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“Divn’t take wor Tyne”: linguistic identity in Newcastle upon Tyne

Individuals must increasingly construct their identity in the face of changing communities and a globalizing world. The north of England, and Newcastle as a case in point, is often thought of and portrayed in mainstream media as backwards and working-class (Lancaster 1995). However, the recent ‘culture-led regeneration’ of the town focusing on more ‘middle-class values’, such as modern art and classical music (Miles 2005), would seem to contradict this stereotype. But perhaps it also leaves the working class, vernacular Tyneside speakers with nowhere to anchor their identity?

This paper presents the results of a study investigating morphosyntactic change in Tyneside English based on the NECTE corpus. Pilot studies examining the frequency patterning of two variables, sentential negation and personal pronouns, in order to establish significant effects of intra- and extra-linguistic constraints on the use of vernacular forms, found that the use of these vernacular morphosyntactic features is increasing, in particular among young working class males. This result is in contrast with Watt’s 2002 phonological study of the variety which showed that certain phonological variables are moving toward regional and thus less localised forms.

This paper argues that the revival of vernacular morphosyntactic forms by the younger generation can be linked to the formation of an exclusively Tyneside identity centred on a sense of place, a linguistic dimension to a geographical space to which the speakers belong.

Lancaster, B. 1995. City Cultures and the “Parliaments of Birds”: A Letter from Newcastle, Northern Review 2. 1–11.

Miles, S. 2005. Understanding the cultural ‘case’: class, identity and the regeneration of NewcastleGateshead. Sociology 39. 1019-1028

Watt, D. 2002. “I don’t speak with a Geordie accent, I speak, like, the Northern accent”: Contact-induced levelling in the Tyneside vowel system. Journal of Sociolinguistics 6:1. 44-63.