

Charles Dickens Makes Fun of Idiolects in *Martin Chuzzlewit**

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ABSTRACT

Martin Chuzzlewit is considered a very rich linguistic mosaic where a number of characters are in the habit of speaking 'private languages' or idiolects. In this travel-book we find a source of Dickens's impressions of America and a treatment of a linguistic problem: to make each class, each group and profession speak in its own characteristic way. In the representation of American speech the Victorian writer uses features such as deviant spellings, unusual morpho-syntactic patterns, standard words used in a different context, extralinguistic capitals and hyphens. The technique in the dialogues of *Martin Chuzzlewit* is especially the graphic and humorous, by means of which he exhibits the most trifling and commonplace things in a new and amusing light.

1. Representation of dialogue in Dickens's fiction

This study adheres to the qualified opinion that the dialogue is a necessary element in any novel which purports to reflect the dimension of human life based on the fact that people who come together invariably talk. Furthermore, this research defends that dialogues in a novel possess much more verbal interest than other parts of the same work, because 'it is in dialogue, above all, that the novelist has most opportunity, if he so wishes, to suggest continuity between his fictional world and the real world' (Lodge, 1966: 47).

In the eyes of Dickens's contemporaries, his real achievement was the writing of dialogue; and even today, when Dickens is quoted, nine times out of ten it will be some fragment of a favourite character's speech, rather than description or narrative, that will come to mind. This great Victorian writer was in deep trouble to individualize the speech

of his characters, and for many of them he devised special languages or 'private languages'. Each of these special languages may well be described, in linguistic terminology, as an idiolect, the term used to describe the totality of speech-habits of an individual, in contrast with a dialect, which refers to the speech-habits of a group (Brook, 1970: 138).

It is obvious that the discourse contains many voices depending partly on conversations between two or more people of different personal types and social class, placed in a number of different physical settings. It is not exaggerated to state that the dialogue of realistic novels imitates the speech of real life, though Ian Gordon, among others, has suggested that all good prose which is 'oral in conception', whilst preserving 'the rhythm and shape of speech', only succeeds by discarding 'the garrulity, the loose ends, the amorphous form, the back-tracking and repetitions characteristic of most speakers' (Gordon, 1966: 9).

In real life the speech of any individual is unique; and this uniqueness derives from the unlimited number of ways in which the features of the spoken language, on the phonological, lexical and grammatical levels, may be combined to generate different modes of utterance or spoken styles. Therefore, the main problem that every novelist must face is that he has to use the written language to represent the wide ranges of expression that are available to any speaker. Some novelists simply attempt to portray spoken language realistically, and the result is that their characters 'talk like a book'. Dickens was in a deep trouble to individualize the speech of his characters, and for many of them he devised special languages or 'private languages'. Each of these special languages may well be described, in linguistic terminology, as an idiolect, the term used to describe the totality of speech-habits of an individual, in contrast with a dialect, which refers to the speech-habits of a group (Görlach, 1999: 136). The 'inimitable' Dickens became aware of the difficulty of representing in writing the unlimited effects that can be achieved in speech. In this sense, in *Christmas Stories* when Doctor Marigold decides to write a book for his adopted daughter, he realizes this great challenge:

I was aware that I couldn't do myself justice. A man can't write his eye (at least I don't know how to), nor yet can a man write his voice, nor the rate of his talk, not the quickness of his action, nor his general spiky way. But he can write his turns of speech, when he is a public speaker, and indeed I have heard that he very often does, before he speaks'em (Dickens, 1989: 452-453).

Dickens was very conscious of the great differences between speech and writing and made no attempt at a completely realistic representation of spoken language, but occasionally, for his own and his readers' amusement, he records the sort of thing that people actually say rather than what they think they say (Brook, 1970: 139-40). Obviously, the representation in a work of literature of 'real' speech in all its prolixities, irrelevances, hesitations and repetitions would be, if not unthinkable, at any rate unreadable. The most realistic fictional speech generally implies a considerable selection and simplification and conventionalization of the real language of men. According to Raymond Chapman 'the novelist selects and economises, excluding the many features which are accepted in reality

but would become intolerable if they were reproduced on the printed page. Speech is full of hesitations, repetitions, anacolutha and non-semantic noises' (Chapman, 1994: 1). David Abercrombie states that 'nobody speaks at all like the characters in any novel, play or film. Life would be intolerable if they did; and novels, plays or films would be intolerable if the characters spoke as people do in life' (Abercrombie, 1965: 4). In 'the fictional world of Charles Dickens', and equating 'fictional world' with 'verbal world', there are many linguistic elements to show that a large part of the interest and the source of energy of this writer's work lie in the way in which *speech* is presented. Norman Page clarified the purpose and author's conventions:

For Dickens...dialogue clearly exists to serve a purpose...to render not the real world but a fictional world that is amazingly vivid and varied. He does not appear to have been interested in persuading the reader...that anyone who ever lived spoke in the manner of Jingle or Mantalini or Mrs. Gamp. In these novels, speech is a matter of fictional convention -the author's own code of conventions- rather than accurate observation (Page, 1969: 97).

2. Variety and richness of speech in *Martin Chuzzlewit*

Some idea of Dickens's responsiveness to the spoken language as part of his social environment may be gained by considering a well-documented episode in his life which left its imprint on two of his books: *American Notes* (1842) and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4). His first trip to America (1842) has been described by Steven Marcus as 'a sixth-months' voyage into the English language' (Page, 1998: 149), and certainly the differences between the British and American varieties of English seem to have struck him with a force with which, in our own age of multifarious transatlantic influences, it would be hard to find a parallel.

Dickens's impressions of America are available in three forms. His letters to his friends at home, mainly to John Forster, are the first source. On the whole, in his private letters about his American visit Dickens shows amusement at the variety of English spoken by the citizens of the United States. He prided himself on his own ability to observe and render the differences between British and American English; he was convinced that British English was superior or, simply, was right, and American English wrong and ridiculous. There is also the travel-book, entitled *American Notes for General Circulation* with comments on what he observed or experienced. In *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the second book with an American setting, we find the third source of Dickens's impressions of America and the treatment of a linguistic problem: to make each class, each group and profession speak in its own characteristic way, and to individualize the major figures through their language.

This study will tackle the variety and richness of 'private languages' devised by Charles Dickens in the dialogues of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, since the American English scattered through the dialogues of this travel-book reveals as well the magnificent ear Dickens possessed for the linguistic peculiarities of the residents of the United States of America

(Görlach, 1999: 104). Apart from the previous reason for research Norman Page has pointed out:

In the seven chapters of *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4) which relate the hero's American adventures, the dialogue makes an important contribution to the impressions of rawness and oddity that Dickens wished to create in his picture of frontier society. There are many instances of orthographic variants suggesting non-standard pronunciation (*doel* for *duel*, *air* for *are*, etc) and of modifications of the normal form of English words (*disputating*); but even more prominent are variations in stress, indicated by capitalization, hyphenation, italicization, the use of diacritics, or some combination of these methods. It is the unfamiliar *rhythms* of the spoken language which seem to have impressed themselves upon Dickens with particular force (Page, 1998: 150-51).

Martin Chuzzlewit, although a powerfully comic work of fiction, is also a serious representation of a society devoted to the pursuit of self-interest. Dickens felt that, while Americans often boasted that they were immeasurably superior to the English, they were in many ways inferior because of the painful disparity that existed between what they professed to believe in and what they practiced.

When Dickens went to America he did not at first think that the differences between British and American English were very great. In a letter from Boston, January 29, 1842, he wrote to Forster:

I will only say, now... that but for an odd phrase now and then -such as *Snap of cold weather*; a *tongue-y man* for a talkative fellow; *Possible?* As a solitary interrogation; and *Yes?* For indeed- I should have marked, so far, no difference whatever between the parties here and those I have left behind (House, 1974: 35-36).

Dickens's America is an illusion, a surface beneath which there is no substance; and because these citizens possess no inner life, they exist wholly in a public form. Americans do not converse with one another, they make speeches at each other. This kind of oratory plays an important role in establishing and protecting the self. To Americans, everyone is the sum of his words. Since there is no inner substance to sustain the individual, one may establish and maintain an identity through the use of language (Evans, 1976: 65). In his representation of American speech, Dickens used all the linguistic strategies he had at his disposal in order to convey the differences between American English and Standard English. There are also signs that Dickens at times would appear to be engaged in a sort of linguistic game with his readers. On one occasion there is the talk of a cocktail called a 'cobbler' which was likely to be unknown to the British reading public (Soto, 1993: 104). Although it is true that the average British reader would only relate the word 'cobbler' to the meaning 'shoemaker', it is also true, as Dickens must surely have known, that in nineteenth-century Cockney rhyming slang, the phrase '*cobbler's awls*' was used to refer to 'balls' (testicles), and by extension 'rubbish' (Trudgill, 1990: 113). Similarly, the misunderstanding which arises over the word 'muniment' used by an American is probably

due to the fact that Martin initially understood that a 'monument' had been put up for him in the bar, rather than the 'written notice' that the American had meant to say.

In *Martin Chuzzlewit*, chapter XVI, as soon as Martin and Mark disembark in New York, their initial contact with the transatlantic varieties of the language comes from a choral representation of boy news-vendors hawking their wares:

'Here's this morning's New York Sewer!' cried one. 'Here's this morning's New York Stabber! Here's the New York Family Spy! Here's the New York Private Listener! Here's the New York Peeper! Here's the New York Plunder! Here's the New York Keyhole Reporter! Here's the New York Rowdy Journal! Here's all the New York papers! Here's full particulars of the patriotic loco-foco movement yesterday, in which the whigs was so chawed up; and the last Alabama gouging case; and the interestin Arkansas dooel with Bowie knives; and all the Political, Commercial and Fashionable News. Here they are! Here they are! Here's the papers, here's the papers!' (Dickens, 1989: 255).¹

Apart from initiating the highly satirical treatment of American newspapers, the effective choral manipulation of direct speech provides examples of idiosyncrasy in morpho-syntactical ('the Whigs was'), lexical ('locofoco', 'chawed up') and phonological ('interestin', 'dooel') aspects, all identifiable as American speech.

To Charles Dickens the failure of the American dream is reflected in the New World's use of language; and *Martin Chuzzlewit* is a very rich linguistic mosaic where a number of characters are in the habit of speaking special languages or idiolects. Dickens tends to picture American countrymen as offensive, conceited, bad-mannered, and ignorant, but he does so humorously (Pound, 1947: 126). When Dickens introduces Americanisms, it is often for the sake of ridiculing or poking gentle fun at them (Sørensen, 1985: 48)

3. Colonel Diver's speech

The first American character with whom the two young Englishmen speak is Colonel Diver. His initial intervention contains only one non-standard feature, the weakening of 'them' to 'em', but this is explained by Dickens's metatextual commentary on his discourse. We are told that Martin's reaction to the Colonel's speech was that of a smile:

...partly occasioned by what the gentleman said, and partly by his manner of saying it, which was odd enough, for he emphasizes all the small words and syllables in his discourse, and left the others to take care of themselves: as if he thought the larger parts of speech could be trusted alone, but the little ones required to be constantly looked after (XVI, 257-58).

The Colonel Diver's English becomes progressively more Americanised, almost as if Dickens wanted to lead his readers gently into a new discourse style. Thus we find loss of medial 't' and subsequent change of vowel quality in 'cap'en': 'Well, cap'en! said the colonel (XVI, 259). Loss of the weak vowel and medial 'h' in 'p'raps'; loss of final 'e' with

change in vowel quality in ‘fortun’ are found in the same chapter: ‘You haven’t got another boy to spare, p’raps, cap’en?’ said the colonel, in a tone almost amounting to severity (XVI, 259); loss of *r* in spelling before consonants in ‘bust’: ‘Keep cool, Jefferson,’ said the colonel gravely. ‘Don’t bust! (XVI, 263).

The use of initial capital letters is a device widely exploited by Dickens as a means of emphasising a given word or words. Mostly, American speech and its tendency to excessive emphasis are ridiculed by means of a complex system of capital letters and hyphens, a system which is neither entirely clear nor entirely coherent. The colonel gives us a typical example:

The name Of Pogram will be proud Toe jine you. And may it, My friends, be written on My tomb, ‘He was a member of the Con-gress of our common country, and was ac-Tive in his trust’ (XXXIV, 539).

Another feature, common to that of many of the American characters is the protraction or dissociation through hyphenation of the first syllables of certain words. Charles Dickens represents this general characteristic of pronunciation by the insertion of a hyphen in the spelling of many words of more than one syllable. The hyphen may indicate a pause, but it is more likely that it is a way of showing that the stressed syllables of the word receive more stress than they usually do in British English:

‘I am at your service, sir; and I wish you,’ said the General, giving him his hand with grave cordiality, ‘joy of your po-ssession. Your air now, sir, a denizen of the most powerful and highly-civilised do-minion that has ever graced the world; a do-minion, sir, where man is bound to man in one vast bond of equal love and truth. May you, sir, be worthy of your adopted country!’ (XXI, 358).

We can see more examples: Eu-rop (XVI, 262); en-tirely (XVI, 264); in-door (XVI, 265); re-tard (XVI, 271); a-mazing Eu-rop (XVII, 289); a-begging (XXI, 349); Ac-tive (XXI, 349). This point is discussed by George Leslie Brook, who correctly relates this with the accentuation of the first syllable of certain polysyllabic words, a trait highly characteristic then, as now, of American speech, and one which produces an indubitable comic effect on non-American English speakers (Brook, 1970: 135). What George Leslie Brook neglects to mention is that this change in stress often results in a corresponding change in vowel quality, a device which is traditionally used to comic effect in parodies of American English. He also fails to point out that Dickens uses this hyphenation to denote deviant word stress in certain ‘English’ characters, most notably Mark Tapley, Bailey and Bill the coach driver. It is apparent that Dickens was especially aware of such deviant accentuation in the speech of Americans, but he also saw it as a characteristic of certain substandard varieties of English speech in the United Kingdom.

4. Scadder's speech

On the whole, Dickens's treatment of Americans is unsympathetic, and this dislike is faithfully reflected in his representation of their speech. The unscrupulous Land Agent, Scadder, is portrayed as a kind of American Tigg, and the language he uses accentuates his apparent lack of scruples. The description of Scadder is revealing. We are told that 'two grey eyes lurked deep within this agent's head, but one of them had no sight of it' (XXI, 353). The one-eyed Scadder becomes a metaphor for the limited range of vision Dickens found in North Americans in the same way as Joyce's "Cyclops" in *Ulysses* was later to be used to criticise the author's fellow Irishmen. Scadder's linguistic usage is no less representative of the idiosyncrasies of American speech patterns. Thus we read: 'You air a tongue-y person, Gen'ral' (XXI, 354); 'They rile up rough, along of my objecting to their selling Eden off too cheap (XXI, 354); 'Well! It ain't all built' (XXI, 355).

The three phrases quoted above give a fair representation of some of the linguistic quirks used by Scadder and many of his fellow countrymen. Non-standard pronunciation in 'air' for 'are' and 'toe' for 'to', lexical differences with the Americanism 'tongue-y' for standard 'talkative' and non-standard morpho-syntactical items such as 'along of' for 'along with', and 't'aint' as a contraction of 'it ain't', the substandard form of 'it isn't', common in many other non-standard varieties of the language on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as in other former colonies such as Australia and New Zealand. The bombastic speech style, accompanied by unusual stress indications can be found in his longest speech:

'P'raps,' pursued the agent, 'them an't plants of Eden's raising. No! P'raps that desk and stool ain't made from Eden lumber. No! P'raps no end of squatters ain't gone out there. No! P'raps there ain't no such location in the territory of the Great U-nited States. Oh, no!' (XXI, 356).

Finally, Scadder gives us a few examples of protraction as do many of the American characters: 'You speak a-larming well in public...but had con-cluded to reserve 'em for Aristocrats of Natur'(XXI, 354). The combination of all these non-standard linguistic features accompanied by the repetitive rhetorical speech patterns combine to help create Dickens's figure of the unsympathetic American.

5. Mr. Pecksniff's speech

The name of this arch-hypocrite *Pecksniff* has spawned at least the following forms: Pecksniffery, Pecksniffian, Pecksniffism, Pecksniffianly, and Pecksniffingly.

If the American episodes constitute one of the high-points of the novel, no less memorable is the characterisation of two of the main protagonists of the work, Mr. Pecksniff and Mrs Gamp. The former uses an idiolect based on a clever manipulation of Standard English, while the latter speaks in a marvellously idiosyncratic adaptation of the social and regional dialect of the East End of London known as Cockney. Although Mr.

Pecksniff's speech is ostensibly Standard English, it is so personal that no study of speech in the novel would be complete without some reference to it. Pecksniff's kaleidoscopic idiolect is rooted, dialectally, in his own singular version of the standard genteel register.

Dickens intended that Pecksniff should be the central focus of the work right from the beginning. Dickens's biographer, John Forster, tells us that

the notion of taking Pecksniff for a type of character was really the origin of the book; the design being to show, more or less by every person introduced, and the number and variety of humours and vices that have their root in selfishness (Tillotson, 1983: 160).

It is also true that Pecksniff was originally drawn from a person of real life. Dickens, in a letter to Forster, wrote that it was to him 'one of the most surprising processes of the mind in this sort of invention. Given what one knows, what one does not know springs up; and I am as absolutely certain of its being true, as I am of the law of gravitation - if such a thing be possible, more so' (House, 1974: 441).

It is through his speech that Pecksniff's character is best presented to the reader. The moral platitudes he so consistently utters are as full of oratory rhetoric as they are empty of any real meaning. His speech is a perfect example of how a signifier can exist without possessing any signified behind it, a case of reference for the sake of reference. Dickens makes the reader aware of this fact right at the beginning of the novel, immediately after Pecksniff's first intervention:

Mr. Pecksniff was in the frequent habit of using any word that occurred to him as having a good sound, and rounding a sentence well, without much care for its meaning. And he did this so boldly, and in such an imposing manner, that he would sometimes stagger the wisest people with his eloquence, and make them gasp again.

His enemies asserted, by the way, that a strong trustfulness in sounds and forms, was the master-key to Mr. Pecksniff's character (II, 15).

In these two paragraphs Dickens states clearly that the only way to understand the character is through the discourse by means of which he expresses himself; just as that discourse is well-rounded but empty of any real meaning, so is his character a meaningless void, pure form with no meaningful content:

Mr. Pecksniff delivered such moral reflections and consolation as might have converted a Heathen, especially if he had had but an imperfect acquaintance with the English tongue (XIX, 319-320).

His rhetoric is often reinforced by extra-linguistic markers; colons, semicolons, hyphens, italics and, most especially, capital letters, widely dispersed throughout his substantives. These are effective because they stress the idea that his speech is more akin to written discourse, and hence false and over-elaborate on a spoken level. Examples of hyphens are: 'ye-es' (II, 15); 've-ry weel': (III, 33); 'Still a-bed' (VIII, 123); 'Chron-ic' (IX, 149).

Italics are recurrent: 'And *you* regret the having harboured unjust thoughts of me! *you* with those grey hairs!' (X, 157); 'You *may* look upon it as done' (X, 161); 'She *has* a lively disposition' (X, 164).

The use of capital letters by Pecksniff is one of the most identifiable extra-linguistic peculiarities:

Salisbury Cathedral from the north. From the south. From the east. From the west. From the south-east. From the nor'-west. A bridge. An alms-house. A jail. A church. A powder-magazine. A wine-cellar. A portico. A summer-house. An ice-house (V, 81).

Again, in chapter X, 168, Pecksniff says: 'Oh Calf, Calf!' cried Mr. Pecksniff mournfully. 'Oh, Baal, Baal!' Pecksniff's speeches are like speeches, revealing highly elaborated rhetorical patterns. The very structure of such discourse can only inspire distrust in the reader. The platitudes he utters portray the logic of selfishness and self-righteousness. His attitude towards the poor, for example, provides a typical case in point:

'For' (he observed), 'if every one were warm and well-fed, we should lose the satisfaction of admiring the fortitude with which certain conditions of men bear cold and hunger. And if we were no better off than anybody else, what would become of our sense of gratitude; which', said Mr. Pecksniff with tears in his eyes, as he shook his fist at a beggar who wanted to get up behind, 'is one of the holiest feelings of our common nature' (VIII, 116).

Another feature of Pecksniff's speech -and hence, by extension, of his character- is its sycophantic nature whenever he talks to a character to whom he believes that he owes deference or to whose favour he wishes to ingratiate himself. Dickens shows this in his exchange with Old Martin in the use of tags such as 'my good sir', 'my noble sir'; and this falseness echoed in his artificial conversation with his daughters in the presence of the eldest Chuzzlewit, with the likes of 'my own darlings' and, from the part of Mercy and Charity, 'dear Pa'.

Such emptiness of content must inevitably lead to a misuse of the language. Apart from his confusion of the word 'sirens' (IV, 59), Pecksniff confuses 'metaphysically' for 'metaphorically' (XVIII, 302) and uses a large number of patronising adjectives such as 'honest' and 'worthy'. George Leslie Brook remarks that some of the above mentioned characteristics 'reflect his character while some of them seem accidental, making him to some extent a figure of fun' (Brook, 1970: 158).

It is important to stress that Dickens continually alerts the reader to the artificiality of Pecksniff's speech. Norman Page states that, when Pecksniff is in a state of inebriation we are told that he speaks 'with imperfect articulation' and there are subsequent reminders of his 'thin and husky voice' and his 'stuttering, but the dialogue itself bears no orthographic or other evidence of his state' (Page, 1998: 27-28).

6. Mrs. Gamp's speech

If Pecksniff, with his meaningless use of Standard English, is one of the main 'figures of fun' within the novel, the other truly unforgettable character is, without doubt, Mrs. Gamp, whose English is anything but Standard.

Mrs. Gamp is one of the best remembered characters ever created by Dickens. Chesterton is one of her enthusiastic admirers and invokes the most distinguished shades in his praise of Dickens's achievement when he created her: 'Mrs. Gamp is, indeed, a sumptuous study, laid on in those rich, oily, almost greasy colours that go to make the English comic characters, that make the very diction of Falstaff fat, and quaking with jolly degradation' (Chesterton, 1992: 147-48). And George Gissing had been no less warm in his commendation:

Among all the names immortalized by Dickens none is more widely familiar than that of Mrs Gamp. It is universally admitted that in Mrs Gamp we have a creation such as can be met with only in the greatest writers; a figure at once universal and typical; a marvel of humorous presentiment; vital in the highest degree attainable by this art of fiction (Gissing, 1974: 100-1).

Mrs. Gamp is said to have had an original in real life. It was while Dickens was already at work on *Martin Chuzzlewit* that he heard, through his rich friend, Angela Burdett-Coutts, of a nurse who took care of her companion Hannah Meredith. The nurse was eccentric in several respects, and things like her yellow nightcap, her fondness for snuff and for spirits were immediately transferred to Mrs. Gamp. No list of Mrs Gamp's prominent characteristics would be complete without mention of her umbrella, since that item of her equipment has caused her entrance into dictionaries of the English language as a common noun (Monod, 1985: 69). The name of Sarah *Gamp* has undergone commonization, so that *gamp* is synonymous with either a disreputable nurse or an umbrella. Although based on Cockney, her speech possesses many individual features, which leads to the conclusion that hers is primarily an idiolect with features of dialect, rather than 'pure' dialect. This character has been described as 'the possessor of what is probably the most individual, certainly the most complex idiolect in the whole of Dickens' (Golding, 1985: 109). Charles Dickens provides a celebrated mark of an idiolect which is unmistakable and unforgettable, yet which could hardly be imagined as existing outside the world of the novel. In this sense, Norman Page points out: 'Dickens has 'found' Mrs. Gamp's speech in its extraordinary individuality and fullness qualities in relation to which it is impossible not to suggest a comparison with Shakespeare' (Page, 1969: 100).

Mrs. Gamp appears in only eight of the novel's fifty-four chapters: XIX, XXV, XXVI, XXIX, XL, XLVI, XLIX and LI. Her speech is phonetically and grammatically unique, though not entirely coherent. In the first place, Mrs. Gamp's English comprises a number of what might be called ordinary peculiarities, by which are meant features common in lower-class English or specifically Cockney forms. Examples of the former category are *chimley* or *chimbley*; mispronunciations (*skelinton*, *agen*, *artewards*, *just*); the omission or

addition of an initial aspirate *h* (*art* -‘heart’-, *andsome* -‘handsome’-, *ouse* -‘house’); the addition of an initial aspirate *h*: ‘It shall be made good to-morrow night,’ said Mrs. Gamp, ‘honorable. I had to go and fetch my things’(XXV, 411). The main Cockney features of Mrs. Gamp are the *v/w* shifts and the substitution of an *ai* sound (as in ‘eye’) for an *oi* sound (as in ‘joy’). Mrs. Gamp says things like *inwallable* (‘invaluable’), *this walley of the shadder, wale of grief, in a wale* (‘valley of the shadow’, ‘vale’), *wexagious* (‘vexatious’). With the *v/w* confusion Charles Dickens seems to have seized on a minor feature of the dialect and, realizing its possibilities for comedy and for character-individuation, made a use of it that goes far beyond what any actual speaker would have been likely to do.

Her rhetoric is very often reinforced by the use of hyphen. Chapter XL provides a handful of examples: a-contradicting, a-turnin’, ex-cuge, a-comin’, a-slippin’, a-jerking, a-taking:

‘There!’ groaned Mrs. Gamp. ‘There she goes! A-crossin’ the little wooden bridge at this minute. She’s a-slippin’ on a bit of orange-peel!’ tightly clutching her umbrella. ‘What a turn it give me!’

...Did you see him a-jerking of her wrist, then?’

He seems to be hasty with her, indeed.’

‘Now he’s a-taking of her down into the close cabin! (XL, 627).

The outstanding novelty of Mrs. Gamp’s speech is the *g* which so often replaces orthographically *s* or *z*, and can also be substituted for *t*, as in *parapidge*: ‘I’m glad to see a parapidge, in case of fire (XXV, 411); and *brickbidge*: ‘harder than a brickbidge’ (XXV, 411), or can simply intrude, as in *deniged* (denied). The origins of the substituted *g* are obscure, though Mistress Quickly -whose speech bears other resemblances to that of Mrs. Gamp- has *pulsidge* for *pulses* (see *II Henry IV*, Act II, scene 4). Dickens may also have intended to suggest the thickened speech of a confirmed alcoholic (Page, 1970: 342).

Maybe, what is most important for our purpose, Mrs. Gamp might be selected as the pre-eminent exponent of the ‘ludicrous misuse of words’ or ‘humorous misapplication of words’ in the rich survey of malapropisms in Dickens’ fiction. When Mrs. Gamp says: ‘If I was led a Martha to the Stakes’(XXVI, 425), meaning a *martyr*, of course, she produces a verbal blunder. When Gamp refers to ‘The torters of the Imposition shouldn’t make me own I did’ (XXIX, 464), instead of *Inquisition*, she replaces one word for another similar in sound but different in meaning. In the expression ‘Where’s the pelisse!’ (XL, 623) replacing *pelisse* for *police*, we are faced with a verbal corruption. In ‘Bless the babe, and save the mother, is my mortar, sir’ (XL, 631), the misapplication of *mortar* for *motto* indicates a new malapropism. And finally, in chapter XLIX, 749, Mrs. Gamp repeats the previous malapropism: ‘To wotever place I goes, I sticks to this one mortar’. In the same chapter, Mrs. Gamp commits a new malapropism by replacing the word ‘aperiently’ for ‘apparently’: ‘Do you know who you’re talking to, ma’am?’ inquired her visitor. ‘Aperiently,’ said Mrs. Gamp, surveying her with scorn from head to foot, ‘to Betsey. Aperiently so’ (XLIX, 757).

From this short survey of malapropisms in Mrs. Gamp, we are conscious that “it is in

the paradigms of ‘illiterate’ versus ‘literate’ speech that Gamp’s usage is to be placed” (Mugglestone, 1995: 219). Dickens intends to convey a deeply significant artistic purpose behind the apparent humorous effect. Consequently, the malapropisms add a new relevant element to our understanding of Mrs. Gamp, and to our comprehension of the novel as a whole.

7. Conclusion

The American English scattered through the dialogues of *Martin Chuzzlewit* reveals the variety and richness of idiolects or ‘private languages’ devised by Charles Dickens. The many texts analysed show clearly that Charles Dickens makes fun of the special languages or private languages which deviate from British English in a wide range of features such as deviant spellings, unusual morpho-syntactic patterns, standard words used in a different context as well as extra-linguistic capitals and hyphens. The slavish dependence on American varieties of English is a gauge of both amusement and complaint about the sad state of the English spoken by the citizens of the United States of America. Colonel Diver, Scadder, Mr. Pecksniff and Mrs. Gamp reflect the continuity between Dickens’s fictional world and the real world. Dickens tries to convey humorously that British English was superior or, simply, was right, and American English wrong and ridiculous.

Notes

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1. Further references to the text of *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit* will be to the same edition, and given in the form of chapter and page-number in parenthesis.

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