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The Problem of Reading Dialect in Semiliterate Letters: The Correspondence of the Holden Family, 1812-16 and of Richard Taylor 1840-51

This qualitative study is concerned with the letters sent by two inhabitants of Lancashire in the first half of the nineteenth century, who had been transported to New South Wales: Thomas Holden (or Holding) and Richard Taylor. The corpus also includes letters to Holden from his family. The forces at work among working class people who had some writing ability – industrialisation, evangelicalism and the Sunday school tradition of education – are then discussed, with Holden and Taylor’s adherence to these norms demonstrated. The essay shows that, although all those writing are semi-literate, the language used which transgresses educated norms tends not to be dialectal but rather non-standard. It is suggested, therefore, that spoken dialect and written non-standard are strikingly different from each other, and not just because of the medium. Even in the early nineteenth century dialect speakers had a strongly developed sense of what was appropriate and could be understood outside their home districts.

1. Introduction

From the 1780s until the 1860s Britain transported tens of thousands of convicts to Australia. The majority of those transported were found guilty of (from a twenty-first century perspective) relatively small crimes against property, although there were some “hard cases” in the colonies who had somehow escaped the hangman. There were also a small but vocal minority of transportees whose “crime” was political in nature. Many were Irish people who had become involved in the risings of 1798-1800; some of the last to be transported in the 1860s were members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Scottish, Welsh and English dissidents were also transported because of their actions in a society either caught up in a “total war” against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France and its allies or, after the completion of that war, affected adversely by structural problems in the British governmental and economic system.

Although there were certainly little pockets of misery in the convict colonies – parts of what is now Tasmania as well as Norfolk Island are particularly striking examples – most of those transported after the first few fleets, whatever their original crime, suffered little more than petty

strictures on their lives, while being aware that, if they kept their heads down, they might actually do quite well for themselves in the colony even before their official freedom was achieved. This sunny interpretation does not, of course, recognise the considerable angst from which anyone who lived in Australia in the early days suffered, largely derived from the sense of distance and dislocation from the “mother country” they felt, and towards which convicts were particularly prone, since they were unlikely ever to get home (for a discussion of this and other features of “the System”, see Hughes 1987).

There are a few collections of letters from convicts housed both in the British Isles and Australia. The two collection upon which this essay will concentrate— since their semi-literate nature is particularly conducive to a discussion of language use at the time — are concerned with two men from Lancashire who were transported to New South Wales in the first half of the nineteenth century: Thomas Holden (or Holding) and Richard Taylor. Holden, a weaver from Bolton, was transported in the final years of the Napoleonic Wars for attempting to set up a Trade Union through administering an illegal oath. A number of his friends and relatives were also tried at the same time, largely for sabotage. Taylor was transported in the early 1840s for handling stolen goods. We know nothing, sadly, about Holden after he achieved liberty, although it is striking that, unusually for collections of this type, we have copies of letters both to and from him (tagged **FH** and **TH** in this essay respectively). Taylor (whose letters are tagged **RT** in this essay) remained in Australia after he gained his liberty, married, had children and prospered as a bootmaker on the outskirts of Sydney. He died in the 1850s from an undisclosed illness (Hindmarsh 2001).

Despite Holden’s being a political prisoner and Taylor a “common criminal”, however, their backgrounds were probably not as different as this analysis suggests. Their “crimes”, and their reactions to their fates, were conditioned by the times and places in which they both lived.

2. Early nineteenth century Lancashire

Before the language use in these letter collections is considered, we must attempt to reconstruct the working class experience in early nineteenth century industrialising Lancashire. This experience can be seen as being affected by three central strands:

2.1 Industrialisation

By the early nineteenth century the towns of southern and central Lancashire had long been associated with a weaving industry connected to handlooms, often owned by the weavers themselves. The concentration of individual weavers in towns like Bolton or Burnley did mean that considerable quantities of finished items were available, although costs remained high and quality was highly variable. A number of technological innovations during the period – the flying shuttle, the spinning jenny and, eventually, powered looms (whether by water or steam) – increasingly endangered the independence (and, perhaps more to the point, livelihoods) of the handloom weavers (Royle 2000: 36; Mori 2000: 144). Almost all were proletarianised; some attempted to fight back, inevitably unsuccessfully.

These weavers – normally literate to some degree, because of the use of patterns and other items in their trade – were associated with political radicalism throughout the British Isles – in particular, but not exclusively, in western Scotland, the Belfast area and Lancashire. As the capitalist strength of mill owners gradually overwhelmed the artisan trade of handloom weavers, many of the latter turned to political action; some attempted direct action, particularly through sabotage (Marshall 1974: 76; Walton 1987: 144; Spence 1996: 187; Mori 2000: 144-50; Royle 2000: 8, 35); a number attempted to set up “societies”, the immediate ancestor of the Trade Union movement. Given that, throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, other sectors of economic life, such as agriculture and the new proletariat (often of rural origin and generally illiterate) in the new cities, were also periodically in turmoil, the draconian powers which the British government

had assumed during the French wars, continued during a peace of economic depression, culminating in the “Peterloo Massacre” in Manchester in 1819 (Walton 1987: 144; Royle 2000: 8, 35, 36-7) hit hard against potential organisation – for political or criminal purposes – among the “lower orders”. The “crimes” of Thomas Holden and Richard Taylor were, in their different ways and different time periods, very much products of change.

2.2 Evangelicalism

From the middle of the eighteenth century on, elements within the Protestant party in the British Isles (their exact combination depending on which nation was affected, but nevertheless carrying out essentially the same programme) began to express dissatisfaction with the ways in which the established churches viewed their mission obligations on home ground. In England, the primary result of these misgivings can be found in Methodism. Its results can also be found – then and now – in the Evangelical wing of the Church of England and in a number of other movements which developed in the early nineteenth century (Bebbington 1989). Essentially, this new evangelicalism was particularly attractive to the artisan class. Its combination of methods for salvation and a focus on the individual and his or her progress in divine and material terms appealed to a group – the artisan class – who were already beginning to feel themselves being crushed by external forces. For this and other reasons, Methodism was strong in south and central Lancashire (Walton 1987: 92, 95, 132)

Part of the evangelical movement’s programme was an increase in literacy, a Protestant principle which had only been honoured sporadically by Anglicanism. The ability to read the Bible intelligently inspired the creation of Sunday Schools, where the basics of literacy and numeracy were taught in a powerfully evangelical setting (Walton 1987: 186-7).

We have no evidence for what religious affiliations – if any – either Thomas Holden or Richard Taylor had. But their letters give some idea that they at least knew how to “talk the talk”, for instance:

TH4 13-7 cut off in the Bloom of my youth without doing the least wrong to any person on Earth O my hard fate may God have mercy on me In him will I trust

RT4 5-24, 32-8 I can assure you my dear father I feel grateful indeed for \your/ good advice and trust by the Grace of God, that I shall not fail to follow it. This is a world of trouble, and our great Business here is to prepare for another and a better home and may I wish dear Parent, meet you and my dear Brothers and Sisters there Never more to part – all things in this probationary world are but vanity, and pass away as if they had never been but Religion, my dear father, is a continual source not only of happiness in this world, but it prepares us for an inheritance of Gorly [sic] in the everlasting Kingdom of God. May then it be my Portion to lay hold of that greatest of all earthly blessings, and never lose it my dear father. I fervently commend you and all my Brothers and sisters in my morning and evening Prayers – You know, my dear father, the Prayers of a Sincere heart [] are as acceptable to God from the dreary Prison as from the Splendid Palace. What a blessing that \assurances/ is to a poor unfortunate mortal in my hapless Situation. ... When I have lived out my ten years in a far distant land, how happy shall I be to return to my native home, and with how much more delight will I return home, if God shall \spare/ my dear father, and converse together about heavenly things – why my dear Parent if \He/ spare us both to enjoy that happiness, it will be like a fore taste of Heaven itself.

If anything, it is Taylor, not Holden, who is given to lengthy perorations on salvation. There are probably a number of reasons for this. Firstly, Taylor had been found guilty of a genuine felony, while Holden might have derived some consolation from the fact that he was a political prisoner, not a criminal. Secondly, Taylor's father (whose letters we sadly do not have) appears to have held particularly evangelical sentiments, these apparently echoed in his son's replies. Finally,

Evangelical ideas had become much more commonplace (perhaps even hegemonic) by the 1840s in ways that they were not in the 1810s.

2.3 Literacy and the early nineteenth century working classes

In any reading and writing instruction organised by the churches or other societies, letter writing was taught in a highly prescriptive way – something that continued well into the twentieth century. Various turns of phrase, particularly involved with beginnings and endings, were taught as essentially the only options. Almost inevitably, these were employed rigorously, in particular, we might assume, by people who did not use their writing skills very often. The usage can be readily compared to letter-writing guides from the time, as discussed by Fens-De Zeeuw (2008) (and for handwriting by Dury 2008), although it is likely that these similarities are second hand via teachers rather than learned directly from books. Fairman (2008 and elsewhere) has described this type of literacy as *mechanical*. Some examples of these features include:

TH10 1-4 Dr Father & Mother, I Received your kind Letter on the 13th and Was happy to hear [o]f your Welfare as I am in Good health at present thank []d for all his Mercies

TH4 17-20 adue dear Wife & parents I will expect to hear from you shortly your Affec-
Unfortunate husband till Death Thos Holden

FH1 2-6 Dear Husband, I Rec'd your well Come letter which was dated may 16 which gave me great Comfort to hear you was well as this leaves both me and your Child

FH14a 25-6 so we Conclude and remain your father and mother till time shall be no more John and Elen holding

RT1 2-4 Dear Father and Brother and Sisters i send this Few lines hopin to find you Well Wich leavs me [] preasent thank god for it

Interestingly, on this occasion it is Holden rather than Taylor who uses more of these previously learned phrases in his writing.

These inputs from the literacy process inevitably place a barrier between the person whose writing we are observing and his or her actual speech. As we will see in this essay, this is not the only such barrier.

3. The corpus

The corpus on which this essay is based consists of two collections, both housed in the Lancashire County Records Office in Preston. The Thomas Holden collection, Preston, Lancashire County Records Office, DDX 140/7, consists of seventeen letters from him (TH) and seven letters to him (FH); the Richard Taylor connection (RT), Preston, Lancashire County Records Office, DDX 505, consists of fifteen letters. In this essay, the numbers following the collection code represent the order in which the Lancashire County Records Office order the letter. All punctuation, and capitalisation is as in the original. Line division is normalised, but with the line division in the manuscript established numerically in each citation.

The hands in which these letters were written vary considerably across time and across documents. This has led one commentator on Taylor's letters (Hindmarsh 2001) to suggest that most of his letters were written by a (semi-) professional letter writer, with the most semi-literate being Taylor's own hand. From consulting the original documents, however, it seems to me (I must here add that I am not a trained palaeographer and that some of the letters have been severely

damaged over the years) that there are relatively few hands involved in the correspondence. Because the letters of the convicts were written in a variety of different places at a variety of different times, it seems extremely unlikely that the *same* scribe was available everywhere; instead, we must assume that many of these letters were written by Holden or Taylor, despite the fact that, as Fig. 1 suggests, they vary considerably along the literacy continuum. To express these distinctions, a two-way split has been constructed: *standardised end* and *less standardised end*. This is a rather primitive way to separate the continuum. Interestingly, however, the language used seems either to be fairly close to one end or the other: there is little evidence for a middle usage.

It is reasonable to assume that the letters (particularly in the case of Richard Taylor) represent the development of writing across time and with practice; they also appear to change depending on need for haste and levels of emotion (and, quite possibly, other factors such as time of day and levels of fatigue). Linguistic variability also seems to correlate with these variables. This variability is particularly striking in Holden's letters; hand 3, only used towards the end of his correspondence, may well be a more emotionally affected version of hand 2.

Letters of Thomas Holden: hands

| Hand | Standardised end | Less standardised end |
|-------------------------------|---|------------------------------------|
| 1 | | TH2 |
| 2 | TH3, TH4, TH6, TH8, TH9, TH10, TH10a, TH13, TH20, TH21 | TH7, TH11, TH12, TH17, TH18 |
| 3 (possibly 2, but bolder) | TH21 epilogue, TH21a | |

Letters to Thomas Holden: hands

| Hand | Standardised end | Less standardised end |
|------|--|-----------------------|
| 1 | FH1, FH5, FH14, FH14a, FH15, FH19 | |
| 2 | FH16 | |

Letters from Richard Taylor: hands

| Hand | Standardised end | Less standardised end |
|------|--|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | | RT1 (part 1) |
| 2 | RT7, | RT1 (part 2), RT3, RT6, RT7a |
| 3 | RT4, RT4a, RT5a, RT18, RT20a, RT22a, RT23 | RT2, RT5b |

Fig. 1: hands in the correspondence.

4. Evidence for linguistic variation and change

4.1 Phonological

Throughout the letters mis-spelling (in relation to the standard) are prevalent (although, as we have seen, the level to which these are used differs according to the letter, if not, necessarily, according to the hand). Some of these spellings are almost predictable, concerned with the use of <gh> to represent /x/ (obviously no longer in use in either Burnley or Bolton in the early nineteenth century, although still present, we assume, at that time across the Pennines in Keighley) and <wr>. Both inevitably turned up, given the context, in *write*:

TH11 19-20 But it is a great Deal of truble and Difficulty to get to **Right** a letter hear

RT6 10-1 This will be the Last Time I can **right** to you for a wile

As with all of the categories, these examples are samples from a considerably larger number of examples. Naturally, these tell us nothing about local pronunciation patterns, except that the spelling patterns associated with *right*, are not, as we might expect, related to the traditional dialect pronunciation in this area – /rɪ:t/ – but rather a diphthongal pronunciation analogous to the standard one.

Other examples, such as

RT1 14-5 you must not fret **be cost** i think i shall do so well

TH3 9-10 but in case we are Liberated we shall be s[t]ill **incasinaty** for want of Mone

TH7 12-4 if you are for Sending me any muneey you must send it **ametitley**

are probably less mis-spellings than genuine attempts to represent a word that has been heard but never seen. Again they have little to tell us about actual pronunciation. Essentially, these are “red herrings” – little or no evidence for contemporary dialect usage can be derived from them (indeed, often they appear to be similar to “mistakes” made by many native speakers today). This may not always be the case, however. For instance, in

TH20 7-8 for Caps and gouns and **Shalls** the Best you have yet and a pase of them prinilled Bed Covers wich the making even I laft home

*shall*s may well represent the unrounded pronunciation still possible in some Lancashire varieties.

The same can probably be said for

TH21a 9-10 I Beg you will Send my **doutter** han to School

and

RT2 12-3 I listen to my fellows prisoners till my Heart goes as **Cowd** as Clay

But in all three collections particularly prevalent features cannot be said to be “local”; they are by far the most common non-standard usages. These include variable /h/ use:

TH13 12 it is **an Hot** Climate wheare we are going

TH18 6-11 I **ham** very unhappy to think that you have for got me So soon for My Part I know that I **ham** Shut up in one Corner of the World But I hope that you wont for get to write to me **hevery** 3 Months as there is a Ship Sails from Portsmouth

FH16 6-8 If you desire to know how trade is with us [] it is very bad and getting worse Every day and where it will **old** we cannot say []

RT3 2-9 I right a fu lines to to [sic] you hoping to find you all in good **elth** as it leaves me at present thank god for it and I have wrighten to my father twice but I have receved [] no answer back I **ham** shure **e** as not got them but you must let him now I **ham** very well and **e** must think as little a bough me as **e** can fo i **ham** quite innesent

or spellings suggesting the merger of /**m**/ and /w/, for instance

TH9 23 our Journey has been verry **whett** and uncomfortable

TH13 3-4 I received your kind letter **wich** gave me Great comfort to hear from you

FH15 14-9 you must get him to write to the government of England for their approbation of your discharge from Banishment as returning before the time without it **whould** cause them to send you again & perhaps fore a longer period

RT1 2-4 Dear Father and Brother and Sisters i send this Few lines hopin to find you Well **Wich** leavs me [] preasent thank god for it

RT5b 26-8 I hope my Brother Thomas **whill** Keep Tetotle till I Return Back a gain **Wich** I hope I Shall if god Spare me

In a sense, it would be worrying if these did *not* occur in texts written by working class people from central or northern Lancashire during the period; they are not localisable there, however. More striking, is the evidence for variable /r/ use, for instance:

TH11 44-6 and I hope you will keepe Sending up **Pertisones** to Government to get me off or to get my Sentance mitegated

TH17 23-6 Dear Father I should like to know the reason my **Brothe** dont write to me Si[nce] that he can find as much time as I can do

RT2 2-4 Dear affectionet **farther** also brothers and sisters it is my Duty to Write these few Lines to you

RT3 8-9 e must think as little a bough me as e can **fo** i ham quite innesent

RT7a 14-6 Dear **Farther** [] to send me a pair of braces and Belt

In contemporary Lancashire, Bolton dialect is non-rhotic, while Burnley dialect, although itself non-rhotic, is spoken not far from rhotic pockets in rural parts of the Ribble valley. What the situation was 150-200 years ago is difficult to plot, although it would seem likely that rhoticity was the norm. But even if we accept the evidence as demonstrating non-rhoticity, it does not explain everything in these examples. If Richard Taylor came from the south of England at this time, *farther* might be seen as representing vowel lengthening in a non-rhotic dialect. This vowel lengthening does not, of course, occur in north Midlands dialects even today, so we therefore have to find other explanations. It is possible, of course, that this is not Taylor who is writing, but rather a scribe from a southern English background (although, as we have seen, where and when these letters were written would make the use of one scribe from a particular background a little unlikely); it may also be an example of hyper-rhoticity, perhaps in the final stages of rhotic use, as shown in more recent times in Bristol vernacular (see, for instance, Britton 2007).

There are also a few occasions where some evidence on actual contemporary pronunciation can be derived – with caution – from the evidence. Thomas Holden, for instance, does sometimes use <ea> where a pronunciation based on /e:/ appears to be intended, as with:

TH2 7-8 But we know not What Will be there **feat** as sentance is not past on any

or:

TH11 35-7 if **thear** is any prospect of you Coming to me and /us\ doing well I will send for you and [sh]ortly

This may even be extended to the use of <ea> in *have*, probably representing a pronunciation previously quite common in English, although largely confined to Scotland in more recent years:

TH3 8-9 we **heave** better hopes to day considerably then we had yesterday

The preservation of an <ea> pronunciation merged with <aCe> and <ai/y> rather than <ee> is not surprising, of course. Pronunciation patterns of this type are still prevalent in the English of the southern counties of Ireland and in Northern and Insular Scots dialects; it would not be surprising if they represent a recessive feature.

But there are problems with the evidence, as seen with

TH7 3-4 I Expect to go from **hear** Every day as **thear** are 7 going of tomerow

Of course /r/-final influence is recorded for a range of vowels during the modern period, so that <ea> in these contexts may not be representative of the set as a whole. Nevertheless, it does not encourage great confidence in any findings derived from them, even when examples such as

TH20 7-8 for Caps and gouns and Shalls the Best you have yet and a **pase** of them prinilled Bed Covers wich the making even I laft home

suggest a different distribution from the present-day Standard English one. It is worth noting, however, that only Thomas Holden shows this variation. FH and RT do not.

4.2 Syntax and Morphology

Non-standard features are also prevalent in the morphology and syntax of the letters. These include the falling together of adjective and adverb forms:

TH10 34-6 Every three Months there is Return made of all the Mens Caractors on Board & the Captain was pleased to speak **favourable** of us

FH14 3-5 It is with the most heartfelt sattisfaction that we can **possible** express to you that yours of June 24 1813 is come safe to hand

the use of *them* as a demonstrative adjective:

TH20 7-8 for Caps and gouns and Shalls the Best you have yet and a pase of **them** prinilled Bed Covers wich the making even I laft home

multiple negation:

TH7 4-6 I Beg you **willnot** Send me **no** Close as we arenot Alowed to wear aney of our own Close

FH1 15-7 your father and mother wonder at your Brothe[r] William sends no word and wonder how he goes on for he **never** send **no** word to them

a-ing progressives:

TH17 18-9 Dear Father you was **a speaking** to me about the Men that came in the Ship with me

verb-noun concord:

with auxiliary *have*:

TH4 3-5 I this day Receivd my Tryal and **has** receivd the hard sentance of Seven Years Transportation beyond the seaz

TH6 30-2 I Receid your letter & 4s and I wrote to you but **has** not receivd an answer since this

or alternatively:

RT7 15-6 I am sorry to hear what **have** befell [] but it may be all for the best

with *be*:

TH7 20-1 But my Spirits **is** low with thinking How I am sent from my Natiff Contrey

TH18 54-6 allthough the Prices **is** So high We are Verry glad to get at aney Price

FH5 3-6 I Recd your letter with Great Trouble to hear you **was** so uncomfortable in your Mind and more so to hear you **was** not in health

with *do*-periphrasis + *not*:

TH17 23-6 Dear Father I should like to know the reason my Brothe **dont** write to me Si[nce] that he can find as much time as I can do

with fully lexical verbs:

TH18 13-5 there is never a Ship Coms to this Contry But I **goes** to know whether there is aney Letter for Me or no

TH2 9 Dear Wives these lines **leaves** us in good health

RT23 26-9 Two of my Children Ellen and Anne **goes** to School every day and likewise attends Sunday School

Also found are unmarked possessives:

TH20 24-8 I shall be shoure to get them sefe put **Mr Allan neme** on it But not mine be sure to Nale this Box doun fast and if there is hanny Room to send **James bradley thing** with mine

TH21 59-60 No more hat present from **you** Lovin housband

It should be noted that, with a couple of exceptions (some verb-subject concord issues and possibly the unmarked possessives), which could be classified as “northern” in the broad sense, practically all of these examples are inherently non-standard rather than dialectal.

4.3 Lexical use

Evidence for local lexical use is even less evident. *Stop*, regularly used in the letters, could be said to be Northern (although with many Midlands attestations) with the meaning “reside, stay”:

TH11 39-41 I hope you will never Seace doing all you Can to get my Pardin or to get me to **Stop** in Ingland

RT5a 20-22 please god that I should **stop** in this country and come under the royal mercy

The only other exception of this non-standard rather than dialectal pattern is one phrasal verb, *hear on*, not used in Standard English:

FH1 7-8 all the witnesses that we Can **hear on** is Isaac

4.4 Archaisms

A striking feature of the language of the letters to and from Thomas Holden, however, is their use of apparent archaisms:

TH2 7-8 But we **know not** What Will be there feat as sentance is not past on any

TH6 8-9 I **know not** how soon I may leave this for the Hulks

TH10 38-9 I []ther you Will Leave n[]thing undon that **Lieth** in your p[]er to Do for me

FH14 13-7 from the tenor of your letter we are led to believe that the man you are liveing with is a gentleman, we beg to say to him we are very thankful that he **hath** so far condes ended to take you into his service

FH19 29-31 we are inform'd that the parson you have with **hath** it in his power to do some thing towards getting you a passage and your liberty

FH19 46-8 Brother Will Remember his love to you as **doth** Mary sister and Father and Mother together with uncles and aunts

It could be argued, however, that the *know not* construction is, even today, much more current than the *-th* forms. Given that the latter probably died out in Lancashire at the very latest by the end of the Middle English period, can only be Biblical in origin. It is difficult to judge, but it does seem likely that passages of particular importance or solemnity might encourage the use of *-th*. It is certainly a feature which is common in rather more literate writers from the same period. It can only really have a literate source.

4.5 Missing local features

It is also striking to consider the features of local usage, such as the everyday use of *thou* and reduced forms of *the*, which, while common in speech, do not occur at all in the letters. It may be, of course, that the relatively small size of the corpus may make this lack purely due to chance. As we have seen, however, a considerable number of non-standard features *do* occur. It may be that local, dialectal, forms are disfavoured in relation to standard and nonstandard.

5. Conclusion

It must, I would argue, be accepted that, while the Holden Family and Richard Taylor were semi-literate (with Taylor becoming increasingly confident in his use of Standard English during his time in Australia), this semi-literacy was essentially associated with Standard English. It is unlikely, therefore, that their written use accurately represented their spoken use. This is not surprising, of course. As we have seen, all of the writers had learned – in a rather prescriptive way – how to write letters; they also knew the Bible and other religious literature inspired by it – including hymns and psalms, probably. They had a developed sense of what was “correct” or “proper”. Bearing this in

mind, features which interest us in their writing are likely to be accidental. But this understanding has to be squared with what commentators both then and later say about the perception of everyday language, however.

Wordsworth, for instance, famously said that he intended “to bring my language near to the language of men”. In a variety of places in his work Bakhtin celebrated the idea that nineteenth century novels (and other writings) were, to use the somewhat confused terminology employed in English translations, *polyglossic*: different dialects, registers and even languages were found in the same document (Crowley 1996). What these letters illustrate instead is that even fairly lowly members of the undoubtedly hierarchical society of the early nineteenth century were endeavouring to demonstrate literacy in one variety and one variety alone. In a sense, dialect had become marked in ways it had not been in the past, as I have also discussed in Millar (forthcoming). Beyond this, however, we may also have to recognise that – at least by this point most speakers of dialect had a developed sense of what was readily comprehensible over a wide area – an ability which facilitated accommodations which are different only in scale from those postulated for the early stages in the creation of colonial varieties as discussed by, among others, Trudgill (2004).

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