

# 'Divn't say dinnae' or 'Dinnae say divn't'?: A qualitative-quantitative approach to verbal negation in the far north of England

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A growing number of sociolinguistic studies highlight the morpho-syntactic differences between standard English and British English dialects in the area of negation (see, for example, Cheshire 1982, Smith 2000, 2001, Anderwald 2002, Moore 2003, Beal & Corrigan 2005). This paper contributes to the existing literature on British dialect grammar by providing an analysis of the verbal negation strategies amongst thirty-six speakers from three age groups and both genders in Berwick-upon-Tweed, England's northernmost town.

Watt & Ingham (2000: 205) describe Berwick English (BwE) as "a 'mixture' of Scottish and north-eastern English varieties." This is reflected in my study of the negation system of BwE. The corpus contains negative forms typically associated with Tyneside/Northumberland, such as *divn't* and uncontracted *cannot* with a centralised vowel (Beal 1993), and forms typically associated with Scotland, notably the use of the negative particles *-nae* and *no*, as in *cannaie*, *wouldnae* or *he's no* (Brown & Millar 1980, Macafee 1992). The quantitative analysis, which is based on approximately 3,500 tokens, reveals that different syntactic and lexical environments prefer different variants of negative modal and auxiliary verbs:

- An overwhelming majority of negative polarity tag questions adhere to the rules of standard English tag formation, which is surprising considering Cheshire's (1982) findings in Reading where tag questions favour the use of non-standard forms.
- With the discourse marker (DM) I DON'T KNOW, the use of the non-standard localised variant *I divn't knaa* is largely restricted to a subsample of young male speakers, while the use of *I dinnae ken* is exceptionally rare and restricted to old speakers (see Pichler in press).
- The vast majority of negative imperatives are formed with non-standard variants. The occurrence of *divn't* and *dinnae* strongly correlates with speaker age: old speakers favour the use of *dinnae*, young speakers favour *divn't*, while middle speakers use both variants to roughly the same extent.
- Negative declaratives are far more variable than other contexts. It is only in this context that we encounter the whole inventory of possible variants. Their occurrence is conditioned by internal (subject, following verb, scope) and social constraints (age and education).

This paper argues that syntactic and lexical environment and age alone do not provide a satisfactory explanation for the variation inherent in Berwickers' verbal negation strategies. It is argued that discourse function is an important conditioning factor as well. While the lack of discourse variants formed with *no* and *-nae* is due to a general decline of these particles in the speech community, the low occurrence of *divn't* in discourse usages is due to the fact that DMs and tags formed with this variant are only gradually taking on functional usages formerly restricted to their standard English equivalents. This paper thus demonstrates the benefits of looking beyond syntax and lexis and including pragmatic function as an independent variable in analyses of sociolinguistic variation.

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