

How multiethnic is a multiethnolect? The recontextualisation of Multicultural London English

Clyne (2000) coined the term *multiethnolect* to refer to a newly-formed contact variety of a mainstream, majority-community language in contexts of high immigration and multilingualism. We pose the question of just how ‘multiethnic’ such a language variety is likely to be in practice, focusing on Multicultural London English (MLE), a multiethnolect that has emerged in inner-city areas of London (Cheshire et al. 2008, 2011; Kerswill & Torgersen 2021; Kerswill 2022). We explore the ‘recontextualisation’ (Bauman & Briggs 1990) of this variety (Ilbury et al. 2022; Ilbury & Kerswill *fc*). Research first defined MLE as a new variety spoken by young working-class people living and working in inner-city East London boroughs such as Hackney and Tower Hamlets. A key claim of the earlier research is that, based on the lack of any consistent ethnic stratification, features of MLE are used by speakers of all ethnicities from a diverse range of linguistic backgrounds. Social factors predicting the use of MLE features included the ethnic diversity of a speaker’s network, location (inner vs. outer London) and gender. However, more recently, scholars working in a variety of contexts, both in London and elsewhere, have documented a number of differences in the use, function and distribution of MLE features (Drummond 2018; Gates 2018; Ilbury 2019). Taking the accumulated and evolving evidence as an entry point, we pose the question of just how ‘multiethnic’ such a language variety is likely to be in practice.

Drawing on ethnographic insights, media discussions and metalinguistic comments, we consider the ways in which MLE features have become recontextualised and have taken on new social meanings. We address these questions by taking a partly historical approach, testing whether, and if so how, there has been a shift in real time from a highly variable working-class inner-city youth repertoire shared across many ethnic groups, to a linguistically focused variety with a much more sharply etched set of indexicalities closely related to a Black British identity. Specifically, we discuss the enregisterment (Agha 2003) of MLE with regard to three main developments. First, we consider the association between MLE and Black British music cultures, such as grime. Second, we explore the symbolic function of MLE in relation to the emergence of a contemporary Black British identity. And third, we consider the broader recontextualisation of MLE as a type of cultural capital that individuals may use to index their identification with particular (youth) cultures (Cutler & Røyneland 2015). We conclude that MLE is now associated with two distinct kinds of social meanings, one symbolising a Black British identity (or an alignment with it), the other seeing MLE remaining multiethnic in its practice and its indexicality. These findings have significant implications for our understanding of language variation and change both in London and more broadly in Britain today.

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