

Secret of accents lies in blether of Buckie

Study explores resilience of local dialects

Mike Wade

The telephone voices adopted by speakers of the broadest Scots could finally help to explain the extraordinary resilience of local accents in Britain.

A three-year study of three generations of men and women in the Banffshire port of Buckie will analyse the different conversational gambits used by older and younger speakers of Doric, the name of the almost impenetrable local dialect.

Researchers believe the study will establish once and for all whether “bidi-alectalism” — the ability to switch almost effortlessly between a strong local accent and a plainer version of English — is helping local linguistic variations survive.

Jennifer Smith, senior lecturer in English Language at the University of Glasgow, suggested that in relatively-isolated communities such as Scottish ports, Lancashire mill towns, or Welsh mining villages, the brains of younger people are wired to talk to two different audiences.

“We all switch, we all have a posh phone voice, but in those communities that sound very different, the switch is bigger, it’s a huge leap over to using standard English,” said Dr Smith, who is originally from Buckie. “There is a big divide between your home dialect and the voice you use for outsiders.”

The Glasgow team will measure the speech patterns of speakers from 15 to 80 years of age. Subjects will be interviewed twice, firstly through a native speaker of the dialect — an “insider” — and then again by an “outsider”, a researcher from the south of England.

The team will test for variations in speech patterns between the age groups, looking for where and when speakers switch dialects, whether all speakers do so fluently and how their speech patterns change.

Dr Smith said she had been struck by the ability of some regional accents to survive. “So many people claim dialects

are dying, but step out on to the streets of Glasgow — they are not,” she said. “When people talk about the loss of dia-

lects they talk about the loss of words, and it’s true that words are the most transient things in dialects.

“But the pronunciation, the grammar, are much more important and these things change much more slowly than words.”

Catch phrases were easily picked up from television but had only a marginal effect, she said, and were easily incorporated in dialect. “If TV was really influential, most people would sound like they were in *EastEnders*, but they don’t. These things are superficial.”

An online Doric phrasebook underlines Dr Smith’s point. One definition reads: “‘Pit yer fit tae the flear!’ Put the foot to the floor (The modern equivalent of ‘Haud the hunel tae the lum!’)”

Some accents do appear to have weakened. Dr Smith, 46, drew a distinction between isolated places such as Shetland, which still has strong connections to a wider world, and places such as Buckie, only about 60 miles by road from Inverness and Aberdeen but, “psychologically isolated, an enclave”. She

added: “Lots of my high school friends chose to stay in Buckie. They are extremely positive about it. They wouldn’t live anywhere else. It’s quite unusual — usually in rural towns young people can’t wait to get out.

“In Shetland, in past generations people had a very distinct dialect, but now half the younger speakers sound like Gordon Brown, they speak a kind of Scottish standard English. But in Buckie, the loons and quines [boys and girls] still sound distinctly Buckie.”

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Fishermen in “psychologically isolated” Buckie have a distinct dialect called Doric

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