

**“Oh my god!”:
Stereotypical words at the intersection of sound, practice, and social meaning**

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This paper examines the English interjection ‘oh my god’ as a socially meaningful resource for students at a multiethnic high school in Texas. By investigating 125 uses of this phrase in 36 conversations among 10 friendship groups, I describe its diverse forms and functions and demonstrate that a local stereotype of this phrase as being used predominantly by privileged white girls diverges from the actual distribution of this phrase among speakers in this community. According to local stereotype, uttering ‘oh my god’ evokes an image of ‘preppy’ white girls, although non-white girls were as likely as their white counterparts to use this item. Additionally, the most regular users of this interjection were girls, but boys also sometimes used it. The tendency for particular girls to favor this interjection seemed to relate not to their ethnic identification but the kind of social persona they constructed (Eckert 2004) (e.g., expressive or excitable) as well as the kinds of stances, acts, and activities (Ochs 1992) in which they regularly engaged.

A detailed examination of the interactional moments in which ‘oh my god’ occurred as well as its precise phonetic and phonological manifestations demonstrates that this phrase had diverse functions and forms. It achieved several pragmatic and affective functions (conveying disdain/complaint/anger, surprise/shock/disbelief, worry, excitement, and admiration) and served particular narrative functions (introducing stories or evaluating them). In addition, students used ‘poetic’ strategies in their creative ‘oh my god’ performances, including variant stress patterns (initial, final, or each syllable), pitch contours, backness of /o/ and /ɑ/, /d/-deletion, devoicing, or replacement with /ʃ/, and voice quality (breathy, guttural, or nasal). Interestingly, the pragmatic force of this interjection was not wholly predictable from its physical shape, although speakers sometimes manipulated its variable features to achieve predictable pragmatic and social meanings (e.g., nasality and backed /ɑ/ for disdain/complaint, breathiness for admiration, fronted /o/ for playful stylization). The analysis also considers the frames of play (Goffman 1974) in which this interjection appeared and demonstrates how femininity could be constructed not only through a speaker’s own affective utterance of ‘oh my god’ but also through an ironic display against which the speaker defined her own brand of femininity.

This paper illustrates the importance of lexical items, such as ‘oh my god’, as local carriers of links between sound and social meaning. Following the lead of other studies that have focused on salient lexical items as indexes of social meaning (e.g., Bucholtz 2004, Kiesling 2004, Wong 2005), I propose that words and phrases can index important social nuances by not only having embedded within them socially significant phonetic and phonological characteristics (e.g., fronted /o/ linked with ‘Valley Girls’) but also carrying semantic content, allowing these items to serve direct pragmatic functions that are in turn associated with particular social personae. Although the infrequent occurrence of specific words and phrases relative to phonemes require analytical methods beyond

statistical correlations, I argue that lexical items, which lie at the crucial intersection of sound and social meaning, deserve close attention in sociolinguistic research.

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