

8th year



Winner

Babel
Young Writers' Competition

'Is it muggy or is it just me?'



Daniel Strogen takes a look at some Love Island Lingo

"I ain't gonna come out with words like you're 'muggy' if you choose her and stuff…"

"What on earth does that mean?" Grandad asks, squinting incredulously at the gleaming, sun-tanned young man on the television.

"It means it's hot, doesn't it? Humid like." Mother answers eliciting some teenaged laughs from across the room. "What's so funny about that?"

Son and daughter continue to laugh.

Any idea what was on the television? When it comes to reality television I admit I am not particularly interested. Or maybe I am interested in it for reasons different to most...

A quick Google search of words like 'bae', 'ick' or 'muggy' brings up hundreds if not thousands of lay glossaries and dictionaries with advice on how to speak like a Love Islander. These words have also appeared in mainstream comedy – Saturday Night Live's Love Island sketch is particularly amusing – as well as in breakfast news programmes such as Good Morning Britain.

Academic interest in RT (reality television) language has grown since 2000. Interest has also proliferated in the popular media, especially in ITV's Love Island. However, the way language is used on Love Island has attracted its fair share of controversy. In August 2021, it made headline news when Ofcom received almost 25,000 complaints over language used in a heated argument between two contestants. The third series also attracted controversy when the word 'muggy' was used by contestants and fans to such an extent that Mike Thalassitis was nicknamed 'Muggy Mike'.

Love Island is designed to appeal to a particular youth subculture. Seemingly, great care is put into selecting the prettiest, straightest, and whitest contestants from across the UK. The programme is associated with hyper-sex, hyper-glamour, hyper-emotion, as well as social media and micro-celebrity. Love Island is also very popular. Its latest series became the most watched programme of 2021 for people aged 16 to 34. This popularity is reflected in many areas of everyday life, from fashion to language use.

Love Island is very English: with the exception of one Scotswoman and one Welshwoman, the contestants of the third series are all English. In the interests of 'reality', they all speak in their regional dialects coloured with terms like 'bae', 'ick', 'muggy', 'melt', 'salty' and 'moving mad'. Social media has contributed to the popularity of these words: with every episode, the internet is lit up with posts, hashtags, tweets, memes and TikTok videos, sending these words across the world and regrouping them as 'Love Island Lingo'.

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Love Island Lingo

The list of so-called Love Island words is extensive. Arguably the most (in)famous is 'muggy'. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, in its original sense 'muggy' derived from the noun 'mug' meaning "a mist" or "a fog". This, combined with the -y suffix allowed for the creation of a new word. It is commonly said that the British are obsessed with the weather, and when the occasion warrants it, the phrase 'It's a bit muggy out there today!' is commonly used.

But what if I was not talking about the weather, as in 'You're being really muggy!'? A second usage in contrast to the first is not listed in the OED. On the surface this word is an adjective used to describe someone or something as 'disrespectful' or 'disingenuous'. This derives from the term 'mugged off', a more common phrase meaning to treat someone disrespectfully. The OED states that 'mugged off' itself derives from the slang word 'mug' – a "stupid, or incompetent person; a fool or simpleton; a gullible person; a dupe". In other words, despite a perceived link between the two meanings of 'muggy' (first and second), there is none beyond form. Linguists describe this phenomenon as 'onomasiological change' – change in the naming of concepts that can include the formation of new words.

Of course, both 'muggy' and 'mugged off' predate Love Island as regional dialect words associated with the London/Essex working class. However, even before the third series they

had began to be associated with the programme. In fact, in the second series a game was made of it – contestants threw mugs of 'tea' into the faces of other contestants they considered to be 'muggy'. This 'regrouping' raises many ethical questions, but let us go back to our questions: how has Love Island affected the way we use language, and how has it affected our attitudes towards certain language use?

Discourse functions of 'muggy'

The third series of Love Island comprises forty-three episodes, covering fifty-two hours of recorded footage. I focus on episodes 12 (the first recorded instance of the word), 13, and 14. I identified three interactional and discourse functions for the new meaning of 'muggy'.

Muggy can be used to describe an individual as 'disrespectful' or 'disingenuous', as in Chris's turn below:

1 Chris: I ain't gonna come out with words like you're **muggy** if
2 you chose her and stuff (.) But obviously (.) but I back
3 myself and I don't think you're gonna get anywhere cos
4 we do have a genuine connection. Obviously, this is just
5 man to man (1) I'm just saying I think you'd get better if
6 you choose someone else.
7 Mike: Yeah (5) Yeah. Nah mate (.) I'm still gonna go with what I
8 want in' I

It is is also used to describe a situation, or more often an action, as characteristic of 'disrespectful' or 'disingenuous' behaviour:

1 Kem: You being serious like. How can someone (.) not, not anything 2towards (.). like I'm not angry that she hugged him (.) she don't
3 even know the geezer (1) Whose team are you playing on at the
4 end of the day? Do you know what I mean? It's just mu (.)
5 It was more **muggy** towards me and it proper, proper pissed
6 me off.

Another use of this 'new' *muggy* is exclamatory, to express disapproval of disrespectful behaviour:

1 Amber: Like. He's been slagging Chloe off to me all night (.) she don't
2 deserve (.) like like (.) he's really like pied her off
3 Kem: Oh what? **Muggy**!

I found four instances of the describing-an-individual function, four instances of the describing-behaviour function, and one instance of the exclamatory function.

Attitudes towards 'muggy'

It is worth noting that in these three episodes, 'muggy' was used by six male contestants: Kem, Chris, Mike, Theo, Jonny and Sam. Does this have implications in terms of perceptions of masculinity? Three of them (Kem, Mike, and Jonny) are from London/Essex. Kem (from Essex) is a frequent user of the word. Does this suggest links to Essex? However, it is also notable that many people not from London or Essex use this slang. Does this confirm that such slang has already been 'regrouped' (or 'appropriated') as Love Island Lingo?

The Love Island contestants appear to have a positive attitude to the word. They are more than happy to use it, and they do so for three reasons: to index masculinity, to index localness (and therefore authenticity), and to index alignment with the programme. However, the most well-known usage of the word, and the most controversial, is this fourth excerpt:

1 Chris: Okay so I want to couple up with this girl cos
2 after bitching about her somehow (.) **Muggy** Mike
3 has decided to take the girl I like (1) So I want to
4 couple up with this girl purely on a friendship
5 basis and cos she has had my back from day
6 one (.) she's always been there for me

In this instance, Chris is mocking the word usage. It is a negative attitude toward the word. This can be seen by the stress he puts on the word. Chris is attempting to distance himself from Mike and his language, in order to portray Mike in a negative light.

This negative use of the word spilled into social media. A look at tweets between 2011 to 2021 sheds light on how we use and think about 'muggy'. My analysis revealed four levels of usage.

Regional Usage occurs typically before 2013 (when the first series of Love Island began). Users are likely to be from London or Essex:

- "mug you off? Your mum. There you go. I've mugged you off you muggy mug. YEAH!!"



- "Lesley u MUGGY MUG!! Mugged em right off!!!!"
- "Constantly being mugged off #muggy #mug".

Love Island Usage occurs typically after 2013. 'Muggy', 'mugged off' or 'mug' are used in one of three ways: ironically, in explicit disparagement of the term, or genuinely. The word is hash-tagged '#Muggy', '#MuggyMike' and repeated across social media:

- "You're a mug, they're a mug, everyone's muggy, and we're all getting mugged off! Jeez I'll just see here with my mug of tea! #loveisland"
- "New drinking game, take a shot every time one of the Islanders says 'mug', 'muggy', or 'mugged off'. #loveisland"
- "Stop saying mugged off, muggy, mug, muggled… please!!! #loveisland"
  "After this series of @ LoveIsland I think there should be a national ban for the word 'mug' and phrases 'muggy' & 'mugged off'"
- "Started saying mug/muggy/ mugged off so much since love island started and I hate it but can't stop".

People deconstruct the word, including through the publication of lay glossaries, dictionaries, and guides:

- "I'm back to watching #LoveIslandUK and I have so many thoughts!!! Starting with the lingo. you've got the misc. words like bishboshbash or penging, but their true speciality is the dating lingo… words of rejection: pie'd/pie'd off, mug/muggy/mugged off"
- "I love the British slang on love island. There's no other way to express being mugged off, looking like a mug, and being muggy"
- "Explained to my brother what 'mug', 'muggy' and 'mugged off' mean. He filmed me w/o telling me & sent it to his British friend. She replied saying I was proper right!!! I'd like to thank love island for my knowledge in british slang"
- "Wonder how many times the words mug muggy or mugged off have been used this series? #loveisland"
- "Jfc can we please ban the words mug/muggy/ mugged off and grafting? #LoveIsland".

For the final type of usage, people **claim** usage of the word regardless of their region of origin. This type of usage often indexes an association with Love Island, and a covert prestige of 'pride' in working-class or youth slang:

- "After watching love island if you catch me saying mug, muggy, mugged off, crack on, moving mad, grafting – please mind your business."
- "That's very muggy #LoveIsland".

"Throughout history, non-standard varieties have almost always been viewed negatively. Linguistic prestige has consistently been attributed to the standard form. In 1972, William Labov identified two forms of prestige: overt prestige (attached to the standard) and covert prestige (an unspoken prestige of using non-standard forms). Both are reflected in Love Island's 'muggy'"

Clearly, Love Island has had some impact on how English is used by some people. Those who know the word now perceive it as an emblem of a particular social persona, one associated with lifestyles relating to Love Island. To look at this a bit closer, I administered a short survey. One hundred participants were given the meanings of 'muggy' and asked which of the two they knew (weather and/or behaviour?). The results showed that 33% of 100 respondents knew the (second) meaning. They were then asked if they

used it. Results showed that 27% of the hundred believed they used it very occasionally, occasionally, or often. The first meaning has not been overtaken in the competition; however, Love Island has clearly affected the way we speak.

I also presented respondents with a list of adjectives (and their antonyms) and asked which they would attribute to a person who used the 'new' 'muggy', or 'mug' or 'mugged off'. The most commonly-chosen words were negative:

- Aged 18 to 29
- Disrespectful
- Untrustworthy
- Irresponsible
- Interested in celebrities and people
- Uneducated
- Working class
- Welsh
- Londoner
- Inauthentic
- Down-to-earth
- Warm
- Masculine
- Lazy
- Liberal

Of course, one cannot rely on this data. If there was more time to develop an experiment, a more solid study could be produced on this topic. Nevertheless, the selection of these words reveals our casual attitudes towards this language.

Analysis

Throughout history, non-standard varieties have almost always been viewed negatively. Linguistic prestige has consistently been attributed to the standard form. In 1972, William Labov identified two forms of prestige: overt prestige (attached to the standard) and covert prestige (an unspoken prestige of using non-standard forms). Both are reflected in Love Island's 'muggy'.

The negative connotations of 'muggy' show that overt prestige is still given to the standard form and denied to the non-standard. On Twitter, use of the word was both disparaged and laughed at. People called for a "national ban" of the word, whilst others joked that "you're a mug, they're a mug, everyone's muggy!". Joking about non-standard dialects may seem harmless, but the discussion around Love Island is an example of when the matter is serious. Historically, non-standard dialects have been laughed at. In 2018, Rob Penhallurick suggested that Chaucer's The Reeve's Tale was an example of this. In it, the northern dialect was used for comedic purposes as the dialect was seen as intrinsically comedic to southern audiences.

Many respondents to the survey also show that the word is looked down upon, as a user would be 'uneducated' and 'working-class' as well as 'disrespectful', 'untrustworthy' and 'irresponsible'. This attitude is two-fold: some may look down on the word for its association with the working-class – an attitude that undoubtedly would have existed even *before* Love Island, while others may look down on the word for its association with Love Island, and more specifically with the lifestyles closely related to the programme. This is also reflected in the results of the survey. Many respondents suggested that a user of the word would be "interested in celebrities and people". Is this connected to the micro-celebrity linked with the programme?

Returning to William Labov's theory of prestige, one could also say that 'muggy' has a form of covert prestige. Some survey respondents suggested that a user of the word would be 'down-to-earth', 'warm' and 'liberal'. This covert prestige is clearly something that the Love Islanders attempt to make use of, presenting themselves as 'authentic' in the genre of unscripted reality television. This explains why the Love Islanders are more than happy to use their regional dialects rather than the standard forms usually associated with television. Covert prestige is also apparent in the tweets of people who 'claim' usage of the word. After public mockery of the word (and other features of working-class regional dialect words), people on Twitter see the word in a positive light. They use the word to express pride in 'muggy' regardless of their region of origin.

It is clear that attitudes to 'muggy' are varied and complex. The word is used for many different reasons by many different people. From reality television stars indexing authenticity or masculinity, to Twitter users expressing how much they dislike non-standard forms of English. However, it is clear that both reality television and social media have influenced these attitudes. In this time of mass and fast media, we should stop to think: how does the media I consume influence the way I think about and use language? ¶

Daniel Strogen is a third year undergraduate student from Port Talbot studying for a BA (Hons) degree in English Language at Swansea University.