

<b>Institution:</b> Aston University		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 26 Modern Languages & Linguistics		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Celebrating the inclusion and community of <i>non-standard Englishes</i> spoken in and around the Birmingham and Black Country regions of the UK		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> July 2009 to December 2013		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b> Urszula Clark  Brian Dakin Ajmal Hussain Esther Asprey Jon Herring	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b> Reader in English & Linguistics Professor Research associate Research associate Research associate Research associate	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b> 2005-2014 2014-2020 2009-2012 2009-2012 2009-2011 2011-2012
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> August 2013 to February 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>Professor Urszula Clark's research centres on the regional accents and dialects of Birmingham and the Black Country. These have long been stigmatised, decreasing speakers' life chances in education and employment. Clark described the regional dialects and then focused on how speakers realise their identity through these dialects during cultural performances. The research has informed and driven substantial engagement between Aston University and local communities; thereby having influenced culture and education in myriad formats and increasing the awareness, pride and confidence of local dialect speakers, as well as other non-standard English speakers, both regionally and around the world.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>The starting point of this research was that West Midlands dialects are typically undervalued and stigmatised by others – and that <i>accentism</i> is a barrier to social equality and speakers' life chances.</p> <p>A 2013 monograph by Clark (<b>R1</b>) addressed the relationship between English language and identity on national and regional levels, as well as the social aspects of English, such as class and race. She also co-authored with Esther Asprey a 2013 monograph (<b>R2</b>) that described and mapped the phonological, grammatical and lexical structure of West Midlands English, as well as the closely allied, yet differing, linguistic varieties of Birmingham and the Black Country industrial heartland, both of which suffered economically and socially from post-war industrial decline. It explored in depth the historical and social factors behind the development of these varieties of English and their attached stigma. In a 2013 journal article (<b>R3</b>), Clark also explored – in the context of West Midlands English – the concept of <i>enregisterment</i>; whereby speakers consciously draw upon elements of dialect recognised inside and outside their locality. These three texts formed the foundation for Clark's subsequent research that focused on the relationship between accent, dialect and the representation of social and regional identity in local creative <i>performance</i> – shorthand for the wide range of creative expression encompassed by the research; including comedy, poetry, prose, song, cartoons and spoken word events. Performance was key to establishing this relationship as it offered a locus of regional identity that importantly connected speakers and non-speakers.</p> <p>Participant observation, audio recordings of 36 performances across the West Midlands region, and interviews with performers and audience members were used to explore the role of accent and dialect in creative expression, and how they are strategically managed for local and non-local audiences. This research also led to the publication of a further monograph about the language of West Midlands performance (<b>R4</b>) and a book chapter on examples of enregisterment found in the cartoons of Staffordshire Potteries (<b>R5</b>).</p>		

The research led to findings relevant to both speakers and wider groups:

1. In relation to **speakers**: accent and dialect are important vehicles for positive expressions of identity and community in six West Midlands regions at a time of increasing dialect levelling and shift, and in the face of stigma attached to these accents and dialects (**R4**).
2. In relation to **wider audiences**: performers and their audiences are aware of the linguistic phenomenon known as *accommodation* – whereby speakers modify accent and dialect for their audience and its communicative context. Specifically, the further away West Midlands performing speakers are from their own locality, the more they accommodate their speech: reducing the number of region-specific linguistic traits they use. Enregisterment was shown to be used as a strategy by West Midlands speakers to be understood and welcomed by non-speaker audiences (**R4**).

Overall, Clark's research shows successful communication is more than a matter of individuals understanding each other. Speakers also change the way they talk to be positively accepted and overcome stigma (**R4**).

### 3. References to the research

- R1** Clark, Urszula. 2013a. *Language and Identity in Englishes*. London: Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203552537>
- R2** Clark, Urszula and Asprey, Esther. 2013. *West Midlands English: Birmingham and the Black Country* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9780748641697.001.0001>
- R3** Clark, Urszula. 2013b. 'er's from off: The indexicalization and enregisterment of Black Country Dialect' *American Speech*. 8 (4) pp441–466.  
<https://doi.org/10.1215/00031283-2691433>
- R4** Clark, Urszula. 2019. Staging Language: Place and identity in the Enactment, Performance and Representation of Regional Dialects. In David Britain and Crispin Thurlow (series eds.) *Language and Social Life: Vol 13*. Boston/Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501506796>
- R5** Clark, Urszula. 2020. 'Enregistering dialect representation in Staffordshire Potteries' cartoons' in Patrick Honeybone & Warren Maguire (eds.) *Dialect Writing and the North of England*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp103-124. ISBN: 9781474442565

### Research awards

Awards made for the project between July 2009 and November 2013, under the umbrella project name of *West Midlands English: Speech and Society*:

- a) 2009-2010: Leverhulme Trust Research Fellowship award for the project *Language and Place: Birmingham*. PI: Urszula Clark, £36,072. RA: Esther Asprey
- b) 2009-2010: ESRC small grant award for the project *Dialect in Discourse: A Critical Discourse Analysis Approach to Linguistic Conservatism and Sociocultural Identity in the Black Country*. PI Urszula Clark, £79,896.87. RA: Brian Dakin.
- c) 2010-2013: ESRC standard grant award for the project *Language, Performance and Region: Discourse and Sociocultural Identity in the Wider Western Midlands*. PI Urszula Clark, £407,078.66 RAs: Brian Dakin, Ajmal Hussain (2010-2012), Esther Asprey (2010-2011), Jon Herring (2011-2012).

Indicators of research quality are publication of the research outcomes in peer-reviewed journals with the monographs published by established academic houses and the significant levels of research funding awarded in competition nationally. The planning contained in the pathways to impact sections of the successful ESRC proposals was instrumental in achieving the claimed impacts.

#### 4. Details of the impact

**Birmingham and Black Country working-class communities** are the prime research beneficiaries, by **speaking with greater awareness and pride. Neighbouring West Midlands communities**, and **speakers of international Englishes**, also **benefitted from this socially inclusive research**.

These impacts resulted from local communities drawing on Clark's expertise to co-create cultural events and artefacts that celebrated, and increased understanding of, their linguistic heritages and identities:

##### 1. Impact on identity and social inclusion of young people

Between 2015 and 2017, Clark's research knowledge benefitted a not-for-profit media company through a GBP31,050 Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) project. The impetus was local youths working at The LearnPlay Foundation who knew their accents and dialects were not readily understood at work. Twenty-five 16-24 year-olds were employed as digital Apprentices, workshopping dialects with Clark. Video-recorded post-project interviews revealed they had gained greater awareness of their dialect and newfound pride to rally against prejudice:

*Things that changed is that I'm more aware of the Black Country dialect... I've started seeing pride as no longer this massive negative thing [like nationalism]...I'm proud of the accent and I'll rarely...change it...We do use it [our accent] as a shield...to push them forward and say look, "Here we are! You aren't getting rid of us that easy!"*

Male, 26 (S1:8'05"-19'08")



Figure 1 LearnPlay Foundation Apprentices, 2015

Clark also provided source material for [Apprentice-built computer games](#) and a [documentary on the dialect](#) (15,460 views (S2:p1)) that resonated with its viewers' day-to-day challenges and triumphs:

*Interesting listening...about having to dilute your accent...especially when out of the area. I had to do likewise to get along, communicate, win job interviews... I am glad I learned my clear English from my native dialect because I'm pretty sure I couldn't have worked around the world if I hadn't...at the same time, it is good to have a heritage and sense of identity.*

JZ (S2:p2)

##### 2. Impacts on creativity, culture and society

Clark's research drove another HLF project, '[Where's Our Spake Gone?](#)' (2013-2015) (Fig 2:top-left). The GBP77,600 grant was awarded to Rights and Equality Sandwell providing Clark's expertise was tapped as a steering group member and consultant. The independent evaluation report stated:

*The steering group not only brought with it a collective expertise but also provided the project with an additional layer of probity.*

Cotterill Consulting (S3:pp3-4)

This multi-generational project with 370 participants and 51 volunteers (**S3:p12**) raised awareness and celebrated Black Country history and dialects through:

- commissioning 12 performers to create two exhibitions, five performances and four films on local townships (approximately 19,000 views) (**S3:p12, S4, S5:p3, S6**):

*A wonderful documentary [on Cradley Heath], proud to say I'm a black country wench, and I'm old enough to remember the different dialects*

GM, viewer (**S4**)

- [producing songs](#) (Fig 2:top-right) with schoolchildren using interviews between older participants who generated 70 conversations in the regions' dialects for listening at Dudley Archives (**S6**).
- publishing 10,000 [project books with DVD](#) (Fig 2:bottom), funded by a GBP15,000 Arts Council award (**S5:p1**).

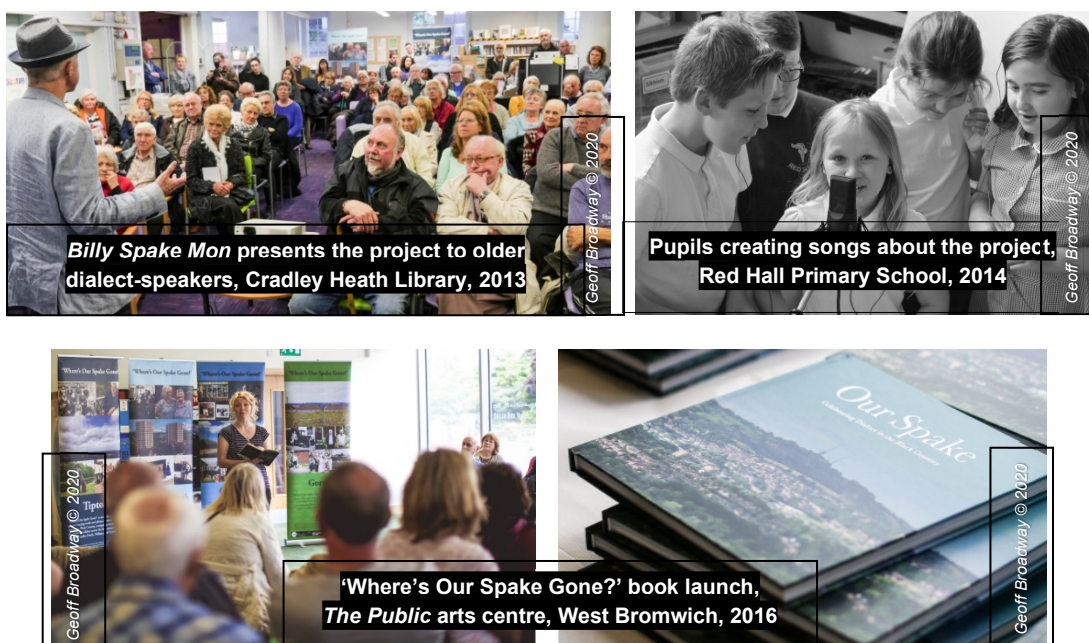


Figure 2: 'Where's Our Spake Gone?' community activities

In 2018, Clark also co-produced a West Midlands writing anthology. The book gave vernacular voice to Clark's findings (**R4**). Its launch at Birmingham Literature Festival and [Waterstones](#) had capacity audiences totalling 378 (**S7**).

### 3. Impacts on understanding, learning and participation

Clark & Asprey's book (**R2**) became the standard text on West Midlands sociolinguistics at Warwick and Worcester universities (**S8a-b**), and its influence has cascaded through their neighbourhoods:

*Portions of your book...provide crucial background for students' examinations of English in Coventry. ...your book has provided a foundation for my own...sociophonetic research in Coventry. ...I have cited your book in two public presentations to about 75 people at the Coventry Archives, as well as during interviews with BBC Coventry and Warwickshire.*

Assistant Professor, University of Warwick (**S8a**)

The research's website, '[West Midlands English: Speech and Society](#)', gives the regions' languages international reach. Its webpages had 241,437 unique views globally, including from Nigeria, Pakistan and Indonesia (**S9:pp2-3**).



Clark's public engagement – via the media ([HuffPost](#), [The Daily Mail](#)) and streaming internationally on the British Council's '[Teaching English online](#)' programme (S10) – reinforced how there is no single 'correct' English, as affirmed by BAME audiences:

*On the way home [after your inaugural lecture], I took a taxi. The driver – ...of West African origin – had been at the lecture too. ...he said, it was great to see other accents being not just accepted but valued, because he too had a different accent than standard English. He had been a teacher of English in his home country. He loved your lecture because it confirmed a positive status on a man with a 'different' accent.*

Historian, University of Birmingham (S11)

The **significance of the impact** is that it has **enabled speakers of West Midlands Englishes, and other non-standard Englishes, to overcome stigma by first recognising the legitimacy of their ways of speaking**. Its reach has **rippled throughout the West Midlands and beyond to international audiences**, and has **been multi-generational: benefitting eight- to 80-year-olds**.

### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- S1** 20-minute recording (audio only) of former project participant being interviewed by Brian Dakin during *Follow-up to History of the Black Country Dialect Project* undertaken at LearnPlay Foundation, 14 September 2019
- S2** Comments left by viewers, and number of views, of LearnPlay Foundation's film *Black Country Dialect*, published in 2017 on YouTube
- S3** Project evaluation report by Cotterill Consulting for 'Where's Our Spake Gone?: 2014-2016', carried out by Rights & Equality Sandwell
- S4** Quote from viewer of Cradley Heath film, & tally of views for all 4 township documentary films in 'Where's Our Spake Gone?' project
- S5** Email correspondence from Project Lead & Editor of book 'Our Spake: Celebrating Dialect in the Black Country', 6 July 2020 & 28 October 2020
- S6** Homepage, & Bursary Artists page, of website for HLF oral history project 'Where's Our Spake Gone?', 30 October 2020
- S7** Email correspondence from Associate Director of the Birmingham Literature Festival, 6 October 2019
- S8** Testimonial letters (24 April 2020 & 20 May 2020) from two socio-linguists:
  - a. Assistant Professor, Centre for Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick, testifying impact of monograph on his own Coventry socio-linguistics teaching curriculum, research, community presentations and radio interviews;
  - b. Senior Lecturer in English Language & Linguistics (Course Leader BA English Language), University of Worcester, testifying impact of monograph on his own Worcestershire, Herefordshire and wider West Midlands socio-linguistics teaching curriculum, research and building of Dialect Archive.
- S9** Visitor traffic statistics (6 years: Nov 1 2014 - Oct 31 2020) from Google Analytics for research webpages '[West Midlands English: Speech and Society](#)'
- S10** Webpage address and screenshot of promotional video on social media for the British Council's 2015 '[Teaching English online](#)' programme
- S11** Email from Historian, University of Birmingham, recounting impact made on lecture attendee of West African origin speaking a non-standard variety of English