

**MULTICULTURAL LONDON ENGLISH: THE NEW MULTIETHNOLECT IN
INNER LONDON CITY**

Ainhoa Fernández Vila
Degree in English Studies
Department of English Studies
Supervisor: Reinhard Stempel
2021-2022

ABSTRACT

The city of London, as many others in Europe, has been home for many immigrant families all over the years. Through interaction between immigrant and native British children, new and ethnically mixed friend groups have been created in the inner city of London. Along with the interaction, English spoken in these groups, and English in the areas where these heterogeneous peer groups are, has changed. The changes that English has suffered are to be called innovations, and the new *multiethnolect* formed thanks to these young working-class varieties of speakers is called *Multicultural London English* (MLE). Multiple language contacts due to social interaction is what has made MLE arise, diffuse and solidify as a new dialect possible. Because of this, it may be said that children and adolescents are of the utmost importance regarding the creation of MLE, as well as any other dialect or variety. The purpose of this paper is to examine the development, formation, spread, and characteristics that constitute MLE, as well as the perception that the British media generate of this *multiethnolect*, which makes more difficult the acceptance of the inner London city's new variety. For the mentioned purpose, I have structured the paper into four main sections. The first section will be devoted to a quick overview of London's sociohistorical background. The second one will highlight the characteristics of MLE, and two experiments will demonstrate which MLE innovations are most significant among young Londoners and that MLE is an ethnically neutral variety. Thirdly, I will discuss the sociolinguistic factors in MLE and how all play a part in the development of a new dialect. Finally, I'll briefly discuss the British media's unfavourable attitudes regarding MLE. I will conclude with a brief summary of the key points of this paper.

Keywords: Multiethnolect; Multicultural London English; multi-ethnic networks; adolescents; youth language; slang.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| 1. INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| 2. SOCIOHISTORICAL BACKGROUND IN LONDON | 2 |
| 3. LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF MLE | 6 |
| 3.1. PHONOLOGY..... | 8 |
| 3.2. MORPHOPHONOLOGICAL FEATURE | 9 |
| 3.3. MORPHOSYNTACTIC VARIABLE..... | 10 |
| 3.4. NEW LEXIS | 11 |
| 3.5. DISCOURSE PRAGMATIC INNOVATION..... | 12 |
| 4. SOCIOLINGUISTIC FACTORS | 13 |
| 4.1. RACE OR ETHNICITY | 14 |
| 4.2. SOCIAL CLASS..... | 16 |
| 4.3. GENDER | 18 |
| 4.4. AGE | 19 |
| 5. ATTITUDES TOWARDS MLE BY THE BRITISH MEDIA | 20 |
| 6. CONCLUSION | 21 |
| REFERENCES:..... | 23 |

1. INTRODUCTION

Immigrant people have made one of the largest European countries their home country. In Europe's major cities, as is the case in London, innovations in the host city languages are emerging in the heterogeneous inner city boroughs. As a result, "the English of inner city London has changed dramatically during the last fifty years" (Cheshire et al., 2013, p.1). Through the interaction between immigrant and native children, a new dialect known as *Multicultural London English* has been created.

MLE is to be said a *multiethnolect*, which according to Trudgill (2017) is "a variety of a host language which has developed as a result of its usage as a lingua franca in interactions between immigrants of different language backgrounds" (Trudgill, 2017, p. 23). Trudgill states that MLE has its origins in contact between "African, Caribbean and South Asian English, as well as Cockney and Jamaican Creole, and second-language Englishes as well as languages other than English" (Trudgill, 2017, p. 23). Despite the social segregation new immigrants suffered when they first arrived in the industrial city, their future generations overcame the situation. Through multi-ethnic friendships, children and adolescents have demonstrated that social interaction is of vital importance in the emergence and diffusion of MLE.

Multiethnolect speakers suffer from discrimination by the British media, but also from the disapproval among the British people with regards to MLE. The present paper aims at analyzing the creation, formation, diffusion and features that characterize MLE together with the perception that the British media create about this *multiethnolect*, hardening the acceptance of the inner London city's new variety.

For the mentioned purpose, I have structured the paper into four main sections. The first one will be devoted to a brief approach to the sociohistorical background in London. I will try to elucidate how MLE emerged and whether Labov's adaptation of Mufwene's Founder Principle applies to the creation of this new multiethnolect. The second section will show the features that characterize MLE, proving that MLE is an ethnically-neutral variety. Thirdly, I will outline the role of children and adolescents in MLE through sociolinguistic factors like race, social class, gender and age, and the impact they have on the creation of a new dialect. Lastly, I will shortly mention the negative attitudes the British media have towards MLE: how unfairly this London youth dialect has been judged

and discriminated against from a fundamental misunderstanding of the language in question. This will be concluded with a quick summary of the main ideas from this paper.

2. SOCIOHISTORICAL BACKGROUND IN LONDON

To explain how Multicultural London English emerged, we first have to go back to the 19th century, also known as the “stable time for English language” (Kerswill, 2018, p. 8). As a result of the standardized forms in which English was written on printed materials, many variants that may have arisen in spoken language were masked. The Industrial Revolution had already begun to alter Britain by the year 1800. Due to the rapid growth of the country’s industry, British industrializing towns and cities needed large-scale migrations. The majority of the movement was local, with towns and their surrounding areas maintaining communication with one another (Kerswill, 2018). It was then, when migration started, that new dialect formation took place. Labov (Labov, 2007) gave an adaptation of Mufwene’s Founder Principle as it follows:

Children growing up acquire the community’s specific accent and dialect features in childhood and adolescence. (...) For a dialect to be changed, there is a need of a minimum proportion of in-migrant people who have not acquired the local dialects. (...) Adolescents and young adults are more likely to integrate with local networks than are older adults, and would hence be linguistically more influential (Labov, 2007, as cited in Kerswill, 2018, p. 9).

MLE, like many other dialects, follows Labov’s explanation. It was immigrants’ children who started to integrate with local youngsters and created connexions in the community. Their heterogeneous peer groups gave both, Anglos and non-Anglos, the opportunity to acquire the necessary features so as to create their ‘own way of speaking’. Not only did the young new arrivals learn from the native people, but also the natives incorporated new features to their already existing local dialect. According to Kerswill (2018), migration-driven gains were restricted mostly to London’s suburbs by the conclusion of the decade. Thus, many families came from different boroughs of England, Wales and Ireland bringing their children with them. As they all were English speakers, new language contact did not happen by that century in London, but new linguistic features were then created in view of the contact of people (children above all) in mixed

working-class communities (Kerswill, 2018). Cockney (thought to have started in the mid-19th century) was one of the many results of this dialect contact within the community (Kerswill & Torgersen, 2017). Equally to Labov's explanation of the children's role in English and its linguistic features, we will later see how children have an irreplaceable effect on the language (change) and therefore on the creation, diffusion, and transmission of MLE.



Figure 1. Map of London, with the boroughs (from www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/Corporation/maps/london_map.htm). The East End does not have universally accepted boundaries. It is located in the city of London and River Lea could be understood to be its eastern boundary.

MLE has dramatically changed the English of inner-city London during the last fifty years, most of which have appeared in the East End of the metropolis (Kerswill, 2020). For further comprehension of how and why society created this new *multiethnolect*, I will divide the twentieth century into three main parts: 1918-1940, the 50s-80s (post World War 2 period), and from the 90s onwards. The term *multiethnolect* is the preferred appellation by linguists when referring to a linguistic variety influenced by several languages, generally created among youth communities in working-class, immigrant neighbourhoods of urban regions. Multiethnolect speakers frequently come

from diverse ethnic backgrounds, and their use of language is more closely related to their neighbourhood than to their nationality or that of their parents.

The oldest Hackney¹ speakers were born in the first half of the 20th century, when the neighbourhood was primarily white working-class with thick social networks². They only spoke Cockney. That is why this generation seldom came into touch with speakers of other languages, as immigrants were (Cheshire et al., 2013).

After World War 2, many Hackney inhabitants were transferred to new estates in the East whilst the reconstruction of London was being performed. Many of them were transferred to Havering (see Figure 1), a partially new borough of London that previously belonged to the county of Essex. Furthermore, the London Docks³ closed for approximately 15 years (1967-1981) leaving thousands of people without jobs and creating a population loss in the area around the docklands. Although the area was reconstructed, the original residents did not return to the docks (Fox et al., 2011). As a consequence of this exodus, Hackney was left with an aging population until it began to grow with the introduction of new foreign immigrants. The first immigrant group that arrived in Hackney was from the old British colonies in Asia, and nowadays “this group still makes up 10.3 per cent of the total population” (Cheshire et al., 2013, p. 66). Yet, immigrants from a broad variety of nations quickly joined them. At the beginning of their arrival, they were isolated from “white Anglo” society and could only interact with their own neighbours from immigrant⁴ groups in their community. As they did not know how to speak the language of the country they were living in, they could not interact with native people, and at the same time, native people had no interest in interacting with the new arrivals (Kerswill, 2020). Within each of these groupings, children only used their native language at home or with their friends in the community. English was exclusively a school language. Instead of acquiring the Standard English that white British children attained in their high class neighbourhood schools, educational institutions in their borough used the local London vernacular (Cheshire et al., 2013). These children that later became caregivers of the nowadays young MLE speakers, were born between the

¹ Hackney is an inner city borough in London very close to the City of London.

² In sociolinguistics literature, social network is a description of the organization of a certain speech community.

³ London Docks is located in inner east and southeast London, in the boroughs of Southwark, Tower Hamlets, Lewisham, Newham, and Greenwich (see Figure 1).

⁴ I use the term ‘immigrant’ as “someone who comes to live in a country from another country” (Macmillan Dictionary, n.d.).

1960s and the 1970s. It is their English that shows the absence of interaction across ethnic groups that was common at the time: “the Anglo caregivers speak standard London English, while the Afro-Caribbeans speak both London English and ‘patois’, an English-based Creole language [from Jamaica]” (Cheshire et al., 2013. p. 67).

By the late 1990s, the sociolinguistic situation of the neighbourhood has changed. The area of Hackney is now full of different ethnic groups, thus eroding the segregation amongst the people and creating a union between community members. Because of the number of new ethnicities, British people are now the minority of the population in the area and a rapid shift in the use of English is noticed among teenagers (Fox et al., 2011). Children only acquired English from their older siblings or peers. They did it at a very young age, as their caregivers did not speak English with them. Typically, their social circles are multiethnic, and bilingualism is something very common among children (Kerswill, 2020). Anglo speakers, as previously mentioned, are the minority, and native English is less easy to reach. Many immigrants’ children’s English in inner city London is a non-standard English, due to the heterogeneous friendships children have in school. This also includes native children, who are in touch with several language variations among their classmates in peer groups (Cheshire et al., 2013).

In their article on language contact and change in London, Cheshire et al. (2013) argued that MLE has been created as a result of the new innovations that such a multilingual situation in inner city has evolved:

The contact situation in inner city London is perhaps best described as arising from the process of group second language acquisition, but there are far more languages in contact in London than in the situations usually considered to produce group second language acquisition, and the linguistic complexity of inner city London makes it impossible and unrealistic to attempt to trace the direct effect of one language on another (Cheshire et al., 2013, p. 6).

To conclude the sociohistorical background, due to the immigration of the past 50 years, coupled with the children who were born from the newly arrived immigrants, a new dialect was formed. The next section will analyse MLE.

3. LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF MLE

MLE is a multiethnolect with several innovative features in phonetics, grammar and discourse-pragmatics (Cheshire et al., 2013). Most linguistic features found in this new dialect are never associated to a single ethnic group. “All the young speakers share a portion of their own linguistic resources reflecting the ethnically mixed nature and multilingual backgrounds of their communities” (Fox et al., 2011, p. 1). It is the ‘Feature Pool’ as described by Mufwene (2001) that will help us understand how and why one feature between all is selected and used by the speakers. According to Mufwene in his paper about language evolution (2001), every individual has their own distinct inputs, and among all speakers, they create the so-called ‘Feature Pool’ (Mufwene, 2001). The innovations that we will see in these sub-sections are the result of three strategies that limit the choices that the speakers of those features may make: overt marking of information structure, frequency and grammaticalization. The innovation will be produced by the combination of factors (Cheshire et al., 2013).

To explain the main linguistic innovations that characterise MLE, two research projects carried out by Kerswill et al. in London will be introduced. These two projects will be the ones showing which MLE innovations are the most influential in young Londoners and that MLE is an ethnically-neutral variety.

The first project is called *Linguistic innovators: the English of adolescents in London* (Kerswill et al., 2007a). In this project, adolescents’ speech, from the inner (Hackney) and outer (Havering) boroughs is studied. The terms ‘Anglo’ and ‘non-Anglo’ will be used along the paper: ‘Anglo’ meaning people with two or three generations of “white London” background, and ‘non-Anglo’ meaning those who are children or grandchildren of immigrant families. Hackney is a borough with a diverse ethnic population (Anglos and non-Anglos), whilst Havering is predominantly white and monolingual. All the adolescents that participated in the research project were post-16 education and from working class backgrounds. In addition, a few working-class Anglo adults (65-year-old) were recorded in both boroughs for a speech comparison with the one of adolescents (Kerswill et al., 2007a).

The results that could be found were as follows:

In Havering, adolescents used: a fronted GOAT vowel [əʏ], and also the morphosyntactic variable *was/weren’t* pattern for the past forms of BE. Although they

were predominantly white and monolingual, Hackney was not the source of the changes that occurred in the outer city boroughs (Kerswill et al., 2007a).

In Hackney, the youngsters used: a back raised GOAT vowel [ou], the morphosyntactic variable *was/wasn't*, they did not drop /h/ in lexical words and they did stress the pronouns, simplification of definite and indefinite article allomorphy (they always used [ə] and [ðə], replacing [ən] and [ði]), the creation of a new pronoun for first person singular *man* and, a new quotative expression: *this is+SPEAKER* (Kerswill et al., 2007a).

MLE speakers, such as these Hackney and Havering adolescents, share many features used by young people even if they are in different boroughs. Although all of these innovations were used by non-Anglos more frequently than by Anglos, Anglos with multi-ethnic friendship groups also use them in their everyday lives (Kerswill et al., 2007a). This also proves that contact between youngsters is one of the key factors for the multiethnolect to arise.

The second research carried out by Kerswill et al. is called *Multicultural London English: the emergence, acquisition and diffusion of a new variety* (Kerswill et al., 2007b). For this project, these scholars recorded more adolescents from the North London area (still in the inner city). On this occasion, there was a “different minority ethnic population mix” (Cheshire et al., 2013, p. 4) and different age groups were recorded (4-5 years old, 11-12 years old, 25-30 years old and some caregivers aged around 40). This was done to see at what age the MLE features start being reflected in young Londoners’ speech, as well as to test whether the use of MLE continues into adulthood (Kerswill et al., 2007b).

Amongst the recordings, there were three main findings: (1) older adults (caregivers aged 40) did not have any MLE features in their speech. As they grew up before MLE was established as such, none of the innovations influenced their speech. (2) Among the youngest children, the characteristics were set. There is a certainty that they got them from their peers and older youngsters (as their caregivers did not use them). (3) Young adults still used MLE features in their everyday life but in a less regular way than teenagers (Kerswill et al., 2007b).

The recordings that were registered were later played to adult Londoners, none of them could distinguish the ethnicity of any of the speakers. When the listeners were not Londoners, they all agreed that the speakers were from the city of London. But still, they

were not able to distinguish the ethnicity of any of the speakers (Kerswill et al., 2007b). This helps show that MLE is ethnically neutral.

In agreement with Cheshire et al. (2013), there are 3 proofs that determine the future of an MLE feature: First, can the features of MLE spread through the community? Second, would young children acquire that innovation and continue to use it in young adulthood? Finally, does it occur beyond London? (Cheshire et al., 2013). Based on the evidence of Cheshire et al. (2011) the answer to these questions will be explained below.

3.1. PHONOLOGY

MLE phonetics are acquired by the youngest non-Anglos age group (4-5 years old). As mentioned above, their phonetics has little to do with their caregivers, since the youngest non-Anglos learn English from their peers or older children. Not only do non-Anglos acquire the phonology of MLE at a young age, but so do Anglo children. What differentiates the two groups is that children from multilingual communities acquire the speech of their peers more than individuals from monolingual communities (who already know English). This is due to the fact that some multilingual community children may not be native English speakers (Kerswill & Torgersen, 2021).

Regarding the features, positions of the onsets of diphthongs have changed in contrast with old Hackney speakers between MLE speakers (Kerswill et al., 2012). There is an incrementation in GOOSE-fronting [u:] in young adults (16-19 years old). We can see the evidence of this incrementation through the data presented in Cheshire et al. (2011) where it states that among the non-Anglo young adults (aged 11-12) GOOSE vowel is “slightly less fronting than in adolescents” (Cheshire et al., 2013, p. 11). This means that in the process of growing, non-Anglos acquire the feature of GOOSE-fronting and this reaches its peak at the age of adolescence.

FACE-raising [eɪ] and GOAT-raising/backing [oʊ] do not have a concrete age for a change to be noticed amongst the young speakers. There is an interesting difference that can be analysed when comparing young adult Anglo and non-Anglo women. Young adult Anglo females tend to obtain a more conservative phonology in their speech, which is then followed by non-Anglo females (Cheshire et al., 2011). The reason female speakers of MLE tend to attain a phonology they are not accustomed to is related to social-class and gender, which will be explained deeply in the next section.

MOUTH [aʊ] and PRICE [aɪ] diphthongs are more central in MLE speakers and FOOT [ʊ] remains back. Although Anglos have a fronter FOOT than non-Anglos, is still fronter than the one in Hackney elder speakers. TRAP [a] and STRUT [ʌ] have an “anticlockwise direction, matching findings for a south-eastern short-vowel shift” (Kerswill et al., 2012, p. 269). Whether these phonetic innovations have to do with contact between different ethnicities or differences on age will be studied in the next section of our paper.

3.2. MORPHOPHONOLOGICAL FEATURE

There is a prominent morphophonological feature in MLE: simplification of indefinite [ə] and definite [ðə] article allomorphy. The usage of the indefinite article [ə] and the definite article [ðə] plus glottal stop before word-initial vowels, rather than the standard and mainstream [ən] and [ði], demonstrates that ethnic minority young people are driving allomorphy system simplification (Cheshire et al., 2011).

The borough of Tower Hamlets (see Figure 1) is in the east of the City of London, and since the 1970s many Bangladeshi immigrants established themselves in this location. According to Fox et al., (2011), nowadays the area boasts the biggest Bangladeshi population in the UK, as well as the largest Bangladeshi population outside of Bangladesh (Fox et al., 2011). It has been found that this morphophonological feature is prevalent among Bangladeshi male teenagers in London. As a consequence, Anglo males have been influenced and this innovation is now in their English (Cheshire et al., 2011). Similarly, Fox et al. (2011) argued that between MLE speakers, non-Anglo males were the ones that used the indefinite article [ə] before vowel-initial words the most. In addition, they also explained that this feature was not only used in the area of London. Immigrant non-Anglos from Italian families were found to be using this innovation in their speech in the city of Bedford (Fox et al., 2011). “Multi-ethnic peer group networks appear to provide the means of transmission between users” (Cheshire et al., 2011, p. 28). It could be thus asserted, that this is a feature of language change with origin in language contact.

Cheshire et al. (2011) found [ə] and [ðə] to be the dominant variants in the feature pool, used by both non-Anglos and, to a lesser extent Anglos (Cheshire et al., 2011). This output, as well as the morphosyntactic variable of *Past tense BE* patterns, are chosen from

the feature pool by means of the frequency-strategy, which will be explained later on (Fox et al., 2011).

3.3. MORPHOSYNTACTIC VARIABLE

One of the most noticeable morphosyntactic variables in MLE is the *Past tense BE*. There are two prominent patterns of levelling using nonstandard forms (Cheshire et al., 2011). (1) *Was/wasn't* system for the past forms of BE as in “*you was, wasn't you?; he was, wasn't he?*” or (2) *was/weren't* system for past forms of BE as in “*you was, weren't you?; he was, weren't he?*” (Kerswill et al., 2007a).

Pattern (1) is the most common prototype across the English-speaking world. In line with Cheshire et al. (2011), in their article “[this pattern] is to be said a basic ‘vernacular primitive’ and is acquired in child language, second language English interlanguages and decreolising English Creoles, where *was* occurs first as a lexical insertion” (Cheshire et al., 2011, p. 24). Equally to the English use of *does/don't* and *ain't*, pattern (2) has a distinctive negative form, which is a common motif in England (Kerswill et al., 2012).

There are differences between Hackney speakers and Havering speakers as we saw in the first London project (Kerswill et al., 2007a). The borough of Havering has a more standard English, similar to elderly Hackney speakers, so the pattern young MLE speakers use is the *was/weren't*. (Kerswill et al., 2007a).

Language contact can explain the differences found between the two boroughs (Fox et al., 2011). As pointed out above, Hackney is a multi-ethnic borough with an enormously heterogeneous linguistic background. All of which work in favour of the *was/wasn't* levelled pattern (Cheshire et al., 2011). Albeit both nonstandard *was/wasn't* are the preferred pattern for non-Anglo MLE speakers, Anglo adolescents favoured the *was/weren't* pattern. Even though this is the ‘common norm’ amongst the MLE adolescent speakers, friendships between the two groups are very relevant. Those with a multi-ethnic peer group tend to use the *was/wasn't* pattern, even Anglos (Kerswill et al., 2012). “MLE differs from other varieties of English in England, then, in exhibiting both the *was/wasn't* and the *was/weren't* pattern” (Cheshire et al., 2011, p. 25).

Frequency⁵ is the main strategy for the output features in the pool (Mufwene, 2001). None of the patterns shows the use of *were* in any positive context, which means that *was* is always the positive past form of BE. When it comes to the negative nonstandard, *weren't* is less used than *wasn't*. This means that *was* is the most frequent form in all negative and positive contexts. "There is an enormous pressure to use *was* among the young MLE speakers, since it dominates the feature pool" (Cheshire et al., 2011, p. 27).

3.4. NEW LEXIS

I would like to introduce briefly some new terminology that has been incorporated into the speech of young MLE speakers. Due to the effect of multi-ethnicity and linguistic interaction in London's inner city, terms acquired from different origins have been introduced to the MLE lexicon. Among them are the following: "*aks, black, brother, bruv, chav, cool, guy, olders, rude, safe, sister, stoned, weed, white and youse*" (Kerswill, 2013, p. 12). The words listed above have origins in Irish English, Northern British cities, the United States and Afro Caribbean region. "Young Londoners' language is firmly embedded in a range of overlapping repertoires [...] speakers are using different styles" (Kerswill, 2013, pp. 12-13).

Most of the new words incorporated into MLE are from Caribbean-influenced youth culture. This (as will be explored later in section 5) has given British media a subject to talk about. Newspapers and the British media decided to use the term '*Jafaican/Jamaican*' to refer to MLE, as according to them, "Jamaican patois' has intruded in England" (Kerswill, 2014, p. 449). They say that the variety of MLE sounds "black" and is due to its grammar and lexis above all, they have stated many times in the British media that "the whites have become black" (Kerswill, 2013, p. 31).

The new lexicon is due to the language contact of youngsters in the boroughs of London. As well as a person of Bangladeshi origin may use the term *geezer* - like British people used to in Cockney - an Anglo may use the term *blad* as a pragmatic marker or *ghetto* to refer to their 'not so high-class neighbourhood' (Kerswill, 2013).

⁵ Frequency is the main strategy because the more an innovation is used, the more people will start using it. When an innovation dominates the feature pool because of the frequent use among the speakers, it is difficult for another innovation to replace it. There is pressure for other speakers not to use the feature that is not the frequent one.

Different MLE speakers' ethnicities and social classes are what have made it possible to have a wider and more heterogeneous vocabulary in MLE.

3.5. DISCOURSE PRAGMATIC INNOVATION

The focus of this sub-section will be the creation of a new quotative in MLE: *this is + speaker*. Adolescents in inner London use this quotative and it does not only belong to Hackney speakers, but also to North London MLE speakers (Cheshire et al., 2011). It starts to be adopted by children aged 8-9 because younger individuals have not yet acquired all the quotative forms, hence are not proficient in narrative. Instead, the youngest ones use verbs like *say*, *go* or *like* as their quotatives (Kerswill et al., 2012).

An example of the use of *this is + speaker* could be: *this is my dad "tidy your room" and this is me "but I want to play with my toys"*. This quotative helps children to do narratives and it is used for certain pragmatic purposes, most notably in dramatic scenes in their stories (Cheshire et al., 2011). Furthermore, 8–9-year-old youngsters use *this is + speaker* as a quotative in narratives to express how the protagonist may feel, their actions or gestures. Though as children get older the quotative is less used. It becomes less frequent between young adolescents (aged 12-13) and it is rare to observe an adolescent (16-19) applying the quotative to their speech (Kerswill et al., 2012).

According to Cheshire et al. (2011), the source for this discourse pragmatic innovation cannot be due to a single ethnic influence. "Deictics are not unusual in quotative expressions, so as a quotative form it is unremarkable from a linguistic point of view" (Cheshire et al., 2011, p. 19). Although there are similar forms in other languages, there are too many languages and dialects in touch with each other in London. This is why a single one cannot be selected as the originator of any of the features. Again, Mufwene's *feature pool*⁶ is the best way to explain the emergence of this innovation: "from the many different combinations of features in the pool, speakers select some of the innovations and get to modify them into new structures in the output varieties" (Cheshire et al., 2011, p. 19). The more languages the more heterogeneous the feature pool will be, and the larger the scope for innovations.

⁶ The linguistic feature pool, according to Mufwene, is the sum of linguistic features present in a given individual's linguistic environment (Mufwene, 2001).

Salience⁷ is the most determining factor for this output to have emerged from the feature pool (Cheshire et al., 2011). The reason for salience to be the main strategy is that *this is + speaker* has many of the characteristics that salient forms usually have: it has free morphemes, it is easy to perceive as a quotative expression and it is performed in the narrative. “The use of the form both then and now may also have been indirectly influenced by language transfer, if some of the languages spoken by bilingual children in Hackney contain identificational quotatives” (Cheshire et al., 2011, p. 20). As with MLE vowels, there is not a concrete age in which a peak may be observed in the use of the new quotative. Nor is there an incrementation in the employment of the innovation as children get older noticed. Again, the young adolescent group is crucial for the acquisition of MLE quotative *this is + speaker* (Kerswill et al., 2012).

The formation of the combined contact features we refer to as MLE in today’s London inner city is best understood as the outcome of second language acquisition, and is best viewed as a feature pool. The same parameters that have been demonstrated to be important in other language interaction circumstances restrict the selection of characteristics of the pool (Cheshire et al., 2011). In the next section, children and teenagers play a critical part in these types of linguistic transformations (Fox et al., 2011).

4. SOCIOLINGUISTIC FACTORS

The social structure is hierarchical. “There is a direct correspondence between this stratification and all levels of language and language use” (Kerswill, 2009, p. 3). Internally, all human civilizations are divided: gender, age, ethnicity... There is little doubt that divisions will differ between communities and times.

People can be classified into major categories, and those categories are also the main factors that will have a brunt on language (Kerswill, 2009). The four main factors that have a large impact on our way of speaking are: social class, ethnicity, sex (or gender) and age (Kerswill, 2012). This means, that in order to understand how MLE has been created and transferred between speakers, we also need to know: (1) the specific social

⁷ Salience in this paper is meant to be “a factor that makes something easier to perceive” (Cheshire et al., 2011, p. 21).

circumstances of the connections (social class), (2) the “frequency and intensity of the contacts”, as well as the duration of the contacts, (3) the ages and gender of the persons involved (age and gender), and (4) the variations and commonalities between the different “language varieties in contact” (ethnicity of speakers) (Kerswill et al., 2012, p. 258).

Language is the way in which social identities are best shown. Despite the different social backgrounds, individuals constantly try to project their identities. This is always carried out in adolescence (Kerswill, 2012).

Initially, urban youth languages in Europe were viewed as new dialects. But actually, the term ‘multiethnolect’ might be considered the new form of speech among youngsters (Kerswill, 2013). For this multiethnolect to arise, several features must occur “in stable, long-term, co-territorial contact situations which involve childhood -and therefore proficient- bilingualism” (Kerswill et al., 2012, p. 260). The factors aforementioned interact between them and let a new multiethnic variety in a multilingual metropolis arise: MLE. In the next subsections, the four before-mentioned factors of social class, ethnicity, gender and age will be examined.

4.1. RACE OR ETHNICITY

For a considerable length of time, London has been the perfect destination for individuals from abroad. Nowadays 40% of all abroad born people living in the UK live in London. Inner London boroughs have the highest percentage of all (Kerswill, 2012). As explained in Section 2 of this paper, the largest migrant group of workers arrived after World War 2, most of which were from the Caribbean, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh (there are many other immigrant groups⁸ in London but they are not as large as these ones) (Kerswill, 2012).

In section 3 we already stated that children of immigrants (almost always) acquire as the second language the local vernacular of the place they are living in (in this case, the London vernacular). Nevertheless, they also include features from their native language, and when meeting their peers, they create the *feature pool* which was mentioned previously in this paper. Therefore, is ethnicity a main factor that alters language? To answer this question I would like to focus your attention to an ethnic

⁸ Other immigrant groups in London included “West Africans, Greeks, Cypriots, Chinese, Turks and Somalis, as well as people from other European countries and the USA” (Kerswill, 2012, p. 34).

minority group of Indians in the West of London: “Punjabi-speaking Indians in the district of Southall” (Kerswill, 2012, p. 34).

Kerswill (2012) studied this group and classified the typical Asian and London pronunciation features as follows:

| Asians | British |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Retroflex /t/: [ɖ] | Alveolar /t/: [t] including the glottal stop [ʔ] |
| Monophthongal <i>face</i> vowel | Diphthongal <i>face</i> vowel |
| Monophthongal <i>goat</i> vowel | Diphthongal <i>goat</i> vowel |
| Light /l/: [l] | Dark /l/: [ɫ] |

Table 1. Classification of Asian and London pronunciation features (information taken from Kerswill, 2012, p. 35).

In the article, Kerswill interviewed different Punjabi-speaking Indians and discovered that the oldest Punjabi speakers varied their English-speaking forms depending on who they were talking with, altering from Indian forms, to Cockney, to even RP. Contrary, the youngest speakers varied very little (Kerswill, 2012). This can be easily explained with history and integration. When the oldest Punjabi-speaking immigrants arrived in London, they needed to be integrated into this new ‘racist’ society and at the same time, they did want to keep their ties with India. As a result, they learned how to switch from some features to others when speaking English depending on who they were speaking with. New generations arrived in a completely different situation. When they were born, they lived in a more ethnically mixed community, as they themselves were the majority (British Asians). There was no need to switch between styles as they were in a heterogeneous environment and all had similar forms of speech (Kerswill, 2012).

Youngest speakers, both Anglos and non-Anglos, have integrated into their speech the various features that are already being used amongst their respective groups, such as the new quotative or the use of new vocabulary coming from AfroCaribbean origin. “The Indians’ Punjabi is just one of some 300 languages spoken in the city’s primary schools, with over 100 spoken in many of its boroughs” (Kerswill, 2012, p. 38).

To summarize, ethnicity is a category that deals with the alteration of language when in touch with some of the other factors (above all, age). It is not the same when a 60-year-old Punjabi-speaker speaks English with an Anglo old man, who will try to sound

as RP as possible. Likewise, when a 16-year-old non-Anglo British Asian speaks English with his ethnically mixed group of friends, who will speak English regardless of ‘standard English features’. The old man will not use his own language features when speaking the second language, hence, there will be no ‘features mix’ or ‘alternance’ in the language. The youngster is already in an integrated society and will find no need to switch when speaking English with his peers. At the same time, his peers will be in the same situation as this non-Anglo British Asian, and the *feature pool* will arise between them. MLE, as said before, is a multiethnolect, which would not be possible without all the heterogeneous features from the different varieties of young English speakers and their linguistic backgrounds.

4.2. SOCIAL CLASS

The Industrial Revolution in Britain resulted in a growing class division in the United Kingdom, which likewise resulted in a dialect and accent divergence. Working-class implications were strong in the new urban vernaculars that arose in cities like Manchester and Leeds. Alongside them was the elite’s more consistent ‘Received Pronunciation’, which included not just businessmen but also traditional landowners, top managers and public employees, as well as the nobility. As a result, social dialects were created in nineteenth-century British English, in addition to regional dialects (Kerswill, 2009).

Language has always been key for social class: socially valuable language varieties, such as RP or Standard English, represent linguistic capital (Kerswill, 2013). If you speak Standard English or RP, it will mean you are in high-class position, with a wealthy lifestyle and a high education. “Language constitutes symbolic capital which is potentially convertible into economic capital, and some kinds of job require more than others the employee’s control of a widely marketable standard language variety” (Milroy & Gordon, 2003, as cited in Kerswill, 2009, p. 5). Economic inequalities remain nowadays in society, most of them related to the class divisions that have been created.

When immigrant families arrived in London in the 50s, they tried to reach the most valuable language variety of English: RP. However, due to the rejection of immigrants by native Anglos, coupled with social segregation, if families wanted to find a job, they had no other choice but to abandon their vernacular tongue and try to sound

as an RP high class Anglo (Kerswill, 2012). In evidence of this, Kerswill stated in his article (2009) the following:

Many English speakers, particularly in the UK, feel the need to change their accent, and in doing so they may feel they are betraying their roots (...) for many, other people's negative attitudes are too high a price to pay for keeping their working-class or foreign accent, and the effort of acquiring another accent reaps sufficient rewards (Kerswill, 2009, p. 7).

When newborn generations started meeting their friends in school and creating their ethnically mixed peer groups, a new fear arose amongst the oldest generations. MLE is far from being a Standard English variety, and many families who suffered from social segregation emboldened their children to learn 'proper English'. They tried to discourage them from speaking MLE because of the 'what if' (Kerswill, 2009). Nevertheless, there is no big difference in the speech between high-class or working-class London youngsters. Both of them use MLE to a larger or shorter extent. High-class young Londoners may be less aware of the segregation that lower class people suffer as a result of their accent. But youngsters, regardless of their class, do not see MLE as a 'working-class speech': "the inner city speech [MLE] is innovative, fashionable and cool, while the outer city is behind the times" (Kerswill, 2013, p. 26).

However, it must be said that this does not apply equally to both genres (as we will see in the next sub-section). We see both social class grading and polarization in language use. "Men and women's usages differ in systematic ways even within a class" (Kerswill, 2009, p.14), and class interacts with gender. Language usage is particularly sensitive to class disparities, both in terms of elements that can be counted and those that cannot. As a result, language use has the ability to provide information on social systems (Kerswill, 2009).

New generations are making possible a change in this stratified situation. The MLE has made young Londoners a more linguistically united and less divided society, regardless of their class, ethnicity or gender (Kerswill, 2013).

4.3. GENDER

“Until the 1980s, stratification research was ‘gender blind’” (Kerswill, 2009, p. 6), that is, as if women did not exist or matter. This was due to their spouses’ perception of them as economically reliant (Kerswill, 2012). Modern stratification systems incorporate the primary earner in a home or a mix of both, as a result of the massive growth in women’s engagement in the economy. Nonetheless, women and men were not equally treated, nor did women feel equal to men in their social class. Women in this social stratum have less both non-economic and economic capital than males. As a result, many were hesitant to identify as working-class (Kerswill, 2009).

“Women use slightly more ‘standard’ or ‘prestige’ features than men in their own social class grouping. (...) working-class women’s striving to dissociate themselves from the working class lies in their adoption of language features characteristic of a higher class” (Kerswill, 2009, p. 7). This occurred over decades, as in Cheshire’s (2011) article, which shows that one of the main distinctions that could be found in the data about MLE was that Anglo females have conservatism towards language. Instead of using a raised FACE diphthong as other MLE speakers, women used a more traditional fronted diphthong, lower than the MLE spokespeople’s. There can also be found a sign of conservatism in the youngest group of Anglo female speakers when avoiding the PRICE-MOUTH crossover⁹ that the rest of the adolescents use (Cheshire et al., 2011).

In Rob Drummond’s article (2017), the gender difference in speech is identified by female speakers on a project called *The Urban British English and Identity* (UrBEn-ID). In this project, they explore over two years the use of language among 14-16-year-olds in inner Manchester city (where, as MLE in London, a young multiethnic vernacular is also arising: *MUBE*). The playing of gender identities on youth language is the main goal of this study (Drummond, 2017). According to one of the girls on the project, a gender difference was identified amongst her friends when chatting:

The boys, the boys have got different speech to the girls (...) I don’t know, they just speak like, ghetto and like... they are just weirdos, just *mongs* the lot of them. They use different words

⁹ Anglo females, unlike the rest of MLE adolescent speakers, did a “very marked distance between the onset of MOUTH (front) and that of PRICE (mid-back)” (Cheshire et al., 2011, p. 12). Therefore, no crossover happened between MOUTH and PRICE diphthongs.

that I wouldn't use like, erm, what was one of them... *bloodclaat* or something like that, they just talk shit (Megan, 2016, as cited in Drummond, 2017, p. 17).

It can be reflected in the article how girls are able to see that there is a difference between their speech and their peers', but they are not aware of why that is. They know that boys and girls in their group of friends use different lexicon, or even some different features when pronouncing words. They notice that the speech their male peers use sounds like 'ghetto', and they criticize it as if it was something bad. Intuitively they associate speaking 'ghetto' with something negative, to be from a lower-class society than the one they are. Speaking ghetto is bad because you do not look as high-class as you should.

4.4. AGE

For changes in language to occur, propagation between speakers must happen so the changes can start emerging and diffusing. Kerswill et al. provide in their (2012) article, three key relationships between people through which changes in language (or MLE) occur: (1) "caregivers' influence on infants and young children" (until age 6); (2) "influence of peer groups on preadolescents" (ages 6-12); (3) influences on adolescents (ages 12-17) (Kerswill et al., 2012, p. 261). During these early years, when children have not aged 6, they absorb phonologically and sociolinguistically important variability "by paying close attention to fine-grained phonetic variation" (Kerswill et al., 2012, p. 262). They are like sponges, absorbing everything going on around them, everything they soak in builds connections in their brain. Later on, in preadolescence, they start getting influenced by their peer groups. In MLE it is the peak age for children to acquire the features from their older friends or siblings. "Preadolescence is the life stage where other children gradually become the decisive models for dialect acquisition at the expense of adults" (Kerswill et al., 2012, p. 262). After reaching 13, it is very difficult for adolescents to acquire new features. They have already created their own friendship groups and formed their "youth subculture". As Kerswill et al. (2012) state, "the ability to modify phonologies (and probably grammars) has become restricted in the same way as for adults" (Lenneberg, 1967, as cited in Kerswill, 2012, p. 264).

In sum, children are the ones who make changes in language possible. For that to happen, they must be in contact with their caregivers, peers and other MLE speakers at young ages. With preadolescence as the peak age for them to acquire MLE features, contact with other multiethnolect speakers is of the utmost importance because, once preadolescence is over, their ability to acquire new features will be restricted.

5. ATTITUDES TOWARDS MLE BY THE BRITISH MEDIA

Young peoples' language is frequently seen adversely by the media and "social commentators" in the United Kingdom (Drummond, 2017, p. 1). Multiethnolectal speech like MLE is increasingly being criticised "by a wide spectrum of authority figures, particularly in education, among members of Parliament, and some sections of the print and televisual media" (Kerswill, 2014, p. 434). The argument is frequently made that young people, particularly black guys, are perceived as being unable to go from an MLE-style variety, packed with slang, to a more conventional variety in situations where this is necessary (Kerswill, 2014).

When in 2011 the melees happened in London, some rioters could be heard speaking MLE, and many of them were black. As expected, many commentators voiced their opinions, one of whom was David Starkey. Starkey linked MLE with violence and black culture, stating that "white people had bought into it, becoming 'black' in the process" (Starkey, 2011, as cited in Kerswill, 2014, p. 434). As we have seen along with this paper, MLE is a multiethnolect resulting from a very heterogeneous background community in the inner city of London. MLE speakers are of many different ethnicities, genders, Anglos, non-Anglos, adolescents, children... they all share something in common, and it is not violence or skin colour. What they share is MLE, something they feel identified with, something that gives them the feeling of belonging. As concluded from the UrBEn-ID project "this distinction between white and black speech is becoming less and less meaningful or, arguably, even perceptible (...) 'talking black' is a difficult concept to grasp; rather, they are simply talking 'teenage'" (Drummond, 2017, p. 18).

As seen in sub-section 4.1., most of the bilingual MLE speakers (if not all) are very capable of code-switching. What occurs is that on many occasions they do not want to apply other features that are not theirs in different situations, because what they are looking for is acceptance (Kerswill, 2012). "Language is one of the most powerful tools

we possess in the performance of personal and group identity, which means it is something on which we are always judged. (...) it seems particularly unfair when the discrimination stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of the language in question” (Drummond, 2017, p. 19).

6. CONCLUSION

All in all, as many other urban language varieties across Europe, as it may be the case of *Kiezdeutsch* in Germany, *Rinkeby Swedish* in Sweden, or *Copenhagen Multiethnolect* in Denmark (Fox et al., 2011), MLE is a new multiethnolect formed by different ethnic and linguistic background youngsters in inner London city. There is an essential factor that makes the emergence and diffusion of a multiethnolect possible: social interaction. For MLE, children and adolescents are of the utmost importance as it is them who accomplish this function through their multi-ethnic friendships. Thanks to the integration of immigrants’ children into London society and their new heterogeneous friendship networks, innovations in language have happened and, along with the diffusion of these innovations, a new dialect known as MLE has arisen.

Amongst the linguistic features in MLE, new positions of the onsets of diphthongs are to be found in phonetics; simplification of indefinite and definite article allomorphy in morphophonology; the *Past tense BE* variable in morphosyntactics; terms that have been acquired from different origins in MLE lexicon; and the creation of a new quotative *this is + speaker* as the discourse pragmatic innovation are the features, we have been through in this paper.

Despite the fact that MLE is on its journey to a successful future amongst its speakers, it is still challenged with major obstacles when it comes to dealing with the British media. The barriers that the media is imposing on MLE do nothing but increment individual’s misunderstandings and cause panic concerning new linguistic varieties. Because of the London riots in 2011, in which various protesters were heard speaking MLE, the media connected this multiethnolect with ‘talking black’. Consequently, moral panic within British society started and citizens commenced to see MLE as a ‘threat’.

My paper has the aim of showing that MLE is a multiethnolect that has nothing to do with a concrete race/ethnicity, gender or age. MLE is not ‘talking black’ or a ‘threat’ to society. MLE is arguably, an amazing (socio)linguistic creation proceeding from an immense variety of linguistic backgrounds, amongst which several linguistic features have been chosen by its speakers. MLE is both, personal and group identity (Drummond, 2017). Therefore, the bias of the media against MLE should be dealt with in order to prevent linguistic discrimination and future misunderstandings of the language.

REFERENCES:

- Cheshire, J., Fox, S., Kerswill, P., & Torgersen, E. (2013). Language contact and language change in the multicultural metropolis. *Revue Francaise de Linguistique Appliquee*, 2, 63–76.
- Cheshire, J., Kerswill, P., Fox, S., & Torgersen, E. (2011). Contact, the feature pool and the speech community: The emergence of Multicultural London English: Multicultural London English. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 15(2), 151–196. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9841.2011.00478.x>
- Drummond, R. (2017). (Mis)interpreting urban youth language: White kids sounding black? *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20(5), 640-660. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2016.1260692>
- Fox, S., Arfaan, K., & Torgersen, E. (2011). *The emergence and diffusion of Multicultural English*. SilviaFox; John Benjamins Publishing Company. <https://benjamins.com/catalog/silv.8.02fox>
- Kerswill, P. (2009). *Language and social class*. 18.
- Kerswill, P. (2012). *Language variation 1—Social factors: Class and ethnicity*. 22.
- Kerswill, P. (2013). Identity, ethnicity and place: The construction of youth language in London. In P. Auer, M. Hilpert, A. Stukenbrock, & B. Szmrecsanyi (Eds.), *Space in Language and Linguistics* (pp. 128–164). De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110312027.128>
- Kerswill, P. (2014). The Objectification Of 'Jafaican'. The Discursial Embedding Of Multicultural London English In The British Media. In J. Androutsopoulos (Ed.), *Mediatization and Sociolinguistic Change*. De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110346831.427>
- Kerswill, P. (2018). Dialect formation and dialect change in the Industrial Revolution: British vernacular English in the nineteenth century. In L. Wright (Ed.), *Southern English Varieties Then and Now* (pp. 8-38). De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110577549-002>
- Kerswill, P. (2020). Contact and New Varieties. In *The Handbook of Language Contact* (pp. 241-259). John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119485094.ch12>
- Kerswill, P., Cheshire, J., Fox, S., & Torgersen, E. (2007a). *Linguistic innovators: The English of adolescents in London*. (Research Report RES-000-23-0680). Swindon: ESRC. <http://doc.ukdataservice.ac.uk/doc/6127/mrdoc/pdf/6127uguide.pdf>
- Kerswill, P., Cheshire, J., Fox, S., & Torgersen, E. (2007b). *Multicultural London English: The emergence, acquisition and diffusion of a new variety* [Research Projects]. E·S·R·C:

- Economic & Social Research Council.
<https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fss/projects/linguistics/multicultural/index.htm>
- Kerswill, P., Cheshire, J., Fox, S., & Torgersen, E. (2012). English as a contact language: The role of children and adolescents. In D. Schreier & M. Hundt (Eds.), *English as a Contact Language* (pp. 258-282). Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511740060.015>
- Kerswill, P., & Torgersen, E. (2017). London's Cockney in the Twentieth Century: Stability or Cycles of Contact-Driven Change? In R. Hickey (Ed.), *Listening to the Past* (pp.85-113). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781107279865.006>
- Kerswill, P., & Torgersen, E. (2021). *Tracing the origins of an urban youth vernacular: Founder effects, frequency and culture in the emergence of Multicultural London English*. 30.
- Labov, William. (2007). Transmission and Diffusion. *Language*, 83(2), 344–387.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2007.0082>
- Mufwene, S. (2001). *The ecology of language evolution*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511612862>
- Trudgill, P., & Hannah, J. (2017). International English: A Guide to Varieties of English Around the World (6th ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315192932>