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Using questionnaires to investigate non-standard dialects

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This article is intended for anyone who has not had much experience in collecting dialect data. It derives from the small research project *Northern English and Scots, Phonology and Syntax* ('NESPS') which was carried out in 2009 and was funded by the British Academy, and explains the methodology used in the project. The project team was:
- Isabelle Buchstaller, Karen Corrigan and Anders Holmberg (Newcastle University)
- Patrick Honeybone, Warren Maguire and April McMahon (University of Edinburgh)

What is the best way to investigate non-standard dialects? We know a good deal about the dialects of English and Scots that are spoken in Britain, but there is still a large amount that we don't know about them, and all dialects are changing all the time. This means that it is important that new dialect data is collected so that we can work out accurate descriptions of the current dialects spoken in Britain. Given that non-standard dialects are largely spoken, rather than written, it might seem that data collection will need to involve recording speakers. This *is* often crucial − certain features of pronunciation can only be properly described by listening carefully to how speakers say them, and recordings are vital for that, but there are several aspects of language which are best investigated on the basis of written questionnaires. This short piece considers this kind of data collection, on the basis of the experience of a team of researchers who have used this kind of methodology.

Dialects can vary in several ways. Most people know of some 'dialect words', which are only used in some parts of Britain (like *bairn* for 'child', for example, which is used in much of the north). Some of the most substantial differences between dialects come at the level of pronunciation, in terms of phonetic and phonological differences between regional accents (for example, in the south of England, people with traditional dialects pronounce the words *put, foot* and *could* with one vowel and the words *putt, love* and *strut* with a

different vowel, whereas people who speak with traditional dialects from the north of England have the same vowel in all six words, so that *put* and *putt* sound exactly alike). In addition to this, dialects can differ at the grammatical level, in terms of linguistic features which involve morphology and/or syntax (for example, speakers of certain dialects from Ireland, the north-east of England, and Scotland, and elsewhere, can say *yous are happy* when talking to more than one person, where standard English would have *you are happy*, as these non-standard dialects have a difference between singular *you* and plural *yous*). Some of the phonological and grammatical differences between dialects can be quite complex to describe, because non-standard dialects have certain characteristics which are linguistically very subtle. A questionnaire can provide a straightforward but delicate way to investigate these things.

One research project which used a questionnaire-based methodology in order to investigate some features of this type in two non-standard dialects was the 'Northern English and Scots, Phonology and Syntax' project ('NESPS'), based at the universities of Edinburgh and Newcastle upon Tyne. The project considered two linguistic features which are not found in standard English, but which *are* found in dialects from the north of Britain, and this article describes the methodology used in the project. The full details of this project can be found here: http://www.lel.ed.ac.uk/dialects/nesps.html.

The NESPS project investigated one phonological feature and one grammatical feature: the 'T-to-R rule' ('T-to-R') and the 'Northern Subject Rule' ('NSR'). These features have been investigated in some detail before, but they are still not fully understood. For example, it is not known exactly which dialects feature T-to-R or the NSR, and it is not known exactly how either feature patterns linguistically, as we explain below.

In T-to-R, speakers sometimes pronounce words that are spelled with a *t* as if they had an *r* sound in them. In the most classic cases, the *t* needs to be at the end of a word, and this word needs to be followed in a sentence by a word which begins with a vowel. However, T-to-R seems to be only possible in certain words (that is, it is a lexically-restricted phonological process), although it is not known exactly which words allow T-to-R in all dialects that allow it. For example, many people who speak dialects where T-to-R is possible could pronounce the word *not* with an *r*, so a phrase like...

Oh no - not again!

...can be pronounced like this...

Oh no - norragain!

However, people normally *can't* pronounce the word *knot* with an *r*, so a phrase like...

Oh no - he's tied it in a knot again!

...cannot be pronounced like this...

Oh no - he's tied it in a knorragain!

In the NSR, the inflectional endings on present tense verbs are subtly different from those found in standard English. In standard English, the present tense is not morphologically marked in the first and second person singular and in the plural (with the exception of the verb *be*). Only third person singular subjects are suffixed by {-s}, as in a sentence like *she knows everything*, where the {-s} on *knows* agrees with the third person singular subject (in contrast to this, a first person singular verb has no suffix, as in *I know everything*). By contrast, in the NSR, the {-s} suffix can also occur on verbs with different kinds of subjects, as in *my mates knows everything*. The NSR has been described in previous linguistic investigations, but it has been assumed that there are some subtle linguistic constraints on the occurrence of the NSR {-s} which are not fully understood, and it is not known exactly how the NSR patterns in the different parts of Britain where it occurs. For example, previous work on the NSR has claimed that a verb can take the {-s} suffix only when it is preceded by a full subject Noun Phrase − if the subject is a pronoun, the verb only takes the {-s} suffix when there are other words intervening between the pronoun and the verb. This would mean that a non-standard NSR grammar would produce sentences like *they break into houses and steals*, where the first verb (*break*) does not have an {-s} suffix, because it is directly preceded by a pronoun, but the second very (*steals*) does have an {-s} suffix, because a string of words intervene between the subject and the verb.

The NESPS projected wanted to find out both (i) which dialects allow T-to-R and the NSR, and (ii) *which words* allow T-to-R in those dialects that feature it and *which kinds of subjects* allow an NSR {-s} suffix in those dialects which allow NSR. These are questions which can be answered on the basis of a questionnaire. The same questionnaire can easily be administered in a number of places, and − if designed appropriately − a questionnaire can investigate the intuitions that speakers of non-standard dialects have about the dialects that they speak. Linguistic features of this type cannot really be fully investigated on the basis of data that is collected by simply recording people speaking (that is, by analysing a corpus of recordings), because it is very unlikely that all the contexts that linguists might be interested in would occur in everyday speech. For example, we need to check if the word *knot* really does make T-to-R impossible, but we can't rely on it turning up in conversation, and there are a vast number of possible combinations of subjects and verbs, many of which offer 'interesting' cases to investigate for someone interested in the NSR, but we can't rely on them turning up in conversation, either.

The kind of questionnaire that allows us to examine these questions in detail investigates speakers' 'grammaticality judgements' about these phenomena. We want to ask if particular constructions are possible for a speaker of a particular dialect − that is, we want to ask speakers if particular sentences are *grammatical* for them, in terms of the mental, internalised grammar that they have for their non-standard dialect. People often find it easy to talk about individual words, but difficult to talk about the grammar of their own language, so an investigation which simply asks speakers to talk

about when that can use T-to-R, or which kinds of sentences allow the NSR is unlikely to be successful. Rather than this, the NESPS project gave speakers a large number of sentences to investigate these features (221 in total) and asked them to judge whether they were possible. It's important not to over-tire those taking a questionnaire, so these were split up into blocks of smaller number of sentences, and the blocks were punctuated by other tasks. It is possible to use either direct or indirect grammaticality judgement tasks. the NESPS project used direct questions for T-to-R and indirect questions for NSR, as shown below (the difference is partly due to the type of phenomena involved and partly due to how we investigated them).

T-to-R is quite easy to represent in writing – the 'r' is unambiguously representable using the letter ‹r› following a long vowel (like the vowel in *meet*), or ‹rr› following a short vowel (like the vowel in *cat*). We needed to tell speakers what we were using the questionnaire to investigate in the case of T-to-R, as all the sentences that we used featured a respelling with ‹r›, so we simply asked speakers about their own judgements of the sentences (a direct grammaticality judgement task), using the following scale:

> 1: I would never pronounce this word with an *r*
> 2: I can sometimes pronounce this word with an *r*, but I wouldn't do it very often
> 3: It would be normal for me to pronounce this word with an *r*

Some examples of the questions that we asked speakers are given below. The word *got* is often reported to allow T-to-R, and the words *cat* and *meet* have never been reported as undergoing T-to-R. The words *cat* and *meet* have a very similar phonological shape to *got*, however, so it may be that previous investigations have missed that *cat* and *meet* can undergo the process. A questionnaire of this type allows us to investigate this issue. The questions were asked in the following format, and speakers were asked to circle 1, 2 or 3 on the questionnaire, to express their judgement.

> Can you pronounce *got* with an *r*?
>
> For example, can you say: *Have you gorra pen?*
> > [normal spelling: Have you got a pen.]
>
> **1---------------2---------------3**
>
>
> Can you pronounce *cat* with an *r*?
>
> For example, can you say: *Give that carra bowl of milk.*
> > [normal spelling: Give that cat a bowl of milk.]
>
> **1---------------2---------------3**
>
>
> Can you pronounce *meet* with an *r*?
>
> For example, can you say: *Did you meera whole crowd of people?*
> > [normal spelling: Did you meet a whole crowd of people?]
>
> **1---------------2---------------3**

The NSR was investigated on the basis of a four-point indirect grammaticality judgement task. The questions were mixed in with 'distractors' (also known as 'fillers') – questions which don't actually include the dialect feature that is under investigation themselves – this is done to hide the fact that one particular feature is under investigation, to avoid people thinking about it too much. Distractors are often included in linguistic investigations of this type, but it was not possible in the investigation of T-to-R, because the whole questionnaire needed to focus on that one feature, in order to investigate it in enough detail. The scale used for NSR was as follows:

1: This type of sentence would never be used here – it seems very odd.
2: This type of sentence is not very common here but it doesn't seem too odd.
3: I have heard this type of sentence locally but it's not that common.
4: People around here use this type of sentence a lot.

Some examples of the questions asked when investigating the NSR are given below. All sentences to be judged were marked in bold and presented in a short text of two to three sentences in order to embed them in a context and to help them appear normal. The first two are questions which focus on NSR {-s} suffixation, and the third is one of the distractors.

George took his children to a new organic sandwich place. They were not impressed with the wholemeal bread and healthy options. The waiter asked what they wanted to order. George said "**They wants white bread**".

1--------------2--------------3--------------4

Jenny is a dog lover. She strongly objects to dogs being fed canned food. Hers only get the best organic ingredients. She says "**My dogs eats fresh food**".

1--------------2--------------3--------------4

The teacher was appalled that Mandy and Kim did not know anything about the current financial crisis. He said "**Yous should read the newspaper**".

1--------------2--------------3--------------4

Other dialect features could be investigated in the same way as that shown above for T-to-R and the NSR. A questionnaire would need a set of sentences that set out a range of constructions that the investigator would like to know about (to find out if speakers use them or not) and a scale to allow speakers to express their judgement of them. Many dialect features could be investigated more easily than T-to-R and the NSR because they are not so complex. For example, the distractor question above, along with a few others, would be enough to find out if speakers of a particular dialect can use *yous* as a plural of *you*.

The NESPS questionnaires were administered to speakers at two localities: Hawick, in south-east Scotland, and Newcastle upon Tyne, in north-

east England. These localities were chosen to provide a fair, but not too great, geographical spread, with one location in England and one in Scotland. We asked both male and female speakers, of two age groups: younger (15-25 years old) and older (55+). This allowed us to investigate (some simple aspects of the) geographical and social distribution of the features. We found, by averaging the scores given by speakers to each question, that speakers in Newcastle upon Tyne showed that they could use both T-to-R and the NSR in their speech, and that speakers in Hawick could use the NSR, but not T-to-R. Although the NSR is possible in both places, it is subtly different in the two dialects. For example, in Hawick, more older speakers accept it than younger speakers (averages: 2.19 *vs* 1.76), whereas in Newcastle, less older speakers accept it than younger speakers (1.93 *vs* 2.3). In terms of T-to-R, there is a significant difference between the ratings given by the two age groups in Newcastle: older respondents give a lower average rating (1.30) than younger respondents (1.50), and there is a significant, if small, difference between the responses given by males and females, with males accepting T-to-R slightly more than females. We also discovered or confirmed some structural constraints on the two phenomena. For example, T-to-R is not possible for any speaker in *fat, pit, hut, dot*, despite the fact that they are so similar to words which do allow it (eg, *at, it, but, got*), and, in the NSR, verbs of communication (eg, *ask* and *say*) favour the acceptance of NSR most, followed by verbs of cognition (*think* and *remember*), then other verbs (such as *eat* and *see*).

Using questionnaires can be an excellent way to test grammaticality intuitions about grammatical features of non-standard dialects, and, as we shown above, it can be used to investigate aspect of phonology, too. If they are used carefully, with a grammaticality judgement scale, they can provide subtle answers to questions about where particular dialect features are found, and about how we should describe these dialect feature in the first place.

Further reading
The NESPS website includes the full questionnaire used to investigate T-to-R and a copy of the guidance given to the fieldworkers who administered the questionnaire. It also includes a version of the article which records the full results of the project's investigations, and some further materials. The website is available here:
- http://www.lel.ed.ac.uk/dialects/nesps.html

The following article discusses some of the issues considered here in further detail and some more of the background to questionnaire design and interpretation:
- Buchstaller, I. & Corrigan K. (2011) 'How To Make Intuitions Succeed.' In: Maguire, W. & McMahon, A. (eds.) *Analysing Variation in English.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 30-48.