

Hierarchy on the playground: Young boys' lexical choice as a marker of social status

This paper examines the language use and lexical choice of 8-10 year old boys in their school playground interactions. It aims to show that that primary-aged school children can make socially motivated lexical choices as a means of indicating social rank and peer-group distribution. In doing so, it will address a gap in the sociolinguistic literature which focuses largely on teen and adult language use.

During adolescence changes occur across most aspects of a young person's life. Their language use is no exception to this. Since the publication of Eckert's (1989) classic study of 'jocks and burnouts' and adolescent language variation, there has been an increase in studies of language use within small communities of often marginal adolescents. Studies have included 'nerd' girls (Bucholtz 1999), Ontario teens (Decker 2002) and British ethnic minorities (Rampton 1995) and have shown that adolescent language is rule-based, structured, and constantly in flux.

While several studies have established that the language use of teens differs from that of adults both socially and linguistically, researchers have yet to determine how and when these differences might develop. Studies of young children's language use are vanishingly rare in the field of sociolinguistics due largely to difficulties in distinguishing developmental from social motivations for variation. However, if we are to account for the type of early teen variation seen in previous studies we must look at the language use of children prior to the onset of secondary schooling and the move away from childhood to adolescence. This is one of the concerns of the current paper.

Data for the study comes from five boys aged 8-10 years, all of whom reside in a Western suburb of Melbourne. The boys, two of whom are brothers, attend the same school and are part of the same cohort. Two group interviews were conducted six-months apart in order to monitor change in language use. In the initial interview participants were asked: What are the "cool" words at school now and what do they mean? In addressing this question and degrees of 'coolness' the participants kept returning to the playground social hierarchy or 'ladder' which consists, in descending order, of: *Cools*, *Bashers*, *Mediums*, (*Normals*) *Shitheads*, (*Dorks*) and *Nerds* (with the addition of *Normals* and *Dorks* in the second interview). This social hierarchy, together with the lexical choices and rules constraining lexical use of each group on the ladder, became the focus of the second interview.

Results indicate that social construction of status and prestige is closely associated with language. The boys in the study laid out a series of lexical items in each interview which were considered 'cool'. These included: *wicked*, *banana teat*, *psycho*, *pacifier*, and *crazy*, among others. While the words changed across the interviews, the social hierarchy or 'ladder' constraining their use did not. For example, a 'pacifier' is someone who loves someone that is *lots* older. Contextual constraints include only saying it to someone below you on the ladder, i.e. a *Basher* can say it to a *Medium* but not vice versa, and interlocutor constraints are that it must be used face to face.

This paper shows that primary-aged school children are aware of language use and its implications for social rank. They can and do vary their language use across peer group constraints as well as in interactions with adults. Further, it highlights the struggle that occurs within individuals when deciding which facet of identity is most relevant to situations and contexts.

References

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