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Garcia-Bermejo Giner, Maira F., "Phonetic Key to The Non-Standard Othography in The Novels of George Eliot" (1991). *The George Eliot Review*. 153.

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PHONETIC KEY TO THE NON-STANDARD ORTHOGRAPHY IN THE NOVELS OF GEORGE ELIOT

by Maria F. Garcia-Bermejo Giner

Any writer attempting to represent graphically variant pronunciations is faced with the double problem of being accurate as regards the pronunciation he has in mind and of choosing a spelling easily identifiable with the standard word. As a rule, he will keep most of the *normal* spelling and alter only the orthography of the syllable pronounced in a different way. The results of this operation should enable the reader to interpret the variant spelling quickly and, at the same time, give him a good idea about how that word *sounds* in dialect speech. It is not always easy to interpret variant spellings and the extra effort they demand from the reader's attention may sometimes provoke his rejection; it all depends on the writer's ability and on the reader's good disposition. The existence of a long standing tradition in the use of dialects in English literature reaching as far back as Chaucer says much for their general acceptance among the public. Research has been carried out on this aspect of the works of some individual authors who tried to suggest Scottish, northern, southern or Cockney pronunciations in the XIXth century. Those were also the dialects most frequently described in glossaries, essays and periodicals, and the best known to the general reader. Yet very little has been said about the dialect in the novels of George Eliot (1), the first author to fully represent the speech of the West Midlands. The reason for this may be the almost total lack of dialect studies about this region in the XIXth century (2) and also the absence of other writers to continue the path she started.

We know for sure which dialects she wanted to represent through a letter she wrote to W. Skeat, probably in 1872, in which she said; "... the dialogue in "Adam Bede" ... is modelled on the talk of N. Staffordshire and the neighbouring part of Derbyshire... The district imagined as the scene of "Silas Marner" is N.

Warwickshire” (3). A high percentage of her variant spellings can also be found in the novels of her beloved Walter Scott and in those of Dickens, Thackeray and E. Bronte. Yet it is possible to associate them with pronunciations truly existing in Derbyshire, Staffordshire or Warwickshire. Through her selection of traditional forms and her creation of other spelling she succeeded in conveying most accurately the way people really spoke in these counties towards the middle of the XIXth century (4). She was herself a dialect speaker until the age of thirteen, shared half her life with her Derbyshire born father, and dwelt in Warwickshire until 1849. She had a first hand knowledge of the speech of this part of England through her daily contact at the time with farmworkers, maids and labourers.

In that same letter we mentioned above she also said, “It must be borne in mind that my inclination to be as close as I could to the rendering of dialect, both in words and spelling was constantly checked by the artistic duty of being generally intelligible... The spelling, being determined by my own ear alone, was necessarily a matter of anxiety, for it would be as possible to quarrel about it as about the spelling of oriental names.” (5) However, the study of nearly four hundred variants she uses in her novels makes it possible to establish a key to their phonetic interpretation which might, otherwise, be somewhat obscure on occasion. We will transcribe the different diagraphs and graphemes for the RP phoneme they represent to the general reader, followed, when necessary, by one or several of the dialect sounds. We have taken as sample for our study her first four novels which present almost all the variant spellings she would later use sporadically in her other novels. Our key may also be of help to interpret those found in *Felix Holt*, *Middlemarch* or *Daniel Deronda*.

Vowels and Diphthongs.

1. A in unstressed syllables usually implies [a] (e.g. *anoof*, *a-coming*, etc.); in stressed position, followed just in spelling or also phonetically, by one or two consonants, it represents [æ] (/a/) (e.g. *ax*, *babby*, *drap*, *yallow*, etc). However, when we find it before a consonant plus mute *e* or the past ending *-ed* (= [ɪd]), we must read it as [ei] (/ɛi/) e.g. *chacenuit*, *chated*, *behave*, *mate*, etc). If it precedes *re* it stands for [ɛə] (e.g. *yare*) but when *r* +consonant follows, *a* should be understood to represent [ɑ:] (/a/) (e.g. *desarve*, *marcy*, *sarvice*, *yarb*) and before just a single *r*, [ɔ:] (e.g. *war*).

As word-initial syllable, *ae* may stand for [e] (/ɛ/) (e.g. *aenytthing*) but as the nucleus of a syllable it usually represents [ei] (/ɛi/) (e.g. *faet*, *kaep*, *hae*, *mae*, etc.). George Eliot also tries to suggest this diphthong by means of *ai*, *ay* (e.g. *raybels*, *behaind*, *denay*, *laif*, *tay*, *whay*,); but whenever *ai* is followed by *r* it represents [ɛə] (e.g. *contrairy*).

2. *E*, as a rule, suggest [e] (/ɛ/) when it is in an accented syllable (e.g. *gether, ledy, mek, mester, set, gev*, etc.), or followed just in spelling or also phonetically by two consonants (e.g. *sperrit, gell, pessecuting*). When in the group *-er* it stands for [] (e.g. *elber, shadder, yer*, etc.) Sometimes George Eliot writes this grapheme just to show that the nucleus of the preceding syllable is a long vowel (e.g. *booke, looke*) or a diphthong (e.g. *quinetance*). When she omits it from the standard spelling of a word she is trying to point out that the nucleus of the previous syllable is a vowel and not a diphthong (e.g. *ston*).

Ee followed by *r* stands for [iə] (e.g. *theer*); otherwise it represents [i:] (e.g. *neebor*). George Eliot also makes use of *ea* to suggest this long vowel (e.g. *measter*).

By means of *ey* the novelist sometimes tries to suggest [ai] (e.g. *away, dey, ley*) or [ei]/(ɛi/) (e.g. *hey, feyther*). It is not often that George Eliot recurs to standard spelling to suggest deviant pronunciation of other words but once we find *flew* for *flown* in which *ew* equates [u:]. The same may be said of *bye, by*, in which *y, ye* represent [ai].

3. George Eliot uses *i* to suggest [ɪ] in unaccented syllables (e.g. *pallis, sacriment*, etc) and also in accented ones (e.g. *cliver, niver*, etc.) as a syllabic nucleus (e.g. *dilegate, dilicate, sich*) or word initially (e.g. *iver, istid*). When *i* is followed by *-ght* (e.g. *favright*) or by *-ne* (e.g. *acquinetance*) it stands for [ai]. If it substitutes *oi* we must also read it as [ai] (e.g. *biler, hile, pisoned, tilette*, etc) The same happens with *y* when we find it where in ordinary spelling there is *oy* (e.g. *by, empty*). *Y* may represent just [ɪ] when preceding an *e* in an unaccented syllable (e.g. *follyers*) and also [j], and the same applies in unaccented syllables (e.g. *disposial, punctial*). When word final *ie* stands for [i:] (e.g. *forgie, gie*).

4. As a rule *o* represents [ɒ] when in a stressed syllable, whether it is followed graphically or phonetically by two consonants or just by one (e.g. *wonna, wotna, ony, mon, rot, onreasonable, hoss, mossel*, etc.). If it is in an unaccented syllable it stands for [ə] (e.g. *hollodays*). When George Eliot makes use of the spelling of a standard word to suggest a variant pronunciation, *o* has the value of [ʌ] (e.g. *come* for *came*).

Oo may represent [u] (e.g. *anoof, yoong, coom, joost*) when followed in spelling or phonetically by two consonants or by *k*. If it precedes a consonant + mute *e* it may also stand for [u:] (e.g. *loove*). Sometimes it is difficult to say for sure whether the writer wanted to imply [ʊ] or [u:] by *oo* (e.g. *doog, goothic, agoo, groon, stoon, stool*) as both pronunciations were in use in these West Midland dialects but more

often than not research comes to show that it was [u:] she wanted to suggest (e.g. *aboot, doon, hoo, noo, oot, prood, groons*, etc.). We may say that when *oo* substitutes *u* (e.g. [ʌ]) it represents [ʊ] and when it is in the place of *o* (e.g. [əu]) or *ou* (e.g. [au]) it implies [u:].

Oo followed by *r* stands for [uə] (e.g. *moor, coort*).

Oa represents [ɔ:] (e.g. *poases*).

By means of *ooa* George Eliot was trying to indicate [ʊə] (e.g. *alooan, dooant, tooad*, etc.).

Ou represents [au] (e.g. *could, fould, foulks*, etc.).

5. In stressed position *u* should be read as [ʊ] (e.g. *druv, hum, fust, nuss, cuss, puck, furrin*, etc.) although those unfamiliar with the dialect would probably interpret it as [ʌ]. When it is followed by a consonant + mute *e* it stands for [ju] (e.g. *fule*). When *u* is found in an unaccented syllable or in one with secondary stress it must be understood to represent [ə] (e.g. *sut, whut, shamrucks*).

Word final *uy* in unaccented syllables stands for [ɪ] (e.g. *carguy, Boguy*).

We must add that omission of one or more graphemes and/or their substitution for an apostrophe implies the elision of the phoneme or phonemes they represent (e.g. *'bate, 'rethmetic, d', th', y', t'naight*, etc.)

Semivowels and Consonants.

Consonant graphemes are usually easy to interpret and as a rule have the same values as in the standard language.

Omission of a consonant of semivowel may be shown either by the use of an apostrophe or a hyphen (e.g. *awk'ar, for'ard, gran', swep'*, etc.), by doubling of a preceding consonant except when it is *c* in which case it is written *ck* (e.g. *forrard, allays, partickler, Lunnon, stanning, sinnify, contradick*, etc.), or simply by not writing it (e.g. *backards, lor, pouns*, etc.)

The only consonantal spellings which may pose a problem are those related to the dialect pronunciations of RP [tʃ] as [t] in some words and of the group [ju:] or the

semivowel [j] in some others. As regards the first case we must take into account that word final [tʃə] is pronounced [t] in these dialects and the writer suggests it by:

- 1 - Omission of final *-e* in the group *-ture* (e.g. *creatur, furnitur, lectur, pictur*, etc.)
- 2 - Substitution for *-ter* (e.g. *pictur*)
- 3 - Omission of *-u-* (e.g. *nat' ral, unnat' ral*)
- 4 - Exceptionally in the word *fortune* she implies a variant [fɔ:tən] by writing *fortin*.
- 5 - Duplication of the preceding consonant (e.g. *statty*).

Loss of [j] in the group [ju:] is shown by the substitution of *u* by *oo* (e.g. *toon*). When [j] is pronounced as [ɪ], the preceding consonant is doubled and *i, y* appear in the place of *u, ue* (e.g. *deppity, eddicated, nevvu, stattiis, wally*, etc). The group *cu* is replaced by *ki* (e.g. *calkilate, spekilation*). An exception to these rules are *diminutive, nephys, nevey, nevvie, valyable*.

Conclusion

The highest percentage of the pronunciations suggested by these spellings belongs to the dialect of Derbyshire, followed by Staffordshire and Warwickshire. These counties share many phonetic features with the dialects traditionally considered northern and George Eliot's orthographical variants show this fact although the general *flavour* of her literary dialect can definitely be located in the North West Midlands.

We hope our key will facilitate the reader's interpretation of the dialect spellings and reduce the possibility of quarreling about them "as about the spelling of oriental names".

NOTES

(1) Apart from the comparison with the speech of Leicestershire in S.B. Evans, *Leicestershire Words, Phrases and Proverbs*, ed. by S. Evans (London, English Dialect Society, 1881), and two short papers on her use of dialect from a literary point of view, A.W. Axon, "George Eliot's Use of Dialect", in *English Dialect Society Miscellanies*, IV. (1880), and P. Ingham, "The Dialect of George Eliot and Thomas Hardy" in *Literary English Since Shakespeare*, ed. by G. Watson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970) pp 347-63. Mention of it was made by S. Ellis in the 1989 *Linda Hulme Lecture*, "Local Speech in Writing: Surely nobody reads it!"

(2) See our “Sources for the Linguistic Analysis of some Nineteenth Century Midland Dialects”, forthcoming in *Papers of the International Congress of Dialectologists*, Bamberg, 1990.

(3) Cf. G.S. Haight, *The George Eliot Letters*, IX vols, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press 1954-1978), IX, p. 39.

(4) As we have tried to prove in our doctoral dissertation “El dialecto en las primeras novelas de George Eliot” (Universidad de Salamanca, 1989), forthcoming as *El dialecto en las primeras novelas de George Eliot: Grafía y Vocalismo*, Ediciones de la Universidad de Salamanca.

(5) Cf. G.S. Haight, *op. cit.*, IX, p. 39.