

CONSTRUCTING ACADEMIC HIERARCHIES: TEASING AND IDENTITY WORK AMONG PEERS AT SCHOOL

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Abstract

In this paper I look at how through the use of teasing as a socially recurrent activity the members of a multilingual, multicultural and multiethnic peer group (comprised of majority Greek and minority Turkish-speaking children of Roma heritage) make particular identity ascriptions and displays salient and position themselves and others in particular ways in peer talk during break-time in an Athens primary school. Taking as a point of departure that identities are produced relationally, through systems of opposition (Barth 1969), the paper deals with how members of this school-based peer group exploit teasing as a versatile discursive device to construct one particular peer as a “poor” pupil and themselves by extension as “good” pupils in talk-in-interaction. The focus on the situated and relational construction of identity makes visible how children position themselves with regard to others in order to construct academic hierarchies. At the same time, it brings to the fore how through such positionings children may reproduce but also challenge powerful institutional discourses of academic success and failure in circulation in the classroom by negotiating identity options closer to their peer concerns. These processes of identity construction demonstrate how social selves are produced in interaction through contestation and collaboration and how identities may be simultaneously chosen and imposed through language use.

Keywords: Teasing; Identity; Peer group; Collusion; Linguistic markness; Academic hierarchies; Institutional discourses.

1. Introduction

Sociolinguistic and anthropological studies of teasing have repeatedly shown that humour, teasing, irony and parody as socially recurrent activities can serve to express social concerns and norms as well as regulate conduct and talk. Participants can exploit these activities as flexible discursive devices to draw attention to and criticize violations in normative behaviour and conversational transgressions or use them as a covert correction mechanism (e.g. Antonopoulou & Sifianou 2004; Archakis & Tsakona 2005; Drew 1987; Eder 1991; Fine 1984, 1990; Lytra 2007a). In so doing, they communicate their views concerning what is regarded as expected or appropriate performance, conduct and talk and implicitly reinforce and reconfirm shared norms across different interactional contexts. This implies that humour, teasing, irony and parody can also function as boundary-marking devices. While voicing their objection, disagreement or criticism, participants make use of these discursive devices to construct, maintain or reinforce particular aspects of their own and their targets’ personal and social identities. As Holmes & Marra (2002) point out, these identity claims and identity ascriptions can actively highlight boundaries between different social groups and can be considered as “one way in which social categories get done through talk” (: 377). Social boundaries

may, thus, be raised based on more lasting identities, such as gender, ethno-linguistic background, race, institutional or peer group affiliations or more temporary identities that are constructed from moment to moment in social action, such as the positioning of one child as a “poor” pupil by his fellow peers, as this paper will demonstrate.

Drawing on an ethnographically informed sociolinguistic study conducted in a primary school in Athens, Greece, in this paper, I explore three key teasing episodes among the members of a multilingual, multicultural and multiethnic peer group (comprised of majority Greek and minority Turkish-speaking children of Roma heritage). I focus on how through teasing as a recurrent social activity in peer talk children position a particular fellow peer as a “poor” pupil and themselves by extension as “good” pupils. I show that the children avoid using explicit forms of self and other-categorisation; instead they use teasing to conjure up indexical links between the teasing activity, its linguistic manifestations and specific categories of identity. Moreover, I illustrate how this group of peers reproduces readily available institutional discourses of academic success and failure in wide circulation in the school that support particular classroom and school pedagogic regimes. To capture these institutional discourses, I present an ethnographic vignette from the classroom data where the class teacher highlights what she regarded as “poor” academic performance, practices and modes of talk and conduct for the class as a whole. At the same time, I demonstrate the ways the child in question resists being cast as a “poor” pupil by his fellow peers. By strategically exploiting frame shifts to non-play or playing along with the teasing and making use of self-denigrated humour, he attempts to foreground other (more favourable) aspects of his identity kit and downplay his “poor” academic performance. In so doing, he also attempts to challenge the aforementioned institutional discourses of academic success and failure at a local interactional level.

2. Theoretical framework

In this paper, I draw upon insights from social constructionist approaches to identities. Rather than situating identities in the individual, these approaches conceptualise identity formation as a process that is shaped by social interaction and social institutions. Far from seeing identities as fixed natural properties, they understand identities as emerging over time and space through discursive and other social practices. This understanding of identities is premised on the view of the self as an active agent in the interactively achieved social construction of meaning. In this context, identities are locally constituted, are shaped through dialogic processes among speakers and intersect with other dimensions of the self, thereby shifting the analytical lens from exploring particular identity aspects in isolation to how they are co-articulated in talk-in-interaction (cf. Androutsopoulos & Georgakopoulou 2003; Antaki & Widdicombe 1998; Bucholtz, Liang & Sutton 1999; De Fina, Bamberg, Schiffrin 2006). The conceptualisation of identity as a dynamic on-going process recognizes that identity construction is not only an individual act but that some identities may be chosen and others imposed and even found to be non-negotiable through language use. In this paper, teasing becomes a resource to construct shared identities (e.g. a “good” pupil identity) but also to distance and differentiate the self and other (e.g. by discursively positioning a fellow peer as a “poor” pupil).

More specifically, following Barth (1969), I look at how identities are produced relationally, through systems of opposition. As Lo & Reyes (2004) persuasively argue in the introduction to the edited volume on Asian Pacific American identities, ethnicity and social boundaries:

There is no Asian Pacific American without Caucasian American, no African American without Latino, no self without the other. This focus on the situated and relational unfoldings of identity reveals how participants position themselves with regard not only to each other, but also to the ways in which they are defined by discourses of race and ethnicity which circulate through mass media, institutions and everyday contexts.

By extension, I suggest that there is no “poor” pupil identity without a corresponding “good” pupil identity. By singling out, through teasing, “poor” pupil practices, performances, modes of conduct and talk, children seek to reinforce relationally what count as “good” ones. Moreover, these identity constructions are heavily influenced by institutional discourses of academic success and failure circulating in the classroom and the school in question. On a linguistic level, these discourses give license to the aforementioned children to reproduce and consolidate academic hierarchies by teasing their classmate who fails to meet the expected or implicit norm (cf. Bucholtz & Hall 2004).

The concept of “linguistic markedness” is particularly useful here. According to Bucholtz & Hall (2004), linguistic markedness applied to identity describes “the process whereby some social categories gain a special, default status that contrasts with the identities of other groups, which are usually highly recognizable” (: 372). “Marked” identity categories are those identity categories that diverge from the norm. “Unmarked” identity categories, on the other hand, are seen as less readily recognizable and, therefore, are considered as normative (ibid). At school, one such highly visible identity category is that of the “poor” pupil. As Bucholtz & Hall further point out “marked identities are also ideologically associated with marked language: Linguistic structures or practices that differ from the norm” (ibid). Drawing on Bucholtz & Hall (2004), Talmy (2004), for instance, describes how some pupils were attributed the socially stigmatized identity of the “ESL student” (as opposed to “regular” or “mainstream” students) by virtue of the fact that some of them spoke a marked variety of the dominant code (: 152). Here, the child cast as “under-achiever” by his peers does not use specific linguistic structures that differ from the standard but engages in a series of linguistic and other social practices that mark his talk and conduct as somewhat “deficient” vis-à-vis the norm (e.g. making gross spelling and grammar errors, falling behind on homework, bringing the wrong school books to class) (see Lytra (2007a) for further discussion).

Another useful concept I draw upon in this paper is that of “collusion”. According to McDermott & Tylbor (1995), “participation in any social scene, especially a conversation, requires minimal consensus on what is getting done in the scene” (: 218). This is where collusion comes into play. It “refers to how members of any social order must constantly help each other to posit a particular state of affairs, even when such state would be in no way at hand without everyone so proceeding” (: 219). In their study, McDermott & Tylbor discuss conversational collusion in the context of turn allocation between a teacher and her first-grade class during a reading lesson. They illustrate how “collusion is visible in the ways the members [of this reading group] have of instructing each other in the use of turns in organizing their interaction” (: 223). As a result, they produce a particular interactional order where one pupil seems to be

consistently missing her turn to read. As McDermott & Tylbor argue, this collusional stand is not generated by a single participant but is “group-produced”, generated in a particular classroom in a particular school setting that is part of a particular educational context (: 224).

Here, conversational collusion takes the form of signalling out one pupil’s linguistic and other practices that fall short of the expected or implicit norm and teasing him about them. This collusional stance is reinforced by particular “participation frameworks” (Goffman 1981) prevalent among this group of peers that favour jointly produced teasing episodes. Participants engaged in two-party teasing episodes (featuring one teaser and the target, see episodes one and two) or co-constructed more multi-voiced teasing episodes (which include more than one teaser at a time, see episode three).

For the purpose of this paper, teasing is regarded as a locally-structured social phenomenon. Building on Kotthoff’s discussion of conversational humour (2006), teasing is seen as “situated practice resting on inference based interpretations” (: 6), where inference making is guided by recurring clusters of “contextualization cues” (Gumperz 1982). These cues include: (1) mock challenges, insults, threats and other forms of marked wording produced in an exaggerated manner; (2) mimicry; (3) formulaic expressions; (4) nicknames; (5) prosody (volume, pitch, rhyme and rhythm, sing-song intonation); (6) laughter and giggling; (8) clapping; (9) repetition; (10) code and style switches; (11) terms of verbal abuse; (12) mock acts of aggression (hair pulling, nape slapping, pushing) and (13) the use of untranslatable particles (“re”, “vre”). Such cues, as Kotthoff (2006) argues, “index the continually changing contextual presuppositions necessary for situated interpretations in oral discourse” (: 7). During this inferencing process, participants also rely on shared background knowledge about local as well as supra local contexts and discourses, interactive goals and interpersonal relations to interpret teases.

3. Research context

In this paper, I report on an ethnographically informed sociolinguistic study that was conducted in an urban linguistically, culturally and ethnically rich primary school in Athens, Greece. The data I draw upon for this paper come from my doctoral research. The fieldwork and data collection lasted over a period of 2.5 years (the first phase of the data collection took place in January-May 1999 and the second phase on subsequent one-day visits to the school between September 1999 and June 2001). The data set consists of participant observations, semi-structured qualitative interviews, pupil self-reported questionnaires, pupil profiles (completed by the teacher) and approximately 30 hours of audio-recordings of peer and classroom talk (see Lytra (2007a) for details).

The peer group which is the focus of this study was comprised of six majority Greek children and five Turkish-speaking minority children of Roma heritage. All children were around ten years old and were attending the same class at the time of the first phase of the fieldwork (January-May 1999). The composition of the peer group had remained relatively stable over the four years they had been at school together. Moreover, they had had the same class teacher, Miss Soula, teaching them over the last two and a half years. Miss Soula was a young, energetic and committed teacher with extensive teaching experience in state schools and considerable in-service training in

teaching children from diverse ethno-linguistic backgrounds and children with special needs. She had been teaching in that school for almost three years.

The high percentage of minority Turkish-speaking children in the school was directly linked to the settlement of a Turkish-speaking community of Roma heritage in the neighbourhood since the early 70s (at present approximately 3,000 people). Historically, the members of this Turkish-speaking community living in the neighbourhood belong to the “Muslim minority of Western Thrace” which comprises three different ethno-linguistic groups (Turks, Pomaks and Roma) (Asimakopoulou & Lionaraki 2002). The present legal status as well as the linguistic, cultural, educational and religious rights of the Muslim minority of Western Thrace are recognized and protected by the 1923 Lausanne Treaty (*ibid*).

Besides minority Turkish-speaking children, the school’s multilingual, multicultural and multiethnic character was further enhanced by the steady influx of immigrant families with young children in the neighbourhood from the Balkans and the Middle East from the late 80s - early 90s onwards. Through out the fieldwork, with some annual variation, the number of minority and immigrant children on the one hand and majority children on the other hand was roughly equal.

Due to the unusually high numbers of minority and immigrant children in the school in 1996, the Greek Ministry of Education took the initiative to change the status of the school into one of the first “intercultural schools” in Athens. According to Androusou (1996: 11), intercultural schools acknowledge the pupils’ diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds and prior intercultural experiences as positive and constructive components for language teaching and learning. By promoting more learner-centred approaches, these schools seek to increase intercultural awareness and encourage children to accepting, respecting, understanding and appreciating diversity at school and in society at large.

This top-down educational initiative was seen as a response to the following social, educational and psychological conditions affecting both minority and majority children’s school performance: (1) high levels of absenteeism, especially among minority children; (2) negative attitudes towards schooling; (3) low levels of active participation in class and lack of motivation; (4) inadequate concentration on schoolwork and (5) overall high levels of underachievement. The prevalence of these conditions reflected the socio-economic deprivation and low educational capital of many families in the neighbourhood. As a result, more and more children were being excluded from the learning process and increasingly becoming marginalised within the school (for a detailed discussion, see articles in Vafea 1996). One way that the intercultural approach to teaching and learning adopted in this school attempted to reverse these conditions was by promoting institutional discourses of inclusion and academic achievement for all.

In the next section, I capture aspects of these institutional discourses of academic success and failure as they were articulated by Miss Soula, the children’s class teacher in a particular classroom encounter. To this effect, I present an ethnographic vignette from the classroom where Miss Soula aided by some of the children co-constructs what it means to be a “good” pupil by highlighting related “good” academic performance, practices and modes of talk and conduct. The purpose of combining ethnographic observations from the classroom with interactional data of informal talk among peers during the break is to show how one particular child works within/against

established institutional discourses that put forth pre-allocated, inscribed visions of the self to negotiate alternative (more favourable) identity options.

4. Institutional discourses of academic success and failure in the classroom

In classroom practice, I observed that Miss Soula, the class teacher, was keen to promote the school's intercultural teaching and learning agenda and boost her pupils' academic achievement levels. In this context, she regularly drew upon prevalent institutionally sanctioned discourses of academic success and failure to highlight what she and other teachers seem to regard as "poor" academic performance, practices and modes of talk and conduct for the class as a whole. The following ethnographic vignette illustrates how by admonishing children who fall short of the expected norm Miss Soula foregrounds "poor" academic performance, practices and modes of talk and behaviour, thereby defining relationally what counts as "good". Although on this occasion she focuses on the conduct of one particular child, Babis, her remarks are representative of how she went about admonishing other children too for similar transgressions:

Literacy hour (15/3/99): It has come to Miss Soula's attention that Babis (a majority Greek boy) has failed to bring the right school book to class. She abruptly stops the lesson, goes over to his desk and asks him why he hasn't brought the right textbook to class: "Για εξήγησέ μας γιατί είναι η γλώσσα στο σπίτι; Έφτιαξες την τσάντα σου για σήμερα;" <Can you explain to us why your Greek textbook has been left at home? Did you check to bring the right textbooks to school today?>. As she hovers over his desk, she notices his English textbooks scattered on the floor and a pile of Greek textbooks (including an old textbook) among some half finished overdue worksheets. The lesson is temporarily put on hold, as Miss Soula elaborates on how Babis' conduct falls short of the expected norm by contrasting it with what counts as "good" pupil conduct. She remarks in a rather exasperated voice: "Αυτό το βιβλίο το οποίο τελείωσε και δε το χρειαζόμαστε είπαμε ή το αφήνουμε σπίτι μας ή το αφήνουμε στο σχολείο" <What do we do with textbooks we're not using anymore? We've said time and again we either leave them at home or we leave them at school [we don't carry them around in our school bags]>. The teacher goes on to identify some other homework that was due that day and Babis hadn't done "ούτε ο Κόσμος είναι γραμμένος ούτε έχει γράψει τίποτα στην μελέτη περιβάλλοντος" <you haven't done the geography homework nor the homework for environmental education>. Then, she moves on to explain what Babis (and everyone else) should do in order to ensure that all homework is handed in on time: "εδώ λέει το πρόχειρο Δευτέρα γλώσσα τα βγάζω όλα μου τα βιβλία έξω και βάζω μέσα αυτά που πάντα πρέπει να έχω για τη γλώσσα τα φυλλάδια μου τα ψάχνω για να τα κάνω" <you check your class schedule and you see that on Mondays we have literacy hour so I take out all my textbooks and I put in my school bag those textbooks for literacy hour then I check my worksheets and do those due [for literacy hour]>).

Two points of interest regarding this sequence. First, although the teacher is the main orchestrator of this sequence, some of Babis' classmates also chip in to reinforce the teacher's arguments regarding what counts as "good" pupil conduct. Similar to other occasions I observed, children either briefly elaborated on what the teacher was saying or provided examples of their "good" pupil practices (e.g. leaving their old textbooks at school, completing their assigned homework on time and/or doing some of the following week's homework too). At the same time, they attempted to provide excuses

on Babis' behalf (e.g. perhaps that he brought all his textbooks to class, old and new, because that he didn't want to forget anything) or volunteered to help him finish his overdue homework during the break. Second, as with other children who found themselves under the interactional limelight, Babis remained silent throughout the sequence. He did not attempt to contest his institutional positioning as a "poor" pupil by the class teacher, by providing, for instance, an excuse for any of his "transgressions".

By highlighting Babis and other children's "poor" pupil conduct and relationally defining what counted as "good", Miss Soula produced a particular institutionally sanctioned vision of academic success and failure for her pupils. Such institutionally sanctioned discourses, however, had the effect of inscribing to Babis (and other children) a priori "poor" pupil identities. I observed that in pupil-teacher talk children found it difficult to resist and/or directly challenge such unfavourable institutionally recognized pupil identities. In peer talk, however, I noticed that children were more likely to resist being cast as "poor" pupils. In the next section, I shift focus to processes of identity construction from the point of view of the agent and look at how one child, Babis, responds to his peers' positionings as a "poor" pupil and themselves by extension as "good" pupils in talk-in-interaction.

5. Being positioned as "poor" pupil in peer talk

Sociolinguistic and anthropological studies of teasing, joking, humour and parody have indicated that through these verbal phenomena conversationalists can communicate implicit meanings. Thus, conversationalists can employ these verbal activities to reinforce and reconfirm social concerns and norms and monitor peer conduct and talk without seriously and explicitly addressing these issues. Fine (1990), for instance, describes how a group of adolescent males in a youth sports club exchanged sexually explicit jokes and taunts. He discusses how through such talk the adolescents in question reproduced existing hierarchical relations and reinforced shared definitions of masculinity among group members. In a similar vein, in their study of a group of young Greek all-male friends, Archakis & Tsakona (2005) look at how this group of friends exploited humorous narratives about personal experiences and witty stories they had heard elsewhere to scrutinize and criticize the talk and conduct of members of their in-group as well as absent out-group figures of authority (e.g. teachers, priests, policemen).

To demonstrate how teasing and identity works among peers at school, I discuss three key teasing episodes among peers that are part of a larger interactional sequence among a group of friends who are engaged in the serious business of "doing homework" during break-time. The protagonists of this sequence are Babis (the majority Greek boy who was also the target of Miss Soula's reproach in the ethnographic vignette in section four), Vasia (a majority Greek girl) and Bahrye (a minority Turkish-speaking girl).¹ All

¹ Note that in the teasing episodes I discuss in this paper, the target of teasing is a majority boy while the teasers are a majority and a minority girl. This pattern of cross-sex teasing where girls join forces with other girls to tease boys and vice versa seems to reflect most of the teasing episodes among peers in my data. As I have discussed elsewhere (see Lytra 2007a), occasions where majority children ganged up and exclusively teased minority children and vice-versa across contexts and participants were few and apart (e.g. in all-boys ritual insulting routines during the break). It is worth noting, however, that even in these instances participant alignments were by no means fixed according to one's linguistic, cultural or ethnic background but shifted based on friendship ties or peer group status.

three children knew each other very well, as at the time of the initial fieldwork they had been in the same class for almost four years. Vasia and Bahrye belonged to the same close-knit group of girls who socialized and played together at school all the time. Babis and Vasia had a well established relationship outside school. They lived in the same block of flats and Babis frequently joined Vasia and her three brothers at their flat to play or watch TV together, especially football matches. Academically, Vasia competed aggressively for top marks and teacher attention. Bahrye had had a slow start when she enrolled in primary school because she could speak very little Greek at the time but had improved by leaps and bounds over the next four years. Babis lagged behind the two girls.

On this occasion, Babis has been grounded by the class teacher for not having done his homework. He was thus forced to stay in during the break to do it. Bahrye is also staying in to complete parts of the same homework, while Vasia (who has done her homework) is hovering about, occasionally doodling on the blackboard, humming to herself, giving a helping hand but also dispensing playful taunts especially to Babis. I, as the researcher, am also present, sitting at the back of the classroom going through some field-notes from previous observation sessions. In the teasing episode presented below, Vasia is going through the grammar worksheets Babis has already completed meticulously checking for mistakes and omissions. As she is reading through his answers in a loud authoritative voice, she highlights Babis' insufficient grammar knowledge, incomplete answers, gross misspellings and consistent lack of punctuation marks in his worksheets.²

(1)

1	Βάσια	((ελέγχει τις ασκήσεις του Μπάμπη)) <i>f</i> ο άοριστος . ‘ΕΠΕΞΑ’
2		μα <u>ά</u> αστο . λοιπόν . κρατήθηκε’ ‘αυτός κρατήθηΚΕ’ ‘εμείς
3		κρατηθήκαΜΕ’ .. αυτό πάει ‘έψιλον’ .. ‘εσείς κρατηθήκαΤΕ’ .
4		‘εσείς’ που είσαστε πολλοί ... ((ο Μπάμπης έχει γράψει τις
5		καταλήξεις του ρήματος με άλφα γιώτα))
6	Μπαχριέ	<i>ff</i> ((προς Βάλλη)) κυρία το κρατηθή <u>τε</u> το ‘τε’ είναι
7		[μεε άλφα γιώτα;
8	Βάσια	[<i>p</i> ((προς Μπάμπη)) τί κάνεις;
9	Βάλλη	((προς Μπαχριέ)) κρατηθήτε εσείς
10	Μπαχριέ	εσείς
11	Βάλλη	εσύ τι λες; ..
12	Μπαχριέ	έψιλον . ε τόχω σωστό . ((διαβάζει ό,τι έχει γράψει)) εγώ . θα
13		κρατηθώ εσύ θα κρατηθείς αυτός θα κρατηθεί
14		[εμείς θα κρατηθούμε εσείς θα κρατηθείτε
15	Μπάμπης	<i>p</i> [δεν έχω γράψει τίποτα ((στην άσκηση))
→	16 Βάσια	<i>f</i> ω ρε Μπάμπη .. ούτε ένα <u>ά</u> οριστο δεν ξέρεις να γράφεις
17		((συνεχίζει να ελέγχει τις ασκήσεις του Μπάμπη)) ‘κουνήθηκα’
18		‘εγώ κουνήθηκα’ ‘εσύ κουνήθηκες’ .. ‘έχω κουνηθεί’ .. ‘έ <u>χεις</u> ’
19	Μπάμπης	‘κουνηθεί’ ..

² It was common for children to tease one another about making pronunciation errors, using non-standard or incorrect grammar, giving an incongruent or wrong answer in response to a teacher's question regardless of ethnic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. I observed that minority children were not targeted more often by majority children for making these kinds of mistakes, although some minority children had a lower competence in academic Greek than the average majority Greek child did.

- 20Βάσια 'έχεις κουνηθεί' γιατί δύο νι;
 21Μπάμπης 'κουνηθεί' με ένα . εε μπερδέφτηκα κέβαλα δύο δύο νι
 → 22Βάσια *dec* έλα Χρηστός και Παναγία .. ((διαβάζει)) 'κρατιέμαι'
 23 'εγώ θα κρατιέμαι' ['εσύ θα κρατι[έσαι'
 24Μπάμπης [αα [τί λέει;((διαβάζει τον τίτλο))
 25 εξακολουθητικός μέλλοντας
 → 26Βάσια *ff* αυτά τα διόρθωσα; πούου πήγες; ((διαβάζει)) 'έχεις κου-νη-θεί'
 27 'έχει αυτός έχει' ((ζητά από το Μπάμπη να διαβάσει ό,τι έχει
 28 γράψει)) λέγε.
 29Μπάμπης 'αυτός έχει κουνηθεί' ..
 → 30Βάσια εσύ τί έχεις γραψει εδώ ξέρεις;
 31Μπάμπης *p* που;
 32Μπαχριέ *f* Βάσια 'εμείς θα κρατιόμαστε';
 33Μπάμπης ((στη Μπαχριέ)) εμείς ναι
 33Μπαχριέ ((στη Βάσια)) *ff* 'εμείς θα κρατιόμαστε';
 34Βάσια ((στη Μπαχριέ)) τί;
 35Μπάμπης ((στη Μπαχριέ)) ναι
- 1Vasia ((checking Babis' grammar worksheets)) *f* the simple past ((of this verb is)) 'I played' leave it ((she continues reading))
 2 so 'he was holding onto' 'he was holding onto' 'we were holding onto' this needs to be spelled with 'epsilon' 'you were holding onto' 'you' who are many ((Babis has misspelled the endings of the verbs; instead of 'epsilon' he has spelled them with 'alfa giota'))
 3
 4
 5
 6
 7
 8Bahrye *ff* ((to Vally)) Miss the verb ending in 'they are holding' is it spelled with 'epsilon' or 'alfa giota'?
 9
 10Vasia *p* ((to Babis)) what are you doing there?
 11Vally ((to Bahrye)) 'they are holding' 'they'
 12Bahrye 'they'
 13Vally what do you think?
 14Bahrye it's spelled with 'epsilon' I've got it right ((she reads out loudly what she has written)) 'I will hold onto' 'you will hold onto' 'he will hold onto' ['we will hold onto' 'they will hold onto'
 15
 16
 17Babis *p* [I haven't written anything there ((he hasn't completed that part of the exercise))
 18
 → 19Vasia *f* come on Babis you can't even to do the simple past ((goes back to checking his exercises)) 'I moved' 'I moved' 'you moved' 'I have moved' 'you'
 20 'mov'
 21
 22Babis 'you have moved' why did you spell it with double 'v'
 23Vasia 'moved' with one 'v' I got confused I spelled it with a double 'v'
 → 24Babis *dec* for crying out loud ((reads on)) 'I am holding onto'
 25Vasia 'I am holding onto' ['you are [holding onto'
 26 [uh [what does it say here? ((reads the heading on the worksheet)) future continuous
 27Babis
 28
 → 29Vasia *ff* have I looked through these ((exercises))? what do you think
 → 30 you're doing? ((she reads on)) 'you have moved' 'he has he'
 31 ((prompts him to read on)) what ((does it say here))?
 32Babis 'he has moved'
 → 33Vasia what have you written here? do you know?
 34Babis *p* where?
 35Bahrye *f* Vasia [is it] 'we will be holding'?

- 36Babis ((to Bahrye)) we yes
 37Bahrye *ff*((to Vasia)) [is it] ‘we will be holding’?
 38Vasia ((to Bahrye)) what?
 39Babis ((to Bahrye)) yes

Throughout this sequence Babis’ academic performance becomes the butt of Vasia’s criticism and teasing. Vasia skilfully exploits a cluster of prosodic cues to highlight Babis’ spelling mistakes in his worksheet: She increasingly pumps up the volume as she is reading through his worksheet stressing the misspelled endings of the verb “to hold onto” he has declined (lines 1-7). When Babis coyly admits that he hasn’t declined the next verb ‘to move’ in the simple past, Vasia teases him in an exasperated voice: “come on Babis you can’t even do the simple past” (line 19). As she resumes reading through the worksheet she stumbles at yet another spelling mistake and inquires why Babis has spelled the verb “to move” with double “v” (line 23). His rather unsatisfactory answer that he got confused elicits another taunt in a slow emphatic voice: “for crying out loud” (line 25). Shortly after, when Babis attempts to skip ahead, Vasia brings him back to order by asking him what he thinks he’s doing (lines 29-30). As she resumes reading through his exercises she stumbles on another mistake and asks him if he is aware of it (line 33). In both instances, the intonation pattern, a loud exaggerated voice emulating that of a teacher disciplining a pupil, transforms her utterances into teases.

Two points worth making regarding this episode. First, teasing is an inherently ambiguous activity that involves both aggressive and playful behaviour. As Boxer & Cortés-Conde (1997) argue “teasing runs along a continuum of bonding to nipping to biting. Because this is a continuum, these constructs are not mutually exclusive and the boundaries are not always clear” (: 279). Consequently, while the content of teases is often negative and hostile conversationalists employ clusters of contextualization cues to signal that their comments should be taken as playful rather than hurtful (*ibid.*, see also Ardington 2006, Kotthoff 2006, Straehle, 1993 among others). On this issue, Drew (1987) comments that one central feature of teasing is that “teases are designed to make very apparent what they are up to – that they are not intended as real or sincere proposals – by being constructed as very obviously exaggerated versions of some action” (: 232). In this episode, Vasia manipulates prosodic cues (especially intonation patterns) and formulaic expressions (e.g. “for crying out loud”, line 25) and produces her teases in an overdone manner. The resultant frame shift from what could appear as hostile criticism to a more playful confrontation has the effect of lessening the negative impact of publicly exposing Babis’ “poor” academic performance.

Nevertheless, it is worth bearing in mind that the play frame may not always be recognized as such. A playful tease can misfire and the nip can become a bite. In fact, teasing as a tool for social control is based on the premise of conversationalists exploiting playful taunts to disguise their bites (Boxer & Cortés-Conde 1997: 285). In this episode, Vasia’s teases targeting Babis’ “poor” academic performance aim at monitoring his conduct and further consolidating academic hierarchies between them which involve particular institutionally imposed visions and teacher sanctioned definitions of “good” academic performance, conduct and talk. At the same time, by weaving in and out of play, she mitigates the force of what could easily be heard as reprimands, especially when emulating the voice of the teacher (lines 29-30, 33) and could have escalated into a potential dispute threatening their bonds of friendship. In other words, while attending to the “serious” business of checking and correcting Babis’

worksheets, Vasia seems to also be attentive to issues of relationship management by defusing tension through successive shifts to play (cf. Ardington 2006).

Second, Vasia appears to be actively drawing upon the aforementioned institutional discourses regarding appropriate pupil conduct, performance and talk already circulating in the classroom (see the ethnographic vignette in section four): She identifies and corrects misspellings and brings to the fore omissions in Babis' worksheets. In so doing, Vasia publicly displays her knowledge and expertise in this area and monitors Babis' "poor" performance. By presenting herself as the unambiguously knowledgeable of the two, she is positioning Babis relationally as the less knowledgeable party. Simultaneously, she is implicitly communicating, reinforcing and reconfirming "good" academic practice: Paying attention to spelling and grammar errors and completing all the exercises on the worksheets properly.

In the next episode that takes place shortly after episode one, it is Bahrye's turn to tease Babis about his "poor" academic performance. Vasia is declining some of the verbs from the grammar worksheets on the blackboard for Bahrye and Babis to copy with the purpose of finishing their homework before the end of the break. Bahrye and Babis are silently copying the verbs when Bahrye breaks the silence. She turns to Babis and teases him in a provocative manner that she is well ahead of him in finishing the homework before the end of the break.

(2)

- | | | |
|---|----------|---|
| → | 1Μπαχριέ | <i>acc</i> ωχ Μπάμπη εγώ σε περν. |
| | 2Μπάμπης | α; ... |
| → | 3Μπαχριέ | <i>acc</i> εγώ σε περνώ παιδά= |
| | 4Μπάμπης | = <i>acc</i> δεν πειράζει .. δεν κάνουμε αγώνες .f άμα κάναμε αγώνες θα |
| | 5 | σ' είχα περάσει με δύο χιλιάδες λάθη ... |
| → | 1Bahrye | oh Babis I'm so well ahead- . |
| | 2Babis | huh? ... |
| → | 3Bahrye | I'm so well ahead of you du= |
| | 4Babis | = <i>acc</i> that's ok .. we're not competing .f if we were competing |
| | 5 | ((to finish the homework)) I would have won by two thousand |
| | 6 | mistakes ... |

In this short exchange, by foregrounding the fact that she is well ahead of him in completing the worksheets on time, Bahrye is implicitly highlighting Babis' "poor" performance (i.e. being too slow). Simultaneously, she is positioning herself relationally as a "good" pupil and certainly as the more "competent" pupil of the two in being able to finish on time. This presentation of self seems to be in agreement with the more complex imagine politics she attends to in this 30 minute sequence during the break. Although she too is doing parts of the same overdue homework she is quick to distance herself from Babis' and his "poor" academic performance. To this end, similar to Vasia, she exploits teasing and its ability to monitor conduct and consolidate academic hierarchies.

One further point worth making in episode two is that Bahrye's shift to play while being simultaneously fully engaged in the serious business of "doing homework" elicits a response by Babis. Unlike episode one where Babis remains silent as Vasia

weaves in and out of play, in this occasion Babis breaks his silence and plays along with Bahrye's teasing by resorting to self-denigrating humour. In instances of self-denigrating humour the target not only accepts being cast in the participant position of the recipient of the teasing but also reinforces this through self-directed remarks (cf. Boxer & Cortés-Conde 1997; Drew 1987). Drawing on Norrick's (1993) discussion of recounting funny personal anecdotes about one's own shortcomings, self-deprecatory humour "end[s] up presenting a positive self-image rather than a negative one" (Norrick 1993: 47). Similar to humorous personal stories, self-denigrated humour can "convey[s] a so-called sense of humour, which counts as a virtue in our society [and] present[s] a self with the ability to laugh at problems and overcome them" (ibid).

In this episode, Babis' response to Bahrye's taunt that he is well behind in finishing the homework on time entails some kind of incongruity commonly found in intentional hyperbole (see Norrick 1993: 48). Babis not only acknowledges the teasing but also further elaborates on it by claiming that "if we were competing I would have won by two thousand mistakes" (line 4). As Kotthoff (2000) suggests in her discussion of humorous narratives, "in self-mockery, tellers try from the very start not to give the impression of having a problem" (: 55-56). By playing along with the teasing and publicly acknowledging his weaknesses as a pupil, Babis seeks to conjure up a positive personal image: He is "cool" with Bahrye's teasing and has a good sense of humour because he can openly laugh at his ineptitudes and shortcomings. In so doing, Babis implicitly attempts to resist his pigeonholing as just another "poor" pupil and attempts to foreground and reaffirm other aspects of his identity kit that are considered equally if not more important for himself as well as among this group of peers. Indeed, given that engaging in teasing routines and other playful performances (e.g. singing and chanting routines) emerged as a key organizational factor of peer talk among the members of this group (see Lytra 2007a, Lytra 2007b for more details), self-denigrating remarks can serve to exhibit one's active engagement with the peer group culture and enhance further one's status in the peer group.

In the final teasing episode presented below, Vasia invites Bahrye to join her in teasing Babis about his "poor" academic performance once more. Vasia's invitation for play has the effect of altering the "participation framework" (Goffman 1981) from a two-party teasing activity (featuring a teaser and the target) to a jointly produced teasing episode (which includes more than one teaser at a time). This more collaboratively generated encounter occurs towards end of the 30 minute sequence. Vasia is hovering about quietly singing to herself while Babis and Bahrye are working silently on their grammar worksheets. Seconds prior to the frame shift to play Vasia walks up to Babis and inquires about how he's getting along with the homework. When he says he's about to finish, Vasia volunteers to check it over and in a loud authoritative voice starts reading through. In line 6, she stumbles on yet another gross spelling mistake. Babis has misspelled the first person plural of the personal pronoun 'we'. This misspelling triggers a series of subsequent taunts.

(3)

1	Βάσια	((τραγουδά χαμηλόφωνα)) α:::χ .. τελείωσες ρε;
2	Μπάμπης	τελειώνω ... το πήρα .. ((διαβάζει αυτά που έχει γράψει))
3		'εγώ- θα- κουνιέ:μαι' . 'εσύ- θα- κουνιέ:σαι' =
4	Βάσια	=ff να δω τι έχεις γράψει βρε ... ((διαβάζει)) 'εγώ: θα- κρατιέ:μαι'
5		'εσύ θα- κρατιέ:σαι' 'αυτός θα κρατιέ:ται' .. acc με κανένα τόνο ..

- 6 *f* ‘εμείς . ΕΜΕΙ:::Σ:’ .. *acc* αχ- θα το σκοτώσω αχ-=
 7Μπάμπης =*p acc* ((διαβάζει ό,τι έχει γράψει)) εγώ εσύ εμείς ..
 → 8Βάσια αχ- *f* Μπαριέ θα το σκοτώσω .. αχ- αχ- ...
 9 *acc* έλα να δεις πως έχει γραψει το ‘εμείς’ ..
 → 10Μπαχριέ *ff* ‘Ε::ΜΕΙ::Σ’;
 11Βάσια ‘εσεις’; . *p* έλα .
 12Μπαχριέ *f* το ‘εσεις’; .
 13Βάσια πάλι ((το ίδιο λάθος))
 14Μπαχριέ *ff* ε:::; .. δεν είναι με::: . έτσι ((γράφει στον πίνακα))
 15Μπάμπης έ::ψιλον γιώ:τα:: ...
 → 16Βάσια ‘α- α- α- .. [τι::
 17Μπαχριέ ((γράφει στον πίνακα)) [ε::μείς... ε::σεις ... αυ:τοί ..
 → 18 [αχ- ρε- .. [τίποτα δε ξέρεις ρε Μπαμπινίνο ..
 19Βάσια [*acc* και κανένα [τόνο βέβαια
 20Μπάμπης Μπαμπινίνο; . *acc* δε με λένε Μπαμπινίνο ..
 21Μπαχριέ δε με νοιάζει .. Μπαμπιλίνο σε λένε . Μπειμπιλίνο hhhh =
 22Βάσια =(προς Μπάμπη) *ff* γράφε ((τις ασκήσεις))=
 23Μπάμπης =(προς Βάσια που έχει το χέρι της στο γύψο)) μπορείς να το
 24 κουνήσεις αυτό το δάχτυλο που το έχεις έξω; ..
 25Βάσια ναι . αυτό ..
 26Μπαχριέ εσένα τί σε νοιάζει παιδί μου;
 27Μπάμπης ό:χι ρε τίποτα ..
 28Βάσια Μπάμπη άσε τη Μπαριέ και τα δάκτυλα
 29Μπαχριέ ((προς Μπάμπη)) για φέρε εδώ ((το χαρτί)) .. να βάλλω αυτό ((στο
 → 30 ντοσιέ)).. *f* τι ντοσιέ είναι αυτό ρε.. για πέταμα ..
 31Βάσια ((προς Μπάμπη)) εγώ θα σου γράψω το συντελεσμένο στο
 32 μπίνακα ... το πρώτο ... ποιά είναι ποιά είναι; .
 33 Μπαχριέ το: κρατιέμαι . και το κουνιέμαι ..
 ((η Βάσια αρχίζει να κλείνει τα ρήματα στον πίνακα))
- 1Vasia ((sings quietly)) ah have you finished (re)?
 2Babis I’m almost done I took it ((reads aloud what he has written))
 3 ‘I will be swinging’ ‘you will be swinging’=
 4Vasia =*ff* let me see (vre) what you’ve written ((she reads)) ‘I will be
 5 holding’ ‘you will be holding’ ‘he will be holding’ *acc* with no
 → 6 stress *f* ‘we’ ‘we’? *acc* uh- I’m gonna kill him uh-=
 7Babis =*p acc* ((reads aloud what he has written)) ‘I’ ‘you’ ‘we’
 → 8Vasia *f* uh- uh- Barhye I’m gonna kill him uh- uh-
 9 *acc* have a look how he’s spelled ‘we’
 → 10Bahrye *ff* ‘we’?
 11Vasia *f* ‘you’? *p* have a look
 12Bahrye *f* ((how has he spelled)) ‘you’?
 13Vasia again ((the same mistake))
 14Bahrye *ff* uh? isn’t it spelled like this ((writes the correct spelling
 on the blackboard))
 15Babis *ff* ((it’s spelled with)) epsilon giota
 → 16Vasia a- a- a- [what ((is this))?
 17Bahrye ((writes on the blackboard)) [‘we’ ‘you’ ‘they’
 → 18 [u [you don’t know a thing (re) Babinino
 19Vasia [and no [stresses of course
 20Babis Babinino? . *acc* I’m not called Babinino
 21Bahrye I don’t care you’re called Babilino Babylino hhhh=
 22Vasia =*ff* ((to Babis)) finish up ((your homework))=

- 23Babis =((to Vasia who has her hand in a plaster)) can you move the
 24 finger that's not in the plaster
 25Vasia yes this ((one I can move))
 26Bahrye what's it to you?
 27Babis no nothing
 28Vasia Babis forget about Bahrye and ((my)) fingers
 29Bahrye ((to Babis)) why don't you give me this ((worksheet)) let me put
 → 30 it here ((in the folder)) *f* your folder is a real mess (re)
 31Vasia ((to Babis)) I'll write the perfect tense on the blackboard what's
 32 the first verb?
 33Bahrye ((it's the verb)) 'to hold' and 'to swing'
 ((Vasia starts declining the verbs on the blackboard))

In line with the previous teasing exchanges, Vasia and Bahrye tease Babis about his “poor” academic performance and practices: Gross spelling mistakes in his worksheets coupled with a very messy folder. Moreover, the two girls exploit a similar cluster of contextualization cues to frame their taunts. In an exasperated voice, Vasia and Bahrye rapidly exchange mock threats (“I’m gonna kill him”) emulating teacher/adult talk (lines 6, 8) and challenges (“you don’t know a thing re Babinino”, line 18 and “your folder is a real mess re”, line 30). These threats and challenges are complemented by emphatic repetition (lines 6, 8, 10), requests for clarification (line 16) and corrections delivered in dramatic high-pitch chuckling voices. In so doing, Vasia and Bahrye co-construct Babis as the “poor” pupil and relationally position themselves as “good” ones. This positioning of Babis is further accentuated by the fact that all his attempts to contribute in discourse, especially in line 15, when he shouts out the correct spelling of the misspelled pronoun, are dully ignored.

However, similar to episode two, Babis attempts to resist this identity positioning, this time by addressing the girls’ taunts seriously. He produces the correct spelling of the word as Bahrye is writing it on the blackboard (line 15) and responds to her taunt (“you don’t know a thing re Babinino”, line 18) by turning the tables and challenging her background knowledge regarding peer group nicknames (“Babinino? I’m not called Babinino”, line 20). While the first frame shift to non-play backfires (Babis is still the butt of teasing), his second attempt proves more successful, as it brings the teasing (temporarily) to a hold. The resultant effect is that Babis attempts to indirectly contest the teasing and its underlying message by seeking to foreground another type of knowledge and expertise, one associated with peer group membership and affiliation rather than academic achievement. Elsewhere (Lytra 2003, 2007a), I have discussed the children’s nicknaming practices and their significance in developing and maintaining peer group bonds. Suffice it to say that in this exchange the importance of this shared non-academic knowledge becomes apparent by Bahrye’s subsequent self-correction and her quick procurement of two of Babis’ nicknames: “Babilino” and “Babyolino” (line 21).

One further point worth making about this episode is that Babis’ serious uptakes do not escalate in a confrontation with the two girls. Indeed, throughout this 30 minute sequence Babis repeatedly becomes the butt of teasing, especially by Vasia. This relentless teasing about his “poor” academic performance and practices could have triggered a fight had it not been for the strong friendship ties between the teasers and the recipient of the taunts. On this issue, Archakis & Tsakona (2005) persuasively argue that

the absence of a quarrel does not mean that the humour loses its evaluative force. On the contrary it shows that the bonds between the group members are so strong that they cannot be threatened by such an evaluation or criticism' (: 56).

In this respect, it collaborates the existence of what Norrick (1993) refers to as "customary joking relationships" among peers in which exchanging teases in a game-like fashion emerges as a habitual activity (: 6). Peers may sometimes complain about this exchange of taunts but these very seldom if ever lead to real falling out.

6. Concluding remarks

In this paper, I explored how the members of a multilingual, multicultural and multiethnic peer group exploited teasing as an already widely established social practice among peers to highlight social differentiation within the peer group with the purpose of constructing and consolidating in-group academic hierarchies. In particular, I showed how Vasia and Bahrye invoked readily available institutional discourses of what counted as "good" pupil practices, performances, conduct and talk at their school. Through their taunts, for instance, about Babis' gross spelling and punctuation errors and his failure to apply syntax and grammar rules in his text production they reproduced the official school discourses of academic success and failure their teacher repeatedly foregrounded in teacher-pupil talk in an attempt to position Babis at the very bottom of the group's academic hierarchy while placing themselves at the very top. By highlighting particular aspects of his "poor" pupil practices and performances, they rendered these practices and performances visible. They brought them to the fore and marked them as falling short of the expected norm. As Bucholtz and Hall (2004) rightly argue,

because markedness implies hierarchy, differences between groups become socially evaluated as deviations from a norm and, indeed, as failures to measure up to an implicit or explicit standard (: 372).

In so doing, they reproduced a particular teacher-orchestrated classroom pedagogic regime in wide circulation in the classroom and the school at large which stressed the significance of "good" academic standing and advocated a particular notion of becoming a "good" pupil. In this respect, it is not surprising that both Vasia and Bahrye appropriated their teacher's authoritative voice in these teasing exchanges. By successfully manipulating prosody and exploiting mock threats and challenges, they emulated the voice of their class teacher, Miss Soula, disciplining children who fell short of the expected norm (see in particular episodes one and three). The resultant effect is that through these teasing episodes the two girls developed a particular collusional stance which discursively positioned Babis as a somewhat "deficient" pupil.

Like other children I observed, Babis found it hard to challenge institutional expectations about who and what pupils should be. As I showed in the ethnographic vignette (section four), like other children I observed, he refrained from contesting being inscribed an institutionally recognized "poor" pupil identity in public teacher-pupil talk. Unlike teacher-imposed pupil identities, he seemed to be more willing and able to resist pupil identities at a local (interactional) level that were ascribed by his

fellow classmates in private peer talk. To this end, he exploited self-denigrated humour (episode two) and frame shifts to non-play (episode three) in an attempt to present himself in a more positive light and foreground other, more favourable, aspects of his identity kit he had chosen. Through these discursive devices he skilfully downplayed his failure to measure up to the unmarked norm while focusing on possessing other forms of social and linguistic capital, notably his expertise of the children's shared nicknaming system, his peer group membership and affiliation and his ability to laugh at his shortcomings. This latter form of social and linguistic capital were significant resources for one's participation in a different kind of "community of practice", that of the peer group, which for Babis, appeared to be of far more importance than the particular pupil "community of practice" the class teacher and some of his peers were co-constructing and were seeking (rather unsuccessfully) to socialise him in.

Transcription key

(()): transcriber's comments; [overlapping speech; . (...) pause(s); h(hh): laughter; = latching; - marks abrupt cutting off of sound; *f* spoken loudly; *ff* spoken very loudly; *p* spoken softly; :(::) lengthened vowel sound; underline emphatic stress; *acc* spoken quickly

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