

Researchi youth languag



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Rob Drummond explains why sociolinguistic research into youth language is interesting and valuable, even if it can be rather challenging.

While there are good reasons to study the language of any social group or demographic, there are two particularly good reasons to study the language of young people. Firstly, young people tend to be at the forefront of language change and innovation. We know that language changes and develops over time, and although there is often some noticeable change in spoken language within an individual across the lifespan, the most significant developments occur between generations; you speak differently from your parents and grandparents, and your children and grandchildren will speak differently from you. This means that changes are always brought about by the 'next' generation; in other words, young people. So, if we want to investigate how these changes come about, it makes sense to focus on those speakers who are right in the middle of the action.

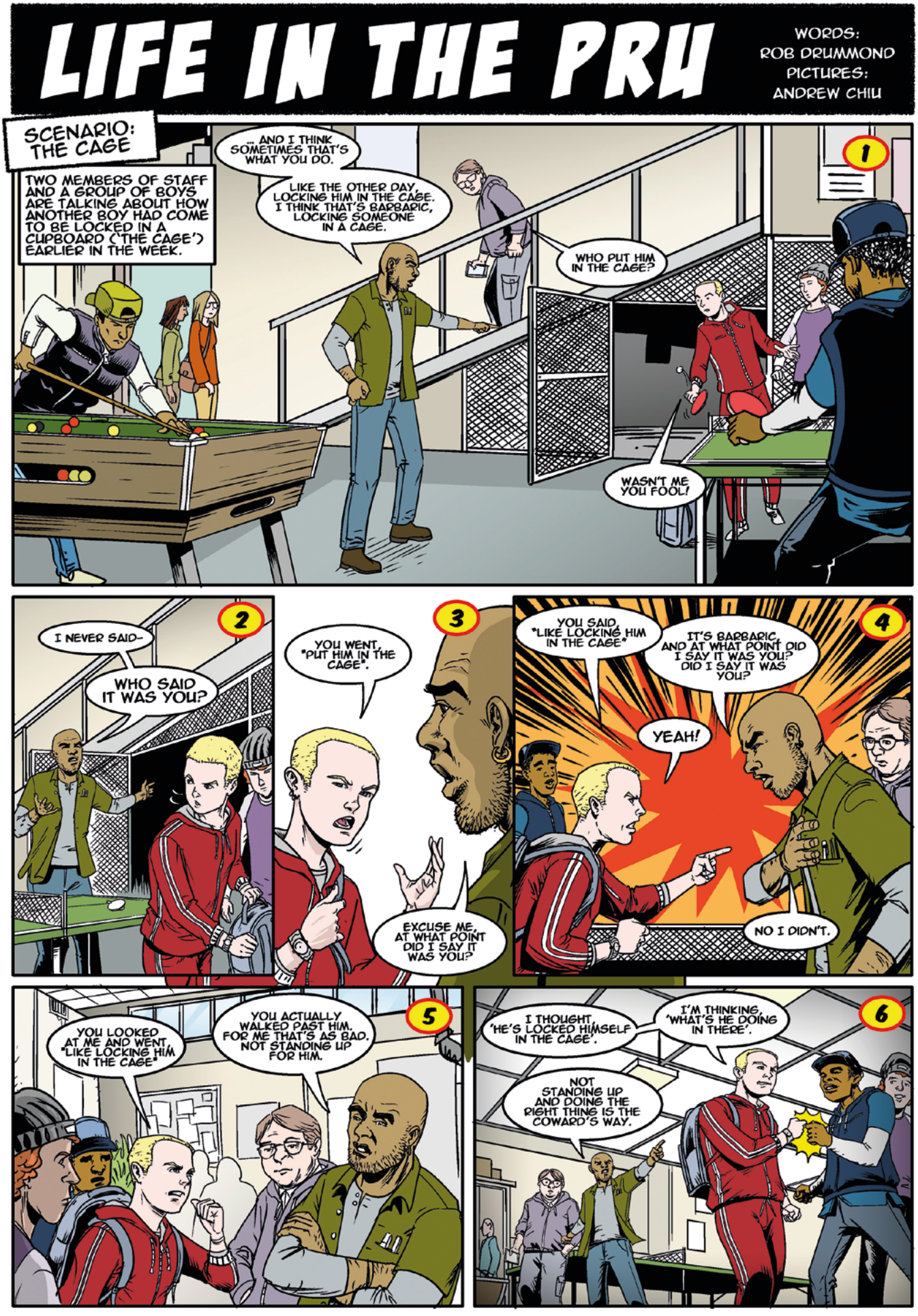
Secondly, young people, especially adolescents, are at a critical and fascinating time of their lives with regard to the construction, negotiation and performance of identity. It is a time of life when we might experiment with music, with fashion and with different behaviours in order to fit in (or not fit in) with different social groups and in relation to different societal expectations. Language plays a key role in this process of identity enactment and performance, but it is a role that can only be properly understood through close inspection.

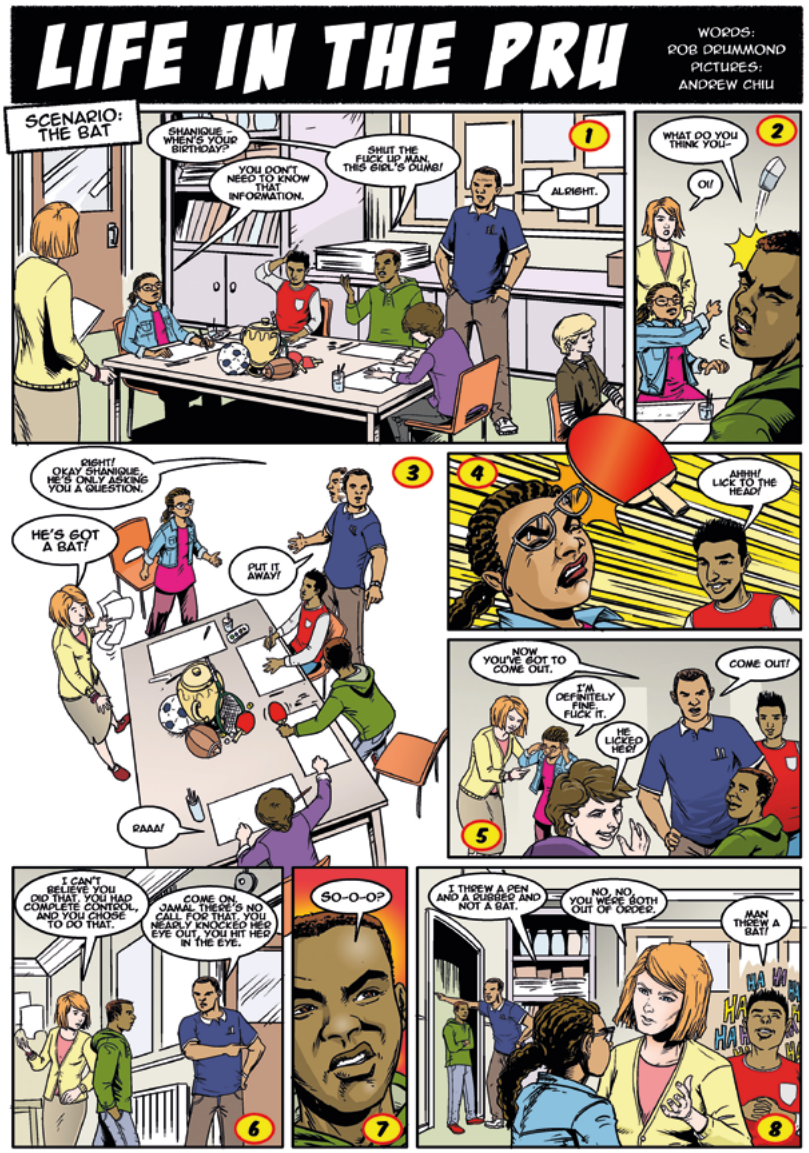
But there is an additional reason to study the language of particular groups of young people over and above the more general reasons just described, to do with the ways in which they are perceived by wider society. The fact is, certain young people are routinely criticised for the way they use language. There appears to be an ongoing discourse in the media and society in general that suggests that language standards are slipping, and that young people are making themselves unemployable due to the way they speak. This is especially apparent in relation to users of Multicultural London English (MLE) or Multicultural Urban British English (MUBE). MLE/MUBE is a development of English that has been documented in London, and is now starting to be investigated in other UK cities. It is often referred to as a 'multiethnolect' – a speech repertoire that has emerged naturally as a result of different linguistic and cultural influences on the dominant mainstream language, yet one that can be viewed negatively by some sections of society. It is not uncommon to see stories in the UK media or discussions online decrying young people's use of 'Jafaican' or 'ghetto grammar' – pejorative terms to describe a way of speaking that some people see as fake, yet which its users would see as entirely natural. As with anything concerning language and identity, the true situation is complex and subtle, but what should be clear is that no good can come from routinely undermining the way somebody speaks. It is for this reason that research into urban youth language is particularly valuable, as better understanding provides the tools with which to challenge that prejudice.

Approaches to youth language research

But having acknowledged that studying youth language is interesting and potentially useful, how should we go about it? There is no single best way. A traditional variationist sociolinguistic approach might be to create a sample of the population we wish to study, perhaps in a particular geographical region, and record their speech through interviews and a series of spoken tasks. We would take demographic information to ensure the sample be balanced for social factors such as gender, ethnicity and social class, and then undertake a quantitative analysis of particular speech features, identifying patterns in relation to the social factors as they emerge. In this way, we might see how young people from particular backgrounds are using language in different ways to young people from other backgrounds, or we might compare our findings with other studies in order to gain insights into changes between generations.

Another approach would be to undertake some kind of ethnography. Here, we would identify a context, perhaps a school or a youth group, and do what we could to become


LIFE IN THE PRU
WORDS: ROB DRUMMOND
PICTURES: ANDREW CHILD
SCENARIO: THE CAGE
TWO MEMBERS OF STAFF AND A GROUP OF BOYS ARE TALKING ABOUT HOW ANOTHER BOY HAD COME TO BE LOCKED IN A CUPBOARD ('THE CAGE') EARLIER IN THE WEEK.
1
... AND I THINK SOMETIMES THAT'S WHAT YOU DO.
LIKE THE OTHER DAY, LOCKING HIM IN THE CAGE. I THINK THAT'S BARBARIC, LOCKING SOMEONE IN A CAGE.
WHO PUT HIM IN THE CAGE?
WASN'T ME, YOU FOOL!
2
I NEVER SAID–
WHO SAID IT WAS YOU?
3
YOU WENT, "PUT HIM IN THE CAGE".
EXCUSE ME, AT WHAT POINT DID I SAY IT WAS YOU?
4
YOU SAID, "LIKE LOCKING HIM IN THE CAGE"
IT'S BARBARIC, AND AT WHAT POINT DID I SAY IT WAS YOU? DID I SAY IT WAS YOU?
YEAH!
NO I DIDN'T.
5
YOU LOOKED AT ME AND WENT, "LIKE LOCKING HIM IN THE CAGE"
YOU ACTUALLY WALKED PAST HIM. FOR ME THAT'S AS BAD. NOT STANDING UP FOR HIM.
6
I THOUGHT, 'HE'S LOCKED HIMSELF IN THE CAGE'.
I'M THINKING, 'WHAT'S HE DOING IN THERE'.
NOT STANDING UP AND DOING THE RIGHT THING IS THE COWARD'S WAY.



part of that context. We would observe behaviour, participate in everyday life and eventually record people's speech, ideally capturing spontaneous interaction between members of the group. In this way, we might start to uncover the ways in which language is used to negotiate particular interactions and relationships; how it works alongside other resources such as dress and behaviour to enact particular identities. We would combine what we hear with what we see in order to generate a deeper understanding of this particular section of life.

The advantage of the first approach is its apparent objectivity and replicability. The dataset is balanced, and the analytic methods are relatively transparent. The sample is large enough to allow for a degree of generalisability, and any outliers have been accounted for, omitted, or explained away. The advantage of the second approach is the depth of understanding and insight that can be gained from taking the time to properly engage with the context in which language is actually being used. Without the requirement to generalise, the focus is firmly on making sense of what is happening among *this* group of people in *this* place, at *this* time.

A third approach would be to combine elements of both of these ideas – ideally, taking the strengths from each in order to build a complete picture that speaks to the wider linguistic context. This is what I attempted in my own research project, alongside Susan Dray, an experienced ethnographer whose skills would complement and inform my own variationist/sociophonetic background. As we embarked on the research, the intention was to find a way of usefully combining our approaches.

Pupil Referral Units

The project took place in a Pupil Referral Unit (or PRU) – an educational facility that caters for young people who, for whatever reason, cannot cope in mainstream school, and so have been excluded. This inability to cope often manifests in behavioural issues, to the extent that 36% of permanent exclusions are due to 'persistent and disruptive behaviour'. The stories behind the behaviour and any individual's journey to the PRU are often complex and challenging, but the result is the same: separation from mainstream education, and daily attendance at one of the local PRU's Learning Centres.

Learning Centres are typically small, each catering for a limited number of pupils from particular year groups. Our research took place in two Centres for pupils in Years 10 and 11, aged 14-16, within the Manchester Secondary PRU. Our Centres had a maximum of 12 young people, six from each year group, and were housed in ex-youth-club buildings. This repurposing is important, as it underlines the fact that these are not traditional educational facilities; in fact, some are not particularly well-suited to education at all. Open-plan spaces with makeshift

classrooms can make focused learning and teaching difficult, and the underlying atmosphere retains its youth-club feel.

Our methods

Susan and I spent one academic year in the two centres. We didn't go in every day, but we made sure that we each visited both centres every week at least once, usually spending the day with the young people and staff. We spent a long time at the beginning of the year simply hanging around and becoming part of the day-to-day activity, rather than attempting to record anyone. It was important for us to be accepted and trusted so that the young people might start to feel comfortable enough for us to gradually introduce the voice recorders. This familiarisation process took six weeks in one centre, and 12 weeks in the other, after which we began to ask people if they minded us recording what was going on.

Recordings took place in as many contexts as practically possible, including:

- Regular classes (English, maths, science, etc.)
- Interactive classes involving some kind of activity (e.g. art, cooking).
- Youth forum meetings
- One-to-one or small group conversations with either me or Susan.
- General between-class (in) activity (playing pool, table tennis, weight training, spitting bars, casual conversations.
- Peer recordings, usually of conversations outside while smoking, with the young people taking charge of the recorder.

This resulted in around 70 hours of usable recordings, alongside over 400,000 words of observational description in our fieldnote diaries (mostly Susan's!).

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Data collection was not always easy. Some of the young people were understandably resistant to being recorded, and often questioned us as to why we were there. We had of course explained the project many times, but for some, the lingering suspicion that I might be 'Fed' (police) never quite went away. On a practical level, some of the data was very noisy and incredibly 'messy' from the perspective of analysis. This affected me more than Susan – as a sociophonetician I am used to dealing with very clear recordings, ideally enabling me to carry out detailed acoustic analysis on individual sounds. This becomes difficult when faced with a recording of a fight developing around a pool table with loud music in the background and everyone having their say as to who is in the right. But as the project progressed, and as we got to know everyone better, many of the young people became genuinely interested in what we were doing, and thought nothing of being recorded, or of spending some time with us to discuss language, music and life in general. And if we needed a bit of peace and quiet, most were happy to take a bit of time out and chat to us in one of the classrooms.

Key findings

TH-stopping

As expected, there was a lot going on in the language of our young people. There was certainly evidence to support the idea that particular linguistic features were being used in the performance of identities. One example of this was in the use of what is known as TH-stopping – the pronunciation of voiceless 'th' as [t] in words such as 'thing', 'thief' and 'three', or the pronunciation of voiced 'th' as [d] in words such as 'them', 'there' and 'brother'. A quantitative analysis revealed that by far the most common pronunciation of voiceless 'th' for all speakers was [f] (known as TH-fronting), and that [t] accounted for only 5% of the total, used by only 8 of 25 speakers. Further analysis revealed that there was no statistically significant relationship between this pronunciation and the ethnicity of the individual (something which perhaps might have been seen as likely, given the prevalence of TH-stopping in various black varieties of English

such as African American English and British Creole).

Subsequent interactional analysis provided a clearer picture. From several possible examples, I chose to look more closely at a conversation between a group of four boys and one adult youth worker. The boys were discussing somebody they all knew who was soon to be released from prison, and each of them was recalling when they had last seen him. In doing so, they all try to align themselves with this person, and by extension, his way of life. As they do this, it becomes apparent that they start to use [t] for 'th' more frequently.

My interpretation of this is that in attempting to align themselves with this person and his tough way of life, the boys start to use a particular feature of speech that somehow helps to enact a certain identity. Of course, this interpretation only works if there is a mechanism that links TH-stopping to that identity. We cannot simply claim a link and use isolated examples just because they support the story we are trying to tell. Instead, we need to gather evidence through observation of day-to-day practices and language use (and in this case, involvement in certain types of music such as grime and hip-hop), and build up a picture of how some linguistic features can be argued to index, or represent, particular social practices and attitudes. This process of indexicality is well-described in recent sociolinguistic work, and helps us meaningfully attach 'social meaning' to aspects of language.

Vowels

Vowel pronunciation was of particular interest among the group, as there were obvious differences between individuals, despite all being from the same area. Most notable were the so-called *happ*Y vowel (the final vowel sound in words such as 'happy' and 'city') and the *lett*ER vowel (the final vowel sound in words such as 'letter' and 'Manchester'), both of which have distinct and traditional local pronunciations. However, while some young people maintained these local pronunciations, others didn't. Again, with the benefit of detailed observation and an understanding of behaviour beyond the recorded speech, I make the argument that these sounds are being used to 'do' identity work. The individuals who use the 'traditional' pronunciations also tended to be the ones who were more locally-oriented in other aspects of their lives, whereas those who used the non-traditional pronunciations tended to be the ones who were distancing themselves from the predominantly white, working-class Manchester norm.

Lexis

Youth language is always rich in terms of words and phrases, especially in terms of slang. Below are some of the phrases that were popular during our time in the centres.

Allow It (Verb) /əˈlaʊ ɪt/ Leave it, let it go, don't worry about it.
Just allow it man, it's not your business.

Bait (Adjective) /beɪt/ Being obvious or acting suspiciously when the situation demands a bit more secrecy or subtlety.
I didn't want to look bait so I went the other way.

Dead (Adjective) /ded/ Boring, rubbish. 'Semi-dead' can be used to describe something as 'not that bad'.
This lesson's dead.

Long (Adjective) /lɒŋ/ Something that requires effort, is boring, or will take ages. It refers to more than just time, the effort aspect being central. Can also refer to people.
This is long (usually lo:::::ng).
You're long, you = you're taking ages.

Macca (Adjective) /ˈmækə/ Rubbish or shit. It can also mean 'dead' (see above) or 'boring'. It's often used in the phrase 'chatting macca', that is, talking rubbish.
He was chattin' macca about the Taliban and all that.

Peak (Adjective) /piːk/ Shame, bad luck, embarrassing, gutted. When something bad happens to someone, it can be described as 'peak'.
Ha ha! That's peak, that.

Time (Noun) /taɪm/ Although still carrying the standard meaning, it's the grammatical structure that's of interest. Used in phrases such as 'I haven't seen you for time', or 'He hasn't been here in time', it essentially means the same as the informal 'ages', to refer to a seemingly long period.
I haven't seen you for time.

The value of research

This project taught me a lot about the ways in which language is used among a particular group of young people in Manchester. It also opened my eyes to an aspect of education I knew little about. But good sociolinguistic research should be about more than simply finding out more about how language works. At the very least, there should be a tangible benefit to the people who have so generously allowed us into



their community. I like to think that this project provides such benefit in several ways, not least in the evidence it has produced to inform the argument against negative perceptions of youth language. But there is one particular output that will hopefully be of real value to current and future PRU students and staff: a unique language and communication resource.

The resource consists of a series of authentic scenarios from our time in the centres, each illustrated in the style of a graphic novel, by a wonderful artist called Andrew Chiu. Accompanying each scenario is a set of questions and activities – some designed to be used with young people to encourage them to discuss similar issues that may be affecting them, and others designed to be used in staff training. The resource is currently being trialled across Manchester Secondary PRU, with a view to making it more widely available in the future. If it works (and current feedback is positive in this regard), then it will hopefully serve as a small example of how sociolinguistic research can be mutually beneficial. ¶

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Rob Drummond is Head of Youth Language in the Manchester Centre for Youth Studies, and Senior Lecturer in Linguistics, both at Manchester Metropolitan University. In addition to researching youth language specifically, he also works with Manchester Met colleague Erin Carrie on Manchester Voices – a project exploring the accents, dialects and identities of people in Greater Manchester (manchestervoices.org), and the Accentism project (accentism.org). For more details on Rob's work, including links to academic and mainstream articles and media, visit robdrummond.co.uk

Find out more

Book

Rob Drummond (2018) *Researching Urban Youth Language and Identity*, Palgrave Macmillan.