Roots of English

What is the explanation for the nature, character and evolution of the many different varieties of English in the world today? Which changes in the English language are the legacy of its origins, and which are the product of novel influences in the places to which it was transported? Roots of English is a groundbreaking investigation into four dialects from parts of northern Britain, out of which came the founding populations of many regions in the other parts of the world. Sali Tagliamonte comprehensively describes and analyses the key features of the dialects and their implications for subsequent developments of English. Her examination of dialect features contributes substantive evidence for assessing and understanding bigger issues in sociolinguistic theory. Based on exciting new findings, the book will appeal to those interested in dialects, from the Anglophile to the syntactician.

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Roots of English

Exploring the History of Dialects

Sali A. Tagliamonte
For:
Honorah H. Williamson, piano teacher, mentor, friend
David Robinson, blood brother
Una Coghlan, sister in spirit
Bev and Gerry Boyce, parents-in-law
My roots by love
With appreciation, Sali
# Contents

- **List of figures**: viii
- **List of tables**: x
- **Preface**: xi
- **Acknowledgements**: xiii
- **Abbreviations**: xv
- 1. Introduction: 1
- 2. Dialects as a window on the past: 6
- 3. The Roots Archive: 27
- 4. Methods of analysis: 49
- 5. Word endings: 64
- 6. Joining sentences: 94
- 7. Time, necessity and possession: 121
- 8. Expressions: 161
- 9. Comparative sociolinguistics: 185
- 10. The legacy of British and Irish dialects: 195
- **Notes**: 214
- **References**: 225
- **Index**: 248

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vii
Figures

2.1 Location of Scotch Corner in context with the Roots Archive Communities page 22

2.2 The Roots Archive and the British Dialects Archive in relation to Scotch Corner 23

5.1 Lexical verbs, –s ending in 3rd person plural by type of subject 68

5.2 Proportion of is in 3rd person plural noun phrases in the present tense of the verb ‘to be’ 69

5.3 Proportion of was in 3rd person plural by type of subject in the past tense of the verb ‘to be’ 70

5.4 Use of was in contexts of existential there is 71

5.5 Distribution of was according to negative vs affirmative 72

5.6 Proportion of zero adverbs by community 77

5.7 Proportion of zero adverbs by type by community 79

5.8 Distribution of zero adverbs isolating two common adverbs 82

5.9 Proportion of –ly by meaning 83

5.10 Distribution of AUX contraction with be by community 88

5.11 Distribution of AUX contraction with have by community 88

5.12 Distribution of AUX contraction with would and will by community 89

5.13 Distribution of AUX contraction with have and be in apparent time in York 90

5.14 Effect of preceding phonological environment on AUX contraction with be across communities with variable NEG/AUX contraction 91

6.1 Frequency of subject relative pronouns across communities 100

6.2 Zero subject relatives across communities by sentence structure 102

6.3 Proportion of that by verb type across communities 111

6.4 Proportion of ‘believe’ type verbs across communities 112

6.5 Frequency of causal connector for across communities 114

6.6 Distribution of for according to location in sentence 115

6.7 Descriptions of the for to infinitive in purpose and non-purpose contexts 119
List of figures

7.1 Distribution of main future variants by community 126
7.2 Distribution of going to by age group in York 126
7.3 Distribution of going to by type of clause 128
7.4 Distribution of going to according to grammatical person 128
7.5 Distribution of going to according to temporal reference across communities 129
7.6 Distribution of going to according to type of sentence 130
7.7 Distribution of going to by type of clause in York 130
7.8 Distribution of going to by type of sentence in York 131
7.9 Distribution of going to by temporal reference in York 131
7.10 Distribution of going to by grammatical person in York 132
7.11 Distribution of main variants used for obligation/necessity by community 139
7.12 Distribution of have to according to type of obligation by community 143
7.13 Distribution of forms for deontic modality according to type of obligation, all communities combined 143
7.14 Proportion of stative possession forms by community 149
7.15 Proportion of have got across age groups by community 150
7.16 Distribution of forms of negated have across communities 151
7.17 Distribution of forms of have in questions across communities 152
7.18 Distribution of have and have got contraction across communities 153
7.19 Distribution of forms of contraction by subject type across communities 155
7.20 Distribution of have got by subject type by age in York 156
7.21 Distribution of abstract vs concrete complements across communities 157
7.22 Distribution of have got by complement type by age in York 158
8.1 Frequency of discourse like out of the total number of words by community 169
8.2 Frequency of like by individual speaker by community 170
8.3 Frequency of discourse like contexts across communities 171
8.4 Distribution of GE types by community 177
8.5 Frequency of length of GE by community 179
8.6 Proportion of long vs short variants with generic ‘something’ 180
8.7 Proportion of long vs short variants with generic ‘thing’ 180
8.8 Proportion of long vs short variants with generic ‘everything’ 180
8.9 Proportion of long vs short variants with generic ‘stuff’ 181
8.10 Distribution of and all, and that and and all that by community 183
8.11 Proportion of and that in the Roots Archive compared to Pichler and Levey, 2011, Berwick-upon-Tweed, England 183
## Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>The Roots Archive</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>British Dialects Archive</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Frequency of Ø adverbs by lexical item (N ≥ 10)</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>The three most frequent adverbs by community and their proportion out of all adverbs used in each community</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Overall distribution of AUX contraction by community</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Distribution of relative markers by animacy in SUBJECT relatives</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Overall frequency of who in subject relatives in England and Scotland</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>Distribution of NON-SUBJECT relative markers by animacy of the antecedent NP</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>Low frequency (&lt;15%) that constructions by verb</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>Distribution of that by verb type and speaker sex in York</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>Distribution of for to infinitive across varieties</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>Diffusion of for to in each community</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>Distribution of GEs in the Roots Archive</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>Distribution of ‘Other’ GEs in the Roots Archive</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>Co-occurrence patterns with general extenders and discourse features</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>Comparison of linguistic features across communities</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>Comparison of select words and expressions across communities</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>Comparison of dialect verb forms across communities</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>Comparison of dialect pronunciations across communities</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Preface

But you see in England and all those places, each place had a sort of their own dialect. They knew by the sound of the voice and the words they used where they came from. (Margaret Aldaine, 80, Swords, Canada, 1982)

My native language is English – Canadian English. It was the mother tongue of my mother and my father, both of whom were born in Canada. But it is my mother’s language that was my linguistic model because, like many of my generation, my mother was a homemaker and the one who raised me. My mother’s parents were also born in Canada. Yet if I go back just one generation more, to my mother’s grandparents, one was born in Ireland and the other was born in England, and both my grandfathers were Scots. Each one of my great-grandparents was a pioneer in a new frontier, the rich farmlands of southern Ontario. They all migrated during the 1800s when thousands of Scots, Irish and English settlers went to North America, the new world of opportunity. To trace my roots back to the ancestors of my great-grandparents in the British Isles is murky. The links are long lost. Or are they?

Have you ever wondered how your ancestry affects the way you speak? For me, it is certain that the dialects of my fore-parents are not directly reproduced in my variety of English. Yet in the bigger picture, Canadian English is a product of development from these founding populations of Scots and Irish and English migrants who first settled in what was then known as Upper Canada. As Canadian English evolved over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it developed into the variety I speak, a variety pretty much indistinguishable from other Canadians like me.

Then I moved to Yorkshire, England in 1995. To my surprise, I shared many linguistic features with my colleagues from Scotland and Ireland, many more than I did with my colleagues from England. I certainly do not sound Scots or Irish, and yet features at all levels of grammar from phonetics to discourse-pragmatics are the same. I have the cot/caught merger, the form gotten for the past participle of ‘got’; I am r-full, I say wee for ‘small’ and it’s a good job for ‘it’s a good thing’. I wouldn’t use verbal –s outside 3rd person singular but I know what it means and where it is ‘normal’, i.e. in constructions such as The

xi
cows eats and I says. I can recall that my mother said things like this occasion-
ally and my great aunts and uncles certainly did. The same is true of regular-
ized preterits come, give and run, zero adverbs such as go quick and speak slow, sentence-final like and many other linguistic phenomena.

If there are correspondences between my variety of English and those of my
northern colleagues, the interesting questions are how and why do similarities
and differences like these between dialects long separated by time and distance
endure? How do the roots of communities and regions and countries play out
in the way their dialects are used by contemporary speakers several hundred
years later? These are the questions I asked myself, and they are the questions
that spurred me to embark upon the ‘Back to the Roots’ project and to write
this book. May it help you explain some strange turn of a word or an unusual
name or a unique expression that you or someone else you know uses. May it
offer you a fresh perspective on your own roots.
Acknowledgements

The formative part of my academic career was spent in Yorkshire at the University of York in the Department of Language and Linguistic Science. I interviewed for the post in March of 1995 and was overjoyed to accept a position as Lecturer A in the department, which was to start five months later. A portent of things to come came in a light blue airmail envelope from Lowfield House in Heslington (near York) in June of 1995. It was a letter welcoming me to the department, ‘You will enhance it’ the letter said, and it was signed ‘Bob Le Page’. To me, it was as if the queen herself had greeted me with open arms.

I arrived in York in early August 1995 with three children in nappies and a huge amount of enthusiasm. I left in early August 2001 to take up a position at the Department of Linguistics at the University of Toronto in Canada. The children were not in nappies anymore, my intellectual life had totally changed and Bob had become a confidante and a friend. My sojourn in the UK left a defining imprint on me both personally and professionally. I count among my dear friends many of the people I met between 1995 and 2001 especially Joan Beal, Jenny Cheshire, Karen Corrigan, Paul Foulkes, Paul Kerswill, Jane Stuart-Smith, Jen Smith, Ros Temple, Peter Trudgill and Anthony Warner. Living and working among the British sociolinguistic scene was a mind-blowing experience. My myopic North American-centric perspective changed gear. Many of the non-standard features reported as innovations in Canadian and US circles were alive and well among the people I met on the street and encountered in the pubs and hiked with in the peaks and dales. My own perfectly respectable middle-class Canadian accent had – to my mortification – transmuted into an ill-regarded American drawl. My children started sounding incrementally more and more foreign. The idea that shepherds in Yorkshire counted their sheep in an ancient Celtic tongue was a source of amazement. In sum, I had embarked on the experience of a lifetime. There I was, a neophyte sociolinguist specializing in language variation and change in English, living on the very ley lines where it all began.

As it happens, I am an early riser, so I would go to work early in the morning. It was dark and damp, but the cheery cleaning ladies were my cherished
companions. They taught me how to pronounce British words properly, such as ‘Scarborough’ and ‘Barbican’ and railed me with stories about their lives and children. Listening to these raconteurs, I first conceived of the idea to create a data repository from the York speech community, which became the York English Corpus collected in 1997. By 1998 I had met Jennifer Smith who collected the Buckie English Corpus. Other students followed, each one did fieldwork in her home town: Elizabeth Godfrey collected the Tiverton data, Megan Jones the Wincanton data, Elyse Ashcroft the Henfield data, and Danielle Martin the Wheatley Hill data. By 1999 I had secured funding to create a corpus of the dialect data from my students’ projects. By 2000, I dreamed of finding the roots of English in the counties that had contributed settlers to North America. I was awarded a large research grant for ‘Back to the roots: The legacy of British dialects’, which enabled me to collect the Roots Archive, the data this book is largely based upon. My academic daughters Jennifer Smith and Helen Lawrence were research assistants and collaborators on this research project. Both of them were in the field (Jennifer in Maryport and Cumnock, and Helen in Portavogie), as well as in the lab and in the office and now appear as co-authors on many of the papers arising from the fieldwork. Before the last draft of the book went to press, I benefited greatly from the input of an anonymous Cambridge University Press reviewer as well as the suggestions of my supervisee Shannon Mooney, who read through the entire manuscript from a student’s point of view.

I am indebted to The Economic and Social Research Council of the United Kingdom (ESRC) for funding these projects in research grants spanning 1997–2001. I am also indebted to the Arts Humanities Research Board of the United Kingdom (AHRB) for providing a research grant to fund ‘Vernacular roots: A database of British dialects’. The latter grant enabled me to compile and transcribe the piles of cassette tapes from the student projects and turn them into a functioning archive of English dialects.

Of course the true heroes and heroines of this book are the women and men from the far north shore of Scotland to the rural countryside of south-west England, who shared their life histories, stories and experiences. Their words infuse this book with colour, nuance and wise humanity. May their stories live long and prosper wherever the offshoots of their roots now bloom.

**Counting**

She used to get me to count in you know, yan, tan, thethera. You know, t’old yan, tan three. (Andrew Meyers, 63, MPT)
### Abbreviations

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<thead>
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