

In Defense of Literary Dialect: A Response to Dennis R. Preston

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NOTES

In Defense of Literary Dialect: A Response to Dennis R. Preston

If folklorists were to accept Dennis R. Preston's (1982) charges against their attempts to record dialect in print, they might feel embarrassed that their textmaking of the 1970s was so bad. Few folklorists would like to admit that their efforts at representing folk speech are culturally or racially biased; nor would they like to think that their uses of literary dialect respellings "having as their primary effect on the reader a demotion of opinion of the speaker represented" (Preston 1982:323). Yet if we accept Preston's data and premises, and adopt his "rules" for determining what to respell, then we will seriously undermine the study of folklore as artistic verbal performance. While Preston's interest in improving the quality of texts is laudable, there are serious problems with his presentation of data, his attitude toward the print medium as a vehicle for recording performance features, and his rules for respelling.

Preston's analysis of the folklore texts published by the *Journal of American Folklore* in the 1970s is seriously flawed, and at times, contradictory. He claims that 35 out of the 45 published folklore texts of English-speaking people contained modified spelling. One might question his method of tallying respellings, since Preston says, "Generally accepted spellings of nonstandard forms (e.g., *clumb* for *climbed*) were not tallied" (1982:305). Just how one decides which spellings are generally accepted is questionable, since "clumb" does not appear in dictionaries. Preston includes such common spellings as "wanna," "gonna," and "git" in his list of dialect respellings. Why he considers these spellings unacceptable, while finding "clumb" acceptable, is a mystery.

After analyzing the 35 texts containing literary dialect, Preston claims that folklorists tend to be "linguacentric," since "The sets of figures in Table I strongly suggest that folklorists find it more necessary to respell the speech of blacks and Appalachians than that of others" (1982:305). A careful examination of Preston's data proves him wrong. His Table I directly contradicts his interpretation. According to Table I, only three articles contained Appalachian texts, and these are listed under the heading, "No spelling changes." His claim about black texts rests on a misuse of statistics. Instead of giving the percentage of respelled texts for a group measured against the total number of texts published of that group, Preston compares the number of respelled texts per group.

For example, since 14 black texts were respelled, and this number is larger than the three "Other U.S." texts (Preston's term) that were respelled, then, according to Preston, folklorists respell black speech more than others. Yet a comparison of Tables I and II shows that a high percentage of this Other U.S. speech is respelled. In Table II, for example, Preston shows three Other U.S. texts as respelled. It is not clear what groups or states comprise this category, since Preston does not identify the composition of the dialect categories in Table II. But looking at Table I, I infer that at least New England, New Jersey, and the Northwest must belong to this group. Since these areas are categorized under "Spelling changes," then three out of

three, or 100 percent of Other U.S. texts are respelled. From these figures we can only conclude that folklorists were just as likely to respell Other U.S. speech as they were to respell black speech, since 100 percent of the texts collected in both groups were respelled. Like his claim about Appalachian speech, Preston's claim about black speech does not withstand scrutiny.

Preston's attack on literary dialect rests on premises that strike at the heart of any attempt to translate performance to print. His premises hold that not only is print incapable of representing performance features, but that to depart from standardized conventions by respelling words devalues the character of the speaker being represented. Preston begins his article with the assertion that "Writing is a poor, secondary system when compared to speech. No tone or quality of voice can be represented; no helpful and delightful accompanying body language is seen; and no dramatic or embarrassing pauses or rapid tempo can be provided" (1982:304). This statement is belied by Charles Dickens, William Shakespeare, Mark Twain, and William Faulkner, to name but a few writers who manage to capture the rhythms, tones, and dialects of a variety of speakers. Barre Toelken's method of describing gestures and audience responses in brackets within a text (1969), István Sándor's use of photographs to convey performance gestures (1967), and Dennis Tedlock's use of typography and layout to convey paralinguistic features (1971), show that folklorists can translate many performance features to print.

Preston goes on to argue that "English has been spelled for so long, and we literates have read it for so long in one shape, that its very appearance has taken on significance beyond the message" (1982:322). Due to this metacommunicative power of print, Preston finds "it difficult to think of a respelling (except such trivial, nonattributed ones as *nite*) that I do not feel to be critical of the speaker" (1982:322). This criticism, he continues, is generally "in the direction of *lower social status, lack of education, illiteracy, boorishness or thuggishness, or rusticity* (though I know that all these 'criticisms' are open to romantic interpretations)" (1982:322, emphasis added). The only evidence that Preston cites to show that others share his objections to respellings is an appeal to an alleged "folk fact": "Even the most intelligent and well-trained reader cannot avoid that response, for, secondarily, I would argue that such responses constitute a folk fact of literate responses" (1982:323).

If Preston is right about this folk fact of literate responses to respellings, then a good many intelligent scholars and writers must be attempting to denigrate the people about whom they write. Yet it is difficult to believe that scholars such as William Labov (1972:265–314), Geneva Smitherman (1977), Roger Abrahams (1972:215–240), Edith Folb (1980), and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan (1972:315–335), all of whom use respellings to represent elements of black speech, seek to devalue the character of their informants. Indeed, some scholars, such as Geneva Smitherman, seem to appreciate black speech patterns so much that they represent their own black dialect through respellings: "On no level is this aesthetic more strikingly revealed than in the language of the new black poetry: the poets bees not only tappin the reservoir of the black cultural universe but doing so in the Black Idiom" (1977:180).

Not only scholars, but black writers use literary dialect to represent black speech. And this conscious choice to represent black speech through respellings comes not out of any devaluation but from either positive pride and appreciation of their culture, or simply a desire to capture the sounds and rhythms of black speech. Writers such as Mari Evans (1973:247), Carolyn Rodgers (1973:346), Nikki Giovanni (1973:280), Sterling Brown (1973:134), and Langston Hughes (1973:126), to name but a few, represent a wide range of black speech patterns, ranging from such simple respellings as *gonna*, *li'l*, or *yo*, to attempts to represent intonation and emphasis through respellings combined with typography: "yo mom ahhh yo maaa yo mommmmmmmmmmmUHma" (Barrax 1973:360). Many highly literate scholars and poets, then, consciously employ literary dialect out of genuine appreciation for the dialect and people they are trying to study or represent.

What are we to make of claims, such as Preston's, that using literary dialect lowers readers' esteem of the speakers being represented? Certainly those who believe that only one standard dialect should be spoken or written by properly educated persons may turn up their noses at any speech that deviates from their standard of correctness. But folklorists should not hamper their demands for descriptive accuracy simply because some readers hold biased attitudes toward speech usage. Perhaps one reason why Preston says that respellings make him critical of the speaker is that he ascribes negative valuations to dialects that differ from those spoken by an educated, middle class. Obviously Preston views lower social status, lack of education, and illiteracy negatively, since he lists these characteristics among those criticisms that respellings imply for him.

No doubt another source of Preston's dislike of respellings is a belief that the print medium is static and incapable of development, subject only to deterioration. His references to the respellings of folklorists as "sloppy spellings" (1982:308) and "especially obnoxious" (1982:320) indicate a strong dislike of nonstandard orthography. Yet such a belief that English orthographic practices should not deviate from "correct" dictionary spellings overlooks the long history of developments not only of conventions of English spelling, but of writing itself. Before the rise of the English "doctrine of correctness" espoused by 18th-century grammarians (Smitherman 1977:186–200), English orthography had not been standardized to the degree it is today. At one time, the early Greeks had only a rudimentary system of punctuation and no word division (Reynolds and Wilson 1968:5–9); these conventions that we take for granted today had to be invented. If we accept the premise that both the print medium and the spoken medium are elastic and are used variably by different persons in various times and places, then no fear of violating so-called "correct" rules should bother textmakers. As folklorists our job should be to record the speech we hear as accurately as possible, not to worry about offending the taste of some literates who cling to a static view of written language.

One would expect any scholar writing on the topic of literary dialect to make reference to Sumner Ives's classic work "A Theory of Literary Dialect," first published in 1950, and revised slightly and reprinted in 1971. While Preston refers to Ives's first version of this article several times, he uses Ives's work in a curious manner. Ives states in his introduction that he will "attempt to formulate principles by which the representations of American English dialects in literature may be evaluated. Concomitantly, the limitations and possibilities of such representations become part of the discussion" (1971:147). In quoting from Ives, Preston refers only to the limitations of literary dialect, without referring to the simple recommendations which Ives suggests to make literary dialect a useful tool. In addition, Preston distorts Ives's work by quoting Ives out of context and expunging important statements.

In "A Theory of Literary Dialect," Ives argues that literary dialect can be a reasonably accurate dialect indicator if readers first know the dialect which the author considers "standard." Since "the phonetic interpretation given to the letters and combinations of letters in the conventional orthography varies in different sections of the country," an author trying to represent pronunciations other than his own, "will select those which 'stand for' the deviant sounds in his *own* speech type, not in that of other varieties of English" (1971:162, emphasis in original). Thus, in order to interpret an author's dialect spelling, continues Ives, "it is necessary to know how these spellings would be pronounced in the region to which the author belongs" (1971:162). To illustrate this basic principle of interpreting literary dialect, Ives refers to the controversy over Joel Chandler Harris's spelling of "brer." Although H. L. Mencken faults Harris's "er" spellings for being an inaccurate representation of the black dialect "BRUH-UH" or "BRUH," Ives counters that Harris, as well as most people in the old plantation areas, did not pronounce the final *r*'s in words. In terms of Harris's own "r-less" dialect, the final *r* on *brer* would not be pronounced: "The ER spelling, therefore,

does not suggest a constricted sound to a native of the 'r-less' areas. Harris actually meant the same pronunciation by his spelling BRER that Mencken meant by his spelling BRUH, namely [brə] or perhaps [brʌ]" (1971:159).

As Ives readily admits, literary dialect cannot give as detailed a phonetic or subphonetic representation as a special phonetic code, such as the IPA. If the user of literary dialect tries to represent too many features, the difficulty in reading it might severely try the reader's patience. Yet Ives finds that literary dialect can "generally indicate a difference in phonemes, or rather a difference in the distribution of a particular phoneme, in the word stock of the dialect" (1971:156). He concludes that "some things in a literary dialect" can be suggested "with a reasonable degree of fidelity." These include social gradation between characters, regional differences on the "vulgate" level, and some "usages which are marginal, in that they appear or do not appear in the speech of educated persons according to the occasion" (1971:170).

Preston selectively uses Ives's work to bolster his own criticism of respellings. Preston (1982:306) quotes the following sentence from Ives (1950:162) to support his contention that users of literary dialect have a "linguacentric, prescriptivist attitude": "They [authors who employ 'literary dialect'] do not represent as 'dialect' those features of pronunciation which, though regional in distribution, do not conflict with their notions of 'correct' English." Yet Ives, on the same page from which Preston quotes, cites reasons to "vindicate the practise which authors follow of not trying to represent regional pronunciation in the speech of persons from the educated classes":

First, the authors see little reason to write as dialect what is to them good English; second, the attempt to represent regional variations in dialogue would increase the unconventional spelling to a repellent degree; third, the attempt is not feasible. The author can represent only those phonetic features for which spellings exist or can be improvised. These improvised spellings can be interpreted only by orthographic conventions, and these associations differ from region to region. Hence, the author cannot respell his own dialect in terms of his own dialect except by using alternate spellings that are phonetically the same, and to the author and to readers in his own region, this would simply be 'eye' or visual dialect. [Ives 1950:162, 1971:165]

In another citation from Ives's work, Preston implies that Ives is critical of authors who pass judgment by using unconventional spellings. Preston writes, "Unfortunately, respellings may suggest more than outdated romanticizing: 'By the very fact that he [the literary dialect writer] has represented the speech in unconventional spellings, the author has passed judgment' (S. Ives 1950:162)" (Preston 1982:322). The above quotation from Ives is only half the sentence, however. Ives continues, "he has indicated that it is *not*, in his definition of the term, standard English" (1950:162, 1971:165, emphasis in original). Certainly Ives is not critical of this practice of passing judgment. The entire practice of recognizing dialects depends on the comparison of features to some conception of the standard speech of a region. How could one describe any linguistic feature without judging differences?

In a third reference to Ives's work, Preston quotes almost an entire paragraph in which Ives shows how literary dialect can be used to record so-called "careless" or "marginal" usages, or "habits which the speaker may follow in ordinary conversation, even though he may 'know better,' and he may eliminate them on formal occasions" (Ives 1950:167-168, 1971:169). Preston finds fault with this practice, asking the question, "Have folklorists used respellings that reflect the degree of formality of the interaction rather than the dialect or sociolect status of the speaker?" (1982:319). According to Preston, such expressions as *kinda*, *gonna*, *'cause*, and *-in* endings "are the results of 'casual speech' rules that exist for speakers of English everywhere in the United States except for those few to whom the careful adjustment of speech to fit situation means little or nothing" (1982:319). Preston continues:

Since writing cannot hope to capture the quality of speech, these few respellings do more to mar the transcript or representation than make it come alive. Furthermore, since respellings in general seem to be more popular with folklorists when offering the speech of the “different,” these particular respellings are especially obnoxious. [1982:320]

Rather than finding fault with folklorists for recording casual speech, Preston should applaud them for being able to capture an important contextual indicator of the psychological scene and interpersonal relationships of the participants in a performance. Whether or not casual speech usages indicate a regional dialect, they indicate the conscious or unconscious choices of a performer, which can convey important information about folklore and its social use. I have recorded one highly educated black informant who switched from his formal classroom speech when he performed a Stagolee tale, to a casual, more pronounced Southern dialect. Although he did not drop postvocalic *r*'s or slur words together in formal classroom interactions, in the performance he chose pronunciations such as “po'ch” (porch), “Fo'ty-fo” (forty-four) and “befo” (before), as well as “gonna” (going to), “coulda” (could have), and “jest” (just). When I asked the performer what type of person he believed the third-person narrator of the tale to be, he replied that he thinks the narrator is someone who believes in Stagolee, one of his followers. Obviously the performer felt that by changing his pronunciation of certain words, he could convey an image of a narrator who was tough, cool, and “ba-d,” just like Stagolee. Knowing that performers can code-shift from one level or dialect of speech to another helps us understand the aesthetics of a particular tale or genre. But if we follow Preston's advice, such details will not show up in texts. Ives too finds such indications of casual speech valuable. In the sentences that Preston expunged from his quotation of Ives, Ives finds merit in the representation of casual speech usages:

As already indicated, some of these usages are hardly regional but others seem to be restricted to certain areas; hence, the presence of them in a literary dialect may give regional significance to the dialect. Some of these features, which are commonly found in the speech of educated persons in the Southeast, are [b] for orthographic *v* in the morphemes *seven* and *eleven*, especially in *seventy*; [d] for orthographic *s* in *isn't* and *wasn't*; and *don't* rather than *doesn't* in the third person singular. Such features as these will ordinarily, and I think legitimately, be found in the literary dialect. [Ives 1971:169; emphasis in original]

Ives goes on to argue that eliminating casual usages “would be artificial, and would give a false, even a contradictory, picture of its nature” (1971:169).

Preston's solutions to the problems he finds with respellings will not only weaken the usefulness of folklore texts, but they will severely impair the study of verbal art as performance. The three rules that Preston suggests for determining what to respell all support his general claim that “morphological accuracy is the appropriate level and that phonetic precision should be sought only when that level is pertinent to the lore or the clarity” (1982:323). Those who want to study verbal art as performance, as a unique, aesthetic communicative process, would no doubt find phonetic precision pertinent. Yet if we follow Preston's advice, we will soon have a corpus of folklore texts whose phonetic precision depends on the *a priori* judgments of individual textmakers. Suppose a folklorist, only interested in a Freudian analysis, or one only interested in a functional analysis, determines that recording dialect is not “pertinent to the lore or the clarity” and does not record it. Their published texts will be of little use to other folklorists interested in verbal art as performance. Preston's line of reasoning could lead to a general weakening of the usefulness of folklore texts to a wide variety of scholars. Folklorists will be better served following Kenneth Goldstein's advice that “the methods of collecting which are to be most encouraged are those which will supply the greatest amount of reliable information to the largest number of potential users of such information” (1964:5).

If we adopt Preston's Rule # 1, which states, "If the phonetic shape of a form is predictable (variably or categorically) by a phonological rule, don't respell it" (1982:317), then the readers of our texts would need expert knowledge of phonological rules in order to "hear" the pronunciation that we did not record through respelling. Although Preston says his "major concern is with texts that are most widely circulated" (1982:302), he expects that the readers of such texts will be able to predict how words are actually pronounced by reading the folklorist's description of the context of the folklore:

Since it is the folklorist's duty to characterize the context of the interaction in which the lore was collected as accurately as possible, the likely variation in some linguistic forms is predicted by the status of the interaction. The precise percentage of realization of one form or another, the subject of much careful sociolinguistic work, seems unnecessary in folklore representations. If the phonetic shapes are categorically or variably predictable from the linguistic and/or interactional environment, the recommendation not to respell is still strongly made. [Preston 1982:312]

While it is certainly a tall order to expect the average reader of folklore texts to be able to infer pronunciation rules from a contextual description, even if they know the rules, they will not have any real knowledge about how the performer really spoke. Whether the performer said "hoss" or "horse," "chillun" or "children," "'cause" or "because" can affect the rhythm and tone of a tale. But since speakers have the freedom to break rules, since a level of language known as *la parole* exists, then knowledge of predictive rules or "competence" cannot tell us about actual utterances. I find it odd that Preston can cite Dell Hymes's article, "The Contribution of Folklore to Sociolinguistic Research" (1971), as an impetus for his own work (1982:323–324), and claim, as he does above, that recording the precise realization of one form or another, as a sociolinguist would, is unnecessary for folklore texts.

Rather than adopting Rule # 1, Rule # 2, which tells us what to do if a morphological rule overlaps with a phonological rule, or Rule # 3, which allows us to break Rules # 1 and # 2 under certain circumstances, I believe folklorists will be better served by following Sumner Ives's recommendations on using literary dialect (1971). The simple expedient of specifying the regional dialect that the textmaker considers standard will help readers interpret dialect respellings. Certainly folklorists will want to avoid using "eye dialect," such as "tu" (to) or "sed" (said), a type of respelling that conveys no phonological changes in pronunciation. While Preston is right to remind us of the deficiencies of eye dialect (1982:320), his data do not reveal any extensive use of eye dialect by folklorists.

The major criticisms Preston raises against literary dialect are not substantiated by the data he presents. Folklorists do not respell Appalachian and black speech more than that of others. How can we accept Preston's claim that folklorists are "linguacentric" and "prescriptivist" in their use of literary dialect? Further, Preston's alleged "folk fact" of negative literate responses to respellings not only is unsupported by any evidence, but is countered by the widespread use of literary dialect by responsible, literate scholars and writers. The print medium can be used in many ways to record performance features more effectively. Literary dialect remains an effective tool for translating performance to print.

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Mowr Bayud Spellin': A Reply to Fine

I was happy to see a response to my "'Ritin' Fowklower Daun 'Rong'" (1982), for I had hoped to open a dialogue on the representation of folk texts by offering a few tentative rules in an area previously ignored or touched on only unsatisfactorily. Unfortunately for my purposes, Fine discovers that everything *is* fine in folklorists' treatments of texts and offers little new to the debate. I am, however, not at all reassured by her account, and I will deal with her points in the same order that she presented them.

There appears to be some difficulty in understanding how I decided to count certain respellings and ignore others. I used the example *clumb* to show that I had not counted as respellings well-recognized and well-motivated spellings of completely different word- or morphological-level facts. I assume that both Fine and I would agree that a folklorist who heard "I come home yesterday" and produced a representation such as "I came home yesterday" would be guilty of serious misrepresentation. What is important to note is that such spellings are not at all respellings. I might have chosen to spell *clumb* as *clom* or *clomb* (all given in thorough historical dictionaries of English, though Fine could not unearth them), but I could not have spelled it *climbed* under any circumstances, for the regular past tense marker (*-ed*) did not occur at all. It is clear that *clumb* is not derived from some phonological process that deletes the *-ed* as might have happened in such a phrase as "he walked to the wall." That Fine regards it a mystery how I chose not to consider such word- and morphological-level items as respellings while counting as respellings such forms as *gonna*, *usetá*, *singin'*, and so on, all the obvious results of such phonological processes, is a mystery to me. I assume this short notice clears up the criterion applied. Difficult cases of morphological-phonological overlap are discussed in my original, and that conflict is resolved in the direction of respelling when there is overwhelming morphological evidence.

The next problem is numbers. Fine suggests that my reference to Table I is internally contradictory since I say that Black and Appalachian speech are respelled more often than that of other groups. Indeed, Table 1 shows that "Appalachian" is not respelled three times, and there is no indication that it ever is. I confess to using, in my comment, the label "Appalachian" when I should have been using the dialectologically sensitive label "South Midland." Since there are minor numerical errors in Tables I and II of the original, I will correct them in a presentation of the original data that should clarify my point.

In Table 1, I show the continuity between geographical labels and dialectological ones, for it is that relationship that has confused Fine. I take all Appalachia to be South Midland (though I would have preferred finer distinctions, the articles surveyed did not make them). Fine's claim that there are no Appalachian texts respelled is based on my poor organization of Tables I and II in the original. It should be clear now that Appalachia was treated along with South Midland and that Black and South Midland (taken together) account for 19 of the 30 respelled texts, a clear majority. The fact is, however, that I attribute little significance to these overall numbers. In the Appalachian texts that contain no respelling, there was, in fact, minimal