

EXCLUDED, YET CONFINED:

IF LANGUAGE IS THE ANSWER, WHAT WAS THE QUESTION?

by

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There is an odd sense of security inherent in definitions. When almost everything is scrutinized, measured and catalogued, safely transcribed and pressed between pages, we somehow become less scared of the unknown, as if all that could befall us is somehow already accounted for in one way or another. We are human but, at the same time, we are also women, children, men, adults, natives, students, immigrants, divorced, poor, rich, homosexuals, straight, white, and so on. Labels have already been pinned upon us, some on the front and some on the back: some are easier to get a glimpse of and others we grow oblivious to. One of the many defining terms that endeavor to delineate who we are, is language: the language (or languages, or linguistic varieties) we speak and, most importantly, where we are when we speak it and who we speak it with. To attempt a discussion of language as a whole would be a lofty endeavor, certainly not one to transpire overnight and occupy but a short written piece; instead, what will be considered here is how linguistic choice aids one in their effort to escape margins and oscillate between mainstream society and peripheral groups as attested and observed in the world of television series as well as in real life.

In our world of words, the language and, more specifically, the dialect we speak frequently gives away aspects of our past, of where we come from, our ethnicity, what our social status might be, or whether we belong to one racial group or another; and, more often than not, these specs are enough to make somebody feel mainstream in a society, for instance, where the language they speak happens to be the standard variety; nevertheless, there are cases when a dialect has been inextricably associated with a racial or social group and all its speakers are unavoidably categorized as their members. Or maybe it is the groups' marginalization and distancing from a society that leads to the development of a distinct variety, one that is as similar to the standard, as it is varied in its sound system, syntax, as well as vocabulary.

Even if it is not real life, fictional writing constitutes our closest depiction of reality and, absurdly enough, the yet most successful outlet from it. The case being such, a TV-series will serve here as a microcosmic depiction of life, which is as real as it is meticulously constructed by the screen-writers of the show. Not a commercial success during its airing, HBO's *The Wire* captured my attention even before the pilot episode was over. Apart from the inspired story-line of the first season with the gang that "reigns" Baltimore's drug-dealing world and the police department's scrupulous attempts to put an end to their supremacy, as well as the naturalistic characters portrayed, what was particularly fascinating for me was the screen-writers' choice to have their characters speak in a non-standard variety: the drug-dealing group speak the African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) dialect, and so do the police officers.

African-American Vernacular English, as its name denotes, is an African-American variety of American English. In an attempt to briefly examine the dialect, what differentiates AAVE from Standard English (SE) is a set of features operating at a phonological, morphological,

and syntactic level. In an effort to briefly present a simplified version of the actual processes that take place, at the phonological level, AAVE is permeated by a set of simplification procedures that tend to reduce the level of complexity of certain words through the reduction or deletion of sounds; for example, pronouncing [des] instead of [desk]. At the morphological level, speakers of AAVE do not use the *-ed* morpheme to form the past tense (e.g. *worked*) while, at the syntactic level, what is encountered is double, or multiple, negation (e.g. I *ain't* going at *no* court), and the rather frequent use of the copula “be” to denote the aspects of verbs, for instance: “*He be working on Tuesdays*” instead of “He usually works on Tuesdays.” Of course, lexical differences exist as well, with AAVE having a proportion of unique to its speakers’ vocabulary (Wells, *Accents of English Vol. 3* 553-556).

Quite unusual for screen-writers to have their characters speak in a non-standard variety, I would like to refer, for instance, to two other shows where dialects are spoken: *The Sopranos* (1999) and *True Blood* (2008); in the former the North Jersey English Dialect is spoken while, in the latter, they speak the Cajun English, a dialect typical of south Louisiana. (There might be other such shows, as well, but I do not know.) However, it was not the dialect alone that made this show exceptional for me: it was, as I mentioned earlier, the processes of its conscious, as well as intelligent, manipulation by the characters. Unlike any other show, linguistic choice in *The Wire* helps the gang-members persevere life in the margins by communicating in a dialect (i.e. AAVE) that is essentially a code, intricately connecting them with one another. At times, it even allows them to cross borders and oscillate, even if only for a short while, between mainstream society and the fringes of the law. For instance, when D’ Angelo Barksdale, the nephew of the drug-dealing king, directs his minions, the use of the AAVE dialect is what he resorts to. But when he takes his girlfriend out to an elegant piano-restaurant on the other side of the city, he would rather not feel marginal anymore. So, instead, he speaks slower; and he enunciates, as well. When he tells the waiter: “we would like a table,” the tone and polite intonation are both in order. The girl responds graciously to the waiter: “yes, thank you; can I have some chocolate cake?” In their attempt to “camouflage” themselves as people of a high social status in an expensive restaurant, they check their dialect at the entrance, and they manipulate what linguistic knowledge they have to their benefit.

In the question of whether a social group creates their own dialect or whether the distinctive dialect employed can lead to the social grouping of its speakers, the answer is not easy to find. Probably, as it often occurs in such complicated circumstances, every factor is of importance, all elements influence one another, and a conclusion is not easily reached; to be able to answer such a question, sociological as well as sociolinguistic issues and theories would need to be addressed, discussed, and thoroughly explored. Whichever the case, the linguistic variety one speaks, inescapably defines them as members of a group—big or small, mainstream or peripheral, social or racial. Language is not to be held responsible though; how could it ever have been? Sound combinations have no intentions, while speakers do. And it is those intentions, the misconceptions and prejudices directly linked to a linguistic variety that may make us feel marginalized due to the dialect we speak or even mainstream due to the one we do not, and vice versa. Subsequently, to be “marginalized” is something one feels, rather than something somebody is, I guess and, essentially, marginalization is probably the result of an only partially successful effort to claim a “mainstream” position in the brand new place. Speaking of “new place,” this past summer I had the chance to participate in the International Summer University, a three-week program that was held at Aston University in Birmingham, UK. I can hardly keep myself from plunging into a lengthy narration of the lovely time I had there. Instead, I will talk about my experience in Birmingham with reference to language, the

difference that linguistic choice can make in a city well-known for its distinguishing dialect, and the ways that prejudices associated with dialect can actually affect people.

Even if I had not known it beforehand, the Birmingham (or, rather, the Brummie) accent is a little hard to not pay attention to. Located in England's West Midlands County, Birmingham gradually evolved from being a medium-sized market during the medieval period to becoming a major international commercial centre today. It seemed to me that "Birmingham" collocates with "industrial" and "industrial," in its turn, does not carry the most positive connotations. Apparently, there is little more to this city than its ten letters endeavor to spell out; Birmingham English had been the object of study of the linguist Steven Thorne, a professor at the University of Birmingham, who found the dialect to be the most disfavored variety of British English, voted so by the British speakers themselves ("Brummie is Beautiful"). In an effort to avoid a lengthy description of the dialect, I will merely address its distinctive accent and that only briefly: varying from speaker to speaker, the Brummie accent is characterized by a peculiar intonation with the recurrent lowering of the pitch of the voice at the end of statements. In relation to specific sounds, some differences (with respect to the Received Pronunciation, RP) are the following: the [ɔɪ] instead of the [aɪ] diphthong, with the personal pronoun *I* [aɪ] pronounced as [ɔɪ]. Also, the [ʌ] sound in /hut/ becomes [ʊ] as in /took/. The /h/ and the /r/ sounds are sometimes dropped, as in the RP, with many speakers pronouncing the name of the city as [bɜːrɪŋgəm] instead of [bɜːrɪŋəəm] (Wells, *Accents in English Vol. 2* 349-374).

From this theoretical description of the accent to my own perceptions of it, I will have to confess that, overall, I did not develop any particular abhorrence to it; heavy at times, maybe a little difficult to understand, but being fond of English accents in general, I am not really one to judge. Nonetheless, as I discovered, pronouncing, for instance, the adjective "mashed" [mæʃt] as [mʊʃt] can, actually, reward one with a friendly nod at the pub. That is, of course, when one does actually want to sound like a local. I have to admit that, at times, I felt a faint need to not strike the native speakers as being a foreigner. This was not consistent, and, certainly, did not constitute part of an effort to diminish my own identity; I could have simply spoken in my own, not-British accent but I found myself trying not to, particularly when interacting with natives at the local stores—I felt more at ease, somewhat safer, and never marginal. One might wonder about the impact that these code-switching practices had on my relations to the other non-natives. Certainly, I diverged moderately, even though I spoke with my regular accent when interacting with them but, I would deem it impossible to simultaneously stand at the centre of two circles, unless they both shared the same centre. And in my case, they did not.

Even so, the Brummie accent may essentially be heavier than it sounds, not in terms of pitch and intonation, but in terms of the social prejudices it stirs up and encumbers those who speak it. Fortunately enough, I was offered the opportunity to discuss the issue of the Brummie dialect specifically, as well as the negative connotations inextricably associated with it, as experienced by a Birmingham native, Ms. Chantal Burden, our English language tutor during the two-week program I attended. Had she not mentioned it herself, I would have never guessed that Ms. Burden actually spoke the dialect; her accent was everything but the Brummie one—in fact, she spoke Standard English – and when I wanted to find out "why" she kindly accepted me in her office and we chatted about the dialect and her response to it over the years.

Ms. Burden currently works at the Centre for English Language and Communication at Aston University (CELCA) as a Teaching Associate where she and her colleagues are responsible

for the direction of different programs. She also teaches international students. But Ms. Burden did not start as an English-language tutor. In fact, as she told me, her first degree was in Business, and, later on, she took courses in TEFL (Teaching of English as a Foreign Language) and, afterwards, she received the Trinity qualification. She is currently completing an MSc in Educational Management for TESOL (Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages).

Always aware of the social prejudices associated with the dialect, its speakers' reputation of being slow as one of its main attributes, Ms. Burden said that she first experienced a slight feeling of marginalization during her stay in London. She was working as a member of a marketing team representing the Head Office and, as she mentioned, in her working environment, only a couple of people (herself included) spoke English with varied accent. Certainly not offensively discriminated against, Ms. Burden unavoidably became part of a linguistic minority formed at the crevices of London's "Queen's English" community. As she confessed, what she was not particularly fond of was the jokes directed at the dialect and its speakers; she also recalled that, at that time, there was a dj working on a national radio station who ridiculed a character through the Brummie accent—nonetheless, she reckoned that, eventually, "it depends on how personal one takes them (the jokes)." As she explained to me, in London, there is a big N/S divide that is also represented in language and linguistic choice which she deemed not particularly aggressive towards herself, yet existent. Even though not purposefully aimed at her, Ms. Burden did fade her Birmingham accent eventually. As she pointed out, she was mostly influenced by other speakers, speakers of different accents, as well as by the time she spent away from the UK. Her position in her then current job in London led to her developing a "persona," something which might have contributed to the adoption of a different, less marked dialect that would facilitate her interaction with people. The altering of her linguistic choice constituting a process that certainly did not expire overnight, Ms. Burden added that her TESOL studies, as well as her subsequent profession as a language tutor, affected her own perception of the accent, especially since she had to learn about certain aspects of phonology so as to teach them to students.

As in all cases of discrimination, in dialectism as well (i.e. discrimination on the basis of language) the speakers cannot do much but acknowledge the circumstances and adjust accordingly. From feeling slightly marginalized in the past due to her dialect, and, afterwards, gradually fading it, to her still employing it (especially Birmingham's colloquialisms) when socializing with old school-friends, Ms. Burden could not have possibly remained impermeable to the misconceptions intrinsically fastened to her dialectal choice. Nevertheless, whichever the dialect might be, she is still a native speaker of English. Upon my rather curious inquisition on whether she considered herself as being privileged to be one, she answered that she deemed it as somewhat of a privilege, especially since there are so many people worldwide who strive to achieve a good level in the language. Returning to my earlier point concerning the contingencies of marginalization, it is evident how one speaker may consistently oscillate between the fringes and the centre, depending upon the particular circumstances, as well as the linguistic environment. It is not a question of what language, or linguistic variety, one speaks, but of where they actually speak it. Yet, I would not convict the words for the meaning attributed to them by people, nor will I be oblivious to the potency inherent in prejudices associated with language. In fact, Ms. Burden, referring to non-Birmingham natives, commented that "it is doubtful there is a single person in England, born outside of Birmingham, who would aspire to have a Brummie accent"; and I think I agree with her. Irrespective of the fact that she does not speak the dialect anymore, her understanding of its nature as fostered through her study of the language, as well as through

her travels, proffered her the opportunity to ultimately benefit from its essence, making it a tool whose disposal of aided her claiming a part in the London society whilst always preserving her place in the Birmingham community.

Everybody's feet are tangled in a thick bundle of limits and are delineate by established definitions. Essentially mere lines but somehow entitled to a fancier name, margins are defined by what creates them, rather than by those who eventually traverse them; be it a geographical location, the social context, or one's ethnic affiliation, these seemingly dissociated variables manage to compose a constellation under whose light language and its speakers are examined. Upon life's broad canvas language drops its shades which are no other than its dialects. Each separate source of light outlines a different shadow: big or small, dark or pale, its angle as well as its distance from language determine the exact shape of the shadows just like the change of geographical location, for instance, determines each linguistic variety and defines its shade—whether it is standard or not, or whether its speakers are revealed as intelligent or even crude and lowly. The shadows always unfold in proximity to language, their edges lodged underneath its base. Nonetheless, it seems to me that we've grown so fascinated by this game of shades, that we have forgotten what the original shape responsible for them looks like.

Feeling marginalized is a common experience and a reality to many people in this world. More often than not linguistic choice becomes the argument on the basis of which people are classified. And while one may be mainstream in my eyes, they could be marginal to somebody else. Often oblivious to its might, one's use of language may aid them in the combating of social classifications as well as in traversing borders; yet, I guess the inescapability of it all lies in the fact that while in the centre of one linguistic community, one might simultaneously be standing at the fringes of another. So, when does this end? When do limits blur and categorizations disassemble? “[T]here are no hierarchies, no infinite, no such many as mass there are only / eyes in all heads, / to be looked out of.” (28-29), writes the American poet Charles Olson in his *Maximus Poems*. We could, then, *look out* of those eyes, simply stare at language, and forget the shadows for a while: overlook their deceitful similarity—how they are but faded facsimiles of an original. Maybe, we could stand amidst the shades as they lie around us like earth-bound leaves, *look* directly at the light and maybe not even squint.¹

¹ For Ms. Marina Mattheoudaki: if only words were language enough –

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