A Note on the Speech of Dickensian Characters

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I

What no one will fail to find in Dickens' prose at its best is the remarkable rendering of English language which glows with the liveliness, the vitality of human speech. His ears are always alive to the human consequences of spoken language. When he listens to people talk, he seems to hear what is signified by the forms of language and whatever nuances brought out by the choice of a particular word, tone of voice, emphasis, sentence structure and so on. His sense of language can be seen in linguistic rendering of psychological observation. Attention to the forms of language is important when we are really going to appreciate him not only as a master of English language but also as an observer of human mind. The following remark comes from a man who is deaf to the human consequences of Dickens' linguistic art:

For the reader of cultivated taste there is little in his works beyond the stirring of their emotions—but what a large exception! We do not turn over the pages in search of thought, delicate psychological observation, grace of style, charm of composition; but we enjoy them like children at a play, laughing and crying at the images which pass before us.¹

G. H. Lewes goes so far as to say:

Dickens sees and feels, but the logic of feeling seems the only logic he can manage. Thought is strangely absent from his works. I do not suppose a single thoughtful remark on life or character could be found throughout the twenty volumes. Not only is there a marked absence of the reflective tendency, but one sees no indication of the past life of humanity having ever occupied him; keenly as he observes the objects before him, he never connects his observations into a general expression, never seems interested in general relations of things.²

Since Lewes, there have been many who complained of the lack of 'thought' in Dickens. As Lewes found nothing 'beyond the stirring of emotion', so Henry James fixed the limits of the novelist whose insight never goes 'beneath the surface of things':

... we are convinced that it is one of the chief conditions of his genius not to see beneath the surface of things. If we might hazard a definition of his literary character, we should, accordingly, call him the greatest of superficial novelists... it were, in our opinion, an offence against humanity to place Mr. Dickens among the greatest novelists. For, to repeat what we have already intimated, he has created nothing but figure. He has added nothing
to our understanding of human character.  

But we will find this is not true if we reread Dickens with a careful attention to the way language works. We find Dickens' delicate observation of the relationship between speech and human mind. As we shall see in this paper, he designs his thought into a prose which is rich with suggestion. The mistake which many of the recent critics seem to have made is that they do not understand why he is not concerned with presenting his thought directly in his works in such a way as to make the reader see at once what he thinks of life. Dickens' art aims at creating a world in which the reader is left to make out by himself what his message is. And what we should do is to expose ourselves again and again to his prose where his delicate observation of life shades into the colour, the texture, and the form of language.

Thus the purpose of this paper is to try to show what recent critics—people concerned with 'thought'—seem to have failed to see in Dickens: keen observations of human nature and experience as represented in linguistic designs of his prose. To discuss Dickens' works as a whole is beyond the scope of a brief paper. What I propose to do is to choose some typical examples of Dickens' remarkable rendering of human speech to illustrate his genius which is sensitively responsive to the relationship between human mind and the use of language.

Linguists have noticed that many of Dickensesian characters have their own habitual phrases which frequently come to their lips. Their speeches offer numerous examples of Dickens' use of language for the purpose of individualization, identification, and typification. Many of the forms of characters' language correspond to their appearances and idiosyncrasies, and they are not changed throughout the novel. As Randolph Quirk puts it, 'virtue shines through the pure and obviously sanctioned lexicon and syntax of Oliver Twist or of Lizzie Hexam.' Oliver's language is not influenced by the slangs of the underworld just as his virtue is not affected by his fate. Barkis's attitude toward life is engraved in the form of his speech. We hear him saying, 'Barkis is willin', when he woos Miss Peggotty. We meet him again, on the verge of death, later in the novel, uttering the same sentence, 'Barkis is willin', manifesting his attitude toward life. The form of his speech mirrors the view through which he forms his life. The language of the old man in The Old Curiosity Shop, as we shall see, shows that his world view is narrowed to a persistence in trying to provide for Nell by means of gambling. As long as his view is so blinkered, it is clear he is drawn to a tragedy. What is told by the semantic rendering of his speech is: 'It is for thy good, Nell.', but what is shown by the form of his language is his incapacity to do good for Nell. Uriah Heep's insincere reference to his humbleness is a typical manifestation of his hypocrisy: the following is an obvious example:

'A person like myself had better not aspire. If he is to get on in life, he must get on umbly, Master Copperfield!' (David Copperfield, p. 312)

His language, however, needs a careful observation throughout the novel because, as the novel goes on, his manner of speaking finds its way to an expression of his real intention—aspiration to make himself in the world. What we should note is the way in which his humility is shown as a false one. His speech is by no means simple. Compare his speech in Chapter XVII,
where he frequently addresses David as 'Master Copperfield' with the following quotations from Chapter XVII where Uriah shows himself as planning to revenge himself upon Mrs Strong:

'Really, Master Copperfield,' he said, '—I should say Mister, but I know you'll excuse the abit I've got into—you're so insinuating, that you draw me like a corkscrew!' (p. 673)

Even after this remark, we see Uriah still keeping his 'abit' [habit] of addressing 'Master Copperfield', but now we know that it is loaded with hidden implication of his resentment. For some time, he uses 'Master Copperfield' and 'Copperfield' by turns until at last David strikes his face in the latter part of the chapter where he reveals himself as a rogue, as it were; then he entirely switches 'Master Copperfield' to 'Copperfield'. Comparison of Uriah's speech throughout the novel shows an increasing density of his malevolent nature.

II

We may now confine our attention to two characters in order to look more carefully into Dickens' art in speech representation. Observation is made, first, on the speech of Jarvis Lorry in A Tale of Two Cities, and then on the speech of Nell's grandfather in the Old Curiosity Shop.

Lorry is really a minor character in the novel: Sydney Carton, Charles Darnay, Doctor Manette are the central characters of the novel; and more important than Lorry. To take an austere view of them, however, they are all flat characters and Jarvis Lorry is not an exception. We will admit at the same time that we remember Lorry long after we close the book. It is important therefore to consider how Lorry, minor and flat character as he is, attracts our interest. He is striking because he is one of the few humorous characters in the novel, and we should notice that his speech is designed to create a human effect. Thus his speech deserves a detailed consideration.

He is characterized as a business man who has spent a great part of his life working for Tellson's Bank. As often in Dickens, the description of how the character looks like is a detailed one. The following is a quotation from Chapter VI where he is formally introduced to the reader:

Very orderly and methodical he looked, with a hand on each knee, and a loud watch ticking a sonorous sermon under his flapped waistcoat, as though it pitted its gravity and longevity against the levity evanescence of the brisk fire . . . A face habitually suppressed and quieted, was still lighted up under the quaint wig by a pair of moist bright eyes that it must have cost their owner, in years gone by, some pains to drill to the composed and reserved expression of Tellson's Bank. (p. 49)

In this description we see that Lorry as a Bank official has a very orderly and methodical appearance, and we may take it as manifesting Lorry's character. Dickens makes it a habit to describe the appearance of a man as suggestive of his character and personality. If we turn back to Chapter II we find a passenger who can be recognized as Lorry. He is described as a man speaking 'in a tone of quiet business confidence' (p. 41). Typification of Lorry is made also by the remarks made by other characters on him as a man of business. See what Stryver
has to say about him: 'Here is a man of business' (p. 175); and there is Carton who says, 'So, Mr. Lorry! Men of business may speak to Mr. Darnay now?' (p. 112). Dickens also makes Lorry refer to his own character: 'Miss Manette, I am a man of business.' (p. 54); 'I have no feelings; I am a mere machine.' (p. 54); 'Feelings! I have no time of them, no chance of them' (p. 55); 'We men of business, who serve a House, are not our own masters. We have to think of the House more than ourselves' (p. 113); and 'I have been a man of business, ever since I have been a man. Indeed, I may say that I was a man of business when a boy.' (p. 339) Along with these, he is typified as a man of business by using habitual phrases associated with business. Words like 'a matter of business', 'Business!' and 'That's business' are often on his lips in the early chapters of the novel, and 'as a man of business' occurs two times in Chapter IX of Book 3.

It is important to note, besides, that Dickens is not content to make Lorry a mere type. He creates a bit of human depth in the type. If we feel a human interest in the type it is because we find a conflict in Lorry's personality between the methodicality as required from a bank clerk and the humanity as essential to human beings. Dickens, quite reasonably, puts a word of criticism of the inhumane element of the type on the lips of another character: after the trial at Old Bailey, Sydney Carton says with an ironical tone to Charles Darnay in the presence of Lorry:

'If you knew what a conflict goes on in the business mind, when the business mind is divided between good-natured impulse and business appearances, you would be amused, Mr Darnay.' (pp. 112–113)

Carton presents us an important view of the type of Lorry, although we know he only says it for a rag: If there is a human depth in the man of business at all, it is because of the pathos which comes from the conflict between good-natured impulse and business appearances. But we do not need to have gone so far as to cite Carton's criticism for the illustration: if we read the novel very carefully we will find that Dickens very adroitly designs Lorry's language into a form suggestive of a human depth. Randolph Quirk points out that 'a character's occupation colour his language as they effect other aspect of his behaviour also', and the same can be said of Lorry's language to a great extent as has been illustrated above. In creating Lorry, however, Dickens seems to do more than the occupational typification by language: Dickens makes the reader glance at a human depth that lies beneath the type. Consider, for example, the following: After Lorry arrived at the Royal George Hotel at Dover where he plans to see Miss Manette, he has a talk with a waiter in the coffee-room:

'We have sometimes the honour to entertain your gentlemen in their travelling backwards and forwards betwixt London and Paris, sir. A vast deal of travelling, sir, in Tellson and Company’s House.' [ , said the waiter]

'Yes. We are quite a French House, as well as an English one.' [ , said Lorry]

'Yes, sir. Not much in the habit of such travelling yourself, I think, sir?'

'Not of late years. It is fifteen years since we — since I — came last from France.' (p. 50)
In this quotation we should notice that Lorry makes mistake in answering the question of the waiter: the question is about Lorry as an individual; but Lorry begins his answer with 'we' as a representative of the Tellson’s Bank as can be seen in 'It is fifteen years since we...'; and quite strikingly Lorry recognizes his mistake himself and corrects 'since we' into 'since I'. It is interesting to remember, in this connection, what he says later in the novel: 'We men of business, who serve a House, are not our own masters. We have to think of the House more than ourselves' (p. 92). It is important to note that the human element is introduced to the whole way in which he is typified throughout the novel. He is typified as a man of business—as a man who is likely to hide his personality while he is engaged in his business. Dickens’s interest, however, goes further in creating a human feeling latent in a type. In the quotation above, we see that Lorry is going to refer to himself as no more than a representative of the Bank even when his own self is in question. The pathos that we see in Lorry here is dramatical enough to make us remember him as a man possessed with something deeper than the surface. Furthermore in the later part of chapter IV and in chapter V we find that Lorry’s language is designed to produce a pathetic irony by means of the contrast between good-natured impulse and business appearances. Consider, for example, how Lorry cheers up Miss Manette when they are going to meet her father greatly changed after restored to life. In the following passage we can see a remarkable example of the good-natured impulse of Lorry contrasted with his effort to keep his business appearances:

'A—a—a—business, business!' he urged, with a moisture that was not of business shining on his cheek. (p. 64)

For want of space, we cannot quote other examples of this kind, but if we reread the two chapters (which describe the conversation between Lorry and Miss Manette and their journey to the garret at Saint Antoine) we find the language of Lorry referring to business should not be taken for its face value.

In the preceding paragraph it was made clear that Lorry’s speech offers an example of a sort of human depth in the use of language, which will illustrate E. M. Forster’s admiration of Dickens’ characterization. Let us remind ourselves of his own comment on his definition of Dickensian characters as flat:

Dickens’s people are nearly all flat... Nearly every one can be summed up in a sentence, and yet there is this wonderful feeling of human depth. Probably the immense vitality of Dickens causes his characters to vibrate a little, so that they borrow his life and appear to lead one of their own... Part of the genius of Dickens is that he does use types and caricatures, people whom we recognize the instant they re-enter, and yet achieves effects that are not mechanical and a vision of humanity that is not shallow.¹⁰

When E. M. Forster sees in Dickens 'a vision of humanity that is not shallow', he is nearer the truth than G. H. Lewes and Henry James, but he does not go further to have a close look at how the flatness of Dickens’ characters is designed to create depth. We need, then, make a
close look at their language. But this is not to say that a linguistic approach is enough: linguistic approach often ends in making lists of linguistic phenomenon found in novels and classifying them under grammatical items. We should keep in mind that 'effects that are not mechanical' come from Dickens' observation of man's experience and nature. Illustration of such a minor character as Lorry makes us sure that Dickens' observation of language is congruent with his observation of human mind.

We may now turn from speeches in minor scale in minor characters, so as to look into a case where language is designed not merely for the purpose of typification, identification, and individualization, but for presenting a character's response to the world that he or she faces.

The form of speech of Little Nell's grandfather in Old Curiosity Shop deserves a consideration in this line. The reason is that what seems to be important to Dickens in relating the sad story of a little girl is not so much the exposition of the cruelty of the world (as epitomized in Quilp) as the representation of the foolish process of the old man's love for his granddaughter. The irony is that the tragedy comes from his overmastering desire to provide for Nell—a blinded love which finds its way to confirmed gambling. Gambling is—according to him—not for his sake but for the sake of his granddaughter. When he asks Quilp for a loan, he says, 'Help me for her sake I implore you—not for mine, for hers!': here is a tragedy because what leads Nell (and the old man alike) to a misery in the end is the fact that his love for her is the sole ground of his resorting to a gambling table. He is such a narrow-sighted old man stupidified with age that he believes his love for her can be justified in hoping he will win in gambling some day. However, there is no correlation between the depth of his love and the probability of his winning, and that is what Dickens aims at in describing this personage. In the following passage we can see Dickens' adroit rendering of the manner of speech of an old man obsessed by the desire to win in gambling: (The old man and Little Nell, in the course of wandering through the country, are caught in a storm and take refuge in an inn where he is excited to find a group of men playing cards):

‘Nell, they're—they're playing cards,’ whispered the old man, suddenly interested. 'Don't you hear them?'

'Look sharp with that candle,' said the voice; 'it's as much as I can do to see the pips on the cards as it is; and get this shutter closed as quick as you can, will you? Your beer will be the worse for to-night's thunder I expect. —Game! Seven-and-sixpence to me, old Isaac. Hand over.'

'Do you hear, Nell, do you hear them?' whispered the old man again, with increased earnestness, as the money chinked upon the table.

'I haven't seen such a storm as this,' said a sharp cracked voice of most disagreeable quality, when a tremendous peal of thunder had died away, 'since the night when old Luke Withers won thirteen times running on the red. We all said he had the Devil's luck and his own, and as it was the kind of night for the Devil to be out and busy, I suppose he was looking over his shoulder, if anybody could have seen him.'

'Ah!' returned the gruff voice; 'for all old Luke's winning through thick and thin of late years, I remember the time when he was the unluckiest and unfortunatest of men. He never
took a dice-box in his hand, or held a card, but he was plucked, pigeoned, and cleaned out completely.'

'Do you hear what he says?' whispered the old man. 'Do you hear that, Nell?'

The child saw with astonishment and alarm that his whole appearance had undergone a complete change. His face was flushed and eager, his eyes were strained, his teeth set, his breath came short and thick, and the hand he laid upon her arm trembled so violently that she shook beneath its grasp.

'Bear witness,' he muttered, looking upward, 'that I always said it; that I knew it, dreamed of it, felt it was the truth, and that it must be so! What money have we, Nell? Come! I saw you with some money yesterday. What money have we? Give it to me.'

'No, no, let me keep it, grandfather,' said the frightened child. 'Let us go away from here. Do not mind the rain. Pray let us go.'

'Give it to me, I say,' returned the old man fiercely. 'Hush, hush, don't cry, Nell. If I spoke sharply, dear, I didn't mean it. It's for thy good. I have wronged thee, Nell, but I will right thee yet, I will indeed. Where is the money?'

'Do not take it,' said the child. 'Pray do not take it, dear. For both our sakes let me keep it, or let me throw it away—better let me throw it away, than you take it now. Let us go; do let us go.'

'Give me the money,' returned the old man, 'I must have it. There—there—that's my dear Nell. I'll right thee one day, child, I'll right thee, never fear!' (pp. 292–293)

The manner of his speech which we find in the repetition of short sentences (such as 'Don't you hear them?'; 'Do you hear, Nell, do you hear them?' and 'Do you hear what he says? ... Do you hear that, Nell?') reflects the fact that the old man's consciousness is overwhelmed by the sound coming from the gambling table. What is shown in the passage quoted above is not about the pattern of his language which is suggestive of his senility taken by an overmastering desire to get to gambling. We are shown the mind of an old man deranged with a sudden impulse to try his luck again, and we see it through the very form of his language rather than through what we are told about him. We are convinced that it is because he wishes to make his granddaughter happy that he is drawn to gambling as can be seen in such sentences as 'it's for thy good. I have wronged thee, Nell, but I will right thee yet, I will indeed.' We understand his love for her, but we know, largely from the form of his language, that his love is unlikely to do good to her: he is a man who is dominated by the desire to win in gambling; he is blinded by the immediate objective of getting money. A little later in the same scene we are told that he seized her purse 'with the same rapid impatience which had characterized his speech.' (p. 293) Here we see narrator's own comment on the old man's manner both in his motion and in his speech, helping us in making out by ourselves the significance of the form of his speech representative of the dangerous element of his love.

If we look carefully into his language throughout the novel we realize that his tragedy lies in himself. To put it another way, Dickens gives a certain element to his speech—an element which comes from his own personality. The old man is shown as a man who presents by his language his poor capacity for confronting his fate. His words 'It's for thy good' may be tak-
en as the expression of his affection for the little girl, but we are aware, at the same time, of the impatience with which he speaks those words symbolizing the narrow-mindedness and weakness unrelated with true love.

III

Much could be said on the relationship between characters and their speech. Lack of space obliges us just to get a glance at some minor features of Dickens' speech. Many will agree that the language used in Dickens' novels is not very much like that of daily life. Dickens aims at using language in such a way as to produce a human effect, sometimes with an immense success, sometimes in a way unlikely to be heard outside fiction.

In Chapter III V of *David Copperfield*, David's aunt, on hearing his praise of Dora, says, 'blind, blind, blind!' hinting that Dora will not be a good wife for him. Later in the chapter he sees a beggar in the street who made him start by muttering, 'Blind! Blind! Blind!'. David feels it as an echo of the morning, but the appearance of a beggar here seems to be a little too theatrical. Mr Micawber's language is likewise theatrical. No one may meet outside fiction a man who talks like this:

'Under the impression... that your peregrinations in this metropolis have not as yet been extensive, and that you might have some difficulty in penetrating the arcana of the Modern Babylon in the direction of the City Road—in short, ... that you might lose yourself—I shall be happy to call this evening, and install you in the knowledge of the nearest way.'

(*David Copperfield*, p. 211)

One should not accuse Dickens of describing language which is unreal, because his world is a world of art, and what Dickens tries to do is to make the reader hear the overtones of the language of a character. The overtones are the exaggeration of what we can hear in our daily lives. Dickens makes exaggeration because in daily communications language has specific uses from which we seldom bother to take out a human interpretation. Outside fiction we rarely listen to the rich nuances of human interest. Speeches of Dickensian characters are loaded with human overtones and it is part of the reason they are impressive. It is true that outside Pickwick Papers we are unlikely to meet a man like Jingle whose speech is characterized by frequent use of disjointed phrases, but this is not to say that in our daily lives we do not meet a case in which we are struck by the humorous effect of such peculiarities. We should notice that Jingle is not left to be shallow. G. L. Brook noticed that when 'Jingle proposes to Rachael Wardle, he completely abandons his usual jerky manner of speaking and instead uses the sentimental style of a circulating library novel', and we are here reminded of E. M. Forster's remark: 'the immense vitality of Dickens causes his characters to vibrate a little, so that they borrow his life and appear to lead one of their own'. Humorous effect of Jingle's manner of speech, which can be subject to flatness, is vibrated a little so as to make us glance at something vibrated 'beneath the surface'.

Speech in Dickens' novels sometimes works as an event which puts the story forward. Chap-
ter XXXVII of *Oliver Twist* closes with Bumble asking the name of a stranger who answers 'Monks!' thus leaving the reader to be shuddered by the revelation which has been suspended throughout the chapter.

A word has a power—this is what seems to have fascinated Dickens in his life-long employment of literary communication. There are numerous examples of his interest in the results of verbal communication, and it is interesting to note that the attention to the result of verbal communication brings acquaintance with powers of language. In the opening chapter of *Great Expectations* Pip is caught by a horrible convict; and in answer to the question where his mother is, Pip says, 'There, sir': words which have a power to give a start to the convict and to drive him to make a short run without seeing that it is in the grave that his mother lies. Even an inanimate is given power to speak: In *A Christmas Carol* the dying flame in Scrooge's room leaps up, as if it cries, 'I know him; Marley's Ghost!' (p. 57)

In this paper we had a glimpse of Dickens' adroit rendering of speech. We see that to accuse Dickens as superficial novelist can not be justified unless one looks deep into the various ways language is designed to produce a complex nuances of words. The culmination of such nuances helps the novelist create a world rich with suggestion. His ears are alive to the rich overtones of spoken language, and characters' speech is one place where he imparts life to the written form of language. It is for this reason that we should 'hear' his language. Many will agree that his career as a shorthand writer gave him a training of his ears which is combined with his sensitivity in grasping human effects of communication. The following is what Angus Wilson has to say about the matter:

Dickens' greatest natural gift was his ear. Those who think that his ear was a naturally distorting one, have only to be referred to Mayhew to see how authentic was the working class note which Dickens caught.18

That his ear was Dickens' 'greatest' gift is open to question because he has equally good eyes. Still, many will agree with Wilson in his encomium to Dickens' aural sensibility. N. Page's suggestion is also worth noting in this connection:

Perhaps his early and rigorous training in shorthand had given him a special interest in systems of representing speech through symbols; certainly there can be no doubt that a writer who takes such pains to convey as much information about oral qualities as the written medium can accommodate will also demand of his readers that they either read aloud, or at least take pains to 'hear' inwardly, what he has written.19

But not only that: we should go further to grasp the human results of choosing a particular form of language as we tried to do in this paper. Culminations of such results help the novelist create a world which is rich with suggestion.
Notes


2 Ibid., p. 69.

3 Henry James, 'The Limitations of Dickens,' *The Dickens Critics*, p. 52.

4 Of Dickens' use of language for the three purposes, see Randolph Quirk, 'Charles Dickens, Linguist,' *The Linguist and the English Language* (London: Edward Arnold, 1974).

5 Ibid., p. 9.


7 All references to Dickens's novels are to the Penguin edition (Harmondsworth, 1979-1983).

8 In Chapter X.L.II, 'Master Copperfield' occurs 13 times; and 'Copperfield' as many.

9 Quirk, op. cit., p. 8.


11 See G. H. Lewes: 'Dickens once declared to me that every word said by his characters was distinctly heard by him; I was at first not a little puzzled to account for the fact that he could hear language so utterly unlike the language of real feeling, and not be aware of its preposterousness', op. cit., p. 66.


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