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# Talking like a servant: What nineteenth century novels can tell us about the social history of the language

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**Abstract:** This article investigates what nineteenth-century novels can tell us about the speech of the lower orders, using the “Dialect in British Fiction 1800–1836” database to focus specifically on how the speech of servants is represented. Recent work on enregisterment has led to a resurgence of interest in literary representations of dialect in relation to specific linguistic features and varieties. I argue that a sustained engagement with literary texts has the potential to illuminate wider cultural constructs of language variation, and that to accomplish this, attention must be paid to issues of genre as well as a range of stylistic features including speech representation, metalanguage and characterisation. The article concludes that, while novels are able to tell us little about how servants really spoke, they are a rich source of information about the attitudes and assumptions that underpinned cultural concepts such as “talking like a servant”.

**Keywords:** dialect, literature, enregisterment, metalanguage, folklinguistics

## 1 Introduction

In Isaac Pocock’s popular play *Hit or Miss! A Musical Farce* (1810) the lawyer Cypher prides himself on his superior driving skills and as a result is mistaken for a coachman. Another character explains:

I see the error, and hope you’ll forgive it; but when gentlemen associate with their servants, talk like their servants, do their servant’s work, and dress like their servants they ought not to be offended at a stranger’s not knowing the master from the man. (Pocock 1810: 32)

This speech expresses anxiety that social distinctions – in behaviour, occupation and dress as well as talk – are in danger of disappearing if social divisions are not properly upheld. The idea of “talking like a servant” has some specific meaning within the context of the play in relation to the character of Cypher. That this observation also had a wider resonance, however, is indicated both by

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the fact that it is phrased as a general truth, and by the fact that the quotation was reprinted, without reference to its dramatic context, in the collection *Beauties of the Modern Dramatists* (1829: 118).

There was, of course, no single way for servants to talk, dress or behave; servants as well as masters were a diverse group. Robert DeMaria Jr in his study of eighteenth-century letters by servants notes that the writers “in many cases may be called servants, although the term is imprecise, hiding class differences among the various people who served in a household” (DeMaria 2012: 192). At the start of the nineteenth century there were hundreds of thousands of people in service, coming from different backgrounds, living in different parts of the country and performing different roles (Steedman 2009). Linguistically, these hundreds of thousands of servants have left very little trace: many were illiterate, those who could write had little opportunity to do so, those who did write rarely had their writings preserved. Indeed, DeMaria Jr (2012: 198) suggests that it was precisely because the letters of servants, particularly female servants, lacked “full literacy” that they have been discarded from the archival record. In any case, how they wrote provides only indirect evidence for how they spoke. Literary texts are thus one of the few places where the speech of servants is extensively represented, but interpreting such evidence is far from straightforward.

In this article I consider the extent to which literary texts, and specifically novels, can provide evidence for the language of servants. I argue that while work in enregisterment has reawakened scholarly interest in literary texts, particularly in terms of tracing the representation of specific linguistic varieties and linguistic features, there is potential for this work to be developed further. I argue that a sustained and nuanced engagement with literary texts as literary texts can elucidate qualitative aspects of the evidence, and that this has the potential to illuminate wider cultural constructs of language variation. In other words, literary representations of servants’ language do not just reflect existing cultural understandings of what it means “to speak like a servant” but also serve to reproduce and perpetuate those cultural understandings. From a linguistic perspective, this suggests that we need a sustained engagement with a range of literary works, taking into account stylistic features such as characterisation, metalanguage and speech and thought presentation, and paying attention to the kinds of social meanings that these texts perform.

## 2 Linguistic evidence from literary texts

At first glance, representations of dialect speech in nineteenth-century novels offer tantalising evidence about the speech habits of the lower social orders from a time

when such evidence is scarce. In practice, however, historical linguists have found these representations to be fundamentally unreliable. For a start, characters in nineteenth-century novels display an unfortunate tendency to speak in ways that do not fit with their observed socio-geographical background. This phenomenon can be found in many novels, but two of the most frequently cited are the eponymous heroes of Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*. Kathleen Tillotson described the practice as a “novel-convention” of the period, and ascribed it to the need to read central characters without the distancing convention of dialect (Tillotson 1956: 213–214). Even when characters do appear to speak in an appropriate dialect, the accuracy of that dialect is frequently questionable. An early and influential account of literary dialect by Sumner Ives proposes a rigorous process for deciding whether or not specific instances of literary dialect constitute an accurate portrayal of the cluster of linguistic features associated with the place where the character is purportedly from. He grudgingly concludes that “if it can be decided that a particular author is, in general, reliable, it is possible that his literary dialect will supply details, especially in vocabulary and structure, that are missing from the phonetician's record” (Ives 1971: 177). Few novelists have, however, attained the accolade of being judged “in general, reliable” in their handling of linguistic features. Historical linguists have therefore tended to give evidence from literary dialects a wide berth. Sullivan summarises: “Whether or not literary dialect constitutes a reliable source of linguistic evidence is a question to which linguists have generally been content to respond in a negative fashion” (Sullivan 1980: 195).

Looking at specific examples from literary texts, there are many cases where detailed attempts at dialect representation come at the expense of reader comprehension. Consider, for example, the case of the servant Joseph from Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*:

This is t' way on't – up at sun-dahn; dice, brandy, cloised shutters, und can'le lught till next day, at nooin – then, t' foil gangs banning un' raving tuh his cham'er, makkig dacent fowks dig thur fingers i' thur lugs fur vary shaume; un' the knave, wah, he can cahnt his brass, un' ate, un' sleep, un' off tuh his neighbour's to gossip wi' t' wife (Bronte 2003: 104)

There is a lot of linguistic detail attempted here, including definite article reduction (“t' way”), monophthongisation of the MOUTH vowel in “down” and “count” (“dahn” and “cahnt”), vocabulary items (“lugs” and “brass”) and contractions (“un” and “on't”). Joseph is alone in having the nonstandardness of his speech marked on the page to such a degree; he is much further from Standard English than either Nelly Dean, a servant of apparently similar social standing, or even Hareton Earnshaw, whose lack of education and “frightful Yorkshire

pronunciation” (Bronte 2003: 220) are explicitly commented upon by other characters.

Bronte has been generally praised for the linguistic accuracy of her representation of Joseph (Petyt 1970; Wiltshire 2005) and her sister Charlotte wrote that “it exactly renders the Yorkshire dialect to a Yorkshire ear” (Bronte 1932: 165). As sociolinguists have pointed out, however, the primary effect of respellings is often to denigrate the speaker in terms of their social status, intelligence and education (see for example Preston 1982, 1985, 2000; Macaulay 1991; Sebba 2007). Furthermore, such extensive respellings can create problems for the reader. Charlotte cautioned, for example, that “Southerners must find it unintelligible” and she recommended that the representation be diluted (Bronte 1932: 165). Susan Ferguson expands upon Charlotte’s argument, explaining why even a “good” dialect representation such as this one may leave the reader confused:

But unless the reader already knows how Yorkshire speech sounds, the sounds of this speech remain mystifying. What, for example, is the meaning of the double k in “making”? Does it suggest emphasis? a stutter? a sound different from the ordinary k sound or a shortened a? Is “nooin” pronounced with one or two syllables? What is meant by the respelling of folks as “fowks”? Is this an instance of what is called “eye dialect” [...] or is the w particularly emphasized in this instance? (Ferguson 1998: 5)

As anyone who has taught *Wuthering Heights* to undergraduates can testify, many readers skip over Joseph’s dialogue because they find Bronte’s dense linguistic representation too difficult to process. Gunnel Melchers finds a similar effect with Tennyson’s detailed attempts at representing the Norfolk dialect in some of his poetry, arguing that “he took so much trouble creating an orthography representing his (partly forgotten) native accent that his texts became virtually unreadable even to insiders” (Melchers 2016 forthcoming). Such findings suggest that the reader plays a more active role in interpreting literary dialects than is recognised in approaches that focus only on the authenticity of the written representation. Roger Cole has observed that “*Both standard and non-standard orthography succeed in representing the illusion of human speech only because the reader already knows what it sounds like*” (Cole 1986: 6, his italics).

The question of what “the reader already knows” has gained greater attention in recent years. Sociolinguists have become interested in understanding the way in which dialects function as ideological constructs, and this in turn has revitalised interest in literary representations. In particular, the development of the concept of “enregisterment” has led to a renewed engagement with what Coupland terms “mediated vernaculars” (Coupland 2009). Asif Agha (2003: 231) defines “enregisterment” as “processes through which a linguistic repertoire becomes differentiable within a language as a socially recognized register of

forms". He explores the means by which speaker status became linked to a particular set of values in the case of RP, tracing the promulgation of those ideas from early prescriptivist works, through handbooks, to novels and penny weeklies. Johnstone, Andrus and Danielson explore the enregisterment of "Pittsburghese" over time, using Silverstein's orders of indexicality in order to explain how the different stages of enregisterment take place. Among other elements they discuss how in the 1970s the newly developing "Pittsburgh" identity "was taken up in the popular media of the time", citing the example of the 1978 film *Deer Hunter* (Johnstone et al. 2006: 93). Several subsequent studies have made use of literary texts and other popular media in order to explore the enregisterment of language varieties over time (including, for example, Beal 2009; Cooper 2013; Picone 2014; Clark 2014)

Approaches which use literature and popular media as evidence proceed on the assumption that the recurrent deployment of a set of linguistic features to represent a specific linguistic variety does not necessarily testify to the real-life use of those features, but does testify to the existence of popular perceptions that those features mark that variety. Alexandra Jaffe and Shana Walton have conducted empirical research into the ways in which readers perform nonstandard voices when asked to read printed dialect representation aloud, concluding that "Reading other people's voices is an active engagement with self and other and with socially stylized, stereotyped personae" (Jaffe and Walton 2000: 582). Stereotyping may intuitively seem to be the antithesis of good dialect representation, but in practice stereotyping is unavoidable if dialect representation is to be effective for readers. Understanding this offers some insight into the question of why the general public in the present day so often ignores the expertise of professional linguists in preference for their own folklinguistic understandings of language variation: children are from birth encultured – through literature, television, film and social media – into a set of beliefs about language that have their roots in the conventions of dialect representation established in the fiction of the nineteenth century.

Susan Ferguson's concept of "fictolinguistics" offers a potentially useful model for thinking about the relationship between individual literary texts and the broader linguistic ecology (using the term in the sense of Haugen 1972), although one, I would argue, that requires some refinement. Ferguson (1998: 3) writes: "To understand how dialect works in the novel, we must understand how it fits the socio-linguistic system *constructed* by the novel (the ficto-linguistics), as well as how it responds to the socio-linguistic patterns accepted and expected by the world outside the novel."

At first reading it appears as though she is setting the sociolinguistic and the fictolinguistic up as separate systems, and indeed in her article she pays most

attention to the systems that operate within individual novels. In the case of *Wuthering Heights*, for example, she argues that although, from a sociolinguistic point of view, it is implausible that Joseph alone would speak in a markedly Yorkshire accent, it makes sense from a fictolinguistic point of view because the “the harsh but more conventional morality of Joseph” “made strange” by his “nearly incomprehensible language”. This, Ferguson (1998: 7) argues, “reinforces the novel’s critique of Victorian morality”. Ferguson does acknowledge, however, that sociolinguistics and fictolinguistics “interact”, and she implicitly recognises the agency of the reader when she discusses “the socio-linguistic patterns accepted and expected by the world outside the novel” – in other words, the linguistic expectations that readers bring to texts (Ferguson 1998: 3). Her use of the term “sociolinguistics” in this context is misleading, however. Sociolinguistics was not constituted as a discipline until the mid-twentieth century, which means that the patterns nineteenth-century readers expected to find are not strictly speaking “sociolinguistic”. It would be more transparent to speak of the patterns expected by early readers of nineteenth-century novels as “folklinguistic”. A clearer rewording of Ferguson’s definition would therefore be: to understand how dialect works in the novel, we must understand both the fictolinguistic system established within the novel, and how that system responds to the folklinguistic expectations that contemporary readers would have brought to the text. This phrasing reflects the fact that, for the fictolinguistic system of a novel to be comprehensible to readers, it must have some congruence with readers’ existing understanding of how language variation works; it matters little whether it tallies with twenty-first-century linguists’ understanding of how language variation works. Some novelists may strive to establish a fictolinguistic system that modifies or re-values the folklinguistic system that readers bring to the novel (and, arguably, this is the aim of linguistically informed authors such as Elizabeth Gaskell and Thomas Hardy), but the starting point is always the system already familiar to readers.

In the case of *Wuthering Heights*, for example, the fictolinguistic pattern that Ferguson discerns, in which Joseph’s strongly marked dialectal speech signals his “harsh but conventional morality” builds upon a well-established association between rural identity, a lack of social polish, and old-fashioned ideas. Hugh Blair, for example, in his influential *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* writes that in primitive stages of society men “will be given to describe every thing with the strongest colours, and the most vehement expressions” (Blair 1783: v. 1, 113), while William Wordsworth in his 1802 “Preface” to *The Lyrical Ballads* writes that he chose to focus on people living in “low and rustic conditions” because such people “are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language” (Wordsworth and Coleridge 1991: 244–245). The

specific configuration of Joseph's character and the detail of his linguistic portrayal may have been innovative, but his depiction is rooted in folklinguistic beliefs that were common in 1847.

Once we accept that folklinguistics and fictolinguistics are closely interwoven, it becomes possible to extend the range of questions that we ask of literary texts. Rather than focusing on the enregisterment of specific linguistic varieties and features, we can interrogate literary dialects for what they reveal about popular understandings of language variation more broadly. To some extent, as I have indicated, this is in line with current developments in sociolinguistics, but the approach can be developed more explicitly. In order to do this I have three recommendations:

First, literary dialects must be understood as complex statements that take place within complex linguistic ecologies. We need to dig deeply into understanding literary dialects both in terms of the fictolinguistic systems established within the literary work, and in terms of how those fictolinguistic systems respond to the folklinguistic expectations that contemporary readers brought to the texts. There has been some previous work that has taken this kind of approach: Patricia Howell Michaelson explores how women writers and readers in the eighteenth century responded to written constructions of "women writers" (Michaelson 2002) while Taryn Hakala investigates how a number of writers during the Victorian period made use of competing discourses about language variation (Hakala 2010). This kind of approach can be expanded upon.

Second, we need to think carefully about the kinds of literary texts we take as evidence. Historically, literary scholars have often shown an explicit preference for "good" writers, where "good" is understood both in terms of recognised literary merit and in terms of linguistic authenticity; indeed, literary scholars have often assumed that these qualities are inextricably linked (for a good discussion of this, see Leigh 2011). Linguists have taken a more catholic approach to the texts they use, although given that until recently the focus was often on recovering evidence of historical dialects, they too have shown a preference for dialect writers concerned with accurately representing linguistic variation. While I am not proposing that we should ignore all novelists who have hitherto been classified as "good" dialect writers, we will understand them better when they are studied within in the context of a much wider range of other authors. Furthermore, the advent of large digital collections such as ECCO and NCCO make a much wider range of texts more easily available than ever before.

Third, there has been an understandable tendency among linguists to focus on those parts of literary texts that represent the direct speech of dialectal



characters and therefore provide evidence of specific linguistic forms. But if we are attempting to understand literary dialects within the broader context of the linguistic system, we need to consider the works more holistically. This means, for example, getting to grips with the ways in which different genres function and the kinds of analysis that are appropriate to them. DeMaria notes, for example, that plays consist largely of dialogue because they are primarily intended for performance, and that this places some limitations on the kinds of metalinguistic commentary possible within the genre: “[d]rama, as it is performed, cannot make jokes about spelling” (DeMaria 2012: 201). As such, there are certain types of metalinguistic commentary that we should not expect to find in plays, although conversely a consideration of issues of staging and performance may enrich our response to the language of plays. In the case of *Hit or Miss*, for example, it is known that the character of Cypher was originated by the notable comic actor Charles Matthews (Vlock 1998: 114).

Novels are more self-contained than plays, and they therefore incorporate extensive passages of narrative which serve to describe action, character and setting. Rather than ignoring such material in order to focus on direct speech, attention must be paid to how the direct speech fits within other elements of the narrative, including:

- (1) The ways in which characters are presented in terms of the content of their speech, their appearance and their behaviour. If literary dialects serve to link linguistic features to social stereotypes, then attention must be paid to both sides of the equation.
- (2) Metalanguage that introduces or frames direct speech. Jaworski et al. (2004: 3) note that “Metalinguistic representations may enter public consciousness and come to constitute structured understandings, perhaps even ‘common sense’ understandings – of how language works, what it is usually like, what certain ways of speaking connote and imply, what they *ought* to be like”. Literary texts are a very rich source of metalanguage and, I would argue, one of the key sites where the ‘public consciousness’ about language is formed. As I have discussed elsewhere, attention must be paid to whether literary metalanguage occurs in paratext, narrative voice or character speech and thought (see Hodson 2014: Ch. 8).
- (3) Types of speech representation beyond direct speech, including free indirect speech, indirect speech and narrator reporting of speech acts. (see Leech and Short 1981). As I discuss in more detail below, when writers use direct speech this always constitutes a choice among other modes of presentation.

In short, if historical sociolinguists are to understand what literary dialects are doing in a text, then we must engage with the text as a coherent piece of

literature, using appropriate tools drawn from both literary studies and literary linguistics.

### 3 Dialect in British fiction 1800–1836 and the language of servants

The Dialect in British Fiction 1800–1836 project surveyed all of the novels written every 4 years across the period (Hodson et al. 2014). The period 1800–1836 was chosen as the focus of the project because it appeared to be a period when literary uses of nonstandard language were changing: it is the period between the appearance of Wordsworth’s Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, with its bold claims about incorporating “the real language of men” into literature, and the appearance of Dickens’s early novels, with their pioneering use of literary dialect for purposes of social commentary. For each of the target years 10 of the most dialect-rich novels were selected. The definition of “dialect” we applied was deliberately very wide-ranging. We included all means of marking nonstandard speech, including orthography, grammar and vocabulary, as well as metalinguistic discussions of nonstandard varieties, and we incorporated all nonstandard English varieties that could be assigned to the social identity of the speaker, including regional varieties, national varieties, class-based varieties, ethnic varieties and extraterritorial varieties. The selected novels were then described within the database, and a representative selection of dialect speaking characters were profiled. A sample of around 500 words was recorded for each dialect speaking character and tagged for nonstandard features.

The result is a tool that allows for the qualitative investigation of literary dialect across a much wider range of novels than have previously been considered. While the database does include a number of novelists traditionally considered to be “good” writers of literary dialect (for example, Walter Scott), it also includes a large number of minor and forgotten writers. To date we have found that overall dialect representation increases across the period (Hodson and Broadhead 2013); we have investigated the literary uses to which dialects are put and we have mapped the trajectory of “American English” as it appears in a small handful of novels (Hodson 2016 forthcoming).

In terms of what the database can tell us about the language of servants in these novels, servants certainly form a significant proportion of the dialect-speaking characters captured within the database. Nonstandard speaking servants appear in 68 of the 100 novels described, and account for 113 characters out of a total of 600 characters. This makes them the biggest social group,

although the overall numbers disguise their underlying diversity: the characters vary greatly in terms of their education and skills, intimacy with their masters, centrality to the plot, and social and geographical origins.

From a narrative point of view the predominance of servants within the set of nonstandard characters may seem unsurprising: in almost all of these novels the central characters are members of the gentry, and the lower orders they are most likely to interact with are their own servants. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that any writer who wishes to depict an encounter between master and servant is not compelled to represent the servant as speaking in a nonstandard variety; there are at least two other options. One alternative for writers is to represent the speech of servants indirectly, as in the case of *The Forged Note*:

Matters were in this position, when, through the medium of James the gardener, they became acquainted with the visit of Mr. Carleton to their father, which had been kept a profound secret. (Jones 1824: 234)

James is here the “medium” through which an important plot point is communicated, but his speech is not represented directly. A second alternative is for writers to represent the speech of servants in Standard English. This can happen for a range of reasons, including that the servant is well-educated, that the novel is set in a foreign country and the dialogue is therefore a putative “translation”, or that the writer simply seems uninterested in marking out social differences between master and servant. The choice by writers to represent servants as speaking nonstandard English is therefore a choice that performs a particular social meaning. Taken as a whole the array of nonstandard servants found in these novels can be seen to repeatedly enact the social message that servants speak differently from masters. Bruce Robbins argues that this is a relatively new development that emerges in the course of the eighteenth century:

A one-sided phonetic naturalism, diverting attention from ideas to “substandard” dialect while retaining the convention of correctness and fluency for the upper-class protagonist, intervenes in order to erode the common ground that genuine cross-class interaction requires. (Robbins 1986: 80)

This observation raises questions about what literary dialect is doing. On the one hand it can be argued that the proliferation of literary dialect in the nineteenth century is evidence that literature opens itself up to a plurality of voices (see for example Adamson 1998: 599). Yet on the other hand, as Robbins points out, the literary representation of nonstandard speech serves to atomize characters into separate social spheres. Thus the increasing representation of markedly non-standard direct speech by servants in novels simultaneously affords their voices

a greater prominence within the novel form, and naturalizes their speech as less educated and articulate than that of their masters.

Robert Bisset's *Modern Literature* (1804) offers an example of how novels both make use of and reproduce folklinguistic beliefs about what it means to "talk like a servant". Bisset himself is an example of the kind of novelist who would not normally receive consideration in any account of literary dialect that focuses on "good" authors. His novels are entertaining but have been largely forgotten; politically, he was proudly anti-Jacobin and a staunch advocate for slavery; in terms of the history of literary dialect his practices look backwards towards the comic characters of Henry Fielding and Tobias Smollett, rather than forwards to the social realism of Dickens. In *Modern Literature* (1804) Susan and her maidservant Betty nearly catch Hamilton, the hero of the novel and Susan's potential love interest, in an assignation with another woman:

Betty, with the pert flippancy and consequential self-importance of a waiting-maid exalted into confidence, first asked what he had done with his sweetheart, and then, putting her hand in her side and elevating her face, declared that a gentleman such as he *oft* to be ashamed of himself for keeping company with *sich* nasty low trollops. Hamilton walked on as if unconscious to what circumstance the sage remarks of Madam Betty had alluded. Miss Sukey and Mrs. Betty having returned to the house, the pin-sticker expatiated with great severity on the wickedness of Hamilton, and finally declared him totally unworthy of the regard of her young lady "Ah! my dear Miss Sukey, were I to give my humble opinion, I think he is nothing to come into *compolisom* with Mr. O'Rourke. Mr. Roger is both more taller and more properer; he has the fear of God before his eyes, he is in a state of grace, and is moreover the best built, the best shouldered, and the best limbed man one can see in a summer's day; he is *consarned* for the good of your soul. [...] He would be a loving and a cherishing husband, and not be running after such gilflirts under your nose." (Bisset 1804: v.1, 132–134)

Betty is a comic character who shifts between admiring Mr. Roger for his religious temperament and lusting over his manly physique. Indeed, as the narrative voice goes on to reveal, she is herself conducting a liaison with Mr. Roger and has "already given him every testimony in her power of her love and affection" (1804: v.1, 135). Her speech is marked as nonstandard in several ways. For example, she uses double comparatives with "more taller" and "more properer", colloquial vocabulary with "gilflirts", something about her accent is indicated in the respelling of "concerned" as "consarned", and she mangles the latinate word "comparison" as "compolisom". These are all highly generic – and highly stigmatised – nonstandard features. The text informs the reader that Betty is from Brotherton in North Yorkshire, but the lack of evidence for this on the page suggests that in 1804 the Yorkshire dialect was not yet strongly enregistered for novel readers. This is confirmed by other novels in the Dialect in British

Fiction 1800–1836 database, which show that before 1828 there was no set of linguistic features that were consistently used to signal “Yorkshire”.

Rather than dismissing the passage from *Modern Literature* because it has nothing to reveal about Yorkshire English, however, attention can be paid to what it indicates about common folklinguistic beliefs. Betty’s nonstandard speech situates her for social standing. Indeed, Bisset can allow Betty’s opinions to creep into the narrative through free indirect speech precisely because the nonstandardness of her vocabulary and pronunciation clearly mark the boundaries between her voice and the narrator’s (“a gentleman such as he *oft* to be ashamed of himself for keeping company with *sich* nasty low trollops”). Moreover, the passage metalinguistically universalises Betty’s speech, telling us that she speaks with “the pert flippancy and consequential self-importance of a waiting-maid exalted into confidence”. The definite article on “the pert flippancy” and the indefinite article on “a waiting maid” inform us that this type of linguistic behavior is exactly what should be expected from a servant who has been given permission to overstep boundaries. Betty expatiates “with great severity”, repeatedly “declares” her opinion, is described as striking a self-important pose: “putting her hand in her side and elevating her face”, and is socially presumptive in addressing her mistress as “my dear Miss Sukey”. Just as *Hit or Miss* offers a warning about what happens if masters get too close to their servants, *Modern Literature* offers a warning about what happens if servants are allowed to become too embroiled in their mistresses’ affairs of the heart. The representation of her nonstandard speech is thus part of a complex of authorial strategies that do not just identify the way in which the character enacts her role as a servant, but also evaluate that enactment both morally and socially.

In later novels in the database it is possible to find more place-specific renditions of servant speech. In the case of *Craven Derby*, for example, a gentleman revisits his ruined country estate and soliloquises about the old servant who used tell him stories of the former glories of the house and family. To his great delight, the same servant, Frank Feldfair, appears and invites Derby to his humble abode, lamenting the fact that his old cottage has been demolished:

My poor old cottage in which I were born, and the mill, hard upon it, were pulled down to make way for the canal and the new rowd, the late improvements of the age, as they call it, and people talk zo much about, thof I zee no improvements in having water, and stones, and gravel in place of the green sward. The land all about is zo cut into quarters loike, and disfigured zo, that a body now scarcely knows his own land, or the part of the country he lives in. (Deale?/Luttrell? 1832: v.1, 11–12)

This is much more specific in terms of place than *Modern Literature* and it is no surprise to learn that the estate is in Worcestershire. Frank’s speech is indicated

through a relatively narrow set of dialect markers, including fricative voicing (“zee” for “see”), respelling of vowels (“rowd” for “road”, “loike” for “like), archaic/colloquial vocabulary (“sward”, “a body”) and lightly nonstandard grammar (“in which I were born”).

Frank is afforded a much greater moral authority than Betty, both on account of his long service to the family and on account of his close association with the rural estate. In terms of the messages it conveys about servant speech, however, the metalanguage is much closer to *Modern Literature* than might be anticipated:

Craven Derby listened with great good nature to the loquacious old man, but he could not suppress a smile that arose at the regrets he so impressively expressed at the altered features of the country, arising from the wonderful undertakings of modern times, the result of man’s ingenuity and enterprise to facilitate the intercourse between all parts of the country, in which the whole of its interests, – political, commercial, and domestic, – are so deeply concerned. He made no comment, for he saw that it would be useless to attempt, – and the endeavor, he considered, would be felt unkind in him, – to shake the affections of Father Feldfair for the soil and appearances he had been familiar with for near a century [...] (Deale?/Luttrell? 1832: v.1, 12–13)

Frank’s rural background and long service to the family give him a moral authority that Betty lacks, but at the same time explicitly position him as old fashioned in contrast to his well-travelled, forward thinking master. There is, of course, a direct line of continuity here between Wordsworth’s “low and rustic” speakers and Joseph in *Wuthering Heights*: Frank’s alignment with tradition and rural life comes at the expense of him having a proper understanding of the “wonderful” improvements of the modern age. Furthermore, while Frank may lack the impertinence of Betty, once given leave to speak he does not know when to stop: he is “loquacious” and expresses himself “impressively”. It is only his master’s “great good nature” and desire not to be “unkind” to the elderly servant that forestalls him from delivering a rebuke. An elderly rustic servant still talks like a servant.

## 4 Servants and anxieties of identity

The master-servant relationship focuses on social distinctions: the master and servant may live in close proximity and may be in daily communication, but the status quo demands that differences between them be maintained. Lynda Mugglestone has shown how, during the nineteenth century, accent becomes an increasingly important means of distinguishing between social classes as other factors fall away (Mugglestone 2003). Walter Scott’s *The Monastery* (1820)

offers a striking insight into the increasing emphasis placed on the relationship between class and accent. The novel is set in Scotland in the aftermath of the 1547 battle of Pinkie Cleugh. It focuses on three families who move into the same dwelling following the disastrous battle: Lady Avenel and her daughter Mary, Dame Glendinning and her two sons Halbert and Edward, and the shepherd Martin and his wife Tib Tackett, who works as Lady Avenel's servant. The novel makes careful use of distinctive language varieties for the different social classes: Lady Avenel speaks Standard English, Martin and Tib speak a variety that is strongly marked with Scots features, and Dame Glendinning is shown to be adept at style-shifting, speaking Standard English when talking about weighty matters to a priest, for example, but switching to a more marked Scots variety when indulging in local gossip. What makes this notable is the fact that Scott writes with an antiquarian eye, and he is able to imagine a world where servants and masters talk freely:

The idea of the master or mistress of the mansion feeding or living apart from their domestics, was at this period never entertained. The highest end of the board, the most commodious settle by the fire, – these were the only marks of distinction; and the servants mingled with deference indeed, but unproved and with freedom, in whatever conversation was going forward. (Scott 1820: v.1, 135–136)

Scott points to the fact that this “mingling” around the fire is very different from the “living apart” that typifies servant-master relations in his own time. Nevertheless, the logic that people living together and sharing everyday conversations would speak in similar ways is apparently beyond the scope of the novel. Scott was a pioneer in the use of literary dialect in the realist novel, and had a huge influence on those novelists who came after him. Yet many of his novels were set during historical periods when the language ecology was very different from that familiar to his contemporary readership – and his novels conform to the contemporary folklinguistic expectations of his readers despite their antiquarian trappings. The fact that readers apparently did not notice that his novels were linguistically anachronistic evidences the fact that a belief in the innate connection between social standing and language variety was already widely accepted. In depicting an Early Modern society already socially stratified by language variety, Scott both reaffirmed and disseminated the belief that such a linguistic hierarchy is universal.

At some level, however, readers and writers in the early nineteenth century were aware that language variety is a matter of upbringing rather than birth. This inconvenient fact is acknowledged in some of the novels in the database, including *Constantia Neville* (1800) where the heroine's parents are careful to guard their daughter's speech by keeping her away from the influence of black

servants, and *Chronicles of an Illustrious House* (1816) where twins are brought up under very different social circumstances and as a result speak different varieties. Hence, while the novels in the database testify to the rapid entrenchment of the belief that language variety marks social and moral worth, they also testify to an underlying acknowledgment that language variety is influenced by social and geographic upbringing. In two novels, *Silvanella* (1812) and *Caprice* (1824), the contradictions inherent in believing that standard language is both a sign of inherent social and moral superiority, and that it is to some extent a matter of upbringing, come to the fore.

In the anonymous *Silvanella* (1812), Deb is a young gypsy girl who – at her own request – is rescued from her family by Sir William Rochford and his sister Mrs. Clarendon. She is renamed “Silvanella” and placed into the care of the housekeeper, Mrs. Nelson, who is given responsibility for educating her. Initially Deb is described as speaking “a strange jargon” (Anonymous 1812: v.1, 22). For example, when asked if she wishes to return to her family she responds “Oh no! no! me hope never see gypsey more; they use me very bad, and make me de theif” (1812: v.1 62). The features of her speech are pidgin-like, showing generic racial features: she uses nonstandard first person pronouns (“me”), flat adverbs (“very bad” for “very badly”) and some TH-stopping (“de theif”). Once ensconced in the house she learns servant’s English quickly, but also learns how to read and self-educates herself to surpass those around her. When Rochford’s sister, Mrs. Cameron, returns to see how the girl is getting on she is surprised:

Mrs. Cameron [...] was still more amazed at the ease and propriety with which she expressed herself, than at her appearance: and the next time she saw Mrs. Nelson alone, she inquired how she had contrived to make such a changeling of her.

The good woman [...] told the advantages she had reaped in the family of Mr. Fletcher; and added, that she only feared that the poor girl had imbibed notions and refinements, above her situation [...] “Indeed,” said she, “all the servants in the house hate her; the men, because she will have nothing to say to them, and the maids, because she is handsome, and in every respect superior to themselves.” (1812: v.2, 3–4)

*Silvanella*, the novel suggests, is born to be a speaker of Standard English and just requires the right environment to blossom. At the end of the novel it is revealed that, as Rochford and Mrs. Cameron have suspected from the outset, she is a changeling who was swapped for a baby boy by the gypsies. The gypsy boy does not speak in the novel so there is no opportunity to learn whether, as the inverse of *Silvanella*, he struggles with Standard English despite his privileged upbringing. The fact that visually he is described as being “the nastiest little ordinary looking wretch” suggests that it would have been a possibility (1812: v.3, 241).



*Silvanella* offers an early insight into the challenges faced by nineteenth century authors when writing dialogue for foundlings of superior birth. Ferguson points to the fact that there was a “widespread expectation among Victorian critics and readers that dialect in novels should follow clear rules based on a certain idea of real speech: a child should speak simply, a working class character should speak dialect” (Ferguson 1998: 2). As Ferguson’s phrasing indicates, however, this “certain idea of real speech” is a highly ideological construct, and not necessarily internally consistent. In the case of foundlings of superior births there are two conflicting versions of “real speech” available: on the one hand, there is the recognition that a child brought up among gypsies will speak like a gypsy, but on the other hand there is the belief that the Standard English of the gentry is one of the overt signs of their innate superiority. The anonymous author of *Silvanella* resolves this tension in what is arguably a rather clumsy manner, drawing attention to the mismatch between the variety that *Silvanella* must logically speak as a child brought up by the gypsies and the variety that she needs to be able to speak to join the social rank of her birth. This solution does, however, throw some light on the choices of later authors such as Dickens, who addresses the problem in *Oliver Twist* by ignoring the fact that it exists.

The second case study is the anonymous novel *Caprice* (1824), which focuses on Louisa, the legitimate daughter of Captain Listowel, who, fearing the influence of his weak and fashionable wife, gives the upbringing of his daughter over to the middle ranking Mr. and Mrs. Kelly. Louisa grows up believing herself to be an orphan. When Captain Listowel encounters his daughter as an adult he finds that she speaks with “the softest, sweetest voice he had ever heard; but strongly tinged with the Kerry accent”. This accent is not, however, marked in her direct speech. This constitutes an alternative strategy for an author to adopt when depicting a character who has grown up among a lower social group than that to which they belong by birth: acknowledge the accent in narratorial metalanguage but do not represent it on the page. Louisa forms a liaison with Talbot, the son of the Earl of Ellismore. The Earl is displeased that his son plans to marry a girl of apparently low birth, and plans to kidnap her and marry her off by force to one of his servants. When the Earl arrives to seize Louisa, however, they discover a young lady dressed in a manner appropriate to Louisa’s social station, but speaking in a much more “vulgar” manner than they have been led to expect. The young lady is in reality Louisa’s garrulous maid, Judith, who has been trying on her mistress’s clothes. The Earl is immediately suspicious about the mismatch between the young lady’s appearance and her speech, but his belief that it really is Louisa is reinforced when he reads a letter he believes she just wrote:

It struck him that, perhaps, she was acting a part, the easier to regain her liberty; that, perhaps, she knew him from his first entrance, and hoped by her vulgar, forward, and affected manner, to deceive him as to the power she might have over his son's mind. Still, notwithstanding her extreme beauty, there was a vulgar turn in her countenance, that did not indicate a well-informed mind. But all his doubt of her want to refinement vanished on perusing the note he held in his hand. In it she expressed the tenderest affection, in the most polished, and yet in the most simple style. (Anonymous 1824: v.3 276)

Despite her dress, the Earl is able to place Judith accurately as a servant through her “vulgar, forward, and affected manner”, but he is then misled by the evidence of the letter. It is easy for him to believe that a young lady can adopt a “vulgar, forward, and affected manner” in order to escape capture, but not possible for him to believe that someone who naturally speaks in a “vulgar, forward, and affected manner” could write “in the most polished, and yet in the most simple style”. Again, the novel struggles with the inherent contradictions within folklinguistic concepts of what constitutes “real speech”. It acknowledges that speakers can adapt their speech styles to suit different occasions, but nevertheless insists that certain “polished” styles are the preserve of the gentry.

The narrative of both these novels raises a moment where the linguistic distinction between master and servant appears to be in danger of collapse: what if a baby from the upper social orders is brought up among the lower social orders, what if a servant dresses in the fine clothes of her mistress? In both cases the linguistic status quo is upheld: the changeling acquires Standard English as soon as she is exposed to it, the Earl is proven to be accurate in his judgement of the servant's “vulgar” language. Both of these novels ultimately reinforce the belief that who you are is how you speak, and that servants will always speak differently from their masters.

## 5 Conclusion

Historical sociolinguists already look to grammars, dictionaries and pronouncing guides, knowing that the information they provide is coloured by the context in which they were written, but nevertheless finding them a useful guide to the prescriptive practices and underlying linguistic ideologies of the day. Novels provide complementary information both through the ways in which individual linguistic features are used to characterise individual speakers, and through the ways in which broader folklinguistic beliefs are mobilised for fictolinguistic purposes. In his account of the transmission of accent values in the nineteenth century, Agha writes that “novelistic depictions of accent do not merely represent the realities of social life, they amplify and transform them into

more memorable, figuratively rendered forms” (Agha 2003: 255). In the case of the two novels discussed in the previous section, for example, it is possible to examine the ways in which the representation of character’s speech responds to and reinforces the metalanguage that accompanies the representation. Judith’s strongly nonstandard speech in *Caprice* confirms the Earl’s judgement that she speaks in a “vulgar, forward, and affected manner” which indelibly marks her as belonging to the servant class. By contrast, the Standard English that Silvanella quickly acquires endorses the view that she now speaks with “ease and propriety” and so demonstrably does not belong to the servant class. Novels of the period do not simply represent the speech of servants. They provide complex and compelling commentaries on what it means to be a servant; and one of their recurrent messages is that to speak like a servant is to be a servant.

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