Age-grading and vowel systems in Multicultural London English

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Our previous research in London has found that a set of innovative linguistic features are shared by many young inner-city speakers, regardless of ethnicity. We have elected to refer to this apparently new variety, or rather set of varieties, as Multicultural London English (MLE). The linguistic, sociolinguistic and socio-demographic characteristics of MLE, as well as its acquisition, are the subject of our second large-scale London study, set in another part of the city, which extends the age range down to 4 and up to 40 years of age.

While the vowel features of the younger children to a large extent resemble that of teenagers, there are some striking differences. The 4 and 8 year olds lack the typical MLE vowels such as the strongly fronted GOOSE, raised FACE, fronted and lowered PRICE and the raised and backed GOAT. Instead they have systems resembling the levelled vowels of young people in south-east England outside London. The 12 year olds have a mixture of MLE and leveled features, regardless of ethnicity, which shows that MLE phonological features are acquired in peer groups in early adolescence. Individual speakers with dense multi-cultural friendship networks acquire MLE features earlier than other speakers within the same age group and our findings demonstrate how contact is the main factor in acquisition of MLE features. The findings relate to the phenomenon of the “adolescent spike” in language change studies (Tagliamonte and D’Arcy 2009). This is notwithstanding the fact that this is an ethnically and linguistically highly heterogeneous community, where brand new vernacular norms are being created.

Reference: