

## Studying enregisterment in the speech community: the 'London talks' interviews

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The 'London talks' interviews are part of an ongoing research project studying the enregisterment of London dialects by members of the local speech community. 'Enregisterment' describes how a linguistic repertoire becomes noticeable and differentiable from the rest of language to speakers (Agha 2003; Silverstein 2003). A 'register' in this sense is 'a way of speaking linked with a social situation, a set of linguistic forms linked with and constitutive of a context' (Johnstone 2017:17). These links are created, maintained and (re-)negotiated by each member of a speech community through a variety of observable metadiscursive activities, such as the invention and use of register names, phonetically motivated dialect spellings, or the creation of stereotypical dialect speakers ('characterological figures' representing the social values of the register) (Agha 2007:151).

The fieldwork collects narrative data on aspects of meta-discourse to establish how London speakers experience and conceptualize their own and fellow Londoners' ways of speaking, labelled, e.g., *Cockney*, *Estuary English* or *Multicultural London English/MLE*. All are scientifically described London-based varieties (Cheshire, Kerswill, Fox, & Torgersen 2011; Altendorf 2012; Fox 2012) as well as socially and culturally enregistered ways of speaking (Kerswill 2014). In the research interviews, informants are encouraged to elaborate on the linguistic shibboleths they consider typical of their own and other speakers' dialects, the social and place indexes they associate with them, and who they consider as prototypical dialect speakers.

The interviews are currently being conducted all over London amongst a broad sample of the local population and are publicised as the project 'London talks' (for more information and a blog featuring some of the informants visit [www.londontalksresearch.co.uk](http://www.londontalksresearch.co.uk)). The conversations consist of a part involving elicited commentary on 5 audio samples of different London voices, and another consisting of questions on the informants' own dialect and individual dialect biography.

Based on a sample of 20 participants, it can be shown that London varieties are enregistered differently for different members of the speech community, but that a community consensus can be established (cf. also Johnstone, Andrus, & Danielson 2006). For example, of the above labels, only 'Cockney' is widely known and linked to a clear place index, whereas the others are generally referred to by lay coinages, such as 'slang', 'patois', or 'South London' for MLE or 'south-eastern bland' for 'Estuary English' and localised all over the city. Furthermore, the social indexes and evaluations of these registers are highly variable and strongly dependent on the informants' own dialect socialisation.

The 'London talks' fieldwork forms part of a wider study on the historical enregisterment of London English, which diachronically analyses meta-discourse about London varieties from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards and in a variety of published and broadcast media and cultural products. Whereas (mass) media meta-discourse provides insight into the culturally and socially shaped registers from a 'sender' perspective, the interviews focus on dialect conceptualisation by individuals in the speech community and thus approach the questions of enregisterment from the 'receiver' perspective.

## References

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