A study of rhythm in London: Is syllable-timing a feature of Multicultural London English?

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Recent work on London English has found innovation in inner city areas, most likely as the outcome of dialect contact. These innovations are shared by speakers of different ethnic backgrounds, and have been identified as features of Multicultural London English (MLE). This study examines whether syllable timing is a feature of MLE, as work on rhythm shows that dialect and language contact may lead to varieties of English becoming more syllable-timed (e.g. Szakay 2008). We hypothesised that MLE speakers would also show suprasegmental innovations, having more syllable-timed rhythm than what has been reported for British English (Deterding 2001, Grabe & Low 2002).

Narratives as told by teenagers of different ethnic backgrounds, elderly speakers born between 1920 and 1935 and speakers born between 1874 and 1895 were extracted from interviews. The speech was segmented into consonantal and vocalic elements by forced phonemic alignment (Yuan & Liberman 2008). All segmentation was then checked and corrected, and measurements of vocalic PVI, as an indicator of rhythmic patterns (Grabe & Low 2002), were calculated.

Overall, the speakers were more syllable-timed than what has been found for British English. The results revealed that young speakers of non-anglo background were significantly more syllable-timed than young anglo speakers (p=0.026). A gender difference was also observed: male speakers were significantly more syllable-timed than females (p=0.04). Additionally, some elderly speakers had a correlation between speech rate and PVI: speakers with low vowel articulation rate were more syllable-timed. The relatively low PVI for all speaker groups may indicate London’s status as a centre of linguistic innovation and long-standing migration. The results of the present study combined with work on other varieties reinforces the idea that the tendency for English to become more syllable-timed is a global phenomenon fuelled by language and dialect contact and is possibly led by male speakers.