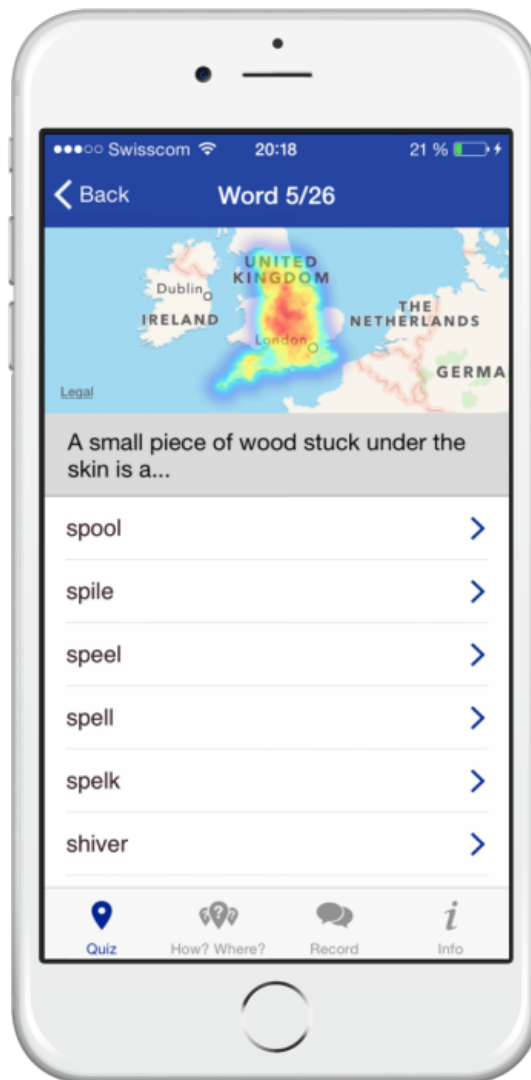


# Do you say splinter, spool, spile or spell? English Dialects app tries to guess your regional accent

January 11 2016

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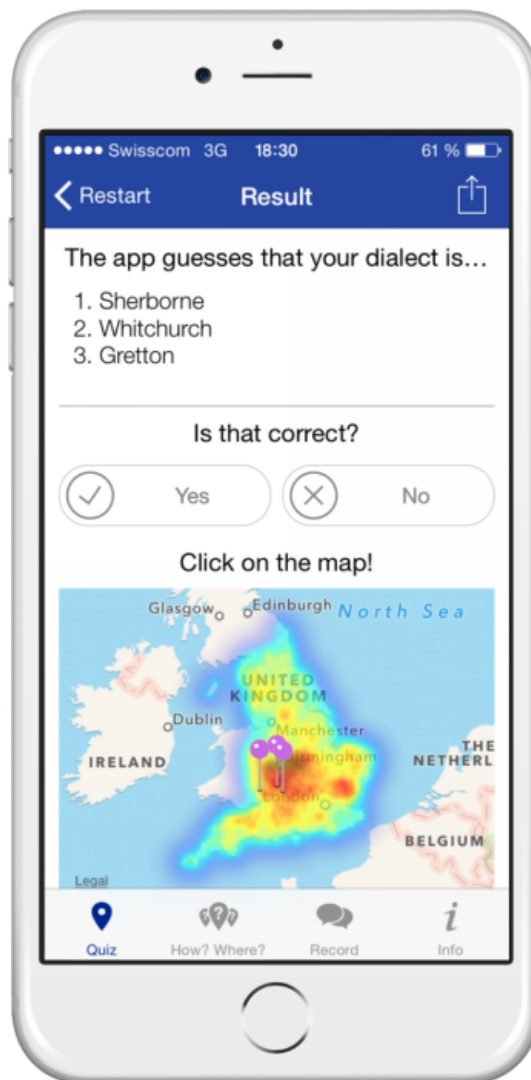


A new app which tries to guess your regional accent based on your pronunciation of 26 words and colloquialisms will help Cambridge academics track the movement and changes to English dialects in the modern era.

Along with colleagues from the universities of Zurich and Bern, Cambridge's Adrian Leemann has developed the free [app](#) English Dialects (available on iOS and Android) which asks you to choose your pronunciation of 26 different words before guessing where in England you're from.

The app, officially launched today on the [App Store](#) and [Google Play](#), also encourages you to make your own recordings in order to help researchers determine how dialects have changed over the past 60 years. The English language app follows the team's hugely successful apps for German-speaking Europe which accumulated more than one million hits in four days on Germany's Der Spiegel website, and more than 80,000 downloads of the app by German speakers in Switzerland.

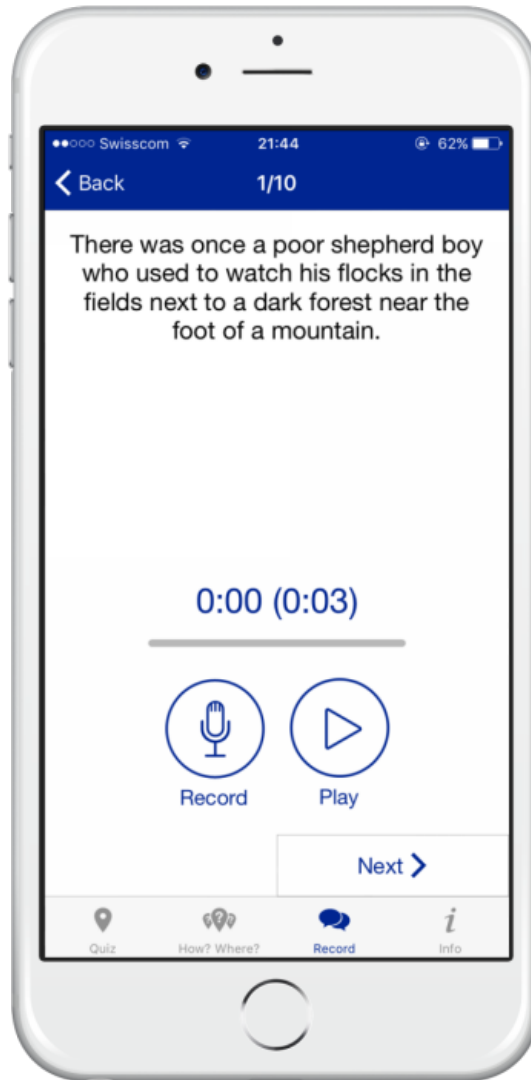
"We want to document how English dialects have changed, spread or levelled out," said Dr Leemann, a researcher at Cambridge's Department of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics. "The first large-scale documentation of English dialects dates back 60-70 years, when researchers were sent out into the field – sometimes literally – to record the public. It was called the 'Survey of English Dialects'. In 313 localities across England, they documented accents and dialects over a decade, mainly of farm labourers."



The researchers used this historical material for the dialect guessing app, which allows them to track how dialects have evolved into the 21st century.

"We hope that people in their tens of thousands will download the app and let us know their results – which means our future attempts at mapping dialect and language change should be much more precise," added Leemann. "Users can also interact with us by recording their own dialect terms and this will let us see how the English language is evolving and moving from place to place."

The app asks users how they pronounce certain words or which dialect term they most associate with commonly-used expressions; then produces a heat map for the likely location of your dialect based on your answers.

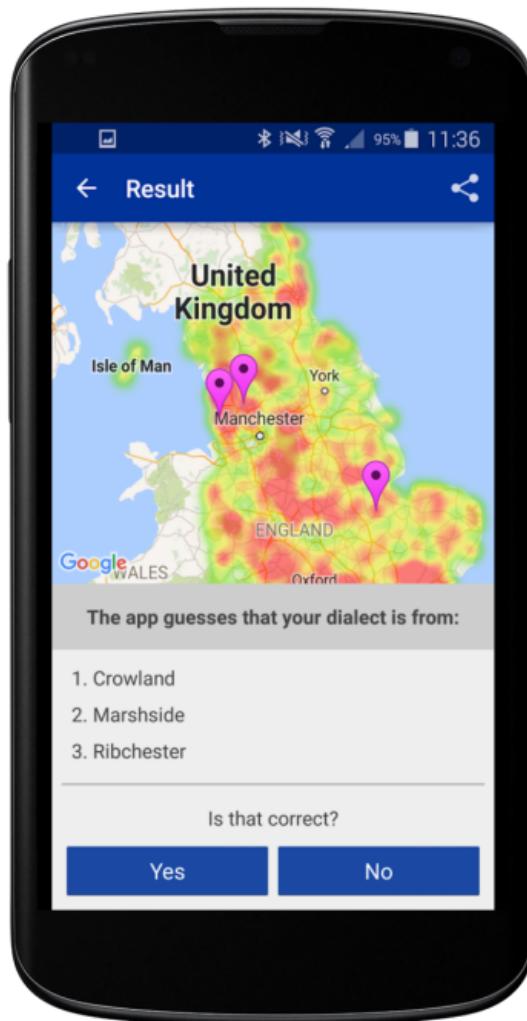


For example, the app asks how you might say the word 'last' or 'shelf', giving you various pronunciations to listen to before choosing which one most closely matches your own. Likewise, it asks questions such as: 'A small piece of wood stuck under the skin is a...' then gives answers

including: spool, spile, speel, spell, spelk, shiver, spill, sliver, splinter or splint. The app then allows you to view which areas of the country use which variations at the end of the quiz.

It also asks the endlessly contentious English question of whether 'scone' rhymes with 'gone' or 'cone'.

"Everyone has strong views about the pronunciation of this word, but, perhaps surprisingly, we know rather little about who uses which pronunciation and where," said Professor David Britain, a dialectologist and member of the app team based at the University of Bern in Switzerland.



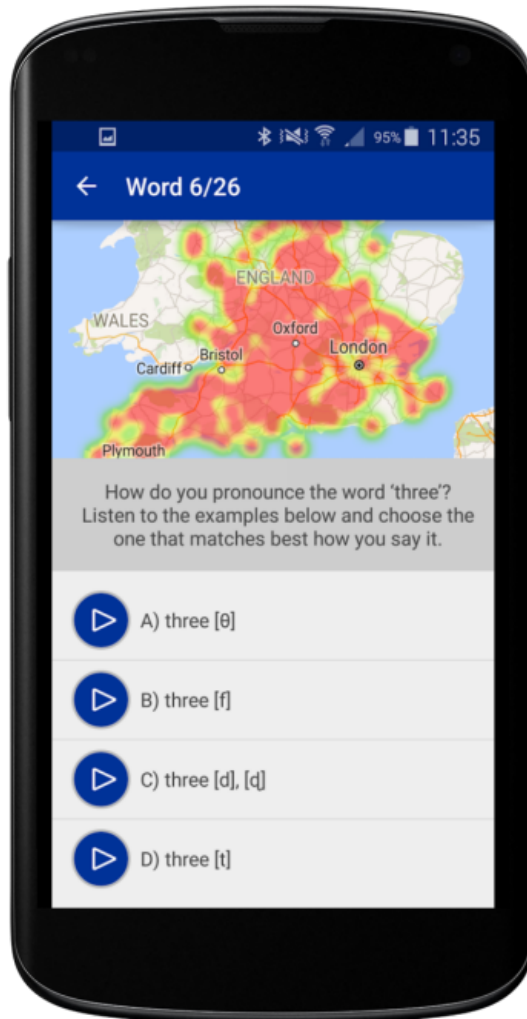
"Much of our understanding of the regional distribution of different accent and dialect features is still based on the wonderful but now outdated Survey of English Dialects – we haven't had a truly country-wide survey since. We hope the app will harness people's fascination

with dialect to enable us to paint a more up-to-date picture of how dialect features are spread across the country."

At the end of the 26 questions, the app gives its best three guesses as to the geography of your accent based on your dialect choices. However, while the Swiss version of the app proved to be highly accurate, Leemann and his colleagues have sounded a more cautious note on the accuracy of the English dialect app.

Dr Leemann said: "English accents and dialects are likely to have changed over the past decades. This may be due to geographical and social mobility, the spread of the mass media and other factors. If the app guesses where you are from correctly, then the accent or dialect of your region has not changed much in the last century. If the app does not guess correctly, it is probably because the dialect spoken in your region has changed quite a lot over time."





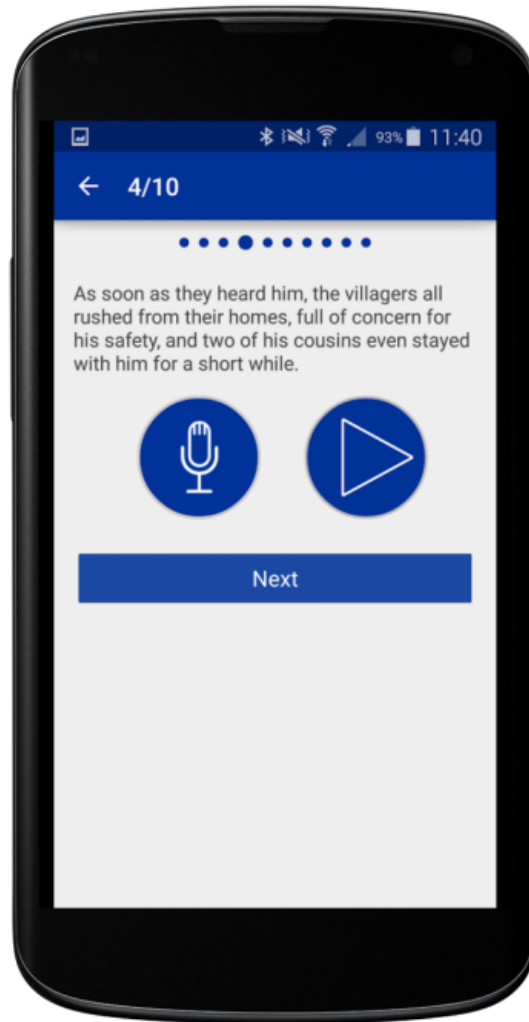
At the end of the quiz, users are invited to share with researchers their location, age, gender, education, ethnicity and how many times they have moved in the last decade. This anonymous data will help academics understand the spread, evolution or decline of certain dialects and dialect

terms, and provide answers as to how language changes over time.

"The more people participate and share this information with us, the more accurately we can track how English dialects have changed over the past 60 years," added Dr Leemann.

After taking part in the quiz, users can also listen to both historic and contemporary pronunciations, taking the public on an auditory journey through England and allowing them to hear how dialects have altered in the 21st century. The old recordings are now held by the British Library and were made available for use in the app. One of these [recordings](#) features a speaker from Devon who discusses haymaking and reflects on working conditions in his younger days.

Dr Leemann added: "Our research on [dialect](#) data collected through smartphone apps has opened up a new paradigm for analyses of language change. For the Swiss version nearly 80,000 speakers participated. Results revealed that phonetic variables (e.g. if you say 'sheuf' or 'shelf') tended to remain relatively stable over time, while lexical variables (e.g. if you say 'splinter', 'spelk', 'spill' etc.) changed more over time. The recordings from the Swiss users also showed clear geographical patterns; for example people spoke consistently faster in some regions than others. We hope to do such further analyses with the English data in the near future."



The findings of the German-speaking experiments were published last week in *PLOS ONE*.,

**More information:** Adrian Leemann et al. Crowdsourcing Language Change with Smartphone Applications, *PLOS ONE* (2016). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0143060](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0143060)

Provided by University of Cambridge

Citation: Do you say splinter, spool, spile or spell? English Dialects app tries to guess your regional accent (2016, January 11) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-01-splinter-spool-spile-english-dialects.html>

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