

Paper Representations of the Non-Standard Voice

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People in the popular press as well as academia have some wrong ideas about how dialect renderings in literature evoke a non-standard voice. They think that graphic representations of dialect have a literal oral counterpart and that the worth of a dialect rendering lies in how accurately it depicts the spoken dialect in question. This paper demonstrates that linguistic accuracy is not and can never be a primary goal of writers who create effective renderings.

The primary semiotic potential of dialect renderings lies in the indexical meaning they derive from their opposition to standard written English, rather than in linguistic detail. Consequently, whether a writer is a speaker of the dialect in question or not has little impact on the effectiveness of the literary dialect rendering. When the renderings of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century white writers of dialect are compared with those of contemporary writers who purportedly speak the dialects in question, we see that though the authors of yesteryear and today often differ in the number and kind of features they choose to represent, neither can be said to be more accurate than the other.

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Visible Language 32.1
Balhorn, 56–74

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In a recent book, David Olson points out that readers of alphabetic writing systems tend to assume that writing is “the transcription of speech.”¹ Since learning to read and write is the means by which we become aware of language as a symbolic system distinct from the ideas we are trying to convey, we naturally come to think of our language “in terms of the entities in the representational system.”² In other words, standard written English, the aggregate of all our conventions regarding the representation of our language on paper, is reified as the language itself and is thought to be not just a conventional, written representation of the linguistic system that speakers share, but to represent what actually comes out of people’s mouths.

Though Olson is primarily concerned in his book with discussing the relationship between writing and its effects on cognition, the latter relationship, that between written representation and the spoken word, is just as important. The belief that the written word directly represents the spoken word was at the heart of much of the discussion surrounding the issue of Black Vernacular English (Ebonics) in the Oakland, California, school system. Margo Jefferson, drama critic for the *New York Times*, for example, in addressing this issue, makes the point that all dialects have expressive potential. She attempts to demonstrate that “Black English... can be spoken with beauty and power,”³ and as proof, provides three paragraphs from Zora Neale Hurston’s folkloric retelling of Genesis and the story of Moses in *Mules and Men*. Though Hurston’s words may be beautiful and powerful, and the text evocative of language patterns and sensibilities of a genuine, African-American voice, it is nonetheless a written text, not a “spoken” one at all. This text may illustrate how eloquent African-American voices can be created through the medium of written English, but it demonstrates nothing about the expressive potential of *spoken* black English.

This misconception, that a written word must have a spoken counterpart, is also found in academia, and in fact, appears to underlie some of the criticism leveled at the Black Vernacular English (BVE) dialect renderings of

1 Olson, D. 1994. *The World on Paper*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 258.

2 Olson, *The World on Paper*, 259.

3 Jefferson, Margo. 1997. The Two Faces of Ebonics: Disguise and Giveaway. *New York Times*, January 7, c.11.

nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American writers. Michael North, for example, claims that the African-American dialects rendered by Stein, Eliot and Pound “sounded a good deal more like Uncle Remus than any actual African-American speaker of the 1920s.” North continues that it was the charge of African-American writers such as Claude McKay, Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston to help African-American literature “fight its way out of the prison of white-created black dialect.”⁴ Recently, Bonnie TuSmith has noted that with the expanding varieties of language to be found in today’s multicultural texts, both teachers and readers of literature need to become more “multilingual.” Literature specialists reared on the “institutionalized and often formulaic Southern black dialect found in writers like Faulkner, Welty and Twain” need training in interpreting other varieties of English and understanding the cultures that underlie them.⁵

TuSmith is undoubtedly right that readers and teachers of literature need to become familiar with the cultures behind the dialect voices found in multicultural novels today in order to properly understand them. She is also correct to say that attitudes toward the language varieties encountered in multicultural texts must change. Likewise, North may also be correct in claiming that in comparison to the Black Vernacular English renderings of McKay, Toomer and Hurston, the renderings of Stein, Eliot and Pound are lacking. But their characterization of the problem as being one of linguistic accuracy is off the mark. In claiming that the renderings of Stein, Eliot and Pound “sounded” like Uncle Remus, North seems to disregard the graphic medium in which these white modernists rendered African-American voices, as if the meaning of the texts only emerge after mediation by a spoken voice. Likewise, TuSmith’s insistence on “monolingual” readers’ “lack of language proficiency”⁶ and consequent unpreparedness to read ethnic literature suggests that the effectiveness of a dialect rendering depends upon readers’ fluency in the dialect in question, not upon their fluency in written English.

4 North, M. 1994. *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, preface.

5 TuSmith, B. 1996. The Englishes of Ethnic Folk: From Home Talkin’ to Testifyin’ Art. *College English*, 58: 1, 46.

6 TuSmith, The Englishes of Ethnic Folk, 55.

Below, however, it will be shown that the worth of a dialect rendering lies squarely with the graphic representation on paper. How closely it corresponds to what speakers of the dialect in question actually say is of secondary importance. Moreover, since the semiotic potential of a dialect rendering is primarily indexical, effective renderings depend more upon readers' fluency in standard written English than on their familiarity with spoken varieties. Thus, though the dialect renderings of white writers from the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries may be different from those of today's writers of color, the differences must be characterized in some way other than linguistic accuracy. We will see that the differences lie in the particular non-standard features that writers choose to represent and the degree to which the graphic representation differs from standard English orthography.

Script as an imperfect model of speech

Even with a perfect orthographic system, unencumbered by the historical pressures that have produced the spelling conventions of modern English, an accurate portrayal of the spoken mode via the written would be impossible. Consider the task confronting linguists. We can assume that the linguist, free to use phonetic transcription, a symbol system that can, at least theoretically, represent every possible nuance of articulatory detail, would be capable of producing comprehensive renderings of speech. But this is seldom, if ever, done. As Macaulay points out, quoting Ochs, a representation that attempted to include every aspect of articulation would be so difficult to read, even by the audience of linguists for which it is intended, that it would be too "difficult to follow and assess."⁷

Rather, linguists who transcribe speech are usually only interested in the aspects of the sound stream that convey meaning. They describe "only the significant articulations rather than the total set of movements of the vocal organs."⁸ So complex is the polyphony of speech that even scientists must decide what to represent and what not to.

7 Macaulay, R. 1991. Coz It Izny Spelt When They Say It: Displaying Dialect in Writing. *American Speech*, 66, 282.

8 Ladefoged, P. 1982. *A Course in Phonetics*. New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 23.

If those whose goal is to simply represent the sound system of a language cannot achieve complete accuracy, then certainly novelists and poets, who are primarily concerned with the meaning the sound system conveys, cannot either. Not only must writers represent both meaning and form simultaneously, but, in addition, their medium is not the socially neutral International Phonetic Alphabet; it is instead standard written English, a medium wherein symbols acquire meaning not only through their combinatorial capabilities, but through their social history as well. Signs formed from the twenty-six symbols of the English alphabet take on a life independent of the sound symbols that compose them. They acquire a psychological status in that they are taken as the embodiment of the very word itself, and a social status, in that any deviations from the conventional representation of the sign is interpreted as non-standard regardless of all linguistic facts.

As an example, consider the word ‘was,’ commonly represented in “eye dialect”⁹ renderings as “wuz.”¹⁰ This spelling points to a pronunciation of ‘was’ that includes a short, central vowel like the vowel in ‘cup’ and a voiced, final consonant, like the ‘z’ in ‘zoo,’ a pronunciation wherein ‘was’ rhymes with ‘buzz’ – precisely the pronunciation this word does have in most standard spoken varieties throughout the English-speaking world. Ironically, then, readers who encounter the written form “wuz,” a phonetically more accurate representation of the standard spoken form, “hear” the voice of a speaker in some sort of social, regional or ontogenetic opposition to standard English. ‘Wuz’ marks the character as commanding either a mature, non-standard dialect, or, in the case of a child or non-native speaker, an approximation of standard. When they encounter “was,” on the other hand, a spelling suggestive of a pronunciation that should rhyme with ‘loss’ or perhaps ‘gas’ – pronunciations found in no standard varieties – they “hear” the voice of the standard speaker. In effect, “wuz,” a phonetically accurate representation of standard speech, has led to a non-standard voice while “was,” the conventional but phonetically inaccurate

9 Discussions of eye dialect usually emphasize its use in denigrating speakers. See, for example, Preston, D.R., *The Li'l Abner Syndrome: Written Representations of Speech*. (*American Speech*, 60, 328) or Pinker, S., *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*. (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1994) 387. But denigration is not necessarily the result of its use in literature.

10 To distinguish words from their graphic representation in written English, single quotes will be used for words and double quotes for written forms of words. Thus ‘was’ refers to the singular past tense form of ‘be,’ while “was” refers to some instance of that word as it has been standardized in writing.

representation, results in a standard voice.

The psychological and social status attached to standard orthography can obscure not only the relationship between written representations and the spoken word, but also between written representations and syntactic structures. In perhaps all dialects of English, for example, there are two grammatically, semantically and phonologically distinct ‘going to’ constructions. Yet, because standard written English represents them the same, as “going to,” most literate speakers of the language are unaware that there are two. Consider the following two sentences written to reflect casual, but standard, pronunciations of “going to”:

- 1 *I’m gun’na buy a new car.*
- 2 *I’m goin’da Kansas City this weekend.*

Though it may at first seem that the difference between the two ‘going to’ renderings in the above reflects some social, regional or at best phonetically conditioned variation, that is not so; there is a robust grammatical distinction. In sentence 1, the upright sequence might be described as a periphrastic modal verb with the meaning of intentionality and somewhat synonymous with ‘will,’¹¹ and ‘buy,’ which follows it, as the main verb. In sentence 2, on the other hand, the upright sequence includes the main verb and a phonetically assimilated form of the preposition governing ‘Kansas City.’ The meaning of the ‘going to’ in sentence 2 is roughly “to travel.” Note too that the two forms are not interchangeable. For example, if one tries to “read” sentence 2 with the ‘going to’ form from sentence 1, the result is nonsense:

- 2’ *I’m gun’na Kansas City this weekend.*

One cannot read “gun’na” in sentence 2’ without getting the intentional modal interpretation and so attempts to interpret ‘Kansas City’ as a main verb. However, since there is no verb ‘Kansas City’ in the lexicon of speakers of the language, the sentence is uninterpretable.

Likewise, if one tries to “read” sentence 1 with the ‘go-

¹¹ Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. 1972. *A Grammar of Contemporary English*. Burnt Mill: Longman, 87–88.

ing to' form from sentence 2, the intentional interpretation is difficult to realize:

1' I'm goin'da buy a new car.

Sentence 1' is most easily interpreted with the main verb meaning of 'going to.' We understand something like, "I'm going in order to buy a new car." Hence, the 'goin'da' form of spoken English is interpreted as a main verb of motion while the 'gun'na' form can only be interpreted as an intentional auxiliary. In effect, speakers of English, both dialect and standard, make a formal distinction between intentional modal 'go' and main verb 'go' in speaking that is obscured by the standard orthography,¹² and, as the following example will show, any attempt to represent this distinction orthographically will of necessity result in a non-standard, dialect rendering.

In Faulkner's *The Bear*,¹³ the four chapters which take place in the hunting camp contain seventeen examples of 'going to' used as the intentional modal or as a main verb. Though Faulkner was sometimes inconsistent in his dialect renderings and admits that he let "the moment, the character, the rhythm of the speech, compel its own dialect,"¹⁴ he consistently distinguishes three different dialects in *The Bear*: town white, country white and black. His rendering of 'going to' is an important part of how he distinguishes between the black dialect on the one hand, and the white dialects on the other. Among the white characters of both socio-economic groups, there are ten instances of 'going to,' five intentional and five as a main verb. All are rendered simply as "going to," there being no difference in the renderings of rural and town whites. In rendering the speech of the black characters, however, Faulkner makes a careful distinction. Of the seven 'going to' renderings found in the speech of the black characters, only two are rendered as "going to," and both of these are the intentional modal negated by a preceding "ain't." The four affirmative intentional modal renderings, found in the speech of both Ash and Sam, the two black characters, are written "gonter," as when Sam, explaining that he is

12 Geoffrey Pullum examined a corpus of 40 million words from the *Wall Street Journal* and found ninety-seven instances of 'gonna,' all of which were intentional and immediately followed by a verb. He concludes, "'gonna'... is not casual, but fully conventional, as shown by the fact that it is never casually substituted for occurrences of 'going to' in which 'go' is a verb of motion. Pullum, G. 1997. The Morphological Nature of English 'to'- Contraction. *Language*, 73:1, 87n.

13 Faulkner, W. 1961. *Three Famous Short Novels*. New York: Vintage Books.

14 Faulkner is quoted in Ross, S.N. 1989. *Fiction's Inexhaustible Voice: Speech and Writing in Faulkner*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia, 101.

referring to the dog, Lion, that is going to help them kill the bear says, “That’s *gonter* hold Old Ben.”¹⁵ The one main verb use of ‘going to’ made by a black character comes near the end of the story when Ash reports on the activities of one of the other characters, Boon: “Said he *gwine* up to the Gum Tree.”¹⁶

15 Faulkner, *Three Famous Short Novels*, 210.

16 Faulkner, *Three Famous Short Novels*, 308.

Again, the effect of this dialect rendering is ironic, in fact, doubly so. First of all, by indicating a grammatical distinction that is common to perhaps all dialects of English, Faulkner evokes one particular dialect. Secondly, by utilizing a representation that is more accurate, at least in this instance, than standard written English in that it does not obfuscate a prominent grammatical distinction, he emphasizes the marginalized status of his black characters. Readers encountering “gonter” and “gwine” see not linguistic accuracy, but as Faulkner intended, exotica, far removed from the conventional, the standard or the mainstream. They do not nod their heads in admiration of Sam and Ash’s verbal and syntactic acuity; rather, they hear the speech of uneducated, socially stigmatized former slaves.

Dialect as an indexical sign

To explain the ironic semiotic effects of written forms such as “wuz,” “gonter” and “gwine,” it is necessary to see how the primary communicative potential of written dialect is not symbolic, but indexical.¹⁷ First, languages are primarily symbol systems. Speakers of a language must agree that a particular sequence of sounds will have a given meaning. Thus, for example, the sequence d-o-g is conventionalized to mean ‘canine’ by speakers of English, but there is no intrinsic connection between those three segments and canines. In Peircean terms, the word ‘dog’ “refers to the object that it denotes by virtue of a law.”¹⁸ The same is true of the standard written form of a word. In the sentence, “I’m *going* to buy a new car,” the reader understands the highlighted phrase and hence the entire sentence due to the conventions of written English

17 Lyons, J. 1977. *Semantics: Volume I*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 107.

18 Peirce, C.S. 1965. *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce: Volumes 1 & 2*. Hartshorne C. and Weiss P., editors. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 143.

(Peirce's "law") which state that the graphic representation "going to" in a syntactic context like the one above denotes the intentional periphrastic modal.

When written in a non-standard form, on the other hand, a word takes on an additional indexical meaning. It becomes a type of sign which, according to Pierce, "refers to the object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that object."¹⁹ Thus, in sentence 1 above, the highlighted phrase "gun'na" is not only a symbolic denotation of the intentional periphrastic modal, but in addition, it is an indexical denotation of the purported speaker of the phrase. Since readers of standard English must assume the laws of the language which state that "going to" is the standard, graphic form of the intentional modal, the marked form "gun'na" must be seen as one that has been "affected" by its object, the speaker. The form "gun'na" thus connects to the speaker and describes him just as much as any other detail of physical description or personal history that the writer might ascribe to the character or narrator.

Note too that the indexical meaning does not depend upon readers' familiarity with the dialect depicted nearly as much as it depends upon their knowledge of standard written English. Just as Saussure has pointed out that words acquire meaning through the oppositional relationships they have with other words in the language,²⁰ so too do dialect renderings owe their indexical potential to the oppositional relationship they have with the standard written form of the language. In regard to "gun'na," if readers and writers did not already agree that "going to" was the standard graphic representation, "gun'na" would have no indexical meaning whatsoever, especially since, as pointed out above, the 'gun'na/goin'da' distinction is already formally present in the speech of virtually all native speakers of the language. Without the conventions of standard written English literacy, the graphic form "gun'na" would be indexically transparent.²¹

Another example of how reader familiarity with particular non-standard dialects is of little importance in

19 Peirce, *The Collected Papers*, 143.

20 De Saussure, F. 1981. *Cours de Linguistique Générale*. Paris: Payot. 160.

21 Standard written English is perhaps never completely without indexical meaning. By default, characters whose speech is rendered in standard English indicate their status relative to other characters whose speech is rendered as dialect. That must be Faulkner's intention in *The Bear* when he renders the speech of town whites such as General Compson and Major De Spain mostly in standard English while country white and black speech requires many orthographic deviations.

dialect renderings can be seen in written representations of words containing post-vocalic ‘r.’ In many dialects both standard and non-standard, ‘r’ after a vowel in words such as ‘car,’ ‘poor’ or ‘heart’ is not pronounced, though, depending upon the particular dialect, the preceding vowel may be lengthened or mutated in some way. In spite of this variation, writers may still utilize r-lessness in the creation of dialect voices, and their creations maintain the intended indexical effect regardless of where they are read. As noted by Ross, Faulkner often spelled the word ‘poor’ as “po” to be indexical of an uneducated, black character and as “poor” when he wished to indicate a character with more education or of higher social status.²² No one would suppose that Faulkner’s indexical meaning would be less effective in areas where r-lessness is the standard, such as in London or Mississippi, than it would be in areas where r-fulness is the standard, such as the northern two-thirds of North America. Regardless of how they actually pronounce ‘poor,’ readers of Faulkner will hear a standard voice when they see “poor” and a non-standard one when they see “po.”

22 Ross, *Fiction’s Inexhaustible Voice*, 42.

Effective and ineffective dialect renderings

So far, we have seen that without readers’ acceptance of the “laws” of standard written English, the indexical impact of dialect forms would not exist. Readers encounter non-standard forms in a text and, in Peirce’s terms, “they direct the attention (of readers) to their objects (the characters or narrators) by blind compulsion.”²³ Because they mark the character as non-standard in at least a verbal, if not geographical, social or racial sense, it might seem that all dialect renderings are necessarily denigrating. But there are ways writers avoid this. Writers who create versatile dialect voices do make indexical connections to the reader’s pre-existing notions of what is and is not standard, but the primary connection they have their readers make is between the rendering and the individual character or narrator to whom the rendering is ascribed.

23 Peirce, *The Collected Papers*, 172

Peirce's semiotic theory provides a mechanism for explaining how this is done. Though an indexical sign must connect to some "object," in his terminology, it need not connect to a concept, a "known existing thing... quality, relation, or fact."²⁴ Indexical signs may just as easily "refer to individuals," that is to say, to the particular character or narrator in the text, not to a type. Unlike conventional symbols which become meaningful through "intellectual operations" and must therefore make connections between script and the sign already lodged in the mind of the reader, indexical signs are associated with an object "by contiguity."²⁵ In an effective dialect rendering, therefore, the reader bypasses those mental categories concerning types of people and ways of speaking and instead reads the dialect as an index of a single individual. The dialect indices help frame the individual voice, but do not necessarily attach the connotations that are included in the categories of the reader's lexicon.

What follows are examples of first an ineffective dialect rendering and then an effective one. The first is a linguistically detailed one in which the indices connect to pre-established categories and the result is a limited voice. The second is a linguistically spare rendering that produces an independent, formidable voice. A comparison will reveal how the indexical impact of dialect renderings reaffirms readers' prejudices and doubts in the one case and controverts them in the other.

The first is an excerpt from the poem "Ol' Doc' Hyar" by James Edwin Campbell, a black poet of the late nineteenth century.

*Ur ol' Hyar lib in ur house on de hill,
He hunner yurs ol' an' nebber wuz ill,
an' he laigs so spry dat he dawnce ur jeeg;
He lib so long dat he know ebbry tings
'Bout de beas'ses dat walks an' de bu'ds dat sings.²⁶*

Campbell consistently represents features of Black Vernacular English that accord well with linguistic descriptions such as those of Fasold and Wolfram²⁷ and

24 Peirce, *The Collected Papers*, 138.

25 Peirce, *The Collected Papers*, 172.

26 This portion of the poem is found in a book by Karla Holloway, (1995. *Codes of Conduct: Race, Ethics, and the Color of Our Character*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 116.)

27 Fasold, R.W. and Wolfram, W. 1973. Some Linguistic Features of Negro Dialect. In DeStefano, J.S., editor. *Language, Society, and Education: A Profile of Black English*. Worthington, OH: Charles A. Jones, 116–148.

28 Smitherman, G. 1985. It Bees Dat Way Sometime: Sounds and Structure of Present-day Black English. In Clark, V.P., Eschholz, P.A., & Rosa, A.F., editors. *Language: Introductory Readings*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 552–566.

29 Fasold and Wolfram, *Some Linguistic Features*, 120.

30 Labov, W. 1972. *Language in the Inner City*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 67.

31 Fasold and Wolfram, *Some Linguistic Features*, 133.

Smitherman.²⁸ The pronunciation of the standard English sounds represented by 'th' as [d] and [t], for example, is indicated in his rendering with the spelling "de" for the definite article 'the' in lines one and five and the relative pronoun 'that' in lines three, four and five. The 'thing' of standard 'everything' is represented as "tings" in line four. He also represents consonant cluster simplification, a rule-governed process of black English, in his rendering of several words that contain clusters of two or more consonants within or at the end of a word. An example of this is 'beas'ses' in line five. The attachment of the plural 's' to 'beast' creates a word that ends in three consonant sounds: [sts]. A phonetically conditioned rule of many black English dialects breaks up such clusters.²⁹ In this case, the [t] is deleted and a short, epenthetic vowel placed between the two remaining [s] consonants, making a two-syllable word. Campbell also accurately represents morphological and syntactic characteristics of Black Vernacular English; namely, the undifferentiated pronoun use of 'he' in line three, the deletion of copular 'be' in line two³⁰ and the hypercorrection of the 's' on 'walks' and 'sings' in line five.³¹

In addition to these features distinctive of Black Vernacular English, Campbell also represents several features that though attested in Black dialects are not necessarily unique to them. This is particularly true of pronunciation features. For example, in line two, Campbell represents the long, tense vowel in the words 'leg' and 'jig' instead of the short, lax vowel of standard English varieties through the spellings "laige" and "jeeg" respectively. These are pronunciations found in many Southern, white dialects. Another example is his spelling of 'birds' as "bu'ds," to indicate loss of post-vocalic 'r,' a pronunciation feature common to many dialects in the United States and standard in England. Finally, Campbell has chosen to represent many aspects of speech common to all varieties of English both standard and non-standard. In line two, for example, he utilizes the eye dialect form "wuz" discussed earlier. In lines two, three

32 Preston, *The Li'l Abner Syndrome*, 325

and four he utilizes an “allegro form,” a representation that indicates a consonant or vowel elision that occurs in speech as words are combined into phrases.³² In this case, “an’” used to render ‘and’ in lines two, three and five, indicates the omission of ‘d,’ an omission common in the speech of all but the most self-conscious speakers of English.

Except for the eye dialect, there is a lot to recommend this piece from the standpoint of linguistic accuracy, but as is evident when one first tries to read it, as literature, it is not very effective. Since the rendering is difficult to process, the resulting voice sounds inarticulate, even inscrutable. Any prejudices or doubts about the intellectual or verbal capabilities of poor, uneducated African-Americans that readers bring to the reading are affirmed. The “object” that the reader’s mind is connected to is not an individual person, Ol’ Doc Hyar, with a real story and a unique point of view, but a type composed of all the prejudices and opinions readers are already likely to hold about non-standard speakers. The representation becomes an example of what North would say African-American modernist literature of the 1920s had to “fight its way out of,” or what TuSmith would refer to as “institutionalized” and “formulaic.” Both would agree with Holloway, in whose book a part of this poem appears, that this rendering “giv[es] life to stereotypes” and is “intellectually diminishing.”³³ Thus, though Campbell has created a rendering that is arguably accurate – in fact, laborious in linguistic detail – readers of his poem hear only a one-dimensional, minstrel-show black voice, one that can convey some of the humor of the African-American experience but not much else.

33 Holloway, *Codes of Conduct*, 115.

In contrast, Reginald McKnight, in his story “Roscoe in Hell,” renders the speech of the narrator and protagonist Roscoe in such a way that though the character is placed within a social and racial context, he never becomes a caricature. In this excerpt, Roscoe describes being introduced to the occupants of hell:

*They clapping so hard I can feel the vibrations in my chest. Seem like they never gonna stop. Melvin just standing up on the desk with me, clapping his ass off, puffing on his stogie, and making so much of that blue smoke, I almost can't see him. Then the two big dudes grab me and carry me on they shoulders around the room, so's I can shake folks' hands.*³⁴

34 McKnight, R. 1992. Roscoe in Hell. *The Kind of Light that Shines on Texas*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 68.

McKnight's rendering of African-American speech is effective in both ways that Campbell's is not. First of all, by emphasizing syntactic and morphological indices of Black Vernacular English instead of phonetic and phonological ones as Campbell does, the rendering is easy to read. Of the seventy words, only two are non-standard spellings, namely, "gonna" and "so's," and both of these representations evoke oral forms common to many dialects, ones which readers are likely to have encountered both orally and in writing. This contrasts markedly with Campbell's rendering in which twenty-eight – more than half of the forty-seven word representations – deviate from the standard dictionary entry. Some of Campbell's spellings, such as "dat" for 'that,' "de" for 'the,' and "an'" for 'and,' probably do not interfere with reader's processing of the text. These determiners and the conjunction are function words carrying grammatical meaning only. There are relatively few in the language and they are encountered frequently in just a few lines of text; hence, they can quickly become familiar. But Campbell's non-standard spellings of content words and phrases severely hinder fluent reading. Spellings such as "lib" for 'live,' "hunner yurs" for 'a hundred years,' and "ebby tings" for 'everything,' are not automatically recognized and the reader must consciously analyze the string in order to retrieve lexical meaning. Moreover, content words, (nouns, adjectives, verbs) are more numerous than function words and many will appear in a text infrequently or only once. Consequently, most of them will not become familiar and reading of the text remains a labor.

The representation of morphological and syntactic features, on the other hand, inhibits processing only slightly,

and these are the types of indices that McKnight relies on to indicate the African-American background of his Roscoe. Like Campbell, he indicates the copula deletion characteristic of Black Vernacular English. In lines one and three, for example, there is no auxiliary “is” to accompany the present participles “clapping” and “standing.” Also like Campbell, he includes non-standard agreement patterns and undifferentiated pronoun usage. There is no third-person agreement morphology on “seem” in line two, and “they” is used in a possessive context in line seven. But unlike Campbell, McKnight’s grammatical indices are not obscured beneath a tangle of phonetic detail. Since readers automatically recognize McKnight’s standardly written words, they can construct a meaningful string and a syntactic representation regardless of the missing “is” or third person ‘s’ verb ending. Readers note the syntactic difference between standard written English and Roscoe’s voice, and this difference places Roscoe where McKnight intends, but it does not inhibit the readers’ understanding of Roscoe’s convincing and articulate voice.

Besides being easy to read, what one notices about Roscoe’s speech is that though it is non-standard, McKnight’s accurate but linguistically sparse dialect “indices,” in the words of Peirce, “assert nothing.”³⁵ They utilize the readers’ existent knowledge of standard written English and the belief that standard written English corresponds to a standard voice to place Roscoe in opposition to the standard. Then, drawing on whatever knowledge, first hand or otherwise, of black dialects readers may have, McKnight’s well-chosen indices direct readers to construct a specifically African-American voice in their heads. The indices connect Roscoe to a place within the social context, but his voice remains that of an individual. To the degree that readers learn and gain insight, to the degree that they come away impressed with the story told by this particular, non-standard, African-American voice, old assumptions about race, level of education and the intellect behind a dialect voice are controverted.

35 Peirce, *The Collected Papers*, 165.

Marked features and the representation of ‘-ing’

Though we have seen that a prominent difference between the restrictive dialect rendering of Campbell and the more versatile one of McKnight concerns the sheer number of phonetic features represented, an equally important difference is to be found in which spoken features writers choose to represent. Writers who create versatile dialect voices must also take into account the differing sociolinguistic weight or markedness of the few features they do choose to include. As an example, consider the representation of ‘-ing,’ the unstressed final syllable of present participles and indefinite pronouns such as ‘nothing’ and ‘something.’ Though the pronunciation with [In] (rhymes with ‘sin’) is a variant in the speech of all speakers of English,³⁶ it is the pronunciation with the velar nasal [ɪŋ] (rhymes with ‘sing’) that has come to be associated with standard speech. Studies in Great Britain by Trudgill³⁷ and in the United States by Labov and Cohen³⁸ show that speakers from a wide variety of social and ethnic groups consider the [ɪŋ] pronunciation a low-prestige, non-standard phonetic realization of ‘-ing.’ In fact, so prominent is the sociolinguistic markedness of this feature that, according to Fasold and Wolfram, representation of the ‘in’ pronunciation is “one of the most stereotyped phonological features of nonstandard speech in the American language.”³⁹ It is perhaps in awareness of the extremely marked status of the ‘in’ pronunciation that McKnight, in the excerpt above, renders none of the five ‘-ing’ word endings with an “in” spelling.

Other contemporary writers are equally aware of the stigmatizing potential of the ‘-in’ spelling. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, for example, Maya Angelou utilizes the ‘-in’ spelling in renderings of no one’s speech. This is despite the fact that she represents a wide variety of socially distinct characters: blacks, whites, field hands, ministers. Even in the example below, a rendering of the speech of black field hands, a class with arguably the least education and social status of any in the book, she does

36 Wald, B. and Shopen, T. 1985. A Researcher’s Guide to the Sociolinguistic Variable (ING). In Clark, 516.

37 Trudgill, P. 1985. *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 47

38 Labov, W. and Cohen, P. 1973. Systematic Relations of Standard and Non-standard Rules in the Grammars of Negro Speakers. In DeStefano, 150.

39 Fasold and Wolfram, Some Linguistic Features, 126

not represent present participles with 'in.' This is in spite of the fact that, like McKnight, she represents elision of sounds with "gonna" and deletes the auxiliary verb in "you (are) standing still":

*I'm gonna work so fast today I'm gonna
make you look like you standing still.*⁴⁰

40 Angelou, M. 1969. *I Know
Why the Caged Bird Sings*.
New York: Bantam, 6.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

So far, it appears that powerful narrative voices emerge from renderings that are indexical of particular dialects, but that differ only minimally from standard orthographic conventions. Writers such as McKnight and Angelou who rely primarily upon syntactic and morphological indices rather than phonetic ones create dialect texts that are easily accessed. Moreover, it appears that when writers do deviate from standard conventions, they avoid representing dialect features that are the most socially stigmatized. With this in mind, let's consider Twain's rendering of Jim's speech in *Huckleberry Finn*.

Twain uses the marked socio-linguistic meaning of the [In] pronunciation to depict Jim's extreme, marginalized status relative to Huck. Though certainly both black slaves and poor whites in nineteenth-century Missouri commonly used the [In] pronunciation, it is only in Jim's speech that Twain consistently uses the corresponding '-in' representation. Consider this exchange between Huck and Jim when Huck decides to play a trick on Jim:

Huck *What's the matter with you, Jim?
You been a-drinking?*

Jim *Drinkin'? Has I ben a-drinkin'?
Has I had a chance to be a-drinkin'?*⁴¹

41 Twain, M. 1983. *Adventures
of Huckleberry Finn*. New
York: Penguin, 87.

It is unlikely that any poor white youth such as Huck engaged in casual conversation with a black slave would utilize the [In] pronunciation indicated by the "-ing" spelling in "a-drinking." This rendering seems especially peculiar given the non-standard prefix 'a-' that both Huck and Jim attach to the present participle and signals that both

use non-standard forms. Nonetheless, Twain chooses to represent Jim's speech with "-in'" and Huck's with "-ing" as a part of his overall intent to build a graphic representation of Jim's speech that will make it seem more distant from standard than that of Huck's. In choosing to represent a pronunciation feature closely associated in the minds of readers with low social status in Jim's speech but not in Huck's, Twain matches the respective social distances of the two main characters from middle-class, white society with what readers believe to be respective linguistic distances.

Twain indicates Jim's linguistic distance from the standard not just in his choice of features to represent, but also in the overall, graphic representation; like Campbell's, Twain's dialect rendering differs markedly from the standard orthography. As anyone who has read *Huck Finn* or who has taught it to college freshmen can attest, it is the dialect rendering of Jim that is the most difficult to read. Below is an excerpt in which Jim proves to Huck that he knows what a harem is:

*A harem's a bo'd'n-house, I reck'n. Mos' likely dey has rackety times in de nusserly. En I reck'n de wives quarrels considable; en dat 'crease de racket. Yit dey say Sollermun de wises' man dat ever liv.'*⁴²

⁴² Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 81.

When twenty-four of the thirty-seven words in this passage deviate from standard spelling conventions, readers of this passage must work to follow it, and are, therefore, constantly reminded of Jim's difference from them.

Conclusion

Perhaps this is at the heart of TuSmith's and North's objections to dialect renderings such as those of Twain and Faulkner. In choosing to give voice to Jim, Ash and Sam through renderings that are linguistically vivid and therefore graphically anomalous, these two white, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers have created black voices that readers of standard English can never

completely assimilate. The high frequency occurrence of non-standard spellings and non-existent or unexpected suffixes commit readers to closely follow the way in which the characters speak so that readers are always aware of the linguistic distance between themselves and the characters. However, it is not that these renderings are “formulaic” or “stereotypical;” the voices of Sam, Ash and Jim, are of authentic individuals. But in their efforts to portray characters from a stigmatized, excluded social class, Faulkner and Twain have created voices that are ultimately impenetrable. Whereas McKnight’s Roscoe communicates in an idiom that readers can enter into, the voice of Twain’s Jim can never be completely embraced, for readers never feel that Jim is speaking to them in a common, shared tongue. His linguistic separateness matches his social separateness. The difference in the accessibility of Roscoe and Jim, therefore, is not due to differences in the linguistic accuracy of the renderings or differences in the “multilingual” versatility of the readers. It has to do instead with differences in the way the respective authors, McKnight and Twain, regard the extent and mutability of their characters’ social marginality.