WHY ETHNOGRAPHY?[1]

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Adolescence is commonly thought of as a condition rather than a life stage; as a biological given rather than a social construction; as universal rather than highly local. Adolescence is also commonly thought of as a problematic condition, an illness, a kind of *folie*. The willingness of adults to view adolescents as interesting specimens, as incomprehensible and somewhat less than rational, reveals the strong middle-aged bias that generally characterizes--and frequently taints--research on adolescence. Adolescents are the linguistic movers and shakers, at least in western industrialized societies, and as such, a prime source of information about linguistic change and the role of language in social practice. Understanding adolescents, their sense of themselves and their world, and the meanings they make with language, is central to our understanding of language. Sociolinguists need adolescents more than they need us.

Explanation in sociolinguistics is commonly sought in adult categories, the most widely used of which is socioeconomic class. Generally assessed as a composite of adult achievements--educational level, occupation, income, and sometimes value and style of residence--class measures just those aspects of life that adolescents do not control. Examining adolescent language in the light of their parents' socioeconomic class, therefore, embodies sociolinguistic assumptions about the relation between parents' class and kids' language that are frequently glossed over. On the one hand, it is possible that the adolescent speaker acquires class-based linguistic patterns from one or both parents. On the other, it is possible that aspects of parents' socioeconomic status influence the adolescents' own orientations to the world which, in turn, affects their patterns of speech. There are no doubt combinations of these factors, for example in the combination of parental and peer influence found in a stable neighborhood. The neighborhood is determined by the parents' material possibilities, and determines one's earliest and most accessible peers. To the extent that the neighborhood is socially homogeneous, parental influence and peer influence are difficult to separate. But even if the neighborhood is relatively homogeneous, school populations are generally more heterogeneous. And in the US, while elementary schools tend to be neighborhood-based, the system of comprehensive secondary

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[1] In: Ulla-Britt Kotsinas,Anna-Brita Stenstrom, and Anna-Malin Karlsson (eds.). (1997). *Ungdomsspråk i Norden* . Stockholm: Stockholm University, 52-62.

schooling provides extensive contact among a heterogeneous student body. This makes high schools an excellent site for the examination of the relation of the linguistic influence of family and peers.

School represents the transition from childhood to adulthood, and from parents' socioeconomic status to one's own. The two life stage elements are manifest in high school: kids still live at home, and in neighborhoods shared with some classmates and far from others. Their parents' socioeconomic status determines, to some extent, what they can buy, where they can go, and what they can do. To some extent, it also determines their outlook on the world, and on school; their expectations and their desires. And to the extent that they hang out with other kids from their neighborhood, their friends' backgrounds are likely to have had a similar effect on them, intensifying class-based orientations. What they do in school--what curriculum they follow, what activities they participate in, and what kinds of grades they get--will determine to some extent what they do after they leave school. Thus all high school students are simultaneously coming from and going towards. What they do in high school is a pivot point, and for some it is a continuation of a style of life from home while for others it is a transition to a new style of life.

The sociolinguist who aims to find explanations for social patterns of adolescent language use must get beyond the adult perspective, and explore meaning within the adolescent community. Just as one would strive to transcend one's native social categories in the study of a foreign culture, one must strive to transcend one's native adult perspective in the study of adolescents. Further, one must strive to transcend the enormous power imbalance that underlies all relations between adults and adolescents--an imbalance that makes studying children in one's own culture a prime example of "studying down." This imbalance is based both on the overwhelming authority that adults have over children, and on the general sense that having been adolescents once, adults have superior perspective and knowledge of adolescence. There can be an enormous gulf between adolescents and researchers--a gulf that is as deep and as wide as the researcher's inability to work with adolescents as equals in an unequal world. And as long as this gulf persists, there will be severe limitations to what the researcher will be able to learn about language and social meaning in the adolescent community.

In the following discussion of phonological variation drawn from my ethnographic and sociolinguistic study of adolescents in the suburbs of Detroit[2]. I intend to motivate the use of ethnographic methods in sociolinguistic fieldwork, and to expose some fundamental principles of

such work. The details of adolescent life that I will discuss are specific to the American context, and to the American schools in which I have done the work. Most particularly, the comprehensive schooling system makes the student bodies of American high schools socially more heterogeneous than one generally finds in European high schools; and the emphasis on the school as a locus for social life is also characteristically American. But the need for ethnography and the fundamentals of the practice of ethnography with adolescents transcends national boundaries and specific settings. Indeed, while I chose to base my work in schools because they are the main site of contact among kids of widely differing backgrounds, other sociolinguistic ethnographic studies may be better based outside of the school (e.g. Cheshire 1982, Labov 1972, Goodwin 1990).

The following discussion will show briefly how the ethnographic approach, time-consuming though it is, provides a very local perspective on adolescent sociolinguistics that could not be gained by other means. The work took place in Belten High School[3], one of four high schools that serve Neartown, a suburb lying in the midst of the urban sprawl that emanates from Detroit. The population of Neartown, almost exclusively of European descent, covers the full socioeconomic range from lower working class through upper middle class. Only the wealthy and the very poor are missing from the student population of Belten High.

BELTEN HIGH

Students spend about six of the best hours of each weekday in school. Some of them remain for several hours after school, engaged in extracurricular activities, and then spend several hours on homework. The school's "ideal" participant can easily spend eleven or twelve hours a day on school-related activities, making school an intensive full-time enterprise. It is not unknown for particularly zealous students to suffer extreme stress and even breakdowns--not from a rigorous academic program but from the combination of academic and social programs. The school's least enthusiastic participant, on the other hand, can frequently get away with spending as few as four or five hours a day in school, and with the absolute minimum required number of days of attendance. While most of the student body falls between these two extremes, the high school social order is based on the opposition between the two extremes. There is a division that is almost universal in American high schools between students who base their social lives in the school and those who reject the school altogether as a basis of their social lives, orienting themselves more towards the neighborhood and the urban area. The two extremes constitute opposed social categories, which are sufficiently important to commonly have names, which

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[3]All local names are pseudonyms.

vary not locally, but by region. In the schools around Detroit (and throughout the midwest and much of the east), those who embrace and those who reject the school are called (and call themselves), respectively, "jocks" and "burnouts" (see Eckert 1989 for an ethnographic account of these social categories). The fundamental status of these categories is reflected in the fact that kids who consider themselves neither jocks nor burnouts overwhelmingly refer to themselves as "in-betweens."

The jocks and the burnouts, respectively, constitute middle class and working class cultures, or trajectories, within the adolescent context. While neither category is homogeneous in its class origins, the jocks are predominantly from middle class homes and the burnouts are predominantly from working class homes, as shown in Table 1. The in-betweens fall, true to their characterization, in between.

	Jocks	In-Betweens	Burnouts
Working Class	16 %	16 %	50 %
Lower Middle Class	34 %	42 %	22 %
Upper Middle Class	50 %	42 %	23 %

Table 1: Socioeconomic Makeup of Belten High Social Categories

But as important as where they come from is where they are going. The jocks, heavily engaged in school, intend to continue from high school into college, while most of the burnouts are bound for the local blue and pink collar workplace. The jocks' primary orientation to the school institution provides them access to, and preparation for, college admission and college practices. The burnouts, on the other hand, have little to gain from engaging in such practices, and prefer to focus on the local community and the wider urban area that it's part of, and into whose workplaces they will graduate from school.

Social networks reflect these differing orientations. While jocks emphasize getting to know as many people as possible in school, and particularly those engaged in extracurricular activities, burnouts emphasize getting to know those who have contact with people beyond the school, and who know how to get around outside of school. The burnouts' local orientation is not an orientation solely to the neighborhood, and certainly not to Neartown itself. Growing out of an eagerness for local access, it involves access to the resources of the greater Detroit urban-suburban area. For the adolescent, these resources may include automotive and auto body

expertise and supplies, after-school jobs, bars that serve minors, pool halls, parks, parties, excitement, and people who in turn have access to these and to other kinds of urban knowledge and resources.

Stuck together in the same institution, the jocks and the burnouts compete to define adolescent norms, and each category sees the other as embodying false values and undermining its own arrangements with the adult establishment. The opposition between jocks and burnouts, therefore, is hostile, and foregrounded in high school discourse. Resources of all kinds are exploited to construct the opposition: clothing and other adornment, territory, substance use, musical tastes, demeanor, and of course language.

It should not be surprising, therefore, that every one of six phonological variables in my study of Belten High correlated either with gender or with social category, one variable correlating with both (Eckert 1987, 1988, 1990, 1995, 1997, forthcoming). None of the variables, however, correlated with parents' socioeconomic class. Table 2 shows one example of the social category correlation--the correlation between social category membership and the use of an urban vernacular variable, the backing of (uh) (see Eckert 1988 and forthcoming for a discussion of this variable). The burnouts clearly lead in the use of the backed variant, yielding a pronunciation of, for example, <u>lunch</u> as something more like <u>launch</u>.

burnouts	jocks	input=.494
.571	437	sig. = .000

Table 2. Backing of (uh) by social category.

The lack of correlation with parents' socioeconomic class is no doubt partially due to the sample selection. The speaker sample in the study of Belten High is not a random sampling based on parents' socioeconomic factors. Rather, choice of speakers was based on place in social networks and particularly relation to social categories, foregrounding the speakers' own socioeconomically related choices. A sampling that did not focus on the two extreme social categories may well downplay individual social mobility and show a greater correlation between linguistic variables and parents' status. It is just this difference that forms the heart of this research, which was designed to focus on the transitional nature of adolescence, and particularly on the relation between the speaker's construction of identity and linguistic variation.

The ability to make these comparisons depends on a social analysis of the community that is sufficiently detailed to yield categories such as jocks and burnouts, sufficient familiarity with the

members of the community to be able to assign them to appropriate categories for correlations, and sufficient familiarity with day-to-day social practice to move beyond these categories in analysis. For example, while there are strong correlations between jock and burnout affiliation on the one hand, and use of urban vernacular variables on the other, these correlations are only for the community extremes. However, the practices that distinguish the two extremes are, themselves, salient for the rest of the population of the school. Thus when one includes jocks, burnouts and in-betweens as well, there is an equally significant correlation between participation in urban-oriented social practice and the use of urban vernacular variables. Table 3, for example, shows a highly significant correlation between the backing of (uh) and the practice of urban cruising. This practice, which consists of driving along particular strips along the border of Detroit that are frequented by teenagers from around the urban area, is engaged in by kids who seek excitement and connections outside the purview of the school.

+ Cruising	- Cruising	Input=.501
.586	.443	Sig=.000

Table 3. Backing of (uh) and urban cruising.

The association of this variable with burnout category membership and with urban social practices such as cruising points to its meaning. One additional correlation clearly indicates that kids use this variable (and others) in constructing selves and styles in relation to the social landscape. Among the burnouts, there is a good deal of diversity. Some are more focused on local involvement and on solidarity with their peers, while others are more focused on autonomy, excitement, and the urban area. This difference shows up in the use of linguistic variables as well. Among the girls, there are three main network clusters of burnouts. One of these clusters is referred to by some as the "burned-out burnouts" or the "biggest burnouts." These girls pride themselves in seeking excitement. Their lifestyle is more adventurous, more dangerous, generally wilder than that of the other burnout girls, and in accordance with this, as shown in Table 4, their use of variables is far more extreme.

Female Jocks	Male Jocks	Female Burnouts	F. Burned-out Burnouts	Male Burnouts	Input=.496
.41	.38	.53	.65	.52	Sig=.001

Table 4: Backing of (uh) by combined sex and social category, separating the burned-out burnout girls.

The social meaning of this variable is closely tied up with urban orientation; not with something as simple as contact with the urban area, but with the construction of identities tied up with the autonomy associated with urban adolescents, with wildness, and with rebellion.

DOING ETHNOGRAPHY

Anyone coming into the school and doing a number of good sociolinguistic interviews would learn about the jock and burnout categories. Finding the jocks and the burnouts, and collecting a speech sample representative of the two categories would require closer contact, but could be done through school adults who are painfully aware of the two categories. But finding interviewees in this way will close off a good deal of the potential for trust on the part, particularly, of burnouts, limiting the kind of information the interviewer will get. But finally, being able to identify practices such as cruising, network clusters such as the burned-out burnout girls, and the values that give these social categories and practices meaning requires a continuous presence and close familiarity with the student body. And above all, it requires trust.

The study of adolescent language requires methods for working with, rather than on, adolescents; and for discovering meaning in, rather than imposing meaning on, adolescent behavior. Language does not exist simply in the abstract, untouched and untouchable; it is used and reproduced in the service of local communities. The sociolinguistic enterprise involves, importantly, the investigation of the local deployment of linguistic resources as they are imbued with social meaning. While we may find that language use patterns with global abstract categories such as class, gender, ethnicity or age, these categories point to, but do not define, the social meanings that speakers associate with linguistic form. Because meaning is made in day-to-day practice, much of it tacitly, the study of social meaning requires access to this practice. Surveys, questionnaires, and experiments all have their place in the study of language in society. But all of them presuppose and test categories and meanings, rather than discovering them. Observations and interviews come closer to providing access to kids' meanings, but if used alone they have serious limitations for one must know what to watch for, and what questions to ask. Any or all of these methods, pursued within a context of ongoing ethnography, will bring the researcher close to day-to-day practice. Ethnography requires a considerable time investment, and it requires for many a serious adjustment of attitude, but in the end it yields insights that cannot be obtained by any other means.

SCHOOL, POWER AND THE RESEARCHER

Conventional sociolinguistic wisdom tells us that schools and other normative institutions are highly problematic sites for the study of the vernacular. However, as a central site for social life among kids, the school is the locus of a good deal of vernacular speech. While certain settings and events that are specific to the school exert linguistic pressure against the use of vernacular, there are also certain settings and events in school that actually encourage the use of vernacular. Most particularly, the very fact that school is problematic for so many students makes the school a site for a good deal of resistance and rebellion. It is above all in school that kids are likely to have empassioned discussions of teachers they hate, unfairness they have suffered, boredom they can't tolerate. And the vernacular that they use for these discussions is itself an act of resistance and rebellion. Thus while the school poses powerful deterrents for the sociolinguist, it also poses unequalled opportunities for the sociolinguist who gains access to these impassioned discussions. The key to this access is personal engagement and trust.

Age stratification presents a seemingly enormous barrier to the establishment of engagement and trust between a researcher and an adolescent population. Another bit of conventional wisdom about field work is that status differences can impose serious constraints on relations between researcher and researched. Age presents a status difference that is potentially far more powerful than differences in occupational status. One can't emphasize enough how normative and power-laden kids' relationships are with adults. From the very earliest days, adults begin correcting kids, telling them how to behave and how not to behave. One could say that by and large, adults' role in kids' lives is to change them, that is, to help them grow up. A barrier under any circumstances, the effect of age is compounded in the school, where age stratification is foregrounded in the institutionally coercive arrangements among adults and students. The highly problematic setting of the classroom, in which thirty or so kids must interact with one teacher and not with each other, is a disciplinary set up. It means that school is *about* evaluation, discipline and control. A good deal of a teacher's job in the traditional classroom, and a good deal of a teacher's skill, is related to keeping thirty kids quietly focused on one person. Unable to have a one-on-one relationship with their students, teachers have to instruct and correct rather than guide. Even in the non-traditional classroom, particularly with the currently increasing emphasis on collaborative learning, there remains a fundamental assumption that kids have to be taught how to interact appropriately. Teachers censor kids' movements, their demeanor, their activities, their opinions, their beliefs, their adornment, their language.

The teacher-student relation embodies all the asymmetries that go with age: asymmetries of power, freedom, knowledge, resources. And since most of kids' waking hours are spent in

school, and since kids are generally excluded from workplace and other adult spheres, they have few opportunities to develop other kinds of relationships with adults. Intensive adult contacts are generally limited to parents and relatives, friends' parents, neighbors and parents' friends, and school personnel. The result is that kids tend to view adults as carriers and enforcers of norms. One way of overcoming this age difference is to minimize it, by being or appearing young, presenting oneself as in roughly the same life stage (see Cheshire 1982). The value of this is not in actually becoming an insider, but in eliminating obvious reminders of status differences. For the research enterprise itself is a clear sign of adult status, and an adolescent doing this kind of work among strangers would no doubt be viewed with suspicion. If adult status can pose problems for the researcher, it can also provide an opportunity, because kids are starved for new kinds of relationships with adults. An adult ethnographer has a good chance of being relegated to the category of adult authority figure. At the same time, he or she has a rich opportunity to become another kind of adult -- one who is interested in kids on their own terms, who does not want to change them, who wants to listen to them, and who is not part of the local authority structure. Such an adult can be a valuable resource to kids, for above all, kids are flexible, and eager to learn and explore, and the opportunity to interact on an equal basis with an adult is rare. And inasmuch as many adolescents feel misunderstood and even mistreated by the adult world, an adult who promises to be an advocate or to present their point of view can be highly valued. In return, the adult has the opportunity to see the world from a new perspective--a perspective that is, with social change, different in unpredictable ways from the perspective that he or she had as an adolescent (and has probably forgotten).

As long as the fieldworker functions as an adult in the school, he or she is expected--by teachers and students alike--to embody adult norms. Functioning as an anomalous character, with the adult privilege of mobility but the adolescent privilege of lack of responsibility for the behavior and safety of others, requires special arrangements with both groups. It requires a very careful negotiation in advance with the school, working out possibilities and mutual responsiblities with teachers and administrators, being maximally explicit with the teachers early on that the researcher can not be put in any position of authority in relation to kids. There must above all be an understanding by all parties, that what the researcher sees and hears will be kept confidential. This means not only that the researcher will not report anything that kids say or do (to adults or to other kids), but that he or she will maintain the confidence of teachers as well.

For lack of staffing, teachers are frequently tempted to leave their classes in the charge of an available adult, and they may call upon an adult in the hallway for help with controlling students. Other kinds of participation in classrooms are dangerous to the ethnographic enterprise as well--a researcher may be a welcome resource to give presentations to classes. But because the

classroom is a site of continual power struggles between adults and children, any adult who commands the attention of the entire class is in a position of potential authority over the kids. Furthermore, the sole person talking to a class makes a claim on the class's attention, and the presumption to tell kids about one's own interests -- and on an adult's terms -- contradicts the claim to be there to listen to them.

In order to avoid many of these issues, I stayed out of classrooms in Belten High, spending time with kids in the hallways, cafeteria, courtyard--during free periods, at lunch, and after school. In these settings, it was easy to keep a low profile and to stay out of teachers' way. And because I was in the school on the teachers' and administrators' suffrance, and had to be careful not to annoy teachers, not to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, not to cause trouble, I was in much the same position as the kids. My own vulnerability put my search for trust on a level similar to that of the kids--since kids were in a position to get me into trouble, we put ourselves in each other's hands.

The above is not a set of guidelines for doing ethnography with adolescents, but a very brief discussion of the kinds of issues the researcher must take into consideration in studying the language of adolescents. Adolescence is a peculiar life stage--a kind of holding pattern imposed by adults, and falling between two clear life stages. On the one hand, adolescents have pulled away definitively from childhood; on the other hand, they remain under adult control. Caught between a clearly dependent and a clearly autonomous life stage, the age cohort makes sense of itself by opposing itself to the adult and child age groups on the one hand, and by creating structure based on difference within the age group on the other. The very status of adolescence separates the age group from childhood once and for all, and the major term of this separation is autonomy. At the same time, the focus on autonomy sets up a new kind of opposition between adolescence and adulthood. Since institutional requirements and constraints prevent adolescents from affirming independence from their parents through full engagement in the adult world, they must do so through engagement in the adolescent world. While one agenda of adolescence is laying claim to adult prerogatives, the only legitimized way to have a sense of autonomy is to elevate the peer community and culture as an independent form of membership and participation. And the value of such a claim to autonomy depends on the autonomy and sense of worthiness of that adolescent culture. The elaboration of adolescent social practices thus stems from the need to create a viable alternative to adulthood, making adolescent life both short and intense--a social hothouse. Symbolic intensity facilitates the rapid social change of adolescence, giving rise to comparably intense preoccupations with clothing and other adornment, style of demeanor and motion, substance use and eating patterns, cars and other forms of consumption, and language use. It should be no surpise, therefore, that adolescents lead all age groups in linguistic

innovation. Adults tend to take a condescending view of this activity, relegating it to childish exuberance and overactive hormones. But all of this activity is a means of making meaning, of giving sense to a very restricted place in the world. And this activity does not index adult social categories or adult-imposed categories, but rather produces specifically adolescent categories and meanings. Understanding this place in the world, and representing it fairly to those who have power over adolescents, should be researchers' primary goal.

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