In recent sociolinguistic work there has been a great deal of interest in urban youth vernaculars (e.g. Cheshire & Gardner-Chloros 2018; Drummond 2018; Nortier & Svendsen 2015; Quist & Svendsen 2010). Yet relatively little is known about how these varieties are acquired by children.

The current study compares the speech production of adolescents (16-20) and children (5-7) acquiring Multicultural London English (MLE). Previous research explored MLE in East London and found that that 4-5 year olds in the London borough of Hackney had already acquired the same MLE diphthong system as adolescents in their community (Cheshire et al., 2011). The authors suggested that community multilingualism lead children to orient to peers as their target in language acquisition at an earlier age than would be expected in more monolingual communities (cf. Kerswill & Williams 2000). The current study investigates this finding further by analysing MLE in another multilingual London borough, Ealing (West London). The aim is to see if MLE features are diffusing across London, and to see if young children are already participating in the same variety as the adolescents. If, as suggested by Cheshire et al. (2011), community multilingualism leads children to orient to peers as their target in language acquisition even before age 8, then we would expect the children to have already acquired the same variety as the adolescents.

The variables for the study are the diphthongs FACE, PRICE and GOAT. Changes in the diphthong system have been said to be the most striking feature of MLE (Cheshire et al. 2011). We analyse these variables acoustically, looking at: position in the vowel space (in terms of formant frequencies); and vowel dynamics i.e. how diphthongal or monophthongal the pronunciation is (Kerswill et al. 2008).

Preliminary results indicate that the children do not differ from the adolescents in the positions of the nuclei of FACE, PRICE and GOAT, i.e. they have already acquired the same forms as the adolescents. Similarly, the children match the adolescents in the monophthongization of FACE and GOAT. But the children do not show all the same tendencies as the adolescents. There are gender differences within the adolescent group – e.g. the boys back GOAT, while the girls tend to front it – that are not yet in evidence among the children. Differences between adolescents and children also appear in the vowel dynamics of PRICE, with the children showing a diphthongal realization of PRICE and the adolescents leading in monophthongization of this vowel.

Overall, the findings support Cheshire et al.’s (2011) suggestion that where the speech community is linguistically very diverse, children may orient to peers as their model in language acquisition even before the age of 8. Yet the findings also indicate that while the children seem to show the same vowel system as the adolescents, other sociolinguistic variables are not acquired this early on. We will explore why this might be the case in terms of children’s acquisition of sociolinguistic competence.
References


Figure 1 Vowel plot showing mean values for the nucleus and glide of FACE, PRICE and GOAT by age and gender.