

# MORE THAN A PUN: THE ROLE OF DIALECT AND DIALECTICS IN SHAPING DIALECTOGRAMS

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## Abstract

A “dialectogram” is a large, detailed documentary drawing of place, drawing upon multiple viewpoints and guided by the feelings, impressions and relationships of those who live there, or use it. The word dialectogram is a neologism created from a pun on the word “diagram” created by inserting ‘dialect’ and later, ‘dialectic’. Having previously assumed this mostly was just a play on words I found that this pun reflected my attitudes towards formal ‘drawing languages’ and that this could be linked both through analogy and direct inspiration, to recent trends in Scottish literature and the post-colonial ‘abrogation’ of Standard English by writers such as James Kelman and Tom Leonard.

Similarly, maps and other forms of technical drawing adopt a standard visual language derived from ‘colonial’ assumptions that are challenged by alternative traditions within drawing (de Certeau, 1988, Ingold, 2007). Dialectograms attempt their own abrogation by borrowing from these traditions in an idiosyncratic fashion to attempt a closer link between the subjects of the drawings and the ‘drawing language’ in which information about them is conveyed. When the dialectogram borrows the ‘totalising’ bird’s-eye view of the diagram to depict grounded, subjective and often idiosyncratic, detail of place, it is at its most dialectical. It creates a tension that encourages the viewer to make their own readings –and possibly syntheses - from the images, just as the characters of James Kelman insert their own language into those of the authorities to subvert it and find their own existential sense of reality. The paper argues that illustrators and other drawing practitioners can learn a great deal from the dialectical relationship between Standard and ‘non-standard’ language use, both verbally and visually.

Keywords: Drawing, Dialect, Dialectic, Literature, Abrogation

## Introduction: And unto us, a pun is born...

A “dialectogram” is a large, detailed documentary drawing of place, drawing upon multiple viewpoints and guided by the feelings, impressions and relationships of those who live there, or use it (Fig. 01). The dialectogram has been identified by illustration researchers such as Gary Embury as belonging to the emergent genre of ‘illustrative journalism’ or ‘reportage’, a small, but growing network of practitioners producing stand-alone, creative works of nonfiction through illustration (2013: 67). A dialectogram sits somewhere between a map, an architectural plan, comic strip and diagram, borrowing from these established visual traditions to contain and arrange diverse, highly subjective and complex information within a single image. The drawings use ethnographic methods to collate personal narratives, local knowledge, feelings and imaginings about place, with the aim being to create a unique social and aesthetic document that can be ‘read’ in a number of different ways at any given time. Like comics, they make use of words within the image to capture voice and offer explanations (Groensteen, 2009).

**(Figure 01 *Red Road Dialectogram No. 1: The Concierge Station*, Pencil and ink on mount board, Mitch Miller 2010.)**

The word dialectogram is a neologism created from a pun on the word “diagram”<sup>1</sup> created by inserting ‘Dialect’ and later, ‘dialectic’. I coined the term when, on the strength of a drawing exhibited at an exhibition in 2009, I was invited to make a proposal to work with the Red Road Cultural Project, a partnership between Glasgow Life (the city’s cultural services division, with responsibility for the arts, sports and museums), the Glasgow Housing Association (the largest social housing landlord in Europe) and a number of other junior partners, including the University of Edinburgh and several local galleries. I needed a word that seemed to describe the images I was creating. It is fair to say that the name ‘dialectogram’ was something of an artistic joke, intended to win the right to work and act as a short hand for a practice whose exact nature I was not yet sure of. Yet the name caught on, and was soon being used rather widely. Before long, it became firmly associated with the work I produced at Red Road, and elsewhere. When in 2011 I began my practice-based PhD research into dialectograms I assumed that the word was no more than a pun; this paper will show some of the ways in which this view has changed.

## Forming the Dialectogram

*Travellerology: Showman’s Yard at 24 Backcauseway* is the ‘proto-dialectogram’ drawn for the exhibition *How’S the Ghost?* (Market Gallery, 2009) and the piece of work on which the word “dialectogram” was first coined. Inventing this word was in many respects an attempt at making a single, simple description of what it meant and what value it could add to my future practice (see Fig. 02). The show at Market was a collaboration with the artist Chris Dooks to explore the archive of material I had gathered on the history of Travelling Showpeople in Glasgow; while Dooks worked his way inwards, interpreting the material through his own mixed media practice, I worked in the other direction to try to externalise an ‘insider’s’ perspective<sup>2</sup>. The *Backcauseway* drawing was one of three contributions to this endeavour, and depicts an extended family of travelling showpeople in the east end of Glasgow who make their home in the old shell of a steel foundry. It is one of 54 sites directly or indirectly threatened by plans to substantially regenerate the east end of the city for the 2014 Commonwealth Games (Gray, 2008).

**(Figure 02 *Travellerology: Showman’s Yard at 24 Backcauseway*, Pencil and ink on mount board (Mitch Miller, 2009).)**

Taking the view that an under-described way of life required its own system of symbols and representations, I improvised a ‘diagram’ that would resemble anthropological diagrams, architectural plans and maps that represented ‘official’ knowledge, but imbue it with

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<sup>1</sup> Here taken as a short-hand to include maps, architectural plans and schematics.

<sup>2</sup> I myself come from this community, and the extended family depicted in the *Backcauseway* drawing was my own. Glasgow is believed to have the largest concentration of travelling showpeople/circus people in Europe.

knowledge that was personal, subjective and perhaps even antithetical to outsider attempts to 'define' and categorise my community.

Nevertheless 'outsider' views such as Judith Okely's sociological studies of how English Gypsies organised and occupied space provided a valuable starting point for my own explorations. In her work, Okely describes Romany camps as if from above:

When Gypsies choose the layout, they often place the trailers in a circle, with a single entrance. The main windows, usually the towing bar end, face inwards. Every trailer and its occupants can be seen by everyone else. When the camp members are self-selected, usually in a political cluster [...] there is no need for privacy and protection from Gypsy neighbours. [...] (Okely, 1983: 88)

**(Figure 03: *Plan of North Cairntow Gypsy Travellers' Site, Duddingston, site plan from City of Edinburgh Council, c1983*)**

It is worth comparing this description to the *Backcauseway* drawing, and then to the *Site Plan of the North Cairntow Gypsy Travellers' site* (Fig. 3), provided by the city council in Edinburgh. In this situation the layout is chosen by town planners and council officials, not by the actual residents, who have voiced their dislike of the metal fencing and constrictive layout (Scottish Parliament, 2001)). In contrast, *Backcauseway* represents a situation where a traveller group has itself chosen the layout, and this layout therefore, has something to say about this culture. In *Cairntow*, this spatial arrangement has been chosen by those in authority, and so the drawing 'speaks' more to their priorities and viewpoints than it does to those of the occupants, who have no hold or input into what the artist Humphrey Jennings would term 'the means of vision' exercised by the draughtsman (Jennings, 1985: xxxviii).

The 'drawing language' expressed in *Cairntow* represents an imbalance of power. By using the term 'drawing language' I am drawing a visual analogy to Saussure's 'system of differences' (Culler, 1976). We can see that a map is made using a system of different types of line, organised according to the particular grammar and set of rules that define the discipline of cartography, while architecture has its own conventions (or grammar) of line weights, broken and unbroken lines and shading, all of which denote something very specific. These lines are descriptive, but also prescriptive; actions are taken according to the mark drawn. In this respect, a mark is in itself, what Saussure would regard as a 'sign' – it has a form (signifier) and a content conveyed by that form (signified). In architecture, heavy lines are a signifier for thicker walls, while on a map it might signify a border or boundary. These lines enforce, or represent an exercise of authority over a given space, whether it is the power to build a wall or to prevent people moving freely from one point to another.

The anthropologist Tim Ingold has examined how the valorisation of the straight, ruled line by colonial powers was used to override and (literally) overrule 'native' traditions and 'linearities' (Ingold, 2007). To do this, colonisers and venture capitalists had to behave as if what was there did not exist – they needed to create 'space' from 'place'. As design historian David Brett argues, the formal technical drawing style that emerged during the industrial age was held to be entirely abstract, a tabula rasa empty of any cultural symbolism that was intended to wipe out the past, the straight line speaking of infinite expansiveness, the capacity to start again (Brett, 1987). This prompted a firm reaction from critics such as Ruskin in favour of the messy, hand-drawn 'expressive' line, creating a now familiar binary split between the restrained lines of technical drawing and the impressionistic line of the artist (Robertson, 2011).

### **(Dialect)ogram**

I wanted to make sure the look of *Backcauseway* spoke of a very different relationship between space, people and the means of vision from the diagram of *Cairntow*. The hand drawn lines here are expressive, but also vulnerable, flawed and forthright in its subjectivity. *Backcauseway* reminds the viewer of diagrams, but the closer they look, the less it seems to follow its conventions. If we can speak of *Cairntow* as displaying the features of a standard 'visual language', then I began to wonder if *Backcauseway* was, as a deviation from

the diagram, a dialect of it<sup>3</sup>. This analogy was inspired by Max Weinreich's Yiddish aphorism; 'A shprakh iz a dialekt mit an army un flot' ('A language is a dialect with an army and navy.'). The exercise of political, economic and social power is what creates and legitimates a language, and the lack of it relegates dialect (defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'peculiar' to a specific region or place') to a subordinate or marginal position.

These ideas have been a major discourse within Scottish culture, where the marginalisation of Scottish English and the Scots dialect has been regarded as part of an 'othering' of non-standard English speakers by the largely London-based establishment<sup>4</sup>. The literary scholar Simon Kövesi has drawn links between the work of literary theorists such as Deleuze and Guattari and the Scottish novelist James Kelman, noting that contemporary Scottish literature is in many regards a response to influential paradigms, where the use of dialect is seen as a failure to understand basic social laws and thus, justifies their marginalisation. Kelman's fellow Glasgow writer Tom Leonard's draws a clinical analogy with another Glaswegian, R. D Laing:

The dialect speaker tends to appear in a narrative much like Laing's patient in a hospital; there is complicity between author and reader that the speaker is 'other', that the user of such language cannot be the person who has written or is reading the work. (cited in Kövesi, 2007: 27)

Like patients in a clinic, users of dialect – particularly those from the working class – are like the inmate, seen as incompetent and thus, incapable of equal participation; indeed, they must be constrained and restricted from full participation in the system. Giving the example of Scots language custodian T.D.Robb, he shows how language was used to sort people into a 'hierarchy of worth', with working class speakers very much at the bottom:

[W]hen one hears working class speech, whether from Scotland, Ireland or England, one should call for civet – i.e. perfume. One should call for civet, because in doing so one would be quoting from *King Lear*, Act Four, Scene Six – and if you knew that, dear reader, you were as cultured a man as T. D. Robb. (Leonard, 1995: 54)

Leonard argues that these inbuilt hierarchies rob the dialect speaker their right to equal dialogue. His response is that 'no language is more sacred than the people who speak it; more to the point, no language is more sacred than the people who don't' (p58). Kövesi has identified the same linguistic politics in Kelman's post-colonial "abrogation" of standard language:

[T]he rejection by post-colonial writers of a normative concept of 'correct' or 'standard' English used by certain classes or groups, and of the corresponding concepts of inferior 'dialects' or 'marginal' variants. (Ashcroft et al, quoted in Kövesi: 169)

These ideas were present, if not always deliberately applied, in the early stages of the dialectogram project. In essence, I was drawing an analogy between the positions taken by these Scottish writers to abrogate the visual languages used by those in power and my own drawing style. Implicit in the *Cairntow* site plan is the logic that a Gypsy/Traveller resident of this site cannot be the same as the person who has drawn it (or those professionals who can interpret it into a physical reality). With *Backcauseway*, I hoped to disrupt this assumption by creating an explanatory diagram that is as much a product of the culture depicted as I was - it would be 'peculiar' to its place because, to borrow James Kelman's pithier explanation, '[L]anguage is the culture.' (Kelman, quoted in Miller and Rodger, 2011: 35).

Theorists of line seem to have come to similar formulations of the imbalance between standardised and informal drawing languages. T.D Robb's hygienic responses are echoed in

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<sup>3</sup> A year after I had exhibited the first drawing I published a blog on *Backcauseway* that showed I was still uncertain if its style was due to a failure to live up to a standard of drawing diagrams, or something else: '[Y]ou can see how I *tried* to be systematic in drawing the lines of influence and interpersonal relationships (I say lines – spaghetti is more accurate). Part of the pleasure of the drawing rests in the complexity, but were I a real data scientist – someone like Edward Tufte – I would really have to think of a more elegant and effective 'delivery system' for this info. (July 2010)

<sup>4</sup> Work on dialectograms began after years serving as editor of the Scottish Literary and Arts Magazine *The Drouth* (2001-present). This meant I was very involved in these literary debates about language and politics, and interacted with many of the key writers and theorists mentioned in this article.

Ingold's critique of Western cartographers who are disdainful of the 'gestural traces' the lines and sketching common to sketch-maps and the traditional maps of Inuit and Aborigines, that describe how people actually use, and explain their surroundings:

The gestural trace, or the line that has gone out for a walk, has no business in the discipline of cartography. Far from becoming a part of a map it is regarded as an excrescence that should be removed. (Ingold: 85)

Spoken dialect, gestural lines; both are rejected as an 'other' that has no place in sophisticated discussion, and undermine correct 'speech'. In dialectograms such as the *Concierge*, I began to mount my own challenge to this notion. The language of diagrams was no longer sacrosanct I began to use direct speech within the structure of the dialectogram, to label and shape how the occupants of that location seemed to create a 'place' together. Language is important to what geographers call 'place-making'. Marc Augé notes that 'place' is created or 'completed' through the word, when its *occupants* name its salient features and meanings (Augé, 2009: 63). In this regard, the *Red Road Dialectograms* use direct quotes from tenants and employees (rather than 'official' definitions) to describe place (Fig. 4). As these respondents are speakers of Glaswegian dialect, then the 'dialect' in 'dialectogram' also refers to the actual use of speech 'peculiar to the place' to describe it rather than those from outside it.

**(Figure 04: Red Road Dialectogram No. 2: The Nivens from S(i)even, Pencil and ink on mount board, Mitch Miller 2011).**

This practice evolved the more I thought about the politics and dynamics of language. In the early Red Road drawings I used quote marks to indicate direct contributions from my (mainly working class) research participants. By the last of my *Red Road Dialectograms* (Fig. 5) I had removed these altogether.

**(Figure 05: Red Road Dialectogram No. 4: The Brig Bar, Pencil and ink on mount board Mitch Miller 2011).**

Here, I was influenced by Kelman's criticisms of prose fiction where the powerful narrator's voice was presented in Standard English, while working class or marginal characters direct speech appears in quote marks (Kelman, 2008: 41). His response to this 'summation of the political system' was to adopt a 'flattening prose technique' whereby there are no quote marks<sup>5</sup> to separate the authority of the narrator ('were the psychological drama occurs') from the autonomy of the protagonist (Miller and Rodger, 2011: 50-51). As a result, current dialectograms, such as this drawing inspired by Kelman's *Kieron Smith, Boy*, (Fig. 6) try to avoid marginalising their protagonists by using quote marks and most of the lines are of equal weight.

**(Figure 06: Matt's Room as described in *Kieron Smith, Boy*. Pencil and ink on mount board, Mitch Miller, 2012).**

## (Dialect(ic))ogram

The politics of 'abrogation' help us to understand the dialectical relationship between diagrams and their apparent antithesis, the dialectogram. Unlike diagrams, whose purpose is to be clear, unambiguous and be sparing with what Edward Tufte calls 'data ink', the profusion of subjective voices within a dialectogram, while filtered through my own sensibilities, makes any single reading – or use – of the image impossible, but allows many 'micro-readings' (Tufte, 1990). They are, in their excessive complexity, a parody of information science and its claims to authority.

Although a sense of the dialectic has shaped recent case studies in my PhD research, understanding the 'dialectic' of dialectogram is a more retroactive process than in the case of dialect. Again, we can turn to contemporary Scottish literature for help. James Kelman's work often parodies the voice of expertise and authority through seeking out these "rough and jagged places". His short story 'Roofsliding' is a deadpan appropriation of the lofty tones of the urban anthropologist to describe apparently irrational behaviour among Glasgow

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<sup>5</sup> Often called 'scare marks'.

tenement dwellers (Kelman, 1983: 194-196). This satirical awareness is transferred to his character Robert Hines when he describes the deteriorating conditions of the back courts to his own tenement block (Kelman, 1985: 88). More recently, a nameless character in the short story 'as if from nowhere', rendered near powerless in his hospital bed, turns the tables on the doctors analysing him by taking his own notes on them (Kelman, 2011: 41-58). That these notes have no purpose is beside the point; it is the activity of note taking in which the real power is exercised, and thus contested.

In my own writings on Kelman I have argued that works such as these set out to counter the way in which lofty, top-down discourses of the establishment blithely smooth over questions of diversity and local complexity. Kelman's contemporary Tom Leonard detects a lethal subtext to this smoothing over in his essay 'What I Hate about the News', about the 1991 Gulf War:

It's one thing to have wide-angle spectaculars of twelve-rockets-at-a-time whooshing upwards into a dark desert sky, patriotic flag somewhere on screen; it's another to have wide-angle spectaculars of what happens to the conscripts on whom the over eight thousand disintegrating "bomblets" fall from each salvo. (Leonard, 1994: 245)

The top down view does more than obscure local culture; it facilitates murder, inhumanity and repression and is thus *colonial* in its structure; it observes – *and describes* – but does not participate in the subject culture. Ingold's identification of the modern map with the colonial priorities of establishing trade routes and designating areas to expand into established suggests that the 'bird's eye view' is a major component in hierarchical systems of knowledge designed to control and shape the spaces in which global capitalism takes place (Ingold, 2007: 79). The Marxist cultural theorist Michel de Certeau has also criticised the 'totalising' tendency of the map, whose clean, rigid lines distances us from the organic life that takes place at ground level, what he calls 'the itineraries that were the condition of its possibility' (de Certeau, 1988: 120) (we might think for a moment, of the Gypsy/Travellers wholly absent from the diagram that sets out their living arrangements as the conditions of *that* drawing's possibility...). He gives the example of someone looking down from the World Trade Center to demonstrate the consequences of this view:

To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. One's body is no longer clasped by the streets [...] he leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes itself up in itself any identity of authors and spectators [...] he can ignore the devices of Daedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths far below. His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance [...] looking down like a God. (1988: 92)

In Kelman's work, the capacity to describe is a crucial flashpoint in the dispute between the powerful and the oppressed. His characters are most existentially acute when they are able to take an imaginative leap and temporarily seize this power for themselves, to better see the reality of their situation. Robert Hines seizes this Promethean moment through a daydream, where he mentally 'draws' a diagram of his tenement,

The rectangle is formed by the backsides of the buildings – in fact it's maybe even a square. A square: 4 sides of equal length and each 2 lines being angled into each other at 90°. Okay now: this backcourt a square and for each unit of dwellers up each tenement there exists the 1/3 midden containing six dustbins. For every 3 closes you have the 1 midden containing 6 dustbins. (Kelman, 1985: 88)

Hines then immediately, subverts this with a very grounded flight of fancy, signalled by the reinsertion of his own dialect ("cunts", 'yins") into the language of the scientific observer,

But then you've got the prowlers coming around when every cunt's asleep. They go exchanging holey dustbins for nice new yins. Holey dustbins: the bottom only portionally there so the rubbish remains on the ground when said dustbins are being uplifted. What a bastard. (1985: 88)

Naturally, I tried to visualise this as a dialectogram:

(Figure 07: *Hinesian Geometry*, Pencil and ink on mount board, Mitch Miller 2011)

Kelman scholar Scott Hames has described the dialectogram style as a 'clever way of 'hijacking' third-person/monumental style for first-person knowledge and concrete experience, without relinquishing its authority' (Hames, 2011). With his imagination tied closely (and tensely) to place, Hines' is the knowledge 'clasped by the streets' that de Certeau misses in the map and which dialectograms try to reinstate. Furthermore, I would argue that like Hines, a 'dialectographer' temporarily seizes upon the diagrammatic language of authority to create a dialectic between what we associate with the users of this language and street-level dialects and usages, with the usually deleted 'excrecences' challenging the assumptions that underpin their visual presentation. Like Hines' bird's eye view, a dialectogram is a native-drawn map, simultaneously lofty and earthy – in them, "dialect" and "dialectical" are arguably much the same thing.

I pursued this idea in the *Concierge* and the *Brig*, and in this remake of the *Backcauseway* drawing:

**(Figure 08: A Showman's Yard in the East End, Pencil and ink on mount board, Mitch Miller, 2012).**

Compared against the original, it is hopefully obvious that 'excrecences' or 'itneraries' - the personal journeys we take through the world, the way in which we consume and interact with the spaces around us- have become central aspects of dialectograms, which use their own 'excrecences' to elaborate the diagrammatic versions of flats, pubs and yards. This is found in both the language used (in a number of senses) and the subjects chosen.

In his work, de Certeau turns away from earlier critiques of the 'consumer' to argue that they use 'tactics' in an improvisational, clandestine and often very intelligent fashion to create their own culture, 'poaching' from the material produced from a strategic centre by political and economic establishments (and often intended for other things entirely). If we think of diagrams as strategic productions, then a dialectogram is a tactical consumption (or 'poaching') of its illustrative traditions to illustrate environments according to how they themselves, are tactically consumed by its occupants.

## Conclusion

When the philosopher and street-level historian Walter Benjamin advocated superimposing different types of image so they would, 'come alive in terms of revolutionary meaning' he expressed the hope that 'dialectical images' could point us towards those points where hidden ideologies can be detected and be understood (Buck-Morss, 1991: 220).

Whether dialectograms themselves offer up such a revolutionary meaning is hard to say – but it may be that their claim to being a breed of dialectical image rests on how they leave it to the viewer (and we could say, their tactical consumption of the image) to make a 'synthesis'. I would argue that the ways in which post-colonial writers have successfully identified 'dialect' as part of the 'dialectic' hold lessons for drawing researchers keen to understand drawing languages. So the dialectogram is *more than a pun* - but it also *is* a pun that leads into serious discussions on language, depiction, forms of resistance and, at a personal level, an appreciation of how my practice is indeed, peculiar to its local context, but hopefully far from parochial.

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Full-sized dialectograms can be viewed online at – <http://dialectograms.co.uk/the-archive/>

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Mitch Miller is an illustrator and writer who lives in Glasgow. He is editor and co-founder of *The Drouth* magazine and has published books, essays and articles on a range of cultural and political subjects. Recent projects include the web-documentary *Boswell in Space* ([www.boswellinspace.org](http://www.boswellinspace.org)) a period resident artist at the Red Road Flats and his open studio project DRAW DUKE STREET. He has exhibited his work in museums, tower blocks, Scottish islands, caravans, temporary exhibition spaces and even actual galleries. He is currently creating his 'dialectograms' for a number of collaborators, include Collective Gallery in Edinburgh, the Glasgow Museum of Modern Art and Glasgow Life, many of which will feature in his practice-based PhD research at the Glasgow School of Art.