

Dialect Where You Least Expect It

Jonnie Robinson, Lead Curator of Spoken English, writes:

The recent publication of fixtures for the 2017-18 hockey season may have escaped the attention of many sports fans in the frenzy of Transfer Deadline Day, but this week's friendly between [Southgate](#) and [Durham University](#) was a personal highlight as, with a daughter on each side, household bragging rights were at stake. A significant occasion for the family, of course, but surely not a source of professional interest: after all, hockey – in the UK anyway – is a predominantly middle-class sport so not, one might imagine, a likely focus for dialect research. Well you'd be surprised: the impressive thing about dialect is it can crop up virtually anywhere.

Take last season, for instance: watching one daughter play at Ben Rhydding I was delighted to see post-match teas included the option of a *bread-cake* (not to mention a *chip buttie*).

✘ Regional variants for BREAD ROLL feature regularly in dialect surveys as noted in a previous [blog post](#) and, given the spectacular setting of Ben Rhydding Hockey Club, little more than a drag flick from Ilkley Moor and the famous Cow and Calf rocks, it's perhaps not surprising to find Yorkshire dialect in this context. However, watching my younger daughter play in a school tournament at Charterhouse – an exclusive boarding school – I was equally intrigued by the wording on a noticeboard next to the astroturf hockey pitch.

✘ This eminently sensible set of principles for parents and supporters includes in rule 8 an appeal to respect 'decisions made by *beaks* and coaching staff'. The [OED](#) records the term *beak* [= 'teacher'] from 1888 and includes four citations: two contain references to Eton College and two are by authors educated at Marlborough College. Its use is categorised as 'schoolboy slang', so not really an example of dialect then, although according to the OED dialect encompasses a '[m]anner of speaking, language, speech; esp. the mode of speech peculiar to, or characteristic of, a particular person or group'. While the distinction between dialect and slang can be a little blurred, it would be interesting to establish how widespread *beak* is within private schools – [this recording](#) explores the existence of a similarly idiosyncratic code at Harrow School, for instance.

So while *beak* might not be strictly comparable with the more overtly dialectal *bread-cake*, it offers a fascinating glimpse of boarding school parlance and demonstrates how localised and vernacular forms permeate even 'official' communication within a school and to its extended community. You would imagine, for instance, that Standard English is universally adopted by schools for written communication to parents, but as the new school term approaches and parents up and down the country check whether their children have the right school uniform it's fascinating to see how one essential item of PE kit varies from place to place. A quick online search of primary school

websites in England confirms that school brochures, newsletters and websites differ in how they refer to SOFT SHOES WORN FOR PE.



The four variants shown here from Francis Askew Primary School in Hull (*sand-shoes*), Wylde Green Primary School in Birmingham (*pumps*), Howard Primary School in Croydon (*plimsolls*) and Hullavington C of E Primary School in Wiltshire (*daps*) were among the many alternatives captured in the [BBC Voices](#) survey of 2004/5 and show how we all use and encounter dialect even in the most unexpected places.