Exploring the enregisterment of the Lancashire dialect in Late Modern England,
with special reference to spelling

Over the past few years, there has been a growing scholarly interest in the processes whereby varieties of English are constructed and publicly circulated as (relatively) stable sets of linguistic features that index sociocultural values. This has been largely prompted by Asif Agha’s groundbreaking theory of enregisterment, which, as is known, he defines as “the processes through which a linguistic repertoire becomes differentiable within a language as a socially recognized register of forms” (2003: 231-2). Whilst modern varieties of English have earned considerable attention in light of Agha’s framework (see Johnstone 2011, 2013; Johnstone et al. 2006), little research has been undertaken in order to explore the enregisterment of older varieties of English: Picone (2013), for example, has addressed these processes in US English, whereas Beal (2009, 2012, 2016), Ruano-García (2012), Cooper (2013), and Beal & Cooper (2015) have explored the enregisterment of northern varieties of British English during the Early / Late Modern periods. They have considered different types of discourse, namely dictionaries and especially dialect writing, which, because it draws consciously upon regional speech forms, Clark (2013: 261) emphasizes, “may not only be an intentional act, but an act of enregisterment”. The conscious selection of a set of linguistic forms indeed suggests that they may have been salient enough to be recognized as characteristic of the dialect and its speaker attributes from within and beyond the speech community. In this regard, Honeybone and Watson’s (2013) study of contemporary Scouse literature proves that the analysis of an author’s respellings offers fertile ground “to shed light on which particular linguistic features are salient to the speakers of a given community, perhaps even to the extent that this leads to, or at least reflects, those features being “enregistered” in the dialect”.

This talk places literary representations of Lancashire English into the context of enregisterment and the sociolinguistics of spelling (Androutsopoulos 2000; Jaffe 2000; Sebba 2007, 2009). I examine some Lancashire dialect writings published between 1700-1900 that are now part of The Salamanca Corpus. A quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data is undertaken to determine, firstly, the repertoire of forms that were circulated in representations of the dialect and the values they indexed. Secondly, this study engages with current research that sees orthography as “a social practice. . .which involves members of a community in making meaningful choices” (Sebba 2007: 31). As such, the paper attempts to identify the respellings employed in representations of the Lancashire dialect so as to ascertain which phonological features may have been salient at the time. To do so, I follow Honeybone and Watson’s (2013) methodological framework in which respellings are treated as linguistic variables and quantified to measure the relative salience of the phonological features they represent: attention is paid to some of the most frequent traits found in the corpus, such as the MOUTH (e.g. neaw ‘now’) and PRICE (e.g. loik ‘like’) diphthongs, trying to determine if they
were respelt to the same degree across time and type of representation. With this, I seek to contribute to current research on historical enregisterment and the sociolinguistics of spelling, arguing that the conscious choice of such forms could be seen as instances of flotsam in that they result from a selection process based on shared ideas and conventions that provide a window into contemporary perceptions about how the Lancashire dialect was like.

References