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Writing dialect fiction

Abstract:
Currently there are only two leading definitions of dialect writing: literary dialect and dialect literature (Honeybone et al., 2022, pp. 4–5). These speak to where dialect appears in a narrative, but not how dialect styles are created, how they can be used in creative practice or the effect this has as a literary form. This paper establishes and defines three new styles for creating written dialect – phonetic dialect, syntactic dialect and lexical dialect – before considering how these styles can be used in the creative practice of writing dialect fiction. Examples of this creative practice will be explored through analysis of two novel manuscripts, as well as existing published work that uses dialect. Though this paper focuses on regional dialects from the North of England, the practice and analysis detailed here is applicable to dialects of any country or region.

Biographical note:
Jen Bowden is an academic, writer, journalist, editor, podcaster and event moderator based in Perth. Originally from North-East England, her journalism has been published in a wide variety of UK publications including *The Guardian*, *The Scotsman*, *The Bookseller* and *The List*. She is a regular reviewer for *Westerly* magazine and has previously worked for Fremantle Press as well as a number of UK publishing houses including Hachette. She now works as a freelance editor and publishing consultant, and teaches publishing, creative writing and journalism at Curtin University. She has a PhD in creative writing, exploring biases against Northern dialect and fiction in the UK book industry.

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Introduction

In his article "Resetting Literature through Language", Brian Boyd explains that "literature obviously depends on language, as well as much else, and the study of literature has often drawn on the study of language" (2020, p. 139). Literature's dependence on language isn't just apparent when studying narrative; it is also integral to our understanding of creating narrative.

The significance of language is not just apparent in literature, but in all aspects of life and culture as "language alone operates by instructing receivers about experience, real or imagined, that they may have no current access to" (Boyd, 2020, p. 140). Though the noise made when speaking language is transient, the choice of words and the meaning gleaned from these words by the receiver endures.

The sound made when communicating (speaking) a certain word or phrase in a particular language varies drastically between countries, regions, towns and even families. This sound is known as accent. According to linguist Rob Drummond, "accent [is] the way in which someone pronounces the sounds of spoken language. Unlike dialect, which relates also to words and grammar" (2023, p. 225). In the United Kingdom, someone with an "accent" pronounces English words in a way that is a variation on the perceived national "standard" of Received Pronunciation (RP). Few realise that Received Pronunciation itself is an accent, but its profile and prestige mean it is viewed as the national "standard" of spoken English.

Dialect is "a variety of language that is associated with a particular group of people or a particular geographic region. It includes words, grammar and pronunciation (accent)" (Drummond, 2023, p. 226). Given that Drummond's definition of dialect progresses beyond the spoken form of accent and also focuses on "words" and "grammar", this definition will be used to refer to written variations of the perceived national standard of written English, known as Standard English. This is not to say that dialect is not also a spoken form, as the inclusion of "pronunciation (accent)" shows, but rather that dialect encompasses more than just pronunciation and production of sound, and extends into language choice, sentence structure and punctuation in both written and spoken forms.

For the purposes of this paper, the definition of dialect will follow Drummond's definition above. It is worth noting, however, that the distinction between dialect and language is often blurred. The most obvious example of this linguistic grey area comes in exploring Scots, the Scottish variant of English. From some perspectives, Scots is considered a dialect of English, a variation on the national standard of the UK. From other perspectives, it is considered a national language in its own right. Scottish author James Kelman has spoken frequently about Scots as a language, rather than a dialect of English, and has often drawn a clear distinction between Scots language and English language. He says:

> in what you could call "the standard literary form", the Scottish voice would always be in dialogue and never form a nationality in itself. That's a crucial problem, and it doesn't only apply to contemporary Scottish literature … where again there is this

> opposition to or subversion of the Standard English literary form by people who have had the imperial language thrust upon them. To come to terms with it, to make use of it, they try to inform this language with the rhythms and some of the structures of their indigenous language, to make their own English [sic] in that way. (Toremans, 2003)

His distinction here between the "imperial language" of English and the "indigenous language" of the Scots highlights the tension between the two linguistic forms. However, it is worth noting here that this view of Scots as a language rather than a dialect is tied up in the long and tumultuous history between the two countries, where England is the colonial power politically, socially and culturally. Perhaps this is why, being viewed through a non-Scottish critical lens, Kelman's work is often referred to as dialect writing by those outside of Scotland, showing how "dialect" as a term can be used to diminish Scots to a variant of the colonially dominant language of English.

There is a distinct focus in written work – particularly fiction – on writing in a "standard" style. As previously noted, in the UK this style is Standard English: the written form of English that is dominant in published material. It is often assumed Received Pronunciation is the spoken form of Standard English – the national, standard way of speaking – due to its prevalence and prestige as an accent. Therefore, as the perceived national "standard", these two forms of communication are expected to be present in anything distributed nationally or internationally. Anything that deviates from these styles is considered lesser. This cultural and linguistic hierarchy is only perceived, not actual, because "dialects are not debased or incorrect versions of 'Standard English'" (Russell, 2004, p. 112), they are simply variants of a language. Boyd notes how

> Communicating through language is never simply a case of transferring message content … Nor is it even a case of packing down experience into a flat pack that the receiver unpacks and assembles according to explicit instructions that come bundled with it. Instead the sender constructs a message by choosing, from what language offers, whatever will lose least of the experience (or invention, generalization, or supposition …) and its hoped-for effect. Receivers understand the utterance by taking what they have heard and give life to each element, word by word, following the implied protocol, the rules of communication, in the light of their own experience. (2020, p. 142)

Understanding language involves both the speaker/writer and receiver/reader, and in this way language becomes the tool through which literature – and by extension the people and experiences present in literature – is constructed. Writers make a conscious choice to use certain words and phrases when creating a work of fiction, and ultimately do the same when writing in dialect. Yet there is little guidance when it comes to the creative practice of writing dialect. This paper seeks to address this issue, exploring how dialect can be used effectively in writing and literature.

Given that there will be discussion of a variety of ways of constructing dialect in this paper, for the sake of clarity and focus on technique, only one dialect style will be used as an example – Northern English. Though Northern English encompasses a broad range of dialects, most

have similarities that will enable focus on the different ways of creating written representations of these words. However, the theories and practices presented here are applicable within a global context. There are numerous examples of the wide variety of dialects in fiction present in award-winning and renowned published books, and no doubt countless more in published or unpublished works that have not gained as much recognition. Marlon James's novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014) is written in English using Jamaican Patois, *The Sellout* by Paul Beatty (2016) uses African American Vernacular English (AAVE) dialect, and *Prophet Song* by Paul Lynch (2024) uses syntax to create Irish dialect. There are countless examples in the Scottish canon including the bestselling novel *Trainspotting* by Irvine Welsh and Kelman's own Booker-winning novel, *How Late It Was, How Late*. There are even works using Australian Bogan dialect, such as Ander Louis's self-published work, *War & Peace: A Bogan Translation* (2019). Unfortunately, there isn't enough space to consider each of these dialects in the depth that they deserve here, hence the focus on the creative practice of writing Northern English dialect, specifically the dialect of the Durham mining villages in the coalfields called "Pitmatic".

This paper will explore the initial practice of writing a novel using Pitmatic dialect before outlining the current definitions of dialect writing and their limitations. It will then go on to offer three new definitions of written dialect styles – phonetic dialect, syntactic dialect and lexical dialect – using examples from published literature. Finally, this paper will outline how these styles were and can be applied in creative practice to produce a work of dialect fiction. Though the discussion here focuses on contemporary UK fiction, the same considerations can be applied to non-fiction, poetry and other written forms, and to any country or language where variations on a perceived "standard" language are present.

Instruction on writing dialect fiction – or the lack thereof

When I began writing my first dialect novel in 2015, I'd had no formal training in creative writing and had never attempted a work of long fiction or any work using dialect. During my undergraduate degree in English and Scottish Literature at Edinburgh University, I had been introduced to Scots dialect writers – among them Irvine Welsh, Tom Leonard and James Kelman. The latter had a profound impact on me as a reader. Kelman's books were the only representation of working-class people (like me) that I'd ever seen in literature. I'd certainly never seen any Northern English working-class characters or settings there, so I decided to write my own novel using North East dialect, my dialect, Pitmatic.

My creative practice at the time was influenced by reading and simplistic analysis of how these writers created dialect – most of them using phonetic spelling. I didn't look for guidance on writing dialect from textbooks; instead, I consulted dictionaries and other books about Pitmatic, such as Bill Griffith's *Pitmatic: Talk of the North East Coalfield* (2007) and *A Dictionary of North East Dialect* (2005). As I began writing, I also whispered words and sentences out loud and tried to replicate them phonetically on the page. There are no other processes that I can describe here that developed that written dialect. As with any writing style, the longer I spent

on the project and the more my writing skills developed as a whole, the more that voice developed, but it was mostly down to trial and error.

After many drafts and many years, I began submitting that novel to agents and publishers. I received one rejection (among many) that suggested the only way I'd get the novel published was to make the dialect milder. At that point, if it had been any milder it would have been non-existent (though perhaps that was their hope), so I instead chose to do the opposite.

This rejection instigated my PhD in creative writing at Curtin University, where my research explored whether the presence of Northern dialect in a work of contemporary UK fiction would affect the manuscript's chances of publication (spoiler alert: it does). Creative practice was a large component of my research in terms of writing in Pitmatic dialect and thinking about how and where that appeared on the page. As my PhD got underway, I read more fiction that included dialect, whether mild and barely visible as occasional words and phrases, or presented obviously and phonetically.

I suspect that had I explored creative writing textbooks I would have found very little instruction on how to create written dialect. Even now, ten years on from beginning that first novel manuscript, and with a plethora of other dialect writers published, winning awards and selling multiple copies, there is little in the way of instruction on the creative practice of writing dialect – only that you don't do it, or if you really have to, then do it well. Yet, no one explains *how* to do it well.

One example of this lack of instruction is Janet Burroway's book *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, a textbook I use when teaching creative writing at university level. Burroway says, "Vernacular is a tempting, and sometimes excellent, means of characterising but it is difficult to do well and easy to overdo" (Burroway, 2019). She goes on to say, "There is no point in spelling phonetically any word as it is ordinarily pronounced" and offers an alternative in claiming "dialect, regionality and childhood are best communicated by word choice and syntax" (Burroway, 2019). At no point does Burroway offer instruction on how to create dialect: either phonetically, through word choice or syntax. It is left up to the reader or those teaching this book to provide examples and give a how-to, which is unlikely to occur unless, like me, this is a particular area of interest for the teacher/writer. Burroway also offers no definitions of what she means by dialect that is written phonetically, or through word choice and syntax.

My PhD research into dialect writing styles found only the definitions – literary dialect and dialect literature – from Honeybone and Maguire (2022), which are detailed in the following section. In lieu of more nuanced definitions that could be of benefit in the creative practice as well as analysis of dialect writing, I devised my own. Analysis into written dialect present in other published works and researching written dialect styles identified three clear categories: phonetic dialect, syntactic dialect and lexical dialect (Burroway's "word choice").

The following section will outline the definitions of dialect writing as created by Honeybone and Maguire as the foundation on which the defined written dialect styles present in the subsequent section are built.

Current definitions of dialect writing

In order to understand how to create written dialect, we first need to understand existing definitions of dialect writing. The predominant definitions come from Honeybone and Maguire, who form their definition of dialect writing based on *where* in a piece of text dialect appears. They say that "the defining characteristic of dialect writing is that it intends to represent a non-standard dialect in written form, at least to some degree and in some portion of a text" (3). Seemingly the size of that "portion" has no impact on the definition of the work as dialect writing; there is no minimum quota. However, the location of that dialect in a text – whether in dialogue or exposition – forms a major part of this definition.

There are, according to Honeybone and Maguire, two dominant forms of dialect writing – literary dialect and dialect literature. Literary dialect

> refers to the kind of dialect writing that exists in texts which have non-standard forms only in direct speech (for example, in dialogue), with the surrounding text in Standard English, and which are intended for a wide, general audience of readers in English (and which we might expect to be published by national publishers and to be sold throughout the English-speaking world). (2022, pp. 4–5)

Whereas dialect literature

> refers to the kind of dialect writing that exists in texts which use non-standard forms throughout the text, where the text is intended for an audience of speakers of the dialect represented (and which we may therefore expect to be produced and principally available in the area where the dialect is spoken). (2022, p. 5)

Notably, these definitions don't explore how dialect is presented on the page. It is worth noting that Honeybone and Maguire include publishing expectations for both types of dialect writing – who might publish them and who the intended audience might be – yet not how to create dialect. This assumption is simplistic, perhaps evidencing a general perception or stereotype in the publishing industry of where and how dialect should appear in literature.

These publishing and audience assumptions are, however, contradicted by the existence of numerous works of dialect literature that have been "published by national publishers and sold throughout the English-speaking world". One example of this is the novel *Trainspotting* by Irvine Welsh. This book would be considered dialect literature by the above definition because it uses a working-class Edinburgh dialect throughout the narrative, including in the exposition.

Dialect is present from the opening lines: "The sweat was lashing oafay Sick Boy; he wis trembling. Ah wis jist sitting thair, focusing oan the telly, tryin no tae notice the cunt" (1999, p. 3). Dialect is presented by strong phonetic spelling, though it is worth noting that presence

of words with "standard" spelling such as "focusing" and "notice" is likely due to the fact that they are the same in both dialects rather than due to a desire to adhere to the "standard".

Trainspotting was first published by Secker and Warburg (now Harvill Secker) in 1993, has sold millions of copies internationally and been made into a successful feature film, reaching just a little further than the "audience of speakers of the dialect represented" (p. 5) defined by Honeybone and Maguire.

Similarly, Kelman's 1994 novel, *How Late It Was, How Late*, uses Glaswegian working-class dialect in a milder phonetic style than Welsh's: "Ye wake in a corner and stay there hoping yer body will disappear, the thoughts smothering ye; these thoughts" (1998, p. 1). The effect in both novels provides a unique "voice" of the narrator, one that represents their identity and spoken speech in a way that Standard English cannot.

Coincidentally, Kelman's novel was also first published by Secker and Warburg and went on to be the first novel by a Scottish author to win the Booker Prize. Again, it went beyond the parochial expectations for dialect literature laid out by Honeybone and Maguire.

It is possible that so little information about writing dialect exists because, as Susan Mandala suggests, "dialect representation involves two often incompatible goals, the need to create a convincing voice for the characters, and the need to maintain wider comprehensibility" (Mandala, 2012, p. 180). As previously noted, it could be because dialect is seen as a lesser form of Standard English and therefore not worth of literary representation. Joseph Borillo says that

> If an author takes the trouble of deviating from the standard, they must do so for good reason. The most immediate reason that comes to mind is realism: a given voice is assigned non-standard features in order to imitate the way people from a similar geographic location or social background speak in the real world. But matters are often not that simple. Powerful as the mimetic urge may be, it soon bumps against the limits imposed by literary convention, which totally decrees that using non-standard language entails not faithfully transcribing all details and nuances of a given speech form but rather selecting a number of representative features. In literary terms, then, the emphasis cannot be on realism but on the added, symbolic meaning acquired by non-standard language, which links it to aspects of characterisation, setting, plot or theme. (Montini et al., 2021, p. 48)

Rather than the author choosing to deviate "for good reason", which implies they have not done so of their own volition and must justify that seemingly unconscious choice, they have done so *with* good reason – they have made a conscious, personal choice. With this in mind, that "symbolic meaning" mentioned by Borillo is incredibly important. It is a deliberate choice on the part of the author to use a certain dialect style to represent a certain kind of person. Therefore, simply reducing the understanding of the creative practice and analysis of written dialect to *where* dialect occurs without exploring *how* the dialect occurs limits both the

understanding of a text and the creative practice of writing in dialect. These limitations are what the following section seeks to address by defining written dialect styles.

Defining written dialect styles

This section will categorise the different styles of dialect writing that could appear in written form. As noted previously, the existing definitions of dialect writing only explore where authors might use dialect, but the logical next step is to define how written dialect is presented on the page in either of those locations. Although this is not a definitive guide, the aim is that this contribution will enhance the understanding of both the creative practice and analysis of writing dialect in literature. Although three styles of writing dialect have been defined here, it is important to note that in the creation of written dialect, any combination of these styles can be used.

Spoken accents and dialects in the UK are often categorised under broad ethnonyms – such as Cockney, Geordie, Scouse and Pitmatic – despite the wide variety within each. Similarly, written dialect styles can also only be broadly categorised because each author has their own unique way of writing dialect that puts forward a distinctive representation of character, place and experience. But even broadly defining the tools that authors use to create written dialect can assist in exploring why they chose this particular mode of representation and the effect it may have. The three types of dialect defined and outlined here will be phonetic dialect, syntactic dialect and lexical dialect.

Phonetic dialect

In phonetic dialect, authors use elisions, punctuation and spelling to create a phonetic representation of certain speech patterns on the page; it is written how someone might speak. Authors such as Charles Dickens, D.H. Lawrence and Thomas Hardy were known to use phonetic dialect in dialogue (literary dialect), and contemporary Northern English writers such as James Walton and Shaun Wilson use it to create entire narratives (dialect literature). Walton's novella, *Every neet o' week*, begins:

> Rottin' urban decay, industrial fallout, smearin' grey clouds hover alone int' sky: this is stereotypical ov a town int' north ov England. Plywood is main stay o'town; former public 'ouses, cafés an' family-owned businesses are no longer in operation within this deprived area. (2023, p. 11)

Walton uses phonetic dialect and includes apostrophes to denote elisions (missing sounds/letters) from words, but Shaun Wilson in *The Legion* does not:

> A went back te the bar an Dad was there, standen at the hatch, an a telt him what a'd just seen, about Carla sitten on Tommy's knee. He gars, What ye gonna dee aboot it? An a gars, What de ye mean? An he gars, Ye've just split up. He's showen ye nee respect whatsoever. (Wilson, 2024, n.p.)

Here, apostrophes are only used to denote contractions. Wilson's phonetic style is wildly different to Walton's despite them both writing dialect from the North of England, highlighting the vast individuality of dialect styles. A consistent representation of a particular dialect would be pointless, as it would render that style another "standard". Although phonetic dialect is often used to give a stronger representation of dialect in writing, it does raise questions of accessibility and readability.

Syntactic dialect

In syntactic dialect, authors use syntax, grammar and punctuation to represent dialect on the page. Sentence structure and word structure as per the rules of the standard language (in this case English) are mostly retained, but "non-standard" grammar and punctuation is used, often in conjunction with elements of phonetic dialect or lexical dialect styles. Minimal elisions are used. This dialogue in Ajay Close's novel *What Doesn't Kill Us* exemplifies this: "'I know you think it were me he wanted to kill—' … 'Were it?' Liz asked" (374). The use of the non-standard tense of "were" instead of "was" in the dialogue of both characters gives the effect of a Northern English (Yorkshire) accent without the need for elisions that would create a phonetic representation.

Andrew McMillan uses syntactic dialect in his novel *Pity*, where non-standard sentence structure and punctuation represent a written Northern English (Barnsley in Yorkshire) dialect. McMillan uses this less obviously than Close – his presentation of this dialect style is hardly perceptible. When considering the following example from *Pity*, it would be pertinent to remember Honeybone and Maguire's comment that to constitute dialect literature or literary dialect, this only has to appear in "some portion" of the text. For example

> that guy who was here with Simon, honestly, proper barged me as he left, and then Simon, he's always been alright with me since I started, always thought he probably fancied me like. What? Don't look at me like that, I'm sure he fancied you n'all, but he just waltzes on past like he's Queen of Sheba, did you see him though when Simon was on stage, just sitting at the back like … (2024, p. 73)

The grammatically non-standard use of words and phrases such as "like" and omitting "the" in "like he's Queen of Sheba" give the effect of a Yorkshire dialect on the page without the need for strong phonetic representation. Here McMillan also uses phonetic dialect in "n'all" (meaning "as well").

The potential for misunderstanding on the part of the reader is prevalent with this style. It could be that the dialect is missed entirely as the brain fills in the blanks while the reader is reading, or lead to an assumption that the author has made an error. Close discussed this issue directly with her book's publisher, Sara Hunt at Saraband, to find a balance between syntactic representation of dialect in the novel and clarity for the reader:

> The draft I submitted to Sara didn't have apostrophes and we had a conversation about it. I said "okay" to using the apostrophes. I didn't want apostrophes all over the place

> because that can be as off putting to the eye as not using them. What I really wanted to avoid was the reader coming across something and thinking that it's a misprint, because that's when it takes them out of the world of the book into their head. That became my main guide as to what was apostrophised and what wasn't. (Close, 2023)

Close made a conscious, considered decision about how to represent written dialect in her novel in a syntactic style. If this level of thought and consideration is put into the work during creation, then it would be remiss not to offer the same level of attention to it during analysis or creative practice instruction.

Lexical dialect

In lexical dialect, the standard language is used along with mostly standard grammar and syntax, but colloquial words replace standard words in some sentences and phrases to present a particular dialect. An example of this is *Pig Iron* by Benjamin Myers, which also uses Pitmatic dialect: "It's funny though because just over a month ago, and five year before that, I was on the inside looking out … I'd have done owt for a few breaths of good clean fresh air, and now I've got bloody hods of it I still don't feel free" (2019, p. 2).

Although most of the narrative is written in Standard English with standard grammar, spelling and punctuation, colloquial words such as "owt" (anything) and "hods" (lots) indicate the Pitmatic dialect of the narrator. The use of "five year before" instead of "five years before" is another speech pattern particular to Pitmatic dialect, though is more in line with syntactic dialect style. The effectiveness of this style is apparent; these small, simple words work with setting and characterisation to immediately make it clear that the narrator isn't speaking in Received Pronunciation and is from a particular area with a particular dialect.

In some examples of fiction using lexical dialect, a glossary was provided, though this tended to be in older texts. Oneworld Publications publisher Juliet Mabey, whose list includes three Booker-winning dialect novels, said:

> Readers seem to cope with difference better. We don't add glossaries. We have in the past but stopped years ago. For accessibility reasons, I do encourage authors to try and make the meaning of an unfamiliar word intelligible from the context on first mention, but it isn't always possible. (2025)

These three dialect styles are not definitive, but they are the most common ways of representing dialect in literature. It is also worth noting that none of these styles are definitively linked to literary dialect or dialect literature. Indeed, any of these styles can be used in either of those contexts.

The following section will consider how these styles can be used in creative practice to construct a work of dialect fiction.

Using dialect styles in practice

The following section will explore the creative practice of writing dialect fiction through the novel manuscript, *Two for Joy*, that formed the creative component of my PhD thesis (2024). Though the dialect style was initially created during the writing of *One for Sorrow* back in 2015 as mentioned earlier in the paper (the first novel in a planned three-part series), the style was honed and defined during the research and writing of *Two for Joy*. As previously mentioned, the process of creating this written dialect was entirely organic and not guided by instruction or previously defined styles.

The creative practice of writing a novel that uses Northern dialect formed the majority of my research into how dialect is created, the effect it has on the reader and the place it has in the wider context of the UK literary industry. According to Graeme Harper,

> the clue to modes and methods of research is that creative writing is action. That is, while we can certainly think about it, creative writing cannot exist without us actually doing something. How we respond before, during and after that doing incorporates what we currently know, and can incorporate what we seek to find out. (Kroll & Harper, 2013)

In this case, creation is research in that the process of writing dialect fiction can contribute to knowledge and understanding of how to construct dialect on a page and analyse other works that use this form. This is precisely what led to the creation of the three definitions given in the previous chapter.

The written dialect style of both *One for Sorrow* and *Two for Joy* used a mix of the three styles defined above; phonetic dialect makes up the largest component, with a much smaller proportion of lexical dialect and a very slight amount of syntactic dialect. Though this weighting was not consciously devised when writing *One for Sorrow*, that initial base style was consciously refined and analysed through the process of writing *Two for Joy* to consider how that written dialect was constructed and what it would represent to the reader.

When refining the dialect style for *Two for Joy* there were a number of decisions to be made in terms of the presentation of the dialect on the page and dialect would appear in the narrative. Two of the dominant influences on the creation of this style were Kelman and Leonard, who comment on the linguistic hierarchy present in much of UK fiction where dialect is kept in dialogue (as per Honeybone and Maguire's definition), othered by speech marks and contains apostrophes to denote elisions. It was decided a glossary would not be included due to the large number of colloquial words present, and instead context was given within the narrative as to the meaning of these words. The decision was made that the dialect in *Two for Joy* would appear predominantly in the dialogue as phonetic dialect (without apostrophes to denote elisions), syntactic dialect and also partly in the exposition as lexical dialect.

The exposition is not written in phonetic dialect but rather in Standard English with occasional Pitmatic words or phrases included (very mild and occasional lexical dialect). Given that

Pitmatic dialect is very specific to a small region and one that is underrepresented in fiction, film and television, that decision to use lexical dialect and Standard English ensures a greater level of accessibility for readers unfamiliar with the dialect or reading dialect fiction, and also improves the commercial potential of the novels given that they are, as yet, unpublished.

The inclusion of minor lexical dialect in the exposition is used to enhance the setting and characterisation in the novel but also to minimise any linguistic hierarchy between dialogue and exposition:

> It took Dan longer than it should have to realise Cristy was shouting to the bairn. Mebbes it had been a mistake to name their Peter after his grandad. More and more Dan sensed his dad's ghost was with them, unfaded and watching, even as the years went on and his death edged further into the past. (2024)

Here the inclusion of "bairn" (child) and "mebbes" (maybe) identifies the character, Dan, as being from Blackton – the fictional pit village where the novel is set. The narrator would also use those words if they were telling the story in the oral tradition that aligns with that region and its storytelling history. This way, the linguistic hierarchy of dialect being confined to dialogue and othered from the superior Standard English narrative is undermined, placing both Pitmatic and Standard English on the same level. In *Two for Joy*, these two linguistic forms are mostly equal, but in certain places Pitmatic rightly dominates.

The decision was also made not to include apostrophes to denote elisions in the dialogue to increase the validity of the dialect and its presence in a work of literary fiction. In my view, a dialect is not a lesser form of Standard English but a language of its own, as many of the Scots writers would undoubtedly argue. However, Pitmatic and other regional dialects are less likely to be formally recognised as languages due to being only regional dialects, unlike Scots which has a national application for a particular country. Elisions imply something is missing or lacking, that this language is 'without' a certain required component that makes it "correct" and valid. But there is nothing missing or lacking and by not using apostrophes for elisions, both Pitmatic and Standard English are both presented as equally valid linguistic forms. As shown here, the only apostrophes used were to denote contractions:

> Well, listen. A've been thinkin about settin up a support group in the village for when the lads come out. Nowt flash, but wa gonna ave people struggling for food an not bein on a wage an that, especially them that have anly just sorted themselves out, like Dan said. A thought wa could help. Raise money n that. (2024)

Apostrophes are used to show contractions in "A've" (I've) but not to denote missing letters in "thinkin", "settin" or "ave" (have). Though some might argue that this makes the language less accessible to the reader, the argument can be made that context – as mentioned by Mabey – goes a long way to ensuring readability and understanding when it comes to phonetic dialect.

This dialect style was used as a means to reject any literary tropes of working-class characters being comedic, secondary or less educated, putting them on a par with characters from other backgrounds and the exposition. McMillan says,

> I wanted to do it in a way that felt serious, I didn't want it to be comedic. That isn't to say it can't be funny, but … I thought, what is it to treat that really seriously and almost not even make a point of it, just explore it in a way that this is authentically how people talk? (McMillan, 2023)

The idea behind rejecting apostrophes for elisions was similar to McMillan's idea to 'not even make a point of it' and attempt to shift focus to what is being said, rather than how it is being said.

Dialect writing away from the page

The practice of writing a novel is not all done with words on a page, and this is even more pertinent when writing dialect, which is based on particular sounds and speech patterns. As well as the refinement of the written form of Pitmatic dialect used in *Two for Joy,* creative research and development of that style was also conducted during conversations about the novel (whether planned or unplanned) and the process of reading drafts aloud – neither of which had been done for *One for Sorrow*. For example, during a conversation with my husband, he asked about the way that people who speak Pitmatic often identify family members or close relatives by using "our" ahead of their name, for example "our Joanne" or "our Steven". It was during this discussion that it occurred to me this very distinctive and prevalent aspect of Pitmatic dialect hadn't been included in *Two for Joy*.

Though this omission was rectified in the next edit of the novel, the situation generated some reflection as to why such an obvious aspect had been missed. It is possible that because it's such a familiar part of my everyday speech, a kind of desensitisation occurred that led to it being overlooked. It could also be because, even when writing from the perspective of a certain character, there is no real familial or emotional connection with their family (their sister, brother, cousin) on the part of the writer that would result in thinking of them as "our Joe", "our Sarah" or "our Daniel". Regardless, this process of conversing in the dialect being written and paying attention to the natural use of it assisted in creating a more authentic written version on the page.

The result was an understanding that reading aloud is a vital component to writing realistic and authentic dialect in fiction. In the following example, the same character uses two different variants of the word "you":

> "Who wa on about?" Joe said.
> "Where've you been the last five minutes?" Aidan scoffed.
> "The bar."
> "A'll let ye off, then," Aidan grumbled. (2024)

In the first bit of dialogue spoken by Aidan, he says “you”, but in the second he says “ye”. When spoken aloud, this is how those bits of dialogue would be said as the emphasis is on different words and syllables. In the first line, the stress is on “you” and so the word is spoken in its “standard” form. In Aidan’s second line of dialogue, the word “you” is written “ye” because the emphasis shifts from ‘you’ to “A’ll” (I’ll) to show Aidan is granting Joe clemency for not having heard the earlier conversation. Therefore “you” is now an unstressed syllable that changes tone from accusatory (you) to inconsequential (ye).

Without speaking this dialogue aloud, it would be difficult to understand how the rhythm and sounds of these words and phrases could be represented as phonetic dialect. This example clearly shows that the creative practice of writing dialect fiction isn’t just conducted in the physical act of writing, but is also formed by discussing, thinking, reading aloud and generating ideas away from the page of the novel manuscript.

One of the aspects taken into consideration when creating the dialect style for *One for Sorrow* and *Two for Joy* was the diversity of dialects in the North of England and how these vary not just from community to community, but also between different families and even individuals in the same family. So while the dialect in these novels came under the umbrella term of Pitmatic, within individual characters there was always a slight variation on how each one used this dialect in order to create an authentic representation of reality. If that dialect was standardised, and every character from that village made to sound the same, then it would be no more representative of the diversity of human life and experience than Standard English.

The objective in creating this dialect form wasn’t to devise a new standard Pitmatic dialect, but to represent that speech pattern in fiction in all of its variable forms. By using the styles defined earlier – phonetic dialect, syntactic dialect, lexical dialect – and considering the creative process of writing a particular dialect, it is clear that writing dialect fiction relies on a little more than just removing letters and words or inserting colloquial phrases. Instead, there is a clear, considered reason behind the stylistic choices made by an author in presenting a certain setting, characterisation and narrative, and having these three defined dialect styles will hopefully assist others in their creative practice.

Conclusion

As discussed at the start of this paper, language is the basis on which all literature is formed. Often, there is an expectation that writers adhere to the standard language of their country, particularly in the UK, as the assumption is that anything that deviates from this standard might not be understood. The positioning of this reasoning as an issue of communication ignores the fact that a nation isn’t made up of one group of people who all speak the same way. Accents and dialects vary across regions, towns and even within individuals and families, yet literary representation of that variety is lacking, likely due to a dearth of creative practice theory and instruction on writing dialect.

The current definitions of dialect writing – literary dialect and dialect literature – do not help us to understand the stylistic choices a writer makes in using dialect in their writing. Rather than looking only at where dialect appears, we also need to consider how it is presented. The three new definitions of dialect styles offered here – phonetic dialect, syntactic dialect and lexical dialect – can contribute to this deeper analysis of literary works and enable those who want to write in dialect to do so with a clear framework through which to make their stylistic decisions. Whether used in combination or on their own, in the context of literary dialect or dialect literature, these definitions enable a more profound understanding of the richness and diversity of language available to writers in their creative practice when representing people, places and experiences.

In a literary landscape – and wider world – that is increasingly focused on diversity and representation, this can only be a good thing. According to Shea et al.,

> There is a recurring conversation surrounding diversity in publishing, and publishing houses of all sizes have claimed dedication to de-homogenizing both the industry and the content. Numerous efforts have been enacted with varying degrees of success, but the answer to the question, "Who is effectively publishing diverse books?" remains elusive. (2018, pp. 207–208)

Currently, the use of dialect or "vernacular" in literature is so underrepresented that there is a tendency to view it not as a means of exploring a diversity of experience but rather ticking a "diversity" box on a publisher's list. This kind of box-ticking is seen in Anthony Cummins's article in the *Guardian* shortly after the announcement of the *Granta* Best of Young British Novelists 2023. Cummins wrote how *Granta's* editor, Sigrid Rausing,

> refreshingly lets us know how the judges pitted authors of similar-seeming books against one another … Graeme Armstrong was last man standing among a gang of "vernacular novelists" that included Moses McKenzie, Guy Gunaratne and Gabriel Krauze. Apparently 'authenticity of voice' swung it. (Cummins, 2023)

That the novelists under consideration were pigeonholed into "vernacular novelists", and a winner chosen from among the contenders in one that particular category suggests that *Granta* – a well-known UK literary magazine – is only interested in ticking boxes in order to be seen as celebrating diversity. Interestingly, the books of each of the "vernacular" writers mentioned here deal with issues of gang violence, criminality or working-class experience in modern Britain. This association of vernacular or dialect fiction with these tropes also reinforces the industry's stereotyped view that dialect fiction is only representative of these kinds of voices and experiences.

This is why understanding the choices made by each author in creating dialect writing, and giving creative practitioners the tools to use dialect in their work, is vital to improving the diversity of our literary output. In understanding how an author created this style and where it was used, we might then understand more about a wider variety of cultures and communities than we have previously. Given that language is at the heart of literature – and by extension

one of the dominant methods of human communication through reading – then it would be remiss to only consider written dialect in terms of where it appears rather than how it appears. As evidenced in the examples above, utilising these definitions of dialect styles can deepen our creative practice as well as the analysis of texts using that form, and subsequently our understanding of the communities and people represented in them.

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