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Forest Dialect[1]

MICHELLE STRAW

Discourses of dialect, place and identity in the Forest of Dean

Introduction

The Forest of Dean (henceforth Forest) is one of the lesser known English Royal Forests. The area is considered locally to be a special place with a distinctive dialect. The Forest lies at the intersection of three regions: South East Wales, West Country, also known as the South West, and the West Midlands. The Forest is situated between two rivers: the River Severn to the East separates it from the rest of Gloucestershire; the River Wye to the West separates it from Wales. National borders and physical boundaries seem to play an important role in identity construction. 'Identities matter most' (Llamas & Watt, 2010: 17) to those communities 'at the physical margins of the nation state' (Llamas, 2010: 225). Such communities may engage in practices that differentiate their dialect and situate it at the centre of their own region.

Llamas & Watt (2010: 22) observe that for communities living close to national borders, ethnographic observation can uncover meanings that are unavailable 'when seen through a wider analytic lens'. Similarly, Coupland & Bishop (2007: 74, 84) recognised the need for additional approaches in their attitudinal study covering nationally recognised accents because they could not access informants' knowledge of local varieties. Also rural areas such as the Forest, tend to be overlooked in perceptual studies, in favour of large undifferentiated regions, e.g. West Country. In Montgomery's (2018) study, the Forest along with the entire English-Welsh border area was overlooked by informants, in their dialect identification tasks. However, dialect surveys have identified a traditional dialect boundary running along the River Severn (Trudgill, 1999: 34; Baugh & Cable, 2002: 191). The perception of physical and dialect boundaries may contribute to a sense of separateness.

The Forest has a literary tradition going back to at least the 18th century. Dialect poetry is part of this tradition and is an important source of evidence for enregisterment. The genre makes extensive use of non-standard features and is only accessible to local audiences with a good understanding of the dialect (Beal, 2017: 33). The data for this study are taken from 14 dialect poems (total 4620 words), published on a website (*Deanforestvoice.org*, 2015). The poems are embedded in a number of recurring discourses and speech events, which reinforce the messages that contribute to dialect enregisterment. Enregisterment refers to a complex set of processes which allow communities to identify a set of linguistic features or 'register' as typifying local



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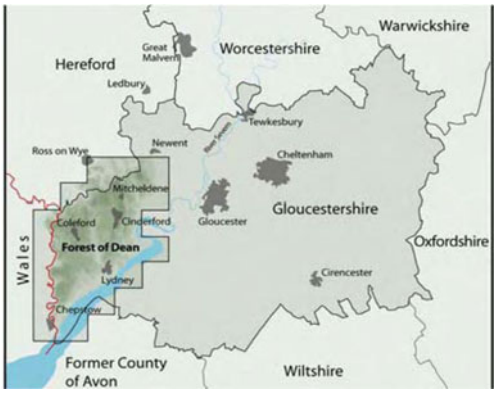


Figure 1. **Forest of Dean** (Small & Stoertz, 2006: 3)

speech and speakers (Agha, 2003: 231–233; Johnstone, 2011: 659–660).

I start by describing the sociohistorical contexts in which the dialect poetry is performed and written before moving on to the linguistic analysis. Using the Lancsbox concordance tool (Brezina, McEnery & Wattam, 2015), I identify the written conventions used by authors to represent non-standard (NS) linguistic forms; as well their frequency and consistency of usage, which are likely to feature in the creation of a register (Agha, 2003: 233). A register is a codified subset of features, established during the later stages of enregisterment, which becomes more widely recognised as associated with the dialect, community norms and cultural personae (see also Johnstone, 2011: 659; Beal, 2017: 33). NS forms are compared with observations from traditional dialectology surveys from the regions bordering the Forest, to determine which features figure most prominently and consistently (Parry, 1972; Wakelin, 1972, 1986; Wells, 1982; Trudgill, 1999; Wagner, 2004; Britain, 2007; Markus, 2019). I finish with a discourse analysis of the poems to understand how indexical relationships are created between linguistic form, character representation and place. Ethnographic and oral history observations are used throughout the discussion to uncover local social meanings.

Dialect Poetry, discourses and situated practices

Social and geographical mobility are prerequisites for dialect enregisterment leading to increased awareness of local forms and eventually hearing them as 'signals of authentic local identity' (Johnstone, Jennifer & Danielson, 2006: 93–94). Although rural, the Forest's population increased due to the establishment of commercial mines in the 18th century. Today, tourism is the main industry and it promotes the area's mining heritage (Olivey, 2016), and its unique landscape as a film location, e.g. *Star Wars*. The Forest features in both South West and West Midlands regional programming and in rural lifestyle programmes, e.g. *Countryfile*. The local community's familiarity with discourses relating to landscape and industrial heritage form the context for establishing the Forest, and its dialect, as distinctive.

The following discussion describes how the dialect poetry is embedded within a set of 'sociohistorically locatable practices' in which 'Forest' is indexically linked in a cultural framework: Faddle, Theatre, Bard, Dialect (Agha, 2003: 232). The Faddle is a variety show that began in 2004, and is held annually at the Forest Theatre in Coleford. During the event, a local author is named 'Forest Bard' and performs their dialect poem, produced specifically for the event. In 2016, other acts featured two local dialect raconteurs, a brass band and male voice choir. To encourage younger audiences, the event also featured a young pop singer and a 'Junior Forest Bard'. Dialect is further linked through the Bard's performance of their poem and through dialect songs, jokes and stories performed by raconteurs. The song 'A land between two rivers' is performed at the Faddle and at other events as a local anthem, thereby establishing the Forest at the centre of the community's own construction of place and separate from surrounding areas. Members of a mainly older, local audience receive the messages typifying the Forest dialect and can produce similar demonstrations of the traditional dialect – a dialect that was documented in the 19th century. The Forest Faddle and other heritage events, provide the foci in which prior messages about the dialect and its speakers are repeated over time and space and transmitted across the community (Agha, 2003: 246).

All poems are published on the website along with details of the Faddle event. The online medium facilitates enregisterment by increasing awareness of the NS forms represented in the poems. Biographical information about the authors is published, including their name, the year they were Forest Bard, and a picture of the author, the majority of whom are female. The website lists the authors' provenance, thus establishing their credentials as authentic native dialect speakers. The poems must be about the Forest and its inhabitants, and 'must be in Forest dialect'. The purpose is summarised

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Table 1: Linguistic features in order of frequency

Linguistic Feature	NS forms	Texts = 14	% NS	Examples (freq tokens)
Pronouns	247	14	56	**'ee (23), thee (60),** thou, un
H-dropping	224	12	86	'ow, 'ouse, 'as, 'ave, 'eart
Fricative Voicing /f,s,ʃ/	130	10	30	varmers, zun, zhout
Verb *be*	72	12	60	**be (29), bist (10),** bin
Demonstrative	71	10	85	**thic (43), thik (10), them (18)**
Alveolar nasal -in	45	8	39	nuthin, gettin, gooin, burnin
Infinitive *do*	38	9	-	wot do irk I, nuthin do zeem
FLEECE[2] short-i vowel	36	11	42	**vit-feet (18),** kip-keep, ship-sheep

in the website title: 'Promote & Maintain the Forest Identity'. For juniors, 'Forest dialect is optional' and, indeed, junior Bards write only in Standard English. The discourses on the website establish the norms for dialect representation in the community – 'the senior Forest Bard' who adheres to local dialect norms and the 'Junior . . . Forest Bard' who adheres to notions of correctness (*Deanforestvoice.org*, 2015). The poems are embedded within a speech chain network in which messages linking dialect to author personae and place are transmitted and re-transmitted across the community (see Agha, 2003: 231–233, 242–246; Johnstone et al., 2006: 78–81; Beal, 2017: 33–35). I now turn to an analysis of the linguistic form and content of the poetry.

Linguistic Repertoire – frequency and patterns of variation

Table 1 summarises the most frequently occurring forms; the linguistic feature's distribution in Texts, i.e., the number of texts containing the feature; and NS spellings as a percentage of the total of NS and standard (StdE) spellings.

Table 1 shows the most frequently occurring linguistic features. Dialect is represented at multiple levels including pronunciation, grammar and lexis. The following discussion shows how writers use NS features associated with the three nearby regions to represent dialect – South West (SW), West Midlands (WM) and South East (SE) Wales. Frequently occurring words are in bold with number of occurrences. NS features found in the poems are 1) non-regional – H–dropping and alveolar nasal for -ing; 2) SW features – fricative voicing, NS demonstrative forms, infinitive *do*; 3) a SW/ WM feature – Verb *be* and 4) SE Wales feature FLEECE. The SE Wales border with the Forest is heavily influenced by both SW and WM dialects and the following features are present – fricative voicing, infinitive *do*, Verb *be*. Wakelin (1972: 120) comments that infinitive *do* is a well known SW feature but that it has an unusual distribution on the English-Welsh border. In Gloucestershire, it occurs on either side of the Severn including the Forest, neighbouring Monmouthshire in Wales, and East Gloucestershire, but not adjacent areas. SE Wales also shares the short-i pronunciation of NS FLEECE with the Forest (Parry, 1972: 145–153).

Pronouns – forms and grammar

Wagner (2004: 157) considers the pronominal system to be the most distinctive feature of the SW region. The features she describes, occur in the data along with pronouns associated with the WM**.** The paradigm accounts for 9.5% of the corpus (440 words out of total of 4,620). NS forms comprise 56.1% of pronoun usage, making the pronoun system a rich source of representation for writers with the potential to index dialect and typical speaker.

Table 2 shows the frequencies of those pronouns that occur with NS forms, compared with StdE forms. The pronoun system represented in the data, combines a number of linguistic features including H-dropping of *he, him, his, her*; SW forms – *un, thoy*; and SW/WM forms *thee* (47), *thou/tha* (31), *thy* (22). The frequent use of NS forms for third-person singular pronouns and the predominance of masculine pronouns, suggests a preference for representing male characters. The use of NS second-person pronouns enables writers to address the audience directly, thus creating an interpersonal relationship between the writer and

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Table 2: Standard and non–standard pronoun forms

Pers./No.	StdE Pron.	No. of tokens	NS Pron.	No. of tokens
2nd pers.			thee	47
	you	22	thou/thow/tha	31
	your	7	thy/thee	22
3rd pers.	he	2	ee	23
sg.	him	2	im	32
	himself	0	iself	1
	his	2	is/iz	30
	she	10	-	0
	her	3	er	27
			en/n/un	10
	it/he	11	contracted it	8
3rd pers.	they	21	thoy	2
pl.	them	0	em/um	13
	their	10	thar	1
	Total	**80**		**247**

a local audience persona. The use of personal pronouns in constructing persona and character are discussed further in the section 4.

NS pronouns are further combined with Pronoun Exchange (PE) – a SW grammatical feature. PE refers to the use of subject pronouns in non-subject positions and, more rarely, the reverse. Wagner (2004: 157) suggests that it occurs more in Gloucestershire than in other regions. Both types of PE occur in the data. In examples 1 and 2 below, writers combine reverse PE *her-she* with other frequently occurring features from table 1: fricative voicing *zed*-said; infinitive *do da*-do; FLEECE – short-i vowel *wik*-week.

1. Her zed. 'Thas twice thees wik'
2. And her da rant on,

PE occurs with second-person pronouns in one direction only. The subject pronoun *thou*, does not occur as an object in the data. By contrast, the object pronoun *thee*, frequently occurs in subject position, reflecting the findings from dialectology, that PE is possible with *thee* but not *thou*.

3. 'Ware bist thou gwoyn' I asked our Jim
4. Thou's bin we thic Jim
5. I bin working 'ard
6. thee be the first

In examples 3 to 6, NS second-person pronoun forms which are commonly found in the traditional dialect of all three nearby regions, occur with other features – PE; Verb *be* - *be* can occur with all pronouns in the present tense and is common in the SW/WM*; bist, bin* are associated more with the WM and SE Wales; although they do occur more rarely in the northern SW (Parry, 1972: 153; Trudgill, 1999: 106; Markus, 2019, *EDD be*). These forms can be traced back to early Old English (*Oed.com, 2020*, *be, v.*). The frequency of Verb *be* forms seems to reflect the relative frequencies suggested by dialectologists *be* > *bist* > *bin*. In addition, *bist* occurs in everyday interactions as a local greeting *'ow bist ole butty?* – How are you, old mate? Features from this greeting, could contribute to a register as non-natives use it routinely to index dialect.

Summary

Writers use features commonly found in the traditional dialects of the three regions neighbouring the Forest – SW, WM and SE Wales. Furthermore, writers' usage of NS features tends to match the patterns observed by dialectologists. The poems are replete with NS forms which,

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Table 3: Semantic categories by gender of characters portrayed

Category	Tokens	Texts = 14	Lexemes	Example Nouns
Other m	36	9	8	forester vorester mon moyt chap pal bloke
First names m	35	8	11	bert jim garge jack jake ivor bob geoff dave
Family m	21	6	5	fayther dad lads uncle grancher
Family f	19	7	9	mother mam missus wife ouman nanny nan widdows aunt
Animal m	19	6	7	hoss pig piggies cock deer porkers mole
Address forms m	18	5	5	butt butty zurry pal lads boy
Professions m	16	6	7	miner freeminer collier vree miner varmers bankers doctor
Other	9	4	6	kids babby families cousins folks neighbours
Animal f	8	3	7	chicken en edge'og pig
Other animal	6	3	5	cat moggy rats ship mutt
First names f	3	1	2	dolly Rosemary

when taken together, could construct a register for representing the Forest dialect, i.e., a subset of features used more widely to typify the dialect (Agha, 2003: 231). The pronoun system particularly, is a rich source for representing the dialect on multiple linguistic levels which interact in complex ways with persona and character representation. Dialect is indexed through the use of recurring spelling patterns representing pronunciation and grammar. Within those patterns, a number of frequently occurring words emerge – e.g. *ee, er, thee, thou*, verb forms *be*, *bist* and *do, and* demonstrative *thic/k*. These words could also contribute to the register.

Discourse analysis and discussion

Agha (2003: 243) asserts that each genre, in this instance dialect poetry, has its own referents, i.e., a set of depicted 'characterological figures' or 'social personae' that become indexically related to dialect. In this section, I have collated those nouns in the data, used by the authors to construct characters, recognisable as typical local speakers.

Table 3 groups semantically related nouns into categories by gender. The categories are organised in order of frequency. The majority of terms have masculine associations (145 m v 30 f tokens), as do the top three most frequently occurring categories. First name references consist of traditional male names which are mostly monosyllabic or diminutive. First name references combine with varied friendship terms to create associations of informality and solidarity with male characters. Nouns include NS forms, thereby linking dialect with masculine identities e.g. *moyt, butty* – mate. Men are represented by manual and professional roles of which miner and freeminer mark the central identity for a Forester. The term *freeminer* invokes a unique forester identity that goes back to the Middle Ages, one that is afforded its own unique rights and privileges to the Forest, and to the land (Wakelin, 1972: 145; Olivey, 2016). This heritage is promoted on tourism websites, in heritage museums and periodically in the local and national press, expanding the range of discourses constructing foresters and the forest as unique (e.g. *Wyedeantourism.co.uk*, 2020).

The following examples show how miners are linked to place – *forester*, *forest* (31) and *home* (16). *Forest(er)* indexes dialect – *f* spelled as *v*; whereas the latter occurs as the dialect word *wum*, in examples 7-8.

7. Our fayther wuz a miner … ee wuz a vree miner, a speshul kinda mon . . . ee worked the shifts, cum wum tired and black
8. Tribute to a Vorest Miner . . . My fayther wuz a miner . . . My fayther is a Vorester

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9. Thee grancher [grandfather] were a Freeminer a proud and splendid breed

Ethnographic observations reveal that members of the community have the strongest claim to a Forester identity, by invoking a kinship relationship to a Forest miner or freeminer. Examples 7–8 written by female authors, invoke a forester persona through a first person account of kinship relationships to male miners and further link *father* to dialect – *fayther*. Furthermore, frequent use of second-person pronouns brings into focus the authors' narrative voices which 'speak' directly to audience and characters alike. In example 9, the author's choice of NS *Thee grancher* invites the audience to align themselves with a forester identity by invoking their kinship relationship to a male freeminer.

10. Ivor was calling have yur tommy [lunch] have yur tea,
Come on owld butty [mate] these stop and squat by me.

In example 10, the author constructs her own persona as a male forest miner combining dialect terms *tommy* and *butty* with other mining terms and practices – *carbide lamp, shaft*. Miners would squat to have their lunch in the mine. While *butty* is associated with other mining communities in South Wales, the East Midlands and Lancashire, *tommy* seems to be local to the Forest. *Butty* also refers to the Butty system that operated in the Forest. A Butty(man) was a subcontractor who supervised a few miners and paid their wages. (Wright, 1972: 40; Olivey, 2016; *Oed.com, 2020*, butty, n.1).

The prominence of masculine nouns contrasts with the lack of feminine nouns. The poems represent male characters, whose identities are interpersonal, relational and professional. Dialect indexes mostly male character attributes. Females are mainly confined to family relationships: mother-*mam*, wife-*missus*. Even when the writers are female, they adhere to the 'forester as male' norm by constructing male persona – miner, or by invoking kinship relationships to male miners.

Finally, the inclusion of animals reflects a traditional rural representation of foresters who would keep domestic and farm animals (Olivey, 2016). Authors invoke foresters' relationships to farmyard animals especially. Animal names are informal - *piggies*, or index dialect e.g. H-dropping – *en*-hen; FLEECE – *ship*–sheep; and dialect words e.g. *porker, hoss* – pig, horse. Gender is represented for animal characters. Most animals are male, with *pigs* being the most frequently mentioned whereas female animals (*en, edge'og*) feature as main characters in just two of the poems.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed a number of processes which contribute to the enregisterment of the dialect in the Forest of Dean, a small area on the English-Welsh border. Dialect poetry produced since 2004 promotes centuries-old traditions. The linguistic analysis reveals how authors frequently and consistently choose NS forms which seem to contribute to a register typifying the Forest dialect. These forms have been described as occurring in the traditional dialects of SE Wales, SW and WM regions. The spread of the register is developed by the physical performance of the poetry in local geographical spaces, and by its written form in online spaces, alongside discourses that also contribute to dialect enregisterment. I have described a number of enregisterment processes in which messages are conveyed through the poetry genre in what Agha (2003: 243) calls a 'speech chain network'. *Senders,* members of the local community convey *messages* by means of dialect poetry and related discourses, typifying the dialect to *receivers*, local audiences and online users. The *message content,* constructs a set of norms that link authors' as authentic speaker, to a set of *characterological figures*. Age and gender are important in the construction of forest characters associated with centuries-old traditions. The register takes on a perceived uniqueness and centrality over time, as it is increasingly associated with the freeminer industrial heritage, and the Forest, a bucolic 'land between two rivers'.

Notes

1 Forest Dialect is part of the Forester's Forest programme funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund; see www.forestersforest.uk/projects/27/forest-dialect.

2 I used Wells (1982: 127-167) keywords to refer to vowel sounds. For example, FLEECE refers to all words that have the same long-i sound [i:] in RP.

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