

**From Sociolinguistic Variation to Socially Strategic  
Stylisation<sup>1</sup>**

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# From Sociolinguistic Variation to Socially Strategic Stylisation

## ABSTRACT

This article investigates the indexical relation between language, interactional stance and social class. Quantitative sociolinguistic analysis of a linguistic variable (the first person possessive singular) is combined with micro-ethnographic analysis of the way one particular variant (possessive ‘me’, as in *Me pencil’s up me jumper*) is used by speakers in ‘stylised’ interactional performances. The aim of this analysis is to explore: (1) how possessive ‘me’ is implicated in the construction and management of local identities and relationships; and (2) how macro-social categories, such as social class, relate to linguistic choice. The data for this analysis comes from an ethnographic study of the language practices of nine- to ten-year-old children in two socially-differentiated primary schools in north-east England. A secondary aim of the article is to spotlight the sociolinguistic sophistication of these young children, in particular, the working-class participants, who challenge the notion that the speech of working-class children is in any way ‘impoverished’.

**Key words:** stylisation, indexicality, stance, morphological variation, social class, ethnography

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

A central question within the study of sociolinguistic variation is: Why does a speaker who has a range of linguistic alternatives choose one particular alternative in a particular context of use, and what effects might this choice have? This article argues that the answer lies within an analysis of how macro social structure relates to micro-interactional moves (and vice versa). The case study I present combines quantitative sociolinguistic analysis of a linguistic variable (the first person possessive singular) with micro-ethnographic analysis of the way one particular variant of that variable (possessive ‘me’, as in *Me pencil’s up me jumper*) is used by speakers in interaction. In combining these approaches I hope (1) to discover how this variant is implicated in the construction and management of local identities and relationships, and then (2) to use this analysis to explore how macro-social categories, such as social class, relate to linguistic choice. An important theoretical concept in this endeavour is ‘indexicality’. I engage specifically with two linguistic anthropological theories of indexicality: Ochs’ (1992, 1993, 1996) model of direct and indirect indexicality; and Silverstein’s (2003) ‘orders of indexicality’.

The data for this analysis comes from an ethnographic study of the language practices of nine- to ten-year-old children in two socially-differentiated primary schools in Teesside, north-east England. A secondary aim of this article is to spotlight the sociolinguistic sophistication of these young children, in particular, the working-class participants, whose use of language challenges the notion that the speech of working-class children is ‘impoverished’ (Rose 2009).

I begin by outlining Ochs’ and Silverstein’s approaches to indexicality, and I introduce the related sociolinguistic concepts of ‘stance’ and ‘stylisation’, both of which are integral to the following analysis.

Ochs (1992, 1993, 1996) argues that few features of language directly index social identity categories; rather the relationship between language and social categories is mediated by social meanings at a more local level. Linguistic features index social stances, acts and activities in interaction, and these local social meanings help to constitute social identity meanings. Ochs illustrates her argument in relation to gender, but states that the model can be applied to social identity categories more generally. The link between linguistic form and social identity is indirect (i.e. it is mediated by speaker acts), but over time it may be perceived as direct because the original associations with interactional acts fade or undergo erasure (Irvine 2001). Sociolinguists who adopt an indexical approach to language and identity thus pay attention not only to the distribution of linguistic forms across social categories (which reveal indirect correlations) but also to the way these forms are used in 'strategic social action' (Coupland 2006).

'Stance' is a central component of Ochs' model and has become an important concept in much recent sociolinguistic work (see e.g. Jaffe 2009). Stance refers to the processes by which speakers use language (along with other semiotic resources) to position themselves and others, draw social boundaries, and lay claim to particular statuses, knowledge and authority in on-going interaction (cf. Du Bois 2007: 163). Building on Ochs' approach to indexicality, researchers have argued that language indexes particular kinds of interactional stance (e.g. affective, epistemic, evaluative) which in turn (and through a process some have termed 'stance accretion' [Rauniomaa 2003, as cited in Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 596]) help to constitute more enduring social identities (e.g. Bucholtz 2009; Bucholtz and Hall 2005; Eberhardt and Kiesling 2008; Johnstone 2007; Kiesling 2009; Podesva 2007). Meanings indexed by interactional stances may be fleeting, but speakers who habitually take such stances become associated with a

particular social position, which is conventionally associated with a particular social identity.

The most striking feature of the data in this study is that possessive ‘me’ was consistently used to index a specific kind of interactional stance. Further, these stances often involved (at least some degree of) self-conscious performance, a form of stance-taking that I will refer to as ‘stylisation’ (Coupland 2001, 2006, 2007; Rampton 1995, 2006, 2009). Stylisation was an important mode of meaning making for the children in this study, and I explore their strategic situated use of this resource in Section 5.

A second notable feature of the data is that possessive ‘me’ was used more frequently by the working-class participants than by their middle-class counterparts. This finding is less remarkable given that studies of language variation, beginning with Labov’s (1966) seminal New York City study, have consistently demonstrated the stratification of linguistic variables by socio-economic class of the speaker<sup>2</sup>.

Silverstein (2003) reinterprets Labov’s NYC findings within an ideological framework. While Ochs focuses on two levels of indexicality, the work of Silverstein refers to multiple levels or ‘orders’ of indexicality. The ideological process begins when a particular linguistic form or ‘*n*-th order indexical’ becomes associated with social values (e.g. through correlation between the linguistic form and some social characteristic of the users or contexts of use of that form) so that they acquire indexical meaning. The association between form and meaning is not stable, however; the process occurs within a fluid ideological space in which the *n*-th order indexical form is always available for reinterpretation, for an additional *n* + 1st order indexical meaning: ‘*N* + 1st order indexicality is thus always already immanent as a competing structure of values

potentially indexed in-and-by a communicative form of the  $n$ -th order' (Silverstein 2003: 194).

Silverstein (2003) illustrates the concept of indexical order in relation to Labov's (1972) trichotomy of sociolinguistic variables ('indicators' vs. 'markers' vs. 'stereotypes'). He suggests that in separating socioeconomic category membership, Labov was 'really hypothesizing a 1st-order presupposing indexical value for rates of production of relatively "standard" vs. relatively "non-standard" pronunciations' (2003: 218). In other words, a high rate of occurrence of 'non-standard' pronunciation (e.g. [t] for (th) in words like *thing*) presupposes membership in (i.e. is a first order index of) the category 'working-class'. The pattern of stylistic variation observed in the use of the Labovian 'marker' reveals a second (i.e.  $n+1$ st) order indexicality, the first-order indexical variation having 'been swept up into an ideologically-driven metapragmatics of standard register' (Silverstein 2003: 219). This is most clearly witnessed in the dramatic shift towards the standard during the task which elicited Labov's most formal contextual style, reading aloud from a word list. This task highlights the correlation between the spoken and written word and thus focuses attention on the 'standard' pronunciation for speakers immersed in a standard language community. Labovian stereotypes are markers that have risen above the level of speaker consciousness and have become the subject of overt metapragmatic commentary. In this scenario, 'the  $n+1$ st-order indexicality has become presupposing, in other words, in effect replacing an older  $n$ -th-order indexical presupposition' (Silverstein 2003: 220).

Johnstone, Andrus and Danielson (2006) build upon Silverstein's illustration in their analysis of the 'enregisterment' (Agha 2003) of 'Pittsburghese' (see also Johnstone and Kiesling 2008). They trace how first-order correlations between the monophthongization of the diphthong /aw/ (in words like *down*) and demographic identities (such as being

from Pittsburgh, being male, and being working-class) become available for further construal. They map the historical processes by which monophthongal /aw/ becomes a 'marker' or second ( $n + 1$ st) order index available for stylistic manipulation such that individual speakers who use this form variably may 'use it less when they are trying harder to sound educated or cosmopolitan, or more when they are trying harder to sound like working-class men or like other Pittsburghers' (2006: 83). Johnstone, Andrus and Danielson (2006: 94) go on to suggest that, in addition to doing second-order indexical work, some regional forms become 'available for self-conscious, performed identity work'. They argue that this constitutes a third-order of indexicality in which variants such as monophthongal /aw/ become even more ideologically laden and are used in self-conscious performances of a person's knowledge about the features that stereotypically constitute a variety such as Pittsburghese (Johnstone, Andrus and Danielson 2006: 99).

In both analyses (i.e. of the NYC and Pittsburgh data), actual values are assigned to Silverstein's variable  $n$  in order to elaborate the historical process by which 'indicators' can become 'markers' and then 'stereotypes' (Johnstone, Andrus and Danielson. 2006: 81)<sup>3</sup>. I show how a linear approach is potentially problematic in relation to the data in this study in Section 4, where I use Silverstein's framework to interpret a quantitative analysis of possessive 'me'. In the final discussion (Section 7) I consider the implications of both the high-level quantitative analysis (Section 4) and the micro-interactional analysis (Section 5) by exploring the complex relationship between the stylised use of possessive 'me' in this data and the macro-level category of social class.

Before moving to data analysis, however, I begin by describing the variant under consideration, the participants who form the focus of the study, and the ethnographic context of the data collection process.

## 2. POSSESSIVE ‘ME’

Possessive ‘me’ sits outside of the mainstream ‘standard’ English pronoun paradigm. Wales (1996: 14) points out that the pronunciations [mə] and [ma] for ‘my’ are ‘widely used and tolerated in informal standard English’ but [mi] ‘is associated with dialect speech and even stigmatised’. Despite this apparently negative social evaluation, possessive ‘me’ is a well-established feature of north-east dialects (Griffiths [2005] cites examples from the region dating back to the nineteenth century). Moreover, its use extends beyond the north-east of England. Kortmann et al. (2004) provide a comprehensive account of the salient phonological and grammatical features of varieties of English around the world. This volume highlights the occurrence of possessive ‘me’ in 20 of the 46 varieties of World English surveyed for the study. Within the British Isles, possessive ‘me’ is found in all varieties except Scottish English and Orkney/Shetland.

Empirical studies have shown that possessive ‘me’ is a frequently occurring dialect form. A pilot study conducted by Anderwald (2004) using south-east material from the Freiburg Corpus of English Dialects (FRED) found 30 percent of possessive pronouns realised as ‘me’. Hollman and Siewierska (2007) re-examine interviews from the North West Sound Archive (NWSA) in their analysis of possessive constructions in the Lancashire dialect. Their results show that 42.3 percent of the 919 possessive pronouns in the corpus were realised as [mi] (40.5% [maɪ], 14.9% [ma], 2.3% [mə]).

Possessive ‘me’ is thus a widespread and frequently occurring linguistic form; but as a native of Teesside, it feels to me like a significant feature of the local dialect. It holds a prominent position within local consciousness, sometimes addressed directly in conversation (e.g. in the Ironstone Primary staff room), and is common in folklinguistic representations of Teesside speech (where it takes on the standard orthography ‘me’). It



is used frequently, often categorically, in poetry produced by Teesside writers (e.g. Willoughby 2005; Longden 1995), in fictional representations of Teessiders' speech (e.g. Pat Barker's [1982] *Union Street*) and in journalistic representations of Teesside speakers (e.g. an interview with Teesside novelist Richard Milward [Betts 2007]). There is some evidence to suggest, then, that possessive 'me' may be indexed as 'local' within Teesside despite its widespread geographical distribution. Beal (2009) makes a similar claim in relation to the use of 'general northern' English features, like the BATH and STRUT vowels, in her analysis of the use of the Sheffield dialect in British 'indie' music, as do Johnstone, Andrus and Danielson (2006: 87) in their discussion of Pittsburghers' use of 'yinz' [jinz] for the second person plural.

### **3. THE STUDY: DEVELOPING AN 'ETHNOGRAPHICALLY INFORMED LENS'**

The two schools which form the focus of the study are Murrayfield Primary School in Fairfield, Stockton-on-Tees and Ironstone Primary School in Grangetown, Middlesbrough. These schools both fall within the urban conurbation of Teesside in the north-east of England, and are approximately nine miles apart. The names of the two schools, as well as the names of all the participants referred to in this study, are pseudonyms.

Murrayfield and Ironstone Primary are differentiated in terms of the socioeconomic profile of the areas they serve, and by implication, the social background of the students. Ironstone Primary is situated in a lower-working-class area of Teesside while Murrayfield Primary serves a predominantly lower-middle-class area<sup>4</sup>. This difference is reflected in the schools' Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) inspection reports. The report for Murrayfield Primary, for example, highlights the stable

nature of the local community and states that the level of attainment of pupils when they enter the school ‘meets expectations’. The report for Ironstone Primary, on the other hand, draws attention to the ‘social and economic challenges’ endemic in the surrounding area and finds pupil attainment on entry to be ‘well below expectations’. The percentage of children entitled to free school meals in Ironstone Primary is over three times the national average (Murrayfield Primary is below the national average), a figure indicative of the ‘economic challenges’ faced by local residents.

In order to understand how these social and demographic differences translated into actual experience, I embarked upon an extended period of ethnographic fieldwork (November 2005 to February 2007). I made weekly visits to the Year 4 (and subsequently Year 5) class<sup>5</sup> in both schools and participated in classroom life initially as a classroom assistant, someone who interacts with the children and helps with classroom activities. This initial step gave me the opportunity to form relationships with the children outside of the constraints of the research situation. I was able to interact with them, not as a researcher who was under pressure to make recordings, but as a helper and a friend. As well as assisting in the classroom during my weekly visits to school, I spent time with the children in the playground, chatting and playing games. As a result, I was able to get to know the children’s personalities, interests and friendships, and engage with their activities both inside and outside of the classroom.

My relationships with the children were set against the relationships they had with other adults in the school. I was not a teacher, nor did I have any other fixed social role; I was just an adult who the children could chat to, include in their games, and go to for help with classroom tasks. There were a number of other individuals in the school who filled these ‘friendly adult’ roles (e.g. volunteers who help out in the library, on school trips, and in after-school clubs). Like these other adult helpers, I was also a native of

Teesside who spoke with a familiar accent and shared knowledge of the local area. I was thus closer to the children and the community I was studying than a researcher originating from outside of the area might have been. The accumulated experiences gained from participating in school activities combined to form the ‘ethnographically informed lens’ (Maybin 2006: 13) through which the analysis and interpretation of the linguistic data is presented.

After seven months of making weekly visits to the schools, I began recording the children using a radio-microphone. The radio-microphone enabled the children to move around freely in recording sessions. I had to be nearby (at a distance where the receiver was still picking up the transmission) but did not have to be involved in the children’s conversations and could be out of sight (e.g. in a classroom while the children were in the playground). There were moments when the children were very clearly conscious of the radio-microphone, as for example when they acted out the role of an ‘undercover cop’ reporting their movements ‘back to base’. Such activities usually occurred in the first few minutes after a child had been given the radio-microphone or when a student from another year-group noticed the microphone and asked questions about it. Both situations occurred less frequently as the fieldwork progressed (cf. Milroy 1987). Overall, the children simply got on with their daily business.

I tried to give all volunteers the opportunity to wear the microphone (provided that they had a signed parental consent form), and in the end collected over 75 hours of data. In this article I analyse 50 hours (25 hours per school), based on the participation of five boys and five girls from each school who wore the radio-microphone for half-a-day. The voices of other children were captured as they interacted with the person wearing the radio-microphone, but only those children who had a signed consent form were included in the analysis. Overall, the analysis includes contributions from 15 Ironstone Primary

pupils and 13 Murrayfield Primary pupils. Data selection was made before I had listened to any of the recordings and was based on an assessment of the likelihood that the microphone would have picked up a wide range of interactions. For example, if a recording was made when there were lots of tests in the classroom, and hence not much talk, it was not included.

#### 4. THE DATA: A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

Table 1 shows the pronunciation variants used by speakers in both schools for the possessive singular (based on auditory analysis).

**Table 1: First person possessive singular**

	Ironstone Primary		Murrayfield Primary	
	N	%	N	%
maɪ	99	23.4%	61	24.7%
ma	265	62.6%	168	68.0%
mi	30	7.1%	3	1.2%
mə	29	6.9%	15	6.1%
	<b>423</b>		<b>247</b>	

[df = 3, n = 670, p < 0.01]

The most popular variant was the phonologically reduced form [ma]. This is as we might expect given that grammatical words are usually pronounced in a reduced form in conversational speech (Wales 1996: 13; Ladefoged 2005: 70). The full form of the pronoun [maɪ] was the second most frequently occurring variant in both schools, being used just over 20 percent of the time. The most striking feature of Table 1 is the low overall frequency of possessive ‘me’: only 33 tokens (4.9% of total) appeared in 50 hours

of recordings. This finding is particularly surprising given the high frequency of occurrence in Andervald's (2004) and Hollman and Siewierska's (2007) studies<sup>6</sup>. I return to this point later (Sections 5 and 7).

Both [maɪ] and [ma] occurred in stressed as well as unstressed position; [mə] and [mi], on the other hand, were always unstressed. The choice between variants was further affected by phonological environment.

**Table 2: Pronoun choice according to following phonological context**

	Ironstone Primary			Murrayfield Primary		
	V	C	Total	V	C	Total
maɪ	38	56	<b>94</b>	12	48	<b>60</b>
ma	3	256	<b>259</b>	4	160	<b>164</b>
mi	19	8	<b>27</b>	2	1	<b>3</b>
mə	0	29	<b>29</b>	0	15	<b>15</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>349</b>	<b>409*</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>224</b>	<b>242*</b>

[Ironstone: df=3, n=409, p < 0.0001 Murrayfield: df=3, n=242, p < 0.0001]

\* These totals are different from Table 1 because examples which could not be categorised as preceding either a vowel (V) or a consonant (C) (e.g. because the utterance was incomplete: *Where's my-*) were excluded from the analysis. This accounted for 14 tokens in Ironstone Primary (5 [maɪ], 6 [ma], 3 [mi]) and 5 tokens in Murrayfield Primary (1 [maɪ], 4 [ma]).

Data from both schools were subjected to a chi-square analysis (possessive variant by phonological environment) and the results were significant (p < 0.001), suggesting that the choice of pronoun is dependent upon phonological context. Table 2 shows that where the initial segment of the following noun was a consonant (C), the preferred variant in both schools was [ma]; where the initial segment of the following noun was a vowel (V),

the preferred variant was [maɪ]. Overwhelmingly it seems that [ma] occurred only before a consonant<sup>7</sup>. The most reduced form of the pronoun [mə] also occurred only in pre-consonantal position. The children used [mi] in both pre-vocalic and pre-consonantal position, but as Table 2 shows, it occurred more often before a vowel (where use of [ma] would not be possible).

Social factors also affected the choice of variant. Sociolinguistic studies have repeatedly shown that the frequency of use of ‘non-standard’ or low prestige linguistic forms patterns with social class. This finding is borne out by the data in this study – possessive ‘me’ occurs more frequently in Ironstone Primary than at the more affluently situated Murrayfield Primary (where most pupils avoided it completely). Again, a chi-square test was performed, and school membership was shown to be a significant factor influencing pronoun choice ( $p < 0.01$ ). Possessive ‘me’ is thus linked to social class ‘in the sense of marking class differences in frequencies of use between class groups’ (Coupland 2009). But can this correlation tell us anything further about the nature of the relationship between social class and the use of [mi]?

Using Silverstein’s (2003) terms, possessive ‘me’ may be an  $n$ th-order index of the category ‘working class’ (i.e. frequent use of [mi] presupposes membership of the category ‘working class’). Even within Ironstone Primary, however, possessive ‘me’ did not occur with a particularly high frequency; rather it appeared to be reserved for more informal interactions. The children at both schools categorically avoided the use of possessive ‘me’ in formal, school-oriented tasks such as reading aloud or answering the teacher’s questions (contexts similar to the tasks used to produce Labov’s [1966] most formal styles). Possessive ‘me’ thus appears to have had social meaning for these speakers. Continuing the analysis of indexical order, we might hypothesise that ‘me’ has  $n+1$ st order indexical meaning based on an ideological reinterpretation of  $n$ th-order

class-based values. Possessive ‘me’ may be linked, for example, with informality or with sounding uneducated via its association with working-class speech – the social evaluation of the macro-level category ‘working class’ having become associated with the index itself (Eckert 2008: 463). Some reflex of this wider societal evaluation may have affected the children’s ideas about what is appropriate language to use when called upon to display knowledge of curriculum-based tasks (perhaps via their teachers’ comments – see below). Variability in the data between possessive ‘me’ and other forms of the possessive singular thus comprises a second- ( $n + 1$ st-) order indexicality, the first- ( $n$ -th-) order indexical variation having been ‘swept up into an ideologically-driven metapragmatics of standard register’ (Silverstein 2003:219).

This analysis assumes that social class is the first-order presupposing indexical value for use of possessive ‘me’, but there is no a priori reason why social class should be a more immediate influence than social situation; after all, even the children in Ironstone Primary avoided the ‘me’ variant in formal, school-oriented tasks. Perhaps, then, there is a first-order indexical association between possessive ‘me’ and informality and/or related conditions such as casualness. Such an association might arise because of the perceived lack of effort in articulation of reduced forms (cf. Campbell-Kibler 2007). A second-order link with social class might then develop in relation to class-based ideologies about formality (Eckert 2008: 467).

Another possibility is that there is a first-order association between [mi] and ‘incorrectness’ or lack of education. Wales (1996: 88) writes that in the ‘context of a prescriptive inheritance of grammars based on formal educated usage, pronoun case forms have come exaggeratedly to be the emotive symbols of social stigmatisation and acceptability’. While the use of the reduced forms [ma] and [mə], in addition to [mai], maintain the contrast between the possessive and objective case, the use of [mi] blurs this

distinction and is thus open to allegations of ‘incorrect’ usage. The issue becomes one of morphology, rather than phonology, and this perspective is reflected in the way in which the [mi] variant has become lexicalised in written representations of dialect speech. Referring to Trudgill’s (1986) model of salience, Kerswill and Williams (2002:100) state that morphological variables are likely to be salient ‘because they involve different lexical realizations of underlying grammatical categories’. Informal ethnographic observations lend credence to this point. In the Ironstone primary school staffroom, a senior teacher expressed strong views against the use of [mi] for the possessive singular, evidently believing it to be an ‘incorrect’ grammatical form (documented in fieldnotes for 14<sup>th</sup> June 2006).

Overall, the kind of high-level analysis performed so far reveals very little about the locally specific interactional meanings attached to possessive ‘me’. As speakers make choices about how and when to use linguistic forms, they (re)produce the indexical values attached to those forms. Perhaps it is these *interactional* meanings that represent Silverstein’s first-order indexicality. This would likely be the perspective of Scott Kiesling, for example, who argues that the local interactional meanings articulated through stance are a primitive in sociolinguistic variation: ‘stance is, in Silverstein’s (2003) terms, where the “baptismal essentializations” of indexicality occur, and is the original first- (or possibly, zero-) order indexicality’ (Kiesling 2009: 172).

In order to explore some of these hypotheses, in particular that the meaning (and thus motivation for use) of [mi] is constructed in interaction, I move now to an analysis of the use of possessive ‘me’ in context.



## 5. STYLISATION AND INDEXICAL FUNCTION

The fact that there were only 33 tokens of possessive ‘me’ in the data meant that it was possible to look carefully at each one in context. It became clear that all 33 occurrences of possessive ‘me’ were accompanied by ‘a partial and momentary disengagement from the routine flow of unexceptional business’ (Rampton 2006: 225). In this respect, the use of possessive ‘me’ had elements of what Rampton (1995, 2006, 2009) and Coupland (2001, 2007) have termed ‘stylisation’, a concept originally associated with the work of Bakhtin (1981).

In Coupland’s (2001: 345) terms, stylisation is ‘the knowing deployment of culturally familiar styles and identities that are marked as deviating from those predictably associated with the current speaking context’. In his analysis of extracts from *The Roy Noble Show*, broadcast on BBC Radio Wales, Coupland (2001) examines a range of phonological variables (along with other non-dialectal features of talk) in order to demonstrate how the show’s presenters constructed stylised (and knowingly inauthentic) images of Welshness. Stylisation can also occur in non-media, non-scripted, face-to-face interaction. In his work with Year 9 pupils at a London comprehensive, Rampton (2006) investigated instances of stylised ‘posh’ and Cockney – varieties at the extremities of his speakers’ linguistic repertoire – in order to explore the ways in which these children experienced social class as a ‘lived reality’. The moments of stylisation, Rampton argues, were moments in which the high-low cultural semantic which structured his participants’ experience at school was foregrounded, offered for public consumption, sometimes resisted but at other times reinforced.

There are a number of similarities between the stylised performances described by Rampton and Coupland and the children's use of possessive 'me' in this study. In the following example, possessive 'me' is part of a conscious, exaggerated performance.

**Extract 1<sup>8</sup>:**

Harry and David are playing together in the Ironstone Primary playground at lunch time. David had worn the radio-microphone during the morning, but around ten minutes before the start of this interaction I had given it to Harry.

1 David: [just say  
2 Harry: [LADY BUDWEISER  
3 David: you say  
4 [just call me daddy  
5 Harry: [ah(hhh hhhh)  
6 can you get me some budweiser (.)  
7 f- they're only er tr-  
8 er one pound fifty a pack (.)  
9 so get me: ten packs (.)  
10 because I've got a budweiser thing here (.)  
11 **I LO::VE MY [mi] (.) BUDWEISER**  
12 David: ((laughs))  
13 Harry: ((makes noises into the microphone))  
14 David: I lo:ve my [ma] thingies  
15 Harry/David ((laughing))  
16 Harry: stop being (.)  
17 stop being stupid David  
18 David: say  
19 Harry David stop sp- speaking in it  
20 you've had enough speaking in it

This kind of performance was not unusual for Harry, though he may partly have been performing for the newly acquired radio-microphone. That Harry has stepped outside of ‘the routine flow of unexceptional business’ (Rampton 2006: 225) is indicated on one level by the subject matter of the utterance. Budweiser is a beer and therefore a risky topic for the conversation of a nine-year-old child (especially one who is being recorded). Budweiser has a tradition of creating humorous television advertisements, however, which have been successful in the UK and other English speaking cultures around the world. It is possible (and indeed likely) that Harry would be familiar with this brand via the media and would have come to associate it with joking and with word- or sound-play. During the fieldwork, it became evident that Harry was very much in-touch with popular culture, perhaps owing to the fact that he had an older brother. He sported a ‘trendy’ haircut, for example, and repeatedly sang bursts from Green Day’s<sup>9</sup> *American Idiot* into the microphone.

Further clues to the stylised nature of this performance include the increased volume of Harry’s declaration, the lengthened vowel sound in *love*, and the pause between *my* and *Budweiser* (line 11) which reinforces the ‘communicative dynamism’ (Quirk et al. 1985: 1363) of the final word in this utterance. Rampton (2006: 262) notes that stylised utterances are often marked by ‘abrupt shifts in some combination of loudness, pitch level, voice quality or speed of delivery’. He goes on to state that ‘[i]f the audience (or indeed the speaker) subsequently responded by laughing, repeating the utterance, by commenting on it, or by switching into a different kind of non-normal dialect or voice, this could be a final clue’. Harry’s ‘side-kick’, David, does just that. Having clearly appreciated Harry’s performance, David laughs and repeats the formulation with slight modification: *I love my thingies* (line 14). David does not use possessive ‘me’ here; he realises the pronoun with the reduced form [ma]. But then, David’s performance

generally is a rather poor imitation. Being less in-tune with adult popular culture, David substitutes *Budweiser* for the vague *thingies*, and is told by Harry to *Stop being stupid* (line 17). By line 19, Harry has moved out of the frame of playful performance. He is back to 'business as usual', which involves ensuring that David (who had had his chance with the microphone earlier that day), does not unduly interfere with his own speaking/recording time.

In other examples, possessive 'me' occurs within a play frame but is part of a less exaggerated performance. In such situations, 'the stylised utterance constitutes a small, fleeting but foregrounded analysis' which is 'offered for public consumption' (Rampton 2006: 225). In Extract 2, for example, Andrew (who is wearing the radio microphone) is play-fighting with some of the girls in the Ironstone Primary playground.

#### **Extract 2:**

1 Andrew: **it hurt all my [mi] hand [and]**  
2 all the way down there  
3 (3) ((*laughing and karate noises*))  
4 Andrew: **she hurt all my [mi] hand [and] down there**  
5 (1)  
6 Andrew: she went  
7 BOOF  
8 Miss Snell: you're quite vicious (you girls)  
9 (5) ((*karate noises*))  
10 Andrew: you're (xxxxxxx) for a little girl are you  
11 (1) ((*karate noises*))  
12 Andrew: ow ((*laughs*))  
13 (14) ((*karate noises*))  
14 Andrew: Hannah's not normally ready  
15 (5)

16 Andrew: a::h ((*laughing*))  
 17 ((*laughing*)) **my [mi] arm**  
 18 ((*laughs*)) no  
 19 (10)  
 20 Andrew: NO::  
 21 (2)  
 22 Miss Snell: (xxxx) Andrew's got it on  
 23 Anon: Andrew  
 24 Miss Snell: yeah  
 25 (3)  
 26 Andrew: a::h  
 27 **my [mi] arm's all red**  
 28 (2)  
 29 Andrew: ((*laughs*)) I ducked  
 30 don't that hurts (.) ah

Andrew uses possessive 'me' (on lines 1, 4, 17 and 27) to point out something negative (that his hand and arm have been injured), but he does so in a mock-serious fashion. There is some doubt as to whether Andrew is really hurt; after all, he laughs through his protestations (lines 12, 16-18, 29) and continues with the fight. I would suggest that Andrew is (over)acting, hamming up his injuries for the benefit of his (exclusively female) audience, and in doing so he uses possessive 'me'. As Coupland (2001: 349) points out, in stylising 'we speak "as if this is me," or "as if I owned this voice," or "as if I endorsed what this voice says"' but the speaker leaves their audience to consider 'whether this utterance is "really mine" rather than "me playing" or "me subverting"'.

All four examples of possessive 'me' in this extract occur before a vowel, including in lines one and four, where Andrew adopts another feature of the local dialect, 'h-

dropping'. Clearly the importance of phonological context should not be ignored in examples such as these, but I would argue that it works in tandem with other factors, including stylisation. There are fifteen occurrences of the word 'arm' in the total corpus of possessive constructions: five occur with the full form [maɪ] (Ironstone 4, Murrayfield 1); seven occur with [mi] (Ironstone 6, Murrayfield 1); and three occur with [ma] (Ironstone 1, Murrayfield 2). I quote these figures in order to demonstrate that the children still have a number of choices available to them before a vowel. They can even avoid vowel-vowel hiatus when using the popular reduced form [ma] by inserting a consonant (see Extract 5), a glottal stop (e.g. *Jamie went under my arm* [maʔɑ:m] – Ben, Murrayfield Primary), or a short pause (*My [ma] (.) uncle* – Charlotte, Ironstone Primary).

In this example, I suggest that Andrew chooses possessive 'me' as part of a stylised performance which articulates a particular kind of epistemic stance: the stylisation dislocates the speaker not only from the 'immediate speaking context' (Coupland 2001: 350; 2007: 154) but also from full commitment to the truth of, or belief in, their proposition (as already noted, Andrew's claims appear to lack sincerity). Possessive 'me' also indexes a kind of affective stance, one of negative affect; but crucially, this negativity is tempered by a lack of seriousness and a degree of jocularity.

Andrew's use of possessive 'me' in Extract 2 is representative of the way this feature is used in the corpus as a whole. Compare the following example from Murrayfield Primary:

**Extract 3:**

Neil is wearing the microphone and is refereeing a game of football in the Murrayfield Primary playground.

1 Neil: get o:ff

2 Daniel: aw right you still have that on

3 soz<sup>10</sup>

4 Anon: pass to me

5 pass to me

6 Neil: ((to Daniel)) you've just dug the electrical equipment-

7 ((to other unidentified participant)) yeah I'm ref

8 Daniel: yeah man

9 ((chanting)) we are the champions

10 Neil: you weirdo

11 get back

12 ah ye- (2)

13 ah

14 a hundred bullets (.)

15 a hundred bolts

16 **going through my [mi] finger**

17 pain

18 agony

19 electrical current

20 Anon: pass

21 Neil: o::w

22 (2)

23 the electrical curre::nt

24 Anon: pass

25 Neil: this electrical current's burning

26 (7)

27 miss I keep getting an electric shock

28 Dinner lady: do you

29 oh no what's that with

30 Neil: project

31 Dinner lady: a project

32 what's it about

The *electrical equipment* that Neil refers to in line 6 (and the referent for Daniels *that* in line 2) is the radio-microphone. Neil's utterance in lines 13 to 21 is hyperbolic (the radio-microphone did not give out agonising electric shocks) and is meant as an entertaining performance for his friends. The pinnacle of that performance involves possessive 'me' (*a hundred bolts going through my [mi] finger*) in addition to numerical exaggeration (*a hundred*), the lexical slip between *bullets* and *bolts*, and Neil's attempt to dramatically lexicalise the pain (*pain, agony, electric current*) which reaches a crescendo on the emphatic, lengthened *o::w*. Again, this is a fleeting performance which leaves those in hearing distance to ponder whether Neil really means what he is saying, or whether he is exaggerating (or making it up completely).

The positive affect of *I love my [mi] budweiser* (Extract 1, line 11) appears to be an exception to my argument that possessive 'me' indexes stylised negative affect. In fact, this is the only exception in the whole corpus. There is something transgressive about a nine-year-old expressing an opinion on a brand of beer, however; so perhaps Extract 1 is not an exception after all. We might add transgression to our emerging understanding of the meanings associated with possessive 'me'. Consider the next example from Ironstone Primary.



#### Extract 4:

Helen, Charlotte, Andrew and Mrs Moon (the class teaching assistant) are working together on a writing task in the Ironstone Primary classroom. Helen is wearing the radio-microphone. Miss Snell is sitting on an adjacent table and can hear the conversation through headphones. Nathan is supposed to be working at a table on the other side of the room but is out of his seat and is misbehaving.

- 1 Charlotte: hello this is Helen speaking  
2 (3)  
3 Helen: Miss Snell it wasn't (1)  
4 Miss Snell it wasn't me speaking it was Charlotte  
5 Andrew: [She goes (xxxxxx) like this  
6 Charlotte: [((*laughing*))  
7 Helen: see she's laughing now because she heard you  
8 Andrew: starting punching him  
9 Mrs Moon: Nathan  
10 sit on your bottom please and get on  
11 Nathan: I'll just get my [ma] pencil  
12 it's up my [ma] jumper  
13 Helen: ((*laughing*)) **my [mi] pencil's up my [mi] jumper**

Helen clearly finds Nathan's comment in lines 11-12 amusing. Amid laughter, she repeats *My [mi] pencil's up my [mi] jumper* in such a way as to suggest that this was an unusual comment for Nathan to make. Even though Nathan realises 'my' both times as [ma], Helen uses [mi] in her reformulation. The stylised use of possessive 'me' creates distance between Helen and the utterance she is voicing: these are not her words; she is 'performing' Nathan. Helen's revoicing further involves an 'othering' of Nathan. Her reformulation suggests that he is being silly, transgressing in a way that marks him out from his classmates.

Incidentally, Nathan joined this class from an out-of-town school mid-way through Year 4 (a couple of months before this recording was made) and was not yet a fully integrated member of the class.

In positioning Nathan in this way, Helen simultaneously positions herself in relation to Nathan and to the rest of the class. She builds affiliations with Mrs Moon, with the other pupils on her table, and perhaps also with me – a group allied in their mutual evaluation of Nathan’s inappropriate utterance. Drawing on the theoretical perspective of Bakhtin (1981), Ochs (1992: 338) notes that the voice of the speaker, the voice of the someone referred to in the utterance and the voice of the person for whom the utterance is conveyed may blend and become part of the social meanings indexed within the utterance. In this example the multiple voices include those of Helen, Nathan, Miss Snell, Mrs Moon and other pupils such as Charlotte and Andrew.

A sense of transgression is also apparent in Extract 5, but it is Miss Snell who subverts normal relations and Andrew, an Ironstone pupil, responds using possessive ‘me’.

**Extract 5:**

Andrew is sitting in the Ironstone Primary classroom participating in the afternoon classroom activities. He is wearing the radio-microphone and is concerned that the radio-transmitter is becoming too hot.

- 1 Andrew: miss this is getting a bit hot this (.)  
2 at the top  
3 Miss Snell: is it  
4 Andrew: yeah it keeps [going like that  
5 Miss Snell: [it’s because it’s been on all day  
6 (3)  
7 Miss Snell: it’s just like- you know if you have like-

8 Andrew: when I touch it with my [ma] hand it's co:ld  
9 but- (1)  
10 when I touch it with my [ma] arm [harm]  
11 it's hot  
12 but when I touch it with my [ma] hand  
13 it's cold  
14 (3)  
15 Miss Snell: your arm  
16 maybe your arm's [warm  
17 Andrew [there  
18 (1)  
19 Andrew: **my [mi] arm's co::ld**  
20 Miss Snell: that's bizarre  
21 (2)  
22 Andrew that there  
23 at the top there  
24 (5)  
25 Andrew: at the arm  
26 at the back there  
27 (2)  
28 Andrew: [at the back that's the battery  
29 Miss Snell [(xxxxxxxx) the batteries (xxxxx get's warm xxxx)  
30 (3)  
31 Andrew: miss how do these turn off  
32 (4)  
33 Andrew: how do these turn off

Andrew makes consistent use of [ma] for the first person possessive singular in his utterance on lines 8-12, even pronouncing 'arm' as [harm] to avoid vowel-vowel hiatus. There is a marked change on line 19, however, following my indirect challenge to Andrew's assertion that the microphone is hot. I suggest (jokingly) that perhaps it is

Andrew's arm that is warm. My remark is meant as a playful tease, but it appears not to have been received as such (cf. Drew 1987). Andrew provides an emphatic correction, and in doing so, he uses possessive 'me': *my* [mi] *arm's co::ld*. The lengthened vowel sound as well as a distinct fall-rise intonation on the tonic syllable in *cold* highlights contrast with my *warm* (on line 16) and indicates Andrew's surprise (Ladefoged 2006: 123) at my suggestion that his arm (rather than the radio-microphone) might be warm. Given my role as classroom assistant, Andrew likely expected a more reasoned response<sup>11</sup>. His use of possessive 'me' stands out against the consistent prior use of [ma] and I interpret the stylised utterance on line 19 as a rejection of my attempt at playfulness. Following line 19, Andrew goes on to reframe the discussion as a knowledge exchange, asking further factual questions about the microphone (lines 31 and 33).

Bauman's (1992, 1996) notion of 'performance' is central to Coupland's work on stylisation, but Rampton (2009) has recently argued that Goffman's (1967, 1971) 'interaction ritual' may prove a sharper lens through which to view stylisation:

With performance, people are asked (and helped) to come away from ordinary activity into the fictive, otherworldly realms created for them by the performer(s), whereas in interaction ritual, instead of participating in a voluntary and controlled release from routine, participants can find themselves CONFRONTED with uncertainty ... Interaction ritual actions are EVASIVE or REDRESSIVE, aimed at PRESERVING or RESTORING normal relations, RE-stabilizing rather than DE-stabilizing the ordinary world, escaping not INTO but OUT OF less charted zones of experience.

(Rampton 2009: 160)

Andrew's stylised use of possessive 'me' could certainly be described in relation to 'interaction ritual' rather than 'performance', aimed perhaps at restoring normal teacher-

pupil relations. I would argue, however, that these two analytic constructs are not necessarily mutually exclusive (as Rampton [2009: 151] himself admits), in fact not at all. For Rampton, 'performance' becomes an unsatisfactory notion because it implies a degree of reflexive control and the evocation of neatly delineated (often stereotypical) personae, neither of which square with his own informants' use of stylisation. Stylised 'posh' and Cockney, in particular, often represented the 'fleeting articulation of stance' (Rampton 2009: 169) in which social meanings were subtle and indeterminate. This subtlety, he feels, is better captured through the analytic lens of 'interaction ritual' rather than 'performance'. In my data too, possessive 'me' was not used as part of self-conscious, 'knowing' dialect performances (in the manner of Coupland's DJs, Roy Noble and John Dee), but I would argue that the children were still 'performing', in the sense that they were agents projecting meaningful stylistic variants for public consumption.

The stance taken in all of these performances was one of negative affect or transgression, often tempered by playfulness or a lack of commitment to the utterance. In adopting this stance, the children were able to fulfil a number of interactional goals and activities, such as: impressing one's peers with risqué humour (e.g. Extract 1), entering the 'heterosexual market' (Eckert 2002) (e.g. Extract 2), and creating social alliances (e.g. Extract 4).

The sense of ingroup play, entertainment and mock seriousness found in these examples resonates with other studies of stylisation in which stylised utterances form part of a 'fun-code' (Deppermann 2007: 326). Unlike other studies, however, the stylised use of possessive 'me' was not an attempt by speakers to lay claim to 'other' identities or to project an image different from their 'usual' self (as in Coupland 2001; De Fina 2007; Deppermann 2007; Rampton 1995). The performances did not involve a switch to a

different linguistic variety, nor did they necessitate mining the extremities of the speakers' linguistic repertoires (as in Rampton 1995, 2006, 2009). In this study, stylisation focused on a single marked linguistic form, one that is associated with the local dialect, but which appears to have fallen out of habitual use (at least for the sampled speakers). It may thus be more accurately represented as 'strategic use of an ingroup variety' (Johnstone 1999: 514).

Possessive 'me' did not work alone: as others concerned with the sociolinguistics of style have indicated, styles comprise a clustering of semiotic resources (Bucholtz 2009, Eckert 2002, Moore 2004). Prosodic and paralinguistic displays of stance (such as increased pace and volume, lengthened vowel sounds and emphatic stress) augmented the children's performances<sup>12</sup>. Their stylisations also included other prominent features of the local dialect. For example, in Extract 2, Andrew pronounces 'no' as [nɔ:] in lines 18 and 20 and displays evidence of h-dropping and the NURSE/SQUARE merger in *don't that hurts* [ɛ:ts] on line 30<sup>13</sup>. Crucially, however, while these other features occurred frequently in non-stylised contexts, possessive 'me' did not; and while prosodic and paralinguistic features varied and occurred with differing levels of intensity, possessive 'me' was a constant. In summary, a stylised performance involves the coming together of multiple semiotic resources, but in the analyses presented here, possessive 'me' was at the centre of these performances.

Whether stylisation as a linguistic process draws, in particular, upon this kind of linguistic form (i.e. one that is both socially marked and relatively infrequent), or whether stylisation as a linguistic process creates such forms, endowing them with heightened metapragmatic significance and ultimately restricting their contexts/frequency of use, is a moot point. In the concluding section I further consider the role of stylisation in

consolidating the meaning of a linguistic variant. First, however, a brief foray into some other stylisations noted in the data.

## 6. STYLISTED 'POSH' AND 'AMERICAN'

While [mi] was used in ingroup play, the full form [maɪ] was sometimes used by the children in their representations of out-group voices: 'posh' and 'American'. The source for 'American' was certainly the media, and this is probably true for 'posh' too (though 'posh' would have had further relevance to the Ironstone Primary children due to their participation that year in a school production of *My Fair Lady*). Stylised 'posh' and 'American' often occurred in playacting, as in the following three examples:

1. *Let's go* [gəʊ] *in my* [maɪ] *hotel* [həʊtəl] (Jane, Ironstone Primary)
2. *I repeat I'm near* [niə] *a teacher* [ti:tʃə]. *I repeat I'm near* [niə] *a teacher* [ti:tʃə].  
(2.2 seconds) *Now she's watching* [wa:tʃən] *me. She's watching* [wa:tʃən] *me with that big thing in my* [maɪ] *pocket.* (Harry, Ironstone Primary).
3. *My* [maɪ] *girls don't have ginger* [dʒɪndʒə] *hair. She's got blonde* [blɑ:nd] *hair.*  
(Rachel, Murrayfield Primary)

The first example illustrates stylised 'posh'. As well as using the full form for the possessive singular, Jane also modifies the vowel sounds in *go* and *hotel*, using the diphthong [əʊ] in line with the RP pronunciation, rather than the long monophthongal [o:] common to Teesside English and other northern English varieties. Jane also articulates the [h] of *hotel*, which can be interpreted against her otherwise frequent 'h-dropping'. The second and third examples illustrate the use of stylised American. Harry is talking directly into the radio-microphone as if it were a walkie-talkie and he were reporting 'back to base'. Harry may have seen American movies in which police-officers on

surveillance would report their movements in this way. In his pronunciation of post-vocalic /r/ in *near* and *teacher*, he displays sensitivity to the fact that the rhotic/non-rhotic distinction is one of the most salient differences between his own accent and American English. Rachel also emulates the rhotic American accent in her pronunciation of *ginger* in Example 3. Both children also appear to have noticed something different about American vowel sounds, replacing [ɒ] with [a] in *watching* and *blonde*.

How do these examples compare to the episodes involving possessive ‘me’? Instances of stylised ‘posh’ and ‘American’ were infrequent in the data (a total of 6 occurrences at Ironstone and 5 at Murrayfield). While all examples included the full form of the possessive singular, I would argue that the contribution this feature made to the stylisation was minimal. Stylised ‘posh’ and American utterances relied predominantly on key phonological distinctions between these varieties and Teesside English (as described above). Further, in contrast to [mi], [maɪ] occurred in many other non-stylised contexts.

## **7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

As already noted in the introduction to this article, Ochs posits a constitutive relation between language and social categories: linguistic features index social stances, acts and activities, which in turn help to constitute higher level social meanings. In relation to this study, and bearing in mind the different frequencies of use of possessive ‘me’ between the two schools, is it possible that the local interactional meanings indexed by possessive ‘me’ help to constitute social class meanings? Does habitual use of a particular kind of interactional stance by the participants at Ironstone Primary cumulatively construct a particular kind of working-class identity (e.g. characterised by humour, playfulness, the policing of social boundaries), or at least an aspect of that identity, which can be contrasted with the middle-class identity associated with Murrayfield Primary (Ochs



1993: 298)? If so, variation in the use of possessive ‘me’ is related to the different social acts and stances in which speakers in these two communities are engaged (Ochs 1993: 298). A theory in which possessive ‘me’ indexes a specific interactional stance rather than a class-based identity explains why some members of the Murrayfield community also occasionally used this form, in situations where a stance of modified negative affect was interactionally useful (e.g. Extract 3). The next question for social scientists interested in the relationship between language and social class is why some individuals might construct particular stances more often than others who differ from them with respect to their socio-economic status.

A focus on stance as the explanatory factor in linguistic variation presents working-class speakers in a more positive light than explanations which focus solely on social class and related notions such as education or linguistic ‘standardness’. The children in this study are shown to be savvy sociolinguistic players who skilfully utilise the range of linguistic options available to them in order to negotiate social relationships and position themselves and others within their community (see also Snell 2007). Claims about impoverished language use among working-class children can thus be rebutted, or at the very least reframed, in terms of their skilful use of local dialect forms. In fact we could go further in emphasising the point that the link between possessive ‘me’ and a very particular stance of negative affect/transgression was not a given, an existing resource that the children merely tapped into; the children had agency in creating this link. At the same time, however, I do not believe that this link came from nowhere, and so I return to the place of social class in this analysis.

While I am satisfied that class is not *the* explanation for speakers’ use of possessive ‘me’, and also that the use of possessive ‘me’ does not *directly* index a class-based identity (both perspectives being equally deterministic), I do not fully align with

Kiesling's (2009: 172) position that stance is necessarily a primitive in sociolinguistic variation. It seems to me that part of what makes possessive 'me' available for indexing a unique stance of modified negative affect/transgression, part of the social colouration of this feature, is its association with working class speech. Social class is present in the indexical history of this form, even though more immediate indexicalities of stance are relevant for speakers/hearers when they use it in interaction. I am suggesting, then, a circular chain of indexicality in which meaning flows from local interactional stances to styles, personas and macro-level identity categories, and then back to local interactional use. Metapragmatic activity, including explicit metadiscourse, may highlight particular points in the chain as being salient. For example, the comments of Ironstone Primary school teachers, which are steeped in the social-institutional processes of a Standard Language culture, evoke the indexical significance of possessive 'me' with respect to norms of linguistic correctness/appropriateness and thus highlight the link between possessive 'me', 'non-standardness' and 'incorrectness'. This might, in turn, feed back into local interactional use in which meanings related to transgression (against norms and correctness) become foregrounded. For a form with an extended history, such as possessive 'me', it is difficult (if not impossible) to see where the chain begins and ends (cf. Silverstein 2003: 196-197).

An important point to make with regard to this process is that dialect and class-based ideologies are multidimensional and fluid, and they depend upon the local communities to which a speaker belongs (Coupland 2009; De Fina 2007). While teachers might censure the use of possessive 'me' as a 'non-standard' or 'incorrect' form in the classroom, other dialect users (perhaps even some teachers themselves outside of school) will attribute very different meanings and values to it (and to the local dialect more generally). For the children at Ironstone Primary, possessive 'me' was not a form lacking in prestige; it was

a form associated with spontaneous performance, affective intensity and a sense of transgressing boundaries. The stylised performances were successful because these meanings were shared by the community.

The meaning of a form may become more and more nuanced through circulation over time. Perhaps this is why possessive ‘me’ was so low frequency in this data: the meanings, and thus contexts of use, became more specific and more restricted through stylisation, and so now, within the communities studied here at least, it is only used in the kinds of stylised performances reported in this paper, a simplification of the ‘indexical field’ in Eckert’s (2008) sense (cf. Bucholtz 2009). Whether or not this represents wider scale language change is a topic for further research which would require data collection with adults in the wider Teesside community. If for example possessive ‘me’ is used more frequently by older members of the community (as it was by the speakers sampled in Anderwald’s [2004] and Hollman and Siewierska [2007] studies), data from this study could provide evidence for ‘apparent-time’ language change, in which possessive ‘me’ is a receding feature of the Teesside dialect but one with specific social and pragmatic functions (cf. Beal’s [2000] discussion of the lexicalisation of Geordie /u:/ in words such as ‘Toon’). Future studies might consider a possible link between stylisation as a linguistic phenomenon and processes of language change.

In summary, this paper has argued that speaker choice is motivated primarily by immediate interactional and relational goals. Speakers select semiotic resources that fulfil these goals, and in doing so, shape and refine the meaning of those resources. This kind of sensitivity to social context and linguistic form is present in children as young as 9-years old (though in-depth study of this age group is relatively rare in variationist research). The micro-level choices that speakers make may ultimately help to (re)constitute macro-level social categories, but at the same time, these choices are

influenced by existing social structure in what is essentially a cyclical process. The analysis no doubt raises more questions than it answers – language, social acts and stances, and social structure are related to each other in complex ways – but it is clear that there are gains to be made from future studies of language variation which focus on the indexical relationship between language and social meanings and integrate variationist with interactional sociolinguistic approaches.

## NOTES

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2. It should be noted that Labov's goal was not to correlate variation with class but to obtain insights into processes of linguistic change, as outlined in Weinreich, Labov and Herzog (1968).
3. As others (e.g. Eckert 2008; Moore and Podesva 2009) have noted, Silverstein does not actually impose a hierarchy on levels of indexical meaning within his framework.
4. Snell (2009) makes a detailed comparison between the two areas based on 2001 census statistics in addition to other government information and ethnographic detail about the two areas.
5. The children were aged 8-9 when I began the fieldwork and were 9-10 years old when I completed data collection.

6. Both FRED and NWSA include material from oral history projects. If possessive ‘me’ is felt to be a significant feature of local dialect and local identity, participants might be primed to use this variant more frequently in contexts which invite them to talk about the nature of life in that particular locality. As Coupland (1988: 27) points out, regional variants and local experience ‘have a mutually encouraging, we might say symbiotic, relationship’.
7. There were 7 exceptions. In Ironstone Primary, 2 of these exceptions occurred because there was a pause between the pronoun and the following noun: *My: [ma:] (.) elastic band; My [ma] (.) uncle*. In these examples, the phonological environment was effectively neutralised by the pause. In the third Ironstone Primary example, and in all four exceptions in the Murrayfield data, the speaker used a glottal stop as a link between the pronoun and the initial vowel of the following noun.
8. The following transcription conventions are used:
- (xxx) - Transcription uncertainty
  - (.) - Brief pause (under one second)
  - (1) - Longer pause (number indicates length to nearest second)
  - (( )) - Description of prosody or non-verbal activity
  - [ - Overlapping talk or action
  - [ - Overlapping talk or action
  - text - Emphasised relative to surrounding talk (underlined words)
  - te:xt - Stretched sounds
  - sh- - Word cut off
  - (hhh) - Audible exhalation

9. Green Day is an American punk rock band.
10. Abbreviated form of 'sorry'
11. In Snell (2009) I reflect on the ambiguity of my role within the two schools during the period of the ethnography. Not only was I both researcher and friend (Milroy 1987), I was also teacher/helper in the classroom.
12. Ochs (1993: 300, 1996: 427) posits a number of universals in the marking of affective stance. These include paralinguistic features (e.g. vowel lengthening and modulation of volume and pace of delivery) in addition to the use of 'a morphologically marked form' (e.g. plural marking for a single referent, use of a demonstrative pronoun to refer to a person rather than a thing). Ochs' category of 'morphologically marked forms' could certainly incorporate the use of possessive 'me'.
13. The /ɔ:/ of THOUGHT/NORTH/FORCE and the /o:/ of GOAT are very close in Teesside accents. The NURSE vowel occurs as fronted [ɛ:] in Teesside, as in Liverpool English (Fennell, Jones and Llamas 2004).

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