

# **Community and identity in language: Small words, big ideas**

**Brian Clancy<sup>1</sup>, Elaine Vaughan<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick , Ireland

<sup>2</sup>University of Limerick, Ireland

Omoniyi (2006: 12) points out that "all social actions are separable into moments which make up the stretch of time it takes to accomplish them", and we extrapolate from this the possibility of large and complex phenomena such as 'community' and 'identity' (useful if largely contested terms), being visible in microcosm in the moment-to-moment unfolding of spoken interaction. Clearly "social action" is far more than face-to-face talk, but natural spoken discourse provides rich data from which to retrieve subtle markers of community and identity. Perhaps the most obvious ones manifest in talk – essential complexity notwithstanding – are personal pronouns. Items such as pronouns serve to evoke conceptualisations of both space and time, but also identity in that they can index social relationships. We argue that the appropriate and natural use of personal pronouns is essential to the successful demonstration of community membership. In order to demonstrate this, we utilise a corpus-based, iterative methodology to examine occurrences of the pronoun 'we' in two small corpora – one of family discourse and one of workplace discourse. Occurrences of the pronoun in both contexts will be isolated and categorised in order to determine to what extent they represent linguistic proxies for both identity and community. What becomes apparent is that in addition to defining community and identity, through the construction of in-groups and out-groups, 'we' also functions in a more complex manner in workplace discourse – a context where the community does not share the same intimacy as a family group. In order to frame the findings of the empirical study, this paper also operationalises the notion of 'community of practice' (e.g. Wenger 1998) with its tripartite criteria, joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire.

Keywords: pronouns, corpus, identity.