

# “Oh, they’re top, them”

## Right dislocated tags and interactional stance

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### 1. Introduction

Right dislocation refers to the phenomenon whereby a clause is followed by a tag which is co-referential with the preceding subject or object pronoun. The tag may be a full noun phrase (e.g. “They do have guns, police”) or a pronoun (as in the example in the title). Whilst this feature is common in colloquial British English (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 1408; Shorrocks 1999: 85, Wales 1996: 43), there has been little research into its distribution (the accounts given of this feature are all descriptive, rather than empirical) and only limited analysis of its function. Typically, the feature has been assigned an emphatic, clarifying or focusing function (Wales 1996: 43; Biber et al. 1999: 957; Quirk et al. 1985: 1362).

In this paper, we use data from two independent ethnographic studies to explore the context-specific functions of this feature. We begin by outlining the datasets and the distributions of different types of tag. We then assess the function of right dislocation by considering the social work achieved through its use. Whilst our findings will not dispute that right dislocation can have emphatic, clarifying or focusing functions, our qualitative analysis will suggest that constructions which have a pronoun tag can fulfil interpersonal functions which go beyond emphatic expression of referential meaning. Finally, we combine our distributional and qualitative analyses to explore the possibility that certain right dislocated tags are used to construct interpersonal stances that are specific to certain communities. In this way, our work will not only demonstrate the manner in which right dislocation functions, it will also suggest that different social groups use different linguistic features to engage in different forms of social interaction.

### 2. The data

The primary school data is drawn from Snell’s (2009) fifteen-month ethnography of two primary schools in the North-East of England. Ironstone Primary serves

a lower working-class area in which the residents face significant social and economic challenges, while Murrayfield Primary is situated within a more affluent lower middle-class area. Snell made weekly visits to the Year 4 class (when the children were aged 8–9) and subsequently Year 5 class (when the children were aged 9–10) in both schools and participated in classroom life as a teaching assistant. As well as assisting in the classroom, Snell also spent time with the children in the playground, chatting and playing games, and as a result was able to get to know the children's personalities, interests and friendship groups. After 7 months of making weekly visits to the schools, six boys and six girls from each school were recorded wearing a radio-microphone for half-a-day. The distribution of data from this study is shown in Figure 1.

	Murrayfield	Ironstone
Number of speakers:	12	12
Number of RD tags:	17	47

Figure 1. Groups in the primary school study

The high school data is drawn from Moore's (2003, 2004) two year ethnography of female students at Midlan High. Throughout this period, Moore went into the school to spend the lunch hour with the girls (who were 12–13 at the start of the project and 13–14 at its completion) and engaged in whatever activity was occurring. Moore observed the four Communities of Practice (CofPs) shown in Figure 2.

The high school is situated in an upper working-class/middle-class area and each CofP exhibits different social class orientations (evaluated on the basis of the forms of practice in which the girls engage, their contact with other communities beyond their high school and their aspirations).

	Eden Village	Geek	Popular	Townie
Number of speakers:	6	12	15	4
Number of RD tags:	38	86	185	102

Figure 2. CofPs in the high school study

The Populars exhibit an anti-school attitude, display a sporty and feminine style of dress, and engage in moderately rebellious activities like drinking and smoking. Midway during the fieldwork, the Townies emerged and broke off from the group of Populars, when the former started to engage in risky behaviour such as drug-taking and sexual activity. Their friendship network includes older boys, with whom they spend time in the local area. The Townies and, to some extent, the Populars exhibit working-class orientations. The Geeks, by contrast, maintain most of their relationships through the school in activities like orchestra and sport. Finally, the Eden Village girls, named after their desirable home area, adopt a trendy 'teen' style, preferring to spend free time dancing, shopping, and at sleepovers. Both the Eden Village and Geek CofPs have a more middle-class orientation.

Despite these two studies being conducted independently, the similarities in their findings on right dislocation are quite striking. As Figure 3 illustrates, Snell's findings show an overall greater number of tags in the working-class oriented group, in particular note the propensity for Ironstone Primary to use more pronoun tags.

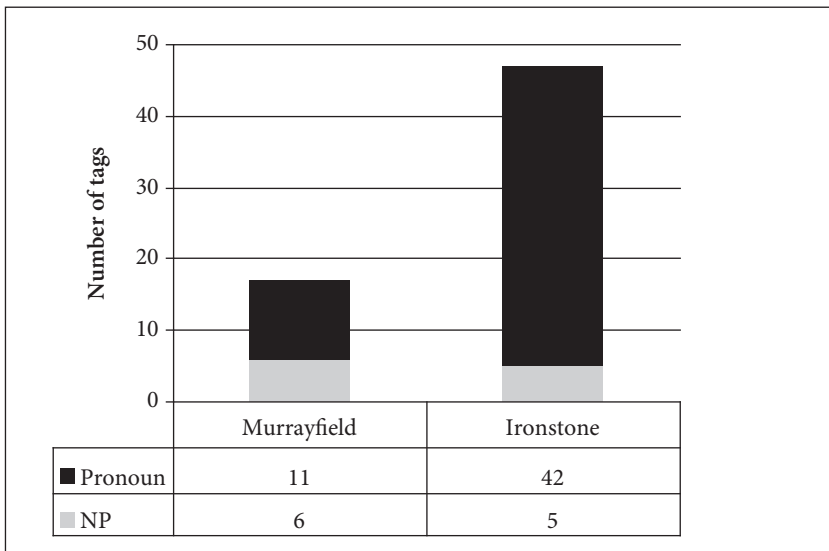


Figure 3. Right dislocation in the NE primary schools

Figure 4 shows a related pattern in the high school data: the CofPs with working-class orientations, the Populars and the Townies, exhibit patterns of right dislocation which correspond with those of the working-class primary school, Ironstone.

Notice that each of the figures present the data slightly differently. This is an unfortunate consequence of each corpus coming from a unique study. The high school corpus, which contains 50 hours of conversational interaction, is fully transcribed. As there are some differences in the amount of data collected from

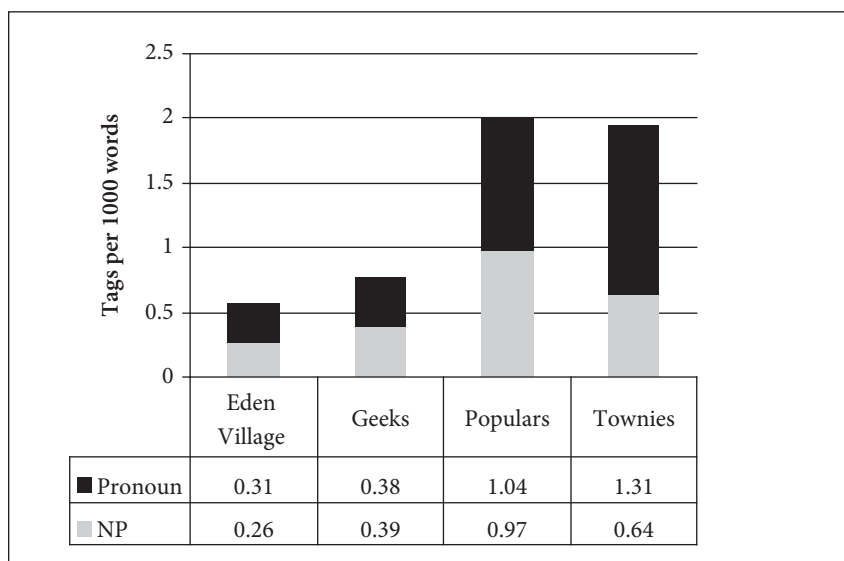


Figure 4. Right dislocation in the NW high school

each CofP, the tags are counted per 1000 words. The primary school corpus contains 25 hours of radio-microphone recordings from each school and is only partially transcribed. The frequencies from this study show actual numbers of tags, given that the two datasets are of even size and, thus, directly comparable. However, despite these differences, the graphs clearly show the proportionally greater number of tags in the data from the working-class oriented groups in both corpora.

### 3. Noun phrase tags

In order to explore these findings, we begin by considering the use of noun phrase tags. It is unsurprising that we find right dislocation with noun phrase tags across the two corpora given that this linguistic feature is well suited to the needs of conversation (Biber et al. 1999; Carter, Hughes & McCarthy 2000; Carter & McCarthy 1995; Greenbaum 1996; Quirk et al. 1985; Wales 1996). Right dislocation can be used, for example, to ensure that an utterance adheres to the principle of end-weight, in which the favoured position for long and complex elements is the end of the clause (Biber et al. 1999: 898, 958; also Quirk et al. 1985: 1362). This is illustrated in the following example, “*They just don’t go, bananas and milk and sausages and chips*”, where the weight of “bananas and milk and sausages and chips” makes the preferred position for this noun phrase the end of the clause. Another function of right dislocation identified by grammars is that of “clarification”, “establishing beyond doubt the reference of the preceding pronoun” (Biber et al. 1999: 957).

This is one of the main functions of right dislocation and is important given “the evolving nature of conversation” (Biber et al. 1999: 958). Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1411) similarly cite “clarification of reference” as one of the pragmatic functions of right dislocation: the speaker utters the pronoun but then realises that the reference may not be clear and so adds the additional noun phrase in clause-final position, as an “afterthought”.

Consider Extract 1 from the Murrayfield Primary School data. The children have been asked to write a description of somewhere they have been on holiday. Mrs Miller has asked Daniel to think of some adjectives to describe the sounds he heard at his holiday destination.

- (1) 1 Mrs Miller: go on Daniel  
 2 Daniel: bi::rds:: (2) birds  
 3 ((Classroom noise – 8 seconds))  
 4 Mrs Miller: no bird isn't an adjective  
 5 Daniel: what do you mean  
 6 Mrs Miller: It's a noun  
 7 Daniel: no bu-  
 8 Mrs Miller: no (1) you need a sound  
 9 Daniel: Mi- yeah *that* is a sound *birds*  
 10 Mrs Miller: no bird isn't a sound  
 11 bird is the name of something

Daniel's utterance on line 9 (“yeah *that* is a sound, *birds*”) comes 9 seconds after the last previous mention of ‘bird’ (Mrs Miller's “No bird isn't an adjective” on line 4) and 17 seconds after Daniel first introduces this topic on line 2. Further, in the intervening period, the discussion has moved onto the difference between nouns and adjectives. It makes sense, therefore, that Daniel should add the noun phrase tag in order to reintroduce ‘birds’ as a topic and clarify the reference of the demonstrative pronoun.

Given the important discourse functions associated with the noun phrase tag, it is unsurprising that we find these tags across all groups sampled for these studies, as shown in Figures 3 and 4. However, what is interesting about this data, and what will form the focus of the remainder of this paper, is the overwhelming preference for pronoun tags in relation to full noun phrase tags in the Ironstone and Townie data – the two most working-class oriented groups in our corpora. What, if anything, is special about pronoun tags for these speakers?

#### 4. Pronoun tags

The first thing to note about pronoun tags is that they do not add anything which clarifies the referential content of the main clause. Some grammars suggest an

emphatic reading of pronoun tags (Shorrocks 1999) and of course, by virtue of the principle of “end focus” (Quirk et al. 1985), they may well be used for emphasis. However, not only is ‘emphasis’ something of an under-specified term, this reading fails to account for the different social distributions of these tags. Furthermore, this reading also ignores the fact that different types of pronoun are distributed differently, suggesting that these tags might be used to achieve specific (potentially identity-related) social and pragmatic effects. Figures 5 and 6 show the pronoun tags distribution for each group.

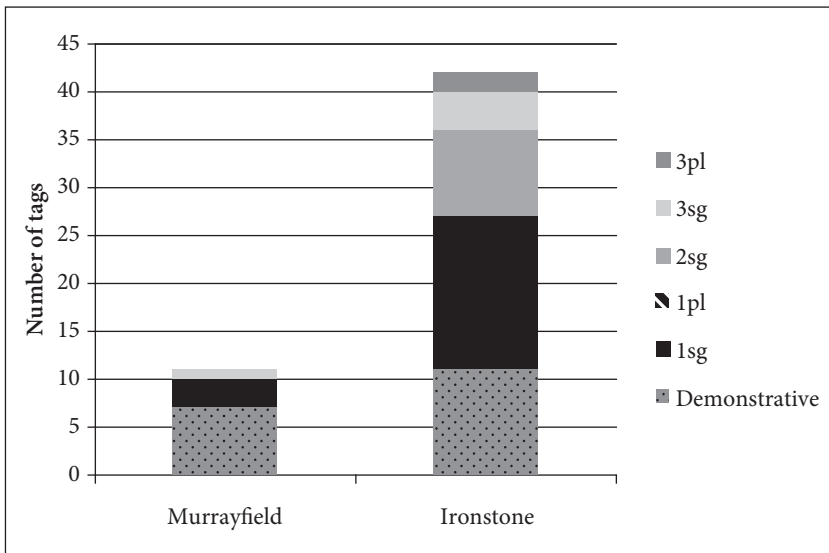


Figure 5. Distribution of right dislocated pronouns at the NE primary schools

The first thing to note when considering the type of pronoun is that, while there is evidence of the use of pronoun tags in all groups, the Murrayfield and Eden Village groups use demonstrative tags more frequently than personal pronouns tags.

Like noun phrase tags, demonstrative tags, such as “*That* looked good, *that*”, are acknowledged within descriptions of right dislocation by grammars such as Biber et al. (1999: 958), in which they appear to be accepted as part of informal spoken English. They have been assigned similar functions as noun phrase tags; Shorrocks (1999: 87), for instance, suggests that these constructions are emphatic.

Also like noun phrase tags, demonstrative tags occur robustly across our datasets. However, Figures 5 and 6 demonstrate that the use of personal pronouns is markedly differentiated across social groups. While all groups display some use of first person singular pronouns, all other personal pronoun contexts (with the exception of a small number of third person singular tags, and one third person

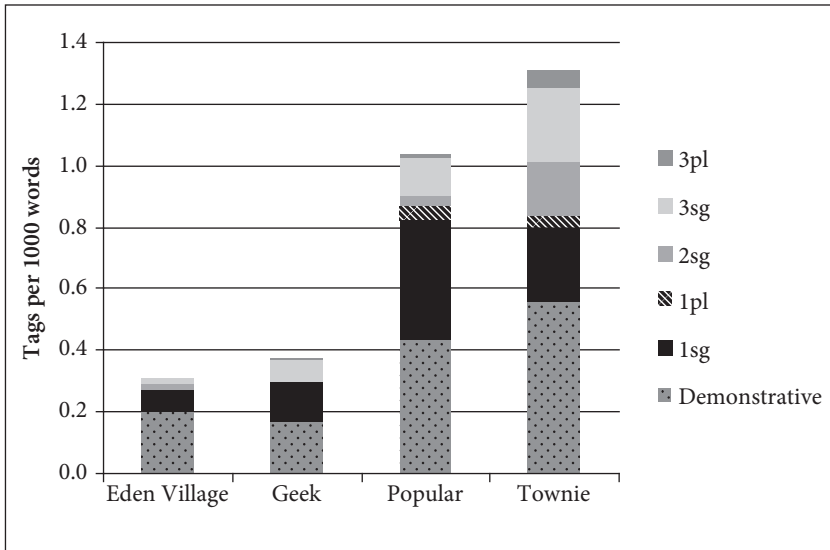


Figure 6. Distribution of right dislocated pronouns at the NW high school

plural tag in the Geeks' dataset) are absent from the middle-class oriented groups' data. These patterns pose a number of questions which have not been answered by the existing literature. While descriptive accounts of right dislocation do not rule out the existence of personal pronoun tags, we have not found an account which addresses their function specifically. In order to understand these tags we examine their functions within speakers' interactions.

The following example of a first person pronoun tag is taken from the High School data. Two Geek girls are engaged in conversation about a third member of their CofP, Scarlet:

- (2) 1 Michelle: she's just diff- she is  
 2 she's dead quiet but she's really weir-  
 3 she's not weird  
 4 she's like erm (.)  
 5 like hanging about with (.)  
 6 she's always wagging it and stuff  
 7 [int she (.) she's just gone different]  
 8 Tanya: [she wagged it and she got caught]  
 9 she always gets caught though.  
 10 I hate her nanna *me*.  
 11 she's evil.  
 12 hoo  
 13 Michelle: Nina's changed loads as well

One could certainly read the tag (line 10) as emphatic in the sense that it may reinforce the negative evaluation as well as the notion that the opinion is subjectively Tanya's. However, there is another way in which the tag could act as a form of emphasis. The right dislocated tag also focuses upon Tanya's opinion as a way of highlighting her contribution to the discourse. In this sense the tag could emphasise Tanya's status as a conversational participant. Tanya knows Scarlet better than Michelle and it is possible that she is using a reference to Scarlet's family situation to position herself as knowledgeable. As the extract shows, Tanya's comment is unsolicited and difficult to contextualise if one knows nothing of Scarlet's living circumstances (she is cared for, and consequently disciplined by her grandmother).

Positioning oneself in discourse is one thing, but positioning others is a potentially face-threatening business, especially when the subject of your evaluation is sitting across from you at the dinner table. In the following extract, from Ironstone Primary, a group of girls are eating their packed lunches together. The extract starts as a disagreement breaks out between Clare and Danielle over who has been stealing whose lunch:

- (3) 1 Tina:                what's she eating  
       2 Anonymous:       I don't know  
       3 Danielle:           you're not getting any of mine then  
       4 Clare:               good (1)  
       5                        I've got my own thanks  
       6 Danielle:           no you haven't  
       7 Clare:               not anymore  
       8                        because you nicked half of it  
       9 Tina:                oh shut up  
      10 Danielle:           I nicked two not half  
      11                        *((Laughing and background noise))*  
      12 Danielle:           *she's a liar her*  
      13                        I hate her  
      14 Clare:               nicked two pieces though

There is no doubt that the utterance containing the third-person right dislocated pronoun in line 13 is intended to negatively evaluate Clare (and quite aggressively so), but there is more at stake here. Danielle, a popular leader within the peer group, expresses this evaluation in such a way as to draw the others into alliance with her (and against Clare). In this way the right dislocated tag serves not only to position Clare as a liar, but also to show Danielle as the moral



authority, thus reinforcing the well-established peer group hierarchy which places Clare firmly on the periphery of the girls' friendship group. Through the use of the third person pronoun tag, Clare is here deemed unworthy even of direct address.

There are a number of examples in the datasets where right dislocated pronoun tags *are* implicated in direct address. Second person pronoun tags were largely used to express unequivocally negative evaluations which explicitly position interlocutors. In some examples, the speaker had little regard for maintaining social relations with their interlocutor, as in (4):

- (4) *Aw, you well pissed me off, you.* (Ellie, Townie)

In other examples, there was close bond of solidarity between speaker and hearer and therefore evaluations, negative or otherwise, serve to highlight the intimacy that these individuals share, as in (5):

- (5) *God, you're gay, you.* (David to best friend Harry, Ironstone Primary)

Second person pronouns also occurred in imperatives, the most direct and potentially risky form of directive, as in (6) and (7):

- (6) *Give us that lid, you.* (Harry, Ironstone Primary)  
 (7) *Get off, you.* (Billy, Ironstone Primary)

Significantly, all of the primary school tokens of second person tags were from working-class Ironstone Primary. Similarly, in the High School data, 9 of the 13 examples of second person tags occurred within the Townie dataset.

Why should it be that working-class groups have large numbers of these apparently negatively evaluative tags? The answer may lie in part in the nature of the social relations which characterise these communities. As already noted, these tags often occur in interactions between intimates and, we will suggest, may police the norms of group practice.

Extract 8 is taken from a discussion with two Townie girls, Amanda and Meg. The girls have been discussing what makes Townies distinct from other kinds of girls and, in this extract, Meg addresses one particular form of distinction, their engagement in sexual activity, through a retelling of the critical way in which her boyfriend, Mark, evaluated her willingness to engage in sexual activity.

- (8) 1 Emma: does it bother you when he says  
 2 stuff like that  
 3 Meg No  
 4 it's funny  
 5 as long as it –  
 6 no (.)  
 7 when he's in (.) a really annoying mood  
 8 and he's being a dick  
 9 and he starts going  
 10 'you're a slag *you*'  
 11 'you're a slag'  
 12 it really pisses [me off because]  
 13 Amanda: [oh right]  
 14 Meg: it's his fault  
 15 Meg: ((*laughs*))  
 16 I even say [it anyway]  
 17 Amanda: [yeah]  
 18 Meg: It just annoys me  
 19 ((*laughs*))  
 20 Meg: but then like if –  
 21 even when I sort everything out with him  
 22 he always goes  
 23 'oh I was only joking'  
 24 god  
 25 he goes  
 26 'You take everything I say too serious *you*'  
 27 so now I just think  
 28 he's only joking  
 29 so

The right dislocated tags, which are attributed to Mark, position Meg negatively both in terms of her sexuality and her inability to take a joke. However, in the context of this discussion, Meg uses this evaluation to emphasise her status as sexually active – an essential component of Townie identity. Furthermore, regardless or not of whether Meg is quoting Mark verbatim, she uses his voice to demonstrate that she is positively influenced by someone Townies would see as authoritative: a young adult male engaged in the working-class culture beyond the school. Drawing upon Bakhtin (1981), Ochs (1992: 338) notes that the voice of the speaker, the voice of 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 an utterance. In this interaction, the multiple voices include those of Mark, Meg and the Townie collective. In this way, the use of the right dislocated

tag not only emphasises the evaluative stance but, moreover, signals Meg's desire to be represented in this way; that is, as central member of the Townie CofP.

It may be, then, that personal pronoun tags, and particularly those which position others (i.e. those in the second and third person), have a role to play in the maintenance of social group norms. As Thompson & Hunston (2000: 6) point out, "[e]very act of evaluation expresses a communal value-system, and every act of evaluation goes towards building up that value-system". The communities which make greatest use of these features are characterised by networks typical of working-class groups. They are simultaneously tight-knit and open: tight-knit in terms of intimacy and open in terms of an ability to express involvement with, or evaluation of, any other member of the group. The Ironstone, Townie and, to some extent, Popular communities are at once defined and sustained by the linguistic behaviours – such as right dislocation – which facilitate this manner of engagement.

To be clear, we are not saying that working-class oriented communities are the only ones who evaluate or who use right dislocation to evaluate. However, our data suggests that some forms of right dislocation may be more uncompromisingly evaluative than others. Thus, whilst everyone uses first person tags to position themselves, only those whose wider community sanctions (and, indeed, values) transparent, open and candid forms of engagement may use second and third person tags to position and evaluate others. In this way, these right dislocated tags may simultaneously index an evaluative stance and, by a process of "stance accretion" (Du Bois 2002; Rauniomaa 2003, both cited in Bucholtz & Hall 2005), the identity of speakers who tend to take these kind of evaluative stances most frequently.

## 5. Conclusion

We have illustrated that right dislocated tags – features which traditional grammars have tended to describe as 'quirks' of informal colloquial discourse – are in fact quite complex discourse features which may undertake identity-related social work in interaction. We have focused our discussion on personal pronoun tags, given that these are the tags which are most markedly differentiated in both of our datasets. However, there is still much more to be said about the functions of noun phrase and demonstrative tags. In particular, while current literature on this topic attributes various discourse functions to these forms, it is not clear that this is the only way these tags are used or that all social groups use them in the same way. For instance, it is possible that some social groups may use them only for clarification, focus and emphasis, whilst others may use them for evaluation in a manner similar to their use of personal pronouns (this, for instance, might explain the very high use of noun phrase tags in the Populars' dataset). In this sense, the overall style of

a speaker's utterance may determine the way it functions – given our observation that certain social groups engage in more heavily evaluative forms of discourse, it is possible that other linguistic features may take on a more heavily evaluative flavour in their interactions. Investigating these kinds of hypotheses will require close qualitative analysis of the kind we have begun to demonstrate here.

Finally, our use of the two datasets shows that there are similarities in the sociolinguistic patterning of right dislocation which transcend age groups. Even young children use quite sophisticated linguistic strategies to fulfil specific interactional goals. This supports the idea that there are trajectories of social practice which can influence individuals across their lifespan, producing identifiable “interpersonal grammar(s)” (Carter and McCarthy 1995: 151) which “signal the relationships between participants” and position speakers in terms of stance and identity.

### Transcription Notations

(.)	Brief pause (under one second)
(1)	Longer pause (number indicates length to nearest whole second)
(( ))	Description of prosody or non-verbal activity
[because]	Brackets indicate overlapping talk or action
[oh right]	
te:xt	Stretched sounds
sh-	Word cut off

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