Eye Dialect as a Problem in Graphics

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This paper examines the problems involved in arranging the letters of the English alphabet into nonstandard spellings for the purpose of producing eye dialect spellings. It argues that the writer of eye dialect is under certain restrictions imposed by the fact that the reader must be able to associate the eye dialect spelling with the standard spelling. These restrictions, and how various writers dealt with them, are illustrated by the use of various eye dialect spellings from literary works.

The production of eye dialect forms poses a problem in graphics. Certain of the symbols available in our writing system must be selected and arranged in a particular order to produce the desired effect on both eye and ear. However, it should be understood here that many writers of eye dialect are not aware of the problem at all. They are often under the impression that they are actually indicating nonstandard pronunciations when in reality the spellings they use are eye dialect.

Some writers probably use distorted spellings without regard to the pronunciations they represent simply because such spellings are a traditional way of portraying the speech of a dialect character. This haphazard use of distorted spellings inevitably produces some eye dialect forms. Still others may intend to convey the impression that "This is the way the speaker would spell the word if he had to write it." In the discussion which follows it had been assumed, for convenience, that the writer is consciously and purposely using eye dialect. However, whether or not he is aware that he is using it, the same considerations involving the arranging of graphic symbols to indicate a standard pronunciation — that is, the problem in graphics — still exist.

The problem in graphics is the same for the writer of eye dialect as it is for the writer of substandard dialect or regional dialect except for one

An excerpt from "Rare Ripe Garden-seed" by George Washington Harris, one of the stories in *The Literature of the South*, edited by Richmond Croom Beatty et al. Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1952.

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important point. The writer of eye dialect combines letters of the alphabet to indicate a standard pronunciation, while the other combines them to indicate an actual, existing nonstandard pronunciation. The writer of eye dialect need not have made a study of peculiarities of regional (or national) nonstandard speech. He merely uses an alternative nonstandard spelling of a word that will yet indicate its standard pronunciation. (He is not, however, looking for alternative *standard* spellings that exist in English in a few cases, such as *catalog* and *catalogue*.)

The inexact "fit" of English makes this task possible, and in many cases relatively easy. There is an exceedingly inexact correspondence between the sounds and letters of English. However, there is an important requirement which complicates the deliberate writing of eye dialect (or of any other kind of dialect, for that matter). The requirement is that the reader must be able to associate the unfamiliar eye dialect spelling with the standard spelling. The eye dialect spelling means nothing to him unless he can recognize what word or words it is intended to represent.

In the process of associating a dialect form with its standard form (and thus understanding its meaning), three factors are involved: context, similarity of appearance, and similarity of pronunciation. Let us consider each of these factors using the nonstandard spelling *wuz* for the word *was*. This nonstandard spelling is eye dialect since it appears to represent [wəz], the pronunciation of *was* which all speakers use in unstressed position — that is, the letter *u* often represents [ə] in standard English spelling. (Phonetic symbols used here are from Pyles, 1971.)

The first of the three factors, context, refers to the fact that the reader has been led to expect a certain word by the written matter which preceded and followed it. It may be that in the context of the matter being read, the word *was* "makes sense" at the particular point where the nonstandard written form *wuz* occurs. This in itself would provide a hint to the reader as to what standard spelling the nonstandard form was intended to represent.

However, context is only one of the considerations involved. It can easily be seen that the similarity of appearance of the two words on the printed page has something to do with the matter of association — that is, *wuz* and *was* look very much alike. For one thing they have the same number of letters, and perhaps equally important they both begin with the letter *w*. If similarity of appearance were not of importance, and context alone provided a sufficient hint to the reader, then some such combination of letters as *jrstvx* might just as well be used to represent *was* as the combination *wuz*. In actuality, however, the sudden appearance of *jrstvx* would be

highly confusing to the reader, and it is thus evident that similarity of appearance is another important consideration in the association of a dialect spelling with its standard spelling.

There is a third important consideration, moreover, that must be added to context and similarity of appearance. If these two were the sole determining factors of whether the reader could decipher the nonstandard spelling, the author might as well represent *was* by the spelling *wkz* as the spelling *wuz*. From the standpoint of context and similarity of appearance there is no apparent advantage in the use of one over the other. There is an advantage in using *wuz* from the standpoint of pronunciation, however. In the English writing system, the letter *u* frequently represents the sound [ə]. The letter *k*, on the other hand, never represents this sound. Since [ə] is the vowel sound in a standard pronunciation of *was*, the use of *u* is preferable to the use of *k* on phonological grounds.

In the writing of eye dialect, therefore, the writer is concerned with the factors mentioned above. There is very little he needs to worry about in connection with context. Ordinarily, regardless of which word or words he chooses to spell in a nonstandard manner, the sentence structure and the "sense" of the words preceding and following the chosen words will give the reader some hint as to what standard spellings will "make sense" when substituted for the nonstandard ones. However, in many cases, the hint received from context is not enough for the reader. Often there are points in a literary passage where more than one word will "make sense."

Similarity of appearance is probably as important as context. As G. B. Shaw is supposed to have pointed out, the word *fish* may be represented by *ghoti* if one interprets the *gh* as representing the final sound of *tough*, the *o* as the stressed vowel of *women*, and the *ti* as the medial consonant of *nation*. But the use of *ghoti* for *fish* would be quite misleading to the reader because of its lack of similarity of appearance.

The factor of similarity of pronunciation is more complex than the other two and bears further discussion. In eye dialect, by definition, the pronunciation of the standard and the nonstandard written forms must be the same. But in the many cases where a large number of variant spellings represent the same sound in English, how does the dialect writer choose the most appropriate spelling?

The writer of eye dialect knows the pronunciation he is trying to represent with a nonstandard spelling, but he is faced with the problem of selecting combinations of letters that will convey that pronunciation to the reader. Since there is not a one-to-one relationship between letters and

sounds in English, he cannot be sure that his choice of letters will necessarily convey the desired sounds. For example, if he wishes to replace the *i* representing the vowel [ɪ] in *hit,* should he use the *ee* of *been* [bɪn], the *o* of *women* [wɪmɪn], the *u* of *busy* [bɪzɪ], the *y* of *myth* [mɪθ] or the *ui* of *build* [bɪld]? Each letter or letter combination represents [ɪ] in the examples given. The question arises as to whether there is a "usual" or "most common" letter (or letter combination) that ordinarily represents each sound and which can be counted on to bring that particular sound to the reader's mind.

Thomas Pyles (1971) lists the vowel and consonant sounds of English, and what he considers to be their usual spellings. For example, of the many ways the sound [š] may be spelled, *sh* is taken to be the usual way. The usual way of representing [ɪ] is with *i* as in *hit,* rather than such alternatives as the *o* in *women* or the *ee* in *been*. Pyles indicates that every sound has spellings which are more usual than the possible alternatives.

In addition, it should be pointed out that some of the "less usual" spellings are limited to certain positions in a word — *gh,* for example, represents [f] only in final position while *ti* represents [š] only before a vowel standing for a weakly stressed [ə] (nation, initial, militia). It is this fact which accounts, at least partially, for the humor in the spelling *ghoti* for *fish*. The *gh* and *ti* are hopelessly out of position. Such positional limitations do impose a practical restriction on the writer in producing nonstandard spellings.

Based on the above, it would appear that the writer of eye dialect will solve the problem of pronunciation similarity if he uses the letter, or combinations of letters, which are usual or "regular" ones for representing the sounds of the word or words involved. Of course, in many cases this will not be possible because the "regular" spelling will be that found in the standard spelling. In these cases the eye dialect spelling should logically use an alternative "regular" spelling, if such is available. If only one spelling is at all "regular" — such as *p* for [p] at the beginning of a word — then no eye dialect spelling is feasible for that sound. In fact, those words for which eye dialect spellings are most often substituted are almost invariably words which have an unusual or "irregular" spelling of one or more of their sounds. Words like *liquor* (with its *qu* representation of [k], *minute* (with its *u* for [ɪ], and *women* (with its *o* for [ɪ]), are good examples. Apparently the writer of eye dialect unconsciously recognizes those places where the letter representing a particular sound is not the "regular" one.

Differences do appear in the eye dialect forms arrived at by different writers as alternative spellings for the same word (some examples are appended to this paper). It should be of interest to take note of several alternative spellings, and to evaluate which form is clearest from the standpoint of the reader.

The word *business* has been spelled in a number of ways that may be considered eye dialect. Let us compare two of them, the *bizness* of Robert Penn Warren and the *bus'ness* of Tennessee Williams. From the standpoint of similarity of appearance the form used by Williams is probably more easily recognized than that used by Warren. It changes only one letter, and the omitted *i* is replaced by an apostrophe. From the standpoint of similarity of pronunciation, however, Warren's form seems preferable. The substitution of *i* for *u* in the first syllable is actually a change from an infrequent way of representing [ɪ] to the most usual one. The complete elimination of the *i* is in keeping with the fact that it is not pronounced anyway: in current English the word is [bɪznɪs], not [bɪsɪnɪs]. The Williams' spelling, *bus'ness,* on the other hand, though it has made only one small change in the standard spelling, at first glance may appear to indicate [besnɪs]. This is because the reader is familiar with the word *bus,* and also because *bus* means [bɪz] to him only in *busy* and *business*. Williams has changed the spelling enough that the word he intends to represent may not be immediately obvious, and the reader may be misled into assuming [bəs] for *bus*.

The word *says* has been given alternative spellings by a number of writers. There would appear to be two reasons for the notice they have paid to *says:* first, it is a word that occurs quite often in dialogue, particularly when a story is told in the historical present; second, the letter combination *ays* is a very unusual way of representing the sound combination [ɛz]. Bret Harte and G. W. Harris use the eye dialect spelling *sez,* whereas Stephen Crane and James Russell Lowell use another eye dialect spelling *ses*. In both cases the unusual *ays* is changed — the writers agree on the usual *e* for [ɛ], but they disagree on the representation of [z]. According to Pyle's list, both *z* and *s* are "regular" spellings of [z], and thus it is difficult to say which spelling is to be preferred.

Sometimes there is good reason why the letter which usually represents a voiceless sound is found where a symbol for a voiced sound might seem called for. Bret Harte spelled *was* as *wus,* for example. The word *was,* by itself, may be represented phonetically by [wəz] when in an unstressed position. But Harte's *was* precedes the word *sick,* and the final [z] of *was* is unvoiced through assimilation with the unvoiced [s] which immediately

follows. Thus Harte is phonetically accurate in his spelling of *was* as *wus* in this particular instance. He is not always consistent in this respect, however, since logically he should use *wuz* when voiced sounds follow — instead he often sticks with *wus*.

Another word that has been given a variety of eye dialect spellings is the word *clothes* [kloz]. The spelling *close,* a form used by George Washington Harris and Artemus Ward, has the disadvantage of being the standard spelling of two different words — the verb *close* [kloz] and the adjective *close* [klos]. While it is true that within the context of a sentence confusion is not likely in this case, such will not always be the case where the eye dialect form actually is the standard spelling of another word. And even in the case of *close* for *clothes,* it seems probable that the reader will be somewhat distracted at first due to his normal association of *close* with meanings which have nothing to do with wearing apparel, and (in the case of the adjective *close* [klos]) with another pronunciation.

The eye dialect spelling *clo'se,* as used by Tennessee Williams is preferable to *close* in that the apostrophe precludes the reader's mistaking the word for either the verb or adjective spelled *close*. The apostrophe signals that certain letters have been omitted, which from the standpoint of similarity of appearance is desirable. However, with respect to similarity of pronunciation, the form used by Williams is inferior to a third form, *clo'es,* used by James Russell Lowell. Lowell's form indicates the loss of letters with an apostrophe, and, in addition, it uses a series of letters, *oes* (omitting the apostrophe since it does not affect the pronunciation), which are unmistakably [oz] in such familiar words as *toes, hoes, Joes, foes,* etc. The *oes* spelling clearly indicates the voiced sound [z], while *ose* may indicate either [z] or [s].

Examples such as the above seem to suggest that the writing of "good" eye dialect — that is, eye dialect which serves its purpose without confusing the reader — is a problem in graphics. Certain constraints imposed by the sound and writing system of the language must be adhered to by the writer in arranging his graphic symbols, the letters of his alphabet. He may not always be aware of these constraints, but they still determine the degree of success he will achieve with the nonstandard spellings he chooses.

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