

## Hehree Pawtuh en thuh Sawsuhrer's Stown: "Othering" via Speech in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

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In J.K. Rowling's novel, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (1997), the author "others" the beloved character Hagrid via representation of dialect in direct speech. Erin O'Connor's article explores how rather than being a positive portrayal of diversity, this language choice exploits a cultural group. By marking the spelling and altering the grammar, Rowling calls attention to Hagrid's West Country accent while leaving every other "majority culture" character's speech unstigmatized. This article calls into question the technique and purpose of literary portrayal of accents and examines the manner in which Hagrid's speech draws upon stereotypes of a more rural culture of the United Kingdom in order to negatively characterize him as "dumb" in comparison to other characters, as Rowling effectively exploits this diversity to make him lovable due to the appearance of innocence.

In 1997, J.K. Rowling unleashed magic, Muggles, and Hogwarts upon the United Kingdom when *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (or *The Philosopher's Stone* in the UK) was first published. Unbeknownst at the time, this book—and its themes and ideologies—would end up becoming a worldwide bestseller, reaching audiences of every sort. Though the text presents an environment of acceptance for many audiences, one aspect of the text is not as progressive as it readily appears—and in fact, is used to marginalize a particular group. Rowling's representations of dialect in direct speech in *The Sorcerer's Stone*, particularly with Hagrid's speech, "others" his character and everything his character represents.

The creative portrayal of dialects or accents in phonetic spellings (or "sound spelling"—spelling words the way they sound when we speak) in literature is not a new tool by any means. In fact, it can be a very useful tool for authors utilizing it to create character individuation.<sup>1</sup> That is, the portrayals

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<sup>1</sup>Character individuation as described by Sylvia W. Holton, but cited from Lisa Minnick's "Community in Conflict: Saying and Doing in 'Their Eyes Were Watching God.'"

of speech get used much the same way that eye color and height do—to characterize an individual. When authors create characters, the first thing they typically describe for their readers are physical characteristics so that we can get a “visual” in our minds from the words instead of from a picture. The attributes that authors tend to describe to create the most vivid of characters are very sensory, like hair color, instead of more intangible personality traits, such as emotion. This leads authors to describe what a reader can see, touch, hear, smell, and taste before the more dynamic and difficult to describe characteristics such as how the character *feels* about an issue. Characters are described by their hair color and texture, for example, because it creates an image in the reader’s mind not only of what the character looks like, but also because it creates an identity when the reader makes a connection between the physical attribute and certain social characteristics based on that physical feature. For example, a character described as “having a tan” will call to mind several different social identities based not only on how the character looks, but on what “having a tan” implies about the character. It could mean that the character originally has a lighter complexion, or likes to be out in the sun, or that she/he works outdoors, or that she/he lives in a warm climate, or that the character is concerned with his/her appearance, etc. All because of one physical characteristic, the reader can make several assumptions about who this character is. And, much like visual physical features, auditory features evoke social personae as well. Accents, like voices, are a highly physical experience, and they are strongly attached to social images and ideas. And like many visual features, auditory features are often more readily noticeable in other people than in ourselves.

## Language Stigma

Take a moment to consider an accent—any accent—and think of a feature that you recognize from it, a feature that is *different* than your own speech. Perhaps a pronunciation of a word that you think sounds “funny.” Now, consider why that feature stands out to you. Speech variation is a dynamic process that occurs naturally and mostly without force. But once accents and dialects within a language become associated with certain social characteristics (such as socioeconomic status, gender, race, etc . . .) their features either become stigmatized or are left unstigmatized. Most often, unstigmatized features go unnoticed, as is the case with mainstream culture. It is, for example, unstigmatized in western culture for a woman to wear pants, and so this goes unnoticed, but it is stigmatized for a male to wear a skirt, and therefore it will call attention. Accents work the same way. As sociolinguist Asif Agha posits: because of unstigmatized features, “[n]ot everybody is felt

to have an accent. [. . .] In a common type of case, accent is what *other* people have” (232 emphasis mine). Due to these features being different from our own, we notice them, and because of *who* uses certain speech patterns based on geography or community, these features are “marked.”<sup>2</sup>

In Britain, what’s known as *Received Pronunciation* (RP) is the unstigmatized or “standard” accent and the “great majority of native speakers of this accent are of middle-class or upper-class origin, educated in private schools and [. . .] universit[ies]” (Roach 239).<sup>3</sup> One of the most popular phrases associated with RP is *talking proper* (236), revealing the notion that speaking any other variety of English is *improper*. RP is widely supported as the “correct” way to speak in the UK and is assumed to be the “default” or the foundational variety of English—like Midwestern varieties of American English are often assumed to be the default in the US, while other varieties are considered “deviations.” In other words, when a British author writes with standardized spellings, the accent that is assumed is being represented in the writing is RP, unless told otherwise.

Now, how this language value gets utilized in *The Sorcerer’s Stone* can be viewed clearly by an examination of the much-loved character, Rebus Hagrid, “Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts” (Rowling 48). Arguably the series’ most beloved character, Hagrid is an unkempt giant and a heartwarming, loyal friend of the protagonist, Harry Potter. His characterizations generally center around his massive size, his disheveled appearance and his love for animals, and he generates a large presence in the first book (not just due to his size). Yet in comparison to the impact Hagrid makes on readers, his physical descriptions and actions take up a relatively small portion of his appearances within the text. So where is this large presence coming from? As is noticeable when Hagrid’s request for tea comes out as, “I’d not say no ter summat a bit stronger if yeh’ve got it” (48), his personality comes mainly from his speech.

## The West Country

Hagrid’s origin is never directly referred to, but the accent he is given is what is called a West Country accent, representing the different counties on the west side of England, including Cornwall. This accent is often stigmatized as a “provincial” one, associated with more undereducated or agricultural communities. Quite often, the West Country accent is rated by speakers to be

<sup>2</sup>“Marked” refers to being socially branded as “different.” For example, a language feature such as “G-dropping” on the end of the word *lightning* so that it sounds like *lightnin’* is marked as different. This is something that is not inherent in the language itself, but is applied to the language based on social stigma.

<sup>3</sup>RP is commonly called—and more likely familiar to American audiences as—the *Queen’s English* and *Public School Pronunciation* (Agha 236), even though these terms have a slightly different implication and the former is more Victorian in style.

culturally on the same level as Cockney, the East Londoner urban accent that is highly stigmatized, and both are rated as culturally inferior to RP and its more educated-associated relatives.<sup>4</sup>

This accent is represented within the text by the use of phonetic or “marked” spellings, and also by grammatical features associated with West Country speech. For example, this is both heard and seen when Hagrid says: “I’m not sayin’ nothin’,” in response to constant pestering by the protagonist (197). In this line, Hagrid’s speech features “marked” spelling and also the use of a double negative. To examine this use of dialect, I conducted a study in which I analyzed each of Hagrid’s lines of dialogue. Within *The Sorcerer’s Stone*, Hagrid has 221 opportunities to speak, consisting of over 530 lines of direct speech in dialogue, combining both complete sentences and fragments.<sup>5</sup> He is the only character in the text with consistent and repeated portrayals of dialect by marked phonetic spelling. Fifty-eight percent of the time, Hagrid is portrayed with phonetically spelled lines, resulting in the reader “hearing” Hagrid’s West Country accent so that she/he is aware that the character is not speaking with RP.

For my study, in order for a line (complete sentence or fragment) to be considered in dialect via phonetic spelling, Hagrid must be portrayed with a phonetically spelled word at least once within that line.<sup>6</sup> Even though that leaves 42 percent of Hagrid’s lines free from phonetic spelling, a large amount of these non-accented lines consist of one- or two-word phrases, often proper nouns, and so Hagrid doesn’t have room enough for the opportunity to speak with an accent. If those instances were removed from the data, then Hagrid’s amount of lines with dialect would in fact be even higher.

By comparison, every other character in the book is portrayed with standardized English spellings (which is, again, believed to depict RP when in writing by default) except for two noticeable but minor instances where two characters, one Cockney and one Irish, each generate a single line with phonetic spellings—not coincidentally, these accents are highly stigmatized in the UK. Besides that, Rowling portrays only scattered, insignificant instances when characters will speak with a phonetically spelled word. And in those

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<sup>4</sup>The study this information comes from was conducted by Howard Giles in 1970, but I gathered this information from Asif Agha’s “The Social Life of Cultural Value” (240-41). Giles’ study involved questionnaires given to citizens that prompted them to consider what values they placed on Mainstream RP, Near-RP, Provincial accents, and Urban accents.

<sup>5</sup>This data is mine. My counting methods are non-computational and subject to human error.

<sup>6</sup>Additionally, many of the accented lines are long, complex sentences and consist of several phonetically spelled words. For example, when Hagrid gives Harry his birthday cake, he says, “Got summat fer yeh here—I mighta sat on it at some point, but it’ll taste all right” (47). This line contains four marked spellings but only gets tallied as a single line, while a fragment consisting of one standardized spelling also gets tallied as a line, therefore the data misrepresents just how often Hagrid’s speech is phonetically spelled.

cases, the percentage is so low and inconsistent that it doesn't make an impact. An example of this is in the three situations where Harry's speech is marked, such as his use of *'til* instead of *until*, *d'you* instead of *do you*, and *dunno* instead of *don't know*—all of which occur only once, and all in separate lines.<sup>7</sup>

## Marginalizing Hagrid

Though Hagrid's accent is represented by *both* phonetic spellings and grammatical features, Rowling relies on the spelling far more. Again, phonetically spelled or "sound-spelled" lines account for roughly 58% of Hagrid's speech, while only 21% of his lines consist of grammatical features of the West Country accent that deviate from RP. There are several reasons why this proves problematic, the simplest of which is that by showing Hagrid's speech as phonetically spelled to portray accent on such a large scale—without portraying any other characters that way—Hagrid is visually marginalized.

A little too frequently, authors dismiss the effect phonetic spellings have on their characters, and, in particular, they ignore their visual marginalization. When a word is deliberately misspelled on the page for the phonetic effect, this often creates an association of the character with *actual* misspelling rather than with only a pronunciation difference. If the word *you* is repeatedly spelled as *yeh* on the page, what is to stop the reader, especially a young reader, from thinking that Hagrid would actually spell the word this way? While the phonetic spelling isn't inherently wrong or even a "misspelling," readers might interpret it as such because it deviates from the spelling they expect and see in the dialogue of other characters. Though it might seem obvious to some that placing value on spelling is a social judgment on par with judging someone's accent, it's not always readily apparent to readers. Spelling, like athletic talent, gets better with practice, but it is a talent nonetheless. It has less to do with intelligence and more with diligence and a natural ability to recognize patterns, but a common assumption is that difficulty with standardized spelling means a lack of intelligence.

Several things occur from a situation like this. Firstly, we need to ask why there is moral value placed on the concept of "correct" spelling at all, when in fact standardized spelling was created simply to make communicating with one another more effective and readily achievable. However, that idea is not widely taught and, therefore, we've ended up in a society where high value is placed on "correctness" without ever understanding the origin of

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<sup>7</sup>Rowling 227, 254, 277, respectively. Interestingly, these examples all occur within fifty pages of each other and nowhere else in the book. Perhaps Rowling used these variances during this period of writing, and not in other periods.

standardized spelling and grammar, as if you are a lesser being if you have difficulty with spelling. From this, many readers fall in line with the dominant ideology that spelling correctly correlates with high intelligence and therefore judge characters accordingly. This is not to say that there is anything moral or superior about the concept of “correct” spelling, but regardless, there is value placed on it, and because of this, Rowling’s use of dialect can be interpreted as consequently marginalizing Hagrid.

It’s important to note that Hagrid demonstrates that he can fit into the visual world of RP, however. In three instances, Hagrid’s written word is depicted instead of his direct speech, and while he still features West Country grammar, in all of them he utilizes standardized spelling.<sup>8</sup> But even this concept is quickly overshadowed when, in questioning Hagrid about Voldemort’s name, Harry asks, “Could you write it down?” to which Hagrid replies, “Nah—can’t spell it” (54). Rowling’s direct portrayal of Hagrid’s difficulty with spelling only emphasizes the effect that his phonetic spellings have on the reader due to social assumptions about education and class. As a result, not only is Hagrid being associated with misspelling, but Rowling also makes a connection with the West Country accent and misspelling, both creating and maintaining the assumption that individuals with the West Country accent lack education.

Other assumptions this situation creates are, again, that speakers of RP don’t *have* an accent, and also that they can spell just fine since all of their dialogue is standardized spelling. As mentioned already, everyone has an accent; it is only that unstigmatized accents get associated with correct spelling because they are considered “normal” or the default and therefore spelled the way they are pronounced. This is hugely untrue, because if it is English, it is most likely not phonetic at all. A great example of this can be seen in the language prejudices present in the US. Many of the Midwestern, middle-class varieties of American English are considered standard (i.e. SAE<sup>9</sup>), and other varieties are considered different, or more often, ignorant. For instance, this stigma is seen in the highly controversial use of *ax* for *ask*, associated with African American English. The prejudice against *ax* was highlighted on an episode of the *Oprah Winfrey Show* in 1989 when a caller remarked, “what makes me feel that Blacks tend to be ignorant is that they fail to see that the word is spelled A-S-K, not A-X.”<sup>10</sup> Firstly, this example reveals that because of the pronunciation of *ax*, it is assumed that speakers don’t *realize* how the word is spelled, which is untrue. And secondly, this reveals that the caller

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<sup>8</sup>Rowling 52, 135-6, 234.

<sup>9</sup>Standard American English.

<sup>10</sup>The Oprah Winfrey Show as cited in Lippi-Green’s “The Real Trouble with Black Language.”

doesn't believe that she pronounces words differently than they are spelled, which is beautifully pointed out when Rosina Lippi-Green explains that:

the authority cited here [by the caller] is the written language: *aks* is wrong because we write *ask*. This kind of criticism is particularly illogical, given the large-scale lack of correspondence between symbol and sound in English. The call-in viewer, citing the authority of the written language, provided excellent proof of this. She spoke what is commonly considered \*SAE (albeit with a strong Chicago accent), and like others who speak unstigmatized varieties of American English, she did not aspirate the /h/ in 'what'; she pronounced spelled /spelt/, and she left out the /n/ and /t/ in 'sentence.' (191)

Thus, as is also seen in the standardized spellings of RP in the text, speakers of unstigmatized varieties of English, both in the US and Britain, believe that because their variety is normal that they must be speaking the way words are spelled, when in fact, they are usually not.

In England, for instance, a prominent feature often associated with RP is the use of triphthongs.<sup>11</sup> This shows up in words like *fire*, *inspire*, and *society* and then also in words like *hour* and *power* (Jowitt 36). As triphthongs, these words in RP sound close to and look like *fawya*, *inspawya*, and *sosawyaatee*, and then *awah* and *pawah* when in phonetic spellings, thus revealing that there are ample opportunities for RP to be portrayed in text via phonetic spellings. However, Rowling never utilizes this tool apart from a rare truncation, such as Harry's use of *'til*, because it is assumed that these RP speakers *are* pronouncing words like standardized spelling.

## Hagrid's Grammar

Now, had Rowling gone through her entire book and portrayed every accent in dialect by phonetic spellings, the text would probably no longer have been suited for children as it would be highly difficult to read. Also, the creative portrayals of dialect then become the purpose of the book, rather than the story. On the other hand, completely standardizing Hagrid's spelling wouldn't remove the dialect entirely either because, as noted before, Hagrid's speech is marked by grammar in addition to phonetic spellings, so his speech would still represent the West Country accent. Features such as double negatives, the use of *meself* instead *myself*, using personal plural pronouns (*we*, *us*) when referring to himself, and using the pronouns *we*, *they*, and *you* with the

<sup>11</sup>The IPA format of the popular triphthongs in RP are /aɪə/ and /əʊə/ – /ɪnspaɪə/ and /pəʊə/

verb *was* all signify this.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, removing the phonetic spellings does not eliminate the “othering” present in the representation of the West Country accent—because the grammar is stigmatized too.

Because West Country grammar works *differently* than RP on occasion, the common assumption is that it is *incorrect*, thereby suggesting that the speaker is undereducated. But the very word *grammar* implies rules and patterns in word and sentence structure that need to be followed in order to accurately convey meaning (Green 79-81). For instance, if a speaker of West Country uses a double negative, it is still possible to get that double negative wrong, implying that there is a system in which it is right. This reveals that if Hagrid knows how to use the double negative within his community and how not to, he is in fact more educated than an outsider (someone from majority culture, for instance) on how to use this feature. Unfortunately, because of the social value placed on “correctness” and the idea that there is only *one* form of English that is correct, readers are likely to assume that he is simply lacking in knowledge.

## Speech and Descriptions Combined

So when is this language stigma manifesting itself? Consistently throughout the text, Hagrid is associated with animals and as being very animal-like. He drinks vast amounts and frequently, he lacks wealth, and he is often portrayed as naïve, or even dumb. Additionally, it is made known that Hagrid was kicked out of school when he was thirteen (59), furthering the undereducated, naïve persona. And notably, Hagrid is the only adult character that is treated like an equal, or even an inferior, by children within the novel.<sup>13</sup> Not oddly enough, all of these “unsophisticated” and provincial characterizations are associated with the West Country accent. And these characterizations not-so-coincidentally are mostly communicated through dialogue, as with the case where Hagrid tells Harry he can’t spell *Voldemort*.

But it is not always the accent itself that marks Hagrid’s speech as West Country. When, for instance, Rowling has Hagrid name a ferocious, three-headed dog *Fluffy* (192), she is utilizing a West Country stereotype to make the other participants in the conversation aware of Hagrid’s naïveté but also his warmth. According to Carol Myers-Scotton’s *Markedness Model*, the “links [made]

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<sup>12</sup>Just as I did with the spelling, I analyzed each line (complete sentence and fragment) for standardized English grammar and features that are associated with West Country English grammar, such as regularizing subject-verb agreement (“you was”). Note, standardized subject-verb agreement, in fact, often has irregular patterns in English.

<sup>13</sup>See Rowling 303, where Harry scolds Hagrid like a child.



between the use of a linguistic variety and its effects in a certain situation” (23) get used to negotiate an idea. In this case, Hagrid’s wording is carefully chosen to mark his speech and make it noticeable, thus enhancing the connection between his character and the simple yet lovable West Country stereotype.

## Conclusion

Consequently, Hagrid gets “othered” by his visual accent and grammar, but also by the content of his dialogue and character descriptions being associated with his accent, creating a sort of chicken-and-egg problem. Does Hagrid act the way he does because of his accent, or does he have his accent because of the way he acts?<sup>14</sup> Now, obviously these sorts of characteristics are likely to exist to some extent. It’s probable that in all of West England there is at least one individual who dropped out of school, loves animals, likes to drink, and is naïve—but this is also a stereotype regularly associated with West Country individuals and their accent, regardless of who they actually are. Therefore, out of all the characters to be portrayed as animal-like, naïve, and undereducated, should Rowling have portrayed *this* character with a West Country accent and continued to perpetuate the stereotype associated with it? Should texts also continue to portray females as loving pink and flowers, and minorities as the only characters with “accents”? Perhaps Rowling simply intended to be “accurate” by portraying the standard RP-speaking English boy, Harry, with unstigmatized spelling and portraying Hagrid’s language as stigmatized because they *are* unstigmatized and stigmatized, respectively, in real life. And since the narration is through Harry’s eyes, then he is appropriately not aware of his own accent but is very aware of Hagrid’s *different* one. So is this simply not good “authentic” writing by utilizing the longstanding tradition of representing “standard” accents with standardized spellings and marginalized accents with phonetic spellings?

Ignoring this portrayal would be letting Rowling off the hook, and suggests that it’s perfectly fine to continue portraying stigmatized language varieties as stigmatized and unstigmatized ones as “normal.” It suggests that it’s okay to marginalize and exploit groups of people for having a different accent and to continue pretending that there really is a “normal” accent, when there is not. Clearly, this decision can be made more easily with hindsight, as many authors are probably not even aware of the language prejudices they utilize—just as many speakers of unstigmatized varieties of English truly believe

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<sup>14</sup>Extra food-for-thought: J.K. Rowling is originally from a West Country town near Bristol, only further complicating the reasoning behind her portrayal of the stereotype, especially by bringing in the factor of authority and responsibility. If Hagrid is portrayed the way he is out of love, does that remove the language prejudice?

they themselves don't have an accent. Therefore, instead of idealistically recommending that we rewind, recommending that every character had been portrayed with phonetic spellings, or that they were all given standardized spellings to be more equal, or that everyone's grammar is accurately portrayed, a better move is to question the purpose behind portrayals of dialect in the first place. Ultimately, portraying everyone's utterances in the same manner, all normalized or all not, "humanizes rather than idealizes" language and the individuals using it (Minnick 132). And with the purpose of publishing in mind, authors should always consider who they are "othering" and the stereotypes they are perpetuating via language portrayals.

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