Multicultural London English: a new dialect, a style, or both?

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Multiethnolect: *what’s that?*

- A term often applied to the speech of young people living in multicultural and multilingual districts of large cities
- It’s a variety of the majority language
- It’s shared by most or all (young) people living in an area
  - Therefor ethnically neutral
- It is both a *style* and a *vernacular* or *dialect*:

```plaintext
Youth
style

Vernacular
```
Labels

• Pejorative terms (invented, or at least propagated by the media):
  – Kanak Sprak (Germany)
  – Kebabnorsk (Norway)
  – Smurfentaal (Netherlands)
  – Jafaican (London)

• Academics’ terms:
  – Kiezdeutsch (Germany – Wiese 2012)
  – rinkebysvenska (Sweden – Kotsinas 1989)
  – straattaal (Netherlands – Cornips et al.)
  – Multicultural London English (London – Kerswill/Cheshire)
Dialect contact in London in the past


1500: the population of London was about 50,000

1600: 200,000

1700: 500,000

In 1700 only 15% of Londoners had been born in London

John Stow (1598 *Survey of London*):

London’s population is “by birth for the most part a mixture of all counties, by blood gentlemen, yeomen and of the basest sort without distinction”
Brick Lane, Bethnal Green

1743 La neuve église (Huguenots)

1809 Wesleyan chapel

Great Synagogue, late 19th century (Jews from Poland and Russia)

Jamme Masjid Great Mosque, 1976 (Bangladeshis)
Effect of historical migration on London English?

• Many innovations due to dialect contact as a result of migration from the north:
  • Introduction of *they, their, them* in Middle English
  • 3\textsuperscript{rd} singular –*s for –*eth in Early Modern English

(Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2003)
Out- and in-migration in London

• Big increase in immigration from 1948

  – Accompanied by outward migration of existing populations to new social housing in suburbs
  – Caribbeans, followed by South Asians
  – From the 80s, West Africa, Somalia, Turkey, South America, North Africa
London boroughs
London school children by ethnicity

Figure 6: Primary school pupils by ethnicity

Figure 8: Secondary School pupils by ethnicity
In 2011, 54% of primary school and 44% of secondary school children had English as an additional language.
The London projects 2004–10


• Jenny Cheshire, Paul Kerswill, Sue Fox, Eivind Torgersen, Arfaan Khan
**Linguistic Innovators project:**
ethnicities of 16-19 year olds

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**MLE project: ethnicities of young speakers, aged 5-17**

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<td>‘Black African’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Turkish</td>
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Diphthong system of elderly male speaker from Hackney born 1918
Joyce, aged 76

I used to work in an insurance office and on the switchboard. And it we used to see him come in and out delivering the post he was a postman um the other little postman that used to come in his name was Wally and we used to say "Wally what's his name" and describe him say "oh you mean babyface" cos he was quite yeah quite a nice face and with his hat on so we said "yeah what’s his name” he said "well we all call him babyface. but his name's Fred” so er this Saturday morning. he came in with the post and we're just chatting and he says to me “would you like to come to the pictures today. tonight?” I said “oh well” I said “where do you live?” he said "upper Clapton” and I said "well I live in East Ham” so he come down to East Ham and er we went to the pictures there and from then onwards we were always together. we were together nearly forty years. he was my real my first really true boyfriend.
Diphthong system of young male from Hackney, Afro-Caribbean origin, born 1989
Alex, aged 17

I mean I literally walked past two thugs that I didn't not knew but they just grabbed me by the hood swung me in a alley and had me at knife point. and I couldn't do nothing but I said . and they said "where you from?“ I said "east london that's where I'm from“ this is them "don't be funny" cos they're . I was right in a bit of east London so they said "don't be funny with me like that cos I'll stab you" and I said “I'm not trying to be funny” this is them "what area are you from . what part?” this is me “I'm from Haggerston . Fields" and then like they just said "oh yeh I don't like that area re re re" and then like some hero. thank god there is some typical heros who. and it's like if you're short don't even bother come over because you're just gonna get stabbed yourself like .
When did MLE start?

- 1950s on: Anglos (white British) and Afro-Caribbeans (mainly from Jamaica) formed the most numerous groups
- Their linguistic repertoires differed:

<table>
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<th>London vernacular (‘Cockney’)</th>
<th>London Jamaican (‘Patois’)</th>
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<td>Anglos</td>
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<tr>
<td>Afro-Caribbeans</td>
<td>✓</td>
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The view from academe, c. 1984

• Mark Sebba and Roger Hewitt also noted an intermediate ‘Black Cockney’ or ‘multiethnic/multiracial vernacular’

  – Apparently used in *adolescent peer groups only*
  – So not actually a *native dialect*, but more a *style*

• Seeds of MLE visible in these comments
A criminologist speaks

• Criminologist John Pitts notes the start of a new youth language among young black people in the East End in the early 1980s, when their deteriorating social position was preventing them from living up to their parents’ expectations.

• Pitts argues that the new dialect reflects a ‘resistance identity’.

• [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gd3SJ6qakyY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gd3SJ6qakyY) (29 minutes in)
Treating MLE as a dialect

• How did the linguistic features get into MLE?

Competition and selection in the feature pool (Mufwene 2001):
Treating MLE as a dialect

The feature pool includes features from at least:

- Englishes of the Indian subcontinent and Africa
- learner (L2) varieties of English
- Caribbean Creoles and their indigenised London versions
- African English Creoles (e.g. Sierra Leone, Nigeria)
- traditional ‘Cockney’ features from the existing Anglo communities
- Standard English from various sources

All children, bilingual and monolingual alike, are exposed to all these features from a very young age.
Contact between languages in inner-city multiethnic London

Direct language contact?

Vocabulary as a sign of cultural influence:

- *ends, whagwan, yardie, batty man, mandem, boydem, bredren*
  - Almost all of Jamaican origin

Vowels of *GOAT* and *FACE* are near-monophthongs

- probably reflecting monophthongs in the languages of the immigrant groups, including Caribbean, Indian and African English

Their frequency of use correlates with *ethnicity* and with the ethnicity of a speaker’s friendship group
Contact between languages in inner-city multiethnic London

Simplification

• Loss of indefinite and definite article allomorphy:
  • *They swang me in a [?] alley*
  • *The [?] apple*
Contact between languages in inner-city multiethnic London

• Simplification of irregular plural forms:
  • *if you put all the mans together . make them fight a cause together*  (Cheshire 2013)

also *mens, man_{plu} and mandem*

• Origin in Jamaican Creole?
  • but distinct from Jamaican Creole in the range of uses
Contact between languages in inner-city multiethnic London

Grammaticalisation

E.g. pronoun *man*

*I don't care, it's her personality man's looking at. I'm not even looking at the girl proper, like*  
(Cheshire 2013)

- This use of ‘man’ is similar to Jamaican Creole
Contact between languages in inner-city multiethnic London

A new quotative

This is me “don’t be funny”  (Cheshire et al 2011, Fox 2010)

• doesn’t appear to come directly from other languages, but is arguably simpler for language learners to use than I’m like or I said

  o Especially when there are lots of languages in contact
Contact between languages in inner-city multiethnic London

Vocabulary

- as a sign of cultural influence: *ends, whagwan, yardie, batty man, mandem, boydem, bredren* ...

But other forms have developed from the communicative context, the result of indirect language contact.

Their frequency of use correlates with *ethnicity* (most features are used more often by non-Anglos than Anglos).

But also with a speaker’s *friendship network* (speakers with multiethnic friendship networks use the innovations more often, whether they are Anglo or non-Anglo).
Innovations in inner-city London

Phonology

• trajectories of some diphthongs have become shorter e.g. PRICE, FACE and GOAT are almost monophthongs e.g. *knife* (Kerswill, Torgersen & Fox 2008)

• initial /h/ is pronounced

Prosody

• *Staccato* (syllable-timed) rhythm (Torgersen and Szakak 2012)
Discourse markers

• *got the right moves innit but I ain't telling you though still*

• *allow blud it ain’t worth it*

• *we’re safe like you get me*  
  (Torgersen et al 2011)

General extenders

• *I had to pay them a score and reh teh teh*

• *he gets all of James Bond's money and ra*
MLE – Social background

The social ecology of London’s East End

• Immigration

• Poverty – at the time of the 2001 census Hackney had the highest rating on indicators of deprivation out of all 355 boroughs in England

> Poverty leaves all groups in these boroughs with few opportunities for interaction with the wider, mainstream, mobile community

• At the same time, there is the formation of close-knit neighbourhood networks
MLE – The sociolinguistic ecology

Language histories are very varied:

- **Dom**: aged 17; parents Colombian; came to London aged 2; parents speak no English; he and his younger sister interpret for them; speaks English, Spanish, Spanglish; acquired English at school.

- **Alex**: aged 16; mother German; lived with her and Antiguan stepfather till 13; since then he and his brother have lived with Maltese grandmother; father Maltese/Ghanaian; father has never lived with them but he and Alex work together; understands Maltese and speaks a little.
MLE – The sociolinguistic ecology

• Much diversity in children’s language backgrounds
• Much diversity in the way that children acquire English,
• Much diversity in the feature pool
• Some bilingual children have to communicate with their friends in English before they are fully proficient
• Lack of a focused target model for the acquisition of English
• Flexible language norms
MLE – The sociolinguistic ecology

• Is the sociolinguistics of the area likely to promote the formation of a multiethnolect?

• How is the feature pool visible ‘on the ground’?

➢ We can look at some child–child interactions

   – This gives a picture of how natural acquisition of English may lead to some of the features of MLE
Interaction in an 8 year old peer group (2) (Uzay is Turkish, Dumaka is Nigerian)

Uzay to . this was . he . this this was this . thi this thi this thi [simultaneous speech not transcribed]

Dumaka this this was Ulash [Arfaan: yeah] to Noam bom bom ..

Uzay ey <Arfaan laughs> . no . he was doing like this to Lauren.

Dumaka [no xxx xxx I didn't say . I didn't I didn't say [simultaneous speech not transcribed]

Uzay look you’re laughing he was doing like this to

Dumaka I didn't I didn't I didn't I swear/

Arfaan [Uzay: uh uh] okay okay

Uzay and he's doing like this .

Dumaka I didn’t how could I do that . liar liar pants on fire
MLE as style
Style shifting in MLE

Courtney and Aimee: Afro-Caribbean girls aged 18

- Courtney’s GOAT vowel at the beginning of the interview is [əʊ]

- Sue: alright so. so yeah er tell me a little bit about what you're doing at college then..
- Courtney: we're both [əʊ] studying forensic science we're in the same class erm. that's it really. come in. go [əʊ] to our lessons
- Aimee: and then go [ɔʊ] home [ɔʊ]
- Courtney: use the library then go [əʊ] home [əʊ]
Courtney’s GOAT vowel in banter style is [ɔʊ]

- Aimee: I'll be more allowed to bring home a woman than a African
- Dexter: yeah .
- Courtney: I don't [ɔ] know [ɔʊ] about . no [ɔ].
Style shifting among middle class youngster

- With her ear glued to her mobile phone, my 11-year-old daughter, Millie, was deep in conversation, her brow furrowed as she discussed some arrangement with a friend.
- I listened in, as I made jam in the kitchen. ‘Lol, that’s well sick!’ Millie said. ‘DW, yolo!’
- This indecipherable code-speak (‘sick’ means awesome, ‘DW’ is don’t worry and ‘yolo’ means you only live once) was delivered in an accent I could only place as somewhere between South London, downtown Los Angeles and Kingston, Jamaica.
- It certainly isn’t indigenous to our home village of Ashtead, in the rolling Surrey hills.
- When Millie ended the call, she turned to me, smiled and asked: ‘What’s for supper please, Dad?’ in perfect Received Pronunciation.
- It seems that after less than a month at secondary school, my daughter is now bi-lingual — but it is not French or German in which she is suddenly fluent.
- Her new language, comprising alien words and abbreviations delivered with faux West Coast American inflections, will not stand her in good stead when she embarks on a school trip to visit museums in Berlin.
- Millie now speaks a version of what academics call ‘Multicultural Youth English’, or MYE, which she has picked up from her friends — middle-class girls from the Home Counties.

Nick Harding, Daily Mail, 11 October 2013
Conclusions

• MLE is a new dialect
  – But born not from contact between dialects, but ultimately contact between languages
• MLE is distinctive on all linguistic levels, including use of slang
• MLE contains features from languages other than English
  – And yet it is (to a large extent) ethnically neutral
• MLE is associated with youth styles
  – Hip-hop, orientation to African American music
• MLE is here to stay
  – Adults keep at least features of pronunciation from it
References


