The participatory vernacular web and regional dialect grammar

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A new account of pronouns in North East England

**Introduction**

English dialects demonstrate considerable variation in their pronominal systems (see for example Trudgill & Chambers 1991 and Hernández 2011). In England, pronouns in North East England – the urban areas of Tyne and Wear and Teesside and the counties of Durham and Northumberland (hereafter NEE) – are often different from those found in Standard English (SE). The most extensive modern accounts of NEE pronouns are Beal (1993) and Beal et al. (2012), but because they appear in chapters dealing with a wide range of morphosyntactic topics, the coverage is necessarily brief. This article is able to offer a more detailed overview of the morphology of NEE pronouns, based on a sizeable naturalistic corpus of vernacular writing.

The corpus is *Ready to Go* (RTG), an online forum for people with an interest in Sunderland A.F.C., a football club with a fan-base centred on a city on the North Sea littoral at the heart of the region. It is a written corpus, making it an unusual data-set in the study of regional non-standard morphosyntax. While ‘the research community is not exactly drowning’ in corpora that sample regional dialects (Szmrecsanyi & Anderwald, 2018: 303), those that do exist consist mainly of orthographic transcriptions of interviews with informants. In some cases, such as the Diachronic Electronic Corpus of Tyneside English (DECTE), these interviews were carried out specifically for linguistic research; in others they have been co-opted for research after being recorded for other purposes (e.g. the Freiburg Corpus of English Dialects is mainly made up of local-history interviews).

This focus on spoken rather than written language in corpus-based dialectology is unsurprising, given that audio recordings allow access to phonology, and also because the naturally-occurring, spontaneous, unselfconscious, everyday *speech* of folk in their locally-based communities has conventionally been seen as the ‘holy grail’ of the sociolinguistic enterprise (Holmes & Wilson, 2017: 268). Certainly, there has been a bias against regarding *writing* as truly vernacular, because the acquisition of literacy has generally meant literacy in *Standard* English. In the UK at least, the Standard Language Ideology exerts its strongest influence at the level of morphosyntax, so when people write they typically use what they believe to be standard grammar. Should written text therefore be discounted as a source of non-standard forms? While in the past writing might have been constrained by proximity to the standard, in the era of Web 2.0 contemporary forms of writing online show ‘a relative lack of institutional regulation’ resulting in a proliferation of ‘spoken-like and vernacular features, traces of spontaneous production, innovative spelling choices’, and so on (Androutsopoulos, 2010: 209). On the vernacular participatory web (Howard, 2008; Androutsopoulos, 2010) sites such as RTG are socio-pragmatically complex arenas of argument, anecdote, banter and debate, in which non-standard, regionally marked Englishes flourish. These are qualities which make them a valuable resource for social dialectologists (see Pearce, 2015). Indeed, in some respects the language of RTG is closer to the ideal object of sociolinguistic enquiry than is the language captured in speech-based corpora, because it has not been elicited for the purposes of research.

Another advantage of the corpus is its size. At approximately 12 million words (and growing) RTG is about twelve times bigger than DECTE, the closest comparable NEE corpus.1 Size is important when morphosyntax is the research focus, since the larger the corpus, the more chance a particular form will occur. For example, *yon* is not found in DECTE, but appears 32 times in RTG. A description of NEE demonstratives based on DECTE would therefore have been incomplete. Size can also be measured in terms of the number of active individuals registered to use the site, which currently stands at over 12,000.

Using *WebCorp Live* to interrogate the RTG site, I began my exploration by searching for all non-standard pronouns attested in previous studies of the region’s grammar (Beal 1993 and 2008; Beal et al., 2012). My findings show that there is perhaps more variation in NEE pronouns than has previously been acknowledged. For example, I provide evidence for the retention of second-person pronouns in *th-* (e.g. *thou*, *thee*, *thyself*)and reveal an extensivesystem of reflexives. Furthermore, possessive pronouns and determiners, demonstratives, interrogatives, and indefinite pronouns receive more attention than they have to date. My account also has a ‘historical’ dimension, in that it draws on earlier dialectological studies – the Survey of English Dialects (SED) from the mid-twentieth century, and the research carried out under the aegis of the English Dialect Society in the late nineteenth century (in particular R.O. Heslop’s *Northumberland Words*) – to assess the extent of conservatism in the system, and also the areal distribution of these forms, distinguishing (where it is of interest) between ‘pan-northernisms’ – features which are recorded widely across northern varieties of English – and those with a more focused NEE saliency.

## Personal pronouns

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| **Table 1: Forms of personal pronouns in RTG*****Standard forms in bold and more localized forms in italics******Selected orthographic representations from RTG are shown in angle brackets*** |
|  | **Subject singular** | **Object singular** | **Subject plural** | **Object plural** |
| **First** **person** | **I** <a, ah, aa> | **me***us* <uz, iz, ez>  | **we** <wa, wuh, wah>*us* | **us** <uz>*we* <wa, wuh, wah> |
| **Second** **person** | **you** <ye, ya, yer, yay> *thou* <tha, thoo, thow> *thee*  | **you** <ye, ya, yer, yay>*thou* <thow>*thee* | **you***yous* <yous, youse, yuz, yez, yees, yeez, yerz, yas, yiz, yays> | **you***yous* <yous, youse, yuz, yez, yees, yeez, yerz, yas, yiz, yays>*thous* |
| **Third** **person** | **he, she, it** | **him, her, it** | **they** | **them** |

## First-person subject

The RTG spellings <a>, <ah> and <aa> suggest pronunciations such as [ɑ] and [a] for *I*.

(1) **a** think Henry was unreal as well but **a** still think Aguero is the best (2019)

(2) **Ah**’m not unhappy about living in Australia (2013)

The feature has been enregistered in NEE since at least the nineteenth century, as this entry from *Northumberland Words* (Heslop, 1892: 2) indicates:

AA, AW, AH, I the pronoun of the first-person. This long, broad sound is a characteristic of the dialect of the Tyneside and of South Northumberland. In local works it is generally represented by the letters *aw*.

For most present-day English speakers in the UK, forms in *a-* have a distinctly Scottish character (see the entry for *A* as a personal pronoun in the *Dictionary of the Scots Language*). They probably arose when *I* [ɪ] (a development of OE *ic*) was lengthened under stress in Middle English, and later diphthongized – probably to [ɑɪ]. The second element was lost under lack of stress and a new form [ɑ] and later [ɑ:] arose. Forms in *a-* are recorded for Northumberland (Nb) and Durham (Du) in the SED, as well as in the other northern counties, the midlands and East Anglia (see Upton et al., 1994: 486).

In the plural, SED records *us* functioning as equivalent of SE *we* in Nb and Du, and also quite widely across the dialects (ibid.). It is to be found (though rarely) in RTG.

(3) It is what it is and **us** cant change nowt (2019)

## First-person object

A more common colloquial use of *us* is as the equivalent of Standard English (SE) *me*. SED records objective singular *us* across the whole of England (Upton et al., 1994: 486). It usually appears in imperative constructions such as ‘give **us** a kiss’ (with the pragmatic function of softening the force of the request). This feature is common in RTG (the broader context of the examples makes it clear that *us* has singular reference).

(4) Someone hoy **us** a link (2016)

In NEE, however, singular *us* is used more widely, meaning that sentences such as the following can also be heard, as they can in Scotland (Miller, 2004: 49).

(5) Are yer gonna knack **iz** marra? (2019)

(6) some aunty bought **ez** it (2011)

Spellings with <-z> are used to reflect the widespread northern pronunciation of the pronoun, while <i-> and <e-> spellings probably represent the unstressed form. Evidence for the regional saliency of this feature can be found in the SED. For example, in response to a prompt designed to elicit the order of pronouns in *given it me/me it* (Orton & Halliday, 1963: 1070), 8 of the 9 Nb informants and 3 of the 6 Du informants rejected *me* and substituted *us*. The entry for *us* in *Northumberland Words* (Heslop, 1893: 758) suggests this distinctive usage has been around for a while:

US, used for *me*. “Wiv *us*” – with me. “Tiv *us*” – to me. “He gov *us* ne answer.” Sometimes shortened, as, “What’ll ye gi’s?”.

*OED* only refers to non-imperative *us* in relation to its use by ‘a sovereign, ruler, or magnate’, but the *Dictionary of the Scots Language (DSL)* has colloquial examples spanning the mid-nineteenth-century to the present day.

Another distinctive first-person objective pronoun associated with NEE is *we*. Described by Beal et al. (2012: 53) as a limited form of pronoun-exchange, it is not recorded in SED, though it is attested for Nb in the *English Dialect Dictionary*, with the example used drawn from *Northumberland Words*: ‘WE, us. “Haw-way wi *we*.” This is perhaps peculiar to Spittal and Tweedmouth’ (Heslop, 1893: 775). In RTG, objective *we* favours prepositional phrases, with spellings reflecting the unstressed form found in this position in speech.

(7)Don’t know how I didn’t know that story when he was with **wuh** (2018)

(8) they’re way too smart for **wah** (2012)

Like non-imperative *us*, objective *we* is also found in Scotland (‘We *pron.*’ *DSL*, 2004).

## Second-person subject and object

RTG also has a rich array of non-standard second-person pronouns. SED records *ye* as a singular second-person subjective and objective pronoun, realised as [ji:], [jɪ] and [jə] (Upton et al., 1994: 486). In RTG <ye>, <yee> and <yer> are found (with <yee> and <yay> sometimes used to represent the emphatic/stressed pronunciation). Modern *ye* is derived from Old English *ge*,which was the subjective case of the second person plural pronoun. *Ye* with singular reference emerges in the Middle English period, used instead of *thou* originally as a marker of respect, deference or formality (*OED*). *Ye* develops an objective function in the later Middle English period. These examples show *ye* as singular subject (9) and object (10 and 11).

(9) **Ye** canna mak a savaloy out of an alsatian, man haway (2018)

(10) fuck **ye** Frank (2013)

(11) Is that **yee** on the phone like? (2017)

Like forms of *I* in *a-*, *ye* has a Scottish flavour, and is widely attested there (‘Ye *pron., v.*’ *DSL*, 2004).

*Yous* is also common in NEE. This analogically created innovatory plural probably originates in Irish English, and it is also found in Scotland and Merseyside (Beal et al., 2012: 53-54). In RTG *yous* and *yees* like *ye*, function as both subject and object (note also the variant spellings in Table 1).

(12) **Yous** need to be careful (2019)

(13) Hope this shuts **yous** up (2019)

(14) **Youse** will survive, just (2014)

(15) Some of **youse** are ganning on like the mags (2014)

(16) If **yees** take offence to that you need to get a life you sad bastards (2014)

Beal makes the important point that for ‘some younger speakers, *yous* has been generalised as the local form, and may be used to address one person’ (1993: 205), as in the following examples.

(17) It must be your little hands and beady eyes that give **yous** the edge like (2017)

(18) Love **yous** too marra (2019)

SED also records the older forms *thou* and *thee* as singular subjective and objective pronouns in NEE, with *thou* sometimes realised as [ðu:] or [ða] (Upton et al., 1994: 486). Orthographic representations of these realisations occur in RTG. There are also examples of *thou* as a plural (25), which is possibly an innovation through analogy with *yous*.

(19) I shall have a pint with **thee** (2013)

(20) Does **thoo** not sleep Hank? (2018)

(21) **thou**’s fukn crackers **thou** is (2018)

(22) You don’t have to act like a scratter in a scratter shop **thee** nars (2014)

(23) ‘**Tha**’s Got Hair Like a Ducks Arse’ (2011)

(24) I’d rather cut my tiddler off with a blunt comb than gan for a pint with **thou** (2015).

(25) I’ll buy **thous** a gill (2012)

Historically, *thee* is the objective case of *thou* but this distinction is not maintained in the northern dialects where the pronoun is still used. *Thee/thou* in NEE is quite a rare phenomenon, and many instances in RTG involve contributors ‘impersonating’ people from further south in northern England, particularly from South Yorkshire, where it is an enregistered feature of the dialect (Cooper, 2019: 71). Since the SED was carried out, when forms in *th-* were widely distributed across England, at least amongst older, rural speakers (Upton et al., 1994: 486), they have gone into steep decline. However, as the examples here show, there is enough evidence in RTG to suggest some contemporary currency in NEE, confirming that Burbano-Elizondo’s informants who ‘argued that *thou* could be heard in Sunderland’ (Beal et al., 2012: 54) were correct. In RTG it commonly occurs in the tag ‘thou knows’ (variously rendered orthographically to capture pronunciations such as [ða na:z] and [ði: na:z]).

(26) Has a turkish cap **thee knas** (2013)

(27) The NHS is creaking, **tha knas** (2016)

Heslop’s remarks (1893: 727) are worth considering here:

THOO, thou; sometimes shortened to *tu* or *ta*. *Thoo’ll*, thou wilt. *Thoo’s*, thou art or thou shalt. *Thoo* is only used by intimates, or by a superior or senior to an inferior. Used in any other way it expresses the greatest possible contempt for the person addressed.

The pragmatics of nineteenth-century usage are echoed in the RTG data, especially in relation to the expression of social solidarity (examples 19, 20 and 25) and contempt (21 to 24).

## Third-person

By and large, in both the subjective and objective, there is correspondence between SE and NEE third person forms, though pronoun exchange sometimes occurs when the subject element consists of a pronoun conjoined with a noun (this is common in many varieties of English).

(28) If **him** and his son want to come and watch as fans they’re more than welcome (2018)

In the plural, *them* is recorded in the SED as a subject form in Du (and more widely) and also occurs in RTG.

(29) **Them**’s the bastards that bombed me granny (2013)

We might also note the presence of ‘singular’ *they*, which is rapidly increasing in all varieties of English (see for example Paterson, 2014).

(30) Anyone who says **they** don’t care is a joke of a fan in my opinion (2017)

# Possessive determiners and pronouns

As with personal pronouns, contrasts with SE are confined mainly to the first- and second-persons of possessive determiners and pronouns (see Table 2).

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| **Table 2: Possessive determiners and pronouns in RTG*****Standard forms in bold and more localized forms in italics******Selected orthographic representations from RTG are shown in angle brackets*** |
|  | **Possessive determiner** | **Possessive pronoun** |
| **First-person singular** | **my** *me* <mi, mee, ma, mah> | **mine** |
| **First-person plural** | **our** *wor* <wor, wa> | **ours***wors* <wors, worz> |
| **Second-person singular** | **your** <yer, ya>*thy* <thee>*thous* <thoos> | **yours** <yewas>*thine*  |
| **Second-person plural** | **your** <yer, yewa> | **yours**  |
| **Third-person singular** | **his, her, its** | **his, hers, its** |
| **Third-person plural** | **their** | **theirs** |

# First person possessive determiners

*Me* is used widely in non-standard varieties where SE has *my*. In RTG, the spellings <mi> and sometimes <mee> occur, reflecting a vowel in the region of [ɪː].

(31) **Me** car’s broke (2015)

(32) I’m just about to have **mi** tea (2019)

(33) Too right i want caviar on **mee** cheesy chips anarl! (2019)

In addition, we find the spelling <ma(h)>, reflecting a lower, backer vowel of the sort which has been attested in northern varieties of English since at least the seventeenth century (*OED*), but like *a* and *ye* is particularly associated with Scotland (McColl Millar, 2007).

(34) **Ma** Mam and Dad still live in Hendon (2014)

 Of more local salience to NEE – though it also found in Scottish varieties (‘Our *possess. pron.*’ *DSL*. 2004) – is the plural possessive determiner *wor*. In the SED *wor* is attested for Nb and Du, but it was also recorded across the northern counties and as far south as Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire as [wəʁ~wər~wəɹ] (Upton et al., 1994: 488). Due to decline in rhoticity this is now often [wə] in speech, reflected in spellings such as <wa> in RTG.

(35) Ya have to understand **wor** pride and passion (2013)

(36) Only we could drop **wa** best player for a must win game (2019)

(37) I am getting **wor** lass to drop us off afterwards (2019)

In parallel with *us*, *wor* is sometimes used with singular reference. Example (37) shows a common pattern in NEE, where there is ‘a tendency for the first-person plural form to be used with reference to family members and sexual partners’ (Beal et al., 2012: 53).

The *OED* records forms in *w-* emerging in the sixteenth century in Scotland, and labels them as ‘northern’ by the nineteenth century. *Wor* has long had a particular cultural salience in NEE, as its repetition in this couplet from a patriotic Northumberland song indicates: ‘In defence o’ **wor** country, **wor** laws, an’ **wor** King, / May a Peercy still lead us to battle’ (1824). Its use as a badge of north east identity (particularly on Tyneside) is evident in its appearance on signs and artefacts in the ‘linguistic landscape’ (see Pearce, 2017), as is its occurrence in national media contexts in conjunction with north east celebrities: *‘Why-aye that was reall-aye beautiful!’ weeps* ***Wor*** *Cheryl* (Shelley, 2014).

## Second-person possessive determiners

These usually coincide with standard *your* (sometimes spelled <yer> or <ya>). There are also rarer forms in [ð-] corresponding to the personal pronouns *thou/thee*, with *thy* [ðɪ~ðə]attested for Nb and Du in SED.

(38) Should have known **thy** ears would prick up! (2013)

(39) And wharrabout **thy** hair? (2014)

(40) Ad **thee** oss. Get **thee** pipe (2018)

(41) Mek **thoos** mind up lad (2018)

# Possessive pronouns

While possessive determiners feature in Beal (1993) and Beal et al. (2012), possessive pronouns do not. Has some interesting variability therefore been overlooked? In the first-person singular, there is general correspondence with Standard English in RTG (i.e. *mine*), but in the plural we do see forms in [w-], cognate with *wor* as a possessive determiner.

(42) Got **wors** at Costco mate (2011)

(43) **wors** came today (2019)

*Wors* is recorded in SED for Nb and Du (Orton & Halliday, 1963: 1072-73). It seems that *wors*, like *yous* is a relatively late addition to the pronoun system. Heslop’s earliest citation is from a song published in 1819, in which London is compared unfavourably with Newcastle. Indeed, despite the rumours, its streets turn out to be just ‘like **wors** – brave and blashy!’ (1893: 797).

Non-standard second-person singular forms are rare in RTG, though *thine* is to be found (and was recorded for Nb and Du in the SED).

(44) I wonder whee’s shitty arse the wife there’ll have to see to first, the bairn’s or **thine**! (2014)

(45) With an avatar like that, I’d fuckin’ dread to see **thine**! (2014)

# Reflexive pronouns

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| **Table 3: Reflexive pronouns in RTG*****Standard forms in bold and more localized forms in italics******Selected orthographic representations from RTG are also shown in angle brackets*** |
| **First-person singular****First-person plural****Second-person singular****Second-person plural****Third-person singular****Third-person plural** | **myself** *meself* <maself>; *mysel* <mysell>; *mesel* <masel, mesell, masell>; *mysen* <mesen>; *ourself*; *worself*; *worsel*  **ourselves** *oursels* <oursells>; *worselves* <weselves, waselves>; *worsels* <worsells, wasels, wasells> **yourself** <yerself, yaself>; *yoursel* <yoursell, yesel, yesell, yersel, yersell, yasel, yasell>; *yoursen* <yersen>; *thyself* <theeself, thaself>; *thysel* <theesel, theesell>; *thysen* **yourselves** <yerselves, yaselves>; *yoursels* <yesels, yersels, yersells, yasels, yasells>; thasels**himself,** **herself,** **itself** *himsel* <himsell>; *himsen*; *hisself*; *hissel* <hissell>; *hersel* <hersell> **themselves**  *theirselves <*thaselves*>*; *themsels* <themsells>; *themsens*  |

Beal notes that ‘in standard English, reflexives are formed by adding *self/selves* to the possessive forms of the first and second person pronouns, but to the objective form of the third person pronouns. Tyneside English is more consistent in this respect, adding *self/selves* to the possessive form in every case’ (1993: 206). This results in non-standard patterns exemplified in RTG.

(46) he didn’t even do it by **hisself** (2012)

(47) County Durham Mags should be ashamed of **theirselves** (2012)

This ‘levelling’ is widespread in non-standard English. However, the full picture of reflexives in NEE also includes variability in the reflexive suffix (Buchstaller & Corrigan, 2015: 87). Table 3 reveals the presence of *-sel(s)* and *sen(s)* alongside *-self(ves)* in RTG.

The *-self(ves)* elementis OE. It seems that *-sel(s)* emerges in the sixteenth century as a consequence of consonant cluster simplification, while *-sen(s)* perhaps reflects a development of a plural form in *-n* (as in eME *sellfenn*) and is recognized as dialectal by the eighteenth century. In SED the *-sel* form has wide distribution across the northern counties, the midlands and beyond, particularly in the first person singular (i.e. *mysel*). It is also very common in colloquial Scottish English (‘Mysel *pron.*’*DSL*, 2004). Forms in *-sen* are rarer with a narrower distribution focused on Yorkshire – where it is an enregistered feature (Cooper 2019) – and Lancashire, but they are also to be found in the East and West Midlands (Upton et al., 1994: 488-489). Both -*sel* and -*sen* are identified as ‘pan-northernisms’ by Ruano-García et al. (2015: 145).

In addition, the use of first-person *w-* and second-person *th-* forms (compatible to the related simplex pronouns) is notable.

# First-person reflexives

SED records *-sel* for Nb and Du and *-sen* in other northern locations. Both are to be found in RTG, alongside the much more widespread colloquial form *meself.*

(48) I’m ashamed of **meself**! (2019)

(49) I got **mysel** a glass of sauvignon blanc at halftime yesterday (2011)

(50) I’ve landed **mesel** in a bit bother with all this (2019)

(51) I shat **mysen** (2014)

(52) Was just going to make **mesen** a Tuna salad baguette (2014)

Plural *w-* forms are common in Nb and Du. In the *Basic Materials*, [wəsɛlz] is recorded for Northumberland.

(53) We dust **worselves** down (2018)

(54) Wa dust **worsels** down (2019)

(55) We were shitting **waselves** (2019)

(56) We’ll have to work it out for **wasels** i reckon (2010)

We also note the more standard form *our* combining with non-standard *-sels*.

(57) Aye, we don’t want to give **oursels** too long to hang on like (2019)

Morphologically singular forms also occur, mainly with plural reference.

(58) If we compare **ourself** to league one clubs we’ll stay as a league one club (2019)

# Second-person reflexives

There is more variation in the second person in RTG than was found in SED, which only records *thysel* and *yoursel(s)* for Nb and Du (Upton et al., 1994: 488-489). The following singular forms illustrate this variety:

(59) So gan fist **thyself** reet in ones rear orifice (2015)

(60) Gan fist **thysel** Warwick (2014)

(61) How’s it gannin **theeself**? (2015)

(62) Get **theesel** down to the computer shop (2011)

(63) Whey behave **thysen** this time round Joe (2018)

(64) Don’t be too hard on **yoursel** (2013)

(65) Get **yesel** on the train like man (2013)

(66) get **yoursen** down the match (2013)

Plural forms also occur.

(67) enjoy **yoursels** while i"m away you intelligent fuckers (2013)

(68) Perhaps decide between **yesels**? (2015)

# Third-person reflexives

*Hissel(l,f)* and *hersel(l)* are recorded for Nb and Du in SED and both are found in RTG. In addition, we find forms in *-en.*

(69) he’s shot **hisself** (2012)

(70) would anyone really be that bothered if he mangled **himsel** in his ferrari the morra (2014)

(71) Tell him to get **hissel** over to Roker and sort it out (2018)

(72) Carol has just bought **hersel** a new house (2010)

(73) unsurprisingly he drank **himsen** to death (2017)

In the plural, *theirsels* is recorded for Nb and Du in SED, but other variants also occur in RTG.

(74) how do the symptoms manifest **theirsels** there mate? (2017)

(75) Smoggy bastards don’t like people enjoying **themsels** (2013)

(76) Baresi and Donadoni who had about 130 Italian caps in their career by **theirselves** (2015)

(77) they’ve really gone the full Guzman and all got **themsens** bulletproof Audis now (2019)

(78) They would just piss **thasels** (2017)

(79) They can’t help **thaselves** (2014)

Spellings in *tha-* probably reflect a reduced *their*; [ðəsɛlz] was a pronunciation recorded in the SED for Nb and Du (Orton & Halliday, 1963: 1097).

We also see singular uses of these forms.

(80) Whoever that was needs to take a long hard look at **theirself** (2018)

(81) So you are seriously commending a person for drinking **themself** to death? (2017)

# Demonstrative pronouns and determiners

Generally, in contemporary NEE, the demonstratives used to mark whether something is near or distant from the speaker (in Cartesian or social space) correspond to SE (e.g. *this*/*that*, *these/those*).However, in RTG we occasionally find the distals *thon* and *yon*, both of which were recorded in the SED for Nb and Du and also widely across the northern counties (Orton & Halliday, 1963: 1089).

(82) **Thon** shite player Maja (2018)

(83) You cool fuckers in **yon** end wouldn’t be able to hear (2019)

Heslop records pronominal uses of *thon* and *yon* e.g. ‘Whe’s **thon**?’ (1893: 727), but in RTG *thon* only occurs as a determiner, as in the examples. Etymologically, *thon* seems to be a comparatively recent alteration of *yon*, the initial consonant being assimilated to *this* and *that* (*OED*). *Yon* and *thon* (used interchangeably as they are in RTG) are also features of Scots dialects (McColl Millar, 2007: 69).

# Indefinite pronouns

NEE contrasts with SE mainly in relation to negative indefinite pronouns, because *no* as a quantifier is often pronounced [ni:], [ne:] or [neɪ] in NEE.

(84) **Neebody** is going to own up (2019)

(85) Hope **nee one** ever does a countdown to your redundancy then (2019)

(86) Well **ney one** can accuse you of sitting on the fence (2017)

(87) **Neen** o’ this turkey shite for me (2017)

*Nee* has a long northern history. For example, it occurs in *Cursor Mundi*, a poem probably written by a Northumbrian in c. 1300 (‘**nee** pride o pane’). *Neen* (*none*) appears in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (c.1390): ‘By goddes sale, it sal **neen** other bee’. The Chaucerian example is from the *Reeve’s Tale*. It is a line given to Aleyn, a student at Cambridge University who is from North East England.

It is also worth noting formulations such as the following which combine *nee* with an expressive noun. Occasionally the elements are orthographically conjoined, pointing towards grammaticalization.

(88) **Nee fucker** gives a fuck about Bradford either so bog off (2020)

(89) **Nee cunt** in my family looks like steve agnew marra :lol: (2012)

(90) **Nee bugger** else is allowed in (2019)

(91) **neebugger** believes it surely? (2019)

We also find the well-known ‘pan-northernisms’ *nowt* and *owt* (with *owt* also occurring as the equivalent of SE *-thing* in conjunction with *some-*).

(92) **Nowt** happening (2019)

(93) **Owt** confirmed? (2017)

(94) Aren’t you from Whitley bay or **summat**? (2020)

Like *thou* and -*sen*, these indefinites are strongly associated with Yorkshire dialect (Cooper 2019), though SED also records them for locations in the East and West Midlands, as well as all six northern counties (Orton & Tilling, 1971: 1047-49; Orton & Barry, 1971: 844-46; Orton & Halliday, 1963: 861-63)

In addition, the pronoun which in SE is *one* sometimes occurs as a *y-* form in RTG.

(95) Layers and layers for **this yin** (2012)

(96) proper insult **that yin** (2019)

Forms of *one* in *y-* are northern English regional and Scots, dating from the seventeenth century, reflecting the development of a front glide before certain vowels (see the entry for *yin* in *DSL*).

# Interrogative pronouns

SED elicits *who* and *whose*, providing transcriptions for Nb and Du which suggest pronunciations such as [hwi:] and [wi:] (Orton & Halliday 1963: 1078). In RTG, these pronunciations are rendered orthographically as <hwee, w(h)ee, hwee(s,z) and w(h)ee(s,z)>.

(97) **Whee**’s this bloke then? (2017)

(98) **whee** can afford eight kids like (2013)

(99) **weez** daft fault was that though? (2013)

(100) “**Weez** keys are these keys” (2013)

*Whee* is well established in nineteenth-century sources and has an entry in *NW* (Heslop, 1893: 780).

# Discussion and conclusion

By examining the non-standard pronouns in RTG through the lens of earlier dialectological studies, I have shown their considerable pedigree in northern varieties of English, with distributions reflecting the external history of the region (Beal, 2008: 373). Some have been recorded in both southern Scotland and across the northern counties of England, revealing the significance of a ‘greater Northumbria’, stretching back to the Anglo-Saxon period and persisting into the present-day (e.g. *I* as [ɑ ~ a]; singular non-imperative *us*; cluster simplification in *-self*; forms of *one* in *y-*). Some also reflect the commonalities that parts of NEE have with the ‘Scandinavian Belt’ – the Norse-influenced territories further south (e.g. pronominal forms in *th-* and the reflexive suffix *-sen*). And some, if not unique to NEE, have a particular cultural salience there, such as *wor* and *yous*.

Evidence from RTG might be used, therefore, to support claims that in the North East – a peripheral region suffering from social and political marginalization (Pearce 2009) – the forces of linguistic conservatism are stronger than in other parts of England. But caution is needed. While the RTG corpus is undoubtedly large, it is not necessarily ‘representative’ of the broader population. The dispositions, structures of feeling, schemes of thought, tastes, preferences and values revealed on the site (the ‘habitus’ in Bourdieusian terms) is working-class and masculinist, and most contributors seem to be in their thirties, forties and fifties with strong local affiliations and network ties. What is potentially missing from the picture are the very people often identified as the vanguard of dialect levelling in the region: the young, women, the middle-classes (see for example Watt 2002). RTG is perhaps fertile ground for a type of linguistic conservatism that might not fully reflect the English of the wider North East.

Nevertheless, what RTG lacks in representativeness, it makes up for in socio-pragmatic diversity. In the charged rhetorical performances that are a feature of the site, items that might well be ‘recessive’ in the wider context can function as identity markers or be used for particular stylistic effects (Robinson, 2016: 29). We see how pronouns – along with other lexical, orthographic and morphosyntactic features – can be deployed in cultural performances in which the voices of others are adopted and characters are brought to life. Often these performances are nostalgic and affectionate, but sometimes they caricature the social and cultural ‘other’, as in these examples in which people from Sunderland ‘voice’ people from Tyneside.2

(101) started a job once working with 2 lasses one from magland the other from Jarrow, about 12 o’clock they got up from their desks announced “Wagoingfor**wa**dinnaz” I honestly could not understand what they had just said (2014)

(102) Played indoor footy in the Sunderland Leisure centre years ago against some lads from Boldon, when leading them 6-nowt one of them said; “Wa hafta play for **wor** pride noo lads” (2014)

(103) But ivverybody loves **wuh** man! (2014)

The creation of such performances reveals an *implicit* understanding of and receptivity towards variation. But sometimes metalinguistic knowledge is *explicitly* expressed, even in relation to features as generally ‘unmarked’ as pronouns.

(104) Hordenites say chor for variation as well as **thee**, **thou**, **thyne** etc haha (2017)

(105) Marra is more a word used by us yackers than by townies. Like ‘**thou’** or ‘**the’** for ‘you’ and so on, all yackerisms (2014)

(106) my mates from Pennywell use **‘us’** instead of **‘we’** (2019)

(107) how well do you think Wally will be able to pronounce “wu dust **waselves** down” (2014)

But such performativity and receptivity should not distract us from the fact that the NEE pronouns presented here are typically deployed in a far less ‘knowing’ and deliberative manner, often appearing as the ‘natural’, ‘unmarked’ choice of the contributor, pointing to the preservation and wider usage of these venerable forms in the speech community beyond the participatory vernacular web.

*Notes*

**1** The exact size of the site is indeterminate. On 4th March 2020, the home page recorded 501,372 threads made up of 20,202,846 messages. However, not all of these remain accessible to web browsers. I estimated the size of the accessible part of RTG by using *WebCorp Live* to determine the frequencies of common nouns, which I compared with their frequencies in a one-million-word sub-corpus built using *Sketch Engine*. For example, *people* occurs 1,754 times in the sub-corpus and 21,700 times on the entire site, so if the rate of occurrence is similar on the RTG site and in the sub-corpus, the site itself consists of approximately 12 million words. In comparison, DECTE contains 804,266 words (Beal et al. 2014: 518).

**2** Research in perceptual dialectology has shown that *wor(s)* as possessive determiner/pronoun and *we* as object pronoun are sometimes associated with Newcastle/Tyneside by people from other parts of the region, hence their appearance in these stereotyped caricatures (see Pearce, 2011 and 2012).

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