

The Sound of Difference: Spelling, Dialect, and American Regionalism

Carly Houston Overfelt

This paper is about the significance of spelling of character speech in American regionalist fiction at the turn of the twentieth century. I'll be arguing for more attention to the surface representations of literary dialect—that is, the shape character speech takes on the page through spelling and punctuation. These shapes give us insight into the politics of texts like Edward Eggleston's *The Hoosier School-master* (1871) and Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896)—insights that we cannot get if we look at dialect authenticity or accuracy alone.

This project came out of my dissertation, partly inspired by Gavin Jones's *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America* (1999). Previous studies of literary dialect are largely single-region or single-author studies, and tend to either analyze dialect as nostalgic for a pre-industrial past or as a management of racial and ethnic difference. Jones notices, rather, that across the canon of 'dialect' literature, the role and attitudes toward dialect are ambivalent and vacillating. Jones emphasizes that dialect's significance depends heavily on the text. Furthermore, American dialects can hold multiple significations, representing the culture's own ambivalence to nonstandard English during a time of rapid industrialization and increased immigration. I see my work in as a continuation of Jones's project with one important intervention. I locate the multi-valent potential of dialect within the orthographic strategies of spelling and punctuation. To understand the orthography of dialect in literature, I draw on theories of nonstandard orthography in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. For example, nonstandard or unwritten languages creating writing systems for the first time must make choices about how closely that orthography will be to the standard language's orthography.

What differences should be captured? How *much* difference should be captured? As linguists like Mark Sebba and Alexandra Jaffe have shown, nonstandard orthographies are political and affect how users of a language—and their languages—are perceived.

This paper asks us to consider the shape of literary dialect on the page as a nonstandard orthography. What *kinds* of differences from the ‘standard’ language are being captured? How *much* difference is being captured? And how do those decisions affect how readers perceive the language and the linguistic community? As a first step towards answering those questions, I focus on spelling and the use of apostrophes in Edward Eggleston's *The Hoosier School-master* (1871) and Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896). Both authors are writing about places roughly representative of where they themselves are from—Indiana in Eggleston's case, in the Midwestern U.S. and Maine in Jewett's case, in the Northeastern U.S. However, the attitudes these authors encourage towards those places and those voices from their childhood are quite different. I find that Eggleston uses unpredictable nonstandard spellings which reinforces his portrayal of the Indiana villagers as wild, unruly rustics. Jewett also marks rural Maine speakers with nonstandard spelling, but uses patterns—predictable, systematic spelling. Jewett's spelling regularity creates a sense of familiarity and rhythm to villager speech and, therefore, village life.

Edward Eggleston was born in 1837 in Vevay, Indiana, a small town on the Ohio River near the Kentucky border. His father was from Virginia, while his mother was from Indiana. After a very short career as a teacher, Eggleston moved around in the Midwest. Eventually Eggleston moved to Minnesota to preach, where he met his wife and started a family. Some years later the family moved to New York, where Eggleston worked various editing jobs, including work at a publication called *Hearth and Home*, which would launch the work that

made him famous—*The Hoosier School-master*. After the novel's surprising success, Eggleston made a career out of writing, though none of his works would be as popular as his first.

Eggleston died in 1902 of a stroke at the age of 65.

The Hoosier School-master is about Ralph Hartsook, who is from Indiana but has been living in the Eastern U.S. for some time. Ralph comes back to Indiana to teach at a rural school in Flat Creek. Unfortunately, Ralph's students are hostile to outsiders and Ralph is just the latest in a string of teachers they have intimidated into quitting through dangerous pranks and intimidation. Ralph proves to be different, and turns the tables on his prankster students, earning the respect of some. While Ralph wins over some of his students through his wit and solid principles, he makes many enemies. Eventually he becomes accused of a crime and goes on trial, but is acquitted through the risky and honest testimony of others in a climactic court scene. Ralph falls in love with one of the locals, Hannah, and she becomes a schoolteacher like Ralph. Their careers as educators commence elsewhere, however, as the Flat Creek school district dissolves in failure and closes for good.

What we now think of as the American Midwest was considered, in Eggleston's time, part of the wild western frontier, and that includes states like Indiana. The word 'Hoosier' initially meant 'redneck,' but eventually (and especially after this novel's popularity) became attached specifically to Indiana. The Hoosiers in Eggleston's tale are characters who are wild and barbaric, in line with stereotypes held by his East Coast readers. They fight, spit, are ugly, and have bad teeth. They are violent and uncouth and Ralph is horrified by their behavior at every turn. These 'barbaric' readings are further activated through Eggleston's unpredictable nonstandard spelling of Hoosier speech. Inconsistencies in the spelling (and, crucially, the *inconsistent combination* of nonstandard spelling and punctuation) contribute to the distance

between the characters and the readers. See Figure 1, for example, in which the leftmost column represents the standard spelling, while the subsequent columns represent spelling alternations in the text's character dialogue.

of	uv		
if	ef		
ain't	a'n't		
rather	ruther	'ruther	
poor	pore	poar	
certain	sartan	sartain	
just	jest	jes'	jes
going	a-going	a-goin'	agoin
learning	larnin	larnin'	l'arnin'

Figure 1

This is not an exhaustive list, but rather a selection to illustrate Eggleston's freedom with character speech. Sometimes 'ain't' is spelled 'ain't' and sometimes it is spelled 'a'n't.' In addition, the phonological phenomenon of 'a'-prefixing is found in Flat Creek, but is inconsistently spelled, especially in conjunction with other features, like so-called 'g' dropping. That is, sometimes the villagers are represented as saying 'a-going,' while at other times this is represented as 'agoin'' (and sometimes 'a-goin'''). Furthermore, while some characters talk about the 'poor-house,' others are represented as saying 'pore-house.' 'Just' is represented in three different ways in addition to the standard: 'jest,' 'jes,' and 'jes'.' The word 'uncertain' is spelled 'onsartin' and 'onsartain.' 'Rather' is spelled two ways: 'ruther' and ''ruther' with an apostrophe to start; the function of this apostrophe is not clear. Another example is the word 'learning.' There is one instance, in fact, in which in the same sentence 'learning' is spelled two different ways, but attributed to the same character: 'l'arnin'' and 'larnin'.' Importantly, none of these spelling alternations seem to map onto actual pronunciation variations. For example, surely 'ruther' and ''ruther' are pronounced the same way, but just represented differently. These

spelling variations are, instead, different ways of imagining the ‘nonstandardness’ of the characters generally, and generates a feeling of uncertainty, unpredictability, and irregularity.

Some of Eggleston’s orthographic choices can be explained as a classic dialect literature strategy called ‘eye dialect,’ in which words are represented with nonstandard spelling even when the pronunciation is standard. For example, ‘wuz’ for was,’ ‘uv’ for ‘of.’ However, Eggleston uses a combination of eye dialect spellings and spellings that indicate ‘real’ dialect differences in unpredictable combinations that leave the reader linguistically unsettled. Eggleston takes advantage of the fact that standard English orthography (like many other orthographies) uses more than one letter to represent the same sound, depending upon the word. When using nonstandard spelling to indicate pronunciation variation elsewhere in the word, Eggleston seems to deliberately choose a letter not found in the standard spelling of the word, to make that word stand out. Another example is ‘consarn’ for ‘concern.’ The ‘a’ seems to indicate a pronunciation difference, but the ‘s’ seems to be eye dialect. And in some instances, Eggleston adds a letter for seemingly no linguistic reason. Take, for example, in one instance the word ‘education,’ is spelled ‘eddicacion,’ with an extra ‘d.’ The strategy here seems to be a compounding of visual markers of difference, and is most certainly a jab at the ignorance of the Hoosiers.

Eggleston’s inconsistent punctuation and spelling strategies in character speech are made all the more significant in light of the story’s emphasis on spelling. The Flat Creek villagers’ favorite past-time is having spelling bees--competitions which are run by the villagers themselves. Ironically, these characters have intense spelling competitions, handling words as complicated as ‘theodolite’ and ‘daguerreotype.’ The main character, Ralph, calls these competitions ‘orthographic conflict,’ which is an apt phrase for the character speech spelling in this novel. The narrator describes the Flat Creek attitude towards spelling as follows: ‘It often

happens that the pupil does not know the meaning of a single word in the [competition]. This is of no consequence. What do you want to know the meaning of a word for? Words were made to be spelled, and men were probably created that they might spell them.'

Indeed, when Eggleston's characters write, they cannot employ their spelling skills. Take, for example, this line from an anonymous letter to 'Squar Haukins': 'this is too Lett u no that u beter be Keerful hoo yoo an yore familly tacks cides with.' And another from a major character: 'deer Sur: I Put in my best licks, taint no use. Run fer yore life. A plans on foot to tar an fether or wuss to-night. Go rite off. Things is awful juberous.' Eggleston's Hoosiers seem somehow subordinated to true literacy. It is as if they are an oral people who can repeat memorized strings of letters, but cannot actually be educated to employ them in 'standard' English. Overall, Eggleston's Hoosier dialect is as crude and unpredictable as the rowdy students Ralph tries, and fails, to tame. Eggleston's novel reinforces his readers' preconceived notions of the wild, barbaric western frontier.

Readers encounter remarkably different orthographic strategies in Sarah Orne Jewett's, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896). Jewett uses a character-narrator who is herself a writer, visiting the community as a peaceful retreat to practice her art. Jewett's minimal, but regular, nonstandard orthography seems to suggest accessibility and a growing familiarity with the language of the people, and therefore the people themselves. Sarah Orne Jewett is much more well-known than Edward Eggleston, and has also enjoyed more prestige as a talented American writer. Jewett was born in 1839 in rural South Berwick, Maine, of a family that could boast generations in New England. Her father was a country doctor and she often accompanied him on his rounds, which critics suggest is the source of much of her knowledge and sensibility for the local color of Maine. While she was often in Boston, she returned to the seacoast villages of

Maine from time to time, enriching her literary inspiration. Jewett enjoyed some society with literary figures like William Dean Howells, who praised her work. She published her first story at only 19 in the prestigious *Atlantic Monthly*. *The Country of the Pointed Firs* solidified her literary reputation. Jewett never married and died of stroke in 1909.

The Country of the Pointed Firs is, technically, a short story cycle and each story can stand on its own, but it is easily read and treated as a novel because of the nature and progression of the final collection of stories, and this is how many critics see it. The main character in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* retreats to write at Dunnet Landing, the fictional fishing village, and has returned to what she calls ‘the unchanged shores of the pointed firs.’ Yet, as each chapter commences, her commitment to writing wanes and she gets caught up in local life. For example, she finds herself accompanying her landlady, Mrs. Todd, on social calls. These local adventures constitute most of the stories, while others are interludes in which characters tell embedded stories about other characters, or stories from their own lives. A coastal fishing village, Dunnet Landing is simultaneously set off from the world and an important link to the global marketplace, although this part of the village’s economy is rapidly fading. The result is a sense that Jewett, through her main character, is recording a fading way of life from the elders who will be the last to remember it, and preserving it in her stories.

While Mrs. Todd, the narrator’s host, seems to have dialect features signaled through nonstandard spelling, they are quite different from Eggleston’s characters. Like the unchanged shores and the unchanged firs and unchanged people, the language of the rural folk is a regularized language. It connotes stability, accessibility, and predictability. It is something one can count on and look forward to. Because Mrs. Todd’s language is the primary rural folk

language of the text, and most obviously contrasted with the narrator's language, my reading focuses on her as representative of the locals.

Jewett uses only a limited number of nonstandard spelling strategies, as seen in Figure 2. This table illustrates how Jewett employs familiar and licensed processes of contraction in her nonstandard orthography. The most common is the use of 'o'' for 'of' and is used widely throughout. For example, 'I've took great advantage o' your bein' here.' This 'o' plus apostrophe for 'of' is very common in many dialect literature works, and could be considered a general marker of the quickly spoken quality of the word, or an 'allegro' form, as sociolinguists might term it. Another hallmark of Mrs. Todd's speech is 'an' for 'and.' Like in 'o', the apostrophe suggests the omission of a sound, in this case the final 'd' sound. This consonant cluster reduction is also quite common in dialect literature, and seems to capture the way the word is spoken in rapid, casual speech.

Word + "as" → ___'s	knows as → knows's
Word + "will" → ___'ll	tide will → tide'll
-ing → n'	going → goin'
-nd → n'	and → an'
"of" → o'	
"get" → git	

Figure 2

The majority of Jewett's other nonstandard spellings for Mrs. Todd's speech come in the form of contractions, using an apostrophe, often with 'will.' For example, 'tide'll' is 'tide will' and 'Mother'll' is 'Mother will.' Other contractions are made with 'it,' like ''tis' for 'it is,' ''twas' for 'it was' and 'but't' for 'but it.' Mrs. Todd also forms contractions with 'as,' in examples like 'quick's' for 'quick as' and 'knows's' for 'knows as.' Finally, Mrs. Todd is also

reported to say ‘em’ for ‘them,’ another common allegra form in most American dialect literature.

Many of the nonstandard spellings catalogued here are predictable and regular either because they are very common dialect literature, or because they take the shape of licensed strategies in standard English orthography, like contraction, unlike Eggleston’s seemingly gratuitous apostrophes. Readers already know that apostrophes are used to show an omitted sound, as in the case of ‘o’ and ‘an’ and that that omitted sound sometimes forms a canonical contraction. Jewett’s readers can easily generalize from what they know of standard orthography to understand her nonstandard orthography.

Jewett relies more on the use of apostrophes to constitute her nonstandard orthography than creative respellings of words. By preserving the shape that readers already know, Jewett’s orthography ensures these words are easily recognized. The result, I suggest, is less attribution of communicative difficulty to the characters themselves. Overall, Jewett’s nonstandard orthography strategies fall into two categories: consonant reduction and word contraction. The repetition and of these techniques means they are easy to become accustomed to and represent stability and a certain element of civility Jewett wants to convey about the rural northeast and that contrasts sharply with the wild unknown of the West and Midwest.

How does this discussion of orthography relate to the conference theme of authenticity? In fact, I offer this approach to literary dialect as an alternative to appeals to linguistic authenticity found in much of the scholarship on dialect fiction. This is especially common in scholarship on canonical authors who are famous for their treatment of dialect, like Mark Twain and Charles Chesnutt. Literary-linguistic approaches to these authors often result in what might be considered linguistic fact-checking. That is, scholars list features of a dialect, like African

American English (AAE); if those features are found in the text, their use is considered responsible, fair, or accurate use of dialect. One example is Lisa Cohen Minnick's *Dialect and Dichotomy* (2004). However, my analysis suggests that even if the pronunciations in a text can be traced back to authentic, attested features of the target dialect, the way those authentic features are represented through spelling and punctuation are political, and affect the way readers perceive those fictional linguistic communities.

References

- Eggleston, E., 1871. *The Hoosier School-master: a story of backwoods life in Indiana*, [ebook]. Library edition. New York: Grosset and Dunlap. [Accessed 30 November 2016]. Available from: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15099/15099-h/15099-h.htm>
- Jewett, S.O., 1896. *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, [ebook]. New York: Houghton and Mifflin. [Accessed 30 November 2016]. Available from: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/367/367-h/367-h.htm>
- Johnson, S., Sebba, M., Jaffe, A., Androutsopoulos, J., 2012. *Orthography as Social Action: Scripts, Spelling, Identity and Power*. De Gruyter, Boston.
- Jones, G.R., 1999. *Strange talk: the politics of dialect literature in Gilded Age America*. University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Minnick, L.C., 2004. *Dialect and dichotomy: literary representations of African American speech*. University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa.
- Sebba, M., 2007. *Spelling and society: the culture and politics of orthography around the world*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK; New York.