

The Gospels in Yorkshire Dialect: Functions and Linguistic Features

Elvira Myachinskaya^{1,*}, Ekaterina Kovalenko², Elena Kozhevnikova² and Olga Ustinova²

¹Department of English Language and Culture, St. Petersburg State University, St. Petersburg, Russia

²Institute of Foreign Languages, People's Friendship University of Russia, Moscow, Russia

*Corresponding Author

Keywords: Gospels, Yorkshire Dialect, Orality, Vernacular, Retelling, Simplification.

Abstract: The paper is concerned with Arnold Kellett's retelling of thirty Gospel tales in broad Yorkshire dialect. To some extent, this book is a simplified presentation of traditional biblical materials. In fact, it is a complex interpretation of profound religious ideas and the use of the local dialect, which is quite different from English standard. The audience of such a text may be twofold: young people who need religious instruction and are familiar with the dialect, and advanced diglossal dialect and Standard English speakers, who enjoy reading, hearing the dialect and speaking it. The purpose of Kellett's book is to create the effect of orality by means of pronunciation, spelling, use of dialectal words, idioms and slang words, as well as colloquial particles and interjections. Retelling, unlike faithful translation, allows the narrator's insertions in the text, which not only gives a personal human touch to the text, sometimes full of subtle humour, but also includes the audience into the narration. Thus, the situation of perceiving biblical stories is akin to the original oral communication of Jesus with his followers.

1. Introduction

The New Testament comprised of four Gospels has long become an integral part of human moral and spiritual life, mentality and culture. For centuries, in the English-speaking world the most venerable and received has, of course, been King James Version of the Bible (KJV), or the Authorised Version, a canonical translation, used in the ecclesiastic service; "it has been described as one of the most important books in English culture" [Wikipedia]. Yet, in some periods of human civilization, time comes requiring new versions to appear. KJV itself supplanted worship in Latin; the 20th century went under the auspices of biblical societies and translations of the Bibles into modern languages. In the same line, Arnold Kellett retells in a free form Gospel stories in the Yorkshire dialect of English [1].

One of the main tendencies in the Bible translation was simplification of the canonic text for linguistic and socio-cultural reasons, which was manifested in various types of translation such as literary-language, popular-language and common-language translations. [2] Kellett's text is not a translation in the strict meaning of the word, but a retelling, though close to the contents and the message of the traditional Bible. "In retelling, the writer usually produces a new work that is published under his own authorship, without its purporting to be a translation of some original. He is thus at liberty to shorten the materials, omitting the details or entire sections that he considers unnecessary for his purpose, and to recast the entire

content into his own style, with or without the addition of explanatory (even fanciful) material not found in the text" [2]. The book is titled "Ee By Gum, Lord! The Gospels in Broad Yorkshire" and contains thirty episodes of various nature: the birth and baptism of Jesus Christ, miracles performed by Him (*T'Feedin' o't' Five Thahsand*), parables (*T'Parrible o't' Sower*), the Sermon on the Mount (*T'Sarmon on t'Mahntinside*) – a good balance between narrative and teaching episodes.

2. Purpose of the Study and Methodology

The aim of the paper is to analyse and demonstrate what particular features of Arnold Kellett's retelling modify traditional biblical themes and what socio-cultural objectives the book, thus, meets. To satisfy our aim we employ several methods: that of comparison of the KJV and the dialectal text in terms of their linguistic structure, content analysis, semantic and phraseological, socio-cultural analysis as well as the review of existing theoretical context to define the place of the dialectal retelling in the general interpretive scholarship.

3. Results and Discussion

The book under study is a beautiful example of combining many-sided aspects of a religious, entertaining and linguistic nature. A sense of humour and deep understanding of religious content of the storyteller evoke compassion of the readers. The author made every effort to give the narration conversational flavour, to involve readers in a "mutual interest- group".

The latter aspect is, perhaps, even more significant than introducing exegetical content and ideas. Written in a variety of 'broad Yorkshire', the text attracts people who understand and are interested in this dialect. For the British, especially from the north of England, their dialect is a matter of pride and an element of their national identity. In such a way, the text increases its value and becomes a kind of an elite piece of instruction and of folkloristic literature.

3.1 Functional Value of the Audience

The place of dialects in a hierarchical structure of developed languages depends on a historical period and it changes with the change of the social structure. Linguistically, the key issue is the relationship of the standard language and regional dialects. In English, socio-cultural prestige of Standard English and its Received Pronunciation (RP) have been at the top for centuries, though the number of RP speakers is very limited even now (3-5% of the general amount of native English speakers [3]). It is within this normative linguistic variety that the KJV has functioned, ever since the early 17th century, when the translation appeared and played an important role in the rise and dissemination of the standard. The KJV did not target exclusively educated standard language speakers but the whole population, serving as a set example of a very high quality, majestic in style. The majority of population, both then and now, speak their local variety of English. Dialect speakers, vernacular and local accents occupied and are still considered to occupy the lowest position in the hierarchy. P. Trudgill has graphically presented the correspondence between the level of the language and the social position of the speakers as a triangle expressing the idea: the stronger the accent and dialect, the lower the social position of the speakers [4]. Traditionally, the public's attitude towards the place of dialects was consistent with this scheme. "Non-standard, non-prestige varieties were often held to be 'wrong', 'ugly', 'corrupt' or 'lazy'" [4]. This is, perhaps, the reason, why the new versions of the Bible try to avoid introducing dialectal elements in the text.

Yet, the situation with English dialects is not as clear-cut as may seem from Trudgill's "Sociolinguistic Triangle". Firstly, the social structure of the English society is moving toward democratization and the attitude to local speech is changing, acquiring the tone of acceptance and positive attitude. This may be illustrated by the rise of Estuary English [3, 5]. Secondly, the English have always been serious about their regional background, of "where they are from". For them, it is an important part

of their personal and local group identity, to a large extent by the way they speak. Some regions are more concerned about their dialect than others are. Northerners are patriotic with respect to their dialect and their local culture. For many years, actually since 1897, The Yorkshire Dialect Society has published its transactions containing dialect verse, and stories, and historical essays, and religious pieces. Its members also publish dialect literature, including *The Gospels* by A. Kellett, the object of the present study. The people who unite in this society, and more broadly speaking, belong to this circle, constitute the most interested readership of the book.

The aim of A. Kellett - the lay preacher, (though he never formulated it), is to spread the understanding of biblical ideas, morals, and humanity to younger population. Simply because senior people have learnt it during their life, when religious education was in the family, at school and elsewhere, they are familiar with the subject matter. All texts of the book contain some explanation of words, phrases or subjects that are hard to perceive by modern people.

Traditional dialect speakers and dialect enthusiasts form the majority of the readers of the book, presumably. Actually, they fully appreciate all the fine points of the linguistic arrangement and the simple and pious ways the author deals with the solemn and tragic subject matter. For them, the humorous style of the author will not disguise the profound seriousness of the author's intention, his deferential attitude to the task he had set to himself.

There is still another type of audience, altogether detached from Yorkshire grounds, i.e. students of English around the world, scholars, for whom the value of such texts lies in the possibility to find regularities outside Standard English and apprehend the diversity of linguistic ways of development and language evolution. Philologists, linguists, educationists, etc. carefully disentangle unfamiliar word forms, enjoying moments of comprehension. Many, like us, people of the Post-Communist era, who were denied all religious instruction, read the thirty pieces and learn their meaning for the first time. There is no doubt that the first time is to be followed by a thorough study of the Bible in a more traditional form.

3.2 Orality and Involvement

“A frequent characteristic of written style, especially formal written style, is an air of detachment or impersonality in which the writer goes out of his way to avoid directly mentioning the persons who participate in an event or are otherwise involved in the subject matter of the discourse.” [2]. Kellett's retelling acts in an opposite manner. The narrator often identifies himself pronominally with the first person and takes the responsibility for the hold of the narration upon himself (In the following examples, the page numbers are from [1]), cf.

No. 1. *Ah wonder if tha's ivver thowt abaht t'way Jesus telled 'is tales.* (p.49) (I wonder if you have ever thought about the way Jesus told his tales)

The narrator may interrupt his stories by introducing his own opinion:

No. 2. *An' Ah'll tell thi summat else. Ah allus see Joseph as a gentle sooart o'chap* (p.1) (And I'll tell you something else. I always see Josef as a gentle sort of chap)

Particles like *like, then, nah, an' all* are only used in colloquial speech and add to the orality of the tales.

The second person pronoun *thu* plays a specific role in the texture of the tales.

No. 3. *Tha'll 'ave 'eard tell o'John the Baptist* (p.7) (You have heard about John the Baptist)

No. 4. *Does-ta see* (Do you understand?) (p.1)

No. 5. “*'As –ta ivver thowt abaht why it wor...*(Have you ever thought why it was...) (p.1)

The second person pronoun has several forms in the text, *thu, thi, thy, ta* – all coming from a historical form of the 2nd person singular. The pronoun had a long way of development and, in Standard

English, has been finally substituted by *you* indiscriminately of number and social position of the referent. In recent Bible translations, *you* have universally substituted *thou* and *thee*. In Kellett's book, the situation is altogether different. In Yorkshire texts *thu* and its forms have practically substituted *you* and are number non-specific. Socio-linguistically, they are markers of belonging to the group of dialect speakers, to insiders as opposed to outsiders (*off-comed-uns*), thus increasing the sense of belonging.

3.3 Linguistic Features

3.3.1 Spelling

The scholarly aim of Kellett-researcher is to fix dialectal forms – lexical, grammatical, phonetic – of a dialect that seems to be disappearing, that of West-Riding Yorkshire. This objective can only be met in the written form, with the spelling means traditionally used by dialectologist to render local accent. English dialects do not have a writing system of their own, nor do they have proper pronouncing rules like the standard variety. Dialect writers use orthoepy system of Standard English writing, imperfect as it is, to register the dialect rather than to write in it, cf. [6]. The thing is, the English accent variation even within one locality is so diverse and unstable that phonetic spelling is hardly possible, and readers imagine the sound of words according to their own idea and knowledge. Still, some spelling methods are universal:

(1) Apostrophe denoting sound or letter omission, cf.

No. 6. *That's 'oo's talkin' ter thi*", says Jesus (p.58) (That is who is talking to you)

(2) Monophthongisation with the help of a "vowel+h" combination (because letter "h" is never pronounced in this position), *Ah = I*, *dahn = down*, etc.

(3) Metathesis: *axing = asking*, *gurt = great*, *brid = bird*

(4) Sound addition: *ter =to*, *fer =for*, *tul'em = to them*, etc.

For linguists, phonetic spelling presents a treasure of systemic information concerning evolutionary variety and plurality. Scholars may see both archaic relics (like metathesis) and advanced stages (like monophthongisation), which enables them to draw a comprehensive picture of linguistic laws and regularities.

3.3.2 Lexical Substitution

Lexical substitution is a universal translation method for any type of text as it allows the translator to properly interpret the intention of the original text and adapt it in the culture-specific way. Simplification texts present this sort of culture-specific transformation answering the author's goal - lexemes that are more elaborate turn to equivalents of neutral style. Though the book we are discussing is not a translation proper, it is fairly close to KJV to enable us to speak of textual equivalents.

No. 7. "This is a desert place and the time is now past..." (KJV, Matth. 14:15) - "*It'll soon be dark. We'r miles from onnywheere.*" (p.56) Of course, there is nothing wrong with the word "desert" in English, but for England, where there are no deserts, it has a flavour of foreign lands, while for the land of Lord it is a most natural word, breathing of their country.

No. 8. "Buy themselves victuals" (KJV, Matth. 14: 15); Get victuals (Luke 9:12) - "*Buy thersens summat [something] to eat*" (p.56). The present-day noun "victuals" is marked in the dictionary "old use" and mostly restricted to military logistics [7], so its substitution to "something to eat" is not merely simplification but a stylistic necessity.

No. 9. "And he commanded the multitude to sit down on the grass..." (KJV, Matth. 14:19) – "*Jesus then telled t'disciples ter get all t'fowk ter sit thersens dahn on t'grass...*" (p.56). The dictionary definition of "command" reads, "to tell (someone) to do something, with the right to be obeyed; formally order, esp. as a military leader" [7]. Here, with the evident cognitive affinity, the connotation is different. Again, it is

not simply a matter of simplification but that of regaining contextual appropriateness.

At the same time, the text contains unaltered archaic religious words, cf. *disciples, scribes, 'ark [hark] at this = listen, think thissen blessed, commandment, commit adultery, the Lord's anointed*, etc. We consider this a clever stylistic move of the author, as it maintains the vital link to the traditional text, makes the dialect text an extension or a branch of the main tree. Such archaisms act as precedent names that give depth to the narration, as symbols of older times and former generations of people.

3.3.3 Slang, Phraseology and Dialect Vocabulary

Common-language translations are recommended to avoid using slang and colloquialisms characteristic of restricted 'common-interest groups' [2]. Dialect speakers are a restricted group as well but the text is abounding in this sort of phraseology used intentionally and with good purpose – to make the text sound naturally and run fluently as an oral tale. For example:

Dialect words: *At-after* – afterwards, *back-end* – autumn, *chuffed* – pleased, *flummoxed* – bewildered, *to fratch* – to argue, quarrel; *jannock* – fair, honorable; *jooarum* – crowd, multitude; *sup* – drink, *take no gaum on him* – don't pay attention, etc.

Slang: *barm-pot* – silly person, *blether-'eead* – fool, *brass* – money, *off-comed-un* – a person from elsewhere, etc.

Idioms: *By Gum* – My word! Fancy that! *Ei up* – Look out! What's this? *Sither!* – Look (here)! *Oud Nick* – the Devil, *he wor as right as rain*, etc.

A reader, who is not a dialect speaker, can comprehend such words mostly from the context. Often he may feel bewildered (*flummoxed!*), not unpleasantly, though. Rather, he may wish to penetrate into the language material and become part of it. There is definite attraction in the lexical set of the tales, certain whimsical magnetic idiosyncrasy that involves even the outsider in the contents and charm of the narration.

4. Additions to the Subject Matter

This may be illustrated by the text *T' Feedin' o't' Five Thahsand*.

The *Feeding of the Multitudes* is a tale to be found in all the four KJV Gospels: Mathew 14:13-21, Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17, John 6:1-15, yet none of them contains an initial paragraph of the following nature,

No. 10. "*Ivverybody's 'eard tell o't'feedin' o't'five thahsand. Ther's some say 'at 't real merricle wor 'at Jesus gat all these fowk ter share among thersens t'food the'd browt wi' 'em' – a bit like one o'them faith tees, tha sees. [you see] (Though i'my experience ther's oft moore faith ner [than] tea at a do like that).* (p. 54)

The narrator not only introduces a different (not his own) interpretation of the Lord's miracle, he also makes a joke of it; he is also mocking ungenerous and sparing people. A *faith tea* is not a widely known idiom, which seems to be Yorkshire specific, too. On the World Reference Language Forum, the users discuss the meaning of "faith teas": "In my native West Yorkshire, a faith tea is the equivalent of the American pot luck meal, where everyone brings along food to be shared with the other guests." Another user of the same forum says, "I asked my mother about the expression earlier today, and she assumed that the word 'faith' referred to the fact that you didn't know what (if anything) people would bring to the meal - you had to have faith!" [8]

After the initial paragraph, goes a true-to-the-Bible interpretation of the plot, but the story ends, or is rounded up, with returning to the same idiom.

No. 11. "*Doonan't thee tell me it wor nobbut a faith tea!*" (Do not tell me it was only a faith tea!)

Example No. 12 is a textual continuation of No. 9.

No. 12. ...*to sit dahn on the grass – ‘cos it wor nice an’ green just there -- ...*

The introduction of “nice and green” sounds like an appellation to the modern value of comfort, which people of old were ignorant of.

A frequent extension takes the form of explaining words:

No. 13. ...*onnyroad, ‘e started aht wi’ these fower fisher-lads as ‘is fust disciples. [Anyway, he started out with these four fishers as his first disciples]. One of these Latin words is ‘disciple’. All it means is someb’dy who’s learnin’. The’ wer’ apprentice lads, really. (p.17)*

Example No. 13 contains both the original lexeme and its extended explanation, resembling a teaching method of a classroom.

Another version of subject matter addition is introducing modern reality elements:

No. 14. *I’them days, of course the’d no mechanical contraptions, same as wi’ave terday. [T’parrible o’ t’ Sower, p.49)*

No. 15. *Satan. Yon feller ‘at stokes boilers dahn yonder... (p.12). Most reality additions are humorous.*

5. Conclusions

In a way, this dialectal version of “robust Yorkshire speech” is akin to the language spoken by the people of Galilee – using simple phrasing and down-to earth vocabulary, nothing too cultivated or pompous. The book serves its purpose of educating: bringing the biblical content to those unfamiliar with it - and the aesthetic function: making dialect speakers enjoy the sense of humour, the delicate refinement of the familiar tradition.

Though the book aims at a rather limited audience, not only dialect speakers will read the Gospels but also people interested in the diversity of the English language. No doubt that through the language, God’s word shall reach the hearts of modern people.

References

- [1] Kellett, A. (1996) *Ee By Gum, Lord! The Gospels in Broad Yorkshire*. Otley: Smith Settle Ltd.
- [2] Wonderly, W. (1968) *Bible Translations for Popular Use*. London: United Bible Societies.
- [3] Trudgill, P. (1999) *The Dialects of England*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- [4] Trudgill, P. (2000) *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society*. 4th ed. London: Penguin Books.
- [5] Upton C. (2017) *Doing Dialects Today*. Transactions of the Yorkshire Dialect Society, Part CXVII, Vol. XXIII, 40-50.
- [6] Stevenson I. (2017) *On Ikley Moor, Again*. Transactions of the Yorkshire Dialect Society, Part CXVII, Vol. XXIII, 51-54.
- [7] *Dictionary of English Language and Culture*. (1993): Longman Group UK Limited.
- [8] <https://forum.wordreference.com/threads/faith-tea.2692329/>