

THE FIRST AMONG MODERN DIALECTOLOGISTS



Harold ORTON

(23rd of October 1898 – 7th of March 1975)

«England was the first to enter the field of dialect study. She now lags far behind. Happily, prospects for this ardently, new, national survey are now bright.»

“The study of dialectal English”, *Leeds Magazine* No.1 (1949), 30-31.



There were, of course, earlier dialectologists of English, but Harold Orton was the most outstanding in the modern era. He was born in Byers Green, near Bishop Auckland, County Durham as the son of a schoolmaster. Orton attended King James I Grammar School of Bishop Auckland and then went to Hatfield College of the University of Durham which he left in 1917 to enrol in the Durham Light Infantry where he served as lieutenant. One year later he was severely wounded in his right arm never regaining full use of it. As a result he was invalided out of the army in 1919. Orton from then on had to use his left hand not only for normal handwriting, but also for writing minute phonetic symbols which was an extraordinary achievement.

At Merton College Oxford Harold Orton became the most remarkable protégé of Henry Sweet's pupil Henry Cecil Wyld, the outstanding lexicographer and historian of the English language; Orton was also influenced by Joseph Wright, the great lexicographer of English dialects. At Oxford Orton acquired an elegant variety of the style of speech fashionable in those days, yet he could instantly revert to authentic 'Pitmatic', as the local mining dialect of his childhood home was known. This dialect was also colloquially known as '(Pit) yakka' in connection with 'yoke', a wooden bar used for joining two animals, especially cattle, together in order to pull heavy loads, also underground in the mining industry. In 1923 Orton received his B.Litt. Seven years later, he published his Oxford thesis, a traditional phonology of the dialect of his native village, under the title *The Phonology of a South Durham Dialect. Descriptive, Historical, and Comparative*.

An enormous body of material worthy of investigation existed in the language of this mining community. The foundation for Orton's lifelong interest in English dialects was thus laid in his early childhood.

From 1924-1928 he worked as a lecturer at Uppsala University in Sweden, from 1928-1939 as lecturer at Armstrong College, Newcastle, now the University of Newcastle, and from 1939-1946 as lecturer in charge of the department of English language at the University of Sheffield. In 1946 Orton was awarded with a chair at the University of Leeds, where he taught until his retirement in 1964. After his retirement he was visiting professor at Kansas University (1965, 1967 and 1968), Iowa University (1966), the University of Tennessee (1970, 1972 and 1973) and Belmont College, Nashville (1971).

Apart from Orton's already mentioned B.Litt. thesis of 1930 the following works must be listed here:

1940 Orton, Harold, "Contemporary English speech", *Proceedings of the University of Durham Philosophical Society*, 10: 3 (1940), 200-213.

1951 Orton, Harold, "The new study of dialectal English", in C. L. Wrenn and G. Bullough (eds.), *English Studies Today*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 63-73.

1952 Orton, Harold and Eugen Dieth, *A Questionnaire for a Linguistic Atlas of England*, Leeds: Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society.

1960 Orton, Harold, "An English dialect survey: Linguistic Atlas of England", *Orbis*, 9: 2, 331-348.

1962 Orton, Harold, *Survey of English Dialects: An Introduction*, Leeds: E. J. Arnold; reissued Routledge: London 1978, 1999.

1970 Orton, Harold, "A linguistic atlas of England", *Advancement of Science*, 27: 131, 80-96.

1962-1971 Orton, Harold, with Michael V. Barry, Wilfrid J. Halliday, Philip M. Tilling, and Martyn F. Wakelin (eds.), *Survey of English Dialects: Basic Material*. 4 vols. (each in 3 parts), Leeds: E. J. Arnold & Son; reissued Routledge: London, 1978, 1999.

1971 Orton, Harold, "Editorial problems of an English dialect atlas", in Lorraine H. Burghardt (ed.), *Dialectology: Problems and Perspectives*, Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee, 79-115.

1974 Orton, Harold and Nathalia Wright, *A Word Geography of England*, New York and London: Seminar Press; reissued Waltham, Mass.: Academic Press, 1975.

Orton was so excited about the fast appearance of the reissue of this book that he suffered two heart attacks during the following night. The second one he did not survive. His passing away also meant that he could not complete the full programme he had originally envisaged. The linguistic atlas was finished and published posthumously, so were the dictionary and grammar:

1978 Orton, Harold, Stewart Sanderson and John D. A. Widdowson, *The Linguistic Atlas of England*, London: Croom Helm; reissued London: Routledge, 1999.

1994 Upton, Clive, David Parry and John D. A. Widdowson, *Survey of English Dialects: The Dictionary and Grammar*, London: Routledge, 1994.

Also Orton's initial scholarly activities were published after his death. To these belong:

1995 Rydland, Kurt, "The *Orton corpus* and Northumbrian phonology (The material from Bamburgh and Bellingham)", *English Studies*, 76: 6, 547-586.

The *Orton corpus* is an unpublished collection of dialect material from Northumberland, Tyne & Wear and Co. Durham, recorded for the Armstrong College Dialect Survey under the direction of Harold Orton in the period 1928-1939. The corpus, which is in phonetic script, includes data from some thirty localities, and consists of a large alphabetical card index of edited material and several smaller, unedited card units as well as a substantial amount of unsystematised raw material.

1998 Rydland, Kurt, *The Orton Corpus: A Dictionary of Northumbrian Pronunciation 1928-1939*, Oslo: Novus Press.

1999 Rydland, Kurt, "Front rounded vowels in Northumbrian English: The evidence of the Orton corpus", *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 3, 1-15.

Orton's lasting achievements in dialectology belong to his period at Leeds. Together with the Swiss Anglicist Eugen Dieth, who died prematurely in 1956, Orton

continued concrete planning of the *Survey of English Dialects* in 1946. The idea for a survey of English dialects, however, predated the Second World War and went back to the Second International Congress of Phonetic Sciences held in London in 1935. After Dieth's death Orton remained the only head of the survey. He saw it then as comprising of five separate projects: the *Introduction* (1962); four volumes (twelve books) of *Basic Material*; four volumes (twelve books) of *Selected Incidental Material*; the *Linguistic Atlas of England*; and Phonetic Transcriptions of Survey tape recordings.

As a basis the survey had a well prepared 1,300-item questionnaire of phonological, lexical and grammatical items applied at 313 carefully chosen spaced out rural localities by nine trained fieldworkers over a period of eleven years. Formal fieldwork, mainly with non-mobile, older, rural male informants began in 1950 and continued until 1961. Most of Orton's subjects were over 60, but a large percentage were much older, as Orton was interested to record the "broadest" possible speech before it died out. A few urban sites were included in the survey. It is strange that they do not seem to stand out against the more rural sites around them in terms of phonetics and phonology, although they don't have the wealth of dialect words for agricultural equipment. Leeds, Sheffield and York have pronunciations that fit in with the other more rural Yorkshire sites as does Hackney with the sites in south-west Essex.

The survey had originally been devised to cover England and Scotland, but a few years later work on a linguistic survey of Scotland began at Edinburgh University. The two surveys differed seriously in important aspects such as data collection, for which Orton favoured the direct method. The surveys also varied in the area of phonetics/phonology and in Orton's denial of structural principles. Orton was mainly interested in a diachronic approach investigating the dialectal reflexes of Old English and Middle English sounds.

The results of Orton's survey were published in list form in minute phonetic transcription according to the principles of the International Phonetic Association's Alphabet (Orton et al., 1962-1971), from which was derived a word geography, published shortly before Orton's death (Orton & Wright 1974, reissue 1975).

Strengths and weaknesses of Orton's survey will no doubt be evaluated differently by adherents of different dialectological schools, but beyond any doubt Harold Orton can be considered the major English dialectologist of the 20th century. Moreover he provided a stimulus for much of the later work in regionally more restricted dialectology, in town dialects and for more sociolinguistically oriented activities in England. Over one hundred student theses on different aspects of dialect were completed during the course of Orton's life at Leeds. Orton considered these theses to be part of the work and as complementary to the survey. Apart from these activities Orton had been an advisor to the BBC between the wars, a broadcaster and an initiator of the first course in folklife studies in any British university.

To finish on a personal note: Harold Orton was a real gentleman. He will be remembered also for his intellectual curiosity and his good humour. Without his indefatigable efforts no publication of this project would have seen the light of day. I met Orton daily during the sabbatical I spent at Leeds University. At the end of my stay he presented me with a complete set of Joseph Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary* and *Grammar* (1898-1905) and was particularly interested in learning more about my linguistic atlas of England, the first computer developed atlas using Orton's survey data. Unfortunately Orton did not live long enough to see it.

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