**The Survival of Traditional Dialect Lexis on the Participatory Web**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article examines the extent to which “traditional” dialect lexis (TDL) attested in the Survey of English Dialects can be found in a contemporary online context virtually located in the North East of England, one of the most dialectally distinct parts of the country. The findings suggest that the rate of survival is perhaps higher than might be imagined, given the conclusions of previous research on lexical attrition in regional varieties of English in the UK. The article also shows the affordances of corpus-based dialect study, illustrating how access to the discursive contexts in which TDL occurs can offer insights into meaning and usage, and give access to the metalinguistic reflections of dialect users.

**1. Setting the Scene**

Since its origins in the nineteenth century, the study of regional dialects in Britain has been carried out in a context in which the objects of enquiry have often been perceived to be under various degrees of threat. Indeed, the English Dialect Society which had been set up in 1873 and published the 80 glossaries, miscellanies and bibliographies which formed the scholarly bedrock of Joseph Wright’s *English Dialect Dictionary* (EDD) was dissolved in 1896 – two years before the first volume of the dictionary was published – because it believed its work was done.[[1]](#footnote-1) In the words of Walter Skeat, Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Cambridge and the Society’s founder: “The dialects are dying, and the competent helpers who understand them are waxing old. In a few years it will be too late”.[[2]](#footnote-2) The work of the Society was carried out in an atmosphere of urgency. It was widely believed that as the social and economic changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution, such as increased geographical mobility (supported by the development of the rail network), urbanisation, and the spread of education impacted on the more stable agrarian lifestyles that had developed over the centuries of the pre-industrial era, traditional dialects would be lost. Indeed, it can be claimed with some justification that “anxiety about the effects of social and technological change on regional dialects is a recurrent theme in dialect study”.[[3]](#footnote-3) Much subsequent research has been carried out within a metaphorical framework of “death and degree of moribundity or ‘decline’, as if dialects are living creatures”.[[4]](#footnote-4) A somewhat elegiac tone also imbues some aspects of the monumental Survey of English Dialects (SED), the first systematic survey of dialects of English in England and the most comprehensive dialectological study in the British Isles since the EDD. Like the luminaries of the English Dialect Society before them, the project leaders, Harold Orton and Eugen Dieth, believed that such a survey was necessary in order to record the traditional rural dialects of England before they vanished as a result of social and demographic change (this time in the period after the end of the Second World War).[[5]](#footnote-5) Between 1950 and 1961, eleven fieldworkers visited 313 localities, armed with a questionnaire consisting of some 1300 items, which they completed with almost 1000 informants who had been carefully selected because they were thought likely to maintain “traditional” features in their speech (these were usually older males, though 12 per cent of informants were female). The wealth of lexical, grammatical and phonological information collected has led to a number of important publications, and the *Basic Materials* (the survey’s main data-set) has been a mainstay of research on dialects in England, acting as “a historical baseline against which future studies could be measured”.[[6]](#footnote-6) It inevitably has a central role in this study of the survival of the traditional dialect lexis of North East England in the context of late modernity.

Aspects of the folk-image of regional dialects are also informed by this metaphor of decline and extinction, though popular discourses are also increasingly inclined to notice, acknowledge, valorize, and celebrate local forms that mark out distinctiveness and difference. While it appears that levelling – “the loss of localised features … to be replaced with features found over a wider region”[[7]](#footnote-7) – is occurring in the UK, the conditions which reduce linguistic differences are also those which, somewhat paradoxically, “foster dialect and language awareness” amongst the folk.[[8]](#footnote-8) Where there is fear that a distinctive sense of place is being eroded, interest in those aspects of the local perceived to be under threat often grows.This can lead to an increase in the amount of popular attention paid to issues of linguistic variation. For example, mugs, tea towels, greetings cards and shop signs can be found which employ dialect features, and there has been a proliferation of popular books purporting to teach a range of dialects.[[9]](#footnote-9) Additional evidence lies with those metalinguistic activities – such as online discussions on social network sites – which emphasize dialectal difference and distinctiveness and often demonstrate (implicitly and sometimes explicitly) folk-awareness of the sort of cultural diversity which is often indexed by linguistic variation.

Perhaps the most impressive evidence for this widespread public interest in matters of linguistic variation lies in the popularity of the BBC’s 2005 *Voices* project. An heir to the EDD and SED in scope and scale, *Voices* was designed to take “a ‘snapshot’ of … everyday speech and speech-attitudes … at the start of the twenty-first century”.[[10]](#footnote-10) Over 80,000 members of the public completed online and paper questionnaires, while some 1,200 participants took part in group interview sessions carried out by BBC journalists across the country. Both the questionnaire and the interview had a lexical focus: participants were asked to list “your word for” 38 notions given in Standard English (e.g. THROW, HIT HARD, COLD). The linguists advising the project were aware that “people find ‘the word’ a readily-identifiable concept, and variation between their lexicon and that of others a source of great interest”.[[11]](#footnote-11) The lexical data-set gathered was huge, with some 734,000 responses to the online prompts.[[12]](#footnote-12) The most commonly occurring variants had wide national scope (e.g. *chuck*, *whack*, *freezing*), but some local patterns of lexical distribution emerged. Furthermore, some of the words associated with particular regions had considerable historical pedigree, in that they were attested in the *English Dialect Dictionary* and/or the SED Basic Materials, implying a word dating back to at least the nineteenth century and in some cases considerably earlier (e.g. *hoy*, *bray*, *nithered*).

For anyone interested in the survival of such Traditional Dialect Lexis (TDL), evidence like this is tantalizing. But certain methodological aspects mean that the utility of *Voices* for the study of TDL is limited. For example, by structuring data collection around just 38 variables only a tiny proportion of semantic space was covered. More notions would inevitably have resulted in the elicitation of more local variants, some of which would have been TDL. Also, to what extent can this methodology really help us with what Macafee has called “one of the most frustrating and intractable problems in the study of traditional dialects”?[[13]](#footnote-13) This is the problem of *currency*. Macafee was writing as the editor of a dictionary of Ulster Scots so hers is the perspective of a lexicographer, asking if “anyone out there” still *uses* “the words and phrases that we document in the dialect dictionaries”.[[14]](#footnote-14) Of course, the answer to this question depends on what is meant by “use”. A traditional dialect word might be part of a speaker’s everyday active vocabulary, or it might be a word dimly remembered from childhood in the speech of a long-dead relative, only to be evoked as part of family lore. The questionnaire format of large-scale dialect studies such as the SED and *Voices* makes it difficult to access these levels of use. Indeed, a common criticism of the questionnaire format is that there is “a skewing towards passive knowledge”,[[15]](#footnote-15) raising questions about “authenticity as representative of unconscious language use”. [[16]](#footnote-16)

**2. The Site of this Research on the Vernacular Participatory Web**

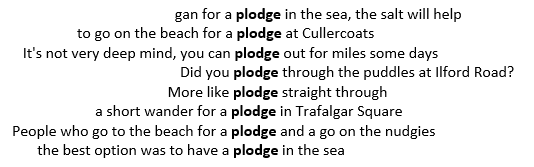
In order to counter such problems, what is needed is naturally occurring, contextually embedded instances of dialect lexis rather than elicited instances which are largely metalinguistic in function. No studies of traditional dialect *lexis* (in England) have used as their data-set naturally occurring, unselfconscious vernacular, unaffected by the presence of an observer – the “holy grail” of social dialectology.[[17]](#footnote-17) There is a practical reason for this. Since the 1960s sociolinguists have become adept at eliciting speech in ingeniously devised interviews. And such approaches have of course gathered detailed information about phonemic inventories and morphosyntactic paradigms. But the same “cannot be expected for lexis”.[[18]](#footnote-18) Topic is a fundamental shaper of lexical usage for speakers: if a subject doesn’t come up in a conversation, then words associated with relevant semantic domains (including dialect words) will not be used. In addition, recent work in the ‘third wave’ of variationist sociolinguistics has shown how we need to take style and style-shifting into account: lexical choice is very sensitive to levels of formality, for instance.

If conventional sociolinguistic approaches are not practical for capturing traditional dialect words “in the wild”, then corpus-based approaches involving vast bodies of naturally-occurring language might be, since they can “provide more direct, usage-based access to language form and function”, thus yielding a more realistic linguistic signal.[[19]](#footnote-19) However, general publicly available large corpora – even if transcribed naturally-occurring speech is incorporated – are of limited use for the study of dialect lexis. This can be illustrated with the verb *plodge*. This is a widely-known traditional dialect word in the North East of England, occurring in the linguistic landscape, commodified on products and referenced in popular guides to North East dialect.[[20]](#footnote-20) However, it does not occur at all in the 14-billion-word iWeb corpus, nor is it present in the BNC. What about more specialized corpora for dialect lexis research? Sadly, “the research community is not exactly drowning in publicly available corpora that sample traditional dialects”.[[21]](#footnote-21) The two most well-known are FRED (the Freiburg English Dialect Corpus) and DECTE (the Diachronic Electronic Corpus of Tyneside English).[[22]](#footnote-22) FRED consists of orthographic transcripts and audio recordings of oral history interviews with people from across Britain, co-opted for linguistic research, offering 2.7 million words of relatively spontaneous and relaxed speech. It is probably the most well-studied corpus of dialect in English, but the research on FRED illustrates its limitations in relation to lexis, with the focus so far mainly on morphosyntax and grammar-based dialectometry.[[23]](#footnote-23) In FRED-S (a one-million-word sampler of FRED) *plodge* does not occur. While FRED has a national range, DECTE – with its data-set of sociolinguistic interviews gathered in the heart of the territory which is the site of this study – is the only widely available corpus of material from a specific English region. Again, studies associated with this corpus are mainly non-lexical. And even here in this localized context, there is no evidence for *plodge*.[[24]](#footnote-24) It is not surprising then, that in a handbook overview of the field the authors conclude that “lexis is … a neglected domain in corpus-based dialect studies, but this neglect is primarily due to the fact that lexical research requires large corpora, and conventional dialect corpora are simply not large enough for lexical analysis”.[[25]](#footnote-25)

But a resource which has emerged in the new millennium and which might help us overcome the problem of lack of size (and focus) in relation to extant corpora is the “vernacular web”.[[26]](#footnote-26) Forming part of the vernacular web are the “interactive, multi-authored discussion forums” which allow users to “converse” by commenting on “threads” started by other participants. This distinctive format of computer-mediated discourse “is relatively free of high-modernist constraints and demands for “purity” of language use. Instead, late-modern hybridity, freedom of stylized expression, and identity play enable a different order of peer regulation and normativity”.[[27]](#footnote-27) The content and form of web forums often makes them a repository of the kind of language where regionally marked forms are liable to occur, and a number of studies have shown this to be the case, identifying web forums (and other manifestations of Web 2.0) as venues where dialect is used expressively and innovatively to create localized meanings, to signal participants’ local origins and affiliations, and to index private, familiar and intimate domains of social life as opposed to public, official or institutional settings.[[28]](#footnote-28) Indeed, though *written* language, such discourse has many of the characteristics of what has traditionally been regarded as the “one true object” of the sociolinguistic gaze: naturally-occurring, spontaneous vernacular *speech*.[[29]](#footnote-29) While in the past writing might have been seen as constrained by its proximity to the standard, “contemporary forms of online talk” show “a relative lack of institutional regulation and a proliferation of the features that have come to characterize informal written language online: spoken-like and vernacular features, traces of spontaneous production, innovative spelling choices, emoticons … and the like”.[[30]](#footnote-30)

The precise virtual location for this research is *Ready to Go* (RTG), a prototypically vernacular forum set up by people in the North East of England with a shared interest in Sunderland A.F.C., open to anyone with access to the world wide web. The football club, which has been in the English league since 1890, has a largely working- class fan-base centred on Sunderland, a city on the North Sea littoral, half way between Edinburgh and Hull, though supporters can be found across County Durham and Tyne and Wear (south of the River Tyne), as well as much further afield. While it is not possible to be certain of the precise geographical location, age, gender or social class of RTG contributors, the dispositions, structures of feeling, schemes of thought, tastes, preferences and values revealed on the site (the “habitus” in Bourdieusian terms) is – at least at first glance – strongly working-class and masculinist. While football is the central concern, discussions on the forum range widely, covering every conceivable topic.[[31]](#footnote-31) In this stylistically complex, often agonistic arena of debate, argument, anecdote, banter, advice giving and seeking, phatic communion, reciprocity, and so on, non-standard English flourishes at the levels of lexis, morphosyntax and even phonology (in the semi-phonetic respellings used to capture accent features).

The affordances of using sites such as RTG to explore traditional dialect lexis are illustrated in Figure 1, which shows part of a concordance for *plodge*, generated by the *WebCorp Live* tool, which accesses the web as corpus.[[32]](#footnote-32) As we have seen, *plodge* does not occur at all in two large general corpora of English and two specialist dialect corpora. However, when pointed at RTG, *WebCorp Live* offers up 35 contextualized instances of



**Figure 1:** Excerpt from concordance of *plodge* in RTG

*plodge*, 5 of *plodged*, 53 of *plodging*, and 5 of the agentive noun *plodger(s).* The frequency counts here indicate that a new front has potentially been opened up in the study of traditional dialect lexis. Clearly, items which are vanishingly rare – even in quite specialized corpora – are much more prominent in this context. In the rest of the article I present the findings of two analyses which exploit this phenomenon. The first (Section 3) records the extent to which traditional dialect lexis has survived in this quintessentially late modern context. The second (Section 4) shows how a corpus-based approach can provide insights into the range of semantic domains occupied by traditional dialect lexis, how TDL meanings have changed over time, how these words can be deployed as a stylistic resource, and the metalinguistic discourse which sometimes surrounds them.

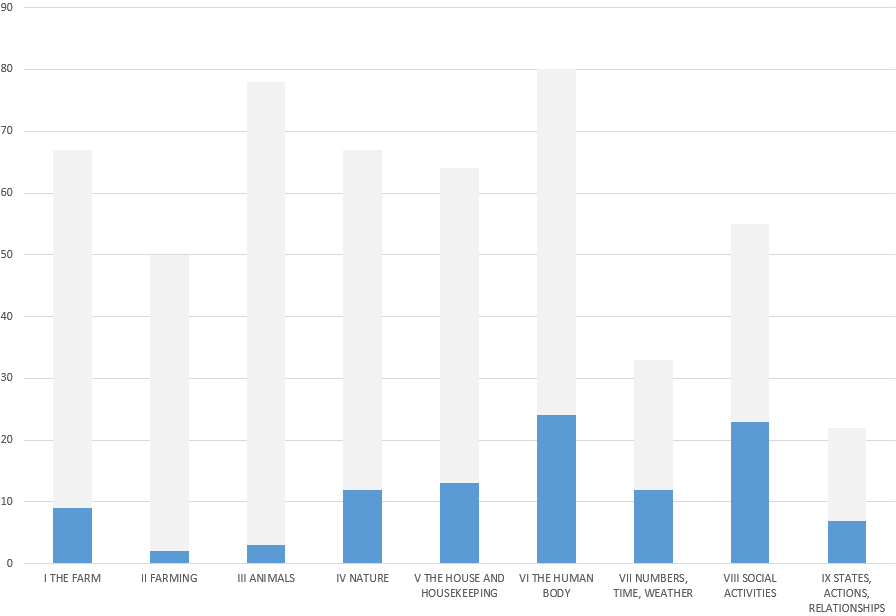
**3. Lexical Survivals in *RTG***

The SED has inevitably been a starting point and “yardstick”[[33]](#footnote-33) for the most comprehensive studies of dialect lexis maintenance and loss in England, and for the purposes of comparability and consistency it is one I adopt here. These previous studies, both on national and local scales, have tended to offer a somewhat pessimistic reading of their findings. For example, Upton and Widdowson concluded a comparison of SED lexical data (collected, as we have seen mainly in the 1950s from older conservative rural speakers) with data from the Atlas Linguarum Europae (ALE) project (collected between 1976 and 1980 from a comparable stratum of informants) somewhat starkly and – depending on one’s feelings about such matters, rather pessimistically – that “there is no doubt that the regional dialect lexicon is being eroded, and across its full range rather than simply in the more specialised fields of usage”.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Other SED-informed work has been carried out on more focused areas. Of particular relevance here are Simmelbauer 2000 and Burbano-Elizondo 2001. Simmelbauer’s survey of lexical usage in Northumberland found that some of the 101 traditional dialect words she examined “were still widely known, several were known by very few or no subjects, and knowledge of others varied according to the age and/or gender and/or location of the informants”.[[35]](#footnote-35) Burbano-Elizondo’s study in Tyne and Wear tested informants’ knowledge of 21 traditional dialect words (excluding specialist agricultural terms) taken from everyday semantic domains, nearly all recorded in the SED for Northumberland and County Durham. She concluded that “in general the traditional dialect words whose survival was being tested were not as widespread among my informants as they had been in earlier studies”.[[36]](#footnote-36)

To what extent has TDL survived in the English of the North East as represented on the RTG site? The findings in Figure 2 result from the following analysis. I identified 671 questions from the survey which had been included “for purely lexical reasons”.[[37]](#footnote-37) For 516 of these notions there was at least one non-standard “local” dialect word attested for locations in either Northumberland or County Durham. I searched RTG to see if these words could be found in the contemporary data-set, and discovered variants for 104 of the 516 SED notions: a survival rate of 20.1 per cent. Figure 2 shows the number of “survivals” for each section (“Book”) of the questionnaire. So, for example, only two out of the 50 lexical notions in FARMING which had generated a local variant also had a variant in RTG: *dottles* and *docken*. At the other end of the scale the figure for THE HUMAN BODY is 24 out of 80, and includes such items as *lugs*, *oxter* and *blebs*. A first glance at these findings reveals what might be regarded as widespread reduction in the dialect lexicon of North East England since the 1950s. But at this point we need to consider in a little more detail both the nature of the contemporary data, and the yardstick against which it is being measured – factors which might lead us to a more nuanced interpretation.

As pointed out earlier, the SED was designed to record “the traditional types of vernacular English”,[[38]](#footnote-38) as typically spoken by older, rural males. Hence, many of the topics covered, particularly in the first four books, are about the farm and its buildings, cultivation and livestock.[[39]](#footnote-39) In the sixty years that have passed since the bulk of the SED fieldwork was completed, the number of British agricultural workers has declined from c.900,000 during the Second World War to c.190,000 in 2008,[[40]](#footnote-40) and in 2011 just 0.6 per cent of the workforce of North East England was involved in agriculture, forestry and



**Figure 2:** Number of notions in SED questionnaire books for which dialect lexical variants recorded for Northumberland and County Durham are also present in RTG.

fishing (compared with 10.2 per cent in manufacturing).[[41]](#footnote-41) We can therefore assume that only a tiny proportion of people posting on RTG have an agricultural background, and fewer still will have any knowledge of some of the practices and implements, such as “threshing and winnowing, the flail, churning, teams of horses” which were “quickly going out of use” even in the 1950s.[[42]](#footnote-42) This makes it inevitable that so few variants associated with farming topics are present in RTG (see Table 1 for the full list of SED survivals).

Other more general “material changes” need to be taken into account. We should not be surprised to find no SED variants associated with the following domains in RTG: the fireplace; the fire; the dairy; the work basket. The inevitability of language change means that “words must come and go, as in the Standard, as new objects, pastimes, etc. appear or disappear, and cultural practices change. Men in Northumberland no longer

**Table 1.** Survivals from SED in RTG[[43]](#footnote-43)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **SED notion** | **Variants in RTG also in SED** |
| I.1.5 PIGSTY  I.1.7 DOVECOTE  I.1.6 HEN-HOUSE  I.5.2 BLINKERS  I.7.2 SACK  I.7.4 CORN-BIN  I.7.5 MALLET  I.7.8 TO DIG  I.11.5 TO OVERTURN  II.1.7 SHEEP-DUNG  II.2.8 DOCK  III.2.10 TO BUTT  III.9.2 TO ROOT  III.13.16 DONKEY  IV.1.1 RIVULET  IV.1.8 BOGGY  IV.1.10 SLOPE  IV.3.11 PATH  IV.3.13 LANE  IV.5.9 BADGER  IV.6.16 GANDER  IV.6.19 WATTLES  IV.6.21 TO PLUCK  IV.6.18 BEAK  IV.8.6 HEAVING WITH MAGGOTS  IV.11.1 BLACKBERRIES  V.1.3 CHIMNEY  V.1.9 LATCH  V.1.13 EARTH-CLOSET  V.1.15 RUBBISH  V.2.8 DIRTY  V.6.7 BURNT  V.6.10 SLICE  V.7.16 SPRING ONIONS  V.8.1 DRINKING  V.8.2 FOOD  V.8.4 SOME SWEETS  V.8.8 TO POUR  V.8.16 ANYTHING  V.9.6 DISHCLOTH  V.9.7 CLOTHES-BASKET  VI.1.5 STUPID  VI.3.6 CROSS-EYED  VI.3.7 GAPES  VI.4.1 EARS  VI.4.3 EAR-HOLE  VI.5.15 SHRIEKING  VI.5.17 I KNEW YOUR VOICE  VI.5.18 PRETTY  VI.6.3 THROAT  VI.6.5 WINDPIPE  VI.6.7 ARMPIT  VI.7.9 TO THE QUICK  VI.7.10 SPLINTER  VI.7.12 WHITLOW  VI.7.13 LEFT-HANDED  VI.9.4 GROIN  VI.8.1 PANTING  VI.8.7 BELLY  VI.11.5 BLISTERS  VI.11.7 CORE  VI. 13.1 WELL. ILL. SICK  VI.13.8 EXHAUSTED  VI.13.9 HUNGRY  VI.13.11 TO RETCH  VI.13.13 BELCH  VI.13.19 VERY COLD  VI.14.9 VEST  VI.14.10 BRACES  VI.14.13 TROUSERS. BREECHES  VII.3.7 AUTUMN  VII.4.1 TOMORROW  VII.4.9 EASTER EGGS  VII 5.2 I DON’T KNOW  VII.5.9 STOPPING-TIME  VII.5.11 SNACK  VII 5.12 MEAL OUT  VII.6.17 MUD  VI.7.9 ALMOST  VII.8.12 ONLY  VII.8.4 NOTHING  VII.8.15 SOMETHING  VIII.1.2 CHILDREN, CHILD  VIII.1.3 BOYS, GIRLS  VIII.1.4 SON, DAUGHTER  VIII.1.8 GRAND-DAD, GRANNY  VIII.1.17 MARRIED  VIII.1.24 MY WIFE  VIII.2.8 HOW ARE YOU?  VIII.2.11 FROM  VIII.2.12 PEOPLE  VIII.3.1 COME IN  VIII.3.2 GLAD TO SEE YOU. VERY  VIII.3.4 CHAT  VIII.4.1 WORKMATES  VIII.4.11 BUSY  VIII.7.2 SEESAW  VIII.7.3 BOUNCE  VIII.7.7 THROWING A STONE  VIII.7.9 GO AWAY! OFF YOU GO  VIII.8.5 SHAPING WELL  VIII.8.10 BEAT  VIII.8.11 SCREAM  VIII.8.13 YES, NO. YES  VIII.8.14 STICKY  IX.1.4 BRITTLE  IX.1.8 DIAGONALLY  IX.1.10 HEAD OVER HEELS  IX.2.6 IN FRONT OF  IX.2.11 BETWEEN  IX.10.3 THAT OVER THERE  IX.11.3 BY MYSELF | ***Pig-cree***  ***Ducket***  ***Hen-cree***  ***Blinders***  ***Poke***  ***Kist***  ***Mell***  ***Howk***  ***Coup***<cowp>  ***Dottles***  ***Docken***  ***Dunch***  ***Howk***  ***Cuddy***  ***Burn; beck***  ***Clarty***  ***Bank***  ***Trod***  ***Loan(ing****)* <lonnen>  ***Brock***  ***Steg***  ***Chollers***  ***Ploat***  ***Neb***  ***Lifting***  ***Brambles***  ***Chimley***  ***Sneck***  ***Netty***  ***Rammel****;* ***ket***  ***Clart****;* ***clarty***  ***Kizzened\****  ***Shive***  ***Scallions***  ***Supping***  ***Bait***  ***Bullets***  ***Teem***  ***Aught***<owt>  ***Dishclout***  ***Creel\****  ***Feckless; sackless\****  ***Glee-eyed***  ***Gaups***<gawps>; *gawks*  ***Lugs***  ***Lug-hole***  ***Greeting****;* ***twisting****;* ***bealing****;* ***twining*** *on*  ***Kenned***  ***Bonny****; smart-looking*  ***Thropple***<thrapple>  *Gizzard*  ***Oxter***  ***Wick***  ***Spelk***  ***Plook\****  ***Cuddy-handed****; cuddy-wifter*  ***Lisk*** *<lisc>*  ***Blowing***  ***Kite\****  ***Blebs***  ***Gowk***  ***Champion****; (good/bad)* ***fettle***  ***Jiggered;*** *paggered\**  ***Clamming\****  ***Boke***<bowk>  ***Rift***  ***Nithered\****  ***Gansey\****  ***Gallows*** <galluses>  ***<Breeks>***  ***Backend***  ***The morn***  ***Pace eggs***  ***Ken***  ***Lowse; kenner***  ***Bait****;* ***ten o’clock; scran\****  ***Bait***  ***Clart(s)****;* ***clarty***  *Very near* <varnigh>  ***Nought but***<nobut>  ***Naught***<nowt>  ***Somewhat***<summat>  ***Bairns, bairn***  ***Lads, lasses***  ***Lad, lass***  ***Ganny\****  ***Wed****;* ***wedded***  ***The wife****; the mrs*  *What fettle? What cheer?*  ***Fro***<frae>  ***Folk(s)***  ***How-way in***<haway in>  ***Gay****;* ***canny***  ***Crack***  ***Marrows***<marras>  ***Throng***<thrang>  ***Shuggy***  ***Stot***  ***Pelting****;* ***hoying***  ***Gan****,* ***gans****,* ***ganning***<gannin>;  ***hadaway***  *Doing* ***grand****; doing* ***champion***  ***Skelp****;* ***twank; bray\****  ***Greet****;* ***bubble***  ***Aye****,* ***why-aye****; no* <na>  ***Claggy****,* ***clagged*** *up*  ***Femmer***  ***Crossways***  ***Coup***<cowp>***your creels***  *In front* ***on***  ***Atween****,* ***tween***  Forms of ***yon*** and ***thon***  ***(By)******mysell****,* ***mysell***<mesel> |
|  |  |

wear *galluses* (‘braces’) and girls no longer play with *boodies* (broken bits of crockery) or boys with *allies/liggies* (‘marbles’)”.[[44]](#footnote-44)

So, what looks like stark evidence of dialect lexis loss in Figure 2, when contextualized, isn’t perhaps quite as fundamental as it appears. The following additional factors also need to be taken into account in relation to the SED as yardstick to measure lexical survival in RTG.

First, the SED was never intended to capture more than a sample of the dialect lexis of England, so we have to assume that some traditional words that would have been in use in the 1950s and have survived in RTG are absent from the SED Basic Materials. Table 2 gives examples of such survivals, attested for County Durham and Northumberland in the *English Dialect Dictionary.* Some of these words are not in the

**Table 2.** Examples of North East traditional dialect words in RTG and EDD, but not SED

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **RTG word**  *Abed*  *Afore*  *Ahint*  *Ally*  *Back-shift*  *Baff*  *Bewer*  *Bleezer*  *Booler*  *Brattle*  *But and ben*  *Chare*  *Clemmy/clem*  *Cob(s)*  *Cockle*  *Crake*  *Dant*  *Deek*  *Dud*  *Fadge*  *Fash*  *Fettle*  *Foisty*  *Fret*  *Galloway <gallower>*  *Gissy*  *Goaf*  *Glaiky*  *Gleg*  *Gully*  *Hack(y)*  *Haway/howay*  *Halfer(s)*  *Hinny*  *Hoggers*  *Hopping(s)*  *Hunkers* <honkers>  *Jarp*  *Kep*  *Knacker(s)*  *Knooled* <nooled>  *Law(e)*  *Lignie* <liggy>  *Logger* <logga>  *Mafted*  *Mizzle*  *Mortal*  *Mot*  *Noration*  *Palatic*  *Pate*  *<pyet>*  *Pet*  *Pish*  *Pittle*  *Plodge*  *Plook*  *Poss*  ***Prog****gy mat*  *Radgy* <radgie>  *Rax*  *Rickle*  *Scud*  *Shan*  *Skeg*  *Skem*  *Skinch*  *Skitters*  *Skimmering*  *Slavver*  *Sleck*  *Snib*  *Springed*  *Spuggy*  *Stife, stithe*  *Stone(s)*  *Stowed (off)*  *Throstle*  *Twist*  *Vine*  *Wean*  *Welt*  *Yark*  *Yarp* | **EDD definition**  in bed; confined to bed by illness  of time: before, ere  ahint an' afoore, behind and before  boy’s marble made of alabaster, fine white stone, marble, or glass  the second set of hewers that go down into the coal mine; the time (usually eight hours) during which they work  of a week or day: the alternate week or day of that week on which the fortnightly wages are not paid  the gnat [EDD]; a woman, spec. one of loose character [OED]  a hood or draught-tin put before the fire to make it burn up  a child’s hoop  a loud clattering noise  a two-roomed cottage, the inner and outer rooms  a narrow lane or alley; a narrow passage between two houses  a stone; the testicles [in plural]  the testicles  a spatch of saliva or phlegm  a crier’s rattle, used when a meeting of miners is cried through the street  soft, inferior, sooty coal  to spy out, descry  rag, piece of cloth; pl. clothes, esp. shabby, ragged, or dirty clothing  a thick cake or loaf, made of wheaten flour or barley-meal  to trouble oneself, bother  to beat, chastise, punish; to kill, overcome, ‘do for,’ ‘finish’  musty, stale, having a damp, mouldy smell  sea-fog, shower of misty rain coming from the sea  pony, small saddle-horse  young pig; a young sow  space left in a coal-mine after the whole of the coal has been extracted  an idle, good-for-nothing fellow; a term of reproach for a woman  look asquint, to look furtively or slyly; to peep, pry  large knife, esp. a butcher’s knife or a carving-knife; a sword  filth, dirt  the call ‘haway!’ is given to the farm hands by the  woman-steward at starting or yoking time, so that all the women  start together.  an exclamation used by children to claim half the value of any treasure found by another  a term of endearment  stocking with the foot cut off, used as a gaiter  a country wake; a dance  in phr. *On one’s hunkers*, in a squatting position  to shake up, toss to and fro; to shake up the sediment at the bottom of a liquid; to beat up eggs  catch, esp. to catch anything falling or thrown; to catch with the hand  the testicles  dispirited, broken down  a roundish hill or eminence; a barrow, tumulus, mound, a heap of stones  in marbles: one of the last remaining marbles  a butterfly  to be stifled or overpowered by want of air, great heat  to rain in very fine drops; to drizzle  dead drunk, hopelessly intoxicated  a mark; a dot, esp. the mark aimed at in the games of quoits, pitch-and-toss; a small girl or thing  loud or prolonged talking, a great noise or clamour; disturbance, fuss  paralyzed with drink  the head  a term of endearment  to urinate  to urinate … used of and by children  wade in water or mire; to plunge or splash about in water; to paddle  a pimple; a spot on the skin  push, dash, thrust; to knock, kick, thump  to prod, push, prick  ill-tempered, angry, excited, violent, mad  to extend, stretch  a loose heap or pile; a stack  a blow, esp. one given by the open hand  pitiful, silly; poor, bad, shabby  a glance; a cast of the eye; a squint  1. Used as a term of contempt. 2. A common or badly bred pigeon; esp. used of the blue rock pigeon  cry of truce used by boys at play  diarrhoea  sparkling with cleanness  fulsome flattery; plausible, fawning speech; nonsense; ‘drivel’; impudence; wild or indecent talk; continual nagging  smooth river-mud, ooze  a small bolt or sliding bar on a door  half-starved, miserable-looking  the house-sparrow  suffocating smell or vapour, reek, stench; a close atmosphere; smoke  the testicles  store, furnish; to pack closely  the song-thrush  to whine; to cry; to be peevish and out of temper  lead pencil  a child; an infant  to beat, thrash; to bruise  jerk; to seize or pull forcibly; to snatch, wrench, force  to ‘harp’ fretfully; to grumble, carp, complain, whine |

Basic Materials presumably because no relevant eliciting prompt was included in the questionnaire; others *could* have been elicited by a prompt, but were not.[[45]](#footnote-45) For example, there seem to be some “gaps” in relation to “subjects that invite informality”.[[46]](#footnote-46) Though informants are asked “what’s your word for breaking wind?”, they are not asked directly about other (human) bodily functions, such as urinating and excreting. So, while the following are evident in EDD and RTG, they are not attested in SED: *skitters* (“diarrhoea”); *pish* (“to urinate”). Also, despite an entire Book devoted ostensibly to the human body, the questions don’t descend very far “below the waist”, as it were. For example, the following traditional terms for “testicles”, attested in EDD but not SED occur in RTG: *clems/clemmies*, *stones,* *cobs,* *knackers.* The possible formalising influence of the questionnaire is not only a product of the type of questions asked, but is also evident in the SED’s wider methods, involving a lengthy interview built around an extensive set of prompts and questions. While great efforts were made to make this a relaxed and enjoyable experience for informants,[[47]](#footnote-47) the format was “slow to deliver and quite formal in structure, with a consequent formalising influence on the kind of responses given”.[[48]](#footnote-48) For Upton, the influence of the format is evident in the surprisingly limited range of responses that some questions – particularly those with a potentially “taboo” element – met with. For example, “when a man has had too much beer, you might say he is …?” produced just three variants in Northumberland and County Durham: *drunk/drunken*, *supped* and *swallowed*.[[49]](#footnote-49) The only words elicited for “breaking wind” were *fart* and *blowing off*.[[50]](#footnote-50) Perhaps a degree of self-censoring was in operation here, with informants moderating their language in the presence of an outsider, who was in all cases considerably younger than they were, and of a different social background.

Second, some traditional dialect words in RTG do not appear in Table 1 because they occur in SED in relation to questions without a primary focus on lexis, so I did not include them in the main analysis. Examples include *taities/tatties*, *cracket, lops*, *scratting*, *baldy*, *sneck/snitch*.

So, losses might be less extensive; or, to reverse the polarity of the metaphor, survivals might be more extensive in RTG than Figure 2 suggests. Indeed, given what we have said about changes in material culture, technology, and way of life, we might regard the presence of so much TDL in an online context some seventy years after the design of the questionnaire as rather surprising.

Widdowson himself offered a slightly less pessimistic view of the findings of the 1999 study a few years later, acknowledging that while there were “substantial losses in dialect vocabulary across the country, notably in the more specialised fields of usage such as that of older traditional aspects of agriculture, animal husbandry, and rural life in general … the diversity of regional dialect vocabulary in less specialised fields such as domestic life and work was seen to have remained remarkably resilient in times of rapid linguistic and social change”.[[51]](#footnote-51)

**4. Howking Deeper**

The resilience of TDL in certain semantic and pragmatic domains has been widely noted. For instance, in *The Dialects of England*, Trudgill, like Widdowson, acknowledges that while “lexical attrition” is undeniably happening, it does not operate uniformly across semantic space: dialect vocabulary is more likely to survive if it belongs to domestic, non-commercial, local areas of social life, and is used in informal contexts.[[52]](#footnote-52)

There is evidence to support the staying power of words in these domains in RTG. For example, the house and its environs is represented, together with activities that take place there, such as cooking, eating and cleaning: *chimley*, *sneck*, *netty*, *dishclout*, *bleezer*, *snib*, *cracket*, *creel*, *skimmering*, *kizzened*, *shive*, *scallions*, *supping*, *bait*, *bullets*, *teem*, *gully, fadge*, *taities/tatties, scran*. We see dialect words for quotidian features in the vernacular landscape and some of the plants and animals inhabiting it: *pig-cree*, *ducket*, *hen-cree*, *burn*, *beck*, *bank*, *trod*, *loan(ing)*, *chare, law(e), rickle*, *docken*, *cuddy*, *brock*, *steg*, *brambles*, *gissy*, *gallower*, *skem*, *spuggy*, *throstle*, *lops, logger*. The weather and other aspects of the environment also feature: *clarty*, *foisty*, *fret*, *mafted*, *mizzle*, *sleck*, *stife*, *hack(y).* But the most extensive set of terms relate to people. There are words for items of clothing and other accessories (*galluses*, *breeks*, *deeks*, *duds*, *glegs*, *hoggers, gansey*); parts of the body (*neb*, *chollers*, *lugs*, *lug-hole*, *thrapple*, *gizzard*, *oxter*, *wick*, *lisk*, *clems*, *cobs*, *hunkers*, *pyet*, *stones, sneck, snitch, knackers, kite*); bodily functions and states (*blowing*, *jiggered*, *rift*, *pish*, *pittle, paggered*, *clamming, nithered*); afflictions (*spelk*, *blebs*, *bowk*, *mortal*, *palatic*, *plook, skitters, swallowed*); behaviours (*gawps*, *cockle*, *deek*, *gleg*, *skeg, scratting*). In addition, we also see a focus on words used to label or describe men, women and children: *bonny*, *smart-looking*, *feckless*, *glee-eyed*, *cuddy-handed*, *cuddy-wifter*, *bairn*, *lad*, *lass*, *the wife*, *ganny*, *folk*, *marrow*, *bewer*, *glaiky*, *hinny*, *pet*, *radgy*, *springed*, *wean*, *baldy, sackless*. Energetic physical action is also represented (*howk*, *dunch*, *ploat*, *pelt*, *hoy*, *skelp*, *twank*, *fettle*, *jarp*, *kep*, *poss*, *rax*, *plodge*, *scud*, *welt*, *yark, bray*) as well as human communication and vocal expression (*greeting*, *twisting*, *bealing*, *twining (on)*, *crack*, *greet*, *bubble*, *noration*, *twist*, *yarp, slavver*).

For some, a lexicon such as this will evoke stereotypes of a “northern” English working-class socio-cultural milieu. A world of cramped domestic spaces set in marginal, de-industrialized landscapes, plagued by inclement weather and populated by a folk admiring of physical toughness with a matter-of-fact attitude to the body, its processes, and the traumas to which hard manual labour makes it vulnerable. But lexical inventories categorized *etically* by semantic domain can provide only a partial, high altitude prospect of the territory. A corpus is not simply a wordlist: a large-scale collection of vernacular multi-party interactions such as RTG allows for nuanced, high-resolution understandings of a dialect word’s range of meanings and contexts of use. In addition, *emic* metalinguistic descriptions and analyses are accessible.

One noteworthy semantic pattern is that some items have less specific meanings in RTG than they do in the SED. For example, *howk* was elicited in the specialized agricultural Books of the SED, with questions related to digging and the feeding behaviour of pigs.[[53]](#footnote-53) Examples (1) – (6) show the semantic range of the word. While *howk* in (1) corresponds broadly with the SED meaning, (2) and (3) exemplify typical current usage in North East England, where it is synonymous with “hit” and “beat” (both in the physical sense and in relation to victory in competition). It should be noted that this broader meaning is not a recent innovation – one of the senses of the verb *howk* in the EDD is “to punish”, with the noun *howking* defined as “punishment, a beating, thrashing”. However, examples (4) – (6) might indeed represent a development of meaning: here *howk* is a synonym of *throw*.

(1) Going to get one of those cotton bud things and **howk** some out (2017)

(2) It is about a bloke who has a big yeti and they go somewhere with some little bears and **howk** some people in white suits (2015)

(3) City will **howk** them at least 3 nowt (2017)

(4) Did you get **howked** out mate? (2018)

(5) Dry on kitchen towel then **howk** onto bread of choice (2016)

(6) I’m not joking, she’s just **howked** up (2019)

The survival of other traditional dialect words might also be ascribed to their wider meaning potential. For example, in the SED *steg*, *neb*, *dottles* *chollers* and *lifting*, like *howk*, were elicited with questions from the earlier Books (see Table 1).

(7) Nah it was an old **steg** that lived there, now it’s a young couple moving in(2011)

(8) He’s actually a lovely lad, just a bit of a **steg** (2019)

(9) They’re always stickin their **neb** in for the wrong reasons (2016)

(10) Put my house up and people had no intention of moving just liked a **neb** (2015)

(11) they are fucking **nebbing** through the fence (2014)

(12) Dog needs a **choller** reduction (2019)

(13) the fat bastard has even got **chollers** (2013)

(14) i last had a shite on the Thursday morning and i only managed a few **dottles** on the Saturday (2013)

(15) Pizzarama is **lifting** like (2013)

(16) That badger ale with ginger is fucking **lifting** (2017)

(17) got sucked into buying one as they had a nylon banner claiming their pie had won an award. absolutely **lifting**, gristle and looked greenish inside (2017)

*Steg* is used figuratively in RTG as a mildly offensive term for a messy or unattractive person and never in relation to geese; *neb* is used not for a bird’s bill but as a nominal and verbal synonym for “nose” – but only in the extended sense of being “nosey”.[[54]](#footnote-54) In RTG *chollers* is used for the jowls of dogs and humans, but not the wattles of domestic fowls. *Dottles* describes human excrement in a particular form rather than sheep-dung, while the meaning of *lifting* seems to have broadened out from insect infestations to bad smells, unpleasant tastes and uncleanliness in general. These examples perhaps indicate that while the contexts relevant for the narrower use of these words have declined, their “extended” use has been preserved.

It is also worth noting that many of the surviving dialect words can encode “high-affect”; that is, they can be used expressively to convey “feelings, moods, dispositions and attitudes towards the propositional content of the message and the communicative context”.[[55]](#footnote-55) Such items are valuable resources in the representational spaces of Web 2.0, where participants often express emotional states and opinions in highly charged and occasionally intemperate discussion and debate. High-affect can be seen particularly in the way people are described and categorized using TDL. For example, they are often presented in unflattering terms, and their actions and attitudes assessed negatively.

(18) Got some **sneck** on him like (2019)

(19) With them swimmers of yours and the **kite** to match, you must be Henry VIII (2012)

(20) just some **radgy** gobshite on a train (2014)

(21) Bruce is a **sackless** twat (2019)

(22) A load of loud, shouty, fish lipped **bewers** (2018)

We also see TDL verbs used to denote acts of communication. Sometimes the contributions of others are represented critically, often as a line of attack in an argument.

(23) don’t **beel** like a pissy knackered bairn (2013)

(24) People on here **twisting** like babies (2019)

(25) you’re **twining** about a few lads getting paid twenty quid for doing more than eleven twats doing nowt and getting paid sixty grand (2015)

(26) If it stops him **greeting** about it and hitting the bottle it’ll pay for itself (2014)

More broadly, high-affect is conveyed through verbs which are used to describe the action of hitting an object/entity, some of which have undergone similar semantic processes to *howk* (27-34).[[56]](#footnote-56)

(27) Aye, grabbing their faces like they’ve been **ploated** (2013)

(28) Some gadgie **dunched** me motor so I **stotted** a brick at his (2014)

(29) None of us ever **howked** a horsey (2015)

(30) If the bairn mentions the Mags in our house I **skelp** his arse and send him to bed early without any tea (2013)

(31) A got **possed** of me mam (2013)

(32) **Scud** the scruffy bastard all ower (2011)

(33) Yep; their defender wouldn’t let go off him for a good 3 or 4 seconds, then Flan **welted** him :lol: (2018)

(34) a boy wanders in and **brays** 3 lads with a bat (2018)

Contextualized instances as presented here raise questions about the discursive status of TDL. It seems likely that the items in examples (18) – (34) have been chosen to produce a particular stylistic effect. But there is also evidence in RTG to suggest that some TDL is capable of being used in an “unmarked” way, as a “natural” “regular”, “normal”, “usual”,[[57]](#footnote-57) term to convey a particular meaning as part of a person’s idiolect, even to the extent that some RTG posters express surprise when they discover that a word or phrase is regarded by others as dialectal; for example, “I only realised a few years ago that ‘to get wrong’ was dialect”. *Bairn*, *canny*, *bait* and *hoy* belong to this category. They seem to be part of a regional “standard” lexis in the North East, certainly in informal contexts such as RTG.[[58]](#footnote-58)

(35) There’s a **bairn** who is always hanging about outside the corner shop when I take the **bairn** to nursery(2014)

(36) there is a **canny** car park just on the left(2016)

(37) Two bags of crisps for my **bait** today because my car is fucked and I’ve got no food in the house (2018)

(38) **Hoy** some grated cheddar on top and then we’re talking (2015)

Evidence for this can be seen in the fact that they are holding their own against more standard quasi-synonyms in RTG. For example, in a one-million-word sample of the corpus, frequencies of *bairn(s)* and *child(ren)* were roughly equal (though standard-colloquial *kid(s)*was more frequent than both), and *hoy, hoys, hoyed* and *hoying* occur 44 times compared with 35 times for *chuck*, *chucks*, *chucked* and *chucking*.[[59]](#footnote-59) Further evidence lies with the fact that these terms often occur in an otherwise more or less standard matrix, meaning that people who by and large adhere to standard English norms writing online are using these terms *as* standard.

This unmarked presentation of TDL contrasts with its “performative” applications, which often occur in more broadly non-standard matrices of dialect morphosyntax and semi-phonetic respelling. Performative discourse is “characterized by orientation to an audience, attention to the form and materiality” of language, and reflexivity.[[60]](#footnote-60) Since lexis is arguably the linguistic level most open to “conscious modification and manipulation”,[[61]](#footnote-61) and since words live a “socially charged life”[[62]](#footnote-62) we might assume that dialect lexis can have an important role in the indexing of social meanings, stances, personal characteristics, persona styles, speaker characteristics, social types.[[63]](#footnote-63) RTG is full of cultural performances such as jokes, anecdotes, reminiscences, in which the poetic function of language has prominence “and considerations of ‘style’ become particularly salient”.[[64]](#footnote-64) One stylistic practice in which TDL is often deployed is the representation of speech and thought, where participants seek to bring the voices of others to life.

(39) aye, they’ll be “**Gannin** doon tha metroooo to get the metroooo to Scumdaland to watch wor team play the dorty makums” (2011)

(40) “Eeeh open the window it’s **maften** in here!” (2017)

(41) “I was using the front page of the Echo as a **bleazer** but it took ahad, man!” (2016)

(42) “I could set **tatties** behind yer **lugs**” (2016)

(43) “This winnut buy the **bairn** a new frock” (2016)

As exemplified here, the motivations behind giving voice to others are various. For example, in metalinguistic threads with titles such as “Old Sunderland slang” and “Words yer ganny used to use”, participants offer affectionate and often nostalgic reconstructions of the speech styles of friends and relatives.[[65]](#footnote-65) But other representations are far less affectionate, often employing hyperdialectisms to construct caricatures of the social or cultural “other”, such as supporters of Newcastle United (Sunderland’s arch-rivals), “charvers”, and so on. [[66]](#footnote-66)

It is clear that in order to produce cultural performances such as these, participants require considerable metalinguistic knowledge. In such displays, the knowledge of and receptivity towards sociolinguistic variation is implicit. But there are also plenty of instances where participants overtly display their understandings and attitudes. Their discursive instantiation takes a variety of forms, ranging from simple glosses to highly technical explanations. The following examples are illustrative, but not exhaustive of the wealth of material in RTG.

(44) There was some old bloke **howking** (coughing) his guts up outside when I drove past (2012)

(45) I think we’ve established that it’s “**crack**” and not “craic” although I respect the rights of those who prefer to use the faux Gaelic version (2017)

(46) Anyone who spells **crack** as craic is clearly a fucking bellend (2016)

(47) Everything was **shan** when I was a kid. Great word (2018)

(48) **Gully** - the geet big sharp knife yer nana used to keep in the scullery drawer (2018)

(49) **Kite** is your belly (2018)

(50) Giz a **deek** - yeah kids at school all said this. Not me … I was rather more refined (2015)

(51) **Stotting** means like banging. You can **stott** a ball or have a **stotting** headache (2015)

(52) Grew up with **marra** being used in Sacriston, same as **fettle**. Every other word me grandad said was **fettle**, had many different meanings (2011)

(53) **Mafted** as in hot. Only recently heard it and had no idea what it meant (2015)

(54) I had never heard nor used the term “**scratter**” til I seen it on here and now it’s part of my day to day vocabulary (2016)

(55) **bleb**’s a crackin word imo mate (2016)

(56) My nana used to always say she was **stowed** (full) after eating something (2017)

(57) I still say I’m **stowed**-out when I’m full (2017)

(58) The mags say **hinny**. Further proof that they are **knackers** (2012)

(59) Me Da and me stepma call each other **hin** (eurrgh) (2012)

(60) “**Bairn”** is nothing whatsoever to do with Danes or Vikings, who had virtually no influence on our dialect. It’s from the Anglo Saxon “bearn”(2013)

(61) I live in Oxford and no one has heard of the word“**bairn**” apart from me family (all from Sunderland)(2015)

These examples reveal that metalinguistic commentary in RTG about traditional dialect lexis is rich and various. It is also often dynamically constructed in argument and debate. We observe discussions about the sociolinguistic status of a word: its etymology; its status as standard or non-standard, dialect or slang; its geographical and social distribution.[[67]](#footnote-67) Semantic and pragmatic discussions consider word meaning, meaning change, and semasiological variation. Some comments aspire to objectivity, while others are highly evaluative, shaped by particular ideological positions such as linguistic purism and the standard language ideology. But they all suggest a considerable degree of “sociolinguistic receptivity” on the part of the writer: an interest in linguistic variation which is often accompanied by positive regard towards variation, a knowledge and appreciation of linguistic differences and some understanding of central linguistic concepts.[[68]](#footnote-68) In addition, some metalinguistic commentary indicates that RTG is the site of a small-scale folk-language revitalization project, as exemplified in (54). Several posts follow this pattern, with a participant stating a gap in their knowledge (“I had never heard nor used the term”) then acknowledging the role of RTG in filling that gap (“til I seen it on here”) and sometimes claiming, as a result of this exposure, that the term has become part of their active vocabulary (“now it’s part of my day to day vocabulary”). Some participants also refer to their own revitalization efforts in the real world: “I’ve been single-handedly bringing that word back recently. Got loads of people saying it now like”.

**5. Discussion** **and Conclusion**

The findings presented here reveal an online space where traditional dialect lexis is not simply surviving, but flourishing. Participants on RTG exploit this lexical resource in a variety of ways: sometimes it seems to reflect their everyday, subconscious usage offline, where these words are an instinctive and intrinsic part of their active vocabulary;[[69]](#footnote-69) sometimes TDL is used more consciously as part of a rhetorical performance, or becomes an object of metalinguistic scrutiny. But why should this be the case? Why do we see so much TDL on the site, and why does it seem to be of such interest to some participants? At least three interrelated answers present themselves.

First, there might be something specific to the general social dialectology of North East England which encourages the survival of TDL there in comparison with other parts of England. The region is distant from London and the South East (the “centre of national gravity”[[70]](#footnote-70)), and broadly speaking – as a consequence of the social and demographic changes that lead to dialect-levelling – traditional dialect lexis is becoming confined to geographically peripheral areas.[[71]](#footnote-71) Furthermore, over the last forty years or so the policies of successive governments have condemned the North East to social, economic and cultural marginalization, resulting in limited in-migration from other parts of the UK. Peripherality and marginalization are conditions which encourage a degree of insularity, meaning that the forces of levelling, compared with other parts of England, might not be as strong there for socio-psychological as well as demographic reasons. An additional brake on the large-scale attrition of traditional dialect lexis in the North East might be the unique cultural status of the dialects of the region. While other urban varieties of English in England, such as those associated with Merseyside and the West Midlands (enregistered as *Scouse* and *Brummie* respectively) might be well-known to British people, urban North East English (enregistered as *Geordie*) though equally recognizable, typically receives much more favourable assessments in language attitudes research, consistently out-ranking many other varieties on affective dimensions such as social attractiveness and solidarity.[[72]](#footnote-72) Such positive exogenous regard might be an additional factor in helping to preserve distinctive dialect forms, a regard which has perhaps been promoted in recent years by the appearance of widely-admired “Geordie ambassadors” in the mass media, who embody well established values of friendliness and sociability, but also infuse “new positive values into the Geordie variety”, such as trendiness and “cool”.[[73]](#footnote-73)

The cultural recognition of Geordie can be seen as evidence of “vernacularization”, a second factor underlying the survival of TDL on the site. There are two dimensions to this process of sociolinguistic change. The first involves a weakening of the standard language ideology (a set of value-judgments whereby characteristics such as correctness, authority, prestige and legitimacy are associated with one particular sort of English and not with others);[[74]](#footnote-74) the second is “a more positive valorization of vernacularity”.[[75]](#footnote-75) Vernacularization is sometimes regarded as part of what the critical discourse analyst Norman Fairclough has called the “democratization” of discourse, a process which he describes as “the removal of inequalities and asymmetries in the discursive and linguistic rights, obligations and prestige of groups of people”.[[76]](#footnote-76) This is the linguistic reflex of a wider realignment of power relations in the UK which has been under way since at least the middle of the twentieth century, involving a loosening of rigid hierarchies of social class, increased social mobility, and a re-drawing of the boundaries between “high” and “low” cultural forms. Vernacularization does not proceed at the same pace across all social domains, though as we have seen the participatory web is an arena where we are particularly likely to see this process in action.

Indeed, the very design of internet message boards could be a third reason for the proliferation of TDL on *Ready to Go*. Third wave variationist sociolinguistics focuses on language as social practice. From this perspective, variation doesn’t simply *reflect* social identities and categories; people exploit semiotic repertoires of speech, facial expression, posture, gait, dress, hairstyle, together with particular dynamic configurations of cultural tastes and behavioural dispositions to *construct* a place for themselves in the social landscape, creating “social meaning through deploying and recontextualizing linguistic resources”.[[77]](#footnote-77) In a site of *virtual* encounter, such as the RTG message board, interactants are limited mainly to the written verbal mode (though it is possible to upload visual images). Lacking the range of semiotic resources available to people engaged in “real world” interaction, posters on the site rely heavily on the words they use for identity work. RTG is a highly local project, in which the symbolic value of local knowledge, humour and dialect is used in the construction of a virtual community. In this context, TDL seems to be a particularly potent and concentrated way to demonstrate local affiliations and loyalties, pungently evoking “a constellation of ideologically related meanings”[[78]](#footnote-78) connected with North East people, places, landscapes, industries and histories.

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1. Upton, 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Görlach, 213. Skeat wrote this in a letter to the First Lord of the Treasury in 1895, appealing for Joseph Wright to receive a pension from the Civil List to enable publication of the *EDD*. Three years later Wright was awarded a pension of £200 a year. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Penhallurick, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Wales, “New Millennium”, 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It should be pointed out that while Orton and Dieth certainly saw themselves in a race against time, their main motivation was to collect reflexes of older forms in order to help with their historical reconstructions. There was little regret on their part for a changing language (Clive Upton, e-mail message to author, January 5, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Orton, Sanderson and Widdowson, n.p. Amongst the most important publications are *The Linguistic Atlas of England* (Orton, Sanderson and Widdowson 1978) and *The Survey of English Dialects: The Dictionary and Grammar* (Upton, Parry and Widdowson 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kerswill, 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Johnstone, 391. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Pearce, “Linguistic Landscape”. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Upton and Davies, vii. The project’s findings were publicly disseminated on programmes for national and local radio and television, and on the BBC’s website. Most of the *Voices* data-set is housed in the British Library Sound Archive, alongside its extensive SED holdings (see Robinson et al.). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Upton, 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Macafee, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Wales, 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Upton, 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Holmes and Wilson, 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Upton, 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Szmrecsanyi, 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Pearce, “Linguistic Landscape”, 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Szmrecsanyi and Anderwald, 303. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For FRED see Hernández. For DECTE see Corrigan, Buchstaller, Mearns and Moisl. https://research.ncl.ac.uk/decte. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Hernández et al. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Nor is *plodge* present in the *BBC Voices* interview description material held in the British Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Szmrecsanyi and Anderwald, 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See Howard. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Kytölä, 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Androutsopoulos, “Participatory Culture”, 50. Web 2.0 has also given us Twitter: a vast source of geo-located data which has allowed scholars working at the interface of dialectometry and geographic information systems to garner new insights into the regional distribution of linguistic items (for a summary see Grieve et al.). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Lillis, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Androutsopoulos, “Localizing the Global”, 209 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Topics covered range from why people hate fish paste to the Higgs Boson. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Research and Development Unit for English Studies (1999–2019), Birmingham City University. All *WebCorp* searches reported were carried out in June and July 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Wales, 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Upton and Widdowson, 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Beal, 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Burbano-Elizondo, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Orton, 47. In the initial analysis I discounted those questions inserted to glean information about phonology and morphosyntax, though as the authors of the *Linguistic Atlas of England* point out, these categories “are not by any means mutually exclusive”. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Orton, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Orton, 49-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Marks and Britton; Zayed, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Census, 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Orton and Dieth, 73. This comment on the development of the questionnaire was published in 1950, just before the main SED fieldwork started. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Where the commonest spelling in RTG is not the one found in SED, it is given in angle brackets. Variants of the same form are separated by a comma; variants of different forms are separated by a semi-colon. An asterisk (\*) indicates that the form is attested for one or more of the other four northern counties in the SED, but *not* County Durham or Northumberland (these items are not counted in Figure 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Wales, 195. While her general point stands, it is worth noting that all of these terms (from Simmelbauer’s study), apart from *boodies*, are present in RTG (see Table 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Although some lexical items are recorded in SED interviews archived in the British Library, but don’t appear in the questionnaire results. This is the case with *gully*, for example. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Dent, 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Orton, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Upton, 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Orton and Halliday, 698. This notion was not reported in my initial analysis because it was included in the SED primarily for phonological and morphological reasons. Perhaps fieldworkers were less concerned with eliciting lexical variants in these cases, so fewer variants were recorded. In RTG a common term for “drunk” is *mortal*, which is attested in EDD. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid., 702-703. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Greene and Widdowson, 510. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. See Trudgill, 121-132 and Dent. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Orton, 51 and 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. The adjectival form is *nebby*. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Besnier, 419. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. *Ploat* and *dunch*, for example. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Radford, 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Dent, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. The sample corpus was built using *Sketch Engine*. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Androutsopoulos, “Participatory Culture”, 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Sandow and Robinson, 335 [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Bakhtin, 293. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. See Eckert, “Belten High”; Podesva; Campbell-Kibler. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Coupland, 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Though in a context where “taking issue” with what people post is common, for some such thread titles can provoke: “Old slang? i say and hear most of these every fucking day man”. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. See Cutillas-Espinosa et al. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. See Pearce, “*Mam* or *mum*”. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. See Benson and Risdal. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Dent, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Wales, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Trudgill, 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. See Montgomery’s overview of perceptual dialectology research in England. It should also be noted that *Geordie* can be a problematic term for some people in North East England. In the region, the word is typically used as an ethnonym for the people of Newcastle and the Tyneside conurbation, so its application by outsiders to all North Easterners (particularly those whose loyalties lie with the other urban areas of Wearside and Teesside and their football clubs) can be a source of irritation (see Pearce, “Geordie”). [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Di Martino, 140. The singer Cheryl Cole and the television presenters Ant and Dec fall into this category. However, the existence of a programme such as *Geordie Shore* indicates that not all media representations of North East England are entirely positive. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Garrett, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Coupland, “Sociolinguistic Change”, 85-86. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Fairclough, 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Coupland, 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Eckert, 464 [↑](#footnote-ref-78)