



THE HISTORY OF THE LANCASHIRE DIALECT AND THE ROLE OF DIALECT IN ELIZABETH GASKELL'S *NORTH AND SOUTH*

Radjapova Gavkhar Kurbonovna

Abstract *This article analyzes the history of the Lancashire dialect and the role of dialects in Elizabeth Gaskell's North and South. The author utilizes various linguistic features to depict the social and cultural differences of the characters within society. Key examples of southern, northern, and working-class dialects are examined to explore how they influence character development and reflect class and industrial conflicts. This research contributes to understanding linguistic realism in 19th-century English literature.*

Keywords: *Elizabeth Gaskell, North and South, dialects, Lancashire dialect, linguistic realism, northern dialect, Victorian literature, sociolinguistics.*

The Lancashire dialect is a variety of English traditionally spoken in Lancashire County, located in the northwest of England. It features distinctive characteristics in its phonology, grammar, and vocabulary. These traits reflect its connection to Old and Middle English, as well as the influence of Norse, brought about by the political activities of the Vikings in the region. Although the use of this dialect has significantly declined in recent years, its traces can still be found in rural areas and among older generations. The Lancashire dialect is rich in unique words and phrases.

For example, Mither-bother, Clarty-dirty, Lad-boy, Lass-girl, Nowt-nothing, Owt-anything, Summat-something, Oreet-alright, Cock-mate, Warch-health, Baggin or packin-a packed lunch or a small tea, Fettle-health, Nesh-soft or tender.

In archaic or rural speech, the singular second-person pronouns *thee* and *thou* were commonly used. The omission of the verb *to be* is also characteristic, for instance, "He proper tired" instead of "He is very tired." As for intonation, the

rhythm of speech resembles that of other northern dialects, marked by a melodic quality. This dialect is closely tied to Lancashire's industrial history, particularly its cotton mills. Words and expressions often reflect concepts related to working-class life and cultural identity. The Lancashire dialect holds a significant place in literature, especially in works portraying the heritage of industrial and working-class communities. During the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century, when Lancashire became a vital center in England's economic and cultural landscape, writers frequently employed this dialect to bring authenticity to their characters and settings.

Although the events in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* do not take place in Lancashire (the fictional Milton is based on Manchester, historically part of Lancashire), the novel incorporates features of northern speech. Gaskell uses northern grammar and vocabulary to depict the social origins of working-class characters, rather than presenting the full form of the dialect. For instance: "You may well smile, my lass; many a one would smile to have such a bonny face." (*North and South*, Chapter 8, p. 83).

Southern characters, such as Margaret Hale and her family, speak in standard English, reflecting middle-class education and values. Their speech lacks regional markers and adheres strictly to grammatical rules, emphasizing their social status and level of education. For example, Margaret's speech contrasts with the direct and pragmatic speech of northern characters. When she meets John Thornton, she says: "Mr. Thornton, I believe!" said Margaret, after a half-instant's pause, during which his unready words would not come. "Will you sit down. My father brought me to the door not a minute ago, but unfortunately he was not told that you were here, and he has gone away on some business. But he will come back almost directly. I am sorry you have had the trouble of calling twice." (*North and South*, Chapter 7, p. 71).

Margaret's speech reflects her southern upbringing, marked by formality and a subtle sense of superiority. Her refined language highlights her initial unfamiliarity with industrial life.

Gaskell's depiction of northern dialects is one of the novel's most vivid features. She employs phonetic spelling and regional vocabulary in the speech of working-class characters from Milton, such as Nicholas Higgins and Bessy Higgins. For instance, Nicholas Higgins' speech illustrates grammatical and lexical features typical of the northern working class: "Hoo's rather down i' th' mouth in regard to spirits, but hoo's better in health. Hoo doesn't like this strike. Hoo's a deal too much set on peace and quietness at any price." (*North and South*, Chapter 17, p. 151). Here, the use of *Hoo's* instead of *She's* and *i' th'* instead of *in the* highlights northern speech patterns. "I wanted to ask yo' to be a friend to her. She's seventeen, but she's th' last on us. And I don't want her to go to th' mill, and yet I dunno what she's fit for." (*North and South*, Chapter 13, p. 118). The substitution of *yo'* for *you* and *dunno* for *don't know* reflects phonetic changes, emphasizing the character's connection to northern culture.

Gaskell's portrayal of the working-class dialect serves not only as a marker of regional identity but also as a tool for social commentary. The unique speech of the working-class characters highlights their struggles and perspectives, often contrasting with those of industrialists. For example, John Thornton, though an industrialist, occasionally uses northern expressions: "I reckon yo' think I'm but a rough kind o' chap." (*North and South*, Chapter 10, p. 105).

The use of words like *reckon* and *yo'* underscores Thornton's association with northern speech, reflecting the complexity of class and regional identity in his character. The linguistic differences between northern and southern characters underscore themes of class conflict and cultural misunderstanding. Margaret's initial difficulty in understanding the northern dialect mirrors her struggles to grasp the harsh realities of industrial life. For instance, Margaret describes Milton workers as follows: "They came rushing along, with bold, fearless faces, and loud laughs and

jest, particularly aimed at all those who appeared to be above them in rank or station. The tones of their unrestrained voices, and their carelessness of all common rules of street politeness, frightened me a little at first.” (*North and South*, Chapter 8, p. 85). Here, Margaret’s observations about the workers’ “loud voices” and disregard for common rules of politeness reflect her initial perceptions of Milton’s people. These views eventually evolve as she comes to respect the strength and resilience of northern society.

Gaskell also uses dialect to explore themes of social growth and adaptation. As Margaret becomes more integrated into Milton’s society, her speech subtly changes. Similarly, Thornton’s ability to communicate effectively with both workers and peers demonstrates his social adaptability.

Gaskell’s use of dialect reflects broader trends in linguistic realism in 19th-century literature. By authentically portraying speech, she vividly depicts the linguistic diversity of Victorian England. However, her portrayal is not without bias. For instance, northern dialects are sometimes associated with simplicity and emotional depth, while southern speech is linked to education and intellect.

Gaskell’s use of dialect in *North and South* is a powerful tool for character development, thematic exploration, and social commentary. By authentically representing speech, the author offers a deep and vivid portrayal of industrial society. The novel’s dialects not only reflect social and class differences but also invite reflection on the complexities of communication and cultural identity in a rapidly changing world.

References

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