

16 Language and Gender in Adolescence

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1 Introduction

Adolescence is a critical site for the study of language and gender. First, it is a life-stage at which a tremendous amount of identity work is being done, and gender is perhaps more salient in this work than at any other life-stage. Adolescents are moving away from identities based in the family to identities based in a newly organized and newly heterosocial peer social order, and this heterosociability both makes gender more salient, and changes its constitution. Second, adolescents are the major institutionalized population within industrial, and perhaps particularly within US, culture, and this institutionalization intensifies identity work, giving rise to an unusual amount of symbolic activity – much of it linguistic. Finally, institutionalization also subjects adolescents to particular kinds of monitoring and policing, much of which is gendered, and much of which focuses on language.

2 Adolescence as Ideology

In introducing my discussion of gender and adolescent language, and of adult activity around this use, I would like to emphasize that adolescence, like gender, is an ideological construct. The joint consideration of gender and adolescence provides a double opportunity to discuss the problems of power, homogenization, reification, and essentialism in the study of language and social groups. Just as gender does not unfold naturally from biology, neither do life-stages such as childhood, adolescence, adulthood, or old age. Biology imposes some constraints, and culture takes off from there. Adolescence is an outgrowth of industrialization – of the shift to institutionalized preparation for work, and the need to keep the young out of the workforce. While there are physiological

changes that coincide to some extent with the entrance into adolescence, to attribute “adolescent behavior” to “raging hormones” is to ignore the obvious: that above all, adolescence is an age- and generation-based location in the political economy.

What is commonly ignored is the fact that adolescents are not simply left to develop into adults, but are put into institutions that isolate them from adults. This situation produces a social hothouse, in which a social order emerges that solidifies the gender hierarchy as well as class, racial, and ethnic hierarchies. Adolescence slows time for the age group as, rather than focusing on getting to adulthood, adolescents enter into a kind of time warp – or a cultural sink – in which adolescence is not something to pass through, but something to achieve. And in the process, people become not more adult, but more adolescent, as the ultimate adolescent is the oldest: the high school senior. “Adolescent culture,” in other words, is very much the product of the place given to adolescents in our society. If we want to consider gender in adolescence (and beyond), then, we need to consider how our adolescent institutions constrain the construction of gender (see, for example, Connell et al. 1982; Thorne, 1993).

If adolescents and women share a naturalizing discourse, they also share stigma and trivialization of their activities and concerns. Discourses of gender, and of race and class, are built on discourses of age – discourses of responsibility, maturity, control, emotionality, intellectual capacity, and rationality. The ultimate legitimate person in the social order, the White upper-middle-class male,¹ is slated to be unemotional, rational, focused on “business,” and endowed with global and objective knowledge. Women and adolescents, on the other hand, are viewed as emotional, changeable, irrational, trivial, and unobjective. Adults can always get a sigh, a groan, or a laugh of commiseration just by announcing that they have adolescent offspring. People joke with those of us who work with adolescents about our bravery and forbearance. At a campus celebration of books published by Stanford faculty in 2000, I was even awarded a tongue-in-cheek prize for “work above and beyond the call of duty” for the ethnographic research involved in my book on adolescent linguistic and social practice (Eckert 2000). Colleagues have actually sat me in front of their adolescent children and asked me to “do my thing” with them – as if I were an animal psychologist and their children were problematic cats.

The purpose of this introductory diatribe has been to emphasize that life-stage and gender are intertwining constructions, and the examination of one calls for the examination of the other. Adolescence is a particularly rich life-stage for the study of the interplay between the construction of language and the construction of social identity because while it is eminently transitional, it is also highly reified and experienced as static (by many as painfully so). In the following discussion, I will step back a bit from adolescence to include the transition into adolescence. For it is in this transition that one can see the extent to which adolescence is not simply an abstract stage, but the dynamic accomplishment of an age cohort.

3 School as Site for the Construction of Adolescence

As the official transition from childhood to adulthood, adolescence is the time when the age cohort moves from their parents' and families' social sphere to one that they construct for themselves – one that is transitional from the social order of their childhood to the social order of their adulthood. Because adolescence is defined by secondary education, this takes place primarily in reference to schools. Even for those who are not in school, or who don't spend much time there, the very fact of their relation to the school is central to their place in society as *dropouts* or *truants*. And within the school, those who choose to minimize their institutional participation are labeled *anti-social*. In other words, participation in the secondary school institution defines legitimate adolescence. In the USA, the role of the high school in defining adolescence is particularly intense because, more than elsewhere, the high school in the USA is a total institution (Goffman 1961), not only providing academic and vocational instruction, but organizing the age group's civic, social, artistic, and athletic activities as well.

The dominant adult view of adolescence is of an "unfinished" population – a population in which judgment has not quite caught up with desire. This attribution constructs the age group as not yet responsible but harmless, their antics relatively predictable. And it defines adolescents as a special leisure class – without family and financial responsibilities, living out of danger and with comfortable adult caretakers, and content to participate in the school institution until it's "time" to join the adult world. Those people in their teens who for whatever reason do not fit this description are cast as anti-adolescents. For them, adolescence and adulthood are blurred, both in day-to-day experience and in treatment by the institutions of society – schools, social services, the courts. Any focus on adolescence as a life-stage locates struggle between adolescents and adults, erasing the ways in which adult-built institutions have set up a struggle among adolescents – a struggle that will endure into the cohort's own adulthood.

3.1 Accomplishing heterosociability

The adolescent social order is sufficiently reified in Western society that it begins consciously to take shape well before adolescence. Beginning in elementary school, there is a gradual appropriation of power and authority from adults into the age cohort, the development of an integrated social order, and the reorganization of normative relations within the cohort from asexual to heterosexual. By the time the cohort moves into secondary school, it has accomplished the social changes that move it into a heterosexual and hierarchical social order. And as the official locus of adolescence, the US high school

brings an institutionalization of traditional gender arrangements, heterosexuality, and romance. The female supportive role is formalized in the pairing of such activities as girls' cheerleading and boys' varsity athletics, and in the feminization of organizational activities such as holding bake sales, organizing dances, and so on. Girls tend to do the majority of the behind-the-scenes work for school activities, while boys predominate in top managerial roles (class president, student body president, etc.). And the heterosexual couple is institutionalized in the king and queen of the high school homecoming and prom, and the yearbook's choice of "cutest couple." Heterosexuality and romance are also publicly constructed in high school through formal activities such as dances, in the relation between dating and social status, and in the careful following of the antics of the "famous couples" of each graduating class.

Achieving adolescence is a goal for younger children – not just individually but as a cohort – and the business of social change within the cohort and the business of individual change are closely and consciously intertwined. The move to adolescence is not an individual experience – it is an age cohort's *prise de conscience*. The following discussion is based on my own ethnographic work, in which I followed a diverse age cohort in Northern California from fifth grade (10–11 years) into eighth grade (13–14 years) – from elementary school into junior high. During this time the cohort moved from late childhood into early adolescence. The initial stages of this process involve a transcendence of the teacher-dominated classroom, developing a social order that spans the age cohort, moving toward age-group autonomy. This transcendence is accomplished through the emergence of a heterosexual market (Thorne 1993), dominated by a *crowd* – a socially heterosexual community of practice that comes to dominate attention and space, and comes to be known as the "popular crowd." In the crowd, heterosexual pairing takes place as a group endeavor, providing support and encouragement for individuals as they experiment, on behalf of the rest of the cohort, with unfamiliar and face-threatening practices. As the visible locus of emerging social heterosexuality, the crowd dominates attention through its fast-paced new heterosexual activity, as couples form and break up at a dizzying rate. The rapid negotiation of alliances creates a market, constructing desirability and worth in heterosexual terms. Within this enterprise arises a new gender differentiation and division of labor. Boys come to dominate certain arenas of recognized accomplishment – most notably sports and overt competition of many kinds. They begin to accomplish masculinity – to expand themselves physically, developing sports moves and postures that maximize the appearance of contained volume and strength, and engaging in aggressive, competitive talk about "masculine" subjects. And as girls become marginalized in these activities, they establish and dominate new spheres of activity and accomplishment. They engage with the technology of beauty and personality, experimenting with cosmetics, clothing, hairstyles, and the development of cute or clever personalities. And more important, they engage in *social engineering*. The entire heterosexual enterprise at this point is about alignments within the cohort rather than about individual boy–girl relationships. The pairs

are brokered by members of the crowd, and the individual couples generally do not spend time together except in a few cases for very brief ritual appearances. And it is the girls who do the brokering. Girls control the heterosexual market – they decide who will go with whom, they arrange meetings and alliances, and they negotiate desirability.

As part of their role as brokers in the market, girls take up new forms of verbal activity. On the fifth grade playground, boys come to dominate the large games that take up the central area – to become *athletes* rather than *boys playing*. And girls, one by one and group by group, move away from some of their old playground activities, and take to standing, sitting, or walking around the periphery, watching the boys, heckling them, or talking intensely together. The practice of walking around has in itself symbolic significance. Moving away from the crowd and walking around slowly, intensely engaged in conversation, draws attention to those who do it. It stands in stark contrast to the fast movements of their peers, with play, with the larger groups engaged in games, and with the louder tone of children's talk and shouting. This walking, furthermore, is a visible occasion on which girls engage in intense negotiation of heterosexual pairings and realignment of friendships. This talk activity is a skill that girls consciously develop. In Eckert (1996), I recount how two girls, Trudy and Katya, gave up playground games for "talking" in February of fifth grade. Trudy had acquired a boyfriend, and as part of a move into prominence on the heterosexual market, she and Katya quite deliberately and self-consciously sat visibly aside and "just talked." It was not the desire to talk that brought them to sit aside on these occasions; rather, it was the cachet of sitting aside that brought them to talk. In fact, at first they sat awkwardly, not knowing what kind of conversation to engage in.

One might be inclined to attribute girls' engagement in negotiating relationships as evidence of the kind of connection orientation that is commonly attributed to girls and women (Belenky et al. 1986; Gilligan et al. 1990). If this is so, then *connection* has a different meaning than is commonly assumed. The focus on connection in the literature portrays girls as benign and positive in their relationships, in spite of the fact that any observer of adolescents during this period knows that girls can get quite mean and their friendships volatile, while boys' relationships tend to remain on a fairly even keel. A major activity among girls during this period is the development of cliques, ganging up on each other, shunning individuals, changing friends – a development of social toughness comparable to boys' development of physical or athletic toughness. Marjorie Harness Goodwin has chronicled this kind of activity in a variety of venues, and what is particularly striking about her findings is the elaborateness of girls' verbal activity in the accomplishment of exclusivity and the termination of relationships. The drawn-out nature of *he-said-she-said*, as girls police and sanction each other's behavior (Goodwin 1990), and the cleverness of girls' insults as they shun undesirables (Goodwin 2000),² all show an engagement in mean articulateness. It may be that a certain amount of this nastiness comes from the feeling of subordination

and exclusion in the new gender order, but the fact is that girls are not sugar and spice.

This emerging social order brings with it – indeed depends on – an increase in peer-based social control and negotiation. Much of the linguistic activity observed as “adolescent” is part of the means of construction and maintenance of the social order. Certain kinds of speech acts gain particular prominence in the search for social control, and in the monitoring, particularly, of individuals’ and groups’ conformity to new gender norms. With the new heterosexual social order comes an intensification of pressure on boys to be aggressively masculine and heterosexual. Teasing is one of the more important and obvious verbal forms of social control that is certainly common in childhood, but continues in later elementary school and junior high school in highly focused encounters (Eder 1991). Much of this pressure comes from other boys, but Eder et al. (1995) found in their research in a junior high school that girls participate in sexual and homophobic verbal teasing and aggression as well. The use of labels such as *fag* to refer to any male who does not match up to masculine norms, or of *gay* to refer more generally to someone who also does not match up to norms, brings together the heterosexual and the masculine imperatives. And the gender asymmetry of terms like *slut* and *stud* create gender-asymmetrical categorizations based on sexual behavior – or in fact, at this stage, on behavior only remotely related to, but nonetheless linked to, sexuality. The meaning of *slut* in early adolescence, and even to some extent in adolescence, is closer to the meaning of *hussy* – a female who oversteps general bounds of propriety, whether a girl who dates too many boys, or who is loud, or who does what she pleases.

Just as “talking” emerges with the heterosexual market, so does another speech activity often taken as indicative of females’ connection orientation. Perhaps the most interesting verbal means by which girls monitor progress in the accomplishment of new feminine norms of behavior and adornment is the use of compliments. As the heterosexual market takes off, one can see girls learning to do compliments, and indeed complimenting becomes a heightened verbal activity. As in the adult population (Holmes 1995), compliments are overwhelmingly addressed to females, and focus on appearance. Like the pairing of couples on the heterosexual market, complimenting is intense and almost compulsive among girls engaged in the market. And like trade on the market, it serves to establish norms of behavior and appearance. Girls accomplish this work through both sincere and sarcastic complimenting. Sincere compliments to players in the market add value to the receiver as evidence of her quality, and to the giver as evidence of her possession and exercise of cultural knowledge. The practice of offering obviously false compliments to stigmatized girls is a major means of pointing out infractions of the new norms, but more important, of establishing and enforcing social hierarchies and boundaries. As with the more direct forms of social engineering, this use of compliments might lead us to reconsider the source of behaviors commonly viewed as reflecting girls’ greater “connection” orientation.

Gender differences begin to appear in data on phonological and grammatical variation at around the time that the adolescent social order begins to emerge in elementary school. Several authors have found boys leading girls in the use of non-standard variants at about the age of 10 (Biondi 1975; Macaulay 1977; Romaine 1984). Macaulay shows gender differences setting in between the earlier age in his sample (10 years old) and the later age (14 years old). It is certainly a general pattern that at least where clear non-standardisms (particularly grammatical) are concerned, from early adolescence on, males in general use more of them than females. The use of vernacular language – language that is sanctioned by adults, particularly teachers – is one means to establish one’s independence, one’s toughness, and one’s right to “make the rules.” And closely related to the use of vernacular language, for many, is the use of expletives and sexual references (deKlerk 1997; Eder et al. 1995; Kiesling 1997). Inasmuch as this is an important goal for boys as they try to achieve hegemonic masculinity, one might expect them to make greater use of vernacular variants. This attitudinal gender difference is what Trudgill invokes in his discussion of *covert prestige* (Trudgill 1972). And this may well explain the pattern that John Fischer found in his study of elementary school children (Fischer 1958), as boys reduced more occurrences of *-ing* than girls, and “typical” boys reduced more than “model” boys. Cheshire’s study (Cheshire 1982) of an adolescent social network as defined by the use of a playground in Reading showed correlations between linguistic variables and participation in “vernacular” culture, which Cheshire defined primarily in terms of “toughness” (carrying weapons, criminal activity, skill at fighting, swearing) – which, in turn, was strongly related to gender. In her work with adolescents in Sydney, Edina Eisikovits (Eisikovits 1987) found boys increasing their use of vernacular variables in their interviews with her, apparently as a show of defiance in the face of an authority figure. But we need to be careful not to automatically equate the search for autonomy and toughness with male gender, however much societal norms may lean in this direction. For however compelling this view of gender may be, it breaks down in part when we take a closer look at general patterns, as becomes particularly clear in the data on adolescent speakers.

3.2 *Constructing adolescent social categories*

The arrival in secondary school marks the official beginning of adolescence, and with heterosociability firmly in place in the cohort, there is increased attention to other forms of diversity. In most places, primary schools feed into larger secondary schools, where there is often greater class, racial, and ethnic diversity – and sufficient numbers to form crowds based in these categories. Thrown together in a close environment for the better part of the week, students engage in identity politics, vying for space, visibility, social resources, legitimation. Space is exploited in such a way that the school layout becomes a highly charged social map, providing a variety of stages from which people

can mount cultural performances. The semiotic activity that constitutes social categories within and beyond the school permeates just about every aspect of people's day-to-day practice. Styles emerge laden with social significance, mapping out the ideological terrain of the age cohort within an adult-defined environment. Differences in class, race, religion, and ethnicity, and positioning in relation to adult institutions (not only the school but government, police, courts, the media), to adult control, and to adolescence itself, create a highly charged atmosphere for the creation of distinction (Irvine 2001). These categories, in turn, are saturated with gender in a complex variety of ways. Categories may be constructed around different gender practices, for example, with more or less gender segregation, more or less gender hierarchy, more or less consensuality – and these within different kinds of activities. The degree of hostility and/or segregation of categories may differ among males and among females, as may the need to exercise difference. It is the magnitude of this complexity that can make generalizations about gender problematic.

Labeling is an important means of producing and maintaining social distinctions. The simple existence of a term for a social type creates a category, allowing it to enter into everyday discourse. At the same time, the potential for labeling can serve as a strong means of social control. Labels arise in real use, and in relation to real people in real situations (Bucholtz 2001; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1995). We make social meaning by labeling as we chat. It is in speech activities such as making observations and judgments about people, pointing people out to others, describing absent people, that we endow labels with meaning. And in thus endowing labels with meaning, we create categorizations. In this way, the day-to-day use and re-use of labels brings about the continual ebb and flow of meaning and social change. This goes for the use of *fag*, *gay*, *slut*, and *stud* mentioned above, as well as for the huge range of category names that constitute an important part of the lexicon in any high school. In every school, a proliferation of labels maps out the local social terrain, the margins of respectability, and the terms of evaluation (T. Labov 1992). These labels connect to those in other schools, but always with either small differences in meaning or with strikingly different inventories – depending on the nature of the local social order. And these terms are used differentially by gender. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1995) have noted that the hegemonic categories (such as *jock* and *burnout*) tend to be primarily defined in terms of males, and female participants in these categories need to work harder to emphasize their category status. (Striking evidence of the hegemonically male status of these categories appeared in one writer's claim that my first book about jocks and burnouts (Eckert 1989) was only about boys.) On the other hand, certain categories may be specifically male or female (such as *nerd* or *ditz*), while others may be used differently when referring to males and females. At any rate, the practice of labeling is a powerful means of co-constructing gender and other social categorizations, and of controlling social meaning within the community.

The volatility of these labels attests to – indeed is an agent of – social change. Mary Bucholtz’s account of a group of girls (Bucholtz 1996) claiming status as *nerds* – a status normally reserved for males – is a striking example of the process of change through the contestation of categories, the regendering of categories, and the reclaiming of epithets. While nerds in schools have been generally stigmatized, their increased power and visibility in the high tech industry – and the increasing visibility of technological expertise in school itself – feeds back into an increasingly self-proclaimed status in high school. These girls, in appropriating an aggressively intellectual and independent style, are making a claim about their ability not only to be smart but, like boys, to “make the rules.” In laying claim to nerd status, these girls are constructing a particular style that includes not only being smart, but being independently smart, beyond the control of teachers. They lay this claim by constructing an entire style of speech that includes specialized names, lexicon, and phonological variables signaling articulateness (e.g. the hyper-articulation of stops). Thus as labels serve to produce and reproduce categories in discourse, speech style joins with other aspects of style (e.g. dress and other adornment, substance use, musical taste, territory, activities, movement) to make claims about one’s own relation to those labels. Norma Mendoza-Denton’s study of Mexican American girls in Northern California (Mendoza-Denton 1994, 1996) shows how gang girls use a wide range of semiotic means, from language choice and variation to make-up and dress, to lay claim to gang identity and practice that has been traditionally reserved for males. Specific features of this style (e.g. the span of black eyeliner) are iconic of toughness, simultaneously signaling ethnic identity to non-Latinos, claiming access to the male prerogative of toughness, and setting themselves off from tamer girls.

General ideology would have it that many adolescent labels and the styles that go with them are trivial, manifesting as they do “purely adolescent” concerns. Adolescent styles are viewed as ever-changing, but trivialized as stylistic activity for its own sake, and limited to adolescence. These styles and the concerns they represent are expected to have no lasting effect on language or society since individuals are expected to drop them as they move into adulthood. This attitude toward stylistic activity is more general, and part of the construction of hegemony by which style is an add-on for people who are not sufficient in their “natural state.” The business suit and the man who wears it are “style-less” – and this stylelessness goes with seriousness of purpose, the important work of the world. Women in high heels and make-up, teenyboppers, goths, and hip-hoppers, on the other hand, are frivolous: their stylistic activity a bid to be noticed or to rebel, and their activities just noise in the world. The opposition between the real and the styled is repeated across society in many ways. Most crucial to this discussion is the recursiveness of this opposition (Gal and Irvine 1995), as it not only separates adolescents from other age groups – and particularly adults – it also separates delegitimated adolescents from the legitimated.

In his study of White middle-class Parisian adolescents, Stephen Albert (Albert 2000) noted how they distinguish themselves from adolescents who are “into” youth styles (*à fond dedans*). For these teenagers, knowledge of youth styles – of dress, of music, etc. – is crucial to being cosmopolitan, but so also is a lack of engagement in conscious stylistic activity, and an avoidance of specific youth styles. In this way, they lay claim to naturalness by claiming to choose what they like, what’s comfortable, and, presumably, what’s objectively good. Being *à fond dedans* (“into”) styles, for them, signals a lack of the self-control and perspective that come with maturity – and with class. Unmarked, they are *hors style* – needing no explanation, packaging, or self-presentation.

At the same time, the situated appropriation of elements of these styles allows “mainstream” adolescents to lay temporary claim to bits of meaning. The use of Latino and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) features by White Anglo teenagers in the USA signals coolness, toughness, attitude. And while these acts of identity may indicate admiration, the admiration is for a specific set of attributes, and as such, as argued by people such as Mary Bucholtz, Cecilia Cutler, and Jane Hill (Bucholtz 1999; Cutler 1999; Hill 1993), preserves the racial hierarchy. Based on her work in Rio Di Janeiro, Jennifer Roth-Gordon (Roth-Gordon 2001) argues that middle-class Brazilian adolescents engage in just enough slang use to establish their connection to youth culture. But the youth culture that they’re connected to is a kind of imagined community in which youth are aligned in their up-to-dateness in opposition to their out-of-date parents. Originating in the tough poor favelas, urban slang represents youthful autonomy, but it is also linked to crime, race, and poverty. In their selective use of favela slang, middle-class adolescents assert that they are the upcoming generation, but signal restraint. And their ability to dispassionately appropriate favela youth resources constitutes, in their and their parents’ view, legitimate adolescence, and an anticipation of legitimate adulthood. In other words, they construct their age group as aligned with their parents’ class position. The favela youth, on the other hand, engage in slang “for real,” and are expected to carry their slang into adulthood – an adulthood that will not differ significantly from youth.

4 Adolescents as Leaders in Linguistic Change

I don’t think that I need to argue that stylistic innovations of adolescence do carry over into adult language. This should be self-evident. But the social work that brings into opposition the marked and the unmarked, the vernacular and the standard, the delegitimized and the legitimized, is an important source of change throughout the linguistic system. There is every reason to believe that linguistic change is propelled – or accelerated – by social upheaval. Historical linguists have noted that languages tend to change more rapidly during historical periods of unrest, and we have seen major linguistic developments at

specific times of social change (Clermont and Cedergren 1979; Zhang 2001). One might consider that very similar dynamics are at work during the adolescent life-stage. The cohort is undergoing rapid social change, with changing alliances, and ever-emerging new forms of identity. It is in, and by virtue of, this process that adolescents act as major agents of linguistic change. Early arguments (Halle 1962) that linguistic change is the result of reinterpretation at the moment of acquisition have been challenged by the fact that it is adolescents, not children, who lead in linguistic change. And this is not a purely linguistic phenomenon, but goes hand in hand with the fact that adolescents are also engaged in social change.

By virtue of their transitional place in the life-course, adolescents are in a particularly strong position to respond to change in the conditions of life, and in so doing bring about lasting social change. It is particularly apparent with immigrant groups that adolescents are society's transition teams, reinterpreting the world, resolving the old with the new, substrate with superstrate, culture with culture, local with transnational. Chantal Tetrault (2000) describes the multilingual punning of French adolescents of North African descent. In *hachek*, a competitive word duel played by two participants, rhyming play between Arabic and French allows these teenagers to play with cultural meaning as they construct a new cultural space, or as she puts it, "creating cultural crossroads from which to speak." Norma Mendoza-Denton's examination (Mendoza-Denton, forthcoming) of the raising of [I] and the fortition of [θ] in the speech of Latino adolescents shows the importation of Spanish phonology into English, transforming English into a language that can construct Latino identities. Particularly, the heightened use of this particular phonological feature in a highlighted discourse use of *and everything* relates it directly to the US life of these adolescents. Teenagers in immigrant communities are simultaneously mediating cultures, and they can do it not simply because they are some transitional generation, but precisely because of their life-stage. As youth, they are expected to mess with meaning. By virtue of their location in time and social and cultural space, they have special knowledge, and in working with this knowledge – in making new meanings – they are constructing authenticity of a new kind. They are not just resolving ethnicity, gender, class, and race for today, but constructing permanent meanings that they will carry into adulthood, to be worked on by the next generation.

Work in phonological and grammatical variation has shown adolescents interrupting what might otherwise be smooth age grading, leading all other age groups – younger and older – in sound change and in the use of vernacular forms. Adolescents are producing linguistic patterns that are no longer reflecting their family of origin, but that reflect their own search for a place in the peer social order. Walt Wolfram's data (1969) on African American English in Detroit and Ronald Macaulay's data (1977) from Glasgow show better correlations of language use with parents' socio-economic class for pre-adolescents than for adolescents. My own Detroit suburban study (Eckert 2000), which included only adolescents, saw parents' socio-economic class give way as a

significant correlate with variation in favor of the age-specific social categories that mediate social class for the adolescent age group. Potentially more striking evidence of the role of adolescent social practice on language change is Sarah Roberts' (2000, forthcoming) powerful argument, on the basis of historical Hawaiian data, that creolization in the case of Hawaiian Creole was effected not by children learning pidgin as their first language, but by older children and adolescents in peer-based communities of practice as they mutually constructed local-based identities.

I mentioned earlier that general gender differences begin to emerge at about the same time as the heterosexual market. The more detailed data on variation in adolescence shows gender as a crucial aspect of the development of phonological distinctions among emerging social categories. In Ronald Macaulay's data, for example (Macaulay 1977), the relation between boys' and girls' speech interacts strikingly with class. The middle-class boys use fairly consistently more vernacular variants than the middle-class girls; but the difference decreases as one moves through the lower middle class and upper working class, and disappears or reverses in the lower working class. In the lower working class, girls take a significant lead over boys in the use of vernacular variants of two variables, boys take a significant lead over girls in one variable, and there is no difference in the remaining two. It is worth noting, too, that the only consistent class stratification pattern across all five variables is among the 15-year-old girls, suggesting that this population is the most sensitive to the use of language to construct whatever social differences are embedded in class.

William Labov has found this crossover pattern among adults as well (Labov 1991), and it is repeated dramatically in my own data on Detroit suburban speech (Eckert 2000). In my ethnographic study of a Detroit suburban high school, the use of sound changes moving out from the urban area distinguishes the two main opposed social categories that constitute the working and the middle class for the age group. It is important to reiterate that these social categories are based not on parents' socio-economic class, but on the speakers' own class trajectory, which is based only partially on parents' class. The *burnouts*, constituting a school-based working-class culture, reject the school as the locus of their social lives, and orient themselves to the local and urban area. The *jocks*, on the other hand, participate in the school on the institution's terms, locating their social as well as their academic lives in the school, isolating themselves to a great extent from the local area and avoiding the urban area. The opposition between these two dominant categories is manifested in a burnout lead in the use of urban sound changes, and of the vernacular feature of negative concord. However, it is the girls' use that shows the greatest difference: the jock girls are the most standard speakers, and the burnout girls are the most vernacular, with the jock and burnout boys falling between them. It is important to point out that not all burnout girls use vernacular variants more than all burnout boys. Particularly, the most vernacular speakers in the school – dramatically leading all other speakers – are a group of girls known to be the “wildest” burnouts. These girls' extreme speech style is an integral

part of their proud construction of themselves in opposition to all of their classmates, male and female, whom they view as tame. (As one of them put it, the other burnouts in the school are really jocks.) If there is a consistent gender pattern in all these data, then, it is the girls' greater overall use of linguistic variability across social categories.

5 Policing Adolescent Language

An important part of the verbal culture of adolescence is produced not by the adolescents but by the media they engage with. It is continually observed that adolescence provides a crucial market for consumer goods and services, and that the media are poised to exploit that market. The media that target adolescents do not stop there, but target pre-adolescent audiences with adolescent-oriented consumerism. Thus the pre-adolescent market is prepared in advance, and hurried along, through the marketing of adolescence itself. An examination of magazines aimed at adolescents shows an overwhelming gender ideology, with magazines aimed at boys focusing on activities (skateboarding, sports) and magazines aimed at girls focusing on romance and the production of the self.³ The encouragement of a preoccupation with the self as object is an important means for building a market (Chanda 1991), and it is well known that the media target adolescents with sexually oriented consumerism, and target girls in particular with the technology of physical and spiritual perfection. These magazines do not simply put forth ideas, they set up a gendered discourse for adolescents to participate in, engaging them in imagined communities that are formed to a great extent by linguistic practice. Mary Talbot (1992) examines the discourse of a British teen magazine, *Jackie*, and shows how the writers engage girls in a "synthetic sisterhood." Through the use of such things as emotive punctuation, first- and second-person pronouns, response-demanding utterances, and through setting up shared presuppositions, the writers engage the reader in imaginary dialogue – all the while constraining the reader's part in the dialogue. Many of these magazines, as well, introduce the readers to the writing and editorial staff, showing photographs and portraying their speech as cool, perky, and "teenage," and inviting them into friendship. In the process, the young adult writers recycle a form of discourse that they view as adolescent. In this way, the readers are engaged in an adolescent discourse invented by adults.

Adolescent language is also directly policed – in school, in after-school programs, even colleges. The recent fervor about "Mallspeak" in the USA is a particularly dramatic illustration of the convergence of the stigmatization of the language of adolescents and females. In 1999, Smith and Mount Holyoke Colleges (private universities in Massachusetts) made a big media splash by introducing programs in speaking across the curriculum. Aimed at training students to be articulate public speakers, a reasonable goal in itself, this initiative

was unfortunately couched in a discourse of verbal hygiene (Cameron 1995), locating the problem not in the need to learn an academic register, but in the need to eradicate "Mallspeak." In an article in *The Seattle Times*, Elizabeth Mehren characterized Mallspeak thus:

A product of both the urban street scene and the consumer cathedrals of the San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles, Mallspeak is the speech form that gave forth the dreaded phrase "gag me with a spoon" and made "like" the first word to be a verb, adjective, adverb and conjunction – all at once. "Minimalist", "repetitive", "imprecise", and "inarticulate" are some of the words Smith College President Ruth Simmons uses to describe Mallspeak, adding, "It drives me crazy." (Mehren 1999)

Smith College English professor Patricia Skarda was quoted in the *New Jersey Star Ledger* (August 29, 1999) as offering the following "Mallspeak lexicon": "'Like' is an approximation – an unwillingness to say one thing. 'You know' begs for agreement, as if the speaker is terribly unsure of him or herself. 'I mean' indicates that the student does not, in fact, know what he or she means."

Despite Skarda's acknowledgment that males as well as females use these forms, the very fact that this way of speaking is referred to as "Mallspeak" points to gender – to the girls who hang out in shopping malls. The actual object of attention in the famous college courses designed to eradicate Mallspeak is more general inarticulateness, and the new efforts at "speaking across the curriculum" are aimed at developing argumentation skills. Professor Skarda's examples – *like, you know, I mean*, are certainly not specific to women or girls (nor does she claim them to be). Yet they are folded into a female style and related to what is commonly thought of as a trivial female activity. (I will not, here, go into the untriviality of hanging out in malls – among the few safe spaces where girls can "go public.")

This construct of inarticulate female/adolescent language is popular in the media. In recent years, considerable attention has been paid to the use of *like* as a discourse marker, and to the use of rising intonation on declaratives (dubbed "uptalk"). Both are attributed to adolescents, and particularly to adolescent girls. And both are interpreted as hedges, and taken to signal the adolescents' lack of concern with precision, or unwillingness to take responsibility for their statements. And when they are discussed specifically with respect to girls, they are taken to indicate insecurity, and an unwillingness to state a forceful opinion. There is some evidence that young people, and females, make greater use of both of these than older and male people. What is problematic is the situated nature of the evidence and the interpretation of this use.

Suzanne Romaine and Deborah Lange (1991) note that in an informally gathered corpus of quotative uses of *like*, the vast majority were used by women

and girls. They do not claim, however, that girls are more likely to use *like* more as a quotative, but that they actually use more of the kind of constructed dialogue that calls for the use of *like*. My own data on the more general use of *like* as a discourse marker (which includes, but does not separate out, the quotative use) in Belten High shows no gender difference across the population. However, gender does interact with social category in this use of *like*. The most frequent users of the discourse marker *like* are the jock girls, and the most infrequent are the burnout boys, while the differences among the jock boys, the burnout boys and the burnout girls are statistically insignificant. But there are also boys who use *like* far more than average – the in-between boys (i.e. boys who affiliate with neither category). Since the sample of in-betweens in this study is quite heterogeneous, it is difficult to speculate about the significance of this finding. But it suffices to observe that there is no simple relation between gender and the discourse marker use of *like*.

Women and adolescents also appear to lead in the use of rising intonation on declaratives. In Australia, this feature is used most frequently by working-class speakers, teenagers, and women, and in description and narrative (Guy et al. 1986). Cynthia McLemore, in a study of sorority speech, found that this intonational contour is part of “sorority” style, and that within the sorority it carries authority. However, a *Darwin Magazine* article (August 2001) says:

A speech pattern called uptalk – ending sentences with an upward inflection that makes it seem like you’re asking a question – is inhibiting success in many people, especially women. So says Diane DiResta, author of *Knockout Presentations: How to Deliver Your Message with Power, Punch and Pizzazz* (Chandler House Press, 1998).

While this intonation pattern, like the discourse marker *like*, is widely accepted as signaling hesitation and/or insecurity, it deserves the kind of pragmatic treatment that Deborah Cameron and her colleagues have given to tags (Cameron et al. 1988). A class project observed 300 people ordering drinks at a Stanford University juice stand during parents’ weekend. As part of the ordering process, the female undergraduate server asked the customer to give his or her name. The demographic group that overwhelmingly used rising intonation the most in stating their names were middle-aged men. How many analysts would be ready to label this as an expression of insecurity?

Marginalized, delegitimized youth are singled out for their own kind of verbal hygiene. Cathryn Houghton (1992) chronicles the practice of group therapy in an institutional setting, which aims at socializing a group made up largely of poor Latina adolescents into “productive and independently functioning adults” (p. 282). Key to this socialization is the imposition of a discourse style that constructs the speaker as autonomous (i.e. referring to the self rather than the group). It is worth noting that the kind of group-oriented language that is

being problematized in this therapy group is precisely the kind of language that is commonly celebrated in discussions of “women’s language.” While I am not endorsing the view of women’s language as particularly collaborative, I do note that it is apparently all right for some women and girls to conform to the maternalistic construction of female speech, but not for others.

6 Conclusion

My purpose in this chapter has been twofold: to consider the interactions among language, gender, and other aspects of identity in adolescence, and to consider the status of adolescence as a site for the study of language and social identity. It should be clear by now that I believe that age-related ideology is inseparable from gender ideology, as well as from ideologies of class, race, and ethnicity. The study of language and gender, therefore, needs to move into the study of the life span, and the gendering of life-stages.

As the move into and through adolescence is a particularly important crossroads for gender, it is one place to look to examine some of our most deeply engrained beliefs about gender. Work on girls moving toward adolescence, for example, clearly calls into question any view that girls’ language use reflects any more of a “connection” orientation than boys’ (e.g. Cameron 1997). A focus on other life-stages may well provide a new way of looking at other aspects of gender. Consider, for example, the view of women as nurturant. This, I would argue, is one of those essentialist ideals built on something that is in fact specific to a particular life-stage. Nurturing is an activity, which can become a long-term quality for those who identify with nurturing activity in a long-term way. Just as competitiveness is required of any athlete and studiousness is required of any scholar, nurturing is required of any caretaker of small children, including mothers. And being an athlete, a scholar, or a caretaker of small children can be temporary phases in one’s life. I would argue that there is nothing particularly nurturant about girls. Children who have strong attachments to young pets may feel nurturant toward them, and girls may be more encouraged than boys to nurture their pets. But this nurturance does not carry into other relationships. But gender norms constrain many women to develop a nurturing persona as they seek to qualify as potential (wives and) mothers, and while gender norms may also lead women to maintain this persona after it has served its purpose, many older women are impatient and eager to move away from nurturing activity. Serious thought about life-stages, therefore, may be an important aspect of the study of gender, and of its manifestations in language. This exploration of language and gender in adolescence should, I hope, encourage people to explore language and gender in young adulthood, in old age, and in any other stages that may or may not have names, that emerge as relevant in people’s lives.

NOTES

- 1 I have argued elsewhere (Eckert 1997: 151–67) that the study of language and age (or anything else and age) has been dominated by the middle-aged bias of those who do most of the research, and those who “manage” the age groups other than their own. Indeed, one might argue that the study of the life-stage of middle age could be analogous to the study of Whiteness.
- 2 It was particularly striking, when, during the discussion period after this talk of Goodwin’s, an elementary school teacher in the audience expressed excitement that someone was finally paying attention to the kind of nastiness that was, in his experience, rampant among girls, and not mentioned in the literature on language and gender.
- 3 I subscribed to a set of boys’ magazines and a set of girls’ magazines under two different names for several years. The two names found their ways onto quite different sets of mailing lists. My girls’ magazine name received invitations to enter beauty contests, while my boys’ magazine name received offers of credit cards.

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