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

The language of African-Caribbeans in Britain has been a focus of linguistic research since the 1970s (Edwards 1979, Sutcliffe 1984; Sebba 1993). The first generation were largely speakers of mesolectal creole varieties from their native countries, but by the second generation, these had been transformed into local British varieties of Jamaican Creole, used even by African-Caribbeans without Jamaican heritage. In London this variety was known as London Jamaican and contained features derived both from Jamaican Creole and London English (Sebba 1993). Second-generation speakers of London Jamaican were also native-like speakers of London English and would code-switch between the two.

Elements of London Jamaican were known to have spread into a more widely spoken London English-based youth vernacular as long ago as the early 1980s (Hewitt 1986). These were mainly lexical, but phonological features were reported. The popularity of African and Caribbean cultural forms is believed to have been important in this.

One generation later, the situation has changed. There is little evidence of London Jamaican as a distinct language variety among the third generation. Younger African-Caribbeans speak a vernacular quite different from the traditional London accent of London, and different also from the vernacular of their predecessors. It is characterised by a radically transformed London vowel system (Kerswill et al. 2008), a markedly syllable-timed rhythm (Torgersen and Szakay 2010), and grammatical features including the levelling of was and were to was (Cheshire et al. 2011). London youth slang contains many items of Caribbean origin, such as yard and whagwan, and few from other potential sources such as Punjabi. These features are variably shared by young inner-city speakers of all ethnicities, and form a distinctive repertoire which has been labelled Multicultural London English (‘MLE’; Cheshire et al. 2011). Although young working-class Londoners of all ethnicities are routinely heard as ‘talking black’, the features of MLE are better thought of as coming from a London ‘feature pool’ than from any one source.

Using data from ca. 1970, 1981–4 and 2005–9, we trace the evolution of African-Caribbean repertoires from the transplanted post-creole continuum in 50s and 60s London interacting with the local London repertoire, through the linguistic integration of the second generation who reserved London Jamaican for in-group talk and identity-marking, to today’s generation who form part of an extremely heterogeneous multiethnic inner-city which has forged its own new repertoire cutting partly across ethnic lines.

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