

## Chapter 6 – Conclusion

This thesis has focused on four salient features of the Teesside dialect: possessive ‘me’, singular ‘us’, ‘howay’ and right dislocation. None of these features are traditional sociolinguistic variables in the Labovian sense. Studies in the Labovian tradition only describe a certain *type* of variation; that which draws upon sets of semantically equivalent linguistic forms and which is analysable in terms of single linear scales (e.g. vernacular to standard, informal to formal). The features that I have analysed in this study, however, are part of systems in which choices are *not* alternative ways of ‘saying the same thing’ and those choices construct meaning across multiple dimensions. I examined a related set of linguistic forms which work at the interface between grammar and discourse, and in doing so, I have not only thrown the spotlight on aspects of linguistic behaviour which have generally been of little interest to sociolinguists, I have also highlighted a number of theoretical issues. I have demonstrated, for example, the utility of studying low frequency variants such as possessive ‘me’, and I have suggested that examining such features in context, and from an ethnographic perspective, could contribute to wider issues of language variation and change. I have also highlighted alternative perspectives on the notion of the linguistic variable. Singular ‘us’, for example, was not investigated simply as a variant of a traditional linguistic variable (i.e. OBJECTIVE SINGULAR) with a discrete set of variants that have the same meaning ([mi], [ʊs], [əs] etc.); had I left my analysis here I would have missed the rich array of social and pragmatic meanings indexed by this form. Instead, singular ‘us’ was examined in relation to the wider syntactic construction which appeared to condition its use, the imperative, and the role that the combined construction (i.e. imperative with singular ‘us’) had in relation to other directives. I have also shown that there are linguistic features that

are not susceptible to variation analysis at all. The analysis of right dislocation called into play the ongoing debate about the nature of the linguistic variable in relation to syntax and discourse, and it added to this debate the possibility that the prevalence of a discorsal feature in one particular social group over another might be due to different social and communicative needs within those groups.

This study also took a different *approach* to the investigation of sociolinguistic variation. Traditional (or ‘Labovian’ or ‘Quantitative’) approaches to language variation look for correlations between frequency of use of a linguistic form and membership in some social category (such as social class). Studies within this paradigm, for example, have repeatedly found that, at the same point on a continuum of attention paid to speech, working-class speakers use a greater proportion of ‘non standard’ linguistic forms than those who rank further up in the social hierarchy. The quantitative analysis in Chapters 3 to 6 corroborates this classic sociolinguistic finding – the Ironstone Primary participants used ‘non-standard’ or ‘dialectal’ variants with greater frequency than their middle-class counterparts. But simply highlighting the fact that working-class speakers use a greater proportion of forms perceived as ‘non-standard’ without considering the agencies involved in the use of such forms could potentially perpetuate class-based stereotypes, implying that the use of ‘non-standard’ language is an inevitable consequence of a speaker’s social position. One of the aims of this study was to challenge this kind of stereotype. An analysis of the ways in which the children used language in a range of ethnographically specific contexts demonstrated that pupils at Ironstone Primary actually utilised a whole range of linguistic options (including ‘standard’ as well as ‘non-standard’/‘dialectal’ forms), and they did so in response to a variety of complex contextual factors. These speakers used ‘howay’, possessive ‘me’, singular ‘us’, and

right dislocated pronoun tags discriminately in order to do social and pragmatic work. This finding draws attention to the complex interface between sociolinguistic variation and pragmatics – an interface that cannot be dealt with adequately using traditional variationist methods.

‘Howay’, possessive ‘me’, singular ‘us’, and right dislocated pronoun tags are all socially significant features of Teesside English, but only ‘howay’ can be categorised as dialectal in the traditional sense of being region specific. ‘Howay’ is a particularly salient marker of north-east identity. It is difficult for outsiders to appropriate this term because of the lack of transparency in its meaning and function. One cannot simply *learn* the meaning of ‘howay’; it is necessary to be ‘at the table’ at which the meanings/functions are continually negotiated (Eckert and Wenger 2005:583). The referential meaning of ‘howay’ is something like ‘come on’, and it seems reasonable to suggest that children in playgrounds across the country might use ‘come on’ in a manner similar to how Robert (and others at Ironstone Primary) use ‘howay’ (e.g. ‘Come on, you can’t guard’). In fact, pupils at Ironstone Primary also use ‘come on’ in this way. But in Teesside, and specifically within Ironstone Primary, ‘howay’ exists as an *additional* resource. Speakers can draw upon this resource to encode meanings related to solidarity, in-group identity, status, and control. When playing bulldog, for example, Robert was able to use ‘howay’ to refer implicitly to the rules of engagement at a point in which there is a potential transgression (see section 4.4.3). His use of ‘howay’ draws upon notions of what is considered fair and acceptable within this game and within the friendship grouping generally.

Possessive ‘me’, singular ‘us’ and right dislocation are *not* region specific. These features occur in varieties of informal spoken English throughout much of the English-speaking world. With right dislocation there is a regional dimension, in that

forms which are present in some regions (e.g. tags which include an auxiliary verb) are absent from the Teesside data, but overall, there is a lack of agreement in the literature as to whether any of these forms are dialectal and in some sense ‘non-standard’ or else simply part of informal colloquial English. Possessive ‘me’ adds an additional layer of complexity. This form *fee/s* like a salient feature of the local dialect and local identity, but if it is used only as part of stylised performances, can it really be regarded as part of a local dialect and in what sense? Perhaps possessive ‘me’ is a performed dialect feature which has lost touch with any local community. The analysis of possessive ‘me’ raises issues, then, in relation to dialect research. What can be defined as dialectal, and from whose perspective should we construct this definition? It seems to me that it is the perception of dialect users that is important. Possessive ‘me’, singular ‘us’ and pronoun tags may be geographically widespread, but for the participants in this study what matters is how these features are used and perceived within their own communities. The analysis in Chapters 3 to 6 indicates that these pronominal forms are important resources in the construction of locally specific stances, styles and identities. Further, while it may not be possible to categorise any of these forms as dialectal in the traditional sense of being region specific, ‘they are all potentially dialect features in the sense of being used by some social groups much more than by others thus creating some potential for social meaning-making’ (Coupland 2007:64).

Personal pronouns have, by their very nature, an underlying potential for indexing social meaning; these pronouns take their orientation from the speaker’s perspective and thus provide the perfect linguistic resource for encoding stance. Regionally or socially salient pronouns, like possessive ‘me’, singular ‘us’ and right dislocated pronoun tags, are particularly useful in this respect as they encompass a whole range

of local associations and social meanings that become available for doing identity work. All of these forms were used with much greater frequency by the children at Ironstone Primary. The work performed by these features may be summarised as follows:

- **Possessive ‘me’.** The children made use of possessive ‘me’ in playful stylised performances in which this feature indexed both epistemic and affective stances.
- **Singular ‘us’.** The children used singular ‘us’ to mitigate imperatives via stances of solidarity and alignment/disalignment in situations where issues of in-group membership, peer-group status, and collective knowledge, rights and responsibilities were foregrounded. In these situations, the relationship between speaker and addressee became the target of identity work, ‘constructing meanings for ‘us’ together, ‘how we are’’ (Coupland 2007:112).
- **Right dislocated pronoun tags.** The children used right dislocated pronoun tags to encode epistemic, evaluative and other affective stances in a community-specific way. This linguistic feature was an important resource for negotiating individual and group identity. A right dislocated utterance (e.g. *I hate this book bag, me*) could be used to set the speaker apart from some individuals while simultaneously aligning him/her with others.

The interactional stances indexed by possessive ‘me’, singular ‘us’ and pronoun tags were involved in the construction of fleeting interactional personae, for example, styling someone as being momentarily concerned with their own appearance (see Extracts 3.5, 3.6). These stances also built up into more permanent identities within

the community of practice, such as that of a troublemaker like Helen (Extracts 3.4, 4.2 and 5.7), a popular leader like Robert (Extracts 5.8, 5.11), or a loner like Caroline (Extracts 3.4, 5.13). These more enduring identities became apparent because ethnography enabled me to situate the extracts that I analysed in the flow of events that occurred before, during and after. Local stances might also build up into larger identity categories via processes of indexicality (Ochs 1992). Over time, the repeated stances of solidarity, informality, humour, openness (e.g. in making evaluations and social positions public), and closeness, which are revealed in the interactions of the Ironstone Primary participants, might crystallise into an ideology about working-class identity (or perhaps about northern working-class identity or, more specifically, north-eastern working-class identity), whereby members of the working-classes are perceived as warm, friendly, open and members of close-knit communities, compared to the more distant, reserved standing of the middle-classes. That these interactional stances are often constructed using (what are regarded as) the ‘non-standard’ resources of the local dialect leads to widespread acceptance of another commonly held view, that working class speakers are uneducated, unintelligent and lack social mobility.

We might therefore suggest a ‘constitutive relation’ between language and social class in that linguistic features (such as possessive ‘me’, singular ‘us’, right dislocation and ‘howay’) index social stances, which in turn help to constitute social class meanings (Ochs 1992:341). These linguistic forms directly index interactional stances but only indirectly index working-class identity. Traditional correlational approaches to language variation do not have the analytical tools to access interactive stances. Such studies only capture the indirect indexical correlations between ‘non-standard’ linguistic features and working-class identity and therefore

miss the complexity of the relationship between language and social class. In doing so, these studies may indirectly (and inadvertently) contribute to long-standing class-based ideologies/stereotypes.

Traditional variationist methods may be inadequate for a meaningful investigation of the relationship between language and social class, but as Rampton (2008) pointed out in a plenary lecture given to the BAAL annual meeting earlier this year ‘there is still a lot of scope for ethnographic and interactional sociolinguistic analyses of class processes’:

if sociolinguists want to investigate class, we don’t have to bind ourselves to large-scale comparisons of high- and low-placed social groups. In class societies, people carry class hierarchy around inside themselves, acting it out in the fine grain of ordinary life, and if we look closely enough, we may be able to pick it out in the conduct of just a few individuals.

(Rampton 2008:3)

While I agree with Rampton’s main point, I am not entirely convinced by the idea that individuals carry class hierarchy around inside themselves. For example, when Clare from Ironstone Primary is taking part in playground games, talking about photographs in the classroom, or making a war-time torch there is little evidence to suggest that she is acting out class hierarchy. Working-class identity is shared by all of the children at Ironstone Primary and hence class-based differences are not salient. On the other hand, Clare being in some ways powerful or powerless, a key or peripheral member of the peer group, skilled or unskilled in a task *is* relevant (Coupland 2007:119). Rather than theorising social class as an attribution/judgement imposed upon individuals at a wider societal level there is therefore perhaps a case to be made for class as a micro-level concept related to positions of power *within* a community. The ‘non-standard’ features analysed in this thesis enabled speakers to

be assertive within their community (even though these features may be interpreted as powerless outside of the community). For these children it is not ‘working class’ and ‘middle class’ that matters but who has power in a particular setting and how that position is achieved. Within Ironstone Primary Clare’s use of singular ‘us’ (e.g. *Give us my shoe back*) or right dislocated pronoun tags (e.g. *I’m a magician, me*) is interpreted against a backdrop of shared understanding and the co-construction of meaning. For participants in these interactions, meanings related to shared experience, in-group identity, popularity, power, social distance, and so on, become salient. For outsiders working with indirect indexical ties and abstract ideologies, however, the same forms might index inarticulateness, unintelligence, and a working-class identity. To complicate the issue further, the association that forms such as possessive ‘me’, singular ‘us’ and pronoun tags have with working-class speech is no doubt part of the social colouration of these linguistic features; it is part of what makes them available for indexing local meanings related to social distance and in-group identity in the first place. So, which part of this process comes first? Where is the source of social meaning? Exploring the nature of this bi-directional relationship between language and social class is an important challenge for future research.

The analysis in this thesis has been very much driven by an ethnographic focus on data before theory, and there are many advantages to this method. I approached the data open to possibilities rather than being constrained by pre-existing theory and research questions. The practices that were important to the participants in this study – rather than those that I felt would be (or should be) important – were therefore foregrounded. As Rampton (2006:386) points out, however, ‘data cannot speak for itself, and descriptions are never inference- and interpretation-free’. The analyses



presented in this thesis are unavoidably influenced by the theoretical and ideological biases that I bring as a researcher and an analyst. By combining quantitative with qualitative methods, however, I was able to build methodological rigour into the analysis while maintaining an interpretative, ethnographic stance. The interpretative claims that I made following the micro-analysis of an extract were situated within a wider understanding of the place that interaction claimed within the data as a whole and against the higher-level correlations and patterns revealed by the data. In this way, evidence for interpretations was collected cumulatively and held up for the reader's scrutiny. Ethnographic studies are criticised for a lack of replicability, and it is true that no one (not even me) could recreate the same conditions in a future investigation. This does not mean that ethnographic studies lack comparability, however (Rampton 2006:403). I have presented detailed descriptions of the people, situations, interactions and practices that I encountered in the communities I studied. Ethnographically sensitive comparisons between these descriptions and other studies would help researchers to develop more nuanced understandings of the linguistic similarities/differences that exist between socially differentiated groups. Ethnography will certainly be an important tool in tackling the challenges inherent in the sociolinguistic analysis of class.