It's (not) diffusing, *innit*?:
The origins of *innit*? in British English

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The tag form *innit*? in British English is said to be rapidly innovating and diffusing from southern England:

(1) Cos it's your people out there, *innit*?
(2) Oh, I've answered this one before last time, *innit*?

Our analysis of the social, syntactic-semantic and functional distribution of 1,655 tokens of *innit*? in synchronic corpora from the multi-ethnic city of London and the mono-ethnic town of Berwick-upon-Tweed leads us to challenge the view that the cross-dialectal occurrence of *innit*? *per se* is a result of spatial diffusion.

Several distributional patterns in our data support the view that *innit*? has had a longer history and is more grammaticalized in southern British English varieties. Firstly, the form has a markedly higher rate of occurrence in the London than in the Berwick data (14.8 and 2.7 tokens per 10,000 words respectively); secondly, the rate of highly grammaticalized non-paradigmatic tokens of *innit*?, as exemplified in (2), is almost five times higher in the London than in the Berwick data; thirdly, the form performs a wider range of pragmatic functions in the London than in the Berwick data.

However, we propose that the cross-dialectal occurrence of *innit*? is in the first instance the outcome of independent local processes of phonological attrition triggered by the high frequency of use of the canonical tag form *isn't it?* across varieties of British English. It is the non-paradigmatic uses of *innit*? that can be equated with supra-local developments, since such uses of tag forms generally thrive in areas with high levels of dialect and language contact such as London. Also, there is evidence that the innovative pragmatic uses of *innit*? originate in this context.

Our study demonstrates the value of detailed syntactic-semantic and pragmatic analyses in attempts to capture the mechanisms underlying the diffusion of discourse forms.