

Causal Interrogative Variation in Multicultural and Traditional Varieties of London English

David Hall, James Brookes, Jenny Cheshire, and David Adger

The grammar of English has several interrogative expressions that serve to question an eventuality's reason or purpose, termed "causal interrogatives". Alongside the basic *why*, as in (1a), we also find two other well-established variants—the discontinuous *what...for*, as in (1b), and *how come*, as in (1c).

- (1) a. **Why** are you looking at me like that?
(Ryan; Sulema_Ryan_Kirsty; LIC)
- b. **What** you look at me like that **for**?
(Chris; Chris_Kim; LIC)
- c. **How come** no one don't look here?
(Roshan; Roshan_Robert_Kevin_2; MLEC)

These three variants exist alongside each other in most, if not all, dialects and varieties of English. Yet in one specific variety Multicultural London English (henceforth: MLE)—the emergent multiethnolect used by speakers in inner city London—a fourth structurally interesting variant of the pattern *why...for* has also been reported (e.g., Kerswill et al., 2004–2007, 2013), an example of which is given in (2).

- (2) **Why** they looking at me like that **for**?
(Paul; Tacito_Paul_Tanya; MLEC)

In this talk, we explore causal interrogative variation in Multicultural London English and traditional London English. Using state-of-the-art data mining techniques, we shed light on the factors that speakers of these two London varieties draw on when choosing an interrogative expression, focussing on the new variant, *why...for*. Since differences between MLE and traditional London English have previously been analysed as cases of sociolinguistic variation (e.g., Cheshire et al. 2011), we consider the influence of social factors in conditioning the use of causal interrogative forms. We find that no social factor can explain the differences in frequency and distribution of use, and argue instead that syntactico-semantic and psycholinguistic explanations are required. From a cross-linguistic perspective, we show that morphologically distinct dedicated purpose interrogatives are not uncommon, and that *why...for* instantiates such a form. Furthermore, the high frequency of *why*, and a dispreference for long clauses with *why...for* can be explained as instances of a related processing preference for *why*.

References

- Cheshire, Jenny, Paul Kerswill, Sue Fox, & Eivind Torgersen. 2011. Contact, the feature pool and the speech community: The emergence of Multicultural London English. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 15:151–196.
- Kerswill, Paul, Jenny Cheshire, Sue Fox, & Eivind Torgersen. 2004–2007. Linguistic Innovators: the English of adolescents in London: Full research report ESRC end of award report, res-000-23-0680.
- Kerswill, Paul, Jenny Cheshire, Sue Fox, & Eivind Torgersen. 2013. English as a contact language: the role of children and adolescents. In *English as a contact language*, Studies in English Language, 258–282. Cambridge University Press.