Leeds Studies in English

Article:

Peter Wright and Fritz Rohrer, 'Early Work for the Survey of English Dialects: The Academic and Human Sides', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 2 (1968), 7-13

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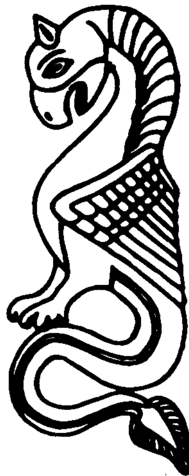

Leeds Studies in English
School of English
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EARLY WORK FOR THE SURVEY OF ENGLISH DIALECTS: THE ACADEMIC AND HUMAN SIDES

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The pleasant task is allotted us of recalling early days with the English Dialect Survey in the years 1949 to 1952. When we began our respective duties as research assistant to Leeds University and research student from the University of Zürich, little did we realize what an entirely new and wonderful world would be disclosed to us in the near future. Nor was our first connexion with it at all exciting. One of our earliest impressions was a glimpse of Professor Eugen Dieth of Zürich toiling page by page, notion by notion, through the six volumes of the *English Dialect Dictionary* in the dimly-lit basement of the Brotherton Library. Such work, which was typical of Professor Dieth's methodical and thorough approach, is an essential preliminary to questionnaire-making, as one of us has recently found in making much shorter investigations of city dialects and various industries; but it is soon counterbalanced by field work, dealing with linguistic problems as they arise and develop in life, not as mummified in a dictionary.

The investigation, primarily to trace and pin-point as accurately as possible modern dialect-boundaries in England, had many subsidiary aims, each fascinating in its own right. There were the phonetic and phonemic angles, the "history of English sounds" approach, the lexical one, and the semantic. Much was to come to light, too, in those little-explored fields of English dialect—intonation, stress, and especially syntax.

In July, 1949, assembled the first dialect-hunting team, consisting of Professors Orton and Dieth, and ourselves. As with most projects, establishing efficient work-methods was to prove the hardest part; and for a "blitz" attack on many dialects, as was envisaged, all depended on a suitable questionnaire. For this reason July saw us installed in a down-stairs room of now-demolished English Language House in Virginia Road, Leeds, making and improving drafts of the questionnaire. These sittings were not without their more humorous side, although this was not apparent at the time. We would often find, when team members grew tired and circular arguments developed, that a ten-minute pause and a cup of tea worked wonders. Once a thunderstorm broke overhead

and, unknown to us, water penetrated the floor above. A trickle appeared down a light fitting, suddenly turning into a flood and cascading onto the reference works on the table beneath. While some of his team stared in astonishment, Harold Orton, with great presence of mind, leapt into action, rescuing the books from a watery fate.

For experiments with the early drafts of the questionnaire, the team stayed five days or so in each of seven places, namely: Hawes in Wensleydale; Marshside, an old shrimping-village but now a suburb of Marshside, Lancs.; Tideswell in remote North-West Derbyshire; Alford, Lincolnshire; Solihull, Warwickshire; and Cullompton, Devon. Some of these places were chosen because team members already had contacts there. When we arrived in a new area, our first aim was to contact the schoolmaster or vicar or anyone else who might put us onto some old native dialect-speaker willing to help. We eventually chose about four in each locality, descending on them sometimes as a quartet, sometimes in pairs.

Naturally the characteristics of each team member soon appeared, such as Eugen Dieth's dogged perseverence and love of walking. With informants and team members alike, Harold Orton had to use a good deal of tact. One member was well known for his well-intentioned obstinacy; English conditions were rather strange to the Swiss questioners; and each team member had his assets and liabilities. Through it all stood Harold's ease of conversation and his ability to draw out the broadest vernacular from the most unlettered informant. The response was remarkable: when a man realizes that the details of his occupation are of vital interest to his questioner, he does open up. Whether it was a shepherd after a domino game in a daleside "pub," a farmer around his pigsties or the housewife in her kitchen, the informant almost invariably became as enthusiastic as the interviewers.

Outstanding, too, was our leader's talent for being so often right. Confronted at Muker in the North Riding with having to sleep in an unaired bed, he inserted newspapers between the sheets with complete success; whereas in the next bed his research assistant, who would not, awoke with a streaming cold. To take a more important matter, in those far-off days we never fully understood why Harold Orton in his dialect questioning probed so much, not only for pronunciations and words, but for their exact meanings. Why, we wondered, should he keep going to immense trouble to ascertain the names and functions of the smallest parts of a farm-cart? But he was undoubtedly right, because the inexperienced fieldworker's worst linguistic difficulty is probably not extracting old words and pronunciations, but checking that answers mean what he thinks they mean. Furthermore, as time

went on, we learnt more and more the value of his method of not taking the first willing local speaker, but of careful inquiry first to find the best available. Also it must be evident that to initiate and carry through a project of this magnitude demands not only enthusiasm but courage.

A provisional network was drawn up of over three hundred villages which had had reasonably stable populations, and which were separated from each other by hills, marshes, wide rivers, old political boundaries, or just fifteen or so straight miles. To aid the plotting of dialect visits, a large wall-map was ordered, but for some time nothing further was heard of this. It was eventually rescued from the English Literature department (where its wrong delivery must have created something of a puzzle), decorated with flags and put to good use. Nowadays it hangs, as splendidly as ever, in the Leeds Institute of Dialect and Folk Life Studies.

Until May, 1950, when petrol came off the ration, we had no car; but train, bus, and our legs carried us wherever required without undue trouble. Accommodation varied from a large but far-too-expensive hotel, which we dared stay in only one night, to many comfortable boarding-houses and private homes, bedrooms in Cumberland and Hampshire that were more like cupboards, and a cottage with the most primitive sanitation. Although village secrets were often confided to us, we were careful not to divulge them, as this would have weakened our standing in a village. Likewise we hastened to explain that we were not from the B.B.C. or the newspapers, in case this might scare our helpers (some of them rejoiced in publicity but many more took an opposite view).

In the earliest searches we lacked the use of a tape-recorder, and had to keep our hearing as sharp as possible by comparing notes and by other methods like listening to Daniel Jones's records of the cardinal vowels. However, the chief aim at this stage was testing the questionnaire, so that the absence of mechanical recording apparatus was no catastrophe.

Interviews were normally conducted in the quiet of an informant's home, where he was likely to feel most at ease, but they also took place wherever opportunity presented itself. Two of the oddest interviewing places we recall are what turned out to be an ant-heap beside a Devon hayrick, where Eugen Dieth and a younger colleague questioned an unco-operative farmer with only moderate success; and a very public interview in a Yorkshire town council chamber, with one of us on the rostrum and informants gathered in a semi-circle in the large hall below.

One of us has been teased for working an informant past midnight;

and for eating a substantial village tea (at which he collected dialect and also had his fortune professionally told) and then refusing to cancel a hotel dinner which fell due half-an-hour later. But he could retaliate with the story of how, sent to check an extraordinary Yorkshire pronunciation of [fɩəl] for "foal," he found only [fɷəl] for the animal, the [fɩəl] having apparently arisen when the previous researcher had, for some minor error, been called a fool. Incidentally, no-one, so far as we could judge, ever invented a pronunciation to spite us. For example, the Lancashire pronunciation [ɩuəʴ] "hair"[1] was a genuine, though queer, one, the speaker having no desire to complicate results for future generations of linguistic analysts.

After each dialect hunt the team would return to headquarters, discard a few useless questions, reframe many others and insert additional ones. Reframing questions was particularly important because it is so easy by using a certain word to influence an answer. Thus, if you ask "What do you call a coat?," an informant may well reply *coat* even if he normally uses the word *jacket*; and, if a question runs "After a meal, when you remove the things, what do you say you do?," this might suggest *side the things* rather than *side up, side away, side the table,* etc. It was and remains a difficult problem, but time spent revising the questionnaire saved much semantic trouble later on.

To Harold, indirectly, we owed some strange experiences, sometimes embarrassing, sometimes humorous. A member of the original dialect team arrived at one remote farmhouse on the Yorkshire moors and tried to explain his mission to the deaf old lady who opened her door at his knock. Catching his request for "help," she told him to wait a moment and disappeared—returning to press a shilling into his hand! However, she proved to be an excellent dialect speaker, and the visit ended with a cup of tea and a good laugh. Other early experiences included the time when, after a researcher had asked about *snecks, hasps* and other door-fastenings, and had gone round the house drawing them, its lady occupant, thinking—not unreasonably—that he would effect a burglary that night, called in the neighbours, who "grilled" him thoroughly before allowing him to depart. There was also a "gun-running" episode, when a Yorkshire hill-farmer, thinking that his questioner wanted old objects as well as older language, insisted on giving him an ancient gun. As he would take no refusal, polite or blunt, the researcher intended throwing the weapon into a ditch on the way back to base; but he forgot, a horrified maid saw it, and informed the police . . . .

Linguistically, too, these dialect hunts sometimes brought remarkable results confirming the reliability of other dialectologists. There

was, for example, the frequent absence of the definite article in the East Riding, especially around Patrington.[2] Secondly, proof was found of the late survival of [ç] on part of the Pennines for the sound now extinct in Standard English but represented by the spelling *gh*. Professor Orton had mentioned that the sound had been heard some years before near Todmorden, and then in 1950 at Heptonstall, not far away, the Dialect Survey found it preserved in *night* and *light*.[3]

Still more remarkable was the survival of "utch." Professors Orton and Dieth, wishing to make the best possible use of their fieldworker (Peter Wright) in his last months as research assistant, sent him on an extended Southern tour to investigate five places in and near London, Hampshire, Herefordshire and Somerset. Vivid memories remain of that tour (e.g. the almshouses in South Hackney where by mistake the tape-recorder was plugged into D.C. current). Out of curiosity the fieldworker chose in Somerset the Merriot area just west of Montacute, called by A. J. Ellis in 1890 the "Land of Utch." Here it had been claimed there survived an "utch" from ME *ych,*[4] the same word that appears in rustic speech in Shakespeare's *King Lear*.[5] Scepticism about being able to find it after so long disappeared when on this tour, in June, 1952, it was recorded, as [ɩtʃ], two or three times on tape in incidental conversation from a farmer only in his forties. Although he did not seem to realize what he had said, his relatives who were present did. These days it seems only too common to decry Ellis's results—probably because his hieroglyphics are difficult to understand—but there is no doubt that Ellis was a most accurate phonetician.

Besides the scientific and humorous aspects of our work, there was a deeper human side. We found the most inspiring wealth, not only of spoken dialect but of different types of people. Out in the country, we realized that we were treading on different ground altogether from that in the towns. Whether we talked to the harsh Lancashire shrimper on the West coast or a rough village blacksmith inland, a talkative Devon farmer in his heavily-laden orchards or a quieter Dales stonemason on the bleak moors, a weather-beaten Cumbrian shepherd on the hills or an elderly housewife in her parlour—it made no essential difference. These folk, wherever they lived and whatever walks of life they came from, had one thing in common: they had arrived at a simple philosophy of life through hard work and humble living. Lack of schooling was made up through experience—a hard master! Yet there was scarcely one amongst these people who grumbled about the social conditions of the old days. "Hard work never killed anyone" was one of their favourite sayings and, judging from their health and good looks, they were right. They almost bubbled over when they dug into the memories

of days gone by. There was a refreshing frankness and warm hospitality about them.

When we got down to asking them questions, we were again and again impressed by their quick mental reactions and extensive knowledge of their particular work. Many of the informants had taken an active part in village life, such as it was; what did it matter what it was so long as they put their hearts and souls into it? They had all seen a great many social and political changes, and not all of them to the good of mankind. That was their opinion anyway!

It would have been hard to keep discussions away from the problem of the rising generation, and our informants' remarks were not always flattering to the youngsters. More than once we felt rather uncomfortable and began to doubt the blessings of the modern welfare-state, especially when we witnessed the peace and happiness of these old people whose eyes and minds had been sharpened by adverse circumstances, but who never gave in. A genuine and immediate faith made them live lives which, after 60, 70 or 80 years, were still full of joy. Relatively untouched by the complicated problems of modern civilisation, they found delight in the small things which are apt to be overlooked. "If you do right when only a trifle is at stake, you can leave the big problems to take care of themselves." This was, in a nutshell, the essence of their philosophy.

Our dialect hunts often took us into the houses of lame or blind people, and even there we came across the same healthy spirit. These people had no time to complain of their own fate—they knew others who had suffered even more than they. One blind man interviewed was in the highest of spirits and declared that, although blindness had overtaken him some years ago, he thanked God for a wonderful life and for memories of bygone days which were vivid and strong enough to let him see light in the surrounding darkness. To men like him, our visits were almost a godsend. They were most anxious to help, and at the same time the dialect-quiz provided them with an unexpected but welcome entertainment. They helped and got satisfaction out of helping. When the interviewer said good-bye to one of these men, his informant wished him well and said, "I'm sorry I can't see you, but I like your voice and your homely way of speaking . . . ." That was the only moment when a touch of sorrow crept into his voice.

These, then, were some of the impressions gathered during dialect hunts, proving that our work was much more than a mere pursuit of linguistic and philological phenomena. It enabled us to see more of the English countryside, to know better both town and country folk, and to appreciate better their background, customs, and ways of living. It

was a rewarding experience travelling up and down the country. To our former leader on these dialect expeditions, and to all those good people who so patiently answered our extraordinary questions, we should like to offer heartfelt thanks.

NOTES

[1] See *Survey of English Dialects*, Vol. I, Part II (Leeds, 1962), p. 592, *sub* Lancashire, place 7.
[2] *Ibid.*, Vol. I, Pt. II, pp. 484, 515, 557, 559, 634, 646, 693, *sub* Yorkshire, place 28; and Vol. I, Part III (Leeds, 1963), pp. 840, 991.
[3] *Ibid.*, Vol. I, Part II, p. 484, *sub* Yorkshire, place 21.
[4] See A. J. Ellis, *English Dialects—their Sounds and Homes*, pp. 25, 29.
[5] Preserved by Shakespeare in *chil* "I will" in *King Lear*, IV, vi.