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Talking to peasants: language, place and class in British fiction 1800–1836[1]

JANE HODSON
University of Sheffield
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This study uses the *Dialect in British Fiction 1800–1836* database to chart the changing representation of the language of the labouring poor during the early nineteenth century. It finds that, broadly speaking, while the voices of the labouring poor are sometimes represented in novels at the start of the period, most novels evince little interest in either the linguistic nuances of these characters' speech, or the access to their lives and thoughts that this speech provides. Around the middle of the period, there is a rapid increase in the fictional representation of the voices of the labouring poor specifically in novels set in rural Scotland and Ireland and – at least in some novels – this is connected to a greater interest in the lives and perspectives of these characters. By the end of the period, while there is a broadening out into extraterritorial varieties and a continuing interest in the voices of the rural labouring poor of Scotland and Ireland, these developments have not translated in any substantial way to an interest in either the rural labouring poor of England or Wales, or the urban labouring poor of any nation or region. Overall, the study demonstrates how fiction can be used to provide an insight into changing attitudes towards speakers and language varieties.

Keywords: literary linguistics, dialect, Romantic period, language ideology, enregisterment

1 Introduction

As the articles in this special issue testify, detailed records of the language of the labouring poor from before the twentieth century are scarce. Fiction is one of the few places where – tantalisingly – the speech of the labouring poor appears to be directly recorded. But this appearance of direct speech is, of course, a literary illusion (Adamson 1993). What we find in novels are variations on a set of conventions for representing the language of the labouring poor in specific areas, typically produced both by and for those considerably removed from them in socioeconomic terms.

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The debate about whether, despite these very real limitations, such representations have anything to offer to the historical study of language variety is a long-running one. Surely, the argument goes, if a writer has personal familiarity with the variety in question and is genuinely committed to representing it accurately, then the resultant writing can have some value to linguists? Sumner Ives (1971), one of the earliest scholars to take literary representations of dialect seriously, adopts this view, proposing that the literary representation of non-standard language can be taken as evidence for linguistic variation, as long as a number of stringent criteria to establish linguistic authenticity can be met. Later critics challenged both Ives' assertion that fiction directly mirrors real-life language varieties and his belief that the quality of authenticity of such texts can be satisfactorily evidenced (for a good overview of these arguments see Leigh 2011; Pickles 2018). There was a general turn away from believing that literary texts offer any real evidence to the historical dialectologist, and a focus instead on what dialect representation does from a literary perspective (Ferguson 1998).

With the development of the concept of enregisterment, some attention has swung back towards fictional representations (Agha 2003; Silverstein 2003; Johnstone, Andrus & Danielson 2006). Agha in particular makes the point that dialect representation is a key means by which understandings of language variation are disseminated to a wider population: '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). As such, although literary texts do not accurately render the sociolinguistic realities of the labouring poor, they do provide a record of what might be termed the sociolinguistic imaginary of the educated middle classes. These insights into how the middle classes perceived the language of the labouring poor is particularly valuable for periods when those perceptions appear to be undergoing significant change but other sources of information about language attitudes are limited. This, I will argue, is the case for the period 1800–36.

The eighteenth century had already seen some interest in literature written by the labouring classes about their lives in Standard English, as evidenced by the success of poetry by Stephen Duck and Ann Yearsley among others (for a good survey see Goodridge & Keegan 2017). In the early nineteenth century, a number of factors flowed together which were to have a significant influence on popular understandings of and approaches to the language of the labouring poor. In sociohistorical terms, it was a period of social unrest coupled with increasing industrialisation and urbanisation (Thompson 1963; Rose 1992). The unrest of the early nineteenth century led to an increase in paternalistic interest in the lived experiences of both the rural and urban working classes, as well as to publications such as Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851). In linguistic terms, there was the ongoing surge of popular prescriptivism via the publishing of grammar books and pronouncing guides in the late eighteenth century (Michael 1987; Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2008), which produced a readership who were much more attuned to the social nuances of linguistic difference than they had been previously (Mugglestone 2003). In parallel with this, the popularity of Robert Burns' poetry in the Scots language from the 1780s onwards

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attests to a growing public interest in and appreciation of at least some linguistic varieties. John Russell Smith's *Bibliographical List of the Works that Have Been Published towards Illustrating the Provincial Dialects of England* (1839) evidences a steady increase in both the number and kinds of publication that represent non-standard language across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including glossaries, grammars and antiquarian collections (see Hodson 2018 for a more detailed discussion). There is also some evidence of theatre as a key site for innovation in the use of non-standard language (see, for example, Hyett & Percy 2022), although this field remains under-researched. It might also be noted that the period witnessed the emergence of comparative philology on the continent with the work of Bopp, Schlegel and Grimm, although it is doubtful that this had any direct impact on popular perceptions of language in Britain.

Literary history attests to the fact that changes were in progress. The period I have chosen to focus on opens with William Wordsworth's call for poetry to be written in 'the real language of men' (1800: ix). This call was to provide an important touchstone in the decades that followed, even though the poetry collection which it prefaced itself contains very little non-standard language (see Broadhead 2010). The period closes with the first publications of Dickens' novels, notably *The Pickwick Papers* (published in series form between March 1836 and November 1837) and *Oliver Twist* (published in series form between February 1837 and April 1839). These were to prove immensely popular not least on account of their memorable deployment of a set of characters, including Sam Weller, the Artful Dodger and Fagin, who speak with marked non-standard voices (Turner 2020). From a linguistic point of view, many of the features that Dickens uses to represent London speech had previously been established by Pierce Egan in his monthly publication *Life in London* (first published 1821), and its theatrical adaptations, including W. T. Moncrieffe's *Tom and Jerry* (1826). There is, however, a fifteen-year gap between Egan popularising a linguistic repertoire for representing Cockney speech in *Life in London*, and the successful deployment of that repertoire for novelistic purposes by Dickens in *The Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist*. As Turner discusses, Egan uses London features primarily for burlesque and comic effect, and he 'makes little attempt to represent "realistic' speech"' (Turner 2020: 47). Norman Blake notes that the key innovation of early Victorian novelists was that they 'established non-standard language as an important tool in the hands of the novelist' and that this was borne out of a desire 'to portray the life of the regions and of the less fortunate' (Blake 1981: 162). This suggests that it is not enough for a linguistic repertoire to exist for it to be successfully deployed in novel form; there must also be a literary set of conventions underpinned by ideological understandings of what it means to represent the non-standard language of that section of the population.

Despite the evidence that the period 1800–36 was one of significant change in terms of the fictional representation of the labouring poor, and the fact that mapping this change can provide valuable insights into popular understanding of language variation, there has been little detailed study of the period (Blake 1981). The authors who are typically cited as evidence of dialect representation during this period (Maria Edgeworth, Walter

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Scott, John Galt) are limited in number and chosen precisely because of their exceptionalism.

2 The *Dialect in British Fiction 1800–1836* project

The *Dialect in British Fiction 1800–1836* project (Hodson *et al.* 2014) therefore set out to sample the novels of the period much more broadly. This work was made possible by two landmark bibliographical works: *The English Novel 1770–1829* (Garside, Raven & Schöwerling 2000, specifically vol. II) and *The English Novel, 1830–1836* (Garside, Mandal, Ebbes, Koch & Schöwerling 2004). Even with the aid of these comprehensive bibliographies, however, it was still challenging to identify the novels that contained representations of non-standard language, as there are no simple search terms to identify novels that contain such material. The project therefore skim-read all the novels published every four years (so 1800, 1804, 1808, etc.) and applied a 1–4 star rating to each novel to signify the quantity of dialect representation. Then for each of the target years, ten novels that were notable for their representation of non-standard language were selected and these novels were analysed in much greater detail, with samples of their dialect representation tagged and entered into a database. Two caveats should be made about this methodology. First, because the project focused on every four years, the story that each novel tells is representative rather than complete: there will undoubtedly be fascinating authors and novels which the project did not identify. Second, because the project selected ten novels for their interest in dialect representation, these novels are still exceptional: it remains the case then as now that many novels were published each year which evinced absolutely no interest in non-standard language.

The project as a whole evidences a broad increase in the representation of dialect across the period (see Hodson & Broadhead 2013 for graphs and full discussion). It demonstrates that much of this overall rise was led by Scots English, closely followed by Irish English (Hodson & Broadhead 2013: 232). The results of the study have greatly increased knowledge of the development of dialect representation during this period, and led to the identification of many authors and texts whose contribution to the development of dialect representation had previously gone unrecognised. It has enabled the study of specific language varieties, including American English (Hodson 2017) and Yorkshire English (Hodson 2020).

This article focuses specifically on the question of the representation of the language of the labouring poor in these 100 novels. Following the categories provided in the *Dialect in British Fiction 1800–1836* database, the primary focus is on characters tagged as 'respectable poor', a category which includes those such as rural labourers, and factory workers who are financially stable enough to earn a living but are emphatically not wealthy enough to own land or follow an established profession, trade or craft. By its nature this is a somewhat permeable category, however, so some consideration has also been given to characters tagged as 'destitute poor' (chiefly, beggars and mendicants).

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Another overlap should be noted between labouring poor and those in service. There are some characters who cross between the categories of servant and labouring poor: Frank Feldfair in *Craven Derby* (Anon. 1832) is both a faithful family retainer and a rural labourer, for example. There are also some characters who start as labouring poor and become servants, as in the case of the eponymous Barney in *Barney Mahoney* (Croker 1832). On the whole, however, the labouring poor are a distinct category from servants from a fictional perspective. The key difference is one of space and therefore interaction: servants live in the same spaces as their employers and engage with them on a daily basis. In a previous article (Hodson 2016), I argued that the language of servants is of particular concern during this period because servants live and work alongside their masters, and the novels therefore demonstrate a concern to differentiate the language of servants from the language of masters, despite their shared linguistic space. The labouring poor present a different problem as, unless they take paid employment in service, they are 'out there' in the fields, cities, fishing boats, or emerging industrial spaces. They are much less likely to engage on a daily basis with their social superiors, and when they do there may be some mutual incomprehension between their style of speech and their interlocutors. As such, there is no risk of direct linguistic contamination between poor and rich. Instead, differences in speech style are used to signal that they are 'other' from the central characters of the novel. In short, they occupy a very different place than servants in the sociolinguistic imaginary of the early nineteenth century. The labouring poor as represented in *Dialect in British Fiction 1800–1836* thus include characters who speak a wide range of different language varieties, many of which are marked both for their regional speech as well as their non-standard speech.

For the purposes of this article, I divide the period into three based on the pattern of findings in Hodson & Broadhead (2013): 1800–12 as a period before significant growth in dialect representation begins to take place; 1816–24 as a period that shows rapid growth, particularly in relation to Scots and Irish; 1828–36 as a period when some levelling off appears to take place. I will focus more attention on the first and second periods as the points of change; in the context of this article, the third period functions more as a coda.

3 Novels of 1800–12

Of the ten novels in *Dialect in British Fiction 1800–1836* database for the years 1800, 1804, 1808 and 1812, around five or six each year represent characters who might be understood to be broadly speaking 'labouring poor' and to be represented as speaking a non-standard variety. We defined non-standard as any representation which differs from the conventions of Standard English, including in terms of semi-phonetic respelling, vocabulary, grammar and discourse markers. Given that around eighty to a hundred novels were published in each of these years, this means that – at a very rough estimate – around 5 per cent of the novels represent the voices of the 'labouring poor'. In the vast majority of cases, these characters were defined within the terms of the

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Dialect in British Fiction 1800–1836 project as being either *minor* ('has identifiable role or function within at least one extended scene') or *peripheral* ('speech restricted to one or two utterances, possibly unnamed character'). With two possible exceptions (*Castle Rackrent* and *The Cottagers of Glenburnie*, which I discuss in more detail below) none of the labouring poor characters meet the criteria for being either *significant* ('one you would name in a 300-word summary') or *central* ('a main focal point within the novel').

Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800) is a very notable exception to the general rule, and a novel that did much to demonstrate the potential for non-standard characters to take central stage, although its central character is a servant rather than labouring poor. The novel is set in Ireland and tells the story of four generations of Anglo-Irish landowners from the perspective of their servant, 'Honest Thady'. Thady narrates his perspective on the lives of the members of the gentry he serves at Castle Rackrent, using idiom, colloquialism and vocabulary peculiar to the region. Several instances of dialect vocabulary are glossed in footnotes and an extensive glossary, complete with anecdotal evidence, is provided by 'the Editor':

> For the information of the IGNORANT English reader, a few notes have been subjoined by the editor, and he had it once in contemplation to translate the language of Thady into plain English; but Thady's idiom is incapable of translation, and, besides, the authenticity of his story would have been more exposed to doubt if it were not told in his own characteristic manner. (Preface)

Thady's narrative weaves together his own voice with the voices of the people around him, including other servants:

> At this Judy takes up the corner of her apron, and puts it first to one eye and then to t'other, being to all appearance in great trouble; and my shister put in her word, and bid his honor have a good heart, for she was sure it was only the gout that Sir Patrick used to have flying about him, and that he ought to drink a glass or a bottle extraordinary to keep it out of his stomach, and he promised to take her advice, and sent out for more spirits immediately; and Judy made a sign to me, and I went over to the door to her, and she said—'I wonder to see Sir Condy so low!--Has he heard the news?' 'What news?' says I.—Did'nt ye hear it, then? (says she) my lady Rackrent that was is kilt and lying for dead, and I don't doubt but that it's all over with her by this time. 'Mercy on us all, (says I) how was it?' – 'The jaunting car, it was that ran away with her' (says Judy). (pp. 156–7)

As is evident from this, the dialect features are not notably dense, and rely on colloquial phrasing, a small amount of respelling ('shister') and some regionally specific lexis ('jaunting car'). Taken as a whole, *Castle Rackrent* signals the possibilities of centring the world view and voice of non-standard characters, but did not in its own time spark an immediate string of imitators.

In most other cases the speech of the labouring poor is generically non-standard. A good example of this can be found in the 1812 novel *The Adventures of an Ostrich Feather* when the eponymous feather, which is telling the story of its life in first-person narration, is found by a man 'who came to take away the hired benchs [sic], chandeliers, plates and glasses':

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> The man who picked me up, looked at me with wonder. – Laws, is it possible like, says he, that this here can belong to a bird? dang me if ever I see such a thing, and the fine ladies stick them there into their hair; why, I wonders how they can carry their heads steady; – I wonders how they be fasted; they don't make a hole in their skulls, does 'em said he to his fellow-labourer. (Anon. 1812: 95)

There is some linguistic detail here: discourse markers 'laws', 'dang me' and 'like'; non-standard grammar: 'I wonders', 'how they be fasted', 'does 'em' and rapid speech processes 'don't', ''em'. This is a generic non-standardness rather than a regionally specific one, however, and it goes hand-in-hand with a presentation of the speaker as lacking knowledge ('is it possible […] that this here can belong to a bird?'), in awe of his social superiors ('the fine ladies stick them there into their hair') and comically stupid ('they don't make a hole in their skulls, does 'em'). Thus the non-standard linguistic features are being used to map out the idea that the labourer in question is distinctively different from the other, wealthier, owners that the feather has had up until this point. The novel has little interest, however, in either his speech or his life. The feather is quickly gifted back up the social ladder to a wealthy Jewish family, which is then the object of a much more extended narrative episode in the novel.

Other novels offer slightly more regional detail but still trade in stereotypes. *The Runaway* by Horatio Smith is set predominantly in South West England and the home of a key character is described very specifically as being set 'near the banks for the Avon, in the county of Gloucester' (1800, I: 6). Most of the characters speak Standard English, but there are a few paragraphs where comic rustics plot a money-making scheme (Smith 1800, I: 72):

> 'Look'e, vrend Tummas,' said one to the other; 'thig hundred poonds wad be a main great thing vor us if we could get un; but Ise donna like thig same lawyer, nor thig name of Thieves Inn; thee knawest all the lawyers be great rogues; and we shall only have our pains vor our trouble; now if so be as how the young man wull ge'us any thing, sull thee take the money and let un goo?'
> 'Why, Ned,' replied the other, 'what thee saist may be right and may be not, zo if the young man wull ge'us vorty or vivty poonds why we wull e'en let un off.'

There is some place-specific detail here, including phonetic features such as fricative voicing ('vrend' for 'friend', 'zo' for 'so'), a feature associated with 'rustic' voices since at least Shakespeare (Blake 1981: 80). Much of it is generic, however, including non-specific vowel respelling ('poonds' for 'pounds', 'wull' for 'will'), non-standard pronouns ('thee', 'Ise' and 'un'), *-st* forms of verbs ('saist', 'knawest') and rapid speech ('Look'e', 'e'en'). The characters who speak this way are both minor and comically mercenary and the novel has little interest in them beyond this brief scene. A similarly stock rustic character appears briefly in *Aubrey* (1804) to provide some background about another character:

> 'As for that there villain who affronted Fanny,' said he, 'noabody knows unny thing about 'un, where he went to, or where he come from. That there day was the first time she ever seed 'un in her whole life.' (Dallas 1804, II: 79)

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There are some set phrases ('that there' to provide emphasis appears twice), non-standard verb forms ('seed'), respelling to indicate vowel pronunciation and rapid speech processes (''un'). The character is purportedly from Warwickshire, but it is difficult to identify any regionally specific lexis or pronunciation features.

A greater degree of linguistic detail is found in some novels. For example, in her novel *The Letters of a Solitary Wanderer* (1800), Charlotte Smith's eponymous wanderer is provided with directions by a local who speaks with a noticeably Yorkshire accent, including 'noot' as a form of 'nowt' and <a> being realised as <o> in 'mon' (see Hodson 2020 for a fuller analysis). In this case, Smith draws a distinction between the farm labourer, whose speech is densely marked with regionally specific features, and the house servants, whose speech is only lightly marked with generic features, including allegro speech and non-standard concordance.

Two novels from this subperiod are worth exploring in more detail as they point towards future developments, while also demonstrating firmly entrenched fictional practices. The first is Robert Bisset's anti-Jacobin novel *Douglas; or, the Highlander* (1800), which makes a strong statement about the value of Highland life:

> Born myself in the Highlands of Scotland; I have written a Novel, in which I attempt to pourtray the sentiments, manners, and character of a Highland gentleman; and endeavour to shew, that the sense of hereditary dignity, to be found in Highlanders, is a powerful incentive to meritorious exertions. (Preface)

It is unsurprising, of course, given Bisset's politics, that what he has in view here is the 'Highland gentleman' rather than the Highland labouring poor. Furthermore, his interest in representing the 'sentiments, manners and character' of Highlanders does not extend as far as representing their language. In part this is a practical decision: as the novel covertly acknowledges at one point, its lead character would not in fact be speaking English:

> 'Well,' continued the Laird, 'I hope you have not forgot the Erse language and Highland amusements; I hope you were a match for all your comrades at manly exercises as well as your books.' (II: 236)

Even allowing for this, Charles is never shown to have any accent at all when speaking English, although the novel indicates that he must do so at least initially: when he goes to study in England he finds his tutor to be incompetent, but stays with him on the basis that 'he could acquire the English pronunciation as well under a weak man as an able man' (II: 216). Moreover, Bisset demonstrably does have a repertoire for representing Scottish speech, as a Highland Scots Captain receives a relatively detailed treatment:

> An' please your honour, there is na a man in the hale army mair milder than yoursell, and de'll a stronger man, or a better feighter there is in it, na in our ain old forty second itsell, tho' mony a clever fallow there is in it; however, sin your honour will hae'd sae, I'll teach the lawdie the gude braid sword. (I: 68)

This contains some regionally specific lexis ('lawdie'), regionally specific grammatical features ('there is na') and regionally specific respellings ('gude' for example, hovers somewhere between a conventionalised respelling and a separate

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lexical item), alongside more generically non-standard features such as rapid speech processes (‘An’’, ‘tho’’). The Captain appears only briefly, however, and his characterisation through Scots stands alongside a more stereotyping treatment of Cockney (I: 105 and 108), aspiring social climbers (I: 220, 235) and a northern servant (I: 237–8). Furthermore, the novel contains some explicitly anti-Scots sentiment ‘Mr. Aitchison […] trusted entirely to his wit, a quality which, in that orator, consisted exclusively in broad Scotch; a mode of pronunciation, it must be allowed, as much a-kin to wit as spouting is to eloquence’ (I: 200–1). Despite his gesture towards an appreciation of Highland ‘sentiments, manners and character’, Scots English is not taken seriously by Bisset.

Eight years later, Elizabeth Hamilton’s *Cottagers of Glenburnie* (1808) also points towards the potential for novels to make use of the Scots language and culture, while at the same time reinforcing negative views of non-standard speakers. In the novel, the virtuous and reforming Mrs Mason visits a small Scottish village, where she attempts to improve the lives of the labouring poor, most particularly the recalcitrant MacClarty family:

> ‘Those who wait till evening for the sunrise,’ said Mrs Mason, ‘will find that they have lost the day. If you permit your daughter, while a child, to disobey her parent and her teacher, she will never learn to obey her God. But, perhaps I interfere too far. If I do, you must forgive me; for, with the strong impression which I have upon my mind of the consequences of a right education, I am tempted to forget that my advice may sometimes be unacceptable.’
>
> ‘Hoot,’ said Mrs MacClarty, who did not perfectly comprehend the speech, ‘maidens bairns are aye well-bred, ye ken, cousin; but I fear ye hinna sleepit weel, that ye have been sae lang o’ rising. It’s a lang time since the kettle has been boiling for your breakfast.’ (p. 167)

There is a detailed engagement here with the language of the Scottish labouring poor, including regionally specific discourse markers (‘Hoot’), lexical items (‘bairns’, ‘ken’), grammatical features (‘hinna’) and respellings (‘weel’, ‘lang’). There is also some recognition by Mrs Mason that her interference with the lives and culture of others may not be entirely welcome. Yet the novel consistently validates the perspective of Mrs Mason, demonstrating Mrs MacClarty to be resistant to the opportunities for positive change that are offered to her, and it is no coincidence Mrs MacClarty ‘did not perfectly comprehend’ the thoughtful advice offered in Standard English to her.

Both *Douglas* and *The Cottagers of Glenburnie* hint at the narrative possibilities offered by a genuine interest in the language of the labouring poor, yet neither fully centre the voice and perspective of the non-standard speaker. The period thus witnesses an ongoing presence of non-standard-speaking labouring poor characters in novels, but primarily for one of three reasons: to anchor realism of the novel by providing an ‘other’ for the main characters to briefly interact with, to underpin the superiority of the wealthier characters by comparison, and for comic purposes and misunderstanding.

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4 An explosion of Scots (and Irish): 1816–24

Much of what has been stated about 1800–12 remains true for years 1812–16: only a small minority of novels represent the language of the labouring poor at all, the majority of these characters whose speech is represented are *minor* or *peripheral*, and much of their speech is represented in highly generic ways. What changes is a sudden upsurge in the representation of Scots in some novels, and with that a shift in the roles afforded to speakers and the values assigned to their speech. It is not hard to see where the trend originates: Walter Scott's first novel, *Waverley* was published in 1814, and the success of this and subsequent 'Waverley novels' by the same author prompted a host of imitators. While 1814 was not one of the target years for *Dialect in British Fiction 1800–1836*, by the time of the next target year (1816) a fully fledged publishing revolution was under way, and the number of novels containing a substantial amount of Scots English had jumped from hovering around two to four for 1800–12, to fourteen to sixteen for 1816–24.

In the Preface to *The Antiquary* (1816) Scott is explicit about the influence of Wordsworth in terms of shaping his approach to Scots-speaking characters:

> I have, in the two last narratives especially, sought my principal personages in the class of society who are the last to feel the influence of that general polish which assimilates to each other the manners of different nations. Among the same class I have placed some of the scenes in which I have endeavoured to illustrate the operation of the higher and more violent passions; both because the lower orders are less restrained by the habit of suppressing their feelings, and because I agree, with my friend Wordsworth, that they seldom fail to express them in the strongest and most powerful language. This is, I think, peculiarly the case with the peasantry of my own country, a class with whom I have long been familiar. The antique force and simplicity of their language, often tinctured with the Oriental eloquence of Scripture, in the mouths of those of an elevated understanding, give pathos to their grief, and dignity to their resentment. (Preface: v–vii)

While this passage is certainly not free from condescension and stereotyping towards the 'lower orders', it nevertheless undertakes to treat them with a great deal more seriousness than has been evident in any of the novels explored to date, Edgeworth included. At the heart of this serious treatment is the identification of 'the peasantry of my own country' with other primitive peoples, including those found in the Bible.

A good example of Scott's treatment of the 'lower orders' can be found in his historical novel *The Monastery* (1820), where two married servants, Martin and Tibb, debate how to care for their mistress, Lady Avenel, who has just been widowed and rendered homeless at the Battle of Pinkie Cleugh:

> They canvassed their situation thus openly before the lady, convinced by the paleness of her look, her quivering lip, and dead-set eye, that she neither heard nor understood what they were saying.
>
> 'There is a way,' said the shepherd, 'but I kenna if she could bring her heart to it,— there's Simon Glendinning's widow of the glen yonder, has had assurance from the southern loons,

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> and nae soldier to steer them for one cause or other. Now, if the leddie could bow her mind to take quarters with Elspeth Glendinning till better days cast up, nae doubt it wad be doing an honour to the like of her, but——'
>
> 'An honour?' answered Tibb, 'ay, by my word, sic an honour as wad be pride to her kin mony a lang year after her banes were in the mould. Oh! gudeman, to hear ye even the Lady of Avenel to seeking quarters wi' a Kirk-vassal's widow!'
>
> 'Loth should I be to wish her to it,' said Martin; 'but what may we do?—to stay here is mere starvation; and where to go, I'm sure I ken nae mair than ony tup I ever herded.'
>
> 'Speak no more of it,' said the widow of Avenel, suddenly joining in the conversation, 'I will go to the tower.— Dame Elspeth is of good folk, a widow, and the mother of orphans,—she will give us house-room until something be thought upon. These evil showers make the low bush better than no beild.' (I: 117–19)

The language of the servants is strongly marked as Scots through lexis, grammar and respelling, and it contrasts with the Standard English spoken by their mistress. Despite this, the characters have no difficulty understanding one another, and Lady Avenel herself uses the Scots word 'beild' (meaning safe place or shelter). Martin and Tibb are serious and responsible figures in the scene, and the narrator briefly shares their thought processes with the reader ('convinced by the paleness of her look […] that she neither heard nor understood'). Their appearance also lasts well beyond their initial scenes.

Robert Mudie's *Glenfergus*, also published in 1820, has a contemporary setting and provides an interesting take on the trope of the wealthy young lady engaging with the labouring poor for the first time. In this early scene, an account is given of how Amelia, who has been raised in London, approaches her interactions with the rural poor:

> She had entered the houses of the rustics, conversed freely with them; and though at first she had found no small difficulty in comprehending their dialect, yet she had begun to listen to it, not only with understanding, but with pleasure; -- as she found that, though their elocution was more uncouth and their ideas different, yet they were possessed of more intelligence and less selfishness, than those she had met with about her father's house in the vicinity of the metropolis. From them, she had learned something of the domestic economy and employments of the Scottish peasants. (I: 44–5)

The scene acknowledges initial communicative difficulties ('at first she had found no small difficulty in comprehending their dialect'), but it is significant that the difficulty is located with the listener rather than with the speakers, and it is she who must learn to adapt. In due course, she finds that she can understand and even derive 'pleasure' from their speech. Some prescriptivist judgements hover around the passage as she judges their elocution 'more uncouth' than that of city dwellers, and yet the scene makes the point that the perceived uncouthness of the language does not invalidate the content of what they say: they are possessed of 'more intelligence and less selfishness' than those to whom they are being compared. Crucially there is also a proto-anthropological turn to her interactions: she learns 'something of the domestic economy and employments

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of the Scottish peasants'. This is not entirely dissimilar territory from that of Bisset's *Douglas*, but where there the central character was a Scots speaker by birth who learned Standard English from his incompetent tutor, here the central character is a Standard English speaker by birth, who learns to appreciate both the language and the lifestyle of the Scottish labouring poor. And unlike *The Cottagers of Glenburnie*, where the learning ran only from the Standard speaker to the (un)grateful poor, here it is the Standard speaker who is shown to benefit from the encounters.

The character of Aunt Rachel in the same novel is also worthy of note. In this scene she explicitly discusses her language with Amelia:

> 'I am astonished,' said Rachel, 'that you wha hae been bred at Lunnon, and seen sae little a' our countra ways, shud ken sae weel what I say. I mith maybe speak English mysel', and I daresay I could; but, waes me! maist naebody here wad understand it but the minister, and he likes the Scots just as weel, and Mr Allan; an' its no ilka day a body can get a sight o' him, he's aye sae bizzy wi' his books. Forbye, I hae been sae lang accustomed to the Scots that fouk wad think me pridefu' gin I waur to begin the English.'
>
> Amelia assured her companion, that she not only understood, but liked the Scotch. 'To be sure, ye're Scots yoursel' baieth faither and mither,' said Rachel. (I: 337–8)

Aunt Rachel's Scots voice is represented in detail, and the metalinguistic commentary she offers makes it clear that there is an element of positive choice to her language variety: she could choose to speak with an English accent but there would be no communicative gain ('maist naebody here wad understand it but the minister') and some reputational damage ('fouk wad think me pridefu' gin I waur to begin the English'). There is thus a marked sense here – which was entirely absent from *Douglas* – that choosing to adjust the language of one's home community carries social penalties. Noticeably, Aunt Rachel also reflects positively on Amelia's willingness to engage with the Scots, thus re-emphasising the point from the earlier passage that Rachel's observed behaviours constitute an ethical practice: Rachel commends the fact that a Londoner 'shud ken sae weel what I say' and Amelia endorses this, assuring her that 'she not only understood, but liked the Scotch'. Taken as a whole, the passage offers an interesting insight into a version of the world where engaging with and learning to understand Scots English – while admiring those who choose to keep their accents – provides evidence of one's good moral standing. This is particularly interesting if we consider that, according to his *Dictionary of National Biography* entry (Goodwin & Matthew 2004), Robert Mudie was himself originally a member of the labouring poor, having been born in Angus in 1777 as the son of a weaver. He attended a village school but was largely self-educated. In 1802 he was appointed a teacher of Gaelic and drawing at Inverness Royal Academy. This was the start of a prolific and diverse if not resoundingly successful career, which included teaching, writing for newspapers, dabbling in politics and writing in a range of genres. *Glenfergus* is his only novel.

Susan Ferrier's *The Inheritance* (1824) treads some similar ground, although the author has a more privileged background. This novel tells the story of a young woman who inherits a Scottish estate. In this instance, the young woman attempts to take seriously

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her new responsibilities, and yet cannot help bringing a lens which romanticises the lives of the labouring poor:

> She stood to admire the effect of some cottages situated on the green shelving bank which overhung the river. 'What a pretty picturesque thing a cottage is,' thought she to herself […] 'When this is mine, I will certainly have some pretty cottages built in sight of the castle, and have the good people to dance on the green sward before their doors in an evening when their work is done.' (I: 34–5)

Noticeably the character is admiring the scene from a distance ('the effect of some cottages') and understanding the cottages in visual terms ('pretty picturesque'). She imagines herself as the inhabitants' benefactor, and the ways in which they will perform their gratitude. The character herself does not pause to reflect on how the people in question might feel about such a performance at the end of a day of labour, although sufficient narrative space is left to invite the reader to make an inference.

The scene continues as Miss St Clair comes to the point of actually speaking to the children:

> 'What a pity those children are all so ugly!' thought Miss St Clair; 'it would have been so delightful to have had them all nicely dressed, and have taught them myself; but they are so frightful, I could have no pleasure in seeing them.' However, she overcame her repugnance so far as to accost them. 'Would you not like to be made nice and clean, and have pretty new clothes?'
>
> 'Aye!' answered one of them with a broad stare, and still broader accent.
>
> 'And to go to school, and be taught to read, and write, and work?'
>
> 'Naw!' answered the whole troop with one voice, as they renewed their splashing with fresh vigour. (I: 36–7)

Again, she understands the children she encounters primarily in visual terms and imagines herself as their benefactor. When she overcomes her initial reluctance to speak to them, we get the opportunity of seeing their response: they utter two markedly Scots English words ('Aye!' and 'Naw!') to indicate that they are in favour of pretty clothes but not the work offered with them. On this occasion the comedy of the scene is at the expense of the presumptuous Standard English speaker, rather than the labouring poor.

The novels of this period are thus much more extensive, detailed and interesting in terms of their engagement with the language of the labouring poor, although these innovations are focused on Scots and to a lesser extent Irish speakers.

5 Levelling off: 1828–36

When I set out to use the *Dialect in British Fiction 1800–1836* database to investigate the language of the labouring poor, I initially imagined that it would be an ongoing story of growth and development: that after the peripheral status of characters speaking non-standard language during 1800–12, followed by a rapid expansion in the presence of labouring poor voices from Scotland and Ireland during the period 1816–24, there

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would then be a further extension into other rural and potentially even urban regions during the decade before Dickens began in his career. Looking in detail at the novels captured by the project, however, this is not exactly the case.

While there was some waning in the popularity of Scots and Irish-themed novels between 1828 and 1836, nevertheless a significant number of them continued to be published each year, including *The Highland Smugglers* by James Baillie Fraser (1832), *Lord Roldan* by Allan Cunningham (1836) and *Edith of Glammis* by Alexander Hamilton (1836). Following Scott, these novels continue to use Scots and Irish to demarcate different social groups who nevertheless interact within a single society. As such they anticipate the uses of regional English speech in the Victorian realist novel.

There are also a handful of novels that employ rural English varieties in interesting ways. For example, *Craven Derby* (Anon. 1832) introduces its largely Standard English historical narrative with a contemporary frame, wherein a young lord returns to his family home and encounters an old family retainer who speaks with a marked Warwickshire accent, complete with philological footnotes. The fact that the old labourer is restricted to the frame narrative suggests perhaps that – despite the established market for Scots and Irish literature – the author or publisher lacked confidence that the readership would be willing to engage with a whole novel written in this style (for further detail see Hodson 2016). In Thomas Crofton Croker's 1832 novel, *The Adventures of Barney Mahoney*, not only does the eponymous Barney have a densely marked Irish accent throughout, but the novel also features an extended episode where two sisters from Yorkshire visit London, and their accents are represented in some detail. Charles Hooton's 1836 *The Adventures of Bilberry Thurland* centres on the eponymous Bilberry, who is born into poverty and wanders through various episodes and adventures. Despite his birth, he and his mother both speak Standard English, although his friend Sam Pogson plays a major role through the novel, and speaks in a variety that is marked as non-standard, with some features of Derbyshire. But beyond these few experiments, there is not a strong upsurge of novels representing the language of the regional labouring poor.

What is noticeably absent during 1828, 1832 and 1836 is any narrative that makes extensive use of London or other urban varieties. As discussed briefly above, Cockney had begun to gain recognition and popularity in other writing forms. But its adoption into the novel form – which was to prove such a popular formula for Dickens – is simply not in evidence in these novels.

6 Conclusion

In this article I surveyed the 100 novels included in *Dialect in British Fiction 1800–1836* in order to investigate what they have to tell us about the representation of the language of the labouring poor during this period. There were four key findings.

First, and unsurprisingly, these novels attest to the fact that there is simply not a great deal of popular interest in the lives or voices of the labouring poor during this period. Only

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a minority of novels represent such speech at all, and those that do typically show little interest in exploring the lived experience of the characters whose voices are briefly evoked. In most novels, the labouring poor are marginal figures, primarily appearing to provide a brief comic episode, advance the plot, or authenticate the fact that the main character has ventured beyond their immediate social circle by speaking in a way that is regionally and/or socially marked.

Second, there is some evidence that Wordsworth's 'Preface' begins to focus attention on the language of the 'unpolished' labouring classes as being of value in its own right, a project which is explicitly carried through by Walter Scott from the publication of his first novel in 1814 and which marks a significant shift in terms of attitudes towards Scots and Irish English.

Third, from around 1820, I tentatively identify a new strand of thought where it begins to be acknowledged that the labouring poor have their own ideas, and that in encounters between the wealthy and the poor, learning might run both ways. This does not translate beyond Scots and Irish English in this period, although it does potentially pave the way for later fictional developments.

Fourth, the project has identified authors from across the period – including Elizabeth Hamilton, Robert Mudie and Susan Ferrier – who represent the speech of the labouring poor in ways that are worth attending to. At the same time, however, the project finds evidence of outsize impact of single authors, most notably Walter Scott and Charles Dickens. In the case of both writers, fictional use of their preferred variety (Scots and London English respectively) is limited in the period immediately preceding the start of their novel-publishing careers but sees a strong upsurge immediately afterward.

In conclusion, anyone approaching the fiction of this period in the hope of finding linguistically reliable representations of the language of the labouring poor is doomed to disappointment. Yet this article demonstrates that novels do provide an insight into changing understandings of and attitudes towards the language of the labouring poor at a time when other attitudinal data is scarce. In terms of future research, there are a number of possible directions. From a methodological point of view, this project relied on a time-intensive skim-reading process, but one of its products is an extensive list of non-standard features from the period. This opens up the possibility of using the list as the basis for a more automated method of discovery, which could be deployed in a number of ways. First, it would be possible to investigate the years within the timeframe of the project which were not targeted (1801, 1802, 1803, etc.). Filling in these years would enable the creation of a much richer and more reliable account of the period, as well as the identification of additional authors and themes of interest. A second possibility is to extend the investigation beyond this period and to track how attitudes towards the language of the labouring poor changed in the early Victorian period, as Dickens' influence began to be felt and other sociohistorical and linguistic forces took effect. A third way forward is to examine other text types which are likely to capture representations of the language of the labouring poor: plays, travel literature and the periodical press are likely to be fruitful here, and may provide different insights into changing attitudes. Overall, building a picture across a longer period of time and

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across multiple fictional and non-fictional text types will lead to a better understanding of the ways in which the language of the labouring poor has been represented and interpreted over time.

Author's address:

School of English
University of Sheffield
Jessop West
1 Upper Hanover Street
Sheffield S3 7RA
United Kingdom
j.hodson@sheffield.ac.uk

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