“There’s a line and Sheffield is in the North”: Chesterfield teenagers’ perceptions of the North-Midland divide in England.

The (East) Midlands region of England has been receiving more attention in Sociolinguistics (cf. Braber 2014, 2016; Braber and Robinson 2018; Docherty and Foulkes 1999; Flynn 2012) despite the supposition that it is difficult to locate and “...a 'no-man's land', a victim of the North-South divide” (Wales 2000: 8). Upton (2012) describes the Midlands region as a “transition zone” between northern and southern dialects, and Trudgill (1990: 44 cited in Dyer 2002: 101) states that East Midlands’ dialects have “few stereotypical features”. Meanwhile, Yorkshire and its various dialects have been analysed across many decades, with the Sheffield dialect alone having been studied for over two hundred years (Stoddart, Upton and Widdowson 1999: 79), with stereotypes of Yorkshire dialects recognised nationally. Drawing on data gathered from perceptual activities, this poster explores how teenage residents of Chesterfield (North East Derbyshire) present their regional identity. Due to Chesterfield’s administrative position as part of the East Midlands, Chesterfield teenagers are hypothesised to identify as Midlanders, perhaps having a stronger Midlander identity due to Chesterfield’s close proximity to the border with Yorkshire (Braber 2014). However, because of Chesterfield’s proximity to Sheffield, South Yorkshire, and being closer in distance to Sheffield than to its county capital, Derby, it is also possible that residents align themselves more with Sheffield and the North (Llamas 2010: 228), especially given the Midlands’ relatively lacklustre reputation (Braber 2016) and Yorkshire’s stronger cultural prominence (Montgomery 2016). Heat maps show where Chesterfield teens place the Midlands region, with 73% placing Chesterfield in the Midlands and 61% positioning Sheffield in the North. Results from perceptual recognition tasks show that the Sheffield accent is the most identifiable to Chesterfield teenagers through variants of FACE and GOAT vowels. Finally, initial analysis of word list data appears to confirm that Chesterfield teens realise the FACE and GOAT vowels as more standard diphthongs, while previous research has shown that Sheffield locals traditionally realise these vowels as monophthongs [eː] and [ɔː], or, among middle-class females, the then incoming centralised GOAT monophthong [ɛː] (FinneGAN 2011), which Watt and Tillotson suggest is a feature that is “becoming typical of an area stretching from Yorkshire almost to the Scottish border” (2001: 296). Chesterfield teenagers appear to deny the existence of these linguistic markers in their own linguistic repertoire, perhaps as a rejection of Sheffield, Yorkshire, and potentially the North as a whole. In sum, despite perceptions of the North being “better” to many of my participants, who largely also consider Sheffield to be part of the North, initial results show that Chesterfield teenagers remain linguistically and ideologically rooted in the Midlands.


Dyer, J. (2002). ‘We all speak the same round here’: Dialect levelling in a Scottish-English community. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*. 6 (1); 99-116.


