

# (Even) New(er) Directions

Further research on Language Diversity

Amanda Cole and Dan Clayton





# acknowledgements

Written by Dan Clayton and Amanda Cole

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## The project

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## New Directions and (Even) New(er) Directions

*(Even) New(er) Directions* is a supplement to *New Directions*, a free PDF download published on the English and Media Centre website in December 2023. The five additional research summaries and Q&As reference summaries found in the original publication. *New Directions* can be ordered for free from [EMC's website](#).

## Please note

Any errors in the research summaries are entirely our own and not those of the linguists who carried out the research. If you do happen to notice something that you would like to query, please contact [dan@englishandmedia.co.uk](mailto:dan@englishandmedia.co.uk)

Some of the themes in a few of the research summaries might require a degree of teacher discretion as they touch on issues of misogyny and prejudice.

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# new(er) directions

## Contents

<b>introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>the research</b>	<b>9</b>
• From the Endz to the Sticks?	10
• 'Learn Jafaikan in Two Minutes'	14
• Bang to Rights	18
• Where 'r' You Going?	22
• Child's Play	25
<b>glossary</b>	<b>31</b>

# introduction

## The authors

### Amanda Cole

Amanada Cole is Assistant Professor in Sociolinguistics at the University of Cambridge. She teaches, researches, supervises student projects and has published widely in the field of sociolinguistics. She is interested in how people speak and how they or others feel about it. In particular, being born into a family of East Londoners in Essex, she has always been fascinated by Essex and London dialects and the way people speak across South East England. Amanda appears regularly in the media discussing issues and topics related to linguistics, and she hopes to share linguistic knowledge and research as widely as possible. Along with Rob Drummond of Manchester Metropolitan University she runs the Accentism Project, a project which explores and shares stories of language-based discrimination, prejudice, and stereotyping.

### Dan Clayton

Dan Clayton is an education consultant at the EMC and specialises in English Language work at A Level and language education across the secondary curriculum. He has been a teacher of A Level English for over 20 years, senior examiner and moderator for different awarding bodies and is author/editor of many books for A Level English Language, including ones for Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press & Routledge, as well as publications for the EMC and NATE. Dan has worked closely with many universities to help develop links between A Level and HE, worked as a research fellow at UCL and runs the EngLangBlog site and @EngLangBlog Twitter account, as well as being part of the Lexis Podcast team. He has also taught Media and Film Studies and is Associate Editor of *emagazine* and *MediaMagazine*.

# the research

## From the Endz to the Sticks?

### Using social media to track linguistic diffusion

Researchers: Christian Ilbury, University of Edinburgh | Jack Grieve, University of Birmingham | David Hall

#### Background

[Multicultural London English \(MLE\)](#) is a [linguistic variety](#) of English that is thought to have originated in East London in ethnically and linguistically diverse communities because of the meeting of various different languages and dialects of English.

Linguists have found features of MLE in other parts of London, for example in the west of the city, but also in other parts of the country such as Birmingham and Manchester. Linguist Rob Drummond found that some young people in Manchester use MLE linguistic features such as [Th-stopping](#) (for example saying 'ting' for *thing*) (see Maybe it's a Grime Ting in *New Directions*). He suggested that there is an overarching variety called [Multicultural British English \(MBE\)](#) which is spoken in different cities in Britain. MBE has several features in common across Britain but also has local regional features in each place that it is spoken.

But several questions remain. How widespread across Britain is MBE? Is MBE a result of MLE spreading across the country? Or has MBE come to life independently in different parts of the country with similar demographics because of the influence of various English dialects and languages such as Jamaican English? Did MLE originate in East London or did linguists spot it there first simply because there has been more linguistic research carried out in this place compared to others?

Christian Ilbury, Jack Grieve and David Hall set out to answer these questions by using a very large dataset of tweets (from Twitter/X) to track MLE words across the UK.

#### Methods

The authors used a dataset comprising 180 million geocoded tweets, containing 1.8 billion words, posted from 1.9 million unique accounts. 'Geocoded' means that the tweets could be located to the precise geographic location where they were posted. The tweets were all posted in the UK between 1 Jan 2014 and 31 Dec 2014.

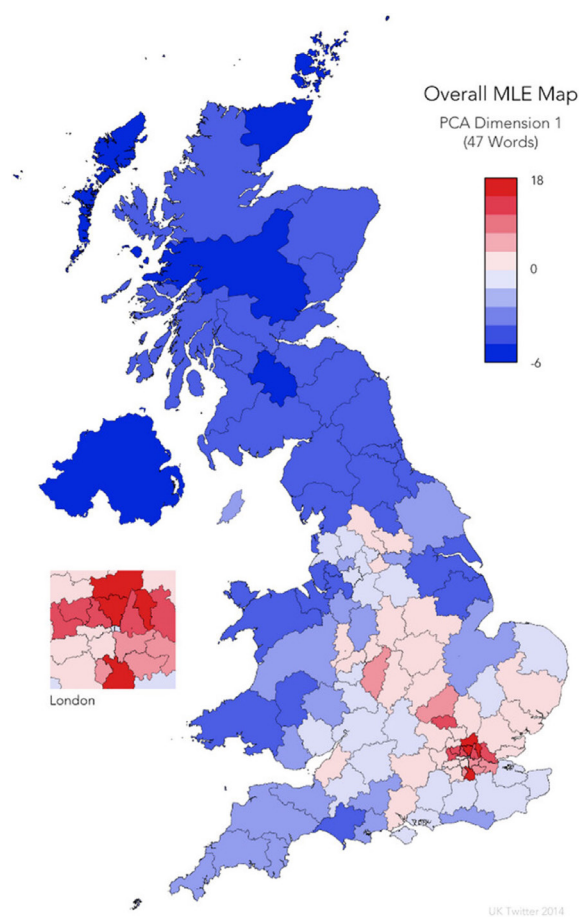
The authors compared how often MLE [lexis](#) (vocabulary) was used in different parts of the UK. They analysed the frequency of 47 different core words used in MLE, including *leng* for attractive, *paigon* for enemy/untrustworthy person and *bare* meaning very/really and *endz* meaning an urban area where a person is from. They wanted to understand if the areas with high rates of MLE lexis had similar demographics. To do this they used data from the 2011 UK population census on the composition of different areas in terms of age, sex and ethnicity.

#### What were the results?

There was a high concentration of many MLE words in the South of England, particularly in North and East London. Assuming that the areas with the most MLE words are those where these terms originated or spread first, MLE did originate in North and East London as suggested by previous research. MLE seems to have then spread across southern England, but it also travelled to several other hotspots. In particular, MLE words were found in other urban and ethnically diverse places such as Luton, Northampton and Birmingham. The researchers found that MLE spread to places

# the research

with sizeable numbers of people identifying as Black British and Asian British. It seems that shared friendship, familial and cultural ties in different cities across England have led to MLE being spoken there.



The distribution of MLE words across the UK. Red = more MLE words; blue = less MLE words. Image reproduced from the research paper referenced at the end of this summary.

There were some MLE words however which showed a different pattern. The words *famalam* (friend/family) and *dench* (attractive and physically impressive) were not used in London or South East England as often as other MLE words. Instead, these words were found in geographically disparate hotspots across England, including around Norwich, Bristol and Southampton. It may be that these are some of the earliest MLE words which have now been adopted in general circulation and are now not used by MLE speakers in London. Indeed, Ilbury notes that in his extensive linguistic fieldwork in London he has never heard these words used.

Perhaps these words are now just stereotyped as part of MLE.

Another important finding was that Multicultural British English may be a misleading term as MLE words were concentrated in England and not Britain as a whole. The researchers found very low rates of MLE words in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. There is an overarching variety with origins in MLE that has spread across England, but we need a new term other than MBE.

It seems to be that shared friendship, familial and cultural ties in different cities across England have led to MLE being spoken there.

## Reference

**Article title:** Using social media to infer the diffusion of an urban contact dialect: A case study of Multicultural London English  
**Authors:** Christian Ilbury, Jack Grieve and David Hall  
**Journal:** *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, Volume 28, Issue 3, pages 45-70  
**Year of publication:** 2024  
**Link to article:** <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/josl.12653>



## Q&A



Christian Ilbury



Jack Grieve



David Hall

### 1. What sparked your interest in investigating this topic?

Since Jenny Cheshire and colleagues' work which defined and documented a new variety of English – Multicultural London English – some work has identified similarities between MLE and varieties used elsewhere in England such as those spoken in Birmingham and Manchester. This has led some researchers (e.g. Rob Drummond) to argue for the emergence of a more general UK variety, what has been labelled 'Multicultural British English'.

However, up until recently, the spread (or 'diffusion') of MLE and/or the emergence of MBE had been documented only in a handful of English cities (Birmingham and Manchester). Though there were claims it was being used elsewhere, the evidence was patchy. We wanted to map the spread of MLE across the UK to understand where and how this variety spread.

Traditionally, researchers would have done this type of work by going to different locations and recording people (i.e. dialectology). This approach is extremely resource intensive and isn't really feasible today. Our approach, however, uses methods from computational sociolinguistics which allows us to explore the distribution of MLE lexis (or words) across the entirety of the UK by using a very large dataset from Twitter (now 'X').

### 2. What were your main research questions?

Our approach was relatively straightforward. We first identified a list of MLE words and then we mapped where those words were being used in the UK. If a word was used more in an area, then we assumed it was used there first. This allowed us to explore the following questions:

1. What is the regional distribution of MLE lexis across the United Kingdom?
2. What can this distribution tell us about the origins and spread of MLE?
3. Can we isolate MLE from other heritage language influences and more general 'youth styles'?

### What are the most important findings and take away messages?

- MLE lexis can be distinguished from heritage language influences (such as Jamaican English) and what people often think of as a 'youth style' on the basis of its geographical distribution.
- Our data provides additional support that MLE first emerged in London, most probably in the North and East of the city, and it was used most frequently by individuals in ethnically diverse, inner-city neighbourhoods.
- MLE has spread, but not across the entirety of the UK. Based on our analyses, MLE appears to have diffused into other ethnically diverse urban areas in England (e.g. Luton and Birmingham) that are both geographically proximate to London and in which there are relatively large numbers of people identifying as 'Black British' and 'Asian British'. These areas form a geographical continuum from London providing a pathway for the spread of MLE.
- Because this variety spread from London and appears to be largely restricted to England (at least based on data from 2014), we question claims of a UK-wide variety called 'Multicultural British English'.

## 4. How does this piece of research relate to other work you or others have done?

For a long time, my work has questioned the earlier claim that MLE is ‘ethnically neutral’ i.e. a [multiethnolect](#). (See Why the Long Face in *New Directions*). Our research in this paper shows that ethnicity plays a central role in the diffusion of MLE. Notably, it appears to have spread in areas that have relatively large numbers of people identifying as ‘Black British’ and ‘British Asian’.

It also sheds some light on the mechanisms of linguistic diffusion. Traditionally, researchers have understood diffusion either through a ‘wave’ or ‘gravity’ model. The former understands diffusion as emanating out from the centre, into areas that are nearby, much like ripples on water. The gravity model predicts that linguistic innovations affect large areas first, and then spread into smaller ones. Our research, however, offers support for a relatively new model of linguistic diffusion – the ‘cultural model’. In this model, innovations are argued to emerge in a culturally influential city and spread out into socially comparable areas.

Q&A responses provided by Christian Ilbury