

Biggest ever linguistic survey on Twitter could find the next 'selfie' or 'twerk'

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Credit: Aston University

Academics from Aston University (UK) will analyse more than one billion tweets from the UK and US in a linguistic study to discover how new words emerge and spread.

A team of academics from Aston University is beginning work on a project analysing more than one billion tweets from the UK and US in a

[linguistic study](#) which could uncover the next 'selfie' or 'twerk'.

The investigation, led by Dr Jack Grieve, lecturer in Forensic Linguistics at Aston, will use Twitter to map out for the first time the way in which new words become popular and how they spread. Online data is increasingly being used to research language variation, and Dr Grieve's study represents by far the largest of its kind.

Dr Grieve said: "I'm very excited to begin work on this project. No previous linguistic report has had so much data to work with so we have a great opportunity to map the emergence of new words and their lexical diffusion.

"In addition to charting the internal movement of words in the UK and US, we hope to look at how words spread across the Atlantic, between the two countries – the first study to do so using the same methods in both nations."

Many tweets contain location data alongside the time they were sent, and appear similar to spontaneous speech, making them particularly valuable to the study of the spread of new words and expressions.

Another of the project's research goals is to analyse recent patterns of human migration to gain an understanding of how the movement of people influences linguistic variation.

Aston University is partnering with the University of South Carolina in the United States, who will conduct research into modern and historic migration patterns using millions of online family trees. The two universities will then share data to assess how modern dialects line up with these [migration patterns](#).

Dr Grieve said: "Throughout history, migration has been a key force in

shaping and transforming language. Very little research, however, has looked at how more recent population mobility has shaped dialect variation today. Hopefully, we will be able to discover new and exciting findings."

The project is being funded by the 'Digging into Data Challenge', which aims to utilise large amounts of complex data, known as 'big data', in humanities and [social science research](#). The challenge seeks to show how computer-based research can be used to ask new questions and gain new insights into the world.

Online language on sites such as Twitter has been at the forefront of recent linguistic developments, with [words](#) such as 'selfie', 'twerk', 'vom', 'buzzworthy' and 'squee' all making it into the Oxford Dictionaries Online in 2013.

Provided by Aston University

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