

ASSOCIATIVE MEANINGS IN THE SCOUSE DIALECT OF ENGLISH IN TV SERIES “THE RESPONDER” SEASON 1 EPISODE 1

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Abstract: This study analyzes the associative meanings of words of the Scouse dialect, a regional variety of English spoken in Liverpool, which is represented in the British TV series *The Responder* Episode 1 (2022), using Geoffrey Leech’s (1981) theory of associative meaning. It addresses two main research questions: first, what types of associative meaning are found in the Scouse dialect within *The Responder* Episode 1, and second, how those identified associative meanings influence the interpretation and usage of Scouse dialect words in the series. Using a descriptive qualitative design, 34 dialogues in which the characters used distinctive vocabularies or lexical items of the Scouse dialect were analyzed and categorized into five categories of meaning: connotative meaning (38%), affective meaning (38%), stylistic meaning (15%), collocative meaning (6%), and reflective meaning (3%). In this case, the connotative and affective meanings dominated, reflecting the dialect’s role in expressing regional identity and emotional expression. This study explains the importance of preserving a region’s distinctive dialect as a cultural asset to deal with language homogenization. In addition, this research also connects the gap between dialectology and media studies, highlights the importance of popular culture in preserving regional dialects, and supports further linguistic exploration of media representations and dialects.

Keywords: Associative meanings, Scouse dialect, the Responder, Cultural identity, Film representation

INTRODUCTION

The Scouse dialect is one among other regional varieties of British English. British English has various dialects, the major ones of which include London (Cockney), Liverpool (Scouse), Manchester, Norwich, Southampton, and many more (Hughes et al., 2012). As Crowley (2012) highlights that the Scouse dialect is not only a variety spoken in the city of Liverpool, but also distributed widely in the surrounding areas, especially in the Merseyside region such as Bootle, Crosby, and other suburbs, which bring unique cultures from the history of immigration, the development of the port economy, and the interaction of working-class communities

Most studies on the Scouse dialect focus on its phonology, sociolinguistics, and historical development. Nance et al. (2020) examined rising intonation in declaratives, showing how Scouse employs a low-to-high pitch to aid communication. Desiyana et al. (2022) compared phonological and lexical elements of Scouse English and the Tabulahan dialect. From a sociolinguistic and historical perspective, Honeybone et al. (2007) highlighted how Liverpool’s nineteenth-century urban expansion and population growth shaped Scouse, while Honeybone and Watson (2013) analyzed non-standard spellings in humorous local dialect literature. Jensen (2017) further revealed that Scouse suffers from negative stereotypes, often being perceived as “rude” or “impolite,” reflecting broader societal views of Liverpool.

Previous studies on the Scouse dialect still leave three main gaps. Research has not yet explored semantic aspects, particularly associative meanings that reflect cultural identity. Studies on how Scouse appears in popular culture are also still very limited, even though media plays an important role in shaping perceptions. In addition, comparative research between

Scouse and Standard British English in media contexts remains scarce. Filling these gaps is important to prevent negative stereotyping and to support the preservation of regional dialects in globalized media.

The lack of research on the Scouse dialect in the media can be a serious problem. If not thoroughly researched, TV shows or movies may end up reinforcing bad assumptions about the dialect, such as the assumption that Scouse people are rude (Jensen, 2017). This can also mean ignoring its true cultural value. For example, if media portrayals are inaccurate, the characteristics of the Liverpool language and its history may be lost, such as the influence of immigration and working-class struggles.

In addition, because it is rarely researched, international audiences may only consider the Scouse dialect as a 'local adornment', rather than an essential part of the community's identity. This research addresses these issues by analyzing "The Responder" Season 1 Episode 1, which is set in Liverpool. By looking at how the Scouse dialect is represented in this popular series, this research aims to show that dialects can counter negative stereotypes and maintain cultural identity in the face of the rise of globalized languages. However, previous research has extensively examined the phonology and sociolinguistic features of Scouse dialects (e.g., Desiyana et al., 2022; Honeybone et al., 2007; Honeybone & Watson, 2013; Jensen, 2017; Nance et al., 2020).

METHOD

The study adopts a descriptive qualitative method to investigate social phenomena through descriptive narratives rather than statistical or numerical analysis (Creswell, 2014). Data were collected from Episode 1, Season 1 of "The Responder", a series consisting of two seasons with six episodes each, lasting around 60 minutes. The research procedure involved two main steps: 1) observing the episode to identify words in the Scouse dialect, and 2) taking notes on dialogues containing target Scouse lexical items by focusing on specific words and phrases.

The researcher used data triangulation to ensure the validity of the data collected from The Responder Episode 1 (2022). Data triangulation is a verification process that compares the data obtained from various sources to ensure data accuracy (Sugiyono, 2017).

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of 34 words and phrases from Episode 1 of "The Responder", this study identified five types of associative meaning according to Leech' (1981) framework: Connotative, Stylistic, Affective, Collocative, and Reflective. Each word or phrase was reclassified to determine the single most dominant associative meaning. The results show that 36% are Connotative, 15% are Stylistic, 38% are Affective, 6% are Collocative, and 3% are Reflective. The findings show that connotative and affective meanings dominate, emphasizing both the distinctive lexical items that reflect Liverpool's cultural identity and the strong emotional elements conveyed through the characters' language.

As part of the data analysis stage, the meanings of the identified Scouse English words were compared to their literal meanings in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED). The comparison revealed three key findings, with 65% showing consistent meaning, 9% classified as non-OED entries, and 26% showing different meaning. 26% of the words differ in meaning from the OED, showing how Scouse adapts to narrative contexts, as noted by Crowley (2012) in relation to Liverpool's harbor history and multicultural exchange. While 65% match the OED, the remaining 35% (non-OED or different meanings) illustrate resistance to language homogenization and preservation of identity through semantic innovation. These findings also

support Rahman et al. (2023), who emphasized the role of popular media in maintaining dialect, as seen in *Peaky Blinders* with the Birmingham dialect.

Connotative Meaning

According to Leech (1981), connotative meaning consists of cultural and social aspects that expand a word's literal meaning. The conceptual meaning remains consistent. Meanwhile, connotative meaning evolves and changes according to historical events, personal and situational experiences.

In "The Responder" Episode 1, Marco uses the word "bird" to refer to Chris's wife, showing its connotative meaning beyond the literal definition in the Oxford English Dictionary as a flying creature. In this context, "bird" informally means wife or female partner, reflecting the Scouse dialect's casual style and regional identity. Historically, the term shifted from meaning "other women" (Hignett, 1966) to "girlfriend" (Spiegel, 1989), showing its evolving use. In the movie, "bird" conveys relationship status, gender, and family roles, while also signaling familiarity and friendliness in conversation. However, it may carry affectionate or negative connotations depending on tone and context. This flexibility aligns with Austin's (1962) Speech Act theory, where meaning is shaped not just by literal sense but also by speaker intention and listener impact.

It was also found that in "The Responder", the word "bizzie" used by Chris to describe himself as a police officer shows how the Scouse dialect reshapes standard meanings. While the OED defines "bizzie" as "always active," in Liverpool it informally means "police officer." The term derives from "busy" or "busybody" and historically mocked the police for interfering too much, reflecting both respect and criticism of authority. Its use signals local identity, solidarity, and the informal, anti-formality style of Scouse speech. In the movie, "bizzie" not only states Chris's job but also conveys confidence, protection, and closeness, while highlighting the complex and ambivalent relationship between citizens and police in Liverpool.

Stylistic Meaning

Stylistic meaning refers to the meaning of language use related to the social context (Leech, 1981). In the dialogue "Come inside Trev, good lad!", the word "lad" shows informality and friendliness. While the OED defines it as a young man, in this context it highlights solidarity and casual bonding. Historically, "lad" dates back to the 13th century, first meaning a servant or young male, then evolving into a symbol of male friendship and group identity. In the movie, its use emphasizes respect and equality between Chris and Trevor. Linguistically, "lad" strengthens social bonds, echoing Moreno's (2020) findings that informal language fosters solidarity and cultural identity within groups.

In the dialogue "I don't know, I was just at Willo's gaff, and he was stoned, so I robbed it", Casey uses "gaff" to mean Willo's house, while the OED defines it as "public entertainment places." This shift reflects Scouse slang, creating informality and closeness. Historically, "gaff" comes from the Romani word *gav* ("village"), later used in English cant for "fair" or "public place," and by the 20th century meant "house" (Minard, 1972). Its evolution shows Scousers' creativity in reshaping meaning. Socially, "gaff" signals solidarity and familiarity, while linguistically it shows semantic innovation in the Scouse dialect. Though informal, it can also conceal illegal acts, reflecting social and cultural complexity in the movie.

Affective Meaning

Affective meaning reflects the emotional tone of a word shaped by culture and context (Leech, 1981). In the film, Casey calls Carl a "blert" to humiliate him, mocking his intelligence and lowering his status. While the OED defines "blert" as useless or cowardly, here it means

“stupid” or “idiot.” Historically, “blert” has been used as an insult for a fool (Sampson, 2002; Griffiths, 2003) and later as vulgar slang for vagina (Dalzell & Victor, 2006). In this film, it serves both as an insult and as a marker of social norms, highlighting the informal, emotional character of the Scouse dialect.

In the dialogue “You talking bollocks”, Casey uses “bollocks” to reject Chris’s advice, shifting its OED meaning of “reprimands” to “nonsense” or “bullshit.” The term conveys frustration, sarcasm, and resistance to authority, marking emotional tension and Casey’s defiance. Historically, “bollocks” began as vulgar slang for testicles, later evolving into an insult or refusal, popularized in working-class speech, literature, and punk culture (e.g., “Never Mind the Bollocks”). In Scouse, it signifies mockery of meaningless talk and social criticism. Socially, it reflects honesty and distrust of authority, while linguistically it exemplifies semantic reclamation, reducing hierarchy in conversation. Its meaning can bond or insult depending on tone, and in this film, it underscores Scouse identity and assertiveness.

Collocative Meaning

Collocative meaning is a type of meaning that relates to a combination of certain words that create different interpretations of meaning (Leech, 1981). In the dialogue “You’ve got more song and dance than Sammy Davis Junior!”, the idiom “song and dance” shifts from its literal OED meaning of an entertainment act to the figurative sense of exaggerating or complicating issues. Carl uses it sarcastically to criticize Chris for overdramatizing instead of acting directly, highlighting inefficiency in communication. Historically rooted in 19th-century vaudeville, the phrase later gained a negative connotation of unnecessary or deceptive explanations. In the film, it works as social critique and humor, portraying Chris as dramatic and Carl as straightforward, while reflecting Liverpool values of honesty and simplicity.

In the dialogue “Listen, mate. I better crack on”, Chris uses “crack” on to mean continuing his work, reflecting the Scouse dialect’s casual tone and urgency tied to job responsibilities. While OED defines it as “to start or continue doing something,” its Scouse nuance lies in its informal use to signal productivity and social closeness, reinforced by the greeting “mate”. Historically, “crack” meant “to hit,” but in collocation “crack on” it evolved into “continue” or, in other contexts, “pretend” or “lie,” showing lexical flexibility (Minard, 1972; Griffiths, 2003). Socially, the phrase marks Liverpool identity, balancing professionalism with informality, while linguistically it illustrates semantic reclamation, turning a once-negative term into a neutral or positive expression. Thus, “crack on” embodies Scouse values of hard work, solidarity, and resistance to rigid formality.

Reflective Meaning

A reflexive meaning is a meaning that has two or more different interpretations of a word (Leech, 1981). In the dialogue “I’m not shagging you,” Casey uses “shagging” not just in its OED sense of “having sex” but as a rejection of sexual violence, expressing fear and refusal. Historically derived from Middle English “shoggen” (“to shake”) before evolving into vulgar slang for sex in the 17th century, “shagging later” became common in popular culture and Scouse slang. In this film, its meaning shifts from a neutral sexual term to a symbol of abuse and resistance. Linguistically, it reflects gender inequality, with Casey reclaiming her bodily rights, while socially it critiques male dominance and highlights Liverpool’s cultural tendency to normalize vulgar slang. Thus, “shagging” functions both as a marker of Scouse identity and a tool of defiance against gender-based oppression.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Based on the data findings, meaning differences were found when compared with the Oxford English Dictionary. Of the total 34 data, 65% of the data have the same meaning in the dictionary, while the rest have different meanings or have not even been found in the dictionary. These differences explain how language developed and show that popular media can be a tool to preserve or even introduce local dialects to public audiences. To build on this study, future research could examine other episodes of “The Responder” or other television series featuring the Scouse dialect to assess linguistic representations in popular culture.

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