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A Cultural Approach to Interpersonal Communication

Essential Readings

Second Edition

Edited by
Leila Monaghan, Jane E. Goodman, and
Jennifer Meta Robinson

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29

Word Up: Social Meanings of Slang in California Youth Culture[1]

Mary Bucholtz

Introductory note from the Editors

One way of using language to construct identity is through slang. Mary Bucholtz's interest lies in how teenagers in a California high school use slang to create specific identities. The California teenagers that she studied used slang as a resource to build the worlds they live in, just as the high-schoolers Eckert worked with used category symbols to develop group identities (Chapter 28). Bucholtz found that whereas certain terms like "hella" (as in "this year was hella fun!") help to construct a school-wide youth culture, other terms such as "punk" and "patna" (a variation of the standard English "partner") can produce social differentiation between racial or ethnic groups. Bucholtz also introduces an important distinction between the language ideologies (beliefs about language) people hold and what people actually do with language in practice. Whereas ideology can exaggerate the differences between subcultures, ethnographic studies of language practices reveal a good deal more fluidity. Finally, Bucholtz shows how slang gets used as an interpersonal resource, as students draw on it "strategically to achieve particular interactional goals" (p. 290).

What kind of slang is found in your social groups? Can you connect the kind of slang you use with larger social categories such as ethnicity, region, neighborhood, or even dorm? What is the difference between swearing (see Chapters 24 and 25) and other kinds of slang?

What different research methods did Bucholtz employ? What do you see as the advantages of each? How would you design a study to find out why your peers use slang?

Slang is a central part of high-school students' experience, but contrary to many adults' perception of slang as a more or less uniform "youth language," the social meaning of slang is as variable as the teenagers who use it. To illustrate this point, I offer a brief anecdote. During ethnographic fieldwork in 1995–6 at Bay City High School, a large, urban high school in the San Francisco Bay Area, I was a regular participant-observer in a specially funded anti-drug class in which students were trained as peer educators and then visited other classes and schools to perform skits about the dangers of drugs and tobacco.[2] The elective class, which students took for reasons ranging from an interest in the topic to filling a gap in their schedule, brought together an unusually diverse group of students, even in this extremely diverse high school: all class ranks, from freshman to senior; both genders; many racial and ethnic backgrounds; and a number of subcultural orientations were represented in the classroom. The interaction shown as Example (1) took place as the students prepared to perform their skits before an audience for the first time. They asked the teacher, Priscilla, what they should say if audience members asked whether they themselves smoked marijuana. Priscilla recommended that they say they did not.

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(1)
PRISCILLA: Remember, you're role models.
AL CAPONE: You want us to lie?
PRISCILLA: Since you're not coming to school stoned – (students laugh)
CALVIN: (mockingly) Stoned?
PRISCILLA: What do you say?
CALVIN: I say high. Bombed. Blitzed.
BRAND ONE: Weeded.
KERRY: Justified.
BRAND ONE: That's kinda tight.

As members of the class continued to discuss the dilemma they faced, Brand One commented that he did not want to lie about his use of marijuana:

PRISCILLA: You won't be doing it during the performance so say, "I don't do it now," because you're not doing it now.
BRAND ONE: I'm not gonna go out of my way to say I get schwamped or something. (fieldnotes, February 22, 1996)

It was not unusual for slang to become a topic of explicit discussion at Bay City High, as it does here. Priscilla's use of the outmoded slang term *stoned* initiates a side interaction in which students jokingly vie with one another to supply current words for marijuana intoxication. The speakers in this exchange appeal to what many researchers view as the fundamental characteristics of slang: a generation-specific colloquial lexicon, often associated with taboo topics, that is creative and rapidly changing. But this common definition does not capture the full range of slang's structure, use, and social meaning. Indeed, the characteristics of slang invoked within the exchange operate here as a set of language ideologies, or social meanings assigned to language and its users, often in ways that grant greater power to some sorts of language users and less to others. Thus the students explicitly comment on Priscilla's slang use, evaluating it as laughably inappropriate, and thereby position her as too old (or old-fashioned) to use slang "correctly." In addition to this ideological dimension, in which students talk about slang and evaluate it as a social object, slang is put to use in linguistic practice in Example 1 when Brand One says, "I'm not gonna go out of my way to say I get schwamped or something," using an innovative slang term. By drawing on these ideologies and practices, the students were able to position themselves as teenagers in contrast to their adult teacher, and particularly as teenagers who were familiar with the lexicon of drug use, and hence cool, in contrast to their fellow students who were not able to participate knowledgeably in the exchange. Although the students in this interaction were of different genders, races, ages, and subcultural affiliations, here they cooperate in a joint construction of youthful trendiness.

This function of slang – to signal a youth identity – has received a disproportionate amount of attention from both scholars and the general public. But slang can be used to construct other levels of identity as well. This chapter considers the multiple uses to which slang, as a resource for the discursive production of identity, can be put. Using multiple methods of data collection, I investigate slang at a single high school as a site where the interrelated processes of ideology and practice come together to produce local identities based on age, race, subculture, and interactional role.

Although the construction of identity through language involves both practice and ideology, these phenomena are not entirely separable from each other, nor can either be reduced to the other. On the one hand, the social meanings that ideology assigns to particular linguistic forms affects who may legitimately use them and in what ways. On the other hand, the ways that people speak may either reinforce or challenge language ideologies – and often the latter, for the social meaning of language, while ideologically rigid, is often more flexible in practice. This dialectic between ideology and practice is evident in the use of slang, a richly semiotic component of language in which linguistic practices and ideologies sometimes collaborate and sometimes conflict in the production of distinctive youth identities based on distinctive styles (see Irvine 2001).

Social Worlds at Bay City High School

The interaction of practice and ideology in slang was central to the identities of students at Bay City High. Language ideologies are not primarily about language; rather, they are in the service of other, more basic, ideological systems – concerning race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, nationality, and other aspects of the social world – which they cloak in linguistic terms (see Woolard 1998). At Bay City High, the ideology of linguistic differentiation that undergirded style rested largely on an ideology of racial differentiation. For both European American and African American students, who constituted Bay City High School's two largest racialized groups, the racial ideology was cast mainly as a black–white dichotomy, despite sizable numbers of Latino and Asian American students at the school. Though less absolute than the ideology would suggest, this divide was visibly enacted on the school grounds through the establishment of predominantly black and predominantly white hangout areas. Around these largely polarized zones were smaller areas associated with other racial and ethnic groups, as well as a few racially diverse groups with shared interests and orientations to particular forms of youth culture.

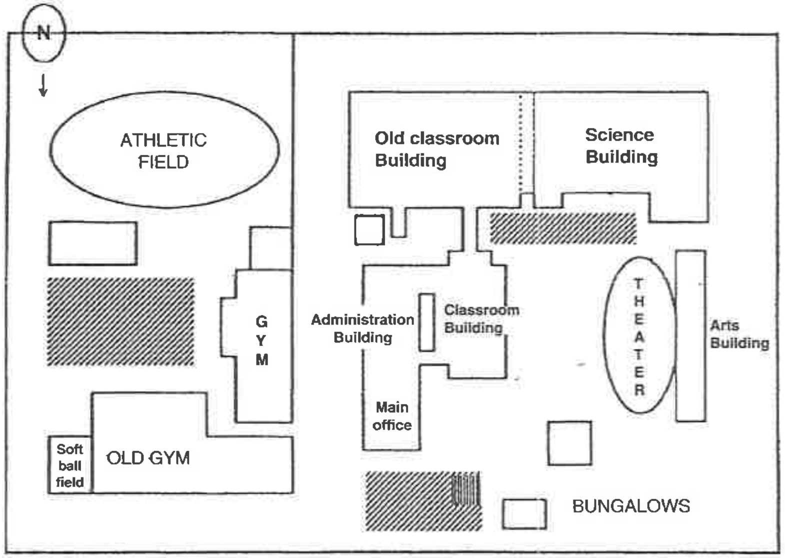

Figure 1 Official Map of Bay City High School

The ideology that reinforced this geographic practice emerges in graphic representations of Bay City High. As part of ethnographic interviews I conducted with students, I asked them to draw a map of the high school indicating where they hung out and anything else they considered important. This method elicited rich information about the ideologies that shaped and were shaped by students' identities. In particular, I did not mention race explicitly, but it often served as the organizing principle for the maps students drew. For purposes of comparison, it is useful first to examine the official map of Bay City High School, distributed by the school administration (Figure 1). The main student hangout on the school grounds was around the courtyard: African American students generally congregated in the area called the Hill, near the principal's office, and a large number of European American students sat on the steps of the arts building, facing the courtyard, an area often referred to simply as the Steps. While other groups were more dispersed, some Asian American students assembled near a low wall north of the science building, called the Wall. None of these areas is labeled in Figure 1, although as part of the school campus the space they occupy appears as undifferentiated physical space surrounding the official institutional domain, the school buildings. Entirely absent from the official representation of Bay City High is the Park, a grassy area across the street from the school, which was an overwhelmingly white hangout. Both spatially and socially, the predominantly white Park, at the southwest end of campus, represented the farthest point from the predominantly black Hill at the northeast end.[3]

The importance of these local spaces is signaled by maps of the school drawn by students. The school map in Figure 1 shows all the official spaces of the campus, including athletic areas where few students hung out, but the student maps often omit entire buildings or represent only those portions that students occupied during unofficial activities at lunch and before and after school, when social identities could be more fully displayed.

For example, in his map of the Bay City High School courtyard (Figure 2a), Mark, a relatively popular European American boy who had only European American friends, excludes all campus buildings, which constitute the space of official school activities. He indicates with an arrow the single building that has social meaning for him in addition to its official function: the science building, which he associates with nerds. By contrast, in his representation of the steps of the arts building, where many of his friends (and sometimes he himself) hung out, Mark exhaustively labels the nuanced social distinctions of particular areas of the Steps (*97 party clique, Baseball, 96 fools*). Once again, however, he does not draw the building itself. He provides a similarly detailed map of the Park, where he usually ate lunch (Figure 2b): *STONERS, POPOLAR* [i.e., popular] *'97 GIRLS, WIERD [sic] PEOPLE*. In fact, the Park is given more space than the school itself in Mark's representation.

In both of Mark's maps, race is highly salient, although this fact is partly obscured by the tendency for white social groups to remain unmarked in his labeling. The racially unmarked status of European American teenagers contrasts sharply with the racial marking of students of color in Mark's maps: "ASIAN GASTAS {gangstas or gangsters]" populate "THE GREAT WALL OF CHINA" (a strikingly racist term I never heard from anyone else; the students in this area were in fact mainly Southeast Asian American), and "Af[rican] Am[erican]" on the Hill, with "1 or 2 white people." It is only in such contexts of racial integration or juxtaposition that white students become marked as such in this map of the campus: the "ASST [assorted] WHITE PEOPLE" on the Blocks (cement benches in the courtyard) are presumably racially marked because they are near the "Af[rican] Am[erican]" hangout under the trees. Such racial explicitness is unnecessary in Mark's map of the Park, because this space was ideologically construed as white, both by Mark and by most other students (although many students of color participated in predominantly European American social groups in the Park, and a few groups with no European American members also occasionally hung out there). It is clear from Mark's map that he was intimately familiar with many of the white social groups at Bay City High but entirely lacking in equivalent knowledge of other groups.[4]

Unlike Mark, John Doe, an African American boy who hung out in a multiracial group of hip hop fans, does not include the Park in his map at all (Figure 3). And where Mark's map carefully documents the fine social distinctions among those who ate lunch on the Steps, John Doe merely indicates that the area was a hangout for (white) seniors. But like Mark, he includes only those areas of the official campus grounds that have social significance for him: hence the classroom building appears on his map because his own group hung out there. Moreover, John Doe shares with Mark an ideology of the school's social space as organized primarily around race. He labels the Hill *African American*, the Wall *Asian*, and the Steps *white*. The only nonracialized labels are *scrubs* (i.e., losers) and the designation of the group on the Steps by class rank (*seniors*). In addition, John Doe notes the "XIV hangout," a meeting place

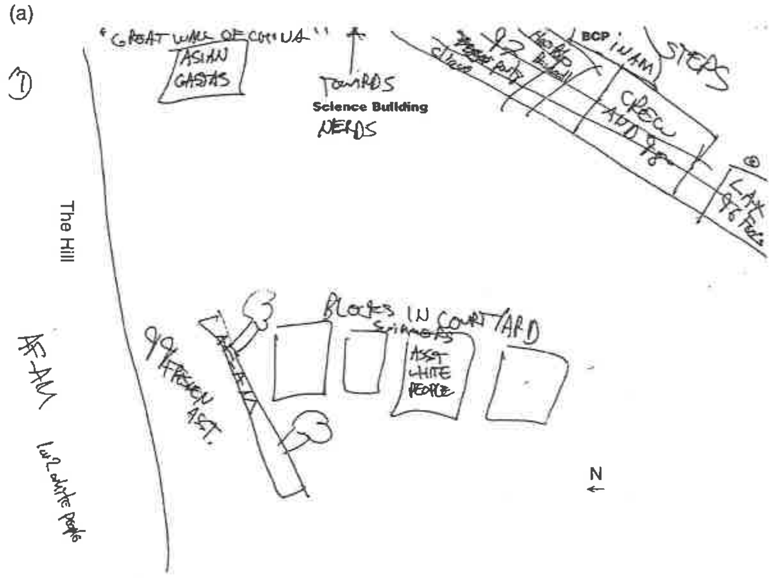

Figure 2a Map of Bay City High by Mark, a European American boy

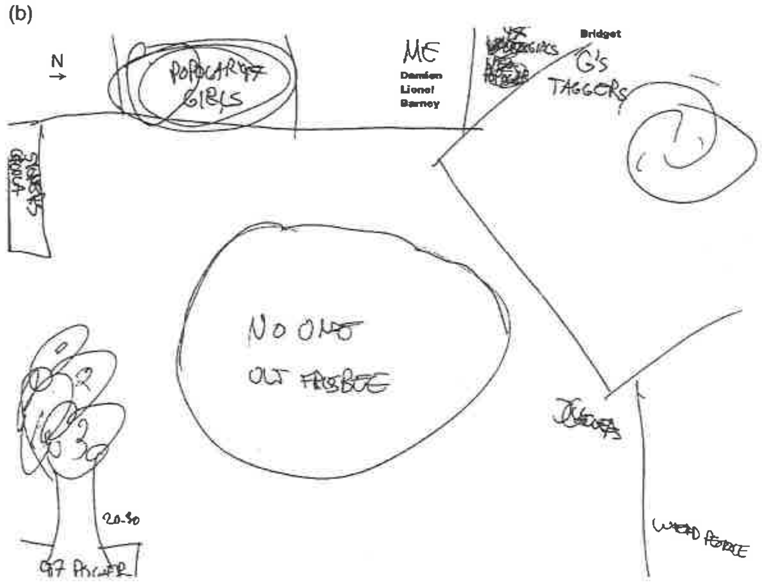

Figure 2b Map of the Park by Mark, a European American boy

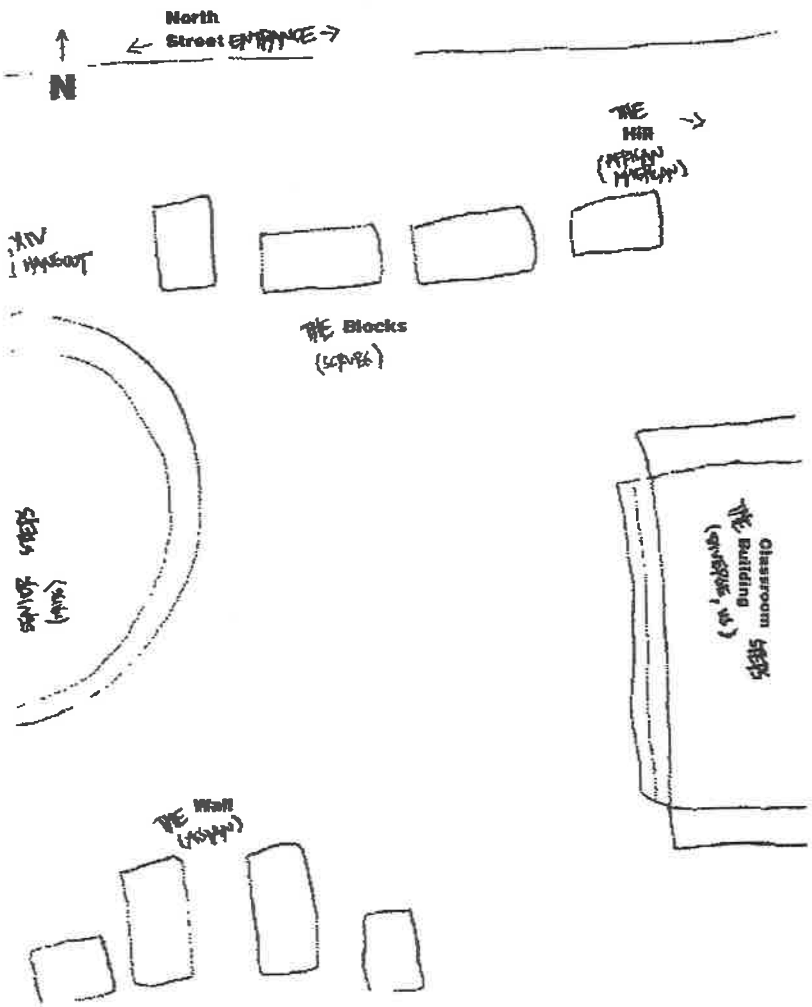

Figure 3 Map of Bay City High by John Doe, an African American boy

for members of the Latino gang the Norteños, whose gang number is 14, usually rendered as Spanish *catorce* (see also Mendoza-Denton 1996).[5] Finally, while Mark leaves his own social group racially unlabeled, John Doe designates his as "diverse," for their multiracial membership was a point of pride for him and his friends. Thus although both black and white students shared a generalized ideology that mapped racialized groups onto particular geographic locations at the school, students with different subject positions drew different levels of distinction within these broad groupings.[6]

But if the student maps construe social space in racialized terms, they also draw on ideologies of subcultural affiliation. Racialization established and enforced racial boundaries; stylistic differentiation created youth subcultures that were themselves racialized. The "XIV hangout" is the only activity-based or style-based identity labeled in John Doe's map, but Mark's map enumerates a vast array of subcultures, all of them (ideologically) classifiable as white. The maps therefore reveal how these multiple levels of identity were produced in local ideologies of spatial organization. Ideological processes exaggerated the racial polarization of Bay City High School's social geography and diminished the extent to which both the racial constitution of groups and their distribution on the school grounds were constantly shifting. This tension between ideology and practice in the display of identity was not limited to the organization of social space at Bay City High. It was equally evident in the ideologically mediated distribution and use of particular forms of language invested with social significance. One such important resource for constructing various aspects of teenagers' identities was slang.

Slang as Social Practice

Previous sociolinguistic and lexicographic research on teenage and young adult slang (e.g., de Klerk 1997; Eble 1996; Munro 1989; Sutton 1995) has documented the wealth of lexical resources available to speakers in the creation and display of youth identity. Yet these studies, which rely on written self-reports of usage, do not always make clear to what degree their data derive from language ideologies and to what degree they represent actual patterns of slang use. Respondents' reports may reflect stereotypes, attitudes, and ideologies of how slang is used rather than linguistic practice.

Many studies of youth slang also offer up ideologies of their own. Primary among these is the representation of slang as a unifying practice that consolidates youth identity in opposition to adults. Like most ideologies, this one has some factual basis: it has been widely observed that slang, at least beginning in the latter half of the twentieth century, has served as one strategy among others for establishing and maintaining a teenage cohort separate from adults on the one hand and children on the other. From this perspective, slang is a kind of "anti-language," to use Halliday's (1976) term, or, in Morgan's (1993) revision of Halliday, a "counterlanguage," through which a shared youth identity is reproduced against a dominant norm. But in highlighting this function of slang, sociolinguists have downplayed the ways in which it divides as well as unifies its users. Some attention has been given to gender differences in reports of slang use (de Klerk 1997; Sutton 1995), but very little scholarly work has focused on slang's relationship to other dimensions of social identity. While the African American origins of many slang terms are acknowledged, for example, the process by which they are transmitted to European American speakers is rarely explored, nor the complex tensions and contradictions of racial separation and appropriation that underlie this process. Indeed, despite the dominant view of slang as a form of youthful rebellion against the older generation, the divisions between different groups of teenagers are often far more relevant in teenagers' daily lives than the division between adolescents and adults. Variation in slang use, like music fandom, clothing, and hairstyles, allows teenagers to identify themselves with some of their peers while differentiating themselves from others; in short, it enables teenagers to produce distinctive linguistic and cultural styles.

In fact, slang is a crucial linguistic element for the creation and display of coolness, an orientation to youth-cultural trends.[7] Such an orientation is a central value of all forms of youth culture, and hence slang fulfills a unifying function for all teenagers who strive for coolness, insofar as displaying knowledge of rapidly changing youth slang allows teenagers to bolster their credentials as individuals who are on top of current trends.[8]

Little is known, however, about how ideologies of slang use are put into play in practice, when slang is used as part of everyday spoken and written discourse. Survey-based studies tend to present their findings in the form of a mini-lexicon or glossary, in which terms are listed alphabetically and definitions are supplied by the researcher on the basis of survey responses, sometimes with illustrative sentences but typically no larger stretches of discourse. In the more ethnographic and discourse-centered approach I take here, slang is instead examined within its discourse context as a resource that speakers may use to lay claim to a variety of identities based on age, region, race and ethnicity, and subcultural participation, as well as to achieve particular local goals in interaction. After all, it is only within discourse that the meaning of slang terms emerges – both at the semantic level of sense and reference and at the semiotic level of speakers' identities, ideologies, and practices.

In considering slang as a discursive phenomenon, then, this chapter expands on traditional approaches to the lexicon within linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics, in which lexical items from a particular semantic field (e.g., color, kinship, metalinguistics) or linguistic variety (e.g., slang, regional English) are extracted from discourse and organized in the form of an inventory or taxonomy. As linguistic anthropologists are well aware, however, linguistic phenomena are not decontextualized structures but contextually embedded social practices (an insight to which this early lexical research contributed). Betsy Rymes' (1996a, 1996b) work on naming and lexical selection among current and former teenage gang members, for instance, indicates that referring terms, long studied by analytic philosophers, are best understood as achieving reference via speakers' negotiation within discourse rather than as the result of a prior social contract arbitrarily linking signifier and signified. And though not primarily lexical in focus, Penelope Eckert's (e.g., 2000) research on linguistic variation as social practice considers the discursive positioning of another linguistic process often removed by analysts from its original context, phonological variation. Eckert demonstrates that phonological variables operate as resources for identity construction for teenagers at a suburban Detroit high school. Such variables are used to constitute two dichotomous social categories based on orientation or non-orientation to school activities – Jocks and Burnouts – as distinctive local identities. Eckert suggests that the use of particular variants is linked not only to identity but to speakers' discursive goals: thus an innovative raised pronunciation of the nucleus of (ay) in *all-nighter* and *fight* indexically ties a Burnout teenager's identity to the practices and ideologies associated with partying, toughness, and rebelliousness (Eckert 1996).

The present study builds on the insights of these researchers to argue that by its very nature, slang is a rich resource both for the negotiation of meaning and for the production of social and interactional identities linked to these meanings. Slang is particularly well suited to the construction of identity for several reasons. First, insofar as it is part of the lexicon (as it is usually understood), it operates above the level of conscious awareness and thus is easily used and recognized. Second, as (at least ideologically) one of the most socially meaningful kinds of lexis, it can provide nuanced and detailed information about the speaker's identity. And third, because it is prone to rapid change, its progress across the social terrain can be tracked with relative ease.

However, when I began my research, I was not particularly interested in slang. It was only when I discovered, in describing my project to Bay City High School students, that most assumed that slang would be a central part of it that I developed a method for studying slang as part of my larger research goals concerning race, subculture, and language use. As part of the informal interviews I conducted, I asked students to discuss the slang terms they used or were familiar with. To facilitate this discussion, I presented them with a set of current words I had collected during my research and typed onto slips of paper. The discourse data that resulted from this activity, though not "naturally" occurring in the sense that they were elicited as part of a research study, were consistent with language ideologies of slang use expressed in everyday interaction, as exemplified by Example 1 above. Of course, such discourse was situated within the context in which it was produced: an informal interview, usually on the school grounds, with a white female adult researcher.

Talking about slang turned out to be more than a methodological entrypoint into issues I was more interested in; it became important in its own right. The elicitation of slang, like the mapmaking activity, was an invaluable source of ideologies relating to social identities, particularly language ideologies. In addition, I found evidence for slang use in practice in student vernacular writing such as the school yearbook, graffiti, and personal notes, as well as in the observation and recording of interaction. The combination of ideology-based and practice-based perspectives revealed the multifunctionality of slang in the discursive construction of various kinds of identity among students at Bay City High School.

Lexical Definition and Social Differentiation

At Bay City High, slang, like race and other categories of social differentiation that it helped to produce, could be mapped onto the physical space of the school grounds. The racialized and other social divisions at the school were thereby reinforced by the assertion of linguistic divisions.[9] This mapping reflected ideology rather than practice, and in any case, any social separation during lunch and before and after school was mitigated by the fact that students intermingled with and encountered diverse social groups and ways of speaking in classrooms, hallways, and extracurricular activities. Yet the teenagers I spoke to often produced very different definitions for the same slang terms that I presented to them. Students were rarely willing to admit that they did not know the meaning of a particular word, not only because it might call into question their claims to coolness, but also because of the discourse situation, which positioned them as linguistic experts in relation to the linguistically naive researcher seeking their help. Two common processes involved in these definitions, homophony and folk etymology, allowed teenagers to claim a wider base of knowledge of slang than they in fact had. Words are homophonous when they have different meanings (and sometimes different spellings) but are pronounced identically; when presented with a slang term with one or more homophones, students could display knowledge of one of its meanings while overlooking alternative senses. Thus when I asked students to define particular slang terms I got dramatically divergent answers depending on individuals' racial and subcultural affiliation. For example, *punk*, which a number of African American students used to refer to a weak or cowardly person, or (rarely) as a derogatory term for a gay man, was understood by many European Americans as referring to the (overwhelmingly white) subculture of punk rock; and *folk(s)*, a collective term for one's friends among African Americans, was defined as a type of music by European Americans or, in the plural, as an outdated term for one's parents. Similarly, *crew*, another African American term for 'friendship group,' was taken by a number of European American students to refer to the preppy sport of rowing;[10] and *jock*, which numerous black speakers used as a verb meaning 'hit on' or 'flirt,' was taken as a noun meaning 'athlete' by most white students.

In folk etymology, speakers propose a more or less plausible but incorrect account of the origin of a word based on its perceived similarity to more familiar words. Folk etymology allowed students to offer interpretations of slang terms that they did not actually know. For example, *notch*, a term used by many African American students to refer to an attractive person, deriving from *top-notch*, was thought by a number of European American girls to be a demeaning term of sexual conquest, based on a folk etymology from *a notch on one's belt*. A similar phenomenon occurred when I asked a number of different teenagers about the meaning of the expression *break yourself*, which was at issue in a legal case for which I was a pro bono consultant. The public defender with whom I was working hoped to find possible meanings for the term other than as the initiating speech act in a mugging, the crime of which her client was accused. I therefore surveyed a number of students for their definitions of the term. Three European American boys who participated in hip hop culture recognized the phrase and defined it variously as "Give me all your money" (Al Capone), "Give me all your valuables" (Billy), and "Give me your wallet. Or anything valuable" (Brand One). The phrase was similarly defined by George, an African American boy, and by Brandy, an African American girl. But Erin, a European American girl who did not participate in hip hop and was part of the white "mainstream" of the school, offered the definition "Don't stress," perhaps on the model of phrases like *Pace yourself* and *Take a break*. While knowledge of the term was differentially distributed by racial and subcultural identity, Erin's use of folk etymology sought to obscure (but actually underscored) her unfamiliarity with the expression.[11] Such variation in the assignment of referential meaning to particular slang terms, as manifested in homophony and folk etymology, contributed, sometimes unintentionally, to the ideology of social differentiation at Bay City High School.

Discursive Practices of Slang and Identity

While definitions of slang terms provide important evidence of ideologies of linguistic and social division, the use of slang in practice demonstrates how such ideologies and their attendant identities are negotiated in specific discursive contexts. Just as ideologies of slang may operate at different levels of identity – to unify youth around the ideal of coolness and to differentiate teenagers on the basis of race and subculture – so too does slang in discourse. Additionally, within discourse slang may be used to structure interaction and to produce emergent and temporary interactional identities.

Coolness

As discussed above, the entire system of youth slang unites those who use it around an identity that is based not simply on age but more crucially on coolness. Individual slang terms that are widely used across youth-cultural categories may also serve this purpose. In the Bay Area, one such word is *hella*, an adverbial quantifier and intensifier that has been grammaticalized from *hell of*, with which it occasionally alternates (Example 2a). *Hella*, together with its G-rated counterpart *hecka* (Example 2b), is used among Bay Area youth of all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds and both genders, much as teenagers in other parts of the United States use such intensifiers as *wicked* and *mad*.

(2)
(a) If we're gonna get back *hell of* late, then I'm just going home. (Al Capone, European American boy, fieldnotes, February 22, 1996)
(b) It's *hecka* kids though. (Kendra, African American girl, fieldnotes, February 20, 1996)

Examples of *hella* abound in students' informal spoken and written discourse. The data in Example (3) are taken from the 1995–6 Bay City High School yearbook. Along with the school newspaper, the yearbook provides an excellent corpus of slang data, for both were produced by students with very little adult oversight. The only restriction on lexical choice in these publications was that profanity not be used; *hella* did not count in this category. All the sentences in (3) were written by graduating seniors as part of personal messages to friends, family, and (occasionally) enemies; each student paid for her or his message, which was printed at the back of the yearbook. The messages often address particular individuals by name, and they contain in-group linguistic features such as initials and nicknames used as address terms; deliberate nonstandard spelling and writing conventions reminiscent of graffiti, album liner notes, and other vernacular and popular forms of literacy (cf. Androutsopoulos 2000); expletives (slightly bowdlerized due to the prohibition against them); and slang.

(3)
(a) Yeah webn through *hella* sht 2getha. (Asian American girl)
(b) Keep on drawing cause you can do it *hella* good. (Asian American boy)

(c) IF I FORGOT YOUR NAME, ITS BECAUSE IM *HELLA* KEYED. (Asian American/ European American boy)
(d) I love ya'll *hella* tite. (African American girl)
(e) I wont to say I had a *hella* fun time Playing with every one from the football team. (African American boy)
(f) this year was *hella* fun! (Latina girl)
(g) my big sista, known you for *hella* years, you were always there for me. (European American girl)
(h) haven't seen ya for *hella* long. (European American boy)

It is evident from these examples that teenagers of all backgrounds use *hella*.[12] But the term is a marker of more than age or generation; it also signals an orientation to coolness, as indicated by its co-occurrence with other linguistic markers of youth culture, such as innovative spellings (*2getha* [together]; 3a) and slang (*keyed* [drunk]; 3c).

Hella is a very stable regional marker, apparently having been in use in the Bay Area as an age-graded term at least since the mid-1980s, although to my knowledge it has not been documented in the scholarly literature. Despite its longtime use, until very recently the term had not moved far from its locus of origin in the Bay Area, with only isolated use outside of this region. At the time of the study, *hella* was largely restricted to Northern California, especially the Bay Area; more recently it has enjoyed a much wider circulation, thanks to its occasional use in popular music, television shows, and films aimed at a youth audience. It has been anecdotally reported to be in circulation around the country, but outside California it appears to be a marked, trendy term, in contrast to its enduring use as an unmarked feature of Northern California youth speech.[13] Within the region it has spread dramatically across social groups: from its probable origins among African American speakers, it has come to be used by young people with different identities who share the youth-cultural value of coolness.

Race/ethnicity

Other slang items, however, serve to differentiate rather than unify youth at Bay City High, especially on the basis of race and ethnicity, and most particularly along the ideological black-white social dichotomy. One such term is *patna*, the r-less pronunciation of *partner*, which in this pronunciation is an affiliative term stemming from African American Vernacular English (Example 4).

(4)
(a) PEACE to my *patnas* from the South. (African American boy)
(b) I only had a few true *patnas* through the High and they know who they are. (African American girl)
(c) I just wanted to tell my *patna* MEL R.I.P. and we will always love you. (African American boy)
(d) & thanx 2 my *patnas* that just never went janky on me. (African American girl)
(e) all my *patnas* in 97…I'll miss ya. (African American girl)
(f) neva 4get my *patna* RIP Mel. (African American girl)

Although students of all backgrounds may use this term in some contexts to refer to their friends, it is primarily used by African Americans. Of the 25 tokens of *patna* (and its variants) that I was able to identify in the Bay City High yearbook, 17, or 68 percent, were produced by African American students. This figure partly indicates the greater representation of African American students in the school population compared with Asian American and Latino students. But European American students – who by senior year constituted a slightly larger percentage than African Americans – produced only 5 of the 25 tokens.

As the example of *patna* suggests, r-less pronunciation is often a structural indicator that a word is understood by speakers as slang. The examples in 4 above demonstrate that this pronunciation (as reflected by the spelling of the final nucleus as *a* rather than *er*) is mandatory. By comparison, the spelling of less semiotically potent lexical items, such as *never*, alternates between standard and nonstandard spellings (*never* in 4d, *neva* in 4f), where the latter reflects both youth identity and African American English phonology. Similarly, the r-less pronunciation of *whore* as [ho], spelled *ho* or *hoe*, in teenagers' discourse functions as a synonymous but weaker insult for a sexually promiscuous woman. And the r-less pronunciation of *nigger* (spelled *nigga*), when used by African Americans, entirely divests it of its force as a racist slur, rendering it instead a term for a (usually male) person, with no necessary racial association (see Spears 1998). Hence one African American girl at Bay City High could ask another in outraged incredulity, "She called you *nigger*?" using the r-ful pronunciation to indicate the seriousness of the offense as a racist insult.

While few students of any race used *nigga* in their yearbook messages, it is noteworthy that two European American students did so (Example 5):

(5)
(a) Let's not stop puffin fat chronic tgthr *nigas*. (European American boy)
(b) 9th [grade] was high season 10th [grade] was cut class & f**ked with that dope feen azz *nigga* Santo! (European American girl)

This cross-racial appropriation of a lexical item that, in its non-AAVE pronunciation, is the most racially charged word in the English language indicates the power of pronunciation to transform non-slang into slang. Yet seemingly nonracialized terms, when they crossed racial boundaries, could take on racialized associations: the use of a term of African American origin in the context of drug use (*fat chronic* 'excellent marijuana'; *dope feen azz* [dope fiend ass, i.e., 'drug addict' + intensifier] *nigga*) thus potentially forges an ideological link between blackness and the consumption of controlled substances.

Such appropriation suggests that slang, especially for European American youth, is not located entirely in the lexical realm but can also extend to phonology and grammar. Indeed, it is precisely this collapsing of enduring elements of linguistic structure with more transient lexical innovations that results in the European American language ideology of AAVE as no more than "slang." Similarly, African American grammar could be reinterpreted as slang in the context of European American use. Invariant *be* was the main resource for this practice, as shown in Example (6):

(6)
Look yall, school maybe wac&tedious but there *be* ways 2 us it 2 yourAdvantage! (European American boy)

This boy, who had ties to some African American students at Bay City High, seems to be using elements of AAVE, particularly the highly recognizable invariant *be* form, which has been well documented by sociolinguists as a marker of habitual actions or states. The author of this message does not appear to be using AAVE mockingly (see Hill 1998; Ronkin & Karn 1999); his use of *yall* (i.e., 'you all,' a pronominal form that is highly marked for white speakers in the Bay Area) may be designed to address an audience that is at least in part black. However, his use of *be* in a nonhabitual context, especially in conjunction with his innovative orthography, as seen in the use of the numeral 2 for *to*, suggests that the verb form was selected due to stylistic rather than syntactic considerations; that is, it is used as slang rather than grammar.

Even European American students who had little affiliation with African American youth culture and relatively little interaction with their African American peers could acquire some aspects of AAVE that they reinterpreted as slang. When Vince, a popular European American boy who was the editor of the school newspaper, asked Brenda, a European American girl whose primary friendship group was with African Americans, where her assigned newspaper article was, she replied (in her usual AAVE-influenced speech style), "I'll get it out the car." Vince mocked her in response: "Out the car? Out *of* the car." Yet a month later, he used the same form to clear a space in a crowd of students: "Get out the way." The transmission of linguistic forms in this fashion testifies to the fluidity both of ideologically established racialized boundaries and of the linguistic boundary between slang and non-slang, at least at the level of white students' local language ideologies and practices.

Subculture

One of the primary factors mediating transmission of slang across racialized boundaries was subcultural affiliation. While some white teenagers, like Vince, encountered African American linguistic forms mainly indirectly, through interaction with European American students who had African American social groups, others, especially those who had a strong affiliation with hip hop culture, constructed their subcultural identities by acquiring black youth slang from African American friends and acquaintances and from popular culture, and then incorporating it into their everyday speech. To examine this practice it is particularly useful to look at the definitions of slang terms that students provided, not as a guide to the meaning of the word being defined but for the use of other slang terms in the definition itself. In this way the social meanings of slang terms as identity markers became linked to the linguistic meanings of slang terms as words, as speakers laid claim to particular words as part of their ordinary vocabulary.

For example, European American hip hop fans drew heavily on the racialized term *patna* as part of their production of a cool urban youth identity. The data in Example 7 are taken from one such speaker named Jay, and his friend Charlie. Charlie was not a hip hop fan and hence did not draw on African American slang terms to the same extent that Jay did.

The recognition that *patna* has racial connotations is suggested in Example (7a), where Jay, seeing the word written in Standard English spelling as *partner*, uses marked pronunciation and intonation to emphasize the oddity of the orthography.[14]

(7a)
Jay: <nasal, rapid> {Partner:! What's up, partner:? h (1.3) Hello:.} h

The lengthening and repeated use of the final [r] calls attention to the non-slang spelling, which Jay went on to correct with a pen on the slip of paper on which the word was printed. That the spelling and pronunciation are not simply wrong but uncool is indicated by the nasal, "nerd"-like quality of his voice. Both the emphasized final [r] and this nasality additionally perform nerdiness as hyperwhiteness, in contrast to the AAVE-inflected cool pronunciation (see also Bucholtz 2001).

In Examples (7b) and (7c), Jay uses *patna* to define other slang terms of African American origin; in both cases he uses the *de rigueur* r-less pronunciation and other discursive strategies that signal his subcultural affiliation with African American youth culture.

(7b)
Jay: *Kick* it, that just means to (like), chi:ll, with your patna, you know? (0.6) Just do nothing, watch some TV:,

(7c)
Jay: Bloo:d.
I don't know,
some*times* it slips *out*.
(0.9)
For *me*:,
I say it [a *lo*:t.]
Charlie: [Yea:h,
me too.]
(0.6)
Jay: <creaky voice> {Just like,
"Shut the fuck ↑*up*,
bloo:d."}
(0.5)
Charlie: [Yeah,
"Bloo:d,
what the *fuck*] (have *you*: been)?"
Mary: [How d-
What's it mea:n?]
(0.5)
Jay: We:ll,
just—
Mary: Like,
per:son?=
Charlie: =Ma:n,
du:de,
(0.5)

27 <creaky voice, lower volume> {A:ll tha:t shi:t.}
28 Jay: <creaky voice> {Yea:h.
29 Just like,
30 *patna*.}

In (7c) Jay makes clear that although some terms, such as *blood*, are off limits to white speakers they may "slip out" (line 3), a remark with which Charlie concurs. But in defining this racialized term, Charlie, who did not like rap music and did not dress in black-pioneered styles, uses the racially neutral terms *man* and *dude*, while Jay proposes the synonym *patna*, which is associated with African American speakers. Thus Jay makes an identity claim through his choice of synonym that Charlie does not. This implicit claim to use at least some racialized affiliative terms in ordinary speech, not just when they "slip out," constructs Jay's identity as a hip hop fan. Yet the fact that both boys provide illustrative sentences that collocate *blood* with the intensifier *the fuck* (lines 11, 16) also suggests that their ideologies of typical use – and users – of the term involve associations with strong profanity.

As Example (7c) suggests, European American students who engaged in the linguistic and cultural practices of African Americans at Bay City High could be subject to sanction. And those who expressed their disapproval could in turn use the resources of slang to do so. In Example (8), Norman, an African American boy, comments critically to another African American student about Al Capone, a European American boy who participated heavily in hip hop culture.

(8)
Norman: That patna over there. He got the hip hop stuff. He be geared *up*! (fieldnotes, January 21, 1996)

Where Jay's use of *patna* in Example 7 asserted his right to both its social and its linguistic meaning, and hence his own status as a patna or in-group member, Norman's use of the same term functions in precisely the opposite way: in applying the term to Al, Norman implies that it is as illegitimate as Al's physical self-presentation as a participant in hip hop. Norman proliferates AAVE-based linguistic forms in a way that iconically mocks Al's careful adherence to hip hop style: he refers to Al as a *patna*; he uses invariant *be;* and he uses the nonstandard verb form *got* for *has got*. Norman's performance of linguistic excess implies Al's stylistic excess; Norman thus makes clear that he does not consider Al a patna at all but only a wannabe. Hence while racialized terms like *patna* could be used by European American speakers to assert their inclusion in hip hop culture, insofar as white adoption of this subcultural style violated ideologies of racially differentiated social practice, the same terms could also be used to critique this perceived racial transgression.

Slang as an Interactional Resource

While slang can be used to assert or challenge relatively enduring identities based on age, region, race, or subculture, it can also be used strategically to achieve particular interactional goals. In the series of narratives in Example 9, both Jay and Charlie use slang to produce assessments (Goodwin and Goodwin 1992). Assessments are not simply devices for reporting events but resources for structuring interaction. Often these assessments are designed to invite the participation of others, especially through the seeking of additional information, and slang seems to help in the achievement of this goal. Like assessments, slang is a highly value-laden component of language; it is often used in contexts that involve forceful stance-taking, such as strong positive and negative evaluation or heavy emphasis. As such, slang is a resource for identity construction, for signaling the kind of person that one is. In Example 9, Jay and Charlie negotiate the interaction, their stances, and ultimately their identities through the use of *hella* and other slang terms. In particular, slang's emphatic, evaluative function is used to elicit questions that allow the narrative to unfold and allow the boys to display their orientation toward the narrative to each other.

The example begins with Jay describing a party that he and Charlie recently attended:

(9a)
1 Jay: It was supposed to be– it wasn't supposed to be hella big,
2 it was just supposed to be a couple of fools that were-
3 just about to kick it at this girl's hou[se.]
4 Charlie: [There] were like (.) forty fools there.
5 Jay: T(h)here was more than forty foo:ls (bud/blood).
6 Hella fools ro(hh)lled up.
7 Charlie: I thought there was like thirty to forty there.
8 Student: <in background> Hey you guys.
9 Jay: No there was supposed to be [thirty to forty *come*,]
10 Teacher: <in background> [Hey you guys,]
11 [You guys are *too* (.)
12 Student: <in background> Shh!
13 Teacher: <in background> *loud*.]
14 Jay: [and then about (.) a hundred and *twenty* fools came.]
15 There was *hella* people.
16 Mary: Wow!
17 So – And they were all from Bay City High?

In (9a), Jay uses the quantifier *hella* in lines 6 and 15 to emphasize that his estimate of the number of partygoers is the correct one; this emphasis is supported by the use of paralinguistic and prosodic indicators like laughter and word stress. After each of these lines, Charlie and I both produce utterances that are designed to elicit more information from Jay (lines 7, 16–17). *Hella* likewise functions emphatically in line 26 of Example (9b), and again I respond to Jay's turn with an information-seeking question (lines 28–9).

(9b)
16 Mary: Wow!
17 So – And they were all from Bay City High?
18 Charlie: Yeah.
19 Jay: No: there was a couple girls from <stretching> {Los Arboles m!} s-
20 Charlie: From where?
21 Jay: From Los Arboles. Didn't you see <falsetto> {those girls}?

22 [<inhalation through pursed lips>]
23 Mary: [What d–]
24 They were good?
25 [or bad.]
26 [They] were *hella* fine. [hhh]
27 Mary: [O(h)k(h)ay]hhh.
28 Did you get to know them:,
29 or,
30 Jay: Oh no I was too drunk to really –
31 Mary: Mm.
32 Jay: <turned toward Charlie> {and (.) Max was ruining fools' game. <[gẽ]>}
33 Charlie: <high pitch> {Max was?}
34 Jay: Max was *ruining* game. <[gẽ]>
35 Charlie: Wh[y,]
36 Jay: [Yeah.]
37 Charlie: what'd he do?
38 Jay: You know just being Max. hh
39 Mary: S- he was what?

In line 30 and again in line 32, Jay produces additional assessments to provide an account for why he was unable to hook up with the girls from Los Arboles, a neighboring city: Max was ruining his game by moving in on the girls himself. Jay signals in line 32 that these assessments are directed at Charlie rather than me by turning to Charlie confidentially, and I subsequently cease my questioning for several turns. Jay's redirecting of the narrative exclusively to Charlie allows him the satisfaction of eliciting powerful reactions from an appreciative audience familiar with the people and setting of the narrative; Charlie responds with incredulity (line 33) and curiosity (35, 37). My ill-timed question in line 39 indicates a certain obliviousness to the reconfiguration of the interactional dynamic that has occurred; however, the boys ignore this interruption and continue with their conversation.

Up to this point Jay has been the primary narrator. In the last segment of the excerpt, however, Charlie proposes a new subtopic that he wants to narrate: Lamar's behavior at the party.

(9c)
40 Charlie: <thumps table twice> {Lamar, dude.}
41 Jay: hh Me – me and Lamar are having a battle next time. <[tʰãj]>
42 We're about to have a phat batt[le.]
43 Charlie: [For] real?
44 Jay: Yeah.
45 It's about to be tight.
46 Charlie: <thumps table twice> (Do that?) hh
47 Jay: hhh
48 Charlie: <quietly> {(Fools dream,
49 fools dream.)}
50 Jay: Who,
51 Lamar?
52 Charlie: He wanted to get with Teresa dude,

53 and then *I* did,
54 Jay: h[hh:!]
55 Charlie: [hhh] I was like,
56 "All right,
57 I'll go talk to her,"
58 Jay: Oh, that [fool *fell*.]
59 Charlie: [And like–] h

Like Jay in (6a), in line 40 Charlie uses slang along with paralinguistic cues to signal that there is more to be said, but he does not offer an assessment. Nor does he manage to elicit an information-seeking question from Jay, who goes on to take up the topic as his own: Lamar, like Max, has competed with Jay for girls and Jay intends to beat him out (lines 41–2). Indeed, Jay's reclaiming of the role of narrator is so successful that when he provides an assessment of this projected battle in line 45, Charlie asks a question in response. In lines 48–9, Charlie then offers his own assessment of Lamar as someone who is deluded about his skills in winning girls. It is only at this point that Charlie succeeds in eliciting from Jay the question (lines 50–1) that allows him to tell his story about his triumph over Lamar. The final assessment by Jay in line 58, an appreciative response to Charlie's story, closes off the narrative, as described by Goodwin and Goodwin.[15]

In this transcript, slang functions less obviously to assert a particular social position than to assert a particular interactional position: that of an authoritative storyteller. But other layers of identity are also operative here. In Jay's assessments in lines 32 and 34 he turns to the resources of African American youth slang, pronunciation, and intonation: not only is the expression *ruining fools' game* itself associated with African American speakers but so too are the nasal deletion and nasalization of the vowel of *game* (which also occur in *time*, line 41) and the emphatic stress pattern in line 34, which places primary stress on the verb and secondary stress on the object, in contrast with Standard English placement of primary stress on the object. As with Eckert's Burnout speakers, Jay's use of socially meaningful phonological variants in particular lexical items creates an ideological association between linguistic form and social meaning. His language choices allow him indirectly to reassert his coolness at a moment when I have threatened it by asking an awkward question about his success with the girls from Los Arboles. In this way he borrows the coolness and suaveness ideologically associated with African American boys at Bay City High to make clear that his romantic failure was not due to his own social weakness.

While Jay's linguistic strategies underscore his subcultural identity as distinct from Charlie's, at the same time they provide Charlie with access to African American linguistic forms. Charlie and Jay generally hung out together on the Steps; occasionally, Charlie also went to the Park, but Jay had nothing but contempt for the white students who regularly congregated there. For his part, Jay also had contacts with African American speakers in his daily life, and these contacts allowed him to act as a cultural and linguistic broker, introducing slang terms from the African American groups into the European American group he hung out with. These teenagers in turn – like Charlie – could take such terms into their other friendship groups elsewhere at the school. As such terms became dissociated from their African American origins, and hence ideologically deracialized, more white students took them up, and African American students began to abandon them. But more than lexical items circulated in this economy of slang: slang transmission was a by-product of cultural contact and social interaction and negotiation. Thus the transmission of slang was by definition a transformation, for both social and linguistic meanings were reshaped each time a term was used.

Conclusion

At Bay City High School, practices and ideologies of slang established identity categories of various kinds: slang could be used to signal coolness and engagement in youth culture, to mark off racial boundaries, or to construct subcultural participation. It could also be used to create interactional identities such as narrator and audience member. In addition to these social meanings, slang could be assigned different linguistic meanings by different social groups. The variability and negotiability of slang as a semiotic and lexical system is unaddressed by scholarship that extracts this system from its context, for such a method cannot capture the fundamentally social character of slang. Thus decontextualized definitions are less useful than ethnographic and discourse-based perspectives that take into account both the ideologies and the practices associated with slang in local contexts. This approach requires multiple methods of elicitation and observation of a range of spoken and written discourse forms in which slang is used and discussed.

Without an analytic balance between ideology and practice, the investigation of slang patterns at Bay City High could become in effect a study in microdialectology, with the geographic boundaries separating different groups from one another on the school grounds aligning with linguistic boundaries dividing distinctive slang practices, forms, and meanings. While there is both an ideological and a practical basis for this perspective, it is also important to bear in mind the fluidity of the situation: student groups did not remain rooted in one place, but moved through the space of the school, and individuals moved from one group to another. Likewise, neither the social nor the linguistic meaning of slang is fixed and determinate, and what counts as slang, or even as lexis, is itself negotiated in discourse.

As linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists continue to refine theories and methods for the study of identity (for discussion see Bucholtz and Hall 2005), the complexity of language in use as a resource for the production of social subjectivities becomes ever more evident. It is precisely because of the intricacy of this process, and the vital importance of understanding it, that the thorny question of identity has endured as a central concern of scholars concerned about language in its social context. Answers to this question must come both from new kinds of data and from new kinds of analysis of areas of language once thought to have been exhausted of their potential to yield social and cultural insights. Although the lexicon is often treated as the poor stepchild within current linguistic and sociolinguistic theory, the ethnographic study of lexical systems, including slang, in interaction with other linguistic levels, is proving to be one such place where researchers may gain purchase on the multidimensionality both of identity and of language.

Notes

1. Portions of this chapter appear in Bucholtz (2011). A somewhat different version of this chapter originally appeared in the (unfortunately now defunct) Language and Culture Online Symposium in May 2001. Thanks are due to Doug Glick for inviting me to participate in that event and to Asif Agha and Marcyliena Morgan for their acute comments on the online paper. I am also grateful to Jane Goodman and Leila Monaghan for helping me to clarify the original version for a student readership. Any remaining errors or weaknesses are my own responsibility.
2. All names are pseudonyms, many of them selected by speakers themselves. Some identifying information in the data has been changed.
3. This arrangement also replicated in microcosm the racialized arrangement of neighborhoods in Bay City itself, with primarily white, upper-middle-class families in the south and west parts of the city and primarily black, working-class families in the north and east.
4. One exception, which is not racially marked on the map of the courtyard, is the inclusion of "BCP" (Bay City Posse), an African American group which European American students considered to be a gang. This detail may have been included due to the salience of this group to Mark and his friends, given that it is adjacent to their social area at least in the morning (*IN AM*).
5. John Doe does not label this area in racial/ethnic terms, and his lack of familiarity with the social group itself was evident in his interpretation of XIV, in his interview with me, as letters of the alphabet rather than as a numeral.
6. The small amounts of data I collected from Asian American students, and the lack of data from Latino students, as well as the absence of a unifying spatial practice or ideology for these groups, prevent me from commenting on their social geographies here.
7. Like much of slang itself, the concept of coolness originates in African American culture (Morgan 1998) and has a rather different meaning in its original context, where it concerns the management of a competent self rather than a displayed adherence to popular trends; at Bay City High, African American teenagers were often viewed as having stronger ideological claims to both types of coolness than other students, especially European Americans.
8. The rejection of youth culture thus also entails a rejection of current slang; Bucholtz (1999a; 2001) documents a category of teenagers, nerds, who construct their identities and linguistic practices in opposition to coolness.
9. Hence my own research may have contributed to the promotion of such ideologies. I was cognizant of this danger during my fieldwork and tried to avoid it by refraining from invoking social categories until the students themselves had introduced them into our conversation, as well as by focusing on the topic of friendship rather than social conflict. However, given the intense scrutiny of the high school's social divisions, and its resulting tensions, by parents, city residents, and the local media in the period preceding my study, it was almost inevitable that students would view any researcher at Bay City High School as primarily interested in social differentiation.
10. In his map of the courtyard, Mark uses the term in this sense in labeling social groups on the Steps (Figure 2a).
11. Although *break yourself*, like most American slang, seems to be an African American innovation, it is of course much more widely recognized than used, and as these data show, many

speakers of other racial and ethnic backgrounds are familiar with it as well. However, it is worth noting the racialized associations of the phrase for at least some speakers. Thus after one European American student, Brand One, defined the term he added, "A big person like George would say it, not a little person like me" (fieldnotes, January 21, 1996). Because George was not only big but African American, a degree of racialization – and perhaps racist stereotyping – is suggested by this remark. See also Bucholtz (1999b) on Brand One's negotiation of ideologies of race, gender, and language in a narrative of racialized conflict.

12. Latino and Latina students used the term less often in their yearbook messages, which were often composed in Spanish.
13. My own informal surveys of college students in Texas in 2000 and 2001, just after the peak of *hella*'s national popularity, indicated that at that time urban-oriented Texas youth recognized *hella* (but did not generally use it themselves, except for special stylistic effect), while more linguistically conservative suburban and rural youth remained unfamiliar with the term.
14. Transcription conventions are as follows:

Line breaks mark intonation units.

.	end of intonation unit; falling intonation
,	end of intonation unit; fall-rise intonation
?	end of intonation unit; rising intonation
!	end of intonation unit; high rise-fall intonation
–	self-interruption; break in the intonational unit
-	self-interruption; break in the word, sound abruptly cut off
:	length
italics	emphatic stress or increased amplitude
(.)	pause of 0.5 seconds or less
(n.n)	pause of greater than 0.5 seconds
h	exhalation (e.g., laughter, sigh); each token represents one pulse
x	unintelligible speech; each token represents one syllable
( )	uncertain transcription
< >	transcriber comment; nonvocal noise
{ }	stretch of talk over which a transcriber comment applies
[ ]	overlap beginning and end

15. Jay's closing of the narrative may be premature, as Charlie's abortive overlapping turn (line 59) suggests. However, Charlie appears to accept this close by laughing in agreement; the story does not continue after this point.

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