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Intersections of class, race and place: language and gender perspectives from the UK

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Abstract

This essay presents an analysis of place references in the spontaneous talk of young Londoners from a range of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. These place references function as ‘cultural concepts’ (Silverstein 2004) which index multi-layered meanings well beyond their denotations, constituting important resources for speakers’ local and supra-local positionings. The essay argues that ‘place’ is an important filter for our experience of language, gender and sexuality and provides scholars with a valuable point of departure for explorations of intersectional identities.

Keywords

intersectionality; ethnicity; class; cultural concepts; place; London

Translation of abstract

Dieser Aufsatz analysiert verschiedene Ortsbezeichnungen im spontanen Gespräch junger Londoner von unterschiedlicher sozioökonomischer und ethnischer Herkunft. Diese Ortsbezeichnungen fungieren als ‘kulturelle Konzepte’ (Silverstein 2004), die vielschichtige Bedeutungen weit über ihre Bezeichnung oder Denotation hinaus erschließen und wichtige Ressourcen für lokale und überörtliche Positionierungen von Sprechern darstellen. Der Aufsatz argumentiert, dass Örtlichkeit ein wichtiger Filter für unsere Erfahrungen von Sprache,

Geschlecht und Sexualität ist und Wissenschaftlerinnen einen wertvollen Ausgangspunkt für die Erforschung intersektionaler Identitäten bietet.

As many of our international students highlight in classroom discussions, the notion of place is highly relevant to our experience of language, gender and sexuality. The question of what constitutes national, ethnic and racial culture and the relationship between local and larger-scale (national, transnational, global) cultural norms, practices and ideologies have been foregrounded in various linguistic fields of enquiry, including intercultural communication, hip hop studies and raciolinguistics (e.g. Alim 2016; Piller 2017). For language, gender and sexuality studies the interplay between the local and the supra or translocal has been of increasing importance in the last three decades since the 1992 Berkeley Women and Language Conference.

Although place has often not been foregrounded in language, gender and sexuality research explicitly, it has clearly always played a significant role; see for example Norma Mendoza-Denton's (2008; 2021) ethnography on the localized rivalry between Norteña (Northern) and Sureña (Southern) Latina youth gangs in the suburbs of San Francisco Bay Area, or Inken Keim's (2007) ethnography of a group of second and third generation Turkish girls in southwestern Germany. Keim showed how the girls used markers of (linguistic) style, including mixing of local varieties of Turkish and German, as well as coarse and competitive language, to express their resistance to gender norms imposed by their parents and to counter the marginalization they experienced when they first moved from their Turkish inner-city neighbourhood to their new grammar school in a different part of town. The implications of

power in relation to place has, more recently, been on the forefront of studies on the geopolitics of language, gender and sexuality, and, in particular, on perspectives from the Global South (Milani and Lazar 2017; Diabah 2020; Singh 2021; see also IGALA 2021). Equally, intersectionality and queer theory have provided additional resources for researchers exploring the heterogeneity of language, gender and sexuality (see also Chen 2021; Milani 2021). On re-reading these texts for the writing of this essay, it is clear how central the notion of place is to much of this recent work (Hall 2009; Levon 2012; Jones 2014; Borba 2019).

In my own research I explore the spontaneous talk of various groups of (young) speakers in London. As I will show, speakers frequently use place references as cultural concepts (Silverstein 2004) to index a range of local and supralocal meanings, whose exploration makes a central contribution to our understanding of intersectional identities. In this essay, I will provide insight into some of these London-based positionings, framed by a brief overview of relevant research on gender and place in the UK, as well as my very own ‘London story’.

In the UK, Rob Lawson’s (2013) ethnography in a Scottish comprehensive school uncovered four salient Communities of Practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992), consisting of Schoolies, Alternatives, Sports and Neds, with the latter encapsulating a tough Glaswegian working class masculinity with associations of deviance and criminality. Intersections of place and social class are also central to Emma Moore’s ethnographic research near Manchester in the north of England, where the Townies displayed street-wise, anti-school attitudes in opposition to the popular, upmarket Eden Village girls (Moore and Podesva 2009).

The multi-ethnic and linguistic diversity of London and its implication for gendered norms and experiences is evidenced in many sociolinguistics and discourse analytic studies in educational settings, such as Siân Preece's (2009) account of laddish British Asian masculinities in the context of widening participation programmes at a London university. Shivonne Gates's (2019) study of Multicultural London English in a diverse East London comprehensive school captures the relevance of ethnicity for a range of the communities of practice, including the self-labelled 'Black squad', 'White squad', 'Asian Squad' and 'Skittle Squad', the latter a label chosen by the group to reflect their ethnic diversity. There is also a wealth of non-linguistic research in the UK which is of interest to scholars and students of gender and discourse, including Kinga Goodwin's (2016) sociological/anthropological study which compared Polish immigrant femininities in London, UK and in Wellington, New Zealand.

Reflecting on 30 years of research since the 1992 Berkeley Women and Language Conference, and 15 years of the journal *Gender and Language*, is an opportunity not only to sum up the current state of the art in our field of enquiry, but also to celebrate/honour our pioneers. We owe them a lot. Whilst new generations of scholars develop the field into a range of important directions, we must not forget that constructive critique and respectful engagement with this pioneering work are not mutually exclusive. My own trajectory began after I stumbled across a book entitled *Women, Men and Language* in Foyles Book Shop in London in the mid-1990s, whilst on a scholarship in the UK to complete my MA thesis. The book not only led me to complete the first MA dissertation on the topic of gender and conversational style in English linguistics at the University of Salzburg, Austria, but also sparked such an enthusiasm in me that the obvious next step was a PhD in language and gender studies. I decided to dream big and

wrote a letter to the author of the book I had found in London. To my great surprise I received a handwritten letter back, encouraging me to discuss my research plans, signed with ‘Yours sincerely, Jennifer Coates’. I still have this letter to this day. Under the tutelage of Prof Jennifer Coates and my second supervisor, Dr Joanna Thornborrow, who made sure that I received very solid foundation in discourse and conversation analysis, my own language and gender journey then began. Jen Coates was one of the attendees of the Berkeley conferences, and after having spent her earlier years working on the Survey of English Usage and on the semantics of modal auxiliaries, pioneered language and gender studies in the UK (e.g. Coates 1986, 1996, 1997). At the time Jen had quite a struggle to persuade publishers that writing about women’s talk (without comparing it to that of men) was a worthwhile undertaking. Thankfully this has changed, although recent years have not seen a flood of publications on the spontaneous talk of women friends, especially not middle-aged or older women.

Jen’s focus was on the talk of white, middle-class, middle-aged women and as her PhD student, I was interested in a different demographic. My initial aim was to collect spontaneous talk from younger women from different social class backgrounds in London, so I decided to turn to London’s East End. In my search for social class, I sought out place, but what I found in the East End of London was also ethnicity and race. These intersections between language, gender, social class, ethnicity and later race, became a continuing focus point for my own work. Whilst I also used the terms ‘interplay’ and ‘interact/ion’, following sociolinguistics tradition (Levon 2015), I was soon drawn to the term ‘intersect/ion(ality)’ when I began to explore the talk and positioning of young Bangladeshi women from working class backgrounds, living in the East End of London (Pichler 2011[2008]). Initially my thinking on intersectional, heterogeneous and fluid identities

was influenced by cultural theorists like Stuart Hall (1992) or Avtar Brah (1996), as I embraced their approach to culture as a positioning, process or ‘semiotic space with infinite class, caste, gender, ethnic or other inflections’ (Brah 1996: 234). At the same time, I have been interested in the constraints of the ‘macrosociological order’ on ‘microcontextual’ positionings (Silverstein: 2004: 640). Kimberlé Crenshaw’s work on intersectionality in the context of anti-discrimination law foregrounds this macrosociological order by highlighting systems of power and (multiple, intersecting levels of) oppression experienced by Black women. Bucholtz and miles-hercules (2021: 416) argue that this focus is frequently lost in research on language, gender and race from an identity perspective. This does not always have to be the case, however, as Susan Ehrlich’s (2021) reflections on the intersections of sexism and racism in sexual assault trials demonstrate.

In my own work, I approach the analysis of intersectional identities by examining language at a discourse (that is, ideological) level (see also Cameron 1997). In particular, I explore the discourses speakers draw on in their positioning and the various levels of indexical meanings of these discourses. One way to make the connection between discourse and indexicality is via the late Michael Silverstein’s (2004) ‘cultural concepts’. Silverstein argues that by dropping into the conversation references to, for example, elite universities, or wine connoisseurship, speakers index certain sociocultural knowledge which, if shared by their interlocutors, identifies them as members of the elite. My spontaneous conversational data reveals how these ‘cultural concepts’ constitute a significant resource for speakers to index macro-sociological identities even outside the performance of elite identities. I have come across many examples where speakers deploy cultural concepts linked to ‘place’, indexing multi-layered meanings well beyond the denotation of the place references (e.g. see Pichler and Williams 2016). As I will show below, a focus on

‘place’ on the level of discourse/ideology provides a useful point of departure for an exploration of intersectional identities, including issues of power.

The following is an extract of the talk of a group of 15-16-year-old Bangladeshi girls from an all-girls comprehensive school in the East of London. The girls had been self-recording their talk for me during break time at school. On this occasion they had been talking about a wedding proposal which Ardiana’s family had received for her from one of their neighbours in Bangladesh (Pichler 2009, 2011). In the ensuing discussion, most (but not all) of the girls show their general acceptance of their parents’ involvement in arranging their marriage, but they are clearly against suitors from Bangladesh. The place reference ‘Londoni’ (stave 4) becomes significant in their positioning.

Extract 1: ‘Londoni girls’

- (1)
Ardiana [but then again a] ha-
Hennah {*amused*} he may be gorgeous but then again he mig[ht have a (a)]
- (2)
Ardiana =YEAH:: [that’s] true (.)
Hennah personality like a (.) **ape** or **something**= [yeah]
Dilshana yeah when
- (3)
Ardiana they just wanna
Hennah [(they just]xxx-)
Dilshana they come to England yeah they just lea[ve you man]
- (4)
Ardiana get married to girls from London [because like they are Londoni (.) yeah
Varda [yeah because of the passport (.)

(5)

Ardiana [they are from London they are British] they are British and they wanna come
Varda [they want their passport inn]it
Dilshana (ah[:]){agreeing}

(6)

Ardiana to this country as well
Varda (-) they want the passports the British passports

In this extract, the girls draw on a number of discourses, including what appears to be a popular anti-immigration discourse, which, however, overlaps with a trend among many young British Asians and a substantial number of their parents to object to marriages of British girls being arranged with suitors from the Indian subcontinent (Anwar 1998). On the other hand, connections with Britain are still valued highly by Bangladeshi families, as shown by uses of the term ‘Londoni’, which tends to be applied to people, houses and entire villages that have connections to Britain (Gardner and Shukur 1994:147). Londoni here becomes a ‘cultural concept’ whose meaning goes well beyond the base meaning of ‘living in London’. It signals prestige status, which extends to the girls themselves. All of the girls in the group are aware of these meanings, and all of them reject their role in matches that would see them positioned as Londoni ‘trophy wives’, valued mostly for their access to a British passport. At the same time the girls are proud of their Londoni (that is, urban) British Bangladeshi identities, which they position as superior to their suitors’ (Sylheti village) backgrounds. The connotations of lack of civility and inferiority are captured in many ways, e.g. when Hennah (who several years later entered into a very happy arranged marriage with a young man from Bangladesh) likens the personality of a potential Sylheti groom to that of an ‘ape’, thereby invoking a discourse of imperial Darwinism with racist implications. The identities that the girls thus construct for themselves are those of urban British Bangladeshi girls who demand compatible partners. For the

girls, compatibility is clearly rooted in (intersections of) ‘place’, as captured in their use of the term ‘Londoni’.

I have a list of other examples from my data over the years. For example, when a group of girls from an elite school in London’s West End sought to distance themselves from some of the other girls at their school, they used the associations of ‘skiing in Val d’Isère’ to index what they saw as overly privileged, socially unaware private-school femininities. Val d’Isère in itself has become a cultural concept indexing (French) exclusivity, and this is deployed by the girls in the group who recorded their talk for me to position themselves as ‘down to earth’ and ‘socially aware’ despite coming from extremely advantaged backgrounds themselves (Pichler 2009).

Another set of conversational data was recorded by a group of 20-year-old young working-class men from Black/mixed-race and mixed-ethnicity backgrounds in southeast London. When trying to authenticate themselves in opposition to ‘white boys’ who ‘understand’ hip hop, but do not ‘overstand’ or ‘live the culture’, Les and his friends draw heavily on place references which function as cultural concepts indexing both social class and race. When highlighting the difference between themselves and these white boys, Les and his friends use the place references ‘Cambridge’ and ‘Oxford’, both indexing historic white privilege due to their elite universities, contrasting those with their own predominantly Black and working-class neighbourhood of Peckham in southeast London (see Pichler and Williams 2016). So even within London, place references carry important sociocultural meanings which are exploited by the speakers in their positioning. The reality of place also differs for individuals and groups. These young Black men from southeast London highlight that whilst white middle-class hipsters have now moved into

their ‘hood’, their experience of the ‘hood’ is not only different but less authentic and dangerous than for Les and his friends. For example, whilst a ‘rich white girl’ Les used to see, lived on one of the roughest estates in London, entering the estate constitutes real physical danger for Les, as the local gang might consider his action as a threat to their territory, thinking ‘I’m some goon [gansta] in their ends tryin’a get me’ (Pichler and Williams 2016: 570).

Although experiences of place are often painfully real, the examples above also show that cultural stereotypes play an important part when we think about the indexicality of place-references. When this is considered as important for their children’s development and future, the young men do at times distance themselves from their (hip hop) language use as well as their southeast London neighbourhood, which they frequently describe as ‘the ends’, in alignment with hip hop jargon and Multicultural London English. So, for example, when they discuss how to prevent children from turning onto the wrong path, Les states that his son, who lives mostly with his mother, will not be at risk because ‘he’s from a different ends man he good in Finchley bruv *{laughter}*’. The connotations of Finchley, in north London, then become apparent in the following extract, which also shows that cultural stereotypes linked to place are not always unproblematic:

Extract 2: ‘best of both worlds’

(1)

Joe it’s not even about Jewish people it’s not about Jewish people man

(2)

Joe the reason why I did say Jewish people because you know when

- (3)
 Les Jewish people live on that road and it's full of Jewish people=
 Tim =that means that
- (4)
 Les and it's in north London it means that that is a money
 Tim road's got money
- (5)
 Les road (.) you know them ones dhere
 Tim and if not it's just it's just=
 Joe yeah
- (6)
 Les =a rich area [I'd rather him grow]
 Tim a maybe in a different c (-) social social [structure of society]
- (7)
 Les up around that and then still be able to come in around my [family
 Tim [so he's
- (8)
 Les =yeah so you know what I mean he won't be
 Tim got the best of both worlds=
- (9)
 Les ignorant (.) but if he's just from the ends it's gonna be like [where we are
 Tim yeah [but if he's just
- (10)
 Tim from there he's gonna be ignorant in another way it's true it's true

Differently from their own southeast London 'ends' in Peckham, north London's Finchley is associated with wealth and Jewishness by the young men. Indeed Finchley is situated in the north London borough with the highest percentage of Jewish population (although still no more than 20% overall). However, household income varies greatly across this borough, and is, on average, in the middle-income bracket. Nevertheless for the group this is a 'rich area', with Joe's son living on a 'money road' with 'big houses'. Perhaps there is an awareness of the antisemitism

contained in the association between Jewishness and wealth, as elsewhere the group appear to make a real effort to go on record about some very different potential benefits of the allegedly Jewish neighbourhood where Joe's son lives, e.g. when Tim says : 'so he's gonna have little Jewish musician friends [...] that's what you want', supported by Joe 'yeah that's cool man'.

Again, this example shows the multi-layered indexicality of place references. Here in the talk about his son, as in so many other extracts, Les constructs himself as a responsible and caring father, an identity which clearly emerges as highly compatible with and significant for his positioning as a young Black man (see Pichler 2021). Whilst initially it seems that Les foregrounds only the advantages of his son's north London home, the remainder of the extract shows that he hopes that his son will grow up (with cultural knowledge and social ties) afforded by both his mother's (north London/Finchley) and his father's (south London/Peckham) families and neighbourhoods. Being connected to both of these different locations will prevent his son from being 'ignorant' (Les), ensuring that he will get 'the best of both worlds' (Tim).

To conclude, 'place' is an important filter for our experience of language, gender and sexuality, as many of our students already know. As the examples from my conversational data have shown, place is also a worthwhile point of departure for scholarship aiming to capture how speakers draw on and interrogate some of the local and supralocal meanings associated with a range of different 'ends' in their positioning. Ardiana and her friends construct their (urban) 'Londoni' Bangladeshi femininities as superior to the (rural) Sylheti village masculinities of their suitors. In this instance then, the girls assume positions of power in their discursive positioning. Social status is also central to the identities negotiated by the private school girls who, despite

their own macro-sociological advantages, want to distance themselves from overly privileged ‘Val d’Isère’ femininities. Finally, when the young southeast London Black men position themselves in opposition to ‘Oxford’ and ‘Cambridge’ masculinities, or contrast their southeast London Peckham neighbourhood with that of Finchley in north London, they construct identities which show clear intersections of gender with race/ethnicity, social class/status, wealth and power. Thus, an exploration of the multi-layered indexicality of place references, approached as cultural concepts, provides important insight into intersectional gender experiences and identities, highlighting not only situational practices and positionings, but also indexing larger-scale social meanings. By seeking out place, we will find intersectionality.

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Transcription conventions

Transcription is based on the stave system. Simultaneous speech is represented by vertically aligned utterances within one stave.

{laughter} nonverbal or paralinguistics information
[] beginning/end of simultaneous speech

bold print	speaker emphasis
yeah:::::	lengthened sound
=	latching on (no gap between speakers' utterances)
(.); (-); (1)	micropause; pause shorter than one second; pauses longer than one second

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