The accuracy and motivations of semi-phonetic respellings in *Summer Bulletin* dialect literature.

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Introduction to Wider Study

Although Yorkshire has a long literary tradition, its dialect literature has seldom been the subject of scholarly attention. To this end, the project of which this article comprises one part analysed over 100,000 words of Yorkshire dialect poetry and prose published in the *Summer Bulletin*. Two sub-sets of data were examined, one made up of all dialect literature contributions published in the *Bulletin* between 1957 and 1974 (hereafter SB57-74) and the other between 2000 and 2010 (SB00-10). The investigation began with an analysis of pronunciations heard in Yorkshire during the 1950s and 1960s offered by the Survey of English Dialects (SED). It was found that there were major divisions in vowel pronunciations between the North and East Ridings (NER) on one hand and the West Riding (WR) on the other. These results were then compared to the Yorkshire sounds documented in the Millennium Memory Bank (MMB) collected half a century later, during 1998 and 1999. Many of the distinctive NER or WR pronunciations found in the SED were *not* found in the more modern MMB data, suggesting they are no longer heard, at least not with the same frequency. Thus, many of the main linguistic distinctions between NER and WR appear to no longer exist with the same salience, suggesting that pronunciations between the areas are becoming more similar, that is, they are 'levelling'.

Following this, the Yorkshire dialect literature data was analysed, with particular attention being paid to the ways in which writers use non-standard 'semi-phonetic' spellings to represent pronunciations.

Summarised, the main spellings used in both SB57-74 and SB00-10 were:

Vowel	Standard English (e.g.)	WR (e.g.)	NER (e.g.)
MOUTH	*house, around, down*	*h<u>ah</u>se/h<u>aa</u>se, ar<u>ah</u>nd/ar<u>aa</u>nd, d<u>ah</u>n/d<u>aa</u>n*	*h<u>oo</u>se, ar<u>oo</u>nd, d<u>oo</u>n*
GOOSE	*school, moon, boot*	*sch<u>oo</u>il, m<u>oo</u>in, b<u>oo</u>it,*	*sch<u>ee</u>al, m<u>ee</u>an, b<u>ee</u>at*
FACE	*space, made, straight*	*space, made, straight*	*sp<u>aa</u>ce, m<u>ee</u>ade, str<u>aa</u>t*
FLEECE	*sleep, feel, meat,*	*sl<u>ee</u>ap, f<u>ee</u>al, m<u>e</u>yt*	*sl<u>ee</u>ap, f<u>ee</u>al, m<u>ee</u>at*
GOAT	*road, don't coal, old, know*	*r<u>oo</u>ad, d<u>oa</u>n't, c<u>oi</u>l, <u>ow</u>d, kn<u>aw</u>*	*r<u>oo</u>ad, d<u>ee</u>ant, c<u>oo</u>al, <u>ow</u>d/<u>aw</u>d, kn<u>aw</u>*
PRICE	*five, mile, night, right*	*f<u>ah</u>ve, m<u>ah</u>le, n<u>ee</u>t, r<u>e</u>yt/r<u>ee</u>t*	*f<u>ah</u>ve, m<u>ah</u>le, n<u>ee</u>t, r<u>ee</u>t*

In turn, these respellings were compared to the pronunciations documented across the Ridings in the SED and MMB. Thus, the accuracy of the semi-phonetic spellings used by the writers could be assessed and the motivations behind the (in)accuracy discussed. It is these facets of the analysis which this article relays.
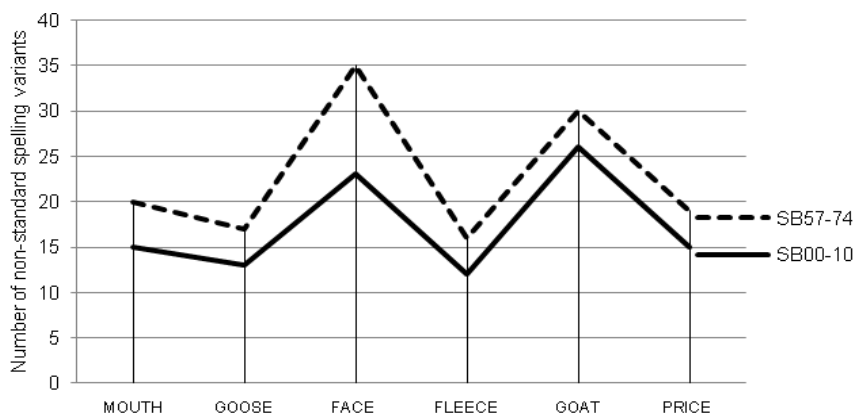
Accuracy

Some linguists argue that the orthographic system of Standard English (StdE) is inadequate in accurately representing sounds. However, through the comparison of semi-phonetic spellings found in SB57-74 and the pronunciations recorded in the Ridings in the SED, it was found that the most common respellings used by writers accurately correspond to sounds heard in their speech community at the time. In turn, the linguistic distinctions between NER and WR on the other clearly emerge from the literature of the respective areas. Thus, if the dialect

literature of SB57-74 was to be evaluated as linguistic evidence of sounds heard in Yorkshire at the time, it can be considered an accurate and reliable data source.

The same cannot be said of SB00-10, however, in that the levelling of the pronunciations suggested by the SED and MMB comparison is not reflected in the literature. It is worth noting, though, that the number of different semi-phonetic spellings used by writers has decreased over time with every vowel (Figure 1). However, overall, the semi-phonetic spellings which were most common in SB 57-74 remain the most common in SB00-10, despite most of the sounds which they represent not being found in MMB. Although their absence from the MMB does not necessarily mean these sounds have dropped out of use completely, it suggests at the very least that they are recessive. Therefore, the literature in SB00-10 projects much the same WR *versus* NER distinction as in SB57-74, despite this no longer being an accurate representation of the linguistic reality as offered by the MMB.

Figure 1: Comparing the number of semi-phonetic spelling variants used to represent each vowel in SB57-74 and SB00-10

Motivation 1: Personal and Group Identity

It is commonly believed that dialect literature is written primarily to be read aloud and to audiences who know and understand the dialect. As a result, when StdE spellings are used in dialect literature readers will interpret it and read it applying their own pronunciation. Thus, if a speaker of a Yorkshire variety will interpret a text in their local pronunciation *anyway*, this raises questions over why semi-phonetic respellings are used.

While some suggest that dialect writers use non-standard spelling simply to indicate that texts are representations of speech, it can be argued that writers are doing something far more sophisticated. The further away a writer moves from StdE spelling the more difficult the text becomes to read, to the point where it becomes almost impossible for those who are not familiar with the dialect to comprehend. In SB57-74 and SB00-10 combined there were a total of 21,443 words across all six vowels, of which 47.8% (n=10,242) were respelled using semi-phonetic spellings. This high density of non-standard spelling puts great demands on the reader. Following the concept of the 'dialect continuum', which holds that the linguistic difference between dialects increases with geographical distance, it is likely that while members of WR and NER are able to comprehend each others' writing, readers from other regions of England will be excluded. The result of this is that the Yorkshire dialect literature becomes largely inaccessible to speakers of other varieties of English, who are thus cast as 'outsiders'. Indeed, this sentiment is resounding in this particular *Summer Bulletin* text:

Dear YDS member,
Ev yer ivver tried writin' a letter in dialect? Ah've done it a few tahmes, but not wi'aht difficulties. Ah'm thinking, will t' person at t'other end think Ah'm daft, or will the' think ah wagged it inter t' bargain........Will the' bi able ter read it anyrooad? Bad news if the' can't, the' could join t' YDS though!

(Extract from *Writing thi Letters*, Nigel Leary, WR, 2009)

Aside from Yorkshire writers marking themselves apart from other areas of Britain, local identities and rivalries *within* regions also play a significant role. When writing in dialect, authors are not always representing their own speech, but rather that of the wider speech community. Thus, there is a performative aspect to dialect writing and it is here that dialect literature intersects with sociolinguistic theory. Nikolas Coupland's (2007:345) concept of 'dialect stylisation' involves the 'performing non-current-first-person personas by phonological [sound] and related means'. In turn, a relationship exists between stylisation and identity, as Coupland (2007: 345) argues that 'stylised utterances project personas [and] identities'. This association between language variation and identities also speaks to Le Page and Tabouret-Keller's (1985: 14) theory of 'Acts of Identity'. This theory claims that linguistic behaviour is a series of 'acts of identity in which people reveal both their personal identity and their search for social roles'. These theorised relationships between language and identity can be offered as mechanisms motivating the use of distinctive WR or NER semi-phonetic spelling in Yorkshire dialect writing. When representing features stereotypically distinctive of WR or NER, dialect writers are consciously projecting themselves as having either WR or NER identities, regardless of whether or not they are actually members of this (speech) community. Through this

projection of WR or NER identity, dialect writers are linguistically and socially aligning themselves with the group with which they wish to be associated; they build an intimate relationship with either WR or NER readers while distancing themselves from the other.

Furthermore, what has been found in the analysis here is that these distinctions between WR and NER are retained in the more modern dialect writing in SB00-10, despite many of the linguistic differences no longer appearing to exist to the same extent as earlier in the century. In her study of Tyneside literature, *From Geordie Ridley to 'Viz',* Joan Beal (2000: 343) argues that the prominence of local features in dialect writing represents 'an assertion of local identity in the face of the perceived threat' of cultural homogenisation. This may also be a driving force behind the linguistic choices of Yorkshire dialect writers. Arnold Kellett frequently bemoans the fact that traditional Yorkshire culture is under threat of extinction, and implores Yorkshire dialect writers to 'conserve surviving local differences which add colour and vitality to the drab overall *sameness* of the modern electronic world'. Further, political climate can also permeate identity construction. In Beal's study she compares Geordie and 'Makkem' (Sunderland) literature, and noted that being Britain's newest city (at the time), Makkems are increasingly aware and proud of their new status and use linguistic features in dialect literature as markers of this identity. Similarly, political reorganisation may be at the heart of identity preservation in Yorkshire dialect writing. Since 1974 Yorkshire has undergone substantial change in terms of political boundaries and area names. In 1992, Arnold Kellett alludes to this, writing that 'in spite of what appears on modern maps and envelopes, underneath this superficial labelling is still original Yorkshire'. Thus, the desire to so strongly project, reinforce and preserve distinctive WR and NER identity

through respellings in dialect literature may be an active response and defence against cultural homogenisation and forced political change.

Motivation 2: Linguistic Conservation or Conventionalisation?

As noted, the analysis of more modern dialect texts in SB00-10 showed that modern dialect writers invariably continue to use semi-phonetic respellings to represent distinctive sounds of the area even though the sounds themselves are no longer heard, or are at least recessive, as suggested by their absence from the MMB. It is well known that dialect literature is preservative and conservative of linguistic features which have fallen out of usage in the community, or are in the process of doing so. Thus, although this continued representation of recessive or obsolete pronunciations may be used to preserve WR and NER identity distinction as argued above, it may also simply be motivated by the desire to conserve traditional pronunciations and linguistic distinctions. In the same way that WR and NER identities are being preserved under the threat of cultural homogenisation, the conservation of regional pronunciations is an effort against linguistic homogenisation. Kellett claims that the Yorkshire dialect is under pressure from the currency of StdE in mass media, education, personal achievement and social mobility, and he encourages writers to pin the Yorkshire dialect down 'while we still have time'. Furthermore, he highlights that outside of Yorkshire, people tend to assume that there is only one Yorkshire dialect and that all Yorkshire people speak in the same way. Thus, the conservation of distinctive, albeit recessive, WR and NER linguistic features in dialect literature serves to rebut this perception and reinforce the existence of separate dialects and identities.

There remains, however, one alternative possible explanation for the continued use of semi-phonetic non-standard spellings representing obsolete or recessive sounds. Yorkshire dialect writing has a long literary tradition, and it may be that rather than consciously choosing to preserve these forms, authors are instead consciously adhering to the literary tradition. Figure 1 above showed that the range and number of different semi-phonetic respellings used has decreased over time for every variable. While this has been interpreted as a possible reflection of dialect levelling, it may be that this reduction in variability across writers is simply an indication that a general consensus is growing on how to represent particular sounds. Similarly, it could perhaps be said that the non-standard respellings which are found in a restricted set of words, for example, <oi> for GOAT in words such as *coal/coil* and *hole/hoil,* and <ei/ey> and <ee> in PRICE words such as *night/neet, right/reyt* continue to be used because they have become 'lexicalised' over time. That is, they have undergone the process in which archaic pronunciations are preserved in a handful of common words and specific contexts. As such, these spellings are no longer considered as indicating pronunciations, rather, they are considered as being discrete *words*. Therefore, although Kellett concedes that there is 'little likelihood that a standard system of writing Yorkshire dialect will be universally accepted', the reduction in range of spelling variants used, coupled with growing consensus regarding the most common spellings and the process of lexicalisation may provide evidence that the written representation of Yorkshire dialect(s) is gradually becoming conventionalised.

In conclusion, in describing the motivations behind dialect writing, there is clearly no substitute for asking Yorkshire writers themselves why they write in the ways which they do. However, what this study has shown is how dialect literature as a linguistic and social

phenomenon can be analysed and interpreted in terms of language variation and sociolinguistic theory. In addition, situated in a body of academic research of literature in other regions such as Beal's north eastern study, generalisations can be made regarding the motivations behind dialect writing nationwide. Finally, an enterprise such as this exemplifies the value of dialect literature as data for rigorous linguistic study.

References

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