

# Northern dialects can be closer to original English – despite what southerners might say

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The 'north'. Credit: [Janaka Dharmasena/Shutterstock](#)

"Ey oop! Ey oop!", says comedian Michael McIntyre [to his audience in Leeds](#). "That's supposed to be 'hello', according to you." He sticks with his Yorkshire theme for a couple of minutes, mocking *nowt*, *summat* and *the* – as in "T'Lion, t'Witch and t'Wardrobe" – at the show filmed in 2010. His audience laps up the ridicule, even though it comes from a posh-sounding southerner.

In [another gig](#), McIntyre has similar fun with the Tyneside dialect: "So I met a Geordie quite recently. It was just me and him in the room, and he said to me, 'are yous lookin' at us?' How many mistakes can you make in one sentence?". Lots of laughter for that too.

"Now the whole language of the north, especially at York, is so uncouth and strident that we southerners can understand none of it. This is because northerners live close to barbarous folk." It's not a great punchline, admittedly, but then this

time it's not McIntyre speaking. This line is from a historical chronicle written at the start of the 12th century by the Benedictine monk William of Malmesbury. [Originally written in Latin](#), this passage is one of the earliest recorded observations of the regional diversity of English, and, as we can see, it takes the form of southern criticism of northern speech – and also of the Scots, who are probably the "barbarous folk" blamed for corrupting the English of northerners. It's all rather subjective, to say the least, but significant.

## A regional language

English from its origins is a language of regional dialects. The immigrants who brought English to Britain in the fifth century were from several continental Germanic tribes speaking different dialects, including the Angles from Denmark (as we now call it) and the Saxons from north-west Germany. The Angles settled in the midlands and north while the Saxons were in the south, thereby founding the linguistic north/south divide of England. William of Malmesbury shows us that even a millennium ago the English were aware of this north/south divide, and that southerners were a tad condescending about northerners' way of speaking.

By the late 15th century we know that northerners had begun to get their own back. In *The Second Shepherds' Pageant*, a [medieval play](#) written in Wakefield, some small fun is had at the expense of southern speech. "Now take out that southern tooth," says one character to another, "And set in a turd!".

All of this teasing becomes even more spicy once Standard English starts to evolve from the 15th century onwards, for Standard English was based largely on the usages of powerful, educated circles

in the south-east. As Standard English norms were gradually imposed on writing and speech, class-based judgements were added to the regional rivalry, and the distinctive features of all dialects of British English came to be viewed as deviations from these norms, and even more funny as a consequence.

Time will tell, but it could be that Standard English reached the height of its use in the mid-20th century. Then in the 1960s things started to shift, as The Beatles' [John Lennon explained](#) in 1975: "We were the first working class singers that stayed working class and pronounced it. We didn't try to change our accents which in England are ... were looked down upon ... probably still are." Nowadays, regional accents are everywhere in the British media, and the internet is [shaking up the formalities](#) of public writing in English, too. A lot, LOL!

### Northern tradition

However, Standard English has not lost its influence, and neither have the historical north/south perspectives ebbed away. Southerners and northerners still mock [each others' speech](#), and custom perceives northern speech to be lower on the social scale than southern, and as deviating from southern-infused Standard English – though this is not quite true.

When in 1975 John Lennon said "working class", he pronounced the vowel in "class" as a short "a", like the vowel that most Britons use in "cat". As he pointed out, this was looked down upon, because in Received Pronunciation and in the south of England most speakers use a long "ahh" vowel in such "class" words. Interestingly, the southern form is actually strictly deviant. Linguists have traced the origin of this "ahh" pronunciation in words like "class" to 17th-century London, possibly emanating from a lengthened form in Cockney speech. The short "a" pronunciation is the [more historical form](#).

The same applies to the northern pronunciation of the vowel in words like "stud" so that it sounds the same as "stood". Once again it is the northerners who have stuck ("stook") to the established pronunciation. It was southerners who deviated, introducing a new vowel into "stud" words possibly

as a result of a fashionable trend in London [from the 17th century onwards](#), leading to what linguists call the "[foot-strut split](#)" — that is, a group of words which previously had the same vowel became split into two groups with different vowels in the south.

The short-long distinction in "class" words and the "foot-strut" issue are two of the best known differences between northern and southern English accents. While McIntyre and other contemporary comedians joke about allegedly incomprehensible [regional dialects](#), the real funny thing is that although southern forms are seen as socially superior, northern habits are sometimes more traditional.

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