

# Dialect Where You Least Expect It

Jonnie Robinson, Lead Curator of Spoken English, writes:

The recent publication of fixtures for the 2017-18 hockey season may have escaped the attention of many sports fans in the frenzy of Transfer Deadline Day, but this week's friendly between [Southgate](#) and [Durham University](#) was a personal highlight as, with a daughter on each side, household bragging rights were at stake. A significant occasion for the family, of course, but surely not a source of professional interest: after all, hockey – in the UK anyway – is a predominantly middle-class sport so not, one might imagine, a likely focus for dialect research. Well you'd be surprised: the impressive thing about dialect is it can crop up virtually anywhere.

Take last season, for instance: watching one daughter play at Ben Rhydding I was delighted to see post-match teas included the option of a *bread-cake* (not to mention a *chip buttie*).

✖ Regional variants for BREAD ROLL feature regularly in dialect surveys as noted in a previous [blog post](#) and, given the spectacular setting of Ben Rhydding Hockey Club, little more than a drag flick from Ilkley Moor and the famous Cow and Calf rocks, it's perhaps not surprising to find Yorkshire dialect in this context. However, watching my younger daughter play in a school tournament at Charterhouse – an exclusive boarding school – I was equally intrigued by the wording on a noticeboard next to the astroturf hockey pitch.

✖ This eminently sensible set of principles for parents and supporters includes in rule 8 an appeal to respect 'decisions made by *beaks* and coaching staff'. The [OED](#) records the term *beak* [= 'teacher'] from 1888 and includes four citations: two contain references to Eton College and two are by authors educated at Marlborough College. Its use is categorised as 'schoolboy slang', so not really an example of dialect then, although according to the OED dialect encompasses a '[m]anner of speaking, language, speech; esp. the mode of speech peculiar to, or characteristic of, a particular person or group'. While the distinction between dialect and slang can be a little blurred, it would be interesting to establish how widespread *beak* is within private schools – [this recording](#) explores the existence of a similarly idiosyncratic code at Harrow School, for instance.

So while *beak* might not be strictly comparable with the more overtly dialectal *bread-cake*, it offers a fascinating glimpse of boarding school parlance and demonstrates how localised and vernacular forms permeate even 'official' communication within a school and to its extended community. You would imagine, for instance, that Standard English is universally adopted by schools for written communication to parents, but as the new school term approaches and parents up and down the country check whether their children have the right school uniform it's fascinating to see how one essential item of PE kit varies from place to place. A quick online search of primary school

websites in England confirms that school brochures, newsletters and websites differ in how they refer to SOFT SHOES WORN FOR PE.



The four variants shown here from Francis Askew Primary School in Hull (*sand-shoes*), Wylde Green Primary School in Birmingham (*pumps*), Howard Primary School in Croydon (*plimsolls*) and Hullavington C of E Primary School in Wiltshire (*daps*) were among the many alternatives captured in the [BBC Voices](#) survey of 2004/5 and show how we all use and encounter dialect even in the most unexpected places.

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## Mr Tickle in a Newcastle accent

Rosy Hall is an ESRC-funded PhD student from Oxford University working with the BL's Spoken English collections. She writes:

At the *Evolving English* exhibition at the British Library (2010-11), we asked visitors to submit recordings of their voices in specially designed telephone booths. Around 15,000 speakers took part, and the outcome is the [Evolving English VoiceBank](#) and [WordBank](#) – a collection of accents and dialect words from over the UK, and all around the world.

One of the things we asked participants to do was to read us a story, so that we could compare different voices saying the same thing. We went for Roger Hargreaves' *Mr Tickle*; it's a useful text because it includes plenty of words that give us clues as to where people are from, like *fast* and *laugh*, for instance (do you say yours with a short or a long 'a'?). We also hoped its light-hearted tone would put the readers at ease so that they wouldn't change their 'normal' voice too much, since sometimes reading out loud can cause people to switch into a more formal register.

In [this recording](#), however, the speaker was so at ease that he put on a performance, exaggerating features of his Newcastle accent to give us the full Geordie experience. He even 'translates' some of the words into dialect terms, such as 'starving' for 'hungry,' 'pack it in' for 'stop it,' and 'arms as long as you'd like' to refer to Mr Tickle's 'extraordinarily long arms.' Then there's 'out for the count' instead of 'fast asleep,' and 'upset' for 'terrible pandemonium.' And of course the speaker adds 'man' at the end of a few sentences for good measure.

Our Newcastle speaker also beautifully demonstrates some Geordie vowel sounds for us. Notice the way he pronounces words like 'house,' 'out,' and 'down' – this 'oo' sound is where the Toon gets its nickname from! There's the 'oo' in 'book,' too, and the characteristically Newcastle vowel sound in 'long' ('lang'). You can find out more about Newcastle English on the [Sounds Familiar](#) website.

Perhaps the theatricality of this reading task makes it inauthentic in some way – it's hard to say whether the participant really speaks like this in everyday life. But, we have more 'natural' recordings elsewhere of these features (check out this other Geordie example in the [VoiceBank](#)), so we know they can be 'real Newcastle' too. What's more, recordings like this can be incredibly useful to us as sociolinguists, because they tell us something about the dialect words and features that are most salient to speakers as markers of their local identity. And, of course, they are evidence of the delight and pride speakers take in their linguistic heritage.

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## [Recording of the week: bringing Batwa voices back to life in Uganda](#)


*This week's selection comes from Dr Janet Topp Fargion, Lead Curator of World and Traditional Music.*

Dr Peter Cooke has been researching music in Uganda since the 1960s. In 1968 he was in the Kisoro area in western Uganda where he recorded a few songs performed by members of the Batwa community. The recordings now form part of his collection at the British Library (BL reference: [C23](#)) and can be listened to on the [British Library Sounds](#) website.

In 1991, the Batwa in Uganda were evicted from their historic homelands and their presence in the country was decimated. In 2006-7 Christopher Kidd, then an anthropology PhD candidate at the University of Glasgow who had been working amongst the Batwa communities, took the Cooke recordings back and played them to local colleagues at the offices of the [United Organisation for Batwa Development in Uganda](#). On hearing them, one of the staff members was able to identify his own grandfather, a man called Kiyovu, as the sole performer of these two songs. Furthermore, he reported that Kiyovu's only surviving son, Jeremiah Bunjagare, was still living in the area although he had been relocated, as part of a development project, to Gitebe beside Echuya Forest.

Dr Kidd went to Gitebe and played the recordings to Jeremiah. He immediately picked out his father's voice and was visibly emotional at hearing his father after all these years. With much pride he explained that the man they were listening to was a man who sat beside kings [Kiyovu was indeed a performer for Mwami Rubugiri, the king of Rwanda]. Later he danced to show his thanks for bringing his father back into his life. Dr Kidd reported: "Listening to these recordings was a time when Jeremiah and other Batwa remembered not their powerlessness but a time in which they 'sat beside kings' and were respected as a people and a culture."

[Urwasabahizi\\_Innanga zither song performed by Kiyovu](#)

 **Jeremiah Bunjagare listening to recording of his father from 1968 – Photo Chris Kidd 2007**

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## [It's all in the tail](#)

Tails are probably not the first things that spring to mind when thinking about animal sounds. Beautiful songs or spine-chilling cries, sure, but tails? It's unlikely.

Several animal groups use their tails to generate sound. One of the most famous of these are rattlesnakes, a group of venomous reptiles found across North and South America. As their name suggests, rattlesnakes possess a rattle at the end of their tail. Its function is to warn potential predators to keep their distance or face the prospect of a deadly bite. The rattle is made up of small pieces of keratin that bang together when the tail is rapidly vibrated. Rattlesnakes aren't the only reptiles to use a bit of tail-shaking when confronted by danger. Many other types of snake use the same, albeit much quieter, method to send a warning to other animals on the lookout for a quick dinner. Why evolution graced rattlesnakes with a sound-producing tail has been the subject of scientific positing for decades but, whatever the reason, the rapid shake of a rattlesnake's rattle has proven to be a highly effective messenger.

[Rattlesnake tail sounds recorded at London Zoo by Richard Ranft \(BL ref 21461\)](#)



Birds can usually make themselves understood with their voices alone, however some species also bring their tails into the mix. The Indian Peafowl is one such species. For a long time the majesty of the male's tail display was thought to be a purely visual cue to woo nearby females and deter potential rivals. As well as producing a feast for the eyes, a peacock's tail display also creates a distinctive rustling sound which was initially thought to be an inert byproduct of the main spectacle. When researchers at the [University of Manitoba](#) investigated this further however, they discovered that the sound also had infrasonic properties which, though inaudible to humans, can be detected by other birds. But what message does this sound actually convey? It's thought that the infrasonic rustling acts as a sonic reinforcement to the tail display, helping other individuals assess the quality and strength of the performer. Indian Peafowls naturally occur in dense forests across the Indian Subcontinent, so being able to utilise low frequencies, which travel further than high frequency sounds, is particularly useful when individuals

can't always be seen. Nobody wants to wade through loads of scrub only to be disappointed, so listening out for these infrasonic clues can save both males and females a whole lot of hassle.

[Peacock tail feather display recorded in England by John Paterson \(BL ref 62061\)](#)



Another bird that uses its tail feathers to communicate is the Common Snipe. Males possess modified outer tail feathers which, when held at right angles to the body, produce a drumming sound during their dramatic aerial display flights. As snipe are crepuscular, these flamboyant performances normally take place at twilight and sit in stark contrast with the bird's usually shy and retiring demeanour.

In May 1943, RAF Flying Officer R.A. Carr-Lewty published a paper in [British Birds](#) which included this eloquent description of the drumming display:

*"When drumming, the Snipe descends with the two outer tail-feathers widely extended, and in this position they are free to vibrate without interference from the other rectrices. Once the requisite speed has been attained, these feathers, by reason of this extension and their peculiar shape and structure, commence to vibrate and continue to do so as long as the speed is maintained; the Snipe attains this speed by diving. In normal flight, the outer tail-feathers, being supported by contact with the other rectrices, have no tendency to vibrate."*

[Common Snipe drumming display recorded in Scotland by Richard Margoschis \(BL ref 22497\)](#)



Common Snipe (courtesy of the Biodiversity Heritage Library)

Moving across to mammals, the North American Beaver uses its flat, paddle-like tail to alert nearby individuals to the presence of danger. When things just don't seem right, beavers will slap their scaly tails on the surface of the water as an alarm signal to other beavers. As these animals are timid and nocturnal, a meaty tail slap may be your only clue that a beaver is nearby.

[North American Beaver tail slap recorded in Ontario by Tom Cosburn \(BL ref 69781\)](#)



Illustration of a beaver's tail (courtesy of the Biodiversity Heritage Library)

Though songs and calls often dominate our perception of what the natural world sounds like, animals across the world have evolved many other ways to communicate with each other. So the next time you think about wildlife sounds, spare a thought for the tails out there.

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# Made-up words and coded sweet-talk

Rosy Hall is an ESRC-funded PhD student from Oxford University working with the BL's Spoken English collections. She writes:

When cataloguing the [Evolving English WordBank](#), we often come across speakers donating words which they have invented themselves. This privileged access to speakers' privately meaningful coinages is not only fun, but also a great reminder of how creative we can be with language when words fail us.

Usually, made-up words come from children's early experiments with speaking; words invented at home – often to name new and unfamiliar objects – which have stuck as humorous and often quite useful family vocab. In the following recording, one visitor to the exhibition describes some of her own family terms:

[C1442 Nonce-Words \(female b.1960\)](#)

Another speaker discusses a personal nonsense word 'amaluvaya,' which she explains is used solely between herself and her partner in order to express affection secretly, meaning 'I'm in love with you.'

[C1442 Amaluvaya \(female b.1953\)](#)

Like a lot of home-grown linguistic innovations, the idea behind 'amaluvaya' is to allow the speaker and hearer to communicate a message in public, but privately. Another example of a coded speech strategy is 'Pig Latin,' a pseudo-language with rules for re-arranging syllables, often used by school-children to conspire without their parents overhearing – or sometimes the other way around!

Occasionally, secret languages are needed for more serious purposes; being able to communicate covertly can of course be a matter of life and death, freedom and persecution. Polari, a form of cant slang used in gay sub-culture at the turn of the century, offered gay men a means of conversing without running the risk of arrest or abuse. A number of our Spoken English collections include fascinating discussions of Polari; you can listen to them [here](#) and [here](#).

You can find out more about Polari at the current [Gay UK exhibition](#), and in Paul Baker's *Fantabulosa: A Dictionary of Polari and Gay Slang* (2002)

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