Shapiro, Mary. "Language, Linguistics, and Literary Dialectology." *Wallace's Dialects*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 1–26. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501348501.0005>>.

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Language, Linguistics, and Literary Dialectology

*If words are all we have as world and god, we must treat them with care
and rigor; we must worship.*

—David Foster Wallace, letter to Jonathan Franzen (Quoted in Max¹)

You can't escape language: language is everything and everywhere.

—David Foster Wallace, “Authority and American Usage” (CTL 70)

In the two decades since David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* catapulted him to literary rock star status, his inventive and poetic uses of language have been frequently praised, but little studied from a linguistic point of view. Wallace’s numerous, if fleeting, dialect portraits (always at least implicitly contrasted with the distinct dominant voice of Wallace himself, embodied by various alter ego narrators) illustrate fissures in American society, force readers to acknowledge and face their own prejudices, and challenge readers to empathize with others across these divides. Some of his dialect portrayals have been particularly vilified, even as the voice of the author himself triggered intense reactions (both positive and negative) from readers. Looking at these performances of dialect not just locally (how they function as part of the particular essay, story, or novel) but also as part of a larger project, a semiotic web of voices that occur across Wallace’s work, allows a better understanding of why Wallace might have made particular linguistic choices.

Wallace is held less in awe today than just a few years ago when McGurl² referred to him ironically as “a leading candidate for contemporary canonization” (in both the religious and the literary senses). Increased awareness of his admitted obsessive stalking and abuse of poet Mary Karr has triggered some deserved revulsion, and Wallace is sometimes dismissed

¹ D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Viking, 2012), 166.

² Mark McGurl, “The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program,” *boundary 2* 41, no. 3 (2014): 27–54, esp. 33. DOI 10.1215/01903659-2812061.

as “a symbol of lit-bro culture.”³ A recent satirical *New Yorker* piece on “How to Read *Infinite Jest*”⁴ mostly mocks readers’ pride in (falsely) claiming to read the challenging tome, and an online magazine article deemed those who love it “insufferable.”⁵ In an *L.A. Review of Books* interview,⁶ Wallace scholar Clare Hayes-Brady characterizes much of the criticism of Wallace during his lifetime and shortly after his death as “hagiographic,” and calls the “inevitable critical backlash” healthy; nonetheless, she argues that he was an author of immense talent and complexity and that there is room for much more critical examination of his work. This is especially true with respect to Wallace’s distinctive and even radical uses of language, which have occasionally been misunderstood, and may have caused some of the “backlash” to go further than it should. Although largely apolitical, this monograph considers how Wallace’s use of dialects relates to some of the more political readings of his work, such as Joffe,⁷ who argues that Wallace “worked hard to present himself as the compassionate, egalitarian, and progressive writer, all while reinstating the centrality of his white masculinity” (25). It is possible, I hope, to question Wallace’s politics while still admiring his brilliance with language and the scope of his literary ambitions.

An in-depth look at Wallace’s dialect representations contributes to an understanding of Wallace’s worldview—not just who is allowed to speak for themselves but also whose speech is represented as nonstandard, and whose is presented without noticeable dialect features (sometimes despite descriptions of the speech by the narrator or by other characters that indicate otherwise). For those characters whose nonstandard dialect is directly encoded, a look at which specific features Wallace incorporated into those representations allows fresh consideration of how he differentiated the speech of individual characters, showing not just personality differences but a more realistic presentation of how language functions in daily life, expressing multiple aspects of speakers’ identities and also their perceptions of the situations in

³ Steve Paulson, “Wallace in the #MeToo Era: A Conversation with Clare Hayes-Brady,” *Los Angeles Review of Books* (September 10, 2018). <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/david-foster-wallace-in-the-metoo-era-a-conversation-with-clare-hayes-brady/>.

⁴ Clare Friedman, “How to Read *Infinite Jest*,” *The New Yorker Magazine*. Print edition November 5, 2018. Online October 29, 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/11/05/how-to-read-infinite-jest>

⁵ Jason Rhode, “Why Insufferable People Love *Infinite Jest*,” *Paste Magazine.com* (June 29, 2018). <https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2018/06/why-insufferable-people-love-infinite-jest.html>

⁶ Paulson, “Wallace in the #MeToo Era.”

⁷ Daniela Franca Joffe, “*In the Shadows*”: *David Foster Wallace and Multicultural America*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Cape Town, 2017. <http://open.uct.ac.za/handle/11427/26899>.

Figure 1 Taxonomy of Dialects in Wallace's Work.

which the speech is produced. Wallace's work, both nonfiction and fiction, provides an interesting "folk dialectology," reflecting and often subverting Americans' beliefs about different language varieties and the speakers who use them.

A catalog of Wallace's dialect depictions reveals a splintering, recursive fractal image of different varieties of the English language with large gaps at each level, like the Sierpinski gasket which Wallace said inspired the structure of *Jest*.⁸ Following this introduction, which explores Wallace's knowledge of linguistics as well as how dialect representations have generally been used in literature, the monograph will follow the structure of Figure 1, showing the pressure felt at every level of social categorization to move from the left side of the diagram toward the rewards enjoyed by the people on the right side.

Chapter 2 considers foreign characters in Wallace's work. The choice to include only a few foreign characters may be motivated by his frequently expressed intent to explore what it means to be American: Showing some examples of what is "not-American" helps to home in on what is, but it is not necessary to show every possible alternative. Although his work is often referred to as "encyclopedic," Wallace's strategy for illustrating social categories is reductive, focusing readers' attention and providing an implicit social critique. Chapter 3 examines Wallace's controversial depictions of African American dialects, showing the continued segregation of people who cannot assimilate into a "melting pot" of default whiteness. Again, there are noticeable gaps in Wallace's work, with very few Latinx characters,

⁸ David Hering, "Infinite Jest: Triangles, Cycles, Choices, & Chases," in *Consider David Foster Wallace*, ed. David Hering (Los Angeles and Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), 89–100, esp. 89.

very few Asians, and no hybrid, blended identities. Chapter 4 investigates the pressure on European immigrants to assimilate, focusing in particular on the Irish American Pemulis family in *Jest* and the Jewish Americans in "Solomon Silverfish" and "Say Never." Although the predominate whiteness of Wallace's work is construed as a default absence of ethnicity, working-class characters often have regional dialects, as explored in general in Chapter 5. As with national and ethnic identities, Wallace is reductive, manipulating only a few possible regional identities. His Southern characters, Midwestern characters, and Eastern (Bostonian) characters are discussed in Chapters 6 through 8, respectively. Chapter 8 also demonstrates that although regionality is a function of the working class in Wallace's worldview, there is a chance for upward mobility for those who can excel as jocks or nerds. At each level (nationality, ethnicity, regionality), Wallace distinguishes "not-me" from "me," instantiating the distinctions in language used by different characters. All the "not-me" voices are implicitly contrasted with the voice of the "Dave Wallace" narrative persona that emerges across Wallace's works (often fictionalized in sound-alike focalizing characters); Chapter 9 outlines how that voice facilitates an ongoing relationship with readers, focusing particularly on positive politeness and conversational strategies. Despite all the social divisions Wallace encoded, the final chapter argues that he viewed language as something fundamentally human that could bring everyone together.

Wallace continually drew readers' attention to language, not merely as an illustration of what Hayes-Brady⁹ identifies as his central concern, "human connection and the establishment of the self among selves," but as a fundamental component of that concern: it is through language that we establish identity and connect with others. Derdeyn¹⁰ notes that Wallace used "experimental elimination" to "reveal the self among selves," focusing on peeling away different "relational identities." Dialect differences are an important way that he illustrated this.

Wallace's work is widely acknowledged to be preoccupied with the act of communication, as reflected in the number of characters who lose their voice, who speak words others have crafted for them, who think about and speak about and judge each other's ways of speaking, who speak but are not heard, and so on. He frequently drew attention to the inherent

⁹ Clare Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 93.

¹⁰ LeeAnn Derdeyn, "Love the Jackalope: Historicity, Relational Identity, and Naming in David Foster Wallace's 'Lyndon,'" *College Literature* 45, no. 4 (Fall 2018): 747–72, esp. 769.

difficulty of communication as well as its value, the human need to be heard and understood, the importance of sincere communication in establishing meaningful connections with other human beings. Critics such as Olsen,¹¹ Boswell,¹² and Hayes-Brady¹³ have amply examined Wallace's investigation of Wittgenstein's ideas throughout his work, and Wallace himself discussed Wittgenstein at some length both in his review of Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and in "Authority and American Usage" (A&AU). Critics have also productively applied Bakhtin's ideas of monologism and dialogism in Wallace's work (e.g., Nichols¹⁴ and Kelly¹⁵), but have seldom considered the actual linguistic variables manipulated.

At stake in a sociolinguistic reading of Wallace's work is not just questions of authenticity (whether he adequately captured different dialects, and whether he had any right to try to), not just additional fodder in disciplinary debates about the value of linguistic criticism or stylistics, but an opportunity to understand an important dimension of Wallace's work that has been heretofore little considered. As Mair¹⁶ remarks, "In a discipline where the greater part of effort and ingenuity have gone into developing ways of speaking about writers' personal stylistic idiosyncrasies, it is difficult to account for effects which are achieved by imitating the speech of others."

Wallace's dialect representations are more symbolic and playful than mimetic, perhaps partly because he was aware of his own limitations and lack of access to various dialects, but also undoubtedly because he was more interested in making statements *about* language—and the social realities it reflects—than he was in linguistic analysis of dialects *per se*. It's perhaps ironic, therefore, that this monograph insists on conducting such analysis—but given how many contradictory statements have been made about his dialect representations, it seemed like a useful exercise to sort these out.

Much has been written about Wallace's observation that his first novel, *The Broom of the System*, was "a coded autobio that's also a funny little poststructural gag" about his "fear that he was nothing but a linguistic

¹¹ Lance Olsen, "Termite Art, or Wallace's Wittgenstein," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (1993): 199.

¹² Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003).

¹³ Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*.

¹⁴ Catherine Nichols, "Dialogizing Postmodern Carnival: David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 43, no. 1 (2001): 3–16.

¹⁵ Adam Kelly, "Development Through Dialogue: David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas," *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 3 (2012): 267–83.

¹⁶ Christian Mair, "Literary Sociolinguistics: A Methodological Framework for Research on the Use of Nonstandard Language in Fiction," *Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 17, no. 1 (1992): 103–23, esp. 107. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43023593>.

construct,”¹⁷ but perhaps the most important take-away from this is Wallace’s awareness that whatever else we might be, we are most certainly *also* linguistic constructs—that identity is performative, and specifically created and re-enacted through language use. Wolfram and Schilling-Estes¹⁸ begin their survey of US dialects by emphasizing that people “make judgments about regional background, social status, ethnicity, and a host of other social and personal traits based simply on the kind of language people are using.” They deem these judgments “inevitable,” and note that language differences may be “the single most reliable indicator of social position in our society.”

Perhaps to nonlinguists the minutiae of linguistic description is, as *Pale King* narrator “Dave Wallace” says of tax policy and administration, “massively, spectacularly dull” (83). But the point the narrator makes in that book is that devoting close attention to such minutiae has an unexpected payoff—that one can push through the boredom to discover a whole world of hidden significance.¹⁹ Language is not just a tool for communication to be taken for granted, it is the primary way people express identities and navigate social interactions, and therefore deserves close attention. As folk-linguistic terminology is often inadequate²⁰ for precise descriptions of language, and the technical terminology is unfamiliar and off-putting to those primarily interested in the study of literature, I have attempted to achieve a compromise that may please nobody, but should make this monograph accessible to all.

Although it is necessary to consider each work in its own context, and the reasons internal to that work why Wallace may have chosen to represent various dialects, it is also instructive to look across Wallace’s work, to reveal the points he kept trying to make about language and society, how the latter is reflected in the former, with linguistic fault lines continuing to divide us. Wallace acknowledged, toyed with, and ultimately subverted the linguistic prejudices that many readers surely feel, while also encouraging

¹⁷ Larry McCaffery, “An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 21–52, esp. 41.

¹⁸ Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling-Estes, *American English*, 2nd edn. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 1.

¹⁹ Ralph Clare, “The Politics of Boredom and the Boredom of Politics in David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*,” *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 4 (2012): 428–46; Brian Douglas Jansen, ““On the Porousness of Certain Borders”: Attending to Objects in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*,” *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 40, no. 4 (2014): 55–77; and Arthur Cockfield, “David Foster Wallace on Tax Policy, How to Be an Adult, and Other Mysteries of the Universe,” *Pittsburgh Tax Review* 12 (2015): 89–109.

²⁰ William Labov, *Sociolinguistic Patterns* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 248.

a love of language in a larger sense as liberatory. Many different theoretical frameworks have been applied to Wallace's works: In addition to structural approaches and the applications of various philosophies, scholars have also productively incorporated a biomedical approach,²¹ Marxist criticism,²² disability studies,²³ and embodiment more generally²⁴—this sociolinguistic approach is intended to supplement, not supplant, these.

In reading *across* Wallace's work, I am going against his view that "each piece of art's its own unique object, and its evaluation's always present-tense."²⁵ This monograph does not offer a full interpretation of any particular work of Wallace's; rather, I attempt to show that his work as a whole reflects certain attitudes about both language and society that can inform any reading of any individual piece. Hudson²⁶ has pointed out that many scholars have over-relied on Wallace's statements about his own work in a variety of personal interviews and essays, shaping the field of Wallace Studies in the way that he wanted. Although Wallace frequently discussed language and linguistics, he never commented explicitly (that I can find) on any of the dialect portrayals he created.

Wallace as Authority on Language

Wallace took pleasure in the nuts-and-bolts of language, not just thinking about language on a philosophical level but also paying close attention to the specifics of lexicon, morphology, syntax, phonetics, phonology, semantics, and pragmatics. I have described elsewhere²⁷ his ability to manipulate linguistic variables simultaneously on multiple levels of language within a single phrase in order to achieve a particular effect, and I offer a few more examples of this mastery in passing in this book. It is unclear to what extent he was playing with certain

²¹ Elizabeth Freudenthal, "Anti-Interiority: Compulsiveness, Objectification, and Identity in *Infinite Jest*," *New Literary History* 41, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 191–211.

²² Stephen Shapiro, "From Capitalist to Communist Abstraction: *The Pale King's* Cultural Fix," *Textual Practice* 28, no. 7 (2014): 1249–71.

²³ Emily Russell, "Some Assembly Required: The Embodied Politics of *Infinite Jest*," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 66, no. 3 (2010): 147–69.

²⁴ Peter Sloane, "The Divided Selves of David Foster Wallace," *Tropos* 1, no. 1 (2014): 67–73.

²⁵ McCaffery, "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace," 28.

²⁶ Cory M. Hudson, "David Foster Wallace Is Not Your Friend: The Fraudulence of Empathy in David Foster Wallace Studies and 'Good Old Neon,'" *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 59, no. 3 (2018): 295–306.

²⁷ Mary Shapiro, "The Poetic Language of David Foster Wallace," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 60, no. 1 (2019): 24–33. DOI: 10.1080/00111619.2018.1441121.

variables consciously and to what extent he just had a good ear, recognizing when a particular construction “worked.” *Broom* Editor Gerald Howard²⁸ recognized Wallace’s “virtuoso deployment of linguistic facility and narrative velocity,” and Fadiman²⁹ said “Wallace doesn’t bend grammar, but he bends English.” In the foreword to the twentieth-anniversary edition of *Infinite Jest*, Bissell³⁰ calls it “a genuinely groundbreaking novel of language,” rhapsodizing about its “exuberant” use of register, “fearless” neologizing, as well as its inventiveness with sentences. I am clearly not the only reader who persisted through seemingly endless paragraphs, knowing I would soon be rewarded with a striking and memorable phrase, something worth reading aloud and quoting to others.

“Obsessed with grammar”³¹ and a “hard core syntax wienie,”³² Wallace kept physical notebooks as well as a computer file of words he wanted to work into his writing, often making note of particular pronunciations. He deliberately crafted sentences that were (in his words) “a real bitch to read,”³³ punned relentlessly, and commented on his own uses of language in footnotes. However much delight he took in his linguistic virtuosity, it was never just a game or a joke to him, never just showing off, but rather an essential part of sincere communication, the only vehicle for minds to meaningfully connect with other minds. Individually, Wallace’s characters provide interesting fodder for sociolinguistic analysis, sometimes illustrating and occasionally belying his famous “good ear,” but together they form a chorus of voices that reveals not just how language functions in US society but also how the very society itself is constructed and maintained.

Wallace’s extraordinary prowess with language—as well as his obvious delight in it—makes his views of language (embodied both in direct pronouncements and in the ways his characters use language) feel weightier and more authoritative. This is, after all, someone who served on *American Heritage Dictionary*’s panel of language authorities and who spent over sixty pages ostensibly reviewing Bryan Garner’s *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* (1998)³⁴ but actually summarizing and commenting extensively on prominent debates within the field of linguistics.

²⁸ Gerald Howard, “Afterword,” in *The David Foster Wallace Reader*, ed. Bonnie Nadell et al. (New York: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Company, 2015), 63–4, esp. 63.

²⁹ Ann Fadiman, “Afterword,” in *The David Foster Wallace Reader*, ed. Bonnie Nadell et al. (New York: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Company, 2015), 759–62, esp. 760.

³⁰ Tom Bissell, “Foreword” to 20th anniversary edition of *Infinite Jest* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 2016), xi–xv, esp. xii.

³¹ Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 166.

³² Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 34.

³³ McCaffery, “An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace,” 25.

³⁴ Bryan A. Garner, *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

As an undergraduate, Wallace wrote two honors theses: the first, for his English major, was published not long thereafter as *The Broom of the System*. The other, for his philosophy major, since published as *Fate, Time, and Language* (2011), is a sophisticated take on the semantics of physical modality. *Jest's* Hal Incandenza includes a similar paper in his college application, along with "Neoclassical Assumptions in Contemporary Prescriptive Grammar" (7), and casually deploys linguistic terminology that is not readily available to most people, such as "glottal stop" (907). Hal's mother Avril, one of the "Militant Grammarians of Massachusetts" (987), has "Dowty, Wall and Peters's seminal *Introduction to Montague Semantics*" open on her desk in one scene (760). *The Union of Theoretical Grammarians in Cambridge*, a film by James O. Incandenza (*Jest* 987, endnote 24), features MIT language riots inspired by a debate between Avril and Steven Pinker over "the political implications of prescriptive grammar," although an early handwritten draft has the debate between Noam Chomsky and Barbara Partee, about "the reduceability of universal syntax to formal first-order logic" (HRC Wallace Papers, container 15.5). Wallace seems to have had particular animus toward Pinker, whose ideas about descriptivism he argues with in A&AU, although he did apparently ask his students to read Pinker's "Grammar Puss" (1994) (HRC Wallace Papers, Teaching Materials, container 32.7). Readers familiar with the real linguists, texts, terms, and philosophical debates in the discipline will be impressed by Wallace's awareness of these; readers to whom these are opaque will perhaps be even more so, although they may also identify with Joelle van Dyne, who (when Hal talks about "something called Haplology") has the desire "to slap the sleek little show-offy kid upside the head" (745).

Wallace was the son of a philosophy professor father and an English professor mother, whose grammar textbook, *Practically Painless English* (1980),³⁵ he frequently assigned to his own students. The Wallace family term "SNOOT" described "a really extreme usage fanatic" (CTL 69), "someone who knows what *dysphemism* means and doesn't mind letting you know it" (CTL 70), "just about the last remaining kind of truly elitist nerd" (CTL 70). The acronym, he claimed, stood either "'Sprachgefühl Necessitates Our Ongoing Tendence' or 'Syntax Nudniks of Our Time,'" depending on "whether or not you were one" (CTL 69). Wallace explored at length his own prescriptive and descriptive tendencies in this essay, finding fault with both approaches to language when taken to the extreme.

³⁵ Sally Foster Wallace, *Practically Painless English* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989 [1980]).

Wallace's Amherst College course on the history of the English language used the well-known textbook by Baugh and Cable (3rd edition, 1978);³⁶ Wallace still had this in his personal library at the time of his death, annotated and underlined, with the marginal note: "EXAM—know major dialect areas in U.S." His research notebook for A&AU (originally the 2001 *Harper's* article "Tense Present: Democracy, English, and the Wars over Usage")³⁷ shows that he consulted Baugh and Cable again as he was writing that essay (HRC Wallace Papers, container 30.2); it is not clear at which time he wrote a marginal note "snotty" beside Baugh and Cable's description of "*vulgar or illiterate speech*" as "the language of those who are ignorant of or indifferent to the ideals of correctness by which the educated are governed" (313). The phonetics chart in Baugh and Cable is marked up, and Wallace also owned and heavily underlined the first four chapters of Peter Ladefoged's *Elements of Acoustic Phonetics* (1962). Roache³⁸ problematizes the "tendency to take an author's marginalia as spontaneous disclosures of 'pure thought' or unambiguous truth," but it seems safe to assert both that he at one point learned the major dialect regions of the United States (though he might have quickly forgotten the details after the test) and that he had strong feelings about more judgmental characterizations of language.

One could probably write an entire monograph on Wallace's handwritten annotations of Garner's usage manual, as he appears to have used color-coding to distinguish (in red) Garner's judgments and proscriptions for "Standard Written English" (SWE) from information Wallace may have found relevant to his own writing and uses of language (in green). In A&AU Wallace acknowledges his own biases and pet peeves, but also his appreciation for local and individual quirks. Although he admits in this article to occasionally correcting others' speech, and was described by at least one acquaintance as "a smug prescriptivist douche-bag,"³⁹ Wallace would be more aptly characterized as taking a pragmatic (rather than dogmatic) approach to language, as Crystal⁴⁰ defines this: having "an ability to adapt knowledge to meet the needs of differing circumstances and a readiness to judge cases on their merits." Wallace insisted that "many of these non-

³⁶ Albert Croll Baugh, and Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language*, 3rd edn. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1978).

³⁷ "Tense Present: Democracy, English, and the Wars over Usage." *Harper's Magazine* 302, no. 1811 (2001): 39–58.

³⁸ Roache John, "'The Realer, More Enduring and Sentimental Part of Him': David Foster Wallace's Personal Library and Marginalia," *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* 5, no. 1, (2017): 11. doi: 10.16995/orbit.142.

³⁹ Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 165.

⁴⁰ David Crystal, *The Language of Stories* (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 2004), 524.

SWE-type dialects have their own highly developed and internally consistent grammars, and that some of these dialects' usage norms actually make more linguistic/aesthetic sense than do their Standard counterpart" (CTL 98). He did not say that this is the case for *all* dialects, and some usages in any dialect may seem illogical or aesthetically displeasing to any particular observer.

Wallace does not distinguish at this point in A&AU between native dialects and learned registers/styles, such as the stilted and pretentious "Academese," which he later describes as a "verbal cancer" (114), adding, "I regard Academic English not as a dialectal variation but as a grotesque debasement of SWE" (CTL 114). He judges "most US academic prose" as "appalling—pompous, abstruse, claustral, inflated, euphuistic, pleonastic, solecistic, sesquipedalian, Heliogabaline, occluded, obscure, jargon-ridden, empty: resplendently dead" (CTL 81). With Lipsky, Wallace discussed his aversion to "puffed up" language like *utilize* for *use* or *prior* to instead of *before* (which is also the first usage he singled out for criticism in "Twenty-Four Word Notes" (*Both Flesh and Not*): "Why did they just take up one third of a second of my lifetime making me parse *at this time* rather than just say *now*?" (Lipsky audio, Walsh and Bonds, n.d.). Almost as soon as the words were out of his mouth, Wallace recognized the responsibility he had as a writer to pay attention to his own usage, to make every word count. Indeed, the amazing string of fifteen adjectives quoted earlier is not simply intended to overwhelm (showing the extent of Wallace's disdain as well as the underlying justification and therefore justness of it), nor simply to comedically mimic such usages (though the pleonastic use of *Heliogabaline* is certainly also both pompous and obscure). In fact, each adjective makes a slightly different accusation. An excellent discussion of how Wallace parodies "Academese" in various passages of *Infinite Jest* can be found in de Bourcier.⁴¹

Another good dissertation may yet be written on Wallace's vocabulary lists (HRC Wallace Papers, container 32.10), tracing where he encountered the terms, categorizing them (archaic vs. specialized vs. regional vs. borrowed, etc.), whether he used them subsequently in his writing, and if so, how. There are many such lists of varying length, both typed and handwritten, some dated, some not, one specifying "from books," another labeled "grammar vocab—random." Some words on typed lists are circled, or added by hand afterward, some are marked with asterisks, and quite a few have blanks or question marks instead of definitions (including *incruent*, *sipe*, *marcid*,

⁴¹ Simon de Bourcier, "'They All Sound Like David Foster Wallace': Syntax and Narrative in *Infinite Jest*, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, *Oblivion* and *The Pale King*," *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* 5, no. 1 (2017): 1–30, esp. 4–8. <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.207>.

addorse, cataphract, palliard, irrangible, aspectant, grumous, anthroparian, dracular, spalaeen, cimmerian, cuspidine, morling, graymalkin, masbled, pauldron, nemoral, grimoire, androleptic, albified, spattled, cyclocephalic, faltress, banjax, grue, and mononate). Some definitions appear to be Wallace's own—for instance, the meaning of *piscean* is given as “fishish.”

The posthumous collection *Both Flesh and Not* (2012) includes before each essay a two-page selection from the wordlist Wallace kept on his computer, organized alphabetically, without line breaks or punctuation between entries, cleverly displayed running across the width of both pages together (forcing readers to read these sections differently than they do the rest of the book). A publisher's note invokes Wallace's “insatiable love for words and their meanings,” and asserts that his invitation to serve on the Usage Panel of *The American Heritage Dictionary* was “one of the great thrills of Wallace's life” (vii). The collection contains the unabashedly opinionated “Twenty-Four Word Notes” (2004), which starts as mentioned earlier and ends by stating that “no really serious writer should be without” an *Oxford English Dictionary* “close at hand” (280).

As student and reader, Wallace paid close attention to language use. His college essay on *Moby-Dick*, for instance, points out that “this is incredible language, and this fourth paragraph (which, if you look at it closely, is actually one very long sentence) draws me into its flow” (HRC Wallace Papers, container 31.6). As writer and teacher of writing, he encouraged his students to do the same. His syllabus for the “Creative Nonfiction” course he taught in spring 1997 told students that “rather than aspiring to language as a transparent window through which objectively to view the world, writers of creative nonfiction create rather a dirty lens. Works of creative nonfiction usually bear traces of their artificing. The writer wants us to see the language or to see him or herself as its maker.” In the syllabus for his “Extremely Advanced Composition” course in spring 2004, he specified that the goal was not “expressive writing,” but “*communicative* writing” (emphasis in the original), adding that “the reader does not automatically care about you, the writer, nor does she find you fascinating as a person, nor does she feel a deep natural interest in the same things that interest you. The reader, in fact, will feel about you, your subject, and your essay only what your written words themselves induce her to feel” (HRC Wallace Papers, container 32.6).

Wallace had confidence in his ability to mimic others, telling McCaffery,⁴² “I think I have a good ear for speech and speech rhythms.” He wrote to editor Gerald Howard, in a letter dated April 25, 1988, addressing references to

⁴² McCaffery, “An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace,” 39.

“real public persons, places, organizations, businesses” in *Girl with Curious Hair*, that “David Letterman has never to my knowledge said ‘Some fun now, boy’—at various intervals or not. It is, though, weirdly, just the sort of thing he’d say” (HRC Nadell Collection, container 1.8). Note that in the story in question (“My Appearance”), when Edilyn quotes Letterman to her husband, he replies, “Of course he really said that. . . . It’s just the sort of thing he’d say” (GWCH 198). So to assert for legal purposes that Letterman *didn’t* really say what Wallace represented him as saying, Wallace quotes his own fictional character asserting that Letterman *did* really say it.

Wallace bragged to Lipsky,⁴³ “I can sound kind of like anybody.” Indeed, Lipsky describes Wallace as a gifted mimic,⁴⁴ as does his biographer.⁴⁵ Several critics have made similar points to his biographers, including Kelly,⁴⁶ and Cohen,⁴⁷ who praises his “perfect ear.” LeClair⁴⁸ refers *Jest’s* “stylistic tours de force in several dialects.” When Moore⁴⁹ credits Wallace with capturing “the way modern America sounds in all its cacophony better than any of his contemporaries,” he may have been referring specifically to the swirl of background noises that appear in Wallace’s fiction, the TV jingles, the car horns and sirens, the pock-pock of tennis racquets hitting balls—but part of this cacophony is undoubtedly the many different voices that Wallace tries to capture. Wallace was a master of invented onomatopoeia—for instance, this list for the sound a tennis racket makes hitting a ball in the cold: “*cut, king, pons, pock, cop, thwa, thwat*” (*Jest* 674)—which may inspire further confidence in his other linguistic abilities, including his assumed mimicry of dialects.

Wallace’s use of language was often playful and funny, especially in his naming practices, but many of his jokes pointed to deeper truths. LaVache is a funny name even if you’re not aware that “la vache!” is used as a mild oath in French to indicate surprise—much as English speakers once said “holy cow!”—and anyone aware of the literal translation must certainly then evaluate to what degree *Broom’s* LaVache Beadsman is bovine. The full name

⁴³ David Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010), 258.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁴⁵ Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 41.

⁴⁶ Kelly, “Development Through Dialogue.”

⁴⁷ Samuel Cohen, “To Wish to Try to Sing to the Next Generation: *Infinite Jest’s* History,” in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: The University of Iowa Press, 2012), 59–79, esp. 75.

⁴⁸ Tom LeClair, “The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, William Vollman, and David Foster Wallace,” *Critique* 38, no. 1 (Fall 1996): 12–37, esp. 35.

⁴⁹ Stephen Moore, “In Memoriam David Foster Wallace,” *Modernism/Maturity* 16, no. 1 (2009): 1–24, esp. 2.

of the “Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House” is given more than half a dozen times in *Infinite Jest*, with a “[sic]” added to one instance (171) in case readers have missed the redundancy in the repeated “House,” which may trigger reflection on redundancies built into the twelve-step recovery programs in which the residents are obliged to participate. The acronym O.N.A.N. for *Jest*’s global superpower, the Organization of North American Nations, is likewise both amusing and thought-provoking regarding masturbation, selfishness, and waste. Wallace’s treatment of dialects was similar to his naming practices—showing little concern for linguistic accuracy (i.e., realism), but always motivated, working congruently with other elements of the text to convey and underline important ideas.

Dialects versus Dialogue/Dialogism/Dialectics

Many scholars have investigated Wallace’s breathtaking intertextuality, and his embodiment of Bakhtin’s notions of heteroglossia and dialogism. Thompson⁵⁰ considers Wallace “the literary equivalent of a hip-hop sampler,” and Nichols⁵¹ refers to Wallace’s “superdialogized textual landscape . . . a linguistic environment ever teetering on the brink of centrifugal disintegration.” Hering⁵² devotes a chapter of his monograph to illustrating how Wallace parroted and pastiched other authors. Even Wallace’s habit of writing in the margins of books he was reading was dialogic: “Wallace was in conversation—sometimes with the book he was reading and sometimes with an earlier version of himself.”⁵³

Literary scholars have tended to jump immediately to a discussion of what Wallace’s dialect representations are meant to index, rather than analyzing the representations themselves. Kelly⁵⁴ masterfully discusses the role of dialogue and dialectics in Wallace’s fiction (interpreting his works in dialogue with each other, as I do), but not of dialects per se. It does not help scholarly discussion of these concepts that the terms are so often confused in

⁵⁰ Lucas Thompson, *Global Wallace: David Foster Wallace and World Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 234.

⁵¹ Nichols, “Dialogizing Postmodern Carnival,” 6.

⁵² David Hering, *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2017).

⁵³ Molly Schwartzburg, “Observations on the Archive at the Harry Ransom Center,” in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. Sam Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 2012), 241–59, esp. 256.

⁵⁴ Kelly, “Development Through Dialogue.”

popular discourse, or that the precise definition of “dialect” even just within the field of linguistics is notoriously slippery.

There are, of course, many individual idiosyncrasies in the way people speak, and many different styles or registers that any given speaker may deploy in different circumstances, but there are also “variations which are systematic in one group,” which “are generally noticed by members of other groups,”⁵⁵ including ethnic dialects, regional dialects, sociolects, and genderlects, as well as discourse communities (or “communities of practice”) that may cut across demographically defined identity categories. A well-defined shared way of speaking tends to be the result not of “objective” identity characteristics that would be tracked on the census, but of a strong (dense and multiplex) social network.⁵⁶ No matter how strong the dialect that emerges, however, there will be individual variations in any individual’s speech or “idiolect.” Wallace put nonstandard language into the mouths of characters not to evoke negative stereotypes of any particular group, but to confront readers with a particular view of how language functions in US society to reflect and reinforce social divisions, and to demonstrate how characters express their identities both in affiliation with and in resistance to other recognized identities.

Kelly’s⁵⁷ study focuses on three conversations (all of which take place in literally elevated settings): one hilltop conversation between *Broom* siblings LaVache and Lenore Beadsman, a mountaintop dialogue between *Jest*’s Rémy Marathe and Hugh Steeply (which is spread out over hundreds of pages), and the “multi-character debate that takes place in an elevator in §19” of *The Pale King* (TPK). Kelly insightfully notes “the anticipatory anxiety his characters feel in addressing others”;⁵⁸ he does not comment on dialect per se, but it is apparent that LaVache and Lenore sound alike, despite gender and personality differences, that the IRS characters all share a corporate sociolect, but that Marathe and Steeply present a stark linguistic contrast. LaVache and Lenore are siblings, sharing regional dialect, relative youth, and family, so might plausibly sound alike. The IRS agents come from different backgrounds but have effectively subsumed their identities to a larger group identity, erasing regional, racial, gender, and other projections of identity. (They also receive new social security numbers, all with the same starting number, symbolizing their assimilation.) Marathe and Steeply are embodiments of different

⁵⁵ Sumner Ives, “A Theory of Literary Dialect,” *Tulane Studies in English* 2 (1950): 137–82, esp. 142.

⁵⁶ James Milroy and Lesley Milroy, “Linguistic Change, Social Network and Speaker Innovation,” *Journal of Linguistics* 21, no. 2 (1985): 339–84.

⁵⁷ Kelly, “Development Through Dialogue.”

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 270–1.

groups which represent different histories and philosophies. Their linguistic differences are key to never letting the reader forget this.

Literary Dialectology

One of the first things you have to beat out of grad students is the habit of always using correct usage + grammar, even in pieces whose characters are not sophisticated. They seem oblivious of the fact that the way someone communicates says more about them than almost anything else.

(HRC Wallace Papers, Teaching Materials, container 30.2)

Writing down something that somebody says out loud is not a matter of transcribing. Because written stuff said out loud on the page doesn't look said out loud. It just looks crazy.

(Wallace, quoted in Lipsky⁵⁹)

Readers are so accustomed to the routine sanitization of dialogue on the page that a more realistic rendering—encoding not just dialect differences but all the disfluencies of normal conversation—would be painful to read and would make characters seem incoherent, unintelligent, perhaps even unintelligible. Even linguists and dialectologists who want to capture all the nuances of real, spontaneous speech for academic purposes argue about what degree of fidelity of transcription is required.⁶⁰ Readers are “inherently resistant to the representation of dialect on the page,”⁶¹ partly because of linguistic prejudice against nonstandard dialects in general or the ones represented in particular but also because of the extra work involved in decoding these. Oster⁶² argues that in literary representations of dialect, “a foreignness that calls attention to itself by means of language” may be “an inviting insider experience” when “the ‘foreignness’ is one in which we already feel at home, or at least recognize a familiar friend or guest,” but notes also the danger that readers “can feel shut out of it, or put off by what is foreign, either *because* it is foreign or simply because it is difficult to understand.” Cole⁶³

⁵⁹ Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*, 164.

⁶⁰ Ronald K. S. Macauley, “Coz It Izny Spelt When They Say It’: Displaying Dialect in Writing,” *American Speech* 66, no. 3 (1991): 280–91.

⁶¹ Jane Hodson, *Dialect in Film and Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 107.

⁶² Judith Oster, *Crossing Cultures: Creating Identity in Chinese and Jewish American Literature* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 93.

⁶³ Roger W. Cole, “Literary Representation of Dialect: A Theoretical Approach to the Artistic Problem,” *The USF Language Quarterly* 14, nos. 3–4 (1986): 3–8, esp. 6.

refers to respellings of speech as “code noise” and argues that authors would not include this without “an overriding purpose.” Authors may initially use some “code noise” to identify a character and trigger desired associations, shifting to more standard representation once these have been established, to lessen the demands on the reader.⁶⁴ Wallace never employed such a shifting strategy for the reader’s sake—he believed in making the reader “do her share of the linguistic work.”⁶⁵ There are a couple of instances (particularly with African American characters) where Wallace characters code-shift for their own reasons, but those shifts are away from the supposed standard to a more marked variety.

Hodson’s⁶⁶ survey establishes that authors less frequently represent “nonstandard grammar” (i.e., syntax and morphology) than incorporate lexical items and nonstandard pronunciations, including an increased use of what Preston⁶⁷ calls “allegro speech,” the “running together” of casual (but otherwise standard) speech, as in “waddaya want? What can I getcha?” Wallace, however, did just the reverse, avoiding “easy” representations in favor of more interesting ones, carefully selecting particular combinations of features, as can be seen in a preemptive note he wrote warning the copyeditor of *Infinite Jest* about “non-standard syntax in sections concerning the characters Minty, Marathe, Antittoi, Krause, Pemulis, Steeply, Lenz, Orin Incandenza, Mario Incandenza, Fortier, Foltz, J. O. Incandenza Sr., Schtitt, Gompert” (HRC Wallace Papers, container 20.5). Interestingly, this list omits several of the more radical dialect representations in that work, perhaps because it would have been more obvious to the copyeditor that Wallace was intentionally introducing nonstandard features into these.

Early dialect representations in American literature were frequently included for comedic effect, to signal ignorance or immorality,⁶⁸ and only very occasionally as “a powerful tool to counterhegemonic subversion.”⁶⁹ A “local color movement” after the Civil War saw the increasing use of dialects for realism rather than humor, including (among others) prominent use by

⁶⁴ Hodson, *Dialect in Film and Literature*, 172.

⁶⁵ McCaffery, “An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace,” 34.

⁶⁶ Hodson, *Dialect in Film and Literature*.

⁶⁷ Dennis R. Preston, “The Li’l Abner Syndrome: Written Representations of Speech,” *American Speech* 60, no. 4 (1985): 328–36, esp. 328.

⁶⁸ Lisa Cohen Minnick, *Dialect and Dichotomy: Literary Representations of African American Speech* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 3.

⁶⁹ Gavin Jones, *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 133.

Twain, Stowe, Cable, Chopin, and Crane.⁷⁰ Skaggs⁷¹ suggests that “careful control of . . . condescension” is a hallmark of the use of “local color” dialect representations, that “although the plain folk are presented as culturally inferior to the recorders, the stories display the many virtues of such commoners,” allowing the reader to feel “doubly smug: he can condescend to the plain folk speaking in dialect while he still respects them, thus avoiding the moral pitfall of snobbery.”

Linguists have mostly been concerned with these representations as historical data, focusing on the accuracy of the linguistic variation shown (often parsing the respellings used by authors to illustrate actual pronunciations), whereas literary theorists have largely remained focused on the purposes of such encoding of dialect in a given work. Mair⁷² points out that “there is an awareness that what is encountered in a work of fiction is not a faithful transcription but an artefact,” agreeing with Ives,⁷³ who notes that “each author has made his own decision as to how many of the peculiarities in his character’s speech he can profitably represent.” More interesting are “questions about linguistic distance between authors, characters, and readers,”⁷⁴ and how dialect representations may serve as “a critique of existing attitudes towards language.”⁷⁵ Esau, Bagnall, and Ware⁷⁶ argue that variation in characters’ speech “reflects the social stratification of the speech community, is used as a tool to establish social dominance, camouflages complicated patterns of overt and covert prestige, and indicates that opposing value systems may be linked to social class membership.” And of course, authors may be motivated to represent dialects “by sheer playfulness.”⁷⁷ Wallace biographer Max⁷⁸ recounts that on a road trip to Tucson with his friend Gale Walden, Wallace expressed the desire “to write a variation on William Gass’s novel *Omensetter’s Luck*.⁷⁹ The laconic hillbilly voice of the story appealed to him. As a ‘weird kind of forger,’ imitating it would be a fun challenge.” The dialect Wallace eventually fashioned for “John

⁷⁰ Minnick, *Dialect and Dichotomy*, 8.

⁷¹ Merrill Maguire Skaggs, *The Folk of Southern Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1972), 211–2.

⁷² Mair, “Literary Sociolinguistics,” 104.

⁷³ Sumner Ives, “A Theory of Literary Dialect,” *Tulane Studies in English* 2 (1950): 137–82, esp. 138.

⁷⁴ Minnick, *Dialect and Dichotomy*, 11.

⁷⁵ Mair, “Literary Sociolinguistics,” 122.

⁷⁶ Helmut Esau, Norma Bagnall, and Cheryl Ware, “Faulkner, Literary Criticism, and Linguistics,” *Language and Literature* 7, nos. 1–3 (1982): 7–62, esp. 12–13.

⁷⁷ Mair, “Literary Sociolinguistics,” 118.

⁷⁸ Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 74.

⁷⁹ William Gass, *Omensetter’s Luck* (New York: Penguin, 1966).

Billy” actually bears little resemblance to the one used in Gass’s book, as I argue in Chapter 6, but Wallace certainly seemed to enjoy playing with it.

When authors depict dialects other than their own, they risk misrepresenting them. Mair⁸⁰ argues that “an incomplete, distorted or otherwise incompetent transcription of nonstandard features in a literary work need not be an artistic flaw necessarily.” Misrepresentation may result from relying on incorrect but widespread ideas about dialects, the general lack of education about these in schools (other than the imposition of the supposed “standard”), and the inaccessibility of much linguistic research. To complicate this further, a single linguistic variable may simultaneously index a variety of identities. The so-called r-lessness (the deletion of /r/ after vowels) can be found in dialects of African American English (AAE) (which despite popular stereotype do vary from region to region), Southern dialects, and various East Coast dialects. Likewise, multiple negation within a single clause is quite common in working-class regional dialects throughout the United States, regardless of ethnic identity. For obvious historical reasons, AAE in any region shares many features with white Southern dialects. The lack of isomorphism between language and subculture means that use of any dialect feature without overt description of the character (or commentary from other characters or narrators) may lead to confusion or misunderstanding of who the character is supposed to be. As Preston⁸¹ summarized decades of matched-guise sociolinguistic perception experiments, “The path from stimulus to group identification to the triggering of attitudes towards the group so identified was not a trouble-free one,” even with all the phonological cues of spoken language. Both *ain’t* and multiple negation have been shown to trigger negative attitudes even when judges aren’t sure of a speaker’s regional or ethnic identity. Most readers are no more consciously aware than authors of how linguistic variables pattern along social lines. Niedzielski and Preston’s extensive study of folk linguistics found that most Americans reduce questions of language use to *You ain’t from around here, are you?* and *He don’t talk so good, does he?*⁸²

To force recognition of the intended identity, an unskilled author may paint with too broad a brush, resulting in caricature—which, if recognized as such, would be found offensive. Ives⁸³ shows that “the literary dialect is

⁸⁰ Mair, “Literary Sociolinguistics,” 106.

⁸¹ Dennis R. Preston, “Language with an Attitude,” in *The Handbook of Language Variation and Change*, ed. J. K. Chambers, Peter Trudgill, and Natalie Schilling-Estes (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 40–66, esp. 52.

⁸² Nancy A. Niedzielski, and Dennis R. Preston, *Folk Linguistics* (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2000), 306.

⁸³ Ives, “A Theory of Literary Dialect,” 146.

likely to be more regular in its variants"; for instance, having a character "use initial [d] in every word in which an educated character would use initial [ð]" ("th" as in "they"), although "it is by no means certain that the man in real life would do so." Folk perception of dialects is usually categorical: people believe that "speakers of certain 'types' either use or do not use certain stereotypical variants,"⁸⁴ although the difference is usually a relatively small but statistically significant quantitative difference. Linguistic stereotypes are subject to confirmation bias:⁸⁵ listeners will notice only the usages that confirm their stereotype. Wallace may have consciously avoided the trap of being overly consistent in his dialect representations—but he may have just been occasionally sloppy with them.

Authors who have the linguistic skill to realistically depict a dialect other than their own may nonetheless be accused of cultural appropriation, although this was less of a concern in Wallace's lifetime. *The Corpus of Contemporary American English*⁸⁶ shows a spike in usage of this term in 2015; Google Scholar returns almost ten thousand "hits" for that phrase since then (likely many more by the time this monograph is printed), but only about a thousand total prior to 1996 (when *Jest* was published). Wallace was nonetheless possibly familiar with what Bourdieu⁸⁷ discussed as "strategies of condescension," when someone with prestige and authority appropriates a subordinated language in order to make a point. Nor is it necessarily a safer choice for authors who are native speakers of a nonstandard variety to write in their own vernacular, as it may then be perceived that their intended audience is restricted to those whose dialect is represented, producing what Graham Shorrocks⁸⁸ calls "dialect literature" rather than "literary dialect."

Wallace was surely aware that he was taking risks, yet his attempts to directly capture dialects (rather than just commenting on them) span his

⁸⁴ Nancy A. Niedzielski, and Dennis R. Preston, *Folk Linguistics* (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2000), 148.

⁸⁵ Joshua Klayman, "Varieties of Confirmation Bias," in *Decision Making from a Cognitive Perspective: The Psychology of Learning and Motivation*, Vol. 32, ed. Jerome Busemeyer, Reid Hartie and Douglas L. Medin (New York: Academic Press, 1995), 385–418; Manuel Padilla Cruz, "Interlocutor-Related and Hearer-Specific Causes of Misunderstanding: Processing Strategy, Confirmation Bias and Weak Vigilance," *Research in Language* 15, no. 1 (2017): 11–36.

⁸⁶ Mark Davies, *The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA): 560 million Words, 1990–Present*. (2008–), <https://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>.

⁸⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, translated by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 68–71.

⁸⁸ Graham Shorrocks, "Non-Standard Dialect Literature and Popular Culture," in *Speech Past and Present: Studies in English Dialectology in Memory of Ossi Ihalainen*, ed. Juhani Klemola, Merja Kytö, and Matti Rissanen (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1996), 385–411, esp. 386.

career. Wallace once said that “maybe half of fiction’s job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough [to be a real human being]. The other half is to dramatize the fact that we still *are* human beings, now. Or can be.”⁸⁹ All real human beings have idiolects, made up of differential access to different registers, dialect features associated with all their different identities, and idiosyncratic verbal habits and routines. Part of what makes it tough to be human is that people use language not just to create community within group lines but also to enforce group boundaries.⁹⁰ Linguistic prejudice is still a mostly socially acceptable proxy in US society for racism, classism, and other evils.⁹¹

Hodson⁹² notes that in fiction, narrative commentary on dialects “allows writers to draw the reader’s attention to dialect variation in ways that are much more difficult for film to achieve” (15) but that often, “audiences end up with the impression that they know what a dialect sounds like and what characteristics a speaker of that dialect is likely to have, even though they have no real life experience of interacting with speakers of that variety” (11). Most readers (who are not members of the dialect communities represented) do not know “whether the style is a representation of a genuine local dialect or whether it is an authorial stylistic manipulation to achieve a particular effect.”⁹³ Wallace both availed himself of many opportunities to comment directly on language and on particular dialects and used direct representation of dialects without much concern for authenticity or equal airtime. Wallace’s world is largely seen through the eyes of his white male protagonists, who prefer to indirectly report the speech of others, to the extent that anyone who is not white, male, youngish, cisgender, and heterosexual has trouble getting a word in edgewise. Most critics have treated this as a blind spot for Wallace, but given his hyper-self-awareness, his obsession with language, his sophisticated understanding of both the philosophy of language and the history of linguistics, it makes more sense to view this as a deliberate strategy. The marginalization of others is an implicit critique of Wallace’s protagonists’

⁸⁹ McCaffery “An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace,” 26, emphasis in the original.

⁹⁰ Katherine A. Collins and Richard Clément, “Language and Prejudice: Direct and Moderated Effects,” *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 31, no. 4 (2012): 376–96, esp. 389.

⁹¹ Rosina Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997); John Baugh, “Linguistic Profiling and Discrimination,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Society*, ed. Ofelia García, Nelson Flores, and Massimiliano Spotti (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 349–68; among others.

⁹² Hodson, *Dialect in Film and Literature*, 2014.

⁹³ Crystal, *The Language of Stories*, 503.

insularity; their blind spots reflect more on them than on the “background” characters with whom they are unable to effectively connect.

As Wallace observed, “Which dialect you choose to use depends, of course, on whom you’re addressing. More to the point, I submit that the dialect you use depends mostly on what sort of Group your listener is part of and whether you wish to present yourself as a fellow member of that Group” (CTL 101). Not surprisingly, therefore, in his fiction, Wallace often uses dialect to comment on social fissures.

People really do “judge” one another according to their use of language. Constantly. . . . But it’s clear that at least one component of all this interpersonal semantic judging involves acceptance, meaning not some touchy-feely emotional affirmation but actual acceptance or rejection of somebody’s bid to be regarded as a peer, a member of somebody else’s collective or community or Group. (CTL 97)

In these quotes, Wallace presents a choice between distinct varieties, not a quantitative adjustment, scaling a bit up or down in the use of dialect features, converging or diverging with interlocutors, as social psychologists describe speech accommodation.⁹⁴ In Wallace’s fiction, characters frequently assimilate (losing ethnic or regional dialects) to fit in with a new target community. Dialects depicted are almost never *named*—perhaps because he recognized that dialect labels come with prejudgment, but also perhaps because he did not represent any dialect as a monolithic, static, well-defined “object.” There are very few black Wallace characters, but they do not all sound alike, for example. The dialects named in A&AU are “Black English, Latino English, Rural Southern, Urban Southern, Standard Upper-Midwest, Maine Yankee, East-Texas Bayou, Boston Blue-Collar” (CTL 98). Earlier in the article, in considering whether usage shapes popular views of correctness, Wallace asks *whose* usage matters: “Urban Latinos? Boston Brahmins? Rural Midwesterners? Appalachian Neogaels?” (CTL 84). I’m not sure whether this last part of the question was intended to be taken seriously. Although there were certainly Scots-Irish immigrants who settled in Appalachia, there is no scholarly use of the term “Appalachian Neogaelic,” and the Celtic influence on Appalachian English is greatly exaggerated in the popular imagination. Clearly, neither list is intended to be comprehensive,

⁹⁴ Howard Giles, ed. *Communication Accommodation Theory: Negotiating Personal Relationships and Social Identities Across Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

and interestingly, one dialect that gets extended use in two of his short stories, Jewish American English, is not included.

Not only do real people express all their intersecting identity traits (ethnicity, region, gender, class, age) in the way that they speak but they also express different levels of affiliation with those identities (which can and does vary dynamically across contexts), adjusting their speech patterns based on how they perceive the nature of the conversation, the identities of their interlocutors, and the goals they're consciously or unconsciously trying to achieve in the interaction. They may subtly converge with or diverge from the speech patterns of interlocutors within a conversation, to express connection and agreement or a lack of these. The sheer complexity of this system of social signaling could well seem overwhelming to an author trying to encode realistic dialogue, who only has limited conscious awareness of which particular linguistic variables are associated with particular identities, and then also has to contend with which variable will survive the change of medium from face-to-face speech to the written page. To Wallace, on the other hand, the very complexity of this system may have posed an irresistible challenge.

Language has always been used as shibboleth, dividing "us" from "them." The most obvious instantiation of this in Wallace's fiction is the contrast of foreigners with Americans, in portraits ranging from brief, overheard snippets of conversation to the most fully developed ultra-foreigner, Rémy Marathe in *Infinite Jest*. But this constitutes just a tiny portion of Wallace's exploration of language and identity. Is the United States a "melting pot"? Should it be one? Who *wants* to assimilate, who is *allowed* to assimilate, and who does not have that option? Wallace put words in characters' mouths that make readers squirm—but that reaction itself bears deeper scrutiny. As Zadie Smith⁹⁵ says about *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (BIHM), "it's *our* character that's being investigated" (276); often, Wallace's dialects reflect less on the speaker and more on the readers who have responded to the dialect with automatic negative judgments.

Wallace's "avant-garde" approach to realism (as opposed to what he saw as the "traditional . . . soothing and conservative" American tradition of "big-R realism") aimed "to countenance and render real aspects of real experiences that have previously been excluded from art,"⁹⁶ and as someone

⁹⁵ Zadie Smith, "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace," in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009), 257–300.

⁹⁶ McCaffery, "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace," 38.

whose “real religion was always language,”⁹⁷ he must surely have thought about whether his depictions of language were small-r or big-R “real.” In cases where he knowingly misrepresented dialects or simply didn’t put in the linguistic research that would have been required to capture them in a more big-r-realistic kind of way, it is probable that he had a more small-r-realistic project in mind. It has long been a staple of US culture to mock nonstandard ways of speaking, but Wallace most emphatically was not participating in that tradition. Irony and sarcasm, as he noted in an extended interview on National Public Radio’s *Fresh Air*,⁹⁸ “are fantastic for exploding hypocrisy and exposing what’s wrong with extant values; as far as I can see, they’re notably less good at erecting replacement values or coming any closer to the truth.” In the case of Wallace’s representations of African American English, Jewish American English, and white working-class dialects from different regions, the hypocrisy Wallace was exploding was ours, and the stories he allowed his characters to tell in nonstandard language that slowed readers down and certainly drew their attention provided the necessary ingredients for the empathy he advocated as a “replacement value.”

Wallace’s dialect portrayals are often fleeting, and they may not always be accurate linguistically, but they are not employed as shorthand “dog-whistles” to evoke particular negative traits supposedly associated with particular communities. Wallace’s characters are often in difficult social and economic circumstances, but their use of dialect is never intended to display a lack of intelligence or deficiency of moral character. A few of the drug addicts in *Infinite Jest* are dialect speakers, but many other addicts’ speech is portrayed as standard, and Wallace has sympathy and empathy for all of them. The most prominent dialect portrayals in Wallace’s work are examined in this book not just in terms of how they contribute to characterizations and themes, but as pieces of “folk linguistics,” to see which variables of regional and ethnic dialects were salient enough for Wallace to include and therefore are the features that his readers may come to associate with dialects of which they themselves may have little real-life experience. In an increasingly racially, regionally, socially, and politically divided modern United States, there are many people whose only real encounter with “the other” is through the media. It seems much less relevant now (in the wake of Wallace’s death) whether *he* was “capitalist, sexist, racist, xenophobic, homophobic, elitist: unfair” (CTL 81) than with whether his work can speak across these divides, whether fans of his work might be encouraged or discouraged in their own

⁹⁷ Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 166.

⁹⁸ Terry Gross, “*Fresh Air* Interview with David Foster Wallace,” National Public Radio, March 5, 1997.

prejudices and unconscious biases. I agree with Joffe⁹⁹ that whether or not Wallace was a misogynist is “less interesting than his evident desire not to *appear* as such,” and that it is more productive to focus on “the strategies he employs to convince his readers accordingly.” Wallace offers his readers not just observations on the social status of particular linguistic varieties but also the complex interrelationship of nationality, ethnicity, regional identity, social class, and gender. Taken together, these portrayals may be seen as one man’s ongoing struggle with his knowledge of his own linguistic privilege and his sincere attempt to capture both the diversity of modern American society and the hegemony of whiteness within that society.

⁹⁹ Joffe, “*In the Shadows*,” 38.