

# Ask a linguist

*Experts answer your questions*



This issue's expert **Dr Sam Kirkham, Lancaster University**, answers the question: "Is it the case that the UK has the highest number of regional dialects?"

To begin thinking about this question we first need to consider what counts as a dialect. This isn't an easy task for a number of reasons! Most people would acknowledge the existence of something like a 'Lancashire' dialect, but do we say there are a number of dialects within Lancashire? Again, most people would certainly agree, citing examples such as a Blackburn dialect, Lancaster dialect, and so on. But could we identify further dialects within a place like Blackburn? When you take into account the systematic linguistic variation between people from different generations, ethnicities and social classes, does it make sense to talk about something like a 'Blackburn Asian' dialect, for example? Some linguists would classify such varieties as 'sociolects', a term often used to describe the variety of language spoken by a particular socio-demographic group, but it's clear that how we define a variety is likely to influence how many dialects we think there are.

To this end, linguists often find it helpful to think of dialects as being separate and distinct entities, but in reality there are rarely sharp boundaries between dialects. In his well-known book

The Dialects of England, Peter Trudgill notes that a Yorkshire dialect does not suddenly become a Durham dialect as soon as you cross the County Durham border! Instead, dialects tend to merge into one other and form a continuum over space and time.

Recent research suggests that many of the UK's regional dialects could be losing some of their highly distinctive features. One interpretation of this is that the UK will have fewer distinct dialects in the future. At the same time, we are also seeing the emergence of new dialects, such as multicultural youth varieties in large cities such as London. One such example is 'Multicultural London English', which has been studied by linguists such as Paul Kerswill and Jenny Cheshire. These new varieties seem to be the result of contact between speakers of various dialects and languages, which has eventually led to the formation of new varieties of British English.

It's clearly difficult to give a straightforward answer regarding the number of dialects in the UK, or how it compares with another country. One popular belief within the UK is that the UK has a greater number of regional dialects than the USA. Irrespective of whether

or not this is true, we certainly know that people are usually better at perceiving differences between dialects of their own national variety than that of another. So if we take non-linguists' perceptions of dialect differences into account then it complicates things even further. While these various factors make it impossible to answer such a question, it remains that the UK is indeed a dialectally diverse place. However, it's worth noting that some countries may have more languages than others have dialects. Take the example of Papua New Guinea, which is often described as having around 800 languages! ¶

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**Dr Sam Kirkham** is Lecturer in Sociophonetics at Lancaster University. His research interests include sociophonetics, language variation and change, and laboratory phonology.

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Do you have a burning linguistic question, something you've always wanted to know about language? Contact us on twitter, facebook or email and we will pose your question to an expert linguist and attempt to answer it in the next issue of Babel.