

“East London ain’t East London no more”: Phonetic variation and change in the Cockney Diaspora

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Much recent literature has suggested that two separate linguistic processes have displaced or are in the process of displacing the Cockney vernacular; the emergence of Multicultural London English (MLE) in inner London as the result of contact between diverse languages and accents, and which has diffused to outer London (Cheshire et al., 2008, 2011; Kerswill et al., 2008), and secondly, dialect levelling across southeast England and the London peripheries (Kerswill & Williams, 2005; Kerswill et al., 2008). The present study analyses language variation and change in the Debden Estate in Loughton, Essex. The Debden Estate was constructed as part of the post-1945 slum clearance programmes and the community forms part of the Cockney Diaspora, whereby over decades, traditional, East London families have relocated to Essex. This study aims to investigate whether the variety spoken there can indeed be described as “Cockney moved East” (Fox, 2015).

Eighteen male participants aged 21-77yrs (mean 49yrs), completed a sociolinguistic interview to elicit speech in a range of different speech styles; a word-list, a phonetically-balanced passage (an adaptation of the popular children’s story “Chicken Little”), and then an open interview about their lives in and experiences of Debden/East London. The interview questions were based on participants’ answers to a language and identity questionnaire, which they completed prior to being interviewed.

An acoustic analysis of the word-list showed that although there was some evidence for innovation and dialect levelling in Debden, traditional Cockney variables have been largely maintained across all age groups, e.g., fronted STRUT vowel, a GOOSE vowel with diphthongal quality and a backed onset for the PRICE vowel (Wells, 1982; Sivertsen 1960). Furthermore, whilst the glide element is significantly lowering, the ‘true Cockney’ monophthongal MOUTH vowel (Wells, 1982) was found in participants in their twenties. However, analysis of the interview data indicated that whilst the older generation considered themselves to be Cockneys or East Londoners and identified their accent as being Cockney, the younger generation thought that they spoke with an Essex accent. Furthermore, the younger generation did not consider themselves Cockney, but instead identified as being from Essex. This suggests that there is a disparity between accent and identity, such that whilst Cockney linguistic traits have moved East (Fox, 2015), the Cockney identity has not.

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