and function**

The term ‘directive’ refers to speech acts (such as requests, orders, commands, instructions) which are issued by the speaker in order to attempt to get the hearer to do something, ‘to direct the hearer toward the speaker’s goal(s), to ask the hearer to make things happen according to the speaker’s wishes’ (He 2000:120). The children in this study have a range of resources at their disposal for formulating directives. Directives can be realised by any one of the three main clause types: imperative, declarative, and interrogative. The following analysis will deal only with a selection of grammatical forms which are generally recognised as likely to be used in directive function (e.g. Ervin-Tripp 1977; Mitchell-Kernan and Kernan 1977; Gordon and Ervin-Tripp 1984). The data was examined for all occurrences of these forms, and the findings of this analysis are summarised in Table 4.1. On some occasions, the children would repeat a directive several times within one utterance, for example, *Put it in, put it in, put it in* (Holly, Murrayfield Primary). This kind of example was counted as just one directive in the quantitative analysis. If, though, there was some variation in the repetition (e.g. *Look at us. Miss look at us*), each directive was counted separately. The numbers in parentheses in Table 4.1 represent examples which were deemed ‘uncertain’. Examples were classified as uncertain if: i) speech was obscured due to a lack of clarity in the recording; ii) it was not clear

that the utterance was functioning unequivocally as a directive; or iii) in the case of imperatives with singular ‘us’, there was some doubt as to whether the reference of the pronoun was singular or plural.

**Table 4.1: Directives: a comparison across schools**

	Ironstone			Murrayfield		
	N	?	%	N	?	%
<b>Imperative (exc. singular ‘us’ &amp; plural ‘let’s’)</b> e.g. <i>Get off my shoe</i>	461	(12)	60.2%	463	(4)	59.3%
<b>Imperative singular ‘us’</b> e.g. <i>Give us it</i>	58	(3)	7.6%	8*	(4)	1.0%
<b>Imperative plural ‘Let’s’</b> e.g. <i>Let’s have a look at yours</i>	25	0	3.3%	10	(2)	1.3%
<b>‘Howay’ **</b> e.g. <i>Mark howay over here</i>	41	0	5.4%	7	(2)	0.9%
<b>2nd person expression of obligation</b> e.g. <i>You have to sit somewhere else</i>	28	0	3.7%	29	0	3.7%
<b>1st person expression of obligation.</b> e.g. <i>We have to go</i>	6	0	0.8%	4	(2)	0.5%
<b>2nd person expression of need/want</b> e.g. <i>You need to write it in your book</i>	10	0	1.3%	18	(5)	2.3%
<b>1st person expression of need/want</b> e.g. <i>Miss we need some felt tips</i>	42	(3)	5.5%	42	(11)	5.4%
<b>3rd person expression of need/want</b> e.g. <i>Miss, Harry wants you</i>	5	0	0.7%	12	0	1.5%
<b>2nd person modal interrogatives</b> e.g. <i>Will you pass me my plan</i>	30	0	3.9%	51	0	6.5%
<b>1st person modal interrogatives</b> e.g. <i>Can I have your rubber</i>	55	0	7.2%	134	(1)	17.2%
<b>3rd person modal interrogatives</b> e.g. <i>Miss, can he have it</i>	5	0	0.7%	3	0	0.4%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>766</b>	<b>(18)</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>781</b>	<b>(31)</b>	<b>100%</b>

\* This figure does not agree with Table 3.3, which shows 12 instances of singular ‘us’ in the Murrayfield Primary data. This is because 4 examples of singular ‘us’ occurred as part of direct repetitions within a single utterance (e.g. *Let’s have a look. Let’s have a look. Let’s have a look*). Examples such as these were counted as one directive.

\*\* Dialect feature specific to north-east England which means something like ‘come on’.

### 4.3.1 Categories of directive

#### 4.3.1.1 Imperatives

Directives ‘embody an effort on the part of the speaker to get the hearer to do something’, and, ‘at the extreme end of this category, we have the classical imperatives’ (Mey 1993:164). Formally, imperatives are characterized by the lack of a subject<sup>1</sup> and use of the base form of the verb (e.g. *Get off my shoe; Put it in your pocket*). Imperatives represent a direct strategy since they convey only one meaning or ‘illocutionary’ force (Searle 1969; 1975), thus making the speaker’s intention explicit. Several subcategories of imperative were included in the analysis. Imperatives with singular ‘us’ made up a single category because this directive is the focus of the analysis. There is also a separate category for examples of the form ‘Let’s...’, which represent a special type of imperative used to express a suggestion involving both the speaker and their addressee in collaborative action (e.g. *Let’s have a look at this one*).

#### 4.3.1.2 Expressions of obligation and want/need

Unlike imperatives, in which the function is encoded grammatically, the function of expressions of obligation or want/need relies on the context and semantic content of the utterance. Second person expressions of obligation include utterances of the form ‘you have to...’/‘you can’t...’/‘you should...’ etc. which state the addressee’s obligation to carry out (or not) a particular action (e.g. *You have to go and sit somewhere else; Clare you’ve got to learn her a dance as well; You can’t keep your pack lunches on that*). Closely related are second person expressions of want/need (e.g. *You need to write it in your book; You want to d- put it smaller*).

---

<sup>1</sup> It is possible to identify the addressee of an imperative with a subject noun phrase functioning as a vocative, e.g. *You put this in your pocket*.

First person expressions of want/need represent a change in perspective; they embody the speaker's own personal desire, which the addressee is expected to fulfil (e.g. *Miss we need some felt tips; I want to talk in it*). Such utterances do not always fulfil a directive function, however. They may occur, for example, as support or justification for a directive (e.g. *Excusez-moi. I need to wash my hands; Come here a sec. I want to tell you something*). Such examples are not included under this category in Table 4.1. For an expression of need/want to function as a directive, it must be addressed to someone who the speaker believes can fulfil that directive. On some occasions, these expressions might simply be used by the speaker to state their own desires. For example, when Helen from Ironstone Primary tells the dinner lady *Miss I need a new skirt. (0.8 seconds) I s-pour- I had wat- I had a water fight with the jug*, it is clear that her utterance does not constitute a directive because the dinner lady is not able to provide Helen with a new skirt, and Helen is aware of that fact. Third person expressions of want/need include utterances such as, *Miss, Harry wants you*, where the speaker (usually the person wearing the radio-microphone), tries to get an adult's attention on behalf of someone else.

There are a number of first person plural utterances which belong to the category of first person expressions of need/want because of their form but which perform a different function. For example, when Beth from Murrayfield Primary says to the children on her table, *So we need to knock it down five each time*, she is not expressing a personal need, but rather is giving an instruction to the children on her table who were working together to grade the performance of a geography presentation given by another group of students. Beth could have issued such an instruction through a variety of other forms, including a second person expression of need (e.g. 'you need to knock it down five each time'). She could even have



reinforced the fact that her utterance was directed to the whole group, rather than a singular addressee, by using the dialect form ‘yous’ to express the second person plural, a form she uses on other occasions (Chapter 3.4). The reasons speakers such as Beth might choose to use inclusive ‘we’ will be discussed in Section 4.4.2. First person expressions of obligation occur only in the plural form and function in a similar manner (e.g. *Right we have to- we have to learn our dance*).

#### 4.3.1.3 Modal interrogatives

Second person modal interrogatives include utterances of the form ‘can/could you...?’/‘will/would you...?’. Such utterances make clear the addressee of the directive and the desired object/action (e.g. *Can you bring it in so we can have a look? Robert please will you pass me my plan?*). First person modal interrogatives differ in terms of perspective, placing more emphasis on the speaker rather than the addressee. For example, both *Can I have your rubber?* (Michelle, Murrayfield Primary) and *Holly can you pass me over the glue?* (Tara, Murrayfield Primary) require action on the part of the addressee, but the former focuses emphasis on the speaker and so avoids the appearance of trying to impose on the addressee. First person modal interrogatives often have the function of permission requests (e.g. *Miss please can I get a drink?*). Third person modal interrogatives can be directives issued on behalf of another person (e.g. *Can Sean Chedsby have this in a minute?*). Modal interrogatives are conventional means of expressing directives in English. The illocutionary force is thus signalled by conventional usage.

#### 4.3.1.4 ‘Howay’

There is one final category that I have included in the analysis, despite the fact that it is not discussed elsewhere in the literature as a directive; in fact, this form is not used by speakers outside of the north-east of England. ‘Howay’, which means

something like ‘come on’, is a dialect feature specific to the north-east of England, and, as such, it is relevant to a study of children’s language in Teesside. The kinds of semantic, pragmatic and social meanings this feature has for the children in this study will be discussed in Section 4.4.3.

### 4.3.2 Comparison between the schools

Using an imperative (such as *put it in your pocket*) is inherently face-threatening since it implies the speaker’s belief that their addressee will perform the action: the use of the imperative does not allow that the addressee has any choice in the matter (Leech 1983:109). Imperatives are still the most frequently used directive for speakers in both schools, however (Table 4.1). This high frequency may be due to the nature of the data, which includes long stretches of informal social interaction. As Biber et al. (1999:221) point out, imperatives occur frequently in conversation since participants are often engaged in some sort of non-linguistic activity at the moment of speaking. In such situations, language is used to monitor the actions of the addressee. Gordon and Ervin-Tripp (1984:299) note that ‘imperative forms are quite normal in adult speech in situations where speaker and hearer are engaged in a cooperative activity, or where the action desired is routine, easy to carry out, or consistent with the listener’s present focus of attention’. In their study of T, a 4-year-old boy, Gordon and Ervin-Tripp also found that ‘imperatives occurred more often than any other request form, and most of these imperative forms occurred during shared or routine activities’ (1984:314-315). The high incidence of imperatives in my data is also in line with other studies of children’s directives (e.g. Mitchell-Kernan and Kernan 1977; Achiba 2003). It seems, then, that imperatives are a popular and relatively low risk strategy when used between intimates involved in cooperative activity. Further, in all types of interaction, there are benefits to be

gained by using imperatives: this type of directive is clear, concise and unambiguous. When formulating a directive, a tension exists between the speaker's desire to make their needs clear to the hearer and their desire to avoid imposing upon the hearer. In situations where the risk attached to the face-threat implicit in an imperative is too high (i.e. where the cost to the hearer is significant or where there is an unequal relationship between speaker and hearer), a compromise can be found in the use of 'conventionalized indirectness' (Brown and Levinson 1987:70). Searle states in relation to conventional indirectness:

there can be conventions of usage ... I am suggesting that *can you, could you, I want you to*, and numerous other forms are conventional ways of making requests ... but at the same time they do not have an imperative meaning.

(Searle 1975:76)

There are four basic types of structural clause (declarative, interrogative, imperative and the very rare exclamative), which generally correspond directly to four basic speech act functions (statement, question, directive, exclamation). Modal interrogatives are indirect speech acts when they function as directives rather than questions. A directive such as *Can I have my book back?*, which uses interrogative syntax, has the appearance of a yes-no question, thereby giving the addressee (at least in theory) the option to say either 'yes' or 'no'. Going one step further, a directive such as *Can you turn it on?* gives the addressee the option to decline on the perfectly reasonable grounds that they are just not *able* to fulfil the request. Such forms are fully conventionalised in English and are unlikely to be interpreted as anything other than directives. By using an indirect speech act, however, the speaker has signalled their desire to minimise the imposition of the directive and by doing so attends to the hearer's negative face wants.

Children in both schools used all three categories of modal interrogatives, but the children at Murrayfield Primary used modal interrogatives to a greater extent than those at Ironstone Primary (25.3% compared to 11.8%). A second major difference between the two schools is in the children's use of imperatives with singular 'us'. While the Ironstone Primary participants used this strategy in 7.6% of directives, it occurred only 1.0% of the time at Murrayfield Primary. We might hypothesise, then, that while the children at Murrayfield Primary prefer to reduce the imposition of a directive by using conventionally indirect speech acts such as modal interrogatives, the children at Ironstone Primary are more likely to soften the imperative form, and use of the 'plural' pronoun is one of the strategies they adopt. Before investigating these differences further, Section 4.3.3 examines the impact that addressee has on the children's choice of directive.

### **4.3.3 Impact of Addressee**

We might expect there to be a difference between directives issued to adults in the school environment and those directed towards other children. In order to investigate this assumption, Table 4.2 shows the data stratified according to whether the recipient of a directive was an adult or a child. When the addressee was another child, the preferred strategy, by far, was 'imperative (excluding singular 'us' and plural 'let's')'. This particular strategy accounts for around two thirds of all directives issued to other children (65.7% at Ironstone, 67.4% at Murrayfield). While imperatives were not used with adults to the same extent that they were with children, they were still the most popular strategy for issuing child-adult directives at Ironstone Primary, and the second most popular at Murrayfield Primary (after first person modal interrogatives). On closer inspection, however, the data behind these figures reveal some interesting patterns. Of the 30 imperatives that were issued to

adults at Ironstone Primary, 23 were directed towards me, and 5 were addressed to a dinner lady. Only 2 imperatives were addressed to a member of the teaching staff, Mrs Trotter, the class teaching assistant. The situation is remarkably similar at Murrayfield Primary, where 33 of the 36 imperatives were directed to me, 2 to a dinner lady, and only 1 to the class teacher, Miss Flyn. The children at both schools clearly vary their choice of directive according to addressee, but the decision making process involves more than a simple distinction according to age (i.e. adult or child). It would appear that the children rank the adults in each community of practice according to relative power or status. Towards the top of this hierarchy is the class teacher. There is only 1 imperative in the data directed towards a teacher. It occurs in Murrayfield Primary when a group of students are giving a presentation using PowerPoint. A problem arises with the computer, and Beth, who is in the audience, offers some advice: *Hit space bar Miss*. Beth's imperative is intended to reach the children at the computer, but she appeals to the teacher's authority in order to gain validation for her suggestion. We might argue, then, that the true addressee in this example is not the teacher at all but the group presenting, since it is their behaviour that Beth wants to influence. Either way, we can be quite confident that this imperative falls much further towards the 'benefit to hearer' as opposed to 'cost to hearer' end of the pragmatic scale (Leech 1983:123) and is hence not significantly face-threatening.

Classroom teaching assistants fall slightly below the teachers in the children's hierarchy: Mrs Trotter at Ironstone Primary is the recipient of 2 imperatives. Further down the hierarchy are the dinner ladies who received 7 imperatives. This tallies with my own observations regarding the children's interactions with the dinner ladies in the playground. It was evident that the women in this environment are

Table 4.2: Directives by addressee

	Ironstone Primary						Murrayfield Primary					
	Adult		Child		Not	Total	Adult		Child		Not	Total
	N	%	N	%	known	N	N	%	N	%	known	N
Imperative (exc. singular 'us' & plural 'let's')	30	27.8%	430	65.7%	1	461	36	24.7%	426	67.4%	1	463
Imperative singular 'us'	0	0.0%	58	8.9%	0	58	0	0.0%	8	1.1%	0	8
Imperative plural 'let's'	0	0.0%	25	3.8%	0	25	0	0.0%	10	1.6%	0	10
'Howay'	0	0.0%	41	6.3%	0	41	0	0.0%	7	1.1%	0	7
2nd person expression of obligation	2	1.9%	26	4.0%	0	28	4	2.7%	25	4.0%	0	29
1st person expression of obligation	0	0.0%	6	0.9%	0	6	0	0.0%	4	0.6%	0	4
2nd person expression of need/want	1	0.9%	9	1.4%	0	10	0	0.0%	18	2.8%	0	18
1st person expression of need/want	28	25.9%	14	2.1%	0	42	7	4.8%	35	5.5%	0	42
3rd person expression of need/want	3	2.8%	2	0.3%	0	5	11	7.5%	1	0.2%	0	12
2nd person modal interrogatives	19	17.6%	10	1.5%	1	30	21	14.4%	29	4.6%	1	51
1st person modal interrogatives	20	18.5%	33	5.0%	2	55	65	44.5%	69	10.9%	0	134
3rd person modal interrogatives	5	4.6%	0	0.0%	0	5	2	1.4%	1	0.2%	0	3
TOTAL	108	100%	654	100%	4	766	146	100%	633	100%	2	781
	14%		85%		1%		19%		81%		0%	

treated with less deference than the teachers by the children. This was specifically commented on, in fact, by one of the teachers in the staffroom at Murrayfield Primary, who felt strongly that the children's attitude towards the dinner ladies was inappropriate.

At the bottom of the adult hierarchy is me. Does this mean that the children had very little respect for me? I believe that the situation is in fact much more complex, and reveals something interesting about the way in which the children viewed me. In Chapter 2, I reflected on the ambiguity of my role within these schools during the period of the ethnography. Not only was I both researcher and friend (see Milroy 1987a:66), I was also teacher or helper. The children called me 'Miss' or 'Miss Snell' and came to me for help with their work in the classroom. There were also occasions in the classroom when I was given responsibility for monitoring the children's behaviour (e.g. if the teacher was temporarily absent) and in such situations I often had to reprimand the children to maintain order. In this respect, I was much like a teacher, or a teaching assistant. But the children also came to me in the playground to chat, tell me the latest gossip, or ask me to join in with their games. While the children's relationships with the teachers were generally stable, their behaviour to me could be variable. On some days I was particularly popular, especially with groups of girls, but there were other occasions when I fell out of favour. I am reminded here of one particular girl at Murrayfield Primary who was annoyed with me because I had not given her the radio-microphone that morning. She proceeded to openly ignore me and exclude me from her group – would she have behaved this way towards a teacher or other member of staff? Further, my presence in the playground did not prevent behaviour such as swearing or fighting, for which the children would have been punished by a teacher. The ambiguity of my

role meant that I was in a good position to see a wide range of behaviour from the children. From their perspective, this ambiguity is reflected in their use of directives. Although the children do use more polite, indirect forms with me (such as modal interrogatives), the most frequently occurring strategy in both schools was the imperative (see Table 4.3). Although I was an adult, and a researcher, the children's linguistic behaviour here gives a clear indication that the power differential was not completely in my favour. The children were aware that they were helping me and so I was obliged to them.

**Table 4.3: Directives addressed to Miss Snell**

	Ironstone		Murrayfield	
	N	%	N	%
<b>Imperative (exc. singular 'us' &amp; plural 'let's')</b>	22	34.4%	33	35.9%
<b>2nd person expression of obligation</b>	0	0.0%	2	2.2%
<b>1st person expression of need/want</b>	18	28.1%	4	4.3%
<b>3rd person expression of need/want</b>	3	4.7%	11	12.0%
<b>2nd person modal interrogatives</b>	14	21.9%	17	18.5%
<b>1st person modal interrogatives</b>	4	6.3%	24	26.1%
<b>3rd person modal interrogatives</b>	3	4.7%	1	1.1%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>64</b>		<b>92</b>	

Second person expressions of obligation and second person expressions of need/want were very rarely directed to adults. In children's play it may be normal to control 'the addressee's action by invoking prescribed procedures or conventions' (Achiba 2003:58), but this would be considered inappropriate when interacting with an adult. As with the use of imperatives, however, the adults in these two communities of practice were ranked according to relative power/status. In Ironstone Primary, second person expressions of obligation and need/want were addressed to the class teaching assistant, Mrs Trotter, but never to the class teacher. Of the 4



second person expressions of obligation uttered at Murrayfield Primary, 2 were to me and 1 was to the class teaching assistant, Mrs Miller. Only 1 of these examples was addressed to the class teacher, Miss Flynn: *Space bar. Miss you've got to hit space bar. Aw no.* It occurred as part of the same interaction as the imperative discussed above, and as such, the same conditions apply.

Ervin-Tripp (1977) and Gordon and Ervin-Tripp (1984) report that first person expressions of need/want are used early by children when addressing adults. We can see this strategy being adopted at Ironstone Primary where, after imperatives, first person expressions of need/want were the preferred form of directive with adult interlocutors. This was a strategy used often with adults but relatively rarely with other children; an unsurprising result since children are used to having their needs fulfilled by adults rather than peers. In Achiba's (2003) study of the acquisition of requests in English by a seven-year-old Japanese girl, she found that want statements were addressed to adult addressees much more frequently than to other interlocutors. In contrast, at Murrayfield Primary, expressions of need/want occurred only seven times with adult addressees. It seems that the children at Murrayfield Primary had found other strategies for formulating directives to adults, perhaps ones that were more effective. Or perhaps this difference in usage highlights a socio-cultural distinction between the two schools. Do the children at Ironstone Primary rely on the help and support of adults at school more than their counterparts at Murrayfield? Five of the examples in Ironstone Primary were simply of the form 'I need help/helping'. From my own observations of both classrooms this seems like a plausible explanation. At Murrayfield Primary, the children attended to tasks set by the teacher with relatively little fuss. At Ironstone Primary, on the other hand, the children often made repeated requests for help. This is not necessarily the same as

saying that the children at Ironstone Primary *required* more help with their work or with fulfilling basic needs in the classroom, just that the culture of the classroom was such that they felt comfortable in expressing their needs and were confident that the adults in the classroom would meet those needs. During my time at Ironstone Primary, a number of teachers and teaching assistants commented to me that the children in this class were ‘immature’. Any actual immaturity, if present, may have resulted in the children expressing their needs to the teacher/teaching assistant rather than actively attempting to help themselves. Or, the adults’ *perception* of the students’ immaturity may have translated into their responding more readily to the children’s expressions of want/need, thus reinforcing the children’s notion that these adults were there to support them unreservedly. In their study of the use of directives among a group of black American children aged 7 to 12 years, Mitchell-Kernan and Kernan note: ‘[a]ll situations in our study in which directives took the form of Statements of Desire are characterised by *a clear expectancy on the part of the speaker of compliance by the addressee*’ [my emphasis] (Mitchell-Kernan and Kernan 1977:194). A further possible explanation is simply that the activities that the recordings picked up at Ironstone Primary encouraged expressions of want/need. 10 of the examples, for instance, occurred when the children were drawing pictures that were to be entered into a competition. After seeing that I had some (small) skill at drawing, many of the children wanted my help with this. There is no reason why they could not have used other forms of directive on this occasion, but they may have felt that emphasising their lack of skill and subsequent need would make it more likely that I would respond positively. This is, however, speculative; it would make an interesting future study to investigate these kinds of differences more rigorously. Is there any correlation between preferred strategy and the rate of success

that directives have? Do children learn at school what are considered ‘appropriate’ requests to be directed at teachers and other adults in the classroom? Is this related to the kinds of mentality that classrooms foster with regard to self-help as opposed to reliance on the teacher? How does the way that children address adults at school compare to their behaviour at home? How far does activity type affect the choice of directive? In future work, quantitative analysis could certainly be extended to code for factors such as activity type, outcome (i.e. success/failure of directive), and speaker goal. While this work is beyond the scope of this thesis, some of these factors will be discussed as part of the qualitative analysis of paired extracts from each school in Section 4.4.6.

Although Murrayfield Primary participants tended not to use expressions of need/want with adults, they did use them with each other. Table 4.2 shows that in relation to child addressees, this strategy was used twice as frequently at Murrayfield Primary as it was at Ironstone Primary. It is important to look at the examples behind these figures, though. Of the 35 examples included in this category, 17 are of the type discussed in Section 4.3.1.2 as instructions which use inclusive ‘we’. For example, when Michelle is trying to organise a game in the playground, she tells her friends *no we a- we need in a circle* and it is clear to her playmates that she is giving them an instruction that they need to follow. This is made even clearer when she later reformulates this instruction as an imperative: *go over there in a circle*. This kind of directive will be discussed in more detail in Section 4.4.2. There is only one example of this sort at Ironstone Primary. If these examples are taken out of this category, the two schools have a reasonably similar relative frequency for directives expressed as first person statements of need/want (Ironstone: 2.0%; Murrayfield: 2.8%).

First person modal interrogatives were the most popular strategy for directives addressed to adults in Murrayfield Primary, where they were used 44.5% of the time. These generally took the form of requests for permission: *Miss can I go and put a tissue on my foot because it's all bleeding?*, *Miss now can I colour it in quickly?*, *Oh can I do it please?*, *Miss can I go and sit on the carpet because I can't see?*, *Miss can I sit on this chair for bingo?* This kind of directive was used less frequently to adults in Ironstone primary (18.5% of total directives). We might hypothesise that this represents a difference in the ethos of the classroom community of practice at Murrayfield Primary compared to Ironstone Primary. As discussed in Chapter 2, it quickly became clear to me that the children at Murrayfield Primary conformed to the school's (and my own) expectations of 'good' behaviour to a much greater degree than those at Ironstone Primary. The classroom at Murrayfield was governed by the teacher's authority; this community of practice was regulated by strict rules set down by the teachers and adhered to by the children. Within this environment, the children made frequent requests for permission as they attempted to successfully negotiate their way through the structure of the school day. The children at Ironstone Primary, on the other hand, responded differently to the structure of the classroom and to the teacher's authority; they often omitted to seek permission in advance for actions unrelated to the task at hand.

There were a number of strategies that were used exclusively with other children: imperatives with singular 'us'; imperatives with plural 'let's'; and 'howay'. Focusing only on directives addressed to children helps us see more clearly the differences that exist between the two schools. The difference in the usage of singular 'us', for example, now appears more marked: Ironstone 8.9%; Murrayfield 1.1%. Imperatives with singular 'us' are in fact the second most frequently used strategy in child-child

directives at Ironstone Primary. Second place at Murrayfield Primary, on the other hand, goes to first person modal interrogatives (10.9%). So, we can refine the hypothesis stated earlier: when addressing other children, the students at Murrayfield Primary prefer to reduce the imposition of a directive by using indirect speech acts such as modal interrogatives, while the children at Ironstone Primary are more likely to soften the imperative form using singular 'us'. But in what situations might it be necessary to reduce the imposition of a directive? Within the child peer group, power hierarchies and relative status are constantly renegotiated. Relationships between the children in both communities of practice were unstable, and the boundaries between friendship groups were in constant flux. In this volatile environment, directives were inherently risky. The children therefore chose from a diverse range of strategic forms when issuing directives to each other, and often entered into complex negotiations. Since friendships could change dramatically in a short space of time, it was impossible to code individual directives with such information (cf. Mitchell-Kernan and Kernan 1977:197). The only way to take account of the complexities of peer-group relations is therefore through close qualitative analysis, to which we will turn in the following sections.

#### **4.4 Directives in context**

The preceding analysis has shown that directives can be realised by numerous grammatical structures. We might ask, as Ervin-Tripp et al. (1990:310) did, why do directives take so many forms? Their answer: 'politeness or, more generally, social meaning'. In the following analysis, I will aim to discover what kinds of social meaning the children in this study encoded into the different linguistic features that made up their directives. Is there more at stake than simple politeness?

#### 4.4.1 Imperatives with singular ‘us’

Section 4.2 established that the widespread use of plural pronouns to singular addressees is understood as indicating deference or distance. Brown and Levinson (1987) analyse this usage as an aspect of negative politeness. They suggest a number of possible motives for this phenomenon, including the following:

in all societies where a person’s social status is fundamentally linked to membership in a group, to treat persons as representatives of a group rather than as relatively powerless individuals would be to refer to their social standing and the backing that they derive from their group.

(Brown and Levinson 1987:199)

Moving the perspective from second person to first person reference, this explanation can be applied to the use of imperatives with singular ‘us’. In using the plural pronoun when issuing an imperative, speakers distance themselves from the force of the imperative by implying group support, such that the agent of the face-threatening act is ‘other than [the] S[peaker], or at least possibly not [the] S[peaker] or not the S[peaker] alone’ (Brown and Levinson 1987:190). Used as an impersonalising mechanism to distance the speaker from the force of the imperative, then, we can infer that singular ‘us’ expresses negative politeness. But do Brown and Levinson have anything specific to say about the use of singular ‘us’ itself? In an earlier work, they invite their readers to contrast the following request strategies:

- (1) You’ll lend us a fiver, won’t you mate.
- (2) You wouldn’t by any chance be able to lend me five pounds, would you?

(Brown and Levinson 1979:320)

In their analysis of the differences between these two directives, they state that the ‘first intuitively involves interactional *optimism*, the second interactional *pessimism*,

and the particular constellation of negative, subjunctive and remote possibility features in the second can be seen to derive rationally from the corresponding strategy' (Brown and Levinson 1979:320). They do not, however, explicitly comment on the change from 'us' in the first example (where it is presumably being used with singular reference) to 'me' in the second. In their later model of politeness, they include the example 'Give us a break. (i.e. *me*)' under the positive politeness strategy 'Include both S[peaker] and H[earer] in the activity' (Brown and Levinson 1987:127). Brown and Levinson argue that this strategy mitigates the force of a directive because it implies that both speaker and hearer will benefit equally from the directive. Brown and Levinson's example here is ambiguous, though, because 'Give us/me a break' is a fixed expression in English which means something like 'stop nagging/shouting (etc.) at me'. The 'us' in this utterance could be seen as a form of inclusive 'we' in that both speaker and hearer are locked in some kind of disagreement, and ending that disagreement would arguably benefit both. But this is not how singular 'us' functions in my data in utterances such as 'give us it'. Here 'us' does not appear to include the hearer; it is an example of exclusive 'we': 'a reminder that I do not stand alone' (Brown and Levinson 1987:202). Singular 'us' does, however, have the potential to allude to an in-group to which both speaker and hearer belong. While negative politeness is generally restricted to addressing the particular face want being affected by the face-threatening act, the sphere of positive politeness is widened to include the kinds of linguistic behaviour which are generally exchanged between intimates (e.g. indicating shared wants and shared knowledge). Perceived as a salient feature of the local dialect, singular 'us' may have a role to play as a marker of shared experience and in-group identity, and as such, perhaps sits within Brown and Levinson's

positive-politeness strategy of ‘claim in-group membership’: ‘by using any of the innumerable ways to convey in-group membership, [the] S[peaker] can implicitly claim the common ground with [the] H[earer] that is carried by that definition of the group’ (Brown and Levinson 1987:107). In using imperatives with singular ‘us’, the speakers in this study are thus perhaps trying to imply closeness with their addressee by virtue of their shared membership in some friendship, school, or local community group. Groups in this sense are not necessarily concrete structures but abstractions which exist in the minds of individuals (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985:4-5)

The above discussion suggests that singular ‘us’ expresses both positive *and* negative politeness. This appears to be a contradiction since negative politeness strategies are generally used for social distancing, while positive politeness is generally used to minimise social distance. At this point, it is perhaps wise to attach a note of caution to Brown and Levinson’s model which, by their own admission, takes a ‘pan-cultural perspective’ and so, while extremely useful at a certain level of generalisation, does not (and could not possibly) account for the complexities of what actually happens on the ground. For this, we must explore the practice of the communities under consideration. As Eckert argues, linguistic features

come to be associated with fairly abstract meanings, derived from large-scale patterns in layered and overlapping communities (imagined or otherwise). They then take on more local and precise meanings as they are vivified in locally-recognized styles which are, in turn, built on recognizable combinations of shared resources.

(Eckert 2002:5)

Having established that plural pronouns are linked, at an abstract level, to notions of politeness and social distance, what are the ‘local and precise meanings’ that singular ‘us’ takes on in the two communities of practice under investigation?



In order to make a case for the special social and pragmatic functions ascribed by the children in my study to imperatives with singular ‘us’, I will address extended examples from the data in detail because, as Podesva (2008) points out, ‘[p]articlar variants are unlikely to be randomly distributed over discourse; rather, if they have social meanings, they occur where their meanings are indexed in interaction’.

#### *4.4.1.1 Ironstone Primary*

One of the Ironstone Primary students, Clare, uses ‘us’ with singular reference on 22 occasions, the majority of which cluster in 2 key interactions. The first takes place in the Ironstone Primary school playground where a group of girls are messing around and stealing each other’s shoes. Clare has approached this group of girls and wants to join in the fun. The girls then steal Clare’s shoe, however, and she has to make a series of requests to get it back.

#### **Extract 4.1**

- |    |         |  |
|----|---------|--|
| 1  | Clare:  | <b>Gemma give us it. (1 second) Quick Gemma give us it.</b>    |
| 2  | Gemma:  | No   |
| 3  | Clare:  | What we going to do, hide it?                                  |
| 4  |         | ((Background noise and sound of laughing – 23 seconds))        |
| 5  | Jane:   | (My feet was freezing.)  |
| 6  | Clare:  | My shoe  |
| 7  | Jane:   | (My feet were freezing.) Let me take your boots off (young     |
| 8  |         | lady).   |
| 9  | Clare:  | Why don’t we take yours off? (.) By the way Jane has already   |
| 10 |         | tried. (1.5 seconds) Jane has already tried but my shoes don’t |
| 11 |         | come off.  |
| 12 | Joanne: | (I’ve stopped)   |
| 13 | Anon:   | ((Screams))  |
| 14 | Jane:   | (xxxx) get Clare’s off. Get Clare’s off.                       |
| 15 |         | ((Inaudible background noise and laughing – 7.1 seconds))      |
| 16 | Rosie:  | Clare I promise I won’t get you. (I won’t be able to) get you. |
| 17 | Clare:  | I’m not (going on anyone’s back) No::!                         |

18 Danielle: (I don't think she should) I just want to try see how far (I can  
19 go with Clare. Oh please Clare.)  
20 Joanne: (xxxxxxx Clare) you haven't had a proper piggy back yet  
21 from there.  
22 Danielle: [I know yeah.  
23 Clare: [And Tina.  
24 Joanne: Howay.  
25 Danielle: Go on. Let me take you up on (xxx).  
26 Clare: Oh f(hhhhh)fine I know what you're going to do. I don't care  
27 (1.5 seconds) I know, I don't care.  
28 Anon: Get them now.  
29 Tina: I can't get them off.  
.  
. (2 minutes 49 seconds)  
.  
30 Jane: We got a boot we got a boot we got a boot we got a boot.  
31 Clare: She's got my shoe. ((laughs))  
32 ((Background noise – 10 seconds)  
33 Clare: **Give us it.**  
34 Anon: ((chanting)) Clare's shoe Clare's [shoe Clare's shoe  
35 Anon: [(Pass us it.)  
36 ((Background noise)) (3 seconds)  
37 Clare: **Give us it.**  
38 Anon: (I know I haven't got it.)  
39 Clare: Rosie (2 seconds) Rosie **give us it.**  
40 ((Inaudible background noise)) (12 seconds)  
41 Anon: Get Clare's [feet.  
42 Clare: [(Give us back) my shoe.  
43 Jane: Get Clare's feet.  
44 ((Inaudible background noise – 2 seconds))  
45 Anon: Get it get it.  
46 Joanne: Danielle Danielle get it ((laughing))  
47 Anon: We've got one.  
48 Anon: Alright you may as well give (her) the other one.  
49 Gemma: Can I get that one?  
50 Jane: Yeah lay down on the floor.  
51 Anon: Yeah lay down (xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx.)  
52 ((Background noise)) (3 seconds)

- 53 Tina: Because Clare's got one shoe on.  
 54 Anon: Give me the shoe (lee) now.  
 55 ((Background noise; children running around – 16 seconds))  
 56 Clare: He::lp  
 57 ((Sound of Clare running – 12 seconds))  
 58 Clare: **Give us my shoe back.**  
 59 Tina: She hasn't got her shoe (xxxxxxxxxxxxx she's a) lucky woman.  
 60 Clare: Jane you- (2.5 seconds) **Give us my shoe back.** (1.5 seconds)  
 61 **Give us my back.** (1 second) **Give us my shoe back.**

Clare is quite outspoken and often falls out with the other children. I witnessed a number of arguments involving Clare during my visits to Ironstone Primary. The class teaching assistant commented on Clare's propensity to court disagreement, and a number of the children singled her out to me as a bully or a troublemaker. On this occasion, however, Clare wants to be able to join in with the play, which is why she has approached the girls in the first place. Notice the way that Clare uses inclusive 'we' in her question to Gemma on line 3: *What **we** going to do, hide it?*

The group of girls with whom Clare is trying to engage in this extract has no official power over her, but Clare is not a fully integrated member of this group, and therefore the interaction ranks low on a scale of solidarity. Moreover, Clare becomes the target of the girls' joke and so is further excluded from the group. Mitchell-Kernan and Kernan (1977) found that politeness to peer group members increased when the speaker was temporarily estranged from the peer group. Clare found herself in this position more often than the other girls due to her forthright manner. Under normal circumstances, this generally did not seem to bother Clare, but faced with bare feet on a wet November day, things were slightly different. I would suggest that Clare is here aware of her position and acknowledges her marginal place within this social group through the use of singular 'us' (lines 1, 33, 37, 39, 58, 60, 61). Her goal is to get her shoe back, but, as already noted, imperatives such

as ‘give me it’ constitute face-threatening acts. In this context, it makes sense that Clare would choose to mitigate the face-threatening act; she does not want to provoke an argument that would cause a delay in the return of her shoe. There are, of course, other strategies that Clare could have chosen for formulating a ‘polite’ directive, but the use of an imperative with singular ‘us’ has added significance. In a situation where Clare lacks status, she attempts to augment her own social standing (and hence her chances of getting the shoe back) by implying group support. Moreover, the group to which Clare alludes also has the potential to include her addressees, thus implying shared membership for speaker and hearer in an in-group. Further, incorporating what is regarded as a dialectal feature into the directive implies a degree of shared knowledge or common ground. The use of singular ‘us’ therefore enhances solidarity by capitalising on the associations of intimacy that come with membership of an in-group. The social meanings attached to the use of imperatives with singular ‘us’ have been cultivated by the Ironstone Primary community of practice. Clare, as a member of this community, understands this special application of ‘us’ and is, I would argue, using it here in a socially meaningful way. Although Clare’s use of singular ‘us’ may be less than fully conscious (in that the use of ‘us’ in this type of context may have become automated through habitual use), Clare is clearly making a linguistic choice which orients to her immediate interactional goals. Clare is the most prolific user of imperatives with singular ‘us’, but it is important to note that she does use a number of *other* strategies for formulating directives. The recordings capture 72 directives from Clare in total, including 42 from the category of imperatives excluding singular ‘us’ and plural ‘let’s’, and 8 of these are imperatives with ‘me’ (e.g. *Now let me paint this*

*one again*). The motivations behind her choice of these different strategies will be examined in Section 4.4.6.

Linguistic choice can embody temporary interactional identities and relations as in Extract 4.1, or more permanent identities as in the following extract:

#### **Extract 4.2**

Helen and Caroline are in the playground. Helen is wearing the radio-microphone.

- 1 Helen: Aw she's laughing at me because she can still hear me.  
2 Caroline: **Let us say thanks for the sweets.**  
3 Helen: No:: (.) I've already said that. ((Stress on 'I'))  
. .  
. (1 minute 7 seconds)  
. .  
4 Caroline: Ere **let us have [(a go at the jack).**  
5 Helen: [No::  
6 Helen: No she's- she's got- she isn't listening.  
. .  
. (12 seconds)  
. .  
7 Helen: Miss Snell (0.7 seconds) Miss Snell (1.2 seconds) Miss Snell  
8 Caroline said she goes out with Mark. It's been recorded now.  
9 It's inside the machine and then she can listen to it.  
10 Caroline: Let me sa:y-  
11 ((Background noise – 2.8 seconds))  
12 Helen: Caroline said she fancies me (1 second) Oo ((laughs)) I said  
13 Caroline said she fancies me by an accident ((laughs))  
14 Caroline: **Let us say it properly plea:se.**

Helen was the first girl that I asked to wear the radio-microphone when I was testing it out because it was clear to me that she was extremely talkative and would relish the opportunity to be recorded. I tried to give all of the children who had brought in signed consent forms the chance to wear the microphone, and many of the children put themselves forward for the task with great gusto. In the same way that Caroline

does not gain permission to talk into the microphone in this extract, however, she missed out on being able to wear the microphone herself due to lack of time. Listening back to recordings, I realised that Caroline was actually very keen to have the microphone, but I was not aware of this fact during fieldwork because she lacked the confidence to push herself forward. The way that these aspects of Caroline's personality are encoded in her linguistic practices will be discussed further in Chapter 5, where I examine her use of right dislocation. In this extract, Caroline makes several bids for permission to talk into the microphone. In terms of relative power and status, Caroline ranks firmly below the confident Helen. The two girls have a relationship in which Helen clearly has the upper-hand (notice how Helen teases Caroline on lines 8 and 12). The fact that Helen has the coveted microphone gives her further power in this interaction. Caroline's directives are therefore inherently risky so she adopts the strategy of imperative with singular 'us' in lines 2 and 4. Caroline could perhaps have used a modal interrogative in order to formulate a polite, indirect request (e.g. 'Can I say thanks for the sweets?') but this would have lacked the force of an imperative, and moreover, would not have encoded the same sense of shared experience and in-group membership as singular 'us'. Brown and Levinson point out that positive politeness techniques are not just used to mitigate a face-threatening act; they are also used 'in general as a kind of social accelerator, where [the] S[peaker], in using them, indicates that he [sic] wants to "come closer" to [the] H[earer]' (Brown and Levinson 1987:103). Caroline's use of singular 'us' in this extract functions not only to soften her imperatives, but also to align her with Helen, establishing her as part of a friendship group. Both of Caroline's requests are met with a staunch refusal. Helen's elongated *no::* in line 5 is particularly aggressive as it comes before Caroline has finished her utterance. In the face of this refusal,

Caroline momentarily adopts standard ‘me’ in line 10 (*Let me sa:y-*), but does not complete this directive. Instead, she reverts back to an imperative with singular ‘us’ in line 14, adding the politeness marker ‘please’ as a sign that she accepts her position in this social dyad.

In the extracts analysed so far, directives were risky largely due to the state of the relationship between interlocutors. In the following extract, I would suggest that the directives are risky because of the nature of the imposition. The interaction begins just after the school secretary has handed out the annual photographs that the children had had taken by an official photographer earlier that day. There is a ripple of excitement in the room as the children look at their own photographs, then vie to catch a glimpse of the portraits of others.

#### Extract 4.3

- |    |           |  |
|----|-----------|--|
| 1  | Clare:    | O::ff (.) <b>Let’s have a look at yours</b> (1.2 seconds) please. (2.1 |
| 2  |           | seconds) Where?  |
| 3  |           | ((Classroom noise and inaudible speech – 5 seconds))                   |
| 4  | Clare:    | <b>Let’s have a look at yours.</b> (1.1 seconds) I’ll show you mine.   |
| 5  |           | (1.4 seconds) <b>Show us yours.</b> (0.8 seconds) ha ha (0.7           |
| 6  |           | seconds) (nope).   |
| 7  |           | ((Classroom noise and inaudible talk – 5.8 seconds))                   |
| 8  | Clare:    | <b>Let’s have a look at yours</b> (.) no please Nathan                 |
| 9  | Danielle: | Look, I’ll show you mine. <b>Let’s see yours.</b>                      |
| 10 | Aaron:    | <b>Let’s see yours.</b>  |
| 11 | Clare:    | No <b>show us yours</b> <sup>2</sup> first.                            |
| 12 | Aaron:    | No::   |
| 13 |           | ((Classroom noise – 12 seconds))                                       |
| 14 | Clare:    | I know (0.6 seconds) <b>so let’s have a look.</b>                      |

---

<sup>2</sup> Given that this usage patterns with Clare’s earlier utterances, it is likely that ‘us’ in this example is still singular, but now that Danielle has become involved in the conversation, ‘us’ could be plural, referring to both of them. This example is therefore classed as ‘uncertain’ in the quantitative analysis in Table 4.1.

- 15 ((Classroom noise – 4.1 seconds))
- 16 Clare: **(Let's have a look).** (1.9 seconds) Not funny.  
.  
.  
(10 minutes 18 seconds)  
.
- 17 Robert: **Let's have a look at yours.**
- 18 ((Classroom noise – 28 seconds))
- 19 Danielle: Do you know what I did right? I've just slipped on Robert's  
20 bag he was going like this-  
21 ((Classroom noise – 19.9 seconds))
- 22 Tina: Clare I'll give you a look. (1.2 seconds) Clare a::w my: go:d  
23 (1.5 seconds) (Me and xxxxx) didn't smile (.) Seen how many  
24 m- have you seen-
- 25 Sam: I look stupid me (and my head's sticking out).
- 26 Jane: **Ere let's have a look Clare.**
- 27 Clare: No:::
- 28 Tina: Clare (doesn't that-)
- 29 Jane: I showed you mine.
- 30 Clare: No you haven't.
- 31 Jane: Yeah I did.
- 32 Clare: No you never.
- 33 Jane: I'll show you mine.
- 34 Clare: No:::
- 35 Jane: Please (only me).
- 36 ((Classroom noise – 4.7 seconds))
- 37 Jane: (Babe) you look nice.  
.  
.  
(1 minute 33 seconds)  
.
- 38 Danielle: **Let's see yours.** (1.4 seconds) You've spoilt yours.
- 39 Clare: So:::

Clare uses 'us' with singular reference 8 times in this extract, but she is not alone. Aaron, Danielle, Jane and Robert also use imperatives with singular 'us'. The imposition involved in obeying the directives highlighted above is great because, not only do they threaten the hearer's negative face, as do all directives in that they



require action on the part of the hearer and thus threaten the hearer's basic want to be unimpeded in their actions, but they also threaten the hearer's positive face. The positive self-image that the hearer claims for themselves may be threatened if the (often unforgiving) presentation of their features in the school photograph provokes ridicule or insults from classmates. Many of the children were extremely guarded about letting anyone see their photograph, and therefore subtle means of persuasion were required. Again, imperatives with singular 'us' are a suitable strategy because they appeal to that sense of in-group solidarity – 'we all had to have our photographs taken and we're all similarly embarrassed by them'.

This extract includes a number of directives of the form 'let's X' (e.g. *let's have a look at yours*). These utterances were categorised as instances of imperatives with singular 'us', rather than plural 'let's', because they do not suggest collaborative action between speaker and addressee (compare the examples in Section 4.4.2). I argue that they are actually contracted forms of 'let us X'. So when Clare says *Let's have a look at yours* on line 4, her utterance is a contracted form of 'Let us have a look at yours'. Clare wants the speaker to give her their photograph so that she can have a look; there is no suggestion that Clare wants them to view the photograph together. This interpretation is supported by Clare's reformulation on line 5 to *Show us yours*. Notice also that a number of the imperatives occur with the statement *I'll show you mine* (lines 4, 9 and 33), and *I showed you mine* (line 29): the implication, 'I'll show you mine if you let *me* see yours'. Admittedly, the distinction between utterances such as *let's have a look at yours*, which are categorised as examples of singular 'us', and *let's have a look for the register* which are discussed in Section 4.4.2, is not clear cut. As already noted, there is an ambiguity between inclusive and exclusive 'we' forms in the usage of singular 'us'. 'Us' can be exclusive and refer

hypothetically to the speaker and some other person or group, or it can be inclusive and refer metaphorically (and potentially, actually) to the speaker and hearer together (as members of an in-group). This sense of ambiguity is heightened when the contracted form ‘let’s’ is used. Speakers can capitalise on this ambiguity by using ‘let’s’ to make an imperative sound less authoritative, thus minimising the strength of the imposition. Contraction itself serves positive-politeness ends, being a marker of ‘in-group membership and casual informality’ (Brown and Levinson 1987:270). There are 12 examples of the type ‘let’s X’ categorised as imperatives with singular ‘us’ in the Ironstone data and 4 in the Murrayfield data. At Ironstone Primary there is a second contracted form included within the category of imperatives with singular ‘us’, ‘gis’ [gɪz] (e.g. *gis it*, *gis one*, *gis the camera*). This occurs 9 times in the data and I argue that it is a phonetically reduced form of ‘give us’: [gɪv ʊz] → [gɪvəz] → [gɪz]. As with singular ‘us’ generally, this form is not unique to Teesside. For ‘advanced pupils’ of ‘Sheffieldish’, for example, *giuzit*<sup>3</sup> is cited as a useful phrase, translated as ‘Give it to me (please)’ (Whomersley 1981). Notice the inclusion of the politeness marker ‘please’ in the gloss, which demonstrates an implicit acknowledgement that singular ‘us’ has a role to play in mitigating the strength of an imperative. As with the form ‘give us X’, ‘gis X’ is a variant which encodes solidarity and in-group identity.

Clare’s use of singular ‘us’ is greater than any of the other children at Ironstone Primary, and perhaps influences the linguistic behaviour of others (as in Extract 4.3 where Jane, Robert, Aaron and Danielle appear to mimic Clare’s utterances). We might therefore call Clare an ‘iconic speaker’ (Eckert 2000; Zhang 2005; Mendoza-Denton 2008). Iconic speakers are:

---

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Professor Joan Beal, University of Sheffield, for bringing this example to my attention.

socially salient individuals toward whom others orient, and who become salient and imitated as a result of their extreme behaviour, centrality within their group, and broad social ties. These factors give them greater weight in the definition of styles.

(Mendoza-Denton 2008:210)

Clare was not a popular member of the class – she was outspoken and got into lots of arguments with her classmates – but she was a larger-than-life character in the class who demonstrated ‘extreme behaviour’ and about whom everyone seemed to have an opinion. After a literacy lesson at Ironstone Primary, I made the following note in my fieldwork diary:

The kids were working on a short comprehension exercise. The comprehension was about a girl who started a new school and was bullied and excluded by the ‘super-popular’ girls; these were the girls that no one really liked but who had a position of authority in the school and therefore could do as they pleased. Mrs Monk said that she didn’t think that there were any ‘super-popular’ kids in that class (by which I think she meant that there was no one who would behave like a bully). Aaron Masterson commented, though, that Clare is ‘super-popular’.

A later entry gives another opinion about Clare expressed by a different boy in the class:

I had an interesting conversation with Harry Lipton who said that I shouldn’t have given the mic to Helen<sup>4</sup>. He said that she should be the last one to have it. He then changed his mind and said that Clare should be the last one and Helen second to last. When I asked which girls I should’ve given the microphone to he said Danielle.

While not necessarily liked, then, Clare was certainly ‘salient, identifiable, and indeed recognisable’ and therefore potentially ‘prone to imitation by others’

---

<sup>4</sup> The analysis of Extracts 3.4, 4.2 and 5.7, which highlight Helen’s role as class gossip or trouble-maker, provide some explanation as to why Harry objected to Helen being granted the privilege of wearing the radio-microphone.

(Mendoza-Denton 2008:212). Along with Robert, Clare was also the most frequent user of ‘howay’ (see Section 4.4.3). Both children were heard using this dialect term 7 times each (18% of total occurrences) in the recordings.

#### 4.4.1.2 Murrayfield Primary

The option to use imperatives with singular ‘us’ exists in the Murrayfield Primary community of practice, but is exercised infrequently and by only by a small number of participants: Daniel, Craig, Holly, and Tara. The most frequent user of singular ‘us’ is Holly, who accounts for 4 of the 8 examples. Three of these examples occur when Holly is working on a group art project, and this interaction as a whole will be discussed in Section 4.4.6. For now, let’s look at the following example in which Daniel and Ben are working together on an IT project. Ben has been doing most of the work and Daniel is keen to have a go:

##### Extract 4.4a

- 1 Daniel: Can I do this o:ne? (.) Can I do this page? (2 seconds) **Ben let**  
2 **us do this pa::ge.** ((Said with exasperation))  
3 Ben: **Let me just do something.**

Notice that Daniel begins with the favoured Murrayfield strategy of modal interrogative. This strategy is twice unsuccessful, however, so Daniel follows up with *Ben, let us do this page*. In doing so, he increases the force of his directive from indirect permission request to direct imperative. At the same time, the use of singular ‘us’ appeals to Ben on the grounds that he and Daniel are not only part of the same wider social group, but also part of the smaller project group – ‘we’re meant to be working on this project together’. Daniel’s choice of imperative with singular ‘us’ also reflects an awareness of his relative status in this interaction; singular ‘us’ is here working along dimensions of power as well as solidarity. Notice

that Ben replies: *Let me just do something*. Daniel and Ben are classmates, and friends, so there is no reason why either should wield any power over the other. The activity that the boys are engaged in here, however, is part of the academic domain, within which Daniel generally has little power. Daniel has special educational needs which are met in the classroom by a teaching assistant employed on a part-time basis purely to support Daniel. Ben, on the other hand, is of average academic attainment. In fact, the teacher noted that he could do much better than average if only he applied himself. At this point in the interaction, Ben has been doing most of the work and has control of the computer keyboard. It is Ben who therefore holds the power, and the resulting non-reciprocal relationship appears to be mirrored in the contrast between ‘us’ and ‘me’. In this particular situation, Daniel is aware that he must relinquish power to Ben, and Ben is similarly aware of his superior position. Daniel does not always use the polite ‘us’ form however. Later in the same recording, as the IT lesson is coming to an end, there is the following exchange.

#### **Extract 4.4b**

- 1 Daniel: Where’s my tissues?
- 2 ((Classroom noise)) (3 seconds)
- 3 Ben: Your tissues are under there. (2 seconds) Jackson [Daniel’s
- 4 surname] where did you put your tissues?
- 5 Daniel: Give me my tissues.
- 6 Ben: I don’t have them.
- 7 Daniel: Yeah you do.
- 8 Ben: No I don’t.

Daniel is much more forceful here and addresses Ben with *Give me my tissues*, using ‘me’ rather than ‘us’ for the objective singular. This interaction occurs when the children are shutting down their computers and preparing to leave the IT room. The lesson is over and Daniel appears to hold more power in this non-academic

frame. Although Daniel had to yield to Ben's superior IT skills in the previous interaction, he will not passively accept his friend's prank outside of the formal lesson.

#### *4.4.1.3 Summary*

Imperatives are the most direct, and hence riskiest, strategy for formulating directives, which is why they tend only to be used with intimates or low-status addressees. Singular 'us' has the potential to distance the speaker from the force of the imperative by implying that the agent of the directive is not the speaker, or at least not solely the speaker. The plural pronoun implies that the speaker does not stand alone; they have the backing of a group. This distancing functions as a negative politeness strategy and mitigates the risk inherent in the imperative. But the group to which the plural pronoun refers (whether it is a circle of friends, the class or school as a whole, or the wider local community) also has the potential to include the addressee. In this way, singular 'us' minimises social distance, emphasising that speaker and addressee are in many respects the same; they are part of the same in-group. Further, as a feature of the local dialect, singular 'us' encodes shared knowledge and common ground between speaker and addressee. Through its association with intimate in-group language, singular 'us' acquires the redressive force of positive politeness.

Several layers of meaning were established in relation to singular 'us'. At the highest level, there is a general (and perhaps universal) tendency for plural pronouns to signify something like politeness or degrees of social distance. At a more local level, social meanings related to shared experience and in-group identity are negotiated within a community of practice. Ultimately though, social meanings are 'constructed in and through their contextualisation in acts of speaking' (Coupland

2007:45). At this micro-level of analysis, it is evident that the same linguistic feature does not have *exactly* the same meaning in every context of use. A range of potential meanings – an ‘indexical field’ (Eckert 2008) – are associated with singular ‘us’ (e.g. politeness, powerlessness, solidarity, camaraderie). The children’s use of singular ‘us’ can only be interpreted in relation to the specific situation, the goals of the interaction, and the social relationships between interlocutors, and ethnographic information is crucial to an understanding of how all of these factors work together.

#### 4.4.2 Collaborative ‘Let’s’ and inclusive ‘we’

The imperatives discussed in the last section were second person imperatives: the implied subject in each case was ‘you’. The directives included in my analysis under plural ‘let’s’, however, are of a different kind. Here, ‘let’s’ functions as

an invariant pragmatic particle introducing independent clauses in which the speaker makes a proposal for action by the speaker and hearer. In this special sense, it may be described as a marker of a first person plural imperative, in which ‘we’ that is the implied subject of the main verb is interpreted as including the hearer.

(Biber et al. 1999:1117)

In this special kind of imperative, ‘Let’s’ is used to invite the addressee to join in an activity with the speaker. The utterance is thus functioning as a kind of proposal or suggestion. Given that ‘Let’s’ implies that both speaker and hearer are equal partners in the task, it is no surprise that this kind of directive is not used by the children with adults; it is a strategy reserved for use within the peer group. At Ironstone Primary, when Caroline says to Clare, *Let’s have a look for the register*, for example, she means for them to search for it together. Clare had just stated that she needed the register and Caroline wants to help her look for it. Similarly, at Murrayfield Primary when Daniel says to Ben, *Yeah let’s do that*, after the pair had reached agreement

about what to do next in their shared task, it is evident that ‘let’s’ includes both speaker and hearer: ‘we’ll do it together’.

There are a number of examples in this category, however, where it seems that an imperative involving ‘let’s’ is functioning as a ‘crypto-directive’, a term Biber et al. give to an authoritative speech act disguised as a collaborative one:

Although typically used to propose a joint action by speaker and hearer(s), it [‘let’s’] sometimes veers towards second person quasi-imperative meaning, in proposing action which is clearly intended to be carried out by the hearer.

(Biber et al. 1999:1117).

At Ironstone Primary, for example, when a group of girls are making up dances in the playground, Jane says to the other girls: *Right let’s start again. (1 second) Start again (0.6 seconds) Let’s start agai::n*. The two imperatives with ‘let’s’ do function as ‘a proposal for action by the speaker and hearer’ (Biber et al. 1999:1117); Jane is involved in the dance routine and so would accompany her addressees in ‘starting again’. Notice though that Jane’s utterance also includes the second person imperative, *Start again*. This mixture of strategies perhaps suggests that Jane’s *Let’s start again* is closer to the authoritative (rather than collaborative) end of the scale. Later, the dance team split up into pairs, and Danielle says to her partner, Joanne, *Aw quick let’s do our dance. Right do our dance quick*. As with the previous example, Danielle’s utterance includes a mixture of strategies. The use of ‘let’s’ might indicate that the girls in these extracts are engaged in collaborative tasks, but individuals like Jane and Danielle certainly seem to be in charge of those tasks.

Jane and Danielle are also responsible for all six occurrences in the Ironstone data of first person expressions of obligation such as *we have to learn our dance*. These, along with a certain type of plural first person expression of want/need (e.g. *We*



*need to get into that one*), were discussed briefly in Sections 4.3.1.2 and 4.3.3. Again, in examples such as these, the ‘I’ and ‘you’ of speaker and hearer are merged into inclusive ‘we’ in order convey a sense of equity. But these utterances are not entirely collaborative; they seem designed to make the hearer take note and comply with the speaker’s instructions.

#### 4.4.3 ‘Howay’ and in-group identity

There were only 7 occurrences of ‘howay’<sup>5</sup> in the Murrayfield data, 3 of which were attributable to a single speaker, Craig. There were 41 occurrences of ‘howay’ in Ironstone primary, however, from 10 different speakers. As with the use of singular ‘us’, this is perhaps unsurprising: we would expect dialect features to occur with greater frequency in the school whose participants are drawn from an area with lower socioeconomic status. Again, however, my interest lies in how and why the children chose to use this feature. In the earlier discussion of positive politeness (Section 4.4.1), it was noted that the use of an in-group code (which can include dialect and local terminology) can imply intimacy because it assumes that the hearer understands and shares the associations of that code. ‘Howay’ is a dialect term (of obscure origin and etymology) specific to the north-east of England and therefore the use of this term encodes a certain sense of solidarity and in-group identity. Moreover, the meaning and function of this term is not transparent to those outside of the group. In fact, the meaning of ‘howay’ is flexible, context dependent and very much open to negotiation within an interaction. Consider the following utterances, all from Ironstone Primary:

- (1) (a) *Howay then.* (Jane)

---

<sup>5</sup> There are various phonetic realisations of this term: [hauwe:], [auwe:], [aui:].

- (b) *Mark howay over here.* (Aaron)
- (c) *What you eating now then (.) howay.* (Clare)
- (d) *Howay because (1.2 seconds) No: because there's- (.) no way we can. Why don't we use this one (1.4 seconds) and then we can f-* (Clare)
- (e) *Howay you need to let u::s..* (Robert)
- (f) *Aw howay Andrew, you're going to hit me.* (Danielle)

In the first 2 examples, the meaning of *howay* seems to be something like 'come on'. In the remaining examples, this sense is still at the core of the referential meaning, but there are additional layers of meaning. Example (1c), for instance, is part of a dispute at the lunch table about whether or not another girl, Tina, has taken one of Clare's chocolates. The meaning of *howay* here is something like 'come on then, tell me, prove it's not chocolate'. Sometimes there are clues in the surrounding interaction as to the speaker's intended meaning. Example (1f), for instance, is immediately followed up by Joanne who says *Andrew behave*, to which Danielle adds, *Go away Andrew*. So in this situation, *howay* seems to mean something like 'stop it'/'behave'/'leave us alone'/'go away'. The utility of 'howay' lies precisely in the fact that it can mean any one, or all, of these things. As Podesva and Chun (2007) argue, indeterminacy in meaning can sometimes constitute an effective social strategy.

The meaning may fluctuate, but ultimately the pragmatic force of the utterance remains the same. In each of the examples in (1), 'howay' is functioning as a directive. On a number of occasions, 'howay' functions as a directive on its own, but in some examples (13 out of 38, 34% of total), it occurs with another directive. In

such situations it seems to soften the force of the other directive. In Example (1e), for instance, the boys are in the playground playing a game they call ‘bulldog’. This involves running from one side of the playground to the other without getting caught by the person who is ‘on’. Robert’s utterance is addressed to this person because he is standing right in front of Robert and one of the other boys, not even giving them the opportunity to run. So the combined utterance means something like ‘come on, you need to move out of the way and at least let us try to run’. Robert follows this utterance up with *Howay, you can’t guard* (i.e. ‘come on, don’t stand guard over us; it’s not fair’). In both of these examples, and as with Examples (1c), (1d) and (1f) above, the children are appealing to a sense of what is right, fair, and acceptable within this community of practice, and ‘howay’ encapsulates this appeal. So the meaning of *Howay, you can’t guard* can be extended to ‘come on, don’t stand guard over us; it’s not fair, and you know it’. As with singular ‘us’, ‘howay’ marks in-group identity within the Ironstone Primary community of practice. The solidary stance indexed by ‘howay’ mitigates the face-threat inherent in *you can’t guard*, and thus retains the spirit of friendliness and camaraderie in the playground game (cf. Bucholtz’s (forthcoming) analysis of the Mexican American youth slang term ‘güey’). The precise referential, pragmatic and social meanings carried by ‘howay’ are continually renegotiated by members of this community as they interact together.

While relatively infrequent, ‘howay’ does occur in the Murrayfield data. All seven examples are set out below:

- (2) (a) *Howay this one this one.* (Craig)
- (b) *Howay they’re on darts. I want to do darts. ((Putting on funny voice))* (Craig)
- (c) *Right. Howay, everyone done, number one.* (Craig)

- (d) *Howay I haven't put any bit in.* (Holly)
- (e) *Howay, where's Matty man? He supposed to be going in goal.*  
(Daniel)
- (f) *Howay (0.5 seconds) I went like that and I got the ball (and it went through his legs and Tim xxxxx)* (Daniel)
- (g) *Howay Fiona* (Tim)

In Examples (2d) to (2g), 'howay' seems to be functioning in a manner similar to that described above. The children in these examples are using 'howay' as part of an appeal to their addressee to recognise some kind of behaviour as being inappropriate or unacceptable. Example (2g) takes place when the children are working in pairs to come up with adjectives to describe a character from a story. It seems that Tim feels his partner, Fiona, is not fully cooperating in the task, which prompts his use of *howay*, meaning 'come on Fiona, join in/do some work'. Examples (2e) and (2f) arise during a playground football game and both are probably addressed to the referee, Neil. In Example (2f), *howay* seems to encapsulate the classic appeal to the referee to take action for the transgression of another player, in this case Tim. Example (2e) is slightly more complex. It may be that, in the preceding interaction, something had happened to prompt Daniel's utterance. The recording is not clear, however, and of course lacks visual information. My best guess is that *howay* here means something like, 'Come on. Stop the game referee. It's not fair – we can't play until we have a goal keeper', but it is impossible to know for certain. This reinforces the point that the precise meaning of 'howay' depends upon the surrounding co-text and context, and its interpretation relies on the shared understandings of group members. Elements of the referential and pragmatic meaning of this term are shared by members of the wider community and, to some extent, the north-east region as a

whole. Certain aspects of social meaning, however, are more limited. Meanings are negotiated, not only within the primary school community of practice, but also within much smaller embedded communities (e.g. boys who congregate every break-time to play football together).

Craig's use of 'howay' is slightly different. All 3 examples occur when Craig is involved in different types of group work. Craig is an outgoing and confident member of the class and naturally takes the lead in shared tasks. In Example (2a), the children have just moved into the ICT room and Craig is calling his co-workers, Freddy and Jeff, over to the computer that he wants to work on. Example (2b) is part of the same interaction. Craig has noticed that some other groups have finished their work and have moved onto something more fun (playing darts on the computer). His use of *howay* in this example means 'hurry up so we can play games'. In Example (2c), Craig is part of a group of children who are working together to score presentations given by other students. Craig is trying to get everyone to tell him their scores quickly so that he can take the results up to the teacher. These examples demonstrate that Craig's use of 'howay' comes at moments when he is asserting his leadership, and in particular, when he wants to use his role as self-elected group leader to get his own way: to choose which computer to work on; to play a computer game he likes; to be the one to deliver the group out-put to the teacher. Craig's use of 'howay', then, seems to be a self-conscious attempt to make his directives appear less authoritative and more solidary in a bid to make them more successful. That this is a strategy he is unable to sustain becomes clear in Extract 4.5, which contextualises Example (2c):

#### Extract 4.5

- 1 Craig: **Right. Howay, everyone done, number one.**  
2 Sarah: No, no you're not taking it- Rachel you're not taking it up  
3 because-  
4 Rachel: I am.  
5 Sarah: [Is (xxxxxxxxxx)?  
6 Craig: [I'm working it out.  
7 Rachel: Daniel's already took it.  
8 Craig: **Right, right, number one ((bangs on table)) Number one.**  
9 Sarah: Right I've put-  
10 Craig: Two  
11 ((Background noise – 2.4 seconds))  
12 Sarah: Two (0.9 seconds) two::  
13 Anon: [One-  
14 Craig: **[((Shouting)) Just read out (.) ((Quieter)) please.**

When the children on Craig's table do not comply with his directive on line 1, he uses more forceful means to bring the group into line, including banging on the table (line 8), and issuing an imperative (line 14). The use of *just* in Craig's utterance on line 14 functions to strengthen the imperative. Although 'just' can be used as a minimiser (in a manner similar to 'a bit', 'a little' etc.), it can also be used for emphasis. The politeness marker, *please*, is added to the end of Craig's utterance as an afterthought; it is as though he has remembered, at this point, the kinds of strategies that are valued in effective group work (see Section 4.4.6). Craig wants to assert his status within the group but realises, to a certain extent, that getting things his own way involves gaining buy-in from his peers. The use of 'howay' is one of the strategies he adopts to achieve this secondary goal. Another strategy is the use of singular 'us'. Craig issues 2 imperatives with singular 'us' in the data. The first example (*Let us see*) comes earlier in the interaction represented in Extract 4.5, when Craig mistrusts the ability of another member of the group to add up the

presentation scores and wants to check the sheet. The second example (*Let us see the end bit*) occurs during the group work in the ICT room from which examples (2a) and (2b) were taken. But how far are the meanings Craig invests in ‘howay’ and singular ‘us’ grounded in a negotiation between speakers in this community of practice? For the group of boys who regularly play football together, there seems to be a shared understanding of what ‘howay’ means to them. We might hypothesise, though, that within the larger community of practice which encompasses the whole year group, ‘howay’ would be less successful as a marker of in-group identity (and hence as a directive) if the social meanings related to in-group solidarity, equity and acceptability were not shared by all members.

#### 4.4.4 Conventionally indirect strategies

In Murrayfield Primary, participants preferred to use conventionally indirect forms such as modal interrogatives over imperatives with singular ‘us’ and ‘howay’. The forms ‘can I...?’ and ‘can you...?’ were the most popular way of formulating modal interrogatives, but there were also other forms present in the data, from both schools, as Tables 4.4 and 4.5 show.

**Table 4.4: First person modal interrogatives by addressee**

	Ironstone				Murrayfield			
	Adult		Child		Adult		Child	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Can I (we)...?	18	90%	29	88%	52	80%	65	94%
Could I (we)...?	0	0%	0	0%	3	5%	0	0%
Shall I (we)...?	1	5%	2	6%	7	11%	4	6%
Should I (we)...?	1	5%	2	6%	3	5%	0	0%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>20</b>		<b>33</b>		<b>65</b>		<b>69</b>	

**Table 4.5: Second person modal interrogatives by addressee**

	Ironstone				Murrayfield			
	Adult		Child		Adult		Child	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Can you...?	10	56%	2	20%	21	100%	22	79%
Could you...?	0	0%	1	10%	0	0%	0	0%
Will you...?	8	44%	7	70%	0	0%	2	7%
Would you...?	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	4	14%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>18</b>		<b>10</b>		<b>21</b>		<b>28</b>	

The forms ‘could I...?’/‘could you...?’ are modified forms of ‘can I...?’/‘can you...?’. The past tense modal ‘distances’ the request by shifting the focus away from reality. Directives phrased in this way are less imposing because they make it easier for the addressee not to comply. The past-tense modals signify a hypothetical action by the addressee, and so the addressee can, in theory, give a positive reply without committing themselves to anything in the real world (Leech 1983:121). Directives formed using past tense modals were rare in the data.

There is a difference between the two schools in their use of ‘shall/should I...?’ and ‘will/would you...?’. The numbers are too small to be able to draw significant conclusions or make generalisations, but I will briefly discuss the way in which these forms were used using some extracts from the data. The form ‘will you...?’ is used on only two occasions in Murrayfield Primary but occurred fifteen times in the Ironstone data. Fraser and Nolen (1981) report on English native speakers’ judgements of the relative degree of deference associated with linguistic request forms. According to them, the ‘will you...?’ form was fairly high on the scale of deference. There is some evidence for this in the data. For instance, in the examples that follow, the use of first name, the politeness marker ‘please’ and the conditional element ‘if you...’ signal a high degree of politeness: *Robert please will you pass*



*me my plan?* (Joanne, Ironstone Primary); *Plea::se (1 second) if you finish yours right, will you help me?* (Sam, Ironstone Primary). The use of ‘will’ does not always signal deference though. On a number of occasions, ‘will...you?’ was said with emphasis and exasperation and was meant to regulate another child’s behaviour: *Aw Danny will you (xxxxx) have it!* (Clare, Ironstone Primary); *Clare will you (pack it in)?* (Andrew, Ironstone Primary); *Miss will you tell Andrew?* (Clare, Ironstone Primary); *Miss will you tell Andrew to get a life and get lost?* (Clare, Ironstone Primary).<sup>6</sup> At Murrayfield Primary, all of the examples involving ‘will’ or ‘would’ were of this type (e.g. *Will you pack it in Michelle; Gavin would you stop i::t?*). In such examples, the speakers may feel that the additional formality or deference associated with ‘will/would you...?’ adds gravitas to their directive. In the following extract from Ironstone Primary, the association of ‘will you...?’ with deference and the addition of ‘please’ certainly appear to add to the sarcasm:

#### **Extract 4.6**

The children are in the middle of a test. Mrs Trotter is helping the low ability table but is unhappy with their responses. Katie is Mrs Trotter’s daughter, who is in the reception class of Ironstone Primary.

- 1 Mrs Trotter: And if I go and get Katie she could tell you.
- 2 Billy: Could she?
- 3 Mrs Trotter: Yes.
- 4 Billy: **Please will you go and get her then?**

In the Murrayfield data, a single speaker, Michelle, accounts for 7 of the 11 occurrences of ‘shall I...?’. A number of these examples are related to Michelle’s desire to gain permission to go to the ICT room to pick up some bingo sheets from the printer: *Miss shall I go and get the bingo sheets?*; *Miss shall I go and get the bingo tickets now because they’ve been prin-*. This was a hot July day, the last day

---

<sup>6</sup> The last two examples may perhaps be seen as encoding politeness and deference to ‘Miss’.

of term, and Michelle was bored and irritable in the classroom. She was therefore eager to perform tasks for the teacher, particularly those that involved her leaving the classroom (the ICT room is in a different building to the Year 4 classroom). The use of ‘shall I’, rather than ‘can I’, makes Michelle’s directives appear more like conventional offers or suggestions than permission requests, and hence closer to the ‘benefit to hearer’ end of the pragmatic scale.

The following extract from Ironstone Primary accounts for all but two of the instances of ‘shall/should I...?’. The children are watching a DVD, *Skrek*<sup>7</sup>, and Aaron has been trying to get the girls’ attention so that he can tell them about his birthday party. The girls are not particularly interested, though. Aaron is rude and badly behaved in class and as a result does not have a lot of friends; on the rare occasions when he wants to engage other children in conversation, he has to work hard to win their interest. His initial attempts to provoke curiosity in his story (e.g. *Do you know what, right*) have failed, so he asks for permission to tell his story using a modal interrogative.

#### Extract 4.7

- |   |            |   |
|---|------------|---|
| 1 | Aaron:     | Ere right (0.7 seconds) <b>Can I tell you something?</b> (0.7 |
| 2 |            | seconds) It’s my birthday on Monday but on Sunday I’m         |
|   |            | having a party right and I’ve got a-                          |
| 3 |            | ((Inaudible – 1.85 seconds))                                  |
| 4 | Aaron:     | Looker.   |
| 5 | Anon:      | I hate the cat.   |
| 6 | Charlotte: | I- I like- I like it-   |
| 7 | Hannah:    | Do you like (xxxxxxx)?  |
| 8 | Charlotte: | I like donkey when he turns into a-                           |
| 9 | Aaron:     | It’s my birthday on Monday so I’m having a party on           |

---

<sup>7</sup> This is a popular children’s animation. It is the last week of term so the children have been given some breaks from normal curriculum activity.

10 [Sunday and I'm having a bouncy castle in the front garden.  
 11 Charlotte: [I like donkey when he turns into a white horse.  
 12 Anon: Thanks.  
 13 Aaron: And I'm having a trampoline in the back garden.  
 14 Kelly: Uh huh  
 15 Charlotte: How does he do it? How does he do it? He goes something  
 16 like-  
 17 Kelly: I've got it- I've got it- I've got it-  
 18 Aaron: **Shall I tell you? Shall I tell you it?**  
 19 ((Background noise – 1.7 seconds))  
 20 Aaron: I showed them that.  
 21 Anon: Oops  
 22 Kelly: Then let go.  
 23 Charlotte: No (xxxxxxxxxx)  
 24 ((Background noise and inaudible talk – 7.3 seconds))  
 25 Anon: Stop messing about.  
 26 Aaron: **Should I tell you? (1 second) Should I tell you now?**  
 27 Anon: Yeah.  
 28 Aaron: Right, my birthday's on Monday and on Sunday I'm having a  
 29 bounc- bouncy castle in the front garden, right and I'm having  
 30 the-  
 31 Charlotte: Trampoline [in the back.  
 32 Aaron: [tramp in the back.  
 33 Aaron Trampoline in the back garden.  
 34 Charlotte: (.hhhh) Isn't that so goo::d ((with emphasis on the final [d]))  
 35 Aaron: Isn't that so cheeky.

Aaron's request for permission has no effect on his desired conversational partners; they continue to comment on the film. On line 8, Charlotte's utterance is temporarily cut short by Aaron's attempt to talk about his party, but she picks-up (and completes) this topic on line 11. Aaron is at first undeterred and continues to talk about his birthday plans (*And I'm having a trampoline in the back garden*), but he becomes increasingly frustrated and so makes another formal bid for Charlotte and Kelly's attention: *Should I tell you? (1 second) Should I tell you now?* (line 26). Not

only has Aaron moved into the hypothetical past tense to increase the politeness of his utterance, he has also chosen the form ‘should I...?’ to make his utterance appear more like an offer, and hence less of an imposition to Charlotte and Kelly.

Modal interrogatives are not the only means of using conventionalised indirectness. When expressions of need/want are directed towards persons able to fulfil that need or want, they also fall under the category of conventionalised indirectness since such utterances are ‘contextually unambiguous’ (Brown and Levinson 1987:132). When a child says *I need help* (Harry, Ironstone Primary) to a teacher in the classroom, for example, it is clear that the child’s utterance is functioning as a directive, rather than a statement. The use of vocatives and the politeness marker please make the directive function even clearer: *Miss I need that bottle (0.6 seconds) please* (Harry, Ironstone Primary).

#### 4.4.5 Self-repair and reformulation

In Andersen’s (1990:167) study of children aged 4 to 7, the participants were given role-specific puppets for which they had to ‘do the voices’. Andersen notes that the ‘spontaneous repairs’ that the children made to their own speech as they role-played in different settings provided evidence of their awareness of how particular forms mark particular registers. In my study, the occasions where participants redesigned their directives mid-utterance, changing to a different strategy, gives us an insight into the decisions that speakers make when formulating directives. Consider the following examples (all from Murrayfield Primary):

- (3) (a) *Sarah ta- can you take them hair brushes out?* (Tara)
- (b) *Right cut- we have to cut it into little bits.* (Sarah)
- (c) *Go and read. You have to go and read.* (Holly)

- (d) *Miss should I- Miss- (0.7 seconds) could- should I watch- Miss (.) Miss should I wash the- should I wash the cups with the paint out?* (Sarah)
- (e) *Can I give- shall I give them out?* (Michelle)

Examples (3a) to (3b) involve a transition from the classic imperative to a less direct form. In Example (3a), it appears that Tara was about to use the imperative form ‘take them hair brushes out’ but she quickly rethinks her strategy and instead uses a modal interrogative. As we shall see in Section 4.4.6, Tara often adopts a less direct, more facilitative style to achieve her goals, which makes her very effective when working as part of a team. Example (3b) is part of the same interaction. Sarah reformulates the initial imperative into an expression of obligation involving inclusive ‘we’. The beginning of her utterance gives us a clue that inclusive ‘we’ here means ‘you’ and is more authoritative than collaborative. Both of these girls are displaying their understanding that success in a group-based task involves careful management of delicately balanced power relations, and in this situation, less direct, more collaborative forms of directive may be more effective.

Example (3c) takes place when Holly has just come back into the classroom after reading to the teaching assistant in the corridor. She has been told to ask the next child on the list to go and read. Initially, Holly uses an imperative, *Go and read*, but quickly realises that she does not have the authority to command one of her peers when it comes to structured classroom activity; such commands generally come from the teacher. Her reformulation to an expression of obligation conveys the same message but also implicitly encodes the teacher’s authority. Holly distances herself from the force of the directive; she is no longer commanding her classmate but simply making them aware of their obligation. Examples (3d) and (3e) reinforce the argument made in Section 4.4.4 for the utility of the ‘shall/should’ forms over

‘can/could’. In Example (3d) Sarah wants to be granted permission to take up a post in the art area while the other children begin their French lesson. These sorts of jobs are much sought after (especially when they involve missing out on curriculum activity) and are given out sparingly. Sarah makes a slip-of-the-tongue mid-utterance when she says *could* but quickly corrects her error and goes back to *should*. Example (3e) comes from Michelle, whose use of ‘shall’ was discussed in Section 4.4.4. Michelle is competing with Mary to get a job from the teacher (giving out the bingo sheets). The true nature of Michelle’s utterance (i.e. that it is a request for permission rather than a genuine offer) is revealed by the original *can I give-*. The reformulation also reveals Michelle’s awareness that the different forms that are used for the directive function have different pragmatic and social meanings which can be manipulated by the speaker.

#### **4.4.6 Comparison of paired extracts**

In Section 4.3.3, I considered the possibility that activity type may influence choice of directive, but ruled out a quantitative analysis that systematically coded for this factor. In this section, an analysis of paired extracts from Ironstone and Murrayfield Primary presents the opportunity to compare the ways in which children from these schools formulate directives during the same kind of activity type: a collaborative art project. Both extracts are taken from approximately one hour of shared activity. Constraints of time and space mean that it would not be possible to analyse a transcript representing the full hour of talk. Instead, short examples have been selected from throughout the course of the activity. Extract 4.8 (Appendix 2) depicts Clare and Hannah’s attempt to make a torch at Ironstone Primary, and Extract 4.9 (Appendix 2) shows Tara, Sarah and Holly working together on a three-dimensional model of a bedroom.

In Extract 4.8 we find Clare involved in a (semi-)structured group task, an activity different to the playground games of Extract 4.1 or the classroom conversations of Extract 4.3. As such, we have the opportunity to compare Clare's use of directives in these different settings. Clare is working with Hannah, a quiet and fairly studious member of the class. Lines 1 to 9 establish rather nicely the roles assumed by the two girls within this group: Hannah has the ideas and does the majority of the work; Clare procrastinates and (occasionally) follows basic instructions (e.g. *Ask Miss Snell to get us a bulb holder*). In Extracts 4.1 and 4.3 we examined Clare's use of imperatives with singular 'us'. In this extract, Clare uses standard 'me' in imperatives such as: *Oh just let me (paint a sparkly one)* (lines 27-28); *Just give me a little bit of glue* (line 30); *Now let me paint this one again* (lines 84-85). In terms of peer-group relations, Clare has the power: Clare is confident, outgoing and outspoken, while Hannah is shy and quiet.<sup>8</sup> Clare feels that she is in a dominant position in the group and is able to issue imperatives without employing very much additional face work. Further, the weight of the imposition in these directives is small and therefore not overly face-threatening: asking your partner for glue in a shared art project is entirely reasonable and does not require a great deal of politeness. From Clare's point of view, she also has very little invested in these directives. When Clare was hopping around the playground with a wet foot in Extract 4.1, it was of extreme importance to her that her directives were successful. In this extract, it matters very little whether or not Hannah gives Clare the glue. Clare could, after all, probably get the glue herself, and in all likelihood, would not

---

<sup>8</sup> A couple of weeks later when I gave the radio-microphone to Hannah, Clare commented that there was 'no point Hannah having the microphone because she doesn't speak'. That in fact proved to be true; Hannah spoke very little when she had the microphone.

have been too concerned if she had failed to get access to the materials required for the task.

While Clare might rank higher than Hannah in the peer-group hierarchy, we must be careful not to assume that Hannah is completely powerless in this interaction. In this extract it is Hannah who has knowledge of the task at hand and this augments her status. She is therefore able to give Clare instructions using imperatives such as *Ask Miss Snell to get us a bulb holder* (line 8) and *Wait there* (line 62). Hannah issues a further 8 imperatives of this type to Clare during the task, which are not represented in the transcript. Hannah was also able to tell Clare ‘no’ (e.g. lines 10, 35, 65, 67) because not only was she the one who properly understood the task, but the girls were also working with Hannah’s materials (see e.g. lines 35, 67). Notice that when Clare is told ‘no’ on line 10 she responds with *No howay* appealing again to that sense of in-group solidarity as well as to an idea of what is acceptable in this task (see also line 84). The two girls proceed in this way, jostling backwards and forwards with assertions, challenges and counter challenges (e.g. lines 16-17, 33-36, 64-68), giving their interaction the characteristics of ‘disputational talk’ (Mercer 2004).

Hannah uses direct forms such as imperatives in this interaction, but she also uses a variety of other less direct (and more subtle) means of simultaneously managing the task and the group dynamics. On line 62, for example, having captured Clare’s attention with an imperative, Hannah makes a request to Clare using the conventionally indirect form: *Can- (.) you just take (0.7 seconds) this off a minute?* Notice also that Hannah hedges her directive with the minimisers *just* and *a minute* (compare Sarah’s directive in Extract 4.9, line 124). On line 23, Hannah uses an interrogative form which has the appearance of a *wh*-question: *Clare why don’t you*



*just use that bit where there isn't any glue on it?* Hannah is echoing Gemma's directive on line 20 but phrases her utterance indirectly. The inference is: 'there seems to be no good reason why you can't use the bit that hasn't got any glue on; so either modify your actions, or explain them to me'. Tara uses a similar technique in Extract 4.9: *Why don't you get some cardboard to make the wardrobe?* (line 77). The inference here: 'there seems to be no good reason why you can't get the cardboard; so if you want to be a cooperative member of this group, you'll go and get it'. There are other directives of this type in the data, though they were not included in the quantitative analysis. Many different types of interrogative can function as directives, and extending the analysis to include close inspection of all interrogative forms in the data was outside of the scope of this thesis.

Hannah's directives on lines 76 to 82 are particularly interesting. On line 76, Hannah uses a third person expression of want that refers, not to another person, but to an inanimate object (i.e. the box/torch): *Clare it just wants leaving now (0.7 seconds) to dry*. Hannah distances herself completely from the force of this directive by transferring agency to the box. Clare continues painting, however, so Hannah has to increase the level of directness: *Clare you need to leave it to dry* (line 79). Clare still does not comply so Hannah tells her: *Clare you're wasting the paint now* (line 82). Here we have a declarative clause functioning as a directive. This kind of utterance is classed as a non-conventionally indirect strategy or 'hint'. Unlike conventionally indirect forms, such as modal interrogatives, hints have more than one possible (and plausible) interpretation and the addressee must make an inference to recover the illocutionary meaning. Hints are called an 'off-record' strategy by Brown and Levinson (1987). Because there is more than one possible interpretation of the utterance, the speaker 'cannot be held to have committed himself to just one

particular interpretation of his act' (Brown and Levinson 1987:211). The intended force of Hannah's utterance, however, is here contextually unambiguous in the light of her previous utterances. Further, Hannah is alluding to the shared rules of the classroom which state that wasting resources such as paint is severely frowned upon. By doing so, she calls upon the authority of the teacher and the school to give her directive greater impact.

Extract 4.8 also gives us a window onto another group interaction, that between Gemma and Joanne. Gemma is a friend of Hannah's and as such has offered advice to Hannah and Clare (e.g. line 20). Within her own pairing, Gemma directs the progress of the task using collaborative forms such as: *No we don't cut around that because we need one bigger than that remember* (lines 40-41). Here Gemma uses inclusive 'we' when she actually means 'you' in order to soften the force of her directive, making it appear more collaborative and less authoritative. Gemma's utterance also shows a concern with establishing a joint understanding of what the group needs to do.

Both extracts involve brief exchanges with the teacher or teaching assistant. In Extract 4.8, Clare uses first person modal interrogatives to address Mrs Trotter (lines 52-54, 96 and 99), a strategy used frequently by the children with adults. In Extract 4.9, Sarah uses a second person modal interrogative with Mrs Norman (line 101) but it functions differently from the majority of second person modal interrogatives in the data. Here 'you' is impersonal and means 'one' or 'people in general'; it is an example of 'generic you' (Quirk et al. 1985:353-4). This impersonal perspective functions as a means of distancing the speaker from the directive force of their utterance. So when Sarah says to Mrs Norman, *Miss Mi::s (2 seconds) can you uhm mix the paint?* (line 101), what she wants to know is if it is okay for *her* to mix some

paint to create the *gorgeous orangey creamy colour* she feels she needs. In formulating the directive in this way, she draws attention away from her own needs, suggesting that her classmates will be fellow beneficiaries should the teacher grant this request. Within the second person modal interrogatives issued at Murrayfield Primary, there were four examples of this type. On lines 105-107, Sarah makes her utterance even less direct: *Miss uhm w- like there's only a few colours and then- there's- we want something like lighter than a certain colour but there's no more white left*. Notice that in addition to the increased level of indirectness, there are several false starts and reformulations in Sarah's utterance and she hedges with the discourse marker *like*; she is clearly aware of the risk inherent in her directive. Sarah here demonstrates sensitivity to the role that addressee plays in formulating directives (compare her much more direct style with her peers in the rest of the interaction), but also perhaps shows her awareness that directives which interrupt another speaker's talk or activity are more intrusive. Sarah is, after all, interrupting the teacher who had been in the middle of a whole class announcement about a missing jumper. Gordon and Ervin-Tripp (1984) report that school-age children are sensitive to interruptions when formulating requests.

The participants in Extract 4.9 are all fully engaged with the task and appear to be more equal partners in the activity than Hannah and Clare were in Extract 4.8. Some members of the group may be more equal than others, however. We get a sense that Holly is less powerful than either Tara or Sarah. Holly is the recipient of a number of imperatives: *Go: and get-* (line 3); *Stop, stop* (line 10); *Do Sarah's idea (1.7 seconds) then put-* (line 42); *Go and ask Miss if we can go next at putting our picture (getting our picture)* (lines 83-84); *Go and get one. Get a yellow one.* (line 115). The imperative on line 83 actually cuts Holly's own utterance short. Holly

issues only 1 traditional imperative herself (line 40), but hedges it with the discourse marker *like*. On other occasions she adopts the less direct first person modal interrogatives such as *Can I just have that please* (line 60) and *Can I have a paint brush as well* (line 113). On line 6, Holly tells her group: *We need some pink felt*. This could function as a directive, that is, an indirect request for either Sarah or Tara to get some pink felt. It could also have been intended to function merely as a statement: ‘this is one of the things we might need to finish the bedroom’. Holly’s intention is irrelevant though, because Tara does not accept the potential directive function, replying with the dismissive *Go and get some then* (line 7).

In group activities, the interaction is influenced not just by the way in which relationships are negotiated (and renegotiated) within that activity, but also by past experiences:

Speakers’ relationships also have histories. Things that are said may invoke knowledge from the joint past experience of those interacting (e.g. their recall of previous activities they have pursued together).

(Mercer 2004:140).

It seems that Sarah and Tara may have past experience of working with Holly (see lines 23-25) which influences their behaviour towards her in this interaction. Tara remains diplomatically silent on the issue but we can assume that both girls have a shared understanding of what Sarah means by *She’s being Holly* (line 25). It is within this environment that Holly uses the strategy of imperative with singular ‘us’ (lines 5 and 48, and 1 example not included in the transcript). Both examples in Extract 4.9 seem to be said out of frustration, but Holly lacks power in this interaction and therefore softens the imperative form by distancing herself from the force of the directive – the agent of the directive is not Holly alone. Further, Holly

may feel marginalised within the group and be aware that the other girls often tire of her *being Holly*. She therefore uses singular ‘us’ to appeal to group solidarity; she wants the other girls to recognise that she is part of the group as well.

Although Tara and Sarah adopt a very direct style for much of the interaction, they both also use indirect forms. In lines 32 and 34, Sarah uses the form ‘Do you want....?’. Such utterances are very similar in form to a conventional offer. This kind of directive ‘appears to leave matters to the hearer’s volition, and avoids the appearance of control’ (Gordon and Ervin-Tripp 1984:308). As with the *wh*-interrogatives discussed above, this type of directive was not included in the quantitative analysis. On lines 50-51, Sarah uses a location question as a directive: *where’s the scissors?* Here Sarah’s *Thank you* indicates that someone has given her the scissors, and hence that the interrogative was interpreted as a directive. In other contexts, however, the same utterance could simply function as an information seeking question. Compare line 118, for example, where there is no way that we can know whether or not Holly intended her utterance to be a question or an indirect request for someone to pass her a paint brush. Again, Holly’s intention is unimportant because her utterance is denied directive status by Tara who (perhaps deliberately) (mis)interprets it as a question.

Tara is particularly skilled at formulating directives in such a way as to gain group buy-in. On line 52, for instance, she uses a tag question to elicit the support of her group members. On line 63, Tara uses the negative interrogative *Don’t we need to put that on first?*, which presumes ‘yes’ as an answer. On line 70, she uses the form ‘shall we...?’ which has the appearance of a conventional offer (*Right, shall we get another mirror?*). That Tara intended this utterance to have a directive function is evident from her follow-up on lines 73-74 after Sarah has shown

disagreement: *No that one's too small. We're getting another one.* The issue of whether or not the group should get another mirror was clearly never actually up for debate. In addition to modifying the linguistic form of her utterances, Tara also occasionally employs paralinguistic features to mitigate the force of her directives. On line 86, for example, Tara's sing-song style as she issues the imperative encodes a sense of fun, informality and friendliness, which makes the speech act appear less authoritative.

As with Extract 4.8, parts of the Murrayfield interaction have a disputational quality (e.g. lines 6-10, and 63-69, though this does eventually end in agreement). There is also evidence of 'cumulative talk', however, 'in which speakers build positively but uncritically on what the others have said' (Mercer 2004:146) (e.g. lines 30-33). There are also perhaps instances of what Mercer (2004:146) refers to as 'exploratory talk' where group members 'engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas' (e.g. lines 76-79). Not all attempts at exploratory talk are successful however. The negotiation that occurs in lines 86-96, for example, ends with an uncompromising imperative: *Sarah just do it.* Notice the use of *just* that seems to give the directive a strong, combative force (in a manner similar to Craig's imperative in Extract 4.5). Throughout this interaction the power relations between Tara and Sarah have been delicately balanced. Both have strong opinions and both believe generally that their way is the right way. The activity ends with the two girls at the sink trading imperatives as they vie for power (lines 120-128).

This analysis has given only a brief snap-shot of the kinds of interaction that characterise group-based tasks within these two schools. Further work could usefully extend this analysis to incorporate a wider range of extracts from both schools, including, for example, tasks related to other curriculum subjects and shared

computer-based tasks (Mercer 1994; 2004). The current corpus of radio-microphone recordings has the data to enable such an analysis. Both extracts involved all-female groups. Examining similar interactions from all-male collaborations and mixed-sex groupings would provide the opportunity to consider gendered differences (if indeed there are differences between the boys and girls in these two schools). In addition to the radio-microphone data, there is a smaller (approximately 10 hours) corpus of video recordings which would be invaluable for such an analysis. Participants in both schools were asked to take part in a series of group tasks/discussions which were video recorded. All participants took part in at least one single-sex and one mixed-sex group discussion in which the topic was controlled by me.

## **4.5 Conclusion**

Most studies of sociolinguistic variation focus on phonological variables and, to a lesser degree, morpho-syntactic variables. An analysis of the realisation of directives is therefore not prototypical within a variationist paradigm. But for researchers interested in the ways in which speakers invest their linguistic practices with social meaning, there is no reason to restrict the investigation to traditional linguistic variables. In fact, if we are to gain a complete picture of sociolinguistic style, it is crucial not to do so.

There is much more that could be said about the use of directives in these two schools. The quantitative analysis included a limited number of predefined categories of directive, but, as noted in Section 4.4.6, there are a number of other forms which can fulfil the directive function. In particular, indirect strategies and ‘hints’ other than those that are conventionally associated with directives were excluded from the quantitative analysis. And it is not just the directive itself that is

important, but the surrounding interaction that frames it. The children often provided justification for their directive or offered some kind of explanation which minimised the strength of the imposition. Further, discourse markers such as ‘right’ and ‘like’ occurred frequently with the children’s directives. Future analysis could usefully analyse this kind of linguistic support.

My focus in this analysis was on the main forms of directive used by the children in these two schools. What I have shown is that when it comes to encoding notions of politeness, power and social distance into the structure of a request, that is, into the grammar, the children in Murrayfield Primary were more likely to use one of the well-known formulae of English to form indirect speech acts, while the children at Ironstone Primary preferred to exploit features of non-standard grammar and the local dialect. The different linguistic choices that the children made carry subtle but significant social and cultural information about the two communities of practice.

The children at Ironstone Primary used singular ‘us’ to soften imperatives because this particular linguistic feature indexes solidarity and aspects of in-group identity that are important to them. These meanings are valued at Ironstone Primary because it represents a close-knit community of practice. Most of the children (and a good number of the teaching assistants) live very near to each other and within close proximity to the school. Many of the children socialise together in friendship groups outside of school, and a number of them also have familial ties. The children therefore know each other, not only as classmates, but as friends, neighbours, and kin. For some of the children, then, this school-based community of practice overlaps with their participation in other communities of practice (e.g. family, neighbourhood groups). Or, using terminology from social network theory, this community of practice includes ‘multiplex’ as well as a ‘dense’ network ties. Such



networks are thought to be characteristic of working-class areas (Milroy 1987b). Milroy states that a close-knit network functions as a norm enforcement mechanism which resists social and linguistic pressure from outside of the group (e.g. to conform to a 'standard' variety). There is little evidence at Ironstone of a salient 'outside' group to be resisted. I would suggest that the utility of the close-knit nature of the Ironstone Primary community of practice is not in its ability to resist pressure from outside but in its ability to negotiate, propagate and reinforce salient local meanings. The social meanings attached to variants like singular 'us' and 'howay' are firmly implanted within this community of practice.

The sense of closeness and solidarity felt within Ironstone Primary is no doubt reinforced by the social problems in the wider community and the trauma this brings to many of the students and their families (see discussion in Chapter 2). Clearly, events in the local community (such as murder and arson) are influenced by wider social forces to which I cannot do justice here. It is evident, though, that the children's social background shaped the close-knit nature of the Ironstone Primary community of practice, which, in turn, affected the children's linguistic practices. In a similar manner, within the more diffuse Murrayfield Primary community of practice, speakers preferred the distance and deference associated with the well-known indirect forms. Variants such as singular 'us' and 'howay' were used occasionally, but this relatively loose-knit network was less able to negotiate and enforce a set of locally agreed meanings for these forms, or less motivated to do so.

The construct of the community of practice can therefore be seen to provide a link between individuals' use of language on the ground and the wider social categories (e.g. social class) to which they belong. It is important not to lose sight of individual agency in such explanations though. As Eckert (2006:125) points out,

‘[w]hile the basic features of our dialect are set in place by the environment in which we grow up, the actual deployment of those dialect features – as well as of many linguistic features that are not part of regional dialect – is left to individual agency’. By examining the use of language in context, this analysis has shown that individual speakers were able to use a range of stylistic options in response to a variety of contextual factors. From this perspective, Ironstone Primary participants, such as Clare, are not to be seen as working-class speakers who use non-standard linguistic features purely by virtue of their working-class background, but rather as savvy sociolinguistic players who are able to utilise the linguistic options available to them in order to negotiate social relationships and construct a range of personal identities in interaction.

