

How multiethnic is a multiethnolect?

The recontextualisation of Multicultural London English

Paul Kerswill & Christian Ilbury

University of York/Queen Mary University of London & University of Edinburgh

In this talk, we explore the 'recontextualisation' (Bauman and Briggs, 1990) of the multiethnolectal variety spoken in London which has been termed 'Multicultural London English' (Cheshire et al., 2008, 2011). Research first defined MLE as a new variety spoken by young working-class individuals living in inner-city London. A key claim in the earlier research is that, based on the lack of any apparent ethnic stratification, MLE could be described as a 'multiethnolect' (Clyne, 2000). That is to say, features of MLE are used by speakers from a diverse range of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. We pose the question of just how 'multiethnic' such a language variety actually is. Drawing on ethnographic insights, media discussions and metalinguistic comments, we use the concept of enregisterment (Agha 2003) to consider the ways in which MLE features have become recontextualised and have taken on new social meanings. We explore whether, and if so how, there has been a shift from a highly variable working-class inner-city youth repertoire shared across many ethnic groups, to a linguistically more focused variety with a much more sharply etched set of indexicalities closely related to a sometimes exclusive Black ethnicity and culture.