A-Level Learning Resources

Dialect and Heritage Project

Dialect and Heritage Project

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Introduction

Welcome to this resource pack which is designed to help A-Level students gain an understanding of the diverse world of English dialects. Through a series of engaging activities and discussions, students will explore the evolution of dialects, grapple with changing attitudes towards different varieties, and experience the life of a dialect fieldworker as they try their hand at using the International Phonetic Alphabet to produce transcriptions of speech.

These resources are part of the **Dialect and Heritage Project**, a National Lottery Heritage-funded initiative based at the University of Leeds. The University worked in partnership with five museums to present a snapshot of dialect in England today. This vital aspect of our heritage is being shared with communities across England and with a wider online audience through the project's website and digitised collections. These digitised collections are available for both you and your students to explore. The focus of the collections is the **Survey of English Dialects** (SED), created by Harold Orton and Eugen Dieth, conducted by fieldworkers from the University of Leeds during the 1950s.

Stanley Ellis with Tom Mason (LAVC/PHO/P2164)

"The project will preserve this invaluable cultural legacy for future generations."

Professor Fiona Douglas

Hornblower (LAVC/PHO/P1622)

Wallops (Ninepins) (LAVC/PHO/P1744)

The Survey of English Dialects (SED)

Imagine a team of intrepid linguists travelling across England to remote villages. They had to find bed and board, and suitable informants to interview in order to capture the diversity of local dialects. This ambitious endeavour was known as the **Survey of English Dialects** (SED). It remains the most extensive and well-known exploration of the dialects of England ever undertaken.

Corn Dolly (LAVC/PHO/P1831)

SED Word Map: Scraps (LAVC/PHO/S032)

Butter-making: Churning (LAVC/PHO/P1485)

The legacy of this monumental project, along with subsequent research conducted by students and staff at the **Leeds Institute of Dialect and Folk Life Studies** (1964-1983), is now carefully preserved in the **Leeds Archive of Vernacular Culture**. This archive is a national treasure containing the results of the Survey: sound recordings, fieldworkers' notebooks, research materials, word and pronunciation maps; and also photographs from the 1960s.

Making a Hay Creel (LAVC/PHO/P0791)

Understanding dialects

What is dialect?

Dialects consist of **pronunciation**, **vocabulary**, and **grammar**, and they combine to create distinctive language varieties, shaped by the people who use them and the regions they come from. Dialects can emerge due to geography, social factors, historical influences, and more, and they can provide valuable insights into our linguistic history. Dialects can be spoken or written.

Accents are all about pronunciation, so they relate to spoken language. Everyone has an accent (simply put, a way of pronouncing) whether or not they speak a variety that reveals where they come from.

Variation and change are part of the natural life cycle of all languages. Some words, pronunciations, and grammatical features are retained by local dialects long after they have been lost from so-called 'standard' varieties. So, by looking at dialects, we can often gain insights into older historical forms of the language as well as tracking similarities and differences between local varieties across different parts of the country.

Activity 1: noticing variation across time and place

Go to the Sound Map on the Dialect and Heritage Project website. Choose a recording close to your local area and play it for the students. The recordings are from the **Survey of English Dialects**. Some of the speakers were born as far back as the 1870s.

Use the recording to prompt a warm-up discussion. Ask students what they can hear. Can they understand it and what differences do they notice between dialect then and now? Are there specific pronunciations, words, or grammatical patterns that they find interesting? Are they surprised that people used to speak like that?

Language attitudes

Language attitudes are an integral part of how we perceive and interact with the world of languages and dialects. Most people prefer some accents and/or dialects to others, and some of these views may go as far as linguistic prejudices, which can shape our interactions with, or attitudes towards, other people. We may feel proud of, or embarrassed about, the varieties we use ourselves. These emotional responses to different varieties are often shaped by our background, education, and the values of those around us.

Linguists recognise and celebrate the diversity that dialects and different accents bring. Dialects are not 'wrong' or 'lesser' forms of language. They represent distinctive, yet equally valid, ways of speaking and writing, though they are often used in different contexts from standard varieties of the language. Dialects can be a source of cultural pride and identity, despite facing occasional stigma or marginalisation.

Activity 2: exploring language attitudes

Play the recording again. This time, students should note down any specific features they notice that are different from their own speech. These could include variations in pronunciation, vocabulary, or grammar. If there are unfamiliar words, can they agree on the spelling? Where would they go to find out and what do we do if we can't find these words in the dictionary?

The English Dialect Dictionary can be found online here (http://eddonline-proj.uibk.ac.at/edd/termsOfUse.jsp)

The Oxford English Dictionary can be found online here (Oxford English Dictionary (oed.com))

Ask students whether they agree that the features in the recordings they have just heard should be regarded as 'non-standard' or incorrect? They should consider why individuals might use these forms, thinking about the influence of geography, culture, identity, gender, and community.

Writing dialect down using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)

One of the problems with written English is that orthography (spelling) isn't a very accurate reflection of how words are actually pronounced. The **International Phonetic Alphabet** (IPA) is a standardised system of symbols and notations used by linguists to represent the sounds of all the world's spoken languages. The IPA facilitates the precise transcription of phonemes which are the smallest distinctive units of sound that can change the meaning of a word in a language.

The IPA is important because it provides meaningful details beyond spelling. For example, we all spell the word 'cup' the same way in written Standard English, but the transcription of this word will vary, depending on the way we actually say it. For some people (e.g. most people from the south of England) /kʌp/ serves as an accurate transcription, while for other people (e.g. most people from the north of England) /kʊp/ will be much better. That is to say, although the English language has only five vowels in its written form (a, e, i, o, u), there are a host of ways in which these might be pronounced when produced out loud by speakers. The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) provides a standardised means of representing this variation. The different symbols relate to where in the vocal tract sounds are made, how, and the quality of the sounds themselves.

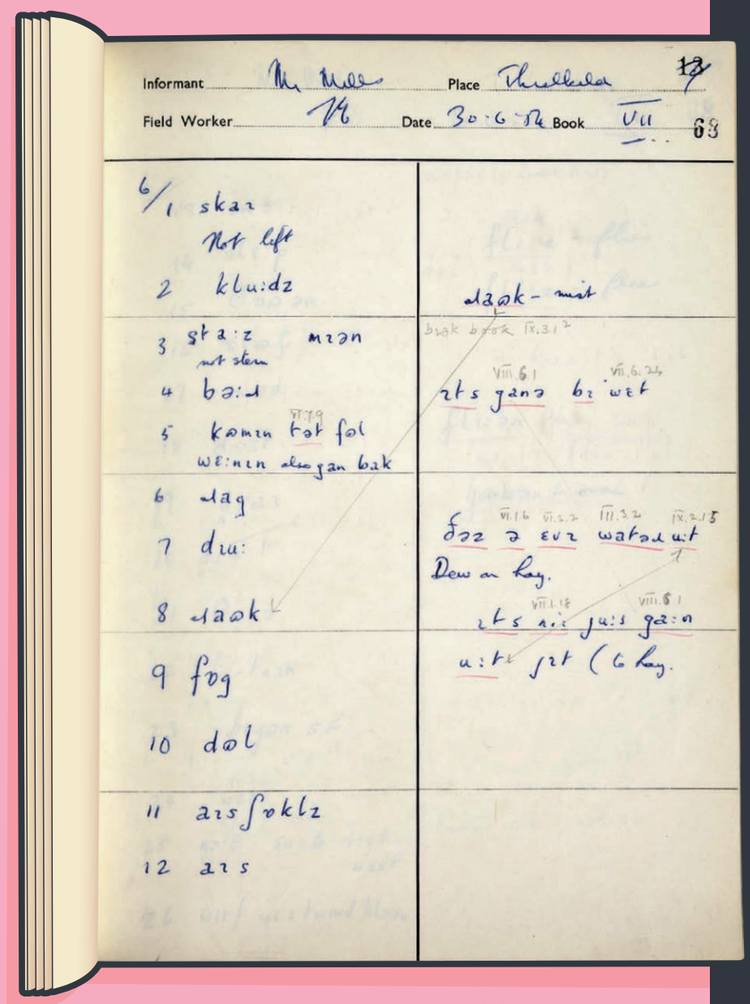
The fieldworkers used IPA in the SED to record the dialect of individuals and capture variation. They recorded it in **Response Books** created for each village they visited.

Activity 3

1. Look at the **Response Book page** from Threlkeld, Cumberland. Can you identify any words without knowing IPA?

2. Now look at the questions. Can you decipher any more words now?

3. Uncover the answers and see how many you guessed correctly.



Threlkeld Response Book - (LAVC/SED/7)

Questions

1. What can you see up there? (Ascertain the existence of *lift)*
2. When you can't see the blue sky, then it must be covered with...
3. What can you see in the sky on a clear night? (Ascertain the existence of *stern)*
4. What can you sometimes see round the moon?
5. The moon is always changing its size. How do you speak of that?
6. When in spring or autumn it has been cold at night, what may you see on the ground in the morning?
7. On other days, especially in late summer, the grass in the early morning is very wet. What has there been during the night?
8. In patches of low-lying ground near rivers, what do you sometimes see, especially in the early morning or the evening?
9. When it is really thick outside, especially in November, you call it...
10. When it is dark and gloomy, what sort of a day do you say it is?
11. In winter when water freezes, what can you sometimes see hanging down from the spouts?
12. When water freezes, it turns to...

Answers

1. Sky*. **2.** Clouds*. **3.** Stars*, moon*. **4.** Halo. **5.** To wax, to wane. **6.** Hoar frost. **7.** Dew*. **8.** Mist. **9.** Fog. **10.** Dull. **11.** Icicles. **12.** Ice*.
The corresponding questions were asked to find variations in pronunciation. The questions where the answers do not have an asterisk were used to record the different dialect words people used.

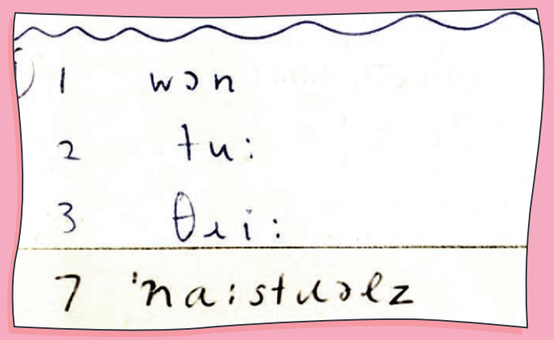
Learning IPA

Activity 4

Using the IPA, can you decode what the fieldworker has written in the following excerpts from SED response books?

Book VII: Numbers, Time and Weather [Tickhill Response Book] (LAVC/SED/2/2/6/33/7)

1.



(1) _____

(2) _____

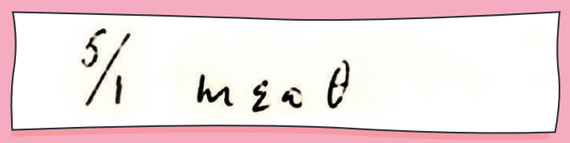
(3) _____

(7) _____

2.

Fill in the blanks: _____ _____ to _____

3.

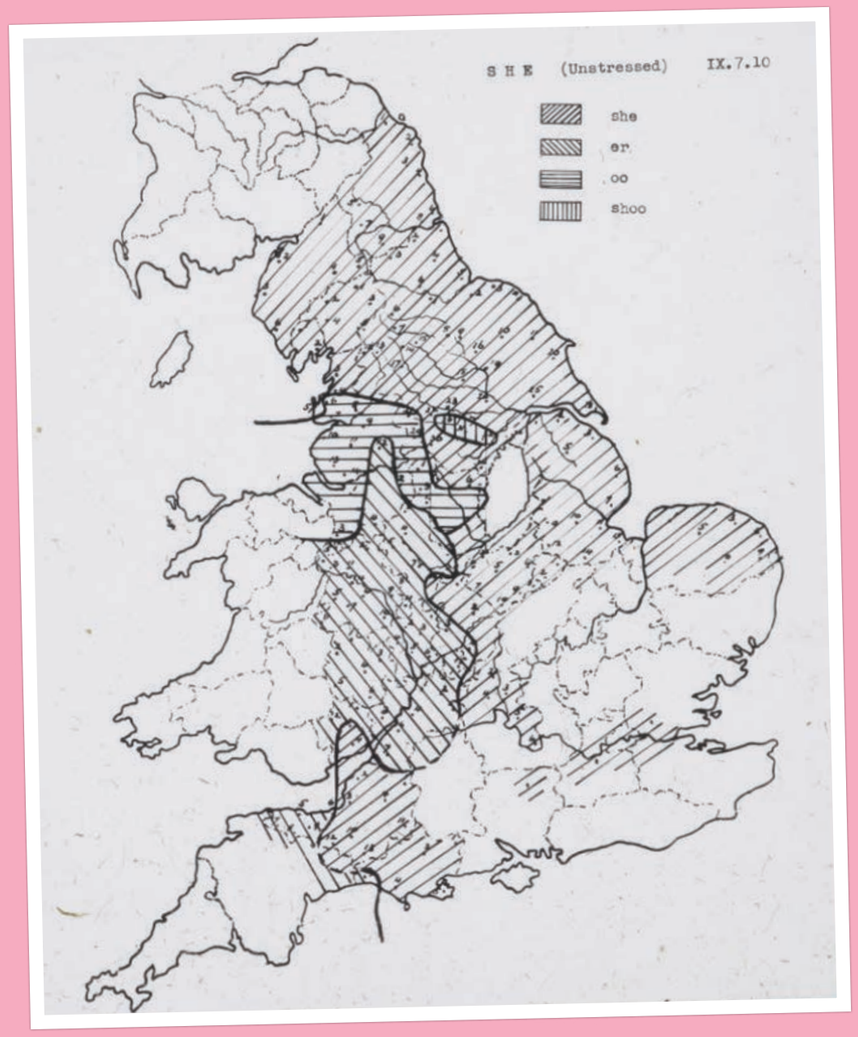


The transcription above is an example of how diphthongs can vary between different regional dialects. What could this word be? Transcribe this word in your own dialect. What are the main differences, if any?

Answers

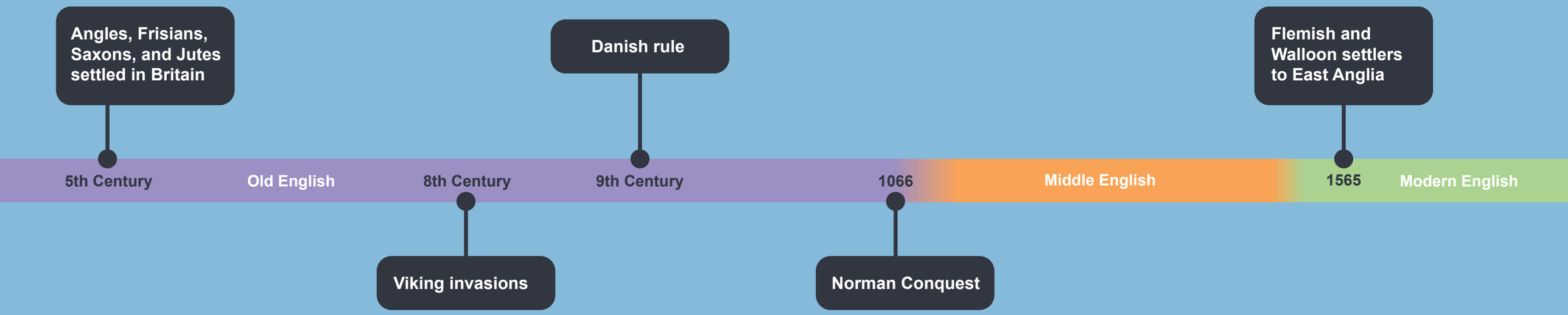
1. (1). one. (2). two. (3). three. (7). nostrils*. **2.** She's going to market. **3.** mouth.

4. At the beginning of each SED interview, the fieldworker would find out basic demographic information from an informant, such as their name, date and place of birth. Now that you've been given the tools to produce phonetic transcriptions, try and put these skills to the test. Ask the students to write down their own demographic information using IPA or those of the person they are working with.



SED Word Map: SHE (LAVC/PHO/S054)

The answers to the Survey questions were noted down in Response Books using IPA, then collated and edited back at the University of Leeds. Many of the responses were made into Word Maps to demonstrate the distribution of words and pronunciation across the UK. Above is a Word Map for 'she'.



How has dialect evolved?

Dialects in England, like dialects in any part of the world, have changed over the years due to various social and linguistic factors. These changes can be attributed to linguistic evolution, historical events, social influences, and more. Here's a brief overview of how dialects have changed in England.

Historical shifts: English has evolved significantly over its history. Old English, spoken in the early medieval period (c. 5th century), had a very different grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation compared to that of today's Modern English. In the 5th century, Germanic tribes known as the Angles, Frisians, Saxons, and Jutes settled in Britain and brought their words with them. Viking invasions between the 8th and 11th centuries and the influence of Danish rule between the 9th and 11th centuries brought a swathe of **Old Norse** vocabulary into the language, e.g. 'knife', borrowed from Old Norse **knífr**.

The Norman Conquest in 1066 marked the beginning of the Middle English period, which saw Old Norman (a form of Old French) and Latin words introduced into English. The strong influence this had on the English language's vocabulary can still be observed in Modern English today. For example, phrases like **vice versa**, **ad hoc**, **status quo**, and **etcetera** may all be used without people realising their Latin origins. And some Latinate vocabulary is even harder to spot, such as **'sophisticated'**.

Viking invaders and settlers from the 9th century onwards established an area we commonly call the Danelaw in Northern and Eastern England, and so introduced many Old Norse words into English. Their influence was extensive, as can be seen from very common words to describe everyday things such as 'egg', 'muck', 'skirt', 'sky', and 'Thursday' that borrowed into English. Some Old Norse words persist to the present day in local dialects, such as the Yorkshire words 'laik' meaning 'to play' and 'beck' for 'stream'.

Similarities can be found between the dialects of Northumberland, Cumbria, much of Northern England, and parts of lowland Scotland, as these all developed from the same Northumbrian dialect of Old English and are in close geographical proximity.

Specific regions in England have also been shaped by particular linguistic influences, setting them apart from the rest of the country, and shaping the local dialects. East Anglia has a history of trilingualism, including Dutch and Walloon French, due to the influence of settlers from the Low Countries. In 1565, the city of Norwich invited 30 'Dutch' (Flemish and Walloon) weavers and other textile workers to help modernise Norwich's own textile industry. From 1567 onwards, they were joined by Flemish and Walloon Protestant refugees, fleeing Spanish Catholic persecution. (The background to this was the Protestant Reformation that was sweeping across Europe at the time, causing huge religious, cultural, and political upheaval.) This led to the retention of some Dutch vocabulary, place names, and even some specific elements of the grammar in the local dialects. For example, in the 1950s, the **Survey of English Dialects** found people in Norfolk using 'dwile' to mean a dishcloth or mop (from Dutch dweyl).

Geographical isolation: In the past, geographical isolation played a significant role in shaping regional dialects. Communities in remote or isolated areas developed and preserved distinct linguistic features due to limited interaction with other communities. You can often see the influence of physical features of the landscape such as mountains or rivers on dialects. (Look at some of our Dialect and Heritage heat maps to see whether you can spot any words that have been influence by **topography**.) The introduction of efficient transport networks has had a profound impact on dialect evolution. With the expansion of roads, railways, and, more recently, air travel, geographical isolation has been somewhat mitigated. Increased dialect contact has led to dialect convergence in some areas, meaning neighbouring dialects have become more similar over time.

Social mobility: Social mobility has led to regional variation becoming less obvious. Over the past half century, there has been a marked increase in the number of people from less privileged or 'ordinary' backgrounds who have risen socially into positions of power and do not feel the social pressure to modify their speech. In the past, Received Pronunciation (RP), otherwise known as the 'Queen's English', was often considered to be the spoken 'standard' used by people in these positions. However, social perceptions of these varieties have now shifted, and they are arguably now linked with the past and often stigmatised.

Education: In the past, standardised language and education curriculum may have contributed to the homogenisation of language, as schools were typically encouraged to teach a standard form of English in speech as well as in writing, with local dialects potentially being discouraged or even stigmatised. Today, greater social mobility has led to increased access to education, including higher education. This change has helped to challenge traditional associations between prestige and specific dialects.

Migration: Migration patterns, both from within the UK and from other countries, have introduced new linguistic influences. People who have moved to the UK from around the world and their families often blend elements of their native languages with local dialects.

Media influence: The spread of mass media, such as television, radio, and the internet has had a significant impact on dialects. People are exposed to a wide array of accents, dialects, and speech patterns through television, radio, the internet, and social media. This exposure can foster a more tolerant attitude towards linguistic diversity.

Perceptions of dialects: Attitudes towards dialects have also changed. While some dialects were historically stigmatised, there is now a greater recognition of their cultural value, and efforts are made to preserve and celebrate them.

Preservation efforts: In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in preserving and documenting dialects. Organisations and researchers have worked to record and document regional dialects to ensure they are not lost.

It's important to note that dialect change is an ongoing process. Modern communication, migration, and cultural influences continue to shape language use in the UK. As a result, contemporary British dialects continue to evolve, adapt, and diversify reflecting the dynamic nature of language.

Activity 5

Ask: Can students think of people within the media who have distinctive local dialects?

Can they name any media channels or programmes that have representation of local or regionalised dialects?

Why are distinctive local dialects being included in more media channels?

Can they explore which channels, if any, may have influenced this potential change?

Activity 6

Old and new recordings. Go to the Archive Map on the Dialect and Heritage Project website. Use the filter to select ‘1950s audio’ and ‘new audio’. Play an SED recording followed by a new oral history recording from a nearby area. Provide the students with transcripts for both interviews. These can be accessed by clicking the transcript link on the map.

Let students hear the differences in dialects. What sounds similar or different?

What factors do students think may have contributed to this?

Repeat with another area on the map. Is there more or less of a difference between the SED recording and the new oral history?

Are there any words from the new oral history the students don’t know?

What do they think are the benefit of oral histories, past and present?

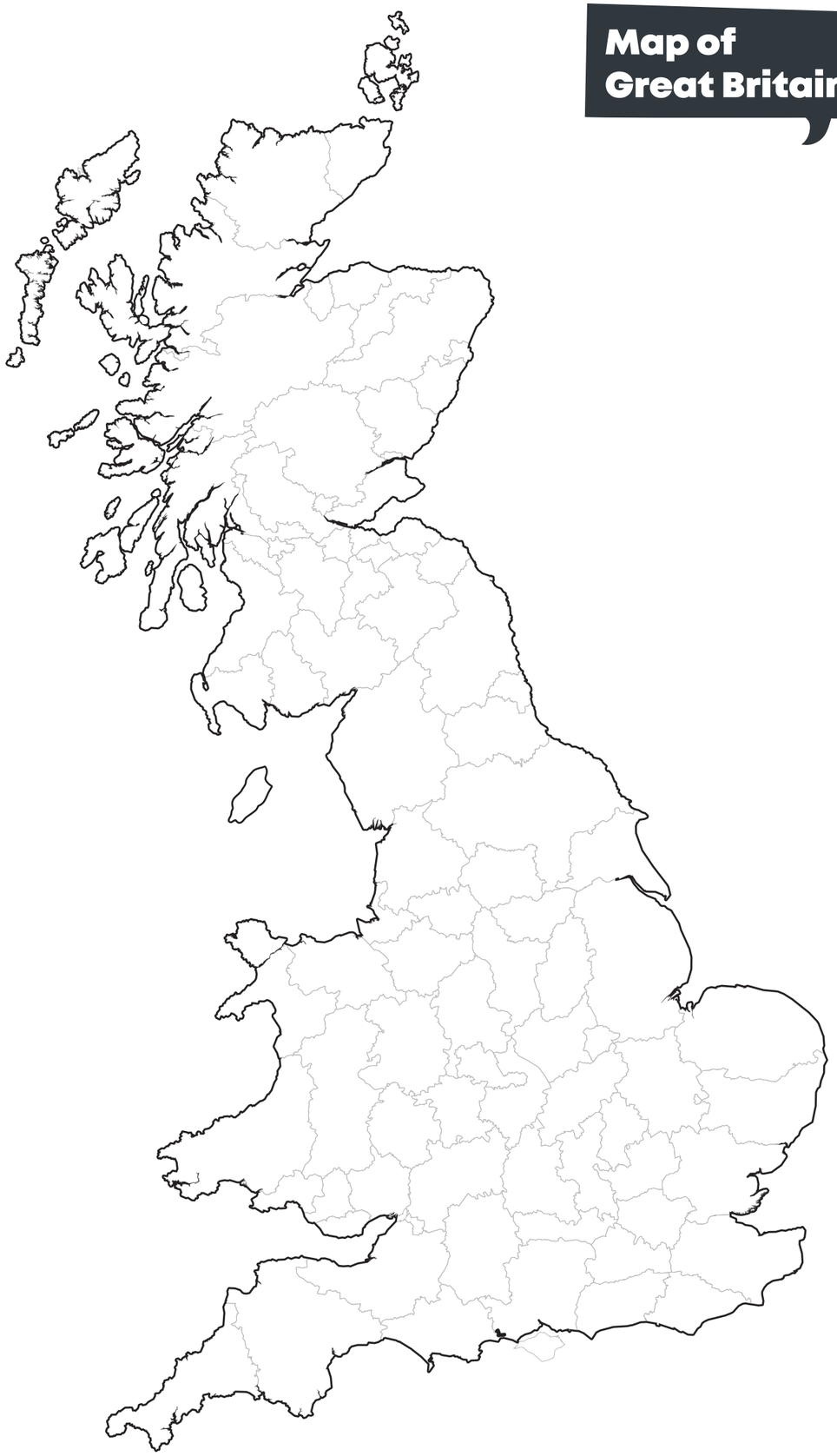
Activity 7

Become a dialect fieldworker. Carry out an investigation using The Great Big Dialect Hunt survey on the dialects used by your friends and family. Can you find examples of variation between people from different geographical areas or different age groups?

What about **borrowed** or **inherited** words? Using this blank outline map of Great Britain, can you begin to map some of this variation? (These activities can be done as individual and/or class activities.)

If you or your family would like to take part in The Great Big Dialect Hunt, please feel free to share a link to the website. We would love to add your words to our research!

Map of Great Britain



Extension activities

These activities are designed to support independent research activities.

There are hundreds of items that can be explored and examined. We suggest students use our website as a starting point. Explore the maps and stories about dialect and the SED.

Research a topic of their choice from the suggested list below or their own using the Dialect and Heritage Project website stories.

1. Choose some word maps from our website and compare and use the new dialect maps in our findings section to contrast the spread of the represented dialect words across England.

Write two articles for a website, one in standard written English and one representing your spoken dialect. You can look at the Dialect and Heritage Project website for inspiration as to what style to use and how to break things up into sections to make them easier to read.

Are you worried about how to spell some of the dialect words? If so, why, and how might you get round this problem?

The English Dialect Dictionary can be found online here

The Oxford English Dictionary can be found online here

2. There are many SED recordings and transcripts to be found on our Map. Please feel free to explore these and use ones from where you are. Just to be helpful, we have also added a few examples to the education resources page for you to use for this activity.

Alternatively, look at some of the photographs taken to accompany the SED and notice the activities they capture. Write an article summarising the recording and discuss the differences between the life and dialect the informant describes and uses to your own. Write one article in standard written English and one in your spoken dialect.

Wallops (Ninepins) (LAVC/PHO/P1745)

Cheesemaking: Putting Curd into a Cheesecloth (LAVC/PHO/P1526)

Cheesemaking: Cheese Press (LAVC/PHO/P1540)

Quoits (LAVC/PHO/P1774)

Bartle (West Witton Bartle Fair) (LAVC/PHO/P1614)

Haymaking: Horse Rake (LAVC/PHO/P1033)

Buttermaking Utensils (LAVC/PHO/P1488)

We hope that these resources have given you ideas for exploring the wide-ranging history of dialect heritage in the classroom. If your students would like to do more, we have some further suggestions.

We have a variety of ways for your students to submit their dialect to the project. This includes their dialect, inherited, and adopted words as explained on the website.

We've also got a fun quiz for your students to try out.

Older children, or younger ones with support, might want to take part in **The Great Big Dialect Hunt**, which is our online survey to capture dialect terms and data from across England.

Finally, we'd love to see photographs of your dialect-inspired school work. Please share these with us via @DialectHeritage on X/Twitter and @dialectandheritage Instagram.

To find out more about the Dialect and Heritage Project and our wider work, please contact us via:

dialectandheritage@leeds.ac.uk or at:

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