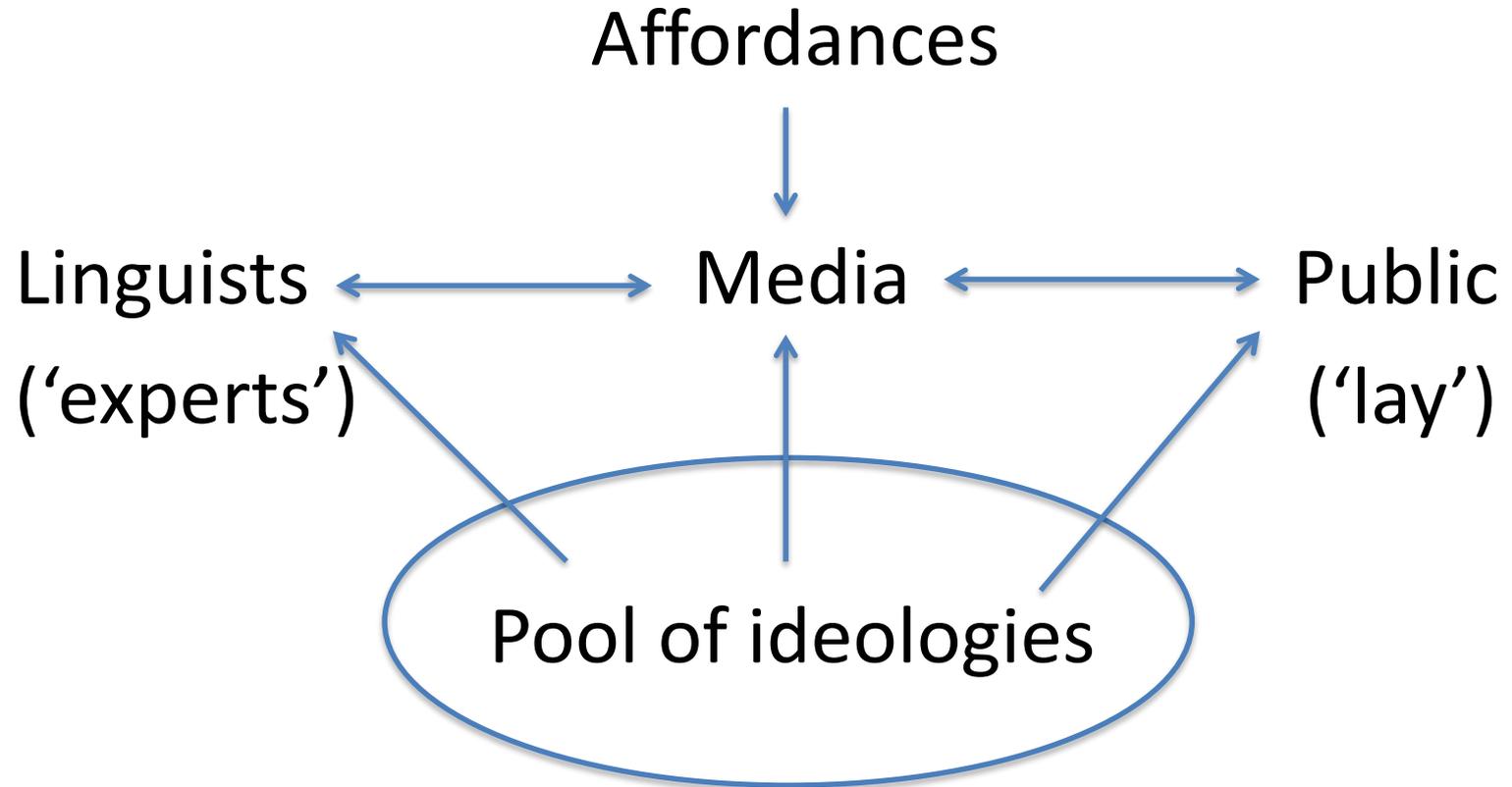Panel: Impact in Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguists in reactive mode: can media involvement ever have a positive spin?

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The media as mediators

Affordances

Linguists ('experts') ⟷ Media ⟷ Public ('lay')

Pool of ideologies

News-mediated ideological controversy about youth language in Germany

- Wiese, Heike, in conversation with Louise Eley and Ben Rampton. 2014. Linguist in an ideological firestorm: Personal reflections on the *Kiezdeutsch* controversy. *Working Papers in Urban Language & Literacies* 141.

'Pittsburghese'

Johnstone, Barbara. 2011. Making Pittsburghese: Communication Technology, Expertise, and the Discursive Construction of a Regional Dialect. *Language and Communication* 31: 3–15.

- Wikipedia entry is 'academics' effort to reclaim expertise about Pittsburgh speech'.

- 'Linguists are always part of the process we study'.

- 'We are language-makers'.

Multicultural London English

Kerswill, Paul. 2014. The objectification of 'Jafaican': the discoursal embedding of Multicultural London English in the British media. In Androutsopoulos, Jannis (ed.) *The Media and Sociolinguistic Change*. Berlin: De Gruyter, pp. 428–455.

- Enthusiastic media take-up of 'Jafaican' from April 2006

- Pejoration of Jafaican/Multicultural London English rapidly ensues
  - discourses of foreignness and gangsterism
  - association with 'Jihadi John' in August 2014

Online questionnaire

- Sent to 44 UK-based sociolinguists

- 1. For the particular media story in this submission, please choose one of the following:
  - The media outlet initially contacted me
  - I initially contacted the media outlet
- 3. What was the story about? How did you get involved?
- 6. Please describe how, in the final piece, you were positioned in relation to the story and to the other people involved. Were you set up in an adversarial relationship? Were there conflicting ideologies expressed in the piece?
- 7. To what extent did you feel your views were fairly represented?
- 8. Did you receive contacts from members of the public, and what did they result in?
- 9. What kind of follow-up was there to the story, not necessarily involving you?
- 10. Do you think you were able to influence anybody's actions or views, including those in authority as well as other people?

Regional dialect	Youth language	Multi-lingual-ism	Apostrophes	Accommodation, social class, linguistic pejoration	LADO (Language analysis for the determi-nation of origin) and forensics	Other
Location of north-south boundary (undergrad project; radio, TV, newspapers)	Rise of Multicultural London English (One Show – TV)	'Which languages are worth learning?' (radio)	Birming-ham CC abandon-ing apo-strophes (TV, radio)	Beckhams reducing stigmatised forms (under-grad project; radio)	LADO scandal (radio)	Female voices used in computer apps etc. (newspaper)
Death of Cromarty dialect (radio, newspapers)	Article in The Sun on the emergence of Multicultural London English (newspaper)	Research on Punjabi comm. of West London (radio, TV, news-papers)	Apostro-phes on signage (TV)	British pop singers sounding American (One Show – TV)	LADO scandal –same one as above, different respondent (newspapers, radio, TV)	Language of internet trolls and child protection issues (radio, TV, newspapers)
Project on stigmatised urban dialect (newspaper)	Interview i*The Sunday Times* n about Multicultural London English (newspaper)	Benefits of multi-lingualism for Brits/ London-ers (radio, news-papers)		Radio programme on language and social class (radio, then news-papers)	Research on acoustic effects of facewear (radio, news-papers)	Contribution to article on how men can make themselves attractive to women (Men's Health)
Use of Kent dialect in stage vn of Chitty Chitty Bang Bang (radio)	Interview on London youth language and multiculturalism, tolerance of language variation (radio)			Racial demonyms' pejoration (radio, news-papers)		Reaction to film on 'gay voices' and lang and sexuality (newspaper)
Tour de France ban on Yorkshire terms of endearment (radio)				Comment on Clarkson's use of 'pikey' (radio)		Reaction to voice on Jihadi John's videos (radio, newspapers)
Aberdeen dialect (One Show – TV)				Article reflecting on Teesside primary school's ban on slang and dialect (newspaper)		Fashion words losing plural marking (radio, newspapers)
Death of Cromarty dialect (radio, TV, newspapers) Article in The Sun on the language in The Only Way is Essex (newspaper)						Identification of Jihadi John's accent as MLE (TV, newspapers)

Summary of results

- 33 stories submitted by 15 sociolinguists

- Contacts instigated by the media outlet: 31

  – Story in 1 or 2 media outlets: 17
  – Story in 3 – 5 media outlets: 8
  – Story in 6 or more media outlets: 8

Were you set up in an adversarial relationship?

- Yes: 3
  - LADO (Language Analysis for the Determination of Origin) case
  - Non-use of apostrophes
  - Radio 5 discussion of Clarkson's use of the word 'pikey'

Were there conflicting ideologies expressed in the piece?

- Yes: 2
  - E.g. A newspaper report on a project on a stigmatised urban dialect was given a headline focusing on the cost of the project, giving rise to a large number of vituperative online comments, while the report itself was non-conflictual.

- 30 of 33 stories were considered to be neither adversarial nor involving conflicting ideologies

How were you positioned in relation to the story?

- 'Expert' (or 'researcher'): 19

To what extent were your views fairly represented?

- ''Very fairly': 16. 'Fairly': 10

- 'Oversimplified': 3

- Many commented on the care with which the journalists had checked and double-checked quotes and points.

- In two cases, respondents felt that they had been able to change the journalist's view on a topic, thereby changing the direction of the story.

- A couple of respondents commented on a 'screw-up' (or similar).

- Overall there was no difference between the newspapers in their level of accuracy and the kind of praise expressed by my respondents. But:
  - The 'screw-up' was in *The Independent*, while *The Daily Mail* did a 'great job' on the same story.
  - In my own experience, *The Sun* has treated language issues fully and seriously, while *The Economist* and *The Guardian* have been flippant and/or sensationalist.

- There were two comments about inappropriate and sensationalist headlines not reflecting the tone of the article – this reflects what Johnstone found.

Maybe change the title of this talk?

From
- 'Sociolinguists in reactive mode: can media involvement ever have a positive spin?'

To
- 'Sociolinguists' love-in with the media'?

Well no, things are a bit more complex.

Did you influence anybody's actions or views?

- Yes: 2
  - Story on internet trolls and child protection led to many contacts, including briefings to Parliament
  - Story on multilingualism in London led to positive contacts from the public, including from a business studies teacher who had noticed the use of bilingual language practices, and another who was interested in the possible economic gain arising from bilingualism

- 'Awareness of the issue': 4

- No: 21

Conclusions 1 / 4: a responsible media?

- The results did not confirm my expectations at all.

- However, they did match my own positive experiences, which up to now I thought were the exception.

- Newspapers and radio and TV programmes take a great deal of care in getting the story right, and will check facts and listen and respond to the linguist.

- There is no tendency for tabloids to be more sensationalist
    - with the exception of their headline writers, who are not the journalists.
    - This problem, which seems to be associated with negative online comments, doesn't seem to arise with the broadsheets.

Conclusions 2 / 4: online comments

A considerable difference in online responses:

- Stories which are 'general interest' or perhaps 'popular science' give rise to relatively small numbers of comments. In my sample, this type of story was in a majority
- Stories which deal with social norms receive a much larger number of comments, usually from starkly opposing viewpoints, reflecting class-based attitudes and interests. Thus:
  – Insistence on linguistic correctness vs. celebrating local speech and diversity
  – Making fun of 'uneducated' language use vs. arguing against this as essentially classist
  – My suspicion of the presence of trolls, some perhaps belonging to or representing the views of right-wing parties
- This is an instantiation of the different ideologies which become salient
- Yet readers' comments are sometimes balanced *very much in favour* of the non-standard varieties, suggesting a groundswell of public opinion that can be harnessed

Conclusions 3 / 4: impact

- My respondents were pretty sure they had very little impact

- Impact is two-faced, however
  - Sociolinguists will probably go for a liberal agenda
  - But impact assessors might be subject to a Dept of Education steer which has the effect of downgrading non-standard varieties of language

- What we can do, and what I have done, is, through our excellent relationships with the media, to sow liberal seeds in generally non-liberal environments

Conclusions 4 / 4: what next?

- Focus our attention on areas where sociolinguistic and lay opinion is divided:
  - **Non-standard varieties and languages other than English in educational and occupational contexts**
- Tolerance and promotion of these is a well-worn call-to-arms dating from the 1970s
- But the media landscape is quite different now, with new affordances – new ways of reaching the kinds of people we want to reach.

References

- Johnstone, Barbara. 2011. Making Pittsburghese: Communication Technology, Expertise, and the Discursive Construction of a Regional Dialect. *Language and Communication* 31: 3–15.

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- O'Halloran, Kieran. A. 2010: Critical reading of a text through its electronic supplement. *Digital Culture & Education* 2:2, 210–229.

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