

SURE AT THE BBC: A DIALECT COLLECTING METHOD ON THE WIDER STAGE

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Two strands — perhaps “strains” might at times be thought a more accurate word — exist within dialectology. One, geographical and historical, charts linguistic variation on the ground and seeks to study language in its diachronic context. The other, sociolinguistic in orientation, focuses on the complexities within localised communities, seeking therein to discover prompts for language change. Each might be expected to be, and indeed sometimes is, supportive of the other, but this cannot be taken for granted, and many practitioners of one are ignorant or even dismissive of the work of adherents of the other. One effort to create a bridge between the two groupings began in the late 1990s with work towards establishing a data-collection technique, for a Survey of Regional English (SuRE), which might serve dialectologists of whatever persuasion and so might produce data of use to all.

A technique to satisfy even the most basic needs of all variationists is, of course, by no means easy to devise, as a brief review of even their most basic preoccupations in Table 1 shows.

TABLE 1
Some features of two kinds of dialectology

Regional/historical dialectology	Sociolinguistic dialectology
● Comparison by geographical area	● Comparison by social variables
● Diachronic orientation	● Synchronic orientation
● Largely rural	● Mainly urban
● Limited speaker set	● Wide social sampling
● Formal (“canonical”) style	● Stylistic variation, casual-emphasis
● Atomistic (short-answer) focus	● Variables in context
● Focus lexis, phonology, morphology	● Main focus phonology

Nevertheless, such a technique was sought by Llamas for her SuRE doctoral work on Middlesbrough (Llamas 2001), and the results from her fieldwork do much to illustrate the worth of the emergent device. Its conception and development are

rehearsed elsewhere (see especially Kerswill et al. 1999; Upton and Llamas 1999; Asprey et al. 2005), but in essence the core items in Table 1 are condensed by the technique into those shown in Table 2

TABLE 2
Conflation of essentials of two kinds of dialectology

Two orientations into one
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographical range and comparability • Any/all areas of variability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linguistic • Social • Casual style emphasis

To be readily deliverable to many people of varying social profiles, in any geographical area, required the technique to be quick and easy to use and simple to explain. It had to be capable of prompting lexical, grammatical, and phonological responses. Like any fieldwork method, to succeed it needed to be attractive to potential informants of all profiles. To yield variants approaching the casual it had to address the observer's paradox.

The literature has now adequately rehearsed the devising of the "Sense Relation Network sheet" or SRN tool. It is now only necessary here to stress its reliance on Aitchison's concept of the "web of words", expressed as follows: "So many words are aroused, because so many words are linked. The human word web is not two-dimensional, or even three dimensional, it's multi-dimensional" (1997:77). This concept, married to the device of the "mind map", defined by the *OED* as "a chart on which information is represented symbolically and organized by mental association rather than by strict logic", produces a structure which is intuitively easy for an informant to relate to and to follow. Furthermore, by concentrating resultant discussion on the *word*, a notion which at its simplest level is immediately apparent to every speaker and, crucially, excites popular interest, the SRN invites just that relaxed, involved discussion that is needed if responses approaching natural pronunciations and grammatical structures are to be reproduced.

The standard kinds of SRN as devised by Llamas, with the revisions and adaptations to local conditions and research requirements which the SuRE method permits, have been used at graduate level in the UK in Middlesbrough, Sunderland, the Black Country (West Midlands) and Southampton. Simplified, they have served for a variety of less advanced (especially lexical) dialect studies by undergraduates, and a bank of SuRE data has been steadily accumulating as a result. But in 2004 the British Broadcasting Corporation conceived a plan to use its fifty-station Nations and Regions radio network to survey speech variation throughout the UK, in what came to be its flagship 2005 "Voices" project (Elmes 2005). Seeking a structure which would help to unite the interviews of broadcast journalists and would stimu-

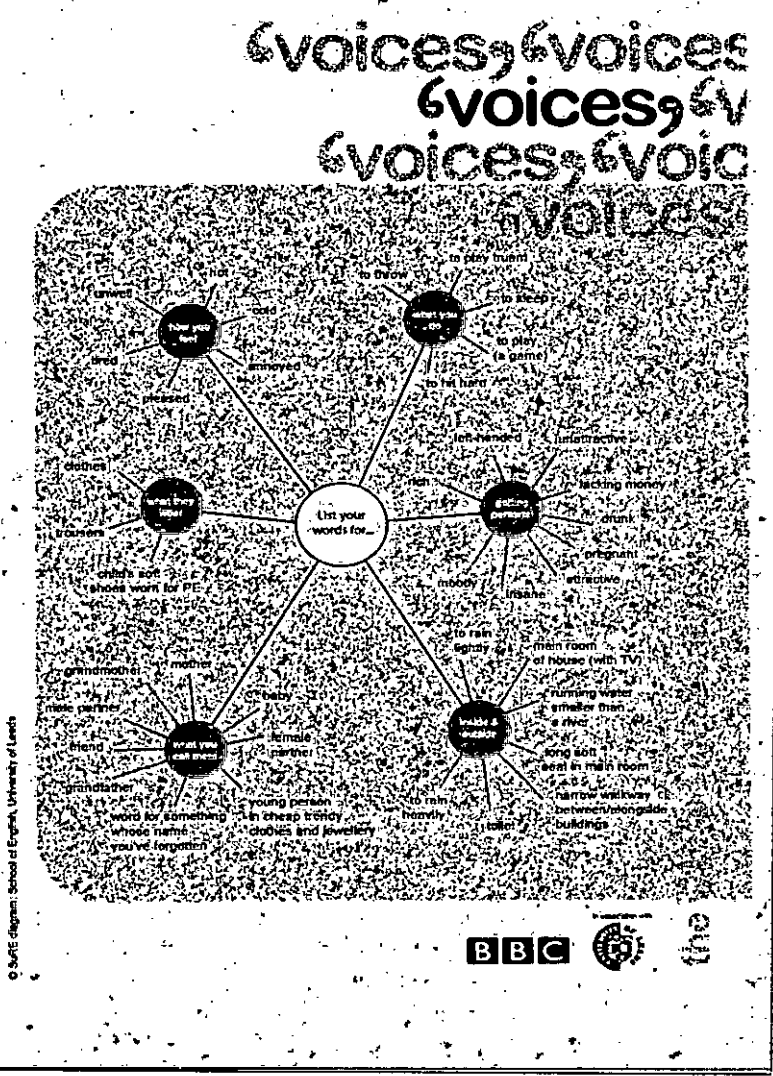


FIGURE 1
The BBC Spidergram

late popular interest, the BBC approached Leeds with the suggestion that a simplified SRN-based tool might serve its purpose. So was born the "BBC spidergram", a one-page prompt around which interview conversations might revolve amongst the diverse speaker samples, and which might also stimulate website input from those attracted to the project by radio and television broadcasts.

The spidergram (Figure 1) is, necessarily, a much-reduced form of SRN. The

(typically) three Llamas-style sheets have multiple branches from a central node, each with its own satellites and associated prompt words. The single BBC sheet has only a central node and satellites with prompt words around these. The full notion-count thus reduces from some 180 notions to 39, so that there is a severe limitation on the range of lexical variables addressed. Its ability to be used in this way nevertheless illustrates a fundamental strength of the SRN tool, in that it is totally flexible and can be redesigned at will. At the same time, its ability to prompt free conversation, relying on speakers' enthusiasm for their vocabulary and that of others to desensitize them to the fact of their taking part in a linguistic interview, remains undiminished.

Fifty-one broadcast journalists trained in the method conducted group interviews throughout the UK during the winter of 2004 and spring of 2005, recording more than 700 hours of speech among 1200 subjects. Although English was the main language recorded, the other major ethnic-minority languages found in the UK were also represented in the sample. Copies of the English and Scots recordings are held at Leeds for study by the linguistic community; the Scots recordings are also to be made available through the Glasgow-based SCOTS project (Scottish Corpus of Texts and Speech (www.scottishcorpus.ac.uk); and a complete set of recordings is held at the British Library Sound Archive, London, for public consultation. Thus a large bank of professionally-recorded vernacular speech, in which speakers both display something of their speech variety and, in many cases, comment on their attitudes to variation, has been accumulated within a six-month period with a unified central focus.

In addition, the project's website, <www.bbc.co.uk/voices>, which has provided an opportunity to take part to those not interviewed, has attracted input from upwards of 50,000 people, who have helped to build word maps based upon the spidergram notions and have commented on issues of their own language use and that of others. Figure 2 gives some small indication of the content of the site.

Those visiting the website have direct access to samples drawn from the larger bank of recordings, which they can access by locality or by a range of speaker profile-types. Interpretive notes are provided for these samples, and "star moments" are highlighted for particular attention. Figure 3 shows the way in which such an extract is foregrounded.

Maps have been building from the accumulating responses of those visitors to the website who have chosen to record their lexical usage, prompted by the spidergram items. These are of course no more than broad-brush representations of word-use distributions, but they do invite speculation as to their implications, and content is lent weight by the numbers of respondents whose usage is represented. Figure 4 is a screen grab of one such map.

The Open University, who were project-partners with Leeds and have produced a Voices briefing booklet for use by their own students and others (Mayor 2005), also provide materials and advice for would-be fieldworkers on use of the SuRE-type method.



FIGURE 2

Screen grab of BBC Voices website homepage (part)

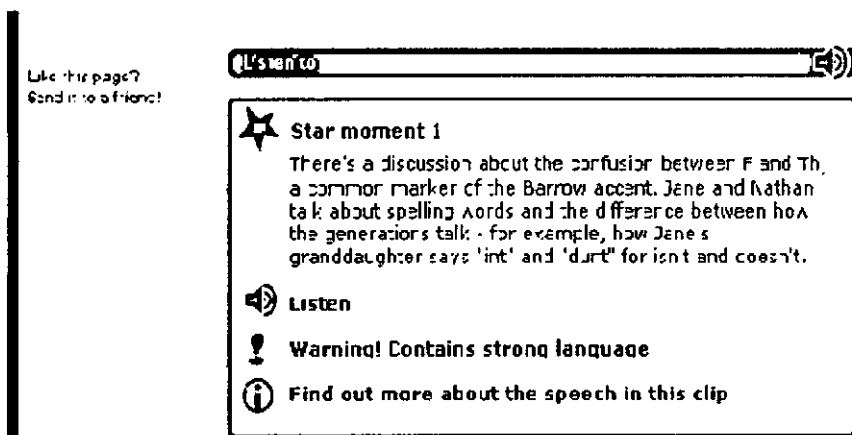
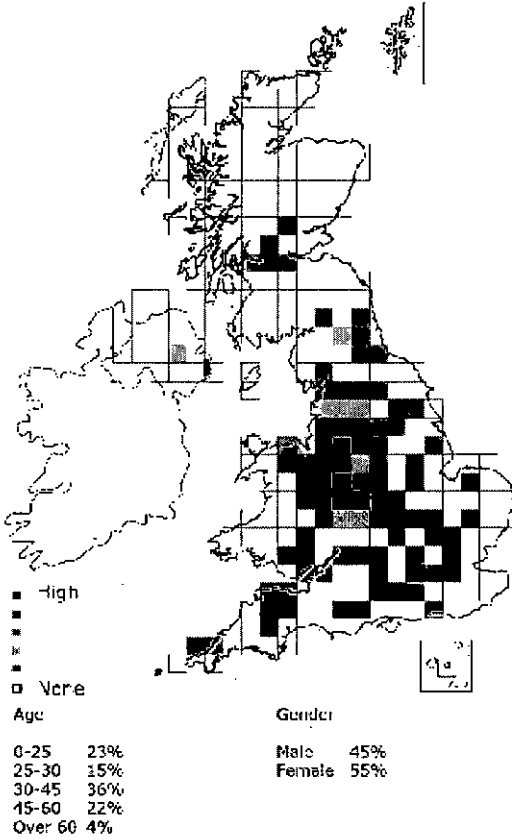


FIGURE 3

BBC Voices “star moment” (Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, detail)

Selected concept: to play truant



Select a concept

What: you do

to play truant

to play truant

Pockets of particular words outside the top 10 include 'twag' in Hull and Doncaster and 'cag' in Derby and Nottingham; 'skidge' is only submitted in Paisley. Submissions: 11,587

Your top 10 words

- skive
- hunk off
- wag
- skip
- mitch
- dog
- hooky
- lwag
- sag
- nick off

The story behind some of the words you submitted...

- skive
- plny hookie

What other words did you submit? See a selection...

Find out more

More about the Word Map

Take part: create your own Word Map

Local language: dialect dictionaries from across the UK

FIGURE 4

BBC Voices map for <wag>responses for concept 'to play truant'

BBC Voices is only one manifestation of the SuRE drive for data which tries to unite the geographical and the social in dialect study. Though serious in intent, the media project is unashamedly "popular" in its approach, but it has mobilised a very large population, giving them a means to articulate the serious interest in and knowledge of the vernacular which we know they have. In that rests just some of the potential of the underlying methodological approach.

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