

Teaching unit 12: Zack – the bike incident

Background

This is an extract from a recording of two male friends, Alex and Zack. Both boys are 16 years old and live in inner London. They were talking to the interviewer about their experiences of school. Here Zack explains to the interviewer why he had been thrown out of his secondary school. He tells a short story about an argument he had with a teacher when he was leaving school at the end of the day. Both boys are skilled storytellers (see Alex's story about the airport). Zack's story contains several features typical of the structure of narratives of personal experience.

Audio, transcript and links to relevant Linguistics Research Digest articles are available at: <http://www.englishlanguageresources.org/TU12>

Discussion points

Clause combining

As usual in spontaneous speech, most of the clauses are linked to the previous one with *and* (lines 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 13, 16, 18, 22, 23, 24 and 25). A smaller number are linked with *so* (line 14, 15, 21 and 27).

Conversational historical present

yeah Zack often marks the end of a clause with *yeah*, simultaneously checking that the listeners are following what he is saying (lines 1, 9 (*like I've gotta go home*), 12, 13, 15, 18, 21, 22 and 26). Note that in line 7 *yeah* is not a discourse marker but is used in direct reported speech as a question, with rising intonation.

like Zack uses *like* at the beginning of a clause (lines 12, 14 and 29) and also at the end of a clause (lines 15 and 17). In line 12 he uses *like* 3 times, marking the different chunks of information in the clause. Note that the pronunciation of the verb *like* in lines 25 and 26 is different from the pronunciation of the discourse marker *like* and *like* in the quotative expression BE LIKE: the vowel in the verb is longer and more stressed.

Hedges

kind of (lines 14 and 15) introduces an element of vagueness into the actions that Zack is recounting here, allowing the listener to fix the precise meaning of *shoved me off the bike* in line 14 and *stumbled* in line 15, and in this way involving them in imagining the scene.

Narrative structure

Zack's story fits well with William Labov's framework for analysing narratives of personal experience. The clauses can be divided into an **orientation section** which sets the scene (lines 1-5, and then line 18), a series of **complicating action** clauses which give a blow-by-blow account of what happened (lines 6-11 and 13-27), a **resolution** that tells listeners what happened in the end (line 28) an **evaluation** in line 29 which makes the point of the story clear (Zack wasn't allowed into any school after he'd attacked a teacher) and finally a **coda** (line 30) that bridges the 'story world' and

returns the speaker and the listeners to the present, as Zack explains that this is why he is now taking a painting and decorating course at the college where the recording is being made. Line 12 is an evaluation clause where Zack explains why he told the teacher that he didn't intend to get off his bike.

Nonstandard grammar

Past tense BE forms

Zack uses nonstandard *I weren't* (line 29). Note though that all other past tense forms of BE with *I* in the extract are (standard) *was*, in line with the frequent tendency to use *was* in positive contexts and *were* in negative contexts. The system is variable, though, as shown in line 18 where Zack uses (standard) *we were*.

Pronunciation

bike (e.g. lines 3, 5, 6, 8) Zack pronounces some vowels as **monophthongs** that in older Londoners' speech are diphthongs, such as the vowel in *bike*.

the entrance (line 12) Like Alex (in the 'At the Airport' extract), Zack does not make a distinction between the pronunciation of *the* when it comes before a vowel and when it comes before a consonant: older Londoners say [ðə] *bus* (roughly, 'thuh bus' but [ði:] *entrance*, 'thee entrance' whereas Alex says [ðə], 'thuh', in both cases.

Quotative expressions

Like many of the stories in the extracts, the drama lies in what the characters in the story said to each other, so there is a lot of direct reported speech in Zack's story. He introduces the reported speech with GO (lines 8, 13 and 25), BE LIKE (lines 7, 9, 10, 11, 17, 19, 20 and 26) and the new London quotative expression *this is* +speaker (line 24). Note that he uses the new quotative (in the conversational historical present tense) at the moment of high drama when he has walked over to the teacher and confronts him.