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Part II

British Dialects in 20th- and 21st-Century Poetry

Abstract

In this chapter I explore the place of "dialect poetry" in contemporary poetry. I argue that, while much contemporary poetry engages creatively with regional and social language varieties, there is often stigma attached to the idea of publishing a "dialect poem." To investigate this, I first consider the word "dialect" itself, arguing that in contemporary usage it is an inherently unstable term, both concealing and expressing complex hierarchies of language and identity. I then explore how traditions and practices of dialect poetry play into the ways in which two contemporary organizations position themselves in relation to language variation: the Yorkshire Dialect Society and The Poetry Business. While the first of these embraces the writing and publication of "dialect poetry" as a core part of its remit, the second maintains a careful distance from the concept of "dialect poetry" and prefers to talk about poetry written in "the demotic voice."

4

The Problem With Dialect Poetry[1]

Jane Hodson

Accents, Dialects, and Folk Linguistics

It comes as a surprise to most non-linguists that, from the point of view of the academic discipline of linguistics, dialects do not exist. Linguists prefer to think in terms of "linguistic variation" and "language varieties." For linguists what exist are dialect continuums: sets of linguistic features that show overlapping distributions across the geographical space that the speakers who use them inhabit (for a good discussion, see Chambers and Trudgill 1998: Chapter 1). From this perspective there is no such thing as "the Yorkshire accent" or "the Sheffield dialect" because there is no uniformity of grammar, vocabulary, or pronunciation within these geographical areas, just as there is no clear break between the grammar, vocabulary, or pronunciation of these areas and those that lie adjacent to them. For linguists, therefore, "dialect," like the similar word "accent," is a folk term: it has a widely understood popular meaning but no established technical meaning.

Despite this linguistic view, most British speakers operate with complete confidence that "the Yorkshire dialect" and "the Sheffield accent" exist as discrete entities, and this is the terminology they automatically reach for when discussing how English is spoken in different parts of the country. The perception that accents and dialects are real is reinforced by the existence of books, YouTube videos, and websites that offer to teach regional varieties; literature written in dialect; and the existence of items such as mugs, t-shirts, and birthday cards that

feature well-known dialect phrases (for a discussion of such commercial items, see Beal 2009; Johnstone 2009). Thus, while accents and dialects do not exist from a linguistic point of view, as cultural constructs they are alive and well.

For many years, linguists had little interest in studying these cultural constructs, and the term "folk linguistics" was used dismissively to differentiate between how ordinary people thought about language and how academics conducted the "real" business of language study. In more recent years, however, linguists have increasingly turned their attention to investigating the ways in which non-linguists think about language, not least in order to understand how perceptions of language shape uses of language (see, for example, Campbell-Kibler). This has led to the development of the field of Perceptual Dialectology and the emergence of "folk linguistics" as an object of enquiry in its own right (see for example Niedzielski and Preston; Martõ; Meadows).

In a seminal paper, Asif Agha (2003) makes the point that "the folk-term 'accent' does not name a sound pattern alone, but a sound pattern linked to a framework of social identities" (232). In other words, popular discussions of accents and dialects do not just describe the way that people from particular places talk but present those ways of talking as innately connected to the social identities of those groups of people. In the case of "the Yorkshire dialect," for example, a set of linguistic features (definite article reduction, words including "aye," "nowt," and "nesh") are linked to a stereotype of what people from this region are like (they wear a flat cap, own a whippet, are careful with money and down to earth, etc.). Agha (2003) uses the term "enregisterment" to describe the process by which dialects—understood as a set of linguistic features linked to a character stereotype—take shape in the popular imagination. He explores the emergence of stereotypes of RP (Received Pronunciation), demonstrating that the ideas that underpin it first emerged in grammar books and pronouncing dictionaries in the 18th century, and were then disseminated through novels and cheap penny weeklies in the 19th century. Johnstone, Andrus, and Danielson (2006) elaborate upon Agha's model, examining the enregisterment of the "Pittsburgh dialect" across the 19th and 20th centuries. As part of their

argument they make the striking claim that "globalization collapses regional linguistic distinctions and creates regional dialects," which they explain in the following terms:

> The social and economic conditions that cause people to speak more alike are the same as those that give rise to the activities in which "dialects" are constructed and standardized as shared representations of ways of speaking, semiotically linked to place and other aspects of social identity.
>
> (79)

In other words, globalization both reduces the real linguistic differences between geographical areas, but also makes people more aware of those linguistic differences, creating the conditions in which the cultural constructs of "dialects" emerge. In Britain and America, social changes across the 18th and 19th century, including the spread of print culture, universal education, the introduction of railways, rapidly increasing urbanization, and population upheavals caused by events such as world wars, served to bring people from different areas in contact with one another. This enabled concepts such as "the Pittsburgh dialect" to take root. Paul Cooper (2013) has applied these insights to Yorkshire English, demonstrating how the particular set of features which are now widely understood to characterize the speech of Yorkshire people emerged in a range of text types, including novels and plays, over the course of the 19th century.

Dialect in the *OED*

Once dialects and accents are recognized as cultural constructs with specific historical trajectories rather than neutral linguistic descriptors, it becomes possible to see the ideological instabilities inherent within these terms. For example, some of the contradictions in the word "dialect" in popular usage can be glimpsed by looking at the relevant *OED* (2018) definition:

> **2.** A form or variety of a language which is peculiar to a specific region, *esp.* one which differs from the standard or literary form of the language in respect of vocabulary, pronunciation, idiom, etc.; (as a mass noun) provincial or rustic speech. Also more generally: a particular language considered in terms of its relationship with the family of languages to which it belongs.

In line with the most common popular understanding of the word today, the definition starts by relating language variety to place: a dialect is a form of language that is "peculiar to a specific region," indicating that both the language variety and the place are distinct from other varieties and places. The *OED* then amplifies the definition by noting that it is especially the case when the language variety differs from the standard or literary form. Standard English is the language variety used nationally in "official" contexts, such as education, literature, and the legal system. The process by which, over a number of centuries, the variety now known as standard English assumed this role was also the process by which all other varieties became non-standard. As the *OED* definition indicates, this means that "dialect" is defined by what it is not: not the standard, not the literary form. After the semi-colon, the *OED* adds the further observation that when used as a mass noun (*dialect in general* rather than *a specific dialect*) it means provincial or rustic speech, by implication in opposition to metropolitan or cultured speech; this type of association often goes hand in hand with perceptions of dialects as being archaic and resistant to change. Questions of status and hierarchy thus surface rapidly once the definition moves beyond the initial "a language variety associated with a specific geographical place": standard versus non-standard, literary versus non-literary, metropolitan versus provincial. Popular discussions of dialect and accent do not simply describe linguistic differences; they also ascribe a range of values to those differences. Hence the characterological understandings of specific dialects discussed in the previous section can be located within a broader context where any regional language variety accorded the status of "dialect" immediately carries associations of being non-literary and provincial.

The *OED* definition is also suggestive of the ways in which the meaning of the word "dialect" has changed over time. The second sentence of the definition introduces a different way of thinking about dialect: that it is "also more generally a particular language considered in terms of its relationship with the family of languages." Again, the hierarchy between language and dialect comes into focus, along with the underlying question of when a dialect is sufficiently different from other dialects to constitute a language in its own right. This points towards the old adage that "a language is a dialect with an army and a navy"; in other words, that the difference in status between what is deemed to be "a language" and what is deemed to be "a dialect" is socio-political rather than linguistic (for example: it is usual to talk about "dialects" of Chinese even though the varieties in question are not mutually comprehensible, while conversely Hindi and Urdu are commonly treated as different languages, although they share a common core of vocabulary and grammar). Many of the illustrative quotations provided by the *OED* record this understanding of dialect, for example:

> 1566 J. Rastell *Treat.: Beware of M. Iewel* i. iii. sig. Jviiiv Though the Tounge of Saxonie, Flanders, England and Scotland be one: yet because of a peculiar Property and Dialect whiche is in them, the Vulgar Saxons are not only Strangers to Englishe men, but allso to the Flemminges their neighbors.
>
> 1635 E. Pagitt *Christianographie* 73 The Slavon tongue is of great extent: of it there be many Dialects, as the Russe, the Polish, the Bohemick, the Illyrian.and others.

In each case, language varieties which we would now consider to be different languages are treated as being dialects of some larger linguistic unity, indicating that the word "dialect" is being used to discuss large-scale linguistic differences. As late as 1821, the status of "dialect" could be denied to some regional language varieties, as evidenced by a reviewer of John Clare's poetry who writes that it is acceptable for Ramsay and Burns to use their Scottish English but not acceptable for Clare to use his Norfolk English because "they employed a dialect in general use

through an entire country, and not the mere *patois* of a small district" (*Monthly Magazine* 52 (Nov. 1821), in Storey 154). For this reviewer in 1821, a language variety has to be of a particular size and status to be considered a "dialect."

It is not until 1841 that the *OED* attests a usage that reflects the more flexibly local scale that the term "dialect" tends to operate at for speakers today:

> J. O. HALLIWELL *Dict. Archaic & Provinc. Words* p. xvii/1 The Durham dialect is the same as that spoken in Northumberland.

In this case, although "the Durham dialect" and "that spoken in Northumberland" are found to be identical, the phrasing implies an expectation that Durham will have its own distinctive dialect. Overall, the set of illustrative quotations provided by the *OED* suggests that while the word "dialect" has been used in English to talk about language variation linked to place since at least 1566, it was not until the 19th century that it begins to be used to talk about the specifics of local usage in a recognizably modern way. It is worth pointing out that this 19th-century shift in the meaning of the word "dialect" coincides with the period when varieties such as "Pittsburgh English" and "Yorkshire English" were becoming enregistered.

The Tradition of Dialect Poetry

It is possible to trace a continuous history of the representation of nonstandard language in poetry published before the 19th century, from Chaucer's "Reeve's Tale" with its depiction of the speech of the Northern students, through to Allan Ramsay's poems in Scots in the early 18th century (see Blake). Nevertheless, it is not until the late 18th century and early 19th century that "dialect poetry" as a genre begins to take its modern form. Drawing a distinction between poetry which represents nonstandard language and "dialect poetry" as a genre requires a careful consideration of exactly what the term "dialect poetry" implies. One way of defining dialect

poetry is by its formal characteristics: dialect poetry is the representation of nonstandard language in writing through one or more of a number of techniques, including the use of nonstandard grammar, nonstandard vocabulary, and semi-phonetic respellings to indicate accent. Such a form-focused definition ignores the cultural and ideological dimensions of accents and dialects that I have mapped in previous sections, however. In what follows, I argue that just as dialects are cultural constructs that take their recognizably modern shape in the 18th and 19th century, so, in a related development, dialect poetry is a genre that emerges during the same period.

A model which has proved very influential in terms of thinking about dialect poetry, and which makes allowance for the cultural contexts of dialect poetry, is provided by Graham Shorrocks (1996), who draws a distinction between literary dialect as "the representation of non-standard speech in literature that is otherwise written in standard English [. . .] and aimed at a general readership" and dialect literature as "works composed wholly (sometimes partly) in a non-standard dialect, and aimed essentially, though not exclusively, at a non-standard-dialect speaking readership" (386). These definitions are based on both formal characteristics (how much dialect the text contains) and contextual factors (who the intended audience is). These two are, of course, interlinked: a reader who has personal familiarity with the variety in question is much more likely both to recognize the linguistic features being represented and to invest effort in decoding them than a reader who has no such familiarity. These definitions also enable us to understand why literary dialect texts tend to accrue more prestige than dialect literature. For literary dialect texts, the market is a national or international one and successful writers will be published by mainstream presses, reviewed in national newspapers, considered for national awards, etc. In dialect literature, the market is a local one: successful writers may achieve popularity and prestige at a regional level but are less likely to attract the attention of major publishers, national newspapers, and literary awards. As Shorrocks notes, dialect literature tends to be looked down on by the cultural elite:

> Most students of English literature do not concern themselves with non-standard dialect literature. Where aesthetic judgements have been made, it has to be said that they have not infrequently been negative. Writing in non-standard dialects has generally been held not to compare favourably with the high (elite) culture of the standard.
>
> (394)

The question of prestige does, however, depend on context: if scholars working within the discipline of English literature have tended to value literary dialect, scholars working within the discipline of English language have tended to be more interested in dialect literature because, being written for local audiences, it represents dialects in greater detail and demonstrates more care for accurately rendering the target variety.

Shorrocks does not explicitly address the question of how understandings of dialect literature may change over time, but Alex Broadhead (2017) takes his ideas as a starting point in order to demonstrate the historical contingency of the concept of "dialect poetry." Broadhead explores the publication history of Josiah Relph, a Cumberland minister whose posthumously published poetry included seven poems written in nonstandard language. He traces the different editions and anthologies that Relph's poems appeared in across the 18th and early 19th century, arguing that "the concept of dialect literature was first constructed in the nineteenth-century discourses, including prefaces, glossaries, and title pages, that surrounded the writing of poets such as Relph" (67). He writes:

> What Shorrocks terms *dialect literature* was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries always mediated for general as well as "non-standard-speaking" readerships by the complex apparatus of the book: its prefaces, dedications, glossaries, footnotes and title pages—all of the marginal tracts that Genette has labelled *paratexts* (1997). It was the content of this apparatus as much as any ratio of dialect to Standard English that, for eighteenth and nineteenth-century

> audiences, helped to distinguish dialect literature from other modes that made use of regional language.
>
> (69)

In other words, a dense dialect poem could reach a general reader when framed by the right set of paratexts, and the presence of those paratexts invited the reader to understand the poetry in specific ways. Such an approach shifts understandings of dialect poetry from its formal characteristics or speculation about the intended audience, to a consideration of the ways in which the form of its publication serves to frame the text for its original readers.

While Broadhead focuses specifically on the 18th and 19th century, his argument raises the question of whether it remains true in the present day that what makes a dialect poem is not the inherent qualities of the poem itself but the context in which it appears and the apparatus which surrounds it. In the next two sections I consider these questions in relation to some of the publications of the Yorkshire Dialect Society and The Poetry Business.

The Yorkshire Dialect Society

The Yorkshire Dialect Society, founded in 1897, is "The world's oldest surviving dialect society" (2018). It originally developed out of work collecting linguistic material for Joseph Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary*. Its present-day activities include social events, research seminars, live performances, and publishing. As its website states: "Our main aim has always been to encourage the study and recording of dialect. Our equal interest is in speech and literature and members like to hear dialect spoken and to see it written in our dialect writing section." It puts out two print publications to its members each year, which it differentiates in the *Summer Bulletin* (2016) in the following terms:

> "Transactions" is the more academic and serious of the two, and concerns itself with the aim of study and research. [. . .] "Summer Bulletin" on the other hand is of a much lighter nature. Its chief purpose is to promote the actual use of dialect and thus to help in its preservation as a living language. If you have a tale to tell, a poem to share or a joke to pass on, and you can express it in dialect, then "Summer Bulletin" is the place for it. Perhaps, to explain the difference in very general and simple terms, one could say that "Transactions" is "about" dialect while "Summer Bulletin" is "in" dialect.
>
> (7)

The Society thus has a number of overlapping aims which pull the idea of dialect and dialect writing in slightly different directions. On the one hand, it is about the "actual" use of dialect and the "living language": dialect as a naturally occurring phenomenon and the object of "research and study." On the other hand, it is about "preservation" and "promot[ion]" which suggests a more interventionist approach, and an investment in dialect as a cultural object worthy of conservation.

Taking the 2016 *Summer Bulletin* as a typical publication, it is worth noting the context in which the poems appear. First and foremost, this is a subscription publication for people who belong to the society, and alongside the literature that appears there are also notes from the AGM, a list of publications, advertisements for future meetings, a quiz, and a crossword. In amongst these pieces of society business, there are 12 short pieces of prose writing and 11 poems.

Focussing on the poetry, it is possible to see a number of recurrent themes: nostalgic anecdotes about childhood, small domestic occurrences, funny stories, and observations of the natural world. "A Miss is as Good as a Mile" by Christine Thistlethwaite (2016) provides a good example of the comic end of the spectrum. It opens by setting the time and place back in the past:

Ther wor a big stir at our Chapel

(Oh! Ah'm goin' back a long while!)

T'wer t'Sunday School Annivers'ry

An' we set out ter mark it in style.

After much preparation, "a ter'ble grand Preacher" named "Elias P. Timms" arrives and starts to give a very lengthy sermon "(Yer could tell frae t'beginnin' yon poor Chapel fowk/ Wor in fer a VARRY long ride!)." Eventually a choir boy throws a heavy hymn book to shut the preacher up but misses and hits "owd Jack Brown" instead, who falls off his pew. The punchline is that rather than being angered at being thumped by the book Jack responds "Chuck another book. Ah con still 'ear 'im!"

In terms of form, as with all poems in the volume, "A Miss is as good as a Mile" uses very dense dialect marking. These include semi-phonetic respelling ("wor," "ah," "ter"), definite article reduction ("t'sarmon," "t'foundations"), vocabulary ("clemmed"), and grammar ("we'd booked us"). From the point of view of poetic form it is highly regular: four-line stanzas, each line being between eight and ten beats long, most of them end stopped, with the second and fourth line of each stanza rhyming. Overall, this is a poem working within a highly regular and established form to deliver a punchline that turns on pitting the quick wit of the local man against the self-importance of the visiting preacher.

"A Cup o'Teea" by Graham Copley (2016) operates at the more serious end of the spectrum, capturing a quiet moment where the speaker drinks a cup of tea at the end of the day in the garden. It is short and lyrical: just eight lines long, with each line varying between four and six beats per line and a loose ABCBDEDE rhyme. The last two lines run thus:

Nah t'day's soft riot

Fades on t'barn owl's wings.[2]

The poem uses many of the same resources as "A Miss is as Good as a Mile" to evoke the dialect, including definite article reduction ("t'dusk," "t'neet," "t'barn"), h-dropping ("'ad"), develarization ("gooin"), and vowel respelling ("teea," "t'neet," "gooin," "bod"). It does not make use of nonstandard grammar or lexis, although, as these are typically much lower frequency items, this may be a product of the short length of the poem rather than because the poet made a deliberate decision to not exclude them. What is notable is the way it uses some poetic features, such as the personification of dusk cocking its ear. It also demonstrates a sensitive handling of metre: while most of the poem is iambic, the final line starts with a trochee which introduces a concluding solemn note. Overall, the poem is serious and reflective, and both tonally and formally a long way from "A Miss is as Good as a Mile."

In considering what makes these dialect poems two obvious answers spring to mind. First, their publication in the Yorkshire Dialect Society's *Summer Bulletin* means that all the paratexts that accompany them announce them to be dialect poetry. Second, they both make use of a dense marking of dialect features ensuring that, despite their formal and tonal differences, they would be quickly categorized as dialect literature wherever they appeared. This second factor indicates a third factor: unlike the late 18th or early 19th century when the category of "dialect poetry" was first emerging and publishers and editors used the apparatus of prefaces, glossaries, and title pages to establish it as a genre, most early-21st-century readers bring an existing awareness of what it means to write a "dialect poem" and would be likely to recognize these poems as such even if they appeared in other contexts.

The Poetry Business

The Poetry Business was established by Peter Sansom and Janet Fisher in 1986, with Ann Sansom taking over as co-director on Fisher's retirement. Both Ann and Peter are well-respected poets, with multiple collections to their names. As publishers they put out books and pamphlets, audio, and eBooks under the Smith/Doorstop imprint; edit a literary magazine; run workshops;

and hold an annual Book & Pamphlet Competition. While they publish poets from across the UK and further afield, it is very much part of their identity that they operate in the North of England, their magazine is *The North*. They have built a significant reputation as talent spotters, and through their workshops and other events they do much to nurture new poets. On their website they list as their priorities: "The spreading of interest in contemporary poetry; The encouragement of new writers; The publishing of work of new and established writers; The setting of high artistic standards" (2019). From the point of view of a dialect literature/literary dialect distinction, they are clearly always going to land on the literary dialect side of the equation.

In 2013 I worked with them on a project as a small offshoot from my larger *Dialect in British Fiction 1800–1836* project. In conversation, Ann, Peter, and I brought together a set of poems by writers who had previously been published by Smith/Doorstop, and which made use of nonstandard language in some way. Students from my undergraduate module "Dialect in Film and Literature" attended a creative writing workshop at The Poetry Business and then wrote blogs about the poems we had collected. This one-off retrospective gathering together of previously published poems is very different from the regular dialect poetry publishing activities of The Yorkshire Dialect Society. Nevertheless, it provides an insight into the way in which publishers and poets with an established national reputation think about the status of regional varieties and the relationship between regional varieties and literary writing.

As someone who normally works on dialect representation from an academic perspective, it was fascinating to discuss the publication of such poetry from the point of view of those actively engaged in doing so. Ann and Peter were keen to bring together a set of poems that represent nonstandard English in some way, but they disliked the idea of referring to it as a collection of "dialect poetry," preferring to call it "demotic poetry" or (even better, from their point of view) "dialogue with the demotic." While they were careful not to comment on dialect poetry in any way which could be constituted as a criticism, they were clear that they did not feel that "dialect poetry" constituted a good fit for the kinds of poems they publish. A consideration

of the dictionary definition of "demotic" perhaps offers some insight into why they prefer this term. The *OED* (2018) notes that the word "demotic" was originally borrowed from the Greek and gives a definition which is first attested in 1901: "Ordinary colloquial speech; the everyday language of ordinary people." While the word is not free from either historical meanings or qualitative judgements, it lacks the complexities of "dialect." It also chimes well with T.S. Eliot's (1942) observation that "every revolution in poetry is apt to be, and sometimes to announce itself as a return to common speech" (16). Furthermore, while the term "dialect poetry" carries with it a set of specific genre conventions in terms of form, subject matter, and audience, "demotic poetry" is a relatively unfamiliar phrase which does not carry the same cultural baggage.

The list of poems that we put together for the students to work on is as follows:

Simon Armitage "Poem"

Paul Bentley "Largos VI"

Sally Goldsmith "Received Pronunciation"

Geoff Hattersley "Rump Poem"

Steven Knights "The Heart of Saturday Night"

Carol Lee "Dad's Lecture"

John Lyons "Jumbie Jamboree"

Ian McMillan "The Meaning of Life"

Ian McMillan "Norman Stopped Me"

Dorothy Nimmo "Kevin"

Kathy Pimlott "You bring out the Nottingham in Me"

Compared to the recurring themes that featured in the Yorkshire Dialect Society's *Summer Bulletin* (natural world, domestic incident, comic anecdote) it is difficult to pick out consistent themes in these poems, although there are elements of both comedy and the domestic in some of them. They also lack uniformity in terms of the density of dialect marking: in fact, in attempting to provide an overview of them, it is perhaps most useful to think about their relationship to regional language.

Many of them contain no recognizable dialect elements. Simon Armitage's "Poem" (1989), for example, opens with:

And if it snowed and snow covered the drive

he took a spade and tossed it to one side.

And always tucked his daughter up at night

And slippered her the one time that she lied.

And every week he tipped up half his wage.[3]

The poem as a whole relates some of the actions of a man who has recently passed away, concluding that: "Here's how they rated him when they looked back:/ sometimes he did this, sometimes he did that." It lacks any of the formal features of dialect poetry: no semi-phonetic respelling, regional vocabulary, or nonstandard grammar. It does include a number of colloquial words: "slippered," "tipped up," "lifted" (meaning stole), "blubbed," "ten quid." It's also noticeable for what it does not contain: there is no latinate or specialist vocabulary, and of its 14 lines, 11 begin with "And" and almost all are end stopped and rhyme or near-rhyme. It is almost aggressively understated, even to the title. But at the same time it is a very knowing poem: the form is that of a Shakespearean sonnet, and it invites comparisons to the poetry of Frank O'Hara, whom Armitage namechecks in another poem from the same collection. The muted colloquialisms of its language evoke the ordinary and contradictory things that might be said of

someone after they pass away, refusing to stand in final judgement on his life. This is what makes it viable to describe the poem as "demotic": it captures the nature of ordinary talk. Other poems from The Poetry Business selection which evoke a sense of "ordinary talk" without engaging with anything that might be considered "dialect" include Carol Lee's "Dad's Lecture" and Geoff Hattersley's "Rump Poem."

Some of the poems use dialect speech as something to briefly allude to. These include Paul Bentley's "Largos VI" which, in a form reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, brings together a melange of different registers and voices, including some short snippets of the voice of his grandparents from Rotherham. Kathy Pimlott's poem "You Bring out the Nottingham in Me" (2016), written in response to Sandra Cisneros' "You Bring out the Mexican in Me," evokes a series of tangible moments associated with Nottingham, playing on the lived experience of the place and its stereotyped associations. Pimlott's choice to respond to Cisernos, a writer who is frequently concerned with the challenges of writing as a Mexican-American woman, is both playful and provocative as it implicitly aligns Cisernos' racialized "Chicana" identity with her own regional British identity. Pimlott's poem ends:

You bring it out of me, me duck, you do, that mardy

Lawrence fuck. With you I'm Clough-strut right, so say it,

say I walk in beauty like a Goose Fair night.[4]

Here, the poem crams in a number of literary and cultural allusions: D H Lawrence, Byron (who wrote "She Walks in Beauty" and is connected to Nottingham because he inherited nearby Newstead Abbey and lived in the city for some time), football manager Brian Clough, and Nottingham's famous "Goose Fair" (a funfair held in Nottingham every October since the 13th century). While Pimlott's poem contains nothing like the density seen in poems published by the Yorkshire Dialect Society, it does use two Nottingham English terms which will be highly

recognizable to local people: “me duck” and “mardy.” Dialect poetry appears here as a register to be slipped in and out of as conscious performance of identity.

Finally, several of the poems play very deliberate games with what it means to write a dialect poem. This includes Sally Goldsmith’s “Received Pronunciation” which maps out different people who have been important to the speaker (grandfather, mother, aunts, and partner) in four stanzas, each of which is written in a different dialect relating to the different parts of the country from which they originated. In form it is immediately recognizable as a dialect poem, but by bringing the different dialects together and linking them to the voices of real people whom she loves it plays with ideas of authenticity and identity.

The two poems included by Ian McMillan are perhaps the most interesting for the games they play with dialect poetry, because, uniquely, he is a writer who has credibility within the worlds of both The Yorkshire Dialect Society and The Poetry Business. He has a significant media profile using his native Barnsley dialect, as a result of which he is often described as a “professional Yorkshireman” (something he reflects on briefly in one of his columns for the *Yorkshire Post*, see McMillan 2015). He has also published a Yorkshire dialect guide, *Chelp and Chunter: How to Talk Tyke* (2007). But at the same time, he is a well-respected poet who has published six collections with Carcanet, one with Smith/Doorstop, and a recent pamphlet with Smith/Doorstop. While it would do his tremendous range as a poet and performer a disservice to imply that he only writes about his position as a dialect performer and literary poet, nevertheless it does surface in a number of his poems, including two that were picked out by Ann and Peter for our project.

“The Meaning of Life” (1983) looks like a dialect poem, even down to including a short paratextual statement about dialect poetry. This statement may initially appear to be the work of an editor, as with the kind 19th-century apparatus that Broadhead discusses, but it is better read as an integral part of the poem:

> "The Meaning of Life" is about Yorkshire dialect poetry and the fact that it's not meant to be able to carry very big meanings, and it's also complete nonsense. Unless you read it very carefully.
>
> From under t'canal like a watter-filled cellar
>
> Coming up like a pitman from a double'un, twice,
> I said "Hey, you're looking poorly"
>
> He said "Them nights are drawing in"

The poem does everything it can to announce itself as a Yorkshire dialect poem, including definite article reduction ("t'canal"), semi-phonetic respelling ("watter"), and nonstandard grammar ("Them nights"). In terms of subject matter, it relates everyday moments of pitmen and ferrets, as well as interchanges of folk wisdom. But none of it makes any sense: the interchange that ends each stanza is absurd. Significantly, the paratext tells us not that it is a Yorkshire dialect poem but that it is "about" Yorkshire dialect poetry. The paratext continues by observing that dialect poetry is "not meant to be able to carry very big meanings and it's also complete nonsense." The "meant" distances the poet from the statement that dialect poetry cannot carry "very big meanings," and the second half of the sentence raises the question of what is complete nonsense: the poem itself? Dialect poetry? Or the idea that dialect poetry cannot carry very big meanings? The use of both "meant" and "meanings" also draws our attention back to the title of the poem, which is in itself another paratext mediating our understanding of the poem. At first glance, using the weighty title "The Meaning of Life" for a work which, at first glance, looks like a dialect poem and reads as nonsense appears to be a joke, but Anthony Wilson (2012) has quoted Peter Sansom as saying that the poem "might actually be about what it says it is, and that he realized this some ten years after first reading the poem." The introductory statement concludes by clouding matters further with the statement "Unless you read it very carefully." What do we need to read carefully? This particular poem? Dialect poetry as a whole? Is the point

being made that dismissive understandings of dialect poetry—including the assumption that they could not deal with weighty matters such as "the meaning of life"—arise from what the reader brings to the poem rather than the poems themselves? Ultimately the poem functions both as a dialect poem, and as an ambiguous metacommentary on the status and reception of dialect poetry.

The second poem of McMillan's selected for inclusion was his much more recent "Norman Stopped Me on the Street" (2011a). This reports an interchange between "Ian" and "Norman," where Norman tells Ian of his hypothetical plans to go to the theatre. It begins:

Norman stopped me on the street

And he said

Hey, Ian lad

Ah cud go t't theatre

If a wanted, ah reckon.

In many ways this looks very much like a dialect poem, including definite article reduction, respelling of vowels, h-dropping, and strongly enregistered vocabulary items such as "lad" and "nowt." It is an anecdote that relays a short encounter between two men, and so in terms of subject matter would sit well within the *Summer Bulletin*.

Is "Norman Stopped Me on the Street" an instance of dialect poetry or literary dialect? It is possible to identify some features which mark it out more as literary dialect, including the fact that the anecdote is introduced in standard English before switching into the Yorkshire English of Norman's speech, as well as the fact that it was originally published in a pamphlet by Smith/Doorstop. Perhaps more importantly, however, it is an open-ended poem that does not overtly support the view either that Norman's life would be improved if he could get over the cultural barriers and go to the theatre, or whether the belief that theatre is always life-enhancing

is patronizing and Norman should operate within whatever cultural sphere makes him happy. In some ways it parallels Armitage's "Poem" in that it observes everyday life, lets the colloquial speak for itself, but does not attempt to resolve the conflict to which it gestures.

As much as anything, however, whether "Norman Stopped Me on the Street" is understood as dialect literature or literary dialect turns on the way in which it is read. I have seen Ian McMillan perform it live to a Yorkshire audience, alongside other poems that made use of dialect, where it got some good laughs and worked well as a comic anecdote. I have also discussed it with a class of undergraduate students as a piece of literature, where several students reported feeling an underlying sadness to the poem (which may be testimony to the belief that Norman's life would be improved by attending the theatre—which I would argue the poem does not endorse). In the first scenario it appears to operate as something approaching a dialect poem, while in the second it operates as a literary text. Readers/audiences bring different sets of expectations to it depending on the genre it is perceived to be operating within, and value different types of responses: dialect literature prompts a communal laugh of self-recognition, while literary dialect prompts a search for a more serious affective response.

Conclusion

Overall, I have made three arguments here. First, I have argued that the word "dialect" is a complex one, which means different things to linguists and non-linguists, has changed its meaning over time, and is always concerned with the status of the people who speak it. Second, "dialect poetry" is a historically contingent genre, which emerges in the late 18th century, and which has a problematic relationship to status and authenticity. Third, I have suggested that much of what goes to make something a "dialect poem" is a complex interplay between the form of the poem, the context within which it is published, and what the audience brings to interpreting it. Ian McMillan, who crosses between the two spheres of national poetry publishing and dialect poetry, comments in his poem "It's the 4th of July!" (2011):

Always, for me, the struggle

Between populism and

Linguistically interesting work

The question here is where he would consider his poems which play with dialect writing to sit in relation to this struggle.

Notes

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2 Credit: Graham Copley ©

3 Credit: Simon Armitage ©

[4] Credit: from “You Bring Out the Nottingham in Me” by Kathy Pimlott (*Goose Fair Night,* The Emma Press 2016).