

The dialect of the Holy Island of Lindisfarne

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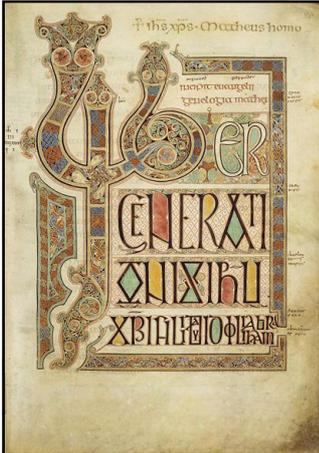
Northumbrian dialects

When we think of Northumbrian dialect, we might first think of the language of the middle and southeast of the county

- with its characteristic sounds in words such as *snow, hand, coat, dog, pub, boots*
- and verb forms such as *cannit, divn't*

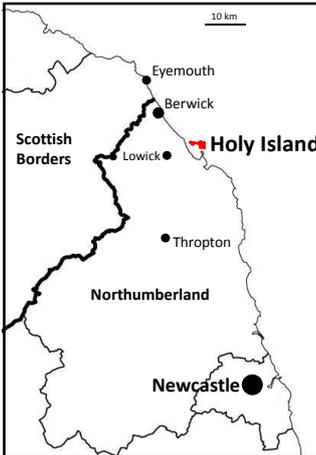
But as you all know, Northumberland is quite a diverse county linguistically

- the urban dialect of Tyneside
- the Pitmatic of the coalfields
- the Cumbrian-like speech of the southwest of the county
- and North Northumbrian, where influence from Lowland Scotland is most obvious (*canna, dinna*)



793 AD

Her wæron reðe forebecna cumene ofer Norðanhymbra land 7 þet folc earmlice bregdon: þet wæron ormete ligræscas, 7 wæron geseowene fyrene dracan on þam lyfte fleogende. þam tacnum sona fyligde mycel hunger, 7 litel æfter þam þæs ilcan geares on .vi. idus Ianuarii earmlice heðenra manna hergung adiligode Godes cyrican in Lindisfarenae purh reafiac 7 mansleht.



Population:
162, less than half native

Distance from the Border:
Connected to the mainland by a causeway at 'low waiter', opened in 1955

Industry:
Traditionally fishing and farming, nowadays mostly tourism, with some farming, lobster and crab fishing

Schools:
One first school, now joined with Lowick Middle and high school in Berwick

THE DIALECT OF HOLY ISLAND
A Phonological Analysis

Dissertation
zur Erlangung der Würde eines Doktors der Philosophie
vorgelegt der Philosophisch-Historischen Fakultät der
Universität Basel

VON
Jörg Berger
VON
Basel


Peter Lang
Bern · Frankfurt am Main · Las Vegas
1980

"The data consist of some fifty hours of tape-recordings,* of which about two thirds are recordings made with usually one informant at a time ... The remaining third contains recordings of conversations between informants" (p. 20)

"*The recordings were made in the years 1971-1973 and are in the possession of the author."

The 1971-3 recordings

Reel-to-reel recordings of natives by Jörg Berger

- 24.5 hrs, 10 main speakers (3F, 7M), born 1893-1914 (the 'older' speakers), plus 1945M

The recordings include:

- conversations:
 - between Berger and Islander(s), or at least with Berger present
 - sometimes several people at the same time, some recorded in the pub, with lots of background, largely inaudible chatter
- discussions of local place-names (from a numbered map)
- answers to dialect questionnaires (e.g. the *Survey of English Dialects*)

Other Holy Island recordings and DHIL

Two *Millennium Memory Bank* recordings (British Library):

- 1926M (30 years in London), 1965F

On-going data collection by WM

- 1945Mb (in 2006), 1947M, 1963F, 1967M (in 2013)

Dialect of the Holy Island of Lindisfarne (DHIL) corpus (British Academy grant SG112357), 2012-2014

- time-aligned orthographically transcriptions
- hosted on the *Diachronic Electronic Corpus of Tyneside English* website (<http://research.ncl.ac.uk/decte/dhil.htm>)
- accessed via a password-protected interface subject to completion of a user agreement form

Conversation types

The speech in the recordings is of different types:

- normal conversational speech (C)
- elicited speech – e.g. answers to dialect questionnaires, where the intention was for the speakers to give their broadest dialect forms (even if that wasn't always the result) (Q)
- In my analysis of the data, I've kept these two kinds of speech separate to see if there are differences between them

Berger's speakers

Speaker	Occupation	Source	Types
1893F	'Herring girl'	Berger	Q and C
1902F	Shop keeper	Berger	Q and C
1908F	Housewife	Berger	C
1903M	Fisherman	Berger	Q and C
1904M*	Wireless operator	Berger	Q and C
1905M	Various jobs locally	Berger	Q and C
1906M	Fisherman	Berger	C
1908M	Driver	Berger	Q and C
1910M*	Fisherman, lifeboat man	Berger	Q and C
1914M*	Various, inc. Navy	Berger	Q
1945Ma	Fisherman	Berger	Q and C

'Older' speaker sample in red; speakers marked * had higher status jobs, typically involving time and training away from the Island

New speakers

Speaker	Occupation	Source	Types
1926M*	Merchant Navy, painter and decorator	MMB	C
1945Mb	Fisherman	WM 2006	Q and C
1947M	Fisherman, bus driver (on the Island)	WM 2013	C
1963F*	Hotelier	WM 2013	C
1965F	Priority attendant	MMB	C
1967M*	Navy, publican	WM 2013	C

The 'younger' speakers have very different life histories

- they went to middle and high school in Berwick (where they boarded through the week)
- they may have gone to college further away again
- often worked away from the Island for substantial periods
- usually employed in the tourism and hospitality industry

Int.	And this is?	
1893F	The door.	
Int.	And, and, and the thing at the door?	
1893F	That's the handle, isn't it, or the -, aye, that's the handle.	
Int.	Uh-huh. And on the other side, you know? These things, there.	
1893F	- The jambs of the door? Is that, do you mean the round about -	
Int.	No, uh, these?	
1893F	Oh, that's the hinges. 	
Int.	Hinges?	
1893F	Hinges.	
Int.	And this is?	
1893F	Tha-, that's the surroundings.	
Int.	Surroundings?	
1893F	Surroundings.	
Int.	Oh. Beautiful.	
1893F	Ye couldn't understand we. 	
1905M:	I've seen it, [when we] used to keep the articles here. You know what them things is, George? Well, I'm going to tell you. Now, there's an art, there's an art, uh, uh, uh, [you know] preparing them first and cutting their throat. Now, if they didn't bleed right, you buggers, they would never cure. You couldn't, they would never cure right.	
1906M:	Keep a woman out the road.	
1905M:	Well, there's something in that and all. I dinna know w-, whether that's an old saying or no.	
1906M:	No, it's quite perfectly true.	
1905M:	It might be right. But, uh, uh, [I know] we used to keep them and I knew perfectly well as soon as they was killed and their throat was cut, if they didna bleed right, they would never cure right. Couldna cure them right. 	

1945M:	You dinna put any boxes upside down in the boat. B-, when you put your empty boxes in they've got to be the right way up. That used to be an old man's , an old man's super-. If the box is upside down some of them would go home again. If the box is upside down how the hell can you put anything in it? Everything's going to fall out . So that was a superstition. Another one . If possible get away from your moorings without going backwards. You know? You've got to go ahead if you can . It's no use going astern . You know? That's no bloody use. Whistling. No allowed to whistle in the boat. My father would, what, he would bloody kill me for, "Do you no think there's enough wind ?" Aye. " Without blowing any more ?" 	
1965F:	Yeah, it's a lovely place for children to grow up. I know there's not a lot of facilities but they're not far away and Berwick's just easy to nip to. There's swimming pools and all those kinds of facilities. They go to nurseries on, if they want to in Berwick. They might actually start a nursery up here if there's more children. But, yeah, when we were small, there's a beach as you come on to the Island called the Chare Ends. And everyone, even my dad, my granny used to take my dad there when they were little . Every day in the summer holidays if it was fine, everybody took their children out there and they all used to sit right along this beach with all the prams and push-chairs and everything. 	

Notable pronunciation features

- *cow, how, now*, etc. with a diphthong (i.e. not *coo, hoo, noo*)
 - also *shoe* and *two*
- *knee, see, tea* with a diphthong (*kney, sey, tey*)
- final -y as a diphthong, e.g. *happy (happy), jetty (jitty), twenty (twunty)*
- short 'u' like Scots (*but, good*)
- 'aw', not 'aa' in *blow, know, snow; hand, man*
- no 'Northumbrian fronting' in *coat, hole; dog, on*
- 'yi' in words like *boots, enough, soot*
- 'yu' in *hook, tough*
- And of course the Northumbrian Burr, often retained after vowels before consonants, e.g. *bird, turn, work*

Analysing of variation and change in the dialect

My research (so far) concentrates on understanding variation and change in the pronunciation of Holy Island dialect

How does it vary?

- between speakers
- between different kinds of speech
- between different social groups

How is it changing?

- its origins
- differences between broad and less broad speakers
- differences between older and younger speakers

The features

I've so far analysed four characteristic features of the dialect:

- 1) The pronunciation of R
 - is it the Burr, Scottish tap/trill, or English (and Standard) R?
- 2) The MOUTH vowel
 - is it a monophthong 'oo' or a diphthong 'ow'?
- 3) Negation of verbs, e.g. *can't/canna, don't/dinna*
 - is negation of an 'English' or a 'Scots' type?
- 4) The word used for affirmation
 - is it *aye* or *yes* (or *yeah*)?

The Survey of English Dialects data

The ground-breaking *Survey of English Dialects* by Harold Orton and Eugen Dieth surveyed the traditional rural dialects of England in the 1950s

They gathered data at nine locations in Northumberland, the nearest one to Holy Island (and the most northerly one in the survey) being Lowick

- large collections of phonetic transcriptions of answers to their dialect questionnaire
- short audio recording

In my analysis, I've compared the data for Lowick with the Holy Island data where possible

R pronunciation

The traditional pronunciation of R in Northumberland is of course the Burr

- Uvular [ʀ]
- SED Lowick has 100% uvular R

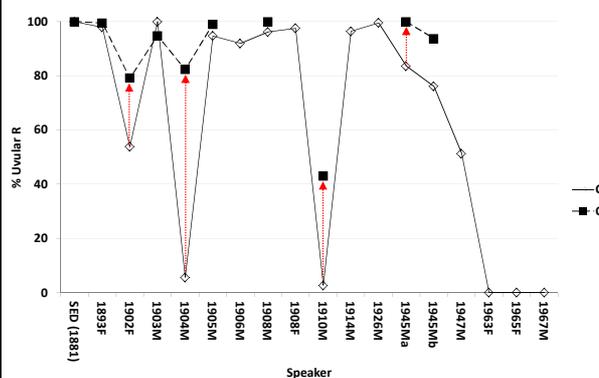
Påhlsson (1972: 222), Thropton:

- "the Burr seems to be faced with fairly bleak prospects for the future, although it constitutes a prominent and vigorous feature of the dialect of the community at present"

Beal et al. (2012: 40):

- "The 'Northumbrian Burr' [ʀ] is nowadays completely absent from urban areas and indeed very rare in rural areas"

R results



The 'MOUTH' vowel

The vowel in words which had Middle English /u:/

- e.g. *about, brown, down, house, out*

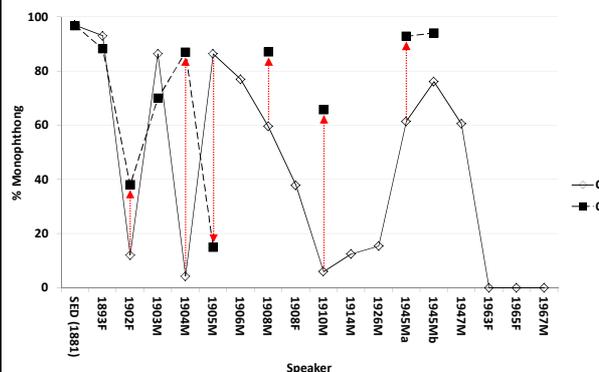
The monophthong (e.g. [u:]) is retained in traditional Northern English and Scots dialects

- but it has been diphthongised in word-final position in some dialects on either side of the Border ('YOW and MEY' dialects), including Holy Island

Beal (2000: 349) suggests that monophthongal MOUTH has become restricted to a small number of lexical items (especially *Brown Ale* and *Town* = Newcastle/Newcastle United) in Newcastle

SED Lowick has 96.83% monophthong in MOUTH

MOUTH results



Negation of verbs

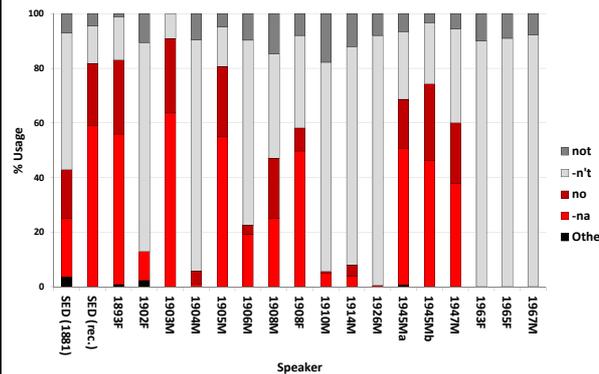
Scots dialects have a rather different form of verbal negation than Standard English and (most) dialects in England:

- inflected negatives with non-contracting verbs: non-Scots *-n't* vs. Scots *-nae* (e.g. *She didnae see it*)
- full negatives with contracted verbs: non-Scots *not* vs. Scots *no* (e.g. *He's no been here*)

Similar forms of 'Scots'-type negation are also found in north Northumberland, as indicated in sources such as the SED

- usually *-na* (*canna, dinna*), rather than *-nae*
- south and mid-Northumberland dialect forms such as *cannit* and *divn't* are much less common

Verbal negation results



Affirmative words

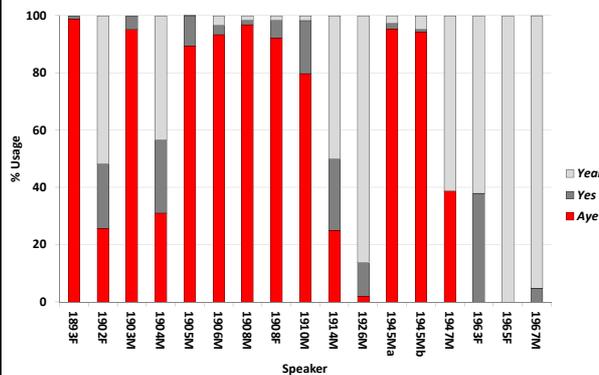
aye for 'yes' is a well known feature of Scots and Northern English speech, and is common in local Holy Island dialect, as it is elsewhere in Northumberland

- alongside *yes* and *yeah*

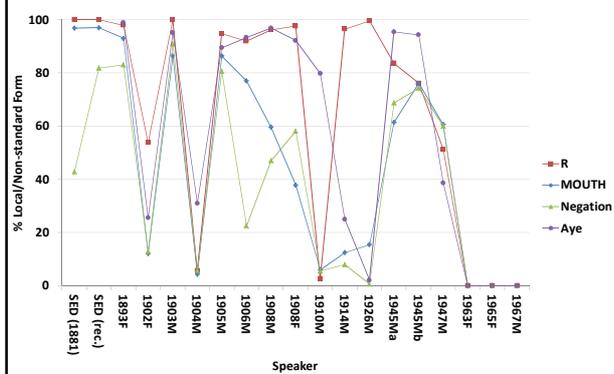
Smith, Durham and Richards (2013) looked at the use of *aye* and *yes* in Buckie in northeast Scotland:

- they find that *aye* is far and away the preferred form in the adult speech community in Buckie (at 99% use)
- aye* "remains today one of the defining features of the Scots tongue" (p. 304)
- "In more formal situations, it is somewhat stigmatized ... In other words it is a stereotype" (p. 304)

Affirmative results



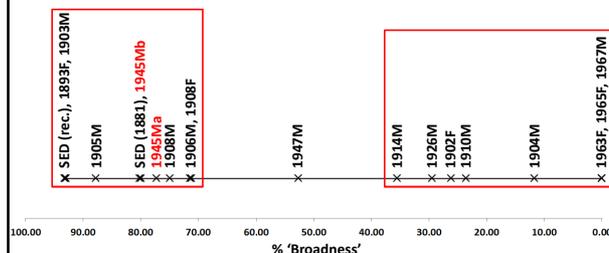
Putting all the features together (C speech only)



'Broadness'

If the average % across all the local features is calculated, a fairly clear distinction between very broad (traditional dialect) speakers and much less local (modern dialect) speakers is evident

- note that 1945M is more local even than his father, 1906M



Summary of patterns

In the early 1970s, there was plenty of broad Holy Island dialect spoken, as we might expect

- though some speakers weren't so broad all the time
- some speakers shifted a lot, depending on the circumstances

At the start of the 21st century, the Holy Island dialect still survives in quite a broad form, but only amongst a very small number of older speakers

Young speakers (so far) seem not to use traditional Holy Island dialect forms much at all

In other words, there appears to be evidence of what's called *dialect death*

- which won't surprise anyone who has grown up in such a community

Final thoughts

Holy Island is home to a unique dialect, characterised by a mix of Northumbrian and Scots features, as well as many peculiarities of its own

- we're very lucky to have been left with a collection of recordings from the 1970s, when the dialect was still going strong
- these allow us to find out what the dialect was really like and to investigate variation and change in it

Things have changed dramatically on the Island in the last 60 years

- including its dialect, which is now only spoken in its broadest form by a few older people on the Island
- the younger residents of the Island often don't speak it at all

But ...

The dialect still does survive

- and in a form as broad as that of the early 1970s, and there's more we can (and hopefully will) learn about it

This collection of recordings is especially important to the Holy Island community

- they often have fond memories of the people in the recordings and are all too aware of the precarious state of their unique dialect

Together, we've begun working on new recordings of natives of the Island, young and old, in an effort to record and preserve this enormously important cultural heritage

Thanks to ...

- The NLS, esp. Kim Bibby-Wilson
- The British Academy
- Eleanor Robert (transcription)
- Karen Corrigan and Adam Mearns (Newcastle University, DECTE)
- Jonathan Robinson (British Library recordings)
- Jörg Berger
- ... and especially the people of Holy Island, past and present