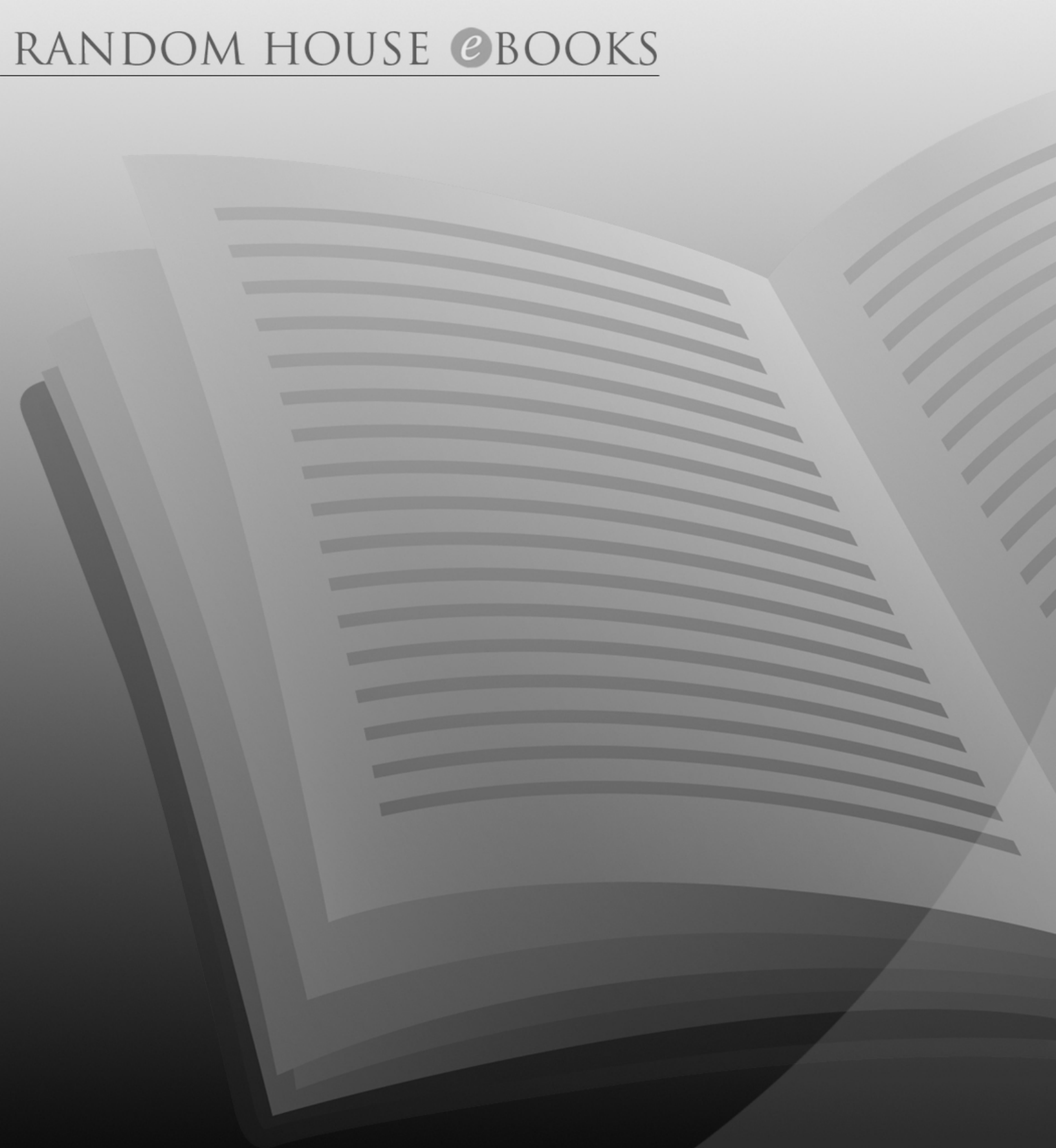
RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS



How to Talk Like a Local

Susie Dent

Contents

About the Book

If you were a Londoner visiting Cornwall would you know how to recognise a *grammersow*?

If you were from the West Country and took a trip up to Scotland, would you be bewildered if someone described you as *crabbit*?

And what if you left your native Belfast for Liverpool, would you understand if someone called you a *woollyback*?

How to Talk Like a Local is an entertaining guide that gathers together and explains hundreds of words that you would never find in an ordinary dictionary. From *dardledumdue*, which means day-dreamer in East Anglia, through *forkin robbins*, the Yorkshire term for earwigs, to *clemt*, a Lancashire word that means hungry, it covers the enormously rich variety of regional words that pepper the English language.

Not only does it pick out unique and unusal local words, it also draws together the dozens of terms from all over the country that mean the same thing, such as *knee-knabbed*, *crab-ankled* and *hurked-up* for knock-kneed, and *obzocky*, *butters* and *maftin* for ugly. In addition, it digs down to uncover the origins of these words, tracing their routes in to the language. Many terms meaning left-handed, for example, are related to the Kerr family of Ferniehirst Castle in Scotland, who preferred left-handed warriors. And many seemingly new coinages have been around for centuries, such as *chav*, which derives from a Romany word meaning

child, or *scouse*, which probably comes from *lapskaus*, a Norwegian word for a sailors' stew.

If you're intrigued by these colourful words and phrases, if you're interested in how English is really spoken, or if you want to discover how our language has evolved over the years, *How to Talk Like a Local* will prove irresistible – and enlightening – reading.

About the Author

Susie Dent is an independent editor and translator who appears regularly in *Countdown*'s 'dictionary corner'. She is the author of six editions of *The Language Report,* an annual guide to the new words and phrases that find their way into the English language.

How to Talk Like a Local

FROM COCKNEY TO GEORDIE,
A NATIONAL COMPANION

Susie Dent

Introduction

When I first told friends that I was embarking on a project collecting British dialect, their first thought was often that I would meet a lot of lonely people. I confess I feared they might be right. The speakers whose gems I was looking for were sure to be the last ones standing, bearers of vanishing vocabularies that would never be replaced. For the word ‘dialect’ has become synonymous with decline, just as English, we are told, is destined to become monolithic, bland, and peppered with universal lines absorbed from TV and Internet chat rooms.

It has been one of the nicest surprises of my career to learn just how wrong we were. That English is far from losing its edge I already knew – its golden age may even lie ahead of us still – but I accepted without question that it was different for dialect. Like most people I know, I believed that our local vocabularies are being ironed out at the same electric pace as new words are being coined, and for a much bigger audience than a particular neighbourhood. That what we now have is a general lexicon from which everyone, north and south, young and old, draws for expression. What I’ve discovered in the course of writing this book is that dialect is alive, well, and kicking hard. It’s just doing so in new and different ways.

Of course, thousands of beautiful and unmistakably local words are dying out; many have already done so. They are just as surely to be missed as the new are to be celebrated. For the most part they belonged to a world now lost to us – one populated with horse-drawn ploughs, dockers and

cotton workers, collieries and tin-mines. The lexicons of these and other industries are still there if you look hard enough, but as the need for them diminishes, so do the aural snapshots of the life they once so brilliantly described. Yet, over the 1,500 years of English's history, it was ever thus – words have come and gone (and often come back again) throughout, but the footprints they leave remain as telling as ever.

That *new* dialect is being coined today was an exhilarating find – of all the surprises that the writing of this book gave me, that was the big one. But there were lots of other discoveries along the way. As a collector of new words on the margins of Standard English, I've long realised that slang prefers particular subjects: sex, money, drink and drugs being at the top of the list. And so it is, I've discovered, with dialect. Local vocabulary collects around certain themes in just the same way. Some of these themes are as you might expect: given the nature of dialect – which is often as personal as it is local – it is hardly surprising that members of a family attract a whole range of different epithets. The staples in life, too, are natural targets for home-grown expression: bread, hunger, putting on a brew, packed lunches – all are core parts of our daily routine. And, just like slang, the lexicon for drunkenness is vast.

If the themes around which our local words congregate are fewer than you might expect, they make up for it with the dazzling variety within them. The dialect waterfront may be narrow – it is a world that deals in the easily accessible and concrete rather than the abstract – but it is infinitely deep. And it tells us an awful lot about Britain, its past, present and its locals (all of us).

Take a stereotype about the British: that we are a pessimistic bunch. If the number of local words for *ugly* is anything to go by – and it far surpasses the number for *pretty* – then on this occasion the cliché may have nailed it. And so it probably follows that the widest dialectal

variation for things connected to our health and our body dwell on the more unsavoury aspects: blisters, for example, or armpits, or the faintly animalistic act of panting. It may seem cruel too that English dialect has quite so many words for physical handicaps or misfortunes. Whether knock-kneed, pigeon-toed or splay-footed, you would be hard-pressed to find a place in Britain that didn't have a local name for it.

Food, too, is usually mentioned in the standard portrait of the British, and rarely without a raised eyebrow. In dialect, however, food has a special place. And rightly so. For all the mockery over the British palate, the variety of foods wrapped up in its history is reflected in a wealth of local words. For bread alone there are estimated to be hundreds of terms which all hold a special resonance (not to say flavour) up and down the land. Being hungry is a labourer's lot, and the lexicons for being famished for your snack or packed lunch are particularly full. In the same vein, if there is anything which defines Britain in the world's eyes more than English beer, it is probably tea-drinking. The nation's two potable obsessions come together in the idea of brewing tea: an act which is called dozens of things depending on where in Britain you want to put the kettle on.

The British may be a nation of shopkeepers, as the saying goes, but it seems we are also a lot of gossips. And the act of exchanging titbits of information about each other is another theme that, when it comes to dialect, knows few limits. It persists across the nation in a glorious collection of names. Among its local variants are **jangle** (Liverpool and North Wales), **jaffock** (Lancashire) and **pross** (Durham). In addition there is **chamrag** which probably links **cham**, from champ meaning 'to grind or chew', and **rag**, which as a noun means 'the tongue' and as a verb 'to talk', often teasingly. But my favourite must be **hawch**, a development of the standard **hawk** meaning 'to

spit’ and today a term that has been reborn in the home of clotted cream and jam teas – to me it sounds like making the noise of a full mouth whether with food or gossip.

These are but a few of the subjects which, travelling up and down Britain, you will find packed with local vocabulary – earthy, funny and full of the resonances of the accent they were born for. Not all of the words are old by any means – the young are mixing it up locally like the best of their ancestors. And this is why dialect survives – it is being taken up, reshaped and moved on by new generations of English-speakers who, contrary to rumour, can still distinguish between home and country.

The selection of words in the book are but a minuscule proportion of the vast array of local words from our past and present. They have been chosen for their colour, for the stories behind them, and for the representation they give of the regions that use them. To those who look up their favourite word and find it lacking, I apologise, but I hope that they will find some new treasures along the way.

I am often asked for my favourite of all the words I collected (and of the many I didn’t, thanks to the wonderful Voices Project conducted by the BBC, and to the efforts of many, many more before me). The truth is it changes every time I look at the words in this book. Two of the most enduring ones, though, have to be Northamptonshire’s **make a whim-wham for waterwheels** – to idle away your time by doing nothing at all, and East Anglia’s **dardledumdue**, a daydreamer. These choices must say something about me, but they also, I think, hold within them everything that is so wonderful about dialect. They, more than any rival expression in standard English, are simply born for their task. So far I’ve come across only one other person in each county who uses them. In this case at least, I hope they won’t be lonely for long.

SD

Acknowledgements

When I took on the writing of *How to Talk Like a Local*, I didn't know that I was a few weeks pregnant, and the deadlines I'd agreed with my editor seemed fine to me. As it turned out, my daughter knocked the stuffing out of our schedule and it is to Sophie Lazar's huge credit that she patiently extended my completion date on more than one occasion and with endless patience. It's Sophie to whom I probably owe my biggest thanks, for her support and for our regular head-bashing about how to get the best book out of the material I'd collected.

Two people in particular helped enormously with the research and facts underpinning this book. Jonathon Green, Britain's foremost chronicler of slang, contributed a great many of the dictionary's rich examples together with accounts of their history. And Andrew Ball's contributions to the vocabulary collected in dialect's central themes were painstakingly researched and wittily presented. I owe them both a lot of gratitude and free lunches.

Thanks to my trips to Leeds and Manchester to the *Countdown* studios, and to impromptu conversations with friends up and down the land whom I harnessed as consultants, I was able to sample the lexicons of many a town and village. Acquaintances of all ages invariably had strong memories of childhood sayings and family expressions. Matt Speddings, Mark Swallow, Elisabeth Atkins and Colin Murray were all particularly helpful.

My final set of thanks goes to two passionate chroniclers of dialect. Simon Elmes contributed the book's essays on

individual dialects and their pronunciation, which followed on from *Talking for Britain*, his hugely important and readable account of the local vocabulary collected so comprehensively by the BBC's Voices Project. Voices itself followed, on a smaller scale, in the enormous footsteps of Harold Orton's Survey of English Dialects at the University of Leeds, and the continuing work going on there, now spearheaded by this country's leading dialectologist, Clive Upton. Having met and worked with Clive during my time at Oxford University Press, for whom he wrote some of the best books I published, I know that it was his unfaltering enthusiasm and passion for dialect that swung my decision to write this book. Compared to such ambitious and necessary ventures as these, this book is a drop in the ocean. But it took its inspiration from them.

Susie Dent
March 2010

a

ackers

MONEY (UK-WIDE BUT originally London)

Coming up with synonyms for money must be one of language's most consistent preoccupations. There are literally hundreds, of which the majority are slang. One traditional source has always been foreign travel, especially when laden by a tin hat, pack, rifle and ammunition, on the way to war. Whatever else the troops may bring back as souvenirs, it seems that the veteran's rucksack is also bulging with foreign cash, thus terms for money have included **piastres**, **kopecks**, **dineros**, **ducats** and many more. The **dollar**, after all, meant five shillings not all that long ago. Which is where **ackers** come in, which began their English-speaking life in the First World War and the allied campaigns in the Middle East. The *akka* was an Egyptian piastre; it worked in Cairo, and, when packed up and brought back home, it would work for Cockneys too – if only as a word.

See MONEY TALKS – OR DOES IT?, *and also* GELT, MORGS, REVITS, SPONDULICKS

addle-headed

silly (chiefly central southern England)

Addle was an Anglo-Saxon word meaning 'stinking urine or other foul, stagnant liquid'. By the fourteenth century, it was commonly used as an adjective describing a rotten or putrid egg, and by the seventeenth referred to

a person's brains, as **addled** (which has also been widely recorded in the south-west Midlands with this same sense of being silly or foolish). It was in the seventeenth century too that **addle-headed** first appeared. It still has wide currency across a whole swathe of the country, from Cornwall to the East Riding of Yorkshire, but it is probably in Wiltshire, Sussex and Berkshire that it is most entrenched.

See DON'T BE DAFT, *and also* BARMY, DAFT, FOND, GORMLESS, QUILT, SOFT

antwacky

old-fashioned (Merseyside)

Unlike such favourites as **fab** and **gear**, which delineate a Merseyside heritage as much as the Fab Four who allegedly used them, **antwacky** ranks a little less conspicuously on the local totem pole. But it is still to be heard there, where it means 'out of date' or 'unfashionable'. For all the lexicographical suggestions that have been made for it, it most probably comes from the local pronunciation of 'antique'.

See also DAGGY, SQUARE

apple-catchers

outsized knickers (Herefordshire)

Apple-catchers are the local equivalent of Bridget Jones's 'big pants'. They are, in other words, so big that they could be put to use during the harvesting of apples.

April gawby

April Fool (north-west Midlands)

Gawby is a simple substitution for fool, and today **April gawby** is restricted chiefly to Cheshire and Staffordshire

although you may still find it in pockets across the Midlands and the North. **April gobby**, and the shortened **April gob**, are also to be found. Sadly for such a ripe-sounding word, the origins of all of these are unclear, although there may be a link with gape or gawp and hence the idea of an open-mouthed simpleton or fool.

See A PINCH AND A PUNCH, *and also* APRIL GOWK, APRIL NODDY, FOOL GOWK, HUNTIGOWK, MAY GOSLING

A pinch and a punch

In 1957 winter was mild and spring came early, and so it happened that on 1 April that year, Richard Dimbleby, the BBC's senior current affairs broadcaster, was able to report from Ticino in Switzerland on the early – and bumper – spaghetti crop. Many intrigued viewers got in touch with the BBC, wanting to know how they might go about acquiring their own spaghetti bush. They had, of course, been duped by an April Fool which has entered British media lore. But, in the north of England and Scotland, they might have been the victims of an **April noddy**, or an **April gowk**, or a **huntigowk**, or even a **fool gowk**. In Lancashire, they could even have been the butt of a **niddy-noddy**.

The April Fool tradition arrived in Britain from Continental Europe during the seventeenth century – frustratingly, though, no one quite knows how it began. The term **April Fool**, meaning the victim of a trick or hoax played on the first of April, is first recorded in the 1690s, and the phrase **April Fool's Day** (as well as the variant **All Fool's Day**) is recorded shortly afterwards. The meaning 'trick or hoax played on this day' is not recorded until the middle of the nineteenth century.

From the late eighteenth century, an increasingly elaborate range of regional alternatives are recorded. This is typical of dialect words: the interest in regional language grew apace in the nineteenth century, partly out of a sense that the regional identities of Britain were slowly fading as the rural lifestyle underlying them dwindled away, and partly as a result of the vogue for philological studies which was sweeping the institutions of higher education throughout Europe. Indeed, quaint rustic customs (with odd names) were exactly the kind of thing to take the fancy of the Oxbridge-educated parsons who wrote many of the regional glossaries published at this time. What is notable about April Fool words is the extent to which they are confined to northern areas, with the ordinary term seemingly unchallenged throughout the South and most of the Midlands.

See also APRIL GAWBY, APRIL GOWK, APRIL NODDY, FOOL GOWK, HUNTIGOWK, MAY GOSLING

April gowk

April Fool (Scotland and north of England)

> **Gowk** derives from the Old Scandinavian word *gaukr* meaning ‘cuckoo’, and it is recorded in the medieval period with that same meaning in northern England and Scotland. At the end of the sixteenth century, an extended use of ‘fool’ or ‘simpleton’ began to emerge in Scots, from where it spread to the very north of England. As a result, **April gowk** became the natural variant of **April Fool** in that region.
>
> *See* A PINCH AND A PUNCH, *and also* APRIL GAWBY, APRIL NODDY, FOOL GOWK, HUNTIGOWK, MAY GOSLING

April noddy

April Fool (Lancashire, Cumbria and North Yorkshire)

Noddy is an old word for a fool or simpleton, first recorded in the sixteenth century. It is now practically obsolete except as it survives in **April noddy**. The phrase is recorded in a number of rhymes to be said to the victim of an April Fool, such as ‘April-noddy’s past an’ gone, An’ thou’s a noddy for thinkin’ on.’ In Lancashire you can also find possibly the best variant of all: the beautifully alliterative and affectionate **niddy-noddy**.

See also A PINCH AND A PUNCH, *and also* APRIL GAWBY, APRIL GOWK, FOOL GOWK, HUNTIGOWK, MAY GOSLING

arney

bad-tempered (Sussex)

Arney means ‘in a bad temper’, ‘contrary’ or ‘cantankerous’ and is one of a variety of alternative spellings of ‘ordinary’ (*see* **ornery**). That ordinary should mean ‘ill-tempered’ seems to have been based on class. Ordinary in standard English may mean ‘of the usual kind’, but since the sixteenth century there has been a strong underpinning of a low social order and of being ‘not up to scratch’. From this sense of social inferiority comes arney, referring originally to the alleged coarseness and ill-temper of those of so-called lower rank. It probably follows that **arnary** or **orbnary**, (or **ommery**) cheese is still a label for a second-rate product, made from skimmed milk.

atweenhauns

now and again (Scotland)

You have, as is so often the case with dialect, to say it out loud, and **atweenhauns**, so odd on the page, becomes, pretty much, ‘between hands’. It means ‘at intervals’, ‘now and again’ or ‘in the meantime’. The

term is linked to Glasgow, but it is in general use in Scotland. Quite what type of hands remains a mystery. A figurative space lies, of course, between the human variety, but it's hard, looking at such phrases as Ayrshire's 'Atweenhaus make up the balance sheet', to resist the thought that there might just be a hint of something to do with cards, or perhaps the intervals of time between the hands of a clock.

auld shanky

death (Scotland and UK-wide)

There have many images of death throughout history, and references to Death's age are a pretty constant theme, together with his traditionally skeletal physique. Hence **auld shanky**, in which auld is the Scots pronunciation of the standard 'old', and shanky is his legs – a word which comes from the same place as the term **Shank's Pony**, an expression for the legs (where the 'pony' transport is in fact your own legs).

b

babby

BABY (CHIEFLY THE North)

Representing a regional pronunciation of baby with a short ‘a’, **babby** is recorded in Scotland and in the north of England as far south as Derbyshire. As with **chiel**, this characteristically northern formation is also found in the South-West, but whether this is by chance or some other reason we may never know. The shorter form, **bab**, is also found, chiefly in Lancashire and West Yorkshire.

See SMALL TALK, *and also* BAIRN, CHIEL, WEAN

backy, backie

riding pillion on a bike (UK-wide but particularly common in the North-East)

Backy, like **croggy**, has become a common term for riding pillion across Britain and is found particularly in Newcastle and the North-East. Other terms include riding **dinky**, **seatie** and **piggy**.

Pillion is one of the earliest words to have entered English from Gaelic, where it meant a small cushion, but for its absolute beginning we need to look to Latin and the word *pellis*, meaning ‘skin’. The first people to ride pillion were on horses, not motorbikes or pushbikes, and they were not necessarily sharing the same mount, for in the fifteenth century a pillion was a light saddle, especially one used by women, and was made of fur or animal hide. The sense of the seat behind a motorcyclist or cyclist dates back to the late nineteenth century.

While pillion sounds rather formal, though, **backie**, and the other local variants for what we all do as children, says it so much better.

See also CROGGY

bag

to take a packed lunch (Yorkshire and Lancashire)

Taking a packed lunch, whether to work or school, has no geographical limits, but it has inspired a number of dialect terms. **Bagging** gets straight to the point: it means ‘to take or carry a bag’. It’s as simple as that.

See CLOCKING UP YOUR CROUSTS, *and also* BAIT, CLOCKING, JACKBIT, NUMMIT, SNAP, TOMMY

bairn

baby; child (Scotland and north of England)

Like child, **bairn** has been a part of the English language since Anglo-Saxon times. Indeed, its first appearance is in the greatest work of Anglo-Saxon literature, *Beowulf*. Its linguistic roots are even deeper than that though, as parallel forms (or ‘cognates’) are found throughout the languages of the Germanic group, such as Frisian, German, Icelandic and even Gothic. By the medieval period, bairn was strongly associated with the North, a fact probably reinforced by Scandinavian versions of the word that arrived with the Vikings. In the *English Dialect Dictionary* (1901), it is recorded in Scotland, across the northern counties of England, and down into the East Midland counties which formed a core area of Viking power, such as Derbyshire and Lincolnshire. Over the course of the twentieth century, however, the word has become more and more restricted to Scotland and to the very north of England.

See SMALL TALK, *and also* BABBY, CHIEL, WEAN

bait

food; a light snack (many areas but particularly Northumberland, Durham and Sussex)

Bait, a term much used in the collieries in the nineteenth century, began life as far back as 1300 when it meant 'an attractive morsel of food placed on a hook or in a trap, in order to allure fish or other animals to seize it and be thereby captured' (*Oxford English Dictionary*). From there it developed, by the mid-sixteenth century, into meaning 'food' or 'refreshment', particularly as offered to horses or as a snack for travellers, and typically eaten between meals. Its origins seem to mix two meanings of the Old Norse *beita*: the first being to cause to bite; the second being food, especially as used to entice a prey – a meaning which of course lives on today.

See CLOCKING UP YOUR CROUSTS, *and also* BAG, CLOCKING, JACKBIT, NUMMIT, SNAP, TOMMY

Bandy-Ann Day

leftovers day (Sussex)

If you're in Sussex and it's Monday you might well call it **Bandy-Ann Day**, where fellow locals would understand that as a consequence meals would consist only of leftovers. The name is intriguing: was there perhaps a Bandy Ann, some hapless housewife condemned to scraping out the weekend's pots for Monday's supper? It would be nice to think so, although it might be worth noting the Cumberland dialect word **bandylan**, a term for a woman of bad character, an outcast, a virago. Could it be that in less enlightened times a woman who

failed to serve fresh food was simply equated with a bandylan?

bange

drizzle (Essex)

It isn’t common for an English regional word to be a direct borrowing from French, but that is what **bange** appears to be. Pronounced ‘bendj’, it derives from *baigner*, meaning ‘to bathe, to wet’. It is one of a number of ‘drizzle’ words found in East Anglia in the nineteenth century with the same basic form; others include **dinge** and **minge**. First recorded in 1790, much earlier than the others, **bange** is also the only one recorded in the twentieth century, and appears to be the core word of the group, with the others likely to be alterations of it, perhaps under the influence of words like damp and mist.

See DON’T TALK DRIZZLE, below, *and also* HADDER, MIZZLE, SMIRR

Don’t talk drizzle

The weather provides possibly the greatest urban myth in linguistics history; that one about the Eskimos and their huge number of words for snow. Unsurprisingly, the Eskimos do have several words for snow, perhaps even a dozen or so, but the other ten, twenty or more popularly claimed for them are just illusory: Scotch mist if you like.

Scotch mist is now almost entirely used as a figurative expression, but until fairly recently it remained in literal use in Northumberland to refer to light rain or drizzle. Perhaps this isn’t so surprising given that the lands either side of the England–Scotland border, up to the Highlands on one side and down through the Pennines on the other, have been so productive of words to describe this kind of

rain. There are over forty words defined as ‘to drizzle’ in the English Dialect Dictionary, of which less than a quarter hail from south of Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire (and nearly all of those are from East Anglia, a statistic which tallies with the decision by the Victorians to make the South-West their pre-eminent holiday destination!).

All of which is before we take into account the already sizeable list of synonyms in more general use, such as spit, spot, speck, pick, sprinkle and drizzle itself. Then there is **dank** in north Lancashire, **dawk** in Scotland, **deg** in Northumberland (a variant of the obsolete **dag**), **damping** in the Midlands, **dozzle** in Cheshire, **haze** and **wet** in the North, **mist** in Kent and **smither** in Suffolk.

So, the next time anyone tells you how many words the Eskimos have for snow, talk to them about drizzle, and give them the list.

See also BANGE, HADDER, MIZZLE, SMIRR

---

bap

bread roll (originally Scottish; now general)

> The Scots invented the bap. In 1643, a baker of Dundee is recorded as engaged ‘in beakinge of bunnes … kaikis and bappis to the tawernis’ (i.e. in baking buns, cakes and baps for taverns). By the nineteenth century, the word had spread to the north of Ireland and the north of England, and it continued its southward progress, so that by 1975 *The Times* could use **bap** as a generally understood term in explaining what a **stotty** was: ‘a local version of a bap, split and filled with meat or cheese’. It is still the case, though, that the word is more commonly used in the area starting in the Midlands and heading north.

See OUR DAILY BREAD, *and also* BARM CAKE, BUTTY, COB, MANSHON, NUBBIES, STOTTY

barm cake

bread roll (northern England)

While **barm cake** is undoubtedly of northern usage, its life began in Cornwall, the most southerly part of Britain. **Barm** is an old Anglo-Saxon word for yeast, and the original Cornish use referred to a cake made with yeast, as opposed to an unleavened **heavy cake**. Somehow, in the early years of the twentieth century, the barm cake made a winding journey north and became another of the many northern words for a bread roll, **bap** or **cob**. It is now most commonly associated with Lancashire, where its application has been extended to people and to mean 'mad person, nutter', by association with the adjective **barmy**.

Barm incidentally has also given us **barm-ball**, a light pudding or dumpling made of flour, a **barm-feast**, a yearly entertainment given in an alehouse, and **barm-head** and **barm-stick**, both meaning a 'soft-headed or foolish person'.

See OUR DAILY BREAD, *and also* BAP, BUTTY, COB, MANSHON, NUBBIES, STOTTY

barmpot

a slow-witted person (Lancashire and Yorkshire)

The **barm** is the froth that forms on the top of fermenting malt liquors, or on a head of beer. A **barmpot**, or alternatively a **barmfly**, **barm-stick** or **barm-man**, is someone of feeble mind. A study of Pentonville prison from 1963 included the observation 'Thus a harmless schizophrenic will be classified by the staff as a "barmpot" and by the prisoners as a "nutter".'

See also BARMY

barmy

silly (North and Midlands, South-East)

Barmy is recorded by the 1950s Survey of English Dialects in two distinct areas: first in the North and Midlands, where it is the principal alternative to **daft** (in Lincolnshire and on Humberside it was the predominant choice), and secondly in the South-East from Oxfordshire across to East Anglia and down to Kent. It originally referred to **barm**, the yeast that creates the froth on beer, metaphorically suggesting a silly person was as insubstantial as the head on a pint. In English prisons, inmates would sometimes feign madness by 'putting on the barmy stick', i.e. by frothing at the mouth or, if you like, appearing full of ferment.

See also DON'T BE DAFT, *and also* ADDLE-HEADED, DAFT, FOND, GORMLESS, QUILT, SOFT

barri

excellent (Scotland)

Barry or **barri** means 'excellent' or 'first-class' in Scotland, and should not be confused with **barra** – which is a Glasgow term that, according to Mike Munro's guide to modern Glaswegian *The Patter*, is used in phrases such as 'that's right inty ma barra', the city's equivalent of 'that's right up my street'. 'That' in this case may well be categorised as barri or wonderful, but sadly we have little knowledge of where that one originates. The prevailing theory is that it is traveller talk, although frustratingly the word does not seem to be listed in any Romany dictionary.

barring-out

a method of school-pupil rebellion (Birmingham)

> You may not find it going on today, but older generations of Birmingham families will still remember talk from their own parents of **barring-out**, a custom which involved shutting teachers out of the school classroom and demanding the day be declared a holiday. The result was often pandemonium. As Jonathan Swift put it in one of his journals: ‘Not school-boys at a barring-out Rais’d ever such incessant rout.’

bawson

a fat or impertinent person (Yorkshire and northern England)

> The **bawson**, or **bauson**, is a badger. It takes its root from the now archaic word **bausond**, an adjective meaning ‘piebald’ or, of an animal, having a white patch on its forehead. It may seem a strange leap from this neutral fact to a pejorative term for a fat or stubborn person, but animals have long inspired allusion and in this case the idea comes from the fatness and stolidness of the badger before its winter hibernation.

beat the devil round the gooseberry bush

to drag something out (Sussex)

> ‘He did not think,’ records one mid-nineteenth-century writer of an ageing parishioner, ‘that the new curate was much of a hand in the pulpit, he did beat the devil round the gooseberry-bush so.’ As recorded in Apperson’s still authoritative *Dictionary of English Proverbs* (1929), the devil takes up some 16 columns, twice that of God. And the concept of beating or whipping the evil one seems to have spread across the English-speaking world. By the look of things, however, the origin of this phrase seems to lie in America. There we find **beat** or **whip the devil**

round the meeting-house, as well as **round the stump**, the first use of which is found in Virginia in 1786. Despite the ecclesiastical context of the quotation, anyone, not just curates, could do it. It means to be evasive, to ramble on without getting to the point, or – more deviously – to accomplish something by subterfuge. The image presumably reflects the fact that while the devil may be pursued and even punished, he is never actually caught.

beaut

an idiot (Liverpool)

Beaut would appear, whether from Liverpudlian or other lips, to be an abbreviation of beauty and/or beautiful, and to be used in a strictly ironical sense, reminiscent of the far older **natural**, which similarly used to denote a fool or something quite antithetical. The other primary users of beaut as a noun are Australians, where it ranks with **cobber** as one of the nation's linguistic badges. It may be that there is an Irish link – Liverpool has a large Irish community and of course early Australia had a heavy concentration of Irish immigrants (voluntary or otherwise).

beck

stream, rivulet (the North)

Beck is more or less the standard northern word for a stream. Like many such words, it is of Scandinavian origin. It is first recorded in the fourteenth century within those areas of England where Scandinavian influence was strongest, and has continued in common use since. The word, however, is not generally found as far north as Northumberland, where the Scottish **burn** is used.

See WATER WATER EVERYWHERE, *and also* BURN, NAILBOURN, PRILL, RINDLE, SIKE, STELL

A twank and a wallop

Words that mean ‘to hit’ in its broadest sense are pretty common throughout Britain. Whacking, thumping, smacking, punching and clobbering are things we all do. Some of us may **twat** something (a word that is restricted only by register and not by region). Batter and clout may be slightly more common in the North but they too can be found up and down the land. There is one specific type of hitting, however, which shows both considerable regional variation and purely local vocabulary. That is, unfortunately, the hitting or beating of children as a punishment. Naughty children can be **toused** in Somerset, **jarted** in Yorkshire or given a good **bannicking** in Surrey.

In fact, they could be given a different type of beating pretty much everywhere. The verbs of spanking include **bash**, **baste** and **bray** in the north of England, **cane** in Essex, **clanch** and **clatch** in South Wales, **clout** and **dad** in Northumberland, **dust** in Surrey, **fettle** in Yorkshire and Staffordshire, **flop** in Lincolnshire, **hazel**, **hide**, **lowk** and **yuck** in Yorkshire, **hole** in Cumbria, **lace** in Northumberland, **larrup** in London, **leather** in the North-West, **lick** in the North, **scutch** in the Isle of Man, **skelp** in Cumbria, **slap** and **tancel** in Staffordshire and East Wales, **wale** in Derbyshire and **yark** in Northumberland.

Wallop, by the way, has been in general colloquial use since the early 1800s. It first entered the English language in the fourteenth century meaning ‘to gallop’ and derives from a variant of the French *galoper* found in northern France in the Middle Ages.

Of course, thankfully not so much hitting of children goes on now. But perhaps dialectologists of the twenty-