VERNACULAR LANGUAGE AND ITS CREATIVE USES

The vernacular: from Latin *vernaculus* meaning 'native': that is, a 'low variant', a substandard, regional variety, non-literary, a local style of English speech: ordinary daily speech.

This article looks at how well the alphabet does its job with vernacular English, gives a brief history of vernacular English, then considers some examples of its creative use in contemporary writing.

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This article asks: in what ways are writers responsible for and to words and the language? How does our language and style of speech ‘represent’ us? Is writing just speech written down? Does written English just offer us another version of spoken English? Does our alphabet even ‘represent’ our language adequately? How and in what way does what we write ‘represent’ how we speak? And how does written language represent the English language? Is written language adequate to all the possibilities of the language, or does it just ‘represent’ a small slice of the language – and if so, which slice exactly? And how does a professional writer make use of these things?

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Before we move look at how we can make use of vernacular language it is a good idea to consider how well our alphabet manages to convey the sounds of our language. There are several questions we might usefully ask - What does the alphabet do? What is the job of the alphabet? Does the alphabet ‘represent’ the sounds we make in speech? How accurately does it do this? As professional writers we need to have some idea about how well our alphabet fits the English language?

When the Phoenician alphabet first arrived in Greece it was a very imperfect match with Greek, mainly because Greek made much more use of vowel sounds than a Semitic language like Phoenician, which relied on a system of consonant roots. The Greeks solved the problem by taking unused signs, which in Phoenician referred to consonants which did not figure in Greek, and applying them to Greek vowels. This was a work of improvisation, but it was effective. None of the languages making use of the alphabet since then has found a better system, but they have all adapted this basic scheme to their own particular needs.

English is no different. The match between the alphabet and our language is far from perfect. Although we have only 26 letters in our alphabet, Phoneticians distinguish 49 phonemes in Standard English.

We have only five alphabetic letters for vowels, but we have 25 possible vowel sounds - 12 vowels, 8 diphthongs (combinations of two vowel sounds) and 5 triphthongs (combinations of three vowel sounds).

While there are 21 consonant letters in the English alphabet, there are 24 consonant sounds in Standard English.

Clearly our alphabet does not represent many of the sounds or combinations of sounds that we make.

Some examples:

Dark and light l. Contrast the ‘dark’ /l/ sound in the words *film, table, bottle* with the ‘light’ /l/ in the words *like, lot, lump*.

Glottal stops. Common in London and in Manchester speech: *bottle, get a cab, Gatwick, mutton*.

Phonemic contrast. In English the words *pair, pear* and *pare* are all pronounced identically - it is the spelling that tells us what we are referring to.

Stress and intonation. In English the noun *entrance* and the English verb *entrance* are not pronounced with the same stress.

Weak and Strong forms. A number of words in English have two forms - a strong or accented form and a weak or un-accented form, depending on whether they are pronounced with any particular force or stress. In English, over 50 words, many expressing grammatical relationships (determiners, pronouns, auxiliary verbs, prepositions, conjunctions and particles) are particularly affected. For example: *a, and, that, his, our, some, the, your, and, as, but, at, for, from, of, to, from, he, her, him, them, us, am, are, can, do, does, had, has, have, is, was, were, must, shall, could, will, would, there, not.* These words differ when they are said in isolation (strong form) from how they are said as part of a sentence (weak form). Weak forms are normal in speech, but they are not indicated in written texts or taken into account in the alphabet. Often the context of a word is important. When, for example, there is a strong adverb denoting a place, the word *there* (*Look over there*) appears in its strong form. But at the start of a sentence like: *There's nothing like a cup of tea*, the word *there* appears in its weak form.

Assimiliation. That is when adjacent sounds influence each other and become closer or similar to each other. This is very common in rapid speech. In the phrases 'ten balloons' or 'ten bikes' the phrase is likely to become *tem balloons* or *tem bikes*. In both cases the /m/ anticipates the bilabial consonant which follows. In the phrase 'bridge score', the *dge* sound clearly influences the start of the second word and modulates the /s/ into a *sch* sound. The same thing happens with Church Street, where the sound is nearer to *schtreet*. In some cases sounds coalesce and fuse into a new sound segment that is neither one word nor the other. In the phrase 'won't she', the final /t/ and the initial /sh/ combine to produce something like a /tch/ sound. Another example would be the phrase: 'don't you'.

Elision. In rapid speech some sounds are left out (elided) altogether. Some examples:
Acts of Parliament (ax uv)
next day (nexday)
government (gove-ment)
mashed potatoes (mash-potatoes)
police (p'lice)
tomato (t'mato)
correct (crect)
library (libry)
particularly (particuly)
got to go
go away (go-way)

try again (try-gen)
cup of tea (cup o tea)
lots of time
lots of people
going to (gonna)
want to (wanna)

Liaising /r/ There are a number of occasions when there is no /r/ in the written sentence, but an /r/ sound is added. This is called the linking or liaising /r/. For example:
The Shah of Iran
I had an idea in the bath
The China interview
Draw up a list
India and Pakistan
Media interest
Law and Order
A flaw in the argument
The liaising /r/ is important in 'oiling' the passage of certain combinations of sounds, but it is not written.

The /ə/ or 'schwa' sound. This is the most common sound in the English language /ə/ (the unstressed *a* sound and the final sound in *leader*, *actor*) but it is not represented in the alphabet at all.

So in fact the alphabet does not deal particularly well with English. The fact that we continue to use it is a triumph of approximation, improvisation and an attitude that says, 'Oh well, it's near enough'. The linguistician Roy Harris tried to imagine what a Martian arriving on earth would make of all this:

> It is interesting to ask oneself what conclusions a Martian might draw if alphabetic writing were the sole source of evidence available to Martians about the languages of Earth, and if it were believed on Mars that the alphabet must be a system able to cope with all the phonetic vagaries of Earthly speech. Among the first conclusions the Martian might draw, presumably, are that stress and intonation play no role in speech. Earthlings would be envisaged as endowed with organs of phonation which were limited to producing an even, monotonous vibration, with abrupt qualitative transitions between one segment and the next (…) Martian philologists would be led to conclude erroneously that, for example, the English noun *entrance* and the English verb *entrance* were phonetically identical. More generally they would be unable to detect patterns of allophonic variation of the type which distinguishes, say, the initial consonant of English *leaf,* from the final consonant of English *feel.* They would be quite unaware that there are sounds in French which never occur in English, and vice versa. They would seriously underestimate the number of English phonemes, and would be oblivious to the fact that different varieties of spoken English utilise

> different phonemic contrasts. They would suppose that *pair, pear* and *pare* were all pronounced differently, and that cough rhymed with rough. In short their attempts to reconstruct phonological systems for the languages of earth would go far astray, and they would have scarcely any information about what speech sounded like at all.[1]

The remainder of this article looks at some of the developments that lead to the growth of the English Language. But before you go any further you need to look up the following words in a good dictionary and make notes on the meanings you find. In particular, note the difference between an accent and a dialect. You will need to refer to these definitions as you read on.

Pidgin
Creole
Vernacular
Dialect
Accent
Received Pronunciation
Standard English

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We don't have much information about the languages of Europe and the British Isles from the time before the Indo-Europeans arrived. Basque is thought to be the only surviving language from those times. In the British Isles, only a handful of pre-Celtic place names have survived. Pictish, the one language for which we have some evidence, might have been an early form of Celtic or a very distant relative of Basque, but there are too few surviving examples of the language to enable the experts to say with any certainty.

After the arrival of the Celts, sometime before about 600-500BC, our knowledge improves a little. We know that various Celtic dialects gradually separated to become the ancestors of the Welsh, Manx, Irish and Scots Gaelic languages. By the time the Romans arrived in 43BC it is probable that, apart from a few surviving speakers of Pictish, Germanic languages may already have been spoken in the eastern parts of Britain – in the north east, in East Anglia and in Kent – and that Celtic languages were spoken throughout most of the central and western parts of British Isles – Wales, Cornwall, Devon, Cumbria, the North West, the Midlands, along the south coast and in Ireland.

After the Romans invasion of 43BC the Celtic languages of Britain began to take vocabulary from Latin. By the time the Romans began to withdraw from Britain, about 410AD, the British might more accurately be described as Welsh and Latin speaking Romano-British. Where they did not speak Latin, they spoke an early version of Welsh.

[1] R. Harris, *The Origin of Writing* (La Salle: Illinois, 1986), 100-01.

Although we think of King Arthur as an English warrior, he or someone just like him was almost certainly a Welsh speaking Romano-British warrior, resisting the incursions of the Saxons after the departure of the Romans.

The direct ancestor of English was Anglo-Saxon. Jutes, Saxons and Angles from along the north German and Dutch coastline had probably begun to settle in Britain before the Romans arrived, but were then recruited to serve alongside the Roman army as mercenaries during the occupation of Britain. However, after the departure of the Romans, the Romano-British continued to recruit them to fend off Scottish and Irish marauders. The Jutes, Angles and Saxons quickly realised that after the Romans had gone Britain was a good place to settle and they started to arrive in ever increasing numbers, marrying and blending in with the British all along the southern and eastern side of Britain. Inevitably they clashed with the Celtic speaking population and around the year 503 King Arthur is said to have fought his last battle against the increasing numbers of Saxons. After this, the invaders were absorbed into British society and Anglo-Saxon gradually began to replace the Celtic languages except in Ireland, parts of Wales and Scotland. Only a few Celtic words – mainly place and river names - were taken into Anglo-Saxon.

However, the Saxons were not in control for very long. The Viking assault on Britain started with the attack on Lindisfarn in the year 793. This reinforced the 'Germanic' element in British culture and introduced Norse words particularly to the north and east of England. The arrival of the great Danish army in 870-78 led to the defeat of the English defenders by the Scandinavians and introduced a range of Danish words into the language of in the Midlands and the east of England. With these two invasions, Anglo-Saxon influence was overlain by two different versions of Scandinavian influence.

The Norman invasion of 1066 introduced French words, while the acceptance of Roman Christianity over Celtic Christianity inevitably made current a great many Latin words. Over time the changes in vocabulary and grammar have been enormous. So great have the changes been that, even though English derives from Anglo-Saxon, without a glossary we now have difficulty reading and understanding it. Effectively, Anglo-Saxon is like a foreign language to us.

English grew not as a 'natural' language, but as a very well developed *pidgin*.[2] That is it developed as the language that the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Celts and Scandinavians who lived in Britain developed to speak with the Norman-French invaders who arrived in 1066. It did not happen all at once, of course, but the two speech communities – the rulers and the ruled - over a period of more than 400 years had to find ways to communicate with each other. English was the result. And by the 14th century, what had been a *pidgin* allowing two communities to understand one another had become a *creole* called English, spoken by the whole community.[3] By the time of the Tudors

[2] L. Todd, *Pidgins and Creoles* (Methuen: London, 1974).

[3] A *pidgin* is a marginal language which arises to fulfil a restricted communicative need between people who have no language in common – i.e. the Saxons and the Normans. A *Creole* arises

English had already lost most of its Anglo Saxon and French inflexional endings and had begun to produce its own literature. As a world-wide commercial and trading language from the late 15th century up to the present day, it has often been in the mouths of foreigners and outsiders who have all helped to simplify it so that its grammar, although still present, has become less obtrusive.

This is a very, very potted history of English Modern English. There is much more to it than this. But it is clear English is a blend of three basic components: various Germanic dialects (predominantly Danish and Anglo-Saxon), Norman-French, and Latin. It should not surprise us to have so many Latin words in the language: Latin words had been borrowed into both Anglo-Saxon and Norman-French, so they were common to both languages as they fed into English. In the following example the words used are basically of Anglo-Saxon origin, but the words of French (Fr) and Latin (L) origin are marked so we can see this blending process at work:

> Bilbo was very rich and very peculiar (L), and had been the wonder of the Shire for sixty years, ever since his remarkable (Fr) disappearance (Fr) and unexpected (L) return (Fr). The riches (Fr) he had brought back from his travels (Fr) had now become a local (L) legend (Fr), and it was popularly (L) believed, whatever the old folk might say, that the Hill at Bag End was full of tunnels (Fr) stuffed (Fr) with treasure (Fr).[4]

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Modern English emerged from Middle English – that is, from the preferred dialect of the king, his court and administration - around the years 1450-1550. That dialect was from a wide area known as the East Midlands. This was roughly equivalent to the southern part of the old 'Danelaw', the area settled and controlled by the Danes. The Danish based language of this area was modified later by the language that developed after the Norman Conquest. The dialect that emerged was to become dominant in Britain simply because the area where it was spoken included London, where the king, the court, civil service and government resided. This dialect became the accent of the Norman-French ruling class and their court, and as London came to dominate the south, the accent came to represent what most of us now think of as 'the south'.

This dialect was dominant in print too. Both Caxton and Chaucer used the used the East Midlands dialect and Wycliffe translated *The New Testament* into this regional dialect.[5] William Caxton (1420-?), who undertook to print Chaucer's book, was the first English printer. The first printed book in the English language was a *History of Troy,* which appeared in 1473, though it was printed in Bruges. Several other publications

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when a pidgin becomes a mother tongue for a speech community, usually with an expanded lexicon and a more elaborate syntax.

[4] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Allen & Unwin: London, 1974), 33.

[5] S. H. Steinberg, *Five hundred Years of Printing* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1955), 70-3.

followed before Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* – the first example of native English literature - was published in 1478. In time this dialect came to be the accepted standard version of the language, though the bulk of the population did not speak it. It was eventually labeled 'Received Pronunciation'.

The phonetician Daniel Jones was the first to label and codify the various elements of Received Pronunciation (RP) in his book *An Outline of English Phonetics* (1918). Received Pronunciation is sometimes called Standard English and it is the name given to what is often now thought of as 'regionally accent-less' English – though of course it is not. Although referred to as 'the aspirational standard of English for those who live north of Watford Gap', it is for most British people the unmistakable sound of 'the south'. RP is the regional accent of the 'Home Counties' - Essex, Kent, Middlesex, Sussex, Surrey, Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Dorsetshire, Hampshire, Cambridgeshire, Oxfordshire and Hertfordshire. Received from whom, we might ask. And the answer is from our social superiors in the south.

By the 16th century the accent was already distinctive and the English courtier George Puttenham wrote in 1589 that the speech of northern nobles and gentlemen was not as 'courtly or current' as that of the 'Southern English'.[6] As most people at this time seeking advancement moved to London and adopted this accent, it came to signify high social position and/or upward mobility. By the 19th century it had become the accent of preparatory schools, boarding schools like Eton, Harrow and Winchester, and a large number of other public schools training people for the universities, entry into Sandhurst, the Civil Service or administration of the British Empire.[7]

While it may once have been a regional accent, RP became the traditional prestige accent of power and authority; throughout the UK it was the class accent of the middle and upper classes - barristers, judges, civil servants, generals, admirals, a great many politicians, the Royal Family, most radio and TV newsreaders, traditional landowners, the Protestant clergy and all leading figures. It was the accent favoured by the BBC. Hence, RP was also known as 'Right Posh'.

Steve Bell, *The Guardian* cartoonist, often parodies the RP accent of the Royal Family in his strip *If...* For example in 1985 he had the Queen, on an official trip to Jamaica, say:

> It is over thirty yahrs since I lahst visited your larvely island. Since thet time, my own femlay has grayn, as I am sure have your own femlays. There, hyever, the similerity ends – because I personally am a monarch with a vair, vair high income. You people I am afraid are not… Which is why you mast not let the grayth in your population itestrip the creation of jorbs.

[6] D. Crystal, *The English Language* (CUP: Cambridge, 1997), 365.
[7] W. F. Bolton & D. Crystal, *Pelican History of Literature, vol. 10: The English Language* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1987), 43-4.

However, RP remains to some extent theoretical, mythical, perhaps even largely fictional. Today only about 3% of the British population speaks unmodified RP: about 80% speak with a regional accent; the remainder speaks a modified version of RP. Some politicians find that it is essential, if they are to stand a chance of election, to speak a kind of hybrid accent between modified RP and a regional accent.[8] These days, and particularly since devolution, rather than a passport to acceptance, authority and power, an RP accent is often perceived to be at odds with the life style, experience and ambitions of Wales, Scotland, Ireland, the North East, the North West and the Midlands - the 'regions'.

However, RP is being replaced not by the 'upper crust' accent of the Sloane Ranger or by the 'frightfully-frightfully', 'cut glass' accents of the few remaining debutants and their public school educated beaux, but by the development of 'Estuary English'. This is the kind of English spoken by ex-Prime Minister John Major who wished to present himself to the electorate as a 'common man'. Currently, and with slight variations, it is the accent favoured by Prime Minister David Cameron and by London Mayor Boris Johnson (both Eton and Oxford men) as they address the country. It is an informal, down-market, (fake) classless accent, based loosely on RP but incorporating many features from Cockney and the general London accent and often imitating the 'Sloane Ranger' variety. For example, the pronunciation of 'Oh, hello' is often closer to 'eih helay', 'going out' sounds more like 'geing ite' and 'going home now' sounds like 'geing heim nigh'. Estuary English is sometimes referred to as 'Mockney', but it has also been described as 'slovenly, mumbling, bastardized, mock-Cockney'.[9]

This accent, though it may have originated in London, now seems to stretch across the whole of southern England from the Thames Estuary to the Severn Estuary, hence its name. It has been spread by Londoners, particularly upwardly mobile East Enders, displaced to the outer suburbs and now, in retirement, moving further out of London. Their accent, often further modified and spread by their children via universities, is now to be heard in the House of Commons, the City, the Civil Service, local government, the media, advertising, and the medical and teaching professions right across the south-east. It is also spreading rapidly northwards and it is commonly the adopted class/group accent identifying university students.

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Most of us, even if we do not speak Estuary English, do not in fact speak RP exactly either. Instead we speak with a 'modified regional accent'. Now even the BBC admits all kinds of regional accents for its announcers and newsreaders. Also most of us constantly modify and vary our use of the language: we drop in and out of both RP and our regional accent, and as convenient, drop or pick up class variations depending on who we are with. This fluid combination of 'modified regional accent' is what now

[8] D. Crystal, *The English Language* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1990), 63.

[9] Conservative Minister of Education, Gillian Shephard at the 1995 Conservative Party Conference: J. Wells, 'What is Estuary English?' www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/estuary/whatis. The term Estuary English was coined in 1984 by EFL teacher David Rosewarne.

constitutes 'The Vernacular'. The Vernacular – from Latin *vernaculus* meaning 'native' - is a 'low variant', a substandard, regional, non-literary, local style of English speech: it is ordinary daily speech. Vernacular English in a number of varieties is the norm on the streets, and while it is not the standard literary language, it is found in a wide range of contemporary writing.

Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1996)

The sweat wis lashing oafay Sick Boy; he wis trembling. Ah wis jist sitting thair, focussing oan the telly, trying no tae notice the cunt. He wis bringing me doon. Ah tried yae keep ma attention oan the Jean-Claude Van Damme video.

As happens in such movies, they started oaf wi an obligatory dramatic opening. Then the next phase ay the picture involved building up the tension through introducing the dastardly villain and sticking the weak plot thegither. Any minute now though, and Jean-Claude's ready tae git doon tae some serious swedgin.

- Rents. Ah've goat tae see Mother Superiour, Sick Boy gasped, shaking his heid.

- Aw, ah sais. Ah wanted the radge tae jist fuck off ootay ma visage, tae go oan his ain, n leave us wi Jean-Claude. Oan the other hand, ah'd be gitting sick tae before long, and if that cunt went n scored, he'd haud oot oan us. They call um Sick Boy, no because he's eyweiss sick wi junk withdrawal, but because he's just one sick cunt.

- Let's fuckin go, he snapped desperately.

Haud oan a second. Ah wanted tae see Jean-Claude smash up this arrogant fucker. If we went now, ah wouldnae git tae…

- Is this English or is it Scottish?
- In what way is this English?
- In what way is it Scottish?
- What does this language tell us about this person?
- What does this language tell us about this society?

Tom Leonard, 'This is thi six a clock news' from *Unrelated Incidents* (1971)

Tom Leonard has said he is interested in 'the political nature of voice in British culture'. Almost all his poetry is written in a kind of Glaswegian dialect - having its own unique diction, vocabulary, spelling and even grammar.[10] Leonard says his aim has always been to make poetry using 'my own ordinary working-class West of Scotland speech that is still poetry...'

This is thi
six a clock
news thi
man said n

[10] Dialect: the language of a particular subset of main language speakers (i.e. Glaswegian as a subset of English speakers) usually those living in a particular place, having pronunciation and vocabulary that is substantially different to that of the main group. Not to be confused with an accent, which is just a regional variation in the pronunciation of standard English.

thi reason
a talk wia
BBC accent
is coz yi
widny wahnt
mi ti talk
aboot thi
trooth wia
voice lik
wanna yoo
scruff. if
a toktaboot
thi trooth
lik wanna yoo
scruff yi
widny thngk
it wiz troo.
jist wanna yoo
scruff tokn.
thirza right
way ti spell
ana right way
ti tok it. this
is me tokn yir
right way a
spellin. this
is ma trooth.
yoouz doant no
thi trooth
yirsellz cawz
yi canny talk
right. This is the
six a clock
nyooz. belt up.

- Is this English or is it Scottish?
- In what way is this English?
- In what way is it Scottish?
- What does this language tell us about this person?
- What does this language tell us about this society?
- Do people resent having the news read in regional accents?
- Why?
- If not, why not?
- Is this RP or just a variation on a local accent?

- How do you think someone who spoke with an RP accent would feel about this poem?
- How do you think someone with a regional accent would feel about this poem?
- How do you think Leonard communicates the arrogance of the RP speaker?
- How do you think Leonard communicates his resentment and reaction to the power of 'proper' English?
- How many people do you know who speak RP – that is, you cannot tell where they come from by listening to them?

Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (1962)

'What's it going to be then, eh?'

There was me, that is Alex, and my three droogs, that is Pete, Georgie, and Dim, Dim being really dim, and we sat in the Korova Milkbar making up our rassoodocks what to do with the evening, a flip dark chill winter bastard though dry. The Korova Milkbar was a milk-plus mesto, and you may, O my brothers, have forgotten what these mestos were like, things changed so skorry these days and everybody quick to forget, newspapers not being read much neither. Well, what they sold there was milk plus something else. They had no licence for selling liquor, but there was no law yet against prodding some of the new veshches which they used to put into the old moloko, so you could peet it velocet or synthemesc or drencrom or one or two other vesches, which would give you a nice quiet horrorshow fifteen minutes admiring Bog and All His Holy Angels and Saints in your left shoe with lights bursting all over your mozg. Or you could peet milk with knives in it, as we used to say, and this would sharpen you up and make you ready for a bit of dirty twenty-to-one, and that was what we were peeting this evening I'm starting off the story with.

Our pockets were full of deng, so there was no real need from the point of view of crasting any more pretty polly to tolchock some old veck in an alley and viddy him swim in his blood while we counted the takings and divided by four, nor to do the untra-violent on some shivering starry grey-haired ptitsa in a shop and go smecking off with the till's guts. But, as they say, money isn't everything.

- Is this English, or is it Russian?
- If it is Russian, what makes it Russian?
- If it is English, what makes it English?
- Do you think a Russian would be able to read this book without difficulty?
- If not, then why not?
- What does this language tell us about this person?
- What does this language tell us about this society?
- How can a non-Russian speaking reader hope to understand something like this?

Burgess imagined a world where Soviet influence was important as part of an effort by communism to undermine the morality and stability of Western European middle-class life. But he also saw that the middle-class reaction to this violence, and the youth-choice teen slang that went with it, would be equally terrifying in its own way. Burgess wanted to write about violence, but he wanted to do it in a way that would not glorify violence or make it exciting - except of course to Alex and his *droogs.* That is one of the reasons he uses the vocabulary of a 'foreign' language.

Joan Riley's *The Unbelonging* (1985)

This book is set in the 1970s, when black children were still relatively unusual in British schools. Hyacinth, a black teenager is sent from the Caribbean to Britain to stay with her stepfather. However, he beats her and eventually she is sent to a children's home run by 'Aunt Susan'. But with all the upheaval she fails her exams. Determined to overcome the memories of abuse and to succeed in her studies, she enrols at the local college.

Hyacinth lowered her eyes, bracing herself. She had expected this reaction, but it was no easier to bear.

'I am going to college', she repeated stubbornly, toes curling in her shoes.

'What college will take you?' the woman sneered. 'Can't you blacks see there isn't any place for you in education? You had your chance and failed. Why don't you give up and stop wasting everybody's time?'

'Keene Fields have offered a place to do the one year 'O' level revision course,' Hyacinth mumbled, shifting uncomfortably under the hostile blue gaze.

The woman looked taken aback, but soon recovered herself. 'They did, did they?' she asked frostily. 'And I suppose they just wrote to you out of the blue and asked you to come.'

'I took their entrance exam three weeks ago. The results and the offer came today.'

'How dare you go behind my back and enrol!' the woman almost shouted. 'When did you become a staff member in this house, Miss Williams?'

Hyacinth stepped back, the sick feeling in her stomach increasing. Her father's voice came out of her nightmare, overlaid Aunt Susan's.

'You think you bad? A going to knock the rust off you.'

She closed her eyes tightly, pushing the image back. She was going to go to college, whatever the cost. The skin on her back stretched taut with remembered pain and expectation of punishment…

- How can you identify here the speech of someone who has been educated in English but in the West Indies?
- How can you identify here the speech of someone who has been born and brought up in Britain?
- Can you identify the speech of a West Indian who has lived and worked in Britain?

- In what ways does the author indicate racist attitudes through speech?
- How does the author indicate that Hyacinth has learned the 'correct' grammar of English fairly recently?
- In what ways does the author indicate what it is that Hyacinth is trying to suppress.

Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980)

On my naming day when I come 12 I gone front spear and kilt a wyld boar he parbly ben the las wyld pig on the Bundel Downs any how there hadnt ben none for a long time befor him nor I aint looking to see none agen. He dint make the groun shake nor nothing like that when he come on to my spear he wernt all that big plus he lookit poorly. He done the reqwyrt he ternt and stood and clattert his teef and made his rush and there we wer then. Him on 1 end of the spear kicking his life out and me on the other watching him dy. I said, 'Your tern now my tern later'. The other spears gone in then and he wer dead and the steam coming up off him in the rain and we all yelt, 'Offert!'.

The woal thing fealt jus that littl bit stupid. Us running that boar thru that las littl scrump of woodling with the forms all roun. Cows mooing sheep baaing cocks crowing and us foraging our las boar in a thin grey girzel on the day I come a man.

The Bernt Arse pack ben follering us jus out of bow shot. When the shout gone up ther ears all prickt up. Ther leader he wer a big black and red spottit dog he come forit a littl like he ben going to make a speach or some thing til 1 or 2 bloaks uppit bow then he slumpt back agen and kep his farness follering us back. I took noatis of that leader tho. He wernt close a nuff for me to see his eyes but I thot his eye ben on me.

This is the opening of the novel. Later Riddley and his friend Lissener visit some ruins.

The lite wer coming from behynt some girt mouns of rubbl unner where the over head ben barmt out. It cudntve ben no moren a cuppl of candls or lanterns jus a feabl glimmer and the jynt shadders wivvering on the stanning walls and broakin stoans and rubbl and what ever over head wer lef. The jynt shadders wer from girt machines o they wer guvner big things and crouching all broakin but not dead they cudnt dy there wer too much Power in them.…

Lissener hispert me, 'What is it? Be they terning be they moving?'

I hispert back, 'It's broakin machines they ain't moving.' It weren't nothing like when you dig up old rottin machines out of the groun these wer in ther parper working place nor nothing rottin they wer some kynd of iron dint rot it wer all shyning all catching that shaky glimmer. (….) Tears begun streaming down my face and my froat akit.

Lissener hispert, 'What's the matter?'

I hispert back, 'O what we ben! And what we com to! Boath of us wer sniffling and snuffling then. Me looking at them jynt machines and him lissening ther sylents. Right then I dint know where I wer with anything becaws all on a suddn I wernt seeing anything from where I seen it befor.

- Can we tell that they are in the ruins of a nuclear power station?
- How does Hoban indicate that they are living in a post nuclear world?
- How does he tell us that we have the ruins of a civilisation?

- What does the language tell us about this society?
- What can we guess about the state of their scientific and other knowledge?
- Do you think he is making a point about the necessity of writing as a basis for civilisation?
- What issues or properties of language are we asked to focus on here?
- Can we say that this language is debased in some way?
- In what way is it debased?

The traditional novel presents us with a more or less coherent world described in a Middle Class, southern accented (or at least a transatlantic) version of the English language, and operates within a conventional narrative framework: any conventionally educated person might be expected to understand these things. Yet now, it seems, all these elements are now under pressure. Hoban called this a 'broken up, worn down vernacular'. His purpose may have been to show that while language is not the source of our knowledge of the world, language is the source and repository of all our recorded knowledge of and about the world. Because their language is altered after a nuclear holocaust, the people of Ridley's generation are reduced in culture and perception, in their understanding of the world and their place in it, their history, very nearly to the level of our prehistoric ancestors.

Merle Collins' 'No Dialects Please'
From: Rhonda Cobham and Merle Collins, *Watchers and Seeker*s (1987)

In this competition
dey was lookin for poetry of worth
for a writing that could wrap up a feelin
an fling it back hard
with a captive power to choke de stars
so dey say
'Send them to us
But NO DIALECTS PLEASE'
We're British!

Ay!
well ah laugh till me bouschet near drop
is not only dat ah tink
of de dialect of de Normans and de Saxons
dat combine an re-formulate
to re-create a language-elect
is not only dat ah tink
how dis British education mus really be narrow
if it leave dem wid no knowledge of what dey own history is about
is not only dat ah tink
bout de part of my story

dat come from Liverpool in a big dirty white ship mark
AFRICAN SLAVES PLEASE!
We're British!

But as if dat nat enough pain
for a body to bear
ah tink about de part on de plantations down dere
wey dey so frighten o de power
in the deep spaces
behind our watching faces
dat dey shout
NO AFRICAN LANGUAGES PLEASE!
It's against the law
Make me ha to go
an start up a language o me own
dat ah could share wid de people

Den when we start to shout
bout a culture o we own
a language o we own
dem and de others dey leave to control us say
STOP THAT NONSENSE NOW
We're all British!
Every time we lif we foot to do we own ting
to fight we own fight
dey tell us how British we British
an ah wonder if dey remember
dat in Trinidad in the thirties
dey jail Butler
who dey say is their British citizen
an accuse him of
Hampering the war effort
Then it was
FIGHT FOR YOUR COUNTRY, FOLKS!
You're British!

Ay! Ay!
Ah wonder when it change to
NO DIALECTS PLEASE!
WE'RE British!
Huh!
To tink how still dey so dunce
An so frighten o we power
dat dey have to hide behind a language
that we could wrap roun we little finger
in addition to we own!

Heavens o mercy!
Dat is dunceness oui!
Ah wonder where is de bright British?

- Merle Collins is a performance poet from the island of Grenada, and here she is using language to question and address her sense of racial identity.
- What different attitudes towards the languages spoken by Black people can you identify here?
- How does Collins demonstrate the foolishness of some of these attitudes?
- What does the poem tell us about the development of pidgins, creoles and Black English?
- What does Collins mean when she asks: 'Ah wonder where is de bright British?'
- Using the evidence of this poem – grammar and phonology - what are the characteristic features of Black English?

*

Clearly the complex ways in which writers try to record and respond to the changes they see in the world around them are many and various. By 'pushing' the language at their disposal and by questioning the view of the world that their own identity generates, they can ask: what is the relationship between a writer, the parts of the language they choose to use, and the dominant culture?

Language and Literature are in themselves very important parts of national culture and tradition. Because writing and language are intimately connected to national identity and cultural traditions, people are very sensitive in this area - even if they are not always well informed. When writers start to do new and unusual things in the language (and with the language), or in literature, opposition to experiment is often the rallying point for traditionalists and conservatives who do not necessarily see change as progress, and who often see decline in any alteration.

Artistic innovation is something in which a specific culture may express preferences through the market place. Anything which is 'ahead of its time' runs the risk of being judged strange or irrelevant, and publishers will certainly be at a loss as to how to market it.

We are said to be in a Post-Modern world of irony and contradiction, so it is legitimate to ask how, and in what ways, standard literary language can reflect this era. Certainly the processes at work on literature seem to be undermining the certainties and standard identities of the nation state, but at the same time to be undermining both the political power of London as a core cultural identity and the certainty of southern English as the standard Received Pronunciation, 'BBC English'. Around this three other key but contradictory forces seem to be at work:

- 'globalisation', meaning mainly the massive power of American capital, most vividly reflected in the power of Hollywood and in the borrowing of Anglicisms into other languages
- regionalisation, reflected in the Hollywood interest in minority cultures e.g. Celtic history, in the success of *Rob Roy*, *Michael Collins, Braveheart, Trainspotting* etc.

and in the enhanced status of dialects and regional languages – readers may also note just a hint of anti-British feeling running through several of these films too
- the increasing acceptability of slang, regionalisms and forms of language (e.g. Black British / Caribbean versions of English) previously deemed deviant or substandard.

Also, to a great extent globalisation and regionalisation are contradictory, but they are connected because a) they are reactions to one another b) they are both attempts to find new markets. Thus, to certain extent we can be cynical about Hollywood's interest in minority cultures. For example, we might legitimately see their interest in a simplified version of Celtic history simply as a way of tapping into the emotions and the pockets of the vast Irish and Scottish Diasporas.

Follow-up Work

We have looked here at several writers who have made unconventional use of the English Language. However, before these writers began to play about with the language, James Joyce, Lewis Carroll and George Orwell had all done unorthodox things with written English. Whenever they were writing, the questions these writers all raise are clear. Ask yourself:

- In what ways are questions of the vernacular linked to issues of Representation as Representation?
- How and in what ways are the issues of Representation linked to the wider issues of vernacular and its use in contemporary writing?
- Why do these writers write in this way?
- What is to be gained from being unorthodox?
- What is it they seek to represent with this kind of writing?
- What issues are emphasised by dealing with language in this way?
- Is it simply a question of literary technique?
- Is it a way of getting noticed?
- If we translated these passages what would we have lost?
- What would we have revealed about the language used?
- What part of their meaning is retained in this particular use of language?
- What would be filtered out by translation?
- Can we make much of these extracts?
- Would a glossary help?
- Is a glossary essential to any of these pieces?
- What distinctive features can we identify with each extract: lexical, morphological, phonological, syntactic? (if you are not quite sure what these words mean, look them up.)
- Is this English?
- Is it slang, or a dialect of English?
- What is the difference between a language an accent, slang and dialect?
- Is this a new language?
- How does the issue of Vernacular language, its relation to writing and its use in contemporary writing relate to the issue of Representation?

- Look up Vernacular in a dictionary or on Wikipedia.
- Look up Standard English and Received Pronunciation in a dictionary or on Wikipedia.
- Look up Estuary English in a dictionary or on Wikipedia
- In what way is 'the vernacular' linked to issues of Professional writing?
- What is the dominant culture – and how do you relate to it?
- So how do you speak – and how do you write? And in what ways does this relate to 'English'?
- In Eva Hoffman's book *Lost in Translation* she wrote: 'Linguistic dispossession is a sufficient motive for violence, for it is close to the dispossession of one's self.' Do you feel the same way? Discuss.

Further Reading

M. Bragg, *The Adventure of English 500AD to 2000*
B. Bryson, *Mother Tongue: The English Language*
G. Chantrell (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories*
D. Crystal, *The Stories of English*
D. Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language*
W. R. O'Donnell & L. Todd, *Variety in Contemporary English*
B. Foster, *The Changing English Language*
E. Partridge, *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*
S. Potter, *Our Language*
L. Todd, *Pidgins and Creoles*
The Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories
R. Williams, *Keywords*
J. Willinsky, *Empire of Words: The Reign of the OED*
www.oed.com - The Oxford English Dictionary website. Good for word histories.