



From ‘Multi-ethnic adolescent heteroglossia’ to ‘Contemporary urban vernaculars’

Ben Rampton*

King's College London, Centre for Language Discourse & Communication, DEPS, FWB Waterloo Bridge Wing, Waterloo Road, London SE1 9NH, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Research on crossing and stylisation among young people in multi-ethnic urban areas of Britain during the 1980s and 1990s pointed to the emergence of new ethnicities with social class underpinnings, and these mixed language practices have now been a feature of the urban landscape for at least 30 years. But how far are they confined to youth? Are they really only transient age-specific phenomena, as terms like ‘youth language’ imply? Focusing on post-adolescent and middle-aged informants during 2008 and 2009, this paper points to their enduring significance, considers their place in individual repertoires, and attempts to settle some of the terminological dispute, using Agha’s theory of ‘register’ to reposition the notion of ‘vernacular’.

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1. Introduction

Over the last 15 years, there has been a great deal of sociolinguistic research on the relatively stylised heteroglossic speech practices of young people with migrant backgrounds, and there has also been a lot of interest in the spread of such practices among both other-ethnic and non-migrant peers (see e.g. Hewitt, 1986; Rampton, 1995, 1999; Androutsopoulos and Georgakopoulou, 2003; Jaspers, 2005; Harris, 2006; Auer, 2007; Madsen, 2008; Alim et al., 2009; Jørgensen, 2008; Reyes and Lo, 2009; see Rampton and Charalambous (2011) for a review). Young people certainly aren’t the only focus for research on heteroglossic speech stylisation,¹ but practices of stylisation and crossing have been much more extensively researched among young people than anyone else, and youth is often taken as central to their social distribution, to the extent that these ways of speaking are regularly described as ‘youth language’.

But what happens to these practices as young people become adults? Here the research literature has far less to say. Reporting on his research in London in the early 1980s, Hewitt says that ‘[w]ith rare exception, creole use by whites is limited in range and restricted to adolescents. This is [partly] related. . . to the fact that black youngsters themselves often reach a peak of creole use in their late teens and gradually come to use it less and less’ (1986, p. 193). In 1990s in New York, Cutler found that the white middle-class teenager who she studied used less African American Vernacular English as he got older, though ‘he continued to use AAVE phonology, hip-hop terms and tags such as ‘yo’ and ‘know what I’m sayin’ as part of his every[day] speech style (and still does now at age 19)’ (1999, p. 430). While in Copenhagen much more recently, in a longitudinal study which followed bilinguals over a period of 17 years, Møller finds that ‘polylingual languaging’ *continues* among young men in their mid-twenties, and that ‘the linguistic features ascribed to Turkish and Danish get more and more

* Tel.: +44 (0)7710 767 659.

E-mail address: ben.rampton@kcl.ac.uk

¹ Unrelated to youth, there is also important work on stylised performance in, for example, public and media discourse (e.g. Bell, 1999; Coupland, 2007a; Androutsopoulos, 2007; Hill, 2008; also e.g. De Fina (2007) and Kotthoff (2007)).

integrated over the years, [with] “mixing’ becom[ing] their ‘natural’ way of speaking’ (2009, p. 188). Overall, three studies in two continents nearly 30 years apart is hardly a good basis for identifying trends, and even then, the picture looks mixed.

So in spite of major sociolinguistic interest in heteroglossic speech among youth, there is a serious lacuna in our knowledge about the durability of these practices, and this has major consequences for any more general interpretation: are the sociolinguistic processes we’re seeing here just an ‘adolescent phase’, a ‘stylistic flirtation’, or do they instead point to the emergence cultural formations that are actually enduring?

To investigate these issues, there are at least four questions we should ask:

- (a) Is this kind of heteroglossia simply an evanescent phenomenon within the particular environments where it has been studied? Is it simply a brief stage in, for example, a longer process of language shift – a transitional moment as new populations shift from dominance in the migrant language to dominance in the language of the ‘host’ society?
- (b) If it isn’t simply an ephemeral phase that new populations pass through in the process of assimilation to majority norms, is it just an age-graded phenomenon, something that successive generations of young people with (and without) migrant roots pick up for a while, but then abandon as they get older?
- (c) If it isn’t just age-graded, if it does actually last into adulthood, then just how significant is it? Exactly what place does it hold in the speech repertoire of individuals and social groups?
- (d) If it is actually significant, then how should we conceptualise it, and what should it be called? Clearly, neither ‘youth language’ nor ‘multi-ethnic adolescent heteroglossia’ will be enough.

Before starting on this sequence of questions, the account begins with a summary of some of the earliest findings, drawing on my own research on multi-ethnic adolescent peer-groups in the 1980s, cross-referring to [Hewitt \(1986\)](#) as well (Section 2). With the baseline for historical comparison laid out, Sections 3 and 4 address questions (a) and (b), mainly drawing on interview data from a study in 2008–2009 focusing on people of South Asian descent in west London, though also alluding to [Harris’](#) analysis of adolescents from the same area in the mid 1990s. These data show that the patterns and practices identified in the 1980s have persisted, and there are also indications that they aren’t necessarily abandoned as adolescents move into adulthood. Section 5 confirms this with extracts of telephone interaction involving a man in his forties, so the discussion then turns to question (c) – if the practices of youth persist, what kind of place do they hold in an adult speech repertoire? Section 6 explores this, first by comparing the man’s most heteroglot speech with the way he talks to a lawyer, and then by reporting his own retrospective account of talk and friendships formed at school. With both the historical and biographical durability of this way of speaking now established, the paper turns to question (d). After characterising the speech in focus as a hybrid style that has emerged at the intersection of migration and class, that is strongly linked to youth in its indexical associations but not in its social distribution, and that is closely related but still distinct from other languages in the vicinity, Section 7 proposes ‘contemporary urban vernacular’ as a solution to the terminological uncertainty and dispute that characterises recent work in this field, drawing on [Agha \(2004, 2007\)](#) to reject the traditional sociolinguistic separation of routine and reflexively stylised speech.

We should begin with the research from the 1980s.

2. Crossing & stylisation in the South Midlands in the 1980s

The research published in [Rampton, 1995](#) was conducted in 1984 and 1987 and focused on about sixty 11–16 year olds with Indian, Pakistani, Caribbean, Anglo and Bangladeshi backgrounds, most of whom had been born in the UK (see [Rampton, 2005, chapter 1.6 & 1.7](#)). The study was located in ‘Stoneford’, a town in the south Midlands of England with a population of about 100,000 and a substantial post-WWII history of labour migration, with people coming to work in local heavy industry, first from Poland, the Baltic states, Croatia and the Ukraine, then from Italy, then from 1958 onwards, from the West Indies and Indian subcontinent, and finally, after 1972, from Bangladesh and East Africa. Immigration produced a significant change in the state school population, with the proportion of ethnic minority pupils growing from 2.7% in 1955, to 14% in 1961, to 19% in 1966, to 24% in 1969 and 31% in 1979, and while there were less than 5% ethnic minority children in some lower schools, in others they constituted between 70% and 90%. [Rampton’s](#) research was carried out in ‘Ashmead’, the most ethnically mixed area of minority settlement in Stoneford, where in the local middle school, the pupils were 9% African–Caribbean, 20% Anglo, 12% Bangladeshi, 28% Indian, 28% Pakistani and 0.7% Italian. Three quarters of the houses in Ashmead were constructed between 1875 and 1914; in 1976, it accounted for one third of all Stoneford’s ‘high stress’ housing; and the inhabitants generally recognised that elsewhere in the town, the discourses about their neighbourhood were predominantly negative.

The research concentrated on inter-ethnic crossing and stylisation – the use of English-based Creole among youngsters of Anglo and Asian descent, the use of Punjabi by Anglos and Caribbeans, and the stylisation of Asian English by all three. Informants located these practices in a social space bounded by both ethnic and class difference, viewing them as neither legitimate nor likely currency among posh whites and Bangladeshis, who generally didn’t live in the neighbourhood and who were seen, respectively, as superior and inferior groups lying above and below the ambit of ‘ordinary’ local adolescent practice.

Beyond the peer-group, there was a great deal of public discourse which polarized black and Asian people in threat/clown, problem/victim binaries ([Gilroy, 1987](#); [Rampton, 1995](#)), and awareness of racist imaging like this meant that with crossing





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