

Travelling Language: An Investigation into Romani Lexis Found in Scotland and North-East England

LIDLAW SCHOLARSHIP: SUMMER RESEARCH PROJECT 1
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ABSTRACT

Based on my own knowledge growing up in North-East England, this study investigates the use of Romani dialect terms in low-formality contexts. Using the Scottish Government Census (2011) and work by the British Broadcasting Company into a Multilingual Nation (2014), it identifies target areas that are popular with the travelling community. There is a current lack of understanding regarding the continued usage of Romani derived terms by communities in the North of the United Kingdom, and their impact on these areas. This study aims to research the origin of these terms and the frequency of usage within a demographic of participants, finally gaining an insight into the attitudes they hold towards them.

The research uses a Qualtrics survey compiling Romani dialect from multiple sources to test social class and geographical frequency of use. Matras (1995) identifies Romani as a language that exists outside of a coherent geographical area. Therefore, the Romani dialect has complicated language contact patterns, and it remains unclear why it is more accepted into local language in specific areas of the United Kingdom. The survey utilises Mike Savages' Social Class in the 21st Century to identify a representative demographic, thus ensuring responses from all social classes. The research paper then discusses the data gathered, and the implications this has for social attitudes and the acceptance of Romani dialect into Modern English. Finally, drawing the conclusion that Romani lexis is impactful on North-East England and Scottish language in low-formality contexts and remains an integral part of everyday speech.

INTRODUCTION

This research primarily investigates the relationship between slang terms used across the North-East coast of England and Scotland influenced by the Romani language. The Romani language is unique as it is the only Indic language spoken exclusively outside of the Indian subcontinent (Szalai, A. 2006). It is therefore significant that it could be used as a social class marker throughout the North of the United Kingdom, and this connection will be explored further with regard to social attitudes and class systems.

The following essay first discusses the background information and existing research surrounding Romani linguistics. It goes on to show the frequency of Romani derived lexis used throughout target areas. Target areas have been identified using the Scottish Government Census (2011) and work by the BBC on a Multilingual Nation (2014). There is then a discussion of methodology when producing a survey for distribution, including reliability of sources. Finally, resulting in a presentation of results and unanswered questions. This study aims to recognise the association with Romani derived colloquialisms and social attitude markers.

BACKGROUND

In the Early 16th century, the Romani language was spoken by the majority of the British travelling population who came from France, Germany and Scandinavia. This was especially common across the Scotland and Northern England border, as it was a popular settlement. (BBC Multilingual Nation, 2014). When examining previous research surrounding this topic, it is clear to see a gap of knowledge surrounding Romani language being used as slang, or colloquialisms, in the North of the United Kingdom. Despite the acknowledgement that Scotland and Northern England were favourable areas for travellers, little is understood of the continued use of Romani language there. This could be due to Romani having complicated patterns of language contact, as it is a language that exists outside a coherent geographical area (Matras, Y. 1995). According to an article by The Guardian citing the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) the East of England hosts the largest volume of traveller caravans at 24% of the total (The Guardian, 2011). This has opened a conversation regarding the influence of travelling communities on Eastern communities across the United Kingdom.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the relationship between Romani derived lexis and markers of informality or social class throughout the North-East of England and Scotland is explored. Thus, aiming to prove Romani lexis is not used by particular social classes and rather it has been adopted as a geographical marker. Furthermore, it can be used to indicate social attitudes towards travelling culture.

To investigate this, it was important to first clarify what can be classified as Romani derived lexis. A number of sources have been useful in constructing a testable word list, which can be found within **Figure 1** below.

Figure 1: Word List with Sources

Source	Word and Definition			
EDD English Dictionary online (2021)	Shan: Meaning pitiful, silly, poor, bad, shabby; probably a Romani word		Radged: Meaning furious, mad, see also <i>radgy</i>	
Dictionary of the Scots Language (2021)	Beirn/Bairn: Meaning a child, male or female, offspring of any age	Gadjie/Gadjo: A man	Scran: Meaning food, especially in off or miscellaneous pieces	
Glossary of Romani Terms (2021)	Kushti: Meaning good or nice	Gorja/Gawjie: Meaning a non-travelling person	Mush: Man or friend	
Online Etymology Dictionary (2021)	Pal: Meaning partner, mate, chum	Chav: Meaning antisocial youth	Shiv: Meaning A razor or knife	Nark: meaning to act as a police informer
A dictionary of North-East dialect (2005)	Mullered: Meaning drunk	Peev: Meaning alcoholic drink	Barry: Meaning excellent or good	Munter: Meaning ugly

A Romany Dictionary (2014)	Togs: Meaning clothes	Pani: Meaning water	Gaff: Meaning house	Divvy: Meaning silly
English-Romany Dictionary (2021)	Chor (chore): Meaning to steal			

From the evidence above, it can be speculated that the words: *shan*, *kushti*, *gorja*, *mush*, *pal*, *chav*, *shiv*, *nark*, *togs*, *pani*, *gaff*, *divvy* and *chor* have emerged from, or due to contact with, the Romani language. Although this is helpful in creating a testable word list, it is necessary to note the reliability of the information presented. As stated in the Bibliography of Modern Romany Linguistics (P. Bakker & Y. Matras, 2003) some publications combine characteristics of different dialects or can be influenced by the authors own experiences. The nature of Romani as a geographically undefined language makes it difficult to pinpoint derivation, as many words emerge a result of language contact with other European languages. For the research purpose, the words have been selected from all sources shown above to test the reliability and usage across the United Kingdom.

The survey platform Qualtrics has provided an easy and accessible way to distribute a questionnaire to participants. The questionnaire consists of fifteen questions, ten being multiple choice and five being open answer. The multiple-choice questions are useful in gaining quantitative data that can be analysed quickly. They also provide potential answers for participants which makes the questionnaire quicker to complete and increases response rate. An example of a multiple-choice question from the survey is:

<p>If something is deemed good or nice, what word might you use to describe it?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Barry b. Great c. Cushty/Kushti d. None of the above
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The term ‘Barry’ meaning excellent in this context has been taken from Bill Griffiths (2005) *A Dictionary of North-East Dialect*. This is notably not considered to be derived from Romani. However, as the questionnaire will be distributed predominantly through the North-East of England, it is helpful to distinguish between participants who will generally use low-formality terms and those who will not, regardless of their origin. ‘Cushty’ or ‘Kushti’ meaning good or nice has been identified as a Romani term by the Glossary of Romani Terms (2021). Therefore, ‘Barry’ and ‘Cushty’ share similar connotations and can be used interchangeably in the same context. The standard English ‘great’ has been included as a control term, it is expected this will be used most by those outside of the target areas.

Open questions have been included to test participants knowledge of word meanings. This gives the opportunity for them to elaborate on their attitudes towards certain words. An example of an open question is:

For the following questions, please state whether you know the meaning of the word. If yes, please provide a brief definition if you can.

1. Chav

According to the Online Etymology Dictionary (2021), the term ‘chav’, meaning antisocial youth, is an example of Northern British slang emerging around 1997. It is also stated that the origin is unclear, however it was found in earlier use as homosexual slang for “have sex” and has since undergone a semantic shift. The Etymology Dictionary also theorises the term ultimately originates from Romani or “Gypsy”. As mentioned earlier sources are often unclear but should not be omitted. The qualitative data collected from this question will provide an insight into the participants understanding of the term, and also their underlying attitudes toward it.

Participants are first questioned about the county they live in in the United Kingdom. This provides a map of respondents and shows the geographical spread of Romani lexis. They are then asked to define their social class using pre-determined categories. The social class definitions are taken from Mike Savage’s *Social Class in the 21st Century* (2015) and the question requires participants to choose the ‘most applicable category’. This consists of seven options: Elite, Established Middle Class, Technical Middle Class, New Affluent Workers,

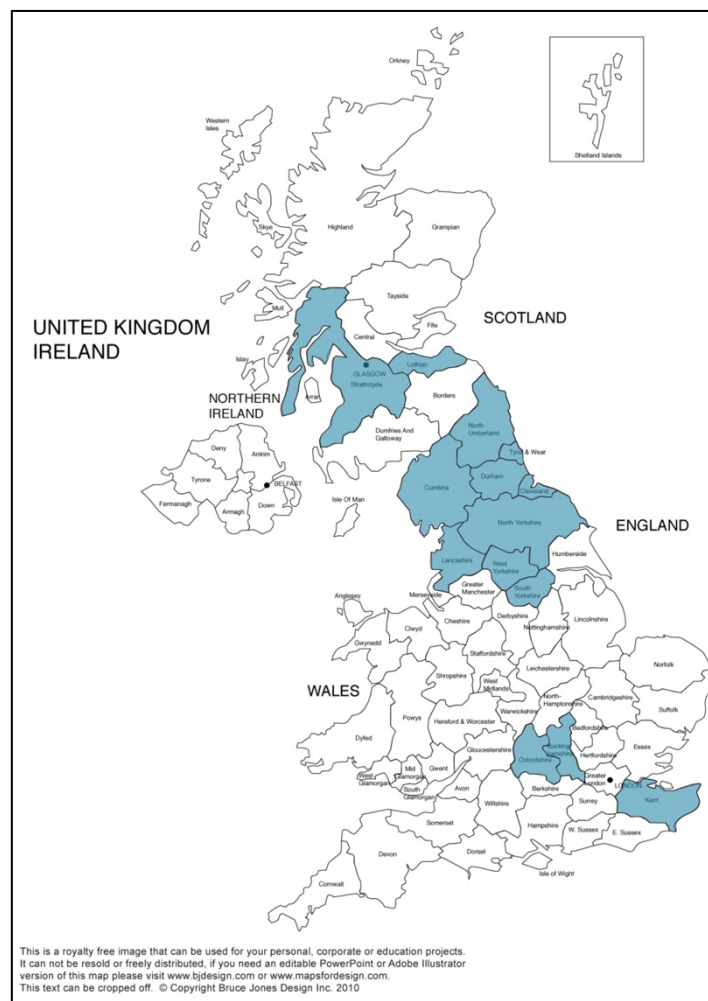
Traditional Working Class, Emergent Service Sector and Precariat. Alongside the category there is a short explanation of the social status or occupation a person may have within that subsection. The research aims to gather results from a wide range of results from all social classes, but ultimately prove that most people within target geographical areas do use Romani slang within informal contexts regardless of their background.

The questionnaire was then distributed across the United Kingdom, with target participants in the North-East of England and Scotland. The distribution was not limited to these target areas, as it is expected that participants outside of the North-East and Scotland will be unfamiliar with the terms or unsure of their meaning. Therefore, demonstrating their concentrated usage.

RESULTS

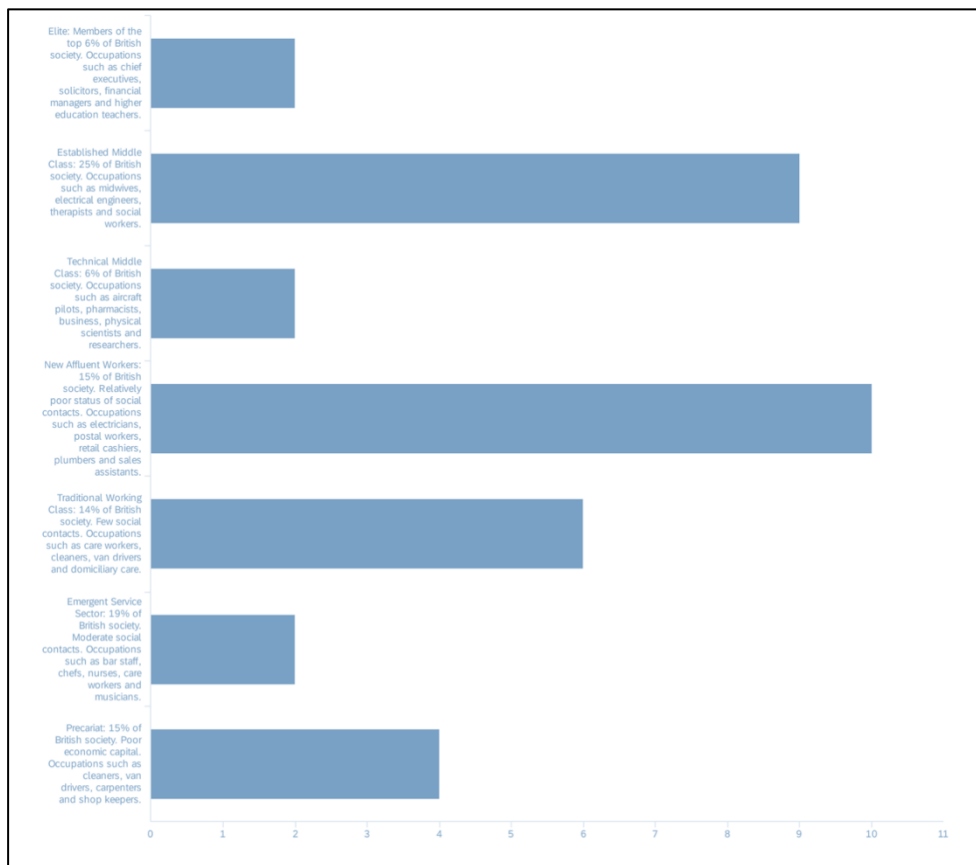
The survey set out to test the correlation between social class, geographical area and frequency of Romani derived lexis used in low formality settings. From the first question it is possible to plot a map of respondents based on their county.

Figure Two:



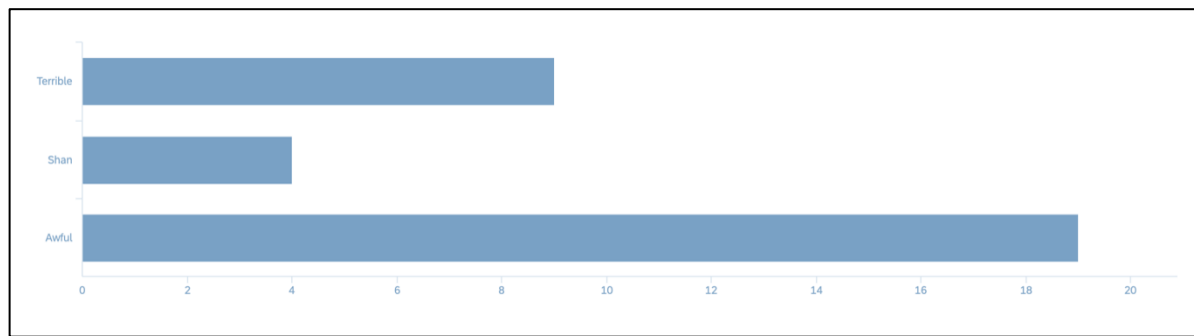
As shown in Figure Two, there are participants from almost all high Northern counties and the target Scotland counties, as identified earlier. The survey distribution was not limited which has resulted in respondents from Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Kent. Although they are not target areas, it is interesting to note if they always opt for the Standard English choice. Looking at the spread of social class, the demographic is spread across all categories. This is somewhat reflective of the United Kingdom population on a small scale. Most commonly, participants classify themselves as Established Middle Class or New Affluent Workers which account for a combined 40% of the British population.

Figure Three:



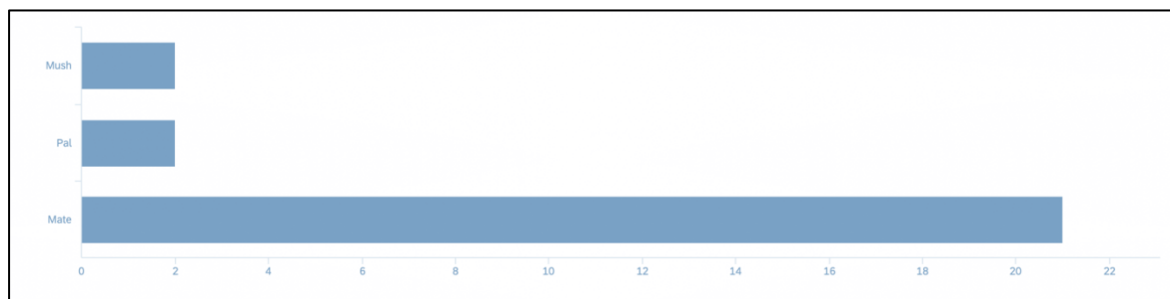
This spread of results can be expected, as some social classes are less common within the population. It is beneficial to the research that every social class is represented within the demographic. As a consequence, it may be possible to suggest Romani derived lexis are not social class specific and are instead a social attitude marker.

Figure Four:



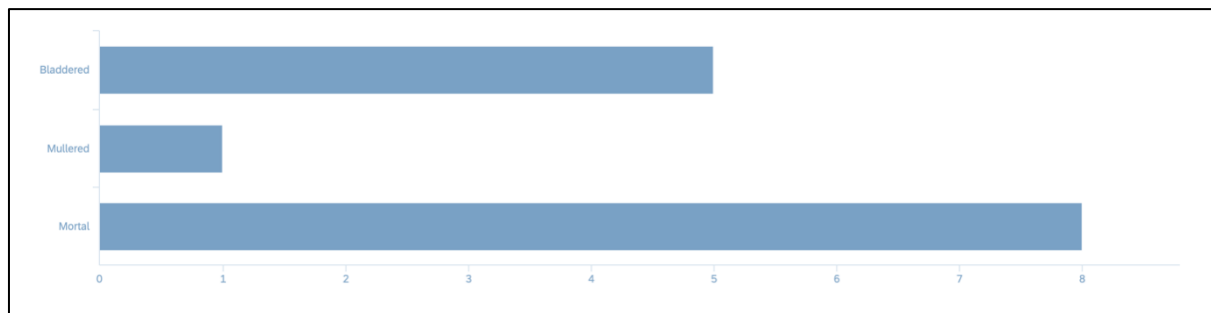
Looking next to the multiple-choice questions, the most common answer for Question One is the Standard English ‘awful’ followed by ‘terrible’. This suggests the participants are less likely to choose the low-formality form, which may influence their following answers. ‘Shan’ is commonly used throughout the North-East of England and Scotland to mean silly, poor, bad or pitiful (EDD English Dictionary Online, 2021). It is also identified as ‘probably a Romani word’, though there is not concrete evidence for this. Nevertheless, it is the least commonly chosen answer, which disagrees with the initial hypothesis.

Figure Five:



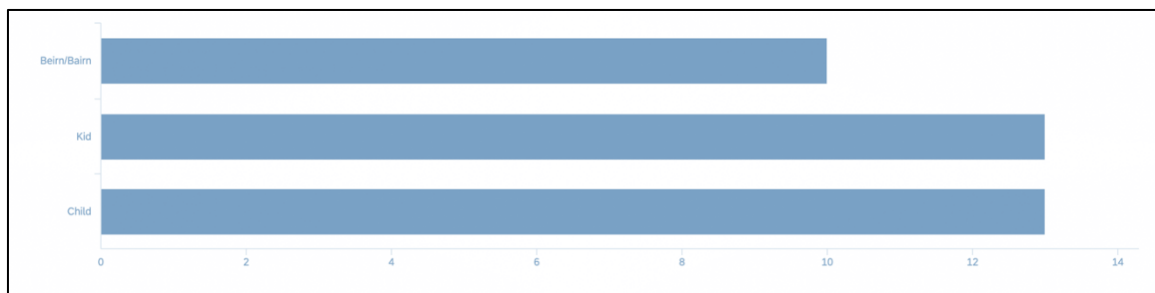
This is echoed in the following question which asks the participants to choose another word for ‘friend’. The most popular answer ‘mate’ is the closest to Standard English. Both ‘pal’ and ‘mush’ are believed to originate in Romani. Peter Bakker’s work in *The Other Languages of Europe* (2000) is relevant in this case, as he states although Romani is ‘geographically the most widespread language in Europe’ it remains a minority language. Words with rumoured origin in Romani are thus far the least frequently spoken with participants across the North of England, Scotland and elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Figure Six:



When choosing a synonym for ‘drunk’, participants most commonly answered ‘mortal’. In this context, mortal refers to someone who is extremely intoxicated, or ‘dead drunk’ (Dictionary of the Scots Language, ‘mortal’, 2021). It is most commonly used in areas Scotland and Newcastle and is not suspected to have Romani ties. This question identifies participants likelihood to use low-formality language that can be considered geographically specific to Scotland and the North-East. As shown here, the participants in this study do tend to use local dialect.

Figure Seven:



In Figure Seven, the spread of answers is interesting as participants are equally as likely to use the informal ‘kid’ as they are the Standard English ‘child’. Ten respondents also stated they are most likely to use ‘beirn/bairn’ in informal contexts. This is defined by the Dictionary of the Scots language (2021) as meaning ‘a child, male or female, offspring of any age’. This is not related to Romani, and instead has Germanic origin. In Modern English it is mainly found in Northern England and Scotland (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2021). This mirrors the pattern of usage found with Romani lexis. From this finding it is possible to suggest Scotland and Northern England naturally share dialect due to their close proximity. Furthermore, the choice to share dialect in this area of the United Kingdom may not be a deliberate choice. It instead reflects covert attitudes to the place they live based on how likely they are to use dialect that identifies them with that place.

Figure Eight:

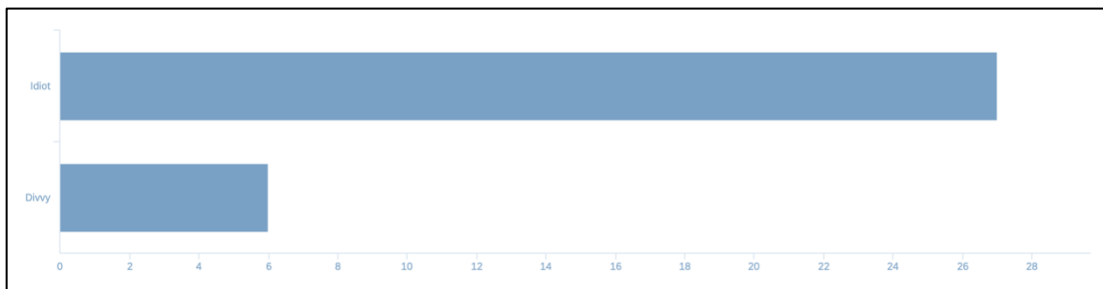
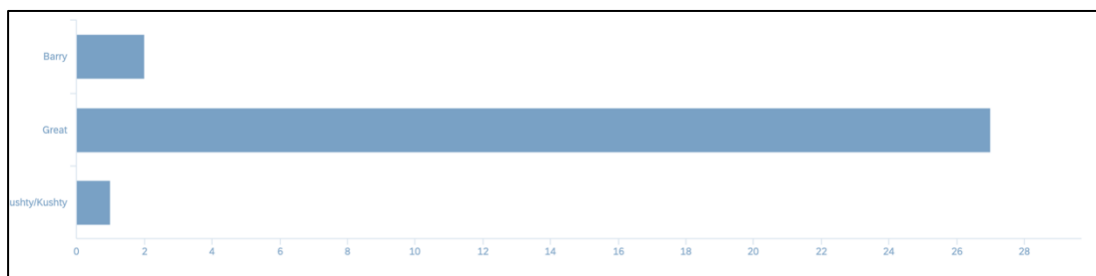
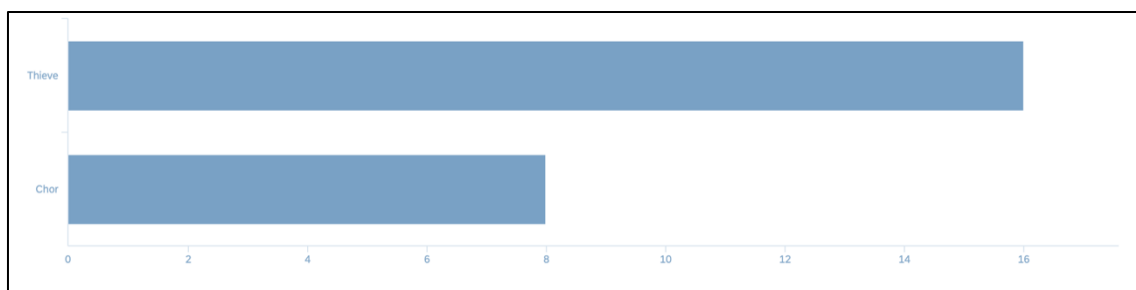


Figure Nine:



Both Figure Eight and Figure Nine illustrate a similar language choice. The most popular choice in both questions is the Standard English option, 'idiot' and 'great'. Figure Nine includes the North-East 'barry' meaning excellent, and the Romani 'kushti/cushty' meaning good or nice. Participants who chose 'barry' are interestingly from the county of Lothian which is home to Edinburgh. Although Bill Griffiths (2005) identified 'barry' as a North-Eastern term, this study shows evidence its' usage is diminishing in this area. Despite this, it does show a connection between the North-East and Scotland dialect, as the two areas are using terms which emerged across the border.

Figure Ten:



The preference for Standard English continues in the above question, however there is a much more even divide with respondents who are also likely to use the low-formality term. In Figure Ten, eight participants stated they are more likely to use 'chor/chore' than they are 'thieve'

when describing the act of stealing. This is identified as potentially Romani by the English-Romany Dictionary (2021). The multiple-choice questions in this study have identified which Romani words are the most widely accepted into British and Scottish dialect. All of the words tested are used by at least one participant within the demographic. Therefore, demonstrating Romani dialect is in circulation within Northern UK, and participants from the South were unfamiliar with the terms – opting for Standard English.

Looking next to the open-answer questions, the qualitative data gathered gives an insight into participants social attitudes. The term ‘nark’ meaning police informer has been identified by the Online Etymology Dictionary (2021) as ‘probably from the Romany *nak* “nose”’. Participants in this study gave varied responses in respect to the definition including tell-tale, ‘grass’, police informer and snitch. Thirteen responses from the thirty-nine understood the Romani derived meaning in Modern English. However, nine respondents from County Durham and Teesside believed the word meant ‘to annoy or be annoyed’, or to irritate. This shows deviation from the Romani derived meaning as it is undergoing a semantic shift in the North-East. Nevertheless, participants from across the North-East and Scotland were aware of the word and its’ meaning.

The word ‘shiv’ proved to be less popular with participants. Meaning ‘a razor’ or knife, it is often believed to be a Romani word deriving from *chivomengro* also meaning knife (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2021). Only twelve of the participants were familiar with this term and able to correctly define it. This could be due to contextual factors, such as the growing use of ‘shiv’ within criminal and prison circles it is less integrated within everyday language. One participant comically answered, ‘the thing with holes in it that you drain your pasta with?’. Showing this word is not commonly used in the North-East and Scotland, but a minority are aware of it.

The colloquialism ‘chav’ is believed to originate from the Romani ‘chavi’ and originally meant antisocial youth. It had become popular British slang by 2004 but was first in circulation around 1997 in Northern England (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2021). By 2005 ‘chav’ had made it into the Oxford English Dictionary, defined as ‘a young working-class person who dresses in casual sports clothing’. This is arguably the most accepted term to derive from Romani in Modern English, all participants were aware of the term and able to give a definition. It is also the clearest indicator of social attitudes, as participants defined chav as ‘scruffy’, ‘scum’ and

‘low level’. The initial definition of ‘chav’ simply referred to a young person wearing designer-style sportswear. From the results gathered ‘chav’ has undergone a semantic pejoration, where views towards the term and the people it describes are now much more negative.

CONCLUSIONS

The data gathered in this study is able to prove the population of the North-East and Scotland are familiar with, and continue to use, Romani derived slang in their everyday life. The quantitative data visualises the frequency of usage within the demographic, and the qualitative data has provided an insight to understanding and attitudes of the terms presented. In relation to the initial research question, the communities within the target areas do use Romani dialect in Modern English. However, it is not a consistent usage across all of the counties studied and the same participant does not use all of the Romani terms and may equally opt for other Scottish or North-East dialect terms. The Romani dialect terms studied often hold negative or informal connotations, therefore contextual factors have played a role in participants likelihood to use the words. To investigate this further, a second survey will be conducted to directly question participants attitudes towards the Romani terms.

Similar to other research into Romani linguistics, this study has left unanswered questions. It remains unclear why Northern England and Scotland have embraced Romani dialect into their everyday speech to a greater extent than elsewhere in the UK. This research has opened a discussion into the continued use of Romani derived lexis, and especially its’ acceptance into Modern English. Words such as ‘chav’ are now widely known and frequently used by people identifying with all social backgrounds. From the evidence presented, it is clear that Romani communities are influential on low-formality speech not only in Northern England and Scotland, but in the whole of the UK. The study of Romani lexis in the United Kingdom is ongoing, and this study will continue to investigate the growing usage and divide of social opinion.

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