

A shame to see dialect words suffer from 'lexical attrition'

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English dialects in this country are holding up pretty well, but we are sadly seeing quite a lot of what dialectologists call "lexical attrition".

This simply means that there's a tendency for local dialect words to disappear in favour of more widespread, nationally recognised vocabulary.

Local words, though, are still surviving, and they tend to endure most strongly when they apply to informal and domestic areas of life which are less subject to influence from the written language, the education system and the media.

Nobody much, I think, uses the Norfolk word "mawther" (girl) very often any more. But when it comes to humble, everyday objects and activities, we do tend to still stick to the local words we learned here in our own part of the world when we were children.

Norfolk people may still have their troughings repaired, rather than the guttering around their house. And many of us still talk about the linen – and linen lines, linen cupboards, linen pegs – rather than the washing or the laundry.



■ Children at play often used words of their own making in the past says Professor Peter Trudgill.
Picture: LIBRARY

But perhaps the area of life where local words survive most strongly, because they do so in a subterranean kind of way, is children's games and activities.

One well-known example has to do with truce words – terms children use when playing so they can be deemed to be out of the game for a short time in order, for example, to do their shoes up.

In 1959, a fascinating book came out called the Lore and Language of Schoolchildren, by Iona and Peter Opie – it was republished in 2000. One of the children's oral subculture topics which Peter and Iona researched was truce words, and their book contains a map showing which terms were used by children in which parts of the country.

Do you remember what you used to say when you were playing games when you were a kid?

In London, children say – or said – "fainites". In the northwest of England, the word was "barley", probably from "parlay". Other terms in different parts of the country included "kings", "keys", "skinch", "cree", "scribs" and "crosses".

The Opies reported that in the Ipswich and Norwich areas, the term used was one which seemed to be connected to the form "crosses", namely "exes".

And that is more or less what I remember. If you had a stitch and needed to stop playing for a moment, you crossed your fingers and shouted "exies!".