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(Mis)interpreting urban youth language: white kids sounding black?
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Abstract

The language of young people is often viewed very negatively by some sections of the mainstream media and by some social commentators in the UK. While this is nothing new – older generations routinely despair of how the youth of today are ruining the language – what is different now is the added element of ethnicity, whereby young people of various ethnicities are perceived as using some kind of 'ghetto grammar' or 'Jafaican' which carry often explicit connotations of 'sounding black'. This paper challenges the mainstream view by firstly introducing the linguistic take on this emerging Multicultural Urban British English, and then exploring the views of young people themselves on how they use language by taking qualitative data from a linguistic ethnography project involving 14-16 year olds in a non-mainstream urban educational setting. The young people provide insights into their language that are in complete opposition to the views so often expressed in the media, and which instead suggest that linguistic features that were previously strongly associated with specific ethnicities are being used in new and innovative ways. Refreshingly, it would appear that for many young people ethnicity is simply not a consideration, at least in relation to language.

Introduction

This paper examines the language of young people living in an urban centre of the UK. It aims not simply to describe the language used, but to explore young people's feelings and insights about their and their peers' speech, and discuss these in relation to popular media perceptions of 'youth language'. It begins by looking at common mainstream representations of the language of young people in the UK, before comparing these to more objective academic linguistic descriptions, highlighting discrepancies and potentially damaging popular misconceptions. In describing current urban youth language, the term Multicultural Urban British English is introduced, representing a possible emerging variety of English that shares features across British urban centres. It then presents data from a linguistic ethnography project and a pilot study carried out in Manchester among 14-16 year olds permanently excluded from mainstream education, who were being educated in Manchester's secondary Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). The young people's views on language are examined and compared, highlighting how perceptions of language use can provide insights into how young people view the role of language in the (non)enactment of particularly ethnic identities.

Popular representations of youth language

'Youth language' is routinely criticised by sections of the mainstream media and some commentators as 'dumbed down' (Johns 2012), or 'sounding ridiculous' (West 2011). With their 'ghetto grammar' (Johns 2011, 2013, 2014) or 'black street patois' (Delingpole 2011), young people are 'literally talking their way into unemployment' (Harding 2013). Complaining that the younger generation is ruining the language and that kids don't speak 'properly' is nothing new (McWhorter 2013 provides excellent historical examples), but this is different. The lament now focuses not only on use of slang or 'incorrect' English, but the apparent influence of Jamaican patois, a perception illustrated by the term often used to describe this way of speaking, particularly in London - 'Jafaican'. This term combines two crucial (yet incorrect) assumptions about this kind of language – its Jamaicanness and its fakeness – into a succinct, media-friendly description. First appearing in 2006 (Kerswill 2014), the term has thrived in the media, although interestingly its popularity dipped after 2014 when news stories about Mohammed Emwazi ('Jihadi John') started using the academic-preferred term, Multicultural London English (Kerswill 2016), when describing his British accent. Presumably it was felt that using a pun to describe any aspect of Emwazi and his actions was inappropriate.

Within the UK there is, arguably, a light side and a dark side to this idea of young (especially white) people using a language variety which seems 'put on' or fake. On the one hand, there are television characters such as Ali G, Lee Nelson, and the staff in Channel 4's 'Phone Shop', who use an exaggerated, if variably accurate, version of the language used by the people they are satirising. On the other hand there are people such as David Starkey who said in an infamous BBC Newsnight interview (13th Aug 2011):

> *The whites have become black. A particular sort of violent destructive,*
> *nihilistic gangster culture has become the fashion; and black and white,*
> *boy and girl operate in this language together. This language which is*
> *wholly false, which is this Jamaican patois that has been intruded in*
> *England and this is why so many of us have this sense of literally a foreign*
> *country.*

Starkey's comments predictably caused a stir, mainly for their apparent racism (e.g. O'Neill 2011; Birbalsingh 2011). I am interested less in the racism than in the links Starkey suggests between black culture, criminality, and language, and in the description of this language as being a 'wholly false … Jamaican patois'.

Lindsay Johns, a writer, broadcaster and volunteer mentor for young black men in London, has repeatedly warned of the dangers of youth language. Johns has written for numerous publications (London Evening Standard, Daily Mail, The Spectator) and appeared on various platforms (BBC Radio 4 Four Thought, Conservative Party Conference, Battle of Ideas) arguing for a 'zero tolerance approach' to what he calls street slang. To Johns, this 'moronic' language 'makes you sound like you've just had a frontal lobotomy' (Johns, 2013). He claims 'speaking patois is a spectacular own goal' and that street slang is 'reckless self-sabotage' (Johns 2011). He believes we need to teach young people 'proper English', and is appalled at the 'risible notions promulgated by cultural relativists – often white, middle class ones' (2013) who argue for an acceptance of this way of speaking on the basis of its authenticity. He rejects the relevance, and even the existence, of code-switching, where people are able to switch between language varieties, and advocates a policy of teaching 'good' language and rejecting street slang. Johns means well; nobody would argue that young people do *not* need to be able to use standard English or that street slang is always appropriate; however, by

dismissing out of hand the idea that young people are able to shift their language as they move between contexts, that they somehow consistently use either standard English or street slang, he is doing them a huge disservice.

The linguists' view

In stark contrast to the popular mainstream media view of youth language is the academic view from various branches of sociolinguistics. Precise viewpoints vary, yet there are some aspects upon which most (socio)linguists would agree.

Standard

The first difference is the concept of 'proper English'. To most linguists, there is simply no such thing as 'proper' English in the sense of a form of English inherently superior to other forms. We can therefore assume that what is meant by 'proper English' is 'standard English', a more comfortable term. The term 'Standard English' is widely accepted in linguistics, but only on the basis that it fuzzily describes one variety or dialect among many, and that it is not superior to any other non-standard (note, not 'sub-standard') variety. Instead, standard English has prestige from its association with power, which itself only stems from the fact that in Britain it happened to be the variety used in the area of the country (the south-east) within which power was focused at the time of the language being codified through printing and other means. Modern standard English is a social rather than regional dialect, so is likely to be found anywhere in the UK albeit spoken with different regional accents, yet its speakers are concentrated at the top of the social scale (Trudgill 2001:166). Obviously it is a vitally important dialect of English, being the variety that is used in print; yet it is not as common as many people believe. Most people speak a combination of standard and regional non-standard English, depending on social factors such as class and context.

Code switching

The only sense in which 'proper' language has any credence is if we think of it as meaning appropriate language. It is certainly advantageous to use (and to teach people to use) context-appropriate language, but accepting this involves embracing code-switching, a concept Johns rejects. In truth, the term 'code-switching' is not clear cut, and can be problematic to some linguists, as it implies two or more distinct varieties of language between which a speaker moves according to context. This view is too simplistic and too mechanical. Perhaps more

realistic are the ideas of code-shifting or code-mixing, where features from one or other variety are used in a more integrated way, or style-shifting, where speakers move between styles of language depending on the attention they pay to speech (e.g. Labov 1984), or their audience (e.g. Bell 1984). Whichever term is used, the point is that almost all people from all backgrounds naturally can and do use language features appropriate to the context, albeit to different extents and with varying degrees of intention.

(Multi)ethnolect

Johns' determination to get young people to reject street slang and speak 'proper [standard] English' is illogical, impractical, and impossible. Language is so strongly intertwined with both individual and group identity that it is not something that can easily be changed, even if it were desirable to do so. Johns' arguments imply that this way of speaking is a choice, and that young people should simply choose to speak differently. Yet this is not supported by linguistic research carried out in urban centres across Europe, almost all of which argues that the various types of urban youth language should be seen largely as a natural development of the urban linguistic and cultural context. Very relevant here is Cheshire et al's (2011) work in London in which the term Multicultural London English (MLE) was coined. They describe a context in which the language is changing as a result of the influences from different languages and cultures in inner-city London. They conceptualise MLE as 'a repertoire of features' (p.154) in which speakers 'select' linguistic items from a 'feature pool' (p.176) of features from the various input languages. The selection of features is determined by factors such as frequency and salience, the latter being affected by cultural influences.

Cheshire et al (2011) and Cheshire et al (2015) describe MLE and similar emerging forms of language around Europe as examples of *multiethnolects* – varieties of language, or repertoires of linguistic features that are shared by more than one ethnic group and which are 'born in the informal spontaneous talk of multi-ethnic peer groups' (Cheshire et al 2015: 2). Crucially, despite their origins in the extensive and varied immigration (and therefore multilingualism) of urban centres, multiethnolects are seen as ethnically neutral and available to anyone, including '(usually monolingual) young people from non-immigrant backgrounds' (Cheshire et al 2015: 2).

White youth sounding black – some context

There is nothing new about a discussion of white youth sounding black[1]. Normal Mailer's essay *The White Negro* (Mailer 1957) describes the white hipsters who adopted black culture and the language of the 'Negro jazzman … the cultural mentor of a people' (p.285)[2]. Closer to home, Hewitt (1986) thoroughly analyses language use in inter-racial friendships in 1980s south London. Crucially, Hewitt identifies black youth language as a 'prestige variety amongst many young people' (p.102), a view in line with similar contemporary studies in the US (e.g. Labov 1972). He also notes some Caribbean creole terms being used by white adolescents in a way unmarked by ethnicity (p.127), thus reinforcing the later conclusions of MLE studies. However, by illustrating the range of creole influence on white speech – unconscious adoption, conscious use of marked features in game-like contexts, and 'openly displayed adoption of black language and speech styles by whites wishing to identify themselves unambiguously with black youth culture' (p.149) – Hewitt highlights the complexity of the situation. Indeed, there is no doubt that many things might be happening when young people use speech features in a way that is interpreted as crossing social or ethnic boundaries. Rampton and Charalambous (2012) attempt clarification by distinguishing 'multi-ethnic vernaculars', 'code-switching', 'stylization' and 'crossing', which all come under the umbrella of white kids sounding black (although Rampton's work in particular is not confined to these groups; see Rampton 2014).

The broader context

In addition to the research on youth language and ethnicity, the project described in this paper is connected to work concerned with youth subcultures more generally. The extent to which linguistic research of this kind can be seen to fit with, benefit from, and add to a theory of subculture (e.g. Blackman 2014) remains to be seen, and will be a focus of the project as it more fully engages with its interdisciplinary aspirations. That said, works such as Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) which straddle social psychology, sociology and sociolinguistics provide a crucial backdrop against which to compare and interrogate the methods and data from the project. Indeed, Widdicombe and Wooffitt's stated intention to

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[1] Or black youth sounding white (cf. Fanon 1952).

[2] Also relevant is Mezz Mezzrow – a white American clarinettist in the 1930s and 40s who identified as a 'voluntary negro'.

'identify and describe a range of discursive procedures through which individuals produce, negotiate, modify and use their [subcultural] social identities in social interaction' (p.73) would not be out of place in a description of a purely sociolinguistic study, despite their own work being positioned elsewhere.

From MLE to Multicultural Urban British English

One initial idea for the project reported in this paper was to investigate the extent to which a version of MLE existed in Manchester. However, rather than simply try to identify a possible Multicultural Manchester English, we wanted to see if there might be a case for identifying a Multicultural Urban British English (MUBE) – a more general variety possibly found in various British urban centres, with each city having its own sub-variety or its own particular features. Data from a range of cities is needed to develop this idea, but if ongoing studies can identify linguistic features which deviate from traditional urban accents but are also shared across different urban centres, then arguably we have the beginnings of an identifiable MUBE variety. Drummond (forthcoming) lays the foundations for this by comparing the language of young people in Manchester with descriptions of MLE taken from Cheshire et al (2011), and it is this concept of an emerging MUBE, consisting of features shared across at least two cities, that is invoked in the following analysis. However, this is done with an awareness that the concept remains, at present, underspecified.

Some of the key features of a possible MUBE variety are described below. These are examples of features found in MLE (Cheshire et al 2011, Torgersen et al 2011) and in the speech of young people in inner-city Manchester, and which differ from the features of traditional London and Manchester dialects; hence their identification as part of an emerging urban youth variety. They will be explained in both linguistic and non-linguistic terms.

- Raised onset and monophthongisation of the PRICE vowel.
  Words such as *like, might, try* have a 'flatter' vowel with very little movement of the tongue. The pronunciation has moved towards a longer version of the vowel sound in *cat*.
- Extreme fronting of the GOOSE vowel.
  The vowel in words such as *food, blue, crew* is produced further forward in the mouth, approximating the pronunciation of the vowel in the French *tu*.
- Word-initial DH and TH stopping.

Words beginning with 'th' *they, them, there* are pronounced with a 'd' sound *dey, dem, dere.* Words beginning with 'th' t*hing, three, think* are pronounced with a 't' sound *ting, tree, tink.*

- Use of pragmatic marker *you get me?*
  The use of *you get me* at the end of a sentence is similar to the popular *innit.*

- Use of (slang) words with a Jamaican rather than a traditional Manchester/London heritage (*e.g. bare, rass, mandem*)

Naming varieties

Naming language forms such as Multicultural Urban British English is itself problematic, even when we use such broad terms as multiethnolect. Within certain areas of sociolinguistics there is ongoing debate as to the very existence of distinct language varieties or even distinct languages in a globalized world characterised by superdiversity (e.g. Blommaert and Rampton 2011). Language does not lend itself to categorisation in discrete, bounded terms, and if we ignore this we inevitably start to create boundaries between groups of people and bring in issues of linguistic deficiency. However, whatever the preoccupations of sociolinguists, the reality is that for most people outside academia, languages and language varieties are a reality. In a 'languagized' world (Cornips et al 2014:14), language names matter a great deal to people. Linguists should be mindful of the responsibilities that come with naming varieties, especially as the terms are picked up by non-professionals and used in ways that might not correspond to their original denotation: Cornips et al (2014) and Wiese (2014) provide useful insights into this process.

The project

The UrBEn-ID (**Ur**ban **B**ritish **En**glish and **Id**entity) project is a two-year study funded by The Leverhulme Trust which is exploring the use of language and other semiotic practices in the enactment of identities among 14-16 year olds in inner-city Manchester. At the time of writing the project is almost complete, the ethnography having taken place in the academic year 2014-15. The project's two main research sites are inner-city learning centres within the Manchester Secondary Pupil Referral Unit (PRU), which cater for years 10 and 11 students who have been permanently excluded from mainstream education. The learning centres are small, each with no more than seven students from each year group. The young people must

attend every day during normal school hours, and study a reduced curriculum of core subjects for GCSE. These research sites were chosen because they offer a neatly contained group of young people who, on the basis of their age, context, and background, find themselves negotiating their place in a challenging environment. From a sociolinguistic perspective, this seemed an ideal environment in which to learn more about the ways young people use language to communicate and perform identities, and in turn explore how we could offer insights leading to more successful communicative practices in the future. The data presented here come from a 2013 pilot study and the main 2014-2016 study in the PRU learning centres.

Two researchers spent the 2014-15 academic year involved in the day-to-day practices of the two centres. We collected detailed fieldnotes and audio recordings. Fieldnotes were gathered through observation and participation in activities both in and out of class. Audio recordings included: spontaneous interactions in and out of class; interviews/conversations between individuals or small groups of young people and one researcher; peer or self-recording by the young people, often while outside smoking; mock-interviews while preparing for college applications; and discussions of words we heard the young people use. This resulted in 413,000 words of fieldnotes and 70 hours of audio recordings.

Conversations involving both researchers are included here, so perhaps it would be wise to include a little bit of information on us as speakers. Both of us are considerably older than the participants, in our 40s, and neither of us are from the local area. Also, neither of us normally have any speech features that could be associated with MUBE. As linguists, we are fully aware of the ways in which people adjust their language according to who they are speaking to, and this is no less true in a research context. Listening to the recordings, there is no doubt that we speak more casually and informally to the young people at times, yet I can categorically state that we do not use any features that could be seen as part of MUBE. At most, we use more informal phrases and drop a few more 't's and 'h's than usual.

Taking a longer ethnographic approach means we gained the trust of most of the young people and staff, and could access practices, observe interactions, and record conversations that would otherwise have been inaccessible. This may seem obvious to people in other disciplines, but studies into linguistic variation (the primary disciplinary 'home' of the larger

project of which this paper is part) have tended not to follow this approach until relatively recently. The area of 'variationist sociolinguistics' traditionally collects data through interviews[3], with any ethnographic element simply there to contextualise the audio-recorded speech data. Few variationist studies can be recognised as ethnography in the sense in which the term is understood in sociology, anthropology etc. It is not until 'third wave' variationist studies (Eckert 2012) that we see a more recognisable ethnography (e.g. Eckert 2000; Mendoza-Denton 2008).

This is not to say that linguistics does not have a strong tradition of ethnography, even within sociolinguistics, and the contrast between sub-disciplines is often commented upon. Interactional sociolinguistics and linguistic ethnography, which focus primarily on the analysis of situated discourse and meaning-making, can be very critical of the variationist approach, drawing attention to the way in which it decontextualizes language. At its most simplistic, it exemplifies the familiar battle between quantitative and qualitative approaches, whereas in reality it is much more subtle than this. Researchers are increasingly working across boundaries, and indeed the UrBEn-ID project is an example of this (see Dray and Drummond forthcoming for a discussion of the challenges that such a collaboration brings).

The data presented here relates to the young people's views of youth language in general or their own language. The majority of viewpoints come from one-to-one or small group conversations, but comments and interactions from other situations are also included.

The findings

Much of the data came from discussions about language, and specifically questions about participants' own language/accent or that of young people in general. The default response for many people in any context when asked about their own speech is that it is 'normal' with 'no real accent'. We tend to spend time around people who are similar to us, and our speech often resembles theirs; it thus appears 'normal' or 'average' in that context. It is only when we interact with people outside our usual social groups that we begin to be aware of how differently we speak when compared to others (even if the sense might persist that it is us

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[3] The traditional 'sociolinguistic interview' comprises a series of elements aiming to generate a range of speech styles from an interviewee (e.g. Labov 1972).

who are normal, and the other people who are different). The young people here are perhaps especially likely to produce the 'normal' answer to questions about how they speak, given their limited exposure to people outside their social groups. This makes it all the more interesting when the young people are able to critically consider their own language.

I will at times refer to participants' use of speech features associated with Multicultural Urban British English (MUBE). Bearing in mind the issues around naming varieties of language, this label should be seen as meaning that a speaker uses linguistic features found in MLE that reflect a departure from traditional Manchester features. I will also mention individuals' ethnicities, using the label under which they self-identify, or that which best fits their recorded family details – this approach to ethnicity is relatively coarse, but not inappropriate given the terms of the mainstream media depiction of youth language.

The findings below are grouped by speaker rather than theme because often several themes emerge in the same interaction. The speech style of each individual is relevant to how they describe their and others' speech, and jumping between speakers in order to follow a theme confuses this aspect. However, thematic links between speakers will be highlighted where appropriate.

Eleven speakers are represented. Table 1 indicates how far they display potential MUBE features, and their ethnicity. All the names are pseudonyms, as are the names of any city areas.

[Table 1 about here]

Ryan and Lee

It's just a teenage accent, innit

Ryan is the archetypal 'white kid sounding black' of media accounts, being a fairly heavy user of MUBE features. At the time of speaking he was almost 16. He was one of three white lads who hung around together during school, although not outside. One (Lee) was an even heavier user of MUBE features, but he was reluctant to talk as he was not convinced that I

wasn't 'Fed' (police); the other (not discussed here) was a much lighter user. I recorded Ryan several times in and out of class, and he became quite comfortable talking to me. In this extract Ryan, Lee and I were hanging about in the entrance of the building:

Researcher	How would you describe your accent?
Ryan	It's just a teenage accent innit, it's just a standard teenage accent.
Res	Yeah
Ryan	Other kids speak like this so I just… You're listening to a guy that speaks like this you're gonna speak like that innit.

Already he has highlighted the social nature of language – that your peers are the primary influence on your speech. I asked him about the ethnic mix of his friends:

Res	And what sort of er is it a mix in terms of backgrounds
Ryan	Nah, same background
Res	White, black…
Ryan	White innit.
Res	All white
Ryan	Yeah, all white.

Why would I think I'm black?

Later, I talked about the perceived link between young people's speech and ethnicity. I was consciously avoiding talking about white kids sounding black, but Lee brought it up:

Lee	They'll just say he [Ryan] thinks he wants to be black.
Res	And so people- but anyone who actually works with young people will say that's not true.
Lee	But that's just how he speaks cos of his area.
Ryan	Yeah not cos of the colour and that, like so if they hear me speaking and they're gonna say that I think I'm black, why would I think I'm black? You get me?
Lee	[laughs]
Ryan	[laughing] You get me.

Lee picks up on ethnicity first, and adds an extra level to it, referring to people possibly thinking Ryan 'wants to be black', rather than the less agentive idea of just sounding black. Ryan himself does not see the connection, and is confused as to why someone would think he was black. However, the laughter is telling, as 'You get me' is a pragmatic marker strongly associated with MUBE, and in the MLE research is an emerging feature (Torgersen et al 2011). Their laughter acknowledges the irony: Ryan asks why people would assume he thinks he is black, and uses a 'black' speech feature immediately afterwards.

Switch it up quick

I then ask what he thinks would happen to his language in an interview. The 'job interview' is frequently seen by commentators as a problematic context for young people; David Lammy (UK MP), talking to a group of sixth formers in 2013, made the point that:

Don't let any idiot tell you you'll get a job by saying 'innit' and 'izzit' because you won't. [Don't listen to] damn foolish liberals saying it's fine. (Muir 2013)

This consolidates two misconceptions: that young people are not able to adjust their language according to context, and that 'foolish liberals' (perhaps Johns' 'cultural relativists') encourage the use of slang in any environment. Neither is true. I have yet to meet a young person who is not able to adjust his or her language to some extent when appropriate. Admittedly there are some who will choose not to, but this is not a question of ability. It is also true that the adjusted language will likely not reach the standards deemed appropriate by Johns, Lammy[4] and others, but we should not expect it to. The inherent and complex role of language in the performance of identity means that we should not ask young people to fundamentally change who they are in a formal context by blindly shifting to some notion of standard English. Instead, we should be asking and teaching them to adjust their language towards a more standard variety in order to fulfil contextual expectations. Unfortunately, this exposes an unfair bias in favour of young people from environments where a more standard

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[4] To be fair, Lammy has simply argued that young people should be taught to speak 'properly' in an interview, whereas Johns has called for a wholesale change in the way young people speak.

variety is normal, who have less distance to travel; but this is an inequality that should be challenged through awareness-raising rather than accepted through emulation of an alien way of speaking.

Ryan's response suggests he possesses this confidence in linguistic adjustment:

Ryan   Yeah, interview for a job and you gotta like change your accent and that.
Res   And would you, would you be able, would you do that?
Ryan   Yeah I can do that easy mate.
Res   So this is your normal- and then you'd be able to-
Ryan   Switch it up quick.

This is interesting as it hints at the respective positioning of each variety. If we accept that people tend to have a more unguarded or 'natural' way of speaking[5], then this and subsequent exchanges suggest that Ryan's MUBE-oriented 'teenage' speech is his natural way of speaking, and that he can 'switch it up' when needed. This contrasts with the view that there is anything 'put on' about his teenage accent.

Damian

Loads of people do it

Another heavy user of MUBE features is Damian, also white. When I asked about his accent, he responded that it was 'pure English'. He was in the same year group as Ryan and Lee, and due to the small class sizes he was with them a lot, but out of class he tended to hang around with Rio, the only black student at the time. Rio is of mixed Jamaican and white British heritage, and I would class him as a considerably lighter user of MUBE features than Ryan, Lee, or Damian. In trying to raise the topic of ethnicity, I mentioned that I had read about

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[5] A growing view within sociolinguistics is that all speech is performance to a degree, and there is no such thing as a natural way of speaking as it depends entirely on the context. I largely agree, yet I still feel there can be a more unguarded, unconscious way of speaking in which we are *less aware* of performing particular identities.

people claiming that white kids were sounding black. Damian seemed to know what I meant, but had a different view:

Damian   Nah but obviously though the accent… they.. they they're trying to say that it's just black people that use it but it's white people as well. They're trying to like stereotype. Trying to say it's just… just black people that used to do it and all that but it's not though, it's like loads of people do it.

Damian's use of 'loads of people do it' again suggests a degree of agency, albeit possibly in a different direction than Ryan above. It might simply be a slip made by someone unused to talking about language (note also how he distances himself from the possibly formal 'stereotype' by using 'like'), but the choice of 'doing it' over 'having an accent' or 'speaking like that' suggests a particular agentive meaning. It is also interesting that Damian knows what 'it' (or 'the accent') is, as this was not always apparent in conversations with other young people. In fact, there does not appear to be a particular link between awareness and use of MUBE features, with some users appearing unaware, and other non-users appearing acutely aware. This goes back to my earlier point about people in all contexts often not being fully aware of their accent, thus potentially normalising this type of youth language further by showing it to be no different to other natural speech varieties.

Callum and Aiden

Shannon speaks like a chav, Leah's just hood

Callum and Aiden are both white and at the same learning centre. Their speech consistently contains several MUBE features, yet they do not appear to see their speech as any different to others. This lack of awareness can be exemplified by their individual responses to questions about their accents:

Callum   My accent's alright. You can tell I'm a Manny head innit.
Aiden   English. Just straight English.

Both see their accents as typical Manchester/English accents. However, they are not unaware of different ways of speaking. In our discussions we ask them about how they see themselves

in relation to their peers, including how their speech might differ. Interestingly, Aiden says this about Callum:

Aiden   He's got like Irish and then like English and then like a bit of gangster and then it's all just mixed, mixed languages.

I argue that the term 'gangster' when applied to language in this context refers to features that might otherwise be connected to MUBE, on the basis that these are the kind of descriptions often found in the media (see above) and that are given by some of the other young people (see below). Callum has lots to say about his classmates' speech, suggesting a sharp awareness of accents. Asked to comment on individuals, he uses the following descriptions:

She [Shannon] speaks like a chav.
Leah's just hood. You can tell she comes from the hood the way she speaks.
Caitlin talks like a standard girl.
I don't like the way she talks … She talks like hood.

He was then asked what 'hood' would sound like.

Callum   Hood means like you come from... you can tell that they come from the hood. Your estate say if I... I live in Eastley, [unclear] you won't tell I'm from Eastley cos I don't talk hood.
Res   Is it just the words that they use or the way they pronounce things?
Callum   Both

It is still unclear what talking hood means then. From an outsider's perspective it could be seen as similar to gangster or ghetto (or MUBE), but Callum's description points to a more subtle distinction, especially as Leah's speech has no MUBE features at all.

In another conversation I ask Callum to comment on newspaper headlines about teenage language (see earlier references):

Callum	I don't talk like that way, I just … it's from where we come from innit, it's slang.
Res	Yeah. I agree. I'm just.. but other people seem to think it's…
Callum	It's like where we were brought up innit.
Res	What's special about where you were brought up? What…?
Callum	Nothing, just, it's a hood estate. Not a hood but like, not a quality estate do you know what I mean?

Callum seems to distance himself from speaking 'hood', even though he was brought up in a hood, or 'not quality' estate. It is not clear how far this distancing can be put down to a lack of awareness; just as likely is that he is fully aware of how he speaks but is choosing not to engage in a discussion which focuses on him.

Luke

Street talk – 'yo blad'

Others' perceptions of Callum's speech, make it clear that there are observed characteristics that tie in with the idea of him having MUBE features. This insight from Luke, another white male from the same learning centre, and not a MUBE user, is revealing:

Res	Who would you sort of say has a particular way or a particular style of speaking?
Luke	[unclear] Callum [laughs]
Res	Callum? And how would you describe it?
Luke	Yo blad [laughing]
Res	Yes, I've heard him say that. But how would you describe it then, was it is it?
Luke	Street talk
Res	Street talk. Is that different from slang or is that the same?
Luke	Basically yeah it's the same thing

Luke is interesting – he is very much an outsider when it comes to language. In addition to being a non-user of MUBE features, he is also known among classmates as someone who is

not skilled in using some of the common linguistic practices[6] in the centre. However, he is clearly able to identify those that do speak in a particular way. As for his own accent, Luke sees himself as speaking 'mainstream … I don't go around saying 'yo blad'.'

The self-descriptions of language are interestingly similar: 'mainstream' (Luke), 'standard teenage accent' (Ryan), 'straight English' (Aiden), and 'Manny' (Callum). These are similar self-descriptions of a typical Manchester/English accent from speakers exhibiting considerable linguistic variation: they can't all be mainstream.

Jordan

Words come from different cultures

Jordan identifies as white British, and is a mild user of MUBE features: likely to use lexical or grammatical items, but less likely to display any of the sound features. Of everyone we spoke to he was one of the most linguistically aware. Discussing how Manchester accents have changed he said:

Jordan   Most of the words come from different cultures. I say *raa* but I don't say it like a Jamaican guy do I, I say it like a normal white person. So it's… the words everyone uses nowadays, they're all… robbed off like different people, but everyone can use them. Like you don't have to look a certain way to be able to use them, but you have got to sound a certain way to use them. If I said it like a Jamaican I'd sound like a bit of a dickhead.

Jordan's distinction between using words associated with a particular ethnicity, but not pronouncing them like someone of that ethnicity would (or might) is important, and accurately describes his own language. One avenue we explore in the larger study is precisely this idea of language change following a pattern whereby linguistic features that are traditionally seen as being part of particular ethnolects are being used in new ways, thus breaking that connection. This would, in part, account for the apparent mismatch in perceptions of urban youth language by insiders (the young people and those who interact

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[6] See's Dray's (forthcoming) exploration of the practices of 'banter', 'boyin' and 'chattin shit'.

with them in meaningful ways or on equal terms) and outsiders (external adults, media etc). While the outsiders continue to associate certain speech features with certain ethnicities, hence 'white kids sounding black', the insiders don't have that link to the same extent, or are aware of it changing.

Who can use what

However, not all language features are available to be used by anybody. For Jordan, it is fine to use *raa* and *rass,* but not appropriate (for him) to use *bombaclat.* The following exchange occurred after I asked Jordan whether ethnicity mattered in relation to the way people speak:

Jordan   It does when you're using words like *bombaclat*. I don't know what it means but that's different, I never used that word in my life. Because if I used that I'd know myself I'd sound like a dickhead.

Res   Right. So who can use that and not sound like a dickhead?

Jordan   Someone who matches the race or where tha- where it's from.

Res   I see

Jordan   Cos you just sound stupid. But it's true.

Res   Yeah, so what if...

Jordan   *Rass* is fine

This is a very intelligent interpretation of language change, whereby words, structures or sounds which are initially seen as unusual or marked gradually become less unusual until they are accepted as unmarked features of a particular variety (recall Hewitt's 1995 discussion earlier on this point). To Jordan at least, *raa* and *rass* are simply part of his everyday speech (although not pronounced in a 'Jamaican' way) but *bombaclat* has not reached that status. Examples from other levels of language would be '*you get me?*' which is used widely, having no ties with particular ethnicities (unlike the earlier work in London, see Torgersen et al 2011) and word initial th-stopping (*ting* for *thing*) which I would argue is at a similar stage to something like *raa* above - increasingly being used by young people in their own way, as part of their own teenage language, regardless of ethnicity (Drummond and Dray 2015).

Jordan made another very interesting point about young people's language:

Jordan	Slang innit, slang – that's probably the word for it innit, slang. Modern day slang. Different.
Res	It's… it's definitely…
Jordan	Like we'd all understand each other, I bet when youse listen to us you probably think what are we saying?
Res	Yeah, I'm getting my ear tuned in now but when I first came I couldn't understand what you were saying. Yeah, so it isn't… although everybody can say we all speak English, I must speak it differently to you because I don't always understand what you are saying.
Jordan	[I know like] cos we obviously speak fu- it is English, it's just advanced English, like it's, it's cl- it looks it sounds dumb but it's clever.

Anyone who spends time immersed in young people's language will appreciate just how clever this point is. I can only presume that Jordan's opinions are influenced by outsiders' perceptions of his/their language, otherwise how else would he have the view that his own speech sounds dumb?

Abdou and Jake

I don't say [t]ree

Abdou is a heavy user of MUBE features. He is black (although he could not decide if he identified as Black African or Black British) and was part of a dominant group of year 11 boys of mixed ethnicities. Abdou's speech displays many MUBE features, and he is one of the two heaviest users of word initial th-stopping. However, he seems unaware of this. With him and Jake, another year 11 boy, I brought up the point about saying 'tree' for 'three'.

Res	I heard you saying downstairs about whether you say [t]ree or not. Do you say [t]ree? You say [t]ree sometimes.
Abdou	No I don't
Res	Don't you?

Jake	Yeah you do yo, you say [t]ree bro.
Abdou	No I don't.
Jake	Yeah you do.
Abdou	Yeah it's f- okay
Res	Why what's wrong with saying [t]ree?
Abdou	I don'- I jus- cos it's not [f]ree[7]
Jake	You always say [t]ree I don't know what you're on about.
Abdou	But it's not but I don't though.
Jake	You do.
Res	But why is it wrong to say- it's not wrong, it's not wrong to say…
Abdou	It's not wrong but obviously I don't say it, cos it's not [f]ree.

It is unclear how much this is him genuinely not knowing he does it and how much is him denying using a possibly stigmatised feature. I would suggest it is the former from his attitude at the time and previously, which speaks volumes about the notion that young people consciously 'put on' a particular accent. Describing his own speech, he said that he speaks 'normally' and 'clearly', and that his accent is 'Mancunian'. Again, both Abdou here and Jordan above see their speech as completely 'normal, or 'modern day slang', in the same way as Luke, Ryan, Aiden and Callum earlier. On the other hand, it is possible that Abdou is fully aware of his use of [t]ree and is only distancing himself from this apparently 'incorrect' pronunciation due to a fear of being judged by us as researchers. However, this specific awareness and desire for 'correctness' would go against the general sense of the rest of the data.

'Why do you think you're black?'

The other participant, Jake, continued later to talk about his own speech, and how he felt that it changes depending on whether he is hanging out at the learning centre with his friends, who are of a mixture of ethnicities consistent with the centre's location, or with his mostly

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[7] It should be pointed out that 'f' for 'th' (known as th-fronting) is by far the most frequent pronunciation of words such as *three, think, mouth* etc. So in this excerpt, 'free' should be seen as Abdou's personal 'standard' pronunciation.

white friends at home in a different part of Manchester. Jake himself identifies as mixed white British and Pakistani, and is a medium user of MUBE features.

Jake	…like people from here speak differently how people near mine that I hang about with.
Res	Oh do they? Why, people from like here as in this area, or from this project [learning centre]?
Jake	This project but this area if you know what I mean.
…	
Jake	…this is like a black community
Res	Right
Jake	And there's loads of different, like multi- multicultural and Westerton is like dead racist so like if I spoke in slang that people speak here, like if I said like, like Abdou said [t]ree, for three, if I said it there they'd look at me weird and say 'why are you saying that?'
Res	Really?
Jake	Yeah or 'Why do you [f]ink you're black?'

Jake appears to be aware of and proficient at adjusting his speech depending on the context. But more than this, he is aware of doing so in relation to ethnicity, something nobody else has mentioned. This is therefore an example of particular speech features (in this case, th-stopping) apparently doing ethnicity work, a function that is notable by its absence in our other recordings and observations so far. Indeed, it is not doing ethnicity work in the learning centre itself, which appears to remain 'ethnically neutral' in a linguistic sense.

Jake also took part in a video-recorded mock college interview, and his speech in that context certainly did not have any obvious MUBE features, thus providing more evidence of young people's ability to 'switch it up quick'. This is entirely to be expected, and is line with our other observations as well as conversations with various adults involved in the recruitment

and interviewing of young people[8]. This suggests the scaremongering of David Lammy, Lindsay Johns et al might be precisely that, an exaggerated reaction to a problem that may well not exist. This does not mean young people cannot benefit from training to become better communicators, it simply suggests that young people's actual speech, in terms of accent/dialect and use of 'slang' is not the issue, or at least, not a central issue. More likely it is a combination of several factors (body language, eye contact, perceived attitude, clothing, lack of interest in the conversation etc) that gives a negative impression, and language is either mistakenly or exaggeratedly identified as the culprit. I am not claiming that young people always achieve contextually appropriate language, simply that they generally have the linguistic skills to do so.

Leah

Breadbins and gender

The gender split in the two centres is roughly equal, but their linguistic practices are generally very different: very few girls displayed any MUBE features at all in their speech. This was not expected, as strong gender effects are not reported in similar studies of urban youth language (e.g. Cheshire et al 2011). Strikingly, many girls were often extremely negative towards the language of the MUBE-using boys, especially those (white) boys who they see as not being authentic speakers of this variety. This is exemplified in a discussion with Leah, Georgia and Shannon. I was asking them about words they might use that I wouldn't know.

Leah	Do you know what breadbin means?
Res	No.
Leah	Do you know like … you know when you get boys who go 'what you on bredrin?' And they say 'bredrin'?
Res	Yeah
Leah	Well, you know, to take the piss say 'breadbin'.

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[8] This data is currently being analysed more fully and will form the basis of another paper. It involves interviews with college recruitment staff, employers, and organisations which help young people from disadvantaged backgrounds find employment.

The term 'breadbin' term is well-known, with Urban Dictionary (www.urbandictionary.com) showing an entry in this sense from 2004. I asked if it was only boys who use 'bredrin' and the confirmed that it is, although they did identify a particular group of girls who would use it:

Leah: But you get them proper fucking girls who want to be proper bad yardies and are like 'Yo what you on bro'.

When I asked where they though it all came from, this way of speaking, they put it down to media:

Leah   Ever since fucking *Anuvahood*[9] and *Kidulthood*[10] started coming out. And they started watching too much soaps.

Bethany and Megan

[The boys] just talk shit

Two girls at the other centre to Leah also notice that a particular group of boys speak differently to them.

Res	How would you describe your accent?
Bethany	Proper Manc, I don't know.
Res	Proper Manc? Do all the kids here speak in similar ways?
Bethany	Yeah
Res	What about the year 11 boys who've just gone?
Bethany	Oh they were just weirdos, just mongs the lot of them.
Res	Did they speak differently?
Bethany	They used different words that I wouldn't use like, erm, what was one of them… bloodclaat or something like that, they just talk shit.
Res	Oh yeah. Where does that come from then, why..

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[9] A 2011 British comedy film about a young man in London http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1658797/

[10] A 2006 British film about a group of 15 year olds in London http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0435680/

Bethany	[laughing] I don't know
Res	Yeah, we noticed that. 'ting', we get a lot of that as well.
Bethany	[that] does my head in. It's like they can't pronounce it properly.

I missed the opportunity to ask her what she meant by pronouncing something 'properly', which might have provided useful insights into the relativity of such a term. She did not seem to think speech was connected to ethnicity (the group of year 11 boys we were referring to was made up of a mix of ethnicities), and saw it more simply in terms of exposure:

| Bethany | I think it's just, when people hear it, they tend to like start using it themselves. |

Another girl at the same centre also identified a gender difference:

Megan	The boys, the boys have got different speech to the girls
Res	The boys. How would you describe how they speak?
Megan	I don't know, just like, ghetto and like…

Leah (again)

She feels she has to talk like a black

Leah, who was so dismissive of the 'breadbin' boys, made a direct link between speech and ethnicity, and was the only person who seemed to push the idea that there was a 'white' and a 'black' way of speaking (recall that while Jake had experienced this idea, he himself did not appear to subscribe to it). Furthermore, she seems to assign a considerable degree of agency to the individual. Asked if there was anything distinctive about the way any of her classmates speak, she picked up on Adana, a girl who identifies as mixed white and Black Caribbean and appears black to the other young people.

Leah	Adana talks like a black. She shouldn't. She doesn't need to talk like a black person, but because she's black she feels like she has to talk like a black person do you know like kisses her teeth…
Res	Yes. So when you say she talks like a black person, are there certain words that you think she uses that…
Leah	No, just like, like the sort of accent sort of thing that they do.

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Adana rarely uses MUBE speech features, apart from some occasional th-stopping, so presumably Leah is picking up on something else. She mentions the kissing teeth, which is noticeable, but I do not share her view of Adana having a particular accent. To me, she displays quite a regular working class Manchester variety. What is fascinating though is Leah's comment that Adana 'doesn't need to talk like a black', but 'feels like she has to'. This is not a question of white boys sounding black when they aren't (as per the breadbin comment), but a black girl sounding black. It would be interesting to know if Leah believes there is ever a context where a black person does need to sound black.

Conclusion

I have tried to illustrate to what extent the young people are aware of their own speech, and to explore the extent to which these perceptions differ from the portrayals often provided by mainstream media. One theme that emerges is the challenge to the notion of 'white kids sounding black' that appears in some of the media descriptions. Both academic descriptions of modern urban youth language and comments from the young people suggest that this distinction between white and black speech is becoming less and less meaningful or, arguably, even perceptible. It would appear that in the minds of our young people, 'talking black' (or at least the assumption of 'talking black' by outsiders) is a difficult concept to grasp; rather, they are simply talking 'teenage'. Modern urban teenage speech incorporates features traditionally associated with particular ethnicities and ethnolects, and certain sections of the mainstream media seem to find this difficult to grasp. This is hard to understand, given that it has been happening for decades (Hewitt 1985). I believe one reason for this mismatch in the perception of youth language is the distance between those who write about the language (journalists and academics) and those who use the language (urban youth). From the outside, the use of 'you get me' or 'ting' or other particular pronunciations might well index aspects of ethnicity, while on the inside, it simply indexes teenage, or masculinity, or 'street'. External commentators bring a white/black authentic/fake interpretation to this way of speaking, but no such understanding exists for the majority of users. Maybe this is because many of the commentators grew up in Hewitt's (1985:149) era of 'whites wishing to identify themselves unambiguously with black youth culture'. However, in 2016, ostensibly similar linguistic practices are motivated by a different desire.

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. This kind of linguistic discrimination is unsavoury and unfair and needs to be challenged; it seems particularly unfair when the discrimination stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of the language in question. It is this misunderstanding that I have tried to illustrate here.

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Table 1. List of participants indicating use of MUBE features and ethnicity.

Name	Use of MUBE features	Ethnicity
Ryan	Heavy	White British
Damian	Heavy	White British
Lee	Very heavy	White British
Callum	Moderate	White British
Aiden	Moderate/heavy	White British
Luke	None	White British
Jordan	Mild (words rather than accent)	White British
Abdou	Heavy	Black African/Black British
Jake	Moderate	Mixed White British/Pakistani
Leah	None	White British
Bethany	None	White British
Megan	None	White British