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From 'multi-ethnic urban heteroglossia’ to 'contemporary urban vernaculars’

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FROM ‘MULTI-ETHNIC ADOLESCENT HETEROGLOSSIA’ TO ‘CONTEMPORARY URBAN VERNACULARS’

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Abstract: Research on crossing and stylisation in the everyday practice of young people in multi-ethnic urban areas of Britain during the 1980s and 1990s pointed to the destabilisation of inherited ethnicities, to a good deal of ground-level anti-racism, and to the emergence of new ethnicities. Recent reassessment of these data has brought out the social class underpinnings of these heteroglossic/polylingual processes, and this is also in line with the findings of a growing body of sociolinguistic research in European cities. Indeed, there is compelling evidence that these kind of mixed language practices have been a stable feature of the urban working class sociolinguistic landscape for at least 30 years.

At the same time, research on this contemporary heteroglossia have overwhelmingly focused on young people, to the extent that polylingual urban vernacular speech is quite often referred to as ‘youth language’. But are these speech practices really only transient age-specific phenomena that young people grow out of? This paper presents some evidence to the contrary. Drawing interview and observational recordings from an ESRC-project ‘Dialect development and style in a diaspora community’, the paper focuses on post-adolescent and middle-aged informants in West London during 2008 & 2009, describes the enduring significance of the kinds of speech practice initially identified with youth, examines the place that these styles now occupy within the informants’ repertoires more generally, and attempts to settle some of the terminological dispute that characterises recent sociolinguistic research in this field, using Agha’s theory of ‘register’ to try to reconceptualise the notion of ‘vernacular’.

Over the last 15 years, there has been a great deal of sociolinguistic research on the relatively stylised heteroglossic speech practices of young people with migrant backgrounds, and there has also been a lot of interest in the spread of such practices among both other-ethnic and non-migrant peers (see e.g. Hewitt 1986; Rampton 1995, 1999 (ed); Androutroupoulos & Georgakopoulou (eds) 2003; Jaspers 2005; Harris 2006; Auer (ed) 2007; Madson 2008; Alim, Ibrahim & Pennycook (eds) 2009; Jørgensen (ed) 2008; Reyes & Lo (eds) 2009; see Rampton & Charalambous 2010 for a review). Young people certainly aren’t the only focus for research on heteroglossic speech stylisation, but practices of stylisation and crossing have been much more extensively researched among young people than anyone else, and youth is often taken as central to their social distribution, to the extent that these ways of speaking are regularly described as ‘youth language’.

But what happens to these practices as young people become adults? Here the research literature has far less to say. Reporting on his research in London in the early 1980s, Hewitt says that “[w]ith rare exception, creole use by whites is limited in range and restricted to adolescents. This is [partly] related... to the fact that black youngsters themselves often reach a peak of creole use in their late teens and gradually come to use it less and less” (1986:193). In 1990s in New York, Cutler found that the white middle-class teenager who she studied used less African American Vernacular English as he got older, though “he continued to use AAVE phonology, hip-hop terms and tags such as ‘yo’ and ‘know what I’m sayin’ as part of his every[day] speech style (and still does now at age 19)” (1999:430). While in Copenhagen much more recently, in a longitudinal study which followed bilinguals over a period of 17 years, Møller finds that ‘polylingual language’ continues among

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1 In different ways – fieldwork, analysis, interpretation - this paper owes a great deal to my colleagues on the project Dialect Development & Style in a Diaspora Community - Devyani Sharma, Lavanya Sankaran, Pam Knight and Roxy Harris. I would also like to thank the UK Economic & Social Research Council for the funding of this project (RES-062-23-0604), as well as for the one described in Section 1 (00 23 2390).

2 Unrelated to youth, there is also important work on stylised performance in, for example, public and media discourse (e.g. Bell 1999; Coupland 2001, 2007a; Androutsopoulos 2007; Hill 2009; also e.g. Defina 2007 & Kothoff 2007).
young men in their mid-twenties, and that “the linguistic features ascribed to Turkish and Danish get more and more integrated over the years, [with] ‘mixing’ becoming their ‘natural’ way of speaking” (2009:188). Overall, three studies in 2 continents nearly thirty years apart is hardly a good basis for identifying trends, and even then, the picture looks mixed.

So in spite of major sociolinguistic interest in heteroglossic speech among youth, there is a serious lacuna in our knowledge about the durability of these practices, and this has major consequences for any more general interpretation: are the sociolinguistic processes we’re seeing here just an ‘adolescent phase’, a ‘stylistic flirtation’, or do they instead point to the emergence cultural formations that are actually enduring?

To investigate these issues, there are at least four questions we should ask:

a) is this kind of heteroglossia simply an evanescent phenomenon within the particular environments where it has been studied? Is it simply a brief stage in, for example, a longer process of language shift – a transitional moment as new populations shift from dominance in the migrant language to dominance in the language of the ‘host’ society?

b) If it isn’t simply an ephemeral phase that new populations pass through in the process of assimilation to majority norms, is it just an age-graded phenomenon, something that successive generations of young people with (and without) migrant roots pick up for a while, but then abandon as they get older?

c) If it isn’t just age-graded, if it does actually last into adulthood, then just how significant is it? Exactly what place does it hold in the speech repertoire of individuals and social groups?

d) If it is actually significant, then how should we conceptualise it, and what should it be called?

Clearly, neither ‘youth language’ nor ‘multi-ethnic adolescent heteroglossia’ will be enough.

Before starting on this sequence of questions, the account begins with a summary of some of the earliest findings, drawing on my own research on multi-ethnic adolescent peer groups in the 1980s, cross-referring to Hewitt 1986 as well (Section 1). With the baseline for historical comparison laid out, Sections 2 and 3 address questions (a) and (b), mainly drawing on interview data from a study in 2008-9 focusing on people of South Asian descent in west London, though also alluding to Harris’ analysis of adolescents from the same area in the mid 1990s. These data show that the patterns and practices identified in the 1980s have persisted, and there are also indications that they aren’t necessarily abandoned as adolescents move into adulthood. Section 4 confirms this with extracts of telephone interaction involving a man in his forties, so the discussion then turns to question (c) – if the practices of youth persist, what kind of place do they hold in an adult speech repertoire? Section 5 explores this, first by comparing the man’s most heteroglott speech with the way he talks to a lawyer, and then by reporting his own retrospective account of talk and friendships formed at school. With both the historical and biographical durability of this way of speaking now established, the paper turns to question (d). After characterising the speech in focus as a hybrid style that has emerged at the intersection of migration and class, that is strongly linked to youth in its indexical associations but not in its social distribution, and that is closely related but still distinct from other languages in the vicinity, Section 6 proposes ‘contemporary urban vernacular’ as a solution to the terminological uncertainty and dispute that characterises recent work in this field, drawing on Agha (2004, 2007) to reject the traditional sociolinguistic separation of routine and reflexively stylised speech.

We should begin with the research from the 1980s.

1. CROSSING & STYLISATION IN THE SOUTH MIDLANDS IN THE 1980s

The research published in Rampton 1995/2005 was conducted in 1984 and 1987 and focused on about sixty 11-16 year olds with Indian, Pakistani, Caribbean, Anglo and Bangladeshi backgrounds, most of whom had been born in the UK (see Rampton 2005: Ch.1.6 & 1.7 for details). The study was located in ‘Stoneford’, a town in the south Midlands of England with a population of about 100,000 and a substantial post-WWII history of labour migration, with people coming to work in local heavy industry, first from Poland, the Baltic states, Croatia and the Ukraine, then from Italy, then from 1958 onwards, from the West Indies and Indian subcontinent, and finally, after 1972, from Bangladesh and East Africa. Immigration produced a significant change in the state school population, with the proportion of ethnic minority pupils growing from 2.7% in 1955, to 14% in 1961, to 19% in 1966, to
24% in 1969 and 31% in 1979, and while there were less than 5% ethnic minority children in some lower schools, in others they constituted between 70% and 90%. Rampton’s research was carried out in ‘Ashmead’, the most ethnically mixed area of minority settlement in Stoneford, where in the local middle school, the pupils were 9% African-Caribbean, 20% Anglo, 12% Bangladeshi, 28% Indian, 28% Pakistani and 0.7% Italian (virtually all local children of Italian descent went to the Roman Catholic schools nearby). Three quarters of the houses in Ashmead were constructed between 1875 and 1914 (mainly 2-3 bedroomed terraced houses); in 1976, it accounted for one third of all Stoneford’s ‘high stress’ housing; and the inhabitants generally recognised that elsewhere in the town, the discourses about their neighbourhood were predominantly negative.

Using a combination of interviews, participant observation and radio-microphone recordings of spontaneous interaction, my research concentrated on inter-ethnic crossing and stylisation – the use of English-based Creole among youngsters of Anglo and Asian descent, the use of Punjabi by Anglos and Caribbeans, and the stylisation of Asian English by all three.

Interview discussion of the social distribution of crossing sketched a social space bounded by both ethnic and class difference – crossing was regarded as neither a legitimate nor a likely currency among posh whites and Bangladeshis, who generally didn’t live in the neighbourhood and who were seen, respectively, as superior and inferior groups lying above and below the ambit of ‘ordinary’ local adolescent practice. The exception seemed to be white girls from outside the neighbourhood, who were the only other-ethnic peers quite regularly admitted into the most prestigious sites of African Caribbean and Punjabi youth cultural activity – the music and dance associated with reggae, hip-hop and bhangra, fields where ethnic inheritors were often active cultivating their own performance skills and were generally less tolerant of any obviously amateur incursions.

Beyond the peer-group, there was a great deal of public discourse which polarized black and Asian people in threat/clown, problem/victim binaries (Gilroy 1987; Rampton 1995/2005), and awareness of racist imaging like this meant that with crossing and stylisation, local youngsters generally developed quite a reliable sense of what they could and couldn’t do, where and with whom (Rampton 2005:301-3 et passim). Even so, within these constraints, all three varieties could figure in joking cross-ethnic interaction between friends, they could all be used competitively, and all could be used against teachers and authority.

Creole was clearly the most attractive to youngsters of all ethnic backgrounds, and it was often reported as part of the general local linguistic inheritance, particularly among Asian boys, who described it as something “we been doing… for a long time” (Rampton 2005:Ch.2.2). Its use was associated with an excess of demeanour over deference, displaying qualities like assertiveness, verbal resourcefulness, and opposition to authority, and when youngsters switched into Creole, it tended to lend emphasis to evaluations that synchronised with the identities that speakers maintained in their ordinary speech. In line with this, it was also often quite hard to distinguish from their ordinary vernacular English (cf Rampton 2005:215-219). In sharp contrast, Asian English stood for a surfeit of deference and dysfluency, typified in polite and uncomprehending phrases like ‘jolly good’, ‘excuse me please’, ‘I no understanding English’. On the one hand, adolescents generally showed solidarity when it was their parents who spoke English with a strong Punjabi accent, but on the other, they generally stigmatised age-mates who hadn’t yet been fully socialised into the vernacular ways of ordinary youth. And when they put on styled Asian English accents, there was nearly always a wide gap between self and voice.

With both Asian English and Creole, crossing was generally more inhibited in the presence of people who had inherited ties to these styles, but with Punjabi crossing, the participation of Indian and Pakistani peers was central. Asked to compare it with Creole, informants agreed that while the latter was tough and cool, the former was ordinary, funny or just like English, and bilinguals were generally enthusiastic about Punjabi crossing, explicitly denying that it was disrespectful: ‘if they’re our friends, we teach them it’, ‘most of them... who hang around with us lot, you see, they all know one word, I bet you’ (Rampton 2005:58).

These patterns invited three broader lines of interpretation (see Rampton 2010). First, even though it didn't stand for a seamless racial harmony, as a general practice language crossing carried solidary interethnic meanings. Second, the socio-symbolic polarisation of Creole and Asian English seemed to locate youngsters in a larger context of migration. On the one hand, Creole indexed an excitement and an excellence in youth culture that many adolescents aspired to, and it was even
described as 'future language'. On the other, Asian English represented distance from the main currents of adolescent life, and it stood for a stage of historical transition that many youngsters felt they were leaving behind. So together, adolescent 'explorations' of a Creole/Asian English binary placed them at an endpoint of migrant transition from outside into Britain. But then once inside – third – ethno-linguistic crossing and stylisation expressed largely working class alignments, and there was very little indication of any commitment to education in these practices. Of course, schools were a vital meeting point for kids from different ethnic backgrounds, and the general pastoral and extra-curricular ethos played a very significant part in promoting good interethnic relations. But Creole, which many admired, hardly featured at all on the curriculum; as already noted, youngsters were intolerant of learners of English as a second language, showing no respect for their progress (contrary to what teaching staff might hope); and instead of curriculum learning, it was the activities and codes of conduct characteristic of playground recreation that were central to the cross-ethnic spread of these minority codes. Certainly, there were complex bodies of knowledge, skill and experience associated with reggae, hip-hop and bhangra, and there were white girls who were very interested in finding out more. But a lot of this interest was embedded in heterosexual relations, and learning was much more a matter of legitimate peripheral participation than classroom study (cf Rampton 2005:Part III; Lave and Wenger 1991). So overall, it looked as though in these heteroglossic practices, youngsters had developed a set of conventionalized interactional procedures that reconciled and reworked their ethnic differences within broadly shared experience of a working class position in British society. Race and ethnicity were very big and controversial issues in the media, education and public discourse generally, but in language crossing and stylisation, kids had found and affirmed enough common ground in the problems, pleasures and expectations of working class adolescent life to navigate or renegotiate the significance, risks and opportunities of ethnic otherness.

Crossing and stylisation were the principal concern in my research in Ashmead. But routine speech was also analysed in a small-scale quantitative variationist study of post-vocalic, prepausal or preconsonantal L and word-initial voiced TH, focusing on 3 Caribbean, 3 Anglo, 1 mixed Anglo/Caribbean, 4 Indian and 7 Pakistani boys in informal interviews in 1984 (Rampton 1987). All of the informants made some use of the standard English variants (even though ‘dark’ L doesn’t typically occur in Punjabi or Creole and fricative TH is generally absent from Punjabi and rare in English in India (Wells 1982:629)). But non-standard variants were much more common. Everyone used traditional non-standard Anglo variants – vocalic L was used by adolescents of Indian, Pakistani and Caribbean descent as well as whites (Wells 1982:258), and all the informants used zero TH (coalescences and other sandhi forms in post-consonantal environments (Wells 1982:329)). In addition, variants with a notionally minority language provenance had spread into the speech of Anglos – everyone used stopped TH, and traditionally Creole and Punjabi clear L was also used postvocically by the white three white informants, one of whom also used retroflex L, a variant typically associated with Punjabi and Indian English (Wells 1982:5,70; Shackle 1972:11). So even though subtle ethnolinguistic differences hadn’t been eliminated from these youngsters’ routine speech and you could still generally tell someone’s ethnic background from their pronunciation, there were also clear signs of non-standard accent convergence in their ordinary English, and this was broadly consistent with the overarching interpretation of crossing and stylisation.

Even in the 1980s, it was clear that Ashmead wasn’t unique as a site for ethno-linguistic crossing and the spread of migrant speech forms into the everyday English of white youth. Hewitt’s pioneering research in broadly working class areas in South London in the early 1980s didn’t include Asians, but his account revealed crossing and stylization practices among Caribbean and Anglo youth that bore a good deal of similarity to the ones that I subsequently identified (see also Back 1996, and Jones 1988:146-150 on Birmingham), and Hewitt also described ‘local multi-ethnic vernaculars’:

"There has developed in many inner city areas a form of 'community English' or multiracial vernacular which, while containing Creole forms and idioms, is not regarded as charged with any symbolic meanings related to race and ethnicity, and is in no way related to boundary maintaining practices. Rather, it is, if anything, a site within which ethnicity is deconstructed, dismantled and reassembled into a new, ethnically mixed, community English. The degree of Creole influence on the specific local vernacular is often higher in the case of young black speakers, but the situation is highly fluid and open to much variation. [This] de-ethnicised, racially mixed local language
[operates as]... a constraining, taken-for-granted medium subsisting through all interactions.”

So clearly, during the early and mid 1980s, broadly comparable practices were becoming widespread at the intersections of language, migration, ethnicity and class. But how long did they last?

The durability of the patterns identified in Ashmead and elsewhere is in fact well-attested in public culture, and representations include: the (originally Birmingham-based) rap musician Apache Indian from 1990 onwards (described in Back 1995/2003), the comic TV character Ali G of the ‘West Staines Massiv’ (1998-2006; see e.g. Sebba 2007), the teenage Bhangra Muffins (‘kiss my chuddies, man’) in the radio and TV show, Goodness Gracious Me (1996-2001), and Gautam Malkani’s 2006 Londonstani, a novel about a white boy growing up in west London. But to supplement this with ground-level data, it is worth turning to a recent project in west London (Sharma et al 2007), supplementing this with cross-reference to Harris’s findings from the same area in 1996-7 (Harris 2006).

2. Was this evanescent? Southall 25 years on

Since the 1950s, west London has been a major area of settlement for people with links to South Asia in general and the Punjab in particular. According to the 2001 Census, the c. 89,000 population in Ealing Southall was 47.8% Asian (23.2% Sikh, 12.4% Hindu, 13.3% Muslim), 37.6% white and 8.9% black, with 43.4% born outside the UK. Southall is a great deal larger than Ashmead, a suburb in a metropolis rather than just a neighbourhood in a provincial town, but in spite of these scale differences, there are broad similarities in patterns of migrant settlement. Neither are affluent areas, and according to Ealing Council, "areas within Southall appear within the top 5% most deprived in the country in terms of income deprivation, crime and barriers to housing and services". Both have strong histories of voting Labour in elections, and in both places, the Punjabi cultural presence has been very strong, with Southall often referred to as ‘little India’ and ‘little Punjab’ (Gillespie 1995:35). So the demography provides some initial warrant for their comparison.

In the project we conducted in 2008-9, there were >70 informants with mainly Punjabi ethnic backgrounds, aged between 14 and 65, born both in the UK and abroad (in India, Pakistan, East African, Malaysia and Hong Kong). Fieldwork was conducted by Devyani Sharma and Lavanya Sankaran, and it involved participant observation, interviews (including the elicitation of social network data) and self-recordings conducted by a smallish subset of the informants. This generated a dataset that differed from the Ashmead corpus in two obvious ways. First, with only eight informants who were less than 20 years old (and only two under-16s), the 2008-9 informants were generally a lot older than my 1980s Ashmead informants, and second, most of them were now engaged in occupations that could be categorised as either middle-class or lower middle-class.

In spite of these differences, there was good evidence that some of the main patterns and practices identified in the 1980s have continued into the noughties, and the following account draws on content analysis of eight interviews (with 4 males and 2 females under 30, and two men in their forties) and some interactional sociolinguistic micro-analysis of one of the forty-year-old’s self-recordings.

Just as Harris had found in the mid 90s (2006:128-9), there were reports of the continuing influence of Caribbean speech features:

Extract 1

Jeet (M; 14; born in London, Punjabi background) & friend (M, 14, Asian) in interview with DS (F, 30+, Indian background).  (Simplified transcript 1651ff; 32.17ff)

1 DS:  do some (. ) is there like a black style of speaking, an Asian style of speaking
2 Jeet:  yeah it's like (. ) 'wha’s gaaing, blood', that's black

3 http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/guide/seat-profiles/ealingsouthall - accessed 12/6/10
4 http://www.visitsouthall.co.uk/Local_Info/southall_middlesex.php - accessed 12/6/10
5 We have made much more comprehensive use of the dataset in the pursuit of other questions about local varieties of English.
((a little later:))
13 DS: and Indian?
14 Jeet: (. ehm
15 Nav: they speak exactly the same as black people
26 DS: but Indian kids like like Punjabi like Asian British kids,
27 so your kind of [kids
28 Jeet: [they mainly talk the black style
29 DS: really
30 Jeet: ye:sh

In Harris’ 1996-7 sample of 17 female and 13 male adolescents with predominantly Asian backgrounds, “[o]n the whole the... boys were more likely than the girls to claim a greater usage of Jamaican influenced speech beyond the expression of individual words, and a greater affiliation to them” (2006:131), and this was also reported in 2007-8:

Extract 2
Sameer (student, M, 23, born in London, Punjabi background) and friend in interview with DS. (Simplified transcript. 1367; 56.52)
1 DS: what's the slang that you think is quite local here that you guys use?
2 can you think of examples of slang or words (.)
3 Sam: 'innit' (.) that's one there they all use 'innit'(.)
4 DS: yeh
5 Sam: um:: (. 'why not man'(. they always say 'man' at the end.
6 DS: yea
7 Sam: yea like a- like a kala ((black)) word.
8 er they will always say 'yea man' or whatever
9 DS: yeh
10 Sam: they always use 'man' at the end for some reason
((a little later:))
21 DS: do you think girls- do boys do it more:-
22 girls and boys here? (. speak the same-
23 Sam: do you know what
24 girls actually are a bit- (.) different actually
25 girls don't (. er yea girls: (. ain't really (. got like a Southall lingo-
26 some girls have (. but not most of them
27 they still sound fluent English like
28 they still like sound posh or something.

But it didn’t look as though females categorically dissociated themselves from non-posh slang:

Extract 3
Rita (student, F, 19, born in London, Punjabi background) in interview with LS (F, 25+, Singapore background). (Simplified transcript 1798 90.30)
1 Rita: in terms of generation
2 English is different.
3 um we have uh:: very- we use slang (.)
4 a lot of slang as in (.)
5 a lot a lot of slang
6 slang which I’m not even aware of sometimes (.)
7 um whereas er:: other people:: use {. f- (. proper version of English
8 like the full English
9 as in we say 'innit' (.)
10 they say 'isn't it'

Indian English was also widely noted, just as it had been in Ashmead in the 1980s. Jeet interrupted his account in Extract 1 by with: “the Indians (. they (just) speak it like (.)
((shifting into a mock Indian accent:)) 'what is going on’ hahahaha”, and this was now supplemented with the term ‘freshie’ (from ‘fresh off the boat’), a word that hadn’t featured either in my dataset from the 1980s or Harris’ from the mid-1990s, and that was said to be a relatively recent innovation - “I think we made that up innit (. I think seriously I think that we did make that up in school innit” “that started in our era” “that happened yes:: that was when our age started all that off” (Sameer, London-born student, M, 23, Punjabi background and friend).
Invoked, invested and contested from a range of different positions, ‘freshie’ is too complex a term for adequate discussion here, but there is an account of its joking use in Extract 4:

**Extract 4**

Anand (student, M, 23, born in London, Punjabi background) in interview with DS. (Simplified transcription 1200 51.10)

5 Anand: I get called a freshie myself
6 LS: you!
7 Anand: yea I get called it because I’m so: (.)
8 cos when I speak with my friends in sort of really (.)
9 um you know er Punjabi accent or whatever (.)
10 I speak Punjabi really well,
11 they just (.). think I’m a complete freshie (.)
12 well (.). some of my mate- cos they don’t understand it to that extent
13 LS: but you can speak Punjabi but they can speak-
14 Anand: they can speak Punjabi too but they’re probably not as fluent or as-
15 LS: so it’s sort of like an affectionate thing? like ‘ah you freshie ( )’
16 Anand: [ yea.. you freshie yea it’s not an offensive thing

Lastly, as in Ashmead, there were reports of other-ethnic crossing with Punjabi:

**Extract 5**

Rita (student, F, 19, Punjabi background) in interview with LS. (Simplified transcript 1665/ 83.46).

1 Rita: yea oh my god another thing (.)
2 a white person
3 if you were to go right ‘you gors’ ((Punjabi = ‘white person’))
4 (he) would understand that now (.)
5 he would understand it (.)
6 and if I er swear at him in Punjabi he would understand it for some reason (.)
7 it's like 'damn! ((snaps fingers)) they've taken over' heh.
8 LS: so is it in Southall that they can understand?
9 Rita: anywhere now.
10 even in Hayes, in Southall:
11 ((a little later [1898 94.41:]))
12 I talk to my white friends like this (.)
13 and I will say 'hunna' and they'll be like yea’ (.)
14 cos they - they've once or twi- they've-
15 at the beginning they'll be like 'what does hunna mean'
16 I’ll be like ‘do you agree with it’ (.)
17 and then they get used to it and now she uses that word
18 she says ‘hunna’ (.). so:

So the comparison of datasets about a quarter of a century apart points to significant continuities – the continuing pre-eminence of Creole/Jamaican in accounts of non-standard speech, Asian English as a point of derogatory or comic reference, non-Asian uses of Punjabi, and the association of all this with slang, non-proper speech and emblematic ‘innit’ (Extracts 2,3; Hewitt 1986; Rampton 1995/2005:Chs 5.5 & 5.6; Harris 2006:99). Given public representations like the ones cited at the end of the previous section, this evidence of durability isn’t really news, but even so, it confirms the answer to our first question – ‘Has multi-ethnic heteroglossia of the kind described in Ashmead proved historically ephemeral?’ No. It also sets the stage for the second question: Is it all just an adolescent phase?

3. AGE-GRADING & ADOLESCENTS ONLY?

In my research in the 1980s, the identity of mixed multi-ethnic English as a youth style was suggested, among other things, in teenagers’ tales of ‘innits’ and bits of Creole getting corrected by adults (1995/2005:Ch.5.6), and in its more recent public media depictions, this kind of heteroglossic

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6 See, however, e.g. Shankar 2008 on ‘FOB’ in a south Indian community in California, Talmy 2009 on FOB in a Hawai’ian high school, Sarroub 2005 on ‘boater’ among Yemenis on the US east coast, and Pike & Trang 2003.
speech has been associated with youth rather emphatically. In our fieldwork in 2008-9, most of the informants were post-adolescent, and so this offered an additional perspective.

Namrita, a professional in her late 20s, discussed young people’s language with a degree of critical detachment:

*Extract 6*
Namrita (free-lance broadcaster, F, 28, born in the UK, Punjabi background) in interview with L.S. (Simplified transcript 51.16)

1 the younger people speak (.).
2 the English they speak (. is very (. umm (. colloq- colloquial (.)
3 umm lots of slang (.).
4 umm they don’t speak the best English (.)
5 purely because their parents don’t speak the best English (.)
6 umm (. I’m not sure that the role models they’re looking at (.)
7 sometimes that the artists they’re looking up to speak (. the best

Naseem – a successful businessman in his late forties – provided a parental perspective:

*Extract 7*
Naseem (businessman, M, 48, Punjabi background, came to the UK aged 3) in interview with DS (simplified transcription 1693/15.15)

1 DS: do you think that young (. kids in Southall are speaking English differently
2 [like their own
3 Nas: [too fast (.)
4 they they have their own lingo their own dialect
5 DS: what's it li I mean do you
6 Nas: it's very- I can't (. I don't understand
7 DS: do your kids speak (. a bit like
8 Nas: when they're speaking with me
9 I I always emphasize the fact that you must speak properly (. you know
10 and when they're with their friends (.)
11 yeah 'how you doing man'
12 you know that sort of thing
13 but it's very difficult to pick up you know
14 like sometimes I'm (. trying pick up but they try
15 but it's so difficult you know
16 DS: so with their friends they speak very differently
17 Nas: it's a different language they speak (.)
18 the dialect the tone the eh eh eh the syllables

And Ravinder gave a personal account of shifting away from a style thought ‘black’

*Extract 8*
Ravinder (student, M, 19, born in London, Punjabi background) in interview with DS (simplified transcription 542 21.38)

15 Rav: two years ago I:: I used to- I used to think I- I'm I'm acting too black (.)
16 it's getting a bit er- it's getting old now
17 everyone will make fun of me cos I'm- not-
18 not make fun of me but everyone's saying
19 ‘oh you why you Asian boys acting all black’ (.)
20 so I started acting like bit more (. a bit more Asian like (.)
21 DS: now?
22 Rav: yes (. yes (. changed my earrings and um:: (.)
23 I don't know (. basically acting more Asian.

23 year old Sameer also referred to younger kids doing styles that were judged too ‘black’:

*Extract 9*
Sameer (student, M, 23, Punjabi background) and friend in interview with DS. (Simplified & abbreviated transcript 60.02)

1 Sam: some youngsters I’ve seen on the road (. when they see each other (.)
2 all they talk about i- (. like (. ‘BLOOD’ (.)
3 DS: heh heh you don't do that
4 Sam: nah we’re too old for that kinda stuff
5 Sam: some of them think they're proper kale ((Punjabi for 'black people'))
6 “what's going on 'pant dig gaya'” ((= 'your pants fallen down?' in Punjabi))
7 once this guy was walking past and my friend said
8 he said “hey bro your pants falling down man what's wrong with you” heh heh
9 DS: heh heh heh so you're not like-
10 Sam: nah not now. not anymore. not anymore. not anymore (    )
11 used to (.) that's when I was really young though

But Sameer’s reflections on stylistic development also looked ahead as well as backwards, and in an account of growing into more mature and peaceable forms of masculine sociability, his description of going to a pub outside the locality included cross-ethnic heteroglossia:

Extract 10
Sameer again, as before (1120; 46.48)
1 Sam: if you go to the one ((the pub)) in your own area (.)
2 you know you're gonna (.)
3 it's jus (.) you're gonna to see the same faces (.)
4 and sometimes fights start off:
5 cos there are so many Indian people in one area (.)
6 Sam: so we got out of the area and we go to ((name of pub))
7 where there's bunde ((= 'men' in Punjabi))
8 like proper gentlemen that go there (.)
9 like men go there (.) and we go there (.)
10 the first time they saw us they were like [ yea ]
((a few moments later:))
21 you get gore ((= 'white people’ in Punjabi)) there as well
22 you get white people there (.)
23 you get Jamaican people there (.)
24 and everyone's alright
25 and it's like you even see black people they try talk Punjabi-
26 DS: really?
27 Sam: kiddan:: kiddan tiikiya yea
((= 'what's up? what’s up? you okay?’ – greeting in Punjabi))
((a little later:))
28 probably everyone has problems
29 but like they- they ((= older pub-goers)) probably grown out of all their
30 little fighting or whatever
31 whereas we might see someone-
32 cos we're only twenty-three twenty-four::
33 maybe when we're like twenty-six twenty-seven everything would have died out

Most of the other extracts run with the association of heteroglot speech with adolescence, variously characterising it as inferior (Ex 6), hard to comprehend (Ex 7), or comical (Ex 9 lines 6-9). But in this one, it is linked with ‘proper gentlemen’ who’ve grown of their problems, who understand the ways of Sameer and his friends, and whose multi-ethnic conviviality provides them with a bit of fresh air. This complicates the picture of adolescents-only age-grading sketched out in the earlier data, and there is a further challenge to this if we now turn to some evidence from interaction.

4. MIDDLE-AGED COMPLICATIONS

Here is a successful 40 year-old businessman on the telephone:

Extract 11
Anwar (businessman, M, early 40s, born in London, Punjabi background) phoning Ronni (M, early 40s, Punjabi background) on his mobile. Key: CREOLE: London vernacular; Punjabi
5 ((ringing tone))
6 R: ((inaudible))
7 Anw: ((in Jamaican accent:)) WJFN RANN
8 ((in a more London accent:)) ow's 'ings man
9 R: ((inaudible))
Anw: nice one man
((in Punjabi:)) Kiddaan
((Translation: ‘what’s up’))
everything alright?
R: (speaks for 2.0 – inaudible)
Anw: wha’s happening
R: (speaks for 3.5 – inaudible)
yeh man yeh yeh (.)
hows everyfing
everyfing cool
R: (speaks for 2.5 – inaudible)
((with sigh?:)) yes bruv yeh yeh yeh yeh (.)
((the conversation is interrupted by an incoming call. When
the incoming call is completed, Anwar rings Ronni back and they
discuss a business arrangement. Then in line 73, Anwar shifts
the topic:

R: (speaks for 1.4 – inaudible))
Anw: hor kiddan – wha’s goin down man everyfing cool
((trans: ‘what else is up?’) [mu]
R: (speaks for 2.3 – inaudible))
Anw: how’s ‘ings a’ e yard
[hau s ing æ o jæðh]

There are a number of linguistic features in Anwar’s talk which align it with the interview
descriptions of an English style infused with Creole and Punjabi, and we can also see a contribution
from traditional London vernacular forms:

Table 1: Some of the linguistic resources in play in Extract 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Creole features</th>
<th>Punjabi</th>
<th>Traditional London vernacular</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● line 7: fronting of [ŋ] to [a] in the</td>
<td>Extract 10 line 27</td>
<td>● line 8: H-dropping in ‘ow’s’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>friend’s name (Wells 1982:Ch.7; Sebba 1993)</td>
<td>● line 75: Jamaican ‘yard’ pronounced with short central vowel [A]</td>
<td>● lines 18,16,73: TH-fronting in ‘bruv’ and ‘everyfing’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● line 75: “yard” used for ‘home’</td>
<td>and a retroflex D</td>
<td>● line 73: alveolar –ING in ‘goin’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● lines 17 &amp; 73 and “nice one” (line 10).</td>
<td>● line 73: centring diphthong in ‘down’ – [ðæʊn] (line 73) (Wells 1982:305)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are also other features that mark this as colloquial speech, several reproducing other
characteristics identified in the interview extracts: vernacular vocatives – “bruv” (line 19) and “man”
(lines 8,10,16,73) (classed as black in Ex 2 line 5); phonetic elisions associated with rapid speech, “aa
s ‘ings” (line 8) and “a’ e yard” (line 75) (see Naseem’s complaint in Ex 7 line 3); and words like
“cool” (lines 17 & 73) and “nice one” (line 10).

However, the complication is that in spite of bearing all these hallmarks of the transgressive,
working-class adolescent style discussed in Sections 1 and 2, the speech in Extract 11 is produced by
a successful middle-aged businessman. More than that, it is a style that he incorporates into the
transactions of his trade, as illustrated in Extract 12:

Extract 12
Anwar being phoned on his mobile by a business associate (M, 30+, Punjabi background) on his mobile.

Key: CREOLE: London vernacular; Punjabi

1 Anw: ((ring tone)) (1) 01.00
2 hallo (.)
3 Man: hallo
There is no Creole pronunciation in this episode, but there are similar greetings and vocatives – ‘o kiddaan vei’ (line 4), ‘wha’ happenin’ wi’ yiu’ (line 10), ‘everyfing good’ (line 14), ‘man’ (lines 9 & 18) – and some comparable accent features – alveolar -ING (line 10) and TH-fronting (line 14).

So if we put these two extracts together with the glimpse that Sameer provided of a style enduring into maturity, it looks as though this isn’t just an adolescents-only age-graded way of talking. So what is going on? Just how significant is this style, and how do we reconcile its middle-aged currency with what everybody else has said?

5. **HOW SIGNIFICANT IS THIS STYLE? PLACING IT IN THE REPERTOIRE**

It is important to set the style that Anwar used with Ronni and the trading associate in a broader view of his speech repertoire, and so here he is on the phone to a barrister about a matter of business:

*Extract 15*

Anwar (businessman, M, early 40s, Punjabi background) phoning Bilal (lawyer, M, late 20s/early 30s, Punjabi background) on his mobile. Key: CREOLE; London vernacular; Punjabi; STANDARD ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION/RP

1 Anw:  
2 Lwyr: hello
3 Anw: hi Bi[al How you doING
4 Lwyr: yeah alhamdulillah not too bad
5 how you doing
6 Anw: yeah I’M I’m I’m fiNe THank you very much...
7 I THough’-
8 Lwyr: [you've caught me at a good moment
9 cause I just finished courts
10 s[o just going back to chambers
11 Anw: [o-
12 oh oh OKAY yeah
13 ‘a’s great
14 e:::hm Bi[al .00.13
15 THE REASON why I ca[lled you is e:::h
16 I jus’ wANTED TO let you KNOW THat (X - a name pronounced in Punjabi))
17 He came.. ande:::h we DECIDED not to pursu[e His case
Although Bilal now lives in another part of London, he grew up in Southall, and Anwar has known him since he was a boy (and comments elsewhere on how hard it was becoming a barrister). So the style here isn’t highly impersonal or formal. Even so, the differences from the opening of his conversation with Ronni are very striking:

Table 2: Stylistic differences between Extracts 11 & 13

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conversation with lawyer (Lines 3-13 (Ex 13))</th>
<th>Conversation with Ronni (Lines 7-18 (Ex 11))</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Line 3: “hi Bilal How you doing”</td>
<td>Lines 7 &amp; 8: “WAAP RANNI ow’s ‘ings man”</td>
<td>a) greetings in informal Anglo with the lawyer versus Creole with Ronni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>b) lawyer’s name pronounced with Punjabi retroflexion versus Jamaicanisation of Ronni’s name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line 10: “‘a’s great”</td>
<td>Line 10: “nice one”</td>
<td>c) Talking to Ronni, D’s lexis is more idiomatic (‘nice one’) and colloquial (‘cool’ vs ‘fine’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line 6: “I’m fine”</td>
<td>Line 17: “everything cool”</td>
<td>d) Standard pronunciation of TH with the lawyer versus vernacular London with Ronni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line 7: “Thank you”</td>
<td>Lines 17 &amp; 19: “everything”, “bruv”</td>
<td>e) See e.g. Extracts 2 &amp; 7 above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lines 3-13: no vocatives other than the lawyer’s name</td>
<td>Lines 8,10,16: “man” Line 18: “bruv”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The contrast is even sharper when we compare the way in which Anwar shifts the topic from business to ask about the family. With the lawyer, he does this as follows:

Extract 14

Anwar on the phone with Bilal the lawyer (1.17)

53 Anw: ((finishing the business topic:))
      bu’ I I’I’L keep you informed in what’s happening
      [bə:] aː aː ɪː] [n] [n] [t] [hæpənɪŋ]

54 How’s everything else
      [θʊəθ ɛlɪs]

55 THow’s the famiili:

With Ronni, it was:

Extract 15 (taken from Ex 11)

73 Anw: hor fiddan - wha’s goin down man everything cool
      [hɔr fɪdən] [wɔs ɡəʊɪŋ ˈdɔːn]

74 R: ((speaks for 2.3 - inaudible))

75 Anw: how’s ‘ings a’ e yeah
      [hɔː ˈɪŋz æ ə jɛð]

So it is clear that Anwar isn’t mono-stylistic, and elsewhere in our recordings, his English becomes more Cockney (his own term) in one conversation, while in another, it is more ‘bud bud’, a description that he says his daughter gives to the way he talks to non-Hindi/Punjabi-speaking South Asians whose English is limited. But exactly how is this particular way of speaking best characterised? In fact, just before he talks to Ronni on the phone, Anwar provides his own gloss:

“Ronni’s a schoolfriend of mine and we speak our- (.) different type of dialect which is a-a typical Southallian language”. He elaborates on this in interview:

8 See, for example, the shift from ‘hello’ to ‘hi’ across lines 2 & 3; Anwar’s selection of ‘how you doing’ rather than ‘how are you’ in line 3; Bilal’s ‘yeah’ rather than ‘yes’ in line 4 (as well as the word-final glottal-T in line 7 – “THough?” – and the word-initial zero TH in line 13).
Extract 16
Anwar in interview with DS (Simplified & abbreviated transcription. 1174 66.46)

1 Anw: when we were at school (.)
2 w- the way we were speaking (.)
3 Southall had its own language (.)
4 DS: its own English.
5 Anw: its own its own English-
6 you know like you saying um: (.)
((in a more Caribbean accent in lines 7 & 8:))
7 "w" ya gaiing man, w' y' aaff to" you know
8 "w' y' aaff to" you know and er::
((with glottal T in 'laters':))
9 "I see you la'ers" "la'ers" "I see you la'ers" you know.
10 this type of language,
((a little later: ))
23 when I see my friends right
24 I (.:) er::m
25 like he would say to me "w' ya goin' (Anwar)"
26 er er I mean this is-
27 I'm talking about friends
28 who've got er:: you know who are [forty-
29 forty- forty year old people
30 from school yea from from from from school

His experience of schooling seems to have been important: “you see I had a- a lovely childhood (.). ok (.). I loved my school days (.). every part of my school days” (456). He started out in a mainly white middle-class school where “we were like p- the poor kids because all of us Asians were- (.). living in this part of Southall” but “we mixed so well (.). that I don't remember any racist type of er- er:. (.). act or even by the teachers”. Then he went to the local state secondary school and “again (.). we had brilliant times”. At this school, “we didn't have many whites left at that time (.). we had Afro-Caribbean and Indian and Pakistani", but religious differences were “on the back burner” - “we were like living in each other's pocket... I acted like a Hindu (.). I acted like a Sikh, acted like a Muslim” (504 26.24). These ties, he says, have been lasting - “my best friends are from my high school and my junior school (.). I still meet with the guy who is my friend, er who is in er my junior school (.). and er::m er (.). they're in very good positions in the civil service and and one is working for the Times and you know", “our high school was not like friendship, we had a bond like brothers bond you know I mean” (535/28.02 & 28.28).

To the extent that Anwar describes a style forged in youth, his contextualisation of the mixed speech used with Ronni is consistent with the other accounts. But twenty-five years later, it looks as though this style still has affectively powerful connotations of peer-group familiarity, very much rooted in personal experience in a particular milieu. This isn’t a way of speaking used with just any co-ethnic of roughly equivalent age – in another phone conversation, Anwar sticks much more closely to straight Cockney talking to a Pakistani mechanic brought up in the East End, while conversely, just after the business conversation in Extract 12, he describes his interlocutor as a friend. Nor is this some kind of Peter Pan refusal to grow up – like Anwar himself, a number of his schoolfriends now have responsible jobs (Ex 17 lines 5 & 6), and it is clear from his comments on texting that he’s not uncritical of the verbal styles of youth today:

you know what annoys me in texting and emailing is you know when the children and when people u::m when I get a text with abbreviated text (.). slang text I don't like it (.). and when I do text I never abbreviate, I write the who::le thing (.).

Instead, there are signs of the mixed style being adjusted to the concerns and constraints of adulthood. Even among the teenagers that I studied in the 1980s, there were signs of mellowing as youngsters moved from primary to secondary school (1995/2005:Ch.7.6), and in place of the humorous, transgressive or ludic practices described in so much of the literature on adolescent heteroglossia, Anwar uses this mixed style in effort to counsel Ronni on serious difficulties in his personal life:
Anwar talking to Ronni on his mobile (02.58)

Key: **CREOLE, London vernacular; Punjabi; STANDARD ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION/RP**.

122 Anw: both of you come home man

123 **edda yaar**

((="here man’ in Punjabi))

124 **Thia’s i’ man**

[ðæs i? mæn]

125 ((tuts)) yer my bruv man wha’s ‘e ma’er wid yiu

[je ma blaw mæn wns ðe ma’er wid jvju]

((a little later [3.38]:))

145 R: ((inaudible, but speaking for 1.1 seconds))

146 Anw: **na na na** you can’t do **Thia**’ man

[na na na] [ðæ?]'

147 you can’t do **Thia**’

[ðæ?]'

148 R: ((inaudible, but speaking for 1.2 seconds))

149 Anw: yeah lets **LEF i’ man**

[les lef i?]'

150 jus’ **LEAV- le- jus’ **LEF i’

[li:v le ðæs lef i?]'

150 if she sey’s **righ’** (. ) 3.48

[sez rai?]'

151 abou’ **dis**

[ɔbɔ: dis]

152 jus give her **wha’** Her dues are (. )

[hɔ: wʊ? hɔ: ðəz ɔ:]
‘kala’ or ‘Jamaican’; and ‘Cockney’ as a traditional local vernacular distinct from Geordie, Birmingham etc. The style outlined in the previous sections is related to these, but it is still felt to be distinctive:

a) it draws on black speech (Exx 1, 2, 8, 9) but people who go too far and ‘think they’re black’ are seen as rather comical (Exx 8 & 9; also Rampton 1995/2005:53-54).

b) It features a significant number of traditional London vernacular features (Table 1) and is judged non-posh, not the ‘proper version of English’ (Exx 2 & 3), even though, of course, the presence of [a] above and [c] & [d] below prevent it being heard as historically monolingual white.

c) It features some Punjabi in ritualised utterances (e.g. greeting, swearing etc), but it doesn’t require high levels of proficiency in the language, and white and black people use Punjabi words (Exx 5, 10; Rampton 1995/2005).

d) Punjabi phonological features like retroflexion carry into the local English, both in casual and more formal speech (e.g. Ex 11 line 75) (even though this was less commonly remarked on in interview (due perhaps to the longstanding evaluative antithesis of Indian English and urban ‘cool’ (cf Rampton 1995/2005:133-4)).

But in spite of its widely sensed distinctiveness, there isn’t a commonly agreed term for this way of speaking.

As a way of talking which recognises many of the other varieties circulating in the intersection of migration, ethnicity and class stratification but reproduces none, this style has a hybridity that may itself complicate the business of labelling:

9 It is in the nature of traditional British sociolinguistic variability in Britain, of course, that standard and local non-standard speech forms alternate in even rather vernacular styles (Rampton 2006:360). So as well as the traditional London vernacular features identified in Table 1, even in Anwar’s greeting to Ronni in Extract 13, one of his everythings has an RP alveolar TH (line 12), and in ‘happe’ing’ in line 14, neither the H is dropped nor the –ING is fronted.

10 According to Ravinder again (213/8.27;230/9.02): “if you’re too like um er if you’re too British, then people make fun of you ( . . . ) saying ‘aww you became white’ or something like that ( . . . ) so you have to be in- in between ( . . . )”, “if you were very white behaving the- then they call you a coconut”

11 Namrita (free-lance broadcaster, F, 28, British-born, Punjabi background) gives a good view of its availability to (middle-aged) Punjabis whose command of the language is otherwise limited:

Extract 18

2 I was driving a couple of artists just up to Birmingham
3 and and ( . . ) we were listening to some songs ( . . )
4 and he kept saying to me ‘so what does this mean?’
5 I was thinking,
6 ‘you're nearly forty, why don't you understand what this means’ ( . . )
7 umm I still class him as young though he's nearly forty but ( . . ) umm ( . . )
8 you know I was like ‘why don’t you- ( . . )
9 you should understand what this means
10 I shouldn't have to explain it to you, but it's beautiful’ ( . . )
11 so ( . . ) i- it's sad
12 so they- while they're very happy to know
13 and they know that it's a good sound
14 and know something good's being said
15 they're not quite sure what's being said ( . . )
16 you know
17 but they always- they're always using the love- lovely Punjabi swear words
18 Punjabi slang and your 'kiddaan'
19 and you know 'chakka de futte' and your 'bulle'

(Simplified transcript 950 49.26)
like um the- or or an Indian accent (. . .) it's in between somewhere- it's not in between but (. . .) it's just not- it's not like an English accent (. . .) I don't know I don't know how to describe it (. . .) I just can't describe it ((Interviewer: do you think you speak it?)) yea I think I speak it (. . .) cos when I w- when I went to America (. . .) my cousins there said 'aw you have a British accent' and over here when I compare myself to other British people, the white people, I- I don't think I have (. . .) a British accent. (Ravinder 858ff (see Ex 8 above))

When informants were more definite, their labelling sometimes seemed to reflect aspects of their own social positioning (Agha 2004:29; LePage & Tabouret-Keller 1985:180-6). So, spending a lot of time cooped up in school, a 14 year old like Jeet might well be inclined to link this style to transgressive acts like ‘swearing’ and ‘slang’ (see also Exx 3, 6; Harris 2006:99 et passim), but for a 40 year old with an active role in local politics, it was more readily identified as an emblem of community (Anwar on ‘Southallian’; also Sameer in Ex 2 line 25). Most commonly, of course, the style was associated with school-aged youth (Section 3), and this could well derive from the contexts of its emergence within the life-span of the individual. It is easy to imagine the style developing new vitality in successive generations of school kids as they venture into the field of sociolinguistic possibilities formed at the juncture of ethnic plurality and the stratifying regimes of schooling, and this is could be the age when the style is practised most intensively (cf Romaine 1984, Chambers 1995, Androutropoulos & Georgakopoulou 2003:4 and van Hofwegen & Wolfram 2010 on adolescence as a period of increasing vernacular usage generally). Indeed, its recurrent association with ‘youth’ might also reflect its conspicuously relational identity, connected to ‘all points of the sociolinguistic compass’ but identical to none. Typically, ‘youth’ designates an intermediate, transitional social positioning, increasingly attracted to a range of pleasures and possibilities beyond the horizons of childhood, sensitive but not necessarily submissive to governing norms and authorities, and it has a strong positivity of its own, linked to intense forms of sociability either in spite or because of its non-canonical positioning. On these grounds, it is quite easy to see how at least indexically, ‘youth’ might serve as a powerful ‘metasign’ for this way of speaking (Agha 2007:22).

Even so, terms like ‘youth style’ fail to capture the contemporary facts of its users’ age profile, its durability, or its embedding in an area with a 50 year history of immigration, and at least for the purposes of analytical discussion, it is necessary to look for alternatives.

In recent years, a number of cover terms have been proposed for urban language practices like the ones described in this paper: not only ‘youth language’ and ‘youth talk’ but also, for example, ‘ethnolect’, ‘multi-ethnolect’ (Quist 2008), ‘polylingual languaging’, (Jørgensen, Møller), ‘late modern urban youth style’ (Jørgensen, Madsen), and ‘Multicultural (London) English’ (Cheshire, Fox, Kerswill & Torgersen nd:1).12 In the UK, Hewitt’s conception of ‘local multi-racial vernaculars’ has been particularly influential (Hewitt 1986, 1989:139, 2003:192-3; Sebba 1993:59-60; Rampton 1995; Harris 2006), and there are several reasons for starting with this, subsequently adding some theoretical elaboration. As used in the British research, ‘local multi-racial vernaculars’ are viewed as involving

i) a hybrid combination of linguistic forms (cf ‘multi-racial’/‘multi-ethnic’): “a bedrock of traditional working class... English (straightforwardly identifiable lexically, phonologically and grammatically/syntactically), elements of language from parental/grandparental ‘homelands’, elements of Jamaican Creole speech... and elements of Standard English” (Harris 2008:14; also Hewitt 2003:192-3);

ii) variation from locality to locality (cf ‘local’), responsive to differences both in the ‘bedrock’ of traditional working class English – Cockney, Brummie, Geordie, Glaswegian etc – and in the local migrant diaspora/heritage languages (Punjabi, Bengali, Turkish, Polish etc);

iii) social and individual variation involving both ‘broad’ and ‘light’ uses and users, as situations and biographical trajectories draw people towards other styles in the polycentric environment to different degrees, and as inter alia lifespan and gendered demands shape their pathways

12 See Jaspers 2008 and Madsen 2008:Ch.5.3 for critical discussions.
into patterns that sociolinguists are only now starting to investigate (see Sharma & Sankaran 2010; see also Eade (ed) 1997). This is consistent with at least some of the preceding account,13 and comparing it with other terms that have been proposed, ‘vernacular’ is preferable to ‘lect’ or just ‘English’ because it gives fuller recognition to the non-standardness and lower class associations of this mixed speech. ‘Vernacular’ also recognises the collective durability of this way of speaking better than ‘style’. Indeed, there are also good reasons for replacing Hewitt’s ‘local multi-racial/multi-ethnic’ with just ‘contemporary urban’ – on the one hand, ‘local’ risks excluding important elements of diasporic and global popular culture that circulate in the urban linguascape, while on the other, ‘multi-’ over-emphasises the groups and varieties that these practices draw on, attending more to derivation than hybrid integration.14 But there is one major disciplinary obstacle to using the phrase ‘contemporary urban vernacular’ to describe the full range of sociolinguistic practices addressed in this paper.

Sociolinguistics has traditionally worked with rather a sharp dividing line between stylised and routine uses of language, and following Labov’s model,15 there has been a tendency to see non-self-conscious, non-stylised speech as the proper referent for dialect and vernacular labelling. Reflexive practices like crossing and stylisation have been allocated to pragmatics and interactional sociolinguistics rather than to dialectology and variationism (see e.g. Rampton 1995:xx; Eckert ftc:21), and indeed in British discussions of the ‘local multiracial vernacular’, there has been an assumption that this is something distinct from practices like code-switching, crossing and stylisation. So on this logic, most of the practices described in Section 1 would be disqualified from categorisation as ‘Ashmeadian vernacular’, while the range of practices eligible for classification as the Southallian vernacular would also be greatly reduced. We can rehabilitate them, however, if we turn to Agha’s discussions of ‘register’.

Agha insists that reflexive metapragmatic/metalinguistic practices play a vital role in the life of a register or style. Through processes of ‘enregisterment’, particular sets of linguistic (and other semiotic) forms are linked to social typifications (2005:46; 2007:81), and this can be seen in a very wide variety of reflexive practices operating in combination, ranging from small-scale metapragmatic actions – the use of register/style names, stylisations, accounts of usage, next turn responses – to institutional fields and discourses like lexicography, schooling and literary representation (2007:151-2; 2004:27).16 Agha argues that “overt (publicly perceivable) evaluative behaviour... is a necessary condition on the social existence of registers” (2004:27; also Jaspers 2008), and this insistence that metapragmatics and language ideology plays a central, active role in the existence of registers distinguishes Agha’s account from more objectivist definitions of ‘variety’ in sociolinguistics, which simply describe a variety as “a set of linguistic items with a similar social distribution” (Hudson 1996:22; Holmes 2001:6). If we accept this – that reflexivity is built into the very definition of a register/style/variety – we can circumvent Labov’s separation of routine unself-conscious uses of a particular vernacular from expressive practices like stylisation and crossing. On Agha’s logic, vernaculars simply wouldn’t be identifiable as such if it wasn’t for stylisation, crossing, ‘tropes’ (Agha 2004:30-2) and a range of other metapragmatic activities, and following this through, we can now suggest that in places like Ashmead and Southall, local discourses about language, crossing,

13 Vis-a-vis individual variation ([iii]), it was clear in the Southall data that even siblings differed considerably in their alignments with Punjabi or standard English.
14 ‘Multi-ethnic’ is also rather presupposed in ‘urban’.
15 “Not every (speech) style... is of equal interest to linguists. Some styles show irregular phonological and grammatical patterns, with a great deal of ‘hypercorrection’... In other styles, we find more systematic speech, where the fundamental relations which determine the course of linguistic evolution can be seen most clearly. This is the ‘vernacular’ – the style in which minimum attention is paid to the monitoring of speech” (Labov 1972:208).
16 To identify the register/style sketched in (a) to (d) above, I have drawn on accounts of usage and register names elicited in interviews, and I have referred to literary and media representations, as well of course as works of linguistic scholarship (Rampton 2005, Harris 2006). In addition, Agha proposes that “the utterance or use of a register’s forms formulates a sketch of the social occasion, indexing contextual features such as interlocutor’s roles, relationships, and the type of social practice they’re involved in” (2004:25), and we have seen Creole-influenced ‘Southallian’ used both in a shift of topic (and footing - Ex 15), and in Goffmanian interpersonal rituals (1981:20-21) – in the opening of phone conversations, establishing a particular kind of social relationship for the talk coming up (Exx 11.12 and 10 lines 25 & 27; Rampton 2005:90-92), in expressions of disapproval (Extract 17), and elsewhere in closings, providing reassurance of continuing affiliation in the period of separation coming up.
stylistisation and unself-conscious phonological convergence are all integral facets of the same sociolinguistic process – different sides of the same (rather multi-dimensional) ‘coin’.

Agha’s work is centrally located within contemporary linguistic anthropology, sharing its widespread orientation to what Silverstein calls the ‘total linguistic fact’:

“[t]he total linguistic fact, the datum for a science of language, is irreducibly dialectic in nature. It is an unstable mutual interaction of meaningful sign forms, contextualised to situations of interested human use and mediated by the fact of cultural ideology” (1985:220; see also Hanks 1996:230) 17

Indeed, perspectives like this are increasingly apparent in post-Labovian, ‘third wave’ variationist sociolinguistics, where analysis now extends beyond linguistic structure to agency, practice and ideology (Eckert 2010:14) and to e.g. the “strategic use of pronunciation variation” (Coupland 1995:312; Schilling-Estes 1998). Crucially for the current discussion, this perspective brings valuable coherence to a growing number of empirical accounts, particularly in urban Europe, that might otherwise remain awkwardly split in the primacy given to system and structure or practice and agency. In contrast, if we follow the integration of habitual, stylised and reflexively explicit language practices offered by Agha, our notion of a vernacular can now encompass even the otherwise apparently anarchic processes that Jørgensen and Møller associate with ‘polylingualism’.

Jørgensen and Møller describe polylingualism as a sociolinguistic dynamic associated with situations of social change where people use fragments from differently valued languages that they don’t speak proficiently or share with their interlocutors, where linguistic forms can be hard to link to designated source languages, where we-code/they-code (or minority/majority language) interpretations over-simplify, and where the linguistic combinations often stand out to participants as non-routine, not just to analysts (Jørgensen 2008:169; Møller 2009). The practices of crossing and stylistisation described in Section 1 can all be considered ‘polylingual’, but plainly, they are part of the same socio-historical formation as the more routine language use historically described as ‘local multi-ethnic vernacular’, and with Agha, we can now see them as practices contributing to the enregisterment of the style/register summarised in (a) to (d) above.

To make this move, though, three theoretical clarifications (and amendments to traditional sociolinguistic thinking) are in order.

First, our definition of ‘contemporary urban vernacular’ needs to be broadened so that it explicitly includes

iv) stylisation and a range of metapragmatic practices alongside routine speech,

and

v) fragmentary appropriations of other registers/styles/languages in the environment, both in habitual and stylised speech.

which in turn leads us to formulate contemporary urban vernaculars as

sets of linguistic forms and enregistering practices (including commentary, crossing and stylisation) that

○ have emerged, are sustained and are felt to be distinctive in ethnically mixed urban neighbourhoods shaped by immigration and class stratification,

○ that are seen as connected-but-distinct from the locality’s migrant languages, its traditional non-standard dialect, its national standard and its adult second language speaker styles, as

17 Of course the routine use of linguistic forms can be separated from their ideological representation in reflexive stylistisation, not just analytically but also empirically. Within specific groups and networks, there will always be some forms of speech which escape the stereotypic social characterisations that have local currency at any given time – in other words, use without stylistisation. And to exemplify stylistisation and other kinds of metalinguistic practice unaccompanied by habitual use, we can look to state officials, historical linguists, or just overhearing passers-by, who often identify, name and describe a particular variety, unbeknown to its putative users and without being able to use it ordinarily themselves (cf Agha 2007:132). Nevertheless, in spite of its traditional hold on the scholarly imagination, it is probably ‘utopian’ (Pratt 1987), “an imaginative... fantasy... of our own retroprojective escapism” (Silverstein 2003:534), to think of any social group possessing an unself-conscious vernacular, and this seems especially unlikely in sociolinguistic ‘contact zones’ like Southall and Ashmead (Pratt 1987).
This definition brings out the significance of crossing and stylisation within (a) to (d) above, and the last part also reckons with the literary and media representations mentioned at the end of Section 1. Empirically, an approach to urban vernaculars that encompasses both tacit and spectacular appropriations of purer styles nearby is also consistent with the fact that it is sometimes very difficult to differentiate the stylised from the ordinary (Rampton 2005: 130–2, 2006:Ch.7.4; Hewitt 1986:151), and that indeed, this can be an important ambiguity on the ground. Hewitt found, for example, that if “a white youngster wishes to use a certain [Creole] word…. he or she may have to make it appear ‘natural’ to their speech if they are to avoid the possibility of being challenged” (1986:151), and they could do this either by claiming family ties to the ethnic group with which the forms are associated (1986:165,195), or much less dramatically, by delivering the word in such a way that it seems like a routine element in the local multi-ethnic vernacular.18

Second, it is important not to let the very noun ‘vernacular’ tempt us back to an exclusive concern with the linguistic systems and codes that form the traditional object of structuralist sociolinguistic enquiry. Rather than simply suggesting that urban vernaculars occupy a sociolinguistic space adjacent to purer versions of Punjabi, Jamaican and Indian, standard and traditional vernacular Englishes, or that they draw on linguistic forms that can be traced back to neighbouring varieties like these, the italicised definition proposes that the phenomenological distinctiveness of this space is continuously marked out by reflexive practices in which other styles are invoked and variously valorised and counter-value (Agha 2004:25). The selective targeting, isolation and formal description of vernacular features remains an essential analytical task, but to understand their meaning and significance, they have to be analysed relationally (Parkin 1977; LePage & Tabouret-Keller 1985; Bourdieu 1991:90-102; Irvine 2001; Blommaert, Collins & Slembrouck 2005), focusing on communicative practice as a site where the reflexive distantiations and the cognisance of options not taken can count as much as the alignments, and where with varying levels of awareness, people are continuously affiliating or dissociating themselves from a range of circumambient images of language and speech.

Third, all of this obviously needs a more integrative, culturally encompassing conception of the relationship between users and vernacular practices than is afforded in the notion of ‘competence’. To characterise the linguistically indexed positioning of groups and individuals in historical process and ideologically freighted, polycentric sociolinguistic space, ‘habitus’ is one option (Bourdieu 1991; Hanks 2005; Coupland 2007b:222), ‘structure of feeling’ is another (Harris 2006:77-78; Williams 1977; Rampton 2006:344-5), and ‘sensibility’ could be a third.

In itself, this rejection of ‘code’ and ‘competence’ perspectives certainly isn’t very newsworthy, but in the development of empirical studies oriented to post-structuralist and/or practice theory, sociolinguists have tended to steer clear of the term ‘vernacular’, opting instead for more complicated formulations (e.g. ‘multietnic adolescent heteroglossia’, ‘late modern urban youth style’, or indeed ‘polylinguism’ above). There are, though, two further reasons for holding on to ‘vernacular’ once it is renovated along the lines offered by Agha and the ‘total linguistic fact’ (TLF).

First, ‘vernacular’ has the advantage of terminological simplicity, and if an accessible and widely known term like this is reclaimed from the methodological strictures of structuralist sociolinguistics,

18 In addition, this rejection of the traditional separation of habitual and reflexive practice encourages fuller investigation of how their dialectical relationship links to language change in both collectivities and individuals (Kiesling 2004:298; Eckert 2000:38). With the data from Ashmead in the 1980s, we might hypothesise, for example, that among white and Asian youngsters, Creole forms spread from the small-scale displays offered in ritual utterances to a wider and more ordinary range of forms, e.g. beginning in (uni-directionally double-voiced) response cries like ‘cha man!’ and ‘gewaan’, and extending from there to lexical items like ‘tief’ and ‘facety’ and to grammatical practices such as copula/auxiliary omission and the dropping of past tense markers on transgression-relevant verbs like ‘catch’, ‘vex’ and ‘slap’ (Rampton 2005:Ch.5.5).
then there is a greater chance of normalising the kind of urban multilingualism to which it can now be applied, moving it in from the ‘marked’ margins of study and debate.19

Second, ‘vernacular’ collocates with ‘standard’, and at least in the UK, sociolinguistic research on standardisation in English could substantially benefit from the integrated perspective offered by the TLF. British research on standard English tends to move between two types of evidence: quantitative data on the social distribution of linguistic forms and language attitudes, and documentary data on debates about language in historical, media and educational texts (e.g. Bex & Watts 1999). It has generally omitted empirical analysis of practical activity and ‘situations of interested human use’, and has said little about how the symbols of class are interactionally negotiated (cp Rampton 2006). But these horizons can be broadened, and the apparatus and procedures applied to contemporary urban vernaculars can be redirected to standard language practices. So in the (re)production of standard styles/registers in different places, we can ask what constellation of styles operate as the most significant ‘others’, appropriated how (Agha 2004:36)? Local non-standard vernaculars may be vital, indeed constitutive, points of contrastive reference, but what about migrant, minority and modern foreign languages (French, Deutsch)20 or indeed a school languages like Latin? How far and in what ways are processes of standard and vernacular reproduction similar or different in the manner and extent to which circumambient styles get acknowledged, ignored or derogated, and how similar or different are the practices that give standards their hegemony and vernaculars their vitality? What kinds of relationship between self and voice get projected in the stylisation of standard codes – are these stereotyped or flexible, affiliative or mocking – and how does this differ for people in different social positions (cf. Section 1; Bucholtz 1999; Rampton 2006:Part III)? What differences in ‘ideological becoming’ are involved in the practices of troping and reflexive enregisterment that emerge when different groups and individuals orient to particular standards and vernaculars? (cf Bakhtin 1981:348; Jaspers 2005)? 21 And finally, of course, if we follow the momentum of contemporary urban vernaculars, these questions have to be properly located in conditions of globalisation, going beyond the confines of the nation-state to investigate the sociolinguistic sensibilities associated with ‘elite cosmopolitanism’ (Hannerz 1990).

Drawing on linguistic anthropology’s long-standing pursuit of the total linguistic fact, Agha’s discussion of register promises to reinvigorate the investigation of both vernacular and standard language practices, in ways that can mesh with recent sociolinguistic work on style (Coupland 2007a). The parameters for research on differentiated varieties and languages are being reset, and it is important now to pursue the new coherence that they offer for the study of contemporary urban vernaculars.

19 There is certainly a warrant for this move in the now quite considerable body of sociolinguistic research that addresses these urban sites (for reviews, see e.g. Quist & Jørgensen 2009, Rampton & Charalambous 2010).
20 cf Rampton 2006:Part II
21 In research on British adolescents, Rampton 2010 identifies ‘domestication’ as the overarching vernacular ideological process involved in the stylisation of Creole, Punjabi and Indian English, distinguishing this from the ‘denaturalisation’ entailed in stylisations of posh & Cockney.
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