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Social categories, social practice and linguistic variation in an urban school – combining variationism, ethnography and language attitudes research.

In this paper I wish to combine different approaches to language variation and change in order to examine the relation between phonetic variation and social meaning. I suggest that the variationist and ethnographic approach used by Eckert (eg. 1989; 2000) and other researchers may be fruitfully combined with a social psychological approach known from verbal guise studies of language attitudes (eg. Garrett, Williams & Coupland 2004; Kristiansen 2003).

If we understand social meaning to be co-constructed in situated discourse, partly by participants drawing on relatively stable structures like social representations or other similar concepts, partly by introducing novel features and thus over time, potentially changing those structures, it is just as important to investigate the meaning potentials of structures as it is to study the actual combination and use of certain features appearing in situated social interaction. It is an aim of this paper to show that verbal guise methods can be used in the examination of such structures.

Furthermore, we know from many sociolinguistic studies that the relation between linguistic variation and social meaning is tied to local communities of practice, and thus it may vary a great deal between communities. However, surely there are relations between linguistic variation and social meaning potentials that are not restricted to the local community of practice but are found in other communities as well. I will argue that the verbal guise technique is very useful in examining part of these meaning potentials.

The paper will report from an ethnographic study of the social categories, social practices and the phonetic variation among young people in an urban school in Copenhagen, Denmark. Among the 80 pupils in ninth grade (15-16 years old), some individuals stood out as stereotypical of certain categories (e.g. ‘the tough girls’, ‘the foreigner boys’ or ‘the nerdy boys’) that existed in the social structure of the school. Some of these individuals were chosen for a verbal guise experiment where each person was represented twice, with two different speech samples. These samples were then played at different schools in Copenhagen, using respondents similar to the speakers in age. The question was to what extent the respondents were able to ‘recognise’ the speakers, solely on the basis of speech samples; i.e. to what extent the respondents evaluations could be seen as corresponding to the day-to-day reconstructions of personae that the speakers engaged in in the school.

Results showed that the respondents are able to recognise the speakers' personae, just by listening to eight seconds of speech, but also that some speakers were not recognised. The

patterns show, among other things, that speakers of the old 'working class' accent are not recognised, and this is seen as indicating that this accent is not known by young people in other parts of the city to relate to the same meaning potentials.

The combination of these approaches gives insight into the interplay between relatively stable structures and dynamic processes in persona construction, and between the local construction of meaning and global meaning potentials.

References:

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