THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 130: DIALECT DIALOGUES

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 130: Dialect Dialogues. In this episode, we're going to look at the first dialect stories in English. Specifically, we'll explore the tale told by the Reeve in the Canterbury Tales. And we'll also examine a Middle English play from the north of England called the Second Shepherd's Play. These works represent some of the first attempts by English writers to feature characters who speak in regional dialects. In an era long before sound recordings, these dialogues provide a rare insight into the way people actually spoke in different parts of the England in the Middle Ages. So this time, we'll examine those dialect dialogues.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast and get bonus episodes and transcripts at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Now last time, I mentioned that I was going to discuss Sir Gawain and the Green Knight in this episode, but due to time considerations, I've elected to save that poem for the next time. And that will actually be the last poem from this period in the late 1300s that we're going to explore in the podcast. From there, we'll move the story in the 1400s where we'll look at the impact of the printing press, the Great Vowel Shift, and lots of other fun stuff.

But this time, I want to focus on one last part of the Canterbury Tales. And it may be the most fascinating part for people who are interested in the development of the English language. That's because it represents one of the first attempts by an English writer to compose dialogue in a regional dialect. Of course, the writer was Geoffrey Chaucer, and the story was the tale told by the Reeve. The tale features two students from the north of England, and when Chaucer wrote their dialogue, he made sure that they used words that were unique to the north of England. He also used grammatical features that were associated with the north. And he spelled words to reflect the way they would have been pronounced in the north.

Modern writers do this type of thing all of the time, but it wasn't common before the time of Chaucer. And unlike later writers, he didn't treat that northern speech as inferior or vulgar. His northern characters are not country bumpkins or hillbillies. They're actually students at Cambridge. At they outsmart a miller who speaks in a traditional southern dialect.

Regional dialects have always existed in England, and scholars can trace some of those regional features back to the Anglo-Saxon period. They do that by examining the language of the surviving manuscripts. By looking at where those manuscripts were composed, they can discern certain regional features. Word choices and grammatical features sometimes varied by region. And spellings often varied from place to place, reflecting different pronunciations in those regions. By examining those documents and comparing the language in the them, scholars have identified several major dialects which we've examined in general terms in earlier episodes.

Though regional differences can be detected in those early manuscripts, the writers didn't tend to highlight those differences. They didn't present characters who spoke with specific regional accents or dialects. We might find a regional word or phrase in a character's dialogue, but that word choice typically reflects the speech of the writer who composed the story. But in the Canterbury Tales, we finally have a story with characters from a different part of the country who speak in their own unique regional dialect. We have dialogue that attempts to mimic that regional speech. And that gives us a great insight into the way people spoke in those regions, or at least the way Chaucer thought those people spoke. In a time long before tape recorders, we can actually get a sense of what these regional dialects sounded like.

As I noted, this particular story in the Canterbury Tales is the tale told by the Reeve. It follows the Miller's Tale which we looked at in the last episode, and it is actually told in direct response to the Miller's Tale. It features two students from the north of England who speak with a distinct northern dialect.

Before I take you through this tale and examine the way Chaucer handled that northern dialect, let me remind you of the some of the common features of that dialect. I outlined many of those features back in Episode 112, but since that was a while back, I thought it might be a good idea to give you a quick review.

First of all, the northern dialect of Middle English had a lot more Norse words than the southern dialect. As we know, the northern part of England had once been part of the Danelaw established by the Vikings, so it had more Scandinavian influence. And that specifically included the Norse pronouns ***they***, ***them*** and ***their***. In the south of England, people used the native Old English version of those pronouns, which were very similar, but they all began with an 'H' sound – ***hi***, ***hem*** and ***hire***. So the southern versions began with an 'H' sound, whereas the northern versions began with a 'TH' sound. Of course, those northern forms ***they***, ***them***, and ***their*** eventually replaced the southern forms. By the time of the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer was already using the word ***they*** which was the form used as the subject of a sentence, but the other words ***them*** and ***their*** were still restricted to the north.

You might also remember that many northern words had a hard 'K' sound where the southern version has a softer 'CH' sound. The hard 'K' sound in the north was partly a feature of all of that Norse influence. Those Norse words tended to retain the original Germanic 'K' sound, but in Old English, that sound often shifted to a softer 'CH' sound. So in northern England, you might have attended a ***kirk*** which reflects that northern pronunciation with the hard 'K' sounds. But in the south of England, you would have gone to a ***church*** with the softer 'CH' sounds that had developed in Old English and were more common in the south.

Northerners also tended to use 'S' sounds as suffixes, whereas southerners often used other endings. That happened with both nouns and verbs. For example, northerners made nouns plural by adding an 'S' to the end which became standard over time, and of course, that's generally the ending we use today. So in the north, ***book*** became ***books***, and ***tree*** became ***trees***. But in the south, people used the 'EN' suffix for plural nouns which still survives in words like ***children***, ***oxen*** and ***brethren***. By the time of Chaucer, that northern 'S' ending had made its way down to

London, and Chaucer routinely used it, though the 'EN' suffix was also used in some words. Since that 'S' ending was associated with the north, Chaucer's northern characters always use it.

Northerners also gave their verbs an 'S' ending in third person singular. Of course, that's another northern feature that moved south and became standard over time. So that's why we say, "he has," "she moves," and "it seems." But during the time of Chaucer, people in the south tended to use the 'TH' ending which survived until the time of Shakespeare. So southerners would have said, "he hath," "she moveth," and "it seemeth." The northern 'S' ending didn't become common in the south until the 1500s, so Chaucer didn't tend to use it. He still used his native 'TH' verb ending. But again, his northern characters use the 'S' ending to reflect their northern speech pattern.

Another major difference between northern and southern English was the pronunciation of the long vowel sound represented by letter A. I discussed this distinction back in Episode 96. As you may recall, the letter A represented the /ah/ sound in Old English like in the words ***what*** and ***father***. And it continued to represent that sound in the north of England during the Middle English period. So there was no change in the north. But in the south, the sound shifted to more of an 'aw' sound. So the sound was slightly raised in the throat region and the lips became rounded a bit. So in Middle English, the south had /aw/ where the north had /ah/, and both of these sounds changed further during the Great Vowel Shift which took place in the 1400s and 1500s. Thanks to those later changes, the sound was raised even further in the back of the mouth from /aw/ to /oh/ So the word ***home*** began as the Old English word ***ham*** (/hahm/) usually spelled H-A-M. But during the Middle English period, it became ***hom*** (/hawm/) usually spelled H-O-M to reflect the sound change. And of course, it eventually evolved into modern ***home***. So again, /hahm/, /hawn/, /home/. That was the evolution in the south.

But in the north of England, that pronunciation was more conservative. It didn't change in the Middle English period. It remained /ah/, and it continued to be spelled with its traditional letter A. So there, a word like ***home*** would have continued to be ***ham*** – spelled H-A-M. If you lived during the time of Chaucer, this would have a been an obvious accent difference. To give you a modern example, if you can imagine someone today saying something like "I saw a flaw in the law," and then someone else saying "I sah a flah in the lah," that difference in pronunciation would have been similar to the difference that existed in the 1300s. And in Middle English, this difference was represented by spelling those words with an 'O' in the south and with an 'A' in the north. And again, Chaucer used this same spelling distinction when writing the dialogue of his northern characters.

There was also a regional difference in the way people pronounced certain short words like ***so*** and the number ***two***. Rather than the modern vowel sounds, both of those words had a long 'A' sound in Old English, which remember was the /ah/ sound. And they also had a 'W' sound between the initial consonant and the vowel. So the word ***so*** was originally ***swa***, and the number ***two*** was originally ***twa***. Of course, the word for number ***two*** is still spelled with a 'W' to reflect that original pronunciation. In the south, the vowel sound changed as I noted earlier, and that 'W' sound in the middle disappeared. So those words changed quite a bit there. However, there was

no change in the north. So Chaucer's northern characters say things like ***swa*** for ***so***, and ***alswa*** for ***also***, and ***twa*** for ***two***. They simply retained the Old English pronunciations.

Another major north-south difference was the first person pronoun '***I***.' First of all, the pronunciation of the letter as /ai/ was a development that took place during the Great Vowel Shift a little later in our story. During these earlier periods of English, the pronunciation was different. The original sound of the letter I was /ee/. Think of Italian words for foods like ***pizza***, ***ravioli***, ***spaghetti***, ***linguini***. The letter I represents the /ee/ sound in those words. That's the traditional sound of the letter, and that was also the sound in Old and Middle English. But the first person pronoun was actually ***ic*** with a 'CH' sound at the end. In Old English, it was usually spelled I-C.

Now that pronunciation was retained in the south. But in the north of England, the word lost that 'CH' sound at the end and simply became /ee/ – spelled with just the letter I. That northern form ***I*** (/ee/) became standard throughout England over time, and the pronunciation shifted from /ee/ to /ai/ during the Great Vowel Shift. So our modern pronoun ***I*** is ultimately the northern form of the pronoun, but during the time of Chaucer, there was still a north-south divide. Northerners said /ee/ and southerners said /ich/, and the Reeve's Tale reflects that regional difference.

Another clear difference between southern and northern speech was the way people said "I am." The word ***am*** could be heard in both the north and the south, but southerners had a tendency to use the word ***be*** and northerners had a tendency to use the word ***is***. So in the south, people would say "ich be" (or /ich bay/). In the north, people would say "I is." And those were considered to be strong markers of southern and northern speech, respectively.

Again, those were some of the most prominent features that distinguished southern English from northern English. We've explored most of those in earlier episodes, and they're also the ones used by Chaucer in the Reeve's Tale. So with that bit of background, let's turn to the Reeve's Tale and see how these features were depicted by Chaucer.

As I noted earlier, the Reeve's Tale immediately follows the Miller's Tale which we looked at in the last episode. The Miller's Tale concerned an old carpenter married to a young wife who was pursued by two potential lovers. The Miller portrayed the old carpenter as a gullible fool.

Now among the pilgrims who were listening to this story was the Reeve, and Chaucer told us in the General Prologue that the Reeve was a carpenter from Norfolk. We now find out why Chaucer included that earlier bit of detail. Since the Reeve was a carpenter by trade, he was angered by the Miller's depiction of a carpenter in his tale. Chaucer tells us that the Reeve was the only one who took offense at the Miller's story. Chaucer writes the following passage – first in Modern English:

Because he was skilled in the carpenter's craft.
A little ire or anger in his heart was left;
And he began to grouse and his blame was set alight.
"As I am," said he, "very well can I thee quiet."

Bycause he was of carpenteres craft,
A litel ire is in his herte ylaft;
He gan to grucche, and blamed it a lite.
“So the ik," quod he, "ful wel koude I thee quyte

So the Reeve is angry, and he says that he is going to ***quyte*** – or ‘requite’ – the story told by the Miller. Since he wants to get back at the Miller, he decides to tell a story about a miller. In this case, a crooked and dim-witted miller.

Now, one interesting note about that passage I just read to you. In the last line, the Reeve says, “So the ik" – literally ‘So the I’ – but it was a figure-of-speech that meant ‘As I am.’ So in that line of dialogue, the Reeve uses the word ***ik*** for ***I***.

Now remember that the first person pronoun ***I*** took different forms in the north and south of England. Southerners said ***ich*** and northerners said ***I*** (/ee/). Well, in parts of eastern England, especially around Norfolk, people pronounced that word with a hard ‘K’ sound at the end. So they said /ik/ usually spelled I-K. And Chaucer has already told us that the Reeve was from Norfolk in the General Prologue. So here, the Reeve uses that pronoun form since he is from that area. And this is a small example of how Chaucer used local dialect forms in this story.

The Reeve then begins his tale which is set near Cambridge. And here, we see how the Reeve’s Tale is told in direct response to the Miller’s Tale. The Miller’s Tale was set in Oxford where a crafty student outsmarted an old carpenter. Here, the Reeve’ Tale is set outside of Cambridge, and as we’ll see, it feature two students who outwit a crooked miller. So this is how the Reeve pays back the Miller for his story.

The Reeve begins his story by telling us that there was a mill in a town outside of Cambridge. The Miller who owned and operated the mill was named Simpkin. He was a bully and a brute who carried around knives. He intimidated people, and no one dared mess with him for fear of their lives. He had a wife who was proud and snooty. And together, they had two children – a 20-year old daughter and an infant son who was just 6 months old.

The Reeve tells us something else very important about the miller. He was a thief. He says:

A thief he was, it's true, of corn and meal,
And sly at that, his habit was to steal.

A theef he was for sothe of corn and mele,
And that a sly, and usaunt for to stele.

Now you might remember from an earlier episode that millers were commonly perceived to be thieves in the Middle Ages. So the Reeve’s miller fits this stereotype. He always kept more than his fair share of the grain that was brought to him to be ground. And he often replaced part of the freshly ground flour with cheap bran.

One of the miller's regular customers was a college hall at the nearby university. The college manciple would bring the students' grain to the miller, and he would keep a close eye on the miller to try to prevent him from stealing anything. But on one occasion when the manciple was sick, someone else brought the grain and the miller stole much more than normal.

So the next time the college had a sack of grain, two of the students volunteered to take the sack to the miller so they could keep an eye on him. The students were named John and Alain. The Reeve says:

John was the one and Alain was the other;
In the same town were they born, a town called Strother,
Far in the north, I cannot tell you where.

John highte that oon, and Aleyn highte that oother;
Of o toun were they born, that highte Strother,
Fer in the north, I kan nat telle where.

So the Reeve informs us that the two students were from the far north. And he then tells us that they gathered their grain, mounted their horses, and headed to the mill. When they arrived, Alan greeted the Miller by saying "Hou fares thy faire doghter and thy wyf?" – 'How fares your fair daughter and your wife?' And right out of the gate, we can see that Alan speaks with a northern accent. He says 'How fares' with an 'S' rather than 'How fareth' with an 'eth' sound. Remember that the 'S' verb ending was originally a northern dialect feature.

The miller greets the two students and asks what they need. John replies and says, "by God, nede has na peer" – literally 'by God, need has no peer' – but it meant 'there is no other option.' They brought the grain because the manciple was sick and they were the only ones available to bring it. Again, John says that need "has na" peer. He uses the northern verb ***has*** rather than the southern ***hath***. And he uses the northern word ***na*** spelled N-A rather than the southern form /naw/ – spelled N-O.

John then says "Hym boes serve hymself that has na swayn" – literally 'Him behooves serve himself that has no swain – or servant' – but to rephrase that a bit using modern syntax, it meant 'He who has no servant best serves himself – or 'he who has no servant must look after himself.' This passage requires a bit of translation in part because the word order is different from Modern English, but also because it uses a couple of Norse words that we don't really use today in standard English. And Chaucer used those Norse words because they were more common in the north of England where the students were from.

One of those words was the verb ***boes*** which meant 'behooves.' And the other Norse word was ***swayn*** which meant a servant.

So the two students have brought their grain to the miller, and they have told him that they had no other option but to do it themselves. They then explain that the manciple who usually brings the grain is very sick and unable to make the trip. John says:

Our manciple - I expect he'll soon be dead,
So aching are the teeth in his head -
And therefore I have come here with Alain
To grind our corn and carry it home again;

Oure manciple, I hope he wil be deed,
Swa werkes ay the wanges in his heed;
And forthy is I come, and eek Alayn,
To grynde oure corn and carie it ham agayn;

Again, we see several northern features here. John actually says of his manciple, "I hope he wil be deed" – literally 'I hope he will be dead.' But it didn't mean that he wanted the manciple to be dead. In the north of England, the word ***hope*** had a slightly different meaning than in the south. It meant that you expected or anticipated the event would occur. This meaning was derived from the Norse version of the word. So when John says "I hope he'll soon be dead,' that was just a northern way of saying 'I expect or anticipate that he'll soon be dead.'

The next line that I read was "Swa werkes ay the wanges in his heed" – literally 'So warks or aches the wangs or teeth in his head.' Again, ***warks*** and ***wangs*** were words that were common in the north. ***Wark*** is actually related to the verb ***work*** – but again, ***wark*** appears to be derived from the Norse version of the word. The English version ***work*** was focused on physical labor which was often hard, and grueling, and exhaustive. The Norse version ***werk*** was more focused on the physical pain associated with hard labor. So the Norse version acquired a sense of 'ache or pain.' And that's the version that John uses here when he speaks of the ***werkes*** or pains that the manciple was experiencing. And he says that the pains were in his ***wangs*** which meant teeth, but more specifically meant the molars. So maybe the manciple was suffering from an abscess in his teeth, which can certainly be debilitating.

John also said that they brought the corn to be ground, and that they intend to "carie it ham agayn" – 'carry it home again.' But here, the word ***home*** is spelled H-A-M. That reflects the northern pronunciation as /ham/. In the south, it would have been /hawm/ – spelled H-O-M.

Now the Miller takes the measure of the two young students. He assumes that they are naive, and that he can steal a large portion of their grain while they're not looking. So he asks the students what they intend to do while he's hard at work grinding the corn. But John isn't so naive. He replies that he and Alain will just hang out there around the hopper "and se howgates the corn gas in" – 'and see how the corn goes in.' Again, for the word ***goes***, he said 'gas' with the northern vowel sound and the northern 'S' verb ending. So he says 'gas' whereas a southerner would have said 'gaweth.'

So John pretends to be interested in seeing the corn go into the hopper. He adds that he has never seen a hopper move 'til and fra' – or 'to and fro.' Again 'til and fra' is derived from Old Norse and was a common expression in the north.

Then the other student Alain speaks up and says if John is going to do '***swa***' – or do 'so' – then he (Alain) is going to go down to the trough and watch the meal come out after it is ground. Again, the students are pretending to be dumb and naive, as if they are trying to learn how the mill works. Alain says to his friend John, "I is as ille a millere as ar ye" – 'I am as bad a miller as are you.' Again, he says "I is" in the northern fashion, rather than 'ich am' or 'ich be' in the southern way. And he says that he is an "ille" miller using the Norse word ***ille***, rather than the more common English word ***bad***.

Now by this point, the miller knows exactly what's going on. He realizes that the students are keeping a close eye on him to make sure he doesn't take more than he is supposed to take. So the miller comes up with a plan of his own. He sneaks outside and unties the students' horse allowing the horse to run away. In recounting the story, the Reeve says:

He stripped off the bridle right at once,
When the horse was loose, be began to run,
Toward the fen, where wild mares ran,
And whined 'WeeHee!' through thick and through thin

He strepeth of the brydel right anon.
And whan the hors was laus, he gynneth gon
Toward the fen, ther wilde mares renne,
And forth with 'wehee,' thurgh thikke and thurgh thenne

Now in that last line, the Reeve says that the horse ran 'through thick and through thin.' This is actually the first recorded use of the phrase 'through thick and thin' in an English document, but here we see the original meaning behind the phrase. Today, if you do something 'through thick and thin,' it means that you do it persistently, regardless of the obstacles in front of you. Well, it appears that the phrase was actually derived from an earlier phrase which was 'through thicket and thin woods.' So if a horse ran 'through thicket and thin woods,' it meant that the horse ran through areas that were overgrown and dense, as well as areas that were more open and spacious. And here we see that phrase 'through thicket and thin woods' reduced to simply 'through thick and through thin.' And over time, it was shortened even further to just 'through thick and thin.' But again, this is the first known use of that phrase in an English manuscript.

So the Miller has untied the horse and let him run free, but he doesn't say anything to the students. Later, after all of the corn has been ground and placed in sacks, John goes to get his horse, but he realizes that it has run away. So he calls to Alain:

Our horse is lost! Alain, for God's bones
Get to your feet, come out, man, now, at once!

Oure hors is lorn, Alayn, for Goddes banes,
Step on thy feet! Com of man, al atanes!

Again in this passage, John speaks with the northern vowel sounds. And he says "banes" instead of 'bawnes' or 'bones.' And he says, "atanes" instead of 'at awnes' or 'at once.' John then says to Alan:

By God's heart, he shall not escape us both!
Why didn't you put the horse in the barn?

By Goddes herte, he sal nat scape us bathe!
Why ne had thow pit the capul in the lathe?

Now once again, in this passage, we see the northern pronunciation of ***both*** as 'bathe,' whereas a southerner would have probably said /bawth/. John also asks Alan why he didn't put "the capul in the lathe." ***Capul*** meant horse, and ***lathe*** meant barn. The origin of ***capul*** is unclear, but it was probably a French loanword derived from the Latin word ***caballus*** meaning horse. And ***lathe*** was another Norse loanword. He also used the word ***sal*** for 'shall.' Again, this was another northern feature. Very often, when a word began with a 'SH' sound, northerners would convert it into a simple 'S' sound. So a word like ***shall*** was often pronounced as /sal/ in the north, and that's the way the word is rendered here in John's northern speech.

There's also another interesting northern feature in those two lines. It's the part where John asks Alan why he didn't "***pit***" the horse in the barn. The word ***put*** is spelled P-I-T. Again, this spelling reflects the northern pronunciation. I discussed this feature back in Episode 113, but in case you don't remember that discussion, it had to do with a change in the sound represented by letter Y.

Now today, the letters I and Y generally represent the same vowel sounds, but in Old English they represented two distinct sounds. As I noted earlier, the letter 'I' represented the /ee/ sound. Remember those loanwords like ***pizza*** and ***spaghetti*** where 'I' represents that same vowel sound. Well in Middle English, the letter Y represented a similar, but slightly different sound. It was basically the /ee/ sound pronounced with rounded lips. So it was /ü./ This sound is still found in many languages in continental Europe, but it has largely disappeared from English. So originally, the difference between the letters I and Y was whether or not you rounded your lips when you pronounced that /ee/ vowel sound. The lips were rounded for Y, but not for I.

Well, in the early Middle English period – in the northern and eastern parts of England – people stopped rounding their lips for the Y sound. And when they did that, the sounds represented by the letters I and Y became identical. They were both pronounced as /ee/. And because they were the same sound, it became common for scribes to use the letters I and Y interchangeably in those regions. And over time, that pronunciation spread to the south and the west as well. And that's why the two letters are still somewhat interchangeable in Modern English.

Well, at the time Chaucer composed the Reeve's Tale, this was still a feature of the north and east. And the word ***put*** was an Old English word that had originally been spelled P-Y-T and had been pronounced with that rounded /ü/ sound. But since that roundness had disappeared in the north and east, the word was spelled with an 'I' to indicate that the northern pronunciation was /peet/. Our modern pronunciation of the word as /put/, and the spelling P-U-T, reflects the

southern and western development of the word where the roundness in the vowel was retained, and it evolved into a 'U' sound which is also rounded. But in the Reeve's Tale, the word ***put*** was spelled P-I-T to reflect the northern pronunciation. By the way, we have a similar situation in Modern English. Think about the word ***busy*** – B-U-S-Y. It is spelled in the southern manner with a 'U,' but it's pronounced in the northern manner with an 'I' sound – /bizzy/. And that happened as these dialects blended together in places like London. Sometimes, the spelling was taken from one dialect and the pronunciation from another. So that's why John asks Alan why he didn't 'pit' the horse in the barn, instead of 'put' the horse in the barn – or the 'capul in the lathe.'

With the horse on the loose, John and Alain chase after it, leaving their ground corn behind unguarded. The miller's plan has worked, and he proceeds to steal a half a bushel of their flour. The two young students finally catch the horse, but by this point, it is already nightfall. And they realize that they've been had by the Miller. They're both embarrassed that they've let the Miller get the better of them. John says, "Now are we dryve til hethyng and til scorn" – 'Now are we driven to contempt and scorn.' Here, John uses the Norse word ***hethyng*** to meant contempt or mockery. Again, we see the Norse influence in his speech.

So the two young students retrieve the horse and return to the mill, but it is too late in the day for them to return home, so they ask the miller if he has somewhere for them to spend the night. The miller doesn't have a separate room for the boys, but he offers to let them spend the night with him and his family. They can all share the common room. The students gladly accept the offer. As John says in the original Middle English:

I have herd seyd, 'Man sal taa of twa thynges
Slyk as he fyndes, or taa slyk as he brynges.'

Now here's a literal translation of this passage:

I have heard said, 'Man shall take of two things
Such as he finds, or take such as he brings'

This is a proverb which basically means, 'Of two things, a person should take either what he finds or what he brings.' In this case, the students have no other option, so that take what they find, even if that means sharing a room with the crooked miller and his family.

Now that proverb I just read is a little tricky to translate, and in fact, in the 1960s, New York University professor Vincent F. Hopper prepared a translation of the Reeve's Tale. It was part of a larger translation of the Canterbury Tales. And in his translation, he included a footnote to the passage I just read. In fact, it's the only footnote he included in his translation of the Reeve's Tale. He wrote, "There is no sensible way of translating the several passages where the students speak in their northern dialect."

Now that may have been a little harsh, but the meaning of some of these passages can be difficult to decipher. And that passage I just read is full of northernisms. John says that "Man sal taa of twa thynges" – 'Man shall take of two things.' As I noted earlier, ***sal*** was the northern form of ***shall***, and ***twa*** was the northern form of ***two***. Also, the line uses the word ***taa*** as a shortened form of ***take*** which also happens to be a Norse word.

The second line was "Slyk as he fyndes, or taa slyk as he brynges" – literally 'Such as he finds, or take such as he brings.' The line uses ***slyk*** for ***such*** because ***slyk*** was the Norse version of the word ***such***. And ***fyndes*** is the word ***finds***, and ***brynges*** is the word ***brings***. And note that both of those verbs end in an 'S' in the northern manner – ***fyndes*** and ***brynges***. The southern form would have ended in 'TH' – ***fyndeth*** and ***bryngeth***. So again, this passage reflects the fact that the students come from the north.

One other quick note about these sleeping arrangements. It harkens back to the last episode where I talked about the gradual shift from communal living to private living over the course of the Middle Ages. Here we see a typical living arrangement with the miller, his wife, their daughter, their infant son, and the two northern students all sharing the same room. That was not at all unusual for the Middle Ages.

So having secured lodging in the miller's home for the night, the two students, the miller and his wife all stay awake and drink and talk. By the time they lie down to sleep, the Miller is drunk, and his wife is tipsy too. Here's the passage:

To bed he went, and with him went his wife.
Like a jaybird, she was jolly and light,
So was her jolly whistle wet,
The cradle at her bed's feet was set.

To bedde he goth, and with hym goth his wyf.
As any jay she light was and jolyf,
So was hir joly whistle wel ywet.
The cradel at hir beddes feet is set.

So the miller and his wife go to bed and place the infant's cradle at the foot of the bed. The most interesting thing about this passage is the part where it says of the miller's wife that her "whistle wel ywet" – that her 'whistle was well wet.' This is an early rendering of the phrase 'wet your whistle' to mean 'have a drink.' And it's the first known use of that phrase in the English language.

So everyone has turned in for the night. The miller and his wife are in their bed with their infant son beside them in his cradle. And the millers' daughter is in her bed. And the two northern students are in their bed trying to fall asleep. But they can't because the miller is so drunk that he's out cold and snoring loudly. And his wife soon joins him, snoring almost as loudly as her husband.

Eventually, Alan pokes John and says "Herdestow evere slyk a sang er now?" – 'Have you ever heard such a song before now?' Here he refers to the snoring as a song. And notice that he asks John if he had ever heard "slyk a sang" – 'such a song.' Again, he uses the Norse word ***slyk*** for ***such***, and he uses the northern pronunciation ***sang*** instead of southern ***song***.

He then curses the couple, saying "A wilde fyr upon thair bodyes falle!" – 'May a wild fire upon their bodies fall!' Now this line is interesting because Alan wishes for a wild fire upon 'their' bodies. He uses the Norse pronoun ***their*** which is one of our standard pronouns today. But remember that it was restricted to the north of England during the time of Chaucer. In the south, people still used the traditional third person pronoun ***hire***. So the use of the pronoun ***their*** was a very strong marker of northern speech. And in fact, that line I just read is actually the only time Chaucer ever used the pronoun ***their*** in all of his writings. For him, it was strictly a northern dialect word.

Now, at this point with the two students being kept awake by the snoring, Alan decides to take revenge on the miller. He turns to John and says that he is going to go to the daughter's bed. He says that the miller has stolen their corn, and now he's going to pay the miller back by sleeping with his daughter. John warns him to be careful because the miller is a dangerous man, and he will attack them both if he discovers what's going on. Alan leaves, and makes his way to the daughter's bed.

After a few minutes, John gets restless and decides that it isn't fair that Alan is having all the fun. So he crawls out of bed and finds the baby's cradle in the dark, and he slowly moves it from the foot of the miller's bed to the foot of his own bed. A short time later, the miller's wife gets out of bed to pee, and when she returns, it is too dark in the room to see. So she feels around for the cradle, and when she finds it, she crawls back into the bed – only it's not her bed. Because John had moved the cradle to the foot of his own bed, she now crawls into bed with him. And she assumes that John is her husband the miller. A few minutes later, John starts making out with the wife. The Reeve tells us, "So myrie a fit ne hadde she nat ful yoore" – 'She had not had such a merry time for years.'

The late night soon turns to early morning shortly before sunrise. Alain is still in bed with the miller's daughter. He tells her goodbye and says to her, "I is thyn awen clerk, swa have I sel!" – 'I am thine own clerk, so have I happiness.' Here he says "I is" in the northern manner. And he says "***awen***" for ***own***. And he says ***swa*** for ***so***. Again, these are all northern features.

In response, the daughter confesses to Alain that she and her father had stolen part of the boys' grain, and she had used it to bake a large loaf of bread. She tells him that the loaf was hidden behind the door of the mill, and he should be sure to grab it on his way back home.

Alain gets out of bed and tries to find John and wake him, but it is still pitch dark in the room. He arrives at John's bed, but he discovers the cradle in front of it. He is confused, and he assumes that he has made a mistake and found the miller's bed by mistake. Of course, he doesn't realize that John had moved the cradle from the miller's bed to his own bed. So Alain continues to feel

around and finally locates the bed without the cradle. He assumes that he has found John's bed, and he crawls in. Of course, he doesn't realize that he has actually crawled in bed with the miller.

Assuming that the miller is John, Alan whispers to him to wake up. He then says:

I have three times in this short night,
Swived the miller's daughter on her back.

As I have thries in this shorte nyght
Swyved the milleres doghter bolt upright,

Now as we saw in the last episode, ***swived*** was a vulgar term for sex. So John accidentally confesses to the miller that he has had sex with the daughter. The miller immediately reaches out and grabs John by the neck and begins to curse at him. He says:

"Ah, false traitor! Lying clerk!" said he,
"You shall be killed, by God's own dignity!"

"A, false traitor! false clerk!" quod he,
"Tow shalt be deed, by Goddes dignitee!"

The two men begin to wrestle and fight, and Alain punches the miller in the nose – leaving him bloodied. The miller then chases Alain, but the miller stubs his toe, and falls into the other bed occupied by his wife – and John. The wife is startled and wakes up. At first, she thinks that she has been attacked by an incubus – an evil spirit that seduces women in their sleep. Then she remembers the two students and assumes that they are fighting with each other. She crawls out of bed and finds a stick. She intends to smack them with the stick, but all she can see is shadowy figures fighting with each other. The Reeve says:

And by that light, she saw them both two,
But certainly, she could not tell who was who.

And by that light she saugh hem bothe two,
But sikerly she nyste who was who.

She finally hits one of them in the head with the stick, assuming that it is one of the students, but it's actually her husband. The Reeve says:

And down he went and cried, 'Help me! I'm dying!"
These two clerks beat him well and left him there lying.

That doun he gooth, and cride, "Harrow! I dye!"
Thise clerkes beete hym weel and lete hym lye.

The two students then grab their clothes and their horse and ride away being sure to take their grain and the hidden loaf that had been baked with their stolen flour. The Reeve then concludes his story with a final refrain which harkens back to the final passage of the preceding tale – the Miller's Tale. In the preceding Miller's Tale, an old carpenter was the butt of the joke. Now, the Reeve, who was a carpenter by trade, has made a miller the butt of his joke. The Reeve says:

Thus is the proud miller soundly beat,
And has lost all of the ground wheat,
And paid for the suppers that were eaten,
By Alain and John who delivered the beating.
His wife is screwed, also his daughter took;
Thus befitting a miller who's also a crook.
And therefore this proverb is said with truth,
"Do evil to others and evil is done to you."
The cheater shall himself be the one cheated.
And God, who sits on high in majesty,
Save all this company, both strong and frail!
Thus have I repaid this miller with my own tale.

Thus is the proude millere wel ybete,
And hath ylost the gryndynge of the whete,
And payed for the soper everideel
Of Aleyn and of John, that bette hym weel.
His wyf is swyved, and his doghter als.
Lo, swich it is a millere to be fals!
And therfore this proverbe is seyd ful sooth,
'Hym thar nat wene wel that yvele dooth';
A gylour shal hymself bigyled be.
And God, that sitteth heighte in magestee,
Save al this compaignye, grete and smale!
Thus have I quyt the Millere in my tale.

So that concludes the Reeve's Tale – one of the earliest examples of an extended dialogue composed in a regional English dialect.

Now despite this innovation, some people apparently didn't 'get it.' There are over 80 surviving manuscripts of the Canterbury Tales from the Middle English period, and the actual text of the students' dialogue varies a bit from one manuscript to the next. It appears that some scribes who copied the text couldn't figure out why the students's dialogue was so unusual – why it used strange words, and spellings and grammar. So they attempted to fix or correct the text. They changed the dialogue so that the northern students spoke standard southern English. In other cases, it appears that the scribes did the opposite. They understood what Chaucer was doing, and they actually tried to give him some help. They enhanced the students' northern dialect by adding some additional northernisms that weren't included in the earliest copies.

Again, some of that confusion may have been because this was such a new approach to composing dialogue. But within another generation or so, it started to become much more common. And in fact, by the mid-1400s, we have another example of a writer trying to mimic the speech of another region, only in this case, the regions were reversed. Chaucer was a southern writer who wrote northern dialogue. But in this next example, we have a northern writer who composed passages in a southern dialect.

This example actually comes from a play composed in the north of England in the early to mid 1400s – so just a few years after Chaucer died. It was a mystery play which was a type of play that was based on stories from the Bible or the lives of Saints. Most people in this period didn't have access to a Bible, and most Bibles were written in Latin, so these types of plays were a common way to present Biblical stories to the masses. And one of the most well known mystery plays of the Middle Ages is known as the Second Shepherd's Play. It was composed near Yorkshire in the north of England, and the dialogue is composed in a northern dialect.

The play begins with three shepherds in the English countryside, again all of whom speak with distinctly northern accents. They are soon joined by a man named Mak who is a local thief well-known for stealing sheep. Mak knows that the shepherds will recognize him, so he tries to disguise himself. As he approaches them, he pulls a cloak over his head and pretends that he is a yeoman from the south of England who has been sent there on a royal mission. Of course, the royal court was also located in the south, so Mak tries to affect a southern accent to fool the shepherds. But the shepherds know exactly who he is.

One of the shepherd's says, "Mak, where has thou gon? Tell us tythyng." – 'Mak, where have you been. Tell us some tidings or news." To which Mak responds:

What! I am a yeoman, I tell you, of the king;
The self and the same, sent from a great lord,
And such.
A curse on you! Go hence
Out of my presence;
Why who be I?

What! Ich be a yoman, I tell you, of the king;
The self and the same, sond from a great lordyng,
And sich.
Fy on you! Goyth hence
Out of my presence;
Why who be ich?

So here, Mak says "Ich be a yoman" – 'I am a yeoman.' So he uses the distinctly southern "ich be" – meaning 'I am.' And he says that he has been "***sond***" from a great lord. It meant 'sent' from a great lord, but in the north, people said 'sand' instead of 'sent.' So instead of using the proper southern form of the verb, Mak simply attempts to southernize the vowel in the northern word. He says "***sond***" instead of northern 'sand.' He also uses the southern word ***sich*** – or ***such***

– rather than the northern form ***slyk*** which we saw earlier in the Reeve's Tale. And he orders the shepherds to "goyth hence" using the southern 'th' verb ending.

Again, the shepherds are not fooled by any of this. One of them says, "Why make ye it so qwaynt" Mak, ye do wrang." – 'Why are you behaving so strangely? Mak, you're doing wrong.'

After another exchange between Mak and the shepherds, one of the shepherds says,

Bot, Mak, is that sothe?
Now take outt that southren tothe
And sett in a torde!

But, Mak, is that so?
Now take out that southern tooth
And set it in a turd!

So in other words, 'Stop talking with that southern accent. We know exactly who you are.'

Now what's so interesting about these early portrayals of regional accents is that they seem somewhat neutral in their approach. The dialects aren't really stigmatized. Chaucer's students speak with northern accents, but they are not depicted as stupid or naive. And Mak the sheep-stealer tries to mimic a southern accent, but he is only ridiculed because he is lying and pretending to be someone he's not. The accent itself isn't mocked or ridiculed.

But all of that would change over the next few centuries. Johannes Gutenberg was introducing his printing press to Germany at almost the exact same time that this northern mystery play was composed in England. Within a few years, William Caxton would bring that printing press to England. And he chose to print his documents in a Midlands dialect – especially the dialect spoken around London – in part because it combined northern and southern features and was therefore better understood throughout the country. Some of those northern features like the plural 'S' and use of the pronoun ***they*** were already used in London during the time of Chaucer. By the time Caxton's printing press was in operation there a century later, many other northern features had spread to London – like the 'S' verb ending, and the northern pronoun 'I'.

Caxton's printing press helped to make that printed dialect the standard dialect of English. And inevitably, it meant that the other dialects became non-standard, and they therefore became stigmatized. So as we move into the Modern English period, we find more and more works of literature that feature characters who speak with a regional dialect. But in many of those cases, the dialect is used to imply something negative about the character. Non-standard or stigmatized dialects were often used to imply that the character was stupid or naive or corrupt. But again, that appears to be a later development that really came about after a standard form of English had emerged.

In these earliest examples from the late 1300s and early 1400s, we find that the dialects are used in a much more descriptive way. They're not used to mock or ridicule. They're merely used to represent the way people actually spoke. And for that reason, they are a fascinating resource for modern scholars who try to piece together the evolution of English in the Middle Ages.

Next time, we'll turn our attention to another major of work of literature from this period. In fact, it may be the second most well-known piece of Middle English literature outside of the Canterbury Tales. It's the Arthurian poem known as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. And it provides us with another glimpse of the English language as it was spoken outside of London. The Gawain poem was composed in a northwest Midlands dialect that was very different from Chaucer's dialect. So it'll be a good opportunity to see how different Modern English might have been if Caxton had established his printing press in another part of England.

So until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.