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***Mam or mum?* Sociolinguistic awareness and language-ideological debates online**

Abstract

The technological advances associated with Web 2.0 allow people to interact in online ‘communities’ built around shared interests and concerns. So far, research in language attitudes and folk linguistics has made only limited use of naturally-occurring discourse in these environments. This article examines an online messageboard virtually located in North East England, and explores the ways in which participants’ beliefs about and attitudes towards sociolinguistic variation emerge through discourse. I focus on a single ‘conversation’, revealing the language ideologies which inform the sociolinguistic awareness of participants, and conclude by using the concept of ‘late modernity’ as an ‘interpretive frame’ (Harris 2011) to help understand what is happening as people appropriate a global technology for local social action.

KEYWORDS: LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES, SOCIOLINGUISTIC AWARENESS, LATE MODERNITY, FOLK DISCOURSE, LANGUAGE ATTITUDES

1 Introduction

The focus of this study is naturally occurring metalinguistic discourse in an online discussion forum – a website which supports asynchronous ‘conversations’ organized into ‘threads’ according to topic. I examine a series of exchanges from a thread set up to discuss a single lexical variable – the choice of either *mam* or *mum* in the context of North East England – showing the ways in which linguistic phenomena are represented and evaluated in ‘talk about talk’, and what this reveals about ‘folk’ (meta)-sociolinguistic awareness; that is, non-linguists’ descriptions of, explanations for and beliefs about the relationship between language use and social context. The analysis reveals how sociolinguistic awareness is not simply a ‘mental condition that pre-exists discourse’ but a discursive phenomenon (Johnstone

2011: 389) that can emerge emically in interaction without the prompting of academic linguists. I show how the creative process of ‘naming, signifying and valorizing linguistic practices’ – what Milani and Johnson (2010: 4) call the ‘sociolinguistic imagination’ – is dynamically constructed and shared, involving disputation, contestation, and agreement. My analysis also reveals the ‘language-ideological’ nature of the discussion, with participants’ articulations of awareness influenced by underlying ‘belief systems’ (Spolsky 2004 in McGroarty 2008: 58) about the nature of the relationship between language and the social. I conclude by using the profound social changes that are sometimes cited as characterizing ‘late modernity’ as an ‘interpretive frame’ (Harris 2011: 347) for understanding the kinds of metalinguistic awareness displayed in the thread. But I start with a description of the data and an outline of my analytical approaches.

2 Data and methods

The virtual location for this research is *Ready to Go*, an online forum for people with a shared interest in Sunderland A.F.C., an English Premier League football club with a fan-base centred on the city of Sunderland, but which extends across County Durham and Tyne and Wear (south of the River Tyne) in North East England.¹ The site allows registered members to start threads by posting a question or statement and inviting comments. Posters on *Ready to Go* often ‘converse’ on linguistic topics, and even when the topic ostensibly has nothing to do with language, language will sometimes be introduced into the discussion. Metalinguistic discourse is, of course, not a new phenomenon, but ‘the advent of Web 2.0 media’ has provided ‘new spaces for representing language’; platforms for ordinary web-users ‘to publicly reflect upon and discuss language-related topics through self-generated writing’ (Barton and Lee 2013: 109-110). Such spaces are a valuable source of unprompted and unmediated data for language awareness research. What sort of linguistic topics do people discuss on *Ready to Go*? In June 2013 I identified every thread in which the original post (OP) was metalinguistic in nature. Eighty-five ‘conversations’ emerged, covering a variety of subjects, ranging from Prince Charles’s plans to learn Arabic, to Sky News subtitles. However, nearly sixty per cent of the threads were primarily ‘sociolinguistic’ in nature, involving observations and evaluations of phonological, lexical or grammatical variation within English, particularly in the context of North East England (e.g. *The Sunderland*

accent; The north east accent on lasses; People with a really broad Geordie accent). This intensity of online interest reflects apparently high levels of public awareness of and interest in matters of local speech and identity across the region, and throughout the UK as a whole: the popularity of the BBC's recent *Voices* project is evidence of the attention paid to linguistic variation and its meanings (see Upton and Davies 2013). Certainly, research on the perceptual dialectology of North East England has revealed nuanced and complex kinds of awareness, with survey participants offering detailed descriptions and evaluations of local forms of speech, which are often embedded in a richly imagined socio-cultural landscape (Author 2009, 2011, 2012). However, to date this research has involved the questioning of volunteer participants who know that they are taking part in an academic study. This 'direct approach' (Garrett 2010: 39) can be vulnerable to various kinds of response bias, where participants give answers which they feel are, for example, socially acceptable in the particular context of data collection, or normatively 'correct', and which might differ from what they 'really' think and express in their everyday interactions (Bucholtz et al. 2008: 77). As a counter to this, Bucholtz et al. suggest that traditional 'direct' methods in perceptual dialectology should be complemented by approaches which 'get at what people say about language in situations in which the researcher is not guiding the discourse' (2008: 83). The analysis presented here is an application of what Preston calls 'content-oriented discourse analysis' (1994), an approach which was developed in order to counter the idea that 'folk belief' about language was merely a 'static set of wisdoms', trotted out as artificial 'static responses' (Preston and Niedzielski 2000: 24). By analysing 'folk discourses', Preston claims, the 'dynamic instantiation of underlying folk belief about language' can be uncovered (Preston 2006: 529).

The thread chosen for analysis is about the options in British English for addressing or referring to the female parent; in particular, the choice between *mam* and *mum*. It consists of 169 turns posted by 49 different contributors between 9th and 11th June 2011. As the discussion unfolds it becomes apparent how much of it concerns the indexical meanings of *mam* and *mum*: the way in which they 'evoke realities beyond the literal content of what is being talked about', particularly in regard to 'social identities or relations' (Duranti 1997: 209).

3 Analysis

Preliminaries

Figure 1 shows the opening exchange of the thread in diagrammatic form. It starts with an original post (OP) in which MARKUS sets up what Schiffrin (1987: 18-19) calls a discourse *position* – a commitment to an idea, often expressed as an assertion – in which he offers his negative assessment of speakers from the North East of England who use the word *mum* (Figure 1, 1a). He does not feel the need to offer support for this position in the form of explanation or justification, because he knows that readers of the forum will have the necessary background knowledge to infer what is meant by this apparently very startling utterance, even though it has not been stated explicitly. As the ‘conversation’ unfolds some participants make contributions which offer support for MARKUS’s position, while others dispute it. Although the exchanges appear heated at times, they are largely what Schiffrin calls ‘sociable’ arguments, being co-operative enactments of conflict which actually demonstrate solidarity, because they display ‘the ability of that relationship to tolerate features of talk typically associated with conflict, e.g. disagreement, challenge, interruption, insult’ (1990: 256).

In language-ideological terms the ensuing discussion exemplifies the process whereby linguistic features come to ‘index’ the social characteristics of speakers (Silverstein 1992; Milroy 2000 and 2004). Three ‘orders’ of indexicality have been identified which ‘relate to ascending levels of awareness within and beyond the speech community’ (Beal 2012: 138).

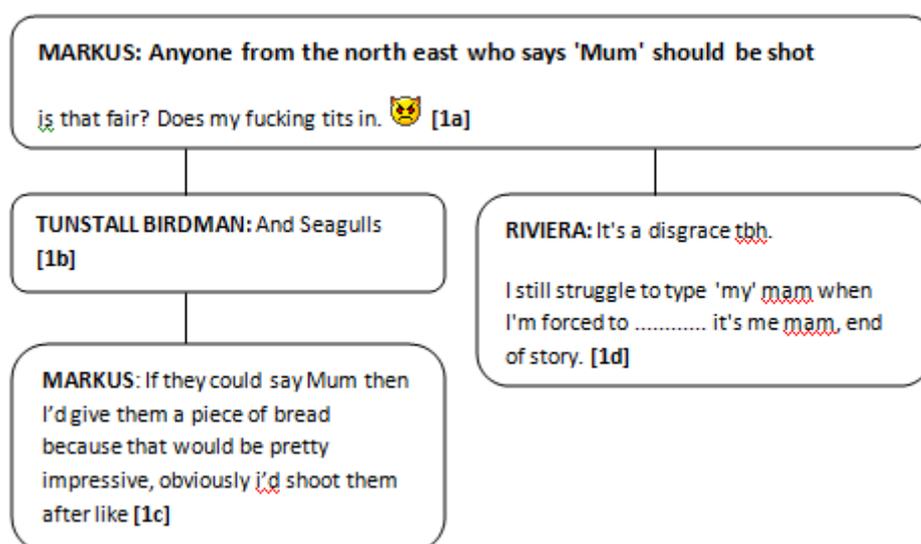


Figure 1. The opening sequence.

The discussion on the thread is at the level of ‘third-order indexicality’, whereby an association has been made between a linguistic form and socially meaningful categories (first-order indexicality), and these associations are subject to justification and rationalization (second-order-indexicality) and overt metalinguistic comment (third-order indexicality). As these associations are discussed, explained and rationalized three main themes emerge: vernacular prescriptivism and maintenance, the relationship between the north and south of England, and dialect purism. Participants take up different positions in relation to these themes, revealing the contrasting language ideologies which underlie their sociolinguistic imaginations.

Vernacular prescriptivism and maintenance

In Anglophone contexts, prescriptivism is a term which is usually used to describe ‘normative metalinguistic practices’ which ‘focus on the value of correctness and equate ‘correct’ usage with adherence to the codified norms’ of Standard English (Cameron 2006: 407). Although the OP is clearly normative – indeed, MARKUS hyperbolically suggests that ‘punishment’ is required for people from North East England who say *mum* – his prescriptivism is on behalf of a non-standard variety of English: it is what might be called vernacular prescriptivism. For MARKUS, *mum* is not inherently ‘wrong’, it is ‘wrong’ when used by people ‘from’ a particular place. As Blackledge (2010: 305) points out (but in relation to languages rather than dialects):

In public discourse language often becomes inseparably associated with a territorially bounded identity in a relationship that takes language, territory, and identity to be isomorphic ... One implication of this is that ideally the nation should be monolingual, with adherence to another language often (mis)read as a lack of loyalty to the national identity.

We can recast the second sentence so that it fits MARKUS’s position more closely: ‘ideally the *region* should be *monodialectal*, with adherence to another *dialect* often (mis)read as a lack of loyalty to the *regional* identity’. MARKUS certainly sees language/dialect, territory and identity as isomorphic, a position which is also taken up by some of the other posters, as in the first response to engage directly with the sociolinguistic variable introduced in the OP:

It’s a disgrace tbh.
I still struggle to type ‘my’ mam when I’m forced to it’s me mam, end of story. (1d)

Here, RIVIERA offers support for MARKUS’s position by echoing his strength of feeling. To behave in the way described by MARKUS is a ‘disgrace’; RIVIERA will not countenance using

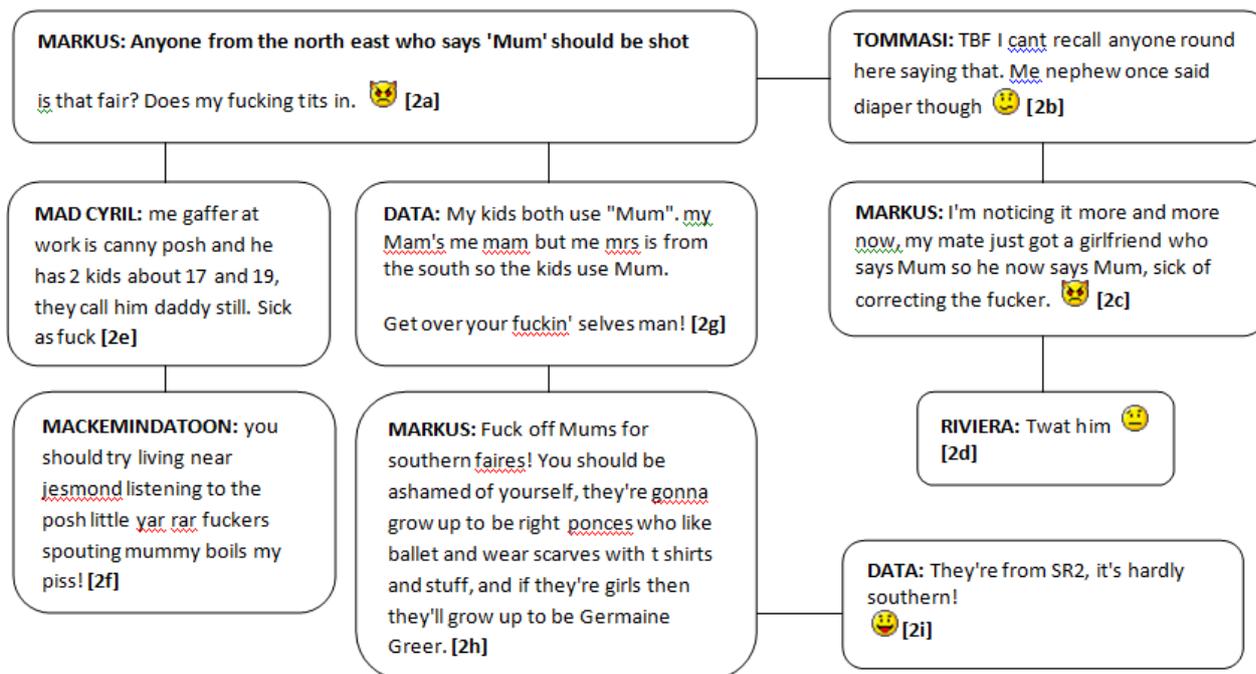


Figure 2. Vernacular prescriptivism 1.

mum, and when writing he even finds it a 'struggle' to use the SE possessive determiner *my*, preferring *me* instead: 'end of story'. This is something on which he will not compromise. In 2c we perhaps see the reason behind MARKUS's current concern with the issue: he has a 'mate' with a 'girlfriend who says Mum so he now says Mum.' MARKUS is 'sick of correcting the fucker.' This is further evidence that MARKUS is a vocal and active 'vernacular prescriptivist', who (if we take his word for it) has no qualms about intervening on behalf of 'correct' vernacular speech. MARKUS and RIVIERA offer an insight into 'vernacular norming', the process by which non-standard linguistic norms which are perceived as symbolizing values of solidarity and reciprocity (Milroy, L 1980: 35-6) are explicitly enforced in social groupings (Milroy, J. 2000: 13-14). It is through this 'enforcement' of vernacular norms that dialect maintenance occurs, even in the face of the strong 'standard language ideology' which exists in the UK. In this sequence, direct physical force is invoked as a means of policing vernacular norms, when RIVIERA recommends that MARKUS should 'twat' (colloquial British English for 'hit') his friend. We also see, in MARKUS's and RIVIERA's animosity towards the adoption of features deemed to be from another dialect, what Hinskens et al. (2005: 9) refer to as 'sociolinguistic polarisation'. This can be 'offensive' in nature, involving divergence from the 'threatening' dialect and the adoption of hyperdialectisms, or 'defensive', involving resistance to convergence. Hinskens et al. go on to suggest that the 'defensive or offensive

reaction may well have sociopsychological motivations, particularly non-integrative attitudes towards the speakers of the ‘threatening’ dialect’ (2005: 9). At the same time as MARKUS adopts this ‘defensive’ position, he also reveals sociolinguistic awareness: ‘so he now says Mum’ implies that MARKUS is aware of the process of accommodation, and that although he might not like it he regards it as an inevitable consequence of speakers coming into contact.

However, not all participants share these non-integrative attitudes or regard the consequences of speaker contact so negatively. The first note of dissent towards the proposition of the OP is introduced by DATA, who writes:

My kids both use “Mum”. my Mam’s me mam but me mrs is from the south so the kids use Mum.
Get over your fuckin’ selves man! [2g]

This comment demonstrates that the fixed associations between place and language which MARKUS values and attempts to police are constantly under threat from what professional linguists regard as sociolinguistic ‘reality’: people are (and have always been) mobile; in this context southerners (who say *mum*) marry northerners (who say *mam*) and have children who accommodate to the speech patterns around them, and language changes. As far as DATA is concerned, MARKUS and RIVIERA are simply being unrealistic and perhaps overly dogmatic in an annoying and tendentious manner (the injunction to ‘get over yourself’ is often used as a way to undermine someone whom the speaker/writer regards as self-regarding, pretentious and possibly over-sensitive). DATA is taking issue with the prescriptive, normative position adopted by MARKUS and RIVIERA, who regard the fact that speakers vary in their speech as an act of betrayal in relation to place identity, to be reacted against and seen as a cause worthy of prescriptivist intervention.

DATA’s is the first ‘oppositional’ voice in relation to the vernacular prescriptivism espoused by MARKUS and RIVIERA; but there are others in the thread. For example, the first post of CHARMLESS MAN adopts a more critical tone (Figure 3, 3a). Like DATA, he first states his credentials (‘I say mam’) but then suggests that it doesn’t matter that someone prefers *mum*. In sharp contrast to MARKUS, CHARMLESS MAN has a liberal attitude which acknowledges the existence of ‘the North Eastern accent/dialect’, but which tolerates variation within that dialect; indeed, which regards this variation as one of its strengths. CHARMLESS MAN maintains this position in the face of a range of attacks. The first of these comes from LORDY: ‘nobody with a proud northeastern accent would say ‘mum’ – this is the point’ (3b). CHARMLESS MAN responds with

No. The point is we don't have to speak in the same way. There's a hell of a lot of things that could be considered part and parcel of the North Eastern accent/dialect that I don't use but I still have a North Eastern accent. It is not, and never should be, homogenised. Variety makes it what it is and that shouldn't change. [3c]

For CHARMLESS MAN, the speech community with which he aligns himself is not, nor should be 'homogenous'; indeed the linguistic variations within the 'North Eastern accent/dialect' are what make it 'what it is.' This echoes in folk linguistic terms Milroy's concept of the stable (vernacular) speech community as one in which there is 'consensus on a pattern of stable variation'. In other words, community norms can be variable norms – in contrast to standard norms, which are invariant' (Milroy 1993 in Stockwell 2002: 153). CHARMLESS MAN appears to imply that 'pride' in being from the North East does not necessarily have to correlate with the strength of the vernacular features in someone's speech. For this poster, locality and speech are not so intimately linked. He is also suggesting that his particular mode of speech, which while still marking him out as coming from the region, does not contain 'a hell of a lot of things' that might be associated with North East speech. In sociolinguistic terms, it seems that CHARMLESS MAN uses a levelled supralocal variety observed by linguists in the region (see for example Watt 2002) which has developed as a consequence of his social and geographical mobility (elsewhere in the thread he gives his location as 'Leeds' and mentions that his girlfriend is from Wiltshire). For CHARMLESS MAN, the kinds of attitudes expressed in MARKUS's original post and supported by others, deny the 'authenticity' of such a variety and represent an unwelcome incursion into regional speech of arguments and positions more often associated with the standard language ideology; an incursion which he resists in his sarcastic response to RIVIERA (3f):

Fair enough then. Let's have a prescriptive North Eastern dialect. It'd be just as shite as RP but still, at least we'd all be saying mam the 'right' way. (3g)

CHARMLESS MAN is implying that a 'prestigious' variety such as RP (and perhaps by extension Standard English) has in a sense been damaged (made 'shite') by the prescriptivism to which it has been subjected, and he does not want that to happen to 'North Eastern dialect'. CHARMLESS MAN's is a rather isolated voice. Other contributors adopt a prescriptivist approach based on various ideological claims to do with language and place, some of which go beyond the variable cited in the OP. For example, ALICANTE MACKEM claims that 'another thing I hate to hear from North East people is when they don't use the article in front of Mam or Dad. For example, I'm going to see dad/mum, instead of saying 'I'm going to see

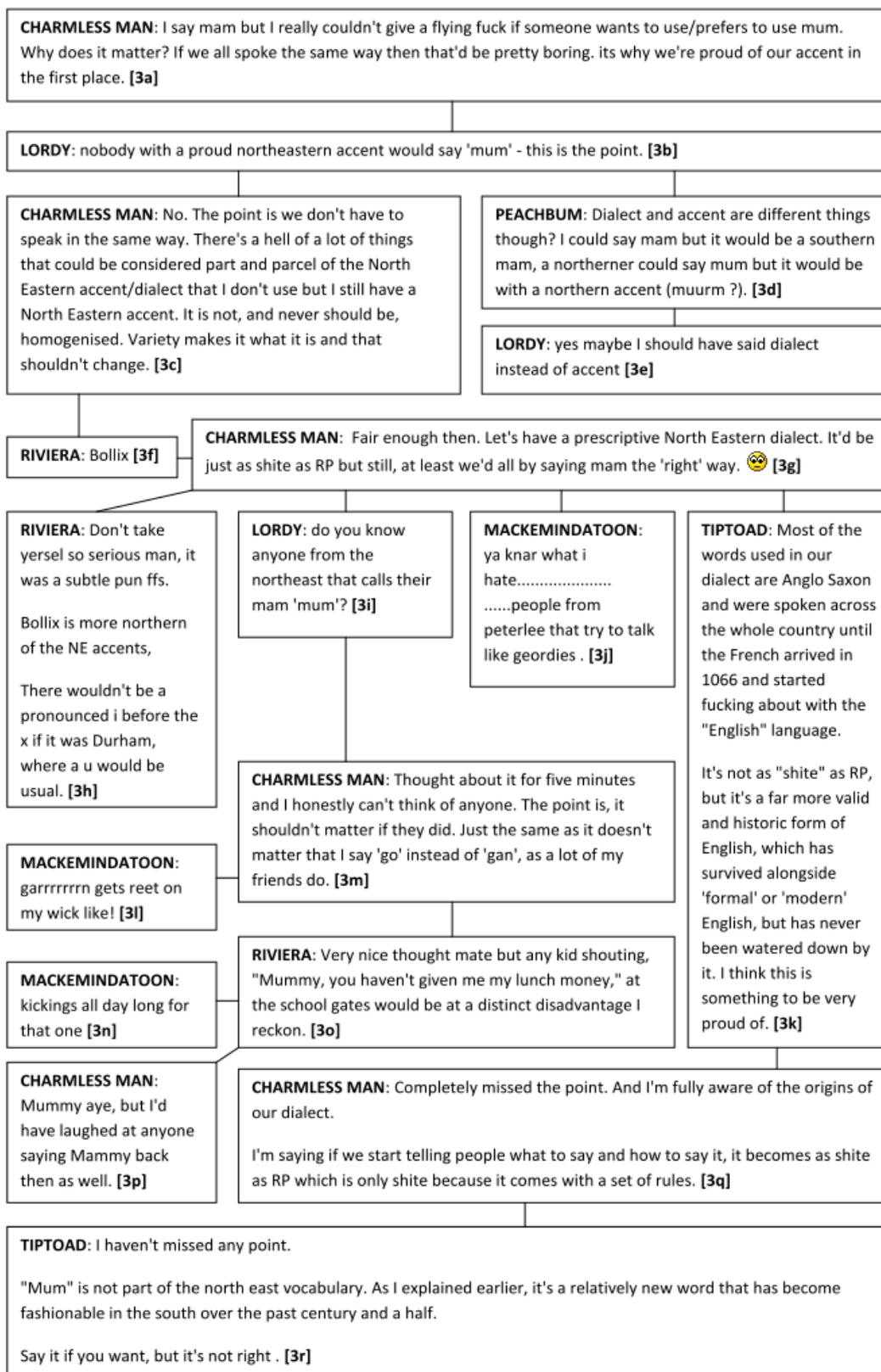


Figure 3: Vernacular prescriptivism 2.

me dad/mam. Incidentally it's the same people who say this, who also say MUM and LUNCH.' He also offers the view that 'Mum and lunch are for southern wanabees'. The linking together of *mum* and *lunch*, and describing them as southern usages, aped by 'wanabees' is interesting. In British English, the word used for the midday meal has traditionally been regarded as socially rather than regionally marked. On the whole, middle-class people have 'lunch' at midday, while working-class people have 'dinner', whether they are from the north or south of England (Rodríguez-González 1999: 107). ALICANTE MACKEM is juxtaposing an authentic, working-class north (where only the socially-striving 'wanabees' use words like *mum* and *lunch*) with an inauthentic, middle-class south. This projection of dichotomous values onto what is sometimes referred to as the 'North-south divide' in England (Billinge and Baker 2004) will be pursued in the next section.

Loathing the south: indexical fields

So far we have considered attitudes to *mam/mum* in the context of a vernacular prescriptivism which associates place and linguistic form. We have seen how some contributors object to people using the 'wrong' form(s), resulting in explicit interventions on behalf of the vernacular – in this case not so much in the promotion of *mam* but in the prohibition of *mum*. But what underlies the strength of feeling which characterises these interventions? Why does *mum* in the speech of a North Easterner 'do' MARKUS's 'fucking tits in'? Why is it 'a disgrace' for RIVIERA? The reason lies in Eckert's suggestion that the situated use of a particular linguistic variable can activate 'a constellation of ideologically related meanings' – the 'indexical field' (2008: 464). For many of the participants *mum* indexes, in the words of the Newcastle-based poet Sean O'Brien, 'everything there [is] to loathe about the South' (2012: xx). This is illustrated by MARKUS in his response to DATA's intervention (2g): he objects to DATA's children using *mum* on the grounds that it is for

southern fairies! You should be ashamed of yourself, they're gonna grow up to be right ponces who like ballet and wear scarves with t shirts and stuff, and if they're girls then they'll grow up to be Germaine Greer. [2h]

For MARKUS, *mum* activates an indexical field linking 'southern' (that is, the south of England and being from the south of England) with the following: effeminacy, homosexuality, affectedness (it is a word used by 'fairies' and 'ponces'), class-marked cultural interests (ballet), particular modes of dress (wearing scarves with t-shirts) and feminism ('Germaine Greer'). These cultural and social orientations are regarded as typically

southern and therefore out of place in North East England (even though, of course, in reality homosexuality and feminism have been found north of Birmingham!).

Differences between north and south in England are sometimes presented in dichotomous terms. And from each perspective, the ‘other’ occupies the negative pole of a set of binary oppositions: northerners are stereotypically portrayed as working-class, tough, down-to-earth; southerners are middle class, ‘soft’ and pretentious (Beal 2009: 230). The difference is sometimes gendered, with the north generally coded as masculine – a site of ‘blue-collar masculinity and machismo’ (Beal 2009: 230), set against a more effeminate south (Russell 2004: 38-39). Stereotypical as these oppositions are, to many English people (and certainly to many of those posting on this thread) it is clear that they are both reflected in discourse, where they are debated and contested, and used in discourse as a way to organize and structure thinking. This is illustrated in the exchange between MAD CYRIL and MACKEMINDATOON:

MAD CYRIL: me gaffer at work is canny posh and he has 2 kids about 17 and 19, they call him daddy still. Sick as fuck. [2e]

MACKEMINDATOON: you should try living near jesmond listening to the posh little yar rar fuckers spouting mummy boils my piss. [2f]

Both posters express a visceral class-based revulsion towards adults who use *daddy* and *mummy*. Despite the prejudice, the sociolinguistic awareness here is nuanced. They have noticed that for most speakers of English, *daddy* and *mummy* are age-graded phenomena, in the sense that beyond childhood these words drop out of active vocabulary (Mair 2006: 30), but that there is a tendency for some speakers in the highest socio-economic groups in England – which are linked with the south in this discourse – to maintain the use of *daddy* and *mummy* into adulthood. MAD CYRIL clearly aligns himself with ‘blue-collar masculinity and machismo’, not just in the way he demarcates his social position in relation to those he criticizes, but in the very language he uses to do it: he has ‘a gaffer’ (boss) who is ‘canny posh’ (very posh); he expresses his disdain towards the adult ‘kids’ who use *daddy* in the strongest terms (‘sick as fuck’). Embedded in the evaluation ‘sick as fuck’ is the suggestion that the continued use of what he perceives as an infantilism into adulthood is unsavoury and disturbing (in colloquial British English, the adjective *sick* can be used to describe behaviours or attitudes deemed morally reprehensible, particularly in relation to sexual behaviour). MACKEMINDATOON’s reply offers discursive support to MAD CYRIL’s position by opening with a statement of class/regional solidarity: ‘you should try living near Jesmond.’ For the

posters on this thread, the indexical meanings of Jesmond are well known. This residential suburb of Newcastle is one of the wealthiest in the North East, and is particularly associated with Newcastle University students, many of whom were educated at socially exclusive private schools and/or come from the south of England.² These ‘posh little yar rar fuckers spouting mummy’ enrage MACKEMINDATOON. With ‘yar rar’, he offers in the written mode a stylised ‘performance’, verging on parody, of RP speech which renders ‘yeah’ as [jɑ:ː] and combines it with ‘rar’ (more usually spelled <rah> or <ra>) – a relatively recent slang term to describe someone who is ‘posh’ (Thorne 2007: 355). Unlike MAD CYRIL, he does not reveal his class position, but his nickname – which serves to identify him as someone from Sunderland (a ‘Mackem’) living in Newcastle-upon-Tyne (‘The Toon’) – in its condensed and creative use of vernacular forms, implicitly sets him up in opposition to the incoming and ‘non-local’ residents of Jesmond, whose southernness and difference is indexed by the performance of ‘yar rar’.

The posts by MARKUS, MAD CYRIL and MACKEMINDATOON reveal a highly anti-southern indexical field. It is difficult not to conclude that some posters – in their attitudes and in the vehemence with which they are expressed (there are references in the thread to ‘southern fashionistas’, ‘southern crap’, ‘right posh southern c.unt’) – are reacting against the long tradition of ‘austrocentrism’ in Britain: a discrimination in favour of the south of England. Because London and the south east is by far the most economically powerful of the English regions it ‘acts as the deictic anchorage, the point of reference (the *origo*)’ against which everywhere else is compared, measured and judged (Wales 2000: 5). The anti-austrocentrism, which is evident in expressions of cultural animosity and in prescriptivist appeals for the use of local forms over standard ones, might be seen as – to borrow a term from post-colonial studies – a ‘nativist’ response to the perceived dominance of London and the south east of England. An additional discursive resource in this attempt at recalibrating the centre-periphery relationship between north and south is the ideology of linguistic purism, which I turn to now.

Vernacular purism

The earlier arguments favouring *mam* over *mum* were regional and class-based: *mum* was disfavoured because it was associated with ‘the South’ and linked indexically with undesirable ‘southern’ (albeit stereotypical) characteristics. The line of argument introduced by TIPTOAD has different ideological underpinnings. In his first post he states that “‘Mum’ didn’t appear in the English language until the 1820s, 300 years after “mam””, thus providing

mam with the longer historical pedigree. He goes on to claim that in North East English, or as TIPTOAD puts it, ‘our dialect’:

Most of the words used ... are Anglo Saxon and were spoken across the whole country until the French arrived in 1066 and started fucking about with the “English” language.

... it’s a far more valid and historic form of English, which has survived alongside ‘formal’ or ‘modern’ English, but has never been watered down by it. I think this is something to be very proud of. [3k]

Here we see linguistic purism in action: the ‘manifestation of a desire ... to preserve a language from, or rid it of, putative foreign elements’ (Thomas 1991: 12). This desire generally follows a model of tradition in which ‘older forms of language are ‘better’ than present-day language’ and which views contemporary changes negatively (Johnson and Braber 2008: 41). There is often a strong link between purist and prescriptivist impulses,

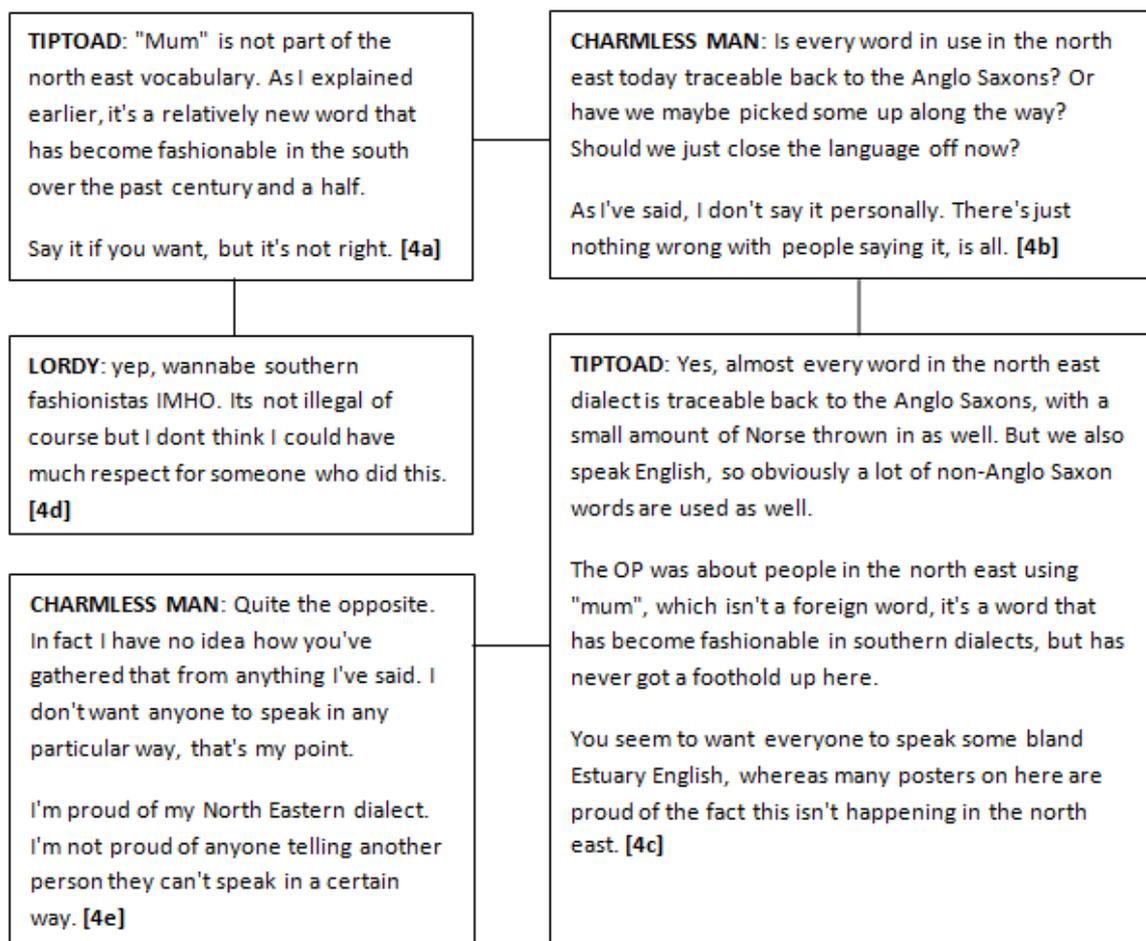


Figure 4. Vernacular purism.

both of which have been closely associated with the process of standardization (see Edwards, 2009: 212-223). However, as we saw in the case of prescriptivism, non-standard varieties can also become the focus of these impulses. TIPTOAD seems to be operating within the tradition of Anglo-Saxon linguistic purism (Milroy 2005) which valorizes the Germanic component of English (here represented by Anglo-Saxon and, in 4c ‘Norse’) but rejects non-Germanic influences (‘the French’). From this ideological perspective, English was a ‘pure’ Germanic language until 1066, after which the invading French deliberately changed it for the worse (note his use of scare quotes for “English” after 1066 – he seems to be suggesting that the variety which he sees as forming the basis of ‘formal’ or ‘modern’ English perhaps doesn’t even deserve to be called ‘English’). But ‘our dialect’ (North East English) represents a survival of this ‘purer’ Germanic English – purer because it hasn’t been ‘fuck[ed] about with’, making it more ‘valid and historic’ (from this perspective it is more ‘valid’ *because* it is more ‘historic’ than Standard English and also because it has resisted what he sees as the ‘diluting’ effect of the standard on other dialects).

CHARMLESS MAN takes issue with the accuracy of TIPTOAD’s claims about the Germanic purity of North East English:

Is every word in use in the north east today traceable back to the Anglo Saxons? Or have we maybe picked some up along the way? Should we just close the language off now? [4b]

TIPTOAD responds with:

Yes, almost every word in the north east dialect is traceable back to the Anglo Saxons, with a small amount of Norse thrown in as well. But we also speak English, so obviously a lot of non-Anglo Saxon words are used as well. [4c]

The exchange here counterposes contrasting positions in relation to the notion of ‘purity’. Whereas TIPTOAD places boundaries between varieties – to the extent that ‘north east dialect’ and ‘English’ (‘we *also* speak English’) are conceptualised as separate languages – and cites historicity and purity as a variety’s most valuable characteristic, CHARMLESS MAN’s attitude is congruent with mainstream sociolinguistic thinking which sees dialects as dynamic and changing and incapable of being ‘closed off’ to external influences. TIPTOAD ends 4c by accusing CHARMLESS MAN of wanting

everyone to speak some bland Estuary English, whereas many posters on here are proud of the fact this isn’t happening in the north east. [4c]

TIPTOAD's sociolinguistic imagination envisages a linguistic landscape of potential 'loss', with the North East as a redoubt against 'bland' homogenisation, represented here by the label 'Estuary English', which although not normally used descriptively by sociolinguistics, is often found in folk-linguistic discourse in England to index what is sometimes referred to as 'supralocalization' (Milroy 1994), or 'regional dialect levelling' (Kerswill 2003): the process by which, as a consequence of intra-regional mobility, 'highly local dialect forms have begun to be eroded, leveled away in favor of forms fulfilling the need for greater geographical scope' (Britain 2010: 213). While both CHARMLESS MAN and TIPTOAD are aware of these processes, TIPTOAD's hostility towards them derives from his adherence to a version of the history of North East English, which sees an unbroken line between the 'Anglo-Saxon' of the first Germanic settlers and contemporary vernacular speech in the region. This echoes the attitudes of late nineteenth-century dialectologists towards North East English, who often emphasized the distinctiveness and indeed 'purity' of a mode of speech which was deemed to have been 'least affected, in its vocalization, by outside influences' (Heslop 1892: xii). What TIPTOAD's and Heslop's versions of history leave out is the importance of the Industrial Revolution and the migration from the countryside to the rapidly growing towns and cities which it precipitated (Beal 2012: 129). The inevitable sociolinguistic consequences of this mobility were levelling and diffusion as a result of dialect contact. In the industrial zones of North East England, the notion of a 'pure' linguistic pedigree is undermined by sociolinguistic facts, at least since the eighteenth century.

4 Further discussion and conclusion

In the *mam/mum* thread, the participants can be divided into two broad – but imbalanced – groupings. In the majority are the vernacular prescriptivists who associate geographical location with particular speech forms which they wish to preserve in the face of 'outside' pressures, sometimes justifying this association with references to purism and/or an evocation of anti-southern sentiment. A smaller number have a less fixed association between location and forms of speech, are not particularly interested in either purification or gatekeeping (Edwards 2009: 217), and accept the inevitable linguistic consequences of the rapid and complex social changes consequent on the upheaval capitalism has undergone during the last forty years or so. The conditions of 'late modernity' – which are characterized by rapid

economic change, geographical and social mobility, and the increased mediation and reflexivity of culture – have impacted upon the lives of people in the west in numerous and profound ways (Coupland 2010a and b; Johnstone 2010), which include the reshaping of language use and ideologies. Johnstone points out that (perhaps paradoxically) these conditions are responsible not only for dialect levelling and loss – as might be expected – but ‘are precisely’ those ‘that most effectively foster dialect and language awareness’ (2010: 387): as speakers of different varieties come into contact, the result is ‘increased popular attention to variation’ (391), of the kind we have seen on this thread.

The conditions of late modernity not only increase sociolinguistic awareness, they also offer more contexts for expressing it in. The very existence of sites like *Ready to Go* is dependent on recent developments in communications, in particular the internet’s ‘Web 2.0’ technologies which allow people to generate their own multimodal content while participating and collaborating in virtual ‘communities of users’ (Barton and Lee 2013: 9). This ‘social networking’ allows interactions between people anywhere in the world who have internet access. *Ready to Go* is interesting in that while the forces that gave rise to the internet and eventually Web 2.0 are essentially ‘late modern’, the global network is being appropriated as one of a range of ‘new resources for social action’ (Fairclough 2006: 121) in what appears to be a highly ‘local’ project: a virtual community built around a football club in North East England. Certainly ‘the local’ is foregrounded throughout the site, and on the metalinguistic threads in particular, which as we have seen are often about language in the context of the North East, participants assume a familiarity with local places and concerns beyond the linguistic. For example, at the start of the thread (see Figure 1), TUNSTALL BIRDMAN’s response to the OP – ‘And Seagulls’ – might at first appear to have no relevance to the discussion. In order to understand this utterance (to perceive it as conversationally ‘co-operative’) participants have to have knowledge of wider social and cultural contexts (it relates to an issue affecting the densely populated coastal areas of Tyneside, Wearside and Teesside, where some people complain about the nuisance caused by seagulls). Despite appearances, TUNSTALL BIRDMAN is agreeing, albeit humorously, with the OP: like nesting seagulls, people from the North East who say *mum* are a pest that needs to be dealt with. MARKUS responds to TUNSTALL BIRDMAN with ‘If they could say Mum then I’d give them a piece of bread because that would be pretty impressive, obviously i’d shoot them after like.’ In doing so, MARKUS acknowledges the joke and adds his own (establishing a friendly footing and perhaps tempering the apparent anger of the thread title). As well as showing the importance of local knowledge as a means of establishing relationships between participants,

the exchange also illustrates the importance of locally-based humour in the discourse: irony, under- and over-statement, wordplay, and banter (what Schiffrin calls ‘sociable argument’) have considerable symbolic capital in vernacular contexts such as this, particular when combined with use of dialect forms (note the sentence final discourse marker *like* – a distinctive North East usage – in MARKUS’s response). Indeed, vernacular forms occur widely in the thread. Participants use North East words and grammatical constructions together with respellings to index their local affiliations and identities (representative examples from Figure 3 include *yersel*, *ya knar*, *reet* and *aye*). Participants also use their online nicknames to index aspects of their identity, and the information about location and cultural affiliations that these can sometimes convey, separately or in conjunction with the information that people give about their ‘real-world’ locations, reveal lives caught up in the changes concomitant with late modernity. Some of the places referenced here indicate potential sites of exile for the coiners of the pseudonyms. These range from the comparatively local, where a ‘Mackem’ is physically located in the North East, but in a place somewhat removed from the symbolic ‘centre’ of the virtual community (SEDFIELDMACKEM and MACKEMINDATOON), to English locations outwith the North East (MERCIA BLACKCAT; EPPING; WOOD GREEN MACKEM), to places outside the UK entirely (RIVIERA; ABU DHABI RED AND WHITE; ALICANTE MACKEM). Amongst the locations given which perhaps suggest the geographical mobility of the posters are ‘Antibes via Allendale Cottages’ (RIVIERA); ‘Planet Earth’ (TUNSTALL BIRDMAN); ‘Hither and thither’ (TIPTOAD); ‘Arl Ower’ (LORDY); ‘Leeds’ (CHARMLESS MAN); ‘Sydney’ (BOB FLEMING); ‘Home is where the heart is REGARDLESS of location’ (ABU DHABI RED AND WHITE); ‘Town and country’ (SON OF REX); ‘ESSEX’ (EPPING); ‘Gloucester’ (GIZMOGANZEE); ‘North London’ (WOOD GREEN MACKEM); ‘Physically – London, Spiritually – Durham’ (SHEPHERD88). So while it appears that some of these people are no longer physically located in North East England, they nevertheless demonstrate allegiance to the area through their participation on the messageboard, investing this virtual space of late modernity with a strongly felt sense of place.

Notes

1. The *Ready to Go* thread address is <<http://www.readytogo.net/smb/showthread.php?t=599428>>. Although you need to be a member to contribute, anyone can read the threads.

2. According to the MOSAIC socio-economic profiles on the Newcastle City Council website, 83 percent of the population of South Jesmond fall into the category of ‘young, well-educated city dwellers’, while six per cent are ‘wealthy people living in the most sought after areas’. The Sutton Trust reported in 2010 that only eight out of 87 English universities had a higher proportion of ex-private school pupils than Newcastle University, and only three universities (Oxford, Cambridge and Bristol) took a lower proportion of students who had been in receipt of free school meals (a widely-used index of poverty).

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