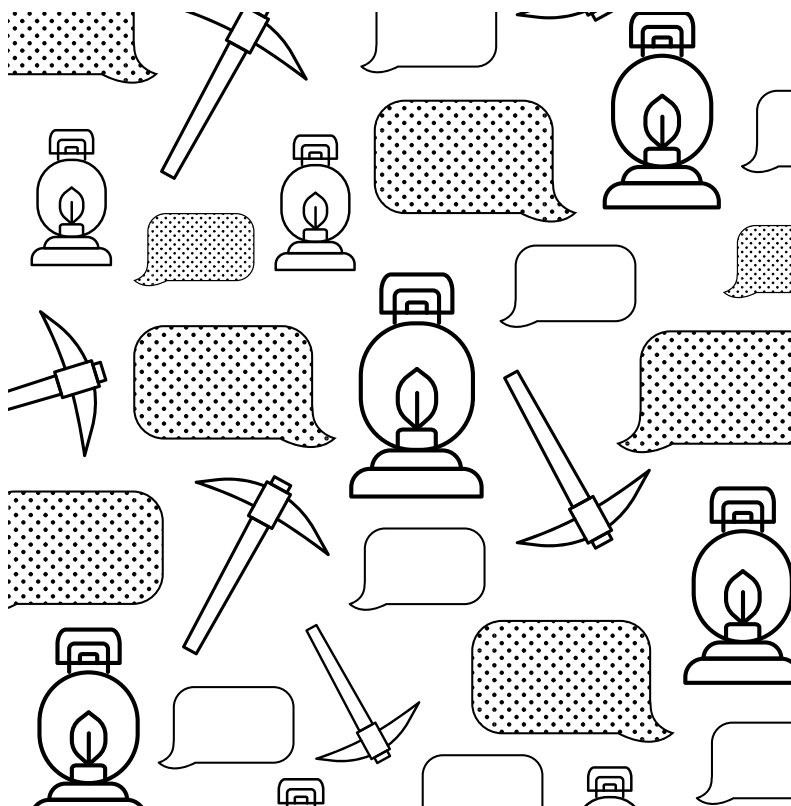


Pitmatic – the talk of the North East collieries

Dr Kate Whisker-Taylor



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In 1885, *The Times* newspaper describes “an unintelligible language”, known as Pitmatic, spoken by men in a mine in the North-East of England. Nearly half a century later, in 1919, the *Northern Daily News* reports that, while younger miners use Pitmatic in street-end and other familiar contexts, they are also able to “converse in a near approach to conventional English”. As we read in Priestly’s *English Journey* (1935), the “curious lingo” of the north-eastern collieries is “only used by the pitmen when they are talking among themselves.” It is further described in Hitchin’s *Pit-Yacker* (1962) as a mixture of “the broadest dialect of Durham” and words, including foreign borrowings, which are used “exclusively” by pitmen when working underground.

So what is Pitmatic and how does this “curious lingo” sound? What words are specific to this “unintelligible language”? Is it used solely by pitmen to talk about their work underground?

To begin answering these questions, we have teamed up with the Beamish Museum to work on their Oral History Collection. We think the Pitmatic recordings in the collection indicate that Pitmatic was used more widely than initially thought. It was not a “curious lingo” restricted to pitmen when below ground, but a more versatile variety also used to create art such as poetry and song. We think that it may have been used by males and females alike to talk about the work underground but also above-ground activities such as washing and life in general. You can see examples in the following three extracts from the archive with the themes of childhood games, mining, and home life. These extracts are also part of a sound scape that you can hear at the Bowes Museum 16 November 2019 - 23 February 2020.

Childhood games: “Tally-ho!”

Well the idea was, you had a lamp and it had a top on, and it made a dark side to the lamp and you used to run away with this lamp, and you used to give a holler out, tally-ho, you know, and then you used to get hid somewhere, and then you were to find out where you were, you might be in one of them middens or somewhere else, on a cree top, anywhere. When they got to walk past you, you used to shine the light again, and then go and find another hiding place, and until they found you, and whoever found you, he was the man that got away, you see.

Mining: “Yokin’ a pony”

The gaffer would say “right, tek him in and show him how to yoke a pony”. The pony’s got a skull cap on which it must have. That’s to protect its head and its eyes. It also has the bit in with this rope, you had rope for its bit to try to control it. Then it had the saddle on and what we called the britchin. The way you picked tubs up was with limmers, which is two bits of wood in a bow and then its hooked on. And of course you have the hooks on the sides of these, now they had to fit on to the collar, what you call the hemsticks, down the pit we called the “yemsticks”, a farmer would talk about hemsticks, which was just the same really. And then there was the britchin which held the back and bag because a pony has to pull and it also has to hold on. Because there’s no brakes.

Home life: “Possin’ day”

We had the water to carry from the middle of the street in pails. I would start to get the poss tub in from outside, give it a good scrub, because it always went in under the pipe where the rain water came down. Then get the poss stick and give it a scrub, then, away to school I would go knowing that when I came back at dinner time, that was the day that we didn't get a dinner, we just got what we could from the pantry. Then I would go back to school and my mother would be washing all afternoon, passing. Sometimes when I came in at night time at about half past three me mother would say, Annie get the crackett, that was a wood stool that every pitman had, and I would stand with the poss stick and I would have to count so many, poss poss poss.

The extracts show speakers using Pitmatic vocabulary and, alongside other language features such as pronunciation and grammar, vocabulary can be used by any speaker to indicate membership of a particular group or community, reinforcing relationships and a sense of belonging amongst group members. As a reader, we invite you to think of examples of how you might do this in your own language use.

Sources:

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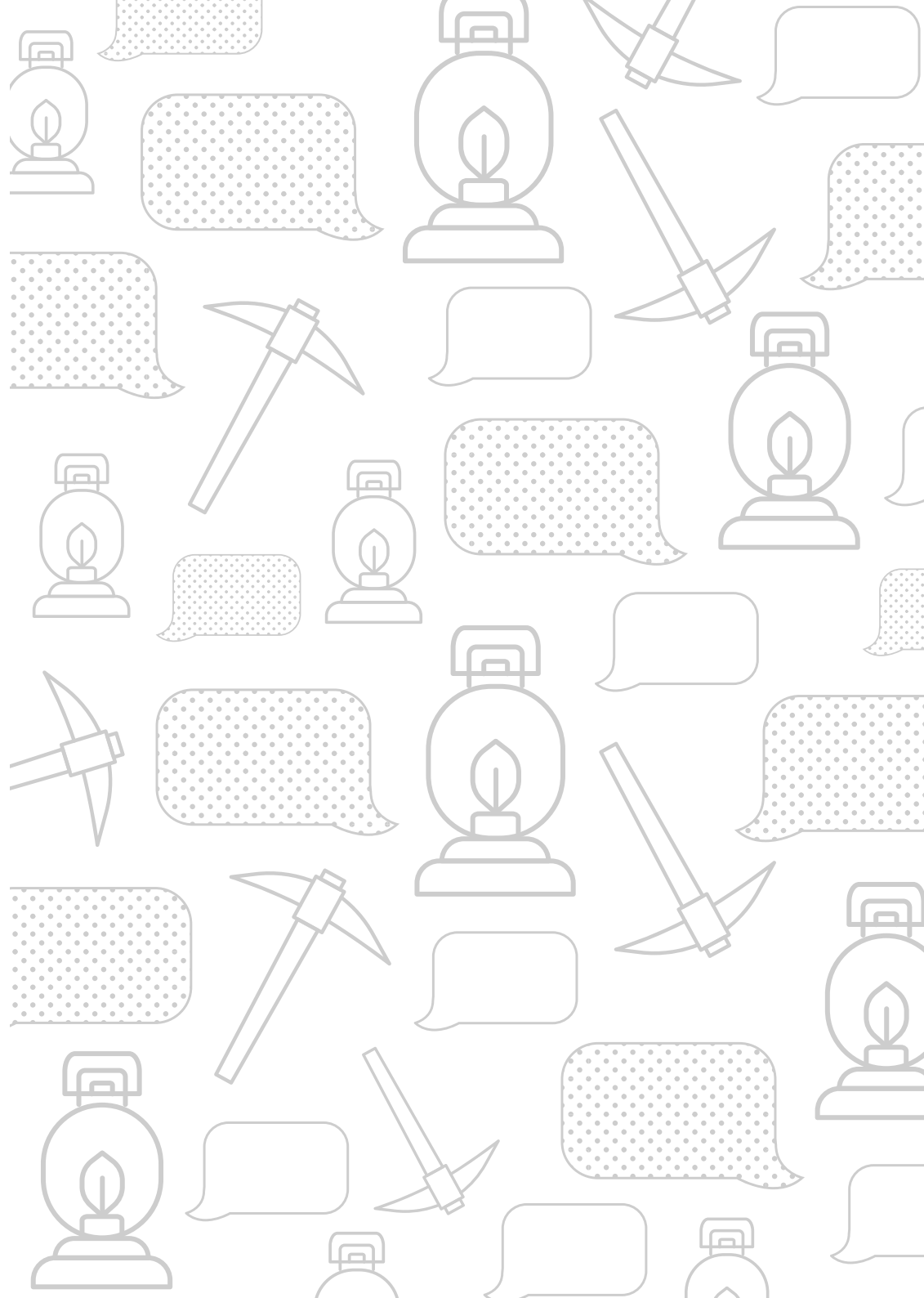
A lecturer in Linguistics at York St John University, Kate teaches on our 'English Accents and Dialects' 'Sociolinguistics' and 'Phonetics' modules. She also supervises undergraduate and postgraduate research on accents, dialects, phonetics, phonology and language variation and change.

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