

Expressing inner city youth identity through ‘Multicultural Urban British English’

Rob Drummond’s ethnographically-informed research will investigate how young people use features of multicultural urban dialect in their speech, and in the construction of their identity.

Recent studies into the language of young people in London have revealed that the traditional London dialect is being replaced in certain contexts by what has been called Multicultural London English (MLE). Despite certain sections of the media labelling this new variety as ‘Jafaican’, suggesting that it is some kind of purely artificial affectation of white London kids, this linguistic development is an entirely natural and understandable one in such a culturally and linguistically diverse urban environment, and represents an actual language change. However, the focus on artificiality so often found in the mainstream media, along with the explicit links being made between language and (bad) behaviour at the time of the 2011 UK riots, is potentially damaging. It risks a situation where all young people who speak in a certain way are in danger of being labelled as potential criminals.

My project brings the discussion to Manchester, a city also affected by the riots in 2011, and one with similar cultural diversity. I intend to investigate the extent to which multicultural urban linguistic features are being used in the speech of inner-city adolescents, both in terms of conscious stylisation and in terms of possible fundamental changes to the underlying language. In doing so, I will explore the ways in which young people in Manchester are using what might be called Multicultural Urban British English (MUBE) as a tool in the construction and negotiation of identity.

The main focus will be on the language of young people who have been excluded from mainstream education into Pupil Referral Units. This particular group of people, several of whom can be identified as MUBE speakers, are in danger of making life difficult for themselves in their interactions with potential employers, police, and other adults of authority because of the way



they speak. The project aims to encourage acceptability of young people’s natural language, while at the same time allowing the young people to appreciate how the way they speak plays a vital role in the way they are perceived. This can only be done through better linguistic awareness, knowledge and understanding.

Methodologically, the project can be seen as an ethnographically-informed sociolinguistic study, meaning that we as researchers will do what we can to embed ourselves in the context and become part of the day-to-day activity of the schools. We will collect data through observation and informal interviews, but most importantly through peer- and self-recording by the young people themselves. In fact, the students will be encouraged to be involved in every aspect of the research process. It is hoped that by doing this, the project can offer something for the students to invest in and to take ownership of, in as little or as large a way as they feel comfortable with.

In some ways, the project is risky. The environment is challenging, and the proposed data collection methods,

while tested, are unpredictable. Yet the potential benefits are large and tangible; not only will the research further our understanding of how language is developing and being used in this context, but the students themselves will gain vital experience and learn new skills which will help them make the most of future opportunities.

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ABOVE Media responses to Multicultural London English ‘risk creating a situation where all young people who speak in a certain way are in danger of being labelled as potential criminals’.