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# ‘GIVE US MY SHOE BACK’: THE PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF SINGULAR *US*

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## Abstract

This paper is based on the results emerging from an ethnographic study of the language practices of 10-year-old children in two primary schools in Teesside, in the north-east of England. It focuses on the children’s use of *us* for the objective singular first person pronoun. Investigation of the occurrences of singular *us* in a corpus of radio-microphone recordings indicates that this variant of the objective singular appears to have a pragmatic function associated with degrees of politeness, power and social distance. At the same time, this paper raises methodological concerns about the importance of combining quantitative with qualitative analysis, and by doing so, articulates a new approach to the study of sociolinguistic variation.

## 1. Introduction

In their treatment of personal pronouns, grammars usually present a table which differentiates the pronouns of English according to person and case. According to such tables, for example, the standard form for the first person objective singular is *me*. As Wales (1996:19) points out, however, such tables belie the diversity that exists in the pronoun systems in use across the English speaking world. For Beal (1993:205), the pattern of pronouns used in Tyneside is so unique that it is necessary to set it out in a table of its own, in which *us* is the paradigmatic Tyneside alternative to standard *me*, though she acknowledges that parts of this table are to be found in other dialects. The use of *us* for the first person objective singular, for example, is ‘common throughout the North (and possibly further afield)’ (Beal 1993:206). As Beal suggests, singular *us* is found elsewhere in the British Isles (e.g. in the Southeast of England (Anderwald 2004)), and in fact, elsewhere in the English speaking world (e.g. Australia (Pawley 2004)). This particular usage is so pervasive that it is referred to within the *Cambridge Grammar of English*, which states that ‘*Us* is sometimes used very informally to mean *me*’ (Carter and McCarthy 2006:382).

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Dr Anthea Fraser Gupta and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

This variant of the objective singular has also been noted historically: the *Survey of English Dialects* shows extensive use of ‘me’ expressed by *us*’ (Upton et al. 1994:486); Wright’s *The English Dialect Grammar* states that ‘[i]n most dialects of Sc.[otland]. Ire.l[and] and Eng.[land]. *us* is used for the indirect object *me*’ (Wright 1905a:271); *The English Dialect Dictionary* (Wright 1905b:332) further states that *us* could be used as an ‘[u]nemph.[atic] form of the *acc. sing. me*’. This idea that *us* represents an ‘unemphatic’ form of the objective singular is echoed in *The Concise Scots Dictionary* which states that *us* is used ‘as non-emphatic substitute for *me*’ (Robinson 1985:755). Others have made similar tentative statements about the usage and meaning of singular *us*. Beal (2004:117) writes that singular *us* is used as both direct and indirect object in the North-east, but that ‘examples from Bolton and West Yorkshire show it only as indirect object’. In writing about Australian Vernacular English, Pawley (2004:635) notes that singular *us* is used ‘when the speaker makes a request for something to be given to or obtained for him/her, e.g. *Give us a light for me pipe, Give us him, Dig us out a pudlick.*’ Carter and McCarthy (2006:382) also suggest that singular *us* ‘is commonly used when making requests, perhaps to soften the force of a request’. Anderwald goes further:

this phenomenon seems to be specific to the first person, and to imperatives. Whether the use of *us* for *me* has its origin in being a mitigating factor in requests has not been investigated yet.

(Anderwald 2004:178)

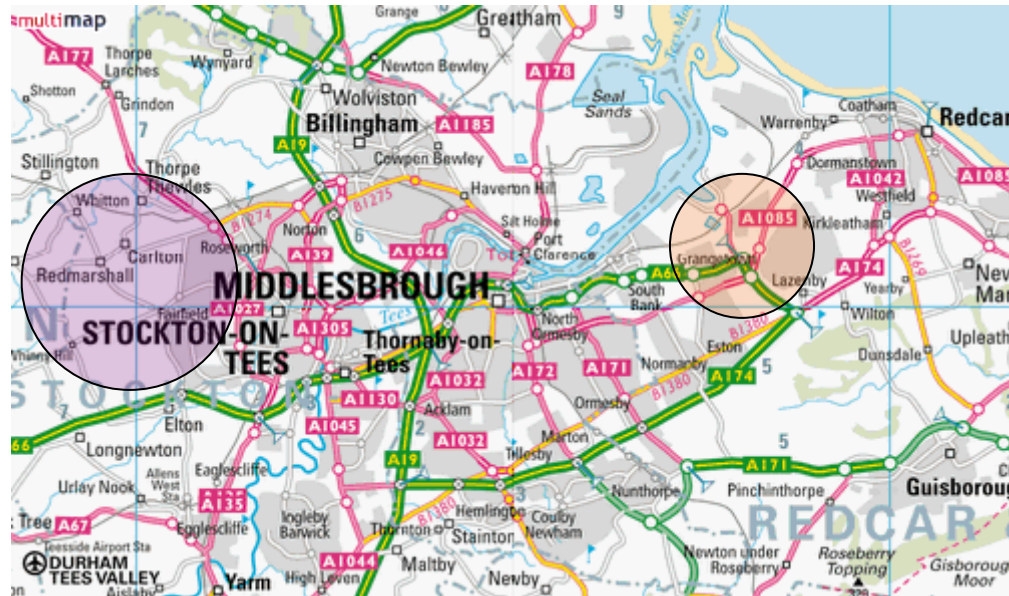
My aim in this paper is to begin such an investigation. By analysing the occurrences of singular *us* in a corpus of children’s speech, I explore the possibility that this variant of the objective singular has a pragmatic function associated with degrees of politeness, power and social distance. In doing so, I introduce a new approach to the study of sociolinguistic variation which aims to combine quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis.

## 2. The Data

The data presented in the following analysis are taken from 28 hours of radio-microphone recordings collected during fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in two primary schools in Teesside in the north-east of England. Six boys and six girls from both schools participated in the study, each wearing the radio-microphone for half-a-day. In this paper, I analyse data provided by 12 children: 3 boys and 3 girls from each school.

The two schools which form the basis of the study are Murrayfield primary school<sup>2</sup> in Fairfield, Stockton-on-Tees and Ironstone Primary school in Grangetown, Middlesbrough.

Figure 1: Map of Teesside showing Fairfield (left) and Grangetown (right)



These schools are differentiated in terms of the socioeconomic profile of the areas they serve, and, by implication, the social background of the students. This difference is made clear by the OFSTED reports:

The school has a stable community and pupil mobility is low. The percentage of pupils who are eligible for free school meals is below the national average...The overall attainment of pupils when they enter the school [at age three] is about what is expected in children who are three.

Murrayfield Primary’s OFSTED Report (2003:3)

We can compare this with a similar paragraph taken from Ironstone Primary’s OFSTED report:

The school serves an area facing significant social and economic challenges and the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is over three times the national average. Attainment on entry to the nursery is well below expectations.

Ironstone Primary’s OFSTED Report (2003:7)

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<sup>2</sup> All names of people, places and institutions referred to in this article are pseudonyms.

The contrast between the ‘stable community’ of Murrayfield Primary and the ‘social and economic challenges’ of Ironstone Primary is apparent. The marked difference between the two areas is further illuminated by a comparison using 2001 Census data. Table 1 gives some of the key census statistics for these areas.

**Table 1: 2001 Census Data (Neighbourhood Statistics 2001)**

	Super Output Area Lower Layer*			
	Stockton-on-Tees 015B (Murrayfield Primary)		Redcar & Cleveland 009C (Ironstone Primary)	
	Number	%	Number	%
<b>Total Number of Residents</b>	1,673	-	1,422	-
<b>Economically Active People Aged 16-74</b>	1,156	-	931	-
<b>Number of Households</b>	713	-	486	-
<b>Unemployment Rate</b>	39	3.4%	96	10.3%
<b>Employed in managerial/professional occupations</b>	139	23.1%	39	9.1%
<b>Households owner occupied</b>	532	74.6%	191	39.3%
<b>Houses rented from Council (local authority)</b>	109	15.3%	226	46.5%
<b>Households with 2 or more cars/vans</b>	175	24.5%	48	9.9%
<b>Households with &gt; 0.5 persons per room</b>	167	23.4%	262	53.9%
<b>Rank on Index of Multiple Deprivation (1 = most deprived, 32,482 = least deprived)</b>	15,626	-	1,475	-

\*Census data uses a unit referred to as *Lower Layer Super Output Areas* (LSOAs). Murrayfield Primary is captured within LSOA Stockton-on-Tees 015B, and Ironstone Primary is situated in LSOA Redcar and Cleveland 009C.

One measure of the status and character of an area is a breakdown of the population in terms of occupation. In Stockton-on-Tees 015B, 23.1% of workers are employed in managerial or professional occupations. The figure drops to 9.9% in Redcar & Cleveland 009C. This difference is mirrored by levels of unemployment (3.4% in Stockton-on-Tees 015B, compared to 10.3% in Redcar & Cleveland 009C). The average unemployment rate for the north-east region as a whole is 4.5%. A further indication of the disparity between the two areas can be found in data based on living accommodation. In general, an owner-occupied house affords more status than a rented one, and a privately rented one more status than one rented from the council. Table 1 shows that the majority of the population in Redcar & Cleveland 009C are living in rented accommodation and most of these homes are provided by the local authority. The higher rate of home-ownership in Stockton-on-Tees 015B, along with lower figures for occupancy per room and average size of household, are all indicative of higher socio-economic status. The differences between these areas are not random.

Indices of Deprivation are also published along with Census statistics. The index of multiple deprivation is a measure which takes into consideration seven domains of deprivation (Income, Employment, Health Deprivation and Disability, Education Skills and Training, Barriers to Housing and Services, Crime and the Living Environment), and allows all 32,482 output areas to be ranked according to how deprived they are relative to each other. The output area which holds Murrayfield Primary was ranked 15,626 out of 32,482, where 1 is the most deprived and 32,482 the least deprived. In stark contrast, Ironstone Primary's output area was ranked 1,475. So, while Murrayfield Primary and Ironstone Primary do not constitute the opposite extremes of the socioeconomic continuum, there is clearly some social distance between them. This social distance means that the background and experiences of the children in these two schools are very different. The schools therefore represent distinct 'communities of practice' (Eckert 2000) as a result of the different social setting of the local community, even though they share elements as a result of being schools in the same wider urban areas.

The concept of the 'community of practice' originated in learning theory (Lave and Wenger 1991), but it was introduced to sociolinguistics in 1992 by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet:

A community of practice is an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavour.

(Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992:464)

The school as a whole constitutes a community of practice. The members of this community come together on a regular basis to engage in the shared enterprise of learning and progressing through the educational system. As a result, members come to share certain practices, modes of behaviour and values. The shared repertoire that develops as a result of this jointly negotiated endeavour includes adherence to certain dress codes, reacting appropriately to symbols such as whistles and bells, using specific techniques to get the teachers attention (e.g. raising of hands), and so on. Within the school, each class group constitutes an embedded community of practice. These communities of practice are quite formal in organization, but others can be fluid and informal. For example, the children who attend the school are also part of other smaller communities of practice when they interact together in the playground. Here cliques form as students attempt to define their identity within the school setting. Members of these smaller communities of practice are brought

together because they share certain interests and activities, and they work together to negotiate their way through the school day.

The socioeconomic background of students has a significant influence on the primary school as a community of practice; each school-based community of practice is a product of the compromise reached between staff and students of how the school can adapt to the social situation within which it exists. No two schools, even those whose students share similar socioeconomic backgrounds, will reach the same compromise. Just as the identity of the community of practice emerges through its participants joint negotiation in this process, so too the identity of an individual emerges through their participation in different communities of practice (Eckert 2000:36). Individual and group identities are thus interrelated. Furthermore, the processes at work at this local level can be seen to reinforce, maintain, renegotiate or even challenge existing social structure:

it is the collection of types of communities of practice at different places in society that ultimately constitutes the assemblage of practice that is viewed as class culture, ethnic culture, gender practice, etc.

(Eckert 2000:39)

The community of practice is therefore a useful construct within sociolinguistics because it provides a link between macro-level categories (such as social class) and micro-level practices.

### **3. The Ethnography**

An important feature of the community of practice as a domain of analysis, and one that differentiates it from other similar concepts such as the speech community, is that it is determined internally by participants, rather than being imposed externally by analysts. In order to gain an understanding of the communities of practice present in each of the two schools therefore, a participant driven, ethnographic approach to fieldwork was necessary.

My journey as an ethnographic researcher began several months before data collection. I entered the classroom in the first instance as a 'helper', someone who interacts with the children and assists them in classroom activities (e.g. arts and crafts, reading, spelling). This initial step was important for a number of reasons. Firstly, it enabled me to build bridges with the schools that would become my research sites. Perhaps most importantly, however, it gave me the opportunity to

form relationships with the children outside of the constraints of the research situation. I was able to interact with the children, not as a researcher who was under pressure to make recordings, but as a helper and a friend. As well as assisting in the classroom during my weekly visits to school, I also spent time with the children in the playground, chatting and playing games. As a result I was able to get to know the children's personalities, interests and friendships, and engage with their activities (both inside and outside of the classroom). In short, I was able to observe informally 'the flow of social practice' (Maybin 2006:5) in the school. My observations were augmented by those of the teachers, who gave their own opinions on the children's relationships, personalities, behaviour and academic ability. These opinions were presented formally in a recorded interview that took place towards the end of the fieldwork, but also informally through staffroom conversation and classroom asides. The accumulated experiences gained from participating in school activities have combined to form the 'ethnographically informed lens' (Maybin 2006:13) through which the analysis and interpretation of the linguistic data is presented.

#### 4. The Findings

##### 4.1 Comparison between the Schools

The use of *us* for the objective singular is associated with informal or dialectal usage; it is a 'non-standard' form of the objective singular. As with many non-standard features, we might expect the frequency of use of singular *us* to pattern with social variables such as socioeconomic class. This expectation is indeed borne out by the data in my study. Table 2 shows the distribution of the different forms of the objective singular used by children in both schools. The Murrayfield Primary participants used standard /mi:/ on all but two occasions, and /ʊs/ (I here include all realisations of *us*: [ʊs], [ʊz], [əs], [əz], [s], [z]) appeared only once (0.7% of all tokens). In Ironstone Primary, however, /ʊs/ occurred 16.1% of the time. As expected, frequency of use of the 'non-standard' variant is greater in the school whose participants rank lower on a scale of socio-economic prestige. In Teesside English, or at least within the variety of English spoken within the Ironstone Primary community of practice, *us* can be used for singular as well as plural reference. But this form is not used categorically, or even with a particularly high frequency; 83.9% of the time, the students at Ironstone Primary use *me* in objective singular position. The occasions where *us* is used must, therefore, represent a choice (whether



conscious of unconscious) on the part of the speaker; this particular variant of the pronoun must fulfil a particular function.

**Table 2: Use of Objective Singular**

	Murrayfield Primary		Ironstone Primary	
	#	%	#	%
<b>mi:</b>	136	98.6%	183	83.9%
<b>mi</b>	1	0.7%	0	0.0%
<b>us/uz</b>	1	0.7%	19	8.7%
<b>əs/əz</b>	0	0.0%	6	2.8%
<b>s/z*</b>	0	0.0%	10	4.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>218</b>	<b>1</b>

\* Represents contracted forms of ‘us’ in utterances such as ‘Let’s have a look’

#### 4.2 Singular *us* and Politeness

There are 36 occurrences of *us* with singular reference in the data, and all are part of imperative clauses in which the speaker is urging the addressee to do something: ‘let us see’, ‘give us it’, ‘pass us that book’ ‘show us yours’, ‘turn it off for us’. Within this data set, type of grammatical construction therefore appears to be an internal linguistic constraint on this variant of the objective singular. Further work is required to ascertain whether or not this constraint operates outside the Ironstone Primary community of practice. In Tyneside English, for example, singular *us* can be found in non-imperative contexts (J. Beal, personal communication). Quantification is not yet complete, but it should be noted that there are also a number of imperatives in the data which have *me*, rather than *us*, in objective singular position (e.g. ‘Just give me a little bit of glue’). In issuing an imperative, the speaker has a choice to make between *me* and *us*. The verb used may also have a role to play; of the 36 instances of singular *us*, 17 (47%) occurred with ‘give’ and 12 (33%) with ‘let’. BurrIDGE (2004:1118) notes that singular *us* occurs ‘especially after verbs of giving and receiving’.

Imperatives are an example of what Brown and Levinson (1987) would refer to as ‘face-threatening acts’. Face-threatening acts comprise any action that impinges upon a person’s face, where ‘face’ (a term Brown and Levinson borrow from Goffman (1967)) refers to individuals’ self-esteem. Brown and Levinson (1987:13) state that face embodies two specific kinds of desires: ‘the desire to be unimpeded in

one's actions (negative face), and the desire (in some respects) to be approved of (positive face).' Face-threatening acts can be mitigated by positive politeness strategies, which attend to positive face wants, or, negative politeness strategies, which attend to negative face wants. An imperative is an example of an act that threatens negative face. It is 'the direct expression of one of the most intrinsically face-threatening speech acts – commanding' (Brown and Levinson 1987:191). Depending upon the situation, the speaker might feel that it is necessary to try to mitigate the face-threatening act, and the use of the 'plural' pronoun could be one of the negative politeness strategies<sup>3</sup> they adopt. There is, after all, extensive evidence for the idea that plural forms can be used with singular reference to express something like politeness in many languages. Head (1978) examines data from more than one hundred languages in order to explore the social meaning of variation of pronominal categories and types of pronouns. He looks at first, second and third person reference, and notes for all that the use of the non-singular in pronominal reference to show greater respect or social distance than the singular appears to be a universal tendency.

The widespread European development of two pronouns for singular addressees began in Latin and still continues today in languages such as French, German, Spanish and Italian. In Latin, the plural as a form of address to one person was first directed to the emperor in the fourth century. The plural was eventually extended from the emperor to other figures of power, and a set of norms gradually formed around what Brown and Gilman (1960:255) refer to as the 'nonreciprocal power semantic'. According to the 'nonreciprocal power semantic', superiors would use the original singular form to their inferiors, and receive the polite plural form in return. A further distinction later developed around what Brown and Gilman (1960:257) refer to as the 'solidarity dimension'. The solidarity dimension provided a means of differentiating address among equals: a high degree of solidarity or 'intimacy' among equals could be established by use of the singular form of address, and low solidarity or 'formality' by use of the plural form.

These dimensions of solidarity and nonreciprocal power were expressed by English with the distinction between THOU and YOU, the direct descendants of the Old English second person singular and plural. In the Middle English period, English used THOU for 'familiar address to a single person', and YOU as 'the singular of reverence and polite distance' as well as the invariable plural (Brown and Gilman

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<sup>3</sup> Pluralisation of the pronouns 'you' and 'I' falls under the seventh negative politeness strategy outlined by Brown and Levinson (1987:190-206) – 'Impersonalise S[peaker] and H[earer]'.

1960:253). In modern standard English the use of the form YOU now obscures distinctions both of number and power/solidarity, though such distinctions continue to be expressed in a number of varieties outside standard English. Wales (1996:76) notes that ‘in those dialects of English outside the British Isles where singular/plural distinction has been introduced into the 2PP [second person pronoun], there are already signs of a semiotic of ‘distance’ or politeness for singular address becoming formalised in the plural. e.g. *oonu* in Jamaican English’.

### 4.3 Singular *us* in Context

In order to make a case for the special pragmatic functions ascribed by the children in my study to singular *us*, I will address some specific examples from the data in detail. One of the Ironstone Primary students, Clare, uses *us* with singular reference on 18 occasions. In the current data set, Clare’s use of singular *us* accounts for over half of all occurrences of this variant of the objective singular at Ironstone Primary. Further work on this variable will take into account a larger corpus of recordings in order to redress the balance. While the current pilot study is based on the sound files created by 6 children from each school, the full investigation will include 12 children from each school, thereby doubling the current data set. It should be noted, however, that the Ironstone Primary data analysed in this paper provides evidence for the use of singular *us* by 4 other children (Danielle, Harry, Robert and Jane). Clare’s usage, while significant, is therefore not unique. Full investigation of this variable will also take into account the internal structure within each primary school. It is possible, for example, that singular *us* is used more frequently by certain peer-group communities of practice within the school.

Clare’s use of singular *us* concentrates in two main sections. The following transcript details one of these episodes. It takes place in the school playground where a group of girls are giving each other ‘piggybacks’ and stealing each other's shoes. At the start of this extract, Clare has approached the girls and wants to be involved in the game. Later, the girls actually steal Clare’s shoe and she has to make a series of requests to get it back.

- (1) Clare:           Gemma **give us it.** (1 second) Quick Gemma **give us it.**  
Gemma:           No  
Clare:             What we gonna do hide it?  
Inaudible:       ((Background noise and sound of laughing)) (23 seconds)  
Jane:             (My feet was freezing.)

Clare: My shoe

Jane: (Feet are freezing.) Let me take your boots off (young lady).

Clare: Why don't we take yours off? (.) By the way Jane has already tried. (1.5 seconds) Jane has already tried but my shoes don't come off.

Inaudible: ((Inaudible background noise and laughing)) (10 seconds)

Gemma: Clare I promise I won't get you. (I won't be able to) get you.

Clare: I'm not (going on anyone's back) No!

.

. (3 mins 19 secs)

.

Jane: We got a boot we got a boot we got a boot.

Clare: She's got my shoe. ((laughs))

Inaudible: ((Background noise)) (10 seconds)

Clare: **Give us it.**

Anonymous1: ((chanting)) Clare's shoe Clare's [shoe Clare's shoe

Anonymous 2: [(Pass us it.)

Inaudible: ((Background noise)) (3 seconds)

Clare: **Give us it.**

Anonymous: (I know I haven't got it.)

Clare: Rosie (2 seconds) Rosie **give us it.**

Inaudible: ((Inaudible background noise)) (12 seconds)

Anonymous: Get Clare's [feet.

Clare: [(Give us<sup>4</sup> back) my shoe.

Jane: Get Clare's feet.

Inaudible: ((Inaudible background noise)) (2 seconds)

Anonymous1: Get it get it.

Anonymous 2: Danielle Danielle get it ((laughing))

Anonymous3: We've got one.

Anonymous4: Alright you may as well give me the other one.

Jane: Yeah lay down on the floor.

Anonymous: Yeah lay down (xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx.)

Inaudible: ((Background noise)) (3 seconds)

Tina: Because Clare's got one shoe on.

Anonymous: Give me the shoe (lee) now.

Inaudible: ((Background noise; children running around)) (16 seconds)

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<sup>4</sup> Since the transcription is in doubt here, this use of *us* is not included in table 2.

Clare: He::lp  
 Inaudible: ((Sound of Clare running)) (12 seconds)  
 Clare: **Give us my shoe back.**  
 Tina: She hasn't got her shoe (xxxxxxxxxxxxx she's a) lucky woman.  
 Clare: Jane you- (2.5 seconds) **Give us my shoe back.** (1.5 seconds)  
**Give us my back.** (1 second) **Give us my shoe back.**

Clare is a girl who is often on the periphery of friendship groups. This marginal position appears to be a result of her confrontational manner. Clare is quite outspoken and often falls out with the other children. I witnessed a number of arguments involving Clare during my visits to Ironstone Primary. The class teaching assistant commented on Clare's propensity to court disagreement, and a number of the other children singled her out to me as a bully or trouble maker. On this occasion, however, Clare wants to be able to join in with the play – the alternative here is to stand in the playground alone. Although the group of girls with whom Clare is trying to engage have no official power over her, Clare is not a fully integrated member of this group, and therefore the interaction ranks low on a scale of solidarity. I would suggest that Clare is aware of her position and acknowledges her place within this social group through the use of singular *us*. In this interaction, her first goal is to integrate with the group, and then later, her goal is to get her shoe back. As noted in section 4.2, imperatives such as 'give me it' constitute face-threatening acts. In this context, it makes sense that Clare would choose to use the plural pronoun to mitigate the face-threatening act; she does not want to provoke an argument that would lead to her exclusion from the group or cause a delay in the return of her shoe. The use of singular *us* is perhaps a way of appealing to some sense of group support, as if Clare's request has the backing of a group. In a situation where Clare lacks status, she attempts to augment her own social standing (and hence her chances of getting the shoe back) by implying group membership. The social meanings attached to the use of singular *us* have been cultivated by the Ironstone Primary community of practice. Clare, as a member of this community of practice, understands this special application of *us* and is using it here for particular effect.

The option to use *us* with singular reference appears to be largely absent in the Murrayfield Primary community of practice. There is one exception, however, which is presented in the following transcript. In this episode, Daniel and Ben are working together on an IT project. Ben has been doing most of the work and Daniel is keen to have a go:

(2) Daniel: Can I do this one? (.) Can I do this page? (2 seconds) **Ben let *us* do this page.**

Ben: **Let *me* just do something.**

After asking twice: 'Can I do this one'? 'Can I do this page'? Daniel follows up with 'Ben, let *us* do this page.' Daniel makes an appeal to Ben, using the plural pronoun as a negative politeness strategy. Notice that Ben replies: 'Let *me* just do something'. Daniel and Ben are classmates and friends so there is no reason why either should wield any power over the other. The activity that the boys are engaged in here, however, is part of the academic domain, within which Daniel generally has little power. Daniel has special educational needs, which are met by a teaching assistant who is employed on a part-time basis to help him. Ben, on the other hand, is of average academic ability; the teacher noted that he could do much better than average if he applied himself. At this point in the interaction, Ben has been doing most of the work and has control of the computer keyboard. It is Ben who therefore holds the power, and the resulting non-reciprocal relationship appears to be mirrored in the contrast between *us* and *me*. In this particular situation, Daniel is aware that he must relinquish power to Ben, and Ben is similarly aware of his superior position. Daniel does not always use the polite *us* form however. Later in the same recording, as the IT lesson is coming to an end, there is the following exchange.

(3) Daniel: Where's my tissues?

Inaudible: ((Classroom noise)) (3 seconds)

Ben: Your tissues are under there. (2 seconds) Jackson where did you put your tissues?

Daniel: **Give me my tissues.**

Ben: I don't have them.

Daniel: Yeah you do.

Ben: No I don't.

Daniel is much more forceful here and addresses Ben with 'Give *me* my tissues', using *me* rather than *us* for the objective singular. This interaction occurs when the

children are shutting down their computers and preparing to leave the IT room. The lesson is over and Daniel appears to hold more power in this non-academic frame. Although Daniel had to yield to Ben's superior IT skills in the previous interaction, he will not passively accept his friend's prank outside of the formal lesson.

The fact that singular *us* is largely absent from the Murrayfield Primary data is significant given that this usage appears to be part of a wider phenomenon which equates plurality with politeness (see section 4.2). If the children at Murrayfield Primary do not use singular *us* as a strategy to soften imperatives in situations where the risk attached to the face-threatening act is high, what other strategies do they use? Further work will compare the strategies adopted generally in both schools for formulating imperatives and other directives.

## 5. Conclusions

In the examples discussed above, Clare, Daniel and Ben demonstrate 'reflexive awareness' (Goodwin 2000) of their interlocutors and the relevant contextual factors that constitute the situation. They attend to the different pronoun options available to them and decide which is appropriate to the specific context. I would argue against Carter and McCarthy's claim that '*Us* is sometimes used very informally to mean *me*', though their claim that it softens requests is closer to the mark. The two forms actually have quite different meanings for the participants in this study; they exist as alternative options for the objective singular, and the speaker must choose between them. The specific situation, the goals of the interaction, and the social relationships between interlocutors, as well as the speaker's own social trajectory, influence the choice of pronoun, and ethnographic information is often crucial to understanding how all of these factors work together. Not all options are in play in any given moment, however. There is no evidence in the data for the use of singular *us* in anything other than imperatives, including no evidence for it in other directives. If this *is* a linguistic constraint, the option to use *us* for the objective singular will not exist in directives encoded by other grammatical structures such as interrogatives (e.g. 'Robert please will you pass me my plan?', 'can't you give me it now?').

From a wider methodological point-of-view, it seems to me that an analysis which takes into account, not just the distribution of linguistic features, but also the functions that those features fulfil within an interaction, is able to get closer to discovering the social meanings with which speakers invest their linguistic practices. Quantitative analysis enables the researcher to describe the pool of linguistic resources that speakers have available to them, but then qualitative analysis allows

for an interpretation of the pragmatic motivations behind the linguistic choices that speakers make. In this second stage of analysis ethnography can yield important insights. From this perspective, for example, Clare is not seen as a working-class speaker who is using a non-standard variant purely by virtue of her working-class background, but rather as a savvy sociolinguistic player who is able to utilise the different pronoun options available to her in order to negotiate social relationships.

### **Appendix: Transcription conventions**

The following broad transcription conventions are used:

[shoe	Brackets signal the start of overlapping speech
[(Pass us it)	
:	Indicates lengthening
(.)	A pause less than 0.5 seconds
(# of seconds)	Timed pause (to nearest 0.1 of a second)
(text)	Speech which is unclear or in doubt
(xxxxxxx)	Indistinguishable speech
((laughs))	Annotation of other verbal/non-verbal activity
. ?	Minimal punctuation is used to aid the reader

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