CSCanada
Higher Education of Social Science
Vol. 4, No. 3, 2013, pp. 35-39
DOI:10.3968/j.hess.1927024020130403.1001

ISSN 1927-0232 [Print]
ISSN 1927-0240 [Online]
www.cscanada.net
www.cscanada.org

On Functions of Dialect in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* from a Sociolinguistic Perspective

GAO Jie[a],*

[a] School of International Education, Shandong University of Finance and Economics, Jinan, China
* Corresponding Author.

Received 2 March 2013; accepted 12 May 2013

Abstract
Dialect is often employed in fiction writing to achieve special effects, as it is a social indicator, carrying social connotations and reflecting aspects of the speaker's identity. Sociolinguistics is a sub-discipline of linguistics, which examines the relationships between language and society, with the speech variation (especially dialect) and the accompanying social significance or functions as the main focus. Therefore, sociolinguistic theories and research findings may play an effective role in the analysis of functions of dialect in fictional conversations. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is considered Hardy's first masterpiece; some critics regarded it as his greatest tragic novel. One of the distinctive characteristics of Hardy's style consists in his masterly use of Wessex dialect in his fictional conversations. Based on relevant theories in sociolinguistics, the paper attempts to analyze the functions of dialect used in the fictional conversations in Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and concludes that the use of dialect is not only successful in conveying a vivid fictional world, adding the local color, mirroring social significance, but is also consistent with Hardy's social and artistic pursuits.

Key words: *The Mayor of Casterbridge;* Dialect; Sociolinguistics

GAO Jie (2013). On Functions of Dialect in *the Mayor of Casterbridge* from a Sociolinguistic Perspective. *Higher Education of Social Science, 4*(3),35-39. Available from: http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/hess/article/view/j.hess.1923669720130403.1001
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.hess.1923669720130403.1001

INTRODUCTION
Fiction, as an important genre in literature, has been traditionally regarded as the epitome of society, depicting various aspects of social reality, and mirroring social life of a particular period of the times. Language is an indispensable part of society; therefore, social factors may have a great influence on the writing of fiction, and the language used in fiction may bear social marks of a certain society. In fact, the variation and complexity of language, dialect in particular, has been employed in fiction writing to convey subtle information and to produce special effects, which is particularly manifested in the conversations between characters. Speeches of each character are peculiar due to various social factors such as their social characteristics, role relationships between them and different situations. Sociolinguistics is the study of language in relation to society, with the speech variation (especially dialect) and the accompanying social significance or functions as the main focus. Thus, Sociolinguistic theories and research findings may be of help to better comprehend functions of dialect used in fictional conversations. To this end, this paper attempts to analyze the functions of dialect used in the fictional conversations in Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* from a sociolinguistic perspective.

1. DIALECT IN HARDY'S *THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE*
The Mayor of Casterbridge is considered Hardy's first masterpiece; some critics regarded it as his greatest tragic novel. "Hardy created in Henchard the most remarkable and dominant of all his characters, providing him with a surrounding group of fascinating—if in comparison with him—minor characters, and a rich historical and social scene." (*The Mayor of Casterbridge*, 1995, p.xiii)

One of the distinctive characteristics of Hardy's style

consists in his masterly use of Wessex dialect in his fictional conversations in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Before the late 19th century, Wessex was only a historical term defining the southwestern area of Britain which had been ruled by the west Saxons in the early Middle Ages. But since Hardy employed Wessex dialect in his novels and poems, Wessex has come to mean the rural and pre-industrial culture. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, his representation of dialect expresses "not only the semantic need of the community that used it, but also shows the effect on an utterance of its whole context, personal and social" (Chapman, 1994, p.125). "The dialect of the agricultural laborers… forms the most, if not the only, amusing portion of the book" (Chapman, 1994, p.118). Through the free switching and sharp contrast of Wessex dialect and Standard English, Hardy not only successfully created a vivid fictional world with the peculiar local color, but also depicted vital and vibrant characters mirroring different social significances, which was consistent with Hardy's social and artistic pursuits.

2. FUNCTIONS OF DIALECT IN HARDY'S *THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE*

This paper attempts to analyze the functions of dialect used in the fictional conversations in Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* from a sociolinguistic perspective.

2.1 Depicting a Vivid Fictional World with a Diversity of Social Structure

The term "dialect" is widely used in sociolinguistics to refer to "varieties according to user" (Hudson, 2000, p.48). According to Catford, "dialect is language variety related to the performer's provenance or affiliations in a geographical, temporal or social dimension" (Catford, 1965, p.85). To be simple, a dialect is what a speaker speaks habitually, which is determined by who he/she is and by the diversity of social structure. Therefore, in principle, dialects are different ways of saying the same thing and tend to differ in phonetics, phonology, lexicon and grammar. Based on these facts, many novelists have simply used a set of useful conventions such as dialects, which help both to establish different social groups and to facilitate a subsequent recognition.

Hardy confines his writing to the rural community which he remembered from his own youthful experience. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, his employment of Wessex dialect expresses not only the semantic need of the community that uses it, but also shows the social context in which the story develops. Hardy's dialect shows far more than the locality of its characters. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is focused on a town rather than the rural life, a Wessex town caught in the past and just embracing the nineteenth-century rustic social changes. Hardy employed the subtle differences between three kinds of dialects to portray characters belonging to three different social groups.

Example 1 "Dost mind how you could jerk a trout ashore with a bramble, and not raffle the stream, Charl?" a deposed keeper was saying, "Twas at that moment I caught'ee once, if you can mind?" (Chapter 36, p.257)

The above example is what an ex-gamekeeper says to an ex-poacher, who fought once but sits calmly together now, talking about the past, in Peter's Finger, the church and inn of Mixen Lane. Here we have the dirty Peter's Finger inn, situated in the dirtiest and most dangerous side of the town.

"It (Mixen Lane).was the hiding-place of those who were in distress, and in debt, and trouble of every kind. Farm-labourers and other peasants, who combined a little poaching with their farming, and a little brawling and bibbing with their poaching, found themselves sooner or later in Mixen Lane. Rural mechanics too idle to mechanize, rural servants too rebellious to serve, drifted or were forced into Mixen Lane." (Chapter 36, p.254)

As the writer describes, people living in Mixen Lane belong to the social group of the lowest social standing in the fictional world of Casterbridge. Their speeches bear the strongest marks of vulgarity to convey the local color and show the social contrast. "Dost mind" (Don't you remember), "Twas" (it was), "'ee" (you) and "you can mind" (you can remember) are the markers of their dialect. These features of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation are widely regarded as common in the speeches of uneducated people of the humble status. That may also be explained from the perspective of the sociolinguistic theory of networks (Hudson, 2001). Mixen Lane forms a dense network in which a speaker knows and spends time with people who know each other well. The closer an individual's network ties are with his local community, the closer his language comes to localized vernacular norms.

Example 2 "What did ye come away from yer own country for, young maister, if ye be so wownded about it?" (Chapter 8, p.53)

At the Three Mariners Farfrae has joined the townspeople who gather there, and at the request of the tradesmen, he sings a beautiful Scottish song full of sadness and pity. The listeners are moved, and they convince him to sing two more songs. By the end of his songs, the townspeople are attracted by Farfrae, and they try to persuade him to stay. The example here is what Christopher Coney says to Farfrae. The people at Three Mariners are those of relatively higher social standing than those gathering in Mixen lane. The frequenters there are the townspeople like "Billy Wills the glazier, Smart the shoemaker, Buzzford the general dealer, and others of a secondary set of worthies, of a grade somewhat below that of the diners at the King's Arms"(Chapter 6, p.42). From the words, the reader can see these characteristics. Compared with the first example, there are relatively

fewer dialect markers in this sentence. The core syntactic structure and words indicate the general standard language and only a few dialect markers like "ye" (you), "yer" (your) and spelling variation such as "maister" (master) imply his social background.

Example 3 "Hey! How about the bad bread, Mr. Mayor?""Will you replace the grown flavour we've still got by sound grain?"(Chapter 5, p.37)

The King's Arms is the chief hotel in Casterbridge, "a spacious bow-window projected into the street over the main portico, and from the open sashes came the babbles of voices, the jingle of glasses, and the drawing of corks" (Chapter 5, p.33). People in the King's Arms are of the highest social status and their speeches are standard. According to the network theory, it is a network of multiplexity, in which there is more than one basis for a tie among individuals and individuals may have the inclination to pursue 'the elite'. These 'elites' are among the people who are important to them in everyday life. Therefore, the Standard English used by the people in the King's Arms suggests their high social standing in Casterbridge.

Just as sociolinguistic studies show, the social values assigned to certain groups in a society will be attached to the linguistic forms used by the members of these groups. The use of particular language variants may be evaluated as socially prestigious or socially stigmatized. The former refer to those that are positively valued due to their association with groups of high social status, whereas the latter carry a stigma because of their association with groups of low social status. By the use of different markers of dialect, Hardy successfully created a vivid fictional world made up of three different social groups, thus adding the local color and enriching the social background where the characters live, which convinces the reader of a sense of reality in the novel.

2.2 Portraying the Social Identities of Different Characters

Individual speech is the social indicator of the speaker including social class, age and gender. Thus, characters speak in different ways due to differences in social status, occupation, education, age, gender, and more importantly, personality having developed on the basis of all the former factors. This causes a challenge to novelists in creation. The reader should appreciate dialects of different speakers due to these factors at phonological, lexical and syntactic levels.

Example 4 "Then is there any house to let—a little small new cottage just a –builded, or such like?" (Chapter 1, p.7)

One summer evening, Henchard, together with his wife and child, is walking towards the village of Weydon-Priors in the region known as Wessex. While they rest, a turnip-hoer speaks to them. From him, the family learns that there is no work and no housing available in Weydon-Priors. The difference between the speeches of Henchard and the turnip-hoer here owes something to the convention of Victorian fiction that major characters of intelligence and virtue speak better than the minor characters. However, there are still some markers of dialect or non-standard English such as "builded" and "such like", which indicates the humble origin of Henchard, a traveling worker.

Example 5 "If anybody will tell me how to turn grown wheat into wholesome wheat I'll take it back with pleasure. But it can't be done." (Chapter 5, p.38)

Years later, Henchard becomes the Mayor of Casterbridge. Confronted with the businessmen's rebuke, he answers in a condescending manner. His speeches carry no makers of dialect, which implies his rise in the social status.

Example 6 "But 'tis her money that floats en upward. Ha-ha - how cust odd it is! Here be I, his former master, working for him as man, and he the man standing as master, with my house and my furniture and my what-you-may-call wife all his own." (Chapter 32, p.229)

In the end, Henchard, losing everything in competing with Farfrae, becomes a traveling worker again. Markers of dialect can be found in his speech now, which shows his fall in the social standing.

Language is regarded as an external behavior, which helps to identify a speaker as a member of some group. Members of a speech community can recognize and respond to subtle differences in the language usage that are associated, within a certain speech community, with social or economic or political or religious or cultural or other divisions of the society. The foreignness of a person's speech can be perceived so as to distinguish him or her from the speech community and imply the social distance between them. This can be illustrated by the example of Donald Farfrae.

Example 7 "It is true I am in the corren trade – but I have replied to no advairrtisment, and arrange to see no one. I am on my way to Bristol – from there to the otherside of the warrld to try my fortune in the great wheat-growing districts of West." (Chapter 7,47)

Farfrae is a young Scotsman who passes Casterbridge on his way to America. However, Henchard quickly notices Farfrae's ability in business, and hopes to make him general manager. When he arrives at Casterbridge, his Scottish identity is easily discerned, which is shown through the variation at the phonetic level: "Corren", "advairrtisement" and "warrld" with the peculiar pronunciation of long vowel [ə:]. The markers of Scottish dialect show his foreignness in the speech community of

Casterbridge and his social distance from the townspeople.

Farfrae is well-rounded. He knows business and understands society's desires for courtly manners and entertainment. Henchard greatly respects Farfrae and asks him for advice on several important occasions. However, in the end, Farfrae has everything that Henchard does not: the love of Lucetta, the support of the townspeople, and eventually the mayorship of Casterbridge. With the establishment of his dominant status in Casterbridge and the acceptance of the townspeople, Farfrae uses scarcely any regional forms, making a sharp contrast to his first appearance as a Scott, which can be shown by another example in the chapter 37. A royal personage is about to pass through the borough. The council members meet, before the appointed day, to arrange the details of the procedure. "I am afraid so, it is out of question, indeed. But of course, you can see the doings full well, such as they are to be, like the rest of the spectators." (Chapter 37, p.263) The reader can notice that there is almost no Scottish dialect mark in his speech. By doing so, Hardy indicates that Farfrae has become the core persona in Casterbridge.

By the switching of dialects and Standard English used by the two important heroes, Hardy successfully showed their rise and fall in the fictional world.

2.3 Representing the Subtle Role-relationships Between Characters

Character's speech in the novel is a vital part of its contact with the real world.

> "It is a way of forming that relationship with the characters which is a dimension of the relationships which they form among themselves. Such at least is the way in which the Victorian novelists and their readers approached their art."(Pettit, 1994, p.118)

Example 8

" What can we two poor lammigers do against such a multitude!" expostulated Stubberd, in answer to Mr Grower's chiding.

" 'Tis tempting 'em to commit *felo de se* upon us, and that would be the death of the perpetrator; and we wouldn't be the cause of a fellow-creature's death on no account, not we!"

"Get some help, then! Here, I'll come with you. We'll see what a few words of authority can do."(Ch.39, p.280)

The interpersonal function of language mainly involves the ways in which people negotiate and maintain social status. In other words, the ways they make use of language can help establish themselves in the social hierarchy and maintain these relations with other people. We do not use our language in the same way all the time, but vary it according to whether we are speaking to a member of the family, a close friend, a stranger or a child. We associate certain forms of language with professions and circumstances. Relation between addressor and addressee refers to the relative status, extent of shared knowledge and amount of interaction among participants.

In the above-mentioned example, the townswomen eagerly perform the skimmity ride to bring shame to Lucetta, and the council members want to arrest the people responsible for the skimmity ride. Mr. Grower, the magistrate, leads the council members in searching for the perpetrators. Here, he argues with Stubberd, the constable. Hardy uses dialect pragmatically to show the differences in local relationships. Now Grower's use of standard speech gives the required effect of his relative position and power to command. Stubberd's lower status and helpless anxiety are emphasized by deviant syntax, dialect lexis and malapropism such as "'Tis", "'em", "commit felo de se" and "that would be the death of the perpetrator".

Example 9

It was dinner-time –they never met except at meals –and she happened to say when he was rising from table, wishing to show him something, "if you'll bide where you be a minute, father, I'll get it."

"'Bide where you be'," he echoed sharply. "Good God, are you only fit to carry wash to a pig-trough, that ye use such words as those?"

She reddened with shame and sadness.

"I meant, 'Stay where you are,' father", she said in a low humble voice. "I ought to have been more careful." (Ch.20, p.189)

Hardy makes full use of contacts, and sometimes tensions between different varieties of English. At different times, dialect can serve opposite purposes –either to bring characters closer together by showing an increasing emotional attatchment, since dialect is associated with childhood or with one's most intimate relationships and informal moods; or to draw them apart, by emphasizing a social gap or acting as an unpleasant reminder of humble origins. This latter function is illustrated by this example when Elizabeth talks to her father. According to the accommodation theory, a speaker may choose not to converge but to diverge, by moving his or her speech away from the other party, to show his or her attitude towards the addressee and establish the social distance between them. When Henchard finds out Elizabeth is not his daughter, he is outraged and hates her when he sees her, so he rebukes her when she said the dialect "bide". The incident contributes to the increasing strained relationship between them. After that, the girl watches her linguistic behavior more carefully, remembering to say "humble bees" rather than "hag-rid". This phenomenon can also be explained by the accommodation theory, according to which we tend to accommodate our speech to the speech of the people we are talking to, in the hope that they will like us more for doing so. Through this example, the reader may sense Hardy's sarcastic attitude towards the improvement of familiar speeches by observing the rules of propriety. Victorian fiction frequently reflects the social concern about proper and improper words. There is perhaps a specific irony in Henchard's own switch from "you" to the non-standard "ye" under the stress of feeling

as he criticizes Elizabeth. Henchard's own ambivalent social status is shown not only by his violent objection to dialect but also by his use of "ye" in his criticism.

In fact, there are some other places in the novel where Hardy uses "bide" in Henchard's speeches, the word Henchard regards as vulgar, to imply the relationships between the characters and the attitude of the speaker to the addressee. In chapter 7, strongly attracted by Farfrae, Henchard tries to persuade him to stay at Casterbridge by offering him the position of general manager, saying "if you will bide and be my manager I will make it worth your while". As sociolinguistic researches show, dialect always implies solidarity to show intimacy. Henchard tries to impress Farfrae by the intimate use of dialect. In chapter 41, Elizabeth-Jean comes to Henchard's, who is upset by Lucetta's death and Henchard comforts her, asking to stay with him, saying "Now do you bide here with me this morning", convincing her again that he can find happiness with her. Stronger dialect often signals emotional upheaval which is also highly effective in heightening dramatic tension. By the use of dialect, Henchard actually tries to narrow the gap between him and Elizabeth.

2.4 Choosing the Appropriate Styles of Speaking in Particular Situations

People choose different styles in different situations. No one speaks the same way all the time and they constantly use nuances of the languages they speak for a variety of purposes.

A sudden change from dialect can be immensely effective. There is a fine example in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* when Henchard, as a magistrate, is confronted by the furmity woman who witnessed the sale of his wife. She is brought in as a vigorous dialect speaker, calling the constable "old turmit-head", but when she starts to accuse Henchard, she loses most of her non-standard dialect features and takes on a more choric role, being a judge and a person to take revenge.

Example 10 "A man and a woman with a little child came into my tent," the woman continued. " They sat down and had a basin apiece. Ah, Lord's my life! I was of a more respectable station in the world then than I am now, being a land-smuggler in a large way of business; and I used to season my furmity with rum for them who asked for't. I did it for the man; and then he had more; till at last he quarrelled with his wife, and offered to sell her to the highest bidder. A sailor came in, and bid five guineas, and paid the money, and led her away. And the man who sold his wife in that fashion is the man sitting there in the great big chair." (Chapter 28, p.201)

The switching from the dialect to relatively standard speech has a very special dramatic effect. The ugly old woman speaks in a way that is not consistent with her social identity, which puts emphasis on the strong condemnation of Henchard's past mistake.

CONCLUSION

Dialect is a social indicator, carrying social connotations and reflecting aspects of the speaker's identity. Dialect is often employed in fiction writing to achieve special effects, Based on relevant theories in sociolinguistics, the paper analyzes the functions of dialect used in the fictional conversations in Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and concludes that the use of dialect is not only successful in conveying a vivid fictional world, adding the local color, mirroring social significance, but also consistent with Hardy's social and artistic pursuits

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At the completion of my article, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude and great appreciation to all those who have contributed to this article directly or indirectly. Special thanks are due the scholars who have done invaluable work in the related fields such as sociolinguistics and literature. In addition, I would like to extend my gratitude to my beloved parents and friends, without whose encouragement and gentle care I cannot accomplish my study smoothly.

REFERENCES

Catford, J. C. (1965). *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*. London: Oxford University Press.

Chapman, Raymond (1990). *The Language of Thomas Hardy.* London: Macmillan.

Chapman, Raymond. (1994). *Forms of Speech in Victorian Fiction.* London and New York: Longman

Chapman, Raymond (1994). "Good Faith, You do Talk!" Some Features of Hardy's Dialogue. In Pettit, P.C. (Ed.), *New Perspectives on Thomas Hardy*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Hardy, T. (1995). *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Hudson, R. A. (2001). *Sociolinguistics*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Leech, G. N., & Short, M. H. (2001). *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose.* Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Ma Zheng Fang. (1991). *On the Art of Fiction Writing.* Beijing: Peking University Press.

Zhang Mai Zeng, & Zheng Rong Xuan (1999). On Speech Variation in Sociolinguistics. *Foreign languages and Their Teaching*, (1), 10-12.

Zhang Ting Guo (2003). On the Influence of Social Factors on Speech Variation, *Foreign languages and Their Teaching*, (5), 20-24.

