

“Dear Mr. Heditor...”: Stylised Letters as Discursive Evidence for Historical Phonology

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The reconstruction of past phonological states is often limited by fragmentary or indirect structural evidence - the classic “bad data” problem. The author’s research explores how stylised epistolary discourse in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century press can supplement empirical dialect studies as a source for historical phonology, providing socially situated cues to features otherwise poorly attested in surviving records.

Drawing on a corpus of Black Country dialect writing in newspapers, I examine the parodic “*Dear Mr. Heditor...*” letters published pseudonymously in the regional press. These formulaic texts – building on a comedy tradition with its roots in North American newspapers – combine eye dialect, local phonological cues, and stock comic tropes to stage the voice of the “ordinary reader”, while simultaneously reinforcing class-inflected editorial perspectives. Despite their stylised nature, the letters exhibit consistent orthographic strategies for representing key vowel qualities that contrast with those of Standard English.

Framed through Agha’s theory of enregisterment (2003, 2007) and Silverstein’s indexical order (2003), the analysis shows how these representations both reflected and actively shaped perceptions of the region’s spoken variety. Their repeated circulation helped consolidate certain features as recognisable markers of local identity, creating a metapragmatic repertoire that later writers would draw upon. As such, the “Heditor” letters offer discursive evidence for which phonological variables were salient, available for caricature, and socially interpretable at the time.