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A standard orthography for non-standard English?

Dora Maček & Mateusz-Milan Stanojević
Faculty of Philosophy, Zagreb

In an etymological spelling such as English, in order to show dialectal features of a character's speech writers use non-standard spelling (*eye dialect*) which has a long tradition in English literature. Dealing with *eye dialect* diachronically and synchronically, it is shown that dialect is not represented in a maximally accurate way, but approximated in varying degrees. Although variant spellings for different features can be observed throughout (inconsistencies occur inside one work and in the whole corpus), standardizing tendencies can be observed, which, together with the semantic and syntactic context, make *eye dialect* more intelligible for the average reader.

1.

> THE FLOWER GIRL. "Ow, eez yə-ooa san, is e? Wal, fewd dan y' də-ooty bawmz a mather should, eed now bettern to spawl a pore gel's flahrzn than awy athaht pyin. Will ye-oo py me f'them?" [*Here, with apologies, this desperate attempt to represent her dialect without a phonetic alphabet must be abandoned as unintelligible outside London*].
>
> (Shaw 1931:203)

Writing these lines, George Bernard Shaw in his Pygmalion was trying to show the dialect that (the future Hungarian countess) Eliza Doolittle was speaking. In an attempt to achieve phonetical correctness, he failed to be intelligible to an average reader. Using Roman letters and certain standard English spelling features, but combining them in ways true to Eliza's Cockney pronunciation for phonetical accuracy, we get spellings such as "eez" for [iəz] ("he is"), "is e" for [ɪzi] ("is he"), "py" for [pɑɪ] ("pay"), and the peculiar "yə-ooa", where Shaw had to resort to the phonetic alphabet for schwa to show the Cockney triphthong in [jəuə]. Apart from these attempts at accurate portrayal of the Cockney dialect, in other cases the author uses standard spellings: for in-

stance "should" "will" and "me", which he apparently considered to be pronounced the same in both the standard variant and in Cockney.

In a language such as English, where the spelling is etymological rather than phonological or morphonological, there is a notational problem for words that do not exist in the written standard. Written representations of these words will vary, because of the lack of clear, unambiguous representations for certain sounds in the standard spelling. Thus, for instance, if we look at the representation of the sounds /i:/ and /ɪ/ in English, we encounter many problems: /i:/ is most frequently represented as <e>, <e...e>, <ee>, <ea>, <i>, <i...e>, and /ɪ/ is usually <i>, <y> and <e>. However, even if we do rely on frequency, it is only our competence that can tell us that <e> in "be" is /i:/ but that <e> in "pretty" is /ɪ/; or even more drastically, that "quay" is /ki:/ or "business" /ˈbɪznɪs/.

The use of dialect in literature has a long tradition, from Chaucer to the present[1]. Depicting characters for whom dialect is a defining (or crucial) characteristic (as a marker of region, social class, education or ethnicity) authors use *eye dialect*: they show the dialect background of the character by using non-standard spellings. Wolfram and Schilling-Estes see *eye dialect* primarily as "a set of spelling changes that [typically] have nothing to do with the phonological differences of real dialects" (Wolfram, Schilling-Estes 1998:308), but they also say that "certain changes in spelling conventions may (...) be used to portray real phonological variation between a standard dialect and a nonmainstream variety of some type" (ibid.).

It becomes apparent from Shaw's quotation that the written material requires a broader view of *eye dialect* that incorporates both the above statements. In fact the analysis of the text shows that most changes in the spelling do represent certain phonological features of the dialect in varying degrees. Therefore *eye dialect* needs to be considered broadly as any deviation from the standard spelling, which aims to show dialectal speech patterns of a character (no matter whether that includes showing any phonological features). As it is clear from Shaw's attempt, when using *eye dialect* in literature authors have to balance between (1) showing that the character is using a dialect and (2) making it intelligible for the average reader, in addition to the artistic effect.

In this paper we shall attempt to trace ways in which eye dialect is used. We shall specifically look at different techniques employed in balancing between dialect depiction and intelligibility. Also, by examining the most frequently used forms, we shall attempt to suggest that there are standardizing tendencies in the practices of dialect presentation in literature.

2.

In the centuries before printing was invented and before a standard for English spelling was set in the 15th and 16th centuries, scribes included different dialectal forms

[1] For a historical survey of the use of non-standard in literature see Blake 1981. The use of dialect from a literary point of view is dealt with in Page 1973, esp. pp. 51-90.

into the texts they wrote for different reasons. An example from Old English is the late tenth century *Kentish Hymn*[2], which contains West Saxon forms, e.g. *heofen* alongside Kentish *hiofen* "heaven" (l. 2 *hiofenrices Weard* "Guardian of heaven, l. 22 *heofenlic leoht* "heavenly light", l. 29 *heafena rices* "the realm of heaven" l. 42 *hiofena Heahcyninc* "the High King of heaven), WS *cyning* alongside K *cyninc* "king" (l. 15 *þu eart cyninga Cynigc*[3] "You are the King of kings", l. 42 *hiofena Heahcyninc* "the High King of Heaven") WS *cwic* and K *cwuc* "living" (l. 15 *Cynigc cwicera gehwilces* "King of every living being", l. 39 *cwucra ge deadra* "of the living and of the dead").

Since the various OE dialectal orthographic traditions followed the phonological principle the variant spellings can be understood in two ways. First, they represent only variant spellings, Kentish and West Saxon, which the Kentish scribe incorporated into the text he wrote. Second, the variant spellings may also represent variant pronunciations. In other words, the prestigious West Saxon was possibly responsible not only for the mixture of spelling, but also of pronunciation, e.g. hiofen [hioven] - heafen [heaven], cyning [kyniŋg] - cyninc [kyniŋk], cwic [kwik] - [kwuk][4].

A different, and certainly deliberate use of dialectal forms is found in Chaucer, who has employed dialect much in the same way as it is done in modern literature, to give authenticity to a character's speech. The best known example is to be found in *The Reeve's Tale*[5] in the speech of two students of Cambridge:

l. 4013 *John highte that oon, And Aleyn highte that oother;*
Of o toun were they born, that highte Strother,
Fer in the north, I kan nat telle where.[6]

In their northern dialect Aleyn says

l. 4023 *Hou **fares** thy faire dogther and thy wyf?*

and John

l. 4031 *And forthy **is** I come, and eek Alayn,*
*To grynde oure corn and carie it **ham** agayn;*

and further:

l. 4036 *By God, right by the hopur wil I **stande** -*
*Quod John - and se howgates the corn **gas** in.*
Yet saugh I nevere, by my fader kyn,
*How that the hopur **wagges til** and **fra.***

[2] W.F. Bolton (1963).

[3] A hybrid spelling where the pronunciation is left to the choice of the reader.

[4] This is a broad transcription, since the exact quality of the sounds is not important at this point.

[5] The Canterbury Tales, F.N. Robinson ed. (1957).

[6] One was called John and the other Aleyn; they were born in a village called Strother, far in the north, I cannot say where (it is).

These two Northerners use what to a Londoner, like Chaucer, must have been typical northern pronunciations such as ***ham, stande, gas, fra***[7]. There are also grammatical forms like ***fare-s, ga-s, wagge-s*** equivalent to southern *fare-th, goo-th, wagge-th,* and finally, ***til and fra*** for southern *to and fro.*

Since the ME spelling was phonological too, regardless of the differences in regional spelling traditions, it is relatively easy to reproduce any pronunciation so that it is recognizable. But it can be noticed even in this early example that only some dialectal features are selected, presumably those that were understood as dialectal, or even as characteristic of a particular (e.g. northern) variety. In the same way a few dialectal grammatical forms are introduced as well as a few items of vocabulary (e.g. til). The situation in Chaucer's tale is in fact linguistically quite realistic. The two students from Strother would have certainly accommodated to the local dialect of Cambridge and the, probably mixed, language used at the university, retaining some northern features. But it is more likely that those features of the dialect that the author himself knew were incorporated in the text, rather than some others. This is a procedure that can be found in modern authors who represent dialects other than their own.

Shakespeare, according to Blake (1983), doesn't use dialect very much, and as Brook (1976:177) says it is "sketchy and conventional, consisting of a few hints to the actor" which "contain mainly pronunciation and lexical items, and much less syntax and semantics" (ibid.). Both Brook and Blake say that the dialect was a rustic stage dialect used by authors in the Elizabethan drama. It was a south-eastern rural dialect that represented low-class people. Other dialects were less known on the stage and were therefore not easy to represent. The dialectal features that occur are usually "one or two key features" (Blake, 1983:33). And again, we may say that this agrees with Chaucer's as well as with modern practice. The difference is that in Modern English literature many more dialects are much better represented. More often than not, 19th and 20th century authors represent a dialect they are familiar with. The often quoted (e.g. Brook and Blake) example of dialect in Shakespeare is to be found in the following extract from *King Lear* (IV, vi, 241)[8]

> ***Edgar*** *Chill* not let go, *Zir,* without *vurther 'casion.*
> ***Oswald*** Let go Slaue, or thou dy'st.
> ***Edg.*** Good Gentleman, goe youre gate, and let poore *volke* passe: and *'chud ha' bin zwaggerd* out of my life, *'twould* not *ha' bin zo* long as *'tis* by a *vortnight.* Nay, come not near *th'* old man: keepe out, *che vor'*ye, or *ice* try whither your Costward, or my Ballow[9] be the harder; *chill* be plaine with you.[10]

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[7] Equivalents of Chaucer's native southern *home, stonde, gooth, fro,* i.e. N [a] - S [o].

[8] Quoted from Blake (1983).

[9] *costard,* "head", *ballow* "cudgel".

[10] The complete Works of William Shakespeare, W.J. Craig ed. (1955 [1905]) OUP. has *zur* for *Zir* (it is possible that *zur* stand for a lower [ɜ], i.e. [ʌ], heard in modern dialects), *further* is

The features of Edgar's pronunciation, characteristic of the rustic southern dialect are as follows:

a) the voicing of initial voiceless fricatives /f/ and /s/, *vurther, volk, vortnight, vor, zur zwaggered, zo* (further, folk, fortnight, for, sir, swaggered, so);
b) *ich* for "I" and consequently contracted forms with auxiliaries *chud che, chill* (< ich would, ich will), and *che* seems to be the spelling for [tʃə], where the "schwa" developed as a linking vowel between two consonant *che vor* (Brook ibid.);
c) elision of unaccented (initial) syllables or consonants and vowels (in such syllables): *'twould* (it would), *ha' bin* (have been), *'tis* (it is), *th' old* (the old, pronounced as one word [ðɑuld];
d) *bin* obviously stands for a short /i/, very likely a lax [ɪ].
e) *ise* (I shall) is a stereotype for northern dialects (found also in Chaucer see above), but it was found to have a wider spread.

It is seen here that Shakespeare uses a spelling which in the Elizabethan period had already lost its phonological character. Therefore it is not always absolutely clear what some of the spellings stand for. Thus Brook has such statements as "Q reads *woosel*, a spelling which **may reflect** Silence's rustic pronunciation", "Jamy's *gud* **may stand** for [gʌd] or [gy:d]", "*De* 'do' **may be** an unaccented form" and so on (Brook 1957:178ff). This state of affairs is recognizable from modern literature as well.

3.

In this paper we shall look at the spelling practices in dialect representation from the point of view of the reader. Dialect depiction and intelligibility for the reader can be represented as two axes on a graph, and each word of eye dialect can be located somewhere in the two-dimensional plane delimited by these two axes. The two axes are usually interdependent: the more dialectal features a word has, the more difficult it is to recognize. Although these two may for that reason seem like opposites on a line rather than a two-dimensional system, there are other factors (most notable of them being context) which may influence word recognition. So without context a word such as *Aw* may be difficult to understand, but if placed inside its context (e.g. "They think *Aw'm* blind; but *Aw'm* noan" (Brontë 1988:125)), it is clear that the word is "I" because of its position in the sentence etc. Therefore, in order to plot the word's recognizability, one has to take into consideration not only the spelling, but also the context in which it occurs.

In the following analysis we used a corpus of 19th and 20th century literature chosen at random. Several groups of words written in eye dialect can be observed:

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vurther as it is in Brook. He also has *zwagger'd,* and Craig, who obviously did some editing has *zwaggered* and *ise* for *ice*. Craig's amendments were obviously done with the intention of normalizing the spelling to be recognizable by the modern reader.

1) The first group consists of those words which are high on the recognizability axis and zero on the dialectal feature axis. These words are cases of "real" eye dialect, where no dialectal feature is shown. The pronunciation represented is the pronunciation usual in the standard, but with a non-standard spelling[11]. These non-standard spellings can be of two kinds:

a) the use of apostrophe for a silent letter (e.g. *Gover'ment*, *mis'ess*, *Pa'son*, *'hore*, *off'n*, *d'you*, *reck'ned*, *gitt'n*)

b) regularizing spelling according to a well-established standard pattern[12] (*stept*, *sowls*, *bin*, *genleman*, *show-fer*)

2) This group consists of words which are generally lower on the recognizability axis, and their spelling shows a certain dialectal feature. Such spellings can be divided into classes as follows:

a) the use of apostrophe for a missing letter or letters, suggesting a non-standard pronunciation (*t'ee*, *t'others*, *on'y*, *a'ternoon*, *evenin'*, *'peared*, *gre't*, *han'*, *th'*, *wi'*, *'em*, *o'*, *don'*, *'cos*, *'ont* (want), *foun'*, *hadn'*, *hid'n*, *'sturb*, *'fraid*, *s'pose* etc.). This group is generally high on the recognizability axis.

b) a regularizing spelling according to a certain pattern, suggesting a non-standard pronunciation (*feller*, *hev*, *cloze*, *swaller*, *projick*, *drave*, *dat*, *mine* (mind), *kilt* (killed), *behine*, *chile*, *bofe* (both), *tole* (told), *whet*, *dahn*, *hend*, *goa*, *loike*, *ole* (old), *watcha*, *yerp*, *bor* (boy), *whaas*, *wuz*, *ketch*, *mawnin'*, *dey*, *k'yer* (care), *gwyne* (going to), etc.) Words in this group vary as to how difficult they are to recognize, from easy recognition (*feller*, *dat*) to more difficult recognition (*mine* (mind), *kilt* (killed), *poach* (porch) for which there are several possible interpretations depending on the context) to almost impossible recognition without context (*urr* (other), *seh* (sir), *mid* (might) etc.).

It seems that the last group is most common in the corpus. It would be reasonable to expect that when representing a certain sound, authors would use the most frequent pattern from the standard spelling. In certain cases this is true: E. Brontë uses <ee> for /i:/, which, together with <e> and <e...e> makes for 64% of the spellings of this sound in the standard (Gimson 1995:97). Wesker uses <i> for /ɪ/, which is used in 61% of the words for that sound (ibid.). However, for the /a:/ sound all authors occasionally or often use <ah> spelling. In the standard the spellings which are most frequent (altogether accounting for 92% of the cases) are <ar> and <a> (ibid.:106). The most varied in its use is the <r> grapheme: it is used for schwa (in non-rhotic dialects) in combination with <e> (*feller*, *swaller*, *yer*, *neckercher*, *nuver*), and is also used to show the length of the preceding vowel (*bor*, *purtiest*, *arfter*, *lars'*, *Lard*, *kyarnt*), and sometimes stands

[11] Compare the definition in the entry from Webster's Third New International Dictionary (1966) "the use of misspellings that are based on standard pronunciations (as *sez* for *says* or *kow* for *cow*) but are usu. intended to suggest a speaker's illiteracy or his use of generally non-standard pronunciations".

[12] Usually a pattern that is used in the standard spelling.

for the /r/ sound. Another interesting spelling convention is the use of the silent <e> at the end of the word which shows that the preceding vowel is a diphthong. All authors included in the corpus have this use for <e>: *cloze*, *tole*, *blime*, *chile*, *bofe*, *ole*, *mine*, *behine*, *dimen*.

There are certain inconsistencies as well: on different occasions the same word may be spelled differently. Hardy has both *zid* and *zeed* for "saw", both *hae* and *ha'* for "have", *wuld* and *wold* for "old"; Page has *jes* and *jes'* for "just", he uses both <ar> and <ah> for /a:/, in *kyarnt* ("can't") and in *kyahn* ("can"), *wuz* for "was" but *wus'n* for "wasn't" etc. Brontë is much more consistent in her use: her inconsistencies are mostly those of spelling certain sounds rather than certain words (e.g. spellings *loike*, *likes*, *fine* and *raight* where all of these obviously stand for the same /ɔɪ/). Only minor words are spelled differently in different situations (e.g. for "and" Brontë has: *and*, *und*, *un*, *un'*)[13]. Wesker is even more consistent than that: he has decided on words which he would write in non-standard spelling, and he uses the same spellings for these words consistently throughout the play (*blust*, *'ont*, *git*, *hevn't* etc.)

4.

From the way dialects have been illustrated through history and from the categories that are most frequent in the works we have examined, it is demonstrated that authors do not show dialectal features in a maximally accurate way. The idea is only to mark the dialect. In doing so the author is likely a) to approximate the dialect in varying degrees, b) to apply a varying number of elements from the classes that make words more difficult to recognize, and c) to be inconsistent, either unintentionally or with a purpose.

It would seem that the difficulty of understanding a literary dialect is inversely proportionate to the above elements. This is, however, not entirely so. As it has been mentioned earlier, the dialect is never fully represented, but only "hinted at". Second, the context is important for the understanding, and finally, the type of word class (grammatical versus lexical words). What remains is only the spelling practice, i.e. whether it includes recognizable spelling rules or not.

5.

In conclusion we would like to return to the question posed in the title. From the point of view of the average reader who is frequently not a native speaker of English, it seems that assistance and guidance in reading dialect in literature is desirable. The economical way of representing it by only marking some of its features is an important element that contributes to a greater transparency of the text. It seems reasonable to as-

[13] The problem with E. Brontë's work is that because of the loss of the manuscript and the editorial emendations by her sister in the second edition of *Wuthering Heights* we cannot be certain how inconsistent the author actually was (see Page 1973:65 and on).

sume that both phonetic symbols and diacritics would be more cumbersome than helpful, another aid would be needed for a reader with little or no experience with English dialects.

We have noted earlier that the difficulties are generated by a complex of factors of which one is strange spellings to show non-standard pronunciation. If the reader is not familiar with the specific dialect, non-standard spellings may present serious difficulties. What he or she has to rely on is an unambiguous lexical and grammatical context. Other facilitating elements include explanations of the spelling conventions (see Wesker 1959:11) or even a special standard for literary dialect. There are already standardizing tendencies in literature, since certain spelling "rules" (e.g. apostrophy, <ah> for /a:)/ etc.) can be observed in most practices (of eye dialect). It would be relatively easy for editors to regularize all spellings according to an agreed pattern. After all, the practice of normalizing 17th or 18th century standard spellings is quite common.

We have to admit, however, that such interference may upset the intentions of the author. Considering, on the other hand, the many unsuccessful attempts at reforming standard English spelling, it does not seem likely that the charm of diversity in eye dialect would ever be jeopardized.

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STANDARDNI PRAVOPIS ZA NESTANDARDNI ENGLESKI?

Da bi se prikazalo da lik u književnome djelu govori dijalektom, u engleskome jeziku pisci upotrebljavaju nestandardnu grafiju (*eye dialect*), čija tradicija seže još do Chaucerovog vremena. Članak se bavi pojavom *eye dialecta* s dijakronijskog i sinkronijskog stajališta, te se pokazuje da u književnosti pisci ne prikazuju sve karakteristike dijalekta u potpunosti, nego da ih samo označavaju u raznim stupnjevima. Unatoč tome što u obrađenom korpusu postoje nedosljednosti u nestandardnoj grafiji (i unutar jednog djela i ako se usporede prakse raznih autora), zamjetne su i tendencije prema ujednačavanju, koje uz semantičko-sintaktički kontekst izričaja prosječnome čitatelju olakšavaju čitanje.