Surrey dialect research
by DAVID NORTH

There seems to be a fairly widespread belief that ‘Surrey does not really have a dialect’. This raises two important questions: first, what do we mean by the word ‘dialect’; and second, to what extent do the geographical limits of linguistic varieties coincide with administrative boundaries?

In non-specialist usage the term ‘dialect’ is usually associated with a type of speech which is considered to be quaint, old-fashioned and rural. Its relationship with other types of speech is often perceived in terms of value judgements which are socially and culturally conditioned and based on non-linguistic criteria. Thus ‘dialect’ is opposed on the one hand to ‘the Queen’s English’ which is held to be ‘correct’ and on the other to the many varieties of modern urban speech which are frequently condemned as ‘ugly, slovenly, lazy’.

While these attitudes are in themselves interesting and indicative of popular attitudes towards linguistic variation, in linguistic terms all forms of speech are equally valid and fulfil the needs of the social groups with which they are associated. Standard English, the variety used in writing, and Received Pronunciation (RP), the most prestigious type of pronunciation associated with it in England, owe their position to their development in influential social contexts over the last five centuries. Non-standard varieties have developed in other social environments and in particular geographical areas independently of, although often in a relationship of mutual influence with, the standard.

Language does not stand still, and change is natural and reflects its vitality. Modern English is merely a point in a process of development reaching back to the speech of the Germanic settlers from northern Germany. Urban varieties are often innovative and progressive, rural varieties frequently conservative and archaic; the standard language tends to be more artificially regulated than non-standard varieties and to resist change, but it has nevertheless lost features which are preserved in some regional varieties, for example the r in words like cart, door, water which is still pronounced in much of western England and in the south-east amongst older speakers.

There are strong arguments for not using the term ‘dialect’ at all. A language is a continuum which varies geographically and socially and which also changes in time; the geographical and social varieties are rarely discrete, still less so the chronological stages of development. It follows from this that no county can have a consistent and rigidly defined ‘dialect’ of its own. Local differences often result from the juxtaposition of innovative and conservative forms whose spread and recession tend to be influenced by factors like communication patterns and social prestige. Looked at from this perspective, the potential interest of Surrey speech becomes clear: its geographical position means that it must be seen as part of a continuum of south-eastern speech, but the social effects of its connections with London will be seen to exercise an important influence.

Dialectology is that branch of linguistics which is concerned with geographical and social variation. Linguistic geography concentrates on the mapping of local forms and the interpretation of the patterns which emerge. The history of dialect study in Surrey reflects the growth of the discipline nationally and is characterised by a steady increase in rigour and accuracy and a corresponding development in theory and method.

The second half of the 19th century was a period in which the rural gentry became increasingly interested in the language and customs of ordinary country people. Many amateur collectors produced glossaries of non-standard words recorded in their district; these vary in quality and usefulness, but in general there is an emphasis on the quaint and archaic and on vocabulary rather than pronunciation, and evidence of a systematic approach is rarely found. G Leveson Gower’s Surrey provincialisms (1876) and Glossary of Surrey words (1893) are collections of this
type: these contain words recorded in the Godstone area – a limitation which increases their value – and include material which is still of interest to the specialist today. Most of the material from these local and county collections was incorporated in Joseph Wright's *English dialect dictionary* (1898–1905) which remains a standard reference work.

During the same period linguists were becoming aware of the importance of non-standard speech, particularly in its contribution to research into the history of the language. A J Ellis undertook a monumental survey of regional pronunciation for which he developed an idiosyncratic and complicated system of phonetic notation. Much of his material was gathered second hand via members of the clergy and gentry, resulting in some inaccuracies and inconsistency of approach. Nevertheless, Ellis's work remains a valuable and comprehensive source of phonological information when treated with due caution. Ellis used evidence from the following localities in Surrey: Charlwood, Chertsey, Chobham, Croydon, Elstead, Ewhurst, Godalming, Godstone, Haslemere, Leatherhead, Ockley and Stoke (Ellis 1889).

After the turn of the century interest in English dialects waned, and it was only after the Second World War that a systematic national survey, inspired by important developments on the Continent, was undertaken. The *Survey of English dialects*, based at the University of Leeds, sent phonetically trained fieldworkers to 313 localities in England between 1948 and 1961. While the principal interest was in pronunciation and in agricultural, domestic and rural vocabulary, aspects of morphology and syntax were also investigated. The material was obtained directly from informants who were natives and life-long residents of the villages visited, and uniformity and comparability were ensured by working through a detailed questionnaire in each locality (Orton & Dieth 1962). Responses were written down using the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet and a programme of tape-recording was also undertaken. The localities investigated in Surrey were Coldharbour, East Clandon, Outwood, Thursley and Walton-on-the-Hill, and material from these villages has been included in work published under the auspices of the *Survey of English dialects* (Orton et al 1962–71; Orton & Wright 1974; Orton, Sanderson & Widdowson 1978).

Fig 1. Sketch map of Surrey, Kent and Sussex. Legend: Surrey points of inquiry: c = Coldharbour, d = Dunsfold, e = East Clandon, o = Outwood, t = Thursley, w = Walton-on-the-Hill. Towns: A = Ashford, B = Brighton, Ca = Canterbury, Ch = Chichester, Cr = Croydon, D = Dover, G = Guildford, Ha = Hastings, Ho = Horsham, M = Maidstone, MT = Medway Towns, P = Portsmouth, T = Tonbridge, TW = Tunbridge Wells, W = Woking.
Finally, the present writer has recently completed a detailed survey of the linguistic geography of Surrey, Kent and Sussex, supplementing the material from the Survey of English dialects localities with additional fieldwork. To the five localities mentioned above Dunsfold was added, so that the material relating to Surrey contained in this article is drawn from these six localities; their position is shown on fig 1. This most recent survey (North 1982) is based on material recorded at 31 localities in the three counties from life-long residents, most of whom were agricultural workers born in the 30-year period 1880–1910. It contains an analysis of the local sound systems and a geographical study of a sample of the agricultural vocabulary of the region. The aim of this paper is to illustrate some of the main features of this type of Surrey speech by means of suitable examples.

Fig 2 shows the distribution of the principal words for the rungs of a ladder in the Home Counties (drawn from Orton et al 1962–71; North 1982). This clearly shows how the three words used in Surrey — round, rung and staff — fit into a wider context, and also illustrates, incidentally, the absence of any correspondence between linguistic and administrative boundaries. It should be pointed out that the lines on a linguistic map, ‘isoglosses’, do not necessarily reflect rigid divisions; they are merely drawn on the basis of the data recorded as an aid to interpretation and to show the relative positions of generalised areas of distribution. Maps such as this are an indispensable aid to research in linguistic geography, since it is often possible to explain distribution patterns by correlating them with landscape features, centres of population or communication routes, and to deduce from them the process of linguistic change. For example, on fig 2 the distribution of the standard word rung is firmly centred on the London area, but has pushed outwards into Surrey, the south-east midlands and elsewhere, at the expense of round and other non-standard forms.

It is this influence of London speech which leads many to the conclusion that ‘Surrey has no dialect’. It has already been pointed out that this view is erroneous, but the subjective perceptions underlying it are nevertheless interesting. The frequent equation of the term
'dialect' with older rural speech leads, in the south and west of England, to an expectation that 'dialect' will contain features of pronunciation like the preservation of r in words like bird, cart, fork. One only has to listen to television advertisements to appreciate the use made of this feature to suggest the alleged country wholesomeness of certain mass-produced brands of food and drink. This r has been absent in RP and London English since the end of the 18th century at least (Downes 1984, 135–6), but its occurrence in the area south of the Thames is variable; some speakers pronounce it on every occasion, some less frequently and others rarely or never. Fig 3 presents my data on the frequency with which this preconsonantal r is pronounced by elderly rural speakers in Surrey, Kent and Sussex. Even in this conservative group preconsonantal r was recorded relatively rarely in north-eastern Surrey and only approaches its maximum possible frequency in the south-west of the county. Looking at the whole region, the distribution revealed by the map is a recurrent pattern in the linguistic geography of the south-east; the form associated with RP and London English (in this case the absence of r – note the position of the black area fig 3) is spreading out from its source in the capital towards the south coast urban centres, particularly Brighton and the Channel ports via the major communication routes and inland towns, ie those areas where the cultural influence of London is strongest (cf fig 1). This pattern has continued to develop so that preconsonantal r is now almost totally absent amongst younger people in the south-east.

In this region local differences in pronunciation are found in the vowel sounds much more frequently than in consonants. While it is difficult to discuss this kind of variation without using phonetic symbols and terminology, it is nevertheless possible to outline a few of the more distinctive developments. Another feature of pronunciation which has spread into Surrey and the rest of the region in the same way as the loss of preconsonantal r – this time from Popular London English (‘Cockney’ in its broadest sense) – is a change whereby the diphthong in words like about, down, round is becoming a monophthong: ‘abaht’, ‘dahn’, ‘rahnd’. This had penetrated the speech of the oldest speakers in the east of the county (an informant at Walton-on-the-Hill born in 1866 had the monophthong in 32% of the relevant instances and one at Outwood born in 1884 scored 17%), and has continued to spread into local speech.
One of the most revealing approaches to phonological variation is that which is concerned with 'structural dialectology'. This is associated with the influential modern intellectual movement which stresses the importance of systems and the interrelated items of which they are constituted. In dialectology one might examine, for instance, the different methods which local varieties employ to maintain the distinction between the words *bay*, *buy* and *boy*, in which the three vowel sounds make up a sub-system of diphthongs ending with an 'i' sound. In south-eastern England the vowel in words like *grass*, *bath*, *calf* was traditionally a long open front sound (like a long version of the short sound in *cat*); however, the movement of words like *round* into this area of the long vowel system (discussed above) would lead to pairs of words like *count* and *can't*, *grouse* and *grass* becoming homophones, were there not another change under way in the region (also under London and RP influence) involving the retraction of the old front vowel in *can't*, *grass* towards the back position occupied by the corresponding vowel in RP.

Other older pronunciations are also being replaced by sounds associated with RP and/or London English and have retreated towards the south, and particularly the south-west, of the county. For example, the rounded vowel which traditionally began the diphthong in words like *road*, *know* is shifting towards the central unrounded vowel of modern RP and London English.

As a result of its close geographical proximity to the capital and the early urbanisation of the northern and north-eastern parts of the county, Surrey speech has been under the influence of Standard and London English for well over a century. The intensified urbanisation of the county during this period and the associated development of social and cultural links with London, as well as its role as a channel through which metropolitan influences are diffused to more distant areas, have ensured that this tendency has continued.

The most important point to be made is that this pattern of change, in which innovations spread at the expense of older local forms, is a characteristic of language as a dynamic phenomenon which reflects changes in the social environment in which it is located. Not even the most conservative rural varieties are unaffected by change and outside influences. Surrey speech as a whole has a great deal to offer the dialectologist since the diversity of social, economic and cultural environments in the county provides a fascinating background to the study of linguistic variation and change.

![Fig 4. Distribution of words for breech-band in Surrey, Kent and Sussex](image.png)
Even the vocabulary of pre-mechanised agriculture as recorded from people born around the turn of the century reflects the influence of standard words. Fig 4 shows the distribution of the south-eastern terms for the broad strap which passes round the back of the horse's legs as part of the harness worn for drawing a cart or wagon. The exclusively south-eastern word coiler(s) (from French cul 'hinder part') must once have occupied much of the region, but its distribution has been fragmented by the diffusion of the widespread term breeching from the London area. This pattern, which reflects the same tendency as that illustrated by fig 3, can be seen again on fig 5 which deals with words for the shafts of a horse-drawn vehicle. The standard shafts is replacing...
rods, another word found only in this region and once used in Kent and all of Surrey and Sussex except the extreme west of both counties. (In figs 4 and 5 some informants knew both the newer and older terms, but the maps have been drawn so as to show the full extent of the latter.)

This recurrent pattern, in which features of Standard and/or London English spread into the region via the major towns and the communication routes linking these to the capital, is superimposed upon older patterns which must reflect innovations whose diffusion stopped long ago and whose distribution has become static. The most important of these in the region is one in which Surrey and western and central Sussex are distinguished from eastern Sussex and Kent. Examples of this pattern are provided by figs 6 and 7, in which carter and whippen both continue westwards into central-southern England. While the boundaries shown do not coincide exactly—there is a long-standing maxim in linguistic geography that ‘each word has its own history’—they nevertheless tend to fall in a similar zone. The causes of this significant ‘bundling’ of isoglosses are not really clear, but this division of the region must reflect past patterns of communication and of social, economic and cultural life parallel to those which have more recently resulted in the diffusion of forms from London into the region.

In addition to these recurrent patterns and relatively well-defined linguistic areas, many items have a very localised distribution or fall into areas which, while coherent, are impossible to interpret. An example of the latter is fig 8, showing the distribution of words for dove-cote in Surrey, Kent and Sussex.

As an illustration of the diversity which can arise within a relatively small area, the words recorded at the six Surrey localities for a number of agricultural and rural objects are given in table 1 (data from Orton et al 1962–71; North 1982).

Although the significance of Surrey distributions can only be fully appreciated when set in their regional context, a few interesting observations can nevertheless be made on the basis of these lists. The use of cart-lodge (1) at Dunsfold is an isolated occurrence of a word usually restricted to eastern Sussex, Kent and southern East Anglia but apparently well established in this corner of south-western Surrey. Bear-bind (2) at Coldharbour is similarly separated by
Table 1  Words recorded at the six Surrey localities for certain agricultural and rural objects (data from Orton et al 1962–71 and North 1982).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Thursley</th>
<th>Dunsfold</th>
<th>E. Clandon</th>
<th>Coldharbour</th>
<th>Walton</th>
<th>Outwood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Wagon/Cart-shed</td>
<td>shed</td>
<td>-lodge</td>
<td>-hovel</td>
<td>-shed</td>
<td>-shed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bind-weed</td>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>Bell-bind</td>
<td>Bind-weed</td>
<td>Bell-bind</td>
<td>Bell-bind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Hay-knife</td>
<td>Mow-cutter</td>
<td>Mow-cutter</td>
<td>Hay-knife</td>
<td>Hay-knife</td>
<td>Hay-knife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Prong (of fork)</td>
<td>Grain</td>
<td>Grain</td>
<td>Spean</td>
<td>Spean</td>
<td>Tine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Gate-bars</td>
<td>Spleats</td>
<td>Bars</td>
<td>Spleats</td>
<td>Bars</td>
<td>Bars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Charlock</td>
<td>Charlock</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Kilk</td>
<td>Kilk</td>
<td>Cadlock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Knee-straps</td>
<td>Whirlers</td>
<td>Whirlers</td>
<td>Whirlers</td>
<td>Straps</td>
<td>Straps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Goose-grass</td>
<td>Cliders</td>
<td>Sweet-hearts</td>
<td>Clider</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Cliver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Rung</td>
<td>Round</td>
<td>Round</td>
<td>Round</td>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>Staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Cow-house</td>
<td>Cow-stall</td>
<td>Cow-stall</td>
<td>Cow-stall</td>
<td>Cow-shed</td>
<td>Cow-house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Weakest piglet</td>
<td>Darling</td>
<td>Dolly-pig</td>
<td>Darling</td>
<td>Dawling</td>
<td>Dawling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Hub</td>
<td>Stock</td>
<td>Stock</td>
<td>Stock</td>
<td>Box</td>
<td>Hub</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

some distance from the area of Kent and south-eastern Sussex to which it is otherwise restricted in this region.

*Mow-cutter* (3) is a word which has not been recorded outside western central Surrey and refers to the knife used for cutting hay from a stack (usually rick in Surrey) in trusses. *Mow* is another word for a stack of hay or corn, now restricted to parts of south-western England; the fossilised form *mow-cutter*, however, shows that in the past *mow* must have been current in
Surrey. This is an example of the important contribution dialectology can make to the history of the language.

Other terms now found only in the south-east are *spear* (4), *spleats* (5: western Surrey and the extreme west of Sussex only), *kilk* (6) and *whirlers* (7). Some words which are characteristic of western Surrey only link this area to the extreme west of Sussex and central-southern England, for example *grain* (4), *clider(s)* (8) and *round* (9, cf fig 2).

These words, it must be remembered, were recorded from informants born at the end of the last century or during the early years of the present one. Some words, like those for the hay-knife, will have become obsolete along with the objects they refer to, but it would be interesting to find out how far, and in which areas, other local and non-standard terms have survived.

It is hoped that this brief survey has fulfilled its aim of introducing the non-specialist reader to the development and methods of dialectology, and of presenting some illustrations of the main lines of development affecting non-standard Surrey speech. The conclusions of the research carried out to date can be summarised as follows: in the past Surrey speech was closely associated with that of central and western Sussex; this larger area often represented the eastern outpost of central-southern English features, and was distinguished from Kent and eastern Sussex by a number of significant isoglosses. More recently, within the last century and a half at least, innovations originating in Standard and/or London English have been diffused into Surrey and the rest of the south-east and superimposed upon the older patterns.

This paper has dealt exclusively with phonological and lexical material since the morphological and syntactical patterns of south-eastern speech have yet to be examined in detail. It needs to be stressed again that the social group whose speech has been studied was a very restricted one, representing the most archaic linguistic stratum in the population. Casual listening to younger speakers and those from urban areas in the county confirms that the influence of London and Standard English, present to a variable extent in the older age-group, has continued. What seems to be emerging at the local level in Surrey, in place of the traditional vernacular, is a non-standard variety of English containing some standard features but heavily influenced by Popular London English. Any future research would have to be along the lines of the elaborate urban sociolinguistic surveys which have been undertaken in several parts of the English-speaking world (cf Labov 1972; Trudgill 1974). Surrey has plenty to offer in this respect both as regards the extent of London influence on the large urban areas, the smaller country towns and the villages, and the present nature of local differentiation within the county.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am grateful to Professor T Shippey for permitting me to make use of material recorded by the *Survey of English dialects* and deposited in the School of English at the University of Leeds.

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