



Youth languages in Africa and Europe: linguistic subversion or emerging vernaculars?

**Paul Kerswill, Department of Linguistics and English Language,
Lancaster University**

African Studies Group, 19th October 2010

1. Why study youth language in cities?

- ▶ Nouchi (Abidjan)
- ▶ Camfranglais (Yaounde/Douala)
- ▶ Indoubil and Lingala ya Bayankee (Brazzaville/Kinshasa)
- ▶ Isamto (Johannesburg)
- ▶ Sheng and Engsh (Nairobi)
- ▶ Ghanaian Student Pidgin (Accra and elsewhere)
- ▶ Jafaican (London)
- ▶ Kiezdeutsch (Berlin)
- ▶ Rinkebysvenska (Stockholm)
- ▶ Jallanorsk (Oslo)

2. Sociolinguistic approach to language change

- ▶ Record old and young, male and female, different social classes, ...
- ▶ Record people in different places
 - ▶ Gives broad picture of *linguistic variation*
- ▶ For change, *age* is the crucial variable
 - ▶ Compare old with young to get an *estimate of change*

Question: which age groups are likely to innovate?

- ▶ **The elderly** – least likely
- ▶ **The middle aged** – perhaps, e.g. the use of new technical or formal vocabulary
- ▶ **Young adults** – more likely, as they embrace the adult world
- ▶ **Older children and adolescents** – the most likely, as they turn their back on parents and their parents' generation (at least temporarily), forging new identities for themselves
- ▶ **Young children and babies** – not so likely, since the very young have limited social contacts.
 - ▶ Changes by the youngest children are limited to misanalyses of adult grammar, and usually don't persist into adulthood
 - ▶ Jean Aitchison: 'Babies do not form influential social groups; changes begin within social groups'

3. Cities as the site of rapid language change

- ▶ What kinds of social groups are likely to be innovative, and which conservative?
- ▶ Cities contain many social groups. Many are newcomers – there is high in-migration
- ▶ Migration means that language contact takes place
 - ▶ Language contact takes place when people with different language backgrounds interact
 - ▶ In migration situations, it's usually the job of the migrants to accommodate to the people already there. Basic strategies might be:
 - ▶ Learn the majority language as well as you are able
 - ▶ Learn a lingua franca, such as a pidgin or a language of wider communication.

Sociolinguistics and the indexical function of language

- ▶ It's not just a matter of smooth transfer of information
- ▶ Language – the way we speak – is part of our identity
 - ▶ Identities relate to nationality, region, ethnic group, social class ...
 - ▶ In a city, language may be tied to sophistication, education, ruralness, urbanness, conservatism, modernity
 - ▶ We choose the way we speak as much for what it says about ourselves and our relationship with our interlocutor
- ▶ Cities with high in-migration contain much more language contact than other places
 - ▶ They have a young population which is socially and ethnically diverse
 - ▶ A large young population means that language developments will be faster than elsewhere
 - ▶ This is what draws sociolinguists to urban youth language.

4. Youth language(s) in Africa: some linguistic traits

I. Nouchi (Abidjan)

- ▶ (1) *On s'imbouate dans nos cherching* “We are busy looking for money”
- ▶ (2) *Je m'en vais mlounmlou dans bateau* “I am going to steal in the train”
- ▶ (3) *Le blow était dang* “The fight was very dangerous” (Kiessling and Mous 2004)
- ▶ This is based on *français populaire*, but has words from other languages: ‘*s’embouater*’, of unknown origin but completely adapted to French. *Bateau* shows an extreme semantic extension, to mean ‘train’. And there’s also an English inflectional morpheme on a French word: *cherching*.

2. Camfranglais (Yaounde/Douala)

- ▶ French is the base language, but there is heavy borrowing from English and local languages. Kiessling and Mous give the following:
- ▶ (4) *La rém a cook le tarou* “Mother has prepared the Taro”
- ▶ (5) *ɲge* “cheerful” (from French *gai*); *ɲga* “girl” (from English *girl*)
- ▶ *Rém* shows the **deliberate** reversal of the order of phonemes at the beginning and end of a word. French and English words often acquire a preceding homorganic nasal, ‘to give them a Bantu flavor’, as in *ɲge* (Kiessling and Mous 2004: 19).

3. Lingala ya Bayankee (Kinshasa), a newer youth version of Indoubil

- ▶ (6) *Oyebi que Camerounais wana a-uti tia nga grand colère ya danger*
- ▶ “You know, that Cameroonian has just made me very angry” (Kiessling and Mous 2004)

Summary of features in African youth languages:

- ▶ Manipulations – swapping consonants at beginning and end of a word
- ▶ Morphological hybridity – e.g. the ending *-ing* on French words
- ▶ Extreme semantic changes – e.g. *bateau* to mean ‘train’

The base language in African youth languages

- ▶ The youth language is based on a language which the young people know well
- ▶ French (Abidjan), Lingala (DRC) or Swahili (Kenya)
- ▶ It's not a completely new language, making it easier to learn. Example: Indoubil
 - ▶ Originally spoken in Kinshasa, where it has a Lingala base.
 - ▶ From there, it spread to Bukavu, where it acquired a Swahili base.
 - ▶ This means that it's what Kiessling and Mous call the 'concept' and the 'deviant vocabulary' which is copied.

5. The sociolinguistics of youth languages in Africa

- ▶ The intimate relationship between migration, language contact, sociolinguistics and language change

1. What are the functions of the youth language?
2. Who speaks it?
3. How does it fit into the repertoire of language varieties?
4. Is it changing?
5. Is it causing mainstream languages to change?

Youth languages as antilanguages

- ▶ Formed to create not only a strong sense of identity, but more particularly **so as not to be understood by wider society**
 - ▶ ‘Secret’ languages
- ▶ This is the reason for the morphological and phonological transformations and all the borrowed words
- ▶ Origins in criminal argots
 - ▶ Spread to youths not necessarily involved in crime, because of their attractiveness as symbols of opposition to authority
 - ▶ Then became associated more widely with youth culture, via hip-hop and rap
 - ▶ Used mainly by males, probably because of the criminal origin
 - ▶ Compare case of **Ghanaian Student Pidgin**

Why youth languages in late 20th century Africa?

- ▶ Postcolonial language situations across Africa
 - ▶ Former **coloniser's language** used in government and education: French, English, Portuguese
- ▶ Rapid urbanisation across the continent
 - ▶ Growth of **languages of wider communication**: Swahili, Lingala, Hausa, Akan(?) as communication strategies in increasingly multilingual cities
 - ▶ Urban settings allow for development of adolescent peer groups
- ▶ Youth languages are transformations of these
 - ▶ The 'legitimacy' of standard French is subverted by its use as a base for Nouchi and Camfranglais
 - ▶ Languages of wider communication likewise distorted, if not subverted
- ▶ Two criteria for a successful youth language:
 - (1) **Expression of identity and separateness, and**
 - (2) **Ethnic identities are neutralised in favour of urbanness, coolness**

From resistance identities to project identities and beyond

- ▶ **Castells (1997, 2001) talks about **resistance identity**:**
 - ▶ true of groups of people whose social status is somehow stigmatised, and who wish to form an identity in opposition to the mainstream
- ▶ **and **project identity**:**
 - ▶ when people try to redefine their position in relation to the wider society by using whatever social and cultural symbols they have available
- ▶ **African youth languages have all made the transition from symbolising resistance identities to project identities**
 - ▶ Associated with (relatively) mainstream youth identities through music
 - ▶ Now appear widely in print and especially on the Internet:

Facebook group *ici on topo le Camfranglais!* *le speech des vrais man du Mboa*

- ▶ alors lè mbom et lè nguèss ki pe me joss la difference entre “réussir dans la life et réussir sa life” la réponse donne un voyage d1 semaine à montréal si c7 un mbom, une nguèss ira avec moi pour y rester si elle me yamo bien sur. avo mark près partez...

(posting, 26th July 2010)

Mixed Lingala (Indoubil), from a Congolese discussion group

- ▶ [A] pardon bo aide nga....ndenge nini ba salaka mikate.....na ko sala fete dans 3 jours, bo aide nga noki..sil vous palit
- ▶ [B] nayebi vraiment bien te ndenge basalaka yango mais comme ba maman balingi ko repondre yo te, je prends le risque puisque souvent je vois comment ma femme le fait.

Translation:

- ▶ [A] Excuse me, please help me. How do they make donuts? I'm having a party in three days. Help me quick please.
- ▶ [B] I don't know very well how they make them, but since the ladies don't want to reply to you, I'll risk it, since I often see my wife making them.

(data provided by Dan Ponsford)

Youth reacting to the shift in status and function of former youth languages

- ▶ Youth languages become legitimised through acquiring a wider speaker/writer base, as the Internet postings show
 - ▶ Topics can be as non-confrontational as how to make doughnuts!
 - ▶ Professionally produced music videos on YouTube reach an international audience
- ▶ Young people's need to maintain resistance identities is reflected in new transformations
 - ▶ Example: Indoubil was replaced as a youth language by Lingala ya Bayankee
 - ▶ Presumably this process is cyclical!

6. Youth languages in Africa: resistance identities signalled by conscious linguistic manipulation

- ▶ Language change is not usually considered to be conscious, or deliberate, but relatively automatic
- ▶ However, the specific need for a ‘secret’ language to help establish a resistance identity was fulfilled by linguistic manipulation by small bands or gangs
- We now consider whether European youth languages have these characteristics, too

7. Late 20th century transition from monoethnic to multiethnic cities

- ▶ North European cities have seen an unprecedented level of immigration from other countries over the past 40 years, a pace which has accelerated in the last 20
- ▶ In some large cities, up to one-third of the population was born in other countries, and in some districts within the cities the figure can be as high as 50 percent
- ▶ If we include the native-born descendants of the immigrants, we routinely reach this figure for the population with an ethnic and linguistic background other than the original, established population
- ▶ Children of immigrants are generally fluent in the national language, while their parents remain learners or non-speakers
- ▶ Widespread bilingualism and diglossia
- **1970s and 80s emergence of urban youth languages, but do they have the same characteristics as the African ones?**

Youth language varieties in Europe – linguistic characteristics

The rise of ethnolects

- ▶ Although 2nd generation children speak the national language fluently, they usually do so using an ethnolectal variety
 - ▶ Characterised by phonetic features – vowels, consonants, rhythm – and by non-standard syntax
 - ▶ These features may be traceable to the ethnic group's heritage language (Turkish, Panjabi, Berber, Creole), but often they can't be

The rise of European pan-ethnic varieties: the **multiethnolect**

- ▶ Rise of forms of language which are *not* strongly associated with a particular ethnicity, but which are markedly different from the local non-standard variety. Spoken by young people of all ethnicities, including the native ones
- ▶ This brings us a little closer to the African youth languages we've been discussing, since ethnic divisions are de-emphasised by the young Africans
- ▶ We turn to some examples now before making the comparison with Africa.

Oslo

- ▶ Young people in multiethnic parts of the city are aware of a way of talking which is characteristic of both 2nd generation immigrant and Norwegian-descended youth
- ▶ They talk about ‘**words from other languages, the tone, the harsh speech rhythm**’ (quote from interview)
- ▶ Slang words from Berber, e.g. *kaber* ‘girls’
- ▶ Morpheme mixing: *dritshpa*, composed of Norwegian intensifier prefix *drit* (‘dirt’) and Berber *shpa* (‘good’)
- ▶ Speakers are aware of it as part of their repertoire, which includes standard Norwegian as well
 - ▶ Although the multiethnolect is felt to be ‘their’ language, they have no name for it.

London

- ▶ London's inner city, for example the borough of Hackney, has among the highest immigration rates in the UK. It is also the poorest borough in England
- ▶ London is being studied by a group at Lancaster University and Queen Mary, University of London
- ▶ We've studied phonological, grammatical and discourse features, but we'll look at vowels today.

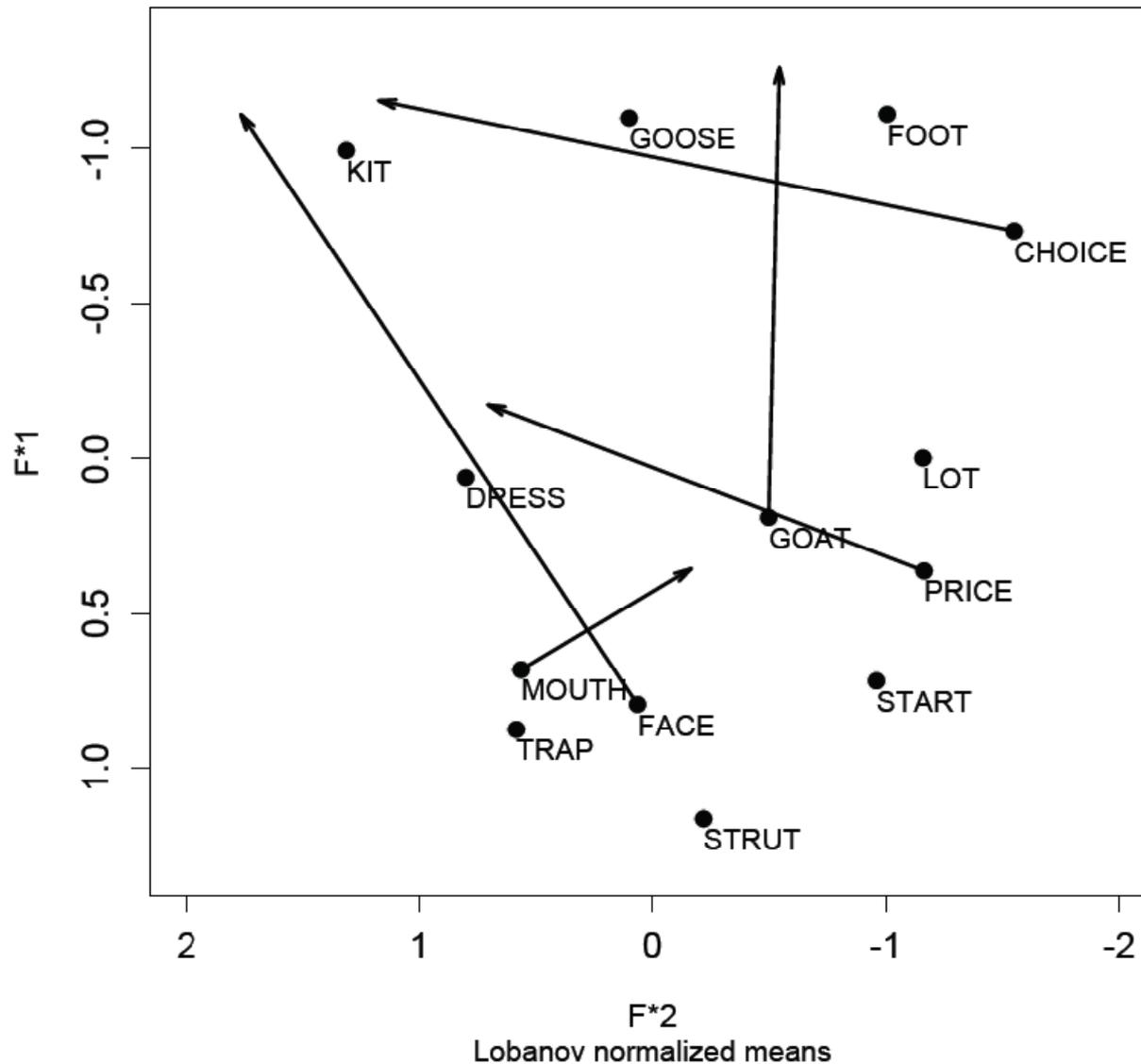


Figure I. Diphthong system of elderly male white British speaker from Hackney, born 1918.

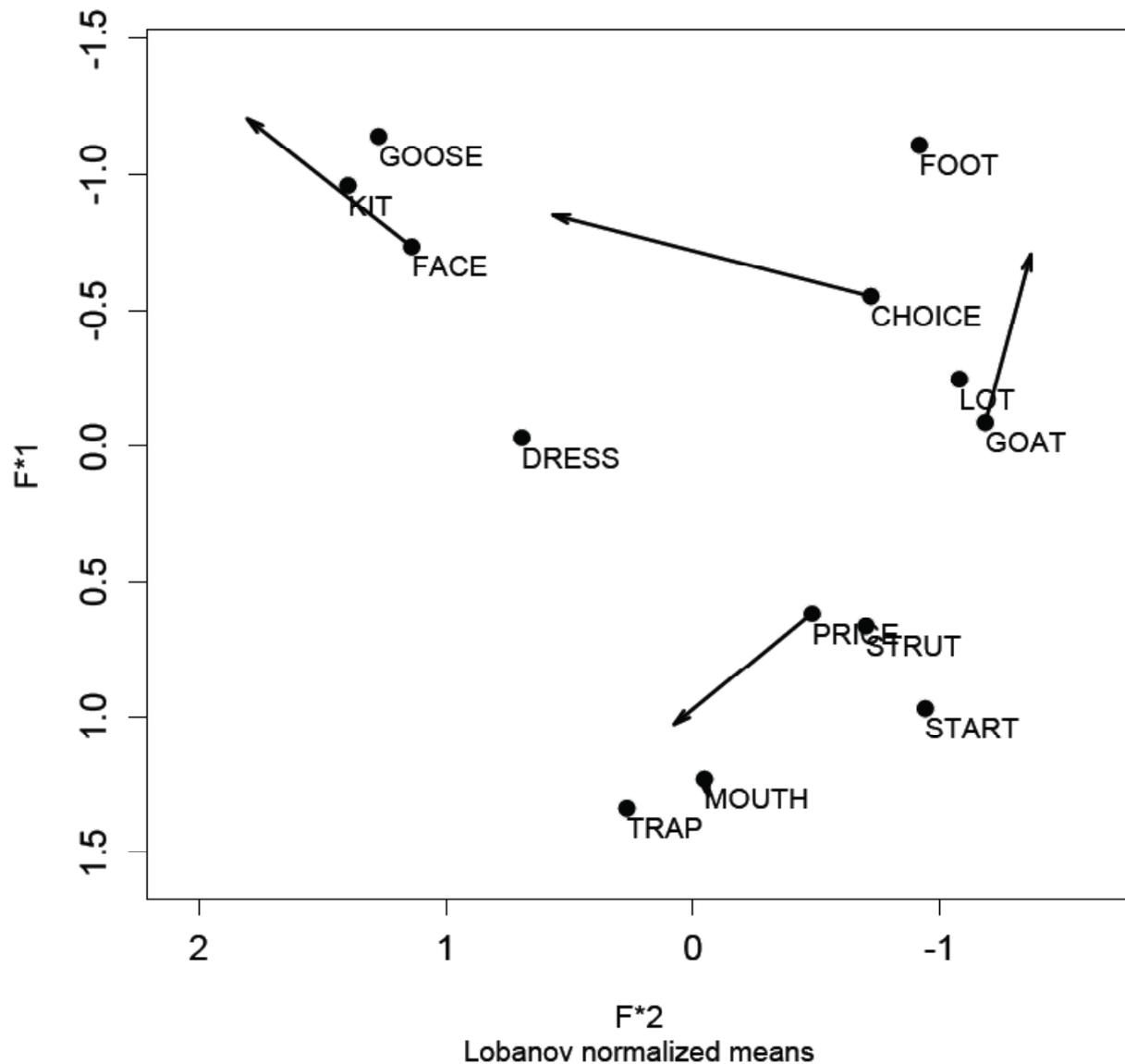


Figure 2. Diphthong system of young male from Hackney, Afro-Caribbean origin, born 1989.

London diphthongs changing

- ▶ The trajectories of the vowels of **FACE**, **GOAT**, **MOUTH** and **PRICE** have become shorter
 - ▶ **FACE** and **GOAT** are raised, and are almost monophthongs
- ▶ Can they be traced to non-London influences?
 - ▶ Caribbean, W African, Indian Englishes have some of these qualities
- ▶ But the **GOOSE** vowel is very front
 - ▶ This is a general southern British change, and is actually global in scope (USA, Australia, South Africa)
- ▶ The London multiethnolect is clearly a mixed variety with multiple origins
 - ▶ In this respect it's like the African youth languages

Some vocabulary from London

- ▶ **Bare** Very, a lot. “I’m bare hungry”; “There were bare people”
- ▶ **Blad/bredren/bruv** Mate; “blad” is thought to relate to “blood” brother. “What you sayin’, blad?”
- ▶ **Buff** Attractive; used to describe a man or woman. “Hey, you seen my new man? He’s well buff, innit?”
- ▶ **Chat** Talk back, contradict. “Don’t chat to me!”
- ▶ **Creps** Trainers; thought to originate from Jamaican parlance. “Gimme dem creps, man.”
- ▶ **Deep** Rude, horrible. “That was deep.”
- ▶ **Ends** Neighbourhood, area. “What ends you from?” (see examples of *ends* in (10) and (11) above)
- ▶ **Hype** (n) Excitement; (adj) exciting; (v) to get excited. “That’s some hype bike you have”; “He got drunk and was runnin’ round on a hype.”
- ▶ **Jamming** Hanging around; thought to originate from musical term. “What you up to, blad?” “Just jammin’.”
- ▶ **Low batties** Trousers that hang low on the waist; slang for man’s buttocks. “Check out dem low batties!”
- ▶ **Nang** Good, cool; originally from Australian slang. “Last night was so nang!”
- ▶ **Nuff** Really, very; from “enough”. “He was nuff rude.”
- ▶ **Safe/easy** Greeting. “Oh, there he is ... safe, man!”
- ▶ **Sket** Loose woman; short for Caribbean sketel, meaning “slut”. “Dat gal is a proper sket.”
- ▶ **Yard** Home (from “back yard”). “Out tonight?” “Nah, man, I’m chillin’ in my yard.”
- ▶ **Yute** Kid, kids; from “youth”. “Those yutes be runnin’ round.”

Why the Jamaican origin of so much of this vocabulary?

- ▶ People from the Caribbean were the first major post-second world war migration stream in London. They were thus part of the founding of 1950s and 60s youth culture.
- ▶ Closely connected with this is the popularity of African American and Jamaican hip-hop and rap
 - ▶ Attractive to youth of all ethnicities
 - ▶ Global styles of music made local
 - ▶ **Compare many parallels in Africa**

Structure of African and European youth languages compared

Both continents:

- ▶ Borrowing, often as slang
- ▶ Morphological mixing (but less productive in Europe)
- ▶ Some changes in phonology and grammar

Africa only:

- ▶ Deliberate, 'non-natural' changes in phonology
- ▶ Extreme mixing at all levels
- ▶ Language unintelligible to non-speakers

Europe only:

- ▶ Phonological change is 'regular' – e.g. London diphthongs are changed systematically, not sporadically – and the changes are unconscious
- ▶ Language remains intelligible to mainstream speakers – it is a variant, or a dialect

8. Youth language(s) and speech community repertoires

- ▶ They are variants of a language variety of wide currency
 - ▶ Africa: non-ethnic language; Europe: majority, national language
- ▶ Differences in speakers' consciousness of youth language

Research questions:

- ▶ What is the scope of the community repertoire and the individual's repertoire?
- ▶ What is the sociolinguistic function of the youth language?
- ▶ Is it discrete (entirely distinct from other ways of speaking), or is it on a continuum?
- ▶ Is it *vernacularised*? (a more or less fixed feature of a person's speech)
- ▶ Is it a *style*? (being vernacularised and being a style are not necessarily mutually exclusive)

Style shifting in a European multiethnolect: London

Courtney and Aimee: Afro-Caribbean girls aged 18

- ❖ Courtney's **GOAT** vowel at the beginning of the interview
- ▶ Sue: alright so . so yeah er tell me a little bit about what you're doing at college then ..
- ▶ Courtney: we're **both** [əʊ̩] studying forensic science we're in the same class erm . that's it really . come in . **go** [əʊ̩] to our lessons
- ▶ Aimee: and then **go** [ɔ̩] **home** [ɔ̩]
- ▶ Courtney: use the library then **go** [əʊ̩] **home** [əʊ̩] .

❖ Courtney's GOAT vowel in banter style

- ▶ Aimee: I'll be more allowed to bring home a woman than a African
 - ▶ Dexter: yeah .
 - ▶ Courtney: I **don't** [ɔ̃] **know** [ɔ̃ʊ] **about** . **no** [ɔ̃].
-
- Multicultural London English is clearly a style, used for in-group communication
 - ▶ African youth languages have this function, too

Naming and awareness in youth languages: Young Londoners' awareness of themselves as *not Cockney*

- ▶ **Cockney**: a term used to refer to both the people and the dialect of London's East End
- ▶ Young East London speakers were asked to discuss the idea of 'Cockney' in relation to their own **identity** and their own **language**
- ▶ **Results:**
 - ▶ Only 30% of white British speakers considered themselves Cockney, and none of the non-Anglos did
 - ▶ None at all claimed to speak Cockney
 - ▶ Cockney people were considered older, white and sometimes racist, and to go to the pub
 - ▶ Their language was considered to contain the words *mate*, *geezer*, *cock*, *sweet*, *guv'nor*

-
- ▶ The East London teenagers said their **own** language contained words and expressions such as *what's up, blood, bredren, save it, safe, shank, mug, bless*
 - ▶ They couldn't come up with a name for it: the best they could do was to call it **slang**
 - ▶ They also used this word to refer to the words
 - ▶ In the discussions, neither race nor ethnicity was mentioned, except when referring to Cockneys as 'white'
 - This suggests a **non-ethnic perception** of themselves and their language by this group of young people
 - ▶ This appears to be true of the African youth languages, too

Isn't the London multiethnolect just a type of London Jamaican?

- ▶ Young inner-city working-class Londoners of all ethnicities are routinely heard as 'black' by outsiders
- ▶ But in the same discussions, **none** of the young people referred to their speech as Creole or Patois or Jamaican
 - ▶ London-based Creole/Patois/Jamaican is a variety still used by many Afro-Caribbean Londoners. It is linguistically distinct from the multiethnolect even if the multiethnolect contains features from it, for example the vowels
- ▶ The London multiethnolect has been **vernacularised** in the speech of many young people – it's a baseline vernacular for them, a habitual mode of speech
 - ▶ This may differ from the situation 25 years ago, when among Afro-Caribbeans there was code-switching between 'London Jamaican' and Cockney (Sebba 1993)

Naming: a clear inter-continent difference?

- ▶ African urban youth languages all appear to have names
 - ▶ The assumption is that they are **grassroots** names, not imposed
- ▶ European urban youth languages (almost) never have grassroots names
 - ▶ But they do have names imposed by the media (often pejorative) and by academia
 - ▶ **Jallanorsk** (Oslo) is a pejorative term
 - ▶ **Kiezdeutsch** (Berlin) means '(neighbour)'hood German', and was coined by academics in the early 2000s
 - ▶ **Jafaican**'s origins are unclear, but there has been a semantic shift from 'person trying to emulate Jamaican style, without being Jamaican' to 'multiethnic youth language of East London, affecting Jamaican Patois'
- ▶ However, we must beware of ignoring the role of the media in the naming of the African languages

Youth languages and language change

- ▶ Youth languages have similar functions within their speech communities' overall repertoires
- ▶ What of the effect of the youth languages on the **structure** of the mainstream languages on which they are based?
- ▶ **African** youth languages have expanded the vocabularies of their 'host' languages as the original young speakers enter adulthood
 - ▶ Can probably only affect mainstream language if speakers shift towards the new language (i.e. adopt it wholesale)
- ▶ Because they are to a large extent vernacularised, **European** youth languages have the capacity to influence mainstream phonology and morphosyntax via the expected sociolinguistic mechanisms

(West and Central) African and (North) European youth languages: Commonalities and differences

- ▶ All are the result of intense immigration/in-migration to cities followed by the socialisation of young people in close-knit multilingual peer groups with little prospect of social and economic advancement
- ▶ All have become legitimised through the mainstream media and music, particularly hip-hop.

Africa

- ▶ Africans have ambivalent attitudes to the ex-colonial languages
- ▶ This may lead to conscious linguistic distortion – a form of deliberate subversion
- ▶ They are additional to the language of wider communication (French, Lingala, Swahili ...) and are used in circumscribed in-group, often oppositional situations
- ▶ Naming appears to be from the grassroots, bolstered but not originated by media

Europe

- ▶ Deliberate distortion less evident, despite the existence of e.g. *Verlan* in France and *Polari* in England
- ▶ Youth languages tend to be multiethnolects, new dialects of the host languages (English, German, etc.)
- ▶ They used as everyday vernaculars
- ▶ Any names that exist are media and/or academic creations

- ▶ Castells, Manuel. 1997. *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture. Volume 2: The Power of Identity*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- ▶ Cheshire, Jenny and Sue Fox. 2009. Was/were variation: A perspective from London. *Language Variation and Change* 21: 1–38.
- ▶ Dako, Kari. fc. Student Pidgin: a masculine code encroached on by young women. In Jane Sunderland (ed.)
- ▶ Ganuza, Natalia. 2008. *Syntactic variation in the Swedish of Adolescents in Multilingual urban settings. Subject-verb order in declaratives, questions and subordinate clauses*. Doctoral dissertation, Centre for Research on Bilingualism, Stockholm University.
- ▶ Kandolo, Emmanuel. 2009. *La saga des “Bills” et des “Yankees” kinois*. <http://www.mbokamosika.com/article-36439261-6.html#anchorComment>
- ▶ Kerswill, Paul, Torgersen, Eivind & Fox, Susan (2008). Reversing ‘drift’: Innovation and diffusion in the London diphthong system. *Language Variation and Change* 20: 451–491
- ▶ Kerswill, Paul & Williams, Ann (2002). ‘Salience’ as an explanatory factor in language change: evidence from dialect levelling in urban England. In M. C. Jones & E. Esch (eds.) *Language change. The interplay of internal, external and extra-linguistic factors*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 81–110.
- ▶ Kiebling, Roland and Maarten Mous. 2004. Urban Youth Languages in Africa. *Anthropological Linguistics* 46,3: 303-341.
- ▶ Kiebling, Roland. 2005. Bàk mwà mè dó - Camfranglais in Cameroon. *Lingua Posnaniensis* 47: 87-107.
- ▶ Kiebling, Roland and Maarten Mous. 2006. “Vous nous avez donné le français, mais nous sommes pas obligés de l’utiliser comme vous le voulez” - Youth languages in Africa. In: Dürscheid, Christa & Jürgen Spitzmüller (eds), *Perspektiven der Jugendsprachforschung / Trends and developments in youth language research*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 385-401.
- ▶ Kotsinas, Ulla-Britt. 1988. Immigrant children’s Swedish – a new variety? *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 9:129–141.
- ▶ Kristiansen, Tore. 2010. Attitudes, ideology and awareness. In Wodak, Ruth, Johnstone, Barbara & Kerswill, Paul (eds.). *Sage handbook of sociolinguistics*. London: Sage.
- ▶ Kube-Barth, Sabine. 2009. The multiple facets of the urban language form, Nouchi. In Fiona Mc Loughlin (ed.) *The languages of urban Africa*. London: Continuum, pp. 103–114.
- ▶ Quist, Pia. 2008. Sociolinguistic approaches to multiethnolect: language variety and stylistic practice, *International Journal of Bilingualism* 12(1&2): 43–61.
- ▶ Rampton, Ben. 2010. Crossing into class: language, ethnicities and class sensibility in England. In Carmen Llamas and Dominic Watt (eds.). *Language and identities*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 134–143.
- ▶ Sebba, Mark. 1992. *London Jamaican*.
- ▶ Svendsen, Bente Ailin and Røynealand, Unn. 2008. Multiethnolectal facts and functions in Oslo, Norway. *International Journal of Bilingualism* 12: 63–83.