

## Teaching unit 1: Alex – at the airport

### Background

Alex is a 16 year old mixed race white British/black Caribbean Londoner, recorded here talking to his friend Zack. Zack is a white British boy, also aged 16. Both boys live in inner London and speak Multicultural London English. Immediately before this extract Alex and Zack had been talking between themselves about going on holiday and ways of bringing banned goods back into the country. In this extract it is Alex who is now holding the floor. Although the interviewer is present, Alexis mainly telling Zack about an incident at the airport in Amsterdam when his friend had hidden drugs in a deodorant spray can. Alex is a lively storyteller and he involves the listeners in the story using a range of different linguistic strategies such as address terms, the conversational historical present tense, kissing teeth, intensifiers and different rhetorical strategies, making the story a kind of performance.

Audio, transcript and links to relevant Linguistics Research Digest articles are available at: <http://www.englishlanguageresources.org/TU01>

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### Discussion points

#### Address terms

Alex addresses Zack with terms that are typical of their peer group and that express solidarity. He uses *bruv* in lines 1, 12 and 27) and *blud* (line 5).

#### Conversational historical present

In lines 9 -24 Alex talks about one specific incident at Amsterdam airport. He uses the present tense to dramatise key parts of his story in lines 13-15 and 18-20.

Note that the present tenses in lines 2-7 and 25-27 are not the conversational historical present; the present tense here is used to refer to events that happen repeatedly (e.g. line 2, *they just wrap it up*; line 27, *they smoke weed in the airport*) or that are general descriptions (e.g. line 2, *it weights heavy*; line 28, *they are mad*).

#### Discourse markers

*innit* (line 9) occurs after *the export people*; Alex has not mentioned these people before and he uses *innit* to draw attention to the term and check that the listeners understand.

*like* occurs before a measurement (line 1), indicating that the amount is approximate. It also marks clause boundaries, occurring at the end of a clause (lines 16 and 20) and the beginning of a clause (lines 11, 14, 17 and 20 (after *yeah yeah*). It co-occurs with other discourse markers in line 11 (with *just*) and line 20 (with *you know*); and before a noun (*weed spray*) in line 16. 17 clause initial with *just*.

Note that when *like* occurs in the phrase *like that* it is not a discourse marker. *That* is a **deictic** in this phrase, occurring with *like* to point to a gesture or sound effect that Alex is about to make (line 5, make a little hole, and line 20) or has just made (line 5, *move it like that*, line 7, *crack*).

**so** (line 18) at the beginning of the clause shows that Alex is resuming the events that make up his story after the digression of lines 15-17. *So* functions here in a similar way to *anyway*.

**yeah** Alex uses *yeah* frequently at the end of a clause (lines 2, 4, 8, 9, 10 and 17). It punctuates the discourse by clearly separating the clauses. At the same time, Alex checks that the listeners are following his story and making sense of it. In line 15 he uses *yeah* 3 times, segmenting the information in his utterance to make it easier for the listeners to process it. In lines 20 and 22, where he reports what the customs officer and his friend said to each other, *yeah* is an agreement marker.

### Intensifiers

*So* is an intensifier in lines 2 and 21, boosting the force of the adjectives *compressed* (line 2) and *dumb* (line 21). *Right* in line 3 boosts the force of *in the middle*.

### Nonstandard grammar

Alex uses the frequent nonstandard negative past form of BE (*weren't*) in line 11. *See* in line 8 is ambiguous: it could be the conversational historical present tense of SEE, but it could also be the nonstandard past tense form of SEE, which is very frequent in English dialects.

Note that in line 11 he uses the standard English negative structure *it weren't anything* rather than the very common nonstandard negative structure *it weren't nothing*.

### Pronunciation

Alex has many phonetic features that are typical of Multicultural London English. For example he says 'fing' in *everything* (line 6), *anything* (line 11) and *thing* (line 14); and he has a glottal stop where other speakers might have [t] in *little* (line 5), *weren't* (line 11) and several of his *its* (e.g. line 18). These are very common features of many urban varieties of English in the UK as spoken by young people. The first vowel in *opened* (line 8), *so* (line 21) and *go* (line 24) are **monophthongs** (this is the so-called GOAT vowel), and so is the vowel in words such as *right* (line 3) and many of his realisations of *like* (these are known as the PRICE vowel). Alex's pronunciation of the *in* in lines 27 and 28 is typical of young people in multicultural London, many of whom do not make a distinction between the pronunciation of *the* when it comes before a vowel and when it comes before a consonant: older Londoners say [də] *bus* (roughly, 'thuh bus' but [di:] *airport*, 'thee airport' whereas Alex says [də] , 'thuh' in both cases.

### Quotative expressions

Alex reports what the customs officer was thinking with THINK (line 19). He uses GO to introduce direct reported speech on line 22. The main quotative expression, though, is the new London form *this is* +speaker (lines 13, 14 and 20). He uses this at a dramatic point in his story when his friend is challenged by the customs officer about the contents of the deodorant can.

### Rhetorical strategies

Alex makes his story lively by punctuating it with sound effects such as *bang* (lines 3, 6 and 23), *smack* (line 6) and *crack* (line 7). He makes a "kissing teeth" sound in line 7. This is a 'sound-symbolism' form that is widely used in the Caribbean to express a range of emotions and attitudes. It is now also used by many young speakers of Multicultural London English. Here Alex uses it to make his account of how easy it is to make a hole in a spray can more lively and vivid.

## Vocabulary

*chiv*, 'chisel', line 7)

*proper*, 'really' (line 18)

*punk*, 'marijuana' (lines 2 and 9)

*weed*, 'marijuana' (lines 12, 27, 28)