

'Gimme dat ting'

Word initial TH-stopping among urban British youth

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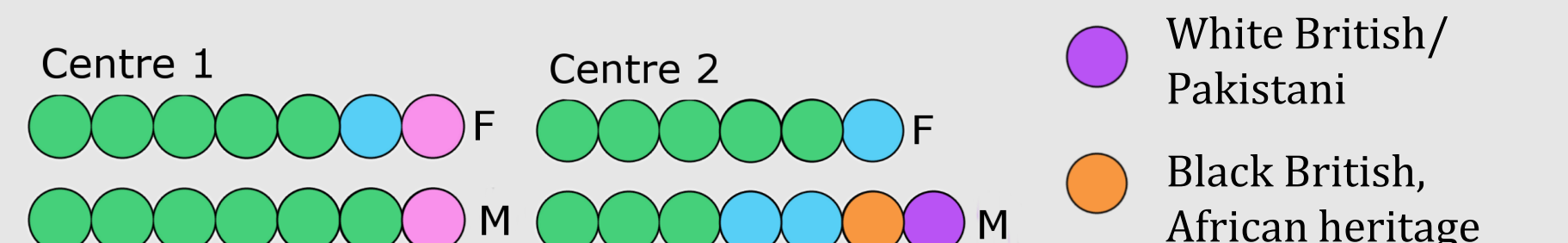
UrBEn-ID

THE URBE-N-ID PROJECT IS A TWO-YEAR ETHNOGRAPHIC LINGUISTIC STUDY (JULY 2014-JULY 2016) FUNDED BY THE LEVERHULME TRUST

1. Introduction

The aim here is to explore the role of th-stopping in the enactment of identities among young people (YP) aged 14-16 in two Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) Learning Centres in Manchester, UK. We challenge the traditional LVC relationship between ethnicity and linguistic features by taking practices rather than individual identities as the empirical focus.

Participants. Traditional 'ethnicity' labels are presented here due to their central role in existing studies into urban youth language.



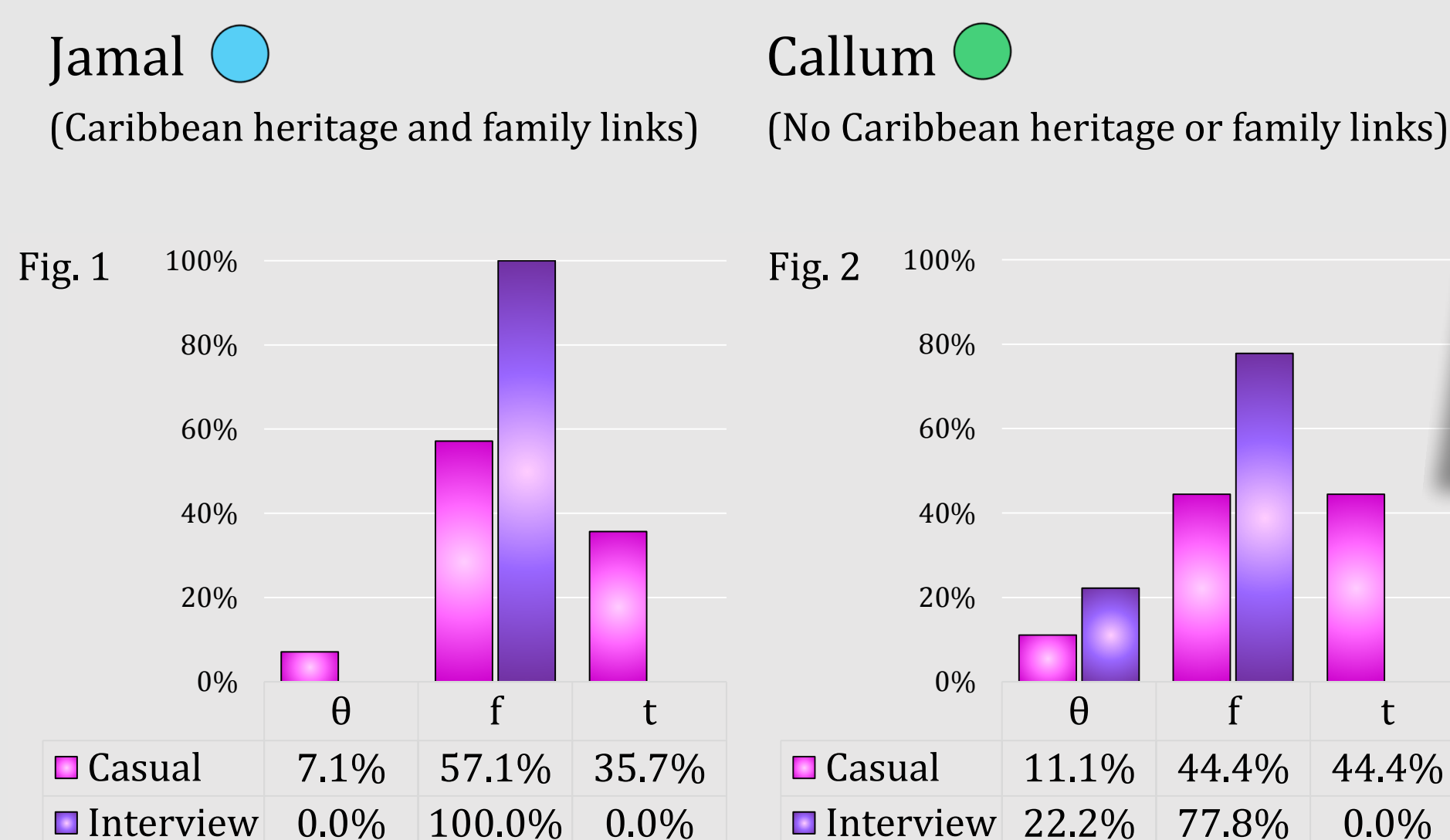
Data collection. Linguistic ethnography. Two researchers visited each Centre 1-2 times per week over the 2014/15 academic year, observing and taking part in whatever came up. Speech data here are from spontaneous interaction in and out of class, and individual or small group sociolinguistic interviews. Additional data come from extensive fieldnotes.

PRUS CATER FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN (PERMANENTLY) EXCLUDED FROM MAINSTREAM SCHOOL FOR DISCIPLINE ISSUES

3. Some quantitative results

Yet in the PRU context, realisation of word initial /θ/ as [t] is not distributed in terms of speaker ethnicity: young people may use [t] irrespective of their ethnic heritage with no evidence to suggest 'ethnic categories' contribute to the making of 'authentic' speakers/users in the Learning Centres. For example:

Figs. 1 and 2 show all voiceless word initial 'th' for two typical (male) speakers, separated by context.



- Interesting shifting between contexts – no [t] for either speaker in the more 'formal' 1 to 1 situation
- [f] appears to be the 'default' variant
- Little difference in frequency of [t] between speakers.

Also... Word initial [t] for /θ/ appears to be under some kind of lexical constraint. We have observed it in only the following words so far: *thing, thump, through, thief, three, theatre, throw*. We believe that some of these examples show lexical rather than phonetic variation (e.g. *thump/tump*). The most frequent [t] for /θ/ word, and the focus from here on in, is [tɪŋ].

4. Practices

Not everyone in the centres uses *ting* but a macro social category like ethnicity is not a useful predictor (not surprising – see Cameron 2009). So what is? We suggest its use can be better understood by looking at the practices which speakers value, participate in and identify with. We treat practices as relatively stable configurations of socio-material relations (gestures, clothing, language etc) *in which identities are performed*.

WE HAVE RESTRICTED THE ANALYSIS HERE TO THE LINGUISTIC, BUT URBE-N-ID IS ALSO EXPLORING THE MATERIALITY OF PRACTICES IN MEANING-MAKING.

5a. No ethnicity?

This is not to say that *ting* does not do some work relating to ethnicity. We have no examples of *ting* performing 'blackness', but occasionally it performed (non)Jamaican identities:

- Jacob appeared to like the music that the classroom support assistant had created (with the software), although he appeared to also be mocking it too, saying that it sounded like something from the past, adding 'dat's a yardie ting bro' as he walked away. He had been dancing to it (also in a jokey way) and how he was dancing reminded me of how older Jamaican men dance, although I don't know if that is what he thought he was doing.

[Extract from SD field notes 4/2/2015]

In enacting the music as 'Jamaican' both linguistically ('yardie ting') and with his body (dance), and locating it historically in time, he was disassociating himself from it. His use of *ting* contributed to his performance of a non-Jamaican.

5b. Spittin' and Boyin'

Several of the YP would sit in lessons and 'spit bars' (generate a spontaneous rap), 'rap' (pre-written lyrics) or sing (a current song). This is arguably common practice in schools (e.g. Rampton 2006) but *ting* users would do all three, with rapping or spitting prevailing. This requires knowledge of Grime/Rap and/or Dancehall, music generated in practices that draw on Caribbean language features.

Both of these musical practices **involve lyrical defence and attack formats** and similar formats were present in the young people's highly linguistic everyday practice of **boyin'**. We suggest that those who were regular and successful 'boyers' were also more likely to be part of these musical practices and also be more likely to use *ting*. We are still working on this, (but see Fig 3).

BOYIN' IS SIMILAR (BUT DIFFERENT) TO DISSING. THE AIM IS TO SHOW UP YOUR OPPONENT OR 'TAKE THE PISS OUT OF THEM'. IT COULD BE ACHIEVED MATERIALLY AS WELL AS VERBALLY AND RESPONSES MATTERED. NO RESPONSE MEANS YOU HAVE LOST.

Acknowledgments

We owe enormous thanks to the students, staff, and teachers at the two PRU learning centres. Obviously the project could not have been done without their support and good humour. The project is funded by a Leverhulme Trust project grant RPG-2014-059

6. (Music) Practices

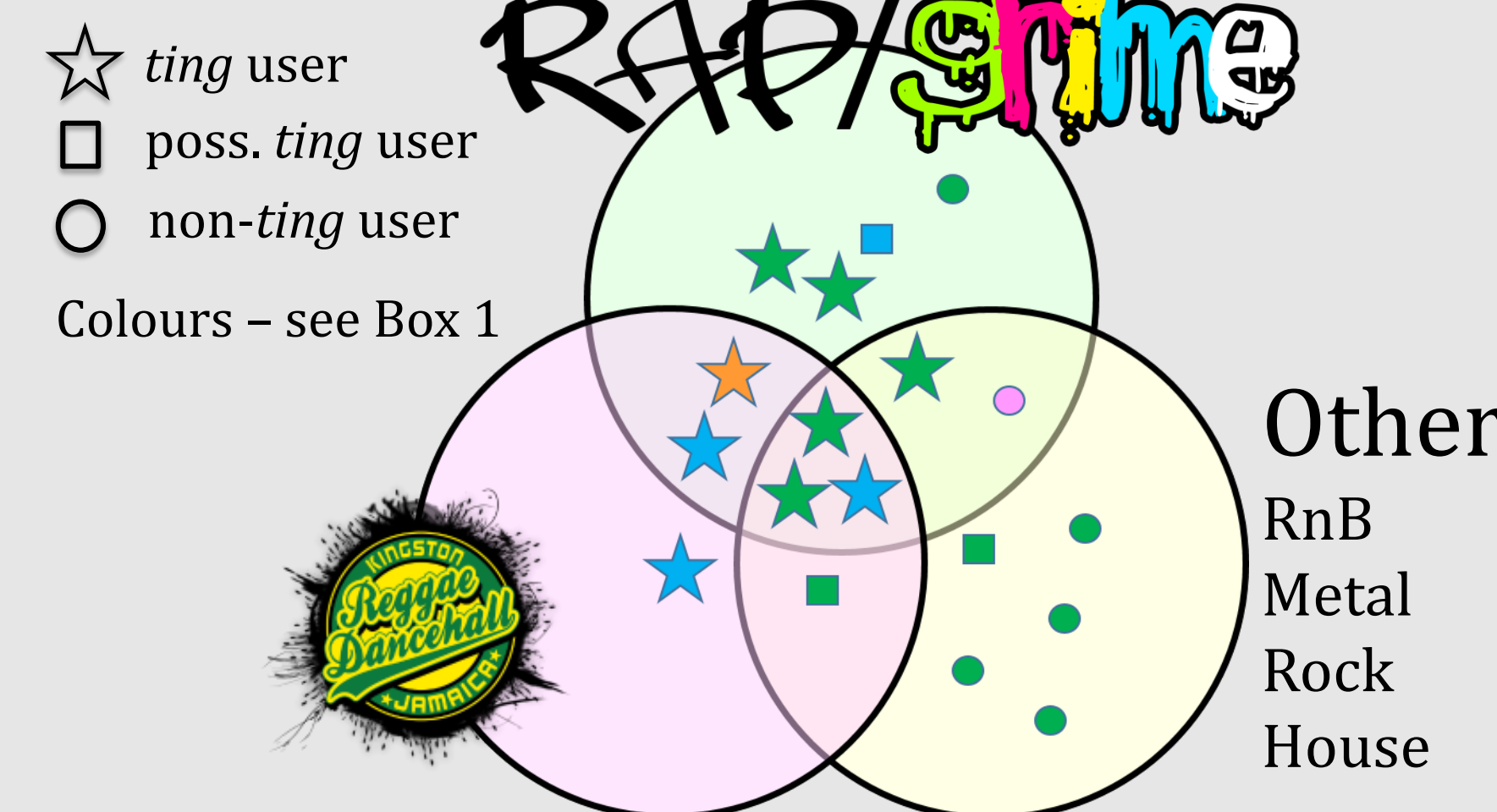


Fig.3 shows a (tentative) apparent pattern of *ting* use and musical practices for all the YP for whom we have relevant info.

7. Conclusion

Identities (e.g. ethnicities) are fluid, multiple and performed in practices. *Ting* may contribute to the performance of an ethnic identity in a particular location and in a particular practice, **but in the Learning Centres it doesn't tend to generate this meaning**. During our time in this space it was considered to be "another word for *ting*, *init*". But when it moved to another space, it could change. We give Jake the last word, as he explains how th-stopping enacted him as 'black' in a different part of the city:

Yeah, well a lot of people- like the people from here speak differently to how people near mine- or who I hang about (with). And they speak differently from people from [Area X in central Manchester] (.) Like, cos I'm like kinda- [Area X] is dead different to like this area, cos this is like a black community and there's loads of different- it's like multicultural and [Area X] is like dead racist so like if I'd spoken slang that people speak here, like if I said like, like Abdou said 'tree' for three, if I said it there, they'd look at me weird and say 'why're you saying that?' Or 'why do you think you're black?' That's what they say.

[LCC_080]

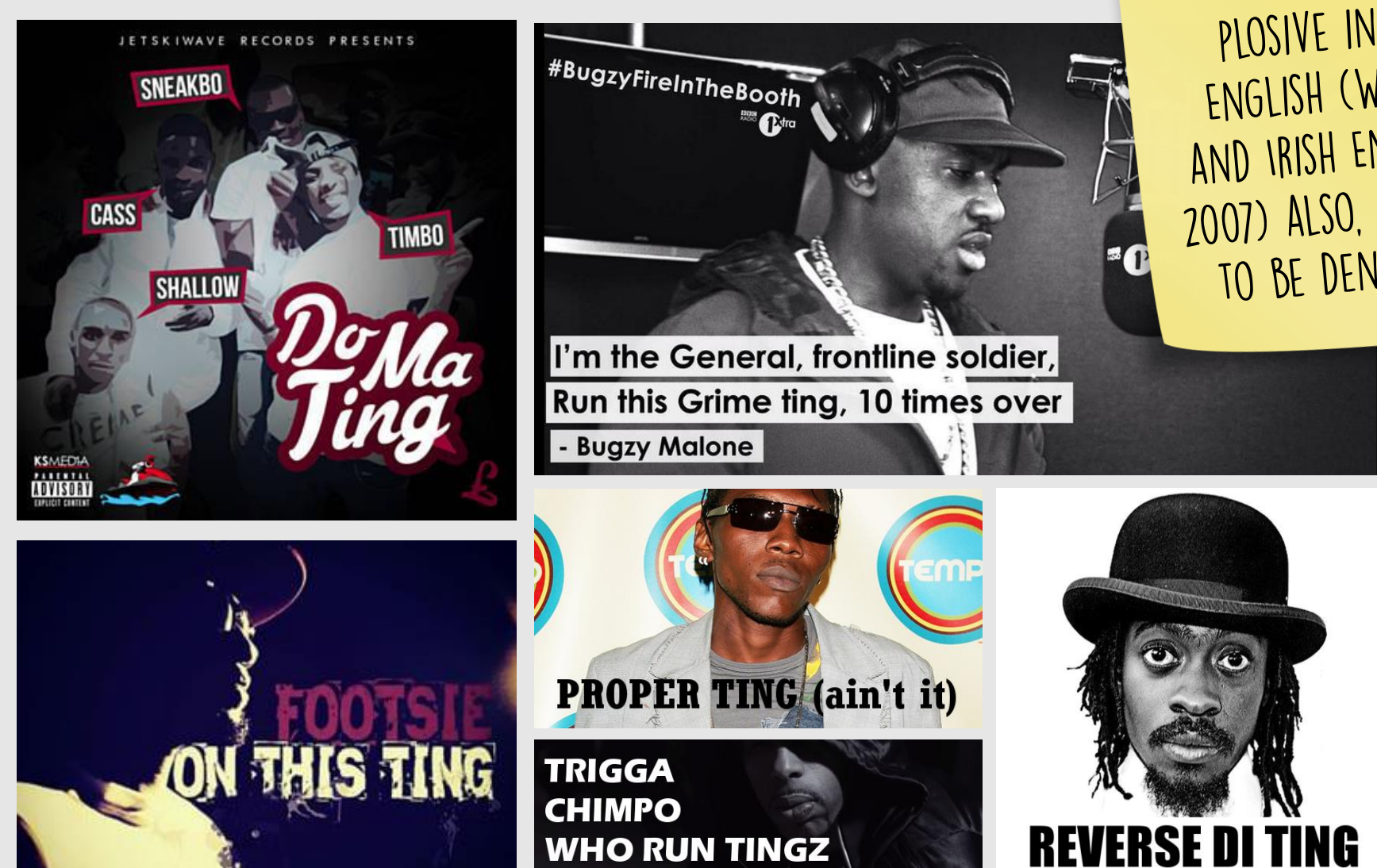
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2. Word-initial TH-stopping (voiceless)

Realisation of word initial /θ/ as [t] is a feature of **West Indian Englishes and Creoles** (Wells 1982) including **Jamaican Creole** (Cassidy 1961). It is also present in **British Creole** (Patrick 2008, Sebba 1993), and is currently (2015) a feature in predominantly **black music practices** such as Grime/Rap and Dancehall.

/θ/ IS REALISED AS A PLOSIVE IN LIVERPOOL ENGLISH (WATSON 2007) AND IRISH ENGLISH (HICKEY 2007) ALSO, BUT THESE TEND TO BE DENTAL STOPS [t̪]



OUR FOCUS HERE IS TH-STOPPING IN RELATION TO VARIETIES OF ENGLISH RELEVANT TO THE UK CONTEXT