
Book Section:
Hodson, J. orcid.org/0000-0001-5020-9724 (2024) 6 The significance of stance in fictional representations of non-standard language and prescriptivism. In: Yáñez-Bouza, N., Rodríguez-Gil, M.E. and Pérez-Guerra, J., (eds.) New Horizons in Prescriptivism Research. Multilingual Matters , pp. 103-119. ISBN 9781800416147

https://doi.org/10.21832/9781800416154-007

The significance of stance in fictional representations of non-standard language and prescriptivism

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In this chapter I argue that the linguistic concept of stance can help us to analyse how fictional texts represent attitudes to non-standard language, and invite readers to align themselves with these attitudes. When stance is attended to, it becomes apparent quite how complex novels are in the ways in which they engage with non-standard voices. It also becomes apparent that, while the dominant tendency of fiction during the past two hundred years may be towards endorsing prescriptivist attitudes, there is also a significant counter-strand which assigns positive values to non-standard language and presents at least some resistance towards prescriptivist attitudes. After outlining my approach to the analysis of stance, I consider two examples from early nineteenth century novels, *Miriam* (1800) and *Domestic Scenes* (1820) before focusing in more detail on a mid-twentieth century novel, Georgette Heyer's *The Unknown Ajax* (1959). This novel, I argue, demonstrates quite how complex stance can be in relation to the representation of non-standard language as it purposefully creates space for the Darracott family – and by extension the reader – to adopt two entirely different understandings of the Yorkshire accent of its central character. The novel thus constitutes an instructive meta-commentary on the ways in which fiction makes use of non-standard language, and its implications for the circulation of prescriptivist attitudes.

1. Role alignment and stance

In his seminal article of 2003, Asif Agha traces the means by which metadiscursive messages about the cultural values associated with different language varieties were circulated to the general public in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He argues that, if specialist linguistic texts such as pronouncing dictionaries constituted the first step in the process, and more general handbooks the second, then literary works provided an important third stage:

> Novels and other literary works comprise a third genre of metadiscourse about accent. In this case we have direct biographical evidence of speech-chain linkages: many of the most famous novelists were avid readers of works belonging to the first two genres [i.e. early prescriptivist works and handbooks]. The general form that metadiscursive activity took within this genre

> was to foreground selected correlations between speech and social identity through devices such as narrated dialogue and dependent tropes of personification. (2003: 255)

Agha thus places "narrated dialogue" and "tropes of personification" at the heart of the metadiscursive messages that novels communicate about language varieties. Citing a passage from Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*, he argues that the key factor about such representations is the way in which they position the reader:

> To a reader of the novel there is a message here, of course, a message that links accent to social persona. Yet such works do not describe the value of accent, they dramatize its uses. They depict icons of personhood linked to speech that invite forms of role alignment on the part of the reader. In contrast to the metadiscursive genres discussed earlier, the message has become more implicit in certain ways. Yet it has also become more concrete and palpable to the reader. (2003: 257)

In other words dialect representation is not only about the passive presentation of non-standard voices on the page, but the way in which readers are invited to respond to such representations. As Agha also notes, any recipient of such messages: "can, in principle, seek to align his or her own self-image with the characterological figures depicted in the message". (2003: 243) What matters is how the reader relates what they see on the page to their own identity.

Agha's account of these "forms of role alignment" in fictional texts is suggestive but underspecified, and as a result the complexity of the ways in which readers are invited to respond to the metadiscursive messages presented by novels has not been recognised. I propose that the linguistic concept of stance provides a useful way to explore this phenomenon. The linguistic study of stance is, of course, a broad field in its own right. Robert Englebretson observes that "stance is by no means a monolithic concept. Definitions and conceptions of stance are as broad and varied as the individual backgrounds and interests of the researchers themselves" (2007: 1) For the purposes of this chapter, where I am concerned with the evaluation of linguistic varieties, I focus particularly on attitudinal stance and take Alexandra Jaffe's definition as a starting point that stance is "taking up a position with respect to the form or the content of one's utterance". (2009: 3) I also make use of Daniela Landert's important observations about how stance functions in fictional writing (2017). There are three key elements I want to draw from Landert.

First, Landert notes that stance can be expressed at different levels within fiction:

> [...] stance expressions play an important role in fiction on different levels. On the level of the communication between narrator and addressee (or: the narratorial level), stance expressions can influence how a story is perceived, for instance when overt narrators explicitly evaluate characters and events. On the level of the communication between characters (or: the character level), stance expressions provide a resource for characterisation and character alignment. Characters can explicitly evaluate themselves and others and they can also be characterised more implicitly through their use of stance expressions, for instance as being insecure or determined. (2017: 489)

As I shall discuss in the next section, recognising the ways in which stance towards non-standard language is expressed at both a narratorial and a character level, and the interactions between these levels, is key to understanding how the reader is invited to take up a position.

Second, Landert notes that there are two broad categories of ways in which stance can be expressed: the specifically linguistic (e.g. lexical items, structural patterns, morphology) and the paralinguistic and non-linguistic (e.g. intonation, body language):

> More grammatically oriented approaches adopt a narrow definition in which stance refers to the speaker's or writer's subjectivity in the form of personal attitudes and judgements. According to this view, stance is a local phenomenon that can be tied to specific lexico-grammatical patterns. In contrast, interactional approaches use a broader definition in which stance is linked to social positioning and identity construction. (2017: 493)

She also notes that sometimes there are no overt markers of stance at all and that it can be "difficult to pinpoint lexical items or linguistic structures". (2017: 492) As I shall argue, both explicit and implicit expressions of stance are relevant to the discussion of non-standard language in fiction.

Third, drawing on recent work in sociolinguistics, she emphasises the extent to which stance can be understood as an interactional endeavour: "the collaborative construction of stance by several interacting participants". (2017: 500) She notes that "expressing an attitude positions the speaker in relation to other speakers, depending on the amount of agreement between their evaluations". (2017: 500) As will follow in my analysis, this collective nature of stancetaking in relation to non-standard language is highly visible in all three of the texts I discuss.

2. Applying stance to dialect representation

In Hodson 2014 I argue for recognising the importance of metalanguage when analysing dialect representation (see in particular Chapter 8). In this, I follow the explanation provided by Jaworski, Coupland and Galasinski writing about metalanguage more broadly: "In doing metalinguistic commentary, for example "What I was trying to say was …", we can influence and negotiate how an utterance is or should have been heard, or try to modify the values attributed to it". (2004: 4) In fictional texts, metalinguistic commentary occurs in a number of different places (including paratexts, third person narration, first person narration, direct speech) but always with the same purpose of trying to negotiate how an utterance should be heard or valued.

When metalinguistic commentary takes place at a character level (chiefly, first person narration or direct speech) I note in Hodson 2014 that it "almost always serves to tell us about the characters themselves, their attitudes and beliefs. It can provide an insight into the kind of social work the speaker is trying to do, e.g. draw boundaries, and it can suggest how the speaker orientates themselves to the broader community". (2014: 157) Following Landert, however, we can also note that sometimes characters express stance in relation to language variety without any explicit metalanguage: their body language or intonation may be sufficient to indicate their stance. Some examples of this can be seen in the analyses that follow.

When metalinguistic commentary takes place at a narratorial or implied authorial level (chiefly, paratexts and third person narration) I note that it tends to be "primarily descriptive as it has the authority of the omniscient narrator" (2014: 153) and that readers "are not invited to reflect upon why the narrator is making such comments or to consider whether or not the narrator's description is accurate". (2014: 153) As Landert notes, "stance expressed by the narrator is part of the communication between the fictional text and the reader". (2017: 496)

In addition to stancetaking by both linguistic and non-linguistic means at both character and narrator levels, it is also important to recognise that any representation of a non-standard language variety in itself constitutes an act of implicit stancetaking by the narrator or implied author. As Agha writes:

> [...] the use of mis-spelling constitutes an implicit metapragmatic commentary on norms of speech. For, armed with the folk-view that every word has a correct spelling and a correct pronunciation, the reader can only construe defective spelling as an implicit comment on

> defects of pronunciation – implicit, because no-one has actually said that the pronunciation is incorrect. (2003: 237)

Any representation of non-standard speech is thus an act of stancetaking: the writer has chosen to mark the language as non-standard, and by doing so invites the reader to draw inferences about character, intelligence, education, etc. This point is also explored by Jaffe and Walton in their study of how readers perform representations of non-standard voices. They find that:

> Orthographic transcriptions have the added dimension of encoding closeness to or distance from a standard. In fact, orthography is one of the key sites where the very notion of 'standard language' is policed. (2000: 562)

As their study demonstrates, it is not the case that all readers presented with the same piece of non-standard representation will align themselves with it in the same way: two participants in their study adopt quite different stances to the same text. But it is worth noting that Jaffe and Walton were using oral history transcriptions which, in effect, comprised only transcribed direct speech, with its implicit stancetaking, and did not include any other stancetaking at either character or narrator level. By contrast, in novels, any implicit stancetaking via the representation of direct speech will be framed and negotiated by both explicit and implicit metalinguistic commentary at different fictional levels. Taking fictional material as her basis, for example, Suzanne Pickles has demonstrated that readers' interpretation of language variety is reached through a complex interplay of many different factors (2018).

3. Stance in early nineteenth century novels:

In *Miriam* (1800) by Mrs Foster, the eponymous heroine takes a journey in a stagecoach alongside a number of other characters. One of these characters, Miss Davis, is described as: "a female, whose shewy dress and conceited air, whose various gestures and exclamations shewed that she was a person of no little consequence, that is, in her own opinion" (1800: vol 1, 223-4). She attempts to assert her own standing by leading a conversation on reading rooms and literary clubs:

> "Have you read the *Puzzles of Litterhater*?" said Miss Davis, drawing up her head majestically.

> "No, Miss, can't say I have."
>
> The young gentleman looked at Henrietta. She smiled, and turned towards her protector, who, looking at Miriam, smiled also; and this little mistake of Miss Davis's had made four of the party more sociable in a single moment, than otherwise they might have been in a week. (1800: vol 1, 226-7)

This short representation of Miss Davis's speech reveals her to be guilty of hypercorrection: she inserts h into the word 'literature' and in doing so she transforms it into something that sounds like two other words: litter hater. The fact that this is marked on the page in direct speech constitutes an act of implicit stancetaking at the narratorial/implied author level: the reader is invited to notice and draw meaning from the non-standard spelling. When a few sentences later the narrator provides explicit metalanguage by referring to "this little mistake" the assumption is that the reader will have no difficulty in discerning which "little mistake" is being referred to. It is also notable that the hypercorrection is counterpointed with Miss Davis "drawing up her head majestically", inviting the reader to observe the disjunct between her obvious desire to impress and the linguistic shibboleth she has just produced.

In response, the other travellers engage in an act of collective stancetaking through a chain of silent looks and smiles: "The young gentleman looked at Henrietta. She smiled, and turned towards her protector, who, looking at Miriam, smiled also". Nothing is said out loud but everyone in the carriage apart from Miss Davis understands what has just happened. This act of collective stancetaking does important social work: it "made four of the party more sociable in a single moment, than otherwise they might have been in a week". What happens here is what I would term *prescriptive sociability*, where the act of identifying someone else's linguistic "error" becomes the basis on which social relationships are built or reinforced. Further, the reader is also included in this stancetaking: by noting and interpreting the original "little mistake" and tracking the responses within the carriage, the reader is aligned with the linguistic judgement of the other travellers, and in opposition to the oblivious Miss Davis.

It is important to note, however, that not all novels of the period play out in quite this way. In a scene that takes place in *Domestic Scenes* (1820) by Mrs Blair, Sophia has just met a mother and daughter who speak in different accents: the mother speaks with a strong Scots English accent, while her grown-up daughter Margret speaks standard English. The mother explains:

> "Deed , madam, that's just Marget's misfortun, though ye'll may be think I might ha' learnt better wha ha' resided at Orleans ever since the forty-five; but my peur Drumfichen wad na let me sully the purity o' my dialeck aws 'gen I were ashamed o't. He aye tell't me a right true-born Scot's laird's wife sud pride hersel i' the language o' her country aws weel's on aw thing else belonging tull't ."
>
> "I honour the maxim," said Sophia, "and have, indeed, felt half angry at the pains taken by many Scotch ladies to affect our pronunciation, which can never seem natural, in lieu of their own, which I have often admired as graceful and pretty."
>
> "Ah madam! I've no mat wi' mony o' yer countrywomen sae rawtional i' their opeenions; deed! it's the rudeness o' laughing at my language that gars me no to be unka wulling to unclose my lips to strangers--wull ye tak a puckle sneeshing, madam?" opening her snuffbox. (1820: vol. 1, 340-1)

In terms of implicit metalanguage the representation on the page is much more detailed than *Miariam*. As well as extensive respelling, there is also some dialect-specific lexis ("unka", "gars", "puckle" "sneeshing"), as well as grammar ("aws 'gen I were ashamed o't","that gars me not to be unka wulling"). Some of the respellings are potentially humorous ("rawtional" and "opeenions") and if left to stand by themselves as one-offs might have attracted amusements in the same way as Miss Davis's "*Litterhater"*. But set within the context of this much more extensive representation, they are less noticeable, and also do not relate to a well-established shibboleth in the same way.

The implicit metalanguage of the direct speech representation is framed and interpreted by extensive character metalanguage. The Scotswoman explains that it is a matter of identity to use her own language variety, and that it was condoned by her dead husband as an act of national pride. The Englishwoman, Sophia, endorses this position, praising the Scotswoman and criticising "Scotch ladies" who attempt an English pronunciation by comparison. The Scotswoman agrees with Sophia in turn, relating that people laughing at her accent has the effect of silencing her. Between the two of them, the women produce lots of positive evaluative lexis around Scots English: "purity", "graceful and pretty", "rawtional". By contrast, to modify her accent would be to "sully" it and suggest she was "ashamed", and others laughing at it is "rudeness". Again it is notable how the two women bond over their positive stance towards the Scots accent. This might be termed a form of *dialect-endorsing sociability*, and the reader is clearly invited to stand alongside Sophia and the Scotswoman in sharing their stance. Two points are noticeable. First, it is significant that this is Scots English

that is being discussed, with its existing literary-linguistic tradition, and does not follow that the same defence would be applied to other varieties. Second, the author is having to put a lot of scaffolding in place to support this endorsement of Scots English: detailed implicit metalanguage, extensive explicit metalanguage and not just one but two out-groups conjured up in the form of the opposition both to those Scotswomen who modify their accent and standard English speakers who laugh at a Scottish accent. While the passage from *Miriam* demonstrates how light a touch is required to establish a stance of prescriptive sociability with the reader, the passage from *Domestic Scenes* demonstrates that rather more heavy-lifting is required to establish a stance of dialect-endorsing sociability.

Taken together, what these two examples demonstrate is quite how complex the issue of reader stance is, and that also from the early nineteenth century, the question of stance in relation to linguistic variation is not one only of prescriptivism. Despite the different stances they establish, however, both passages use the same basic set of tools: direct speech, evaluative lexis, agreement between characters. Furthermore, both scenes turn on the principle of linguistic authenticity: the Scotswoman is to be admired for choosing to stay true to her own identity, while Miss Davis in the stagecoach is guilty of attempting to be something she is not.

4. Georgette Heyer *The Unknown Ajax*

I turn now to an extended consideration of Georgette Heyer's *The Unknown Ajax* (first published 1959). Georgette Heyer was a prolific and popular novelist who wrote many historical romances, the majority of which which were set during the Regency Period and drew on conventions first established by Jane Austen. In *The Unknown Ajax* Major Hugo Darracott unexpectedly becomes heir to his grandfather's estate. Hugo is the product of a marriage between Lord Darracott's second son and a weaver's daughter, now both deceased. The match was so displeasing to Lord Darracott that he disowned his son and never attempted to meet his grandson, who was brought up by his mother's family in Yorkshire. But the death of Lord Darracott's eldest son and heir forces him to summon the "weaver's brat" to see what can be made of him.

The family's first impressions of Hugo confirm their fears that he is an ill-educated bumpkin: he is physically large, he can be clumsy, his eyes are "well-opened and childishly blue" and he arrives late, spattered in mud. At dinner things take a turn for a worse as Hugo talks about his experience of military accommodation in Europe:

> "After Toulouse I shared quarters with the Smiths in a château, and lived like a prince. That was in France of course. A château," he explained, "is what the Frogs call a castle – though it wasn't a castle, not by any means. You might call it a palace."
>
> "Our ignorance is now enlightened," murmured Vincent.
>
> "We all know what a château is!" snapped Lord Darracott.
>
> "Ay, you would, of course," said Hugo, with a note of apology. "Eh! but I thought myself in clover! I'd never been in such a place before – except when I was in prison, but you can't reetly count that."
>
> James, the first footman, let a fork slide from the plate he had just removed from the table, but Charles, deftly nipping away the plate before Lady Aurelia, maintained his equilibrium. James was shocked, but Charles was storing these revelations up with glee. A rare tale to recount to his Dad, so niffy-naffy as he was about the Quality! Properly served out was old Stiff-Rump, with a jail-bird for his grandson!
>
> *"What?*" thundered his lordship, glaring at his heir. "Do you tell me you have been in *prison*?"
>
> "Ay, but it wasn't for long, sir," replied Hugo. "Of course, I was nobbut a lad then, and it seemed a terrible thing to me. I had the fever too, mortal bad!"(2005: 62-3)

Much of the scene focuses on the reaction of other characters to Hugo's artless blundering, and the family do little to disguise their disdain of him. When Hugo makes the mistake of thinking that the high-bred Darracotts might need "château" translating for them, for example, Vincent responds with irony and Lord Darracott irritation. When Hugo refers to his time in prison his grandfather is enraged. Hugo seems oblivious to their response to him, however, happily expanding on his experiences. A few minutes later, it emerges that the way that he has told the story has misled his family:

> "I collect," said Matthew coldly, "that when you speak of having been imprisoned, and – er – transported – you mean that you were a prisoner of war?"
>
> "Why, what did you think I meant?" asked Hugo, much astonished.
>
> "You must forgive us!" said Vincent, leaning forward to speak to him across Anthea. "The thought that you had been imprisoned for poaching, perhaps, did, I fancy, occur to some of us."

> "Nay! I've always been respectable!" countered Hugo. (2005: 63-4)

The family's understanding of Hugo's imprisonment shifts at this point (being taken prisoner of war is socially acceptable while poaching is not) , but their collective judgement of him remains.

The fact that Hugo's direct speech is consistently if lightly marked with Yorkshire features underpins the depiction of him as not very bright or well educated. He uses a number of strongly enregistered Yorkshire features, including the discourse markers "ay" and "eh", the non-standard negative "nobbut", non-standard intensifiers "reetly" and "mortal", the vocabulary item "lad" and some generic "in clover" and the slangy "frogs" for "French". This is not the subject of explicit metalinguistic commentary in the scene, but like in *Miriam*, the author/narrator assumes that the reader will be able to interpret the representation as indicating that his speech is markedly different from that of his newly acquired family. Hugo's family are expecting to see an ill-educated "weaver's brat", overawed by his unexpected inheritance and willing to dance attendance on the crusty paternal grandfather who holds the family purse-strings. The implicit metalanguage offered by the way in which his speech is represented chimes in with this view.

Some sixty pages later, and after the dinner party, his Uncle Matthew expresses that shared view that "he seems to me little better than a dummy!" (2005: 139) Only his austere Aunt Aurelia offers an alternate perspective:

> "Of the amiability of his disposition even you can have no doubt. I have observed him narrowly, and have been agreeably surprised. He is a man of principle; his temper is equable; his manners perfectly gentlemanlike and unaffected. The only fault I perceive is a tendency to levity, but –"
>
> "*Levity?*" broke in Matthew.
>
> "If it escaped your notice, my dear sir, that his atrocious brogue overcame him only when it had been made deplorably plain to him that his family held him in contempt, I can only say that it did not escape mine." (2005: 140)

This interchange presents two entirely different readings of the previous scene, both turning on the question of intentionality. Matthew does not explicitly reference Hugo's accent, but it is not hard to see that he has read it as an unconscious part of Hugo's overall identity as a "dummy". Aunt Aurelia, by contrast, singles out Hugo's "atrocious brogue", situating it as a

conscious response to the hostile attitudes expressed towards him by his family. Across the remainder of the novel it emerges that Aunt Aurelia's reading is the correct one, and the new arrival into the family is a man who was educated at Harrow, pursued a distinguished military career, and has half a million pounds in the bank. His maternal grandfather may have started life as a weaver but rose to be a wealthy industrialist by the time of his death. Hugo's mild manner and Yorkshire accent, combined with what his family believe they know of his upbringing, mislead them (with the exception of Aurelia) to 'read' him the wrong way.

Rather than setting his family to rights, Hugo amuses himself by playing up to his family's prejudices, intensifying his accent and presenting his life-story in a way calculated to be wrongly interpreted. His cousin Anthea realises what he is doing around 200 pages into the novel, and taxes him with disguising the fact that he was educated at Harrow:

> "And why have you told no one that you were there?"
>
> "Well, no one asked me," he replied. "If it comes to that, Claud hasn't told me he was at Eton!"
>
> "No, but he hasn't done his best to make you think he was educated at a charity school!"
>
> "Now, what have I ever said –"
>
> "Hugo, you deliberately tried to talk like your groom! They *cannot* have allowed you to do so at Harrow!"
>
> He smiled. "No, but I was very broad in my speech before I went there, and I had it in my ears in the holidays, so that I've never really lost it." (2005: 192)

Like Aunt Aurelia, Anthea immediately identifies accent as a key means of Hugo's deception. It is worth noting the logic of her argument here: if you speak Standard English like Claud then you do not need to explain your education; if you speak Yorkshire English like Hugo, then you are guilty of deception unless you explicitly tell people you went to Harrow. As Hugo explains to his grandfather towards the end of the novel "when I saw how there wasn't one amongst you that didn't believe I'd been reared in a hovel I could no more resist trying how much I could make you swallow than I could stop drawing breath". (2005: 242) In effect, Hugo has weaponised the Darracotts' snobbish stance-taking about non-standard language against them: where normally their appraisal of accent leads to a

judgement of character, Hugo has reversed the process by using his accent performance to nudge them into taking up the stance that he is attempting to induce.

There are in fact two audiences for Hugo's misleading accent, because just as Hugo attempts to trick his family into misreading him, so too, I would argue, does Heyer attempt to trick her readers, first inviting them to align with the Darracotts in adopting a stance of prescriptive sociability, and then inviting them to switch to switch allegiances to Hugo and adopt a stance of dialect-endorsing sociability. I suspect that the point at which the reader becomes aware of quite how different Hugo is from the initial presentation of the character will differ for different readers. Personally, I was aware from early on that the demands of the romance genre, of which Hugo was clearly set up to be the male lead, demanded that there must be more to him that initially met the eye, but like Matthew I couldn't initially see how Aunt Aurelia reached the conclusion that the excruciating first dinner party scene was evidence of Hugo's "levity" and was frankly startled by her perspective. I am put in mind here of Philip Leigh (2011), who argues that dialect representation is a form of confidence game played by the writer on the reader in order to make characters feel "real". He writes that "I believe that the metaphor of the confidence game is useful in formulating discussions about how real literary representation can be and how readers have always been tempted to see dialect representations as the hard edge of realism". (2011: 53) Normally this confidence trick proceeds covertly and without the reader thinking about it too hard: the reader picks up the clues laid down in the text and accepts the character as 'real'. Heyer disrupts the trick and shows the reader how it works.

If you read the key scenes very carefully, there are lots of ways in which Heyer invites the reader to align with the Darracott's misreading of Hugh. Right from the first moments of Hugo's late arrival, for example, Heyer creates a scene which can be read two entirely different ways:.

> "I am a trifle late," acknowledged the culprit. "I'm sorry for it, but I missed the way, and that delayed me."
>
> […]
>
> Considerably unnerved by his reception, the Major took an unwary step forward, and very nearly fell over an unnoticed stool in his path. Vincent said, in Richmond's ear, not quite under his breath: "*The lubber Ajax*!"

> If the major heard him, he gave no sign of having done so. Matthew caught the words, and uttered a short laugh, which he changed, not very convincingly into a cough.
>
> […]
>
> "Nay!" protested the Major. "Don't call me sir! I'd as lief you didn't call me Cousin Hugh either." (2005: 53)

There are two ways of reading "he gave no sign of having done so": in one, we are aligned with the family and confident of our ability to read people correctly. If Hugo does not appear to have heard the comment, then we assume he did not do so. Re-reading the passage, however, we can assume that Hugo heard the comment perfectly clearly, and indeed that he presumably also heard Matthew's "short laugh". Although it goes completely unregistered at a surface level in the text, this is the moment where he switches tactics from making himself agreeable to trying to see how much of a "*lubber Ajax*" performance he can make them swallow. Linguistically, Hugo's first sentence quoted above is from before the level of insult has become apparent and it is in Standard English, but in his second sentence at the end of the passage he's started to drop Yorkshire features with "nay" and "lief". For readers, attention will be drawn to the non-standardness of his second utterance, but they are unlikely to contrast it with the Standard English of Hugo's first utterance and identify the shift. The absence of any explicit narratorial metalanguage to highlight either the shift of the reason behind it throws the reader onto their own interpretation, and default is towards reading non-standard as inferior. Hence one very available reading of the scene is to find, like the Darracotts, that Hugo is clumsy, uneducated and not very bright. The alternative reading that Hugo is by far the smartest person in the room and is exploiting his ability to linguistically code-switch in order to play a trick on the Darracotts is not explicitly marked for the reader.

Re-reading the earlier quoted passage about the chateau and prison, it is possible to see how the misdirection is managed here too. Crucially, Hugo is only observed from the outside at moments when he is trying to make his family "swallow" a misreading. At no point does the reader get any indication that Hugo is noticing or taking offence at the rudeness of his family towards him, let alone that he is hamming his accent up as a response. As a result, it is easy to adopt the default reading which is that he is speaking in this way because this is his natural voice. This absence of interiority is disguised in two ways: first, because the novel continually switches its point of focalisation, sometimes providing Hugo's perspective and sometimes that of other characters, readers are unlikely to notice the absence of Hugo's

perspective during these moments of conflict; they will have been lulled into believing that they have access to any significant interior thoughts, and do not suspect that a significant chunk of his thought processes is being kept hidden. Secondly, there are some instances of what appear to be insights into his mental state. During the dinner party scene, for example, he speaks "with a note of apology" after translating "chateau", and is "much astonished" to find that his family suspected him of poaching. Closer inspection of these moments, reveals that they are not narratorial insights into his actual state of mind, but rather reports on how his family are interpreting his reactions: they hear the "note of the apology" and think he looks "much astonished". As readers we are aligned with his family at such moments, witnessing his "*lubber Ajax"* performance from the outside and adopting a position of prescriptive sociability, rather than gaining any insight into his actual thought processes.

Given how badly the Darracotts are behaving towards the guest, the fact that the reader is apparently being invited to align with their prescriptive sociability might give pause for thought. Heyer offsets this, however, by also briefly dropping us into the perspective of the footmen and allowing us to hear his thought through free indirect discourse:

> James, the first footman, let a fork slide from the plate he had just removed from the table, but Charles, deftly nipping away the plate before Lady Aurelia, maintained his equilibrium. James was shocked, but Charles was storing these revelations up with glee. A rare tale to recount to his Dad, so niffy-naffy as he was about the Quality! Properly served out was old Stiff-Rump, with a jail-bird for his grandson! (62-3)

The Darracotts may be snobs who are unfairly judging Hugo, but this moment serves to remind us that they are also horrified by what they find: the family inheritance is about to pass into the hands of the "*lubber Ajax"*. The reader is thus invited to align themselves with the watching servants, and take pleasure in seeing them get their comeuppance.

Towards the end of the novel, after the switch to dialect-endorsing sociability is complete, readers are given the opportunity to see the same narratorial sleight of hand from the inside. This time, Hugo is colluding with his family in order to distract the local exciseman, Lieutenant Ottershaw, who has caught Hugo's young cousin, Richmond, smuggling and is determined to bring him to justice. Richmond was shot during the encounter but escaped. Hugo masterminds the encounter in an attempt to make it appear that Richmond is merely drunk. The extended scene comes to a head when Ottershaw looks directly into Hugo's eyes and attempts to discern the truth of the situation:

> Hugo nodded, and looked at Ottershaw. "Well, lad, you've had your wish, and kicked up a rare scrow-row into the bargain, but happen it's time you took your leave now," he said, not unkindly, but with a certain authority in his deep voice.
>
> The Lieutenant stared up into his face, his eyes hard and searching, his lips tightly compressed. For several moments he did not speak: to the Darracotts the moments seemed hours. The Sergeant cleared his throat and moved towards the door, but Ottershaw paid no heed. He could read nothing in Hugo's calm face but slight amusement, nor did those very blue eyes waver. Could any man appear so totally unconcerned unless he was as innocent as the Major looked? Some, perhaps, but this enormous, simple creature – Nothing could have been clumsier than his efforts to keep Richmond's mother and grandfather in ignorance of his condition; his naïve attempts at deception had been the blunderings of the big, good-natured, stupid man he appeared to be. But was he? There was no subtlety in his face, as there was in Vincent Darracott's; his eyes were sometimes grave and sometimes twinkling, but they were the eyes of a child: they gazed innocently upon the world, there was no thought behind them. (2005: 322)

This time all readers will understand that Hugo is the most competent, intelligent, and subtle member of the Darracott family, and can watch the confidence trick play out. As with the early dinner party scene, Heyer provides access not to Hugo's thought processes but to those of the person he is misleading: in this case, Ottershaw. Hugo's speech is described as having "a certain authority" but again he has larded it with Yorkshire features: "lad", "scrow-row", Happen". The narrative tracks Ottershaw's thought processes as he assesses Hugo, switching from indirect thought ("he could read nothing") into free indirect thought for the rest of the paragraph ("Could any man appear so totally unconcerned […]?"). The reader watches as Ottershaw weighs his own deep suspicions against the evidence of Hugo's appearance and manner before reaching the conclusion that "his eyes […] were the eyes of a child […] there was no thought behind them". As with his family earlier, Hugo allows Ottershaw's own prejudices to lead him to exactly the wrong conclusion.

In many ways, rather like Leigh's argument that Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man* is a novel "obsessed with what authors can and cannot make readers believe" (2011: 42), Heyer's novel is an exercise in thinking through how characters are created on the page, and the role that non-standard language plays as a part of that. Just like Ottershaw reads Hugo by

considering the evidence presented in front of him in light of his own knowledge of the world, so the reader's perception of Hugo at the outset of the novel is created by an interplay of what is presented on the page and pre-existing understanding of the world. But unlike Ottershaw, who is a textual construct perceiving and thinking within the fictional world created by Heyer, the reader exists within the real world and may draw on a range of different experiences in order to interpret the character of Hugo Darracott.

In many ways, of course, there is no excuse for my initial mis-reading of Hugo. I have lived in Yorkshire for over twenty years, during which time I've met a wide range of people with Yorkshire accents. Indeed, among my immediate circle of friends I can think of at least one large-framed, blue-eyed, good-natured Yorkshireman who is very far from being "a dummy" (he's an architect). But meeting a character on the pages of a novel is not like meeting someone in real life. When reading literature, I draw on my own personal experience in the real world, but I also draw heavily upon my cultural knowledge and the literary conventions I am accustomed to. Norman Blake has observed that historically dialect speech was often assigned to minor characters and was used to "signal comedy,because the serious matters will be handled by the major characters" (1981:3) while Michael Toolan has noted that there is "an inbuilt bias against treating dialect-speaking characters as worthy of the most serious respect" (1992: 34) Furthermore, I first encountered *The Unknown Ajax* relatively early in my Heyer-reading phase when I still thought of her as a hack writer of Jane Austen knock-offs, without recognising what a sophisticated prose stylist she is in her own right. As a recent collection of essays dedicated to her work (Wilkins and Rayner 2021) lays out, however, Heyer was very much a popular genre writer, but she enjoyed playing with the conventions of the genres within which she was working (see, for example, Perriam's chapter for a discussion of Heyer's subversion of "the stereotype of the masculine hero" in *Cotillion* (36), or Sherwood's chapter for a discussion of the ways in which Heywood uses metafiction "to participate in critical and cultural debates surrounding historical romance" in *Sylvester, or the Wicked Uncle* (76)). *The Unknown Ajax* is the only one of her novels where she turns her attention so explicitly to conventions of dialect representation, but it is part of a much broader pattern of genre experimentation within her works.

There remains the question of whether it is possible to discern where Heyer's own sympathies lie and whether there is any deeper linguistic-ideological purpose to her narrative games in *The Unknown Ajax*. Heyer's representation of dialect and dialect-speaking characters is certainly sympathetic throughout the novel: aside from her treatment of Hugo's

playful style-shifting, it is also worth noting her positive representation of Hugo's loyal dialect-speaking groom Joseph, Hugo's respectful memories of his dialect-speaking grandfather, and the fact that Hugo himself continues to use dialect affectionately when speaking to his romantic interest Anthea, even after his true social standing has been revealed. Nevertheless, I would argue against reading the novel as a radical statement of linguistic solidarity with the working classes. Studies in perceptual dialectology have long established that people typically assign positive qualities of warmth and trustworthiness to speakers of non-standard Englishes, even as they also assign positive qualities of intelligence and competence to speakers of Standard English (see for example Zahn and Hopper 1985). *The Unknown Ajax* arguably unsettles this a little by presenting Hugo – an authentic speaker of both Yorkshire English and Standard English – as capable of being simultaneously warm, trustworthy, intelligent and competent, but the novel does not fundamentally undercut the prestige of Standard English. As such I would argue that it is appropriate to place *Unknown Ajax* in a tradition of dialect-affirming sociability in novels that date back to at least *Domestic Scenes,* inviting readers to rethink some of their prejudices and recognise the value of dialect speech, without fundamentally challenging the preeminence of the standard language.

4. Conclusion:

In this article I started from Agha's observation about the ways in which fiction "invite[s] forms of role alignment on the part of the reader" and used the linguistic concept of stance to explore some of the ways in which this plays out. Through close-reading passages from three novels I have argued that role alignment for readers of fiction depends upon a complex interplay of factors, including the implicit metalanguage of dialect features in direct speech representation, explicit metalanguage at both character and narratorial level, and fictional features in terms of focalisation, as well as the real world experience and genre expectations that readers bring to the text.

I have also demonstrated that there are at least two strands in relation to the treatment of non-standard speaking characters in British fiction: a dominant prescriptive one and a more covert dialect-endorsing one. What *The Unknown Ajax* demonstrates is that both stances are available to readers: in the absence of other clues, readers may more naturally incline towards a prescriptive stance, but the alternative dialect-endorsing stance can be activated retrospectively, and indeed it can be a source of considerable pleasure to the reader to re-

orientate themselves to a reading where Hugo is misleading his family. At the same time, however, it is important not to overstate the case for this dialect-endorsing strand. *Domestic Scenes* was written in 1820 and *The Unknown Ajax* in 1959, yet prescriptivist attitudes remain dominant in society at large. These textual moments do not necessarily undermine the edifice as a whole: it is in the nature of stereotypes and ideologies that they are both internally inconsistent and resilient to the occasional counter-example or challenge. Yet what paying attention to stance in this way demonstrates is that attitudes which may seem monolithic have always included counter-currents and eddies, moments of exception and resistance.

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