

Mapping the English language – from cockney to Orkney

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If they were Scousers they'd be “made up”; from the Black Country they'd be “bostin”. But researchers from the University of Leeds are naturally “well chuffed” to receive a £460,000 grant to examine and catalogue the dialects and diversities of the English language.

The team will mine a huge volume of material collected by the BBC Voices project, a survey of regional English which amassed 700 hours of sound recordings.

Leeds researchers have been involved in Voices from the start – building on a wealth of expertise stretching back to the 1950s, when the University carried out the UK's last major survey of English dialects, leading to the publication of the first linguistic atlas of the UK. Perhaps the most remarkable finding in the Voices study is that the English language is as diverse as ever, despite our increased mobility and constant exposure to other accents and dialects through TV and radio.

It reveals an amazing range of words to describe the simplest things. While a Yorkshire youngster would wear his pumps to meet his mate in the snicket, his Scots counterpart might wear gutties to see his pal in the close, while on the south coast he could wear his daps to meet a butty in the twitten.

When the BBC made these findings available online, they provoked a huge response – with more than a million hits on the website and thousands of on-line posts adding to the mass of information already

collected.

Now the Leeds researchers, led by Sally Johnson of the Department of Linguistics and Phonetics and Clive Upton of the School of English, have received Arts and Humanities Research Council funding to assess that material, describe and interpret it, and make it available as a catalogue for people to access.

Professor Upton said: “People really opened up for this project. The BBC got more information than they ever expected.

“The website also gave people the opportunity to sound off – to respond to ‘expert’ views of language, accent and dialect and to confront the stereotypes. Some people seem to think it is open season on the big regional dialects. But if I were to say ‘how intelligent are Scousers?’ is that any different to racism?”

Little wonder then that the project grabbed the public imagination. “It’s about their identity,” said Upton. “It’s about who they are and how they express that – and these are things which people feel strongly about. We’ll certainly not be judging whether they are right or wrong.”

The project runs to the end of 2010, looking at accent and dialect and their relation to such issues as gender and ethnicity and how these are represented through the BBC Voices website. And it will build up a detailed lexicon of regional vocabulary, demonstrating how urban, social and geographical factors have influenced the verbal landscape.

The project will also examine how language is reported in the media. The Voices project collected hundreds of news articles, from stories about slang and swearing to pieces about language tuition in schools and the research will catalogue the types of language making the news and where it was reported. It will also assess how the influence of indigenous

languages like Manx and Welsh and migratory languages such as Urdu and Polish are reported in the press.

Source: the University of Leeds

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