‘Gimme dat ting’
Word initial TH-stopping among urban British youth

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1. Introduction
The aim here is to explore the role of TH-stopping in the enactment of identities among young people (YP) aged 14-16 in two Pupil Referral Units (PRU) Learning Centres in Manchester, UK. We challenge the traditional LVC relationship between ethnicity and linguistic features by taking practices rather than individual identities as the empirical focus.

Participants. Traditional ‘ethnicity’ labels are presented here due to their central role in existing studies into urban youth language.

Data collection. Linguistic ethnography. Two researchers visited each Centre 1-2 times per week over the 2014/15 academic year, observing and taking part in whatever came up. Speech data here are from spontaneous interaction in and out of class, and individual or small group sociolinguistic interviews. Additional data come from extensive fieldnotes.

2. Word-initial TH-stopping (voiceless)
Realisation of word initial /θ/ as [t] is a feature of West Indian Englishes (Wells 1982) including Jamaican Creole (Cassidy 1961). It is also present in British Creole (Patrick 2008, Sebba 1993), and is currently (2015) a feature in predominantly black or ethnic minority practices such as Dancehall.

3. Some quantitative results
Yet in the PRU context, realisation of word initial /θ/ as [t] is not distributed in terms of speaker ethnicity: young people may use [t] irrespective of their ethnic heritage with no evidence to suggest ‘ethnic categories’ contribute to the making of ‘authentic’ speakers/users in the Learning Centres. For example:

Figs. 1 and 2 show all voiceless word initial ‘t’ for two typical (male) speakers, separated by context.

4. Practices
Not everyone in the centres uses ting but a macro social category like ethnicity is not a useful predictor (not surprising – see Cameron 2009). So what is? We suggest its use can be better understood by looking at the practices which speakers value, participate in and identify with. We treat practices as relatively stable configurations of socio-material relations (gestures, clothing, language etc) in which identities are performed.

5a. No ethnicity?
This is not to say that ting does not do some work relating to ethnicity. We have no examples of ting performing ‘boycie’ but occasionally it performed (non)Jamaican identities:

Jacob appeared to like the music that the classroom support assistant had created (with the software), although he appeared to also be mocking it too, saying that it sounded like something from the past, adding ‘that’s a yardie ting bro’ as he walked away. He had been dancing to it (also in a jokey way) and how he was dancing reminded me of how older Jamaican man dance, although I don’t know if that is what he thought he was doing.

[Extract from SD field notes 4/2/2015]

In enacting the music as ‘Jamaican’ both linguistically (‘yardie ting’) and with his body (dance), and locating it historically in time, he was disassociating himself from it. His use of ting contributed to his performance of a non-Jamaican.

5b. Spittin’ and Boyin’
Several of the YP would sit in lessons and ‘spit bars’ (generate a spontaneous rap), ‘rap’ (pre-written lyrics) or sing (a current song). This is arguably common practice in schools (e.g. Rampton 2004) but ting users would do all three, with rapping or spitting prevailing. This requires knowledge of Grime/Rap and/or Dancehall, music generated in practices that draw on Caribbean language features.

Both of these musical practices involve lyrical defiance and attack formats and similar formats were present in the young people’s highly linguistic everyday practice of ‘boycie’. We suggest that those who were similar and successful ‘boyies’ were also more likely be part of these musical practices and also be more likely to use ting. We are still working on this, (but see Fig 3).

5. (Music) Practices

- poss. ting user
- non-ting user
- non-ting user

Colours – see Box 1

6. Conclusion

Identities (e.g. ethnicities) are fluid, multiple and performed in practices. Ting may contribute to the performance of an ethnic identity in a particular location and in a particular practice, but in the Learning Centre it doesn’t tend to generate this meaning. During our time in this space it was considered to be ‘another word for fing, init’. But when it moved to another space, it changed. We gave Jake the last word, as he explains how ting-stopping enacted him as ‘black’ in a different part of the city:

Well, wait a lot of people- like the people from here speak differently to how people near mine- or who I hang about with. And they speak differently from people from area X in central Manchester (I like, cos I’m like the kids - Area X is dead different to this area, this is like a black community and there’s loads of different - it’s like multicultural and Area X is like the dead racist so if I’d spoken slang that people spoke here, like I said, like, Abosid said ‘tree’ for ‘three’, if I said there, they’d look me weird and say ‘why are you saying that? ’ Or do you think you’re black? ’ That’s what they say.

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References
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7. Appendix

Fig 3 shows a tentative apparent pattern of ting use and musical practices for all the YP for whom we have relevant info.

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