

The acquisition of London English: a longitudinal study of emerging speech varieties in an East London primary school

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Most studies of children's acquisition of sociolinguistic variation have examined children growing up in monolingual homogeneous communities. This work has shown that children initially acquire speech variation patterns that reflect their caregivers, and with experience in school, begin to sound more like their peers [1,2,3]. In London, the ambient environment is much more complex – the input at home and in school can include an enormous range of accents and languages. Multicultural London English (MLE) appears to behave differently as a result: Cheshire et al. (2011:189) argue that, unlike non-contact situations, children in London diverge from caregiver and local adult models earlier than in less diverse settings. In the present study, we build on this early work and track the English speech production patterns of two cohorts of children in an East London primary school. We ask: Is there minimal home influence for London children? How do children navigate the varieties available to them? How early does social differentiation (class, gender, ethnicity) emerge?

Starting at the beginning of primary school, we are recording 43 children from the same school every six months until the end of primary school. To date, children have been recorded at four time points spanning two years. The sample reflects the school population and local East London community, with children from a range of social class and ethnic backgrounds. Two cohorts are followed in parallel: (1) children in the first year of primary school (n = 21, ages 4–5) and (2) children in the third year (n = 22, ages 6–7). Speech is being elicited using child-friendly activities (picture naming, spot-the-difference, free play) targeting vowels and consonants (e.g., PRICE, GOAT, and FACE and coda //) that vary across London English accents (e.g. Multicultural London English, London Asian English, and Standard London English). Caregivers are being recorded producing the same target sounds and have completed a home background questionnaire on language/accents exposure, family structure and indicators of social class.

Recordings have been transcribed and diarised using WhisperX and force-aligned with the Montreal Forced Aligner using a customised pretrained acoustic model. Analyses to date focus on the PRICE, GOAT, and FACE and coda // over the first two timepoints. Diphthongs were analysed acoustically, with F1 and F2 extracted at onset and trajectory points using FastTrack. Coda // was auditorily coded for realisation type (clear, dark, vocalised).

Initial analyses reveal high individual variability at school entry (Time 1). For coda //, younger children (4-5) show closer alignment with caregiver production, with // realisation reflecting the variety spoken at home (e.g. clear // in South Asian and African heritage families), consistent with previous findings from East London [4]. By Time 2, in the next school year, social patterning begins to emerge for the younger cohort, with working-class children showing reduced variability and predominantly vocalised //. Likewise, the older children (age 6-7) already display class- and ethnically patterned coda // productions at Time 1. For diphthongs, an MLE-like realisation of FACE is present at school entry. GOAT shows early alignment with caregiver production, such that children whose primary caregivers produce a backed GOAT also show backed realisations. For PRICE, gender differences are evident for older children at Time 1 and emerge for younger children by Time 2, with girls showing longer vowel trajectories. At BAAP, we will present findings from additional time points, using longitudinal modelling to characterise how fine-grained developmental speech trajectories are modulated by social factors, in a diverse urban environment.

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