

Policy Papers

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Multicultural London English and social and educational policies

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- The linguistic diversity of the UK presents a longstanding challenge for social equality and social mobility.
- Only a small proportion of the population speaks or writes a variety that would be considered standard English grammar, yet standard English is needed in professional life and to succeed in education.
- In schools, the National Curriculum requires students to be taught to use ‘standard English when the context and audience requires it’ (Department for Education 2014a); yet the available evidence indicates that this policy, intended to improve educational and social outcomes, has not been particularly successful.
- Educational and institutional policies do not usually take account of the fact that social and regional accents are often perceived negatively and can cause discrimination, whether conscious or unconscious, in life-changing situations such as oral examinations, job interviews or legal contexts.
- The challenge has become even greater with the recent emergence of multiethnolects – new socially inclusive English dialects spoken in many multilingual urban centres – resulting from an increase in the amount and diversity of immigration.
- We provide four concrete policy recommendations based on research into developing multiethnolects in the UK:
 1. Increase students’ exposure to standard English, while ensuring that they are not discouraged from using non-standard English in appropriate contexts;
 2. Commission the production of descriptions of local non-standard varieties for teachers;
 3. Embed an understanding of non-standard varieties throughout the curriculum;
 4. Outside education, promote the inclusion of language in equality and diversity policy.

The emergence of Multicultural London English (MLE)

Two large-scale sociolinguistic projects carried out in London between 2004 and 2010 (Kerswill et al. 2004–2007, Kerswill et al. 2007–2010) analysed language use in Hackney, an area in the East End of London traditionally associated with the dense social networks of working class white Cockneys. Although there had been some immigrant arrivals to the area in the first half of the twentieth century (mainly Jewish people from different European countries and people from Ireland), in general Cockneys had rarely come into contact with speakers of other languages. However, during the post-war slum clearance and reconstruction of London many of the original inhabitants of the East End were transferred to new housing estates further east or to new towns in Essex (Fox 2015). This relocation left an ageing population in Hackney until, with the arrival of foreign immigrants, the population started to increase. The earliest immigrants to arrive were from the West Indies, but they were soon joined by immigrants from a very wide range of countries.

At first, immigrant groups were isolated from the indigenous community, which was not always welcoming. The children tended to keep the language of the home and the language of the school separate, and mainly did not acquire English until they attended school, where the English that they heard was the local London vernacular. Research carried out in London in the 1980s (Sebba 1993) found that Afro-Caribbean adolescents at that time were bidialectal, switching between Jamaican Creole and London English. ‘Anglo’ adolescents (children of the indigenous white working class Cockney families) sometimes used Creole words but they maintained the London Cockney English spoken at home.

By the late 1990s, when the adolescents who participated in the London research projects were growing up, the linguistic ecology of the area had changed. Hackney was becoming increasingly multilingual, and residential segregation was much less common. Today the area is multicultural, home to many different minority ethnic groups. In 2000, Baker and Eversley recorded 26 different languages spoken as a first language by schoolchildren in Hackney, a figure that underestimates the linguistic diversity of the area since it does not take account of the Creole languages spoken by immigrants from the Caribbean and from several African countries. The 2011 ONS (Office of National Statistics) survey recorded 88 different languages as spoken in Hackney. White British people now make up only about a third of the total population of the area (36.2% according to the 2011 ONS Census).

This linguistic diversity means that the local London vernacular is no longer the main English variety that children encounter at school. From a very young age, friendship groups are typically multiethnic: for example, the friendship groups in the Hackney projects, including for 5 year olds, included young people with parents from the Caribbean, several different African countries, Bangladesh, India, Morocco, China, Colombia, Portugal, Albania, Turkey and the Middle East, as well as from local Cockney families. The English spoken by children from such diverse backgrounds is very varied. The parents of some children are learning English and, although they may speak English at home, have various levels of proficiency and various kinds of language transfer from their first languages. Other children are from homes where English is spoken, often alongside other languages, but the English of the home may encompass different postcolonial varieties such as Indian English, Nigerian English or Ghanaian English, or a Creole-influenced variety. Children from homes where English is not spoken acquire English from a very young age from older siblings or from their peers at nursery school, but since ‘Anglo’ speakers of the indigenous London Cockney variety are in a minority, local models of

English are less available for them than for previous generations. Thus, the English that children hear from each other is very varied. This means that there is no single clear target variety of English for

children; instead, there is an extremely varied set of features of English, which can be likened to a 'feature pool' (Mufwene 2001) from which children select different combinations as they interact with each other. Of course, Anglo children are also exposed to the feature pool and the immense linguistic variation in their friendship groups. The English that emerges in this context is naturally very variable and norms are flexible: what is important above all is to communicate with each other.

As the children grow older, their English stabilizes. The result is Multicultural London English: a new variety of English that remains quite variable but that contains a core of innovative phonetic, grammatical and discourse features. Although our focus here is on London, similar developments are reported in other cities in the UK (Manchester, for example; see Drummond 2016, who introduces the term Multicultural Urban British English) as well as for other languages spoken in multilingual cities elsewhere in Europe and beyond.

Linguistic characteristics of MLE

For linguists, the emergence of multiethnolects is an intriguing and exciting development. The rapid development of a set of innovative features means that we can observe language change at first hand rather than having to compare present day usage with documents from hundreds of years ago. It is relatively rare, for example, for new pronouns to emerge in a language and, when they do, it can take many years for them to become established. Pronouns are words referring to the speaker and the interlocutor (so, *I* or *you*) or to people or things previously mentioned (e.g. *he*, *she*, *it*, *they*). In MLE, *man* has recently emerged as a new pronoun, used for a range of rhetorical functions such as giving more communicative force to the expression of a personal opinion and having a range of specific grammatical functions. In (1), for example, the speaker explains that personality is more important than appearance when it comes to choosing a girlfriend: here the pronoun *man* takes on the same kind of grammatical function as the pronoun *I*.

(1) I don't care what my girl looks like it's her personality man's looking at

Another new grammatical form is *this is* +speaker. This is a quotative expression (a form such as *say* or *be like* that introduces direct reported speech) which is used at key dramatic points of narratives, as in

(2) this is my mum's boyfriend "put that in your pocket now".

Such innovations reveal the kinds of communicative strategies that drive language change. The two features just mentioned, for example, allow speakers to give pragmatic force to key aspects of their discourse.

Other innovations are not completely new forms but instead result from young people using existing features of English to accomplish important discourse functions. For instance, unlike many other languages, English does not have special particles that emphasize specific parts of an utterance and that therefore allow speakers to indicate what is especially important. Bengali, in contrast, uses the particles *je*, *to*, *naki* and *ki* to indicate that a phrase is the topic of a clause (what the clause is to 'be about'); and in Jamaican Creole the particle *a* emphasizes a following noun or adjective. Young speakers in London have filled this gap by using existing English forms in new ways. For example, research has shown that elsewhere in the UK the relative pronoun *who* is gradually being replaced by *that* (e.g. *she's the woman who/that bought my house*). In MLE, however, *who* is not only alive and well but has acquired the function of indicating that the preceding noun is likely to be the main topic

of conversation in the next few clauses. *Innit*, a very frequent new discourse marker in young people's spoken English

generally, has also acquired a special discourse function in MLE. Young people in Hackney use *innit* with the same frequency as young people in Havering, an outer London area with very little linguistic diversity (one of the areas, in fact, to which Cockney families were relocated postwar); but in Hackney it has a unique discourse function of indicating that the preceding noun refers to an important item that will be developed in what comes next (e.g. a speaker who utters *the girl innit* makes it clear that she intends to tell a story about something the girl in question did).

There are innovations in accent too. Phonetic innovations include the backing of /k/ before low back vowels to [q] and changes to the long vowel system, including a narrow diphthong or monophthong for the lexical set of FACE ([eɪ] or [e] in place of Cockney [æɪ]); this means that a word such as *face* sounds more like 'fes' than RP 'fays' or Cockney 'fayis'. Samples of MLE can be heard on <http://linguistics.sllf.qmul.ac.uk/linguistics/english-language-teaching/> The region is traditionally h-dropping, with a word like *head* pronounced without the initial /h/; young MLE speakers however, pronounce initial /h/ to an extent greater than in other South Eastern English varieties. There is a more syllable-timed (staccato) rhythm and while standard English has two forms, *a* and *an*, for indefinite articles, MLE tends to use only *a*: *a* is heard not only before consonants, as in *a banana*, but also before a following vowel, as in *a apple*. Innovations in vocabulary are mainly borrowings from Jamaican English, illustrating the well-known (in linguistics) Founder Principle, a term borrowed from population genetics (Mufwene 2001): the vocabulary of the linguistic founding population in an area continues to survive despite the arrival of later, different, immigrant groups. They include *blood* and *bredren* ('friend'), *cuss* ('defame'), *ends* ('estate' or 'neighbourhood'), *tief* ('steal') and *whagwan* ('what's up').

Attitudes to MLE

Kerswill (2014) describes responses to MLE in the media, where it has been referred to as 'Jafaican', a term that encapsulates lay perceptions that 'it sounds black'. Journalists are presumably influenced by the recognisably Jamaican English vocabulary, and perhaps also by the characteristic MLE vowels: the MLE pronunciation of words such as *face* and *goat* is similar to their pronunciation in the English of the Caribbean and in parts of West Africa. However, these pronunciations are also typical of the English of the Indian subcontinent and other postcolonial varieties, as well as that of many learner varieties of English. The same is true of the tendency to use *a* and unstressed *the* before nouns beginning with a vowel as well as before nouns beginning with a consonant. It is the frequency of forms such as these in the feature pool that results in the typical MLE pronunciations, and that the forms stem from a diverse set of linguistic sources rather than from any single language. Other innovations in MLE reflect universal tendencies in language generally (such as the marking of discourse prominence, mentioned above). Certainly the young people who participated in the MLE projects did not associate their way of speaking with 'talking black'; if pressed, they either said that their language was 'normal' or that they spoke 'slang', referring to the characteristic vocabulary. Like most speakers of English, they were generally unaware of the phonetic, grammatical and discourse-pragmatic features of their grammar.

The sociolinguists' term 'multiethnolect', then, reflects the fact that MLE (and similar varieties elsewhere) is spoken by young people from all ethnic groups living in the multilingual inner city area, including the 'Anglos' from indigenous Cockney families. It should be welcomed as a socially inclusive new variety. It fully reflects the findings of a recent survey carried out by Hackney Local Authority, which reported that 89% of Hackney's residents find Hackney to be a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together and that Hackney's diversity and multiculturalism are

the main factors contributing to residents feeling proud of Hackney. The Local Authority (London Borough of Hackney Policy Team 2016: 14) explain that

In part this is a result of Hackney's long history of immigration and welcoming people into the borough which has resulted in local neighbourhoods that are very diverse where people have an opportunity to mix and meet people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds. Many people also have personal or family experience of migration and are welcoming to new arrivals.

Yet rather than rejoicing in the emergence of a socially inclusive way of speaking, a wide range of authority figures, particularly in education, among members of Parliament, and in some sections of the print and televisual media, have condemned it (see Kerswill 2014). Kerswill refers to comments made by David Starkey, a medieval historian and successful television history presenter, during a live discussion on BBC TV's *Newsnight*. Starkey made an explicit link between this type of language, violence and black culture, and stated that white people had bought into it, becoming 'black' in the process.

There is a longstanding divide in attitudes towards linguistic diversity between speakers of non-standard dialects, linguists who have studied these dialects, and the media and influential authority figures. However, in the case of MLE the divide risks becoming racialized. If MLE, and multethnolects more generally, are stigmatized and poorly understood, there is also the risk of increasing still further the gap in the educational achievement of young speakers of non-standard dialects and young people who grow up speaking standard English at home, as well as increasing the possibilities of unwitting social discrimination on a wider scale.

Implications for educational practice and policy

Some aspects of educational policy in England and Wales deal positively with linguistic diversity. The General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced level syllabus for English Language requires students to show how a wide range of linguistic terminology can be accurately applied to a range of contexts for language use, including historical, geographical, social and individual varieties of English, and aspects of language and identity (Department for Education 2014b: 2). The English Language A level has proved popular in schools in multicultural urban areas, where the focus on sociolinguistic variation and identity appeals to students from minority ethnic backgrounds, since their own linguistic experiences are relevant, valued and analysed during their studies. It positions speakers of non-standard varieties to acquire standard English more effectively through learning about the social diversity of English. Teachers report that although higher grades are just as hard to gain as in other subjects, its relevance to everyday life and the opportunity for students to analyse their own language uses allows less able and average students to achieve as well as the most gifted (Bleiman and Webster 2006: 28). It therefore provides opportunities for social mobility and for improving the skills base of UK society, with significant benefits for both individuals and society. Furthermore, the subject is 'boy-friendly': 6% of all male and 8% of all female A level entries are for English Language, compared to, for example, 14% male and 26% female entries for A level English Literature. Boys prefer GCE A level English Language to other language subjects, giving them the opportunity to catch up with girls in the acquisition of language skills. For a brief period between 2010 and 2014 the General Certificate of Secondary education (GCSE) English Language and English Literature curriculum also included the study of variation in spoken English and its relation to identity and cultural diversity.

School teachers of A level English Language tend to be well informed about the nature of linguistic diversity in general and about dialects, including multiethnolects, in particular, attending workshops

on the topic and making good use in the classroom of resources developed by linguists (Cheshire and Fox 2016). Other educationists, however, have reacted negatively to the new ways of speaking. Kerswill (2014) discusses the 2008 ban by a secondary school in Manchester on the use of ‘slang’ anywhere on the school premises. The language that was objected to was contemporary British youth

slang, some of which was Jamaican in origin and typical of MLE. In London, the use of words associated with urban youth dialects was forbidden at the Harris Academy of Upper Norwood, as a way of preparing pupils for their future on the labour market and in mainstream British society.

It is understandable that head teachers and others are concerned about the social prospects of young speakers of a variety that is stigmatized. The aim of the National Curriculum guidance that students should be taught to use standard English ‘when the context and audience requires it’ presumably has the goal of social equality in mind. But a blanket ban goes against this guidance and is not the way to promote linguistic and social equality. People change their way of speaking only to the extent that they are motivated to do so; and it has long been known that negative motivations result in an increased use of non-standard linguistic forms from young people who in fact have the ability to change their way of speaking (see Cheshire 1982 for an early empirical study of pupils’ unconscious use of standard and non-standard English forms at school). We do not yet know the extent to which speakers of MLE adjust their way of speaking in different situations, though research at Queen Mary University of London is currently investigating this. In Manchester young speakers of the local multiethnolect adapt their language use when taking part in mock job interviews (Rob Drummond, personal communication), and a great deal of research shows that speakers of nonstandard dialects shift towards standard English in situations where they see it as appropriate to do so, for example in role plays or when called on to speak with authority to the class. A realistic educational policy would aim to increase students’ exposure to standard English and ensure that the exposure is a positive experience, and to ensure that students are given opportunities to adopt an authoritative footing in the classroom, while not discouraging them from using non-standard English in appropriate contexts.

Multiethnolects such as MLE have emerged in city areas with limited financial resources. In 2010 Hackney ranked second in the country on the Index of Multiple Deprivation. The situation has improved with the post-Olympic focus on the East End as an area of growth and development; nevertheless, the figures from the End Child Poverty Campaign show Hackney as having the second highest rate in the country for child poverty in 2015 (London Borough of Hackney Policy Team 2016: 19). A background of high deprivation combined with negatively assessed language creates difficulties in expanding social and employment networks, but attempting to impose standard English will not help. Rather, students need to be taught about language variation and about using language appropriately, and this means understanding their own language, as well as standard English. We would recommend a policy that embeds an understanding of non-standard varieties throughout the school curriculum, from primary school onwards.

It follows that there is a need for a clearer dialogue between linguists and schools, so that schools are well informed about the properties of local linguistic varieties, and their relation to standard English. A concrete policy suggestion is to commission the production of descriptions of urban multiethnolects, explaining why they are consistent linguistic systems, how they differ from standard English, and how issues of style and register impact on the use of the different varieties, along with guidance for teachers in the local area. This would facilitate understanding between teachers and students and might allow teachers on occasion to sensitively guide students in ‘code-switching’ between non-standard and standard forms. Students themselves, as they grow older, can be engaged in this descriptive linguistic work, which has social, educational and linguistic benefits. Of course, it is not only descriptions of multiethnolects that would be useful: ideally, descriptions of the local dialect would be available for all school teachers in all areas of the country.

A further policy suggestion is to commission research that compares the linguistic situation in the UK with that in comparator countries around the world. We agree with Snell and Andrews' view (2016) that there is much to learn from common problems that are faced globally. The more the world moves to three or four world languages (English, Mandarin Chinese, Spanish and possibly Arabic), the more the relationship between local dialect, national languages and world languages will become critical to

personal and social/economic advancement. We further recommend commissioning research to evaluate the effectiveness of the many initiatives designed to promote use of the standard variety in different European countries (Cheshire et al. 1989), few of which yet to be formally assessed.

Outside education, institutions working towards policies that promote social equality and diversity should be encouraged to include language. Awareness of linguistic diversity and avoidance of unconscious discrimination on the basis of language is as important for social equality as awareness of the potential effects of gender, race, disability, religion or sexual orientation.

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Resources

A databank containing recordings of MLE speakers, together with transcripts of the recordings, are at <http://linguistics.sllf.qmul.ac.uk/linguistics/english-language-teaching/>

A general overview of the MLE research is in Cheshire, Jenny, Paul Kerswill, Susan Fox and Eivind Torgersen, 2011, 'Language contact and language change in the multicultural metropolis', *Revue Française de Linguistique Appliquée* 18: 63-76; available at <http://jennycheshire.com/publications>

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