

## Language, social class and education: listening to adolescents' perceptions

Sarah Spencer\*, Judy Clegg and Joy Stackhouse

*Human Communication Sciences, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK*

*(Received 25 October 2012; final version received 17 December 2012)*

Young people's perceptions may offer an insight into the complex associations between language, education and social class. However, little research has asked young people what they think of their own talking. Forty-two British adolescents aged between 14 and 15 years were interviewed: 21 attended a school in a working class area; 21 attended school in a middle class area. This paper examines and compares interview extracts from the two groups of adolescents.

Results of a thematic analysis suggest that adolescents in both schools use language to signal their identity and to identify the group membership of others. Identity was linked by participants to social class. For example, adolescents attending school in a working class area described how they avoid talking 'posh' and those in a middle class area avoided talking like a 'chav'. Adolescents attending school in a working class area described differences between the requirements of talking with teachers versus with their peers. Those in a middle class area discussed how their language skills were related to literacy and educational success. Implications for educational policy and practice are examined.

**Keywords:** language; social class; social disadvantage; interviews; secondary school; vocabulary

### Introduction

This paper will explore the link between education, social class and language by listening to the perspectives of young people in secondary schools in the UK. It is well established that socioeconomic background is a determining factor in the educational attainment of children and young people. For example, in 2011, only 35% of pupils eligible for free school meals (an indication of low household income) attained five or more GCSEs<sup>1</sup> at grades, A\* to C (including English and Mathematics), compared to 62% of pupils who were not eligible for free school meals (Department for Education 2011). This inequality in educational attainment is an on-going concern for government and educational professionals (for example, see the Cambridge Primary Review 2009). As discussed in this special edition (in particular see Grainger and Jones, this volume), there is a long and on-going tradition of exploring how language use relates to education and specifically to the marginalisation of pupils from working class backgrounds within educational settings (Maybin 2007). Furthermore, researchers and practitioners have called for a greater focus on language and communication skills to address educational inequalities (Ginsborg 2006; ICAN 2011; Locke, Ginsborg, and Peers 2002; Sage 2005).

Some researchers have claimed that children and young people from areas associated with social disadvantage are at increased risk of language difficulties in pre-school (Locke

---

\*Corresponding author. Email: [sarah.spencer@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:sarah.spencer@sheffield.ac.uk)

and Ginsborg 2003), primary school (Law, McBean, and Rush 2011) and secondary school (Spencer, Clegg, and Stackhouse 2012). In the UK, the findings of such studies have been used to argue for additional support and greater resources for children and young people in areas of social disadvantage, with a particular focus on enhanced language development work in schools (Locke, Ginsborg, and Peers 2002; Spencer, Clegg, and Stackhouse 2012; Trott, Stackhouse, and Clegg, In preparation). Law, McBean, and Rush (2011) go as far as to suggest that this association between social disadvantage and increased prevalence of language difficulties is a public health issue. This is linked to the recommendation that speech and language therapists support teachers to take responsibility for whole-school approaches to language development (Law, McBean, and Rush 2011). The underlying theory is that language skills are central to children's access to the curriculum and learning in the classroom, and therefore children and young people with lower scores on language assessments are at risk of educational underachievement (Ginsborg 2006; ICAN 2011; Locke, Ginsborg, and Peers 2002). Research demonstrating higher risk of language difficulties in areas of social disadvantage has been used in a number of reports to argue that 'approximately 50% of children in socially disadvantaged areas have significant language delay on entry to school' (Bercow 2008; The Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services 2010), leading to the use of terminology such as 'impoverished language' (Rose 2009) to describe language delay associated with socioeconomic disadvantage. As discussed in this special edition (in particular see Grainger and Jones, this volume), this description of children's language is fiercely contested. Furthermore, despite a growing focus on the role of language in educational inequality, very little research has examined the associations between language skills and educational outcomes.

A different perspective on language and social class is provided by studies that demonstrate that children in working class areas use language to construct and manage their own local identities and relationships (Snell 2010; this volume). Such research demonstrates high levels of sophistication in the use of language by children and young people within their community (Moore 2004; Snell 2010). As part of an ethnographic study, Snell (2010, this volume) investigated children's use of possessive 'me' in two schools in two different social class contexts. Although there were differences in the frequency of the use between the two schools, Snell moves away from describing this linguistic variation in social class terms. Instead, close analysis demonstrates that children used linguistic features to index a specific interactional stance, associated with spontaneous performance and affective intensity. By shifting attention away from membership of macro-level identity categories and towards language use in action, there is more potential for explaining (rather than describing) linguistic variation and presenting working-class speakers in a more positive light (Snell 2010, 649).

In another study of local interaction using ethnographic methods, young people have been shown to use linguistic features to relate interaction back to social class. Social class was a central reference for young people in their interactions with both teachers and peers in an urban secondary school in London (Rampton 2006). The study analysed stylised episodes of speech, where adolescents used hyper-cockney or hyper-received pronunciation ('posh') accents to respond to specific situations in the classroom. Analyses of episodes of stylisation were used to show that adolescents 'repeatedly foregrounded social class' as a relevant framework for their lives (Rampton 2006, 379 and see Gazeley, this issue). Rampton argues that while social class is difficult to discuss explicitly, implicit reference to social class via adopted accents can effectively reveal class-consciousness. His analysis suggests that social class is a feature of young people's everyday experiences in school and that they actively reflect this in their language use.

Therefore recent research has claimed that: (a) increased risk of language delay may be associated with social disadvantage and (b) children in working class contexts are skilled users of language, employing linguistic features as an active response to their local context. It is difficult to reconcile these two claims and yet it is necessary to determine how best to both support and recognise the skills of these children.

Eliciting young people's perceptions on language, education and social class is one approach to both, refuting deficit models of working class language and understanding any need for policy development or educational support. Work within education and sociology has shown that interviews can be used to counter the portrayal of people from working class areas as 'deficient' (Gillies 2007; Skeggs 1997). Perceptions of adults in working class communities have given insight into the experiences of women in working class contexts (Skeggs 1997) and of parenting in contexts of economic hardship (Gillies 2007; Lees, Stackhouse and Grant 2009). Primary school children in Ireland have also taken part in focus groups, reflecting on their own experiences of language within school (Mac Ruairc 2011). However, the views of young people regarding their own language skills remain under-researched and under-theorised. Such views may prove insightful in terms of recognising linguistic proficiency, and understanding and therefore responding to any perceived challenges. Any approaches to supporting language skills in working class areas would surely fail if they are at odds with the perceptions of young people in these contexts. Therefore, the current study examines interview data in order to explore the associations between language, social class and education. It addresses the following questions:

- (1) During interviews about their own talking, do young people make links between language skills and social class?
- (2) During interviews about their own talking, how do young people relate their language skills to education?
- (3) Do young people from two schools in different socioeconomic contexts differ in how they relate their own language to (a) social class and (b) education?

## **Method**

The data in this paper is taken from a larger study which looks at the associations between language, social class and education in two secondary schools (Spencer 2010; Spencer, Clegg, and Stackhouse 2012). The interviews formed one part of this overall project, which also involved examining scores on standardised language assessments and associations with educational outcomes upon leaving school.

A comparison design using interviews was selected because: (1) interviews with young people about their perceptions of their own talking are rare; (2) this was the most efficient method of data collection as the young people were preparing for examinations; (3) interviewing is well suited to the exploration of attitudes, values, beliefs and motives, allowing a rich corpus of data to be gathered. Semi-structured interviews were used rather than more open-ended methods such as unstructured interviews, in order to facilitate a detailed exploration of different aspects of language and allow comparison across different groups, whilst at the same time providing leeway for participants' own interpretation and priorities.

## **Participants**

The research involved interviews with 42 young people in total: 21 from a school in a working class area of an English city (13 females and 8 males) and 21 from a school in a

middle class area of the same city (13 females and 8 males). Participants were aged between 14;6 and 15;7 years old, with a mean of 15;1 years.

Using the *English Indices of Deprivation* (Department for Communities and Local Government 2011), the school in a working class area has a catchment ranked in the bottom 2% of England's wards<sup>2</sup>. In terms of educational attainment, less than 20% of the students in this school leave with five grades, A\* to C, at GCSE including Mathematics and English. Less than 40% of the students leave with five grades, A\* to C, in any GCSE subject. The other school is situated in an area ranked around the 50th percentile of England's wards. This school was recruited to the study as it was more representative of the national average (although referred to as a middle class area, it is not particularly advantaged as such, but is in line with the national average). Approximately 60% of the students in this school leave with five grades, A\* to C, at GCSE including Mathematics and English and around 70% leave with five grades, A\* to C, in any subject.

### ***Procedure***

The study gained ethical approval through the University of Sheffield's ethics procedure. The head teachers of both schools agreed for the study to take place and parents gave consent for their children to participate. Participants themselves also signed consent forms to agree to take part in the interview.

Interviews took place individually and in a quiet room within the school, taking up to 45 minutes. Interviews were carried out by the first author who had been spending time in both schools during the previous 6 months and so was familiar with the participants. The participants knew that the interviewer was not affiliated with the school and was there as a researcher. At the beginning of each session, the purposes of the study were outlined again and participants were given an opportunity to withdraw from the study, although none did. The interviews were audio-recorded.

### ***Interview schedule***

The Appendix details the questions used to guide the interviews. These questions are also detailed elsewhere, along with a discussion of how the interview schedule was developed (Spencer, Clegg, and Stackhouse 2010). Questions were related both, to pupils' perceptions of their own language ability and to language in general. Questions were used as an interview guide only, with flexibility to follow-up participants' responses. This paper focuses on interview findings related to perceptions of language, social class and education. This was not pre-planned in the interview schedule but was a theme that emerged during data analysis.

### ***Data analysis***

Interview data was transcribed verbatim by the first author. Transcripts were then imported into a software programme for qualitative analysis, NVivo 7 (QSR International 2007), and all of the raw data was related to a coding system electronically. As more data was analysed, the coding system itself was refined and adapted as necessary in response to new codes. A code is a re-occurring theme, which may be an attitude, belief, behaviour, motivation or view.

The Thematic Coding approach, outlined by Flick (2006), was used in order to facilitate comparison between individual participants and groups of participants based on socioeconomic background. Using this method, a system of codes and categories is developed for

each individual and analysed in depth, before comparing participants to develop an index system. This is to allow greater scrutiny of similarities and differences of an individual and a group, rather than focusing on common themes across all transcripts, and is therefore used when the social distribution of perspectives is of interest (Flick 2006). Thematic Coding is a three-stage procedure which is described in relation to this project elsewhere (Spencer 2010).

Quotations were selected to illustrate recurring themes throughout the interviews and to facilitate comparison of the views of young people from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The quotations are given verbatim, with discontinuities in the interview marked with [. . .].

## Results and discussion

Data analysis showed that both groups of young people discussed (a) social class and language, and (b) language and education. However, young people from middle class and working class backgrounds differed in the way that they conceptualised language in relation to social class and education.

### *Social class and language*

#### *Young people attending school in a working class area*

Young people attending school in a working class area discussed language in relation to unity with their peer group, rejecting ‘posh’<sup>3</sup> ways of talking. Tammy compared her own use of slang words to the language of posh people, who she felt were outside her own social group.

T: I like slang words me.

S: Tell us about slang words.

T: Like – you know instead of saying – like I don’t know – it would be I dunno or anyfin instead of anything. I prefer it like that like that [laughter]. You see what I mean I don’t like talking like that. It just comes out all the time. I can’t change it. I can’t talk right posh.

S: Would you want to talk right posh?

T: No, I wouldn’t fit in really if I talked right posh. Everyone would be like eerrr she’s right posh her, don’t hang about with her [S: laughter]. I think alright I don’t talk – I don’t talk like people like that. I like slang, cos I understand people who talk slang. But do you know – like – if they’re talking right posh, and that I’d be like what you on about? I don’t understand what you’re on about.

S: Yeah do you know anyone who talks posh?

T: Not really, I’ve met people who – do like – do you know when you go on holiday and you go like Skeggie and that, you meet people who talk right posh – you know – like [hyper-posh voice] hello darling you know [S: laughter], and I’m thinking – no don’t talk to me, I’m alright.

The preference for ‘slang’ over ‘posh’ is both an active choice (‘I don’t like talking like that’) and beyond her control (‘I can’t change it’). It is unclear whether Tammy cannot change due to an inability to talk that way or due to the importance of slang for her sense of belonging within her peer group. Slang is associated with understanding (‘I understand people who talk slang’) and again it is unclear if this is linked to linguistic comprehension skills or a broader understanding of someone’s aligned identity. Adapting her talking towards ‘posh talking’ would have real social consequences: She would not fit in

and people would distance themselves from her. Furthermore, Tammy herself rejects ‘posh’ people and their talking, and displays a defiant pride in the talking of herself and her peers. This pride in working class value systems has been examined elsewhere (Evans 2006) and has clear consequences for language interventions based on deficit views of language. If such interventions aim to develop language skills associated with ‘posh talking’, they are likely to be rejected by these young people. They may be interpreted as an attempt to alter not just their language skills but also their own identity and that of their peer group.

Nicole compares her own talking to other people brought up in her area, with emphasis on the similarities in talking that lead to group unity.

N: Me mum, me mum uses big words.

S: Ah, that’s interesting.

N: Erm, but then she’ll use just short words – but she does use big words every now and then – Not really, we all just use – we all really talk the same. It’s cos we all hang round, like, we all that close – in that much close a group that we all talk the same. We all use the same sort of words that’s why.

...

S: Do you think that people in this school need help with their talking?

N: Not really, it depends though, if they want to. We all talk same, we’ve all been brought up in the same area – things like that – so we all just talk the same. We all know – we all understand each other, and as long as we understand each other, that’s all what really matter.

Nicole emphasises ‘we all’, stressing the uniformity of talking and relating this to the local community. Group cohesion is linked to upbringing, geographical area, and mutual understanding. Nicole’s stance is summarised by: ‘as long as we understand each other, that’s all what really matter’. Nicole describes belonging within a ‘close group’ and discusses how the unified way of talking within this community is both, a result of this closeness and a way of facilitating it by ensuring mutual understanding. Therefore, Nicole describes her specific access to a language register as a positive cultural symbol within her own community.

Tom also describes his talking in relation to his peer group, describing how he adapts his own talking to facilitate his friends’ understanding.

T: I’m always with my friends, and we just talk, we don’t talk big words. We talk small words and slang and stuff like that [2] cos they understand and that better, because I’m probably cleverest one [S: hmm] so if I started talking all words that I learnt they’ll not know what I’m on about.

...

T: If they wanted to get a job and they’re not clever enough – they needed to know bigger words for the job to get it – so if they were in a call centre and they were talking to people, they might have to talk posh if you know what I mean.

S: Hmm – explain what you mean by ‘talk posh’

T: So in a posh accent and long words, long sentences, not in slang

Tom, both sets himself apart from his peers who have less vocabulary knowledge and associates with this group, like Nicole emphasising that ‘we just talk’ and explaining that his language use is closely linked to his social group. However, Tom highlights the complexity of this identity and how it relates to others’ perceptions of ‘cleverness’. From within his own peer group, he uses language as a criterion for judging intelligence and concludes

that this judgement will extend to the workplace. Talking posh is a mixture of accent and linguistic features, with longer words and longer sentences.

Lucy compared her own perceived limited use of ‘big words’ to her step-father and his family’s talking which includes a lot of big words. Earlier in the interview, Lucy said that she talks in a different accent to her step-father’s grown-up children who work as a policeman and a doctor, linking her talking implicitly to social class. When asked if she wanted to use big words, Lucy discusses the conflicting influences on her talking.

L: If I start using big words, then people are gonna go – What’s she doing here? What’s she using big words? You know in school.

S: Yeah.

L: But then I do, cos then when my step-dad and that say like big words, I know what they mean. [S: hmm] But I don’t know. I don’t think I want it – I don’t know. In school I wouldn’t like to use big words cos they’ll probably just go – ‘Oh you’re right posh, you’ – Like they do.

S: Yeah.

L: But at home. I don’t know how to explain it. Nobody does in this school.

S: Nobody uses big words?

L: Some of them do [pupil name]. [S: hmm] He uses very big words and then some people just don’t – and you’re just thinking, what do they mean?

Lucy refers to ‘big words’ as did many young people within the working class area. ‘Big words’ appear to be conceptualised within ‘posh’ language registers, rather than being a description of the actual length of words only. Lucy discusses the complexity of the value of big words in different interactions. She highlights her mixture of feelings towards (1) having access to meaning and (2) being accepted by her peers. Use of big words is linked to communication breakdown: frustration at being unable to understand some words at home, along with the confusion in school caused by an unusual peer who does use big words. Lucy talks explicitly about the negative reaction of her peers if she spoke in a way similar to her step-father. If Lucy did learn and then use big words, she describes potential accusations of being ‘posh’, and the potential of her membership in her peer group to be questioned (‘what’s she doing here?’).

A level of prestige is associated with Lucy’s own way of talking (also evident in the extracts of Nicole and Tracy’s interviews) and there is an explicit rejection of posh-type language, as found in the work of Mac Ruairc (2011). Participants who attended school in a working class area referred to social class implicitly, stressing the unity among their local peer group. As we will see, participants attending school in a middle class area were more explicit in how they compared groups based on social class.

#### *Young people attending school in a middle class area*

Most young people attending school in a middle class area made explicit links between language and social class, often from a position of advantage, attributing their own advanced language skills to their background. For example, Sadie discusses how her friendship group shared a similar socioeconomic background and therefore had access to an ‘intellectual’ linguistic repertoire.

Sadie: I notice when people do wrong grammar and I guess there is like an intellectual thing with speech – I mean – well – My friendship group are all kind of like quite middle class, quite top-set-y so and it’s just – And then it’s funny how people who are middle class seem to make friends with people who are middle class, and people who are like – like working class or whatever seem to make friends with each other. And then maybe the speech is to do with

that, and it's to do with their social groups, as well as to do with just like age, and things like that.

Sadie describes how 'intellect', speech and social class are all factors in determining friendship group membership. Harrison also links vocabulary knowledge to a stereotype of social class:

H: I think it's quite a – quite an intelligent school. I mean probably because it's in a very nice area. I used to live down there so very good [laughter]. But – erm yeah – it's not as in one of the – I mean – I'd brand it rougher areas. But of course, the more poorer, less intellectually developed [laughter] – I don't know – I mean most of the workers would be working in the primary industries, so they're not as – they don't have to have any qualifications or understanding as such to get the job done.

S: And do you think that affects the words that they use in that school?

H: Yeah because they're the children of the people who maybe don't know, so they grow up not knowing as many words.

Harrison makes associations with being poorer and being 'less intellectually developed'. 'Primary industries' is a specific term, used to legitimise this broad stereotype by its association with objective measurement and classification, building a rationalised projection of working class people (Gillies 2007).

Like Sadie, Natalie highlights similarities between her own talking and that of her friends. She contrasts her talking to the talking of 'chavs' at school. 'Chav' is a slang term used to ridicule and stereotype the white working class (Gillies 2007).

N: I think I talk the same as my friends. I don't think I talk the same as everyone else, cos – like – we all have – like – different styles of talking. Depends where you come from, but I mean, some people in our school talk like really different to me. I know – I think if you hang out with some people, you pick up some of their speaking, as well so.

S: So who are these people who talk really different to you then?

N: Errrrr [1] am I allowed to say chavs?

...

N: I can't even understand them, they're like – what's your problem, are you stupid? And I'm just like no [laughter] I just don't understand you.

...

S: So what do you mean by chav then?

N: Well – I don't know – I probably sound – well I'm going to say that loads now – but [laughter] they're like the boys are like monkeys, and the girls are like squeaky squirrels who like slap people if they even look at you [laughter].

In this extract, Natalie positions her friends in opposition to 'chav' groups who are described in relation to animals, with complete communication barriers between groups ('I can't even understand them' and 'I just don't understand you'). Similarly, Graham mentions different social groups within school:

G: And then people at school – I mean there's a lot of different groups, so like like chavs and stuff would speak a lot – well – not even less complicated, I mean less, complicated – like sort of standard English is a way of speaking – but um in their own language themselves, then, they've got phrases and stuff so just a lot of more slang and stuff.

In this extract, 'chav' groups are described as having less complicated language, contrasting Standard English with 'their own language'. 'Own language' emphasises the total difference



between groups; it is entirely separate, again describing a mutual lack of understanding. The term ‘chav’ has been widely criticised for allowing more privileged groups to openly insult people from less advantaged backgrounds (Jones 2011).

### **Language and education**

#### *Young people attending school in a working class area*

A key theme in the interviews with young people attending school in a working class area was the differences between how they talked at home and at school. For example, Claire contrasts her talking at home with that at school:

C: When I’m at school and when I’m with my family and my friends, we just speak differently. And we use short sentences and that. But then when I’m in school I mostly talk polite and stuff like that.

S: Ah ok – so what do you think about that then?

C: I don’t know. Weird.

Claire uses the word ‘we’ to show unity with friends and family who ‘just speak differently’, the use of ‘just’ making the difference sound inevitable or easy.

Young people attending school in a working class area also discussed how their own language skills fell short of the language demands of school. Aalam also reflected on the difference between his ‘little words’ and the words and syntax required for assessment.

A: If I’ve got English, and if I used my little words, I’ll get a little grade. If I use bigger words, I might get a higher grade for like writing [S: right hmm] like writing test or sumit. If I write with like higher punctuation or sumit, I can get higher grades.

S: Ok, do you think it’s important – like – outside of school?

A: Outside of school, I’m not really bothered, you see, it’s in school. I don’t really like school much.

A second related theme was that some words had a specific currency in educational activities, but would not be useful in other contexts. While words may be important for specific situations such as when in lessons or in job interviews, when questioned, the young people made it clear that such words had a specific, strategic use and were not needed in everyday interactions. For example, Rabia describes how she would like to use ‘big words’ (a term she had used earlier in the interview) in science but not with friends.

S: Would you like to be able to use big words?

R: Yeah, so then I can just seem a bit more clever. [S: hm] Not with my friends. I prefer to stay like how I say, cos then, like, they wouldn’t understand the words I’m saying. But like if I’m doing any work in science, I wish I could put them words into it and get myself a higher grade.

A third theme was that school was a potential source of learning new forms of language, particularly when talking about ‘words’ during the interview. However, young people reported that school did not support relevant word learning effectively. Josh discusses the link between education and vocabulary knowledge, in an extract discussed further in Spencer, Clegg and Stackhouse (2010).

S: Is there anyone else who comes out with long words?

J: Martin cos he’s in a higher set than me in English, and they learn more. My brother sometimes comes out with em, and he’s only eleven.

S: So do you think it’s good that they’re in different classes for English then?

J: Yeah like my brother – he comes out with words that even my mum don't know what they are. They have to write sentences out with it.

S: Yeah?

J: And they get told off if they say 'I don't know – what this mean?'

S: They get told off?

J: What this word means? Yeah it's in [primary school]. I never got words like them. And I used to be good at English. They come out with stuff like dissect and that.

In this extract Josh discussed that school is a source of learning big words and that those in lower sets may be denied this opportunity. School demands use of a particular linguistic register but it also provides knowledge of this linguistic register in the form of vocabulary. Josh shares his sense of injustice at being denied access to this linguistic repertoire. This is in contrast to some participants who rejected teachers' attempts to introduce what they perceived as irrelevant words. For example Lucy said:

L: [Teachers] don't learn you big long words. They just learn you boring ones or words that you're just like – really big long words – that you're just like – this long – and they try and expect you to remember them, and you just like – 'No, don't.' [S: hmm] like some words, you really just cannot remember.

#### *Young people attending school in a middle class area*

A central theme in the interviews with the young people attending school in a middle class area was that their language skills were related to educational practices, either using academic achievement to legitimise their own positive evaluations of their talking or linking their language skills to literacy practices. This theme was not present in the interviews with the young people from a working class area.

Harrison discusses his advanced vocabulary when evaluating his talking, and makes links with education:

H: I'd like to think my talking's ok. Reasonable.

S: What makes you think that?

H: Erm, I like to read quite a bit, so I read quite a lot, so I have an extended – I don't know – I have quite an extended vocabulary. Erm, I am higher up in English, er, sets – so that probably some type of judgement on how your speaking is, cos it's all to do with speaking, listening and writing.

Harrison supports his positive evaluation with an evaluation of his own literacy and success at school. Mary also relates her advanced vocabulary to reading and academic attainment.

S: What's your talking like then?

M: I don't know [laughter] [posh accent] People tell me I have a posh accent.

...

M: I read enough books to get my language out of them, anyway. I read about two books a day. [laughter]

S: Wow [laughter].

M: I read a lot. That's maybe a slight exaggeration, but I can finish a book in a day, and I have read three books in a day before [S: whoa] and I read a lot basically. [laughter] So –

S: Wow.

M: So, you know, I come up with words and my friends are like – what you doing? What does that mean? [S: hmm] Yeah, so it means like stories in English, I always get high marks for it. Makes me happy – I'm just like – yes!

Mia attended school in the middle class area but lived in a working class area some distance from the school and took two buses each morning to travel to school. Mia's interview contained themes that differed from the rest of the young people in her school. She discussed the associations between social class, education and language:

M: My mum sent me quite far away because – I don't know why – she wanted me to get educated – like not like – more better than I would around my area. Because around my area, the education's not exactly perfect, if you know what I mean, like the grades aren't very high [S: right] and the speaking – like if you were in an interview or something with a job person and then you started talking all this slang they wouldn't exactly accept you. So my mum and my dad thought about that, and sent me to a school that's more, like, in a posher area – if you get what I mean – so then my grades would be higher and it would be better for me. So I was really happy to go here cos around my area there's like a lot of killings.

She contrasts 'her area' with the posher area of her school. She also describes how she perceives that the typical talking associated with her own area forms a part of the barriers to employment. Mia also discussed how people make judgements based on language, and about how her own talking has changed as a result of her schooling.

M: Before, I used to go to a school round my area. And – erm – the way that they spoke was different. I don't know how – I don't even understand why it was different – but the way you hear it, if you hear someone from my area where I live, or someone from this sort of area, you'd be able to tell the difference. And you'd judge them on the way they talk, for some weird reason. You'd say – oh that person's less educated – But it's not actually true.

Mia relates language to education, viewing language as a necessary device for avoiding the negative judgement of others. Although Mia's position is different to that of her peers at school, her interview fitted with a central theme of this group's interviews; discussing their own talking in relation to educational advantage.

### **Summary and implications**

The interview data presented in this paper demonstrates that young people perceive associations between both social class and language, and education and language. There were differences between the two groups of young people, between those attending school in working class and middle class areas. A central difference between the two groups of young people was that in the working class area young people valued being able to communicate with one another. Language was discussed as an essential part of their peer-group identity. In contrast, the young people in the middle class area did not associate communication with a sense of belonging so strongly, but discussed educational success in greater detail.

The young people attending school in the working class area discussed how their language use was part of how they created group cohesion with their immediate peer group. While emphasising this unity, they highlighted differences between their own talking and 'posh' talking. Their own language was in contrast to the language demands of school and school-based assessment.

The young people attending school in the middle class area contrasted their own language use to 'working class' or 'chav' talking. This group of young people discussed how their own language fitted with the curriculum and with literacy practices. Despite these differences, there were similarities between the views of young people from the two areas. Both groups reported that they adapt their language when talking to teachers, both highlighted

similarities with their peers' talking, and both described communication breakdowns when talking with those outside their most immediate social group.

Contrary to the research which claims that working class language skills are deficient, the interview data here suggests that young people from working class areas have sophisticated language use and they are able to reflect on how they match their communication to their social context. The responses may have been influenced by the use of a semi-structured interview schedule. However, this schedule did not explicitly ask about how language relates to education or social class, with these themes emerging during analysis. The findings are also in keeping with other research, including studies which have demonstrated that young people in working class contexts use language as a resource for marking social boundaries and to position themselves and others (Snell 2010, this volume). They are also compatible with the results of focus-groups with younger children, which concluded that language skills are part of both identity formation and cultural production (Mac Ruairc 2011).

Young people interviewed in the working class area discussed the negative impact of using 'posh' language on their relationships and interactions with peers. This finding that young people in the working class context rejected posh language is consistent with previous research (e.g. Milroy 1980; Mac Ruairc 2011). However, there has been less specific investigation of how vocabulary use fits within this system of values. The current study shows that young people associated 'big words' with both posh talking and educational outcomes. The balance between the perceived currencies affording to big words within education versus the effect of using big words on the management of local identities requires further investigation, as there could be important consequences for educational engagement and outcomes.

Discontinuities between the language of home and school have been explored as a reason for educational underachievement for children from working class backgrounds (Milroy 1980; Maybin 2007; Jones, this volume). The data from the current study supports this to some extent, given that young people perceive that their language skills may affect their performance in school. However, there was little evidence of linguistic insecurity in the interviews with the young people attending school in a working class area, reflecting the findings of an earlier study by Rampton (2006). In general, the perceptions of the young people from the working class area render the issue of language difficulties as a public health issue problematic. Nevertheless, there was a recognition that school was failing to provide adequate opportunities for learning new words (this theme was only present in the interviews with the working class group). These new words were often described as 'big' words and were described as being useful in relation to specific and strategic contexts such as when talking to specific people or when completing educational activities. The need for such words was described in relation to their value in specific contexts, and not in relation to correcting a more general language 'deficit'.

The interviews presented in this paper were part of a wider study into the language abilities of 103 young people in a working class area, in comparison to 48 young people in a middle class area (Spencer 2010). The data collected in this study suggested that young people in working class areas of Britain are at increased risk of low vocabulary knowledge and that up to 60% of young people may have an undetected language difficulty as measured by standardised language assessments (Spencer, Clegg, and Stackhouse 2012). The interview data discussed here provides a valuable context for these quantitative findings. It demonstrates that the young people who participated in this study are not passively affected by their socioeconomic position. In contrast, they are using language to actively respond to their local context, to forge identities and to shape interactions and relationships with peers and adults. By interviewing young people, the focus can shift away from quantified

'language difficulties' to acknowledging the sophisticated language use and communicative competence of these young people.

This shift towards acknowledged linguistic strength has implications for educational programmes and interventions aimed at supporting language skills in working class contexts. The interviews from the young people in the working class area call for both recognition and resources (Sayer 2005). In the working class context, young people described how using 'posh' language and 'big words' would hinder their immediate social relationships. This has clear implications for policy and interventions designed to increase the language and vocabulary skills of children in working class contexts. However, some of these young people did also mention a need for a widened linguistic repertoire for specific contexts and expressed frustration that school did not provide opportunities for learning new words. It is clear that any programme of support that does not tackle the social consequences of 'talking posh' risks being rejected by young people in these contexts. The challenge will be to both value young people's sophisticated language skills while also responding to young people's own perceived need to further develop education-specific language skills for assessment and the job market.

### Notes

1. A British school-leaving qualification ('General Certificate of Secondary Education'). Grades A\* to C are required for continuation into tertiary education.
2. British towns and cities are divided into electoral districts called 'wards'.
3. 'Posh' is a British English colloquialism, referring to behaviours associated with the social elite.

### References

- Bercow, J. 2008. *The Bercow Report: A review of services for children and young people (0-19) with speech, language and communication needs*. Nottingham: DCSF Publications.
- Department for Education. 2011. *GCSE and equivalent attainment by pupil characteristics in England, 2010/11*. <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001057/index.shtml>
- Evans, G. 2006. *Educational failure and working class white children in Britain*. London: Palgrave Macmillan
- Flick, U. 2006. *An introduction to qualitative research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Gillies, V. 2007. *Marginalised mothers: Exploring working-class experience of parenting*. London: Routledge.
- Ginsborg, J. 2006. The effects of socioeconomic status on children's language acquisition and use. In *Language and social disadvantage*, ed. Judy Clegg and Jane Ginsborg. London: Wiley.
- ICAN. 2011. *Speech, language and communication in secondary aged pupils*. I CAN talk series – issue 10. [http://www.ican.org.uk/~media/Ican2/Whats%20the%20Issue/Evidence/ICAN\\_TalkSeries10.ashx](http://www.ican.org.uk/~media/Ican2/Whats%20the%20Issue/Evidence/ICAN_TalkSeries10.ashx)
- Jones, O. 2011. *Chavs: The demonization of the working class*. London: Verso.
- Law, J., K. McBean, and R. Rush. 2011. Communication skills in a population of primary school-aged children raised in an area of pronounced social disadvantage. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders* 46: 657–64.
- Lees, J., J. Stackhouse, and G. Grant. 2009. Learning to talk: Community support and views of parents from socially disadvantaged families. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs* 9: 91–9.
- Locke, A., and J. Ginsborg. 2003. Spoken language in the early years: The cognitive and linguistic development of three- to five-year old children from socio-economically deprived backgrounds. *Educational and Child Psychology* 20: 68–79.
- Locke, A., J. Ginsborg, and I. Peers. 2002. Development and disadvantage: Implications for the early years and beyond. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders* 37: 3–15.
- Mac Ruairc, G. 2011. Where words collide: Social class, school and linguistic discontinuity. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 32: 541–61.
- Maybin, J. 2007. Language and education. In *The Routledge Companion to Sociolinguistics*, ed. L. Llamas, L. Mullany, and P. Stockwell, 149–56. London: Routledge.

- Milroy, L. 1980. *Language and social networks*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Moore, E. 2004. Sociolinguistic style: A multidimensional resource for shared identity creation. *Canadian Journal of Linguistics* 49: 375–96.
- Department for Communities and Local Government. 2011. *The English indices of deprivation 2010*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-indices-of-deprivation-2010> (accessed January 4, 2013)
- QSR International. 2007. NVivo version 7.
- Rampton, Ben. 2006. *Language in late modernity: Interaction in an urban school*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rose, J. 2009. Independent review of the primary curriculum: Final Report. <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/2009-IRPC-final-report.pdf>.
- Sage, R. 2005. Communicating with students who have learning and behaviour difficulties: A continuing professional development programme. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties* 10: 281–97.
- Sayer, A. 2005. Class, worth and recognition. *Sociology* 39: 947–63.
- Skeggs, B. 1997. *Formations of class and gender: Becoming respectable*. London: Sage.
- Snell, J. 2010. From sociolinguistic variation to socially strategic stylisation. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 14: 618–44.
- Spencer, S., J. Clegg, and J. Stackhouse. 2010. ‘I don’t come out with big words like other people’: Interviewing adolescents as part of communication profiling. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy* 26: 144–62.
- Spencer, S., J. Clegg, and J. Stackhouse. 2012. Language and disadvantage: A comparison of the language abilities of adolescents from two different socioeconomic areas. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders* 47: 274–284.
- Spencer, S. 2010. Language and socioeconomic inequality in adolescence: Assessments and interviews. PhD thesis. University of Sheffield.
- Stockman, I.J. 2000. The new peabody picture vocabulary test-III: An illusion of unbiased assessment? *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools* 31: 340–53.
- The Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People’s Services. 2010. Grasping the Nettle: Early intervention for children, families and communities. [http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/earlyintervention/files/early\\_intervention\\_grasping\\_the\\_nettle\\_full\\_report.pdf?dm\\_i=7SL,9M0N,12Q3B2,PNQ1,1](http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/earlyintervention/files/early_intervention_grasping_the_nettle_full_report.pdf?dm_i=7SL,9M0N,12Q3B2,PNQ1,1).
- Trott, K., J. Stackhouse, and J. Clegg. In preparation. *Children’s language and literacy groups*. Guildford: J&R Press.

### **The Appendix: Interview schedule**

General question about school, such as: ‘how is school?’

#### *Quality judgements about talking:*

Are some people better at talking than other people or does everyone talk the same?

What is good talking like?

#### *Perceptions of own language ability:*

What is your talking like?

Do people understand you when you’re talking?

Do you talk the same as other people?

What are you like at explaining things?

Do you need help with talking?

What are you like at listening?

When you do listen, can you understand what people say?

Do you need help with understanding talking?

*Vocabulary:*

Is it important to know lots of different words or not?

Can you understand enough words?

Can you use enough different words?

Do you need to learn more words?

When do you learn new words?

What helps you learn new words?

Do people need help learning new words in school?

*Other questions:*

What is the hardest thing in school? What are you good at in school?

Tell me about your hobbies and interests.

Copyright of Language & Education: An International Journal is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.