

## Dialect perception amongst Gen Z East Londoners: Discrimination of London Englishes

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**Background:** It is well established that speech perception is not determined by acoustic information alone; it is also shaped by the listener's social background, expectations, and experience (e.g., Foulkes & Docherty, 2006; Drager, 2010). For example, previous research has shown that familiarity and exposure can facilitate accent perception (Clopper & Pisoni, 2004). However, this research is mostly situated in monolingual homogenous communities, whereas in urban centres like London the ambient environment includes an enormous range of accent variation. To date, little is known about how local listeners process the variety found in urban Englishes. The current study investigates how young East Londoners discriminate between the ambient accent features that are present in dominant English varieties in East London, namely Multicultural London English (MLE), London Asian English (LAE), and Standard Southern British English (SSBE). It explores whether social background and accent familiarity influence discrimination accuracy and confusion patterns.

**Methods:** Twenty lifelong East London residents (aged 18–30; 10 female, 10 male), representing dominant East London heritage groups: Caribbean, South Asian, African, and Arab took part, allowing exploration of listener background on perception. All participants completed an oddity discrimination task targeting three phonetic features that vary between the target London English varieties: the GOAT vowel (fronted [əʊ], backed [o:], standard [əʊ]), intervocalic /t/ (retracted [t̠], glottal [ʔ], canonical /t/), and coda // (vocalised, clear, dark). Stimuli consisted of single-word tokens (e.g. ball, bottle, boat) produced in each accent by a trained phonetician. All tokens were normalised for duration, and amplitude, and pitch-flattened in Praat to minimise prosodic cues but to also to make sure the only cue was the main segmental feature investigated (e.g. MLE GOAT or vocalised //). Each participant completed 54 trials per accent, resulting in 162 trials divided into two counterbalanced blocks. We also included 10 catch trials, from different speakers with clear contrasts, to track attention throughout the experiment. Participants also completed a language-background questionnaire to gather information on their exposure to and familiarity with London English varieties and self-described accent aptitude.

**Results:** Overall, in terms of feature, participants were most accurate at discriminating the accents for intervocalic /t/, followed by the GOAT vowel, and least accurate for coda //. Coda //, in previous research, has shown to be less distinct and operate on more of a phonetic gradient (Sproat & Fujimura, 1993) which may explain the difficulty to found by our listeners. Across accents, SSBE targets were most accurately discriminated from MLE and LAE, while the MLE–LAE contrasts had the lowest accuracy. Error patterns revealed consistent confusion between MLE and LAE, with most errors occurring for GOAT, followed by coda //, and intervocalic /t/. This pattern can be explained by the acoustic overlap in MLE and LAE for GOAT (i.e., both occupying the high-back vowel space, with trajectory and length being the main distinction), whereas intervocalic /t/ are acoustically distinct between these accents (i.e., vocalised /t/ vs retracted [t̠]) (Cheshire et al, 2011; O'Brien, 2010). Although statistical modelling found no significant effect of listener background or accent aptitude, descriptive trends indicated that moderate self-rated accent aptitude corresponded to slightly higher discrimination accuracy than low or high aptitude groups. These findings demonstrate that even within a single urban setting, phonetic distinctiveness and social familiarity jointly shape how listeners process accent variation. This study contributes to understanding sociophonetic perception in multiethnic urban contexts, showing how exposure within a diverse speech community can influence perceptual boundaries between locally coexisting accents.

**References:**

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