As an age cohort moves from childhood to adolescence, its members jointly construct a peer-based social order, appropriating social control from adults and lodging it in an emerging hierarchy of their own. This process is the major impetus for linguistic change, as identity work engages resources at every level of the linguistic system in intense stylistic practice. In this presentation, I will describe this process, and discuss the research trajectory that led me from the study of the geographic spread of sound change to ethnographic work in elementary and high schools, and ultimately to a theory of the construction of meaning in stylistic practice.