Abstract: Authenticity and ownership have been problematic for both linguists and users of Creole in Britain. In this paper we review the changing issues connected with authenticity and ethnicity, based on empirical research spanning the period 1981-2011. Second-generation speakers of Creole in London in the 1980s were conscious that they could not pass for natives when in the Caribbean, but could nevertheless claim to be authentic ‘Black British’ by virtue of commanding both the local British vernacular and a local version of Jamaican Creole (Sebba 1993). By the end of the century, claims of authenticity linked to ethnic identity had been undermined by the emergence of a non-ethically specific youth variety incorporating Creole grammatical and phonological features, as parodied by the fictitious character Ali G (Sebba 2003, 2007). Sometimes called ‘Jafaican’ by the media. We argue that as ‘Creole’ manifests itself less and less as a linguistic system and more and more as an additional linguistic resource in a complex semiotic system, ‘authenticity’ is achieved through practices rather than inherited ethnicity or native-like use of a specific variety.

1. Introduction

Let’s get back to me. The sta::r! (1.0) The star of the show (1.2) To be or not to be, that is the question (1.8) [Quietly, off-mike] Me a joke! Me a joke, me a joke, right (6.0) [Normal volume] Previous lessons I’ve learnt in [name of the youth club]. A lot really. How to kick a man’s a::s [æ:s], that’s what. [Sings] yeah yeah baby [speaking voice] Outside (1.0) We’re outside (1.5) we’re liking the scenery:: (1.0) ‘cause I like the greenery:: (.) you get me? (1.5) Charbillin (0.5) kickin a little seznesh (0.5) on the little powtesh, you get me::?

These words were spoken to camera by a boy in a video made in a youth club in Manchester, England. From the quasi-RP declamation of Hamlet’s words, a widely recognised classic of English literature, to seznesh and powtesh, fleeting coinages which may only be understood by members of the club; from the Jamaican Creole me a joke (‘I’m joking’) to the American pronunciation of the word ass (arse [ɑ:s] in British English), and the rest of the speech pronounced

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1 This was part of a video made by the club organisers, in which the members talked about how they had benefitted from attending.