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Published version

HERMESTON, Rodney (2014). Indexing Bob Cranky : social meaning and the voices of pitmen and keelmen in early nineteenth-century Tyneside song. *Victoriographies*, 4 (2), 156-180.

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Indexing Bob Cranky: Social Meaning and the Voices of Pitmen and Keelmen
in Early Nineteenth-Century Tyneside Song

Rod Hermeston

Abstract

This article examines the social meanings (indexical relations) of Tyneside dialect spoken by pitmen and keelmen in early nineteenth-century Tyneside dialect songs. I focus on the pitman Bob Cranky. Pieces about Bob and other pitmen and keelmen emerge from a song culture enjoyed by audiences of clerks, artisans, and shopkeepers. A debate emerged from the 1970s as to whether Bob is a subject of satire who could not appeal to a ‘working man’, or whether pitmen and keelmen derived self-celebration from him. Recently, the perspective of self-celebration has dominated. The songs, northern dialect literature more broadly, and dialect itself are said to promote communal values, regional, local, and ‘working-class’ solidarity, and populism.

I show that pitmen and keelmen are most closely associated in the songs with non-standard spellings and with expletives. Employing a notion of dialogism, I argue that the meaning of the songs and the language attributed to pitmen or keelmen depends on the attitudes of audiences towards their behaviour, and towards nineteenth-century discourses of ‘respectability’ and ‘correct’ language. Bob and his speech may be the subjects of satirical mockery, resistance to respectability, or self-celebration. The material also has potential to convey labouring-class and regional solidarity.

Keywords: dialect, dialogism, identity, indexicality, keelmen, pitmen, song, Tyneside.

Tyneside, an area of north-east England, had long been famed for the export of coal by the beginning of the nineteenth century. From the early 1800s, the area also witnessed a burgeoning of dialect song in which pitmen (coalminers) along with keelmen (who carried coal down the river Tyne in boats known as keels) were central figures. These occupational groups had long produced songs themselves (cf. Lloyd 319, 333), but the bulk of new popular material appearing in the early century and repeatedly published as that century progressed appears to have been performed and written by clerks, artisans and shopkeepers of Tyneside's major town, Newcastle. It is the latter material on which I will focus. This article will explore the complex social meanings of Tyneside dialect as represented through the voices of the pitmen and keelmen in song – what its use symbolises and implies in relation to them. In doing so the article combines linguistic theory and analysis with literary readings and interpretation.

Colls claims that 'as characterisations' in song pitmen and keelmen were 'interchangeable' (1977: 26). Wales too sees them as iconic of the region thanks to popular culture and song (2006: 135; cf. Joyce 284). Prominent within the songs is the figure of the coalminer, Bob Cranky, a drunken bully and bruiser who also has affectionate, convivial, and exuberant attributes. Songs about Bob in particular and pitmen and keelmen more broadly have been the subject of an important debate which began in the 1970s as to whether such representations are satirical or celebratory, and I will engage with this later. Nevertheless, this article also challenges a dominant modern view of northern dialect literature of the period more broadly, which sees it as promoting

solidarity at the levels of a 'working class', locality, region, the home or community, or in terms of populism.¹ Dialect itself is seen to convey such meaning symbolically.

The current dominant view, as noted, holds that the material promotes group solidarity. Such views are to varying degrees underpinned by known or perceived links and correlations between language and identity and between the use of regional dialect and membership of the labouring class.² Among linguists, Taavitsainen and Melchers claim that the functions of non-standard dialect literature are 'social rather than literary as it is used to strengthen patriotism and solidarity' (13). Beal argues that Tyneside dialect song and literature promotes 'Geordie' solidarity and identity (353–4).³ For Wales dialect is 'consciously *emblematic* of regional and social identities; and of the associated community values of common sense, stoicism, homeliness, humour and self-reliance' (2006: 132). Wales maintains that the dialect promotes 'working class' solidarity – an 'us' versus 'them' ideology (2002: 61). Shorrocks too emphasises the role of northern dialect literature in affirming for working people the value of the group, as opposed to the individualism of élite culture (1999: 96).

Despite his identification of Bob Cranky as a 'rake', the historian Joyce sees in the literature generally an emphasis on populist rather than class ideologies, a popular radicalism based on the idea of northern England as the heart of a crusade against privilege, and which emphasises the worth of 'decent folk' (269, 329–331). Russell, another historian, is largely in agreement, though he emphasises that celebration of 'domestic pleasure was arguably the single most powerful theme of dialect literature' (125). He also says that even an analysis as subtle as Joyce's may not go far enough in asserting the importance of regional as well as class mentalities (Russell 120). The genre,

Russell argues, ‘was a far more overtly cross-class phenomenon than has generally been recognised’ (120, 123).

Similar responses emerge from literary scholars. Vicinus sees regional identity fostered through non-standard dialect, and the major theme of the literature being self-help, encompassing class pride against the masters, or family pride (190, 208). McCauley emphasises issues of self-reliance, temperance, and ‘working-class’ unity (289, 298). Even Goodridge and his fellow editors, while offering a highly nuanced response to the development of labouring-class poetry (in Standard English or otherwise) over the nineteenth century, also emphasise in their collection that through dialect writing labouring-class poets could participate in the creation of local and regional cultures, and in general writers could act as spokespersons, occupying communitarian roles (McEathron 1: xix, Kossick 2: xv, Goodridge 3: xv–xxii). Goodridge, however, does recognise a burlesque strand in song in the north-east (3: 145).

My focus in this paper is on language and its relationship to character. I acknowledge the link between language and group identity. Language can enhance bonds at the levels of class, region or community. Nevertheless, I argue that a more nuanced understanding of language and its social meanings is needed in order to grasp its function within the songs.

Indexicality and Song

My starting point in analysing song is the concept known among sociolinguists as indexicality. In general terms, according to Bucholtz and Hall, this

involves the creation of semiotic links between linguistic forms and social meanings [. . .] In identity formation, indexicality relies heavily on [. . .] cultural beliefs and values – that is, ideologies – about the sorts of speakers who (can or should) produce particular sorts of language.

(Bucholtz and Hall 594)

Thus the ability of language, dialect and accent to carry and symbolise social meaning is not in question in my analysis. Such meaning might convey local or regional belonging, or membership of a particular social class, but associations with character trait and smaller-scale groups too are involved in this process. For Eckert, in the real world, ‘linguistic choices rarely index social categories directly; rather, they index attitudes, stances, [and] activities that are in turn associated with categories of people’ (21–2; cf. Ochs 1992, 1993, Bucholtz and Hall 595–6). For her, indeed, speech style is a ‘practice’ and is key to the construction by individuals of ‘personae’, which she identifies as ‘social types that are quite explicitly located in the social order’ (Eckert 17). Mediating between persona, character and the categories of ethnicity, class or region, according to Eckert (16–17), are smaller-scale groups known as communities of practice. She notes that a family, a sports team or small village are all examples of communities of practice (Eckert 16). Membership of these different groups and the behaviour in which they engage are also indexed through linguistic styles or ‘ways of speaking’ shared and constructed by the individuals within them (Eckert 16–18). While I will not seek to identify specific communities of practice in this article, it will be useful to think of groups of pitmen and keelmen in similar terms in order to rationalise indexical relationships between language and group character.⁴

In this study, of course, I am dealing with representations of pitmen and keelmen in songs not the observable ‘real’ world. Indexicality in language, I argue, is nevertheless central to the meaning of the songs, but is mediated through performance and negotiated with the audience. The emergence of such meanings in relation to character and group behaviour is therefore complex. I contend that it results from a convergence of the following factors:

- 1. a dialogue with other cultural and linguistic forms and discourses;
- 2. generic expectations and conventions regarding the depiction of character;
- 3. pre-existing stereotypes;
- 4. observations, however skewed, of behaviour in the real world.

The concept of dialogism is central to my approach to indexicality in song. Here I am influenced by Bakhtin’s claim that the meaning of an utterance arises from a dialogue, as it brushes up against ‘thousands of living dialogic threads’ (276); therefore he claims that the utterance ‘is understood against the background of other concrete utterances on the same theme, a background made up of contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgements’ (281). Ochs notes that Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism has had a considerable impact on work on the social meaning of language (1992: 338). His arguments, Ochs says, imply that the ‘voices of [the] speaker/writer and others may be blended in the course of the message and become part of the social meanings indexed within the message’ (1992: 338). Therefore, despite Bakhtin’s claim that in genres which are ‘poetic in the narrow sense, the natural dialogisation of the word is not put to artistic use’ (285), I contend that the concept can be central to an understanding of the social meanings indexed in song by the Tyneside dialect. This and the interpretation of songs

more broadly will depend upon the discourses and attitudes brought to them by a range of audiences and such interactions will provide the main focus of an understanding of character, social meaning, and language in this article.

A related issue is that of generic expectations and the conventions to which songwriters might adhere in representing character or in their performances of such characters. As Coupland has noted in a discussion of modern popular song, the meanings of a given performance are 'mediated by genre norms' and 'the history of prior performances' (575–6). In the case of Tyneside song, certain types (notably pitmen and keelmen) occur again and again particularly in material from the early nineteenth century, and these songs as we shall see are labelled as 'satire'. This then will feed into social meaning through the provision of prior models to be followed.

Such depictions, however, do not occur in a cultural vacuum. Authors and performers would make associations between particular language varieties or styles and particular types of people. These might be based on social stereotypes (in part influenced through depictions in song). Such ideas, nevertheless, also stem potentially from real (though perhaps skewed) observations of behaviour in the real world. The main focus in this article, however, will be on the nature and sources of dialogism arising in performance contexts in relation to character and language. I therefore turn to a consideration of the voices of pitmen and keelmen and Bob Cranky's character in particular to explore these points further.

Character and Language

The pitman formerly was called Cranky, or Bob Cranky [. . .] The term cranky given by outsiders to the pitman was in later times replaced by ‘Geordy’.⁵ (Heslop 196)

This quotation from Heslop’s dictionary, *Northumberland Words*, published 1892–4, indicates that the name *Bob Cranky* is a sobriquet, a nickname, and that it is supposed to be representative of a social type.⁶ Bob is named by outsiders according to Heslop, a point with which I shall take issue shortly. Nevertheless, he became the eponymous subject of at least five songs in the early nineteenth century by various authors dwelling in or near Newcastle and responding to visits to the town by coalminers from nearby pit villages. Songs appeared in a range of collections during this period. John Selkirk wrote the bulk of ‘Bob Cranky’s ‘Size Sunday’, and penned ‘Bob Cranky’s Complaint’ (in Bell 25–7, 27–9).⁷ John Shield contributed ‘Bob Cranky’s Adieu’ (in Bell 31–2) and perhaps ‘Bob Cranky’s Leum’nation Neet’ (in Fordyce and Fordyce 37–9).⁸ Meanwhile, William Midford authored ‘Bob Cranky’s Account of the Ascent of Mr Sadler’s Balloon’ (in Fordyce and Fordyce 42–4). I offer here quotations at length, though not exhaustive, from Selkirk’s song, ‘‘Size Sunday’ (in Bell 25–7). I also give select definitions in endnote form.⁹ Owing to the length of the extracts and detail of analysis I will provide line numbers for ‘‘Size Sunday’. Thus Bob sets out to see the pomp of the Assize procession at Newcastle:

HO’WAY¹⁰ and aw’ll sing thee a tune, mun,¹¹

‘Bout huz see’n my Lord at the town, mun,

Aw seer¹² aw was smart, now

Aw’ll lay thee a quart, now

Nyen' them aw¹³ cut a dash like Bob Cranky. 5

When aw pat on my blue coat that shines se,

My jacket wi' posies se fine see,

My sark¹⁴ sic¹⁵ sma' threed, man,

My pig-tail se greet, man!

Od smash! what a buck was Bob Cranky. 10

Blue stockings, white clocks,¹⁶ and reed garters,

Yellow breeks, and my shoon wi' lang quarters,

Aw myed wour bairns cry,

Eh! serties! ni! ni!

Sic verra fine things had Bob Cranky. 15

Aw went to awd Tom's and fand Nancy,

Kiv¹⁷ aw, Lass, thou's myed to my fancy;

Aw like thou as weel

As a stannin pye heel,¹⁸

Ho' way to the town wi' Bob Cranky. 20

As up Jenny's backside¹⁹ we were bangin,²⁰

Ki'²¹ Geordy, How!²² where are ye gannin?²³

Weyt' see my lord 'Sizes,

But ye shanna gan aside us,
For ye're not half se fine as Bob Cranky. 25

Ki' Geordy, We leve i' yen raw,²⁴ weyet,²⁵
I' yen²⁶ corf²⁷ we byeth gan below, weyet,
At a' things aw've play'd,
And to hew aw'm not flay'd,²⁸
Wi' sic in²⁹ a chep as Bob Cranky. 30

Bob hez thee at lowpin³⁰ and flingin,
At the bool, foot-ball, clubby, and swingin:
Can ye jump up and shuffle,
And cross owre³¹ the buckle,
When ye dance? like the clever Bob Cranky. 35

Thow naws, i' my hoggars³² and drawers,
Aw'm nyen o' your scarters³³ and clawers:
Fra the trap door bit laddy,³⁴
T' the spletter³⁵ his daddy,
Nyen handles the pick like Bob Cranky. 40

So, Geordy, od smash my pit sarik!³⁶
Thou'd best had thy whisht³⁷ about warik,³⁸

Or aw'll sobble³⁹ thy body,
And myek thy nose bloody,
If thou sets up thy gob to Bob Cranky. 45

Nan laugh'd – t'church we gat without 'im;
The greet crowd, becrike, how aw hew'd 'em!
Smasht a keel-bully⁴⁰ roar'd,
Clear the road! Whilk's⁴¹ my lord?
Owse⁴² se high as the noble Bob Cranky. 50

Having seen the procession they retire to an ale house with a few 'hearty lasses and fellows' (lines 56–7):

Aw gat drunk, fit,⁴³ and kick'd up a racket,
Rove my breeks and spoil'd a' my fine jacket:
Nan cry'd and she cuddled
My hinny,⁴⁴ thou's fuddled,
Ho'way hyem now, my bonny Bob Cranky. 65

So we stagger'd alang fra the town, mun,
Whiles gannin, whiles baith fairly down, mun:⁴⁵
Smash, a banksman⁴⁶ or hewer,⁴⁷
No not a fine viewer,⁴⁸
Durst jaw to the noble Bob Cranky. 70

Careless of his torn suit, Bob is confident that he will be able to buy finer clothes at a later date (lines 71–77).

An outline of Bob's character traits is appropriate here. He is a flamboyant dresser and extremely proud of this (3–15). Bob is a swearer and prone to oaths: 'Od smash! what a buck was Bob Cranky' (10), 'od smash my pit sarik!' (41), 'becrike' (47). This tendency to oaths is reflected in statistical analysis of the voices of pitmen and keelmen in early song more broadly and I shall discuss this shortly. Bob is impolite, blunt, and aggressive. Hence he rejects Geordy's company and threatens him with 'aw'll sobble thy body / And myek thy nose bloody' (43–44). He is bragging and proud with delusions of nobility and education, calling himself a 'buck' (10), 'fine' (25), 'clever' (35), and 'noble' (70). In another of Selkirk's songs 'Bob Cranky's Complaint', however, he hints at his own illiteracy (in Bell 28). Returning to 'Size Sunday', our 'hero' is also a violent drunkard and a spendthrift, careless of the cost of new clothing (61–77). Perhaps more positively, he is tough, energetic, and proud of his abilities at work: no-one 'handles the pick like Bob Cranky' (40). This self-attested prowess extends also to sport and dance (31–5), and he is also sexually confident: 'Lass, thou's myed to my fancy' (17). Finally, he can be pleasure-seeking and convivial (56–7). This image could, as we shall see, mean different things to different audiences, but it is useful first to examine whether these traits are found elsewhere.

The type represented by Bob is confirmed in the popular but anonymous song, 'Billy Oliver's Ramble'. The main protagonist, another coalminer, is virtually interchangeable with the 'hero' of 'Size Sunday'. Billy boasts of his fine looks and attire, his abilities at

work and his success with the ‘lasses’ (in Fordyce and Fordyce 24). On visiting Newcastle he says

aw walks wi’ sic an air,

That, if the folks hev eyes,

They a’wis think it’s sum greet man [. . .]. (in Fordyce and Fordyce 24)

Billy in his irrepressible chorus insists that he is ‘a cliver chep’ despite his singing in ‘the Cock’ leading ‘folks’ to demand ‘Haud yor tongue, ye cull⁴⁹ [. . .]’, the result being violence (in Fordyce and Fordyce 23–25).

Keelmen are depicted in a manner similar to coalminers. Here I will discuss comments about keelmen in song, whether written in Standard English or otherwise, in addition to the actual voices of the keelmen themselves. The anonymous, ‘Song on the Flight of the young Crows’, describes an unlikely future in which ‘keelmen, in *manners*’ will become ‘quite polite, / No *cursing* at morn, nor *much* drunk over night!’ (in Bell 78). As with the pitmen, the keelmen in much Tyneside song are indeed prone to swearing. Frequently they are drunkards, often illiterate, or depicted as lacking intelligence, and liable to mistakes and mishaps. Thus in Gilchrist’s song, ‘The Skipper’s Erudition’, keelmen who have been drunk the previous night forget the name of the ship ‘Amphitrite’ to which they must deliver coals (11). Sent by their skipper to enquire the name, two of them retire to a public house where they overhear a ‘Dandy’ refer to his ‘appetite’:

‘Appetite!’ cried the bullies⁵⁰ — like maislins⁵¹ they star’d,

Wide gyepin’ wi’ wonder, till ‘Crikes!’ Jemmy blair’d.⁵²

‘*The Appetite*, Geordie! smash dis thou hear that?’

The verry outlandish, cull⁵³ nyem we forgat'. (11)

The '[e]rudition' of the skipper to which the title alludes is ironic. He previously suggests that the name might be 'Empty Kite'⁵⁴ before accepting 'Appetite'.

There is also violent behaviour. In the anonymous piece 'The Sandgate Girls Lamentation', a keelman's wife says her 'loon' of a husband kicks her down the stairs, emphasising her woes in the chorus: 'And I have married a keelman, / And my good days are done' (in Bell 48–9). The unfortunate 'peedees' – boys who work aboard keels (Heslop 528) – likewise are often the target of beatings. In Armstrong's 'The Jenny Hoolet', the skipper 'maist fell'd the Pee Dee', before threatening an owl (in Fordyce and Fordyce 9). His keel run aground, he has mistaken its hoot for laughter: 'Iv a raving mad passion he curs'd and he swore / Aw'll hoo-hoo thou, thou b----r, when aw come ashore' (in Fordyce and Fordyce 9). Here, of course, aggression combines with low intelligence and swearing – typical traits of keelmen in the songs.

It is true that more positive representations exist than those which I have outlined. The 'new' versions of the well-known Tyneside song, 'Weel May the Keel Row', are notable in this respect. I have labelled these 'new' versions, both by Thomas Thompson, 'A' and 'B'. In the most popular, 'The New Keel Row A', a keelman is described by his sweetheart. He is a hard worker, a great dancer, likes to drink and has little learning (in Bell 6). These are attributes seen already in Bob Cranky. Nevertheless, we are told 'reet frae wrang discerning, / Tho' brave, ne bruiser he' (in Bell 6). This differentiates him from Bob and his violent ways. Furthermore in 'The [New] Keelrow B' the keelman is preoccupied with home and family:

Our canny⁵⁵ wives, our clean fireside,

Our bonny bairns, their parents' pride,
Sweet smiles that make life smoothly glide,

We find when we gan hyem [. . .]. (in Fordyce and Fordyce 114)

This resembles the images that Russell emphasises when he states that 'domestic pleasure' is 'arguably the single most powerful theme' in northern dialect literature (125). Nevertheless, in the Tyneside material considered here, the comic genre is dominant and in the range of these songs we frequently encounter drunkenness, swearing, irresponsible spending, low intelligence, impoliteness, and violence.

The similarities in the depiction of character trait among pitmen and keelmen are paralleled by similarities in the way they are represented in terms of language use. Indeed, pitmen and keelmen are represented in song through linguistic patterns which differentiate them from other voice types in the printed material of the period. I have shown elsewhere, using computer-based analysis, that pitmen and keelmen are most closely associated in song of the early nineteenth century with non-standard spellings (Hermeston forthcoming).⁵⁶ Taking into consideration the words 'and', 'I', and 'with', it emerges that in non-standard songs pitmen and keelmen as a category are represented through 61% non-standard spellings while the closest other category 'Othe Males' are represented using just 44% (see Appendix: Table 1). While spellings cannot represent speech accurately, this is an indication that writers associate pitmen and keelmen more than other groups with non-standard speech and probably the Tyneside accent. In addition, pitmen and keelmen are most closely associated with oaths and expletives in song (Hermeston forthcoming). Indeed they account for 90% of uses of the word 'smash' in the data examined from the early century (See Appendix: Table 2).⁵⁷ Such points

indicate that pitmen and keelmen as groups may indeed be linked to particular linguistic styles by authors and performers and that for songwriters and their audiences such styles have a particular range of social meanings arising specifically from their association with pitmen and keelmen. In order to understand what the language of these workers indexes we need to consider how audiences could respond to character depiction. However, it emerges that interpretation of character in the songs is the subject of debate among modern scholars.

Debated Voices

Sustained analysis of the genre of popular pitmen / keelmen songs has until recently been restricted mainly to the work of social historians. In this respect it is important to address a debate which developed in the 1970s and 1980s around Bob Cranky and other representations of the pitmen and keelmen in Tyneside song. Harker, who takes a rigidly Marxist perspective, denies that songs of the Bob Cranky type could appeal to 'a working man', and claims that 'no spokesman in song for working people' emerges until the likes of the singer-songwriters Corvan and Ridley in the early music hall period of the 1850s (1985: 77, 1971: xlv–v). Thus, Harker believes, for instance, that "'Size Sunday' and an earlier manuscript form are a means by which Bob is 'caricatured' and 'ritually pilloried', in a 'petit-bourgeois' song culture enjoyed by individuals who were gradually distancing themselves from pitmen and keelmen (1981: 41–3, 1985: 60, 74). Colls, a fellow historian, disagrees with Harker's analysis. For him, Bob is an 'Everyman' representative of the labouring class (Colls 1977: 26). He sees the pitman or keelman in song as a 'kind of Social Fool' – a drunken fighter, frequently in and out of 'love and work' (Colls 1977:

26–7). However, while accepting that the songs were caricatures and the early writers ‘were not of the Tyneside *sans culotterie*’ of whom they wrote, he insists that from the early century to the music hall period such material was acceptable to miners, keelmen and sailors, who ‘must have actively enjoyed their role as celebrities, found, in fact, a self-celebration in their attested notoriety’ (Colls 1977: 37, 51, 56).

The debate has continued though frequently in less depth than the earlier analysis. Russell refers to the ‘easy bonhomie and drink-fuelled cheeriness of the Tyneside “Bob Cranky” archetype’ (38). For Wales, too, figures such as Bob Cranky are ‘literary and cultural *archetypes*’ (2006: 133). The word ‘archetype’ implies something to be replicated socially and culturally. Joyce also has added briefly to the Bob Cranky debate and recognises that the ‘seemingly proletarian hero’ (257), who was taken up by workers, ‘might have a surprisingly unproletarian literary lineage, and with it a similar set of original values and associations’ (257). He also, as noted, identifies Bob as a rake, seen by workers from both critical and celebratory perspectives, but nevertheless suggests that celebration of such ‘Geordie’ identities symbolised by pitmen and keelmen is predominant (Joyce 269, 271–2, 283–4). Joyce does not go far enough in outlining Bob Cranky’s roots and as a consequence he fails to identify the full range of conflicting values that Bob might inspire. As noted, Joyce, Wales, and Russell are representative of the now dominant view that northern dialect literature more broadly promotes solidarity at levels such as region, locality, a labouring-class, the home, community, or in terms of populism. Yet such claims continue to sit uneasily with specific issues related to early Tyneside song, and most recently Keegan, has observed briefly that the Bob Cranky tradition may have perpetuated prejudices against the coalminer (183). Given that the

majority of the audience for Bob Cranky songs would have been local, this implies that the prejudice against the coalminer also was local and complicates ideas that the songs promote solidarity.

My own contention is that the songs have different meanings for different audiences and that language and its indexical relationship to character trait is central to these varied meanings. To understand this we need to explore pre-existing images of pitmen and keelmen, the historical and cultural contexts in which Bob Cranky songs and others are created and performed, audience reception of Bob as a character, and also the inferences drawn by audiences about the language that he speaks.

History, Song Culture, Image and Performance

Pitmen and keelmen suffered from unflattering reputations in the nineteenth century and earlier. Pollard notes that '[i]nnumerable observers [. . .] recorded their view of colliers as little more, and in some cases less, than savatges' (14). Keegan points out that 'the stereotype of the filthy, intemperate, improvident miner abounds in the nineteenth century' (184). Keelmen fair little better. Though they had a reputation for solidarity and made up a close-knit community, for the majority of them this was in the slums of Sandgate (Fewster 3–5; Lloyd 333). Wesley visiting Newcastle in 1742 was shocked by the 'drunkenness cursing and swearing' that he found in what was 'the poorest and most contemptible part of the Town' (cited in Fewster 4). Sixty years on and the Presbyterian minister, Baillie, claimed that 'not many years ago' keelmen had been characterised by 'ferocity and savage roughness' (cited in Fewster 4). Fewster, however, casts doubt on the alleged improvements (4). Certainly in 1812 a letter by William Potter to the Coal

Trade Committee still identified a need ‘to civilise such eccentric mortals as pitmen and Keelman [sic]’ (cited in Colls 1977: 55).

Observations and stereotypes may often have been made by social or geographical outsiders, and the observations may be partial and inaccurate. Nonetheless, much Tyneside song does seem to play on such limited perspectives. Well-known writers of much material in the early nineteenth century were frequently shopkeepers, clerks, artisans, and small tradesmen. Towards the end of the century, Allan comments that these writers performed for their friends at social meetings, and that such meetings held among tradesmen in public houses were ‘the rage’ (v, 230). Marshall in his anthology of 1827 comments on the manner in which these writers depicted Tyneside’s best-known workers:

Our Keelmen and Pitmen have generally been the common subjects of satire for our local Poets; but, in attempting to describe the character of these useful bodies of men, the Poets appear often to have claimed their privilege, and given, instead of faithful portraits, only rude caricatures; – delineations not characteristic of the Keelmen and Pitmen of the present day. (i)

Fifteen years later in their own edition of songs the Fordyces are not so sure that character traits singled out for ‘satire’ have entirely disappeared among the ‘humbler classes of society’ (iii). The reality of behaviour is not the main issue at this stage of my argument. The point is that these are not simply scholarly commentaries. They are made at the beginning of editions whose title pages also carry the message about satire. On its title page Marshall’s collection is labelled ‘satirical’. The Fordyces do the same, as does

the author Midford in his collection of 1818. The use of this word on title pages is advertising, aimed at attracting readers. It must be acknowledged then that much of the enjoyment taken by clerks, artisans, and tradesmen was in response to a genre based on satire. In this respect it is useful to consider the anonymous song, 'A Parody on Billy Oliver's Ramble'. The 'hero', Willie Dixon, a coachmaker, who is 'flaid' (or frightened) of pitmen, appears to be the embodiment of a song culture that mocks them:

On Pay-day neets aw gan to the Cock,
When the pitmen's aw gyen hyem,
Then aw begins to rair and sing,
And myek o' them a gye. (in Fordyce and Fordyce 25)

This is obviously a direct response to the earlier song, 'Billy Oliver's Ramble'. More broadly, it also appears to be a riposte to a genre, a tradition of mockery in songs about coalminers and their character.⁵⁸ An examination of the perspectives and discourses which underpin the satire is now required. This will also help to explain evidence for the enjoyment taken in the songs by pitmen and keelmen (whatever the provenance of the 'Parody on Billy Oliver's Ramble'). In addition, it will help to explain the emergence of varied social meanings indexed through language in song by describing the nature of the dialogism which facilitates such social meanings.

What then underlies meanings arising through song for a range of audiences? I contend that concepts of 'proper speech', 'respectability' and self-improvement are central to this. Agha discusses a gradual spread of related notions about correct speech and correct behaviour reaching the aristocracy and intelligentsia through pronouncing dictionaries before 1800; they then reached the 'middle classes' through, among other things, the

novel and guides to etiquette; finally, by the mid 1850s, Agha says, penny weeklies brought such messages to the 'lower middle and upper working classes' (259). In the case of the northeast, it must be added that among the industrial labouring-class much of the impetus towards 'respectable' codes came from within. Colls argues that this was most fully carried through by Methodists, above all Primitives, among whom labouring people were strongly represented (1977: 77, 1987: 200). Wesleyans were established by the start of the nineteenth century, but the Primitives, who had been founded in 1811, reached County Durham and Tyneside in 1820; they were established in the coalfield by 1825, and by 1845 their activities were central to local life (Colls 1987: 11). Thomas Wilson, in a preface to an 1843 edition of his lengthy Tyneside dialect poem, 'The Pitman's Pay', describes improvements that have occurred among pitmen in the foregoing years (vii–viii). These changes, he argues, are due to the Sunday Schools; the promotion of useful knowledge through cheaply available publications; and the new Savings Banks. Wilson claims that on Sundays, miners, who forty years previously might have been found gambling or gaming, can now be seen at home reading, or 'if absent, they will be either at the Methodist chapel or a prayer-meeting' (viii). Wilson's is not the only perspective. One pitman, a Methodist Sunday School teacher, told Government commissioners in 1842, that many of his fellows were fond of drink and 'desperately wicked' (cited in Colls 1977: 57). Timescales are therefore difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, Uglow alludes to the 'respectable atmosphere that settled like a cloud' by the time of the Napoleonic wars (314). Overall, there seems very little doubt that whatever the reality of their effect on behaviour particularly among the industrial labouring class, discourses circulate from early in the nineteenth century which gradually make the middle and lower

classes aware of ideas about correct speech, etiquette, and the virtues of education, self-help, and self-improvement. It should be added also that such discourses could result in expressions of revulsion towards pitmen and keelmen as seen in the accounts given above by those observing them. In addition, for Colls, the activities of the Primitives in particular represented a concerted attack on the perceived evils of popular culture (1977: 77–9).

Artisans, clerks, and small tradesmen were prominent among the primary audiences for early songs and might feel themselves to be more sophisticated and cultured than pitmen and keelmen. The first printed version of ‘Size Sunday’ appears with musical notation and carries the humorous instruction ‘Allegretto Pitmanale’ (cited in Harker 1985: 66). It is also stated that the piece is written by a ‘Gentleman of Newcastle’ (cited in Harker 1985: 66). The mock instruction reinforces the notion that Bob should be viewed as a type, a stock character, while the claim that the song is by a ‘Gentleman’ also suggests a contrast between Bob and the writer (or writers to be more accurate). These points indicate a degree of interaction or dialogism between the representation of the miner and his utterances (low culture) and the world of high culture, signalled by the mock Italian and the word ‘Gentleman’. Whether the main author Selkirk, a clerk, is indeed a gentleman, is unclear, but Bob, at least from this viewpoint, certainly is not.

The influence of discourses of ‘respectability’ is suggested by a commentary in 1849 by the writer and editor, Robson, on Shield’s song, ‘Bob Cranky’s Adieu’. Bound for a period of soldiering in Newcastle, the ‘hero’ urges his sweetheart to console herself:

Come, ho’way get a jill o’ beer,
Thy heart to cheer [. . .]

Cheer up, ma hinny! leet thy pipe,

And take a blast o' backy! (in Bell 31)

Referring to Bob's suggestions, Robson comments: 'What unbounded affection! What a tender appeal!' and 'Soothing request!' (vi). These remarks, ironic as they are, point to the manner in which such works could be received earlier in the nineteenth century among those more educated and 'sophisticated' than Bob. The pitman's speech, manners and exhortations are completely at odds with the potential meanings suggested by the French element 'Adieu' in the song's title. Robson, a schoolmaster, apologises in his edition for presenting songs that might be deemed 'vulgar and decidedly ungenteel' (v).⁵⁹ However, he also singles out 'Bob Cranky's Adieu' as the 'perfection' of local songs, offerings by his brothers in the 'gentle craft', at which he has 'laughed to tears' (Robson vii). In reality it seems that it is the vulgar in dialogue with the genteel which provokes Robson's laughter.

That these songs could appeal to pitmen and keelmen despite being labelled 'satirical' by early editors has been remarked already in this article (cf. Colls 1977: 51; Vicinus 34–36; Gregson and Huggins 88). There is also evidence that pitmen were proud of their rough and ready ways and indeed that the very name, *Cranky*, could be used as a term of admiration among them. Brockett notes this in 1825 in his dictionary:

That man in the village, who is most conspicuous for dress, or who excels the rest of the villagers in the sports and pastimes held in estimation amongst them, is called, by way of pre-eminence, the *Cranky*. (Brockett 48)

These are surely some of the activities about which Bob Cranky boasts. But to return to the songs more broadly, Marshall states in 1827 that earlier collections published by him have been read by the 'labouring classes' (i). Colls also cites evidence from 1850 that the miner's 'library' though scanty often would include a 'song-book' (1977: 51–2). Marshall claims that the satire has helped in the education and improvement of the 'labouring class' (i). However, this ignores the fact that satire can be reinterpreted and appropriated by those who are satirised. As indicated, different readers or audiences and even members of the same audience, would not necessarily derive the same meaning from Tyneside song (cf. Bailey 1986: 65–6, Bratton xii).

It is relevant at this point to consider interpretations of song in the music hall which emerged towards the middle of the nineteenth century, in other words later than the songs that I am discussing here. Interpretations tend to view this national genre (indulged mainly by labouring-class audiences) as resistant to (usually middle class) discourses of 'respectability' and self-improvement, and efforts to impose these on the lower orders (Kift 64–7, 176, 182; Bailey 1994: 155; Medhurst 67; Gregson and Huggins 91). While, as noted, much of the drive towards labouring-class 'respectability' on Tyneside came from religious groups within the labouring classes (Colls 1977: 73, 77, 1987: 200), such resistance might also account for much of the pleasure taken earlier by pitmen and keelmen in Bob Cranky. Corvan's somewhat retrospective music hall song, 'The Pitman and the Kipperred Herrin', certainly suggests this:

'Boot pitmen an' keelmen thou's hard some queer jokes,
What wi' blunders, misteykes, an' thor funny queer spokes:
But when we get a drop beer we're a' full o' glee,

Gosh, we meyke mony a blunder when we gan on the spree [. . .]. (1850s:
Song Book 1, 13)

Corvan emphasises exuberance or ‘glee’. At its extreme, of course, this ‘glee’ could manifest itself as ignorance of discourses of ‘respectability’. However, another form of ‘glee’ might involve participation in ‘non-respectable’ behaviour or enjoyment of its representation, despite knowledge of discourses describing labouring people as brutes, or over intrusive pressure towards reform, self-improvement, ‘correct speech’, and ‘respectability’.⁶⁰ Thus we have a rationale for understanding the pleasure taken by industrial workers in the earlier songs in addition to the audiences for whom they were originally performed.

Dialogism and Social Meaning

The range of audience responses to song that I have outlined so far – whether those of clerks, artisans and shopkeepers, or pitmen and keelmen – is crucial to a nuanced appreciation of texts and performance. Interpretation of character and, in turn, the language characters are represented as using is dependent upon such audience response. I have shown that a genre exists which carries with it specific expectations about the representation of character. Certain prejudices and stereotypes exist more widely about pitmen and keelmen. No doubt writers on occasions also observe real behaviour. However, audience response to song remains central in the production of meaning. I have referred already to Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism and his belief that the meaning of an utterance arises as it brushes against ‘contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgements’ (276, 281). I have also noted Ochs’s claim that Bakhtin’s ideas have been

central to work on indexicality, since the ‘voices of [the] speaker/writer and others may be blended in the course of the message and become part of the social meanings indexed within the message’ (1992: 338). I contend that the following types of response to Bob Cranky and the voices of pitmen and keelmen more broadly in song might be possible, though the list is not exhaustive and responses are not mutually exclusive. Audiences might view Bob as a target of satire and laugh from an assumed position of cultural superiority in relation to his character; they might enjoy his character traits as a resistance to or respite from contemporary and frequently intrusive discourses of ‘respectability’, improvement, refinement, morality, and religion. Finally, audiences might enjoy for their own sake Bob’s exuberance, his drunkenness, swearing, and violent tendencies. Even boasts in song about working ability and prowess may be subject to such multiple meanings. On the one hand they could convey narrow horizons and intellectual limitations, on the other hand, pride and dignity in the face of moral attacks or simple exuberance.⁶¹ In broad terms these points suggest a two-way continuum of possible responses to song which is available to audiences of clerks, shopkeepers and tradesmen, and also to the pitmen or keelmen. These may all speak Tyneside dialect. However, this continuum will have an impact on the perceived social meanings of the dialect in the mouths of pitmen and keelmen in song, since it will affect the manner in which behaviour is viewed. Different types of audience will perceive different indexical relations between the pitmen or keelmen and the Tyneside dialect, according to their attitude towards those groups, as depicted in song, and the nature of the dialogism involved. This in large part depends upon the cultural discourses and knowledge they bring to texts.

These arguments cause considerable difficulty for now dominant claims that through its language, northern dialect literature and song in general promotes solidarity at the levels of the home, community, locality and region, or a 'labouring-class'. By engaging with an earlier debate specific to Tyneside song, I have shown that the social meaning indexed by dialect is far more complex. I certainly do not deny that material can and does carry meanings of solidarity and local patriotism and indeed the potential for this is great. Tyneside songs, however, may need to evolve in order for such straightforward connotations to become unambiguous. The passage of time may be necessary, for instance, for the original implications of material to be lost. Likewise repeated publication of songs in anthologies marketed as 'Tyneside song' aids this process and creates canonical locally representative material. Nevertheless, original meanings of song are highly complex in comparison to this, and include satire, mockery, celebration, resistance and exuberance.

Conclusion

Local dialect and accent are central to the meaning of early nineteenth-century songs about pitmen and keelmen. Rather than follow a straightforward assumption that language reflects regional, local or labouring-class identities, and values of solidarity and community or homeliness, I have focused on the related notion of indexicality or social meaning in language and the multiple connotations emergent in performance or reading which this involves. The meaning of the Tyneside dialect in the mouths of pitmen and keelmen and as represented especially through Bob Cranky relates to character and group character in addition to any class or regional connotations. Sub-local antagonisms and

cultural distinctions informed by prior discourses of ‘respectability’ impact dialogically upon reception of songs. This in large degree explains why such widely varied responses have emerged in relation to material specific to Tyneside among some early scholars of the texts. Thus songs do afford enjoyment of satire for artisans, clerks, and small tradesmen who might perceive themselves to be familiar with issues of ‘respectability’, politeness, and self-improvement. Pitmen and keelmen on the other hand, as indicated also by interpretations of subsequent music hall material, may take pleasure as respite from or resistance to such discourses of ‘respectability’ or simply in terms of exuberance. These varied responses, as noted, are not mutually exclusive but they do affect the indexical relations of character to Tyneside dialect. The songs and the language within them, whatever their origin, afford and construct through dialogue with varied audience experience and attitudes, both satirical and celebratory meanings. Only later is it possible to talk far less ambiguously of them promoting regional and labouring-class loyalties and identities.

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Appendix

Table 1: Proportions of Non-Standard and Standard English (StE) Variants in 59 Non-Standard Dialect Songs Prior to 1849 (combining the three variables ‘and’, ‘I’, and ‘with’)⁶²

	% non-standard	% StE	Total variants
Pitmen / keelmen	61%	39%	468
Their wives / sweethearts	33%	67%	63
Other male voices	44%	56%	631
Other female voices	33%	67%	51
Mixed / ungendered voices			0

Standard and non-standard variant spellings of the words are as follows:

‘And’: <and>, <an’> / <an>

‘I’: <I>, <Aw> / <aw>

‘With’: <with> / <wi’> / <wi>, <wiv>

Words forming part of an abbreviation are not counted.

Table 2: Proportions of use of the Word ‘smash’ in 59 Non-Standard Dialect Songs and 16 Standard English Songs Featuring Non-Standard Dialect Prior to 1849

Pitmen / keelmen	90%
Their wives / sweethearts	0%
Other male voices	8%
Other female voices	0%
Mixed / ungendered voices	2%
Total occurrences	48

Notes

¹ I will give preference to the term ‘labouring-class’ in this paper rather than the more ideologically loaded ‘working-class’.

² For linguists the oft cited link between language and group identity supports these interpretations (see Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 181; Mendoza-Dennton 480–2, 486–9), as does the well-established correlation between regional dialect, accents, and labouring-class speech (see Trudgill 30–1).

³ The term ‘Geordie’ refers to the inhabitants of Tyneside.

⁴ Actual research on communities of practice involves close observation of human behaviour during fieldwork.

⁵ I do not explore the origins of the word ‘Geordie’ in this article.

⁶ Heslop (196) believes that the term ‘cranky’ probably originates from the checked clothing worn by pitmen as a ‘swagger costume’.

⁷ The collector and editor Bell added some verses to ‘Size Sunday’ (see Allan 88).

⁸ In line with the Fordyces, Robson (8) also attributes ‘Bob Cranky’s Leum’nation Neet’ to Shield. Allan, however, gives it to Selkirk (85).

⁹ Unless otherwise stated definitions given for words in these endnotes are taken directly or derived from the dictionary *Northumberland Words* (Heslop).

¹⁰ A ‘term of encouragement’ (Griffiths 87).

¹¹ Listed under *man*: a ‘familiar term of address to a person of either sex or of any age; often used at the end of a sentence to give it special emphasis’ (*English Dialect Dictionary*).

¹² Sure.

¹³ None of them all (my gloss).

¹⁴ Shirt.

¹⁵ Such.

¹⁶ Dandelion head decorations embroidered onto shoes (Harker 1985: 59).

¹⁷ Said.

¹⁸ Perhaps the bottom or top crust of a loaf of bread or a pie (see *Oxford English Dictionary* under *heel* especially the Langland quotation ‘pye hele’).

¹⁹ The ‘back premises of a house or building’.

²⁰ Rushing violently.

²¹ Said.

²² A ‘salutation’.

²³ Going.

²⁴ Live in one row of houses (my gloss).

²⁵ Listed under *wait*, an exclamation ‘surely’ or ‘isn’t it so?’.

²⁶ One (my gloss).

²⁷ A ‘large basket’ (Brockett 46).

²⁸ Frightened.

²⁹ Such.

³⁰ Leaping.

³¹ Over.

³² Footless stockings.

³³ Scratchers: the sense being that Bob does not scratch the surface, he does real work.

³⁴ A boy operating an ‘air-door in a pit’.

³⁵ A ‘pit worker’ (Griffiths 161).

³⁶ Pit shirt.

³⁷ ‘[H]old your tongue’.

³⁸ Work (my gloss).

³⁹ Thrash.

⁴⁰ A keelman.

⁴¹ Which is?

⁴² Anything.

⁴³ Fought (Griffiths 59).

⁴⁴ A ‘sweetheart’.

⁴⁵ Sometimes walking, sometimes both collapsing (my gloss).

⁴⁶ In a pit ‘the man who has control of the shaft top’.

⁴⁷ A ‘coalface worker’ (Griffiths 83).

⁴⁸ The ‘chief manager of a colliery’.

⁴⁹ A fool (Griffiths 41).

⁵⁰ The crew of a keel are called ‘the *bullies*’.

⁵¹ Simpletons.

⁵² Shouted loudly.

⁵³ Foolish (Griffiths 41).

⁵⁴ The stomach.

⁵⁵ ‘[K]indly, good, and gentle’.

⁵⁶ This involved quantitative analysis of an electronic corpus of nineteenth-century Tyneside songs using the software package Oxford WordSmith Tools 4.0. The package locates and counts specified features of language. The electronic corpus comprised 285 songs in total. Analysis of spellings for the early nineteenth century is based on 59 non-standard dialect songs. My literary analysis in this article extends beyond the corpus.

⁵⁷ Analysis of the word ‘smash’ is based on 59 non-standard dialect songs and a further 16 Standard English songs featuring non-standard dialect. The latter may have a Standard English narrator but characters speaking in non-standard dialect or contain minimal non-standard dialect (cf. Shorrocks 1996:386).

⁵⁸ In Selkirk’s ‘Bob Cranky’s Complaint’ (in Bell 27–9) Bob rails against the writer of a comic song about him, noting that townfolk often call pitmen ‘gowks’ or fools. The issue is, nevertheless, a complex one. Bob is irrepressible asserting in the ‘Complaint’ (in Bell 29) that he will continue to attend the Assize procession despite its provoking mockery. Also in ‘Bob Cranky’s Leum’nation Neet’, probably by Shield (in Fordyce and Fordyce 37–9), he is permitted amid his usual confusion to state that in cold weather those who are ‘cliver’ still need the aid of his ‘pick’. Overall, nevertheless, the tone of songs remains satirical.

⁵⁹ Robson, nevertheless, also writes music hall songs for industrial labouring-class audiences.

⁶⁰ Corvan, however, also strongly defends labouring-class decency in songs such as ‘The Happy Keelman’ (1850: 11–12).

⁶¹ It is noteworthy that in William Stephenson’s satirical song, ‘The Quaside Shaver’ (in Bell 44), pitmen awaiting a shave ‘[d]iscourse about nought but whee puts and hews best’. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt of the pride taken by pitmen in hard physical work (cf. Vicinus 36; Colls 1977: 65). This eventually fed into trade union rhetoric about manliness, humanity, worth, fair treatment, and fair pay (Colls 1977: 121–7).

⁶² The date ensures that statistical analysis excludes very early music hall songs by Robson.