UKLVC 12
‘They were canny good like’:
Variation and change in the intensifying system of Tyneside teenagers

This project examines discourse features in Tyneside teenage language, providing new insights into: (1) intensifiers, (2) quotatives, and (3) discourse-pragmatic markers. The research questions revolve around what typifies current Tyneside Teen Talk, by comparing it: (i) synchronically with other age groups in the region; (ii) diachronically with Tyneside English data from other time periods; and (iii) cross-regionally with the teen talk of other English-speaking regions and even other languages. I also aim to discover whether these features suggest an age-grading process or instead demonstrate evidence for ongoing language change in the dialect.

The study analyses speech samples from males and females in three different age groups (12-15, 16-18, and 19-20). Data for the oldest group is extracted from DECTE (Diachronic Electronic Corpus of Tyneside English; Corrigan et al. 2012). Further recent recordings have been made of semi-structured sociolinguistic interviews with Tyneside speakers from the 12-15 and 16-18 age groups, at schools and other such institutions locally.

The present paper focuses on intensifiers, analysing usage specifically among the 16-18 age group which shows very low frequencies of very and of the local variant canny. The latter is used almost exclusively by the males. This corroborates previous findings on canny suggesting it to be a recent innovation that is still used infrequently (Barnfield and Buchstaller 2010: 272). It also supports Childs’s (2016: 250) conclusions that canny might hold covert prestige for male speakers.

Focusing on the subset of boosters (following the model of McManus 2012, based on Quirk et al. 1985 and Paradis 1997), the four most-frequent boosters (really 44%, quite 21%, so 18% and very 8%) account for 91% of all boosters used, with several speakers exhibiting no other variants in their systems during their interviews. There is also considerable variation in the competition between quite and really. These two variants are used with very similar frequencies in the repertoire of male speakers, whereas really alone accounts for more than half of the boosters used by females (gender differences significant at p < 0.001, chi-square test) (see Figure 1). By comparing these results with Barnfield and Buchstaller’s (2010) diachronic analysis of DECTE, my dataset shows the steep decline in the frequency of very, and the rise of both really and so. It also confirms their conclusion that dead and pure were short-lived innovations, since they are almost non-existent in this newer dataset, with only one speaker (‘James’) using dead very frequently.

By examining the syntactic position of the modified adjective (see Figure 2), my results show that in attributive contexts, really is the most frequent variant (64% of the instances) while so is used marginally (3%). In predicative contexts, quite and so are used almost at the same frequency (syntactic position differences significant at p < 0.01, chi-square test).

These changes in the intensifier system are the focus here alongside changes in the systems of discourse-pragmatic markers and quotatives more broadly so as to offer an original and comprehensive account of recent language change in Tyneside discourse.
Figure 1 Distribution of the most frequent variants for the booster variable across genders

Figure 2 Distribution of variants for the boosting variable across syntactic positions of the modified adjective

References