A Cockney Blueprint for Tower Hamlets

A guide for including Cockney in the Tower Hamlets Community Languages Programme

About Us

This blueprint has been produced through collaboration between Cockney Cultures and the University of Warwick.

Cockney Cultures is a grassroots community partnership between the Bengali East End Heritage Society and Grow Social Capital.

The Bengali East End Heritage Society began in 2016 with an aim to highlight, retain, and restore the Bengali community's cultural and heritage assets within the East End of London. The Society encourages critical responses to policies and agendas that impact on the community's shared long-term legacy in the area. Through educational projects, public exhibitions and active campaigning it continues to forge links with the British-Bangladeshi diaspora who hold connections with this unique area of East London.

Grow Social Capital is a social enterprise working to address the challenge of changing levels in society of social capital—our collective ability to help each other. It believes these changes are the root cause of many social problems, including growing divisions and distrust, fewer people getting involved in civic society, and increasing isolation. It is developing new responses to enable organisations, communities, and individuals to take practical and positive action to grow and nurture social capital.

The partnership **Cockney Cultures** is a non-party political, pioneering living heritage and cultural identity project, based on inclusive values. It works to prompt conversations and celebrations among people who identify as 'Cockney' or identify with the values of Cockney and other 'traditional' and 'working-class' cultures. It creates a platform for celebrating and promoting a positive sense of 'who we are' to break barriers, build social capital, increase interaction, and share commonality across the multidimensional 'Cockneydom'— across London and throughout the global Cockney Diaspora.

Dr Christopher Strelluf is an associate professor of linguistics at the University of Warwick, with expertise in sociophonetics, language variation and change, and dialectology. He provides scientific advice to Cockney Cultures on Cockney as a language variety and on relationships between language and society. His involvement in this project reflects an ethos among linguists of using linguistic science to combat social prejudice and inequality, and the University of Warwick's commitment to using academic research to achieve positive public engagement, outreach, and impact.

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Cockney as a Community Language

In March 2023, in response to a grassroots community petition, Tower Hamlets Council formally recognised Cockney as a 'community language'. Executive Mayor of Tower Hamlets Lutfur Rahman acknowledged the significance of this moment:

"Cockney emerged from the lives of working people, enabling them to thrive in an environment of social inequality and exclusion. Importantly, with the influx of new and different cultures into Tower Hamlets over the years and indeed centuries. Cockney became an inclusive and vibrant identity - evolving to accommodate new linguistic and cultural traditions."

Mayor Rahman's comments highlight Cockney's unique status as both a label for a variety of London English and an identity for Londoners.

As a **language variety**, the words, sounds, grammar, and interactional conventions of Cockney have differed across time in some ways from those of other Englishes. Just as importantly, the idea of 'Cockney' as a language variety is highly salient in our collective cultural consciousness, and authors and artists have routinely used features that are popularly associated with Cockney as a shorthand to mark people for a range of characteristics of place, social status, and personality.

As an **identity**, for people who think of themselves as 'Cockneys', the label may be associated with values and practices at the core of their experiences day-to-day and across their lives. Cockney has also been used—often by people who do not see themselves as Cockneys—as a general term for Londoners, as a designator of people in the East End, or as a marker for a range of (usually socially undesirable) social traits and behaviours.

This *Cockney Blueprint* offers an intellectual and practical guide for the inclusion of Cockney in the Tower Hamlets Community Languages Programme. It explores Cockney from the perspective of linguistics—the scientific discipline that examines 'Language' and languages. It celebrates Cockney as a language and social identity historically and contemporarily. It explores relationships between language features, personal social identities, and social realities. It highlights ways that language attitudes and ideologies work to enforce social structure—often in unjust ways that damage people and their communities. It illustrates educational activities for incorporating Cockney into a pro-social justice community languages programme. Most importantly, it reflects the lived experiences and perspectives of Londoners, who have talked with us over a series of fieldwork activities in East London and whose words we quote throughout this blueprint.

While the focus of this blueprint is Cockney, it is really about 'non-standard' Englishes. Everyone who reads this book will know that some Englishes are considered 'better' than others. Any evaluation of a language variety as 'good' or 'bad', 'correct' or 'incorrect', 'smart' or 'stupid' is a social judgement, not a judgement grounded in linguistic science. Treating varieties as 'non-standard' and limiting access to social capital for people who use a non-standard variety are forms of discrimination.

Tower Hamlets' designation of Cockney as a community language creates an opportunity to combat linguistic and cultural discrimination through community education. In that context, this blueprint provides a model for celebrating all the Englishes spoken in our communities and for removing barriers to equality and attainment that are imposed by language ideologies.
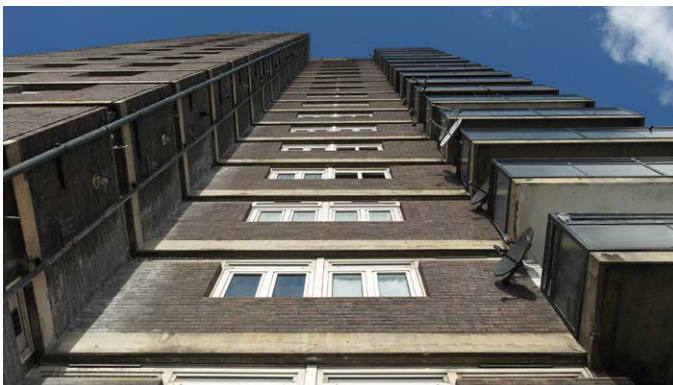
Linguistics of Cockney

Linguistics is the scientific study of language. Language is an innate biological function of the human brain. In order to understand how the human brain produces and processes language, linguists explore the components the comprise languages.

This section explores some features of Cockney—both as a language variety and as a target of language ideologies—from the perspective of linguistics. It uses technical terminology from linguistics. Some of these terms might seem familiar from 'grammar lessons', and many might be difficult to follow. If you barely remember 'grammar' from school, that's probably good.

Many of the things we learn in school about language are incorrect and are based on language ideologies, rather than linguistic facts.

The content in this section offers a guide to using Cockney to learn about the components of language from a scientifically informed perspective. This is an important step to correcting the language ideologies that are at the heart of linguistic discrimination.

The Emergence of 'Cockney'

We have inherited a narrative that Cockney emerged in the working-class communities of Tower Hamlets and East London more generally. This story implies that at one point in history, all Londoners spoke the same variety of English. Then (as the story goes) social conditions isolated East London, and the English spoken by those people 'born in the sound of Bow bells' began to diverge from broader London English.

This narrative probably misinterprets the historical reality of the origins of Cockney. It reflects that we have inherited ideological positions that were established to capitalise on people's aspirations to become middle class—and to do so by giving them a set of working-class behaviours to be trained (and shamed) away from.

To start, 'Cockney' was originally posh.

The earliest citation of *Cockney* in the Oxford English Dictionary occurs in Langland's poem 'Piers Plowman', written around 1390. There, it refers to an edible egg from domestic fowl (i.e., 'cock's egg'). Early written uses of Cockney to describe people capitalised on an egg's delicateness and newness—when Chaucer used *Cockney* in the Canterbury Tales in the early 1400s, it was in the sense of 'a spoilt or pampered child'. Further citations as late as 1783 equated *Cockney* with 'a child wantonly brought up'.

The themes of wealth, indulgence, and being sheltered from hard work and discipline that *Cockney* carried probably linked to ideologies that life in cities was luxurious and easy relative to toiling on England's farms and in small villages. Written citations as late as the early 1900s used *Cockney* in ways that suggest 'a feeble and pampered person from a city' (not necessarily London) in opposition to a person from rural areas.

Of course, because London is the prototypical English city, it is unsurprising that *Cockney* would be applied to people in London. The famous Bow-bell-birth definition of *Cockney* is attributed to a 1571 sermon by J. Bridges: 'We are thorough out all the Realme called cockneys that are borne in London, or in the sounde of Bow bell'. In other words, 'people in England call Londoners "Cockneys"'. In 1571, St. Mary-le-Bow would have been a common reference point at the centre of London. 'Born in the sound of Bow bell' was almost certainly not a way to distinguish Cockneys from other Londoners. Today, Bridges might have said, 'Londoners are born in the ULEZ'.

So historical attestations show that *Cockney* did not emerge as the name for a working-class variety of English in Tower Hamlets. Rather, it emerged as a transfer of properties of an object (an egg) to people who metaphorically embodied those properties (i.e., 'rich children are like eggs'), which then extended to a broader set of people (i.e., 'posh people in cities are like rich children'), and then focused to the canonical example (i.e., 'Londoners are posh city people'). The label *Cockney* could then be synonymous with London as a place...Londoners were 'Cockneys' (and vice versa), and whatever variety of English Londoners spoke was 'Cockney'.

So how did 'Cockney' come to be re-imagined today as a working-class Tower Hamlets language variety?

Today's Tower Hamlets was of course historically a primarily working-class area. In studies of active and ongoing language variation and change in large cities during the 20th and 21st centuries, localised linguistic innovations have generally emerged from close-knit social networks in working-class communities [i]. Working-class linguistic innovations have then spread to the wider, more linguistically conservative speech community. Given what we observe in large cities today, we would expect that working-class communities in London in past centuries would also have been the leaders of linguistic innovation. Like in big cities today, posh Londoners (especially young people) would have adopted working-class innovations, though they would be trailing behind the working-class lead. So, it is very likely that Tower Hamlets would have been a driver of innovations in London English, and perhaps the most representative example of 'London English'.

In the 1700s and 1800s, the emergence of a middle-class lifestyle as a target for upward mobility gave rise to a self-help industry that advised people on how to attain higher social status. In order to give people middle-class behaviours to adopt, it was also necessary to give them working-class behaviours to avoid. Along with prescriptions for how to dress and how to eat a meal, adopting 'proper speech' was targeted as a way to ascend to the middle class.

Elocutionists sold books by picking out innovations of London English that were popularly associated with working class communities and inveighing against using them. They used the label *Cockney*, reflecting its general use as a name for London English, and implied that this variety was a deviant form of the 'Standard English' that proper middle-class people should use. This is obvious in Thomas Sheridan's 1762 Course of Lectures on Elocution, as cited by linguist Johanna Gerwin [ii]:

In the very metropolis two different modes of pronunciation prevail, by which the inhabitants of one part of the town, are distinguished from those of the other. One is current in the city, and is called the cockney; the other at the court-end, and is called the polite pronunciation.

Sheridan imposes an ideology that Cockney is a working-class variety and that 'polite' speech is different. Publications contemporary to Sheridan often followed the more general usage that equated 'Cockney' with 'London English'. But they joined Sheridan in identifying the most innovative features of London English (which would have been used by working-class communities as the leaders of language change) and decrying these as features to be avoided for anybody who wanted to sound middle class.

Illustration from Vic Gatrell, *City of laughter: Sex and satire in eighteenth-century London,* Atlantic Books, 2007.

In the 19th century, popular authors like Dickens and Thackeray followed the lead of elocutionists' guides (and drew on the public understandings of the social characteristics of varieties of London English) by assigning socially salient features of Cockney to working-class characters. Their characterisations reinforced the popular conceptualisation of Cockney as something distinctively working class. Educators, elocutionists, and scholars then subsequently drew on the characterisations of greats such as Dickens and Thackeray as evidence of the features of Cockney and its associations with social characteristics.

The circularity here is clear: artists used Cockney to build a profile of working-class traits in working-class characters from the descriptions of elocutionists, and elocutionists used artistic characterisations as evidence for the characteristics they decried as working-class behaviours.

So what changed across more than 600 years of use of the word *Cockney* was the way that Cockney was *enregistered*. Enregisterment is the process of a set of language features becoming linked in popular consciousness to a group or place. When this process happens, using linguistic features becomes ideologically conceptualised as a characteristic of people who are from that group or place, and being authentically from that group or place entails using that language variety. (You know a language variety is enregistered when you can name it and you immediately have an idea of who would speak it—e.g., Brummie, Scouse, and Geordie are all enregistered varieties.)

By the 1700s, 'Cockney' was enregistered as 'London English'. The leading edge of Cockney would have been the tight-knit working-class communities of Tower Hamlets and elsewhere in East London. Through the 1800s, an aspiring middle-class that was desperate to avoid working-classness led to working-class linguistic features being identified and selected for avoidance. This narrowed the enregisterment of 'Cockney' to 'working-class London English', which of course was most prominent in the popular consciousness in East London communities.

So it is absolutely right that the set of linguistic innovations that came to be enregistered as Cockney emerged historically in the working-class communities of Tower Hamlets and elsewhere in East London. But these almost certainly did not arise in opposition to other varieties of English. In actuality, these working-class communities would have been the leaders of innovation in London-wide Cockney. Desires to be 'middle class' led to efforts to resist these innovations among those who wanted to emerge out of the working class. A notion of 'Standard English' was carved out from innovative working-class London English by elocutionists and educators who profited from inventing strategies for people to avoid sounding working class.

Ironically, then, middle-class 'Standard' London English was born from Cockney.

The same processes continue today, of course. Working-class Tower Hamlets communities are a driving force behind linguistic innovations that are spreading throughout England and more widely. Those innovations are frequently targeted for correction in gatekeeping settings such as school and media. The evolution of Cockney's enregisterment highlights the role of ideologies in determining our understanding of language varieties, their social meanings, and their histories.

"What makes Cockney working class quite different to other working-class ones around the country is that they're from the capital. Whereas in Newcastle, everyone's Geordie and everyone's had the same language. Here you've got people living in a particular area, and just a mile down the road you've got ultra, ultra rich where the other half lives. So Cockney is a class accent."

"Posh Cockneys call themselves Londoners, whereas in Liverpool. it's only Scouse."

"Cockney for me you think of working class, East End. And then obviously the make-up of London has changed over the years. And many people who may have lived in places like the East End moved out to Essex, or whatever. That would be my initial understanding of Cockney, but I suppose it changes all the time."

"Cockney sounds nice to me. It's London and it's local. Because it's native and it's very authentic in a way. You can't get it if you're learning English from another part of the world."

Linguistic Features of Cockney

Words: Rhyming Slang

Today, Rhyming Slang is easily the best-known feature of Cockney. Look for a shop selling London merch to tourists or a news story about Cockney, and you will almost certainly see references to *apples and pears*, the *trouble and strife*, or having a *rabbit*.

However, from a linguistic and historical perspective, Cockney Rhyming Slang is fun… but not especially interesting.

Cockney Rhyming Slang phrases are 'lexical items'—words. (Yes, whole phrases can be stored in the brain as words—consider the way Harry Potter characters use *He who must not be named* as a single name for Voldemort.) Lexical items do not usually show us much about language. While our ability to acquire language sounds and structures declines rapidly as we go through childhood and adolescence, we can usually continue to learn new words throughout our lives. Words mostly show us that humans can memorise things. So while knowing some of the *lexicon* of a language—the set of words that a language contains—is clearly essential to 'knowing' a language, it is rare for linguists to define a language on the basis of its lexicon.

Historically, rhyming slang is only a recent addition to Cockney. The earliest attestation of a Cockney Rhyming Slang word is *lord of the manor* 'tanner' in 1839.[iii] Linguist Johanna Gerwin reports that rhyming slang was first mentioned as a feature of Cockney in slang dictionaries in the 1850s, but then only rarely.[iv] Cockney Rhyming Slang only became entrenched in the public consciousness in the 20th century. Given the long history of references to 'Cockney' as a language variety, Cockney Rhyming Slang is relatively new.

Cockney Rhyming Slang's proclaimed function as a code to obscure meaning from police and other authorities is likely more mythical than real. There are several reasons to challenge the logic of this myth. First, lexical items are not a good way to hide meaning over time. They only work until another person learns them. So, once police know that *penny-come-quick* is 'a trick', the phrase does not obscure anything (consider that today, street cops are fully conversant in the vast vocabulary for drugs and other criminal activities that they encounter on their beats). Second, the street-level police that would have interacted with working-class communities would not have come from posh communities and elite schools. Many of them would have grown up in working-class East London, and if Cockney Rhyming Slang was a feature of their speech community, then they themselves would be fluent users. Finally, the vocabulary of Cockney Rhyming Slang for illicit activities is not uniquely rich. All of us, regardless of our language variety, likely have an extensive set of slang words connected with drinking, drugs, sex, money, body parts, and other referents that might be connected to naughty behaviours. This is just a regular focus of slang.

In fact, the idea that Cockney Rhyming Slang functioned to enable criminal activity probably reflects the ideological stigmatisation of working-class Londoners. The first references to Cockney Rhyming Slang in the 1850s were published as an emerging middle class was consuming books to teach them to use language to speak like posh people. Depicting Cockney Rhyming Slang as an enabler of criminal activities would have aligned with ideologies that being working class was itself socially undesirable. In other words, the association between Cockney Rhyming Slang and criminality probably reflects circular reasoning that working class people engage in criminal activity, so if working class people are talking about something, it must be criminal activity.

What is special about Cockney Rhyming Slang is the creativity it embodies. In that sense, the creativity in slang spoken by young people in London today is a continuation of the spirit of Cockney.

Grammar: Morphosyntax

Linguists examine features a language variety's grammar through the fields of *syntax*—comprising the structure of sentences—and *morphology*—comprising the formation of words. These fields are sometimes combined into the study of *morphosyntax*.

Historical descriptions of Cockney listed many morphosyntactic differences between Cockney and other, more socially prestigious varieties. Linguist Johanna Gerwin found a list in the writings of historian Samuel Plegge, who worked in the 1700s [v].
These include:

- Negative concord – A syntactic requirement for multiple markers of negation in a sentence. (e.g., 'I **don't** know **nothing**.' – This is identical to French Je **ne** sais **pas**.)

- Past-tense levelling – Reducing irregular verb forms by using the normal English past tense rule of adding <ed> (e.g., for the past tense of *to know*, saying *knowed* rather than *knew*) or by using either the participle or perfect forms for both functions (e.g., *I have took it* [the participle form of *take*] for *I have taken it* [the perfect form of *take*])

- Regularisation of reflexive pronouns – Forming reflexive pronouns (e.g., *himself*) with a possessive pronoun (e.g., *his*) + rather than an object pronoun (e.g., *him*) + *-self*. 'Standard' Englishes use possessive pronouns to form 1st and 2nd person reflexives (e.g., *myself*, *yourself*) but illogically use object pronouns to form 3rd person reflexives (e.g., *himself*). Cockney *hisself* and *theirselves* regularise the English rule.

Morphosyntactic features of Cockney have not featured prominently in recent popular descriptions. The examples here all occur widely in 'non-standard' Englishes around the world. While they are uniformly decried by language prescriptivists, all of them are morphosyntactically rule-governed. In many cases, they fix a problem in 'Standard' English—following a rule that posh Englishes idiosyncratically violate. In many cases, the non-standard varieties follow patterns that are the norms across the world's languages. They are clear evidence that what we judge to be 'good' and 'bad' English has nothing to do with facts about language.

Sounds: Vowels and Consonants

Linguists explore the sounds of a language through the fields of *phonetics*–comprising the actual sounds speakers create and hear—and *phonology*—comprising the abstract inventory of sounds in a language and in a person's brain.

The sounds of language varieties evolve continuously. Linguists normally observe these changes across generations, especially as children introduce changes into the language that they are acquiring from adults. These are not learning errors—children observe changes that are taking place in a speech community and advance those changes further in a process called 'incrementation' [vi].

Several patterns of change are observed quite frequently in sound systems. These include:

Shifts – when the phonetic quality of a sound ('the way a sound is pronounced') changes. Shifts can affect a single sound, or multiple sounds can undergo coordinated changes in a process called 'chain shifts'.

Mergers – when a distinction between two sounds is lost. Speakers begin to produce the sounds the same (phonetics) and only have a single sound stored in their brains (phonology).

Splits – when a distinction between two sounds is introduced. Speakers begin to produce the sound the same (phonetics) and children reanalyse the sounds as distinct entries in their language (phonology). The well-known difference between Southern and Northern British Englishes between the pronunciations of words such as FOOT and STRUT is the result of a split: the vowel in FOOT split in the South, but not in the North.

Sounds may, of course, also be deleted or added.

Some of the unique features of Cockney are associated with vowels and consonants.

Vowels

In linguistics, vowels are not the letters *a, e, i, o, u*. They are sounds made by vibrating the vocal folds to introduce 'voicing' into the airstream, and then using the tongue and other parts of the vocal tract to make some components of the sound louder and others quieter. Different vowels are associated with different profiles of loud and quiet components in the sound wave. Different Englishes have different numbers of vowels, but many have 15 to 20 distinct vowels.

You can feel this process if you pay attention to what your tongue, lips, and jaw are doing while you say words such as LOT and FLEECE. When you say LOT, your jaw is probably quite open and your tongue pushed down at the bottom of your mouth. When you say FLEECE, your tongue is probably pushed right up close to the roof of your mouth and relatively near the front of your mouth. The ways that you have shaped your oral tract have formed the sound wave associated with these vowels.

In many Englishes, vowels can be *monophthongs*—where there is one articulatory target for the vowel—or *diphthongs*—where a sound that we think of as one vowel is actually created from making one vowel sound right after another. Depending on your variety of English, if you say PRICE slowly, you might feel your mouth transitioning from the LOT shape (the diphthong's *nucleus*) to the FLEECE shape (its *glide*).

20th century forms of Cockney are associated with several shifts in diphthongs. These include the vowels in words such as FACE, PRICE, and MOUTH:

- FACE – the nucleus of this vowels shifted to a more open target. This makes the start of the FACE vowel sound more like the way many English speakers say the vowel in words like TRAP.

- MOUTH – the nucleus of this vowel shifted to a 'fronter' target. While many English speakers might use a vowel more like the one in BATH or LOT as their target for the nucleus of MOUTH, in recent forms of Cockney MOUTH's target shifted to something more like the vowels in TRAP or DRESS.

- PRICE – the nucleus of this vowel is shifted to a 'backer' target. Cockney is associated with using the vowel of words such as THOUGHT for the nucleus of PRICE, while many other English speakers use the BATH or LOT vowel. This may make the Cockney PRICE vowel sound more like the CHOICE vowel in other varieties of English.

Vowel shifts are extremely common in Englishes around the world. In fact, linguist William Labov and colleagues characterise these vowel shifts in Cockney as a continuation of the 'Great Vowel Shift'—a systematic reconfiguration of most of the English vowel system that took place over several hundred years from about 1400 and vastly changed pronunciations of English vowels [vii]. Labov suggested that the patterns of vowel changes in Cockney were consistent with vowel shifts taking place in Southern Hemisphere Englishes of Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa and in the southern United States.

Ongoing vowel shifts have been identified in probably every variety of English where they have been looked for. Everywhere in the English-speaking world, children produce different sounds for some vowels than their parents. Young people in London have largely shifted their vowels away from the articulations that were recently associated with a Cockney accent [viii,ix].

Consonants

Consonants are formed by obstructing the airstream as it passes through the vocal tract. These obstructions change the acoustic characteristics of the sound wave. Each consonant is characterised by a unique profile of the *place* where the obstruction occurs, the *manner* of the obstruction, and whether or not our vocal folds are vibrating to add *voicing*.

Stop consonants are created by cutting off the airflow, briefly building up air pressure, and then releasing the pressure, creating a sudden burst of sound. In pronouncing the word *Cockney*, you create the /k/ sound by raising the back of your tongue to the soft tissue at the back of your mouth (the *velum*) to build up air pressure, and then release that air in a burst of sound.

Fricative consonants are created by shaping the mouth to add turbulence to the airstream as it passes. If you make the sound we spell with <sh> in *mash* and *shop*, you can hear the result of this turbulence, and feel how your tongue is uniquely shaped to create a high-speed channel of air that will collide with your tongue and teeth. (Linguists use [ʃ] for the <sh> sound).

There are a number of other types of consonant. If the place, manner, or voicing of a consonant changes, then the sound that is produced will change.

Consonants featured prominently in the first elocution guides that critiqued Cockney. Among these were a merger between the sounds at the start of words such as WAIL and WHALE. In most places where English spelling has <wh>, the [w] would have been accompanied by a fricative similar to [h], so that WAIL and WHALE would not have sounded the same. The [w] and <wh> sounds have now merged in most dialects of English, so people no longer critique this merger as speech to be avoided—and indeed adding the [h] might be critiqued as rustic or backward.

More recent Cockney consonantal innovations continue to attract notice:

- TH-fronting – Conservative Englishes produce the sound associated with the spelling <th> by putting the tip of their tongue between the front teeth. This is a *dental* or *interdental* place of articulation of a fricative (linguists use [θ] for the <th> sound in words like THREE and [ð] for words like THOSE). Interdental fricatives are acoustically weak sounds and frequently change in Englishes around the world. Cockney is associated with a change in *place* from interdental to the *labial* place of articulation associated with the sound [f]. This is generally formed by bringing the lower lip into contact with the upper teeth. This leads to a merger between the interdental and labial fricatives, so that words like THREE and FREE sound identical. This Cockney feature is now deeply entrenched in innovative Englishes of young people in many parts of Britain.

- Glottal-replacement – The sounds represented by the English letters <p,t,k> are all *stops* that are differentiated by *place* of articulation. [p] is *bilabial*, formed by stopping and releasing air at the lips. [t] is *alveolar*, formed by placing the tip of the tongue near the back side of the upper teeth. [k], as noted above, is *velar*. An additional *stop* [ʔ] is formed by closing air at the *glottis*—the opening between the vocal folds—by slamming the vocal folds shut. This *glottal stop* is not traditionally included in English phonology, even though many English speakers use [ʔ] to break up sequences of vowels (such as between sounds in *uh-oh*). Modern Cockney is associated with either adding a glottal stop to the sounds [p,t,k] or shifting the *place* of articulation of [p,t,k] to the *glottis*. Glottal replacement occurs most frequently when a [t] occurs between two vowels (e.g., *water*), but recent varieties of Cockney add or shift to glottals in a wider range of environments. The shift of [p,t,k] to [ʔ] is also widespread in the innovative British Englishes of young people.

- H-deletion – Johanna Gerwin finds a critique of Londoners 'not sounding the *h* where it ought to be sounded' in a pronunciation dictionary published in 1791. [h] is a fricative formed by introducing turbulence into the airstream at the *glottis*. The 1791 reference shows a long tradition of deleting [h] at the beginning of words such as *Hackney*. H-deletion is also traditional in other English dialects, such as Black Country English [x]. Young people in London and elsewhere are retreating away from H-deletion, adopting the more conservative pronunciation of [h] at the beginnings of words.

Naturally there are many more consonantal innovations associated with Cockney, either historically or more recently. Some have become ubiquitous in Englishes all over the world, while others have disappeared from Cockney and other Englishes long ago.

Explore

British accents and dialects recordings at the British Library: **https://www.bl.uk/british-accents-and-dialects**

Language Prejudice

In a famous study of language discrimination in the United States [xi], linguist John Baugh responded to advertisements to let flats. He phoned landlords three times, saying the same sentence each time: "Hello, I'm calling about the apartment you advertise in the paper." But during each call he would use a different accent, varying among accents associated with Black, Latino, and white Americans. Baugh's white guise received more invitations to view flats than his Black and Latino guises. In some cases, he was told a flat was unavailable when calling in his non-white guises, only to be later invited for a viewing when he sounded white. Baugh and his co-authors then used a laboratory experiment to test how much of his sentence people needed to hear to identify the ethnicity associated with his accent. Hearers could determine whether the speaker sounded Black, Latino, or white from the word *Hello*. (A later study in Britain also found that hearers judge speakers from just a single word [xii]). Their study demonstrated that hearers use language nearly instantaneously to identify social characteristics of speakers and use those social characteristics to discriminate.

The mental links between language and social characteristics are also clear in creative works where characters are given accents to establish or reinforce personal traits. Rosina Lippi-Green studied the accents of characters in animated Disney films [xiii]. She reported that heroes (especially princesses) were overwhelmingly voiced with accents associated with white middle-class Americans, while villains and comic sidekicks disproportionately were voiced with foreign-, regional-, or working class-accented Englishes. Of course, there is a long tradition of using Cockney for fictional characters—famously in the works of Dickens and Thackery, and in a long list of films [xiv]. In using language to create characters, artists are drawing on shared cultural knowledge about the social meanings of language varieties and simultaneously reinforcing an perpetuating those social meanings.

Hierarchies of 'better' and 'worse' accents are well established in Britain. (There's nothing special about the United Kingdom in this regard—probably every culture has prestigious and stigmatised language varieties, and part of our knowledge of our culture is knowing the way language varieties are valued.) In the late 1960s, communication scientist Howard Giles surveyed students on the prestige and attractiveness of varieties of English and found a clear hierarchy among Englishes of Britain and elsewhere in the world [xv]. In the 2000s, linguists working with the BBC repeated Giles's survey with more than 5000 British adults [xvi] and found the hierarchy largely unchanged from more than three decades before. (Though 'London' fared much better in the new study than Cockney had in the old one. In Giles's study Cockney was rated worst of all varieties in both prestige and attractiveness, but rated relatively highly in the 2005 study. No such luck for Brummie!)

These ideologies about language varieties have very real consequences for the people who use the language varieties. A small study of a courtroom scenario, for instance, found that listeners rated a defendant as more guilty when he spoke in a Brummie guise than in a 'standard' accent [xvii]. In a much more wide-ranging project, linguists in the *Accent Bias in Britain* project recorded job interview-type statements read in five different English accents [xviii]. Listeners rated the speakers for their suitability for an entry-level position in a UK law firm. Their 2021 findings showed that traditional accent hierarchies still remained, with the speakers of South England working-class varieties being rated least 'hireable'. In particular, they found that raters who were older and who were from South England penalised Southern working-class speakers the most. Given that this demographic is relatively likely to be at a life stage where they would be responsible for hiring decisions and other gatekeeping functions, particularly in elite firms and agencies in London, continued accent bias among this group represents a potentially significant barrier to social mobility.

> **Explore**
>
> The Accent Bias in Britain Project:
> **https://accentbiasbritain.org**
>
> The Accentism Project: **https://accentism.org**

"When a Cockney plumber worked in our house my daughter says to me, 'Mom, what language is he speaking?' I said he's speaking English."

"I had a real fixed idea in my head from films, sort of the Don't Blow the Doors off! and those kind of films of what Cockney was. And then at Bethnal Green Centre there's a real mix of people and the people who are like the caretakers and the administrators were all Cockneys. And it was interesting, because that was kind of my first meeting of being around loads of Cockneys and they weren't like the films at all."

"The deputy headteacher at the school, around the corner from here is actually a Cockney speaking. We do have a stereotype but seeing him in that position just automatically makes you look twice, like you notice it straight away."

"In the world of academia, conferences and meetings, there's never a working-class accent. You have loads of varieties of Englishes, loads of different languages, but there's never a working-class accent. And if you hear one, people do a real double take. And I think that they're raising the profile of working-class culture".

Cockney Culture and Identity

Can there be a 'Modern Cockney Identity'?

This section explores the values, beliefs, practices, and perspectives that are connected with 'Cockney' as a culture and as an identity—both historically and today. It suggests pathways for fostering positive character traits by celebrating Cockney culture and identity with the Tower Hamlets Community Languages Programme, whether people identify personally as Cockneys or not.

Cultural and Identity
Features of Cockney

Personal Strength

In September 2022, football icon and former England captain David Beckham received widespread praise for queuing for 12 hours, joining thousands of others to pay respects at Queen Elizabeth II's lying in state.
His decision to queue was inspired by the memory of his East End grandparents. It was what they would have done, he said. What they would have wanted him to do.

Beckham's words and actions reflect the complex ways that the identities we carry drive and determine our behaviours and beliefs. In a moment of pain and reflection, Beckham followed his family's Cockney model for 'doing the right thing'. A cultural identity is not a demographic label; it is a core aspect of the ways we construct ourselves, of the decisions we make, and of our interactions with the world.

As an identity, 'Cockney' has a long tradition of being associated with character qualities. W.H. Davies celebrated Cockneys in his 1908 *Autobiography of a Super-tramp*:

"Cockneys make good beggars. They are held in high esteem by the fraternity in America. Their resource, originality and invention, and a never faltering tongue, enables them to often attain their ends where others fail, and they succeed where the natives starve."

People who identify with 'Cockney' often feel connected to values of resilience, defiance, resourcefulness, and stoic and irreverent wit. Such values are powerful resources for Tower Hamlets residents and for working-class communities everywhere. They build self-belief, confidence, and purpose. They provide power to stand up for yourself, to pick yourself up when knocked down, to look after others, and to have faith that tomorrow things might be better (and to keep going when they are not!). They enable anyone with an affinity to the Cockney identity to better overcome adversity, setbacks, or risk of being exploited.

Of course, it is increasingly rare for young people to self-identify as 'Cockney'. Young men in particular reject being labelled as 'Cockneys' [xix]. However, the values linked with Cockney are fundamental to the character of Tower Hamlets, from the families who lived in the East End for generations to the new residents who follow a centuries-old pattern of London being a place for people to begin new lives. And they provide connection across generations and geography for all of Cockneydom.

While the myth that Cockneys are defined by being born in the sound of Bow bells is a modern misunderstanding of a historical comment, Cockney values and beliefs create a reality where 'the sound of Bow Bells is heard through the heart', through identity practices, emotional attachment, belonging and affiliation to place, and pro-social actions.

In today's challenging times, having a positive and confident sense of a shared identity and proud past can build greater resilience to overcome adversity, and provide a more supportive narrative for dealing with life's challenges.

Moreover, in a post-Brexit Britain experiencing division and rancour, the values associated with Cockney identities can enable celebration of localness in a divided country. Many are proud of being 'English', 'British', or carrying another national identity. Reconnecting with local identities such as Cockney offers a rich sense of engagement in being part of the fabric of a locality. Whatever one's feelings about their national identity, the exploration, celebration, and affirmation of Cockney identity and values can be a pathway to building social cohesion, promoting a shared sense of values, and enabling communities to come together for their common cause and being part of a greater tribe of humanity.

Pressure and Erasure

People who identify as 'Cockney' are offered a powerful legacy of a proud, inspiring past of values of resilience and defiance, resourcefulness, and a stoic and irreverent wit. For them, Cockney provides a potent resource to contemporary challenges, to overcome adversity, and to be more purposeful today and tomorrow. It is one that links them not only with Tower Hamlets and the East End, but with a broader global diaspora of Cockneydom.

But like working-class and similarly 'non-standard' identities all across England, Cockney is under pressure from forces of standardisation. Ideologies of 'standardness' themselves exert a force to encourage upwardly mobile people to suppress Cockney identities. In an analogy to the English Poor Act of 1697—which required people in receipt of parish relief to wear a visible shoulder badge to publicly confirm their poverty, and had the effect of shaming people out of collecting relief—for some a Cockney identity, accent, or postcode is something to shed geographically and socially at the earliest opportunity to avoid projecting a public display of poverty and other negative social meanings.

Others who held Cockney identities have been pressured to leave traditional Cockey spaces in Tower Hamlets and elsewhere. In the mid-20th century, residents moved away from the East End in response to the lack of housing in London and the availability of luxuries like extra bedrooms, bathrooms, and gardens in Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent, and beyond. These tendencies have been exacerbated by the tremendous economic pressures of 21st London living, as gentrification pushes all but the richest residents and businesses out of Tower Hamlets.

Cockney is also under pressure from acts of erasure by London's civic institutions. A striking instance is the Mayor of London's 2018 cultural strategy report for London, titled Culture for All Londoners. The report is 180 pages long with 35,000 words, but the word *Cockney* is not used once. Google Analytics of the Mayor of London's Office website shows that in 357,000 webpages cached since 2011 and containing 375 million words, Cockney is only used 22 times—and 21 of these are from third-party contributions! To provide a context the words *Londoner* and *Londoners* were each used about 179,000 and 180,000.

Cockney was also not used in the Mayor of London's 'I am London' exhibition—despite featuring a pie'n'mash shop and a Pearly King—both icons of Cockney identity. This final case illustrates a simultaneous erasure and coopting of Cockney—Cockney culture is used by authorities to visually index London to their benefit, but is not worthy of being named by those authorities.

Because identities are central to each of us individually and communally, when identities are suppressed, erased, or coopted by the elite, our selves and communities are suppressed, erased, and coopted. The pressures exerted on Cockney identities through forces of 'standardness' mirror pressures on working-class and non-standard communities across England.

Pluricentric Identities

The complexity and fluidity of Cockney identity, and the empowering set of core Cockney values and beliefs, allow Cockney to be a complementary identity in the many identities shared and negotiated among Tower Hamlets residents.

Our flexibility of navigating the identities we use to present ourselves to different audiences is familiar from the statement of a Tower Hamlets resident who described his child's practices of linguistic codeswitching: 'My daughter speaks in different ways to me, to her friends, different types of friends, in her part-time job, and to her teachers'. It is also evident in the ways that identities have always been simultaneously maintained, adopted, and shared in Tower Hamlets, as waves of newcomers historically and contemporarily have adopted Tower Hamlets language and culture, held on to heritage language and culture, and shared language and culture back into the tapestry of Tower Hamlets.

Cockney identities can sit among a wardrobe of social identities that are relevant to people's lives and sense of purpose–whether that means actually identifying as 'Cockney' or drawing on the personal resilience and community-mindedness that are central to Cockney identity. Rather than being a reductive, monolithic identity to isolate a specific group of people in a defined area, Cockney today can be part of the patchwork quilt of multiple identities. Cockney Cultures have met Londoners who identify as Bengali Cockney, Black Cockney, East End Cockney, Essex Cockney, Jewish Cockney, and Sylheti Cockneys, among others.

While these personal identity choices affirm the flexibility of Cockney to be explicitly part of expressions of personal authenticity, Cockney values and beliefs offer all Tower Hamlets a shared heritage of personal strength and pro-social behaviours. When Tower Hamlets residents challenge injustices and illogicalities; when they refuse to be stopped by obstacles; and when they care for friends, family and community; they demonstrate the values and beliefs of a Cockney identity, and through their acts, unconsciously sustain, replenish, and deepen these values and beliefs.

Rather than being a social identity that belongs to the past, Cockney identities offer positive personal and community benefits relevant for Tower Hamlets today and into the future.
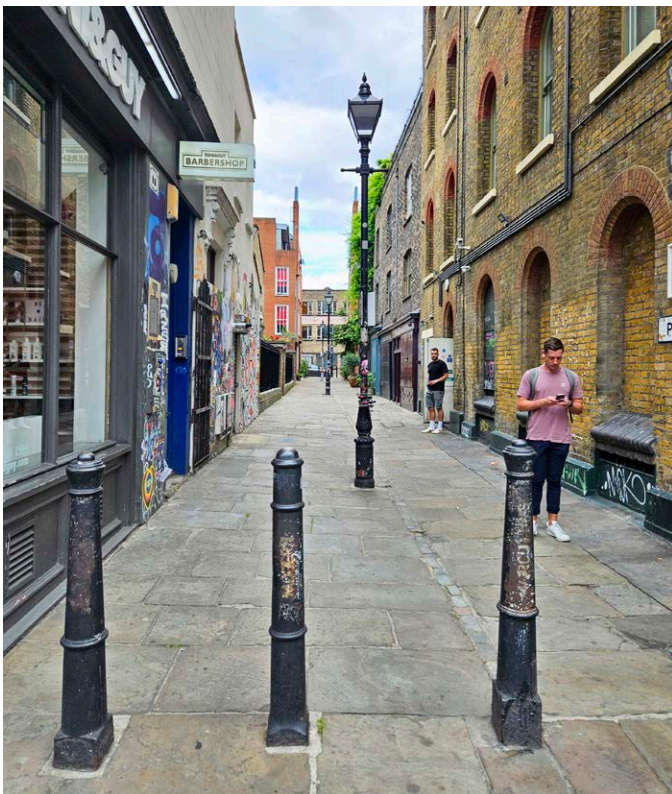
What is the Modern Cockney?

Cockney Cultures explored the question 'What is "Cockney" in the modern-day world?' through a series of 'Cockney Conversations'. The Cockney Conversations featured a technique called a 'Cockney Chat', using two sets of story cards. The cards depicted a set of crowdsourced positive images of Cockney culture and identity, and a set of common negative stereotypes about Cockney.

5 cards of the positive, evolving story of Cockney

Do you know any Cockney rhyming slang?

Optimism - is that a Cockney characeristic?

The Battle of Cable Street, what does the fight against fascists say about Cockneys?

Is there a 'Cockney laugh', a response to other's misfortune?

'Dad's arrival to UK certificate' - what are the stories of Cockneys and their background?

5 cards of negative stereotypes about Cockney

Are Cockneys of low intelligence or lesser educated?

Does being a Cockney mean you are of low social status?

Are all Cockneys racists?

Are Cockneys untrustworthy?

Are Cockney's lawbreakers?

The Cockney Conversations created space for people to share their lived experiences and mental associations of 'Cockney'—whether they identified personally as Cockneys or shared positive values and beliefs connected with Cockney identity. A set of core Cockney values and beliefs emerged:

Cockney values:
1. Resilient, defiant, and sometimes subversive
2. Resourceful
3. Underpinned by a stoic and irreverent wit

Cockney beliefs:
1. Stand up for yourself and pick yourself up when knocked down
2. Look after each other
3. Some believe this time next year they will be millionaires, others believe'enough is as good as a feast'
4. It's important to have a 'larf' and not let everything get to you
5. Cockneys are special people

"A lot of people talked about themselves as being 'Sylheti Cockneys'. That seems to be kind of a really valuable thing, to have that plurality of working-class culture."

"Pie'n'mash, it's not just the food there's almost an associated passion with it."

"If you're strapped for cash and almost all in the neighbourhood are in the same boat, people become resourceful because of the circumstances."

"On the one hand people born in traditional Cockney communities wants to get out of the area, but their means of getting out is based on Cockney values of resilience and resourcefulness."

"My dad said just because we were born in the East End he didn't mean I had to doff my cloth cap to others. I just really identify with it really strong."

"I was saying, is there a 'middle-class Cockney'? And then like, I have lived here 25 years in East London, am I a 'Cockney'? So I suppose it's like kind of questioning these different identities is quite interesting. Who can be what and why?"

"The history taught in primary schools it just seemed to be all about the Romans, the Egyptians and Kings and Queens. The local history, there's a lot behind it. And it is an identity that's being lost."

"It's a manifestation of working-class culture. That's how it feels, a kind of positive working-class culture, which is under the cosh. To have vibrant working-class culture is something that is absolutely valuable."

"It's important because it's to do with identity, with history, heritage and roots".

"Everybody's just struggling to kind of you know make ends meet, or get higher up the ladder, yet be marginalised on the basis of class, it's absolutely important to keep these working-class cultures".

A Formula for Cockney Identity

During a Modern Cockney Festival 2023 event on Cockney humour, the comedian Arthur Smith defined Cockneys as, 'non-posh Londoners'. The Cockney Conversations revealed a far more complex answer to the question 'What is a Cockney?', riddled with ambiguities, contradictions, paradoxes, and misconceptions.

To make sense of this complexity, Cockney Cultures devised a creative tool to harness what is called 'Mathematical Language' (despite not having words people can make sense of the communication through numbers and symbols) to explored, 'What is the modern Cockney cultural identity?' By using an alternative language to words, in this case creating a formula, it is possible to identify different elements, their interaction, and any synergies that may operate between the various parts.
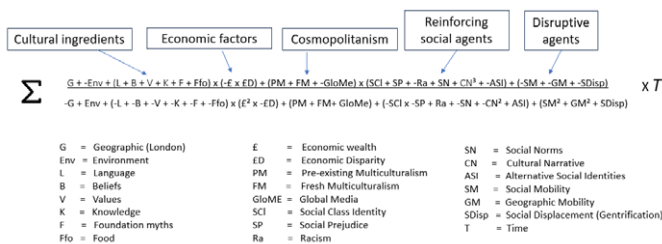
While the formula may indeed look complex, it belies a far greater complexity of reality. It nonetheless can be a useful device for identifying different component elements and also their interactions with a body of elements positively promoting a positive, confident, and vibrant Cockney identity opposed by counterforces undermining its vitality and existence.

The narrative that underlies the formula is:

"Cockney is an emergent culture with communities spanning those living within a traditional heartland through to a Cockney Diaspora spanning geography and generations, yet united in an emotional affinity and attachment with Cockney cultural identity. It is shaped by the interaction between positive and negative forces."

The formula reveals:

1. Cockney identity is connected to geography. When it is celebrated as part of localness, particularly in connection with London, it thrives. When it is challenged by dislocation and gentrification, it is weakened.

2. Cockney identity consists of a shared language, beliefs, values, knowledge, foundation myths, and a culture featuring iconic foods.

3. A sense of identifying with Cockney identity is fuelled by a low economic status juxtaposed against economic wealth that creates a working-class status and identity, which is reinforced through social prejudice. Improved economic status can encourage moving away socially from identifying with working class identity and experiencing reduced social prejudice, as well as geographical mobility.

4. Cockney has always been a cosmopolitan soup of multicultural identities, with a constant fresh influx of new different influences from all part of the globe.

5. The formula serves as a starting point for recognising complexity, the dynamic forces operant within it, the relationship between its different elements, and how it provides the ingredients for a wide spectrum of interpretations of a single identity, labelled 'Cockney'.

Lesson Plans

This section explores the values, beliefs, practices, and perspectives that are connected with 'Cockney' as a culture and as an identity–both historically and today. It suggests pathways for fostering positive character traits by celebrating Cockney culture and identity with the Tower Hamlets Community Languages Programme, whether people identify personally as Cockneys or not.

Sample Lesson Plan 1: Linguistic Landscaping

Background

Linguistic landscaping is a sociolinguistic approach that examines the ways visible language is displayed in public spaces—and the ways public spaces are shaped and defined by displays of language. Researchers examine artefacts such as signs, advertisements, and graffiti. They unpick the ways that choices about language reflect cultural, social, and political dynamics. They gain insights into language diversity, power dynamics, identities, and the interactions between different linguistic communities in a particular area.

Linguistic landscapers might ask:

- Why do some businesses in communities where English is not widely spoken nevertheless use English in advertisements? Does English carry associations with technology or global culture that consumers might understand just by seeing English, even if they do not understand the message?

- How do communities engage with official 'top-down' language through 'bottom-up' language—for instance, by defacing regulatory notices? What do these actions reveal about relationships between people and institutions? Do they increase visibility of 'top-down' language by drawing attention to institutional postings or undermine institutional authority and reclaim power for people?

- How does signage function to define an area? For instance, can the borders of London's Chinatown be identified by whether menus are displayed in Chinese scripts or by English and Chinese script? Are there businesses owned by non-Chinese speaking people who nevertheless present their business with Chinese-script signage—and, if so, what does this mean about the way that Chinese script is being turned into a commodity or resource?

See **https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linguistic_landscape** for further reading.

Preparatory Discussion Questions

- How does the language displayed on a street in a community create meaning for that street and that community? (e.g., What does it say to people when Brick Lane streets signs are printed in English and Bangla script?)

- Why do the people who create public language make the specific choices they make? (e.g., Why does a pub use an old-fashioned font for its signage?)

- How do language creators manipulate our perceptions through their choices in creating public language? (e.g., How do the large financial interests in the Truman Brewery use language to create a persona that they part of the Tower Hamlets community?)

- How does language define spaces? (e.g., Do signs around Canary Wharf tend to point 'in' toward the business district or 'out' toward nearby spaces such as Billingsgate Fish Market—and is this meant to separate Canary Wharf from the rest of Tower Hamlets?)

- How do choices about language displays reflect power differences between languages and speakers of languages? (e.g., Why aren't more signs in Tower Hamlets displayed in Sylheti?)

- How do people take language to gain money or power? (e.g., Do businesses or institutions use language that does not 'belong' to them to communicate?)

Practical Activity

Research question: How is language displayed to define the space around us?

Activity: Participants spend a fixed amount of time in the local area. Working in small groups, they observe language in signs, postings, advertisements, graffiti, and other public displays. They photograph these. They return to class and collaborate to analyse their artefacts. During their analysis, they may return to the original discussion questions. Finally, they prepare a brief presentation of their analysis of at least one language artefact to answer the research question.

Output: Participants present their analyses (along with the photo of the artefact) to the class.

Sample Lesson Plan 2: Cockney Rhyming Slang

Background

Cockney Rhyming Slang is one of the most well-known features of Cockney. Words or phrases are replaced with a rhyming phrase—often only using the first part of the phrase—to say what you want to say. Here are some Cockney Rhyming Slang phrases:

- *Adam and Eve* = 'believe': 'Would you Adam and Eve it? I won the lottery!'

- *apples and pears* = 'stairs': 'Going up the apples to get to my bedroom.'

- *butcher's hook* = 'look': 'Let's have a butcher's at what's in your bag.'

- *dog and bone* = 'phone': 'I'll give you a call on the dog and bone.'

- *Hank Marvin* (a well-known guitarist of the 1960s) = 'starving': 'I'm Hank Marvin! What's for dinner?'

- *jam jar* = 'car': 'That's a nice jam jar parked in the street.'

- *loaf of bread* = 'head': 'Use your loaf, think smarter.'

- *Pete Tong* (a well-known English radio DJ) = 'wrong': 'It's all gone Pete Tong.'

- *plates of meet* = 'feet': 'Get your plates off of my nice clean floor.'

- *Ruby Murray* (a popular singer in the 1950s) = 'curry': 'Fancy a Ruby for dinner?'

Playfulness and agility with words make Cockney Rhyming Slang a delightful linguistic phenomenon, and a great example of the creative potential of language. People are word acrobats, who can twist and turn words to create new expressions that amuse and bring extra colour to our expressions. Cockney Rhyming Slang also carries cultural significance. It's a way for a community to use words to assert its identity, fostering a sense of belonging. If someone says, 'It's all gone Pete Tong,' they are simultaneously saying two propositions. On one level, they're expressing a proposition about an immediate situation or experience: 'it's gone wrong'. But on a deeper level, they're also expressing a more abstract idea about their identity and the identities of the person they're talking to: 'I identity as a Cockney and identify you as one, too, because we both recognise and use Cockney Rhyming Slang'.

There's a myth that Cockney Rhyming Slang was used as a secret code to hide meaning from the police. This is probably not really true, and reflects popular ideologies about the people who spoke Cockney rather than facts about the world.

See **https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhyming_slang** for further reading.

Preparatory Discussion Questions

- Do you know other examples of Cockney Rhyming Slang?

- What sorts of concepts are encoded by Cockney Rhyming Slang? (e.g., Does Cockney Rhyming Slang focus on everyday objects and experiences, taboo subjects, or other types of topic?)

- What are some of your favourite slang words that you or your friends really use?

- Are there commonalities between your favourite slang words and Cockney Rhyming Slang? (e.g., Are similar types of topics encoded? Are slang words funny?)

- When we use slang, do we communicate more than just the literal meaning of the slang? (e.g., If you say a person is *leng*, does it say something more about you or the person that you are talking to than it would if you said they were *pretty*).

- Why do people choose to use slang sometimes even though it might be 'improper' English?

- Why do people believe that Cockney Rhyming Slang evolved to hide meanings from police? (e.g., Do people believe that Cockney speakers were criminals, so that however they spoke must be tied to criminality?) Are there parallels with the way people view other forms of slang?

- Are there examples of 'standard' and 'nonstandard' words and phrases in any other languages you know?

Practical Activity

Research question: How does linguistic creativity support our communicative practices and identities?

Activities:

1. Invent Cockney Rhyming Slang from:
   - famous singers: Ed Sheeran, Stormzy, Taylor Swift
   - well-known brands: Burger King, Coca Cola, iPhone

2. Create your own rhyming slang for these words:
   - computer
   - pizza
   - mobile phone
   - plane

3. Find examples of reasons it is better to use slang than 'proper' words.

Output: Participants create a dictionary for their new slang, including guidance on when and why people should use the slang words instead of 'standard' alternatives.

# Sample Lesson Plan 3: Nursery Rhymes and Cultural Heritage

Background

Nursery rhymes and folk songs from London reflect local culture and history.

For example:

- Oranges and Lemons
  (**https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oranges_and_Lemons**)

- Ring a Ring o Roses
  (**https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ring_a_Ring_o%27_Roses**)

- Pop goes the weasel
  (**https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pop_Goes_the_Weasel**)

These old rhymes and songs often began as ways for people to tell stories about their communities. They're passed down from parents to children across many generations. They give us insights into the ways communities used to be, and ways to compare our lives today to older times. They also share community and family values.
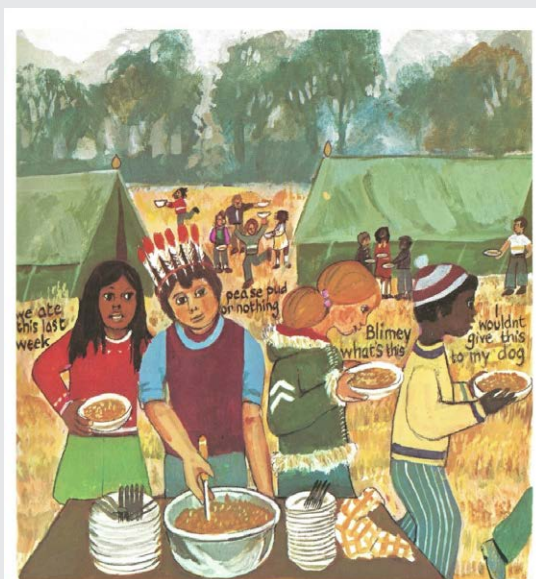
Pease pudding hot,
Pease pudding cold,
Pease pudding in the pot
Nine days old.

Some like it hot,
Some like it cold,
Some like it in the pot
Nine days old.

Illustration from Rosemary Stones & Andrew Mann, illustrated by Dan Jones, *Mother Goose comes to Cable Street*, Kestrel Books, 1977.

Preparatory Discussion Questions

- Show pictures and maps of churches mentioned in 'Oranges and Lemons'.

- What do we learn about London many generations ago from the rhymes? (e.g., Why do the bells at Old Bailey say, 'When will you pay me?')

- Why are church bells so important in 'Oranges and Lemons'?

- How does London compare today to the society that is described in these nursery rhymes and folk songs?

- Why do parents and children share nursery rhymes and folk songs?

- Share the picture from the book of illustrated Cockney nursery rhymes. What values are depicted by combining the illustration with the nursery rhyme?

Practical Activity

Research question: How does linguistic creativity support our communicative practices and identities?

Activity: Participants create a new nursery rhyme inspired by local culture, landmarks, or history.

Output: Participants share their nursery rhyme. They also describe the experiences, values, and beliefs they are trying to reflect in the nursery rhyme.

Cockney and the Community Languages Programme

Tower Hamlets' recognition of Cockney as a community language is an anti-prejudicial act that challenges the marginalisation of Londoners who happen not to conform linguistically, culturally, or otherwise to dominant standards.

Cockney's designation as a community language offers a pathway for the Tower Hamlets Community Languages Programme to be a radically innovative engine of social justice in the context of 'non-standard' Englishes. It resists discrimination against a language variety—which is always in reality discrimination against the users of that language variety. It celebrates the centuries-old cultural heritage that is common to all Tower Hamlet residents. It empowers Tower Hamlets residents to celebrate their identities as Cockneys, Londoners, English, British, and otherwise, and equips them with values and beliefs of resilience, pride, self-belief, and sense of togetherness to promote well-being, inclusivity, and social cohesion.

Cockney's inclusion in the Tower Hamlets Community Languages Programme delegitimates prejudicial standard language ideologies by providing space for a scientific curriculum of linguistics. It gives permission to use 'non-elite' varieties of English spoken in Tower Hamlets as scaffolding to attain the Englishes of wider access that are a social gateway to upward mobility. It creates opportunities for learners to recognise the legitimacy of their own language variety and transfer their fluency in their own English to Englishes of broader educational attainment. To our knowledge, it is the first such opportunity to be created in the UK. Tower Hamlets may provide a model for social justice curricula and activities to support 'non-standard' varieties everywhere.

This blueprint has provided an intellectual and practical pathway for Cockney's inclusion in the Tower Hamlet's Community Languages Programme. It has revealed the social injustices that are perpetuated through standard-language ideologies. It has challenged ideologies about Cockney as a non-standard language variety and cultural identity. It has illustrated ways that Cockney can be used in teaching about language and language ideologies, which may increase meta-linguistic knowledge, foster pro-social values, empower learners with knowledge of local language varieties and cultures, and enhance acquisition of Englishes for upward mobility.

Goals for Cockney in the Tower Hamlets Community Language Programme

A Cockney-focused curriculum in the Community Language Programme should:

1. Provide linguistically and sociolinguistically informed education on features of Englishes spoken in Tower Hamlets, across domains of phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and discourse.

2. Challenge standard-language ideologies and other acts and practices that are discriminatory toward 'non-standard' languages and cultures.

3. Equip learners with metalinguistic and metacultural knowledge and strategies to resist language prejudice and language ideologies.

4. Celebrate local languages and cultures in Tower Hamlets through a lens of Cockney to increase personal pride, self-belief, and community spirit, and enhance pro-social behaviours.

5. Foster acquisition of Englishes of wider economic access by using 'non-standard' Englishes such as Cockney as scaffolding to support codeswitching to 'standard' Englishes.

6. Connect challenges faced by Tower Hamlets speakers of non-standard Englishes like Cockney to broader experiences of linguistic and social discrimination in other communities, building inter-cultural and inter-community empathy.

Partnership

As Tower Hamlets blazes a trail for implementing a pro-social justice Community Languages Programme through its recognition of Cockney as a community language, Cockney Cultures looks forward to continued partnership with Tower Hamlets. Cockney Cultures will continue to work with Tower Hamlets to:

1. Establish a vision and strategy for the future of Cockney as a community language to tackle social prejudice, discrimination, and divisive tribalism.

2. Create emergent spaces for rediscovering Cockney's story and understanding the dynamics of its continued evolution.

3. Empower changemakers, providing them with better tools to understand, share, and nurture cultures, like Cockney, that emerge from communities of working people.

4. Measure outcomes from Cockney's inclusion in the Tower Hamlets Community Language Programme.

5. Communicate the vision of a pro-social justice Community Language Programme.

6. Support further research to develop the case for supporting community languages to tackle social prejudice, discrimination, and divisive tribalism.

7. Be part of a compelling coalition to realise greater change

By celebrating a Cockney cultural identity and community language based on positive inclusive values, with a confident forward-looking narrative of pride, self-belief, and togetherness, Cockney Cultures and Tower Hamlets can create agency for a greater sense of well-being, inclusivity, and social cohesion for the residents of Tower Hamlets.

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Modern Cockney Charter

A Cockney Blueprint highlights the need to create a new agenda for Cockney cultural identity and community language. This agenda must challenge discrimination based on negative stereotypes, ideologies, and misconceptions, and advocate positive investment in language, heritage, and education to celebrate a proud Cockney past with a confident future among other language varieties and cultural identities.

To promote Cockney as a community language Cockney Cultures proposes a Modern Cockney Charter. The charter calls for activities that:

1. Establish a vision and strategy for the future of Cockney as a community language to tackle social prejudice, discrimination and divisive tribalism.

2. Create emergent spaces for rediscovering Cockney's story and understanding the dynamics of its continued evolution.

3. Empower changemakers, providing them with better tools to understand, share, and nurture cultures, like Cockney, that emerge from communities of working people.

4. Measure outcomes from programmes that celebrate aspects of Cockney culture, identity and language.

5. Communicate the vision of pro-social justice programmes that celebrate Cockney and other working-class language varieties and cultures.

6. Support further research to develop the case for supporting community languages to tackle social prejudice, discrimination, and divisive tribalism.

7. Be part of a compelling coalition to realise greater change.

Find out more

www.growsocialcapital.org.uk/campaigns/cockneyblueprint

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