

Here's an article on Northern English which appeared in *emagazine*, a publication for A-level English Language and English Literature students. To what extent do you think that the things the author says about Northern English are applicable to Scots and Scottish English? What evidence do you have to support your view?

Northern English: a state of mind

It's a difficult thing, working on accents and dialects of English, if you come from northern England like I do. As an academic who works on varieties of English, I strive to show that all varieties are linguistically equal, with no accent or dialect being inherently better than any other; as a northerner, I know that northern English is the best accent of the lot, no matter what academics think. It all boils down to this. There are two groups of people in the world: those who have a northern English accent, and those who wish they did.

But what is 'northern English', exactly? If we ignore any sociolinguistic variation within the north, and try to concentrate just on a traditional, regional definition of a 'dialect', we run into problems. What land mass corresponds to the area in which northern English is spoken? Historically, for instance, much of lowland Scotland could legitimately be considered part of the linguistic north, given what we know about the early history of English, and the similarities between the dialects of the far north of England, and those of southern Scotland. But because political boundaries and social groupings have formed and reformed since the Anglo-Saxon period, we have to recognise that geography alone cannot serve to delimit linguistic varieties. An alternative approach is to consider individuals, and the identities that they project, partly through their linguistic behaviour. The critical issue here is one of identity as action: your identity is not a reflection of what you are, but rather the outcome of what you do. It is agentive, and manifests itself in many ways, from the clothes that people buy, the music they choose to listen to, and the language that they speak.

Multilingualism is perhaps the most obvious way of illustrating this, and many northerners are multilinguals. Sometimes the context of the speech act, or the social and linguistic background of the participants in the discourse, will determine what language speakers use: a community language at home with grandparents, for instance, but English in the classroom. However, we also find speakers exploiting their linguistic repertoire by varying the language they use even when the context and participants remain constant: a group of teenagers from Preston might well create a variety which appears to be a jigsaw of English, Urdu, Bengali and other languages when engaged in informal talk. Such speakers don't need to be fluent in all of these languages; some may only know a handful of Bengali words and phrases, but drawing on even this limited knowledge can be enough to indicate group membership, to show that you belong. Patterns of 'crossing', to use Ben Rampton's term, are a regular feature of the linguistic behaviour of multilingual speakers in communities both within northern England and beyond. This crossing is a way of marking identity.

What holds for languages also holds for dialects. Speakers project aspects of their identity by drawing on the range of 'Englishes' that they know – Tyneside English, Northern English, British English and so on. For instance, in any particular speech event, a speaker from Newcastle might say *hous* (with a diphthong) rather than *hoose* (with a monophthong), but, in words like *bath* and *dance*, still retain a low front vowel (as most speakers of English have in *cat*) rather than the low back vowel associated with

southern speech. Thinking about this in terms of ‘local’ and ‘supralocal’ poles, we’d say that the speaker is locating himself or herself in the middle of this cline – he or she may be perceived as having a ‘General Northern’ accent, rather than a heavily localised variety. In another speech event, the same speaker may use many more ‘Newcastle’ variants, in which case the speaker is located closer toward the ‘local’ pole. Again, this linguistic behaviour is tied in with the projection of a particular kind of identity, from local Geordie to supralocal northerner. In my own research on Tyneside English, some of the older speakers I talked to were lamenting the fact that younger speakers from the north-east didn’t talk ‘proper Geordie’ anymore. This view was not upheld by the younger speakers, who took great pride in speaking Geordie – they just considered themselves to speak modern Geordie. For many (including many people from the north-east) this modern Geordie is not as distinctive from other accents as it used to be, and this process of dialect levelling has been attested for other dialect areas in surveys carried out in the British Isles. But even if we accept the claim that local varieties are not as distinct as they were, the concepts of ‘northerner’ and ‘northern English’ remain.

How are such concepts formed in our minds? One of the ways in which our minds work is that we create stereotypes – it’s an unfortunate but necessary by-product of our human ability to categorise. Our minds are constantly categorising, assigning things into larger groups, based on what we perceive to be similarities among different entities. Stereotypes function as abstract members of the social categories we store in our minds; we identify attributes that we associate with the categories, and the more attributes a given instance of a particular category has, the more we consider that instance to come close to the stereotype. In terms of social categorisation, these attributes can be to do with the way in which people dress, the kind of music they like, and the kind of language they speak, which we’ve also seen to be influential in the projection of identity. So identity and stereotypes are closely linked in speakers’ minds.

All of you reading this will have a social category of ‘northern Englishman’, for instance, a category which you’ve built up through experience, as a result of encounters with men from northern England. These encounters vary massively in kind, of course: part of your category of ‘northern Englishman’ might have been constructed on the basis of your dad being from York; another part constructed because you’ve seen Ant and Dec on the television; another part because you’ve heard Steven Gerrard be interviewed after he has played for England, and so on, over potentially tens of thousands of instances of northern Englishmen you’ve encountered, however briefly. Your category of ‘northern Englishman’ will be unique to you, because no-one else in the world has had exactly the same experiences as you have. This is why your concept of ‘northern Englishman’ can’t correspond directly to a person in the ‘real world’: it is abstract, part of your mental make-up. And what’s true of ‘northern Englishman’ as a social category is equally true of ‘northern English’ as a linguistic category. Just as you encounter and categorise speakers, you encounter and categorise speech. This is why northern English is a state of mind.

Sometimes, however, this social and linguistic stereotyping is based on very little evidence indeed, and this can result in prejudice. Let’s take a more specific category, ‘Yorkshireman’, and an aspect of the language associated with Yorkshiremen, the phrase “Eeh bah gum”. I don’t think I’ve ever heard a Yorkshireman say “Eeh bah gum”. Yet this has become such a stock Yorkshire phrase that a story on *The Sun*’s website, detailing the fondness of Brad Pitt and his wife for the soap opera *Emmerdale*, set in the Yorkshire Dales, had the headline “Jolie bah gum, Angelina”. “Eeh bah gum” has now passed into

folklore, and has become entrenched as a marker of Yorkshire speech with the result that it works as a stereotyped linguistic form that invokes a stereotyped social category.

Such stereotypes regularly feature in comedy portrayals of the north. Here is a transcript of part of a famous Monty Python sketch, where Michael Palin, Eric Idle, Graham Chapman and Terry Jones are dressed in white tuxedos, drinking white wine, against a background of a beautiful coastline:

FIRST YORKSHIREMAN: Aye, very passable, that, very passable bit of risotto.

SECOND YORKSHIREMAN: Nothing like a good glass of Château de Chasselas, eh, Josiah?

THIRD YORKSHIREMAN: You're right there, Obadiah.

FOURTH YORKSHIREMAN: Who'd have thought thirty year ago we'd all be sittin' here drinking Château de Chasselas, eh?

FIRST YORKSHIREMAN: In them days we was glad to have the price of a cup o' tea.

SECOND YORKSHIREMAN: A cup o' cold tea.

FOURTH YORKSHIREMAN: Without milk or sugar.

THIRD YORKSHIREMAN: Or tea.

The sketch then descends into madness as each of the Yorkshiremen try to outdo the others by recounting how difficult his life was while growing up. Much of the humour derives simply from the exaggerated accounts of hardship, but there is also humour in the incongruity of discourse topic and linguistic forms – the affluence associated with the discourse on risotto and fine French wine, combined with the non-standard grammar (*thirty year, them days, we was glad*) and Victorian names. This incongruity is marked too by what appears to be a mismatch between the way the characters are dressed (white tuxedos) and the way they speak (with Yorkshire accents). But why a Yorkshire accent? Why not one associated with London, Bristol, Plymouth, or Norwich? Again, the humour derives in part from wider cultural knowledge (or rather, assumptions) about a typical Yorkshireman, playing on the stereotype that it's grim up north.

This links to a wider, institutional stereotype: the portrayal of the north as 'other'. This is part of the cultural norms of much of the British media, which is both metrocentric (focussed on cities) and austrocentric (focussed on the south). These terms are used by Katie Wales to describe the way in which the history of English has often been analysed by linguists, but they are true too of much of the British establishment. For instance, the BBC News website in 1999 reported the decision of the *Oxford English Dictionary* to include the exclamation "Ee", considered to be a northern form, in revisions to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, as follows:

Ee bah gum, it's in t'dictionary

By 'eck! Them daft 'apeths at t'Oxford Dictionary have gone all northern.

If that were true, what a wonderful world it would be.