Pronouns and identity: A case study from a 1930s working-class community

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Abstract

This article investigates the relationship between certain pronoun uses and identity in a 1930s working class community. It is based on a corpus of informal conversations drawn from the Mass-Observation archive, a sociological and anthropological study of the Bolton (UK) working class at this time. The article argues that certain pronoun uses in the corpus can only be explained as homophoric reference, a kind of reference which depends on implicit agreement about the intended referent of the pronoun. The article then discusses the basis on which this implicit agreement could operate: shared culture and knowledge and a tight network of social relations. In the conclusion, two particular questions are raised: 1) How far can the homophoric reference described be related to social class? 2) When does (dialect) grammar become pragmatics?

1   Introduction

Pronouns, as Pennycook (1994) and Wales (1996) observe, have often been regarded as unproblematic features which simply 'replace' or 'substitute for' a noun that is present in the co-text or very obviously inferable from the context. Pennycook (1994: 178), however, challenges us to go beyond what he terms 'bland descriptivism' in relation to pronouns and argues that pronoun use, far from being unproblematic, "opens up a whole series of questions about language, power, and representation". In similar vein, Wales (1996: xii) observes that her work on personal pronouns is "inevitably concerned with social, political and rhetorical issues of culture, relationships and power". Bramley (2001: v), discussing the strategic use of pronouns by politicians, also goes beyond 'bland descriptivism' and focuses on the important role pronouns play in constructing identity:

> Pronouns play a key role in the construction of 'self' and 'other'. They are not merely a way of expressing person, number and gender as is

suggested by traditional grammarians, nor do they only do referential and deictic work. Rather, they must be thought of in the context of interaction and in terms of the 'identity work' that they accomplish.

This article investigates the identity work accomplished by particular personal pronoun uses by a specific community, the working class of Bolton (an industrial town in the North of England, near Manchester) between 1937 and 1940. It seeks, for example, to account for the use of the pronoun *they* in the utterance below, produced by a 55-year-old working-class woman in Bolton in the early years of the Second World War, when asked, as part of a survey, what she thought the country was fighting for:

(1)   don't know, they tell us what they're fighting for, don't they, it seems alright to me.

This example is taken from an unusual corpus of conversations, (described in detail in Section 2 below), which took place in Bolton during the period 1937–1940, (The Bolton Corpus, Timmis 2010). The rationale for the use of the Bolton Corpus in this study is that it offers a rich site for the investigation of certain pronoun uses which are not amenable to 'bland descriptivism'. It is important to stress that this is a case study. The argument is not that the pronoun uses to be found in the Bolton Corpus are unique to the community in question; the argument is rather that these uses are salient due to the nature of the community and the historical period in question allowing us to see in sharp focus a "strong relation between social structure and pronoun usage" (Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990: 14). Certain personal pronoun uses in this corpus, it is argued, reflect a number of attitudes prevalent at the time in this community, in particular attitudes to the war and to authority, and to some extent attitudes to family and gender roles. More broadly, I would argue, this research contributes to historical sociolinguistics by showing clearly how an aspect of the grammatical system can be affected by the social and historical circumstances of the time.

2 The nature of the data

2.1 Mass-Observation in Bolton

As the Bolton Corpus is rather unusual, it is important to outline its origins and construction so that the data and the interpretation of the data can be properly appraised (see also Timmis 2010). The spoken data which constitutes the Bolton Corpus has been drawn from the Worktown (Bolton) papers of the Mass-Observation archive. Mass-Observation was founded in 1937 by Tom Harrisson,

Charles Madge and Humphrey Jennings (Jeffrey 1999) to carry out a sociological and anthropological study of the English working classes. One of the motivating forces behind Mass-Observation was a belief that the working classes of Britain were poorly understood by those in power. Bolton, known as Worktown in the Mass-Observation project, was chosen to be a particular focus for the study. The Worktown project took place between 1937 and 1940 and was set up by Tom Harrisson, who also led the project in its initial phase.

The Worktown project was carried out by placing observers in the local community to report on the behaviour and attitudes of the working class in relation to a range of topics such as sport, leisure, work, religion and the war. As a part of their work, these observers, often operating incognito, gathered spoken data on occasions by transcribing 'live' parts of conversations they overheard in public places such as pubs or sports grounds; the same observers also recorded responses to specific oral survey questions about, for example, the war situation or a particular political event.

2.2 From archive to corpus

Compiling the Bolton Corpus has involved scanning through the voluminous archive to identify the spoken data which is scattered unsystematically among the mass of other papers and records gathered for this sociological study. This process has yielded around 80,000 words. The spoken data is fragmentary, however, as conversations are often incomplete and, in the case of the oral survey data, we sometimes have to reconstruct the question from the responses given. While basic speaker information is sometimes recorded, e.g. M40D (Male, aged 40–45, lower working class), and reproduced in examples used in this article where available, coding is often absent. The oral survey data, while in some ways less rich in grammatical and lexical features typical of spoken language, has the advantage for this study of including complete exchanges.

2.3 The methodological challenge

The unusual nature of the Bolton Corpus, then, poses two important and related methodological questions:

- How much faith can we have in the verisimilitude of data gathered by non-linguists transcribing data 'live'?
- Given the fragmentary nature of the data, can we draw any worthwhile conclusions?

In terms of verisimilitude of the data, it is important to consider the credentials of the observers in relation to the task: Hinton (2013: 35) notes that, while there was a shifting cast of middle-class outsiders involved in M-O in Bolton, "Harrisson's key men, and his local helpers, had all been recruited as 'native informants', familiar with the culture they were studying". Observers who were not 'native informants' were coached in the dialect by Harry Gordon, a local unemployed fitter (Hinton 2013). Understanding local speech, however, was only part of the challenge: the observers faced the problem, in the absence of recording equipment, of transcribing conversations verbatim, often while trying to operate incognito. A contemporary account by Ferraby (1944) sheds some light on how observers went about the task: they tended to develop their own system of shorthand and fell into three basic categories: those who focused on word-for-word transcription at the expense of recording a complete exchange or conversation; those who focused on capturing the general sense at the expense of verbatim accuracy, and those who attempted to capture the general sense *and* specific, striking phrases. For the purposes of collating the corpus I exercised quality control by including only data where I was confident the observer had made an effort to transcribe verbatim. This might be indicated, for example, by the presence of ellipsis, contractions, questions tags, or dialect words. Inevitably there is an element of intuition in such judgements, but as a native of Bolton I can at least claim informed intuition.

Observers also tended to share ideas with each other about which techniques worked best for recording observations. Specific examples of surreptitious recording techniques employed by observers are provided by Hinton (2013): one observer working in a factory appeared to be constantly writing letters to 'Aunt Emma' while actually transcribing conversations; another made frequent trips to the factory toilet to write notes on what she had just overheard. In the case of oral surveys, observers wrote down the replies as the interviewee was answering the next question (Ferraby 1944). Examples from the corpus are reproduced in the article exactly as they were transcribed by the observers at the time so that readers can judge for themselves the verisimilitude of the data. The coding used by the observers is also reproduced where available, as in (1) below.

Even if we accept the verisimilitude of the data, however, questions remain. Given that we often have only fragments of conversations, how can we make observations about discourse-level features? The answer here lies partly in the data which *does* give us access to a complete exchange. In the case of the oral survey data, of which (2) is an example, we *do* have the complete exchange:

(2) Observer: What do you think the country is fighting for?
     W55WC [20.11.39]: I don't know, they tell us what they're fighting
     for, don't they, it seems alright to me.

It is conceivable, of course, that this exchange was preceded by some comment which included an antecedent for *they*, but it is highly unlikely that *all* survey exchanges were part of a wider conversation. In some cases, we do have longer conversations in the data where there appears to be no antecedent for *they* in the co-text. It must be acknowledged, however, that working with this data on a discourse-level feature makes a 'beyond reasonable doubt' conclusion difficult; I will argue, however, that it does allow a 'strong balance of probabilities' verdict in favour of the argument presented.

A further question is that of representativeness: we have already acknowledged that the observers were not carrying out linguistic research and the language data often seems somewhat random. This clearly means that statistical representativeness is out of the question: the most that can be said is that the feature under scrutiny was frequent enough to be recorded numerous times. Ultimately we have to accept that we are engaged in *historical* sociolinguistics where working with incomplete and imperfect data is the norm (Conde-Silvestre and Hernández-Campoy 2012); as noted above, in this case I tried to exclude the most imperfect data systematically. We should also note, however, that we are now better placed to meet these methodological challenges in historical sociolinguistics thanks to "the extensive parallel development of other ancillary disciplines: corpus linguistics, on the one hand, and social history, on the other" (Conde-Silvestre and Hernández-Campoy, 2012: 2). This paper employs both these 'ancillary' disciplines in the attempt to suggest conclusions commensurate with the quality of the data.

As noted in the introduction, what motivated this study was a desire to understand the pronoun use illustrated in (3) below:

(3) Observer: What do you think the country is fighting for?
     W55WC [20.11.39]: I don't know, they tell us what they're fighting
     for, don't they, it seems alright to me.

This example seemed to me to be remarkable in two ways: it showed a remarkable confidence that the interlocutor would be able to identify the referent of *they* and a remarkable sense of distance from a major event: the Second World War at a critical point for the country (this sense of distance contrasted markedly with the conventional narrative of national unity and resolve in the war). Example (1), while particularly striking, was, as we shall see, far from isolated in dis-

playing confidence that the interlocutor would know who *they* were in this instance. This paper seeks to explain both the basis upon which such pronoun use operates *and* what this says about the community in question.

3   Literature review

3.1   Anaphora

While anaphoric (and cataphoric) *reference* are often seen as the canonical form of pronoun reference (Wales 1996), there are advantages for this paper in adopting the terminology suggested by Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1457–1458):

> Traditionally an anaphor is said to refer to its antecedent, but that is a very different sense of 'refer' from that in which we say an NP refers to a person or other entity in the outside world. We will not use 'reference' for the relation between anaphor and antecedent… We will describe an anaphoric pronoun as anaphoric to, or anaphorically linked to, an antecedent.

The advantage of this distinction for our purposes, as we shall see, is that it allows us to distinguish clearly between in-text pronoun /NP links and reference to 'a person or entity in the outside world'. Huddleston and Pullum (2002) also suggest the terms 'retrospective anaphora' and 'anticipatory anaphora', which are adopted here. If we apply this terminology to (1), it is immediately obvious that there is neither a retrospective nor an anticipatory antecedent in the text. We are obliged, then, to look beyond what Mühlhäusler and Harré (1990: 14) describe as "an arbitrarily narrow and peripheral aspect" of pronoun use and consider other types of pronoun reference.

3.2   Deictic reference

Mühlhäusler and Harré (1990) and Wales (1996) point to the need to give greater consideration to the deictic functions of pronouns: the capacity of pronouns to indicate referents which can only be understood in relation to the moment or situation of speaking. In (4) and (5) below, for example, where Bolton people had been asked to comment on paintings, the referent of *they* could only be clarified in the context; i.e. the reference is deictic or exophoric (outside the text), as opposed to endophoric (within the text).

(4)   M65: This is a funny picture. It looks like haymaking and brick kilns. What are they carrying? Something. This is a bit of a puzzle. Looks as if they're loading wheat or flour.

(5)   M60: I can't say I care for this one. Not for religious scruples. They don't look real. Are they men or women?

3.3 Homophoric reference

In cases such as (4) and (5), the referent of the pronoun is fairly easily identified from the context, a picture which both the speaker and interlocutor(s) could see. However, while exophoric reference as exemplified in (4) and (5) takes us beyond the text for a referent, it still cannot account for (1) as *they* were presumably not physically present when the utterance was made. To account for (1), therefore, we need to consider the distinction drawn by Halliday and Hasan (cited in Wales 1996: 44) between 'specific' exophoric reference and less specific 'homophoric reference'. If the reference is 'specific' exophoric reference, the referent, as in (4) and (5), can be identified from the immediate situation; if the reference is homophoric, identification depends on shared *cultural* context and presupposed shared knowledge. The following anecdotal example illustrates homophoric reference. Some years ago, a colleague of mine put his waste bin outside his office only to be told by the cleaner, "He doesn't like that". At that time, my colleague's university was run by a rather autocratic vice-chancellor with an all-seeing eye. The vice-chancellor was present neither in the co-text nor the physical context, but there was no doubt as to the identity of *he*, given the knowledge of the institutional *culture* shared by the cleaner and my colleague. 'Homophoric reference', then, takes us beyond endophoric or 'specific exophoric' explanations of pronoun use, which we found inadequate to explain (1), and offers a plausible explanation for the use of *they* in (1): the speaker expected the interlocutor to understand the referent of *they* on the basis of shared culture and knowledge.

3.3.1 Homophoric *they*

A number of linguists have commented on the homophoric or generalised use of the pronoun *they*. Carter and McCarthy (2006: 380), for example, remark that "*they* can be used generically, with vague reference to wider groups of people, bodies, institutions, authorities etc. which exclude the speaker". Wales (1996: 46) also draws attention to the range of possible referents for *they*: "For the majority of instances, however, when generalised *they* is used…a meaning of 'people in general' is far too broad….*they* has as many meanings in effect as there are different groups, or potential groupings, of people in society." The specific use of *they* by politicians to construct oppositional groups is commented on by Bramley (2001). Examples (6) and (7) below illustrate how difficult it can be to identify a referent of *they* with complete certainty:

(6)   [Blackpool, Good Friday, 1938]
      S1: Is that Tower?
      S2: No that's a pylon. Tower'll be down. They'll be pullin it down to
      paint it.

   •   Does *they* in S2's facetious remark refer to some local authority or is
       it simply a kind of agentless passive?

(7)   11.11.1938: They always get a good day for armistice.

   •   Does *they* in (7) refer to the people who arrange armistice day
       events, people who attend them, or both?

A further aspect of homophoric *they* is noted by Wales (1996: 61), who points
out that one of the definitions of *they* given in the *Longman dictionary of
English language and culture* is 'other unknown people who control one's life',
while also noting that *they* can have a sinister dimension: "Even though context
usually helps to delimit *they*'s 'indefinite' reference, potential vagueness can
reinforce a sinister mystery, or be exploited". In this role, *they* has been useful to
parents from time immemorial, as this comment from a parent to a child on
Blackpool station in 1938 attests:

(8)   You'll get lost and they'll lock you up.

3.3.2 The sociolinguistic perspective on homophoric they
While the descriptive work above shows the potential of pronouns for
homophoric use, it does not account for how the interlocutor manages to under-
stand the intended referent from amongst the range of possibilities. In this
respect, it is interesting that Wales (1996: 14) notes that one of the *sociolinguis-
tic* functions of *they* is to distinguish between an in-group and outsiders, describ-
ing it as a 'site of antagonism' between *us* and *them*.[1] Shorrocks (1999: 73–74),
in his work on Bolton dialect, also observes a certain hostility or alienation
expressed through the use of *they* by his informants:

> The informants for the present study often expressed themselves (for
> the most part, resignedly) in terms of us v. them, where they might
> refer to employers (v. workers), the rich (v. the poor), the higher social
> classes (v. the working classes), the powerful (v. the powerless). Most
> often, they will represent whatever group has power in a given situa-
> tion, whether by virtue of money, class, position in the bureaucracy or
> some level of government, or any other position of authority.

Given that our focus is on the working class of Bolton, who generally did not wield power, "by virtue of money, class, position in the bureaucracy or some level of government, or any other position of authority" (Shorrocks 1999), it is particularly relevant to this study that Bernstein (1962), Hawkins (1969) and Johnston (1971) carried out research which related aspects of pronoun use to social class. Hawkins (1969) and Johnston (1971) carried out research with working class children and in both cases used a picture story experiment as part of their research. Both researchers found that, in relating the story, working class children made greater use of exophoric pronouns in subject position than middle class children. Bernstein's (1962) research, which involved a discussion rather than a narrative task, indicated that working class adolescents made significantly more use of *you* and *they* than middle class children. All three studies cited were carried out against the background of Bernstein's (1962: 263) famous and controversial distinction between restricted and elaborated codes, which he defined thus:

> A restricted code is generated by a form of social relationship based upon a range of closely shared identifications self-consciously held by the members.
> An elaborated code is generated by a form of social relationship which does not necessarily presuppose such shared, self-consciously held identifications with the consequence that much less is taken for granted.

Bernstein (1962) suggested that working class children made greater use of this linguistically less explicit 'restricted code'. Controversy arose as Bernstein was accused of taking a deficit view of working class language through the notion of restricted code (Bolander and Watts 2009). Bernstein denied taking such a view and explained that he had *not* intended to say that working class children were *limited* to restricted code; he had simply wished to explain that the working class made greater use of restricted code because of the nature of their social relationships; i.e. they still had access to elaborate code. At a later date, Bernstein (1971) was also explicit that a restricted code could express 'a vast array of meanings' and 'carried its own aesthetic'. The position I am taking here is that restricted code is a useful explanatory concept for language use in a tight-knit community provided that:

- Restricted code is seen as a community-based rather than a class-based phenomenon;

- We accept that restricted code use does *not* suggest limited access to elaborate code.

For our purposes, it is important to note that Bernstein (1962) relates non-specific uses of *they* to restricted code: and speaks of the possibility of "some implicit agreement about the referent such that…elaboration is redundant" (Bernstein 1962: 234).

3.4 Homophoric **we**

Wales (1996) points out that *we* can be used for both specific exophoric reference and homophoric reference and that the dividing line between the two types of reference is not always sharply drawn. In the case of the inclusive use of *we*; i.e. including only speaker and addressees, it will typically be easier to identify the referent. However, in the case of the exclusive use of *we*, which refers to the speaker and third parties who may or may not be present, the exact identity of the referent may be more difficult to establish. As Wales (1996: 58) notes the third parties in the case of exclusive *we* "…may be widely disseminated in ever larger contexts of situation, and of ever increasing unfamiliarity…in the cognitive space of culture or knowledge as well as in physical space". Bramley (2001: 260) comments on how politicians make strategic use of *we* and its versatility of reference: "'We" (and other related first person plural forms) is central in the construction of identities of politicians as members of groups and can be used to invoke a collective identity or group membership which politicians want to make salient at the time".

3.4.1 Sociolinguistic perspective on homophoric *we*

Both Bernstein (1962) and Wales (1996) point to a sociolinguistic relationship between *they* and *we*. Bernstein (1962: 234) notes that the degree to which the referent of *they* will need to be specified "will depend upon the community of interests generated by 'we'". Wales (1996: 59) also remarks on the relationship between *they* and *we*, but is more explicit about the political aspect of *we*: "in social and ideological senses…, *we* can mean 'more than one' of the same; if the addressee belongs to the same group, and shares the speakers' views…", going on to note that in different contexts, *we* versus *they* can "produce different antonymic contrasts". In (9) below, for example, the antonymic contrast appears to be between the pretentious intelligentsia and the plain-speaking (Bolton) working man:

(9)   This bloody modern art – they would call that a bunch of wallflowers – modern art, it's a damned deal of hocus pocus – I expect they laugh

like 'ell at us but if an agricultural worker went on the binge then painted with the whitewash brush – and call the picture The Next Dawn he would be hailed as a genius among 'em – The silly buggers an they think they're kiddin' us.

4 Analysis and discussion

The argument established through the literature review is that the key to understanding the pronoun use which interests us is the notion of homophoric reference. It has also been suggested that examining the bases on which homophoric pronoun reference operates can reveal much about the attitudes and assumptions of the speaker. The analysis of *they* was carried out by producing concordance lines for *they*, *them* and *their* using the concordance software *antconc*. Examples with a clear antecedent for *they* in the surrounding co-text were eliminated. *Antconc* allows you to click on the search word and view the wider co-text, so this procedure was followed to eliminate examples where there was a clear antecedent for *they* in the wider co-text. This procedure was repeated for *we*, *he* and *she*. The remaining examples were then categorised according to referent which could most reasonably be inferred from the example.

This analysis focuses in turn on the homophoric uses of the pronouns *they*, *we*, *he* and *she* (and object case forms and possessive adjective forms where relevant) in the Bolton Corpus and seeks to determine the referents possible for each pronoun when the reference is homophoric. The analysis and discussion sections are integrated: the analysis of each pronoun in turn is followed by a discussion section which considers, with reference to the social history of the time, the attitudes and assumptions which, I argue, underpinned the homophoric use of the pronoun in question.

4.1 Who are **they**?

4.1.1 The remote and authoritative 'other'

Analysis

Certain uses of *they* in the Bolton data suggest, at the very least, a sense of remoteness from the governing class, as this conversation which took place in a Bolton pub illustrates:

(10) S1: They're [Conveyors for the government] not making all this bloody stuff for nothing, it's only a matter of time before the bubble bursts.
S2: Well, I don't think another war will start now *they*'re getting friendly with Italy and Germany.

> S1: Don't you believe it. *They*'re a cute lot of buggers in this country and *they*'re only waiting till they're ready. Why *they*'re even making the stuff for them *they*'ll be at war with.

Example (10) is interesting in two ways:
- The referent of *they* changes from 'conveyors for the government' (inserted parenthetically by the observer) to, presumably, the government itself.
- It is only the phrase 'this country' which makes it clear that the speakers are actually talking about their own country rather than another foreign power.

This sense of remoteness is particularly evident in the sense that comes through from some respondents that it is *their* war. While it is *their* war, however, *they* will not be fighting it, and there is a marked reluctance on the part of some respondents to fight *their* war, a reluctance sometimes expressed in vivid and vigorous terms.

(11) [Do you think there will be a war?][2]
M35C 24.9.38:
They can please themselves whether they have a war or not. I will go when they send for me: they will have to give me 6 months training, it will be a good holiday and like as not the war will be over by the end of it all. Wife hopes there will be a war because they get a good allowance for kiddies and she said she'd like me out of the road for a few months. Every time I get drunk there is one in the bloody box.

(12) Well, they'll not bloody well get me. I had a packet in the last do and it's a bloody mug's game. I'll bet chaps that were in the last do as sees them posters about joining the modern army and keep the country strong will feel like pissing on them.

It is even possible that the notion of remote governing classes pursuing their own interests extends beyond UK borders, depending on how one interprets *they* below:

(13) M45C 8.6.40 Won't catch me joining up. They've started all over again.

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that the remote, authoritative Other is always viewed with antipathy or distrust. The comments below show an almost

naïve faith that they must know what they're doing in spite of the news of German victories and allied retreats:

(14) F35C 12.5.40: [Dunkirk is] what they expected. They've been waiting for this for a long time.

(15) F40B 18.5.40: [The war situation on May 18th is] pretty serious but I have faith in the government, and I think they might be trying to lead them into a trap or something.

They comes across as almost paternalistic in the following comment [Did you hear the radio broadcast?]:

(16) F55C 23.5.40: I didn't hear it [Duff Cooper?] but the older people in the house had it on. They thought things were worrying us. He's very good.

Discussion

We should not be surprised by the sense of remoteness from government which comes through in the quotations above, given that one of the motivating forces for Mass-Observation was the perception of a gulf between the governing classes and the governed. As Beaven (2005: 217) puts it: "… the M-O organisation emerged from the fear that there was an increasing dislocation between the people and parliament.". This remoteness of the governing classes was very apparent when a member of the Labour leadership, Herbert Morrison, came to visit Bolton: M-O had observers in the audience of his meetings noting down the numerous words which they thought would be unintelligible to the local working-class audience. More locally, Harris (1973: 334) speaks of a class structure which was 'solid' and 'real' in Bolton at this time, and of a gulf between the upper class and the working class which "had its concrete and physical aspects, and also manifested itself in the consciousness of the top and bottom layers of society for each other" (Harris 1973: 82). Indeed, we can note that one or two of the middle class members of the M-O team were painfully aware of the gulf between them and the people they were observing (Jeffrey 1989). Trevelyan (1957: 85), cited in Jeffrey (1989), for example, remarked that, "I was aware, not for the first time, of the gulf that separated me from these English workers, the gulf of education, language, accent and social behaviour". The sense of remoteness from government on the part of the local working class appears to have transferred itself, in more than a few cases, to a lack of interest in the war. The author Bill Naughton, for example, part of the M-O team at the time, com-

mented on 20.11.39: "I met 16 people in the last week and I've talked to them anything from 3/4 hour to 2 hours and not one mentioned the war." On 3.6.40, (at the time of the famous Dunkirk evacuation), a certain Florence Mayer had this to say:

> The trouble with Bolton is that everyone is complacent. They don't seem to think that there is a war on and everybody has to play a part. The men just play around at being Air Raid Wardens and drink their beer and think about nothing.

In the political sphere, while we observed a general antagonism towards government, we also saw some examples of a rather naïve trust. In this respect, it is interesting that Harris (1973: 405) refers to the "the lingering deference of the working-class voter for the 'natural' leadership of the capitalist parties".

4.1.2 Obstructive officials

Analysis
Some of the most vituperative comments in the Bolton Corpus are to be found in the data collected in the Labour Exchange in relation to how the local people were treated by officials. This sense of gratuitous obstructiveness on the part of Labour Exchange officials comes through strongly in (17) and (18):

(17) 25.6.37 Christ, they send you every bloody place but the Town Hall.

(18) They just do it to buggar (sic) you about and get fed up.

Toilet attendants and station officials could also be obstructive, though with less serious consequences:

(19) Blackpool Central Station Ladies Toilet 4.9.37: There's no convenience[3] here is there? They're not letting you miss paying.

Discussion
At the time of the Worktown project, unemployment was high due to the decline in the cotton industry, so it is likely that many people would have been affected directly or indirectly by unemployment: Gazeley and Langhamer (2013) note that by 1936 male unemployment had dropped only slightly below the 17 per cent figure recorded in 1931. Indeed, Harrisson (1961: 33) remarked that in 1936–1937 "the whole atmosphere [in Bolton] breathed insecurity and dread of unemployment". Against this background, there was much resentment by local unemployed men at their treatment by Labour Exchange officials. One observer, for example, recorded a hostile exchange when a clerk refused to stamp the cou-

pon of an unemployed man unless he said aloud the words 'No work'. Another observer hints at class bias in the attitude of the officials, noting that he received better treatment because he did not speak in dialect.

4.1.3 The controller and manipulator of information
Analysis

They is used to refer to those who control the flow of information, e.g. the government and the media. As the examples below show, the referent of *they* cannot always be identified with complete confidence, at least by an analyst looking back over 70 years later. Is it the government, or the media, or government-controlled media?

(20) 31.5.40: They're catching it pretty hot over there on the other side. It reads smooth enough in the papers, but they don't tell you what it's like.

- In this example, *they* in the second sentence presumably refers to newspapers

(21) 13.6.40: When they say 3 of our bombers have attacked 50 Messerscmitt (sic) fighters and brought down 10 or 15, I don't believe them. They are cracking them up too much.

- A plausible referent for *they* in this example would be a government spokesperson, but it is not clear-cut.

In the following example, the referent of *they* is similarly ambivalent:

(22) M30C/D 11.6.40: They say the cause wins the war. Well, I don't think we've got the case. Our young men don't want to go.

In (22), *they* may simply refer to folk wisdom, as discussed earlier, or may be a more specific reference to government propaganda. If the latter, then the switch to *we* is interesting as it would indicate a gap between the government line on the justification for the war and popular opinion. As the examples above suggest, cynicism about the accuracy of information which comes from *them* is particularly prevalent in interpreting reports of the war. This is also evident in (23):

(23) 2.7.40
S1: I see they've taken those islands.
S2: Oh aye, but they've evacuated them all.
S1: They've bombed Wales too. They told everybody on wireless where they would be safe, they were telling mothers that, now they are

> bombing the place. What did they want to tell them for, they might have known

> The referent of *they* switches seamlessly from the Germans to the government/government-controlled media and back again, with an anaphoric *they* reference to 'everybody' tucked in there as well.

Discussion

It is not surprising that we see examples of cynicism about the truth of press reports. Jeffrey (1999) observes that the press were included in the M-O critique of the political process, particularly the failure of the press to "bridge the gap between rules and ruled, to tell the public of the moves and thoughts of its elected leaders and to tell the leaders of the opinions of the electorate" (Jeffrey 1999: 1). Similarly, Harris (1973: 357) argues that at this time, "The press promoted myths, values and attitudes that emanated from the upper class and presented their world view".

4.1.4 Them *and* us

Analysis

In the literature review, we established that the corollary of a strong sense of them is a strong sense of us. The following remark captures the sense of them and us, and the relationship between them, in rather a striking way. It also reinforces the idea of remoteness from the governing class and remoteness from the war referred to above:

> (24) [What do you think about the war situation?]
>   9.5.40: I couldn't really tell you [about the war situation]. It's not for us to say. We aren't educated. If there is opinion in war, it don't do…We have to need them because they need us.

A further remark also suggests a curious relationship between *them* and *us* in the way that the group represented by *they* seems to be seen as a separate entity from 'our country'.

> (25) [What do you think the country is fighting for?]
>   W25C/D 20.11.39 Well, they're fighting for our country I suppose.

Certain comments, particularly those made in response to paintings of Bolton, suggest a community with a strong sense of identity, perhaps a self-defined working class community. The following remarks were made in response to realist paintings of Bolton and it is noticeable that the speaker assumes that the

interlocutor will understand the referents of *our* and *we* without further elaboration.

(26) I think it's the tramp that's down and out. That's a picture of everyday life in our station of life. He's lookin' as if he's just 'ad a bottle of beer. Yer can just ere 'im sayin' 'I would ave this if it's my last pleasure. That's a picture of everyday life in our station of life.

(27) There's something about it I don't like. We're dead, we are! Our people are dead!

A further remark in response to a surrealist painting of Bolton shows a similar assumption that the referent of *us* will be understood

(28) Great. That's great. One thing, it is us. You can tell that.

We can also convey a sense of a deprived and/or powerless community duped by the newspapers (29), dependent on means-tested benefits (30) and with no job security (32).

(29) 1938: The newspapers have us beat, they understand psychology from A to Z and they can make us think any way they want.

(30) He's[4] the man for us. Oh, he knows about us, he knows about the means test.

(31) Poor fellar – like lots on us – he's out o' work.

Discussion

As we have noted, a sense of *us* is closely related to a sense of *them*, and there is independent evidence of a strong feeling of local identity in Bolton at this time. Harrisson (1974) commented on a strong sense of 'local patriotism' among the community observed and a sense that Bolton was distinct from the surrounding towns. Walton (1987: 358) remarks of Lancashire in general on the "pride and separateness of localities, with their long tradition of resisting interference from outsiders, whether from London or the next parish…" Given that dialect is "…a major force for the expression of local and regional identities" and language a "vehicle of communication and excommunication" (Waller 1987: 1, cited in Russell 2004), it is important to note that the local dialect was alive and well: a significant amount of the spoken data was transcribed to represent the local dialect, particularly the data from the bowling greens and the rounders pitch.

We can also argue that the social network structure in Bolton at the time contributed to a strong sense of *us*. Cotton mills were the major employer in this

period and most working class people lived close to their workplace (Harris 1973) – even local sports' teams often represented a particular mill. During the mill holidays[4], a large part of the community spent their holiday in the seaside resort of Blackpool[5]. Indeed, Mass Observation moved their operation to Blackpool for the holiday weeks to continue their observations of the people of Bolton. All this, of course, was at a time of less social and geographic mobility than we have now. As the cotton industry was in decline, there was little inward migration to Bolton and the education system was not set up to promote social mobility (Harris 1973). It seems reasonable to suggest, then, that the Bolton working-class community met some of the criteria for 'dense' and 'multiplex' relationships in the sense defined by Snell (2008: 5):

> The density of a network relates to the connections between network contacts. A person's network structure is said to be relatively dense if a large number of their personal contacts also interact with each other. Multiplexity relates to the nature of a person's network ties (e.g. kin, friend, neighbour, co-employee). A person's network is said to be relatively multiplex if their network ties are of more than one kind (e.g. if a person's co-worker is also a neighbour and a personal friend or family member)

4.2 Homophoric **he** *and* **she**

Analysis

He

He is used homophorically in the Bolton data in two ways: it is used by wives to refer to husbands (as Shorrocks 1999 suggests) and often used by a number of speakers to refer to Hitler. War is seen as 'his' business by some women:

(32) [What did you think of Churchill's speech?]
F40D 20.5.40: Don't bother about it. I leave that to him. I don't bother about war.

(33) [What do you think of the war news?]
24.5.40
I leaves it to him. I gets worried over it. He hears it. He follows it up with being all through the last war.
24.5.41

Politics may also be 'his' business. The following comment was noted by an observer canvassing before a local election. The observer also noted that he got the same reply *ten* times when asking women which way they would vote.

(34) [Which way will you vote?]
      See what he says when he comes home.

This sentiment was also expressed even more starkly:

(35) [Which way will you vote?]
      What he does, I will do.

One of the remarkable features of the Bolton data is the extent to which the enemy seems to have been personified as Hitler. Two examples will suffice to illustrate this:

(36) 31.5.40: It's my opinion that if we can hold out for 4 months, and then paste hell out of him in spring, we'll win next year.

(37) M30B 11.5.40: I'm not looking forward to going to fight. I'd like to have a smack at him, but I don't look forward to the risk of being killed.
      Some of the references are almost jocular, or at least expressed in language which verges on bathos:

(38) 28.9.38: Yes, I will fight. It's about time we gave him a dose of his own medicine. He's nowt only a bloody big bully.

(39) I've got a grudge against him now they've invaded my holiday country (France). And I was looking forward to going there again.

The homophoric use of *he* to refer to Hitler can be explained in two ways. Firstly, it is natural that Hitler would have been prominent in war-related discussions in all communities at this time. Secondly, the government policy was to try to separate Hitler from the German people in the minds of the public and to portray Hitler as a demonic warmonger (Jeffrey 1999). There is perhaps a third, more speculative reason: a desire to diminish the enemy through this personification. It is interesting in this respect that some of the references to Hitler are almost jocular or playful. He is variously referred to as, for example, 'a braggart'; 'an old rogue'; 'a twister'; 'a bully'; 'two slates short', and 'a bloody insulting bugger'.

She

There are far fewer examples of homophoric *she* than homophoric *he* in the data. This is perhaps because so little data was gathered in a family context. The only two examples I could find, reproduced below, do at least show the varied roles of a mother.

(40) She would have scrubbed it [rounders bat], only I took it with me.

(41) 4.9.37
Observer: What time do you close?
15-year-old chocolate stall assistant: When she sends for me.

Discussion

We should note first of all that Shorrocks (1999: 81), referring specifically to Bolton dialect, though based on later data, comments on what he calls the 'known referent' use of *he* and *she*:

> Certain stressed uses of the third person singular pronouns (masculine and feminine) may refer to a known referent…The reference will often not be comprehensible from the co-text, nor from the pragmatic situation – unless one is intimately acquainted with the informant.

He also observes that this use of *she* refers most commonly to a female relative. While Shorrocks (1999) does not comment on the range of referents possible with stressed *he*, he does draw a parallel with the use of 'himself' and 'herself' in Irish English to refer to a spouse. The homophoric use of *he* was remarked upon in a different context by a member of the M-O team working in a Bolton cotton mill: the observer noted that the women *never* referred to their supervisor by his name and *always* referred to him as *he*.

The homophoric use of *he* and *she* rests, I would argue, on a stable family structure and well defined roles within the family. At a time when divorce rates were much lower than they are today, it would be much easier to infer the referent of *he* and *she*. If any doubt remained, this could be disambiguated by the co-text or the context of discussion. When, for example, women replied to M-O canvassers, "I'll do what he does", this may well reflect the notion, commented on by contemporary observers, that politics was the man's sphere. M-O research into one electoral ward in Bolton revealed that in 85 per cent of cases, couples adopted the same voting behaviour: neither voted or both voted, and if both voted, they voted the same way. At this time, both work and leisure were quite segregated on gender lines. This tendency to a relatively strict demarcation of family roles would presumably help to identify the referent of "She's picking me

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up". While there is no reason to suppose that this use of *he* and *she* should be peculiar to Bolton, neither a search of the literature nor consultation with experts on English dialects has revealed specific reference to this use. References such as 'her indoors' may seem analogous, but they seem to have a jocular sense not present in the Bolton data.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has argued that certain pronoun uses in the Bolton Corpus can only be explained as homophoric reference, which involves implicit agreement about the intended referent. This implicit agreement rests, in turn, on shared culture and knowledge. However, the argument is not that the community was totally homogenous; it is simply that, in this period, there was enough shared culture and knowledge for homophoric pronoun use to operate efficiently. It is also worth recalling that there is no suggestion that this shared culture and homophoric pronoun use were or are unique to this Bolton community. The argument is rather that homophoric pronoun use was salient in this community because of the social and historical circumstances of the time: it was salient enough, we noted, for a contemporary observer to remark on the homophoric use of *he* and salient enough for this observer, born and brought up in Bolton, to be forcibly struck by it when reading the Worktown Papers. While this paper is a case study of a specific historical period, it is possible that social and historical circumstances could conspire again to make this aspect of pronoun use salient in another community at another time.

It needs to be acknowledged that pronoun use is not the only aspect of language which depends on shared culture and knowledge. To take a further example, Shorrocks (1999: 201) describes the known referent use of the dialect equivalents of Standard English *there*: "… *theer*, *yon* and *yondher* can refer to a known referent that is assumed by the speaker to be obvious to the listener(s)…but which may well not be so to strangers". In the case of the working-class community of Bolton, 1937–1940, I have sought to show that the key elements of the shared culture which supported homophoric pronoun use were a sense of remoteness from government, a sense of being mistreated by a malign local bureaucracy, and a stable family structure with clearly defined gender roles in the domains of both work and leisure. This identity was reinforced by a tight network of social relations. Indeed, it can also be said that homophoric pronoun use both reflects and reinforces identity: the unspoken assumption on the part of a speaker that a referent will be understood by the interlocutor reflects the assumption that speaker and interlocutor share a sense of identity; if these

assumptions are proved correct, that shared sense of identity is reinforced. Thoits (1983: 175) stresses the value of 'generalized identity' to an individual: "if one knows who one is (in a social sense), then one knows how to behave. Role requirements give purpose, meaning, direction, and guidance to one's life".

The question arose as to how far, as Bernstein (1962) initially hypothesised, this kind of pronoun use could be related to social class, or whether, as he later intimated, it was a product of a particular set of social relations. I would argue that there is nothing intrinsically class-based about this kind of pronoun reference: it probably requires as a minimum a stable social structure, dense and multiplex social relations and a shared sense of the Other. It just so happens that the working-class community of Bolton at this time exhibited these characteristics to a conspicuous degree. This in turn made their homophoric pronoun use conspicuous and, therefore, I would argue, very suitable material for a case study of an aspect of pronoun use which is often neglected.

A further question which arises is whether homophoric pronoun use can properly be regarded as a dialect feature. It is interesting in this respect that Shorrocks (1999) in his *Grammar of the dialect of the Bolton area*, which is a quite conventional syntactic treatment of the dialect, does include discussion of 'known referent' uses of *they*, *he* and *she*. However, as Mühlhäusler and Harré (1990) argue, when pronoun use is considered, the divisions between syntax, semantics and pragmatics tend to collapse. In this case, we can ask, whether we are dealing with a sociolinguistic or a pragmatic phenomenon: does this homophoric pronoun use depend on community or context? Here we must return to a comment by Shorrocks (1999) quoted earlier in relation to homophoric *he* and *she* (my italics below):

> Certain stressed uses of the third person singular pronouns (masculine and feminine) may refer to a known referent…The reference will often not be comprehensible from the co-text, *nor from the pragmatic situation – unless one is intimately acquainted with the informant.*

If the pragmatic interpretation depends on the social relations, then, I would argue, we are justified in calling it a sociopragmatic phenomenon.

More broadly, we can consider homophoric pronoun use in relation to Halliday's (1978: 19) famous dictum, "Language is as it is because of what it has to do", and ask if it is equally valid to say, "Language is as it is because of what it *doesn't have to do*".

Finally, it is worth reminding ourselves that this is a case study. Specifically, it is a case study of how social and historical forces can interact to shape a specific aspect of language use to a conspicuous degree (Millar 2012).

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