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Variation and speaker awareness: investigating morphosyntactic change in Tyneside English and what it means

Newcastle upon Tyne has in recent years been witness to a transformation, a so-called 'culture-led regeneration' and it is easy to spot the difference between 'then' and 'now' when surveying one of the town's most iconic places, the Quayside. There seems to have been a shift in the outward appearance of Newcastle from a place defined by heavy industry to one of modern art, classical music and cutting-edge architecture (Miles 2005). This, however, seems to be at odds with the way Newcastle upon Tyne (and often the north of England in general) is represented in mainstream media; as a grim, backwards and working class place (Lancaster 1995).

And just like the townscape has changed, so has the local vernacular. I will present results of an investigation into morphosyntactic change over time based using data from the NECTE corpus (pronouns, sentential negation, verb forms) and compare these results to Watt (2002) and discuss the topic of dialect levelling in connection with this. Furthermore, I will give some tentative impressions from research currently underway examining awareness of morphosyntactic forms and reactions to local variants. The role of linguistic awareness in instances of language change will also be briefly discussed here.

This research also raises issues of the enregisterment of forms (Agha 2003) and local identity formation through language (Beal 2009) which is in turn linked to local perceptions of and reactions to the town itself. The working assumption of this investigation is that Tyneside speakers are increasingly defining themselves through the use of local language forms rather than through identification with the town itself. As the urban landscape of the town is changing speakers are increasingly looking for other ways to anchor their identity and signify local identity. One way to this is through the use of local vernacular forms.

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