

## Dialects – where can we find them?

Dialects are defined with respect to different areas of language use such as pronunciation, lexical and grammatical features. Many definitions of a dialect highlight the fact that dialects are related to a particular region; however, not all dialects are defined by regional boundaries. While some dialectal features are restricted to very specific regions, others may be more common across different parts of the UK. In this worksheet, we will explore what other factors define what we consider to be a dialect - we will focus on the use of language by different social groups of speakers. Dialects are not equally used by all speakers of a particular region: sometimes men use more dialect forms than women, sometimes education status, or workplace will come into play as well. Younger speakers might use more or less dialect features than their elders. We will, in particular, investigate the use of one dialect feature – demonstrative *them* followed by a plural noun. The following sentence is an example of the feature: 'I saw *them* dogs running down the street again!'



### Key terms

(non-)standard language use

dialect

### Task 1

What do you know about the feature and where is it used? Do you use it? Discuss with a partner why '*them* + plural noun' can be considered a dialectal feature.

### Task 2

On the BNClab website, look up demonstrative *them* + a plural noun. Use the corpus tool to find examples of the feature, using the following search function:

(PREPOSITION)

(them)

(NOUN)

Go to Usage button and note down a few examples that illustrate the use of the feature.

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### Task 3

Now go to the Region button and consider the regions where the feature is used. Can you see any patterns emerging? Note down your observations.

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How does this distribution across region compare to other features? Select two of the following features and search for them in BNClab: "I says", "hanky", "jeez", "ain't", "they was" (or other non-standard features that you can think of) and see whether there is a difference in how the features are used regionally. Are some of the expressions more region-specific than others?

## Task 4

In BNClab, find information about the use of demonstrative *them* in relation to social factors other than region using the Gender, Age and Social class buttons.

- Are there differences in the way men and women use the feature?
- Is there a difference between how the feature was used in the 90s and in current spoken English?
- Do younger speakers use it more or less frequently than older speakers?
- Does social class of speakers play a role?

Make a note of the similarities and differences you find. Using your notes, discuss each social factor and its relation to the use of 'demonstrative *them*'.

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## Research bite



When we talk about regional differences in language use, deciding on specific boundaries is difficult. Dialect features do not uniformly fall into or out of use from one region to another (sociolinguists call this the dialect continuum). At the same time, not every resident of a region uses dialect features. Some features are used by only a few speakers of a region, while others are used by the majority of speakers. An example that shows the difficulty in pinning down a dialect to a specific region is the case of MLE, or Multicultural London English. This relatively new dialect is found in London, among young and mostly working class speakers. Typical features include *was/were* variation ('you was', 'we was'), using 'man' as a pronoun (instead of 'you' or

'one'), or using 'innit' as a clause final tag ('This was cool, innit'). Research has shown that some features of MLE might be spreading to other multicultural cities, such as Birmingham or Manchester, as well as to other speaker groups within London. Here, pinning down MLE to 'just' certain areas of London and certain speakers seems futile indeed.

### Did you know...

A good indication of how difficult it is to place people's accents in terms of regions was shown in a recent poll by YouGov. After asking around 8000 adult people from all over the UK whether the Midlands were North England or South England, it turned out that around 30% of people assigned the Midlands to the North, while less than 10% would go for the South. Midlanders themselves, when not opting for neither North nor South (roughly 70%), would more likely go for being part of the North (roughly 20%) than the South (under 10%).