Working Papers in
Urban Language & Literacies

Paper 43

Linguistic ethnography & the study of identities

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2007

This text (written for non-linguists) was presented at a colloquium on ‘New Ways of Knowing: Bending the Paradigm in Identity Research’ at the Annual Conference of the British Sociological Association, April 2007.
Linguistic ethnography, interactional sociolinguistics and the study of identities

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This chapter provides an overview of linguistic ethnography and interactional sociolinguistics, two closely related perspectives on communication, and in order to develop an account of their relevance to ‘real world issues’, it discusses their contribution to the study of ‘identity’. Both in research and public debate, identity is a major focus of interest. In the UK, the main funding body for social science, the Economic and Social Research Council, has been running a large 5-year research programme on ‘Identities and Social Action’, and the programme rationale proposes that

“[r]esearch on identity provides a window on social change. It can answer questions about what is happening to identities based on familiar social class hierarchies. Are identities based much more now on ‘life-style’ and consumer choices? It can explore whether traditional political and community commitments are being replaced by a more volatile and dynamic ‘identity politics’. The study of identity investigates how different images and narratives ‘grab hold’ of individuals. It explains why people act from one basis rather than another and why they invest in some affiliations and alliances rather than others. So why research identity, then? Because research on identity addresses some of the most troubling phenomena of our times: communal violence, xenophobia and exclusion and discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability and religion” (www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/identities/pdf/programme_pims_themes.pdf; accessed 14/4/08)

Against such a background, it is hard to imagine any research engaging with identity being dry or pointless, and indeed in my own work on everyday communicative practices among young people, I have investigated the tensions between educational and popular cultural identities, the emergence of new ethnic identities, and identity dynamics around social class (Rampton 2005, 2006).

And yet when I am actually nose-down in the empirical analysis of interactional data, ‘identity’ is not a particularly useful term. Indeed, if it comes in too quickly, there is a risk either of obscuring the dynamic ambiguities in everyday social experience – reducing the social to the fixed forms that Raymond Williams warned against (1977:129) – or of losing sight of what Foucault called the ‘immediate struggles’ preoccupying people, overlooking the fact that before drawing on established categories to critique an unpleasant episode as, for example, racist, sexist or ageist, “people [often] criticise instances of power which are the closest to them, those which exercise their action on individuals. They do not look for the ‘chief enemy’, but for the immediate enemy” (Foucault 1982:211-212). So the kinds of issue that have greatest currency in public and social science debate don’t necessarily jump out at me from the data right away, and instead, it is often only when I step back from the intensive process of trying to work out what’s going on in a particular episode that notions like identity becomes potentially relevant, pointing to a more general set of issues or debates that the episode maybe speaks to. Identity, in other words, tends to feature as a second- or third-order abstraction, a bridge back from data analysis to social science literatures and public debate, just one among a number of potential resources for explaining why the research is important, for answering the ever-pressing questions ‘So what? Why bother?’.

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1  This paper draws on two research projects funded by the ESRC – ‘Urban Classroom Culture and Interaction’ (2005-08; RES-148-25-0042) and ‘Multilingualism and Heteroglossia In and Out of School’ (1997-99; R 000 23 6602). An earlier version of this paper was presented at a British Sociological Association 2007 Conference Symposium Panel entitled New Ways of Knowing: Bending the Paradigm in Identity Research, organised by Margie Wetherell. Though its problems are very much my own, I’m grateful to Adam Lefstein and Theresa Lillis for valuable feedback which helped me to clarify the argument in this paper.

2 Issues of practical relevance are explicitly addressed in e.g. Rampton 1996a, 1996b, 2005:Ch.13 and 2007b.
What are these investigative procedures and perspectives that speak to identity issues, that often engage with the ideas about identity expressed by their informants, but that don’t incorporate the term ‘identity’ into their most basic analytic vocabularies? In what follows, I shall begin with a characterisation of linguistic ethnography (LE) and interactional sociolinguistics (IS), sketching a set of concepts and frameworks that are certainly capable of accommodating a concern with identity, but that do not depend on it. After that, I shall try to show how these approaches can be used to look at one very significant social identity – social class – though again, during the empirical analysis itself, I shall hold the term ‘identity’ in abeyance, only bringing it in afterwards in the third section to renew the connection with more general debates and literatures. Finally, in the last section, I shall consider the worry that this kind of analysis is impractically over-complicated.

So first of all, what are linguistic ethnography and interactional sociolinguistics?

1. **LE and IS: Tenets, scope, resources, goals and interdisciplinary positioning**

Linguistic ethnography is something of an umbrella term, and there are a number of different research traditions that participate in the discursive space that LE provides – interactional sociolinguistics and new literacy studies, as well as certain types of critical discourse analysis, neo-Vygotskyan research on language and cognitive development, and interpretive applied linguistics for language teaching (see Rampton 2007a; Rampton et al 2004 for an overview of LE in the UK). But whatever the differences between sub-traditions, linguistic ethnography holds that

i) the contexts for communication should be investigated rather than assumed. Meaning takes shape within specific social relations, interactional histories and institutional regimes, produced and construed by agents with expectations and repertoires that have to be grasped ethnographically; and

ii) analysis of the internal organisation of verbal (and other kinds of semiotic) data is essential to understanding its significance and position in the world. Meaning is far more than just the ‘expression of ideas’, and biography, identifications, stance and nuance are extensively signalled in the linguistic and textual fine-grain.

These **methodological tenets** mean that linguistic ethnography can be very wide-ranging in its **empirical scope**, investigating communication within the temporal unfolding of social processes that involve

- **persons**: their physical bodies, senses and perceptions; their cultural and semiotic repertoires, and the resources they have at their disposal; their capacities, habitual practices and dispositions; their likes and dislikes, desires, fears, commitments, and personalities; their social status and category memberships;

- **situated encounters**: the events, genres and types of activity in which people, texts and objects interact together; actions, sequences of actions and the use of semiotic materials (signs, language, texts, media); inferencing, interpretation and the efforts of participants to understand or influence each other; the physical arrangement of the participants and the material setting; origins, outcomes and wider links – how signs, actions and encounters fit with interactional and institutional processes over longer and broader stretches of time and space.

- **institutions, networks and communities of practice**, varying in durability and scale from e.g. playground peer-groups to clubs to schools, mass media and government policy: how institutions shape, sustain and get reproduced through texts, objects, media, genres and practices etc; how institutions control, manage, produce and distribute persons, resources, discourses/representations/ideologies, spaces etc.

The assumption is that persons, encounters and institutions are profoundly inter-linked, and a great deal of research is concerned with the nature and dynamics of these linkages – with varying degrees of friction and slippage, repertoires get used and developed in encounters, encounters enact institutions, and institutions produce and regulate persons and their repertoires through the regimentation of encounters. There is an illustration of this in Box 1, although the analysis can go in many different directions. Language has, after all, been extensively studied as a psychological, as an interactional and as a sociological phenomenon, and if these can be linked up judiciously, then there is a point of entry into socialisation (e.g. Ochs and Schieffelin 2001), into literacy (Heath 2001), into
artful performance (e.g. Bauman 2001), into practical consciousness shaped in hegemony (Williams 1977; Rampton 2003) etc etc.  

**Box 1:** An example of research investigating the links between persons, encounters and institutions

The links between persons, encounters and institutions are very clearly illustrated in the work of John Gumperz, Celia Roberts and others on ethnicity in job interviews (Gumperz, Jupp and Roberts 1979; Roberts, Davies and Jupp 1992; Roberts and Sarangi 1999). The starting point in this work was a very widespread social process – race discrimination and disadvantage in the workplace – and the first move was to identify events in institutional life that played a key role in the allocation of opportunities and resources. Interviews presented themselves as a prime site for institutional ‘gatekeeping’ like this, and so Gumperz et al then undertook detailed analysis of interviews as situated encounters. Here they uncovered the way that participants had different expectations about the interview genre, and how they drew different kinds of inference from the use of particular linguistic signs. Gumperz et al were able to relate these patterned differences back to the participants’ ethnically different social networks, and in the end, they were able to argue that hitherto unnoticed ethnic differences in the communicative repertoires and practices of individuals were having a negative effect on the outcome of these interviews. Overall, participants in these interviews might start out with a fair degree of initial good will, but the interaction was influenced by ethnically-based differences in communicative style that no-one was aware of, and this fed into the wider patterns of race discrimination.

In the branch of linguistic ethnography that I am most closely involved in, interactional sociolinguistics (cf Gumperz 1982; Gumperz 1999; Eerdmans et al 2002; Rampton 2006:Ch.1.3), these ideas come together in a view of situated communication that pays particular attention to the efforts individuals make to get other people to recognise their feelings, perceptions, interests etc. Every moment in the unfolding of communicative action is unique and never-to-be-repeated, but this also involves linguistic forms, rhetorical strategies, semiotic materials and institutional genres that have achieved a degree of stability, status and resonance in the world beyond the encounter-on-hand. Individuals only ever have partial control over these forms, materials and strategies, and you can see the partiality of this control in face-to-face interaction, where there are two or more people involved in trying to build a provisional consensus on ‘meaning’ sequentially from one turn to the next, as well as in the afterlife that signs, texts and utterances have when they get reported or recycled elsewhere. In the words of Ortega Y Gasset,

“[t]wo apparently contradictory laws are involved in all uttering. One says ‘Every utterance is deficient’ – it says less than it wishes to say. The other law, the opposite, declares ‘Every utterance is exuberant’ – it conveys more than it plans and includes not a few things we would wish left silent” (1959:2)

Working with that basic view of communicative action, interactional sociolinguistics draws on four major sets of analytic resources:

a) linguistics and discourse analysis provide a provisional view of the communicative affordances of the linguistic resources that participants draw on in communication

b) Goffman and conversation analysis provide frameworks and procedures for investigating situated encounters. More specifically, they help us to see: the ongoing, sequential construction of ‘local architectures of intersubjectivity’ (Heritage 1997); the rituals and moral accountabilities permeating the use of semiotic forms and strategies; and the shifting spatio-temporal distribution of attention and involvement in situations of physical co-presence;

c) ethnography provides: a sense of the stability, status and resonance that linguistic forms, rhetorical strategies and semiotic materials have in different social networks beyond the encounter-on-hand; an idea of how and where an encounter fits into longer and broader

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3 A number of the references here are included in A. Duranti (ed) 2001 *Linguistic Anthropology: A Reader*. Oxford Blackwell. ‘Linguistic anthropology’ has much in common with linguistic ethnography, but is much stronger in the US than in Europe. There is a discussion of the relationship between the two in Rampton 2007a.
biographies, institutions and histories; and a sense of the cultural and personal
d) **other public and academic discourses** provide purpose and relevance for the analysis, as well as a
broader picture of the environment where the study is sited. In the importance attached to these
external discourses, both IS and LE are aligned with (extended) case study methodology
(Burawoy 1998), and instantiate Dell Hymes’ motto for ethnography – “two feet on the ground
and one eye on the horizon” (1999:xxxiii,xl). And indeed as I have already noted, it is here that
notions of identity tend to show up most explicitly.

When these resources are pulled together in the empirical analysis of recordings of interaction, the
**goal** is to produce an account that respects the uniqueness, deficiency and exuberance of the
communicative moment, while, at the same time, describing how participants handle specific forms,
strategies and materials, considering the ways in which their use feeds into the communication
overall, and trying to understand how this feeds off and into local social life more generally. There is
no complete or definitive interpretation either for analysts or participants, but you want an end-
product that is mindful of the scholarly virtues of care, coherence, accuracy, accountability,
scepticism and cumulative comparison, that is sufficiently plausible to stand up to the scrutiny from
other analysts, that is open to reformulation in terms that participants can engage with, and that speaks
to wider social or intellectual concerns.

Locating all this in wider social science debate – coming to questions of **inter-disciplinary
positioning** – there is no doubt that for the **linguistics** side of IS and linguistic ethnography, post-
structuralism has been the spur to a major philosophical rethink, shifting the balance from system to
agency, from elegance to indeterminacy (see Rampton 2006:Ch.1.2 and 1.3; also Voloshinov 1973,
Bourdieu 1977, Giddens 1977, Bauman 1992). More generally, though, neither IS nor LE have been
tempted to abandon data and retreat to theory by developments in post-modern thought. On the one
hand, the core concepts, tools and procedures we work with come out of long, active and ongoing
lines of empirical testing and development, and on the other, social constructionism and the
‘discursive turn’ have invigorated the **discourse** elements of IS and LE, boosting the idea that there
are a great many issues that they can contribute to – including, of course, the debates about ‘identity’
(see also Fairclough 1992:1, Coupland 1998:115-6).

At this point, it is worth looking at what LE/IS can actually do, and for this, I shall refer to some
of my own research on the significance of social class for a group of 13 and 14 year olds in a 1990s
multi-ethnic comprehensive school in inner London (Rampton 2006:Part III). There is additional
background information about this research in Box 2.

**Box 2: Background information on the research reported in this paper.**

**The field-site school:** A multi-ethnic comprehensive in inner London in the mid 1990s. About a
third of pupils at the school were from refugee and asylum families; over half received free
school meals; and almost a third were registered as having special educational needs.

**Data collection:** The project involved approximately one year of fieldwork, and data collection
involved interviews, participant observation, radio-microphone recordings of everyday
interaction, and participant retrospection on extracts from the audio-recordings, focusing on 4
youngsters (2 male, 2 female) in a tutor group of about 30 fourteen year olds.

**The analysis of social class:** My analysis of social class eventually focused on (i) the school’s
position and ethos; (ii) accounts of social class given in lessons; (iii) the students’ ethnic,
occupational and linguistic backgrounds, their general dispositions and trajectories within
recreational and institutional space; (iv) their views of class, as articulated in interviews,
lessons and peer discussion; (v) their routine linguistic performance (assessed through
Labovian analysis); and (vi) their **obilization** of posh and Cockney within situated activity.

**Analysing stylisation:** The analysis of posh and Cockney stylisation centred on c. 65 transcripts
from 37 hours of audio-data, loosely differentiated into: (1) interactions where young people’s
identities as pupils are at issue; (2) interactions involving an element of conflict between male
and female class-mates; (3) sound play interactions; (4) recreational interactions where no-
one seeks to exercise institutional control, where there is no obvious conflict over the status of
different groups, but where something more than just the sound properties of posh or
Cockney seems to be in focus. The data I discuss in this paper falls into category 1.
2. Social class in interaction
Rather than setting out to investigate particular ideas about social class itself, I started my investigation with an interest in what was happening when these youngsters either put on exaggerated traditional posh/upper class voices or did Cockney/vernacular London accents, as described in linguistic detail by, for example, Wells 1982:Chs.4.1 and 4.2. Of course, I had an intuition that class relations and class identities would prove relevant, and drew initial encouragement for the idea of linking these to social interaction from readings of Thompson, Williams, Bourdieu, Burawoy, Skeggs and Reay. But the main work of analysis and interpretation started with the identification and transcription of speech stylisation in radio-microphone recordings of spontaneous interaction, and here is an example, taken from the start of a Science lesson.

Hanif has been away from his table looking around for a book he needs for the writing work they’ve been set, but now he has arrived back, bringing a copy with him, and the hyper-Cockney pronunciation of ‘Galaxies’ in line 11 provides the starting-point for my analysis:

Extract 1
Hanif (14, male, Bangladeshi descent, wearing the radio-mic), Arun (14, male, Malaysian descent), Simon (14, male, Anglo-descent) are sharing the same table in science.

1 Hanif: ((whistles six notes))
2     what you doing Arun
3 (.)
4     what you doin Arn
5 (.)
6 (>shup<) leave it Dimbo
7 (2)
8     look what you ma-
9     look what you made me do
10 (4)
11     “Stars and Galaxies”
   [stʌːz  n  ɡæləksɪz] 4
12 (1)
13     ((quietly reciting page numbers:))
14     one three seven
15 (3)
16     ((fast and loud to the teacher:))
17     >SIR can I go check if there’s any
18     Essential Sciences left<

In lines 2-4, Hanif asks Arun what he’s doing, and after that in line 6, he tries to ward off some kind of territorial incursion. Exactly who’s trying what isn’t clear from the tape, but Hanif follows it with a reproach in lines 8 and 9. There is no audible apology or retort, the matter drops and Hanif then turns to his worksheet, reading the title aloud and ending the word Galaxies with an exaggerated Cockney dipthong. 5

To begin with, linguistic phonetics helps to pin down this pronunciation, differentiating it from Hanif’s normal accent and lining it up with broad London (I also double-checked on this by playing it back to Hanif himself). The next step is to try to understand what is going on interactionally in line 11, and it is here that Goffman is useful. Hanif seems to be talking to himself when he reads the ‘Stars and Galaxies’ worksheet title, dedicating himself to the solitary task ahead. But as Goffman says, we’re still very alert to the people around us when we talk to ourselves in public, and so in Hanif’s self-talk, we are entitled to see an orientation to the over-hearers nearby (1981:97-98). In fact, in reading out the worksheet title, Hanif is also consolidating a shift of footing, displaying his...

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4 The script in this line (and elsewhere in square brackets) is phonetic, following the International Phonetic Alphabet. There are many good introductions to this area of linguistics, such as e.g. Roach (xxxx).

5 To clarify the distinctly Cockney aspect of how Hanif says ‘galaxies’, it’s worth noting that the (mid-central) starting point for the diphong in the last syllable (represented phonetically as [ʊ])
a) was highly untypical of Hanif’s pronunciation of the vowel in the happY group elsewhere,
b) was associated by Hanif with the accent of a cousin who lived in London’s East End when the sequence was replayed to him, and
c) is described by Wells as broad Cockney (1982:319).
upcoming involvement in the curriculum task, disengaging from the business with his friends. If we add into this the ethnographic observation that broad Cockney was quite often associated with informal sociability, we can move to an initial interpretation of what is going on here – Hanif may be starting up on schoolwork, but in rounding off the title with hyper-Cockney, he’s toning down the signs of his school commitment, showing that that he’s not a nerd, that he’s still in tune.

In fact, dwelling on this a little longer, there is a case for saying that when Hanif uses Cockney to read aloud from a school text, he is contradicting what one would normally expect. Normally, as variationist sociolinguistic research has often shown (Labov 1972, Holmes 2001:234-242), people’s pronunciation tends to get posher when they read aloud or when they turn to school business. But Hanif is doing the opposite, and in fact this becomes more pronounced if we follow the activity unfolding over several minutes. Shortly after Extract 1, Hanif’s exclamations suggest that he’s really quite interested in the subject matter—“WO:W (2) oh my gard (7) oh my god (1)” – but at the same time, he continues weaving exaggerated accents into the task. The next time he returns to the “stars and galaxies” title, turning from talk to work, he renders it in quasi-Caribbean:

Extract 2
Hanif and Arun have been arguing about how long it takes to reach the moon, and Arun has contested Hanif’s claims by showing him that the book he’s cited is more out-of-date than Hanif thought, being published in 1993 rather than 1996. Hanif’s accent in lines 9, 11 and 13 is quasi-Caribbean (see Wells (1982:572 et passim and Sebba 1993:154) on the TRAP vowel and the non-reduction of unstressed vowels in Caribbean English)

1 Arun: things can change (in four years)
2 Hanif: 1993 was (.)
3 three years ago
4 (.)
5 >get your facts right(<
6 ((very fast: )) >oh you ( )<
7 Arun ((turning to John who appears to have said something: ))
8 SHUT UP JOHN
9 (4)
10 Hanif ((with a quasi-Caribbean accent:))
11 'gu lu xies , mun
12 [galaksiz man]
13 (.)
14 stars , mun
15 [stə:z man]
16 (.)
17 'gu lu xies , mun
18 [galaksi::z man]
19 Arun: ( your sta )
20 Hanif: shudup
21 ((Hanif now stays silent for 9 seconds, breaks this by briefly noticing a textbook nearby (‘someone put an Active Science Book here’), and he then keeps out of conversation for nearly a minute))

And then after a period of attentive silent reading, he begins to turn the worksheet into quiz questions for Simon and Arun. At one stage of the quiz, he uses hyper-Cockney “okay” ([əʊkæɪ]) (cf Wells 1982:303-4) to get Simon and Arun to attend to the next question:

Extract 3
Later on in the lesson, with the ‘quiz’ underway

1 Hanif ((writing down an answer: ))
2 Mercury (.)
3 takes (.)
4 the (.)
5 shortest (3)
6 shortest time (1)
7 to trave:l (.)
At moments like these, there seems to be more involved in Cockney stylisation than just toning down the signs of Hanif’s own school commitment. Here it is part of an attempt to get his peers to focus on their classwork, and rather than speaking of ‘apologetic self-mitigation’, it would be more accurate to describe Hanif as making school knowledge more vernacular and accessible, bringing the science worksheet to life with non-standard accents and a popular TV format.

So far, then, our micro-analysis of this situated episode has covered vowel sounds, close attention to the interactional dynamics around one utterance (line 11 in Extract 1), and genre mixing in the development of subsequent activity (Extracts 2 and 3). At this point, it is vital to broaden the focus in at least two ways – on the one hand, it is essential to situate these episodes in longer ethnographic observation of Hanif, his friends and classmates, and on the other, it is important to bring in other episodes where posh and Cockney were stylized.

In the first instance, ethnographic familiarity with Hanif points to a match between the challenge to traditional equations of book learning with poshness glimpsed in Extract 1 and a much more general pattern in his conduct, involving an impressive combination of commitment to learning with a lack of regard for the decorums with which learning is traditionally surrounded. Hanif was identified by teachers as one of the stars of the class, and as very clever at schoolwork – a ‘boffin’ – by his peers. But he attached a lot of importance to friends, was the ring-leader of his circle, and knew that friendship and success could sometimes conflict – one of his oldest pals, Mansur, was renowned for his ambition to be a judge, but he’d now started to bunk off school quite regularly. This tension between school success and sociability was reflected in Hanif and co’s style of participation in class – they were often interested in lessons and attended very closely to teacher-talk, but they nevertheless (a) transgressed the traditional Initiation-Response-Evaluation structure of classroom talk (Edwards and Westgate 1994:Ch.2) more or less as a matter of routine, and (b) continuously sought to liven things up with the importation of all sorts of extraneous, non-curriculum materials (see Rampton 2006:Ch 2). Against this background, there is little to surprise us in Hanif’s vernacularisation of school knowledge in Extracts 1-3, although in case we’re tempted to read him as a radical, it’s also worth noting that Hanif’s teachers were often very receptive to his transgressive enthusiasms. Out of c. 15 episodes in which he used an exaggerated posh or Cockney accent in school-related business, eight were either loudly performed on the classroom floor, or directly addressed to teachers.

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6 In fact, there were other occasions when Hanif’s exaggerated Cockney looked politically regressive, as when, for example, it was perjoratively targeted, for example, towards non-conformist girls. Indeed, given his status as star students, there’s a case for seeing his stylization in Extract 1 as a piece of Bourdieuan condescension (Bourdieu 1991:68ff).
themselves. Teachers gave him a lot of discursive space, listened to what he had to say, and largely accepted his stylisations of Cockney, so that overall, Hanif had good cause for thinking of school as a generally hospitable institution, open to his socio-linguistic innovations. Indeed, there is a case for saying that instead of being constructively rebellious, the ‘Cockneyfication’ of the science worksheet was a systemic product of the particular conditions in which Hanif found himself and operated.

Looking sideways, next, to other instances of exaggerated posh-and-Cockney, it was clear that this kind of stylization was actually rather common, occurring on average about once every 35-45 minutes in my 37 hours of data. In one way or another, about 20-25 of these performances of hyper-posh-and-Cockney registered processes of stratification and division associated with schooling. As in Extract 1, both posh and Cockney were quite often stylized in the transitions between work and play, and ultra-posh was also used when kids felt patronized by teachers. But in addition, away from the demarcations and ranking involved in schooling, hyper-Cockney and posh were quite extensively used in humour and mockery among kids themselves. In fact, pulling together the connotations evidenced in about 20 of these non-school-oriented episodes, Cockney seemed to be associated with vigour, passion and bodily laxity, while posh got linked to physical weakness, social distance, constraint and sexual inhibition (see Rampton 2006:Ch 9).

All in all, I looked at well over 50+ episodes in detail, and in line with my comments in Section 1 about reckoning with the uniqueness of the communicative moment, I took a lot of time to analyse each of them. For much of this time, I worked to the aesthetic of ‘slowness’ and ‘smallness’ that Silverman (1998) associates with conversation analysis, squeezing out the kind of interactional detail illustrated in Extract 1. But as intimated earlier, I was also very interested in how these episodes figured within both biographical and institutional process, and so in the end, like a good deal of linguistic ethnography, the account also covers both individuals and institutions, even though it is situated interaction that occupies the central place.

That is an attempt, then, to illustrate something of the scope of linguistic ethnography. So far, though, there has been no space for the term ‘identity’ in the analysis, and instead I have been drawing on a mixture of linguistics, discourse analysis and ethnographic detail. But this changes, I think, once we turn to wider debates.

3. Linking to more general debates about identity

At a meeting of the research programme I mentioned at the outset – the ESRC’s ‘Identities and Social Action Programme’ – we presented an interactional account similar to the analysis in Section 2, and Stuart Hall asked about

“the relationship between the mobilization or performance of… identity at the local, micro, more ethnographic level, and the large thing that brought us into the field at the beginning, namely a [stratified…] social world, a world in which material and symbolic resources continue to be deeply unequally distributed. Why are you in this field if you are not concerned about that? It was easier to get to that when the methodology was to take those as given and see how they were working out in that space or that. Once you deconstruct these points of reference – how do you ever get back to the larger field?” (IandSA Ethnicities Workshop at the London School of Economics, 21/6/06)

Much of the answer to this vital question lies in making a connection back to the academic (and public) discourses that I identified as the fourth resource for IS/LE (Section 1), and staying with social class, there are a number of ways in which the interactional data provides material for case-study engagement with more general debates about identity (cf e.g. Bendle 2002).

Extract 1, for example, can be seen as an instance of reflexive identity negotiation, especially if we use E.P.Thompson (1978) to reinforce the link to social class. In the struggle for resources, Thompson conceptualizes social class as an agentive process that involves the ‘drawing of lines’ to different degrees in different ways at particular times and places, and when kids produced hyper-posh and Cockney in transition between work and play, we can see these stylized performances as fleeting but quite frequently repeated moments of heightened sensitivity to the broader identity implications of different positions within curriculum activity – moments when there’s temporarily sharpened reflexivity about social class and the dividing lines between work and sociability (Rampton 2006:306-
7), moments when the class implications of difference become an active concern for participants in interaction.

Elsewhere in the dataset, more psycho-social discussion of identity and class look relevant. There were times, for example, when kids produced contorted mixtures of hyper-posh and exaggerated Cockney during spontaneous performances of the grotesque, and this brings Stallybrass and White’s ‘classed Imaginary’ to mind, where “ideology and fantasy conjoin” (Stallybrass and White 1996:25; Rampton 2006:346-351). Similarly, when some of the boys used deep-voiced ultra-Cockney to caricature one of the powerful but non-conformist girls in the class, there is a lot of relevance in the discussions of fear, desire, sexuality and class provided by, for example, Skeggs or Ortner, who argues that “class discourse is [often] submerged within, and spoken through, sexual discourse, taking ‘sex’ here in the double English sense of pertaining to both gender and the erotic” (Ortner 1991:171-2; Skeggs 1997:99-100; Rampton 2006:351-60). Following a substantial period from the 1970s to the early 1990s when statistical survey treatments of social class predominated, there has been a resurgence of interest in the psychological significance and costs of class stratification, and the fact that evidence of the complex affective meaning of social class emerges in radio-mic recordings of spontaneous interaction rather than just in, say, psycho-analytically oriented interviews, provides useful supplementary support for the importance of this more recent line of enquiry.

A great deal of the data also contradicted quite major claims about identity transformation in late modernity. Looking across my dataset as a whole and pulling together all of the themes and images evoked in these situated stylisations of posh and Cockney, one can see the over-arching imprint of a set of high/low, mind/body, reason-and-emotion binaries that reach back to the emergence of bourgeois society in the 18th and 19th centuries (Cohen 1988:66-7 on England, and Bourdieu 1991:93 on France). When we consider that this wasn’t a traditional white working class school, that pupils came from all over London, that about a third were from refugee and asylum seeking families, that less than a quarter in Hanif’s class were white, and that Hanif spoke to his parents mostly in Sylheti – in short, when we consider the globalised, multi-ethnic late modern environment, then these kids’ insistent reproduction of a very traditional class imagery contradicts the view that class is losing its salience particularly among contemporary urban youth (e.g. Bradley 1996:77; Surridge 2007). Maybe more profoundly, if we bring the imagery these kids had at their fingertips together with the interactional situations in which they spontaneously stylized posh and Cockney – and if in addition, we factor in their ordinary London accents as well – then I think we have a graphic empirical picture of what Williams calls the “saturation of the whole process of living… [by] the… dominance and subordination of particular classes” (1977:109; cf Rampton 2003, 2006:360-79). What the analysis shows, in short, is that these kids’ everyday practical consciousness was deeply impregnated with the sensibilities that we traditionally associate with social class in Britain.

So overall, even though ‘identity’ doesn’t figure in its empirical tool-chest, there are a number of different ways in which the descriptions produced by IS/LE can speak to the debates about contemporary identity. But what is the practical utility of this kind of analysis?

4. Defending complexity
Within linguistic ethnography as whole, there is a long and robust tradition of work that combines a substantial contribution to academic knowledge with practical intervention. In the new literacy studies, Shirley Brice Heath’s classic work in the Piedmont Carolinas introduced the methods and understandings of research into local schools (1983), and in interactional sociolinguistics, Gumperz, Jupp, Roberts and their associates linked the study of situated interaction with systematic programmes designed to raise social and communicative awareness in multiracial workplaces in Britain (see Box 1; also Hymes 1980; Cameron et al 1992.). My own analysis in stylised posh-and-Cockney class was partly prompted by the general retreat from class analysis in both academic and public discourse, and in an era when educational policy makers tend to give exclusive emphasis to ethnicity and gender, the testimony here to an insistent class awareness enduring amidst ethnic hyper-diversity is potentially rather consequential. When, for example, (historically) migrant ethnicities are made central to discussions about education, the discourse tends to focus on cultural differences and the social integration of new populations, on the effects of ethnically distinct family structures and parenting, on
the need for mother-tongue or English language support etc. Ethnicity is seen as presenting the nation-state with new challenges, and the assumption is that inequalities are soluble, requiring only an increase in cultural adjustment/hospitality and better-targeted interventions. In contrast, class presents a set of more intractable issues. It is no longer possible to isolate education from central processes in the mainstream production and distribution of cultural and economic capital, and it becomes necessary to consider people’s financial resources, their career/job prospects, their stances/positioning within high vs low culture, and their ways of adapting to enduring stratification. Looking back at the data in Section 2, Hanif’s family background might be seen as inviting an ethnic analysis of his everyday life at school, but a close look at his language practices suggests the importance of a class interpretation, leading back potentially, from a politics of recognition to a politics of redistribution (Fraser 1995; Rampton et al 2008).

As it happens, I haven’t personally used my analysis of posh and Cockney stylisation as the basis for intervention in policy or political debate, but there is absolutely no in-principle problem if some of the micro-analytic findings are picked up, shaved of some of their nuanced particularity, and then recontextualized in more public arguments. In terms of the current discussion, there might well be occasions where it was strategically valuable to fast-forward here through to ‘identity’ past the phonetics, the discourse-, interaction- and ethnographic analysis. In ending, though, I would like to offer a defence of complexity.

Making your point count in politics, and producing a piece of research that makes a difference to academic debate are two different activities, and I think it would be a mistake to underestimate the skill, time and effort it takes to do a decent job in either. In addition, there are a lot of very perceptive cultural commentators able to pick out important issues in social process much faster than empirical researchers can – I’m sure it never occurred to Stuart Hall to wait for the reports to come in from sociolinguistics before he started to talk about ‘new ethnicities’, and a good thing too! Sometimes, if you have worked in professional or community settings, if your research is animated by frustration with state policy and prevailing institutional discourses, or if your employment itself involves practical activity with health workers, teachers, interpreters etc, then the methodological proximity of ethnography and action research encourages researchers (a) to read macro-scopic and historical processes only in the most obvious elements of policy, and (b) to attach higher priority to relevance and rapport with people in the field than to theory development and cumulative comparative generalisation. In this context, Hymes’ discussion of educational ethnography in the US has much wider relevance:

“[e]thnography, as we know, is in fact an interface between specific inquiry and comparative generalisation. It will serve us well, I think, to make prominent the term ‘ethnology’, that explicitly invokes comparative generalization, and it will serve schooling in America well. An emphasis on the ethnological dimension takes one away from immediate problems and from attempts to offer immediate remedies, but it serves constructive change better in the long run. Emphasis on the ethnological dimension links anthropology of education with social history, through the ways in which larger forces for socialisation, institutionalisation, reproduction of an existing order, are expressed and interpreted in specific settings. The longer view seems a surer footing” (Hymes 1996:19).

Turning back to my own research, exaggerated performances of posh and Cockney showed up in a number of different ways in my dataset, and it certainly has been both complex and time-consuming trying to analyse, summarise and interpret them all. But this range and complexity is itself significant. The very fact that posh-and-Cockney stylizations showed sensitivity to stratification in a plurality of ways and situations is precisely what you’d expect of a social process that reaches deep – if you shied away from accounts that looked long and elaborate, it would be hard to appreciate just how far social class impacts on everyday conduct and experience. By the same token, it should be no cause for regret if, in our attempts to combine broader relevance with as much faithfulness to our findings as we can manage, our summaries end up looking rather baggy, lacking in eye-catching elegance, more interesting for undergraduates than the readers of the Sunday papers. The processes that we inspect are often fairly general, capable of arousing comment and interest in lots of different arenas, but it is surely also important as a moral and political principle that beneath the headlines and beyond the
attention to spectacular cases, there is still some documentation of the intricacy, distribution and significance of these processes in ordinary lives.

**References**


Gumperz, J. 1982a *Discourse Strategies* Cambridge CUP


Rampton, B. 1996b "Language crossing, new ethnicities and school". *English in Education* 30:14-26
Transcription conventions

Phonetic symbols:

\[\text{stɑːz man}\]  Script like this inside two square brackets draws on the IPA phonetic alphabet (revised to 1979)

Prosody

\  low fall
\ /  low rise
\ \  high fall
\ /  high rise
\^  fall rise
\^  rise fall
\|  high stress
\|  very high stress
\|  low stress
\|  very low stress

Conversational features

( . )  pause of less than a second
(1.5)  approximate length of pause in seconds
[ ]  overlapping turns
[ ]  loud
>text<  more rapid speech
( )  speech inaudible
(text)  speech hard to discern, analyst’s guess
((text:))  ‘stage directions’
bold  words and utterances of particular interest to the analysis