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# Multicultural London English: a new dialect, a style, or both?

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# Multiethnolect: *what's that?*

- A term often applied to the speech of young people living in multicultural and multilingual districts of large cities
- It's a variety of the majority language
- It's shared by most or all (young) people living in an area
  - Therefore ethnically neutral
- It is both a **style** and a **vernacular** or **dialect**:



# Labels

- Pejorative terms (invented, or at least propagated by the media):
  - *Kanak Sprak* (Germany)
  - *Kebabnorsk* (Norway)
  - *Smurfentaal* (Netherlands)
  - ***Jafaican*** (London)
- Academics' terms:
  - *Kiezdeutsch* (Germany – Wiese 2012)
  - *rinkebysvenska* (Sweden – Kotsinas 1989)
  - *straattaal* (Netherlands – Cornips et al.)
  - ***Multicultural London English*** (London – Kerswill/Cheshire)

# Dialect contact in London in the past

Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (2003) *Historical Sociolinguistics*:

**1500: the population of London was about 50,000**

**1600: 200,000**

**1700: 500,000**

In 1700 only 15% of Londoners had been born in London

John Stow (1598 *Survey of London*):

London's population is "by birth for the most part a mixture of all counties, by blood gentlemen, yeomen and of the basest sort without distinction"





## Brick Lane, Bethnal Green

1743 La neuve église  
(Huguenots)

1809 Wesleyan chapel

Great Synagogue, late 19<sup>th</sup>  
century  
(Jews from Poland and  
Russia)

Jamme Masjid Great  
Mosque, 1976  
(Bangladeshis)

# Effect of historical migration on London English?

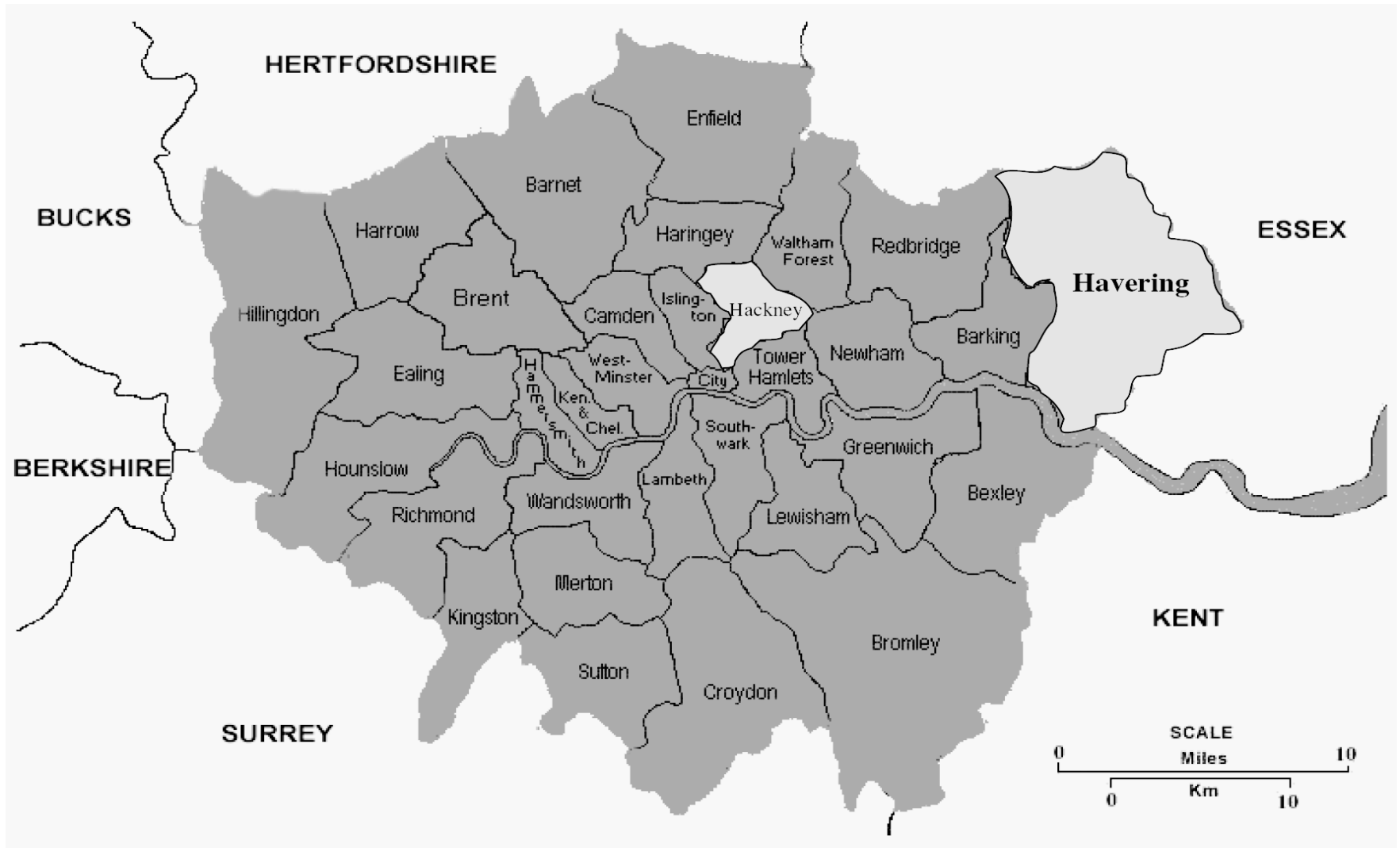
- Many innovations due to dialect contact as a result of migration from the north:
  - Introduction of *they, their, them* in Middle English
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> singular –s for –*eth* in Early Modern English

(Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2003)

# Out- and in-migration in London

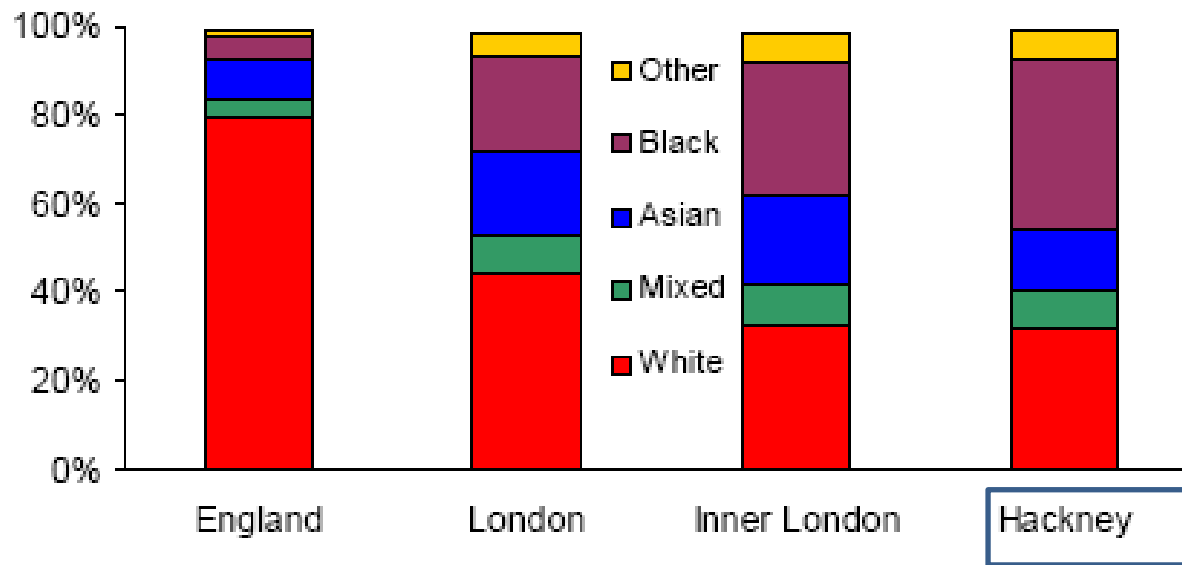
- Big increase in immigration from 1948
  - Accompanied by outward migration of existing populations to new social housing in suburbs
  - Caribbeans, followed by South Asians
  - From the 80s, West Africa, Somalia, Turkey, South America, North Africa

# London boroughs



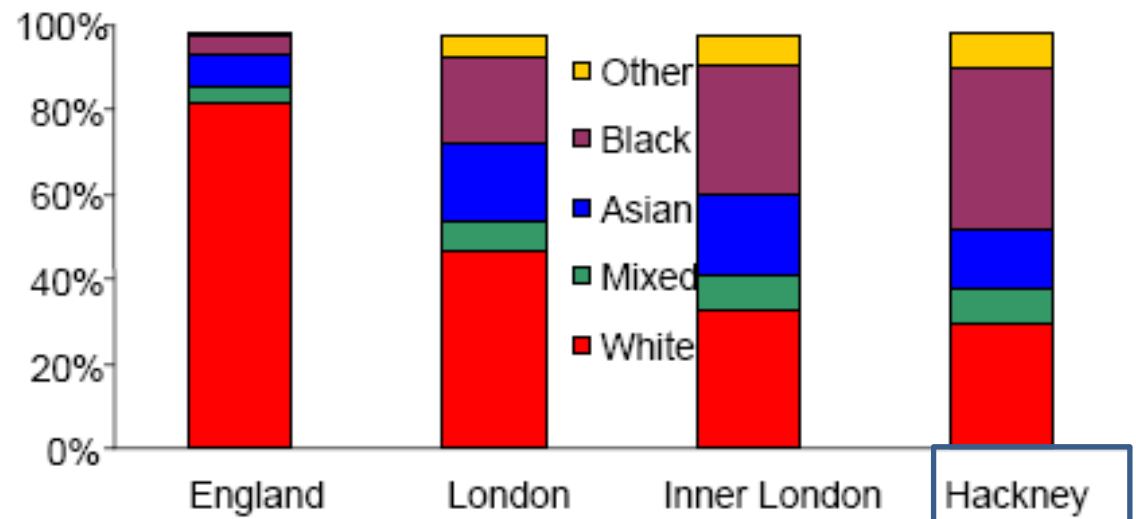


**Figure 6: Primary school pupils by ethnicity**

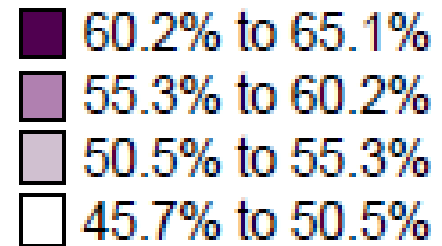


London  
school  
children by  
ethnicity

**Figure 8: Secondary School pupils by ethnicity**



## Percentage of Ward Populations who are NOT White British



In 2011, 54 % of  
primary school and 44  
% of secondary school  
children had English as  
an additional language

# Hackney, 2001

# The London projects 2004–10

- *Linguistic Innovators: the English of Adolescents in London (2004–7)*
- *Multicultural London English: the emergence, acquisition and diffusion of a new variety (2007–10)*
- Jenny Cheshire, Paul Kerswill, Sue Fox, Eivind Torgersen, Arfaan Khan

*Linguistic Innovators* project:  
ethnicities of 16-19 year olds

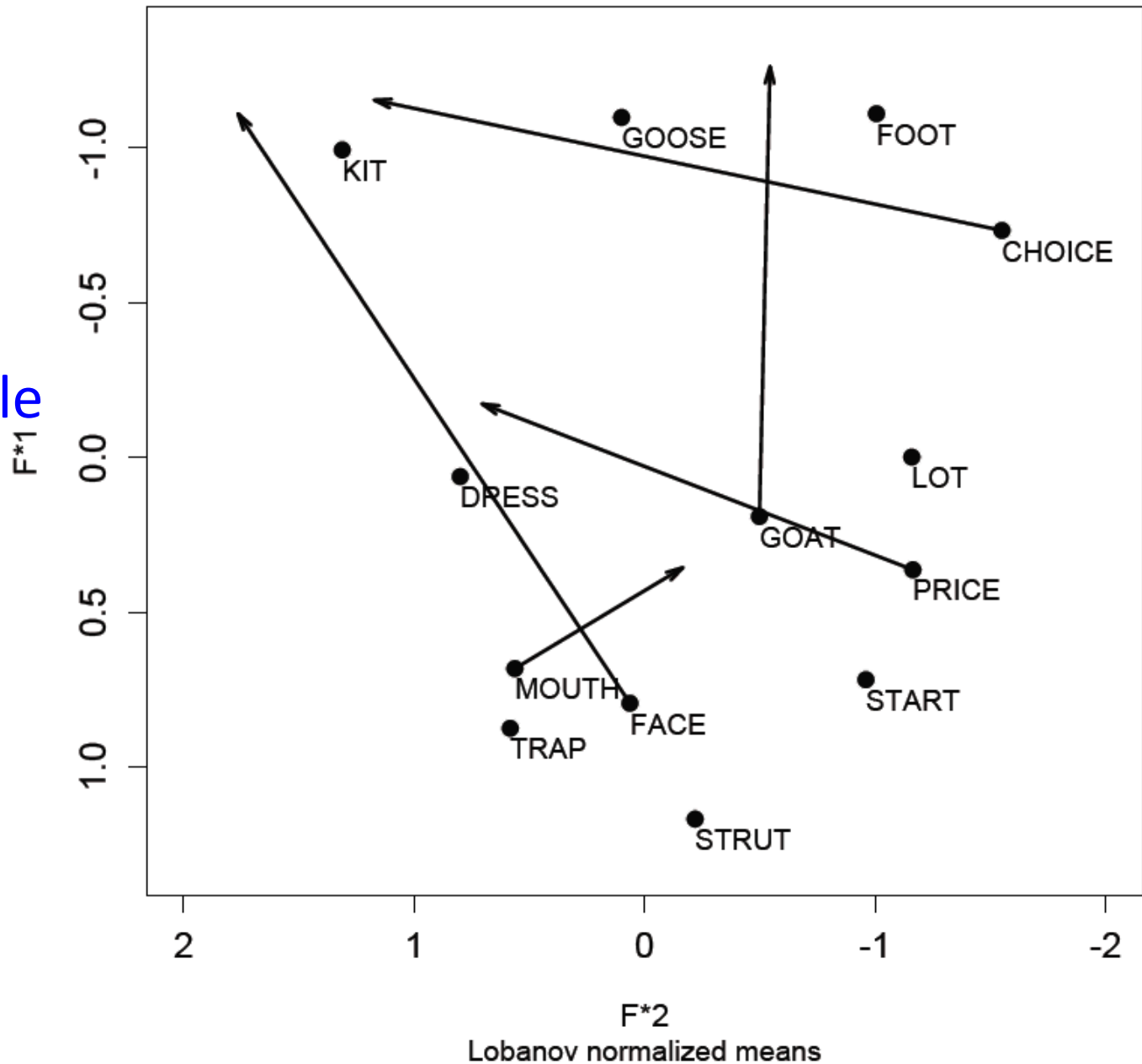
Anglo	22	Moroccan	2
Mixed race	8	Jamaican	1
Afro-Caribbean	6	Colombian	1
Bangladeshi	6	Portuguese	1
Nigerian	2	Ghanaian	1

## *MLE* project: ethnicities of young speakers, aged 5-17

Anglo	19	Bangladeshi	2
Afro-Caribbean	12	Ghanaian	2
Mixed race	10	Moroccan	2
Turkish	8	Kurdish	2
Nigerian	6	Portuguese	2
Bengali	3	Somali	2
'Black African'	3	Albanian	1
Turkish	3	Philipino	1



Diphthong  
system of  
elderly male  
speaker  
from  
Hackney  
born 1918

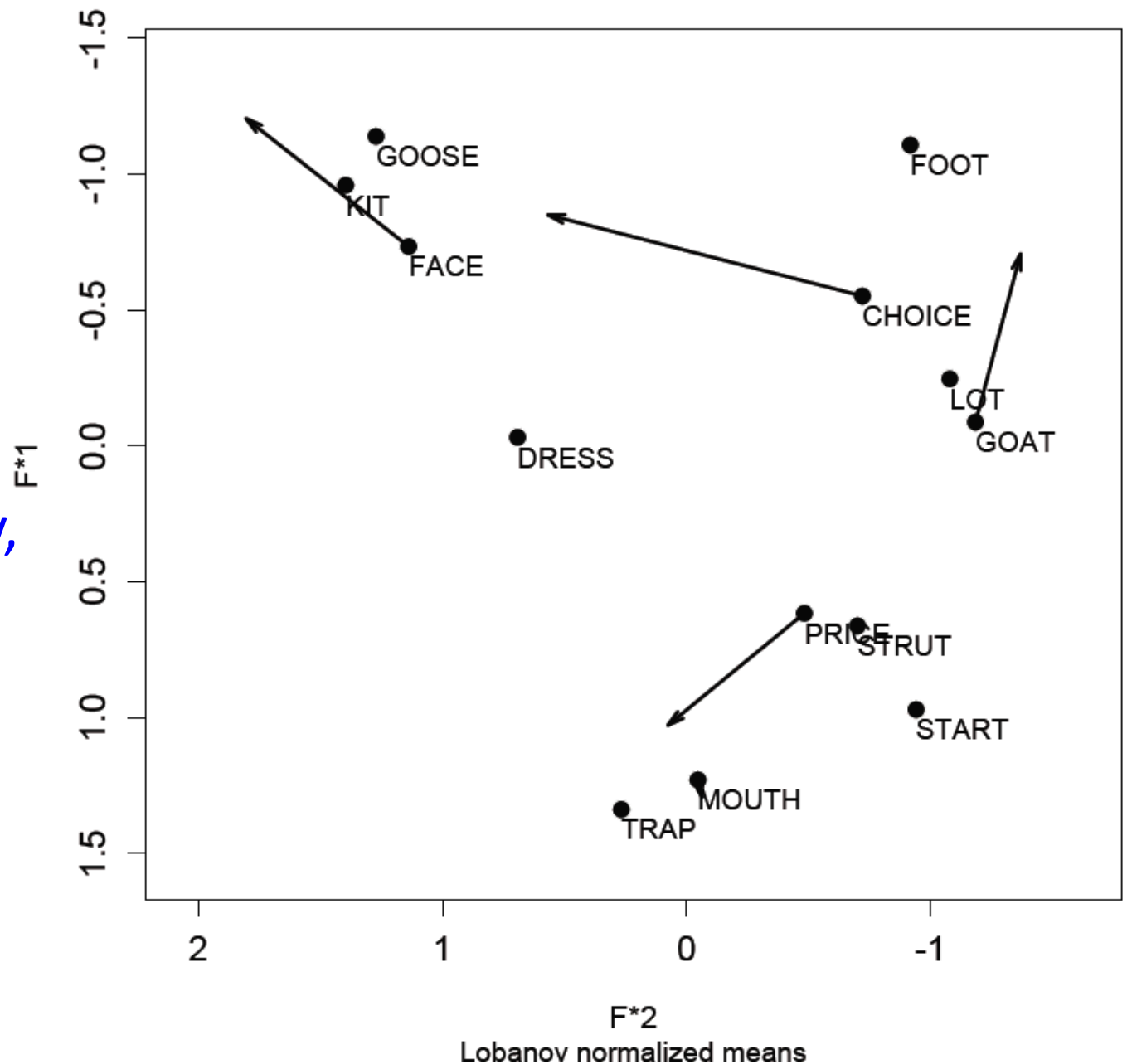


## Joyce, aged 76

I used to work in an insurance office and on the switchboard . and it we used to see him come in and out delivering the post he was a postman um the other little postman that used to come in his name was . Wally and we used to say "Wally what's his name" and describe him say "oh you mean babyface" cos he was quite yeah quite a nice face and with his hat on so we said "yeah what's his name" he said "well we all call him babyface . but his name's Fred" so er this Saturday morning . he came in with the post and we're just chatting and he says to me "would you like to come to the pictures today . tonight?" I said "oh well" I said "where do you live?" he said "upper Clapton" and I said "well I live in East Ham" so he come down to East Ham and er we went to the pictures there and from then onwards we were always together . we were together nearly forty years . he was my real my first really true boyfriend .



Diphthong  
system of  
young male  
from Hackney,  
Afro-  
Caribbean  
origin, born  
1989



## Alex, aged 17

I mean I literally walked past two thugs that I didn't not know but they just grabbed me by the hood swang me in a alley and had me at **knifepoint**. and I couldn't do nothing but I said . and they said "where you from?" I said "east london that's where I'm from" **this is them** "don't be funny" cos they're . I was right in a bit of east London so they said "don't be funny with me like that cos I'll stab you" and I said "I'm not trying to be funny" **this is them** "what area are you from . what part?" **this is me** "I'm from Haggerston . Fields" and then like they just said "oh yeh I don't like that area re re re" and then like some hero. thank god there is some typical heros who. and it's like if you're short don't even bother come **over** because you're just gonna get stabbed yourself like .



# When did MLE start?

- 1950s on: Anglos (white British) and Afro-Caribbeans (mainly from Jamaica) formed the most numerous groups
- Their linguistic repertoires differed:

	London vernacular (‘Cockney’)	London Jamaican (‘Patois’)
Anglos	✓	
Afro-Caribbeans	✓	✓



# The view from academe, c. 1984

- Mark Sebba and Roger Hewitt also noted an intermediate ‘**Black Cockney**’ or ‘**multiethnic/multiracial vernacular**’
  - Apparently used in *adolescent peer groups only*
  - So not actually a **native dialect**, but more a **style**
- Seeds of MLE visible in these comments

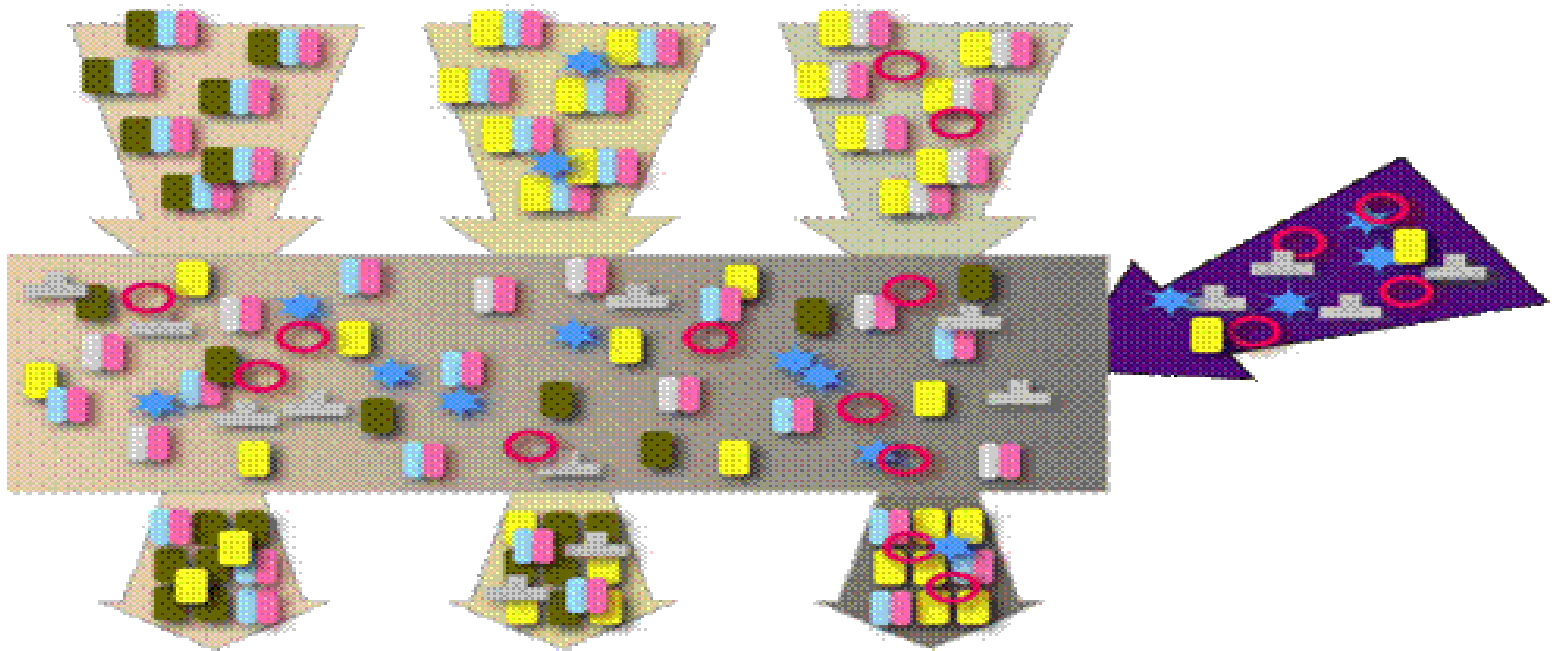
# A criminologist speaks

- Criminologist John Pitts notes the start of a new youth language among **young black people** in the East End in the early 1980s, when their deteriorating social position was preventing them from living up to their parents' expectations
- Pitts argues that the new dialect reflects a '**resistance identity**'.
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gd3SJ6qakyY> (29 minutes in)

# Treating MLE as a dialect

- How did the linguistic features get into MLE?

Competition and selection in the **feature pool**  
(Mufwene 2001):



# Treating MLE as a dialect

The feature pool includes features from at least:

- Englishes of the Indian subcontinent and Africa
- learner (L2) varieties of English
- Caribbean Creoles and their indigenised London versions
- African English Creoles (e.g. Sierra Leone, Nigeria)
- traditional 'Cockney' features from the existing Anglo communities
- Standard English from various sources

All children, bilingual and monolingual alike, are exposed to all these features from a very young age

# Contact between languages in inner-city multiethnic London

## Direct language contact?

Vocabulary as a sign of cultural influence:

- *ends, whagwan, yardie, batty man, mandem, boydem, bredren*
  - Almost all of Jamaican origin

Vowels of **GOAT** and **FACE** are near-monophthongs

- probably reflecting monophthongs in the languages of the immigrant groups, including Caribbean, Indian and African English

Their frequency of use correlates with **ethnicity** and with **the ethnicity of a speaker's friendship group**



# Contact between languages in inner-city multiethnic London

## Simplification

- Loss of indefinite and definite article allomorphy:
  - *They swang me in a [?] alley*
  - *The [?] apple*

# Contact between languages in inner-city multiethnic London

- Simplification of irregular plural forms:
  - *if you put all the **mans** together . make them fight a cause together* (Cheshire 2013)

also **mens**, **man**<sub>plu</sub> and **mandem**

- Origin in Jamaican Creole?
  - but distinct from Jamaican Creole in the range of uses

# Contact between languages in inner-city multiethnic London

## Grammaticalisation

E.g. pronoun *man*

*I don't care, it's her personality **man's** looking at . I'm not even looking at the girl proper, like* (Cheshire 2013)

- This use of 'man' is similar to Jamaican Creole



# Contact between languages in inner-city multiethnic London

## A new quotative

*This is me “don’t be funny”* (Cheshire et al 2011, Fox 2010)

- doesn’t appear to come directly from other languages, but is arguably simpler for language learners to use than *I’m like* or *I said*
  - Especially when there are lots of languages in contact

# Contact between languages in inner-city multiethnic London

## Vocabulary

- as a sign of cultural influence: *ends, whagwan, yardie, batty man, mandem, boydem, bredren* ...

But other forms have developed from the communicative context, the result of indirect language contact

Their frequency of use correlates with **ethnicity** (most features are used more often by non-Anglos than Anglos)

But also with a speaker's **friendship network** (speakers with multiethnic friendship networks use the innovations more often, whether they are Anglo or non-Anglo)



# Innovations in inner-city London

## Phonology

- trajectories of some diphthongs have become shorter e.g. PRICE, FACE and GOAT are almost monophthongs e.g. *knife* (Kerswill, Torgersen & Fox 2008)
- initial /h/ is pronounced

## Prosody

- Staccato (syllable-timed) rhythm (Torgersen and Szakay 2012)

## Discourse markers

- *got the right moves innit but I ain't telling you though **still***
- ***allow blud** it ain't worth it*
- *we're safe like **you get me*** (Torgersen et al 2011)

## General extenders

- *I had to pay them a score **and reh teh teh***
- *he gets all of James Bond's money **and ra***

# MLE – Social background

## The **social ecology** of London's East End

- Immigration
- Poverty – at the time of the 2001 census Hackney had the **highest rating on indicators of deprivation out of all 355 boroughs** in England
  - Poverty leaves all groups in these boroughs with few opportunities for interaction with the wider, mainstream, mobile community
- At the same time, there is the formation of close-knit neighbourhood networks

# MLE – The sociolinguistic ecology

Language histories are very varied:

- **Dom:** aged 17; parents Colombian; came to London aged 2; parents speak no English; he and his younger sister interpret for them; speaks English, Spanish, Spanglish; acquired English at school.
- **Alex:** aged 16; mother German; lived with her and Antiguan stepfather till 13; since then he and his brother have lived with Maltese grandmother; father Maltese/Ghanaian; father has never lived with them but he and Alex work together; understands Maltese and speaks a little.

# MLE – The sociolinguistic ecology

- Much diversity in children's language backgrounds
- Much diversity in the way that children acquire English,
- Much diversity in the **feature pool**
- Some bilingual children have to communicate with their friends in English before they are fully proficient
- Lack of a focused target model for the acquisition of English
- Flexible language norms

# MLE – The sociolinguistic ecology

- Is the sociolinguistics of the area likely to promote the formation of a multiethnolect?
- How is the feature pool visible ‘on the ground’?
- We can look at some child–child interactions
  - This gives a picture of how natural acquisition of English may lead to some of the features of MLE

## Interaction in an 8 year old peer group (2)

(Uzay is Turkish, Dumaka is Nigerian)

Uzay        to . this was . he . this this was this . thi this thi  
             this thi

[simultaneous speech not transcribed]

Dumaka    this this was Ulash [Arfaan: yeah] to Noam bom  
             bom ..

Uzay        ey <Arfaan laughs> . no . he was doing like this  
             to Lauren.

Dumaka    [no xxx xxx I didn't say . I didn't I didn't say  
             [simultaneous speech not transcribed]

Uzay        look you're laughing he was doing like this to

Dumaka    I didn't I didn't I didn't I swear/

Arfaan     [Uzay: uh uh] okay okay

Uzay        and he's doing like this .

Dumaka    I didn't how could I do that . liar liar pants on fire



MLE as style



# Style shifting in MLE

Courtney and Aimee: Afro-Caribbean girls aged 18

- ❖ Courtney's GOAT vowel at the beginning of the interview is [əʊ]
- 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** [ɔʊ] **home** [ɔʊ]
- Courtney: use the library then **go** [əʊ] **home** [əʊ] .

❖ Courtney's GOAT vowel in banter style is [ɔʊ]

- Aimee: I'll be more allowed to bring home a woman than a African
- Dexter: yeah .
- Courtney: I **don't** [ɔ] **know** [ɔʊ] about . **no** [ɔ].

# Style shifting among middle class youngsters

- With her ear glued to her mobile phone, my 11-year-old daughter, Millie, was deep in conversation, her brow furrowed as she discussed some arrangement with a friend.
- I listened in, *as I made jam in the kitchen*. ‘*Lol*, that’s well *sick!*’ Millie said. ‘*DW*, *yolo!*’
- This indecipherable code-speak (‘sick’ means awesome, ‘DW’ is don’t worry and ‘yolo’ means you only live once) was delivered in an accent I could only place as somewhere between South London, downtown Los Angeles and Kingston, Jamaica.
- It certainly isn’t indigenous to our home village of Ashted, in *the rolling Surrey hills*.
- When Millie ended the call, she turned to me, smiled and asked: ‘What’s for supper please, Dad?’ in perfect *Received Pronunciation*.
- It seems that after less than a month at secondary school, my daughter is now bi-lingual — but it is not French or German in which she is suddenly fluent.
- Her new language, comprising alien words and abbreviations delivered with faux West Coast American inflections, will not stand her in good stead when she embarks on *a school trip to visit museums in Berlin*.
- Millie now speaks a version of what academics call ‘*Multicultural Youth English*’, or *MYE*, which she has picked up from her friends — *middle-class girls from the Home Counties*.

Nick Harding, *Daily Mail*, 11 October 2013

# Conclusions

- MLE is a new dialect
  - But born not from contact between dialects, but ultimately contact between languages
- MLE is distinctive on all linguistic levels, including use of slang
- MLE contains features from languages other than English
  - And yet it is (to a large extent) ethnically neutral
- MLE is associated with youth styles
  - Hip-hop, orientation to African American music
- MLE is here to stay
  - Adults keep at least features of pronunciation from it

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