

Wigh ai lyke *eye-dialect*

*or*

Wai igh lyke *eye-dialect*

*or*

Wye ai lighk *eye-dialect*

Patrick Honeybone  
patrick.honeybone@ed.ac.uk

### **The structure of the talk**

1. What is eye-dialect and how does it relate to dialect writing?
2. How common is eye-dialect in dialect writing?
3. Does anyone *not* like eye-dialect?
4. Why might that be mistaken?
5. Analysis and conclusions

## 1. What is eye-dialect and how does it relate to dialect writing?

‘Dialect writing’ is a cover term for all types of writing which “intends to represent a non-standard dialect in written form, at least to some degree and in some portion of a text”

I am principally interested in dialect writing as a **phonologist** and **dialectologist**.

Perhaps perversely, **eye-dialect** has been argued precisely *not* to be dialect writing

- on the assumption that it does not represent a non-standard dialect
- but I think this can be a misunderstanding

I focus on the use of nonstandard **spelling** (**‘respelling’**) in dialect writing

- not on dialect morphology, syntax, lexis *etc*

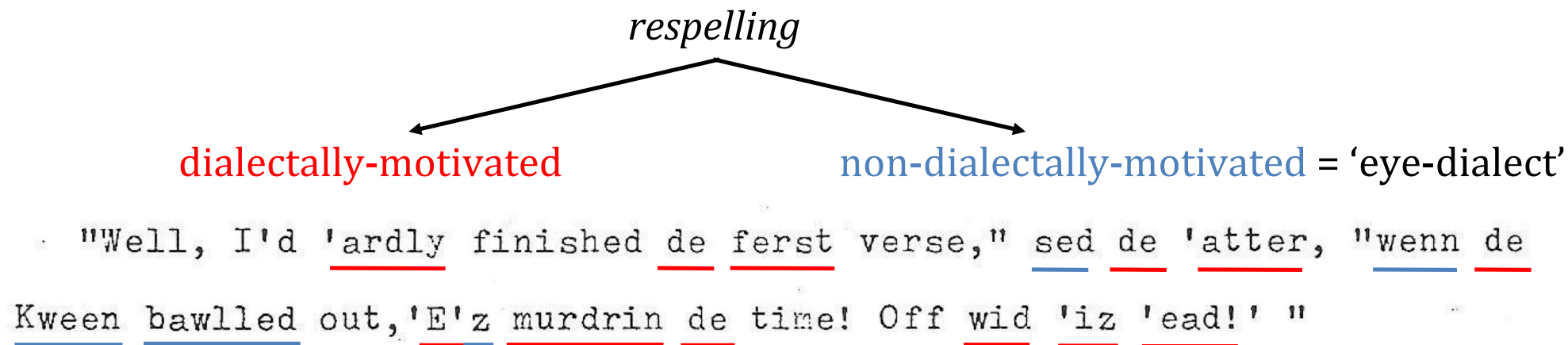
### DIALECT WRITING AND THE NORTH OF ENGLAND



EDITED BY  
PATRICK HONEYBONE  
AND  
WARREN MAGUIRE

As in this piece of dialect writing from Liverpool English ('Scouse')...

- fundamental here is that we can recognise **two types** of respelling in such material



**Dialectally motivated** = a respelling which is intended to draw the reader's attention to the fact that a word has a different phonological form in the dialect being represented than in the locally relevant reference form (= pretty-much RP for LE)

**Non-dialectally-motivated** = 'eye-dialect' – a term introduced in Krapp (1926)

- Bowdre (1964) writes that: eye dialect consists "in words or group of words (...) which have been spelled in a way which to the eye is recognizably nonstandard, but which to the ear still indicates a pronunciation that is standard"
- Preston (1985) writes that: "EYE-DIALECT forms ... reflect no phonological difference from their standard counterparts"

As in this piece of dialect writing from Liverpool English ('Scouse')...

- fundamental here is that we can recognise **two types** of respelling in such material

*respelling*

**dialectally-motivated**

**non-dialectally-motivated** = 'eye-dialect'

"Well, I'd 'ardly finished de ferst verse," sed de 'atter, "wenn de  
Kween bawllled out, 'E'z murdryn de time! Off wid 'iz 'ead! " "

'ardly, 'atter, 'ead	= <i>h</i> -dropping	(in LE, <i>ate</i> and <i>hate</i> can sound the same)
de, wid	= DH-stopping	(in LE, <i>dare</i> and <i>there</i> can sound the same)
ferst	= NURSE/SQUARE	(in LE, <i>fair</i> and <i>fur</i> can sound the same)

sed	<i>sed</i> = [sɛd] = <i>said</i>
wenn	<i>wenn</i> = [wɛn] = <i>when</i>
kween	<i>kween</i> = [kwi:n] = <i>queen</i>

## 2. How common is eye-dialect in dialect writing?

English is a particularly good language for respelling

- the spelling system is ripe for reuse
- English has a ‘deep orthography’ – it is ‘irregular’ so there are many graphemes which can be reused in respelling

Do those producing dialect writing use eye-dialect much?

- to find out, I considered **1000 words** from 3 Liverpool English dialect writing texts:
  - *A Scouse Interpretation of Alice in Wonderland*
  - *Stump*
  - *Lern Yerself Scouse* volume 1

A 'translation' into dialect

A SCOUSE INTERPRETATION  
OF  
ALICE IN WONDERLAND

BY  
MARVIN R. SUMNER

1990

\* Twinkel, twinkel, littul bat!

'Ow I wunder wot yor at!"

"Yunnow de song doyeray?"

"I've herd sumtin like it," sed Alice.

"It goezon, yernow," de 'atter kontinyewed, "in diss way:--

\* Up above de werld yew fly,

Like a tea-tray in de sky.

Twinkel, twinkel---"


'Ere de Dormowse shuk itzself an began singin innitz sleep"\*Twinkel, twinkel, twinkel, twinkel----" an wenn on so long dat dey 'ad to pinch it to make it stop.

"Well, I'd 'ardly finished de ferst verse," sed de 'atter, "wenn de Kween bawllled out, 'E'z murdrin de time! Off wid 'iz 'ead!' "

" 'Ow dredfully savidge!" eksclaimed Alice.

"An ever since dat," de 'atter wenn on inna mornful tone, " 'E woan do a ting I ask! It's orlwayz sixa klok now."

# A novel with 'literary dialect'



Search

Books

My books

Shop

Comics

Textbooks

Children's Books

My account

My Play activity


My wishlist

Redeem

Buy gift card

Parent Guide


Genres ▾ | Home | Top Charts | New Arrivals



## Stump

Niall Griffiths May 31, 2011  
Random House

★★★★★ 6

 Add to Wishlist

[Free sample](#) [£4.99 Buy](#)

A newcomer has arrived in a small Welsh seaside town - a one-armed Liverpoolian. Seeking to rebuild his life, if not his body, he is attempting to lead a life here unlike any he's lived before: a normal one - shopping, gardening, signing on, visiting friends, all the usual diurnal activities. Over a hundred miles to the north, however, two men in shellsuits are leaving Liverpool, heading south in a rickety old car. They have been sent by their gang-boss to wreak terrible, violent revenge, but have only a rough idea of their quarry: a one-armed man, maybe living somewhere in west Wales, in a small town by the sea.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Niall Griffiths was born in Liverpool in 1966 and now lives in Wales. He has published six other novels:



Niall Griffiths' *Stump*

—Fuckin useless mudderfucker *cunt* of a car ... fuckin Tommy givin us *this* pure piecer fuckin wank ...

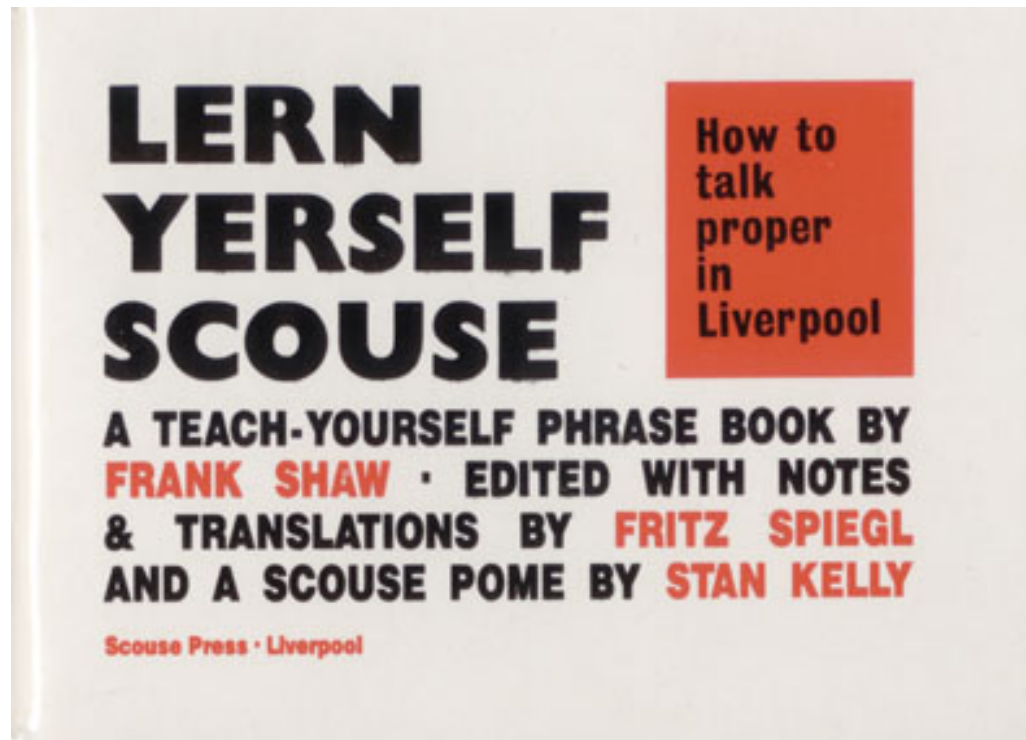
Alastair the passenger does not look up from the *Reader's Digest Book of the Road* he is studying balanced on his trackie'd knees.

—Yeh want Runcorn.

—I know I want Runcorn, Ally. I *know* me way out of the fuckin city.

—Runcorn, an then we can gerron to the M56 til ... Hapsford or somewhere, wharrever the fuck it's called.

A piece of Contemporary Humorous Localised Dialect Literature



Yer cudden knock de skin off a rice puddn.  
*You are a weakling.*

*Lern Yerself Scouse (1966)*

Dialect writing texts use eye-dialect to very different extents:

- some texts use a lot, while others use very little

*Alice*

546 respellings in total = c. 55% of the text

eye-dialect = 46%

*Stump*

109 respellings in total = c. 10% of the text

eye-dialect = 2%

*Lern Yerself Scouse*

292 respellings in total = c. 29% of the text

eye-dialect = 6%

### 3. Does anyone *not* like eye-dialect?

The use of eye-dialect is often disparaged in 'dialect writing studies'

Preston (1985) 'The Li'l Abner Syndrome: Written Representations of Speech'

- writing about written recording of speech by folklorists and sociolinguists
- "forms such as *sez* and *wuz* are known as eye-dialect – forms which reflect no phonological difference from their standard counterparts *says* and *was*. These last forms **serve mainly to denigrate the speaker** so represented by making him or her appear boorish, uneducated, rustic, gangsterish, and so on"

Fine (1983) 'In Defense of Literary Dialect: A Response to Dennis R. Preston'

- "Preston is right to remind us of the **deficiencies** of eye dialect"

Leonard & Tenney (1992) *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn*

- "The speech of Jim and other black characters in the novel is marked by extreme forms of eye dialect, while that of whites usually is not; the result **exaggerates the ignorance and/or deviance** of black speakers as compared to white."

Cook (2004) *The English Writing System*

- “This convention has been called ‘eye dialect’, that is to say the use of written forms that are labelled as non-standard through their deviant spelling but do not represent the actual pronunciation. ... **Spellings like those ... imply** at some level not just that the people speak a dialect, **but that they are illiterate or at best quaint.**”

Dollinger (2010) ‘Written sources for Canadian English’

- “This is nowhere more apparent than in eye-dialect, which is an orthographic representation that reveals no phonetic information, but uses non-standard spelling to denote the ‘difference’, usually the **uneducated** status, of a character.”

Everson (pc, 2011) on editing the typescript Scouse *Alice* in order to produce a published version

- “It’s going to take some work. **There are very many eye-dialect spellings** and a plethora of apologetic apostrophes **that need to be sorted.**”
  - Everson rerespelled (‘unrespelled’?) a lot of the text to introduce forms in Standard English spelling

All this argues that the use of eye-dialect in dialect writing is a bad thing because it denigrates the character or writer, implying that they are ignorant.



#### 4. Why might this total denigration of eye-dialect be mistaken?

The case for the defence?

- exhibit 1: **Slade**
  - sold c.50 million records in their heyday



Respellings like these involve a lot of eye-dialect

- this is not inviting people to look down on the band, but is, rather, **invoking humour** and **inviting affection**



*Coz I Luv You* 1971

*Gudbuy T'Jane* 1972

*I Won't Let It 'Appen Agen* 1972

*Mama Weer All Crazee Now* 1972

*Cum On Feel the Noize* 1973

*I'm Mee, I'm Now, an' That's Orl* 1973

*Skweeze Me, Pleeze Me* 1973

And it's not just Slade...

- exhibit 2: **Lizzo**

*Wat U Mean* 2013

*Luv It* 2014

*Big Grrrl Small World* 2015

*Cuz I Love You* 2019

Titles like these similarly use several eye-dialect spellings

- the point seems to be that eye dialect is fun/cool



Respelling can be carnivalesque, in line with Bakhtin's recognition of the subversion of norms as a positive thing.

People use eye-dialect all the time...

- as in Tagg, Baron & Rayson's (2012) corpus of text messages

Category	Examples	Tokens	Types
Letter homophones	u, r, ur, c, b	1040 (29.91%)	30 (3.25%)
Number homophones	person2die, 2gether, up4that,in2hospital, 2nite	476 (13.69%)	126 (13.64%)
Clippings	tomo, tho, v, bout, prob, hav	414 (11.91%)	113 (12.23%)
Apostrophe omission	wots, im, il, its, thats	367 (10.56%)	60 (6.49%)
Eye dialect	<u>bak, luv, wots, gud</u>	243 (6.99%)	47 (5.09%)
Colloquial contractions	lookin, av, cos, n, whaddya	232 (6.67%)	94 (10.17%)
Spacing	<u>Thankyou, ur, u2, aswell, Ohdear,</u> sleep4aweek	232 (6.67%)	171 (18.51%)
Consonant writing	txt, msg, lv, wld, pls	130 (3.74%)	51 (5.52%)
Mistyping	your (for you're), definately, adn, menas	61 (1.75%)	47 (5.09%)
Double letter reduction	<u>stil, worry, spel, I'l, 2moro, ul</u>	43 (1.24%)	16 (1.73%)



This ties in with a debate that exists within movements to create standardised orthographies for forms of English or related languages, like **Scots** and **Pitkern-Norf'k**.

In discussions of **Scots** writers distinguish between a **minimalist** and **maximalist** approach

- should the author stay as close to Standard English as possible, or emphasise the difference between the lect/language represented and StEng/RefEng

We thinkna ón the lang Scóts miles,  
The mósses, watters, slaps, an stiles  
That lie atween us an oor hame,  
Whaur sits oor sulky, sullen dame,  
Gaitherin her brous like gaitherin stórm,  
Nursin her wrath tae keep it warm.

Wei think na on the lang Scots miyls,  
The mosis, watirs, slaps an stiyls,  
That liy betwein us an our haem,  
Whaar sits uir sulky, sulin daem,  
Gethiran hir brous liyk gethiran storm,  
Nursan hir vraeth ti keip hit warm.

Arguing for a maximalist position: McClure (1979) says (arguably including eye-dialect)

- “Though the perpetual scholarly discussion of whether or not Scots is a language does not focus on its lack of a spelling system, **the fact is certainly that in its written form it does not *look* like a language, but like a distortion of another language.**”

Arguing for a minimalist position: McArthur (1998) describes it as ...

- “... a pragmatic system which **reflects the similarities and differences of Scots and Standard English** ... [maximalism] impos[es] an unnecessary burden...”

## 5. Analysis and conclusions

We seem to be left with a paradox:

- analysts who have discussed the matter seem overwhelmingly to think that eye-dialect is a 'bad' thing, **denigrating** and implying **ignorance**
- eye-dialect keeps popping up in texts, with some writers **keen** to use it, clearly viewing it **positively**

We can make sense of this if we recognise the variation that exists in dialect writing

- everyone can be right in their own way...
- there are a series of overlapping axes which classify different kinds of dialect writing
  - who has written it? a native speaker of the dialect? a non-native speaker?
  - who is it written for? native speakers? non-native speakers? everyone?
  - why is it written? to celebrate a dialect? or to record it? or to laugh at it?

If a non-native speaker has transcribed a dialect speaker, in sociolinguistic research or a novel, the use of eye-dialect may not be sanctioned by those speakers

- **eye-dialect may be inappropriate here** – for the reasons seen above

If a native speaker has written a piece for other native speakers to celebrate their dialect, they may want to (i) **maximise its difference** from Standard English and (ii) revel in the fact that it is **full of variation and has no standard**.

This may seem obvious, but the **positive potential for eye-dialect** is often missed.

*Remember this?*

Everson (pc, 2011) on editing the typescript Scouse *Alice* in order to produce a published version

- “It’s going to take some work. **There are very many eye-dialect spellings** and a plethora of apologetic apostrophes **that need to be sorted.**”
- Everson rerespelled (‘unrespelled’?) a lot of the text to introduce forms in Standard English spelling

“ ‘Ow dredfully savidge!” eksclaimed Alice.

“An ever since dat,” de ‘atter wenn on inna mornful tone,” ‘E woan do a ting I ask! It’s orlwayz sixa klok now.”

“Ow dreadfully savidge!” exclaimed Alice.

“An ever since dat,” de Atter wenn on in a mournful tone,  
“E wo’n do a ting I ask! It’s allus six o’clock now.”

The editor produced a ‘minimalist’ version of the text, contrasting with the ‘maximalist’ native-speaker author’s original, missing their point

- eye-dialect *can* make a positive contribution to dialect writing, in the right place