

**‘Are you embarrassed about my accent?’ –  
Enregisterment and dialect socialisation in the ‘London Talks’ interviews**

The sociolinguistic concept of ‘enregisterment’ describes processes and practices that lead to speakers noticing and conceptualising different ways of speaking by linking (‘indexing’) linguistic forms and repertoires with social meanings, values, and contexts (Agha 2003; Agha 2007; Silverstein 2003). A ‘register’ in this sense is ‘a way of speaking linked with a social situation’ (Johnstone 2017: 17) by speakers, as well as the concept, ‘idea’, or knowledge a speaker has of a dialect. The processes and practices leading to enregisterment can be observed in meta-linguistic discourse, for example, as elicited in interviews (Agha 2007: 151).

This paper studies the formation and consolidation of the ‘registers’ associated with London and conventionally labelled ‘Cockney’, ‘Mockney’ or ‘Estuary English’, and ‘Multicultural London English’ (MLE) and seeks to answer the questions, which linguistic shibboleths and repertoires are used to delineate each dialect, which social meanings and contexts are associated with these shibboleths, and against which (language) ideologies are these indexical links created.

The ‘London Talks’ interviews, conducted in London in 2021-22, provide a corpus of elicited metacommentary on London ways of speaking from 54 female and male Londoners of various social and ethnic backgrounds and ranging from age 18 to 85. The interviews were thematically coded by means of MAXQDA, a computer-assisted qualitative discourse analysis software, and analysed according to the DIMEAN (discourse-linguistic multi-level analysis) program introduced by discourse linguists Spitzmüller and Warnke (2011), which provides a useful framework distinguishing between an intratextual, transtextual, and actor-focussed analysis.

The results show that, while, in general, speakers are consciously aware of only a few concrete language shibboleths marking each repertoire, such as ‘h-’ and ‘t-dropping’, their comments on typical speaker personae and contexts reveal a large and varied ‘indexical field’ (Eckert 2008) for each repertoire, as well as intricate meta-discursive knowledge influenced by and influencing the participants’ own dialect socialisation and identity construction. The question ‘Are you embarrassed by my accent?’ was asked by a husband of his wife, both in their sixties when interviewed together for the ‘London Talks’ project, and indicates that negotiating the values of a register as well as a speaker’s linguistic identity through meta-discourse is a life-long and pervasive practice. The paper thus also investigates biographical ‘enregisterment moments’, i.e., when register-forming indexes come to a speaker’s attention, and how these moments influence their own speech and linguistic identity, rooting this approach firmly in so-called ‘third wave’ sociolinguistics, which grants speakers agency over their sociolinguistic outputs (Eckert 2012).

In studying speakers’ conceptualisations of London ways of speaking, the paper adds a layer of analysis to existing research on London dialects. In treating meta-linguistic commentary as data for enregisterment processes and meta-linguistic knowledge as determinants in language variation and change, the study endorses a novel approach that places the discursive/register level of variation on a par with the traditional, structural level of sociolinguistic analysis (cf. also Paulsen 2022).

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