From London Jamaican to British youth language: The transformation of a Caribbean post-creole repertoire into a new Multicultural London English

Paul Kerswill and Mark Sebba
Lancaster University

1. The London multiethnolect and early linguistic inputs to it

This talk deals with the history of 'traces' of Caribbean Creoles in the language of young working-class Londoners. Present-day London English has undergone a transformation from traditional Cockney of *My Fair Lady or Pygmalion* fame to something which linguists have labelled a multiethnolect – this being defined as a repertoire or network of linguistic features and styles which all people living in a multilingual and multiethnic area can draw on to varying extents. For many speakers it is clearly a vernacular, in the Labovian sense of being the 'unmarked', psycholinguistically entrenched way of speaking. Multiethnolects have been described in many of the cities of Northern Europe, in Oslo, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Amsterdam, Berlin, and elsewhere. This North European focus many be coincidental, but it seems that such language forms don’t exist in places like Madrid, Rome or Athens. Nor do they exist in this form in North America, in the cities where this has been investigated: San Francisco, Toronto and New York.

The London multiethnolect is unusual in that it has, as a major input, a set of creoles, both basilectal and mesolectal, with a lexifier which is also the L1 of the original population of the city – in this case English. These are the African-Caribbeans who came over to Britain, particularly London and Birmingham, starting in the late 1940s, with the largest waves being in the 1950s and 60s. In this paper, we’ll be dealing with one of the two most striking aspects of the transformation of the working-class London English of young people: the vowel system. The other aspect is the everyday vocabulary which is characterised by the use of slang of largely Caribbean origin rather than of other possible origins, such as Panjabi, Turkish, Arabic or Yoruba.

2. Research questions: Caribbean input and changing post-migration repertoires

Rather than dealing with the history of the London multiethnolect as a whole, we’ll deal with it from the vantage point of what we can legitimately think of as one of the founder populations – the African-Caribbeans – the other population, of course, being the existing White British population (itself mixed). Doing this will allow us to address at least two related questions:

1. What is the Caribbean contribution to London’s multiethnolect? Given the Caribbeans’ status as the first major wave of post-war immigrants to London, and given the fact that, in particular ways, they were Anglophone, we can expect the Caribbean element in today’s London English to be greater than that of other, later, non-Anglophone immigrant groups. The important issue is whether we can talk of a process of koineisation – the levelling of different inputs in a case of dialect mixture.
What features can be ascribed to the transplanted Caribbean varieties, and which cannot?

2. From the vantage point of the African-Caribbeans themselves, how have their own linguistic repertoires changed across the three or more generations who have grown up in London? This question deals with the linguistic reflexes of the changing relationships this group has with other groups: did they initially accommodate their speech to the host majority, or did they expand their linguistic repertoires by keeping their earlier ways of speaking alongside the accommodated, London-based styles? Did second and later generations remain a linguistically distinct group, or did they merge linguistically? Did they maintain some of the immigrant generations’ repertoires, or did they create new ones?

We have the advantage now of being able to carry out a real-time study of Jamaicans’ and other Caribbean speakers’ repertoires. We have done this by gaining access to and digitising the original tapes of the two earlier studies, and then comparing them to a more recent corpus of recordings. The earliest published study is John Wells’ 1973 *Jamaican pronunciation in London* is based on recordings he made in 1970. This is an account of the pronunciation of about 200 words elicited from around 30 Jamaican men and some women who were born in Jamaica and had moved to London in their late teens or early adulthood. Wells’s book isn’t primarily sociolinguistic in focus, but the decision to record this particular group of migrants reflects a strong interest in the way these people had accommodated to London English. He states that he has deliberately avoided London-born Jamaicans, for the reason that another group of researchers was investigating these – though we haven’t yet been able to locate any of their publications. Although Wells’s speakers are not London-born, their ‘voices’ would have formed a very significant part of the input to the emerging new varieties of the following generation.

The second body of recordings was made by Mark Sebba in 1983-4 as part of a project on second-generation Caribbean speech. Mark’s focus was on the more creole-like part of the young speakers’ repertoire, though he used various means to gain access to a wide range of styles. The most striking finding was the emergence of a pan-Caribbean London creole which was closely modelled on Jamaican creole. This formed part of a repertoire which included a variety that was, in the case of most speakers, indistinguishable from the contemporary version of London’s traditional dialect, Cockney.

The third set of recordings was made as part of two projects based at Lancaster University and Queen Mary, University of London, from 2004 to 2010. These were extended paired sociolinguistic interviews with some 130 late-teenage inner-city working-class Londoners of a wide range of ethnic backgrounds.

3. Brief migration and post-migration history (Mark’s slides)

4. What was the input and what is the outcome 50 years on? Jamaican and London vowels then and now
An obvious first place to start is the vowel systems of non-migrated Jamaicans. The problem with doing this is that we need to know what the vowel systems were like perhaps 50 years ago, rather than relying on their modern equivalents. We can, however, use Wells's own account of Jamaican basilectal and mesolectal vowels from his 1973 publication as well as Bailey (196x) [nb BAILEY 1960S ON JAMAICA] as reference points. Here is the vowel system of a speaker who was born some time after the post-war immigrants to London:

For us, there are a number of salient features in this system:

- Peripheral FLEECE and GOOSE vowels – front and back, respectively
- Onset of FACE near FLEECE and some centring
- Low central onset of PRICE, long upgliding trajectory
- back FOOT
- mid-back onset of MOUTH, rising
- back-mid STRUT
- high-back monophthong/centring glide for GOAT

What kind of London vowel system did this come into contact with? Here is the vowel system of an elderly Londoner, who would have been a young adult at the time of the early immigrants:
Diphthong system of elderly male speaker from Hackney born 1918

Salient features

- low onset for FACE
- front onset for MOUTH
- low-mid STRUT
- back-mid PRICE onset
- back FOOT
- central GOOSE
- GOAT is mid-central to high-back

We’ve chosen to highlight these sets of properties because of the contrast they show between the two systems.

What is the contemporary set of vowel articulations in London? We start with four vowel spaces illustrating the contemporary London diphthongs.
Let’s focus just on the diphthongs of FACE, GOAT, PRICE and MOUTH. For these two Anglos, the trajectory of FACE is notably shorter than that of the elderly Londoner. For Laura, GOAT is a fronting diphthong, representing the mainstream South-eastern development. Jack does not follow this fronting, and as such is out of line with the mainstream. For both speakers, PRICE has an onset lower than the position of START. MOUTH is now a fully open vowel, with a very short inglide. The figures also show that TRAP and STRUT have moved in an anti-clockwise direction in relation to the elderly speaker, as part of a general South-eastern vowel shift.
The two non-Anglo speakers show some of the same developments: TRAP and STRUT have moved back in the same way as the Anglo speakers. For Grace, PRICE likewise has a fully open onset. However, for Issah the onset is not so low, but, significantly, is a low vowel, the percept of which is a low monophthong. Issah’s MOUTH vowel is a open monophthong, similar to that of the Anglos, while Grace’s is low-back. The most striking differences lie in the two rising diphthongs, FACE and GOAT. Both of these now have a raised onset and peripheral offsets.
What vowel systems do the young A-Cs have?

Adolescent speakers (aged 16–19) of Afro-Caribbean origin, born c 1989. (For diphthongs, only onsets are shown.)

How does this vowel system fit into that of all W-C London adolescents? We see that it is very much part of the overall pattern. To see this, we look at the full vowel systems, and ally these to the social parameters of gender and Anglo vs. non-Anglo ethnicity, taken across the whole sample of speakers.
London inner city vowels: Multicultural London English project adolescent speakers (aged 16–19). (a) Short monophthongs plus goose and start, (b) diphthongs plus goose and start

This quantitative analysis shows that, while there are clear ethnicity-based differences, gender is at least as significant. This being so, we see this London repertoire as being just that: a set of features which are available to speakers. We can say that they are used in different proportions by different ethnic groups, but they are all available for both indexical and stylistic functions.

5. Multicultural London English as part of a stylistic repertoire

By way of illustrating how the back raised GOAT vowel is used in variation with a more mainstream diphthong, consider the following example from Courtney, an 18 year old young woman of Jamaican descent:

Courtney and Aimee: Afro-Caribbean girls aged 18
Courtney’s GOAT vowel at the beginning of the interview:
- 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 [ʊ] home [ʊ]

- Courtney: use the library then go [əʊ] home [əʊ] .

Courtney’s GOAT vowel in banter style:
- Aimee: I’d be more allowed to bring home a woman than a African
- Dexter: yeah .

  - Courtney: I don't [ɔ] know [ʊ] about . no [ɔ].

This, then, is the overall sociolinguistic situation as it relates to present-day working-class London English vowels. How did this system develop, and what contribution did the Jamaicans make?

6. Jamaican speech in London: a longitudinal study

We consider first two men who migrated to London as teenagers:

Leroy, aged 25, arrived age 16. Recorded 1970

Comment

Winston has a Jamaican vowel system almost identical to that of the non-migrated man illustrated earlier, despite 30 years’ residence in England. This is despite the fact that, in the interview section of the recording, he is speaking something very close to standard English. Note the vowels of FACE, PRICE, GOAT, MOUTH and GOOSE.

Leroy, on the other hand, represents something much more ‘English’, with Cockney features. GOOSE is now central, and matches the elderly Londoner in this quality. The FACE onset is lower, but raised in relation to the elderly man. GOAT, too, has a lower onset than either Winston or the non-migrated Jamaican. We can argue that these pronunciations are on their way to today’s relatively raised onsets of these vowels. Yet they are not as raised as many contemporary non-Anglo, particularly A-C speech. This suggests that there have been
later developments in the generations following Leroy – a point I’ll return to. Why is Leroy so different from Winston? I think the age of arrival is a critical factor (see Kerswill 1996 etc.).

If we seen embryonic forms characteristic of today’s speech in the accommodated speech of the immigrant Leroy, what of these later generations? We consider just one speaker, Everton, who was 20 at the time of his recording in 1984. This is taken from a lively monologue he recorded, telling the absent listener about a party he has attended.

![Graph showing vowel qualities over time]

Everton, aged 20, recorded 1984

Comment

FACE is not raised any more than the younger Anglos: it is not yet as high as contemporary A-C speakers (see figure above). The GOAT onset is a good deal more central than contemporary speakers, too. MOUTH has a Cockney-sounding front onset (see elderly speaker). Strikingly, GOOSE remains a central vowel, well out of the range of any of the contemporary speakers. This suggests that all sections of WC London speakers have, in the time period since the 1980s, followed the general south-eastern fronting of this vowel. PRICE, however, has its modern low-central onset. STRUT is mid-central, and this is a Caribbean quality that is not so frequent in any younger people’s speech.

The picture, then, is of a gradual move towards today’s vowel qualities, starting in the accommodated speech of the younger immigrants of the 1960s. Some of what we now recognise as contemporary MLE, particularly A-C speakers of it, can be seen as continuations of Jamaican forms. But we must beware of this, since the same qualities are also found among many other non-Anglo groups, too. Many input varieties, both foreign-accented and L2 (Africa, India), have these qualities – feature pool idea (Mufwene).
6. Emergent and changing repertoires

Immigrants:

Different island creoles + Caribbean English + speech accommodated to London English

Second generation:

Composite vowel systems of 11 adolescent London Jamaicans recorded in 1984. ‘Patois’ style (left), interview with white fieldworker (right). (For diphthongs, only onsets are shown.)

This shows switching between a Caribbean and a Cockney system. The differences between the two styles are very striking, with lowered onsets for both FACE and GOAT, suggesting that the raised onsets of Everton are not universally found.

Third generation:

Little evidence of discrete code-switching, and knowledge of London Jamaican is now much less than before – though of course there is great individual variation. When Courtney changes here vowels, this doesn’t make her sound more Caribbean.

References


Sharma, D. under review. Style repertoire, network diversity, and social change. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*.

