

# Lessons from a survey of British dialect grammar\*

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## Abstract

This article is intended for non-specialists interested in linguistic and educational issues associated with regional variation in grammar. It is based on the work of the Survey of British Dialect Grammar which entailed an unusual collaboration between linguists and school children. The findings of the survey have made it possible to provide a fuller picture of the national distribution of nonstandard grammatical features and to generate hypotheses about dialect levelling in urban centres. They also provide interesting challenges to educational policy and practice.

**Key words:** British Dialects, Non-standard English, Sociolinguistics, Education.

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## 1. Introduction

Regional variation in English has long been the object of scholarly attention. With the emergence of sociolinguistics as an independent discipline, scholarly interest in this question has continued to flourish (Trudgill 1990; Trudgill and Chambers 1991; Milroy and Milroy 1992). However, coverage of the different parts of the British Isles remains extremely patchy with individual linguists tending to focus on their home territories. For many areas, popular publications such as *Notts natter: how it is spoke* (Wright 1986) and *Son of Bristle: a second guide to what the natives say and mean in the heart of Wess Vinglun* (Robson 1982) are the main sources of information.

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To date there have been two national surveys of British dialects. The first, the Survey of English Dialects, grew out of the work of Harold Orton and his colleagues (1962–71) at the University of Leeds. Pre-dating as it does the advent of modern sociolinguistics, the focus is on lexis and phonology. The second national overview of regional variation, the Survey of British Dialect Grammar, was made possible by an Economic and Social Research Council Research award to Jenny Cheshire and Viv Edwards. As the title implies, there was a significant shift from lexis and phonology to grammar. Other changes in focus concerned methods of data collection. Traditional dialectologists elicited information from elderly, male informants. In contrast the more recent survey focuses on school children in mainly city schools.

A partnership between researchers and schools came into being for very practical reasons. The project's shoestring budget was not sufficient to employ trained linguists to record and analyze authentic speech data in a wide range of settings. However, at the time the project was taking place, there was considerable interest in regional and social variation in schools. By providing stimulus material to teachers, it was possible to harness this interest in order to collect a wide range of interesting data, using school children both as informants and as researchers. We were also able to collect qualitative data on language attitudes from older informants: coverage of the survey in regional newspapers and local radio broadcasts resulted in many letters containing personal views on dialect.

## **2. The survey of British dialect grammar**

In the first stage of the project, we established a network of teachers throughout the United Kingdom. Some 87 schools distributed throughout the country ultimately took part in the survey. While the coverage of rural areas was incomplete, urban areas were well-represented. Approximately 5,000 children took part. The number of participants varied from school to school: in some cases, teachers worked with one class, in other cases, they worked with several. Almost all the schools were comprehensive schools drawing on children from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds and pupils between the ages of eleven and sixteen.

For reasons of economy, the survey took the form of a questionnaire, which we sent to all the participating schools. The questionnaire consisted of 196 linguistic features, drawn from the main areas of dialect grammar described in Edwards, Trudgill and Weltens (1984). We felt it essential that a period of preparatory work should precede the administration of the questionnaire, in order to ensure that children provided reliable information, rather than the answers they assumed their teachers wanted. In order to reinforce this point, a series of lesson outlines and materials were sent to all participating schools. The lesson outlines covered topics such as multilingual Britain, language variation, language change, standard English, and 'talking proper'. The questionnaire on local dialect usage was presented as the end

point of the work around social and regional variation in English, with the intention of consulting pupils as the experts on their local variety of English, and asking them to tell us whether the forms listed on the questionnaire were used locally.

We suggested to teachers that classes working collaboratively should divide into three groups, each dealing with one page of the questionnaire, and that each group should report on the forms of dialect grammar listed on their page that were used in their community. If more funds and research staff had been available it would, of course, have been preferable to have based this part of the survey on audio recordings of a sample of speakers in different parts of Britain. We were, of course, acutely aware of the limitations of using questionnaires to collect linguistic data and we took steps to guard against these limitations, as far as possible. A pilot study was carried out in 1986 in the town of Reading, Berkshire, where a previous empirical study of morphological and syntactic variation had taken place (Cheshire 1982). In the pilot study, children's appraisals of dialect forms regularly heard in Reading coincided closely with those which we know, from the previous study, actually do occur. Each completed questionnaire that we received during the survey itself was examined to see if any examples of dialect usage were reported which, on the basis of existing knowledge, were unexpected for the area. Such examples were infrequent but did occasionally occur. Our procedure was to write to the teacher concerned to query the feature and to ask for further examples of utterances in which it occurred. This allowed us to judge for ourselves whether misreporting had taken place. Wherever possible, we also cross-checked examples of this kind with linguists working in that area of Britain.

Several problems emerged during the data collection phase. Teachers were not able to cooperate as fully as we had hoped partly because of industrial action which they were taking on pay and conditions during this period and partly because of the pressures caused by the introduction of a new examination system. Two hundred questionnaires were distributed, and eighty-seven returned. Although this was a smaller number than we originally expected, the completed questionnaires in fact covered all the major urban areas of England, Scotland and Wales with the exception of Edinburgh, Newport and Portsmouth (see Cheshire, Edwards and Whittle 1989). The Survey of British Dialect Grammar therefore contrasts sharply with the Survey of English Dialects not only in its focus on syntax rather than on phonology, but also in its emphasis on urban rather than rural areas.

This predominantly urban distribution of responses allowed us to make a contribution to the controversial question of dialect levelling. Earlier analyses of English dialects based on the Survey of English Dialects material (see, for instance, Wakelin 1984; Lass 1987) found it possible to define regional dialect areas in terms of the phonological features that occur in different parts of Britain, but could not identify any clearcut regions of England in terms of morphological features. Lass (1987: 234) suggests that this may be because

morphosyntax has remained relatively stable throughout its history; Hudson (1983) also draws attention to the fact that, on the whole, there is less syntactic than phonological variation in language.

The massive social and demographic changes that have taken place since the Second World War, however, appear to have had an effect on this putative stability. Urban dialectologists agree that the growth of cities has been accompanied by very rapid mixing of a number of different dialects from surrounding areas (see Milroy 1984: 214), as former rural populations become increasingly urbanized. Dialects of English are now usually thought of as falling into two groups: traditional dialects, spoken by a probably shrinking minority of speakers living mainly in remote and long-settled rural communities, and mainstream dialects, spoken in various parts of the English-speaking world, including most of the urban areas of Britain (see Trudgill and Chambers 1991: 2-3).

Whilst traditional dialects may differ from each other and from standard English in unpredictable ways, mainstream urban dialects are thought to closely resemble one another and to have relatively few grammatical differences from standard English. In other words, it is thought that in some cases dialect diversity is reducing and being replaced not simply by standard grammatical forms but also by a development towards a levelled nonstandard dialect. This is a controversial question that can only be properly addressed by empirical investigations of actual usage, but the survey responses allowed us to make a preliminary, informed contribution to the question, by determining those features that were reported most frequently as used in the urban centres of Britain.

Certain nonstandard grammatical features, such as multiple negation and unmarked plurality, are sometimes listed as common to most urban varieties of English (see, for example, Hughes and Trudgill 1987). Coupland (1988: 35) suggests that several of these grammatical features are so widespread that they are best seen as British social dialect characteristics rather than as marking regional provenance. These assumptions, however, have been unsupported by systematically collected empirical data.

The survey responses formed the basis for a more principled approach than has previously been possible. It emerged that a large number of features were reported infrequently (61 of the 196 features —31 per cent— were reported by fewer than 5 per cent of the schools). One dialect feature (demonstrative *them*, as in *them big spiders*), on the other hand, was reported by more than 90 per cent of the schools who took part in the survey, and a further ten features were reported by more than 80 per cent of the schools. We list these eleven features below, together with the percentage frequency with which they were reported and the questionnaire item that was used to ask about them. Note that we attach no importance to the actual percentage frequencies; these were calculated simply as a way of distinguishing those features that were reported more widely than others.

<i>them</i> as demonstrative adjective (item 125: Look at them big spiders)	97.7 %
<i>should of</i> (item 196: you should of left half an hour ago!)	92.0%
<i>never</i> as past tense negator (item 7: No, I never broke that)	86.2%
absence of plural marking (item 95: To make a big cake you need two pound of flour)	86.2%
<i>what</i> as relative pronoun (item 115: The film what was on last night was good)	86.2%
<i>there was</i> with plural 'notional' subject (item 58: there was some singers here a minute ago)	85.1%
<i>there's</i> with plural 'notional' subject (item 29: There's cars outside the church)	83.9%
present participle <i>sat</i> (item 46: She was sat over there looking at her car)	83.9%
nonstandard <i>was</i> (item 51: we was singing)	83.9%
adverbial <i>quick</i> (item 86: I like pasta. It cooks really quick)	82.8%
<i>ain't / in't</i> (items 9 and 10: that ain't working / that in't working)	82.8%
present participle <i>stood</i> (item 47: And he was stood in the corner looking at it)	80.5%

The survey thus confirms that the following features are widespread throughout the urban centres of Britain, as suggested by Hughes and Trudgill (1987) and Coupland (1988): *them* as demonstrative adjective, absence of plural marking on nouns of measurement, *what* as relative pronoun, nonstandard *was*, adverbials without the *-ly* suffix, and *ain't/in't*. In other words, 'regional dialect' appears to be a misnomer for these features. We think it important to report, however, that their social distribution and frequency of use has yet to be determined, so that, despite Coupland's (1988) suggestion, we do not yet feel ready to label any of them as social dialect features.

Some features were not reported as frequently as we had expected. These include multiple negation; the use of simple prepositions such as *up*, *round* and *over* where standard English has complex prepositions such as *up to*, *round to* or *over at*; the regularized reflexive pronoun forms *hisself* and *theirselves*; *done* as the past tense form of full verb *do*. With the exception of the nonstandard reflexive pronoun forms, all these features were reported much more frequently by schools in the south of England than by schools else-

where in Britain, suggesting that there may be a hitherto unsuspected regional distribution to these forms.

### 3. Some unexpected outcomes

The results of the survey provided the information that we had hoped for, giving us a general picture of the regional distribution of those features of dialect grammar included in the questionnaire at the same time as generating some preliminary hypotheses about dialect levelling in the British Isles. In addition, we obtained some sociolinguistic information of a more general kind, as a by-product of the lesson suggestions.

Children's written work was often of considerable interest to us as sociolinguists because it provided a qualitative counterbalance to experimental research on attitudes to regional variation in English. We give some examples in the following sections.

#### 3.1. *Reactions to linguistic diversity*

We were particularly interested in the topic of correction, both because we wanted to see which linguistic variables are salient to the teachers, parents and other adults who feel the need to monitor children's language and because we were curious about the children's reactions. We were also interested in written work that illustrated the way in which language functions as a symbol of individual and social identity, or which revealed children's attitudes to regional variation.

##### 3.1.1. Correction

Part of the lesson outline on the topic of 'talking proper' invited children to reflect on correction. We were interested in the identity of the forms that pupils said were corrected, since there is little precise information available on stigmatized forms in the research literature, and few hypotheses offered to explain why some variables are more salient to speakers than others. Condemnation of 'h' dropping, for example, is very widespread in Britain, but people do not seem to be concerned about vowel alternations (such as regional variation in the pronunciation of a word such as *bus*, which may be [bʌs] or [bʊs]).

Trudgill (1986: 11) suggests that overt stigmatization occurs when there is a high status variant of the stigmatized form which tallies with the orthography, while the stigmatized form does not. Many of the corrections concerning pronunciation that schoolchildren wrote about gave support to this view. Sometimes (as in examples 1-3) corrections were expressed in terms of 'dropped letters' or additional 'letters':

- (1) Mum corrects my speech when I drop letters especially 'h' and it annoys me but I suppose she's right.

- (2) Yes they moan at me when I start to speak like a Scouser [someone from Liverpool]. I say *married* as if there's about seven *r*'s in it -*marrrrrrried*.
- (3) Yes like when I say *ye* they always correct me and say *yes*.

Predictably, other corrections concerned features of nonstandard English grammar, which —it was claimed— did not exist (example 4) or were 'not English' (example 5):

- (4) Yes because I use words like *worser* and other things like that when there's no such word.
- (5) Yes they correct me when I am saying something and say that's not English. If I say *what* they say *that*. If I say *can I borrow this* they say it's not *borrow* it's *lend*.

A second reason for our interest was the information that we received, indirectly, on whether correcting children's language is a worthwhile exercise. Teachers in England and Wales are sometimes advised on the kinds of corrections that they should make. For example, the Cox Report (DES 1989: 4.46) rightly points out the dangers of indiscriminate correction, but suggests that teachers should correct nonstandard forms and highly stigmatised forms (such as the past tense forms of *see*) that occur frequently. The work which we received, however, led us to believe that such an approach is often counterproductive. Several children who reported that their speech had been 'corrected' gave examples which could not be attributed to standard English speaking teachers and can be explained more adequately in terms of hyper-correction:

- (6) Teachers normally correct me when I say *can I lend a pen* but you should say *can you please borrow me a pen*.
- (7) Yes. When I say *I saw something* they [teachers] say to say *seen* but my parents say it the opposite. This confuses me.

It can be argued on the basis of these examples that correcting pupil's speech is a waste of time and is likely to lead to confusion about the linguistic relationship between features of standard and nonstandard English.

Sociolinguists stress that language is closely bound up with individual and social identity: criticisms of the way we speak are likely to be interpreted as personal attacks. It is certainly not difficult to envisage a scenario in which persistent corrections of a child's language can lead to a reticence in oral work. We were interested, therefore, in the reactions that children expressed to being corrected. Examples 8-11 illustrate a broad range of professed reactions:

- (8) I feel very angry because I know what I am saying and so does the teacher.
- (9) I am not really bothered: I know what I mean and so do they.

- (10) My mum corrects me and it annoys me but I suppose she's right.
- (11) It doesn't bother me because they [teachers] know how to speak better than I do.

With the possible exception of the sanguine response in example 9, this range of reactions confirms our view that it is not a good idea to correct children's speech. In this respect, the repeated complaints of older dialect speakers also consulted during the course of the survey present a point of comparison. One northern octogenarian commented:

Any child using dialect speech would be severely reprimanded or ignored, depending on which teacher was in charge. Some teachers would endeavour kindly to explain that this was not on; others, less sympathetic, would perhaps resort to sarcasm or pretend to deliberately misunderstand.

Although tolerance of the spoken word has certainly increased in recent years, it is extremely doubtful whether the attempts of present-day teachers to change dialect speech or writing will be any more effective than those of the past. As one fourth year pupil in Rotherham reflected:

Teachers always correct the way I write. They correct the way I write more than anything. When I write a story and include talking I write it how I would speak. But sometimes teachers cross it out and put in how they would talk. I don't think they should do that. They should leave it as it is.

Though we remain sceptical about the usefulness of correcting non-standard forms, we are convinced of the value of including discussion of this aspect of 'talking proper' in the school curriculum. We agree with the Cox Committee's view that every child is entitled to learn not only the functions but also the forms of standard English (DES 1989: 4.7). However, it is by no means clear how this should be achieved, nor how teachers are to achieve the Cox Report's instructions to teach children the grammatical differences between the speech of their local area and spoken standard English (DES 1989: 15.37ii). Nonetheless, the opportunity to air personal reactions to corrections and to see the range of reactions amongst classmates seems a necessary prerequisite for constructive teaching of the linguistic differences between standard and nonstandard English.

### 3.1.2. Attitudes to regional variation

The research literature in sociolinguistics and social psychology is unanimous about the nature of attitudes towards regional varieties of English. Experiments have shown that accents associated with rural areas of Britain tend to be perceived by British speakers of English as more attractive than accents spoken in heavily urbanised areas, and that speakers with Received Pronunciation



(sometimes called 'the Queen's English') are considered to be more intelligent and more competent than speakers who have a regional accent (Edwards 1990). This perception has been found to be shared by standard and non-standard speakers alike, though nonstandard speakers may have strong feelings about the value of their own speech, associating it with friends, family and neighbourhood, with social attractiveness and with integrity.

The lesson suggestions invited children to consider their views on regional dialects. One teacher in a school in the urban centre of Widnes, Lancashire (in north west England) sent us some written work that showed that 'talking posh' was often associated with the south of England, particularly London:

(12) I dislike London accent. It sounds really posh.

(13) I dislike London accent because they are stuck up snobs.

As for other accents, the most striking feature of the children's comments was the complete lack of unanimity in their likes and dislikes, and the very wide range of reasons that were given in support of these opinions. Many of the attitudes that were expressed within a single class of pupils directly conflicted with each other. Compare, for example, 15 with 16, 17 and 18, 19 with 20, and 21 and 22 with 23 and 24:

(14) I like Cockney because it gives you a laugh. I also like American because it's dead cool. Geordie is OK as well.

(15) I dislike Geordie accent because of the way they say it, it just gets right up my nose.

(16) I detest American accents because there is too much of it going on TV.

(17) I don't like Cockney accents because it sounds like they're talking out of their nose

(18) I like the Welsh, Manchester, and Australian accents because they're good.

(19) I dislike Manchester accent because I don't like Manchester and everything's slower.

(20) I like Scottish because of the way they say it and when they say it fast it sounds dead cool.

(21) Scottish is the best because it sounds so easy going.

(22) I dislike Scottish because I can't understand what they are saying.

(23) I dislike Scottish accent because they speak so quick I can't understand it.

The comments that pupils made about different regional accents revealed a very interesting selection of idiosyncratic likes and dislikes, which they justified in equally idiosyncratic ways:

(24) Norfolk accent is the best. The people sound like farmers.

- (25) I like the Australians and the French because they're different and good.
- (26) Scousers speak terrible. Apart from that I don't really mind the rest of them except the people from Devon, they're really stuck up.
- (27) I hate the Birmingham accent because it makes them sound thick.
- (28) I dislike Newcastle. They talk really slow and drawn out.
- (29) I like Welsh: it's got a nice sound to it.

Airing these personal views in the context of a class discussion is a valuable educational experience, showing those individuals who have very strong linguistic prejudices that others may have equally strong, but different, prejudices. Such a discussion can never be neutral. However, if children are to understand the reasons why some accents and dialects are more prestigious than others, they need to be introduced to the historical development of English and to the intimate relationship between language and power. While the national curriculum does not advocate a critical approach of this kind, it does not exclude it.

### 3.1.3. Linguistic variation as an expression of individual and social identity

Another aspect of the lesson outline on 'talking proper' invited pupils to consider what they liked and what they disliked about speaking the way they did. The statements about what they liked confirmed without exception the function of language as an expression of personal identity. Examples 30 and 31 are typical of the children's views:

- (30) I enjoy speaking the way I do as I think it's me.
- (31) I feel comfortable speaking the way I do and I think it's good.

Similarly, there was widespread confirmation of the role of language as a symbol of loyalty to the neighbourhood (examples 32 and 33) and to the peer group (examples 34 and 35):

- (32) I like the way I speak because it sounds normal in this town.
- (33) I like Widnes accent best because it goes with the town and it's different from all the others.
- (34) I like it because you don't feel stupid, because all your mates speak it.
- (35) I like the way I speak because my friends all speak the same way and I can understand them.

The territoriality of language was mentioned by one cautious student:

- (36) If you go to Liverpool you might change the way you talk because you might get beat up.

There were few comments, however, about aspects of their speech that children disliked. We were surprised by this, since research carried out in Britain has sometimes shown that individuals who speak with an accent typical of a heavily urbanised part of the country experience linguistic insecurity about their speech (Macaulay 1977; Trudgill 1983: 209). Some of the comments that we received showed that pupils were aware of the social prestige associated with certain kinds of speech:

(37) When I am talking to posh people I feel terribly common.

but other comments, such as 38 and 39, revealed an antipathy to 'talking posh', and we were interested, and encouraged, to note that most children commented as in example 40:

(38) What I like is that I speak just like anyone else and not like a Yuppie (posh person).

(39) I like it because it doesn't sound posh.

(40) I don't really dislike anything about the way I speak.

Thus we found little evidence of the linguistic insecurity that has been reported as typical of children who speak with a regional accent. Perhaps insecurity develops later, if individuals mix with people from outside their region after they have left school; or perhaps times are changing, and attitudes to regional accents are becoming more tolerant. We would like to believe in the latter explanation; after all, some newsreaders and programme presenters on the BBC now have (slight) regional accents, especially on local BBC stations, and accents other than Received Pronunciation are increasingly heard in public life. Collins (1988), however, found that the prestige of Received Pronunciation is still firmly entrenched, at least in London schools. Even those school teachers who had been teaching in an Equal Opportunities school for fifteen years and who professed to have liberal attitudes towards regional accents nevertheless gave the highest ratings to speakers of English with Received Pronunciation. Trainee teachers who participated in Collins' study also gave the highest ratings to Received Pronunciation.

#### 4. Resources for diversity

Classroom discussions of dialect are useful not only for raising children's social and linguistic awareness, but also for their development as writers. The work which teachers shared with us demonstrated not only that children write with interest and enthusiasm *about* dialect but also that they write most competently *in* dialect. Teachers who participated in the project used a wide range of stimulus material – texts about dialect, short stories and poems in dialect, records, tapes and television programmes. Children

have recorded an equally wide range of responses. They have improvised plays which they have later transcribed. They have written plays in dialect which they have then performed. They have also composed poems and stories in dialect.

Work on the project made it clear that dialect continues to be a source of fascination for a wide range of people: for academics who believe that the description of dialect is as important to linguistic theory as standard English; for teachers who feel that education should acknowledge and build on children's speech, rather than criticizing and rejecting it; for writers and performers who find dialect a versatile vehicle for their work; and for the large body of laypeople who identify with regional speech and want to find out more. It also became clear that there was a very great need for a central source of information on dialect resources. A secondary development, the compilation of a *Directory of English Dialect Resources* (Edwards 1993) therefore attempted to bring together as comprehensive as possible a range of books and commercially available sound recordings, together with information on dialect societies, resource centres and sound collections.

## 5. Conclusion

The Survey of British Dialect Grammar was an attempt to incorporate sociolinguistics directly into the classroom, with the short-term aim of enlisting teachers and their pupils as researchers, asking them to help us in the systematic collection of data on local dialect grammar. We have used these data to formulate hypotheses on dialect levelling, which have been tested subsequently with interesting results by other researchers (see, for instance, Kerwill 1997).

We also found that schoolchildren were interested in acting on their own account as sociolinguistic researchers, exploring their personal reactions to linguistic diversity as well as investigating the linguistic variation that exists in their local community. These personal explorations seem to us to be an essential first step in paving the way for an understanding of the differences between written and spoken language, standard and nonstandard English, and towards the addition of standard English. Activities of this kind also allow children the opportunity to share their experiences of linguistic diversity with their peers and their teacher, and empower them to face the adult world (see Fairclough 1992 for further discussion).

Activities of this kind also offer interesting challenges for teachers. Children are allowed to assume the role of expert and, in most cases, will be able to speak with greater authority on the local dialect than their teachers. Children's views on non-standard speech may, on some occasions, cause teachers to reappraise their own classroom practice, particularly in relation to the 'correction' of non-standard forms.

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