

## Sex, fights & utterance-final tags in adolescent narratives of personal experience

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Previous studies have demonstrated how story-tellers strategically employ discourse-pragmatic features such as *ken* or *you know* to maintain audience involvement and demarcate narrative events (e.g. Macaulay 1997; Schiffrin 1987). This paper argues that London adolescents exploit utterance-final tags such as *yeah*, *innit*, *you know what I'm saying* or *din he* for similar reasons. Crucially, it demonstrates how close investigation of utterance-final tags' functionality and placement in complicating action sequences as well as consideration of the story worlds created by story-tellers can account for these tags' high prevalence in males' and virtual absence in females' narratives (see (1) and (2) below).

- (1) We saw it, *yeah*. So I just picked it up, *yeah*. Walked away. Found about hundred pounds in it. Took the money. And left the purse, *innit*, for the police to find it. Didn't take nothing else. (Rufus)
- (2) And as I walked down the road. I had my hair up, like I've got it today. And someone grabbed my hair. And as I went to turn around, they pulled me to the floor. And we found out it was four girls and one boy. (Danielle)

The investigation is based on monologic adolescent narratives of personal experience extracted from the *Linguistic Innovators Corpus* (Kerswill et al. 2007). The quantitative analysis reveals that male adolescents tag finite declaratives almost four times as often as female adolescents. Close examination of every invariant tag (N=116) in its interactional context shows that the male adolescents overwhelmingly use these tags to draw listeners' attention to propositions that escalate the tension before the narrative climax, and that they do so predominantly in narratives of criminal activity or physical contests. Female adolescents only rarely tell narratives of this kind, and unlike male story-tellers, they are not usually the instigators or winners of such contests. Their narratives tend to be about embarrassing or frustrating social encounters where their rare use of utterance-final tags is concentrated in orientation sequences. Based on these findings, I propose that – in the data studied here – utterance-final tags index violence, toughness and streetwiseness, and that they are exploited by male adolescents to maintain narrative face, i.e., to hold listeners' attention until a contest has been resolved in the story-teller's favour.

## References

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