WRITING IN DIALECT: WRITTEN REPRESENTATIONS OF SPEECH

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Abstract: *This paper[1] discusses different types of respellings (allegro speech, dialect respelling, eye-dialect, semi-phonetic respelling) used by different English authors. In some contexts dialect is usually used for humorous purposes, and sometimes even to promote negative character evaluations by the readers. The representation of dialect in writing draws mainly on stereotypes, using eye-dialect or semi-phonetic spelling to render some of the best-known features of a certain dialect or accent, including specific words or grammatical structures. The aim of this paper is to delve into the ways in which different English authors represent various dialects. The authors under consideration are William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Irvine Welsh, Rudyard Kipling, and Robert Burns. The first four are included in what Beal (2006) calls 'literary dialect' while the latter in 'dialect literature.'*

Keywords: *literary dialect, semi-phonetic spelling, eye-dialect, dialect literature, allegro speech*

1. Terminological clarifications

In an article published in 1985, Dennis Preston identifies three types of respellings: ***allegro speech***, ***dialect respellings*** and ***eye-dialect***. The first type includes spellings such as *gonna, wanna, jeet* 'did you eat'. Their function is to render through the use of nonstandard spellings the fact that speech is naturally occurring, relaxed, and sometimes even slangy. The second type encompasses forms such as *wint* 'went', *dis* 'this', with the purpose of capturing regional and even social features of pronunciation. Forms such as *sez* 'says', *wuz* 'was' are known as *eye dialect*. They are usually used to denigrate the speaker who uses them and make him/her appear illiterate, rustic, uneducated.

More recently, Beal (2006) draws a very important distinction between ***literary dialect*** and ***dialect literature***. She argues that as far as literary dialect is concerned, the majority of the text is written in Standard English, but the speech of some characters is rendered as dialectal. In dialect literature, the whole text or at least a significant part of it is written in a dialect.

2. Literary dialect and dialect literature

Minnick (2010: 163) writes that literary dialect has the purpose of documenting and contributing to the development of the English language. Literary representations of English spoken in Britain have functioned as "travelogue curiosity, social status marker, regional identifier, comic trope, and mimetic device, sometimes performing multiple functions" (Minnick, 2010: 163).

One of the first authors who used **literary dialect** to depict the speech of some of his characters was William Shakespeare. In *Henry V*, Shakespeare represents some characters as using Welsh, Scottish and Irish varieties of English. Consider the following excerpts:

> (1) FLUELLEN: By Cheshu, he is an ass, as in the 'orld: I will verify as much in his peard: he has no more directions in the true disciplines of the wars, look you, of the Roman disciplines, than is a puppy-dog.

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(2) MACMORRIS: By Chrish, la, tish ill done; the work ish give over, the trompet sound the retreat. By my hand, I swear, and my father's soul, the work ish ill done; it ish give over (...)

(3) JAMY: It sall be vary gude, gude feith, gude captains baith: and I sall quit you with gude leve, as I may pick occasion; that sall I, marry.

(4) JAMY: By the mess, ere theise eyes of mine take themselves to slomber, ay'll de gude service, or ay'll lig i'th' grund for it; ay, or go to death; and ay'll pay't as valorously as I may, that sall I suerly do, that is the breff and the long. Marry, I was full fain heard some question 'tween you tway.

(William Shakespeare – *Henry V*, 2009: 620-622)

Fluellen, MacMorris, and Jamy are the captains of King Henry's troops from Wales, Ireland, and Scotland and their speech is rendered in such a way to depict their accents from their countries of origin. The play *Henry V is* an example of literary dialect because everybody in the play, with the exception of the three captains mentioned above and the French princess is represented as speaking Standard English. The examples provided in (1) – (4) all contain semi-phonetic spellings: <'orld> for 'world', <sall> for 'shall', <vary> for 'very', <gude> for 'good'. We can also find instances of eye-dialect: <trompet> for 'trumpet', <suerly> for 'surely', <feith> for 'faith'. Another intriguing aspect is the use of the words 'Cheshu' (Fluellen) and 'Chrish' (MacMorris) for *Jesus Christ*.

Just like Shakespeare, British novelists such as Charles Dickens, Rudyard Kipling, Irvine Welsh write in Standard English, but they occasionally make use of different techniques to portray the speech of some of their characters. Charles Dickens is by far one of the greatest novelists in British literature, and *Great Expectations* is considered to be one of his masterpieces. It tells the story of Pip, an orphan, raised by Mr and Mrs Joe Gargery, who has an eerie encounter with an escaped convict, Magwitch, whom he helps. As the story unfolds, Pip becomes a gentleman with the help of a mysterious benefactor. Consider the following excerpt:

(5) One night, I was writing in the chimney-corner with my slate, expending great efforts on the production of a letter to Joe. I think it must have been a full year after our hunt upon the marshes, for it was a long time after, and it was winter, and a hard frost. With an alphabet on the hearth at my feet for reference, I contrived in an hour or two to print and smear this epistle:

'MI DEER JO i OPE U R KRWITE WELL i OPE i SHAL SON B HABELL 4 2 TEEDGE U JO AN THEN WE SHORL B GLODD AN WEN i M PRENGTD 2 U JO WOT LARX AN BLEVE ME INF XN PIP.'

There was no indispensable necessity for my communicating with Joe by letter, inasmuch as he sat beside me and we were alone. But, I delivered this written communication (slate and all) with my own hand, and Joe received it, as a miracle of erudition.

'I say, Pip, old chap!' cried Joe, opening his blue eyes wide, 'what a scholar you are! Ain't you?'

(Charles Dickens – *Great Expectations*, 1994: 43)

When Pip starts scribbling a note to Joe, the readers are exposed to the way Pip actually writes, and his level of literacy. Young Pip is just learning to write, so this type of phonetic rebus is

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actually an intermediate stage on the way to literacy. Stewart (1990: 194) argues that Pip's speech is strewn with Cockney humour. The most obvious example is 'habell' for 'able'. Interestingly, Pip also uses numerals (four and two) which function as prepositions, as well as letters (I M for 'I'm', U for 'you', R for 'are', etc). Stewart (1990: 194) further notes that Pip's words 'INF XN' stand for '*in-aff-ection'*, that is, '*in affection*', but it can easily be confused with '*in f-ection*' if the reader starts a split second too late.

The excerpt from *Great Expectations* is an example of literary dialect. The first five lines of the excerpt are written in Standard English. Pip's letter contains different types of respellings. The possessive pronoun '*mi*', instead of '*my*' is an example of eye-dialect as it reflects no phonological difference from the standard pronunciation '*my*'. The same goes for the proper name 'Jo' instead of 'Joe', another case of eye-dialect. The pronunciation is the same, the spelling is different.

In a very compelling article, Poussa (1999: 33) compares Dickens to a sociolinguist, in the sense that he successfully managed to render different types of accents in the novel '*David Copperfield*'. The East Anglian accent is indicated in the novel, in the speech of Ham and Daniel Peggotty. Consider the following examples:

(6) **Ham Peggotty**

'Made out of a boat, is it?' said Steerforth. 'It's the right sort of a house for such a thorough-built boatman.'

'So 'tis, so 'tis, sir,' said Ham. 'You're right, young gen'l'm'n. Mas'r Davy, bor, gen'l'm'n's right. (Ch. VII, p.113)

(7) **Daniel Peggotty**

'... I'm obleeged to you, sir, for your welcoming manner of me. I'm rough, sir, but I'm ready – leastways I hope I'm ready, you unnerstand. My house ain't much for to see, sir, but it's hearty at your service if ever you should come along with Mas'r Davy to see it. I'm a reg'lar Dodman, I am,' said Mr Peggotty, by which he meant snail, and this was in allusion to his being slow to go... (Ch. VII, pp. 113-114)

(quoted in Poussa, 1999: 33)

In the examples provided in (6) and (7) we can identify the glottalisation of alveolar stops in the words *gen'l'm'n* (in the speech of Ham Peggotty) and *unnerstand* (in the speech of Daniel Peggotty), elision of unstressed syllables in *gen'l'm'n*, and *yod*-dropping mixed with elision in the word *reg'lar*. Poussa (1999: 34) highlights that *yod*-dropping is a feature of the East Anglian dialect. Another hint at the East Anglian dialect is the use of the word '*dodman*' which in the East Anglian dialect means 'snail'. This is even explained by Dickens in the novel 'by which he meant snail' in the excerpt provided in (7). Dickens also makes use of eye-dialect, in the speech of both Ham Peggotty and Daniel Peggotty. The noun *master* is pronounced '*mas'r*'. This word '*mas'r*' also reveals that Ham and Daniel Peggotty are rhotic, a feature usually associated with speakers from the lower classes (both characters are fishermen). To this we also add the nonstandard grammatical form '*ain't*' instead of '*isn't*'.

Scottish writer Irvine Welsh has enjoyed global success with novels such as *Trainspotting, The Acid House,* etc. *Trainspotting* is Welsh's first novel, published in 1993, and has enjoyed worldwide success despite the fact that parts of it are written in the urban Scots dialect of Edinburgh. The novel was also adapted for the stage and turned into a movie. Consider the following excerpt:

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(8) The swear wis lashing oafay Sick Boy; he wis trembling. Ah wis jist sitting their, focusing oan the telly, tryin no tae notice the cunt. He wis bringing me doon. Ah tried tae keep ma attention oan the Jean-Claude Van Damme Video.

As happens in such movies, they started oaf wi an obligatory dramatic opening. Then the next phase ay the picture involved building up the tension through introducing the dastardly villain and sticking the weak plot thegither. Any minute now though, auld Jean-Claude's ready tae git doon tae some serious swedgin.

(Irvine Welsh – *Trainspotting*, 1997: 9)

First of all, *Trainspotting* is a good example of literary dialect, in which most of the novel is written in Standard English but Irvine Welsh consistently makes use of the Scots dialect to appeal to the readers and create a special effect. In this excerpt, the spelling <oa> is used for the Standard English <o> in words like '*oafay*', '*oan*', '*oaf*', '*auld*'. These are examples of semi-phonetic spelling, which inform the reader that the pronunciation is different from that of Received Pronunciation (RP) and show how these words are pronounced in the Scots dialect. Throughout the excerpt we also have cases of diphthongs flattened to a long vowel: <Ah> [ɑ:] for the personal pronoun *I* [ai]; <ma> for *my* [mī]; <doon> for the adverb *down* [daʊn]. These are all examples of semi-phonetic spelling.

Other examples of semi-phonetic spelling include the use of the front close vowel [i] instead of the back/central/more open [ɔ]/[ʌ]/[ə]/[e]: <wis> instead of *was* [wɒz], <jist> for *just* [dʒʌst], <git> instead of *get* [gɛt]. We also have examples of monophthongs which have been turned into glides: <oaf> for off [ɒf], <oan> for on [ɒn]. These are all examples of semi-phonetic spellings because the pronunciation is different from RP. Regarding consonants, let us take as an example the word *thegither*. The voiced dental fricative [ð] is used in initial position instead of the alveolar [t] as in RP [təˈgɛðə].

Another example of semi-phonetic spelling includes <tae> for *to*. The spelling <tryin>, <swedgin> for *trying* and *swedging* suggest the pronunciation with an alveolar nasal, i.e. [ɪn] for the RP [ɪŋ], that is with a velar nasal. However, many studies (Oancea, 2016; Schleef et al, 2011; Tagliamonte, 2011; Wald and Shopen 1985) have shown that the [ɪn] pronunciation is favoured by many English native speakers. Interestingly, Irvine Welsh does not use this semi-phonetic spelling consistently with all the words ending in [ing]: *lashing*, *trembling*, *sitting*, *focusing*, *bringing*, *introducing*, etc. As far as the choice of words is concerned, the author uses the informal Scottish word '*swedgin*', meaning *fight* or *brawl*. Irvine Welsh's goal in *Trainspotting* is not to produce a novel written in the Scots dialect, but to use enough pointers to the urban Scots dialect in order to place his setting and characters.

Irvine Welsh made use of semi-phonetic spelling, but other authors use different techniques such as eye-dialect or allegro speech respellings. Consider the following excerpt from Rudyard Kipling's poem *Gunga Din*:

(9) You may talk o' gin and beer
When you're quartered safe out 'ere
An' you're sent to penny-fights an' Aldershot it;
But when it comes to slaughter
You will do your work on water,
An' you'll lock the bloomin' boots of 'im that's got it.
Now in Injia's sunny clime,
Where I used to spend my time.
A-servin' of 'Er Majesty the Queen,
Of all them blackfaced crew
The finest man I knew

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Was our regimental bhisti, Gunga Din.
He was "Din! Din! Din!
You limpin' lump o' brick-dust, Gunga Din!
Hi! Slippery – hitherao -!
Water, get it! – Panee lao -!
You squidgy-nosed old idol, Gunga Din."

(Rudyard Kipling – *Gunga Din*, 1890)[2]

In this poem Kipling uses an apostrophe to pinpoint any missing letter. However, this apostrophe can be interpreted in two ways. In can either be an example of **allegro speech respelling** as in the cases of <o'> for '*of*' or <an'> for '*and*' or **semi-phonetic spelling**, as in <'ere> for 'here', <'im> for 'him', <'Er> for 'Her'. In the case of semi-phonetic spelling these examples indicate *h-dropping*. This feature, though very common in England, is regional, probably Cockney (Beal, 2006: 85). Fox and Torgersen (2018: 199) write that as far as h-dropping is concerned, this feature is more consistent among older speakers than younger speakers. Cheshire et al. (2005) argue that this is part of a general process of H reinstatement in south eastern British English. Kipling also uses a-prefixing, a feature typically associated with Scottish English and Appalachian English. The spelling <bloomin'>, <A-servin'> and <limpin'> for '*blooming*', '*serving*' and '*limping*' indicate the pronunciation [ɪn] for the RP [ɪŋ]. Kipling uses this semi-phonetic spelling consistently throughout the poem. All the ING words are spelled like this indicating the pronunciation with an alveolar nasal. Also, another case of semi-phonetic spelling is represented in the spelling <Injia> for 'India'.

Interestingly, Kipling uses the Hindustani words *bhisti*, *hitherao* and *Panee lao*. The first one describes a traditional water-carrier of South Asia. The second word is actually a combination of the English word '*hither*' + the Hindi word '*ao*', thus resulting '*hitherao*', meaning 'Come here!'. *Panee lao* is also a Hindi expression meaning 'Bring water quickly'. Elsewhere in the poem Kipling uses the spelling <sez>, an example of eye dialect, which represents the pronunciation /sɛz/, used by RP speakers: (*'I 'ope you liked your drink,' sez Gunga Din*).

The texts discussed so far are examples of *literary dialect*[3]. The poems of Robert Burns are examples of what Beal (2006) calls **dialect literature**, because they are written almost entirely in dialect. Consider the following poem:

(10) Oh wert thou in the cauld blast,
On yonder lea, on yonder lea;
My plaidie to the andry airt,
I'd shelter thee, I'd shelter thee:
Or did Misfortune's bitter storms
Around thee blaw, around thee blaw,
Thy bield should be my bosom,
To share it a', to share it a'.

Or were I in the wildest waste,
Sae black and bare, sae black and bare,
The desert were a Paradise,
If thou wert there, if thou wert there.
Or were I monarch o' the globe,

[2] The poem can be accessed here: <www.poemhunter.com/poem/gunga-dim/>.
[3] Another poet who made use of literary dialect in his poems to convey national dialect is the Irish poet Seamus Heaney. Poems such as *Anahorish* or *Broagh* contain such features in their titles.

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Wi' thee to reign, wi' thee to reign;
The brightest jewel in my crown
Wad be my queen, wad be my queen.

(Robert Burns – *O, Wert Thou in the Cauld Blast*, 1800)[4]

Translation into Standard English

(11) O, were you in the cold blast
On yonder meadow, on yonder meadow,
My plaid to the angry direction,
I would shelter you, I would shelter you,
Or did Misfortune's bitter storms
Around you blow, around you blow,
Your shelter should be my bosom,
To share it all, to share it all.

Or were I in the wildest waste,
So black and bare, so black and bare,
The desert were a Paradise,
If you were there, if you were there.
Or were I monarch of the globe,
With you to reign, with you to reign,
The brightest jewel in my crown
Would be my queen, would be my queen.

The poem by Robert Burns provided in (10) is not accessible to outsiders (i.e. speakers of the Scots dialect). This poem was written by a dialect speaker for dialect speakers, i.e. for a special readership. The use of dialect features is very dense, making it almost impossible to understand without the translation into Standard English. Burns uses one allegro speech respelling <o'> for Standard English <of>, but there are no instances of eye-dialect. There are also some examples of semi-phonetic spelling: <wi'> for Standard English '*with*' or <a'> for '*all*'.

3. Conclusion

This article has tackled the differences between literary dialect, in which dialectal features are used for specific purposes, inserted in texts that are written in Standard English, and dialect literature, written wholly in dialect. Dialectal features abound in dialect literature, as the texts are written by speakers of that dialect for a limited readership, who also speak that particular dialect. We have also looked at some of the 'tricks' used by different authors (from the 16th to the 20th century) to convey dialect: allegro speech forms, eye-dialect, semi-phonetic respellings and even regionalism to better describe their characters and the accent or dialect that they use. Such devices help readers understand better the social, political and linguistic implications of the era in which they were written.

[4] The poem can be accessed here: < www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poems/o-wert-thou-cauld-blast>

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