

Where North meets South?: contact, divergence, and the routinisation of the Fenland dialect boundary.

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One of the more important bundles of dialect isoglosses that separate the linguistic ‘north’ and the linguistic ‘south’ of England straddle the Fenlands of Eastern England. The boundaries of perhaps the most salient differentiators of North and South – the presence or absence both of a TRAP-BATH split (as in (1)) and a STRUT-FOOT split (as in (2)), pass through this area.

(1): North (and West) of Fens: /træp baθ/; South (and East) of Fens: /træp/ v /baːθ/.

(2): North (and West) of Fens: /strʊt fʊt/; South (and East) of Fens: /strʌt/ v /fʊt/.

Back before the early 17th century, the Fens were literally that – marshland that presented a considerable physical barrier making communication between either side quite difficult. From the mid-17th century onwards, however, the Fens were gradually drained and have become exploited agriculturally. The dialect boundary remains however, despite the fact that the physical boundary has gone. In this paper, I present some of the linguistic features implicated in this boundary - some showing evidence of North-South divergence, others of contact phenomena at the boundary’s transition zone - and then argue that the continued existence of the boundary can be largely accounted for by the routinisation of people’s socio-spatial mobilities in the area which both shape and are shaped by a range of social, economic, physical, institutional, psychological and political factors. Giddens argued that socio-spatial routines are the “*material grounding of the recursive nature of social life*” (1984: xxiii). Many activities in our daily lives are routinized and the structure of these activities is reproduced by their very performance. I argue that since people’s sociospatial routines largely avoid significant and regular crossing of the dialect boundary (for the reasons listed above), this has contributed to the preservation and reinforcement of that boundary.

Giddens, Anthony (1984). *The constitution of society: outline of the theory of structuration*. Cambridge: Polity Press.