

Dialect, interaction and class positioning at school: From deficit to difference to repertoire

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(Received 25 April 2012; final version received 11 October 2012)

Abstract: Sociolinguists have been fighting dialect prejudice since the 1960s, but deficit views of non-standard English are regaining currency in educational discourse. In this paper I argue that the traditional sociolinguistic response – stressing dialect systematicity and tolerance of ‘difference’ – may no longer be effective by questioning a key assumption that both deficit and difference approaches share, namely that there exist discrete varieties of English. Based on an empirical study of the language of working-class children in north-east England, I demonstrate that non-standard dialects of English do not have a discrete system of grammar that is isolated from other varieties; rather local dialect forms interact with a range of semiotic resources (*including* standard forms) within speakers’ repertoires. Interactional analyses of the children’s spontaneous speech highlight this hybridity, as well as the social meanings behind the linguistic choices children make. I conclude by addressing educational responses to non-standard dialect in the classroom, suggesting that it is not the presence or absence of non-standard forms in children’s speech that raises educational issues; rather, educational responses which problematise non-standard voices risk marginalising working-class speech, and may contribute to the alienation of working-class children, or significant groups of them, within the school system.

Keywords: dialect; repertoire; social class; linguistic variation; interaction; classroom discourse; voice.

Introduction

The assumptions underpinning deficit accounts of working-class children's language were challenged over forty years ago by sociolinguists across both sides of the Atlantic (see also Jones, this issue). In the US, William Labov's (1969) 'The Logic of Nonstandard English' addressed misunderstandings about the relationship between concept formation on the one hand, and dialect differences on the other. In a UK context, the argument was taken up by Peter Trudgill's (1975) *Accent, Dialect and the School*, a publication aimed directly at teachers. These linguists demonstrated that, grammatically, non-standard dialects like Black English Vernacular (in Labov's case) or regional varieties of British English (in Trudgill's case) are as systematic, logical and rule-governed as standard English; they are just *different* dialects of English. These two approaches – deficit versus difference – have polarised debates around working-class language and educational failure. In this paper, I aim to transcend this dispute by challenging an implicit assumption that both approaches share, namely that there exist discrete dialects of English.

The assumption that clear boundaries can be drawn around different varieties of English is evident in the following excerpt from the report *So Why Can't They Read* (Gross 2010), commissioned by London Mayor Boris Johnson (see also Grainger, this issue). The author, Miriam Gross, claims that a phenomenon she calls 'Speaking "street"' is relevant to the debate on alleged falling standards in literacy in London schools. This is what she had to say about 'Street' English:

Speaking “Street”

There is another language issue which is rarely mentioned: “Street” English, the argot in which children – both white and non-white – who live in the poorer areas of inner cities often speak to each other. This language contains a mix of various ethnic influences – Caribbean, Cockney, Afro-American, Indian and others. Like dialects and slang in other countries, “Street” has its own grammar, its own vocabulary and its own pronunciation.

In other European countries argot and slang are not allowed into the classroom; children know exactly what is “correct” usage in their main language, and what is not. In this country, by contrast, primary school teachers – dedicated as many of them are to “child-led” education – don’t feel that it’s their role to interfere with self expression in any shape or form. On the contrary, they encourage children to read poems and stories written in ethnic dialects – in Barbadian patois, for example – which is fine, but they omit to point out that there are linguistic discrepancies.

Only later, when they get to secondary school, do these pupils discover that “Street” is not acceptable in their written work. Understandably, they find this both confusing and discouraging.

(Gross 2010, 28)

Gross’ report focuses on perceived deficits in the speech of working-class children (see Grainger, this issue), yet when she writes that ““Street” has its own grammar, its own vocabulary and its own pronunciation’ she is picking up on Labov and Trudgill’s line that non-standard dialects of English are discrete linguistic varieties with their own set of rules. Set within this context, claims about dialect difference and systematicity start to sound as narrow and ideological as some of Gross’ other assumptions (e.g. that there is only one ‘correct’ dialect, all other dialects being incorrect or ‘slang’)¹. There may be good reasons to

draw boundaries around linguistic varieties for the purposes of formal linguistic description, and the idea that discrete language varieties exist clearly circulates in public discourse, but as sociolinguists interested in language as a social phenomenon, we must recognise that these constructions do not reflect real-life language use. It has long been recognised that it is not possible to delineate the boundaries of ‘a language’ using linguistic criteria alone; such units are sociocultural constructions (e.g. Woolard, Schieffelin and Kroskrity 1998). In line with Jørgensen et al. (2011, 28; see also Blommaert and Rampton 2011), this paper argues that the same thinking should be applied to other packages of linguistic features, such as ‘dialects’ or ‘varieties’ (see also Agha 2004 on ‘register’ and ‘enregisterment’). If sociolinguists are to make a serious contribution to debates about language, class and educational failure, it is crucial that our arguments reflect sociolinguistic reality as closely as possible.

Building upon a study of the speech of working-class children in Teesside, north-east England, I first draw attention to the limitations of a different-but-equal approach to dialect variation. I demonstrate that non-standard dialects of English do not have a discrete system of grammar that is isolated from other varieties (such as standard English); rather local dialect forms interact with a range of semiotic resources (*including* standard forms) within speakers’ linguistic repertoires. I outline the advantages of a ‘repertoire’ approach over the different-but-equal model and apply it to two extended examples of peer-group interaction. These analyses reveal the interactional dynamics that give rise to the use of non-standard forms, and highlight the creativity behind the linguistic choices working-class children make. Focusing only on creativity and choice, however, leaves an incomplete picture. We have to acknowledge that some linguistic resources are more highly valued than others, especially within the educational domain. In the final part of the article I therefore examine constraints around the use of non-standard dialect in the classroom. Here I introduce the notion of ‘voice’, considering how and why some speakers make themselves heard in educational

settings while others fail to do so. I suggest that it is not the presence or absence of non-standard forms in children's speech that raises educational issues (as commentators such as Gross have suggested); rather issues arise when non-standard speakers are dealt with inappropriately in educational contexts.

The case study: Sociolinguistic variation in Teesside

The setting for the analysis is Teesside, north-east England, where I conducted a comparative ethnography of the language practices of 9 to 10 year old children in two socially-differentiated primary schools (Snell 2009): Ironstone Primary was situated in a lower-working-class area of Teesside; and Murrayfield Primary served a predominantly lower-middle-class area². From November 2005 to February 2007 I made weekly visits to the Year 4 (and subsequently Year 5) classroom in both schools and participated in school life as a classroom helper (e.g. supporting the children with classroom activities, accompanying them on class trips). I also spent time with the children in the playground, chatting and playing games. As a result, I was able to develop some knowledge of the children's personalities, interests and friendships, and engage with their activities both inside and outside of the classroom. After seven months of making weekly visits to the two schools, I began recording the children's interactions using a radio-microphone. This method meant that the children could move around freely while being recorded, participating as normal in their daily school activities. I was not necessarily (in fact not usually) a participant in the recorded interactions. This method produced a rich repository of children's spontaneous speech. The quantitative and interactional analyses presented in this article are based on 50 hours of radio-microphone data (25 hours from each school), collected when ten pupils from each school wore the radio-microphone for half a day.

In this article I focus on working-class Ironstone Primary, and in particular, on one pupil, Clare, whose language I was able to capture in a wide variety of settings. The first of these (represented in Extract 1) was a playground game that took place during the lunch break on 3rd November 2006 when Clare was wearing the radio-microphone. The children are in the playground, where a group of girls are playing a game that involves stealing each other's shoes. Clare has approached this group in order to join in the fun. The girls then steal Clare's shoe.

Extract 1³:

1 Jane: ((*chanting*)) we got a boot
2 we got a boot
3 we got a boot
4 we got a boot
5 Clare: she's got my shoe ((*laughs while saying 'shoe'*))
6 Anon: Clare's shoe
7 Clare's shoe
8 Inaudible: ((*Background noise - 3 seconds*))
9 Danielle: kinky boots
10 kinky boots
11 Anon: pass us it
12 Anon: Clare's shoe
13 get off Gemma (xxxxx)
14 Inaudible: ((*Background noise - 3 seconds*))
15 Clare: **give us it**
16 Anon: Clare's shoe ((*chanting*))
17 Clare's shoe
18 [Clare's shoe
19 Anon: [(pass us it)
20 (3)
21 Clare: **give us i::t**
22 Anon: (I know I haven't got it)
23 Clare: Rosie
24 (2)
25 **Rosie give us i:t**
26 ((*Background noise - 12 seconds*))
27 Anon: get Clare's [feet
28 Clare: [(**Give us back**) my shoe
29 Jane: get Clare's feet
30 (2)

31 Anon: get it get it
32 Joanne: Danielle Danielle
33 get it ((*laughing*))
34 Anon: we've got one
35 Anon: alright you may as well give (us) the other one
36 Gemma: can I get that one?
37 Jane: yeah lay down on the floor
38 Anon: yeah lay down (xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx)
39 Julia: (what's going on)
40 Tina: because Clare's got one shoe on
41 ((*Background noise and sound of children running - 17 seconds*))
42 Clare: he::lp
43 ((*Sound of Clare running - 12 seconds*))
44 Clare: **give us my shoe back**
45 Tina: she hasn't got her shoe (xxxxxxxxxxxxx)
46 (she's a) lucky woman
47 Clare: Jane you- ((*breathing heavily*))
48 (3)
49 **give us my shoe back**
50 (1)
51 **give us my ba::ck**
52 (1)
53 **give us my shoe ba:ck**
54 Anon: Clare I've got my shoes off
55 Clare: I know but my feet are freezing

Clare makes a series of requests to get her shoe back, and in doing so, she consistently uses 'us' for the first person objective singular, rather than the standard form 'me' (highlighted in bold in the transcript). What can we infer from Clare's use of 'us'? Does it signal linguistic deficit? Is Clare unable to differentiate between singular and plural? Does this reflect an underdeveloped sense of self (see Jones, this issue, on Bernstein's 'public language')? The traditional sociolinguistic response would state quite clearly that Clare's use of language is not deficient in any way; on the contrary, Clare is speaking a variety of English, the Teesside dialect, which is linguistically different from – but equal to – standard English. Her use of singular 'us' is communicatively effective – there are no misunderstandings when Clare says 'Give us my shoe back' – and thus it is not inferior to the

standard English form. What we have, then, is two different (but equivalent) pronoun paradigms, as represented in Table 1⁴.

[Table 1 near here]

In Beal's table 'us' appears as the paradigmatic alternative to standard 'me' for the first person objective singular; so, while non-standard, this form fits within the wider north-eastern pronominal system, which is as rule governed as the standard English system⁵. Beal does caution, however, that the pronoun paradigm she presents is an idealisation: 'the reader is unlikely to encounter anybody who uses all of these features all of the time' (Beal 1993, 191). This appears to me to be a crucial point, one that makes the difference model insufficient. Let me elaborate further.

Table 2 illustrates the frequency with which children in both schools used the two variants of the objective singular. There were 655 occurrences of this variable across the data set and singular 'us' was rather infrequent. As we might expect, speakers in Ironstone Primary used this feature more often than their middle-class counterparts (16.9% in Ironstone Primary compared to 3.8% in Murrayfield Primary), but the majority of the time they used standard 'me'. We do not have two separate pronoun paradigms then; actually, what we find in Teesside (and elsewhere) is that standard forms are available to *all* speakers, but these exist together with other forms within a speaker's repertoire.

I am certainly not the only one to have made the point that few people use non-standard forms categorically – it's a basic tenet of variationist/quantitative sociolinguistics that speakers, and speaking situations, are differentiated according to the frequency of use of non-standard forms rather than categorical absence/presence (Chambers 2004, 115) – but this point does not come out clearly in the difference approach to debates around language and educational failure. In fact, the focus on difference suggests separation, when what we have

in reality is mixing. I would like to propose, then, that we move from ‘difference’ to ‘repertoire’.

From ‘difference’ to ‘repertoire’

The term ‘repertoire’ has circulated within sociolinguistics for several decades, being categorised by John Gumperz as one of the ‘basic sociolinguistic concepts’ (Gumperz 1986, 20-21). Hymes (1996, 33) defines repertoire thus:

A repertoire comprises a set of ways of speaking. Ways of speaking, in turn, comprise *speech styles*, on the one hand, and *contexts of discourse*, on the other, together with *relations of appropriateness* obtaining between styles and contexts.

The use of repertoire has several advantages over the traditional difference approach to language variation. The first point to note is that repertoire refers to the set of resources that a speaker actually commands rather than to abstract linguistic models. In this way, it can account for speakers who draw upon and mix resources associated with a range of linguistic varieties. Second, the use of repertoire invokes Hymes’ (1974, 75) notion of ‘communicative competence’ in that it links linguistic resources with knowledge of how to use these resources. Applying this to our analysis of singular ‘us’, we might note that this form occurred only in informal peer-group interaction. Table 3 shows that over 40 percent of occurrences of singular ‘us’ were recorded in the playground (even though less than 20% of the recordings were made in this part of the school). When singular ‘us’ was used in the classroom, it was during peer-centred paired/group activities (e.g. a shared art project) or in informal side conversations, but never during centre-stage classroom talk. It appears, then, not only that the children had access to the standard as well as to the non-standard form, but also that they had developed a ‘practical sense’ (Bourdieu 1990, 66) of the contexts in which each of these forms is considered appropriate: ‘me’ in formal, teacher-oriented contexts, and

‘us’ in informal, peer-group contexts. This focus on formality oversimplifies the children’s stylistic choices, however, and tells us very little about the meanings invested in these choices. To give a more nuanced account I turn to Jan Blommaert’s attempts to ‘*reconstruct* the concept of repertoire in a descriptively realistic manner’ (Blommaert and Backus 2012, 7; see also Blommaert 2005) (emphasis in original). Blommaert focuses our attention on the actual use of linguistic resources, emphasising that these resources might come to be associated with non-referential meanings and social values:

The resources that enter into a repertoire are indexical resources, language materials that enable us to produce more than just linguistic meaning but to produce images of ourself, pointing interlocutors towards the frames in which we want our meanings to be put.

(Blommaert and Backus 2012, 26)

To take account of indexical as well as referential meaning, we must move away from an exclusive focus on linguistic form and towards an analysis of language in context. With this in mind, let’s return to Extract 1.

[Insert Tables 2 and 3 near here]

Clare finds herself in a difficult situation: it is a wet November day and she has bare feet because one of her shoes has been stolen by some of the other girls. Though difficult, this situation is not unique – others have also fallen victim to this game – and Clare’s initial response is quite positive, even jovial: she laughs through her utterance on line 5. Ten seconds later, however, when Clare makes a request to get her shoe back (line 15) there’s a change in footing (Goffman 1981) to a more serious stance: this time there is no laughter and Clare’s intonation is flat. It is not easy to decipher from the recording exactly what happened during this ten second period, but it seems that Clare’s shoe was being passed around (see e.g. lines 11-13) amidst chanting (lines 6-7, 9-10), and that Clare was being positioned by her

peers as a non-participant (in addition to the teasing implicit in the chanting, notice the use of the third person in lines 6, 7, 12, and then later in lines 16-18, 27, 29). We might reasonably assume that all of this was frustrating for Clare, and perhaps also that her foot had started to get cold (see her later comment on line 55). It appears, then, that by line 15 Clare is no longer a willing participant sharing in the fun.

Clare wants to get her shoe back and has available to her a range of options for formulating a directive, including the standard imperative ‘give me it’ (see Table 4). But imperatives have the potential to function as face-threatening acts (FTAs) (Brown and Levinson 1987, 191), and issuing an FTA could be counterproductive in this case, perhaps causing a delay in the return of the missing shoe. It has been suggested that the use of singular ‘us’ might have its origins in being a mitigating factor in such FTAs (Anderwald 2004, 178; see also Carter and McCarthy 2006, 382)⁶. This could be true – singular ‘us’ occurred exclusively in imperative clauses in the Teesside data⁷ – but for the children in this study it seemed to have more local significance. Clare and her peers used imperatives with singular ‘us’ to index stances of solidarity and alignment, going beyond the politeness encoded in the conventionalised indirectness (e.g. Can I have my shoe back?) that was preferred by the middle-class participants in the study (Snell 2009, Ch 4). As a local dialect form, singular ‘us’ indexed a sense of solidarity and ingroup membership, and was used when issues of solidarity, group identity, alignment, and so on, came into play, as in Extract 1.

[Insert Table 4 near here]

In summary, then, I am suggesting: (1) that singular ‘us’ is not simply a different way of saying ‘me’ for working-class speakers in Teesside (cf. Dines 1980, Lavendera 1978 and Romaine 1984 on the debate in sociolinguistics about the validity of the ‘linguistic variable’); (2) that it has indexical meanings related to solidarity, alignment, and group identity; and thus (3) for these speakers communicative competence means being tuned to the local social order

and to the exigencies of the interactional moment, where what is considered ‘appropriate’ is up for negotiation and contestation (cf. Rosen 1991, 115).

It might help us to further understand Clare’s (and her peers’) use of singular ‘us’ if we situate it in a broader view of her speech repertoire (cf. Sharma 2011; Sharma and Rampton 2011). Extract 2 includes excerpts taken from approximately one hour of shared activity during a design technology lesson. Clare and her partner Hannah are attempting to make a torch. In this lesson they are working on the outer shell of the torch using boxes, paint and other materials.

Extract 2:

1 Gemma: why don't you just use (xxxxxx) the other bit
2 where it hasn't got any glue on
3 Clare: why didn't we think of that
4 (5)
5 Hannah: Clare why don't you just use that bit
6 where there isn't any glue on it
7 Clare: **are yous two twin sisters**
8 (3)
9 no because I've just done it- (.)
10 **I'm- I'm- I'm a magician me**
11 (1)
12 now what do you do
13 (1)
14 you can do that (.)
15 >oh just let me paint a sparkly one<
16 (2)
17 Clare: just give me a little bit of glue
18 Hannah: you're a very good magician there
19 Clare: thanks
. .

((8 minutes 30 seconds later))

.

20 Clare: miss
21 (2)
22 Mrs Trotter: what
23 Clare: we've done it
24 we've trimmed it
25 Mrs Trotter: what you giving me it for then
26 Clare: cos we dunno what to do with it
27 Mrs Trotter: you put it over your bulb
28 that's [what you do
29 Hannah: [yeah but what about that bit
30 Clare: I know
31 Mrs Trotter: well just stick the scissors through it
32 Clare: here I'll do that job (.)
33 let me
34 (2)
35 Clare: NO::W look
36 **you made me fall and my- [mi]**
37 Mrs Trotter: WELL GET THE SCISSORS ((not clear whether this is
shouted to Clare or another pupil))
38 Clare: **my [mi] microphone fell off**
39 Mrs Trotter: it's a piece of paper for goodness sake
40 (3)
41 Clare: you should (lea::rn)
42 (17) ((Classroom noise))
Clare: ((starts singling gently to herself))
43 'cos there's one thing
44 we're gonna rock all over you
45 dum de dum de da'

.

((3 minutes 30 seconds later))

.

46 Hannah: wait there
47 can- (.) I just take

48 (1)
49 this off a minute
50 Clare: here I'll hold it
51 Hannah: no I will I'll just [take (xxxxxxx)]
52 Clare: [I want to hold it
53 Hannah: no
54 it's my box
55 Clare: so I want to hold it
56 (1)
57 when you say turn
58 I'll tu::rn
.
((8 minutes 30 seconds later))
.
59 Hannah: watch
60 Clare: **a::w howay I was enjoying that**
61 now let me paint this one again
62 *((Sound of tap running - Clare is at the sink))*
63 Clare: *((Singing))* 'Bill and Ben the flower pot men'
64 (2)
65 'in his hand
66 he's got the whole'
67 Anon: there's loads more
68 Helen: excusez-moi
69 I need to wash my hands

A range of strategies for formulating directives are evidenced in this extract. The most popular is the standard imperative (e.g. lines 46, 59), including first person imperatives with 'me' (e.g. lines 15, 17, 33, 61). Imperatives like these were the most frequently used directive across the data set for children in both schools, accounting for around two thirds of all directives issued to other children (Ironstone: 65.7%, Murrayfield: 67.4%). This finding is in line with other studies of children's directives (e.g. Mitchell-Kernan and Kernan 1977;

Achiba 2003). In fact, imperative forms are quite normal (and not face-threatening) for both adults and children in situations which involve shared, cooperative and/or routine activity, just like the activity represented in Extract 2 (Gordon and Ervin-Tripp 1984, 299, 314-315). There are no contested issues of group membership or alignment here: Clare and Hannah are working together towards a common goal, and requests for glue, and so on, are entirely reasonable in this setting. In addition to imperatives, we also have the conventional indirectness of a first person modal interrogative (lines 47-49), and the direct embodiment of a speaker's desires in a first person expression of want/need⁸ (e.g. line 52). The point is further reinforced, then, that imperatives with singular 'us' are just one option within the repertoires of these speakers.

A final strategy, which the reader may not recognise as a directive, can be found in line 60. 'Howay' is a dialect term specific to the north-east of England. Referentially, it means something like 'come on' (though the precise meanings associated with this form are indeterminate) and it functions generally as a directive. On line 59, for example, when Hannah tells Clare *watch*, she is attempting to direct Clare's behaviour at the sink (Clare is supposed to be washing her paint brush but is actually covering the sink with paint, and is thus breaking class rules). Clare's response is quite forceful – notice the additional stress placed on 'enjoying that' – but the sense of ingroup solidarity indexed by the highly localized dialect form (together with the absentminded singing that follows) mitigates the confrontation and retains the spirit of camaraderie in this classroom task. I would like to suggest that it does more than this though. Clare's use of 'howay' appears also to communicate a sense that the more disciplined Hannah does not have the right to spoil Clare's fun; she does not, for example, have the authority of a teacher. Clare's use of 'howay' in this context is consistent with the way it was used across the data set. Speakers used 'howay' to construct a stance of authority with regard to the local social order when it

appeared that their interlocutor had somehow infringed upon their rights (as in lines 59-60). I have argued elsewhere (Snell 2009, 2011) that it came to index for these speakers meanings related to fair-play and egalitarianism, as well as ingroup identity.

There are several other non-standard features in Extract 2. On line 7 Clare uses ‘yous’ for the second person plural pronoun, rather than the standard form ‘you’. ‘Yous’ is not unique to Teesside; it occurs in a number of urban dialects of British English (e.g. Liverpool, Newcastle) and in Irish English, where speakers are making a grammatical distinction (singular vs. plural) that they are currently unable to make in standard English. Varieties of US English have also developed strategies to mark this difference, using forms such as ‘y’all’ (Crystal 2004, 449) and ‘yinz’ (Johnstone et al. 2006). In this way, ‘yous’ is perhaps part of a wider global tendency to innovate within the pronominal system. This may be true also of singular ‘us’ (see note 5) and of another non-standard pronominal form, possessive ‘me’ (i.e. the use of [mi] for the first person possessive singular), which Clare uses on lines 36 and 38 in Extract 2. Kortmann and Szmrecsanyi (2004, 1153) show that this feature is geographically widespread (for more detail see Snell 2010), but it takes on a distinctively local flavour in the Teesside data. Speakers consistently used possessive ‘me’ to report something negative – tripping up (as in Extract 2), an injury sustained in a play fight, a dramatised electric shock – in a mock serious/jocular fashion (Snell 2010). In doing so, they forged an indexical link between possessive ‘me’ (a feature conventionally associated with non-standard grammar) and a stance of stylised negative affect. In Extract 2, Clare’s stylised performance includes increased volume, emphasis, and elongation of the vowel in ‘NO::W’(line 35) in addition to possessive ‘me’. The stylisation seems to be an example of ‘self-talk’ (Goffman 1978), an outward display designed to re-establish Clare as a competent person by (1) shifting the blame, and (2) recontextualising a clumsy trip as something with

more serious consequences, such as dropping the valuable radio-microphone (the children felt that wearing the radio-microphone gave them a certain amount of status).

A range of linguistic resources are displayed in this extract: some are associated with standard English, some with the Teesside dialect, others with a supra-local or even global non-standard dialect. It is not possible, therefore, to impose a neat binary – standard English versus Teesside dialect – on the children’s language⁹. In fact, any analysis at the level of distinct linguistic varieties would be problematic. Even if we could settle upon which varieties to include, it might not always be possible to decide which features belong where. The use of a right-dislocated pronoun in ‘I’m a magician me’ (Extract 2, line 10) is associated with non-standard dialect, and to a certain extent it is regionally marked: the personal pronoun tag illustrated in Extract 2 is common in the north-east of England, but in Yorkshire an auxiliary verb is included in the tag (e.g. ‘He’s got his head screwed on, has Dave’) (Beal 2004, 135-136). When the right-dislocated tag takes the form of an extended noun phrase (as in ‘It’s lovely, the weather’) it is accepted as part of spoken standard English, however (see e.g. Biber et al. 1999; Carter and McCarthy 1995; Quirk et al. 1985), and even of informal writing (Huddleston and Pullum 2002). The phenomenon of right-dislocation therefore straddles the standard/non-standard interface (for further analysis of this feature see Snell 2009, Ch 5 and Moore and Snell 2011). A further complication is that standard English grammar is spoken in a distinctive Teesside accent. Clare regularly drops /h/ in word initial position, reinstating it usually only for emphasis, as in her emphatic use of ‘hold’ on line 52. Variations in accent are undoubtedly as distinctive and socially sensitive as those at the level of grammar and vocabulary (Rosen 1991, 110; Lippi-Green 1997; Mugglestone 2003); thus Clare’s prolific h-dropping is unlikely to pass unnoticed, even when her grammar adheres to the rules of standard English. Finally, notice Helen’s use of ‘excusez-moi’ in line 68. Helen does not ‘know’ French in the sense of having full and active competence in this

language, but nevertheless her use of this phrase represents ‘a minimal form of learning and a minimal form of knowledge’ (Blommaert and Backus 2012, 13). This further highlights the important point that ‘[t]he repertoires of people absorb whatever comes their way as a useful – practical and/or pleasant – resource, as long as such resources are accessible to them’ (Blommaert and Backus 2012, 16). Clare’s use of song represents another resource, one that draws upon popular culture (lines 43-45), children’s television (line 63), and a hymn from school assembly (lines 65-67). In this way, repertoires become complex and layered, and thus any attempt to analyse language use by identifying separate linguistic varieties inevitably simplifies the range of resources involved (Jørgensen et al. 2011, 28).

The clustering of semiotic resources described above is what many sociolinguists working within the ‘third wave’ of variation studies refer to as ‘style’ (see Eckert 2012 for a review; but also Auer 2007, Coupland 2007, Eckert 2000, Moore 2012). This definition of style encompasses the idea that speakers continually make choices between socially meaningful forms, adapting and combining resources from their repertoires in a process of stylistic ‘bricolage’ (Hebdige 1979). Third wave studies have thus highlighted speaker agency in a way that earlier studies of dialect variation (including the early work of Labov and Trudgill) did not:

The emphasis on stylistic practice in the third wave places speakers not as passive and stable carriers of dialect, but as stylistic agents, tailoring linguistic styles in ongoing and lifelong projects of self-construction and differentiation.

(Eckert 2012, 97-98)

So far this paper has also foregrounded speaker agency, demonstrating that Clare was not simply a ‘carrier’ of Teesside dialect, but a speaker who made strategic linguistic choices in response to multiple social, pragmatic and contextual factors. It would be misleading to suggest that Clare and her peers were *entirely* free in their stylistic choices, however. They

were subject to constraints imposed upon them by their teachers, who were themselves constrained by the wider institution within which they work. In the next section I consider what happens when children use non-standard dialect in formal classroom contexts, where speakers may have less stylistic freedom than the analyses so far (set in the playground and informal discussion) might suggest.

Dialect, identity and learning in the classroom

The interaction presented in Extract 3 is an example of what commonly happens in UK and US classrooms when children use non-standard language in whole-class discussion. It comes from a corpus of video recorded Year 5 and 6 literacy lessons collected in an East London primary school as part of an ESRC-funded project¹⁰ on classroom discourse and dialogic pedagogy. The class have just watched Aiden Gibbon's short animation *The Piano*. Prior to the start of this extract, the pupils had worked together in pairs to come up with a word that might sum up the emotion in the film. One of the pupils has just given the response 'sad'.

Extract 3

- 1 Mr Robbins: put your hand up if you think he looks sad
2 ((Around 9 pupils raise their hands. After 5 seconds Freddy joins in))
3 Mr Robbins: Freddy why do you think he looks sad
4 what makes him look sad
5 Freddy: because he's-
6 he ain't got a smile on his face
7 Mr Robbins: ain't got a smile on [his face
8 Asha: [((laughs))
9 Freddy: he (.) has (.) not got a smile on his face
10 Mr Robbins: Okay

Just over half a minute before Freddy speaks on line 5, Mr Robbins had called upon him to report on the word(s) he had written down to describe the emotion in the film. Freddy replied:

‘I’ve come up with one thing but I don’t think I’m going to say it out loud’. Mr Robbins accepted Freddy’s reluctance to speak in front of the class and moved onto another pupil. When Freddy does later speak (lines 5-6, Extract 3), Mr Robbins’ first response is to correct his grammar, rather than comment on the substantive content of his contribution and/or acknowledge the change in his attitude (i.e. his willingness to speak)¹¹. The strategy that Mr Robbins uses (i.e. correction through marked repetition of the non-standard form) was not uncommon in this school, as can be seen from the way Freddy immediately recognises the need to reformulate on line 9 (cf. Godley et al. 2004, 109). Freddy has no problem in reformulating, and thus it is evident that he (like Claire) has access to the standard as well as the non-standard form. But why was this reformulation necessary? Freddy’s answer posed no issues of intelligibility or communicative effectiveness – his utterance was understood by all – but there is a difference between being understood and being listened to (Bourdieu 1991, 55), and this is where ‘voice’ must be incorporated into our discussion of repertoire.

Following Hymes (1996), Blommaert (2005, 4-5) defines voice as ‘the way in which people manage to make themselves understood or fail to do so’. He continues that in ‘doing so, they have to draw upon and deploy discursive means which they have at their disposal, and they have to use them in contexts that are specified as to conditions of use’. In Extract 3, Freddy was constrained by norms which dictate that only utterances in standard English can function as legitimate contributions to classroom discourse. Forms such as ‘ain’t’ may have value in peer-group interaction, but they do not have value in teacher-focused discussion in the classroom. In order to be accepted in this context, Freddy had to substitute a feature that occurs frequently in local speech with its standard English equivalent. The interaction was over in less than a minute and the classroom discussion moved swiftly on, but moments such as these may have more enduring consequences.

Teacher corrections are of course part of a much wider system. They are one product of a National Curriculum that stresses the importance of teaching children spoken standard English. Curriculum documents dictate for example that children in the UK aged 7 to 11 should be able to ‘speak audibly and clearly, using spoken standard English in formal contexts’ (DfEE and QCA 1999, 50). Linguists have raised concerns about such requirements (see e.g. Bex and Watts 1999), noting in particular the point that spoken standard English is inadequately defined in National Curriculum documentation. Indeed, any attempt to comprehensively define spoken standard English is doomed to failure for the reasons outlined above (i.e. that a number of linguistic features straddle the standard/non-standard interface, that issues of accent become confused with standard grammar, and so on). I add to this debate the point that it is socially naïve to assume that correcting children’s speech in the manner demonstrated in Extract 3 will serve to enhance their linguistic repertoire (cf. Rosen 1991). This approach does not take account of the social dimension of voice, the fact that differences in social value are being attributed to different linguistic forms, leaving pupils with an apprehension of the limited value their working-class speech has in this formal educational domain¹². The imperative to challenge non-standard forms in pupils’ speech often comes not only from the teacher but also from other pupils. Notice that in Extract 3 Asha laughs during the correction of Freddy’s utterance in a manner that suggests she’s laughing at his ‘mistake’, rather than at Mr Robbins. There is support for this interpretation in another recording in this classroom in which Asha vehemently scolds a classmate for his use of non-standard ‘we was’. Corrections, reformulations and disapproving looks are hard to resist (Bourdieu 1991, 51), and ultimately, speakers like Freddy and Asha buy into a system of linguistic evaluation that works against them (the inevitable consequence of a phenomenon Bourdieu 1991 describes as symbolic power).

If low value is accorded to working-class speech in the classroom, some pupils may become less confident in oral expression and thus reluctant to contribute to whole class discussion. In Godley et al.'s (2007) study of grammar instruction in an urban (and predominantly African American) 10th grade English class, the focal students expressed discomfort with their teacher's insistence that they speak only standard English in class, and two of the 11 students interviewed said that they tried not to speak at all to avoid being corrected. Such reluctance to speak is an issue not just for the teaching of literacy but for the whole curriculum. Classroom dialogue is crucial to learning (Alexander 2005; Lefstein and Snell 2011b; Mercer 2008; Vygotsky 1978). Pupils should therefore be encouraged to respond, question, challenge, and elaborate their thinking using whatever language they find most comfortable. There is no reason why this 'thinking aloud' should be done in standard English.

Related to this are identity implications. Performing the identity of a 'good pupil' in UK classrooms involves a specific configuration of semiotic resources, including displays of competence in standard English. Given the associations already noted above between non-standard dialect and local peer-group meanings, pupils may perceive a conflict between the identity of 'good student' and other identities (like 'peer-group leader', 'popular boy'). Some will be successful in negotiating this conflict. In his research with working-class pupils in a London secondary school, Rampton (2006, 293-301) describes how one pupil, Hanif, used an exaggerated Cockney accent in the classroom to transition between work and chat, combine a display of 'being on task' with signs that he is not a nerd, and 'vernacularise' school knowledge for his friends. In doing so he was able to balance being a good pupil with being a fully integrated member of the peer-group. As Rampton (2006, 316-317) points out, however, Hanif's case was rather special. His place at the top of the academic hierarchy meant that teachers gave him a lot of discursive space in lessons and this put him in a privileged

position. Hanif's school also had a tradition of respect for non-standard dialect. The key point, then, is not the presence or absence of non-standard dialect in pupils' speech, but the way it becomes the focus for relational work (McDermott and Gospodinoff 1979, 181). Where it forms part of congenial classroom relations, pupils like Hanif will flourish. In a less hospitable environment, it is possible that pupils will resist their teachers' corrections, choose not to inhabit the identity of good student, and reject the resources associated with this identity. Within this final group, there will likely be pupils who disengage with education completely (Piestrup 1973, 170; Willis 1977; see also Wortham 2006 on the way problematic school identities are constructed through a series of interactions over time).

It would be wrong to assume that all working-class children become the hapless victims of prescriptive attitudes in the classroom. As we have already seen, Rampton (2006) has shown that some working-class pupils draw upon the resources of their local dialect to transition between peer- and school-centred spaces with relative ease. Similarly, in Godley et al.'s (2007, 120) study, one pupil directly challenged her teacher's insistence that only standard English be used in the classroom, and several others drew upon formal school language to mock their teacher (2007, 119; see also Rampton 2006, 284-293). Some working-class pupils will be successful in managing complex linguistic and identity repertoires. But an important few will not. Such pupils may become alienated from educational opportunities and thus more likely than those who have had a more positive educational experience to take up the same positions that their parents hold in the social hierarchy. If working-class children come to school without linguistic and cultural capital, and do not find there the means or motivation to increase it through educational investment, it is likely that social inequalities will be reproduced (Bourdieu 1991, 62).

Conclusion

Sociolinguists must continue to challenge the deficit view of working-class children's speech, but our arguments should be grounded in real examples of language in use rather than in idealised linguistic models. When interactional data is taken into account, it becomes clear that the different-but-equal approach to language variation does not work. Rather than distinct language varieties and systematic difference we find complex mixing within speakers' repertoires. In urban areas like London, this mixing is likely to include resources from other languages (Rampton 2011; see also Hewitt 1986; Harris 2006, 2008), hence the reference in Gross' (2010) report to 'ethnic influences'; but even in less diverse communities, like Teesside, there is significant mixing. The blend of resources demonstrated in the analyses of Extracts 1 and 2 – the combination of standard English, non-standard forms, local vocabulary, musical influences and stock phrases, together with indexical meanings – is a reflection of how speakers actually use language. From this perspective, working-class speakers like Clare appear as multi-skilled language users. Our challenge is to communicate this view to outside audiences.

Focusing only on creative linguistic practice leaves an incomplete picture, however. We have to acknowledge that some resources are more highly valued than others, especially within the educational domain. Our analyses must therefore also take account of voice, of how and why some speakers make themselves heard in educational settings while others fail to do so. The discussion in the final section of this article is largely suggestive. The extent to which issues of linguistic insecurity and conflict of identity are central within the educational system is an empirical question. There is currently little evidence of the 'damage getting done' in UK classrooms (Rampton 2006, 319), but there is a pressing need for research that addresses this issue, especially given the recent high profile accounts of UK schools cracking down on non-standard speech (Shepherd 2012), even offering their pupils elocution lessons

(Harris 2012). We need to investigate the educational and cultural backdrop that has given rise to these directives, as well as their effects on young people.

Notes

¹ In his work in South Central Harlem, one of Labov's (1969, 1972) aims was to demonstrate that BEV is a discrete rule-governed system (just like standard English). In order to do this he sought 'the most consistent and reliable data' (1972, 255), which he found in the natural interactions of core members of the local adolescent vernacular culture. Adolescents who did not participate actively in this culture were termed 'Lames' (by Labov, as well as central members of that culture). The language of core members was felt to be the most reliable data because these speakers followed the rules of BEV consistently. Lames, on the other hand, were more variable in their use of BEV. For this reason, Labov writes that Lames 'fall short as informants' (1972, 288). This designation, however, better reflects Labov's political goal (of describing a discrete grammatical system) rather than sociolinguistic reality. While Labov presents 'Lames' as the sociolinguistic informants to be avoided, this paper argues that in their variable use of the local dialect together with standard English they represent the majority of speakers we encounter (I owe this point to discussion with Emma Moore, University of Sheffield).

² The names of the two schools, as well as the individuals named in this paper, are pseudonyms. Elsewhere (Snell 2009, see also Snell 2010) I make a detailed comparison of the two school areas using census data, indices of deprivation and OFSTED reports.

³ Transcription notations include:

(text)	- Transcription uncertainty
(xxxxxxx)	- Indistinguishable speech
(.)	- Brief pause (less than one second)
(1)	- Longer pause (number indicates length to nearest whole second)
(())	- Description of prosody or non-verbal activity
[- Overlapping talk or action
[
<u>text</u>	- Emphasised relative to surrounding talk (underlined words)
te::xt	- Stretched sounds
sh-	- Word cut off
>text<	- Speech delivered more rapidly than surrounding speech.
give us it	- Bold used to highlight utterances for analysis

⁴ This table gives a comparison between the standard English pronoun paradigm and the Tyneside English pronoun paradigm. While the Tyneside and Teesside dialect are different, there are a number of similarities (both being dialects of the north-east of England), especially with regard to grammar. All of the Tyneside forms, with the exception of possessive 'wor', can also be heard in Teesside.

⁵ Speakers in the north-east of England are not alone in their use of this form. Singular 'us' is found elsewhere in the British Isles (e.g. in the south-east of England [Anderwald 2004]) and, indeed, elsewhere in the English speaking world (e.g. Australia [Pawley 2004]); it has also been noted historically (Wright 1905, 271). This is true of many features of non-standard dialect grammar, which are actually widespread among urban dialect areas rather than region specific (Hughes and Trudgill 1987; Cheshire and Edwards 1991).

⁶ There is evidence more generally for the idea that plural forms can be used with singular reference to express something like politeness (e.g. greater respect or social distance) in many languages (e.g. Brown and Gilman 1960; Head 1978 – for a review see Snell 2007).

⁷ In neighbouring Tyneside it has a wider distribution, being found in non-imperative contexts (Joan Beal, personal communication). The fact that the children used singular 'us' in imperatives likely explains (at least in part) why they did not use this form with adults. In both schools, children used imperatives mostly with other children. They did use imperatives with me and with the playground 'dinner ladies', and on a couple of occasions with the class teaching assistant, but they did not use imperatives with their class teachers (see Snell 2009).

⁸ These directives are used early by children, especially when addressing adults (Gordon and Ervin-Tripp 1984; Achiba 2003).

⁹ Sharma (2011) makes a similar point with respect to British English versus Indian English in the repertoires of British-born Asians from Southall, London. These speakers drew upon Indian English style, standard British style and vernacular British style, as well as a range of hybrid styles falling somewhere in between.

¹⁰ 'Towards Dialogue: A Linguistic Ethnographic Study of Classroom Interaction and Change' (RES-061-25-0363). For more details about this project see Lefstein and Snell 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Snell and Lefstein 2011.

¹¹ This example (which was common in our data-set) provides counter evidence to Gross' (2010: 28) assertion that primary school teachers in England 'don't feel that it's their role to interfere with self expression in any shape or form'.

¹² The argument that such corrections are necessary for the development of pupils' writing also does not hold. Research carried out with working-class children in Reading (Williams 1989, 1994, in Williams 2007) found that while 'ain't' was a frequent feature of their recorded conversations, it was not present at all in their writing. It would appear, then, that 'ain't' is a feature associated only with spoken English (cf. Dyson and Smitherman 2009, 991). Overall Williams' study found that some non-standard dialect forms (e.g. the non-standard present tense suffix -s) did occur in pupils' written work, but much less frequently than in their speech, and this difference increased as the children progressed into adolescence, suggesting that most pupils are able to use non-standard forms in their speech but switch to standard forms in their school writing (see also Williamson and Hardman 1997a, 1997b). See Dyson and Smitherman (2009), and Piestrup (1973) on the impact of explicit correction of non-standard dialect in writing and reading tasks.

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Table 1. Tyneside pronominal system (Beal 1993, 205)

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

Table 2. First person objective singular by school

	Ironstone			Murrayfield		
	N	%		N	%	
me	285	83.1%		300	96.2%	
us	58	16.9%		12	3.8%	
	343			312		

Table 3. Distribution of singular ‘us’ by situation of use

	Ironstone		Murrayfield		TOTAL	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Playground	24	41.4%	5	41.7%	29	41.4%
Classroom: paired/group activity	4	6.9%	6	50.0%	10	14.3%
Classroom: hushed side conversation	30	51.7%	1	8.3%	31	44.3%
Classroom: centre-stage talk	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
	58		12		70	

Table 4: Clare’s strategies for formulating directives across the data set

	Clare	
	N	%
Imperative (without indirect object) e.g. <i>Get off my shoe</i>	36	37
Imperative with ‘me’ e.g. <i>Now let me paint this one again</i>	8	8
Imperative singular ‘us’ e.g. <i>Give us it</i>	22	23
Imperative plural ‘Let’s’ e.g. <i>Let's go and paint it.</i>	1	1
‘Howay’ e.g. <i>Howay we need to paint</i>	7	8
1st person expression of need/want e.g. <i>Miss we need some felt tips</i>	5	5
1st person modal interrogatives e.g. <i>Can I go in the toilets and wash my hands?</i>	11	11
2nd person modal interrogatives e.g. <i>Miss will you come and help us with this?</i>	5	5
3rd person expression of need/want e.g. <i>That needs sticking first</i>	1	1
TOTAL	97	100
