

Book Review

Urszula Clark, 2019. *Staging language: Place and identity in the enactment, performance and representation of regional dialects*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, x + 176 pp. ISBN: 9781501515415. € 99.95.

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Staging language reports on findings from an ambitious project to investigate the ways in which a range of performers from the West Midlands engage with dialect features in their acts. These acts include stand-up comedy, comedy sketches, spoken word and various forms of theatre. In line with the work of researchers such as Penny Eckert, Nikolas Coupland and Barbara Johnstone, Clark's intention is not to catalogue and quantify the use of dialect features but rather to explore the meanings and affordances that those features have for performers and audiences. As she states at the outset, the aim is to “investigate the relationship between a specific discursive practice – that of creative and imaginative performance played face to face by local performers in front of a local audience – and any connections such performance may have with language and identity” (p. 1).

Chapter 1 sets out the research questions and introduces Clark's take on key terms such as ‘dialect’, ‘style’, ‘mediatization’ and ‘performance’. It also presents an initial overview of the research materials collected by the project. These include recordings of the performances themselves, interviews with the performers about their creative decisions, and interviews with audience members about their experiences of the performances. Performance-specific interviews were further supplemented by interviews with “local and national public creative artists and personalities” (p. 21) about their own dialect practices. Attention was paid to ensuring that the performers were genuinely diverse. In total 36 performance events and around 50 hours of interviews were recorded. At the outset it should be noted quite what an undertaking it must have been to put this together: there were substantial challenges entailed in finding a suitable set of performers, persuading them to participate and resolving the sometimes complex permission issues surrounding live performance. As the rest of the book evidences, the result is an exceptionally rich set of materials that allows important questions about the relationship between public performance and underlying ideologies of language variation to be investigated.

Chapter 2 surveys the theoretical perspectives that Clark brings to bear on her material, which range from sociolinguistic concepts, including indexicality and enregisterment, drawn from Michael Silverstein and Asif Agha, as well as more

philosophical concepts, including heteroglossia, double voicing and frames, drawn from theorists such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Kenneth Burke. Early on, Clark situates her project as one which adopted a “grounded theory” approach as originally conceived by Glaser and Strauss, allowing for “flexible strategies to be developed in relation to both theoretical perspectives to be employed in relation to frameworks for data analysis and preparation as all as the collection of data itself” (p. 23). Clark explains, “[m]y original research design had been configured in a more traditional sociolinguistic paradigm, with sampling frames devised that related to the age, gender and ethnicity of performers” (p. 25). What she found in practice, however, was that “the social world of creative, face to face entertainment does not lend itself very easily or readily – in fact, not at all – to the imposition of such sampling frames” (p. 25). She therefore decided to adopt the more flexible approach, allowing the questions and analysis to arise from the material rather than imposing a rigid predetermined structure.

Chapter 3 focuses on comedy acts performed in local venues by amateur and semi-professional performers in predominantly white ethnic contexts. These include stand-up comedians performing at ‘open mic’ nights and a women’s theatre group performing comedy sketches as part of a variety show. The chapter provides illuminative examples of the ways in which performers use regional features to index stereotyped identities. Clark draws attention to the ways in which regional features are repeatedly linked to working class personae but are used to situate those personae in relation to a wider, globalised world (p. 84). Conversations with the performers provide insights into some of the practical considerations that underlie their performances. A repeated issue for performers is tempering their dialect performance to make sure that jokes do not get lost. For example, Clark discusses how for Paul Jennings “the constraints of comic efficiency ‘trump’ considerations of regional presentation in relation to dialect” (p. 61). Beyond these investigations of the performance side, however, the live recording of the events and interviews with audience members means that Clark is able to investigate the experiences that audience members take from the performances. These prove to be diverse: while for one audience member the traditional Black Country dialect provides an uncomfortable reminder of being bullied, for another it is a positive marker of identity. As Clark notes “whether or not a person embraces or rejects the regional dialect of their upbringing depends largely upon their experiences of becoming aware of it through social interaction with others” (p. 66). At the same time, however, the collective nature of performance has an effect, and Clark argues that “speakers of middle-class origins and working-class origins can project the same linguistic norms in a performance situation, and a mixed-class audience can evaluate the linguistic variation in the same way because of situational context” (p. 85). What emerges in this chapter is quite how complex the sociolinguistic

landscape is in these performances, and how difficult it is to reduce the findings to a single pithy analysis.

Chapter 4 focuses on what Clark broadly terms the use of ‘Black Brum’ in spoken word events by minority ethnic performers of Afro Caribbean-origin in Birmingham. The analysis examines the way in which these performers draw on a range of linguistic resources, most notably regional dialect and global varieties including Jamaican Creole, to index different facets of their identity. She finds that the performers construct these identities in “polyphonic ways” (p. 120), indexing both their sense of belonging to a local community and their place within a global Afro Caribbean heritage. It is perhaps a weakness of this chapter compared to the others that there is rather less material drawn from interviews with audience members, although discussion of an interview with high-profile dub poet Benjamin Zephaniah adds additional insight to the analysis. As with the previous chapter, Clark finds that the performers are highly aware of the linguistic choices they are making: “not only do speakers have choices, but they are aware of choice, particularly in preformative contexts” (p. 120). She also notes how attitudes towards regional identity and linguistic features are unstable: both performers and audiences “may shift between positive and negative attitudes to their home area and linguistic use situationally” (p. 120).

Chapter 5 focuses on more scripted material in the shape of performance poetry and dramatic plays. The professional plays in particular introduce complex additional dimensions, in that the author of the words is not physically present on stage, and the performers are cast primarily for their acting ability rather than because they naturally speak the language variety of their character. In the case of both *Too Much Pressure* and *Riot*, this led to fewer regional linguistic features being present in the performances than might have been anticipated given that both plays were very explicitly set in the local area, and commentary from the playwrights and actors provides insights into the creative decision-making behind this. The final short section on Mummers’ plays performed in small Warwickshire towns offers an interesting contrast between rural and urban areas: in this case, Clark argues, the plays serve to form “an imaginative link to a rural past where dialect would have been spoken as a matter of course” (p. 152) and yet the performance of enregistered forms does not appear to be a matter of great concern to the amateur actors.

Chapter 6 provides a conclusion to the study and draws together some of its running themes. A key observation throughout is the extent to which audience determines the degree of dialect used: the more “locally oriented” the venue “the more dialect use is prevalent” (p. 155). Further, Clark argues that while local identity is in focus in such dialect-rich performances, this is always in relation to more global forces of “media and migration” and that that such performances

“help local communities to understand or to make sense of the modern world” (p. 156). She further situates her findings within ongoing demographic changes in the UK, where clear class boundaries have to some extent broken down and are being replaced by the performance and interpretation of cultural markers, a highly salient one of which is dialect. As a result, she argues, “the traditional distinction between dialect and register is no longer as clear cut as it once was” and that “working class dialect can be shown to be motivated by interactional circumstances” (p. 160). She therefore concludes that dialect use in performance does not indicate “parochial insularity” but rather “serves to give voice to the experiences of a specific, locally based community at a time of significant social change” (p. 167). This more than anything makes the case for why a study of this type is timely and of much wider significance than its local focus might suggest.

Perhaps inevitably given the study’s somewhat open-ended nature, it identifies a broad range of questions and ideas but does not have space to explore all of them fully. For example, I found the introduction of the Bakhtinian concept of ‘double voicing’ was instructive and sporadic use is made of it to explain how certain performances worked (see for example the discussion of *Fizzog* on p. 71). Such analyses were suggestive but sometimes too brief to be satisfying. The book also periodically raises the question of whether these performances serve to challenge or reinforce the standard language ideology. The introduction, for example, promises that the book will “show how performers and writers link dialect and place whilst *at the same time* also subvert the ways in which the social stereotypes they enact are represented by dialect itself” (p. 31; my italics). Although some reference is made to this at various points, it is an extremely tough issue to address and needs more space for discussion than is available here.

Overall, this book describes a project that was planned as a (relatively) straightforward study based on sociolinguistic sampling but became something much more complex and ambitious once underway. The decision to adapt the methods to the emerging landscape of the study was a good one, and as a result the study is able to probe the complexity of the cultural performances it analyses in detail. It also ensures that there is a real generosity towards participants and a willingness to listen to their own accounts of their experience of using language to perform identity. Clark notes that “factors such as gender, ethnicity, occupation and audience undeniably have an impact upon how people and especially adult’s talk” but also that “performers are very adept at treating such factors as resources” (p. 163). In summary, I found this book insightful and stimulating, and I hope that it provides a road map for future studies of this type.