Teaching notes

These notes and answers support the student activities that follow on pp.5-7.

Task one: Standard and non-standard sentences

All the sentences are examples of non-standard English, and many feature regional dialect forms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 We were stood at the bus stop for ages.</td>
<td>Although this is primarily a regional dialect form common to northern England and the Midlands, it is becoming more frequent across the UK. At times this and its equivalent with the verb ‘sit’ e.g. ‘They are sat’ can be heard in places where Standard English might be expected (BBC News on TV/radio for example). A quick online search shows that many people are discussing it (even on Mumsnet), which suggests this is a dialect feature that is spreading.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 I didn’t do nothing.</td>
<td>An example of a double negative, a common feature of a range of regional dialects.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 They got off the train at the wrong station.</td>
<td>This might be regarded as an example of language change rather than a distinctive regional dialect feature. Speakers seem to consider that the first ‘off’ is part of the verb phrase, and as a result an extra preposition is needed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 There are less opportunities now for young people than in the previous decade.</td>
<td>Again, this is an example of language change in action - think of supermarket checkout signs for ‘10 items or less’. The distinction between countable and uncountable nouns appears to be changing, with the comparative ‘fewer’ (used for countable nouns) falling out of use.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 I’ve gone and took one of your biscuits.</td>
<td>Many regional dialects see a regular pattern in the past tense and past participle forms of irregular verbs. In Standard English many irregular verbs have distinct past tense forms from past participle forms: ‘take - took - taken’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 We had this French student came to stay with us last summer.</td>
<td>Again, a number of regional dialects omit relative pronouns where Standard English would require it: ‘... this French student who came ...’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 I’m looking forward to seeing youse.</td>
<td>Irish and Liverpudlian English both feature the distinctive plural second person pronoun ‘youse’. Liverpool English has been influenced by Irish English as a result of Irish immigration to the city. Other varieties of English also feature a plural form of Standard English’ ‘you’ i.e. ‘y’all’ in American varieties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 The lift mustn’t be working.</td>
<td>The use of ‘must’, where Standard English would tend to use ‘can’ or ‘is’, is typical of Tyneside and Scottish dialects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 She ain’t got no pencil.</td>
<td>This use of a double negative, plus the non-standard negator ‘ain’t’, which is typical across a range of English regional dialects.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
10. Sorry I were late yesterday. The paradigm for past tense forms of ‘to be’ has become regular across regional dialects, unlike in Standard English. The use of ‘were’ for first, second and third person singular and plural is typical of northern and Midlands dialects.

11. I was a backseat car passenger in a car accident, so I was. The emphatic tag ‘so I was’ is typical of Northern Irish English.

12. That is going to be bad weather tomorrow. The pronoun ‘that’ instead of ‘it’ when used as a dummy pronoun is typical of East Anglia dialect.

13. Mother would take us to school and her would then go straight to work. Standard English regards ‘her’ as an object pronoun, but many regional dialects make different distinctions. In the West Midlands and Black Country, ‘her’ can be used as a subject pronoun as in this example.

14. They’ve not had the time to do the work yet. The way the negative ‘not’ is attached/not attached to verbs differs between standard and dialect varieties of English. In northern English and Scottish English dialects, it is common to see ‘not’ used separately, rather than the Standard English equivalent ‘They haven’t’.

15. You was so right about that. Again, the use of only one past tense form of ‘be’ unlike the distinct paradigm in Standard English ‘I was’, ‘you were’, ‘s/he was’. South-east English dialects typically feature this variant.

Sources:
- The British Library’s Sounds Familiar web resources on dialect grammar: www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/sounds/regional-voices/grammatical-variation/

Depending on the students’ background(s) and homogeneity, there may be lots of similarities or differences. Class discussion would be helpful to tease out any differences, such as students who may have moved into the area and who as a result speak a different regional variety of English than the majority of their classmates. The discussions might consider whether certain dialect variations are increasingly more generally used, rather than being typical of a specific region.

For example, sentences 1, 3 and 4 feature examples of non-standard English that are very widespread and not necessarily linked to a particular regional dialect. Indeed, these examples are among the most often complained about, and a quick search online will attest to this. They are also increasingly common in situations where Standard English would be expected: signs in supermarkets, BBC news or current affairs programmes on radio and television.
Task two: Research

Ask students to use the same sentences or add example sentences which are typical grammatical dialect forms of their region to create a survey, looking at attitudes to dialect features. The British Library’s archive, ‘Sounds Familiar?’, has a good range of examples of dialect grammar from different regions, if you want to encourage students to study local dialect variations.

Although the students’ sample will be too small to be statistically significant, it may be interesting to see if their findings replicate what has been commonly found in dialect studies with regard to gender, social class, age and the use of Standard English or dialect forms.

Ethics in research is absolutely vital, so students should avoid giving details about their research that might prejudice or affect their results. Students should, however, explain that they are doing the questionnaire as part of their A-level, and that the anonymity of participants will be respected.

Analysing results

Students will have considered regional origin/identity, gender and age as factors that influence speakers’ attitudes to and use of non-standard English forms. This question asks them to consider any other possible factors in the respondents’ background that may affect their attitude to and use of non-standard English forms. They may have already looked at how regional accents in the UK are closely linked to socio-economic class; often the use of regional accent is accompanied by regional dialect features.

Task three: Dialect Levelling

a. She left you them books. ‘Them’ as demonstrative adjective.
b. He dressed himself this morning. Regularisation of reflexive pronouns.
c. I’m coming up London. Simplification of complex prepositions (compare Standard English ‘I’m coming up to London’).
d. How are you doing? I’m doing good. Adjectival form used as adverb.
e. They all like to do it themselves, that lot. Regularisation of reflexive pronouns.
f. They’ve got a daughter. She is five year old now. Plural noun form is the same as singular form.
g. I never saw you at the station yesterday. ‘Never’ used as past tense negative.
h. We aren’t going nowhere this summer. Double negative.
i. You owe me ten pound. Plural noun form is the same as singular form.
j. There’s never been no one like her. Double negative.


Extension task

Again, you’ll need to emphasise research ethics to students. Students can use the traditional measurements of A to E, established by the National Readership Survey (see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_structure_of_the_United_Kingdom for details) to give a rough indication of their respondents’ social class. Discourage students from simply counting the number of non-standard features. Instead, they should present these as a percentage of the whole of each respondent’s speech.

Students could transcribe their informants’ answers for more detailed analysis, and count the total number of words, lexemes and structures used and the number of non-standard words, lexemes and structures. This can then be expressed as a percentage for easy comparison across
different speakers (perhaps pooling other students’ responses to make a bigger database or corpus for investigation).

Students could also use Coupland’s list of seven typical sociolect features as a checklist and/or pick out other examples of non-standard lexis and grammar. As before, they can use the British Library’s ‘Sounds Familiar?’ webpages to identify features that are typical of the local area or the area where their respondent came from.
Task one: Standard and non-standard sentences

1. Look at the sentences below and rate them for yourself as ‘Acceptable’, ‘Acceptable only in speech’, or ‘Unacceptable’.
2. What it is about the sentences you have classed as ‘Unacceptable’ that makes them so? Explain your ideas using appropriate language terminology.
3. Compare your responses with someone else. If you have disagreed about any of the sentences, why do you think this is?

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Sentence</th>
<th>Acceptable</th>
<th>Acceptable only in speech</th>
<th>Unacceptable</th>
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</thead>
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<td>2  I didn’t do nothing.</td>
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<td>3  They got off of the train at the wrong station.</td>
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<td>4  There are less opportunities now for young people than in the previous decade.</td>
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<td>11 I was a backseat car passenger in a car accident, so I was.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Task two: Research

Most of the example sentences above are typical of regional dialects across the UK. According to research into dialects in the UK:

- Dialect variation (especially in grammar/syntax) is more common in men’s speech than women’s, as men derive covert prestige from using non-standard forms, while women are regarded (mostly) more negatively for diverging from Standard English.
Regional dialects are changing as a result of the growth of the cities since the 1980s, as rural areas become increasingly urban and rural dialects converge with their urban neighbours’ dialects.

Among researchers there’s sometimes a belief that ‘purer’ forms of regional dialects are only spoken or used by older generations, as younger generations’ dialects become more similar - a process known as ‘dialect levelling’.

Use the fifteen sentences in task one to make your own survey. You can ask people in your school or college, as well as friends and family to give their opinions on the acceptability of these 15 non-standard sentences.

As well as noting down your respondent’s judgement on each sentence, take down their details:

- where are they from originally
- their gender
- their age.

Make sure you keep respondents’ details anonymous and always explain how you are going to use their data.

If you like, you can use the British Library’s resources on regional dialects available at: www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/sounds/regional-voices/grammatical-variation/ . You can search for examples of dialect forms that are typical of your own area, which you could include in your survey (and exclude some of the sentences that are not typical of your area).

Analysing your results

Once you have completed your surveys, categorise the answers. You may wish to group responses according to the respondents’ gender to see if women are more likely to prefer standard forms for example. You can create age categories, e.g. 16 - 25, 20 - 40, 41 - 60 and 61+, to investigate whether there are differences in accepting (and possibly using) non-standard forms of English.

Looking at your results, do age and/or gender explain your findings? What other contextual aspects may influence people’s attitude towards Standard English and dialect varieties?

Task three: Dialect levelling

Research into British regional dialects has suggested that there are several grammatical features that are non-standard, but which are found across different regional dialects. Coupland (1988) suggested that there are seven grammatical features that are so common that they should be considered British sociolect features, as they are more linked to the speakers’ socio-economic background than their regional origins:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>multiple negatives</th>
<th>‘never’ as past tense negative</th>
<th>‘them’ as demonstrative adjective</th>
<th>unmarked plural forms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>adjectival forms used as adverbs</td>
<td>simplifying complex preposition constructions</td>
<td>regularising reflexive pronouns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Identify the following examples, using Coupland’s British sociolect index:
   a. She left you them books.
   b. He dressed hisself this morning.
   c. I’m coming up London.
   d. How are you doing? I’m doing good.
   e. They all like to do it theirselves, that lot.
   f. They’ve got a daughter. She is five year old now.
   g. I never saw you at the station yesterday.
   h. We aren’t going nowhere this summer.
   i. You owe me ten pound.
   j. There’s never been no one like her.

Extension task

Record short interviews with different people in your local area. Explain what you are doing, and how you will keep their details anonymous. If you ask an interviewee to tell you about their work/job, this will probably lead to a sufficient amount of speech for you to analyse. This will also help you to find out more about their social class if you search online for the A-E categories.

Alternatively, it might be interesting to test if Coupland’s British sociolect research, published nearly 30 years ago, is still relevant today. Select a TV programme, such as Gogglebox, which features real people from across the UK’s regions and social class spectrum. Do the more middle class and elite class speakers use fewer of Coupland’s sociolect forms in favour of Standard English, for example?