

“We don’t count you as Polish, you’re just like us now”: The social side of language learning for teenagers in Glasgow



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Naw I didnae!

No I didn't!



My research questions...

- How do learners pick up local accents, words, sentence structures etc. in a new language?
- Why do some people do so more quickly than others?
- How does this tie in with people's experiences, identity, friendship groups etc.?

A wide-angle photograph of St John's High School. The building is a large, modern structure with a mix of light-colored panels and dark wood cladding. It features a prominent glass-enclosed entrance on the right side. In the foreground, a paved walkway leads from a grassy slope towards the building, where a large group of students in school uniforms is walking. To the left, a circular driveway is filled with parked cars, including a white SUV. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds.

St John's High School

Who?

Working with 14 pupils who were born in Poland...

...comparing their language to that of 7 of their Glasgow-born classmates

Why a high school?

- During adolescence, kids go through a period of rich linguistic creativity, as they formulate independent identities away from the home
- This often involves increasing the use of non-standardized linguistic features, as well as new features not used by the older generation

stan
salty dank leng flex lit
ship low-key sksksksk slaps
mood sweat yeet
basic VSCO girl spill the tea/T
bias snatched bet search it up
verses retweet bless up move extra
pattern welp and I oop

Why a high school?

- During adolescence, kids go through a period of rich linguistic creativity, as they formulate independent identities away from the home
- This often involves increasing the use of non-standardized linguistic features, as well as new features not used by the older generation
- But what about when an adolescent is living most of their life in a new language? Are they able to do the same things? Or do they miss out on this developmental stage?

Glaswegian linguistic features...

“Why would I kill you?”

Right they need to just heat up first, so [gie] it about ten minutes to heat up.

[Gies a backy.]”

- Yes / Aye
- No / Naw
- Can't / Cannae
- What / Whit
- Wa[t]er bo[t]le / Wa[ʔ]er bo[ʔ]le
- I already did that / I already done that
- That's really stupid / That's pure stupid



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Piotr

Me: What were your first impressions of Glasgow, like, how was it different from your home town?

Piotr: It was dark so I couldnae really see anything, but the next day it was, like, different, 'cause in Poland, when I go on holiday, it's like – I stay in a wee village with my gran. And then... I had a hoose there and all that, and went to school, so yeah, and then, I came here, it was like a big city, so, yeah it was like, different, a lot.

- Yes / Aye
- No / Naw
- Can't / Cannae
- What / Whit
- Wa[t]er bo[t]le / Wa[?]er bo[?]le
- I'm going shopping / I'm away for the messages
- I already did that / I already done that
- That's really stupid / That's pure stupid

“What” or “whit”?

Cameron: Sometime I just say “wh- ” say “what”, but when I’m in school I say “what”. No “whit”. Say “what”. ‘Cause I’m a nice boy.

Me: Do the teachers ever tell you to, like, say “what” instead of “whit”?

Cameron: Nah beca- well, depends who you get.

Me: Yeah.

“What” or “whit”?

Cameron: Yeah, some teachers don't really care, but if you say, like, they ask you a question and you say “whit” to them they go crazy.

Me: Yeah?

Cameron: Oh!

Me: Really?

Cameron: Yep, because they take it as an insult because you were cheeky to them.

Me: Is it – do you think it's cheeky to say “whit”?

“What” or “whit”?

Cameron: Naw. But yeah.

Me: Yeah?

Cameron: Yeah because – well depends, see s- y- somebody’s talking to you, like a teacher, and they go “[Cameron]” and you don’t hear them and you go “whit”, that’s quite cheeky.

Me: You think?

“What” or “whit”?

Cameron: But if you go like “wh- whit’s your name” or something, that’s – that’s alright, because you’re just asking a question. But you know – but –

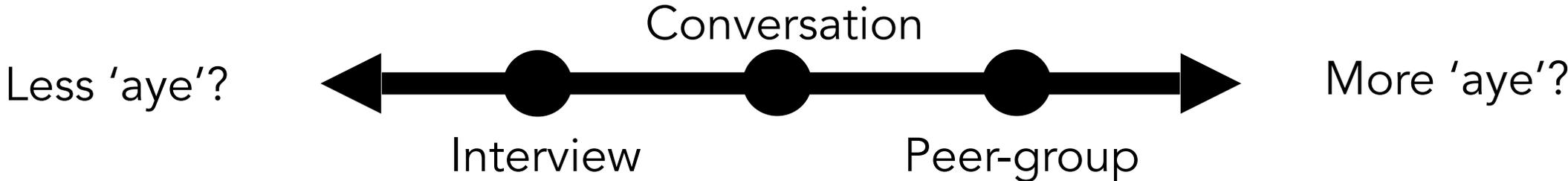
Me: What if you don’t know though, whether you’re saying “what” or “whit”?

Cameron: Well then you’re in trouble!

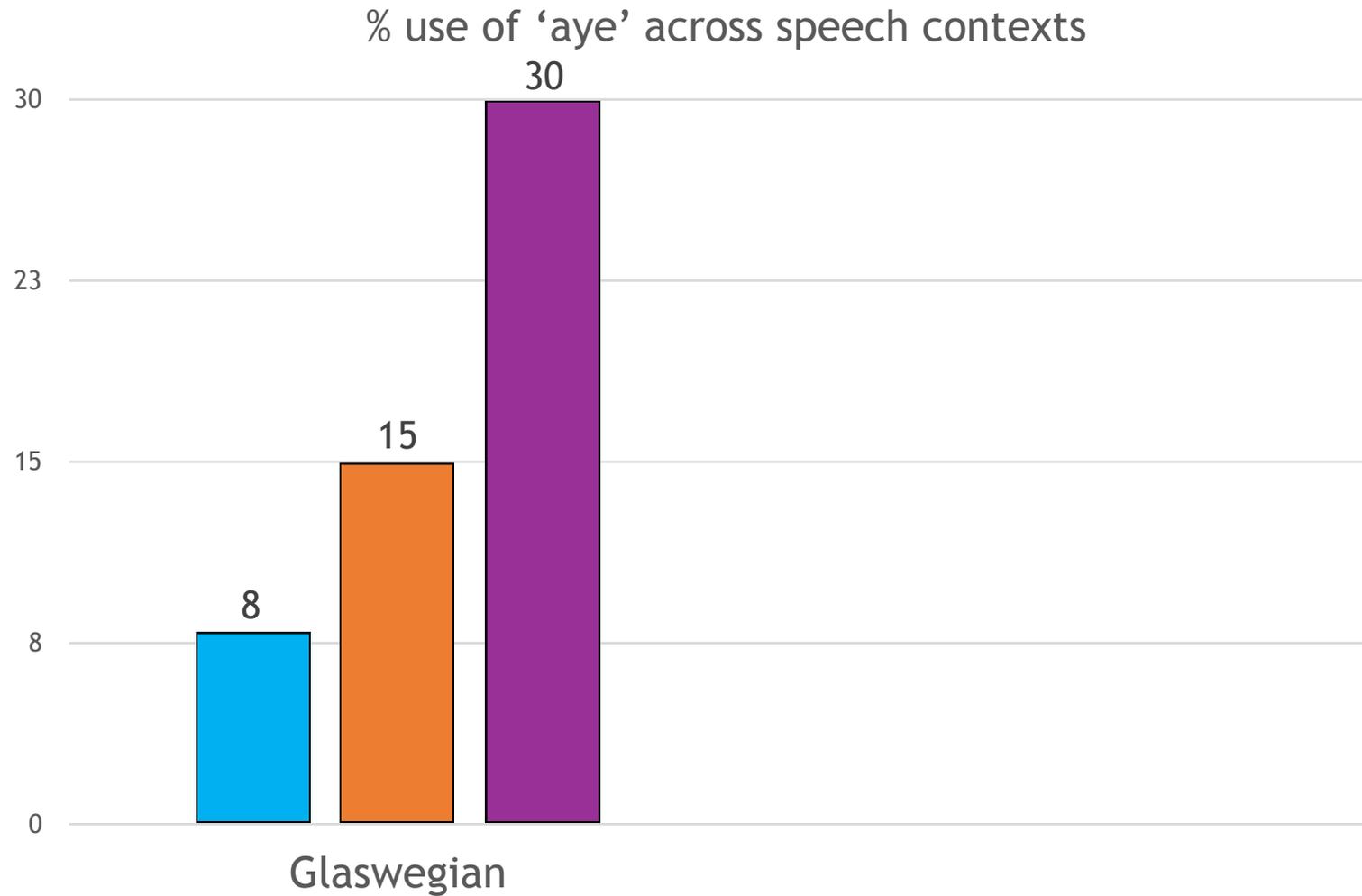
Different social contexts

- 'Interview' context (classroom-like, with an unknown adult, Evelyn)
- 'Conversation' context (mid-point, with a well-known adult, me)
- 'Peer-group' context (playground-like, with friends)

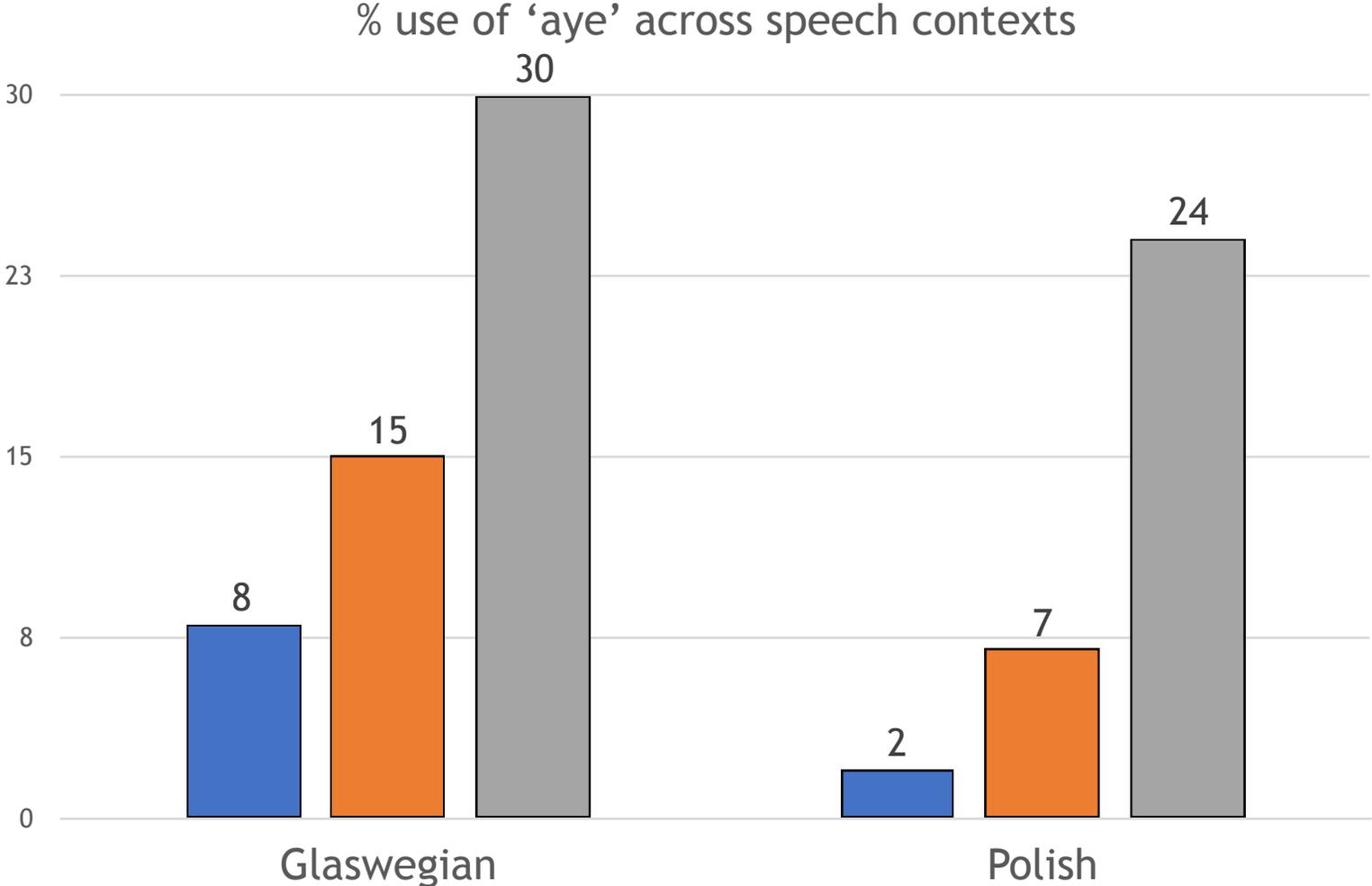
Different social contexts



Different social contexts



Different social contexts



Individual speakers

This is true of the group as a whole, but it's also important to note that the individual speakers I worked with were acquiring Glaswegian speech patterns **at different rates.**

Individual speakers

Angelika: My mum, dad, eh, younger sister and brother.

Me: How old are they?

Angelika: Eh, my sister is, eh, nine year old, and a brother two.

Me: Two?

Angelika: Yeah, oh, yeah, and I have a dog.

Me: So was he born here?

Piotr

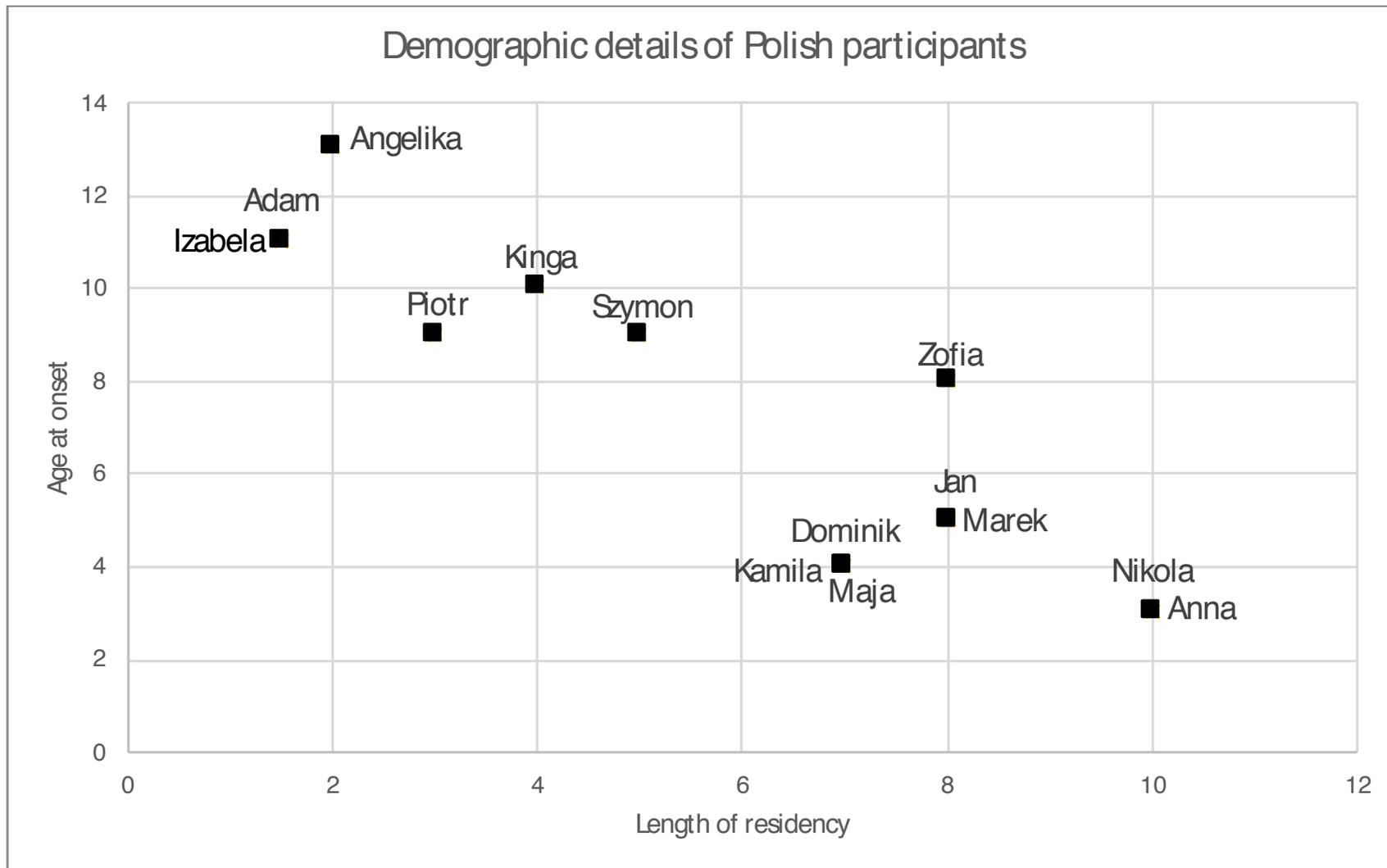
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So how do we explain this difference?

Why do Angelika and Piotr not have the same accent?

The Polish participants

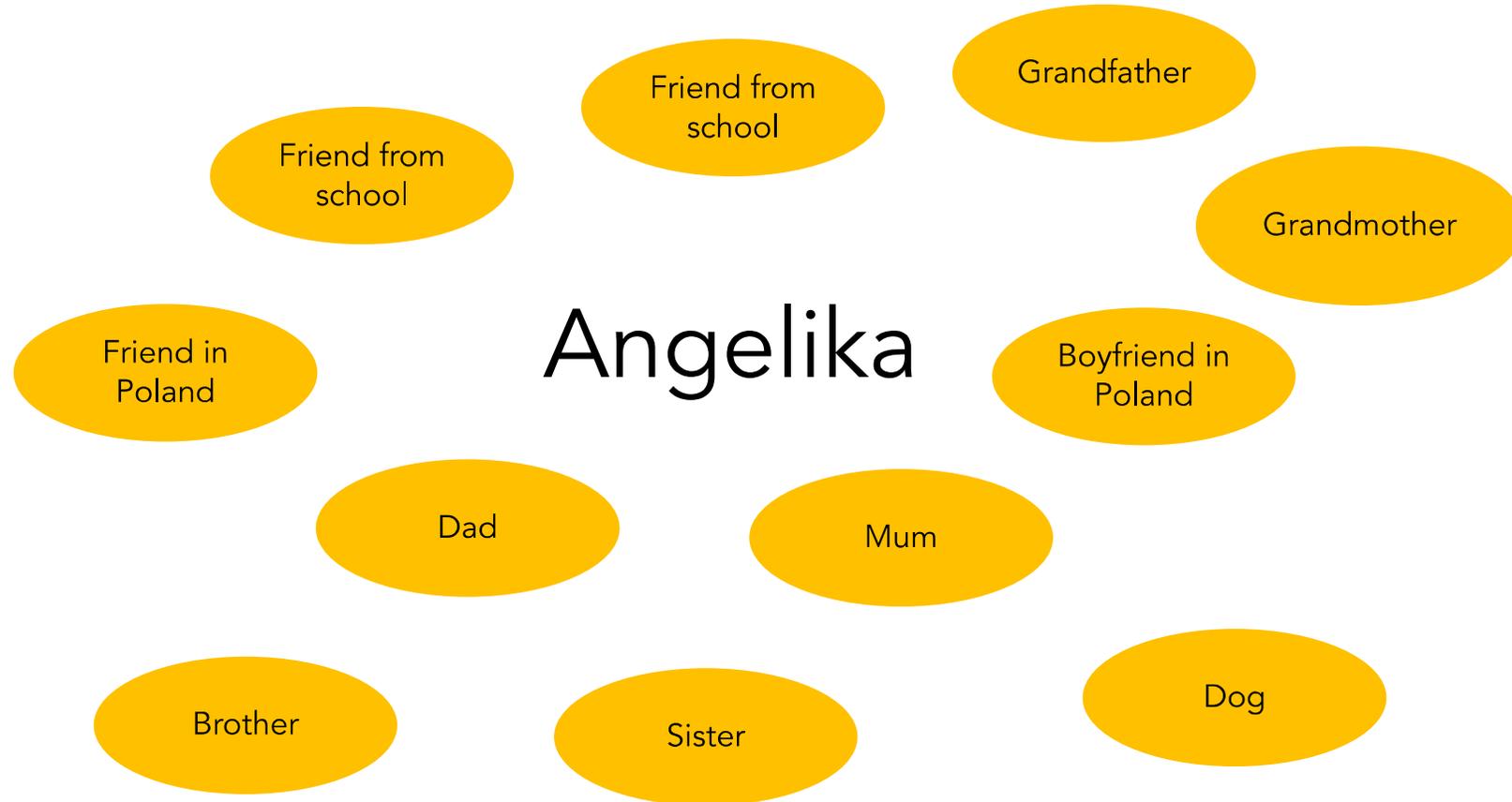


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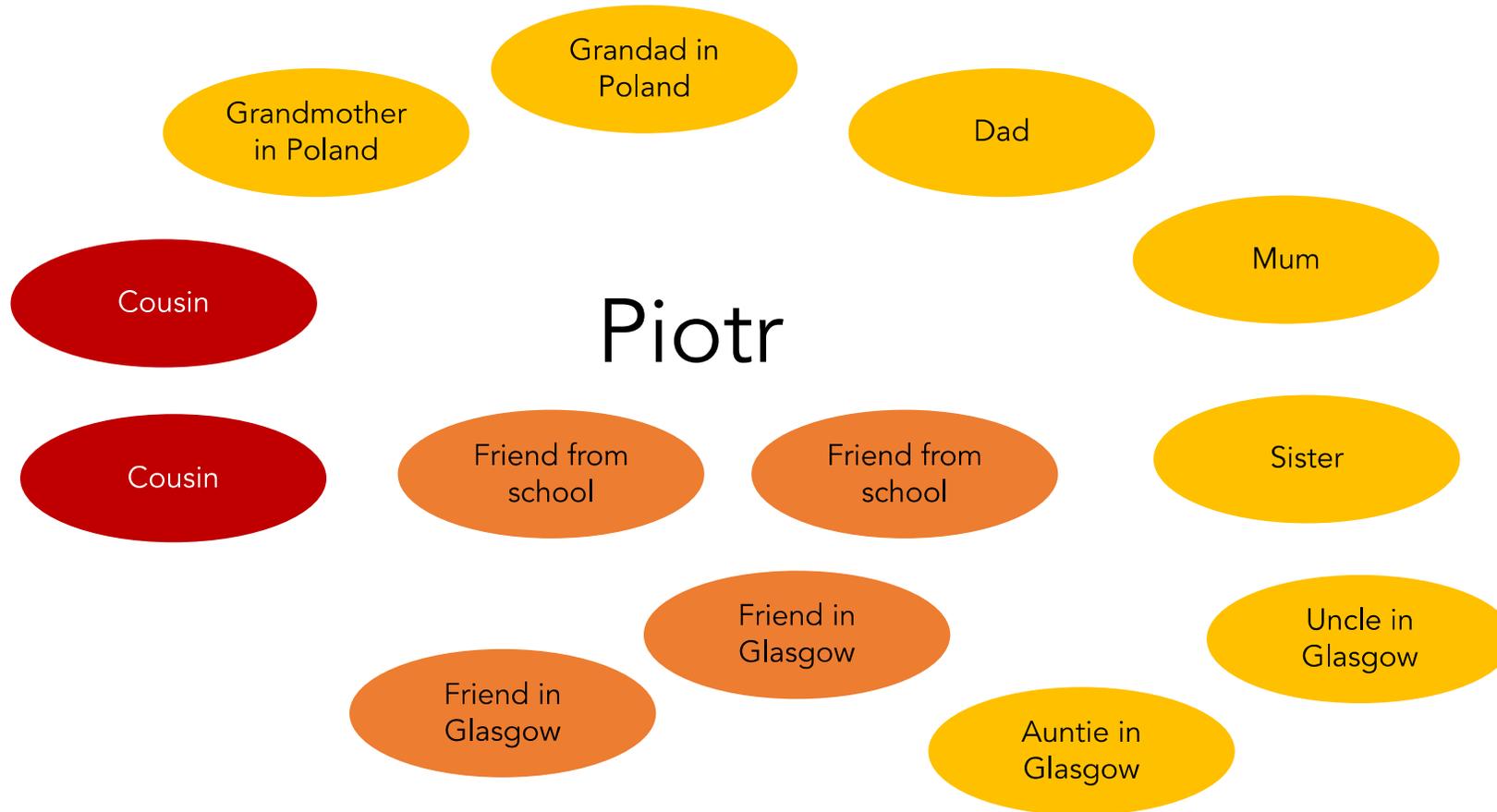
Some possible explanations:

- ~~Length of residency~~
- ~~Age at arrival~~
- Social networks?

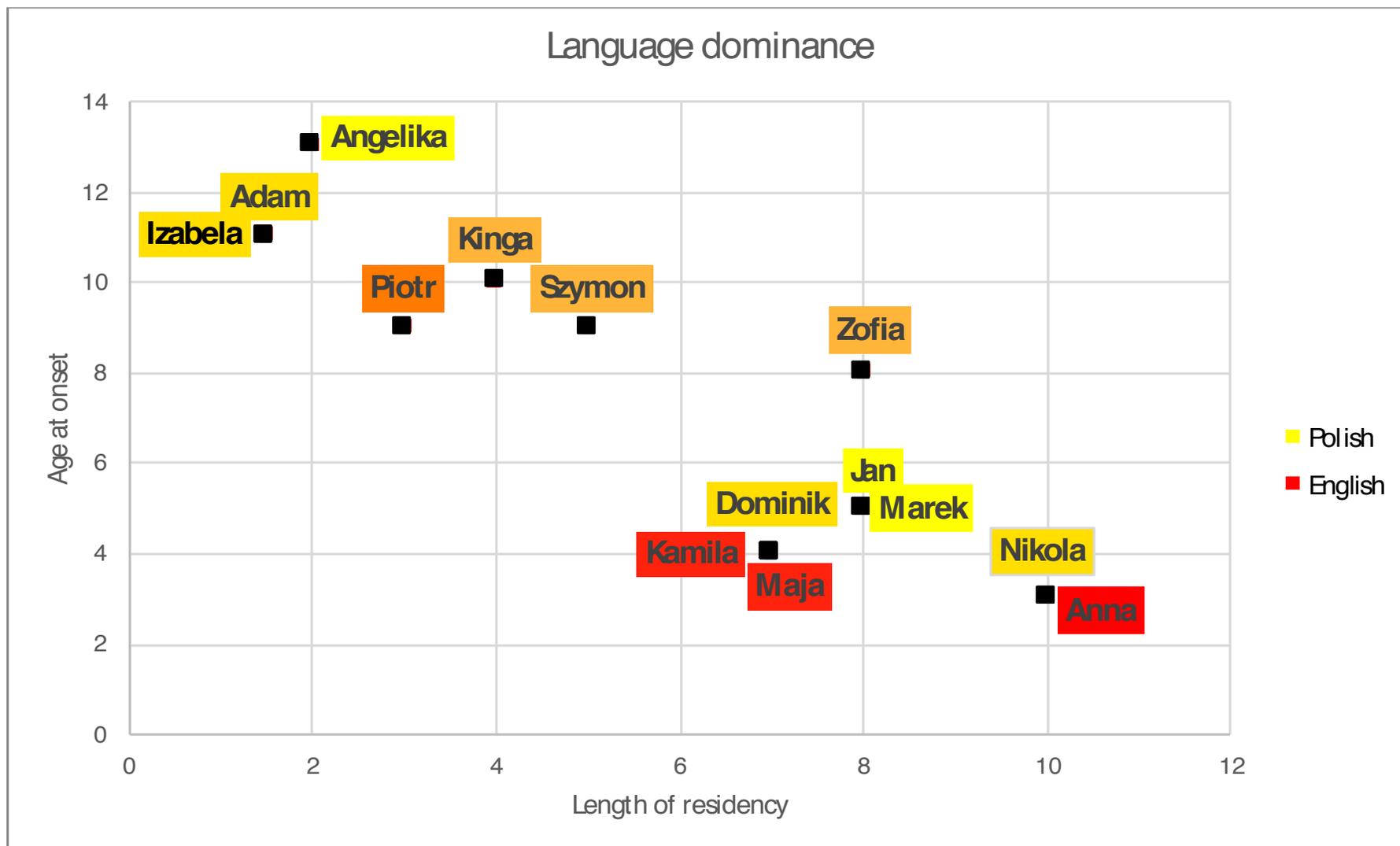
Social networks



Social networks



Language dominance



Experiences, attitudes, identity: Angelika

- 'I didn't speak English because I was in Scotland for, maybe, one month? So, my English, it - it wasn't well. And they were like, em, "oh my god you can't speak English!" "Go away! Oh!" '
- 'I know all Polish people in the school'
- She has a boyfriend in Poland, and misses him a lot
- She also misses her grandma, and has many friends in Poland who she speaks to every day over the internet
- Visiting Poland feels like going home

Experiences, attitudes, identity: Angelika

- 'I didn't speak English because I was in Scotland for, maybe, one month? So, my English, it - it wasn't well. And they were like, em, "oh my god you can't speak English!" "Go away! Oh!" '
- 'I know all Polish people in the school'
- She has a boyfriend in Poland, and misses him a lot
- She also misses her grandma, and has many friends in Poland who she speaks to every day over the internet
- Visiting Poland feels like going home
- She plans to move back to Poland as soon as possible

Experiences, attitudes, identity: Piotr

- 'I started off with, like, playing football. So I got, like, most of them words, like "pass", "go there", "go on goals" and all that, so yeah. Yeah, so I started off with that.'
- Although he was reluctant to leave Poland, Piotr says that once he arrived in Glasgow he settled in fine. He found people really friendly and he felt welcome. It was exciting to move to a big city, because his home in Poland was very rural
- I asked him why he thinks people form exclusively Polish groups. 'they can't be bothered learning [English]. So yeah, probably that's why.'

Social networks

There is some evidence that having English / Scots-speaking friends correlates with faster linguistic integration, but...

...there is also evidence that having friends with shared a home language (e.g. Polish) is really valuable, both in the early and later stages of acquisition.

Language and identity

- Language is inseparable from the people that use it
- We (linguists and non-linguists!) often want to explain people's language use without looking at their ideas, attitudes and experiences
- To understand language use we need to understand identity too

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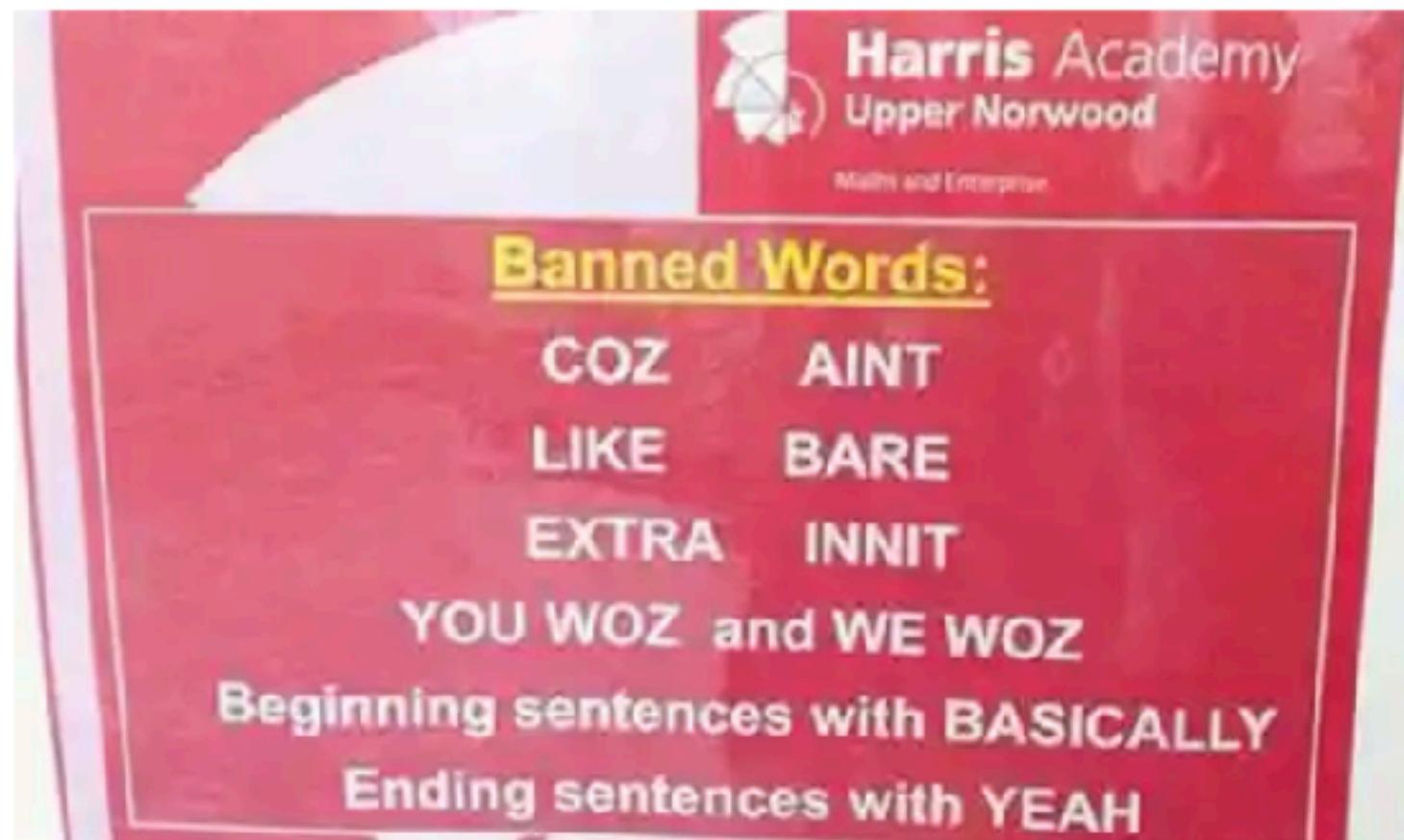
@accentricitypod

Accentricity

by telling people, but I don't wear it

London school bans pupils from using 'innit', 'like', and 'bare'

A list of slang words and phrases have been banned as part of a new initiative at a school in south London. Given the chance, which slang words or phrases would you put a stop to?



▲ Staff at Harris Academy Upper Norwood hope to improve awareness of formal language by banning a list of slang words and phrases Photograph: @artsemergency

How can we support learners like these?

- Give people (especially adolescents) space to experiment with language and identity
- Make space for the home language whenever possible, and value multilingualism
- Open classroom discussions about how the way we speak relates to who we are

How can we support learners like these?

- Give people (especially adolescents) space to experiment with language and identity
- Make space for the home language whenever possible, and value multilingualism
- Open classroom discussions about how the way we speak relates to who we are
- We can't force friendships, but we can create fertile ground for them to grow in by making our communities welcoming and not tolerating bullying or xenophobia

Thanks to...

- My supervisors, Professor Jennifer Smith, Professor Evelyn Arizpe, Dr Clara Cohen and Professor Jane Stuart-Smith
- The pupils and staff at St John's High School, where I conducted my research
- Maria Walker and the Glasgow EAL service (the other teachers can't be named because I need to preserve the school's anonymity!)
- The transcription team: Megan Christie, Ashley Gordon and George Hardwick
- Those who supervised and led workshops at the after-school club: Faye Baxter, Alba Briongos, Liam Chapman, Roanna Davidson, Gill Higgins, Kenny Horner, Yvonne Knox, Finn LeMarinel, Noreen Macdonald, Craig Mackenzie, Clare McBrien, Kelly McGhee, Julie Ann Munro, Sarah Rankin and Hilary Stewart.