

Teenage Labelling: "Are you a Jock or a Freak?"

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1. Introduction

There are three classes in speech that reveal personal characteristics of the speaker: those that indicate membership in a group, those that characterize the individual and those that reveal changed states of the speaker. In this paper I am dealing with the indicators of group membership, the group markers. A group-marked vocabulary is social, it reflects the members' interests and reinforces group solidarity (Laver & Trudgill, 1976). The subject matter is related to the activities of the group (Brown & Fraser, 1976). Physical appearance and situation are important factors in determining a person's group membership (Siles, Scherer & Taylor, 1976).

The social groups of a high school can be identified by the way their members dress, act and speak. Students wishing to be identified with one of these groups modify their appearance and behaviour to match the target group's norms. The language use that the students adopt is one of the ways they achieve solidarity within the group. It seems very important for peer groups to conform to language use (Labov, 1975).

Labelling of the social groups by others also has an effect on language use and behaviour. The different aspects of interaction become predictable because of the preconceived notions of the participants (Scherer, 1976).

I conducted a brief survey of a small group of students from a high school in Southwest Calgary. It is considered by the students to be an athletic school. Most of the students come from average to above average homes. By the general consensus of the students I interviewed, the total list of social groups is: the Jocks; the Freaks (Heads); the Punks (Rockers); the Snobs; the Preppies; the Brown-Noses or Homework Gang and the Hosers or Nerds.¹ Not all students used all of these labels and for one person a Nerd is the same as a member of the Home-Work Gang. Whereas for others, the Hosers and Nerds are synonymous. They are people that do not belong to a social group for one reason or another. They may be depressed, not accepted or not social.

It is significant that some social groups gave fewer labels than others. They either assigned different group memberships or simply did not notice the niceties of the divisions in the school. All students agreed on the descriptions to fit each type and how a student would be identified. All groups are co-ed except for the Snobs. A Snob is usually a female. Also, a Jock male is not completely synonymous with a Jock female. Many of the students interviewed felt that none of the labels applied to them and they thought of themselves as being normal.

My son is in Grade 11 at the High School. I used him as an informant and a contact. He arranged for two groups of self-considered normal people and one group of Punks to come to our house where I interviewed them. I also asked a girl who associates with Freaks to arrange an interview. She interviewed three normal-Freak groups and one male Jock in the girls' bathroom at school. Three male Jocks were interviewed by myself at the school. Most of the interview groups had at least three people in them and were co-ed. They were all selected by other students except the three male Jocks who were selected by virtue of being in Phys-Ed 30 and of being considered Jocks by their Phys-Ed teacher. There were a total of eight interviews. Questions were asked to obtain labelling, subjective evaluations and self-evaluations.

2. Social Group Identity

The biggest factor in identifying a person as a member of a social group is by appearance. Secondary factors are: how a person behaves, talks, and who they hang around with.

When asked: "If you wanted to change your image, how would you go about it", most answered: "change appearance", then realizing that it was not enough to look the part, many added: "start doing things that the (target) group does", and girls said: "get a Jock boyfriend".

The two main groups at the school are Freaks and Jocks, with the Punks being a conspicuous minority. A typical Freak is a person who wears leather or denim jackets, faded blue jeans, black T-shirts, concert shirts, red and black or green and black checked lumber jackets. A Freak guy has long hair; a Freak girl wears lots of make-up. They use drugs and hang around the "Freak Doors" or the "Seven-Eleven" (store). They mainly talk about drugs, how they feel, parties, sex, weekends and parents. A Freak is often stoned in class.

A typical Jock has short, styled hair, wears sport clothes, rugby pants, shirts with their name or a University logo on it,

and running shoes. A Jock is cooperative at school and is considered aggressive and rough by others. Jocks hang around the cafeteria and the school foyers in large groups. They talk about sports, weekends, parties and sex.

Preppies and Snobs can be confused with Jocks. They wear expensive designer sports wear and designer jeans. They look down on Freaks, especially the girls. They are interested in fashion and status and doing well at school. Some of the girls protect their reputations by only being seen with girls.

Typical Punks wear lots of black leather, dog chains around their wrists, dog collars around their necks, bizarre or dyed hairstyles, uneven haircuts - really wild clothes. The girls wear lots of make-up. A lot of Punks wear earrings and have tattoos. They keep to themselves, are considered low in status, rebel against everything, complain and act tough. They talk about fights and weekends. The girls talk about their boyfriends, clothes and hairstyles, and the boys talk about music. Their taste in music sets them apart from the other social groups.

All of the students agreed that each group used words that were uniquely identified with that particular group. Freaks curse a lot, talk slow, and mumble "like they're burnt out". Just about all their words have to do with drugs. The Jocks sound "normal" and only differ in a few adjectives and their sports vocabulary. The girl Jocks and the Preppies use some stock "Val Girl" (Californian) phrases which are used in fun by some, but have become part of the repertoire of others. The Punks are thought to have a good sense of humour. Their list is unique in that they reported most of the words themselves and only a few of the words - "gig", "slamming", "thrashing" and "skanking" are related to Punk-specific activities.

Freak Words and Phrases:

hey man what's happening
hey man
hey suds
hey bud (freak)

Terms for Drugs:

cents-a-mill drugs
hoots
tokes (joint)
bakeables
hash
joints
dooby

splif
oil
red weed
bennies
lewds

Terms for feelings during and after taking drugs (many of these terms are now used not only when under the influence of drugs, but when tired or feeling good, etc.):

far-out
freak-me-out (oh wow, bizarre)
mellowed out (relaxed)
mellowing out
potent (strong or bizarre)
potent (stoned)
baked
cooked
raunchy
fried
zapped
dead
wired
buzz
wreck
stoned
I'm flying

Typical Phrases:

let's party tonight
friggin eh (that's great eh)
give 'er a buddy
wow, I got really baked last night
wanna get baked
wanna go for a toke tonight
munchies (food, need for food,
originally the hunger for
incredible edibles (food) having
come down from a high on drugs)

Jock Words and Phrases:

raps (training times)
hey baby, wanna go to track
awesome (terrific, bizarre)
excellent (terrific)

Girl Jock & Preppies' Words and Phrases:

like you know (you understand)
totally
barf me right out the door (gross,
disgusting)
gag me with a spoon

grody me max
grody
for sure
awesome
like totally

Punk Terms:

grim (bad)
loads (a lot of)
coke - loads
deef (definite)
tons (lots of)
rank (provoked, out of control
behaviour)
narli (far-out)
gigs (band engagements)
thrash (the violent dance of Punks)
skanking
slamming
bitching-babe (good looking girl)

This is not an exhaustive list of expressions from each group. These words were collected from the students as being typical of these groups.

The labelling and descriptions of the typical member and language use all involve stereotypes. It is not the nature of this report to verify the students' intuitions, but rather to discover how the perceived notions about social identities are related to language or affect language.

3. The Function of Language for Social Grouping

All of the students interviewed believed that certain words were in the domain of certain groups. So although all students obviously have access to all of the words, these words are markers for the social group using them. When persons from different groups interact an attempt is made to modify their language to fit the person they are addressing (Giles, Scherer & Taylor, 1976). A girl who is probably a Freak said that she would never talk to her Jock girlfriend about parties or Freaks, but she would talk about her boyfriend. She said: "...talking to Jocks, like Lisa or Sue-Ann, don't talk about parties...or Freaks at all. I'll talk about my boyfriend or something like that, something that I can relate to them about...you're try'n to relate to the person you're talking to." (MIII:300)

A Jock group noticed that Freaks dropped a lot of their jargon when they were alone. "The 'hey man' is just between themselves.

If you talk to them they talk normally...just do it to act like that in a group - identify themselves...out of the group...just regular."
(J2:96)

The Punks seem to be generally ignored and one Punk said:
"I just don't sit around and say I'm stoned for a hippie." (P:171)

Most of the students are aware of the different vocabulary items, but they are not necessarily a part of their verbal repertoire. Some words are misused by out-group students. Most people use Punks and Punks interchangeably but the Punk group interviewed felt that Punks was the acceptable label. Also, a type of activity called "slamming" is called "slam dancing" by outsiders. "People who don't know anything about it call it slam dancing...girls don't thrash...not (guys) dancing, never call it dancing mega insult...girls just stand around and watch." The misuse of these words is one way of identifying the speaker as an outsider. The correct usage would reinforce group solidarity.

The lexical items identified with Freaks are mostly to do with drug use. The use of the terms, that is, the talking about drugs may serve a solidarity function. Many of the students who felt that they might be labelled as Freaks did not use drugs as much as the Jocks believed. "If you do drugs once they think you're a Freak... they (Jocks) do it at the same time, they just don't talk about it." (MII:180) The Punks and the "normal" students observed that sometimes it was the one who never mentioned drugs who was most heavily into them.

Choice of topic in conversation is important too. It is not enough to be in Phys-Ed and to be good at sports to be considered a Jock. You have to talk sports, have what is called a Jock mentality. What a person talks about can be more indicative of social grouping, than what a person does.

4. The Effect of Labelling on Language Use

When a student is labelled, certain assumptions are made concerning his or her personality. For the categorized student, some aspects of language use become restricted. Topics, participants and even the situations where conversations might take place become predictable.

All the students talk about their social life, but Jocks tend to talk to other Jocks about sports in the cafeteria or the foyer; Freaks talk about drugs and being under the influence of or recovering from drugs in the bathrooms, at the "Freak Doors" or at the "Seven-Eleven"; and Punks talk about music to other Punks.

As mentioned earlier, some of the interview groups used fewer labels when categorizing the students. The Punks feel that almost everyone is a Freak or a Jock. Some of the average-to-Freak people believed that the Punks and Jocks thought of them as Freaks whether they were or not. "Jocks call us Freaks, think we smoke, do drugs. If you do drugs once they think you're a Freak...they do it at the same time just don't talk about it." (MII:175) "Punks and Jocks see us as Freaks, but we don't see ourselves as Freaks." (MIII:307)

So, although many students felt that they were normal, they perceived that they were treated as Freaks by the Jocks. "Freaks - they think they are normal, but not to us." (J2:50) They feel uncomfortable being around Jocks, so they hang out together at the "Freak Door" or in the bathrooms or go off-campus. Thus, being mislabelled by the Jocks as Freaks has the effect of restricting who they can talk to and where. "The Freaks are all in a group, they all hang around in one spot. The Jocks get three-quarters of the school whereas the Freaks take a quarter of it...the Jocks are all over the school, in the hallways and everywhere, the Freaks are right at the "Freak Doors"." "What do you do at lunchtime? We sit in the bathroom, we seclude ourselves...there are not many places you can go, that aren't overruled by Jocks. If you go in the cafeteria you feel totally out of place - same with the foyer...give you dirty looks."

The students that felt that they were not labelled, said that they had a lot more freedom of choice when it came to activities and subjects to talk about. Topics then are not so restrictive for "normal" people, but they find that they are restricted in choice of participants outside of the "normal" group. They find many Jocks unapproachable and change their choice of topic and use different lexical items when addressing Freaks.

5. Conclusion

Only about twenty-four students were interviewed, but there was agreement in the labelling and descriptions of the social groups, even if there was not agreement about group memberships or size. Even though the sample was small there was great consistency. The use of stereotypical labelling predicts the nature of the interactions between the students as they modify their language use to meet the requirements of the situation, whether to adjust their vocabulary for an outsider or to reinforce their solidarity with an insider. It is not just topic and lexical use that varies according to the participants, but also the situation of the interaction as the behaviour of the students varies according to their social grouping or assigned social grouping. The need to belong to a social group and the result of being labelled as a member of a social group has a great effect on the language use of the students of this high school.

Footnotes

¹The Brown-Nosers, Homework Gang are probably idiosyncratic terms. I also heard "goodie-goodies". "Mellow-guy" was also heard - he/she is a type of Freak - mellow is a positive attribute to a Freak or semi-Freak. "Boods" is also heard occasionally. It refers to "Budlins", a head-shop that used to exist downtown.

References

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