My Reading Lounge

Writing Lab

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ACCENTS IN WRITING

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I was going to write about specific tools in writing that warp the lines of time within a story, but also serve to enrich it. However, that'll have to wait for next month because the other day a conversation with my amazing beta, PunkyBumpkin, happened. It was about our love of accents and with it a new direction for this article blossomed.

When I sent out my first manuscript to an editor, she tore that thing apart. Rather viciously actually. But I'll never forget every single writing lesson she taught me. And one of those lessons was about conveying dialect in writing and the use of misspellings. She propelled me in the direction of Dave King and Renni Browne's *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*. Allow me to quote it here:

> *A century ago, Mark Twain could write a novel full of passages like this one—*
>
> > ***"Why, Huck, doan' de French people talk de same way we does?"***
> >
> > ***"No, Jim; you couldn't understand a word they said—not a single word."***
> >
> > ***"Well, now, I be ding-busted! How do dat come?"***
> >
> > ***"I don't know; but it's so. I got some of their jabber out of a book. Spose a man was to come to you and say Polly-voo-franzy—what would you think?"***

> ***"I wouldn' think nuff'n; I'd take en bust him over e head."***
>
> *—and get away with it.*
>
> *Times have changed, and few authors today would write dialogue as hard to follow as Twain's. But beginning novelists even today are often tempted to write dialect—whether it be southern black or Bronx Italian or Locust Valley lockjaw—using a lot of trick spellings and lexical gimmicks.*
>
> *It's the easy way out.*

And it truly is the easy way out. Something I had had to learn quickly as a beginning novelist back in those days. It had just so happened that one of my characters in the story that my editor had ripped apart was Portuguese, and had a thick accent. I took the easy way out with her dialog. This was actually a piece of dialog from that story: "Eez nah easy wash you hans."

Needless to say, it didn't survive the chopping block. But, luckily for me, I had an editor that cared enough to teach me that there *is* a better way to convey accents and dialect through written text and dialog. My goal here with this article is to share what I've learned along the way—with a little help from Dave King and Renni Browne—so that you won't have to make the same mistakes I had.

Self-Editing for Fiction Writers goes on to say:

> *When you use an unusual spelling, you are bound to draw the reader's attention away from the dialogue and onto the means of getting it across. If the dialect gets thick enough, it isn't read so much as translated—as any twentieth-century reader of Huckleberry Finn could tell you. The occasional dropped g or common phonetic spelling such as "gonna" or "lemme" won't get you into trouble with your readers, but it doesn't take much to make too much.*

So how *do* you convey things like accent and dialect in dialog and/or text?

The first thing's first—**research**.

> Whether you want to write 17th century Scottish or modern day Texan, the amount of effort you put into researching your character will show. It's the same with any character plotting—you research their home, you research what school they went to, what career they have. If they've got an accent, well that's just another facet of their character and should be researched just as thoroughly. However, researching for accents in dialog is different than the research you might do when learning what school a character went to as a child. This type of research calls for a little auditory learning.
>
> Go to youtube and search for videos of whatever country or place your character is from. You can use "Greek accents" as a guide. And you'll see that many will come up. Take the time to listen to them. They may all vary on a small scale, but most will have certain consistencies that you can pick up.
>
> Watch movies and TV shows with characters in a certain type of accent. Not only that, but try to find the screenplay, see what the written equivalent to what you're hearing looks like.
>
> And lastly, make friends. Places like Adifferentforest.com have people in the fandom from all over the world, many that are more than willing to help if you just ask for it. You can use programs like Vocaroo to even hear specific lines from your story in whatever accent you're wishing to convey.

When you focus on auditory research, some of the pivotal things you're going to want to take careful note of are: cadence, word choice, volume, and emphasis. All of these things can translate into written text, and will make all the difference when trying to convey accents and dialect.

Everything is good . . . in moderation.

We're going to cover three essential tools to conveying accents and dialects in text by a means of showing and not telling. However, the main focus of the article is to make a better story, something that translates with readers and is easier to read than a distracting and confusing piece of prose. And it's always best to remember this: when the tools are applied, moderation is the method of choice. You want to be able to hide the techniques within the text so that they don't boggle it down, or overwhelm a reader. Because when used effectively, a reader will be able to be transported into another world . . . another voice, and this is best achieved when they don't even realize it—they're just taken there.

Word choice

This is the tool you're going to want to use the most, and will apply both in dialog and if you were to write in first person text. And when it comes to conveying accents, nothing is more important than the words you chose . . . or don't.

This tool can be broken down into three categories—omitted words, swapped words, and catch words.

Omitted words:

English, when written, is very technically sound. The way someone speaks is very often not what is written, or what would be. The same applies with quite a bit of emphasis when writing dialects and accents.

Read the following two sentences aloud:

The narrowing of his eyes told me he knew exactly what this meant; he was thinking the same exact thing as I was.

Narrowing of his eyes told me he knew exactly what this meant; he was thinking same exact thing as I was.

Did you read them differently? Did they sound differently?

Let's try it again. Read the same two sentences aloud:

The narrowing of his eyes told me he knew exactly what this meant; he was thinking the same exact thing as I was.

The narrowing of eyes told me he knew exactly what meant: he thinking the same exact thing I was.

Did you read the two sentences differently this time?

Now if you were to try and read the original sentence, and the two variations, you would have a distinct voice in each, and that voice was achieved with something as simple as omitting certain words. Now *what* words to omit is a very important thing to note. As shown by the difference in voice from both sentence variations, the words omitted can change the accent drastically. When researching the

type of dialect you're hoping to achieve, pay careful attention to what sort of words are commonly omitted.

Swapped words:

This is a fun little twist on the variation of misspellings. Where you replace the intended word with one that is phonetically similar to the accented version. Also this rule can be used for swapping plural versions of nouns or verbs when singular is called for or vice versa.

Read the following six sentences aloud:

This isn't at all like I planned.

These isn't an all like I planned.

He had a pretty smile.

He had a pretty smiles.

The children wanted to play.

The children wanted to plays.

How did those sound to you?

Catch words:

This category applies to words that are commonly accepted, or their misspelled versions. Things such as ain't, gonna, lemme, goin', c'mon, etc . . . . These words can help add the accepted variety to your writing without distracting.

When used all together, or separately, all the categories of word choice help to create a foundation in your writing that aids a reader to not only read an accent or dialect, but to hear it as well.

It helps a show a reader instead of tell them.

Cadence

Everyone has a distinct way of speaking, and this has never been truer than it is when trying to show a reader a type of accent or dialect. When researching your accent or dialect, pay careful attention to the emphasis placed on words, consonants, and syllables as these things are a very important facet of cadence. Another important facet is the length of what's spoken, sentence breaks, and pauses as well as tools like alliteration and dissonance.

I like to use Valdimir Nabokov's writing as an example when playing with cadence. This one here is from *Look at the Harlequins!*

> *I groped in my pockets, fished out what I needed, and shot him dead, as he lunged at me; then he fell on his face, as if sunstruck on the parade ground, at the feet of his king.*

But what happens if we do this:

> I groped in my pockets. Fished out what I needed, and shot him dead. As he lunged at me. Then he fell on his face. As if sunstruck on the parade ground, at the feet of his king.

Now what if we did this:

> I groped *in* my *pockets*, fished out what I *needed,* and shot him *dead,* as he lunged *at me;* then he fell *on* his face, as *if* sunstruck on the parade ground, *at* the *feet* of his king.

Or maybe this:

> I groped . . . in my pockets, fished out what I needed . . . and shot him dead, as he lunged at me; then he fell on his face . . . as if sunstruck on the ground, at the feet of his king.

Every writer has a cadence, just as every voice does, every inflection, every dialect, and every accent; it's up to you as a writer to find out the sound to the particular one you're trying to convey. When it's more likely to pause, when it's more likely to run-on, or when it's more likely to emphasis certain points.

Grammar

> The final tool to conveying accents in your writing is the use of grammar. Here is the one VERY acceptable time to take risks and even throw grammar out the window! Fragments? Go ahead. Mixing up tense? No problem. Possessive pronouns? That's fine. Double negatives? Definitely okay. Loose instead of lose? Yeah, we covered that in word swap, it's okay here! But do take the golden rule into consideration: everything is good . . . in moderation.

You don't want one sentence to contain all of the tools, and then completely disregard all grammar. You don't want one sentence to have so many omitted and swapped words that it doesn't makes sense. Remember, you don't want to overwhelm a reader so much so that it distracts from the story itself. Find the right balance for you as a writer between conveying the accent and dialect and conveying the message of the story. The ultimate goal is to transport a reader as seamlessly as possible.

Now let's see what happens when we apply what we've learned!

- *When I was twelve years old, my family live in small village outside of the Mozdok province, near underdeveloped Caucasus region, but Russian border, not Georgia. It was poor place of existence and jobs were few; old KGB ran city and Krasnodar, which was biggest city near us to northwest. Our home was brick and we didn't have heating but nobody really did. One day fucking KGB came into my home, kicked down the door an asked for my father by name. I was sent to my room and hear yelling; my father never yell. Something broke and then there were bangs. They pull him out to dirt street in front of home and executed him. My mother wouldn't even let me go to him and bring him into house or yard to give him burial; she just slammed door and said that we never speak of it again. Three days later she was gone along with my two sisters. To this very day, I have no idea where they are. If they're lucky, they're dead.*

- *"I didn't stay up to fight," she said. "But I got to find out what it is keeping us here. What it is keeping my children from being somebody."*

  "They already be somebody. They born *somebodies."*

  "Somebody to do what? Work the cane field? All I want is what's good for us and the children."

"You making me crazy, that's what you doing. I used to could forget about the cane field at night. I used to not remember about my papa and mama so much. Now—"

"If we left here, you wouldn't seen the cane field no more. You wouldn't have nightmares about your papa and your mama, neither. I can't understand why you stay."

"Why I got to give you a reason? Reason ain't no pain killer. Reason ain't no free-feeling good world."

- *"Now what we do?" she sobbed. "Me only daughter. I can no believe."*

  "Now we go to feed another baby an what you do? We come to these country to give you better chance an you mess it up. No school. No money. No husband, just a whore." Her sobs increased with each scathing word as her daughter stood glaring.

  "No. Is no easy to wash hand, you open you legs, now you close den."

If you remember to keep to the golden rule of everything in moderation, the use of word choice, cadence, and grammar can prove to be an interesting and exciting way to explore writing in accents and dialects. But more than that it shows a reader, instead of telling them. And that's what you should strive for in your writing. Explanations, -ly adverbs, oddball verbs of speech, trick spellings—these can't really help your writing because they distract a reader, they blur the lines instead of transitioning them seamlessly. They take the place of good writing and dialog rather than helping create it. But if you don't take the easy way out and put forth a little effort, research, and creativity, you'll find that the payout is something that is rewarding for both the writers *and* the readers.