

Multicultural London English (MLE) as perceived by the press, on social media, and speakers themselves

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Abstract – This paper aims to contribute to the study of Multicultural London English (MLE) by focusing on the perceptions of MLE speakers of their own linguistic production and, also, by exploring the reactions and responses to this variety in the British press and on social media. The results indicate that most of the MLE speakers feel that they use a kind of slang. The majority of accounts found in the media depict MLE as foreign, associated with grime music and bad behaviour. Opinions garnered from social networks show more diverse views; while some reiterate the perceived negative aspects, others highlight its multicultural nature and uniqueness. The paper also suggests measures that could be adopted to change negative attitudes towards MLE.

Keywords – Multicultural London English; language attitudes; Cockney; teenagers' language; language contact; multiethnolect

1. INTRODUCTION¹

Over the last two decades a new multiethnolect (Clyne 2000)² has emerged in London, widely known as Multicultural London English (henceforth, MLE) —see Cheshire *et al.* (2011) or Cheshire (2019)— but also as New Cockney (Fox 2015) or even as Jafaican/Jafaikan, that is, fake Jamaican,³ because it is generally believed that a large

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² A multiethnolect is, according to Clyne (2000: 87), an ethnolect where members of the dominant group, particularly young speakers, share it with other ethnic minorities in a language-crossing situation. This is regarded as “the expression of a new kind of group identity.” The concept has also been referred to as ‘contemporary urban vernaculars’ (Rampton 2015), ‘urban vernacular’ and ‘urban youth speech style’ (Wiese 2009; Cheshire *et al.* 2015; Nortier and Svendsen 2015) and even, more recently, as ‘urban contact dialect’ (Kerswill and Wiese 2022).

³ Kerswill and Torgersen (2021) show how the influence of Jamaican English in MLE is particularly visible at the lexical level but not so much in the morphosyntax (except for the pronoun *man*, which is usually equivalent to the first or third singular personal pronouns in English), and in phonology.



number of its speakers use an accent and expressions typical of the Caribbean, more particularly from Jamaica. However, MLE is much more than this, in that it has been formed by a feature pool (Mufwene 2001) derived from local varieties (namely Cockney), plus other UK dialects of English, standardised varieties of English, in addition to the expression of an array of speakers from different Caribbean, Indian, North-African and Asian backgrounds. Similar developments have taken place in other multilingual European and African cities (Wiese 2009; Kerswill and Wiese 2022) and even within the UK, to the extent that some scholars such as Drummond (2018) refer to the existence of a Multicultural Urban British English.

There is a growing literature on many of its innovative phonetic, lexical, grammatical and discourse features, including quotatives (Fox 2012), intensifiers (Núñez and Palacios-Martínez 2018), pragmatic markers (Palacios-Martínez 2015; Torgersen *et al.* 2018), negatives (Lucas and Willis 2012; Palacios-Martínez 2016, 2017), address terms (Palacios-Martínez 2018), verb variation (Cheshire and Fox 2009) and how certain of its vowels and consonants have a different pronunciation from standardised varieties of English (Cheshire *et al.* 2011; Fox 2015). To these investigations, we might add studies focusing on the attitudes of both MLE and non-MLE speakers towards the sociolect⁴ itself (Kerswill 2013, 2014; Cardoso *et al.* 2019; Gates and Ilbury 2019; Kircher and Fox 2019a, 2019b; Levon *et al.* 2021; Sharma *et al.* 2022).

The current study seeks to contribute to this body of work by investigating the perceptions of MLE speakers towards their own variety, that is, their attitudes and perceptions of the language they use in their everyday lives, and also by considering the reactions and responses towards MLE in a variety of British media and on social networks. To this end, the analysis will be based on materials extracted from the *London English Corpus* (LEC; Cheshire *et al.* 2011), newspapers, radio and TV programmes, together with posts from *Twitter* and videos available on *YouTube*, along with their corresponding comments.

The paper is organised as follows. Following this introduction, the concept of language attitudes to be used in this study will be defined in Section 2, noting the different approaches taken in research, and justifying those to be used here. This will be followed

⁴ The terms ‘sociolect’, ‘ethnolect’ and ‘multiethnolect’ can be used interchangeably since they basically express the same meaning. However, ‘sociolect’ is a more neutral label, while ‘ethnolect’ refers to a language variety associated with a particular ethnic group. A ‘multiethnolect’ is, in fact, a type of ethnolect, as stated in footnote 2.

by a review of existing studies on the description of language attitudes and ideologies in MLE (Section 3). Section 4 will deal with the objectives and methodology of the study and will provide a section setting out the main findings. This latter will be organised around three major headings: 1) speakers' perceptions of their own mode of expression, 2) MLE as perceived in the media and on *Twitter*, and 3) the presence of MLE on *YouTube*, together with viewer comments and reactions. Following this, Section 6 will be concerned with a description and some reflections on certain measures that could be taken to engender positive views on MLE and its speakers in educational settings. This is an important issue, in that attitudes of acceptance and tolerance towards non-standard or non-mainstream varieties and their respective speakers should be fostered by educational authorities, social institutions and in the mass media. The paper will conclude with a summary of the main findings in Section 7.

2. DEFINING AND INVESTIGATING LANGUAGE ATTITUDES

Language attitudes (henceforth, LA) are the ideas and opinions, beliefs and prejudices that speakers hold towards a particular language, variety or accent as a whole, or towards a specific feature of any of these (Oppenheim 1982: 39). However, the field of LA is not limited to this and is, in fact, rather broad. For example, Baker (1992: 29) refers to a number of domains within the scope of LA which cover areas such as attitudes to language variation, the learning of a new language, attitudes to particular language lessons, language preferences and parents' views on language learning.

LA can also be seen as the study of reactions or responses to a particular stimulus, which—in this case—might simply be exposure to the variety in question. Three main dimensions or components can be distinguished (Garrett 2010: 23): 1) a cognitive element, which corresponds to a speaker's beliefs and opinions; 2) an affective dimension, having to do with feelings and emotions; and 3) a conative constituent, responsible for our behaviour, reactions and responses. This is generally known in the literature as the ABC model of attitudes, which is based on Baker (1992) and Augoustinos *et al.* (2006), although the latter studies go back ultimately to Rosenberg and Hovland (1960) and Azjen (1988). Furthermore, according to Garrett (2010) and Dragojevic *et al.* (2017), LA are organised along two evaluative dimensions which are present in the majority of LA studies: 1) status (e.g., intelligent, educated, competent) and 2) solidarity (e.g., friendly, unpleasant). Status attributions refer mainly to the individual's perceptions

of socioeconomic conditions, while solidarity tends to be based on in-group loyalty, that is, the degree to which the speaker is perceived as being a close or distant member of the group. In this study, this would apply to the perceptions of the speakers' status in MLE and also to their degree of identification with speakers who represent this variety.

There has been considerable debate as to the origins of these LA. Although for quite some time it was argued that they are mainly innate, it is now widely thought that they are also learned, that is, we tend to be influenced by the attitudes of society as a whole and the people around us (Allport 1954). As Oppenheim (1982: 40) claims, "they are more likely to have been adopted or taken over from significant others as part of our culture and socialization." From an early age, children develop an awareness of the language they use and tend to show a preference for their own language variety (Ebner 2007: 64). In our present data, children as young as eight are able to distinguish the accent used in one London area from that typical of another neighbourhood in their community, and they are also able to discuss these. However, this does not mean that underlying attitudes towards varieties cannot be changed. Language attitudes commonly come hand in hand with stereotypes, ones which are often not justified. In this respect, standard varieties tend to be associated with prestigious, well-educated and middle/high class individuals, while non-standard ones are often seen as rude, uninformed and typical of ignorant working-class or lower-class members of society (Trudgill 1975; Milroy 2001). This is a relevant issue to be taken into consideration in the educational field since the sort of information children receive and the type of attitudes fostered by teachers and educators with respect to the status and role of the languages studied, or even towards their own variety, will be of vital importance. As Trudgill (1975: 61) rightly claims:

teachers' attitudes to children's language can be very influential in shaping relationships between the child and the school, and in affecting a child's attitude to education generally.

In the study of language attitudes three main kinds of research methods can be distinguished (Garrett *et al.* 2003: 14–18; Garrett 2010: 37–52; Kircher and Zipp 2022): the societal-treatment approach, direct approaches and indirect ones. In the first of these, researchers gather attitudes from observed behaviours, and subsequent analysis focuses on the treatment of language and language varieties, the study of government and educational language-policy documents views on the use of various languages in education, the use of dialect forms in the literature, the discourse analysis of print media and content analysis of social media (including social networks and other digital genres).

In turn, so-called direct approaches are based on the elicitation of data. Informants are asked to report their attitudes through scales, questionnaires, surveys, polls, interviews, focus groups or through the methodologies of perceptual dialectology. Corpora studies (Vessey 2015) might also be classified within this group. Finally, indirect approaches involve techniques that go beyond asking direct questions, and often adopt the Matched Guise Technique (MGT) developed in the late 1950s by Lambert and his colleagues in Canada.⁵

3. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The field of LA has been investigated extensively from both psychological and sociolinguistic perspectives, and this also seems to be the case when considering LA as applied to MLE, especially taking into account that it is quite a new dialect. I will focus on these studies in the following section.

Kerswill (2013) deals with the construction of language by young speakers of London considering their beliefs and views on the issues of identity, place and ethnicity. For this purpose, he studies the speakers' own perceptions and constructions of speech produced in inner and outer London, Hackney and Havering. The results indicate that, as regards Hackney speakers, those who are 'not Anglo' do not identify themselves with Cockney, either as a group identity or as their mode of expression, while the opposite applies to a small group of 'Anglo' speakers. Likewise, a similar number of both groups consider that they use a kind of slang. This clearly contrasts with the views of Havering speakers, who associate themselves with slang and do not claim a Cockney identity. Although these findings are quite revealing, the distinction made between 'Anglo' and 'non-Anglo' is somewhat blurred and can be easily questioned nowadays.

Kerswill (2014) also considers the presence of MLE in the media, specifically in reactions in the British press between 2000 and 2013. His analysis of comments therein illustrates that MLE is regarded as a threat, and that there are two essential components to this. The first of these has to do with the displacement of Cockney and the loss of British cultural values, while the second is a threat to liberal principles (gender equality

⁵ In MGT, interviewees are asked to respond according to different criteria to the varieties of speakers whose voices are recorded on tape, whereby the same speaker uses different linguistic varieties or accents, something the interviewees are not generally well aware of. This accounts for the label given to this technique: 'matched guise'.

and homosexual equality). Likewise, MLE is associated with bad behaviour and, more particularly, with the social unrest and riots that took place in London in August 2011.

Gates and Ilbury's (2019) paper is broader in scope and considers how standard ideologies can constrain and affect speakers of non-standardised varieties. To this end, they analyse data collected from two groups of young speakers from different areas of London between 2015 and 2017. MLE is characterised by the young participants in this study as being 'urban' and 'street-ready', in contrast to the 'standard', and is regarded as inappropriate for the classroom. In addition, adolescents are aware of certain stigmas associated with some vernacular forms they use, and a connection between language and race is also drawn since, in the views of participants in the study, white speakers tend to speak more formally than black ones. Young learners are also aware of the importance of using standardised varieties of English. Apart from this, the authors maintain that some tension between the curriculum and the way people use language everyday is identified. Thus, according to the answers given by the participants in the study, those forms of speaking which are regarded as more formal (i.e., standardised varieties of English) are considered important for the future, for education and for getting a job, but not for everyday social interactions. In contrast, any way of speaking that does not follow the standard is not perceived as 'normal', that is, as following the mainstream, and a stigma is seen to be attached to it.

Kircher and Fox (2019a, 2019b) focus specifically on attitudes towards MLE, whilst also investigating the implications of these for attitude theory and language planning. Findings indicate that the classic status-solidarity distinction is not confirmed, this being regarded as unusual. The authors argue that this may have been related to the fact that MLE does not behave like other language varieties and has its own characteristics as a multiethnolect. The participants' overall attitudes towards MLE were negative, although speakers of MLE held more positive attitudes towards their own variety. Among the factors that had an impact on the creation of LA was the contact with MLE speakers which fostered positive opinions. Speakers of languages other than English maintained more positive views towards MLE and the same applied to speakers with high levels of education. Kircher and Fox (2019a, 2019b) conclude by noting the need to engender positive attitudes towards MLE and its speakers through the reduction of stereotypes.

Kircher and Fox (2019b) addresses the issue of standard language ideologies in relation to MLE. The data were collected through an online questionnaire, conducted

between October 2016 and July 2017. Regarding language ideologies, the data reveal that non-MLE-speaking Londoners used more negative than positive terms to describe the multiethnolect, while MLE speakers themselves resorted to more positive labels. The negative semantic categories used to describe MLE include terms such as broken language, language decay, secret code and fake variety. In contrast, positive semantic categories describe MLE as mainstream, a natural evolution, cool, interesting, fascinating, innovative, endearing, rich and relaxed.

As far as social stereotypes are concerned, the data analysed in Kircher and Fox (2019b) contain numerous representations of MLE speakers' demographic characteristics: ethnic minorities, age (teenagers), class (working-class), gender (male users) and location (East End of London), with non-MLE speakers maintaining stronger social stereotypes here. The negative stereotypical characteristics attached to MLE speakers were those of aggression, lack of education and intelligence, and the inability to switch to the standard language.

Cardoso *et al.* (2019) describe and illustrate the importance of inter-speaker variation in the evaluation of British accents as part of a nationwide survey based on interviews conducted with a sample of 1,015 participants. In their analysis of five British accents, special attention is paid to MLE. Speakers with standard accents, such as RP, are more positively rated than those showing a southern accent such as Estuary English or MLE, the latter being the lowest rated of all. Non-standard northern accents, in turn, stand between these two poles. The authors also conclude that those speakers of MLE with more accentuated MLE features, such as *k*-backing or *th*-stopping, trigger more negative attitudes, since these accent traits tend to be associated with specific socio-indexical traits (being less educated and ethnically black). Moreover, accent bias seems to be present to some degree in employment contexts, to the extent that MLE speakers with a more clearly distinctive accent are more negatively evaluated in terms of hireability.

Also, Levon *et al.* (2021) report on a large-scale study focusing on current attitudes to accents in England. Through a verbal guise technique, a sample of 848 raters evaluated the interview performance and potential hireability of candidates for a position in a law firm. These candidates were native speakers of English who showed one of the five characteristic accents of England (RP, Estuary English, MLE, General Northern English and Urban West Yorkshire English) in their speech. Results indicate that bias persists in British society against particular accents such as Estuary English and MLE. The authors

also examine the impact that this may have in perpetuating social inequalities in England with the implications that this has in the labour and educational fields.

Finally, Sharma *et al.* (2022) present an updated overview of national attitudes towards various accents by replicating and expanding previous studies. In this study, a total of 821 British subjects, with age ranging from 18 to 79, were asked to rate 38 accents on a seven-point scale for prestige and pleasantness. The results show that some conservative accents are demoted in terms of perceived prestige, while some other lower-ranking ones are more positively considered than was previously the case. MLE itself is found to be in nineteenth position regarding prestige, with an average rating of 3.81, whereas it occupies twenty-fourth position when rated for pleasantness. RP, and so-called Queen's English, plus French accents are the most favourably rated in both categories. Furthermore, the authors also conclude that the hierarchy of accent prestige is conditioned by a number of social, contextual and psychological factors, such as the respondent's age and regional origin, together with stimulus content and a respondent's psychological predisposition.

4. PURPOSE AND METHOD

The purpose of the present study is to deepen our understanding of attitudes towards MLE by investigating how its speakers see themselves, and how they are perceived in the broadcast and traditional printed media, in social networks, and thus in wide sectors of society generally. As with previous studies, I use recent data drawn from corpora, newspapers, radio programmes and social media such as *Twitter* and *YouTube*, employing a combined approach to the study of attitudes towards MLE. Given the rise of digital genres as forms of communication over the last two decades (Squires 2016; Herring 2019) and their attested value as useful sources for language research (Palacios-Martínez 2020), together with the growing importance of social networks for the young and middle-aged generations, an analysis of data from these sources may help us to gain a better understanding of the attitudes towards MLE, the representation of this variety in the media and on some social networks, and the possible implications for language planning and education. In this respect, I also intend to reflect on possible measures to change the negative attitudes towards MLE identified in this and previous studies. All this aims to contribute to the understanding of attitudes to MLE and to its perception in the media and

on social networks, which thus far has adopted a direct approach by considering data largely from questionnaires and interviews.

The method followed here can be defined as mixed, combining the direct and societal treatment approaches described in Section 2. For the direct element, I will use data from LEC, compiled by Cheshire and her team in London between 2004 and 2010 (Cheshire *et al.* 2011; Cheshire 2019), which consists of the *Linguistic Innovators Corpus* (LIC)⁶ and the *Multicultural London English Corpus* (MLEC).⁷ The data for the former corpus, which contains over a million words from 121 speakers, was collected between 2004 and 2007 in the districts of Hackney (inner London) and Havering (outer London) and includes the speech of both teenagers and adults. The MLEC was compiled between 2007 and 2010 and contains data not only from young speakers but also from children as well as from different adult speaker groups, covering parts of the districts of Islington, Haringey and Hackney in north London. It amounts to 621,327 words from a total of 137 speakers. In both cases, the material was collected through individual and group interviews in youth centres and schools.

The LEC corpus was accessed using *SketchEngine* (Kilgarriff *et al.* 2014), which allowed me to conduct different types of simple and combined queries. For the extraction of the data the following key words directly connected with language and related terms were searched: *Cockney*, *language*, *speech*, *talk*, *jargon*, *lingo*, *slang*, *accent*, *London English* and *standard*. Once all the tokens were retrieved, they were manually analysed in accordance with the purposes of the study. In addition, I reviewed all those newspaper articles that mentioned MLE and/or London English from 2011 to 2020. This particular period was selected because Kerswill (2014) had already surveyed the timespan between 2000 and 2013, and hence it was of interest to see what had happened between 2013 and the present. To this end, I followed a procedure similar to that used by Kerswill (2014) by searching *Nexis UK*,⁸ an online database of English language newspapers and other media known, for all contributions referring to the English language; labels here included *Cockney*, *Jafaican/Jafaikan*, *London English*, *London accent* and *MLE*. News and other articles from seven daily papers were retrieved and examined closely together with BBC reports, both on TV and radio, for the same period. I then turned to attitudes, perceptions

⁶ <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fss/projects/linguistics/innovators/>

⁷ <https://www.sketchengine.eu/london-english-corpus/>

⁸ <https://bis.lexisnexis.co.uk/research-and-insights/nexis>

and reactions towards MLE in social networks, starting with *Twitter* in general and then focusing on exchanges of three rappers who are frequently identified with MLE, namely Dizzee Rascal, Wiley and Dappy (the three of them stage names). The accounts of these three artists were selected because they were brought up in London, the first two specifically in East London, an area that has been traditionally associated with the origin of Cockney; all three have a significant impact on the music industry, and they all make overt, public use of this sociolect in their everyday communication and in their exchanges with their fans and followers. The analysis of the *Twitter* material was restricted to the last 15 years and included not only the tweets posted by the three rappers in question but also all the responses and reactions of their fans and followers. It must be borne in mind that the responses given by the speakers vary greatly in terms of their length and the kinds of details provided, with some of the respondents providing very elaborate answers, while others being more sparing with words. The previous data were complemented by the examination of videos about MLE and London English available on *YouTube*, looking not only at their content but also at the comments below a video, which yielded valuable information regarding the views and opinions of individual users. The analysis of all this data will be mainly qualitative, although some figures will also be provided to better illustrate some of the points made. This study is thus intended to make a contribution to previous research by providing the perspective of speakers in media and social networks together with that of the MLE speakers themselves. The information and recent data obtained from the press and social networks will hopefully serve to complement the findings of previous studies.

5. FINDINGS

5.1. *Speakers' perception of their own variety*

I here focus specifically on the speakers' definition and description of the type of language or expression the participants of the different age groups (adolescent, teenagers, young adults, middle-aged adults and elderly speakers) think they use rather than in terms of their ethnicity and identity. As mentioned above, the latter was closely analysed by Kerswill (2013) although, in his account, he was restricted only to the language of the young speakers, while now new data extracted from a longer and more recent period of time and from the rest of the age groups are also considered.

As noted above, data from LEC were the main source used to investigate this issue. The word *Cockney(s)*, referring either to the language variety or its community of speakers, occurs 244 times. This high number of tokens in LEC stems from the questions the fieldworkers ask participants about the accent or the type of language they think they use, and also whether they identify themselves with Cockney or not. Apart from this, there are also a high number of repetitions typical of spoken language.

A close look at the data shows that 28.3 per cent of the respondents identify themselves with Cockney, 41.7 per cent claim that they use some kind of slang while 5.9 per cent opt for patois. Other terms they mention to designate their mode of expression are the following: *gangsta*, *east London Cockney*, *urban speech (bashment)*, *street talk*, *new lingo*, *Hackney Cockney* and *London accent*. The area of London where they live and even at times their ethnicity may have a bearing on their decision. Thus, the majority of the respondents who choose the label *Cockney* come from inner London and are white and Anglo speakers, while those who select *patois* are of African Caribbean origin. As regards the term *slang*, views are more divided according to the area of London participants come from, although, in this case, it is the clearly the preferred alternative for non-Anglos. Some examples are provided in (1)–(4).

- (1) William (17 years, inner London): What we call it is *urban speech*.
- (2) Mandy (16 years, outer London, Havering): We are typical cockneyes the way we talk and that we talk in *slang*.
- (3) Robert (16 years, inner London): We call it *urban speech gansta*.
- (4) Alan (age unknown) yea just *street talk* it's like ... slang. It's all sort slang when we talk.

Table 1, below, sets out the different terms used by respondents according to their age group to refer to their own expression.

COCKNEY						
Speaker's age	No.	London Area		Ethnicity		
12	2		Inner London	2	Anglo	1
			Havering (Outer London)	-	Non-Anglo	1
16-19	12		Inner London	8	Anglo	8
			Havering (Outer London)	4	Non-Anglo	4
20-30	1		Inner London	1	Anglo	1
			Havering (Outer London)	-	Non-Anglo	-
40-50	-		Inner London	-	Anglo	-
			Havering (Outer London)	-	Non-Anglo	-
+70	4		Inner London	3	Anglo	4
			Havering (Outer London)	1	Non-Anglo	-
TOTAL	19					

SLANG (ING)						
Speaker's age	No.	London Area		Ethnicity		
12	3		Inner London	3	Anglo	1
			Havering (Outer London)	-	Non-Anglo	2
16-19	21		Inner London	11	Anglo	6
			Havering (Outer London)	10	Non-Anglo	15
20-30	-		Inner London	-	Anglo	-
			Havering (Outer London)	-	Non-Anglo	-
40-50	4		Inner London	-	Anglo	2
			Havering (Outer London)	4	Non-Anglo	2
+70	-		Inner London	-	Anglo	-
			Havering (Outer London)	-	Non-Anglo	-
TOTAL	28					

PATOIS						
Speaker's age	No.	London Area		Ethnicity		
16-19	3		Inner London	3	Anglo	-
			Havering (Outer London)	-	Non-Anglo	3
40-50	1		Inner London	1	Anglo	-
			Havering (Outer London)	-	Non-Anglo	1
TOTAL	4					

Table 1: Terms used by the respondents in LEC to describe the kind of language they use according to age group, London area and ethnicity

NORMAL / COMMON						
Speaker's age	No.	London Area		Ethnicity		
12	2		Inner London	2	Anglo	1
			Havering (Outer London)	-	Non-Anglo	1
16-19	1		Inner London	1	Anglo	-
			Havering (Outer London)	-	Non-Anglo	1
TOTAL	3					
GANSTA						
Speaker's age	No.	London Area		Ethnicity		
16-19	3		Inner London	2	Anglo	-
			Havering (Outer London)	1	Non-Anglo	3
TOTAL	3					
EAST LONDON COCKNEY						
Speaker's age	No.	London Area		Ethnicity		
16-19	2		Inner London	2	Anglo	1
			Havering (Outer London)	-	Non-Anglo	1
TOTAL	2					
STREET TALK						
Speaker's age	No.	London Area		Ethnicity		
16-19	1		Inner London	-	Anglo	-
			Havering (Outer London)	1	Non-Anglo	1
TOTAL	1					
DIALECT						
Speaker's age	No.	London Area		Ethnicity		
+70	1		Inner London	1	Anglo	1
			Havering (Outer London)	-	Non-Anglo	-
TOTAL	1					

Table 1: (Continuation)

URBAN SPEECH						
Speaker's age	No.	London Area		Ethnicity		
16–19	1		Inner London	1	Anglo	-
			Havering (Outer London)	-	Non-Anglo	1
TOTAL	1					
COCKNEY SLANG						
Speaker's age	No.	London Area		Ethnicity		
16–19	1		Inner London	-	Anglo	1
			Havering (Outer London)	1	Non-Anglo	-
TOTAL	1					
HACKNEY COCKNEY						
Speaker's age	No.	London Area		Ethnicity		
16–19	1		Inner London	1	Anglo	1
			Havering (Outer London)	-	Non-Anglo	-
TOTAL	1					
HACKNEY STYLE GHETTO						
Speaker's age	No.	London Area		Ethnicity		
16–19	1		Inner London	1	Anglo	-
			Havering (Outer London)	-	Non-Anglo	1
TOTAL	1					
DIFFERENT LINGO						
Speaker's age	No.	London Area		Ethnicity		
16–19	1		Inner London	1	Anglo	1
			Havering (Outer London)	-	Non-Anglo	-
TOTAL	1					
NEW LINGO						
Speaker's age	No.	London Area		Ethnicity		
16–19	1		Inner London	1	Anglo	-
			Havering (Outer London)	-	Non-Anglo	1
TOTAL	1					

Table 1 (continuation)

When interpreting these data, we ought to bear in mind that the number of speakers for each age group is not the same, the 16–19 year group being the largest in number; also, for some speakers these labels are not mutually exclusive. Hence, it is relatively common that they use two or three of these labels, claiming as they do that they can adapt and switch their expression according to the situation or interlocutor in question, or even according to the communicative purpose intended so as to sound funny or make fun of someone. This seems to be particularly frequent in the case of middle-aged and elderly speakers, as shown in (5)–(6).

(5) Talulah's father (45 years, inner London): when we'd meet like . of s say for instance I'd meet I'd I a white person or yeah no I talk to my brother say my brother [right okay] . and I would say . whagwan uhu .. theirs is much .. you can hear their English .. they the . the the broken up . English . Jamaican patois ... and it would sound it would sound totally different.

(6) Serena (18 years, inner London): sometimes I'll be in a cockney mode sometime. I'll be in like a ghetto mode.

A large number of these participants do not know how to classify themselves (cf. (7)), that is, they cannot think of a specific name for their variety or accent, and none of the speakers uses the label *MLE* or *Jafaican*.

(7) Interviewer: How would you describe yourself
Justin (16 years, outer London). I'm not like cockney or nothing like my family. I'm just common but erm I dunno.

As regards the association of Cockney with a particular area or neighbourhood of London, there are also some elderly speakers who associate Cockney particularly with the East End of London (cf. (8)).

(8) Joe (70+ years, inner London): People say you are cockney but a cockney is strictly within the sound of Bow bells mm supposed to be yeah supposed to be.

However, there are no unanimous views on this since for some other respondents there are now more speakers of Cockney outside London (in Essex, for example) than in the capital itself, something that has also been pointed out by Fox (2015: 29), due to population movements and the arrival of immigrants (cf. (9)):

The white working-class families- the 'Cockneys'- have, in the main, left the area and moved out to the suburbs of London, Essex and surrounding areas. In doing so, it might be said that they have caused the geographical 'spread' of the East End, this term now being applied to a much wider area than that with which it was traditionally associated.

- (9) Ted (+70 years, inner London): most of the east like east enders cockneys moved out to essex and they're cockney lang. (LEC)

The age factor seems to play a role here, in that some of the respondents make a distinction between the type of language used by teenagers and that typical of adults: for some speakers, Cockney is associated with the older generation, the *sweet people*, whereas the new form of speaking is connected with a younger age group, that is, the *safe people*, since the latter tend to use this expression very often in their everyday activities (cf. (10)).

- (10) William (17 years, inner London): "Sweet people speak cockney, safe people use urban speech."

Attitudes to Cockney in particular vary greatly from one speaker to another. Thus, some of them maintain that Cockney is rude and a lazy way of speaking, as shown in (11).

- (11) Ted (+70 years, inner London): i was lazy i suppose i was cockney . in a lot . cos cockney is a lazy way of speaking.

However, for some others it is a form of expression they all share, and they even refer to particular features of Cockney which they like and feel proud of because it makes them feel part of their own culture; this is the case with the accent, rhyming slang, and the use of the address terms *mate* and *geezer*, as in (12).

- (12) Paul (16 years, inner London): "you alright mate" like everyone's using it so I I kind of like it you know # laughter # I won't even lie. I actually like it like the cockney accent's kind of big so . everyone using the cockney accent and mate at the end and . like "you alright you alright geezer" and all that.

For some of the respondents, Cockney is also associated with brusque speech, in contrast to standardised varieties of English, which sound softer in tone. It is also contrasted with 'posh' English and is considered to be fake. Thus, Cockney speakers are even regarded as performers by an elderly speaker (cf. (13)).

- (13) Ted (+70 years, inner London): I've noticed that most cockneys are performers er. I noticed it most when I went into the army.

We can also find discussions on the issue of race and its possible connections with ways of speaking. While for some respondents the variety used by a speaker is conditioned by their race, for others the place or area where a speaker lives plays a far more significant role, as exemplified in (14):

- (14) Sulema (18 years, inner London): I don't think white people black people speak differently it's just in the area which you're in .. that makes you you know cos if you see white people and black people in Hackney they all speak the same to me but then again if you go to . somewhere like . Chelsea side they will speak differently from how we speak here.

Some of the respondents also feel that the variety they use in their everyday communication would not be the one expected to be used in school, since it is clearly different from what they regard as standardised varieties of English.

It is also interesting to see that teenagers in particular are able, in their explanations, to identify and discuss the meaning and implications of certain words which are typical of their own mode of expression, namely ethnical and slang terms, such as *gash* for girl and *waste/road man*, to refer to someone who spends a lot of time on the streets, *creps* or *kreps* for trainers, *low batties* for low trousers, the exclamative *Oh my days* equivalent to *Oh my god!*, *bredren* and *bruvs* to refer to their peers, *geezer* for man, *nang* for cool, *sket*, a pejorative term to refer to a girl, *bait* as obvious or well-known, *chav* referring to a white working class person with a stereotyped lifestyle and way of dressing, and *ends* and *yard* for local area, etc. Some examples are provided in (15)–(17).

- (15) Maria (18 years, inner London): think it's a actually a jamaican words i really do believe that they call trainers *kreps* [aah] in Jamaica.
- (16) Maria (18 years, inner London): everyone's using it though *oh my days oh my days* . oh my god oh my god.
- (17) Dale (17 years, outer London): low batties was invented by . blacks .. because of prison ... well in prison they only had small medium and large sizes like for the trousers and tops and that

All these exchanges show that the participants are not only aware of the kind of language and accent they use but also possess some metalinguistic knowledge as to a number of its main features: slang words and expressions, degree of formality and level of acceptance by society and their teachers at school, questions related to identity, social class and race, etc. This does not apply only to middle-aged and elderly speakers but also to young speakers.

5.2. MLE in the media

It is important to explore how MLE is portrayed in the print and broadcast media to identify those features which seem to be the most relevant and attractive, and to confirm

the extent to which their descriptions and the information provided are accurate. It is also important to see how all this contrasts with the perceptions of the speakers themselves.

The current analysis covers a total of 17 articles and radio programmes dealing directly with MLE from February 2011 to November 2019. As noted above (Section 4), Kerswill (2014) already dealt with the period between 2000 and 2013. The year 2014 yielded no information, whereas in 2016 four articles appeared. Table 2 provides full details of the journal of publication, date, headlines, and main contents.

Source	Date	Headline	Main contents
<i>The Evening Standard</i>	01/02/11	Language can't stay still - just listen to London.	Cockney is losing ground and it may disappear in 30 years being supplanted by MLE.
	31/01/13	English still stands tall in multicultural London.	Teenagers who have never been in contact with Caribbean speakers introduce in their conversation words of Jamaican patois.
<i>The Daily Star</i>	14/03/11	Anuvahood 15.	Taking the series Anuvahood as the source of examples, the author maintains MLE speakers can be regarded as performers since they tend to portray a Jamaican accent.
<i>National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE) Classroom Vol. 17.</i>	22/06/12	A multicultural English language.	The perceived Jamaican influence on teenagers' speech is regarded as a problem in education.
<i>The Daily Mail</i>	25/07/13	Present Day Cockney Speakers more likely to live in Essex than the East End of London.	Cockney is giving space to MLE mainly because of immigration.
	11/10/13	Why are so many middle-class children speaking in Jamaican patois?	MLE is considered to be a kind of superbug infecting children, this having serious consequences for education and the job market
<i>Mail online</i>	10/11/13	Is this the end of Cockney? Hybrid dialect dubbed 'Multicultural London English' sweeps across the country.	Cockney is being replaced by MLE and is also spreading to other parts of England, such as Manchester and Birmingham.

Table 2: Overview of the attitudes towards MLE in the media examined

Source	Date	Headline	Main contents
<i>Metro</i>	25/09/15	My London... Dizraeli; The rapper and musician loves to escape to Waktthamstow ... and is fascinated by London lingo.	An interview with this musician who claims he loves MLE because it is “crazy and rich.” London kids are seen as living representations of modern times and teenagers are agents of language change and innovation.
<i>The Independent</i>	05/01/16	Youth slang decoded: How to tell a ‘durkboi’ from a ‘wasteman’, bruv.	In defence of youth language and slang (Tony Thorpe). Slang users know how to adapt their language to the context in question.
	14/02/17	Why UK grime artists are staying true to their regional roots.	British grime artists remain loyal to the local accent, and they do not adopt an American one. They make use of a particular accent to construct their identity.
	27/11/19	Birmingham and African caribbean accents face worst bias in UK, study finds.	The article reports the results of a study on prejudices against particular accents conducted at Queen Mary University. MLE receives lower ratings than other accents. ⁹
<i>Agence France Presse</i>	26/02/16	Sick, bad, wicked: London’s colourful slang on the rise.	J. Green believes that speakers of MLE are not governed by race, class or colour but by age. The variety of English spoken in London could show the way English could evolve in the future. Some artists, who are also speakers of MLE, are proud of the way they speak because they have their own code, and form a family.
<i>Express on line</i>	29/09/16	Queen’s English to be wiped out from London ‘due to high levels of immigration’.	Immigration is a problem that is affecting the English language.
<i>The Sunday Telegraph</i>	02/10/16	I fink this is the future-but it’s just nt proper; in London, the capital of the English-speaking world, the writing is on the all for the sound.	Negative reactions towards MLE which is described as “an egalitarian porridge of mangled consonants, glottal stops, online abbreviations, street slang, gamers’ insults, pop lyrics and quotes from the Simpsons.”
<i>BBC Radio 4</i>	14/07/18	Multicultural London English.	It records parts of an interview with R. Drummond on this sociolect. It shows how language is changing. MLE is spoken by young people in the Home Counties.
	12/09/19	Multicultural London English.	James Massiah claims there is no right or wrong way of speaking, but there is a language barrier between different groups of people.
<i>Plus Media Solutions</i>	23/11/18	What two French words can teach us about social change.	MLE reflects the perceived prestige of Jamaican-influenced English among (largely) young people, but it is spoken by people of all ethnicities.

Table 2: (continuation)

⁹ This corresponds to the study conducted by Cardoso *et al.* (2019), reviewed above (Section 3).

When considering the views and opinions on MLE as conveyed in these sources, we clearly note that negative attitudes prevail over positive ones. This is something which was expected, and which confirms previous findings (Kerswill 2014; Gates and Ilbury 2019; Cardoso *et al.* 2019; Kircher and Fox 2019a, 2019b; Levon *et al.* 2021; Sharma *et al.* 2022). The positive judgements tend to be seen in contributions from academics and linguists, specifically Rob Drummond, Tony Thorpe and Jonathon Green, whose interest in MLE is mainly linguistic, and highlight the innovative and creative nature of slang. They see MLE as a variety of its own and emphasise the importance of the factor of youth in language innovation and change (BBC Radio 4, 14/07/18; *The Independent*, 05/01/16). Furthermore, MLE is seen as not being conditioned by race (white, black, Asian, etc.), social class (working class versus high class), speaker's area or location (inner London versus outer London) or ethnicity, but only by age, and is considered to be spoken by all ethnicities (*Agence France Presse*, 26/02/16). Also, artists and poets such as Dizraeli and James Massiah consider it as “cool, crazy and rich” and as a group identity marker, with the question of persevering identity appearing here to be crucial (*Metro*, 25/09/15; *BBC Radio 4*, 12/09/2019).

By contrast, the negative assessments of MLE are versed in terms of the same notions reported in previous studies. MLE speakers are regarded as performers and as adopting an artificial accent (*The Daily Star*, 14/03/11). The fact of having so many immigrants in London is seen as negative, with undesirable consequences for the English language, and thus constituting a serious problem (*Express online*, 29/09/2016). Several contributions also claim that MLE is responsible for the displacement of Cockney English, which may disappear within a fifty-year timeframe together with British values more broadly (*The Evening Standard*, 01/02/11). In a similar vein, MLE is considered to be a kind of disease infecting children, with serious consequences for their education and for their future job prospects (*The Daily Mail*, 11/10/13). Even when an academic study conducted by researchers from Queen Mary University on the perception of English accents is reported in the press, emphasis is on the low valuation given to MLE in sharp contrast to RP, French-accented English and Edinburgh-accented English, these being the most highly rated (*The Independent*, 27/11/19). It is difficult to anticipate exactly how information of this kind will be received by the general public and hence how it will influence public opinion, and for this reason the next two sections will explore the perceptions of MLE on social media.

5.3. *MLE in social networks: The case of Twitter*

The data reported in this section can be regarded as a preliminary survey since it focuses on only one of the social networks, *Twitter*, and thus conclusions should be taken with caution. However, it can help to provide new or additional perspectives on the issue. This preliminary study was conducted in two stages. In the first of these, I considered only the *Twitter* accounts of three rappers (Dizzee Rascal, Wiley, Dappy) for a fifteen-year period (2005–2020). These musicians are generally associated with MLE and use this accent in their speech regularly. The analysis was not restricted to their own posts but also included the responses and retweets of their followers. From the information provided by the accounts of these followers we know that most of them are young adults and are fond of hip-hop, rap and grime music. Some of them are also artists and producers themselves, and the majority of them are based in London. This may explain why lexical and grammar traits of MLE can be easily observed in their exchanges. This is a relevant data for my purposes.

In a second stage, I carried out a similar study but extending the analysis to *Twitter* in general, the only limitation being that the searches and results retrieved all concerned MLE, London English, Jafaican/Jafaikan or Cockney. In this case some of the examples retrieved correspond to extracts from newspaper *Twitter* accounts and other media blogs.

The analysis of the *Twitter* accounts of the three rappers brings together two main ideas. The first has to do with the incorporation of the study of MLE in the English A level curriculum. There are even some tweets that point specifically to the study of the language of Dizzee Rascal, as shown in (18).

- (18) We're studying your language in English atm and are writing an essay about it ... wish me luck? (DR 11/12/2014)

No doubt, the incorporation of some features of MLE in the school curriculum of English seems to be a positive policy and may indicate a desire to engender positive attitudes towards this sociolect, in that teenagers will tend to see the academic value of this language as being worthy of study.

The second main idea refers to the influence these rappers are exerting on the English language since they are regarded, by some posters, as precursors of language change and innovation (cf. (19)).

- (19) Teenagers in Britain will study Rusty Rockets and Dizzee Rascal as part of a new English A level designed 2 focus on *contemporary use of language* (Ivanka Zonic 08/05/2014)

When considering the tweets attested in the second and wider group of *Twitter* accounts, we also see that views are divided. Some express a preference for the sociolect while others highlight the multicultural nature of this variety and how it has been stigmatised in the media. However, the majority show negative attitudes, believe that the speakers who use this urban dialect sound ridiculous, and that they adopt the accent artificially, as can be seen in (20).

- (20) Jafaican may be cool, but it sounds ridiculous. (*Daily Telegraph* blog 29/20/2015)

A set of tweets refer to Cockney and compare it with MLE; most of these allude to the displacement of British values with the emergence of MLE (cf. (21)).

- (21) Find it a shame how the cockney accent is slowly disappearing and everyone in London now speak like a fucking roadman (Ben honour 16/06/2017)

Finally, one of the posters calls our attention by mentioning the addition of Jafaican as a new term in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (cf. (22)).

- (22) Whateus, chillax, simples, sumfin and Jafaican are some of the new words added to the OED. (*Metro* 16/10/2019)

5.4. YouTube videos on MLE and responses

A total of 11 video documents with their corresponding comments were analysed, amounting to 4,591 comments with an average of 417 comments per video. Overall, the videos can be rated as quite popular since they attained high numbers of views, a total of 2,306,171, with an average of 209,652 per item.¹⁰

The majority of these documents, which are addressed to the layperson rather than to language specialists, feature the different accents that can be identified under the general category of ‘London English’, including here classical or traditional RP, Contemporary RP (RP with new developments), Cockney, Estuary English and MLE. In some cases, the presenters illustrate the main differences and, when dealing with MLE,

¹⁰ See Table 3, below, for a full account of the title and website, date of publication, main contents, duration, views and number of comments of the viewers for each of these videos.

they discuss the most relevant pronunciation, lexical and, less often, grammar and discourse features.

These video presentations can be regarded as neutral since the presenters, in general, do not make any critical value judgements about any of these sociolects. They only discuss some of their features. Here is a list of the main MLE features mentioned:

- (1) As regards pronunciation, *t*-glottalisation, *l*-vocalisation, $\delta > d$ thing > ting, $\theta > f$, sharply iambic use of deep voice, etc.
- (2) As regards grammar and discourse, high use of address terms (*mate*, *bruv*, *blud*, *man*), use of third person singular present *don't* and negative concord structures, irregular past of BE, invariant tag *innit*, shortening of some words, e.g. *enough* > *nough*.
- (3) As regards lexis, the introduction of words having their origin in Jamaican English (*mandem*, *ends*, *yardie*, *yute*, *wagam*, *cotch*) together with other vernacular lexical items (*butters*, *peng*, *safe*, *allow*, *bait*, *beef*, *jack*), words undergoing a semantic shift (*sick* meaning cool, awesome), tags with multiple meanings (*innit*, *you get me*).¹¹

The comments and reactions included after the videos reveal both positive and negative views towards MLE, although the latter, as before, clearly predominate. In fact, two out of three comments are of a negative kind. Foreigners generally highlight the positive properties of RP and the inarticulateness of MLE, possibly because it does not follow the expected standard, as illustrated in (23).

- (23) I'am not british and no native speaker! So maybe I don't get it. But why is this MLE great? Never been to England, but I want to speak this language, as properly as possible, even I don't live there. (Video 1, Learn English with Stormzy. Multicultural London English)

Those who highlight the positive aspects of MLE concentrate on its musicality, its multicultural character, its uniqueness and distinctiveness. Among other opinions, they note it as being a great evolution of Cockney and an effective blend of two cultures, a sexy accent, a positive transformation of the nation's capital embracing multiculturalism,

¹¹ Notice that some of these features are not exclusive to MLE since they are also present in other London English varieties and even in some general British English dialects. This is the case, for example, with *l*-vocalisation, *sick* as meaning cool, invariant tags as *innit*, negative concord structures, etc.

a posh cockney, that is, cockney with aitches. Its multicultural nature and musicality clearly prevail. (24) to (26) below illustrate some examples.

- (24) This video is sick fam! Ha ha. I've been learning MLE from Arsenal Fan TV all these years ha ha ha. Again this video is brilliant! Keep it man. (Video 1, Learn English with Stormzy. Multicultural London English)
- (25) It's exciting. (Video 2, MLE or Jafaican. BBC1)
- (26) I love the multicultural London accent aha. (Video 2, MLE or Jafaican. BBC1)

Negative comments, on the contrary, identify it with the death of English, describing it with the following adjectives and expressions: *non-educated, lazy, ugly, vile, ghastly, horrible, barbaric, chavvy, disgusting, London pidgin, fake, fashionable, failings of multiculturalism, gay version of the original, incorrect/wrong way to speak English, trash teen talk, the ebonics of the UK, dumbed down English, lowlife slang, sounds like tramps, horrible accent*, especially hearing it from white people. Multiculturalism is even regarded as a cancer to UK with homophobic and racist overtones here included. Examples (27)–(30) can be regarded as an illustration of this.

- (27) The Multicultural accent is the British version of Thug/Gangstas Rap very barbaric. (Video 5, London Accents: RP/Cockney/Multicultural London English)
- (28) The MLE is like cancer to my ear. It's associated with low life, aggressive things. It's vile and ghastly. It would me more appropriately called London pidgin, chavvy, disgusting accent, dumbed down English, lowlife slang. (Video 6, London accent tips).
- (29) Honestly MLE accent sounds like gay version of the original London accent. (Video 5, London Accents: RP/Cockney/Multicultural London English).
- (30) MLE is so far the ugliest accent O have ever Heard. Multicultural means actually White people trying to sound Jamaican. (Video 2, MLE or Jafaican. BBC1).

Overall, the views expressed by the participants focus on the same issues as mentioned above. They highlight its lack of correctness, the negative condition of multiculturalism, its broken and ugly nature, and its association with teen and black speakers. They also regard it as uneducated speech, as common among young speakers, and as not suitable for school and academic purposes. Some views also draw a connection between this accent and lower working class. They also refer to the need to adapt their speech to the

context in question. This means that in their judgements they combine social, educational, racist, and even sexual orientation arguments and criteria.

Title and website	Date	Main contents	Time	Views	Comments
Posh British Girl Teaches Londoner How to Speak English < http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=agV7XYGhFu8 >	September 2019	This is an educational video which explores variations with RP and MLE, and how Britain's division of social classes has a bearing on accents. Speakers tend to adapt their language according to the situation, for example, in a job interview.	24:38	14,808	144
Learn English with Stormzy. MLE: < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1MQdEV06Yc >	April 2019	The presenter introduces new features of MLE by illustrating examples from an interview with Stormzy, a British rapper, singer and songwriter.	12:19	57,493	381
London Accents: RP Cockney Multicultural London English < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_H8r2Izzo5k >	February 2018	They describe what they call London accents. MLE is featured as the newest of the accents heavily influenced by African and Asian communities of speakers and is considered as the most widely used in London.	12:10	555,830	1,139
London Dialects < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOQUnt5h8w4 >	January 2018	Five different London accents are distinguished. MLE or Jafaican is regarded as the variety of the hip-hop generation, invented by some hipsters and teenagers hanging out.	03:43	29,345	81
Multicultural London English: Dialectable Episode 1 < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BKHczYBW6DI >	September 2017	The presenter describes MLE in rather neutral terms. He, first of all, explains how MLE was formed and then refers to distinctive features of this variety.	4:51	7,557	12
London Accent Tips. MLE. <i>Bruv. Innit. Ting!</i> < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUjMmwxmOnY >	June 2017	The speaker presents the video as a tribute to London after the riots that took place in August 2011. It is defined as an amalgamation of the different accents of London that came together.	03:14	62,151	175
How to Talk like a Real Londoner < http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbCiNdAAUM4&feature=youtu >	January 2017	MLE is described as having its own rules of pronunciation and grammar. It is a style of English. MLE has replaced Cockney.	13:01	541,451	463
<i>Sick, Bad, Wicked: London's Colourful Slang in the Rise</i> < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=91Zq0YHxHfg >	February 2016	MLE is regarded as a new variety that is rapidly spreading and with a strong influence from hip-hop. It is also described as an accent that is governed by age and not by race or colour.	01:46	743	0

Table 3: Overview of the *YouTube* videos on MLE considered in the analysis

Title and website	Date	Main contents	Time	Views	Comments
MLE or Jafaican. BBC1 < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0KdVoSS_2PM >	May 2015	MLE is described as gaining ground to Cockney. Several features of MLE are described and illustrated with examples.	11:17	55,609	311
The Best British Street Slang < http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Z8JqutRWrs >	April 2015	It focuses on MLE. Who speaks it? Ali G, D. Rascal, N-Dubz, hip-hop, grime and garage artists and musicians. Some examples of characteristic words and expressions are provided as examples.	10:26	957,677	1840
Who's an Eastender now? (Paul Kerswill) < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAnFbJ65KYM&feature=emb_title >	September 2011	Part of a general talk delivered by Kerswill who refers to how migration has transformed Cockney. He also alludes to the riots in London and to the evolution of different London varieties. Then he analyses the views of the well-known journalist, Starkey, on MLE who claimed MLE was a foreign variety associated with the black community. In Kerswill's view, Starkey is totally wrong.	18:16	23,507	45

Table 3: (continuation)

6. ENGENDERING POSITIVE ATTITUDES TOWARDS MLE

As a secondary aim of this paper, I also sought to provide some reflections on measures and initiatives that could be taken to fight some of the stereotypes commented on throughout this paper, towards fostering more open attitudes of respect and tolerance to MLE and its speakers. These reflections could even be extrapolated to other accents which, like MLE, may be stigmatised or regarded as inferior to other varieties. As several scholars have pointed out in a broader context of language change (Trudgill 1975, 1983; Cheshire 1982; Edwards 1984; Cheshire and Trudgill 1989; Cheshire *et al.* 2017; Gates and Ilbury 2019), it would be necessary to discuss the traditional notion of 'standard English' further, especially considering the evolution and diffusion of English nowadays; the same would apply to the notion of 'linguistic diversity'. The introduction of extracts for discussion and consideration from MLE artists and influencers in the A level curriculum seems to be a positive initiative, since it might help towards a fuller recognition of this sociolect and of other varieties which do not necessarily follow what is generally regarded as the standard. In addition, this would be directly connected with one of the learning outcomes of the *Assessment and Qualifications Alliance* (AQA) English syllabus for the A-level in English Language in 2023, which makes reference to the specific "study of social attitudes to, and debates about, language diversity and

change” as well as to the analysis of different texts using different sociolects (occupational groups, ethnicity, gender) and texts using different dialects (regional, national and international). In the learning outcomes referred to in module 3, “Language in Action,” specific reference is also made to research projects that could be undertaken regarding how people feel about language.¹² In this respect, we might bear in mind the results of previous studies (Snell and Andrews 2017) that have clearly shown how the inappropriate pedagogical treatment of regional variation can have negative effects on students’ educational achievements. Students need to be taught how to switch from their own variety to standardised varieties of English according to the situation in question and this passes necessarily through the contact, appreciation and understanding of these varieties of English and their own mode of expression.

Teachers and educators can also play an important function here by being trained on how to respond to students’ own variety and how to deal with all these issues, that is, language attitudes and ideologies, and accent bias in the classroom. However, we should not overlook the role of parents, who can also have an influence on their children. Explaining to them some of the decisions taken in the English classroom and the reasons underlying those decisions could have beneficial effects. The creation of suitable resources and materials with particular attention to MLE and other non-mainstream varieties for their use in the English classroom might also play an important role in this direction. Mass media should also pay more attention to the importance of language diversity and make a positive contribution here, rather than adopting critical attitudes which frequently engender unjustified stereotypes. Students should also be cautioned about the information available on social media regarding attitudes to language and language ideologies, so that they may be in a position to be critical and not to accept everything that is being claimed without reflecting about it, and that, where necessary, they should be able to contrast and question the data.

¹² Further information at: <https://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/english/as-and-a-level/english-language-7701-7702/subject-content-a-level>

7. FINAL WORDS

This paper has contributed to the study of attitudes towards MLE and its speakers by providing new data extracted and analysed from corpora (LIC and MLEC), mass media, and also from the social networks *Twitter* and *YouTube*. The latter have turned out to be rich sources of information for the study of language attitudes since they collect large samples of spontaneous thoughts and beliefs, and provide additional perspectives on language attitudes, which may be different from those found in printed material and speech data. It is true that they also show some limitations, especially if compared with corpora-derived data and other methods of attitudes linguistic research (Kircher and Zipp 2022), such as scales, questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, association tests, completion of specific tasks, in that the latter can be regarded as more rigorous and scientific. With data from social media, by contrast, it is not always possible to control closely some of the variables pertaining to the posted comments, with contributors often using nicknames and providing very little information about themselves, thus being difficult to categorise.

In terms of the degree of awareness MLE speakers show regarding their own variety, it was observed that quite often they do not really know how to define it, and that they resort to general labels such as *slang* or *urban speech*. Some younger speakers use the label *Cockney*, although this was not the preferred option by the majority of participants. The age factor seems to play an important role in this respect, since older and white speakers tend to be associated with Cockney, while respondents of the younger generations are more clearly identified with slang or this new urban sociolect.

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