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Justina Goldbeck

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WHAT IS MLE, WHO SPEAKS IT AND IS IT SAFE?

By

JUSTINA GOLDBECK

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**PROFESSOR MEREDITH LANDMAN
PROFESSOR THOMAS KIM**

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Abstract

Some youth in London speak a non-standard variety of English whose lexical items are difficult for non-speakers to understand. This study collected naturally produced speech samples from students of various ethnicities and class backgrounds who spoke this dialect. It also polled students about their identity, as well as about their use of particular slang words. The recordings were glossed to determine the kind of slang used, as well which populations were more or less likely to use slang. The surveys were analyzed to determine relevant background characteristics of those who used slang versus those who did not. This study concludes that one's geographic background, as well as one's class and peer group, impact the variety of English spoken. The idea of language as a method of counter culture is advanced, claiming that speakers are using this dialect as a way to signify resistance against the highly rigid class systems of the U.K.

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1.Introduction

The United Kingdom is a hotbed of linguistic diversity. A geographically small nation whose population speaks predominantly the same language, variation in dialect is extreme across even small areas. London is a point of dialect conversion in the United Kingdom. This linguistic intermingling has strongly affected the dialect of Londoners, especially those of young generations. The dialect for which London is famous, cockney, has recently been declining in popularity in favor of Multicultural London English or (MLE). MLE is a multiethnic dialect, or a dialect spoken across different ethnicities. Multiethnolects are becoming more common among the youth in cities where various ethnicities converge. London, a city with some of the most ethnic diversity in the world, is now host to a particularly thriving form of youthspeak, known by linguists as MLE. This paper seeks to investigate who uses MLE among British youth, specifically focusing on a population of students at art school in London. Each of these subjects hail from different locations in the United Kingdom and are from different class backgrounds. This study pursues the question: What is MLE and who speaks it? This paper synthesizes literature on the topics of class and the linguistic behavior of social groups to investigate who speaks MLE and what effect it has on young people and their social behavior.

This paper will first discuss the historical background of London English, as well as regional accents across the U.K and how accents are used to classify people in the U.K. As MLE is not a typical dialect or single ethnolect which is restricted to one region or race of people, but a multiethnolect, this paper will then discuss what MLE is and why multiethnolects are of interest to linguists. This paper will then address critiques of MLE and

why some school districts have gone so far to ban its use. A lit review section follows, which synthesizes past research on British English, class as a significant barrier in cultural production, language as creation of identity, and MLE's position as a counter cultural dialect.

The current study which attempts to determine who speaks MLE in a London art school is discussed, as well as the results, which demonstrate that there is not a perfectly linear relationship between class and slang use, which had previously been predicted. Possible reasons for this result as well as various ideas for future research are briefly described.

2. Background

This section will address the historical background of dialects spoken in London and across the U.K. as well as discuss the impact of dialect on speakers in the U.K. It will then explain how MLE as a multiethnolect is unique from these historical dialects. MLE speakers have also faced discrimination across the U.K, as use of this speech is associated with gang violence and downward social mobility, this discrimination will be addressed in section 2.2.

2.1 Historical Background

In recent years across London and other cities in the UK, the use of Multiethnic London English or MLE has been increasing. This dialect has overtaken the once dominant way of speaking in London, Estuary English which is itself a blend of Cockney and Standard English. While MLE shares several phonological traits with its predecessor Cockney English it is in many ways distinct. In the UK dialect is extremely important because it gives information about the speaker's home town as well as class background. It is possible in the UK to tell a wealth of information about someone simply from the way they speak. MLE as an emerging dialect which is not strictly bound by geographic region, race, or class, disrupts this system of identification.

2.1.1 Cockney English

Cockney English originated in London's East End in working class neighborhoods. The dialect is associated with cockney rhyming slang as well as specific phonological features:

- *“Raised vowel in words like trap and cat so these sounds like “trep” and “cet.”*
- *Non-rhoticity, meaning the r at the ends of words isn't pronounced (mother sounds like “muhthuh”).*
- *Trap-bath split, meaning that certain a words, like bath, can't, and dance are pronounced with the broad-a in father. (This differs from most American accents, in which these words are pronounced with the short-a in cat.)*
- *London vowel shift: The vowel sounds are shifted around so that Cockney “day” sounds is pronounced IPA **dæɪ** (close to American “die”) and Cockney buy verges near IPA **bɔɪ** (close to American “boy”).*
- *Glottal Stopping: the letter t is pronounced with the back of the throat (glottis) in between vowels; hence better becomes IPA **beʔə** (sounds to outsiders like “be'uh”).*
- *L-vocalization: The l at the end of words often becomes a vowel sound Hence pal can seem to sound like “pow.”*
- *Th-Fronting: The th in words like think or this is pronounced with a more forward consonant depending on the word: thing becomes “fing,” this becomes “dis,” and mother becomes “muhvah.”” (Smith 2017).*

While Cockney English originated in the London's East end, post WWII housing redistribution as well as recent migration by a Bangladeshi population to East London means that Cockney is no longer the dominant dialect spoken here . Cockney is still spoken across London however its use is declining especially among younger generations. Estuary English a blend of Cockney and standard english began to replace Cockney in the 1980's and in recent years MLE has overtaken Estuary as well. “MLE is overtaking the last ‘new’ London language: Estuary English, itself a mix of Standard English and traditional Cockney pronunciation and vocabulary, and spoken by an older generation as their rejection of ‘pure ‘cockney’” (Coleman 2014). Some phonological aspects of Cockney English are preserved in MLE, such as th-fronting, glottal stopping, and l- vocalization, however though mixing across race and language backgrounds gives MLE a breadth of phonological features such as the shortening of traditional London vowels as well as less emphasis on glottal stopping (Green 2014). Additionally, MLE does not drop the ‘H’ at the beginning of words as is very

typical of Cockney English, the typical Cockney “Ello” is pronounced “hello” in MLE, though this greeting would not be typical of MLE.

2.1.2 Regional Accents in the UK

Cockney English is the dialect most closely associated with London, each town in the UK has its own regional dialect which is often retained even after movement around or out of the UK. The United Kingdom is small at only 94,060 square miles, which is just 57% of the size of California. Despite its size it has an incredibly wide range of accent diversity. Each city across the UK possesses its own accent and it is often possible to determine someone’s hometown simply through the way they speak.

2.1.3 Accent bias

Accent bias is prevalent across the United Kingdom. Anyone who speaks something other than Received Pronunciation can be target to discrimination based on their dialect. Dialect is viewed as something which people have control over in a way that race and gender are not. Dialect is therefore a feature that is not taboo to openly criticize or discriminate against. This discrimination is often targeted against people who speak dialects from Northern parts of the UK like the Birmingham or Liverpool (Hiraga 2005).

The discrimination extends further than simply regional prejudice and is often harshest on those who speak non standard dialects. According to the Economist, “Kids who go beyond accent and use dialectal or nonstandard forms—*ain’t*, *gizzit*, *nowt* double

negatives—are politely told with the best wishes that Standard English is crucial to climbing the economic ladder.” (R.L.G 2015). While Standard English may be helpful in one’s, the idea that one can only speak one variety of English is incorrect and most people who do speak non standard forms can code switch between the standard and non standard (Young 2013).

2.1.4 MLE as a multiethnolect

Multicultural London English is a multiethnolect which means it is a dialect spoken by people across various ethnicities. A common misconception is that creoles and other non standard ways of speaking have no rules and are simply a result of mistakes or other errors. This misconception has been disproven in studies of AAVE and Chicanx English (Young 2013). Additionally, a study by Cheshire on the phonological, pragmatic and syntactic variation of speakers of MLE found that these forms are distributed in a systematic way across speakers. Therefore, this dialect is just as structured in its variants as a standard form of English and can be studied and analyzed as a legitimate dialect. MLE is spreading rapidly across the UK, Kerswill a linguist who has extensively studied MLE asserts, “What we’re seeing with MLE is qualitatively different, It’s a real dialect rather than simply a mode of speech, and there’s already evidence that it’s spreading to other multicultural cities like Birmingham, Bristol and Manchester. It’ll become more mainstream through force of numbers and continued migration, and because it’s considered cool.” MLE is growing in speakers as UK cities become increasingly multicultural. Additionally, there has been an increasing rejection of mainstream culture in UK hip hop, fashion and all arena’s of youth culture which contributes to MLE’s increased use.

2.2 Cultural Implications

MLE is a rejection of the speaking norms of R.P. and its use is often associated with other aspects of counter culture. This association with the counterculture movement, as well as the influence by Jamaican and other non white populations on MLE, make this dialect a target for racism and discrimination. MLE has been linked with violence and social decline and its use has even been banned in some schools across the U.K.

2.2.1 MLE as “black english”

MLE has often been stereotyped and associated with blackness. Many people consider speaking MLE to be “talking black.” While linguists have adopted the name Multicultural London English to refer to this way of speaking, this term is not used outside of linguistic circles. Media coverage of the dialect sometimes calls it ‘Jafaican’, a name which speaks to the Jamaican influence on the phonology and non standard forms of the dialect. The term Jafaican conveys negative opinions about the dialect, the impetus for this term is sourced to likening this speech to fake Jamaican. Media portrayals of MLE using the word Jafaican are widely negative and entrenched in stereotypes of gang culture and the decline of society due to this perversion of English. “The point often made is that young people, especially black males, are seen as unable to shift from an MLE-type variety, laden with slang, to a more standard one in situations where this is required” (Kerswill 2014). This stereotype is not rooted in truth as students who speak a nonstandard dialect are often able to code switch between the two dialects. (Young 2013). Additionally, much of the bias against

this way of speaking is attributed to racism and scapegoating. The most famous instance of this was during the London riots which will be described in more detail in the next section.

2.2.2 London Riots

In August 2011, 14,000 people took to the streets of London in a three-day riot. The riot was called the “worst outbreak of disorder the UK had witnessed in the post-World War era,” (Hallsworth 2016) and resulted in five deaths and over 100 million dollars in property damage. Speculation on the causes of the riots include: anti capitalist motivations, poor relations with the police, general poverty as well as societal breakdown due to interracial living.

Renowned historian David Starkey in an interview on the riots specifically blamed the event on the intermixing of races, “The whites have become black. A particular sort of violent destructive, nihilistic gangster culture has become the fashion and black and white boys and girls operate in this language together.” He then targeted MLE specifically, “This language which is wholly false, which is this Jamaican patois that has been intruded in England and that is why so many of us have this sense of literally of a foreign country.” While Starkey faced public backlash for these comments and their implied racism many others agreed with him that “gang culture” was a significant problem in the UK. The informal speech of the young became an important signifier for this “gang culture” and the criminal behavior it encouraged. Thus the spread of this way of speaking became culturally linked to spread of violence, drugs and crime.

2.2.3 Slang in Schools

MLE is not considered “proper” english and is so discriminated against that one Manchester school went so far as to ban its use in 2008. In the school, “Formal language must be used at all times in communications with adults and pupils have been told that street slang should be "left at the school gates" (Henry 2008). At another school in Middlesbrough the headmaster sent home a list of words and phrases for parents to correct if they were heard at home, “Pupils were given a list of examples of incorrect grammar or pronunciation to watch, such as "gizit 'ere" and "yous"(Furness, 2013). Teachers at these schools cite concern about children’s ability to speak standard english in the future and the effect this may have on their post school opportunities.

3. Lit Review

This section explores previous literature which relates to this project. First, it explains Received pronunciation, the standard form of British speech. It then discusses the class system in the U.K., as well as the effects of class discrimination. The section confronts class discrimination in universities at large, as well as universities specifically for creative fields. The populace I studied attended art school and were vulnerable to the same kinds of issues as highlighted in the below literature. This section then discusses the role of language in shaping identity. Finally, the section covers a brief history of MLE, its cultural roots and its status as an element of counter culture.

This section advances the following arguments:

-Lower class members are disadvantaged in British society, especially in communities with high barriers of entry, such as the arts.

-Elites in the U.K. consume both pop culture and high culture while barring lower class participation in determining what is culturally relevant or accepted.

-Rejected from mainstream culture, lower class members create counter culture, the goal of which is to push back against the mainstream and create something entirely non consumable to the societal elite.

-Variation in language is a tool that can assert aspects of speakers' identity.

-MLE as a dialect is rooted in counterculture, and a speaker's use of it therefore asserts that they are a non-elite or that they stand in opposition to mainstream culture.

3.1 British English

Received pronunciation is what people think of when they imagine a traditional British accent. RP is an accent or form of the dialect, standard English. RP is regionally nonspecific and does not contain any information about the speaker's geographic background, though it does reveal information about their class or educational background. There are three varieties of Received Pronunciation: Conservative, Mainstream, and Contemporary. Conservative RP is typically associated with older speakers and aristocracy, and is the language most likely to be found on a show containing traditional representations of the British elite, like *Downton Abbey*. Conservative RP has connotations of class and snobbery. Mainstream RP is a neutral kind of English, most likely spoken by news hosts, which gives no clues as to the regional background of the speaker, but does, however, carry with it connotations of middle to upper class upbringing. Contemporary RP refers to the dialect of speakers using features common to younger generations. All forms of RP express regional neutrality, meaning they don't display any pronunciation patterns that reveal information about where a speaker is from. Some of the linguistic patterns typical to RP are provided below:

- *“The long [a:] sound in words such as bath, palm and start.*
- *RP speakers never drop the letter ‘h’ at the beginning of words, which is common in many other varieties of English.*
- *Words such as news, due, stupid, Tuesday are enthusiasm are pronounced with a /j/ sound: /nju:z/, /dju:/, /'stju:pid/, /'tju:zdeɪ/, /ɪn 'θju:ziæzəm/. Many other accents, including American English, have lost this sound in a process known as ‘yod-dropping’: /nu:z/, /du:/, /ɪn 'θu:ziæzəm/ etc. However, not all words behave like this; cute, fuse and music are pronounced with the /j/ sound by RP speakers and others alike.” (Vincent 2015).*

These are not all of the features of RP but are some of the most easily recognizable traits of the accent.

In the past, RP was considered the correct way to speak. Now, RP is less fashionable and does not have the same kind of social prestige as it did in the past. Younger RP speakers now often add regional features or other non-standard forms to their speech patterns in order to sound less “posh” or snobby. While many speakers of British English can switch into RP, this transition may be more difficult for speakers with a heavy regional dialect or speakers who have not lived in environments which provided a high exposure to RP. The inability to switch into RP is often associated with lower class or a lower amount of education received.

3.2 Class Discrimination in the U.K.

Social class is an extremely polarizing identity feature in the United Kingdom. Class structures in the United Kingdom are a remnant of an old land-based wealth system which contained strict parameters for social classes and did not permit much movement between them. While in France revolution has removed much of the wealthier class’ fortune and status, the same has not happened in the U.K. Despite class mobility increasing and a heavy inheritance tax reducing the wealth of the upper class, class still remains a salient dividing characteristic in the United Kingdom. A study by Claire Maxwell which focused on young girls in the UK found, “ rather than moving towards a classless society, social class (as well as gender) continues to be drawn on as a fundamental organizing principle for understanding conceptualizations of self and others.” In the United Kingdom, class is a

relevant part of one's identity and can be ascertained by one's name, way of dress and speech. Posh accents are evidence that one is higher class, and high use of slang signifies working class. Even how clearly one enunciates words in RP communicates something about their identity. These subtle judgments inform the social dynamics present in the United Kingdom.

Class discrimination is widespread across the U.K., with class prejudice impacting young people strongly. In Imogen Tyler's article "Chav Mum, Chav Scum" she argues that whenever social groupings become increasingly polarized a characterized "figure" often emerges to represent a kind of identity. The emergence of this figure is demonstrative of an underlying social crisis or anxiety. In the U.K, "chav" is a negative term for a young person of lower class. This slur came into popularity in the 2000's and was a culturally condoned way of expressing distaste or disgust for members of lower classes. Tyler asserts that "in terms of classed identities, we can understand the emergence of the chav figure as an intrinsic part of a larger process of "class making which attempts to distinguish the white upper and middle classes from the white poor." Terms such as these strengthen the barriers between class identities and reflect anxieties and fears about lower classes.

Research on the impact of class divides is sparse, not because these divides are shrinking, but rather because the opposite effect is taking occurring. As class distinctions widen, sociologists are more and more hesitant to study or write about class. Tyler states, "for whilst disgust has often been central to *descriptive depictions* of social class in Britain, less attention has been paid to the role of emotions in the *formation* of class identities" (Tyler 2008). Emotions are important in the discussion of class because fear, anger, and moral condemnation are driving forces which divide class groups. The figure of the chav embodies

the condensed stereotypes of the white poor as dirty, prone to committing petty theft, and poorly educated. The term *chav* rose to popularity at the height of class anxiety in the mid 2000's, and while the term is used less today the distaste for lower class members still remains in UK society. Class is an incredibly polarized topic in the U.K. and one deeply rooted in the emotions of the populace. For this reason, measures intended to equalize opportunities across social class are not always successful. Increased access to university for low income students is one arena which has not been fully successful.

3.2.1 Social Class in School

Despite forces intended to equalize student experiences across the U.K., lower income students often have a hard time fitting in with other students and balancing the school and work life necessary to afford university. Diane Reay's paper "Fitting in' or 'standing out': Working-class students in UK higher education" integrates case studies from working class students across institutions in the United Kingdom in order to develop a complex sociological understanding of student identities.

This study found that low income students who attend universities often have a hard time balancing familial or workplace obligations as well as the demand of school. They are often unable to reach their full or highest potential at these schools due to being overwhelmed by the competing pressures in their life. Social background, differing demands and struggles in school distance these low income students from their more well-off peers and can result in social stratification between classes. "Working-class students, for the most part," claims Reay, "end up in universities seen to be 'second class' both by themselves and

others.” Despite being accepted to university and qualifying on an academic basis, low income students face unique hardships when attending university that are not remedied by the “level playing field” that university education seeks to create. These divides only increase in disciplines such as the arts, which culturally exclude those without the money to participate in them.

3.2.2 Cultural Consumption in Art school

The art world, despite its attempts at creating a meritocracy, is still deeply entrenched in the politics of established galleries, critics, and the money which supports them. For lower class youth this field is incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to break into. Art University attempts to level this playing field; however, the difficulties which emerge in any university are amplified in the context of art or other culture making.

In the article “Learning to labour unequally: understanding the relationship between cultural production, cultural consumption and inequality,” Oakley and O'brien argue that issues of inequality in cultural consumption and production are linked. The article states that “looking at both production and consumption is absolutely essential to understanding the relationship between cultural and social inequality and that it is not sufficient to simply interrogate these activities alongside each other, but that we need to think about the ways in which these phenomena are linked.” The output of cultural industries is critical in our understanding of class. Those who work in culturally producing industries such as the arts don't necessarily reap the same benefits as those who consume them. Art culture is not as accessible to lower class participants; therefore, despite laboring in these fields, lower

classes' consumption of culture is still restricted, and culture they do consume is rejected by the mainstream.

A policy report from the Warwick Commission recently found that “The wealthiest, better educated and least ethnically diverse 8% of the population form the most culturally active segment of all.” Those with the most privilege are the most influential on dominant cultural narratives. While other social factors are important, class is one of the most important social characteristics that shape who determines cultural relevance. “Whatever social advantage might arise from heavy engagement in cultural activities will accrue to those who are highly educated, who occupy higher occupational class positions, and who have backgrounds within higher social classes” (Bennett 2009). Those of higher class background have an inherent bias in achieving high cultural status, as they are the ones determining what is culturally relevant, as well as providing the funds to access a wide array of cultural activities. This role of status in determining cultural relevance negatively affects lower classed members of artistic communities who have less influence upon the status quo for cultural behavior.

Cultural items which are more accessible across classes, such as television or amateur performing arts, are viewed as somehow inferior to more formal and less accessible cultural items such as classical music or museums. Public works projects intended to help expose those who are “missing out” on these cultural experiences reinforces the idea that participating in more accessible forms of culture is inferior to proper cultural experiences. In recent years, there has been a notable shift in the valuing of high vs low culture, as it is now considered socially acclaimed to be well versed in both popular and highbrow culture.

Bennett claims that, “Having a wide range of cultural interests is a form of, rather than an end to, processes of social distinction.” (Bennett 2009). The ability to absorb both popular and high culture becomes increasingly important among young university social groups, especially those in arts universities. At first glance, this new expectation of being well versed in both high and pop culture seems like a slackening of the cultural barriers which exclude the lower classes. In fact, the consumption of pop culture by elites does nothing to make high culture more accessible to those of lower classes, nor does it deteriorate the prestige of high culture: it simply profits off the labor and culture of lower classes while simultaneously rejecting it as legitimate.

3.2.3 Classed barriers of entry

Problems with assimilation for lower class students aren't only restricted to cultural consumption but are inherent to the education system. Economic barriers of entry are common in creative careers. Unpaid labor is a necessary stepping stone to “make it” in the creative world. In creative fields, students are expected to put up with unethical work environments that they would not tolerate in any other field. The necessity of unpaid labor, as well as the other financial sacrifices expected in creative careers, restricts the participation of lower class students in these fields. “The ability of parents to support their children not only through higher education but beyond into internships, the likelihood of having friends or relatives in expensive parts of the country with whom one can lodge (in large enough houses) without paying rent, the ability to borrow small amounts of funds (the popular media phrase ‘the bank of mum and dad’ is full of such class-based assumptions) and so on all, have a clear

impact on the ability of working class people to enter the cultural professions” (O'brien 2014). Lower class students, therefore, are at a disadvantage both socially as well as academically with opportunities to succeed restricted by money.

In addition to not having the monetary means to support themselves while doing unpaid labor, lower class students may face disadvantages due to not having the same social network and connections as their higher class peers. “ Recent policy research (Creative Skillset (2015). suggests that 48% of the media industries workforce have done unpaid work at some point in their career, up from 43% in 2010 and over half (56%) found out about their current or most recent role through informal recruitment methods, personal and social networks” (O'brien 2014).Not having affluent parents with connections to galleries or other cultural venues places lower class students at a disadvantage in the workforce.

There exists a dominant narrative that creative industries are meritocratic and reward participants based on talent and skill. This narrative suggests that the determiner of those who are able to make a living by capitalizing their creativity is one's passion or natural talent. This idea was made popular by the Richard Florida's 2002 article on the rise of creative industries. However, recent data shows that the lower class is consistently under-represented in many creative industries, and worse, “even when those from working-class backgrounds enter certain CCIs, they face a “class origin pay gap” compared to those from privileged backgrounds.” Creative industries are therefore not the meritocratic oasis that public opinion might see them as (Allen 2013).

Class discrimination and barriers, especially in creative fields, unfairly target lower income and lower classed students. In terms of cultural production, items which are

accessible to the lower class are seen as less valuable than cultural products with high monetary and social barriers to consume. This tension and devaluing of lower class culture has given rise to a growing production of counter culture items intended to eschew dominant norm. These items aren't intended to be consumed by the masses or the cultural elites, and these items' subject matter contains violent rejections of the mainstream, such that it disgusts or repulses elite consumers.

3.3 Language and identity

Language provides a unique opportunity to express one's identity. Sociolinguists investigate differences between ways of speaking. Individual variables such as phonological or lexical items are components of styles of speaking, and interpreting why speakers employ these variables requires deeper analysis into the interaction between different variables as well as the associations these variables have culturally. Penelope Eckert posits that "Meanings of variables are not precise or fixed but rather constitute a field of potential meanings – an *indexical field*, or constellation of ideologically related meanings, any one of which can be activated in the situated use of the variable. The field is fluid, and each new activation has the potential to change the field by building on ideological connections" (Eckert 2008). Language features therefore do not directly mean any one thing about a speaker, as past sociolinguistic research might suggest (Labov 1963), but can convey a wide range of information about a speaker.

Language styles are inherent representations of a speaker's ideology. Just as one's clothing choice or hairstyle reflects the way they wish to be perceived by the world, the way

one uses language is a product of a potentially subconscious but still voluntary decision. In this sense, one's class or gender doesn't naturally result in a certain kind of speech, but rather, one's speech reflects the class or other aspects of one's identity that the speaker wants to convey.

Sometimes speakers will use specific linguistic variation to convey more personal aspects of their identity, such as coolness or toughness. Often when speakers are in a community where they want to distance or align themselves with other community members they will use language to show these intentions. "Ideology is at the center of stylistic practice: one way or another, every stylistic move is the result of an interpretation of the social world and of the meanings of elements within it, as well as a positioning of the stylizer with respect to that world" (Eckert 2008). Linguistic variations reflect not only facts about a speaker's identity, but give insight into a speaker's aspirations, fears and desires.

3.3.1 Language and Adolescence

Linguistic variation is heightened in times of adolescence. Eckert's study "Adolescent social structure and spread of linguistic change" analyzed language of adolescents from a Detroit suburb and tracked the variation of phonological as well as lexical items across the population. In this study Eckert seeks to explain why two kinds of speech patterns occur in this population and what environmental distinctions account for the variation in speaker groups. She concludes that the determining factors of who will speak like a "jock" or a "burnout" are partially due to social class distinctions, but also partially due to aspirations and future goals of speakers.

Children's linguistic decisions are heavily reflective of their parents' class position and way of speaking. Secondary school, however, gives adolescents more agency in the way they portray their own identity and requires that they maintain class structure on their own. This age is therefore a rich time to study subjects, as there is intense motivation for the first time to create and maintain one's own social identity. It then follows that "in our society the very uncertainty of the adolescent life stage, and the need to capture a clear identity in the face of uncertainty, provides greater motivation than at any other time in life to adapt linguistic patterns to community structure" (Eckert 1988). While University students are much older than secondary students, leaving for university is often the first time these individuals live away from home and therefore are constructing their entire identity without the influence of their parents. Often living, working, and going to school with young people, all social stimulus comes from their peer group. Therefore, there is an increased pressure to fit in and find their place among this group, and the language used reflects this.

Social groups such as class or gender are not set determiners of what linguistic variation a speaker will use. Linguistic variation exists to provide meaning, both about what the speaker is saying as well as how the speaker wants their listeners to perceive them. This variation is heightened in adolescence and therefore, youth language offers a larger potential to study the use of variables in constructing identity.

3.4 Background and origins of MLE

3.4.1 Origins of MLE

A study by Cheshire places the beginnings of MLE in the 1980's. Much of what is now MLE originates from music early MLE came from songs which were a blend of Reggae with U.K. dancehall music. These early songs by DJ Smiley Culture and Tippy Irie blended Jamaican slang with cockney English. One of the earliest mentions of MLE style of speech in academia was from Hebdige in 1990, who states, "In some parts of Britain, West Indian patois has become the public language of inner-city youths, irrespective of their racial origin"(Hebdige 1990: 158). Like many youth languages, music and the lyrics which make up this music are particularly influential in the creation of MLE. Grime, a blend of U.K. Garage and dancehall music which originated in East London and spread mostly through pirate radio stations broadcast through tower block apartments, is particularly influential on MLE's lexical items and phonology. "If grime has an overriding characteristic it is that of being music put together by the young for themselves—taking advantage of new technology even if their products remained spurned by major labels. MLE, which has nothing like the worldwide spread of rap slang, seems a parallel phenomenon: a London creation that has sprung wholly from the street, blending linguistic sources just as grime has combined musical ones. It reflects the immigrant communities: poor, multilingual, family based and self-reliant." (Green 2014). MLE is a dialect in direct reaction against RP or mainstream ways of speaking in the U.K. Just as Grime music is not produced for the masses, MLE is used by speakers of the dialect only with other speakers. Though its use is growing, this is

not due to MLE being embraced by the mainstream, but an increased turning away from the mainstream.

3.4.2 Speakers of MLE

According to Green, “MLE speakers are primarily working class, both black, white and brown, i.e. Asian.... it appears that the lexis has also been adopted, probably to a lesser extent, by middle-class speakers, in the same manner that some took on Estuary English, and before that ‘Mockney.’ MLE has thus become something of a lingua franca for those under 30. Middle-class users, however, are far more likely to code-switch, in the same way that white users of rap slang/ebonics will also have other alternatives available.” As MLE is a multi ethnolect its use is not restricted to any specific race or geographic region. MLE speakers are generally young people in urban cities. This way of speaking is highly associated with street culture and therefore those who speak it are most likely members of the lower class who speak it to express their identity or middle class members using it in order to distance themselves from mainstream culture. Currently a youth language, “MLE may move with its speakers as they grow older, but at the moment it does not exist outside the young.” (Green 2014).

3.4.3 What is MLE?

MLE is a youth language spoken in London and other cities in the U.K. Its speakers refer to it simply as slang, because much of its lexis is slang terminology. The media refers to it as “Jafaican”, given its roots in Jamaican patois. However, linguists assert that MLE is in

fact a real dialect, just as standard as RP or standard English. Cheshire found, “Looking in detail at usage within very narrow age bands allows us to see how the various features comprising MLE are differentially distributed across the lifespan. In doing so, we can see differences and similarities between MLE and structured variation in canonical monolingual urban communities. Acquisition and age distributions are different for MLE, but the variation is no less structured, both linguistically and socially” (Cheshire 2014). Socially, MLE behaves differently than most dialects which are restricted to location and or race. MLE is spoken by people across race and class backgrounds. MLE is highly associated with grime and music of the counterculture and is spoken by young people whose identity is highly fluid and is being constructed through interaction with their peers. This way of speaking therefore is adopted by people across class and race boundaries as a way of expressing non elite identity and resisting to mainstream culture.

4. Current Study

The current study seeks to investigate the question: What is MLE, who speaks it and why? The study focuses on the language of students in years two and three at the University of the Arts London. This school has campuses across London and pulls students from the Greater UK. The students are from diverse ethnic as well as socioeconomic backgrounds, making this school a good place to study a dialect as convergent as MLE.

Media depictions of non standard dialects often aid to the perception of these dialects as “other” and less than the standard. This study is cautious to avoid the othering which has been increased by previous linguists’ attempts at classification. “Research on ethnolectal speech (and on ‘multiethnolects’ – see below) shows that naming, both within and outside the media, forms an important part of this process: giving a variety a label serves at once to reify it as a ‘real’ entity and to categorize that entity as one that can be compared with others at the same level, a process often leading to derogation” (Kerswill 2014). Othering is most prevalent among media sources which often emphasize limited and highly stereotyped features of the dialect. The intention of media portrayals is to classify the dialect and speakers of it as substandard. This is not the intention of the the present study.

Several methods were used to resist potential othering. Interviews were collected by a peer in informal settings, in contrast to a formal researcher who might have increased power due to institutional support, age and potential socioeconomic gain from the exploitation of a vulnerable population. Additionally, while lexical items were collected in the study, the researchers acknowledge the phonological, morpho-syntactic and pragmatic features also used in this dialect. Lexical items are an item of interest in this study because

lexical features are what separate this dialect from other regional accents across the U.K. Additionally, while most phonological and pragmatic variation is able to be understood by non speakers lexical items in this dialect render speech often unintelligible to non speakers. This phenomenon is interesting for this study as its unintelligibility by non speakers is part of what gives power to this form of speech as an item of counter culture.

Most speakers of this dialect call the way they speak “Slang.” As Cheshire notes, “The term Jafaican, used to refer to youth language in multiethnic parts of London and beyond, most likely has media origins and is strongly associated with hip-hop; it is likewise not essentially a ‘members’ concept’, young people preferring the word ‘slang’ to characterise their way of speaking” (Cheshire 2011). The labeling of this speech as simply “slang” by linguists has the potential effect of reducing the dialect to simply the non standard forms it uses. The present study focuses on these nonstandard forms not to exclude or deny phonological or morphological terms but because lexical items are of particular interest in this dialect. The term “Slang” is used throughout this paper to refer to words which occur in MLE and not in Standard English, and was used in data collection during the study as it was the most culturally appropriate word.

Based on background research which links MLE to street English as well as research into the current class system of the UK, this study hypothesizes that:

Members who identify as higher class or view language features associated with a lower class negatively will use less slang than those who identify as lower class or who have more positive associations with street culture.

This research anticipates that due to the restrictive class system in the U.K. as well as the roots of MLE in counter culture that the use of MLE by participants acts a method of resistance against the dominant culture. Lower class members are affected most negatively by the class system in the U.K. therefore they are expected to use this and other forms of counter culture the most.

5. Methods

5.1 Participants

Participants of the survey data were students from Chelsea College of Arts. Nearly all were UK natives and all had lived in London for at least a year prior to the study. All participants were between their first and third years in University and were between the ages 18 and 21, gender was not recorded. Recruitment was voluntary and was done in the library of the college.

5.2 Materials

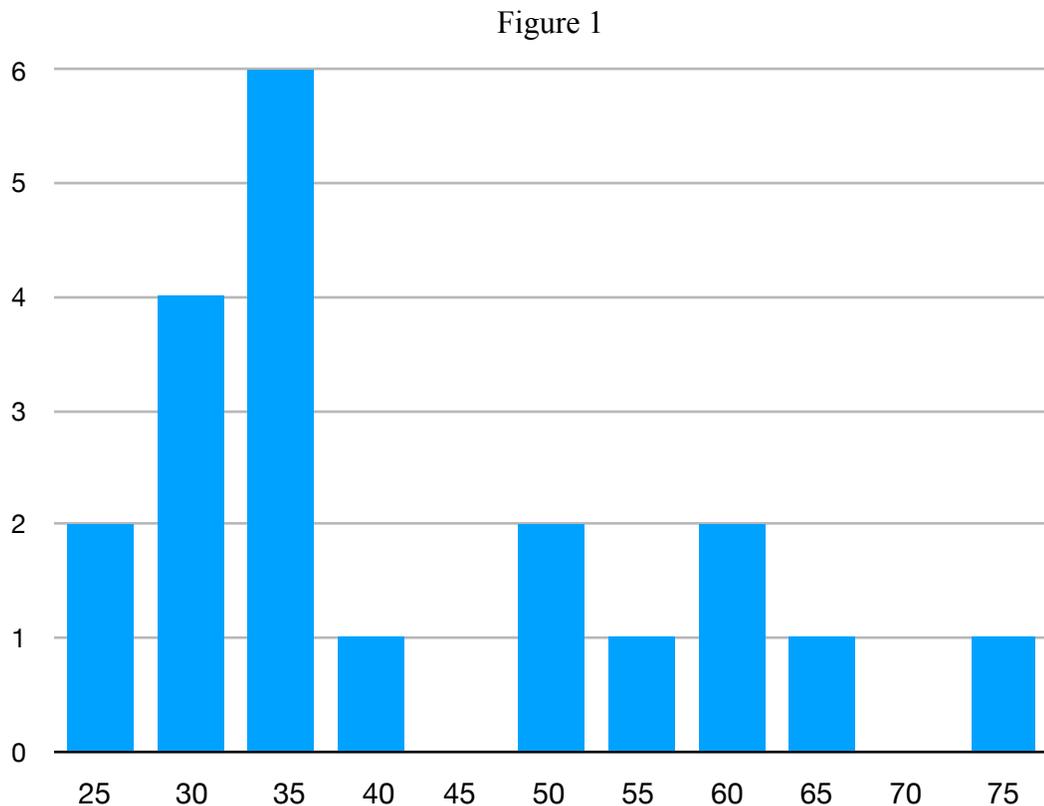
This study utilized a questionnaire attached in the appendix. The questionnaire was distributed throughout the library of Chelsea College. The survey asked participants to provide their place of birth and their parents occupation as well as whether they had a job on campus in order to determine socioeconomic class. The survey also included a brief section on attitudes about the use of slang and finally a section where students could fill in their likelihood of using various slang terms. Participants ranked each term on a one to five scale. One indicated that the term was used never; five, that the term was used daily. The slang terms listed on the survey are typical of MLE and were collected by the researcher on a prior visit to the college.

5.3 Procedure

Survey participants were approached in the library of the college, American candy was offered as an incentive for completion. Surveys were filled out in the school library and returned to the researcher. Surveys by individuals and in groups and while some students completed their survey within visibility of their friends this was not expected to negatively influence the accuracy of the self reports.

6. Results

Participant's self reported slang surveys were totaled to find each participants "slang score." Each term on the survey was marked by students between one and five, one signified that the term was never used, five signified daily use. The total of all of these terms were added to acquire each participants "slang score." Distribution of survey scores is recorded below. In this survey $N = 20$, the highest slang score is 72 and the lowest is 22. The scores had a median of 34. Distribution was concentrated in the lower scores with the largest concentration between the scores 35 and 30 with nearly one third of participants reporting in that score window. Figure one below shows the distribution of these slang scores.



Hypothesis predicted that: Members who identify as higher class or view features associated with a lower class negatively will use less slang than those who identify as lower class or who have more positive associations with street culture. However, when Slang scores were mapped against socioeconomic class survey data did not show a strong positive correlation with low use of slang and high class.

Limited questions on the survey asked about attitudes towards way of speaking. The main question: “What do you think about someone who speaks in a posh/street way?” did not elicit responses which could be mapped against slang scores. Answers towards attitudes about language mostly cited a lack or increase of education, location of upbringing, as well as the social class of the person. Even among participants who used low amounts of slang and ranked high in class there was a marked avoidance of speaking negatively about anyone else’s way of speaking. Many participants declined to answer or wrote “nothing” in answer to the question: what can you assume about someone who speaks in a more street way than you.” People were more likely to make assumptions about someone who spoke in a more posh way than them but still the overwhelming response was a refusal towards making judgment. Attitude toward language was therefore not a helpful metric to measure slang use against.

Figure 2.1 below maps students self reported slang score against the relative class of each student averaged from both parents’ professions. The ranking of each profession onto class was informed by the Office for National Statistics publication, “A picture of the United Kingdom using the National Statistics socio-economic classification.” This publication grouped UK professions into six groups, where class was ranked one to six, high to low. As

this survey was from 2005 and several of my participants parents work jobs in the tech industry, supplemental research was also included to ascertain a relative class ranking for each participant. Figure 1.1 below shows my participant’s slang usage mapped lowest to highest against social class categories 1-6 ranked highest to lowest. This chart shows a small trend of positive correlation with high class and low slang use, however, middle class participants, especially with the class score of two, demonstrate the widest range of slang usage, with both the lowest scores of 22 and highest score of 72.

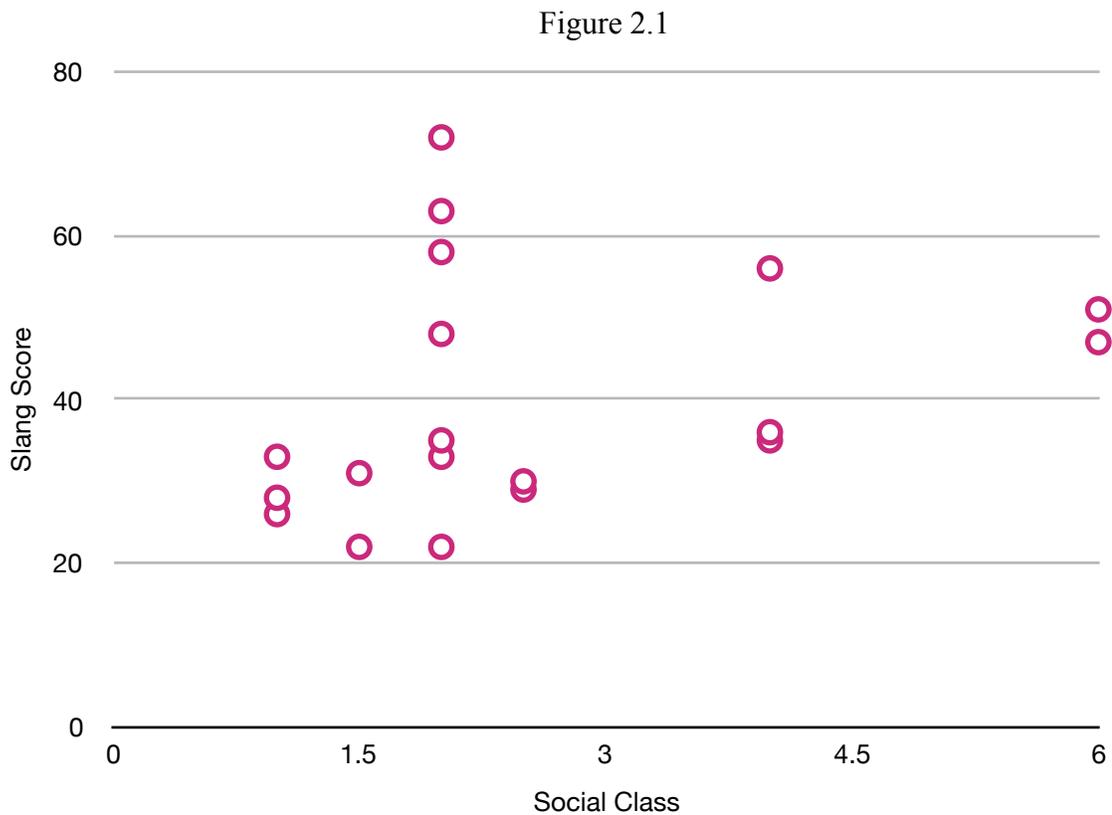


Figure 2.2 shows the same data mapped with a line graph, the average slang score for each class group was charted. This chart demonstrates the same correlation seen in Figure 2.1 as well as the sharp rise in Class group two.

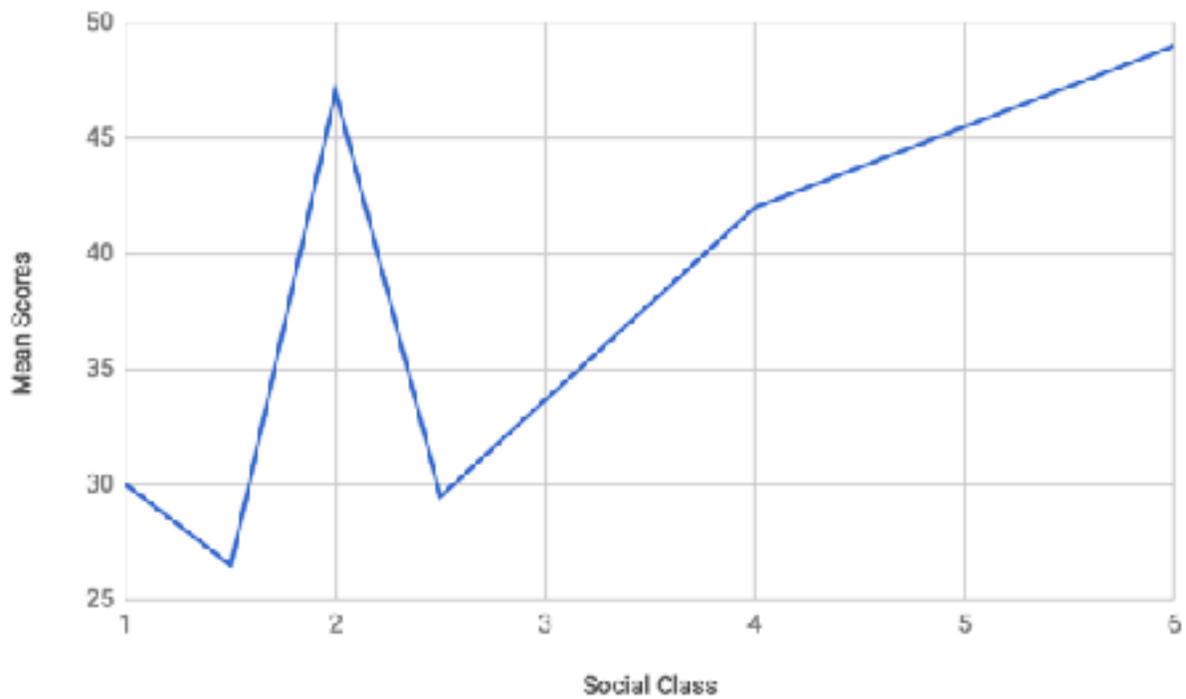
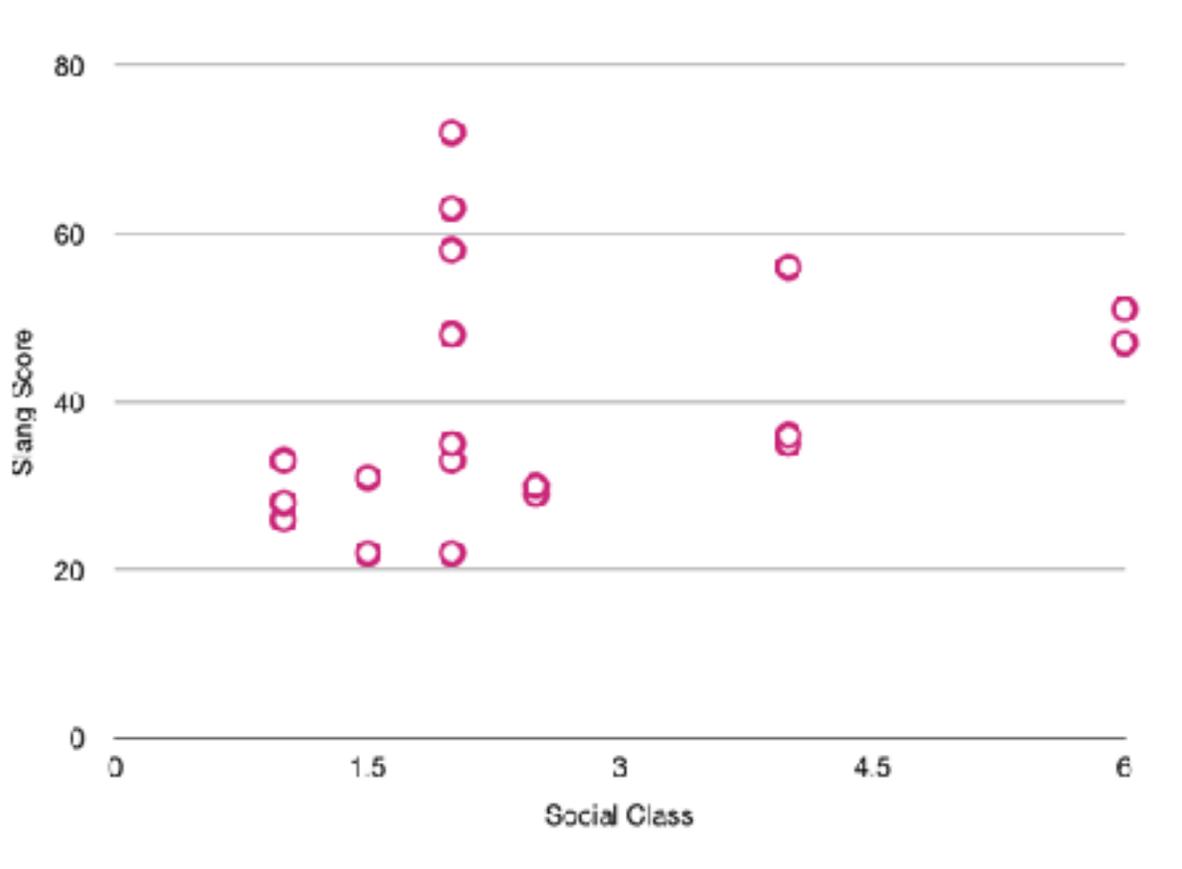


Figure 2.2

Figure three shows the mapping of social class against slang score with only participants who ranked between 1-1.5 and 2.5-6 included. This chart shows more of the positive trend I was expecting. This graph demonstrates that on the ends of the spectrum low slang is positively correlated with high class. The correlation between slang use and class on ends of the class spectrum are .789, this stands in comparison to the correlation between slang across all classes which was .327.

Figure 3



Clearly class alone is not a direct indicator of use of slang. As regional dialects inform much of the speech patterns of the U.K. I also factored participants hometowns into slang use. When participants hometowns were plotted on a map, participants with high slang (darker red) were predominantly concentrated close to or in London. This correlation isn't perfect, with one participant with high slang hailing from Birmingham, but this map adds more to our knowledge of what students are more or less likely to use MLE characteristics. A recent study by the University of Cambridge which used a smartphone app to collect corpus

data of speakers' dialects across the UK found similar phonology, perhaps originating from London in the mid to south quadrants of the U.K. but that west tends to remain separate in their features (Leeman 2017). This trend may explain the high slang use which I noted moving north of London but not as much west.



Figure 4

When hometown population was analyzed, a moderate correlation of .5937 between population size of hometowns and slang use was found. This can be seen in Figure five below. Most youth languages are concentrated in urban areas, therefore it was expected that those who hailed from more populous places might be more prone to features of MLE.

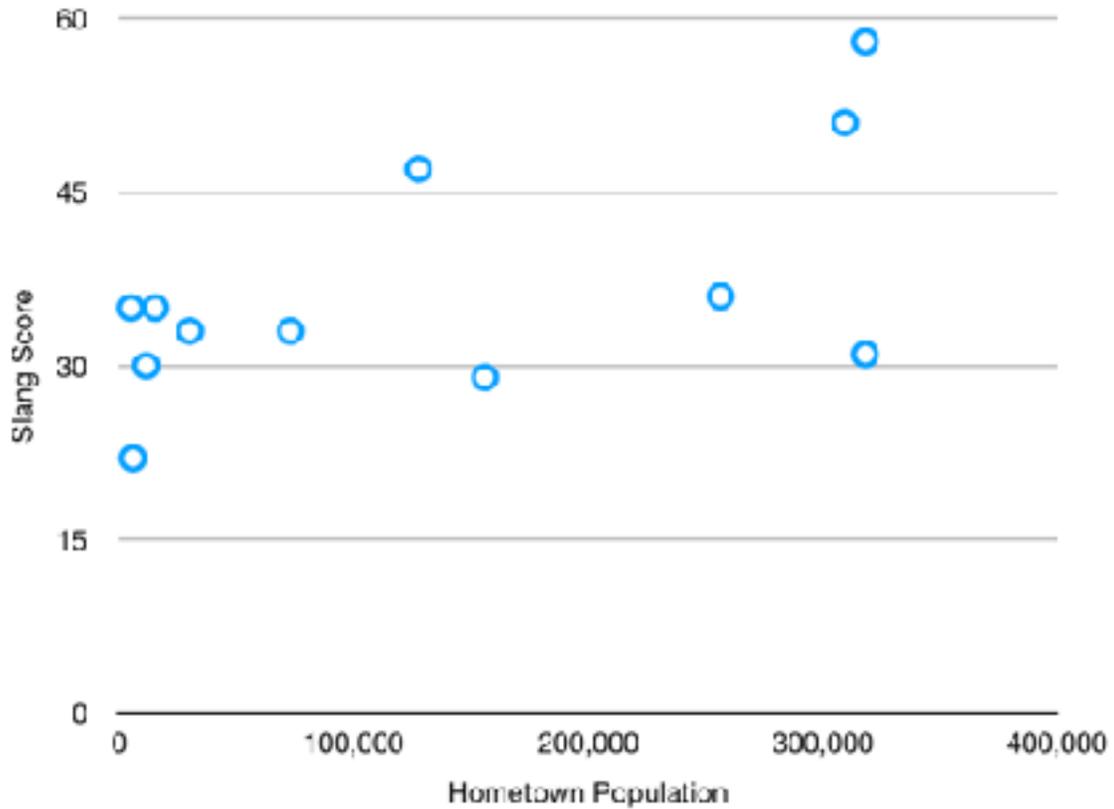


Figure 5

7. Discussion

While the number of survey participants (twenty) means that even perfect correlation wouldn't be statistically significant, the data found shows a lack of obvious correlation between class and slang (.327).

Some reasons for this finding include the following:

First, the survey was distributed among a small population. This means that outliers have large impact. The terms I was testing for came from a collection of words from several of my participants. Their slang scores were obviously much higher than the speech of others, as the words I was testing for were words that I previously had collected from them. If I were to repeat this study, perhaps using a list of terms which I had collected from an alternative source or not including my original speakers in the study could have been effective.

Additionally, determining class was difficult even with knowledge of participants parents' professions. Some participants only had one working parent and it was difficult to tell what this meant about the family. Some professions were not listed in the national guide for class distribution or participant's answers were too vague to correctly assign a category. With such a small sample this lack of information could have negatively skewed the results.

Multiple factors are at play in who speaks MLE, what MLE is and why people speak it. As the dialect is an emerging multiethnolect, speakers are distinguished by more factors than simply their race or class. Proximity to London and size of hometown were two other factors that I explored, however it is possible that even more characteristics than this study was able to encompass affect who uses what features of MLE. Other potential factors include

attitude about language, parents' birth towns, secondary school attended, university friend group and career aspirations.

Finally, further research reveals that perhaps middle class Londoners might have motivation to adopt ways of speaking associated with MLE as a way of distancing themselves from the posh upper class. A recent paper on MLE states, "The novelty, if there is one, is the adoption of MLE by an increasing section of the white middle class, but again, one can see this in the previous popularity of Estuary English. The terror of being perceived as elitist, let alone 'posh', holds serious power among those whose credo is 'authenticity'" (Green 2014). My results reflect this spike in use of MLE features used by the middle class speakers. This stands in opposition to what I originally expected but does not necessarily negate my hypothesis that use of MLE is linked to resistance against the class system.

Several factors could explain the spike in middle class use. Perhaps MLE began as a lower class resistance to RP and other conventional British norms of a heavily classed society. Now this resistance has now traveled up to the middle class. Many members middle class members use MLE or participate in other facets of counterculture in order to avoid being classed as posh or stuck up. Middle class members, not fully able to participate in upper class culture due to monetary restrictions, may have just as much if not more of a reason to reject the mainstream culture than lower class speakers. Members of the middle class are more likely to be mistaken for upper class elites and therefore must use additional techniques such as language and clothing to distance themselves from the upper class. Additionally, most young communities especially those which pride themselves on

originality and inventiveness (such as art communities) do not value displays of wealth or conservative ideology. Students involved in the arts, like my population, may be early adopters of counter culture and other rejections of the dated, and pretentious mainstream.

8. Conclusion

The present study investigated possible factors which influence who speaks MLE. MLE is an important dialect to study, as it is a member of a new wave of dialects spoken by a variety of ethnicities in a variety of places. Though MLE is spoken most in London, other studies have recorded its use in other cities across the U.K. (Kerswill 2014). The present study hypothesized that social class and use of MLE would be strongly correlated. This was anticipated because MLE is a dialect entrenched in counter culture and lower classes should have the strongest motivation to rebel against the class system of the U.K.. High correlation between slang and class (.789) was found between to be true in the highest and lowest class members. However, middle class participants, who made up a large section of the study, had both the highest and lowest slang scores of the survey. Therefore, there was not a linear correlation between class and slang. The spike in middle class usage could be attributed to several possibilities. As MLE is highly associated with counter culture, use of slang by middle class participants could be interpreted as a growing reaction against mainstream British culture, one that is fueled by desire of middle class youth to not seem dated, posh or uncool. Additionally, as not all middle class speakers used slang it is possible that the factors which influence this use fluctuate across the middle class demographic.

This finding could also demonstrate that social class is not the only factor which influences use of MLE. Especially among middle class members of the UK, other factors are at play in determining one's likelihood of using MLE. Identity characteristics, aspirations and group dynamics all effect one's use of MLE. What is evident is that more research is necessary to ascertain which populations are more or less likely to speak MLE, when these

speakers use the dialect as well as potential attitudes which may be shared by MLE and non MLE speakers. This research could take the form of survey questions which delve into speakers preferences for mainstream vs counterculture, recordings of speakers use or lack of use of the dialect in social settings and more background information on speakers prior linguistic history.

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Appendix

Below is the survey distributed to students at Chelsea College of the arts about language attitudes as well as a list of MLE slang which students were asked to rank how often they used.

Linguistic Dissertation Questionnaire

All information disclosed is confidential and will only be used in a collection of data for research purposes, no information will be linked back to individuals. Please answer honestly as possible even if the answer seems impolite.

Where did you grow up?: _____

What do your parents do for a living?: _____

Where do you live while at uni? _____

Do you have a job at uni/where do you work? _____

How would you greet a friend?: _____

What does the word "safe" mean: _____

How would you use this word in a sentence: _____

Is the above sentence something you would say regularly? Yes No

What could you assume about someone who speaks in a more formal (posh) way?

What could you assume about someone who speaks in a less formal (street) way?

Have you ever changed the way you speak to sound more or less formal? Yes No

In what circumstance and why: _____

Rank the following 1-10

How easy is it to communicate with someone who speaks in a more formal way than you?

(easy)1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (difficult)

How easy is it to communicate with someone who speaks in a less formal way than you?

(easy)1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (difficult)

Rank the likelihood of you using a phrase with 5 being daily and 1 being never

Taking the piss ¹	1	2	3	4	5
Mong	1	2	3	4	5
Skanking	1	2	3	4	5
Pinging	1	2	3	4	5
Pranging	1	2	3	4	5
jokes ²	1	2	3	4	5
Crease	1	2	3	4	5
Slate	1	2	3	4	5
Mug her off	1	2	3	4	5
Lean	1	2	3	4	5
Peng	1	2	3	4	5
Prang	1	2	3	4	5

¹

² These terms were not used in data analysis because they received high scores from the majority of participants (median: 4) even those who used nearly no other slang, therefore they are most likely not a part of MLE.

Peak	1	2	3	4	5
Bare	1	2	3	4	5
Rinse	1	2	3	4	5
Booki	1	2	3	4	5
Zoot	1	2	3	4	5
Moist	1	2	3	4	5
Gassing	1	2	3	4	5
Cotch	1	2	3	4	5
Aired	1	2	3	4	5
Buff	1	2	3	4	5