Tales of the unpredictable:
Researching TH-stopping in urban British English

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Introduction and Aims

The UrBEn-ID project is a two-year ethnographic sociolinguistic study funded by the Leverhulme Trust running from July 2014-July 2016. The project explores the ways in which young people (YP) in an urban environment use language (including features of what might be called Multicultural Urban British English) to enact identities in their day to day lives.
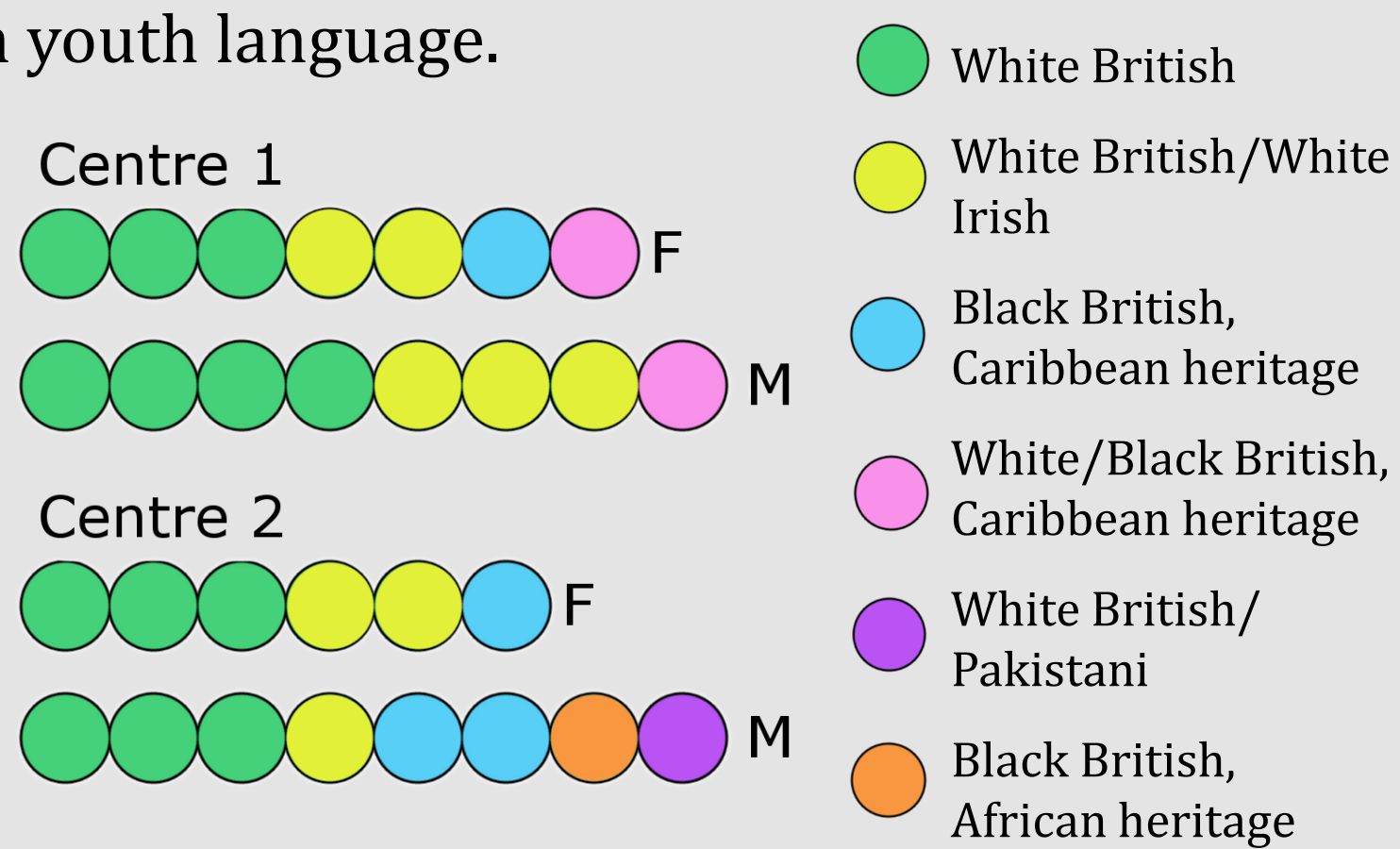
Having only recently finished collecting the data, this poster offers some <u>preliminary</u> thoughts.

Context

Three research sites: two Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) centres and one mainstream school.

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

The focus here is on the PRU centres – both cater for Yrs 10 and 11 (age 14-16) with approximately 12 students at any one time (29 discussed here). The centres follow a reduced curriculum with peripatetic subject teachers and permanent youth worker/coordinator staff.

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

● White British
● White British/White Irish
● Black British, Caribbean heritage
● White/Black British, Caribbean heritage
● White British/ Pakistani
● Black British, African heritage

Centre 1

Centre 2

MOST OF THESE CLASSIFICATIONS CAME FROM ASKING THE YP TO SELF-IDENTIFY AGAINST CENSUS CATEGORIES

Methods

ROB DRUMMOND AND SUSAN DRAY

Data collection

Linguistic ethnography. Two researchers visited each centre 1-2 times per week over the 2014/15 academic year, observing and <u>taking part</u> in whatever came up.

Speech data has come from: spontaneous interactions in and out of class; interviews/conversations between individuals or small groups of young people and one researcher; peer or self-recording by the young people, often while outside smoking; word lists.

Observational data was gathered via fieldnotes in the form of two shared researcher diaries.

Audio recording: 53+ hours

Fieldnotes: 413,000+ words

WORD LISTS INVOLVED YP BEING ASKED FOR <u>THEIR</u> DEFINITIONS AND USES OF WORDS WE HAVE HEARD BEING USED.

Data analysis

Methods from...

- Variationist sociolinguistics (sociophonetic analysis)
- Interactional sociolinguistics (discourse analysis)

Challenges

- Don't know what to expect day to day.
- Erratic attendance
- Exclusions (common for individuals to be excluded temporarily)
- Mood swings (and the freedom to have them)
- Unclear role of researchers in the context
- Playing by their (YP) rules, which are very different (humour, politeness, education)
- We don't want to annoy anyone (might jeopardise the project)
  - Explaining the project in an accessible, meaningful, and non-patronizing way for YP and staff.
- **Combining different approaches to data collection, data analysis, identity, ethnicity, and even linguistics.**

Preliminary findings

Multicultural Urban British English (MUBE)

One initial aim of the project was to explore the extent to which features of Multicultural London English (MLE) (eg Cheshire et al 2011, Fox 2015) can be found in Manchester, thus raising the possibility of a multi-city urban youth variety of English in the UK (MUBE) (Drummond 2013).

Taken as a group, the following comparisons can be made:

'VARIETY' IS USED FOR WANT OF A BETTER WORD. 'REPERTOIRE' (CHESHIRE ET AL) IS BETTER, BUT THEN NAMING REPERTOIRES (MLE, MUBE) IMPOSES UNHELPFUL BOUNDARIES

Feature	MLE	Manc
PRICE monophthongisation	✓	✓
FACE monophthongisation	✓	✓
MOUTH monophthongisation	✓	✓
GOAT monophthongisation	✓	✓?
Extreme GOOSE fronting	✓	✓
Reduction in h-dropping	✓	✗
DH-stopping	✓	✓
TH-fronting	✓	✓
K-backing	✓	?
'this is me' quotative	✓	✗
Simplified article allomorphy	✓	✗
'You get me?' discourse marker	✓	✓
Pronoun 'man' – 'Man's listening'	✓	✓
Word initial TH-stopping	✗	✓

✓ = EXISTS
✗ = NO EXAMPLES
✗ ✓ = MIXED
? = MORE ANALYSIS REQ.

While the general Northern BrEng features remain, some specifically MCR features are more variable:

Feature	Trad Manc	Youth Manc
Lack of FOOT/STRUT split	✓	✓
Lack of TRAP/BATH split	✓	✓
LettER	✓	✓✗
HappY	✓	✓
Dark /l/	✓	✓✗?

Word-initial TH-stopping

ALTHOUGH TH-STOPPING IS NOT PARTICULARLY FREQUENT, IT IS, ARGUABLY, INTERESTING

Realisation of word initial /θ/ as [t] is strongly associated in the UK with West Indian Englishes and Creoles (Wells 1982) and British Creole (Patrick 2008).

/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]

Yet in the PRU context it does not appear to have the same association. Boys from all ethnicities are regular users, and there is no sign of 'ownership'.

NOTICE THAT ALMOST NO GIRLS USE THIS FEATURE. THE ONE WHO DOES IS AN INFREQUENT USER AND POSSIBLY ONLY A 'STYLISTIC' USER (AS OPPOSED TO USING IT REGULARLY IN EVERYDAY SPEECH)
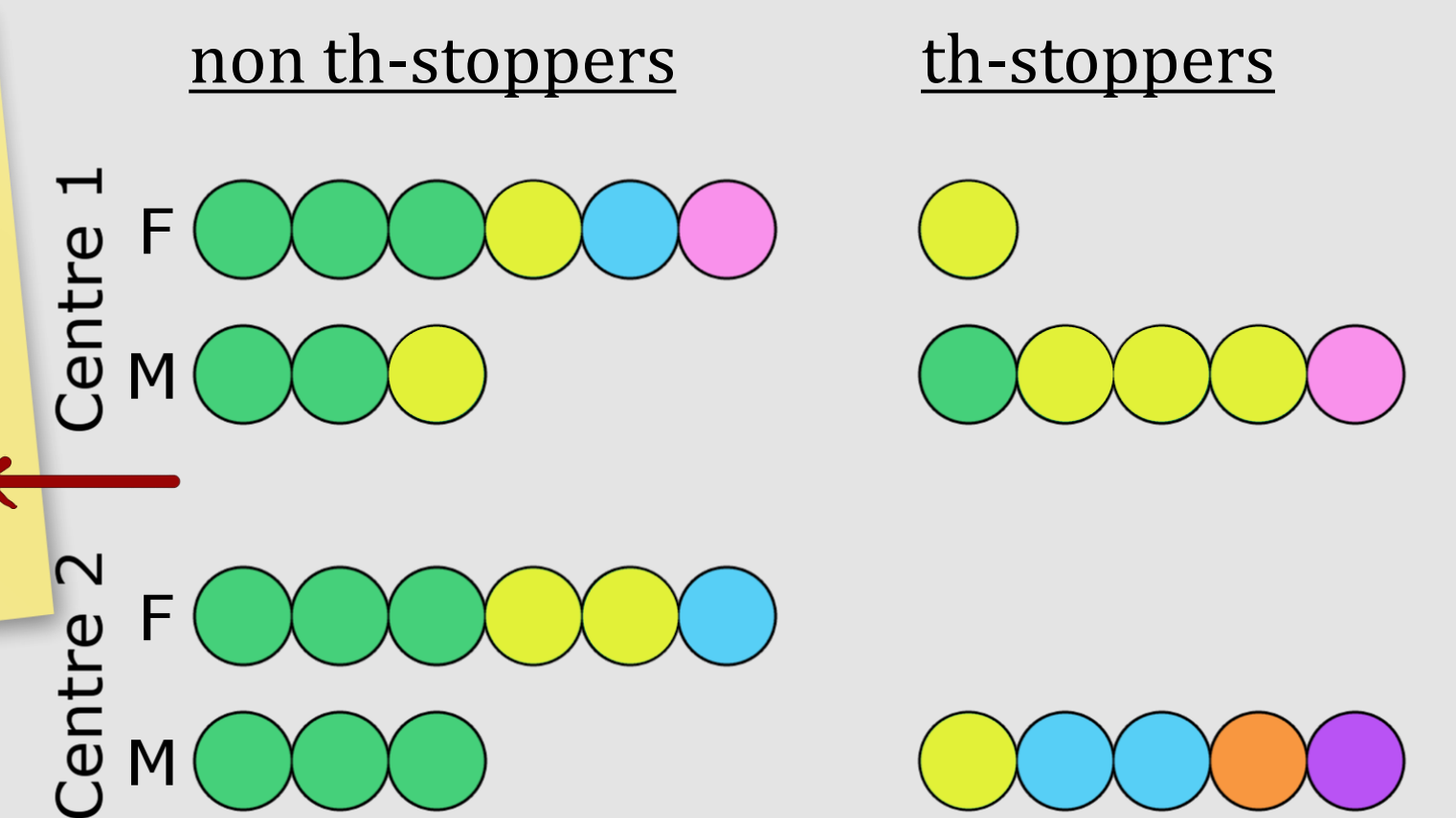
non th-stoppers   th-stoppers

Centre 1   F   M
Centre 2   F   M

Some examples

● Jamal, on laptop in class
"Man's held down the [t]ing, and pressed the [t]ing and moved the [t]ing, but it's not working"

● Callum, in class
"Where's your other [t]ing?"

● Jake, in class
"Have you saw that [t]ing where that guy asks the girls for his number?"

'TING' IS BY FAR THE MOST FREQUENT CONTEXT FOR THIS, POSSIBLY SUGGESTING IT COULD BE SEEN AS A SEPARATE LEXICAL ITEM FROM 'THING'. HOWEVER, INTRA-SPEAKER THING/TING VARIATION AND YP DEFINITIONS OF 'TING' SUGGEST OTHERWISE. CERTAINLY ITS MEANING IS FLUID.

Regular th-stoppers are not always aware. Jake ● and Abdou ● are discussing with Rob whether Abdou says [t]ree for /θ/ree (he does).

OF COURSE IT MIGHT BE THAT HE IS AWARE, BUT IS SELF-CONSCIOUS GIVEN THE CONTEXT. HE IS A PROLIFIC TH-STOPPER

Jake | Yeah you do yo, you say [t]ree bro.
Abdou | No I don't.
Jake | Yeah you do
Rob | Why what's wrong with saying [t]ree?
Abdou | I don'- I jus- cos it's not [f]ree
Jake | You always say [t]ree I don't know what you're on about.
Abdou | But it's not but I don't though.
Jake | You do.
Rob | But why is it wrong to say...
Abdou | It's not wrong but obviously I don't say it, cos it's not [f]ree.

Preliminary conclusions

The fact that word initial th-stopping (especially in certain words) is used apparently entirely naturally by speakers of different ethnicities suggests this is not an ethnicity ting. In fact, despite their associations with non-white varieties of English and 'non-Anglo' speakers, we would argue that th-stopping and other MUBE features are not the primary agents of ethnicity work in this context. We suggest that ethnicity is being performed in other ways, through linguistic and social practices, and that for the boys at least, th-stopping might be indexing something altogether different.

To be continued....

WE ALSO QUESTION THE VALUE, IN 2015 UK URBAN CENTRES, OF EVEN DISCUSSING LANGUAGE VARIATION IN RELATION TO THE KINDS OF ETHNICITY CATEGORIES MENTIONED ABOVE. ETHNICITY CATEGORIES DO NOT EXPLAIN YP LANGUAGE – THEY FIX IDENTITIES AND OBSCURE INHERENT FLUIDITY.

Cheshire, Jenny, Paul Kerswill, Sue Fox, and Eivind Torgersen. 2011. Contact, the feature pool and the speech community: The emergence of Multicultural London English. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 15(2), 151-196.

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Acknowledgments