A ‘youth’ variety or long-term language change? An investigation of a multiracial vernacular

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In recent years, linguists across Europe have documented the emergence of varieties termed as ‘multiethnolects’ (Kotsinas 1988; Royneland and Svendsen 2008; Quist 2008; Wiese 2009) to describe the rise of new linguistic practices among adolescents in large urban multicultural contexts. Yet to be determined, however, is whether they are exclusive to adolescent language or whether users continue to speak the variety as they become older and move away from their peer groups and the extent to which preadolescent speakers, who are not yet engaged with teenage youth culture, use features identified as typical of these varieties. These issues are fundamental to the question of whether multiethnolects are simply varieties signalling allegiance to a dominant youth culture during adolescence or if they will develop into long-term language change.

Under investigation here is whether a variety used among London’s multicultural youth is age-graded, arising in adolescent friendship groups and used in the expression of a non-ethnic youth identity. In this paper we compare the results of adolescents from our previous Linguistic Innovators project with the results of adults and pre-adolescent speakers (4, 8 and 12 year olds) from our current Multicultural London English project. We analyse two features identified as typical of this multicultural variety in London. Firstly, new patterns of was/were variation which show the existence of competing was/weren’t and was/wasn’t systems and secondly, innovations in the quotative system which confirm the increase of BE LIKE and the emergence of a new quotative, THIS IS + SUBJECT. Our results demonstrate that these new patterns are robust among speakers other than adolescents, particularly in the younger age groups. We argue that these results suggest language change in progress and that the multilingual backgrounds of young people in metropolises like London contribute to a complex ‘feature pool’ (Mufwene, 2001) from which innovations can emerge.

References