
Abstract

This paper discusses the interactional construction of identity amongst members of reading groups, also known as book clubs or book groups: people who meet regularly, often in one another’s houses but also in a range of other settings, to discuss and evaluate literary texts. We draw on evidence from a study of The Discourse of Reading Groups, funded by the British Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

While reading groups represent a significant contemporary practice, reading group discourse is as yet comparatively under-researched. Our own interest is in how interpretations of literary texts are constructed in spoken interaction; how such critical activity is interwoven with the social, interpersonal and affective demands of group interaction; and the kinds of reader identities that are discursively constructed. We seek to address these issues through a combination of qualitative and quantitative linguistic analysis, including interactional sociolinguistics, supported by qualitative analysis software; and corpus linguistics.

Insofar as is possible in a small study (of 16 reading groups) our sample is relatively diverse in terms of factors such as geographical location, gender composition, age range and interactional setting (e.g. groups meeting in members’ houses, in pubs and cafés, in bookshops and in institutions such as workplaces and prisons). In the paper, we look at spoken interaction across these diverse groupings, with a focus on the dialogical co-construction of contextualized reader identities that emerge in literary discussion. We explore, in particular, the mutually constitutive nature of the relationship between identity work (the construction of reader identities) and literary activity (the construction of particular readings of literary texts). While we focus here specifically on reading groups, it is likely that some of the points we make will also have more general relevance to an understanding of identity construction in informal interaction in several institutional or quasi-institutional contexts.