

## Adam Sedgwick on language and dialect: a linguist's view\*

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Adam Sedgwick's *Memorial* (1868) and its *Supplement* (1870) are fascinating works. Their original purpose was to argue his case for the name and district assigned to Cowgill Chapel, of which Sedgwick was a founding trustee. But within the work, and especially in the various Appendices, he gives us valuable and interesting views on aspects of life in Dent (never in his time called "Dentdale") in the years around 1800.

Though primarily renowned as a geologist, Sedgwick was obviously widely read, and his comments on various subjects are both interesting and perceptive. As a student of Linguistics, and especially Dialectology, I found his remarks in those areas of particular interest. The late nineteenth century was a time of rapid progress in the study and understanding of language. The year 1876 is regarded as an *annus mirabilis* in the history of Linguistics with several groundbreaking developments in phonetics, comparative philology and dialectology. Sadly Sedgwick (who, he tells us, dictated several of his Appendices including those on dialect from his Cambridge armchair in the late 1860s, when he was in his 80s) was too early to profit from the new insights. So his account is essentially that of an intelligent layman – and it is a mixture of perceptive and more naive observations.

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An early part of the *Memorial* argues about the etymology of the name of the hamlet in which the Chapel is located. "Kirkthwaite" is declared to be an "erroneous orthography" for "Kirthwaite", and "Cowgill" is an "ignorant mutilation" of "Cogill".

Sedgwick's arguments about "Kirkthwaite" *not* being the older form of "Kirthwaite" include his assertion of a "sound dialectical rule" that *k* is not lost when *kirk* is compounded with another noun (cf. *kirkbank*). But he admits that when "the interposed word *by*" comes in, it does get lost by another rule (e.g. *Kir(k)by Lonsdale*). If Sedgwick had been writing a few years later, one might have thought he was familiar with the doctrine of the Neogrammarians (one of the landmark developments of 1876) that phonetic laws have no exceptions, and that some *apparent* exceptions can be explained by another interacting law. In fact however, I think one could find several other examples of *k* being lost through the common phonetic change of the simplification of a cluster of consonants – and anyway the form *-by* was of course itself a noun (meaning "settlement").

More interesting are his other statements about "Kirkthwaite/Kirthwaite/Krithwaite". He admits in footnotes that he had recently been made aware of some ancient documents which do have the form "Kirkthwaite", which he had earlier passionately denied. But he claims this must be a case of what linguists call *popular etymology*: changing a form into something more easily understood (e.g. "sparrow-grass" for asparagus, "Welsh Rabbit" for rarebit etc). He alleges the same sort of change occurred in the name "Cowgill" for the well-known gill called "Cogill". (As an aside, I wonder whether certain inhabitants of Dent today who use the pronunciation [kɛYɪl] instead of the more popular [kɔYɪl] are

\* This paper forms the second chapter of an "extended review" of some 16,500 words entitled *A Survey of Dialect Studies in the area of the Sedbergh & District History Society* (2014). I wrote this for my own interest and have deposited a copy with the Society in case anyone wishes to consult it. Because he is such an eminent son of our area, I discussed Sedgwick in much more detail than the other works I considered.

seeking to preserve the older form – or are they using a somewhat affected Received Pronunciation? If Sedgwick is correct, I think they should more accurately say [ko:γIλ]).

As for the form “Kriithwaite”, Sedgwick makes the amusing remark that in several words with *r* plus a vowel there is “a ludicrous struggle between the two letters for precedence”, which gives us the pairs *thorp/throp*, *firth/frith*, *grin/girn* and so on. He is essentially correct (a linguist would use the term “metathesis” for this phonetic process), but his use of the term “letter” – and also that of “orthography” – points to a problem with Sedgwick’s understanding of language to which we shall return at various points in this paper: his confusion of spoken and written language i.e. sounds and letters.

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Appendix VI is a general discussion about the dialects of Northern England, especially in the Parish of Sedbergh. Sedgwick notes that this area is rather cut off from the rest of Yorkshire and has more in common with Westmorland, where the various valleys – even extending into the Lake District - have slight variations of speech but are significantly different from Cumberland or Wensleydale. He notes that education is destroying dialect – a concern expressed by several more prominent linguists around that time, and one which led to the quickening of interest in dialect. Sedgwick gives examples of changes of vocabulary and meaning which have occurred within his own lifetime. He expresses the enlightened view that ability to use Standard English is desirable, but one should not forget the ancestral dialect.

Sedgwick gives a fair account of the history of the languages of Britain, with the succession of Celtic, Anglo-Saxon (with Celtic pushed into the western and northern areas), Danish coming from the east and Norwegian from the north-west, and French brought by the Normans. He goes on to give examples of place-names which indicate the places settled by these “tribes”: Anglo-Saxon *-ton/-ham/-worth...* Danish *-thorp/-toft/-by...* Norwegian *-thwaite* etc.

Then he applies this to the area in which Dent is situated. The Ribble Valley and Morecambe Bay have many *-ton* names, but to the north of the Bay we find Danish *-thorp* and Norwegian *-thwaite*. The Lune Valley has many Anglo-Saxon *-ton* names, but the Sedbergh area has more with *-thwaite* (Norwegian) and *-thorp/-throp* (Danish). Dent itself has mostly names from the Norwegians, “who overcame the old settlers”. This last statement is questionable: others would say that Angles and Vikings appear to have co-existed in separate but adjacent settlements. However, Sedgwick is happy to believe that in Dent “we are all of the blood of the North-men” – Vikings rather than the Anglo-Saxons he says are to be found in Wensleydale!

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It is in Appendix VII that Sedgwick gets down to a more detailed discussion of dialect. The nineteenth century had seen a quickening of interest in the subject, and he refers to several of the early works, notably that of Carr on the dialect of Craven published in 1824. He says this contains most of the provincial words heard in Dent, but there are differences and Dent is closer than Craven to Norwegian-type dialect.

There follow some six pages which largely concern phonetics, and it is here that Sedgwick's observations are most variable in quality. Sometimes it is clear that he is referring to the Standard Language; at other times it is dialect; but in other places one cannot be sure. Some of his remarks are quite perceptive for a layman; some are more questionable; others I find incomprehensible.

As he says at the start, "there is a great difficulty...in giving a real phonetic spelling to provincial words"; one really needs "a new alphabet" - in other words a phonetic transcription. Having to work without such an aid leads to the danger of confusing sounds with letters, and when added to Sedgwick's understandable lack of familiarity with the developing subject of phonetics, this results in some apparently naïve assertions.

Sedgwick says that the "elements of our articulate sounds" can be divided into vowels, diphthongs and consonants. A vowel sound is one which can be prolonged (i.e. lengthened without a change in quality), whereas a diphthong is a union of two vowels as one syllable. So far, correct. But then his examples show confusion. He says that in "house" and "head" the vowels unite to form one syllable, but in "fear" and "hear" the vowels do not unite into a diphthong and in the dialect are sounded as two syllables. Now:

- i) "house" does indeed contain a diphthong (if we assume that in dialect it was pronounced [αYσ], as the *Survey of English Dialects*\* records for Dent), but with "head" there *could* be a diphthong if he is referring to the dialect form [I≡δ] – but one wonders whether Sedgwick is looking at the spellings with "ea" in these items. In other words, was he confusing sounds and letters?
- ii) "fear" and "hear" *would* be described by phoneticians as having a diphthong [I≡] in their usual pronunciation. It is only when pronounced in what Sedgwick seems to imply is a *more* dialectal form as [ϕI–≡, I–≡] that they are two syllables.

These examples begin to illustrate the difficulty in interpreting Sedgwick's account. But let us continue to his third type of sound. He says that a consonant gives no sound by itself but needs a following vowel for us to hear it. Partly correct, at least. Then he says that there are four consonants called "liquids" (*l, m, n, r*) which can "flow on" i.e. give sound in themselves, either before or after a vowel. Correct again – though later these four sounds were divided by phoneticians into "liquids" and "nasals". But then he goes astray. He says he wants to add *v*, which is "as good a liquid as any of them", because it can be lengthened in itself in the same way. He would also add *f* to his liquids, by the same reasoning. Still partly correct (*v* and *f* are the same articulation, pronounced with or without vocal cord vibration). However

- i) Phonetics would describe *f/v* as fricatives – and *all* fricatives can be prolonged, including the pairs [σ/ζ, Σ/Z, T/Δ], a point which Sedgwick has missed.
- ii) He also says *v* has "strangely and falsely long been associated with *u*, which is a vowel and sometimes a diphthong". Leaving aside the latter dubious assertion, I can only think Sedgwick is thinking of *letters* written *v* and *u*, which are indeed

\* The *Survey of English Dialects* (SED): a major project to record the oldest forms of traditional dialect still to be found at a network of 313 localities around England, mainly conducted in the 1950s. By happy coincidence Dent was one of the localities selected in Yorkshire. This was the most thorough and reliable account of the Dent dialect, though in my judgement it was surpassed by a later study concentrating just on Dent which was published in 1967.

associated typographically (being used interchangeably say in Latin inscriptions). Phonetically [w] and [Y] are not related: it is *w* [w] which is the consonantal form of [Y].

It is when he starts to discuss vowels that one really gets the mental picture of old Sedgwick sitting comfortably in his armchair in Trinity College and dictating his rather confused opinions. He starts by saying grammars used to speak of five vowels (*a, e, i, o, u*) or possibly six (if *y* is included). Clearly he is here referring to *letters*, as indeed he says. A phonetician would certainly say there are more than five vowel *sounds*, even if we do not count long and short vowels separately. But then Sedgwick says that only three of them are true vowels, because

- i) *i* is not a true vowel because it cannot be prolonged: it is a diphthong of *a+e*. Here he is talking about the letter *i*, but then he refers to the sound of the *name* of this letter: [αI] – a total confusion of speech and writing!
- ii) He says *u* is a vowel (as it can be prolonged), but it is often combined with *q* as a consonant – again confusing speech and writing, since *q* is merely a (redundant) letter of the alphabet and is always sounded as [κ]. But in words like *cube* or *use* he says *u* is a diphthong i.e. [φv:] (though in fact phonetics would regard this as a semivowel + long [v:]). For all these reasons he says he cannot retain *u* in his list of vowels.

The third vowel he rejects is *y*. This is never a distinct vowel: it is either a consonant as in *you*, or “in place of short *e*” in *only*. To speak of the word as containing any sort of *e* just illustrates Sedgwick’s total confusion of sounds and letters. In other words he wants to talk about spoken language, especially dialect, but he cannot get written language out of his mind.

Having reduced his initial six vowels to three, he then says the prolonging test shows there are in fact six. Where does he get his new three?

- i) He says “the first letter of the alphabet” (*sic*) gives us two separate vowels: to be heard in the words *father* and *hate*. Again he is getting tied up over letters and sounds. He makes a correct observation that in *father* it is “guttural” (i.e. what would be described phonetically as a back vowel) – but then he loses me completely by saying “it differs from the other gutturals in being unconnected with the aspiration of the letter *h*”. He goes on to say that both *a*’s can be long or short. The [A:] of *father* and [α] in *hat* are indeed long and short, but what can he mean by a short-vowel form of [εI] (or [ε:]?) in *hate*?
- ii) The “double vowel in words like *look* is only an unfortunate spelling”; it is one vowel sound and can be prolonged. Quite right: he talking about the sound [v:], but unfortunately he still keeps referring to spelling.
- iii) His sixth “good vowel sound” he calls “ô guttural”, as in *hall*. He is speaking of the long vowel [O:], and he says many Northerners cannot pronounce this, so he believes it did not exist in the old dialects of the area.

His attempt at a phonetic description of this vowel as “like a low note in music, entirely from the throat, with an open mouth and the tongue at rest” might amuse a phonetician.

But he is correct in saying that this sound [O:] is true vowel and can be prolonged. He then spoils things by criticising its use in *Saul* and *Paul* where he claims the “despotic authority of custom” has decided on the pronunciation with [O:] while several other languages sound the two vowels separately as a diphthong. This remark is as misguided as his saying that two of his six vowels are “natural and guttural sounds, unchanged by the lips and tongue, and unconnected with the hard breathing of the letter *h*.” Whatever is intended by the last part of this, the first part is totally inaccurate: the essence of vowel sounds is that the different vowels are produced by different positions of the tongue and lips. Indeed, he says shortly afterwards that all our vocal sounds are produced through the windpipe (i.e. using what phoneticians would call the pulmonic airstream mechanism), “setting the membranes at its top (i.e. the vocal cords) in a sonorous vibration”, which is then modified by the lips and tongue. So again we have a mixture of perceptive and naïve statements.

When turning to some individual consonant letters (*sic*), we find some interesting remarks. On *h*, he contrasts the “hard/soft breathing” which distinguishes *hear/ear*, but then he says that, though in some counties this sound hardly exists, and in some it is “wrongly affixed” (what would now be called *hypercorrection*), “this vulgar abuse does not characterise the Northern dialects”, and in Dent “the letter is hardly ever misapplied”. This apparent claim that in Dent dialect *h* is used as in the Standard language is surprising – and goes contrary to the findings of other studies, such as SED, which found *h* to be absent more often than not.

Sedgwick is interesting when he comes to *w*. He says it is “erroneously called a consonant”, whereas it is very much like the vowel *oo* [v:]. If it is used in words like *wanton*, it is sounded like a diphthong run rapidly together. So it is not really a consonant. He is essentially correct: [w] is classed now as a semivowel i.e. the vowel [v:] used as a consonant (though [wə] is not regarded as a diphthong).

When the “letter” *oo* (he means the sound [v:] – or rather [w]) is combined with *h* in words such as *what* or *where*, he says that the spelling ought to begin with *hw*, because the pronunciation is *hoo-at* etc said rapidly. He claims that in the North such words have aspirated *w*, whereas in the Standard English of the South is sometimes lost “to the great enfeebling of the English tongue”! It is obvious that Sedgwick is claiming that in 19C Dent the usual pronunciation was one which by the mid-20C was only found in Northumberland among the Northern counties (cf. SED).

Concluding this general discussion about phonetics, Sedgwick says “Having thus pointed out one or two distinctions between provincial and good English...” and goes on to summarise his conclusions about vowels. The sentence just quoted illustrates the fact that he has what linguists would regard as an incorrect appreciation of the distinction between the standard language and dialects. In fact, Standard English (or Received Pronunciation, if one is thinking mainly of phonetics) is not “good English” as compared to other forms. It is simply a historical accident that one dialect (that of a certain class of speakers in one part of the country - which we now call Standard English) and one form of pronunciation (that of a small minority belonging to a higher social class – which we call RP) have attained that status. As forms of language and speech they are no more “good” or correct than any other.

Later in the same paragraph Sedgwick says “the vowel *oo* replaces diphthongs; so *cow* becomes *coo* and *house* becomes *hooose*... Not only are these changes made, but they seem to defy all obedience to any intelligible rule.” This again shows his misunderstanding

of the relationship between the different forms of English. The forms of Standard English/RP are not in any sense primary: they do not “become” i.e. *change* into the non-standard forms. Rather the different forms developed alongside each other, in different geographical areas and in different social classes – and they all did so through thousands of changes, many of which (in pronunciation at least) occurred according to regular “rules”. But we cannot blame Sedgwick for living a few years before these facts were more clearly stated and appreciated.

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After this lengthy more general discussion, Sedgwick points out “some of the peculiarities of the northern dialect”, and this is a more interesting section.

- 1 Sedgwick says that “in the old tongue of Dent” the Definite Article in a phrase like *in the abstract* would be *i th’abstract*, while in Craven it would be *i t’abstract*. “As a general rule *the* is not suppressed but sounded strongly”. It is a pity he gives only one example, of a word with an initial vowel; before a consonant would the article be [τ]? The alternation of [T] before vowel ~ [τ] before consonant occurred in parts of Yorkshire (though generally further south), but Sedgwick’s examples imply [T] in both contexts, which certainly is not heard today. The SED for Dent (in the 1950s) records [τ] in both contexts except for one example *in the oven* [I Δ YϞv].
- 2 Sedgwick notices the major isogloss between North Midland and Northern dialect areas which passed between Dent and Sedbergh. He says Dent would say *Our brawn caw ran dawn th’ braw* with [αY] in several words, while in Sedbergh it would be *Oor broon coo ran doon th’ broo* with [v:].
- 3 Whereas the above two are important points affecting many words, Sedgwick’s third of what he calls “dialectic corruptions” is a more occasional phenomenon: to “replace a good old word with a modern word of similar sound”. Thus *Harbergill* became *Harbourgill* and *Risell* became *Rise Hill*. He is not too sure about those examples, but (if I interpret his attempted phonetic spelling correctly) he is confident in saying that *Baughfell* is [βO:φελ] not *Bowfell* [βOYφελ].
- 4 The letters (he means sounds) *h, v, w* are “often misused in provincial dialects”: *h* is often lost, and *v/w* are interchanged. But according to Sedgwick, this never happens in his native valley. We have referred above to *h*-dropping; the confusion of *v/w* is indeed irrelevant to Dent.
- 5 The “suppression of the guttural sounds” is a major change in the spoken language of the north. By this he means the palatal fricative [X] in *sigh, night* and the velar [ξ] in *trough, rough*. Though he calls the latter a “grand sonorous guttural” from the chest, he is correct in observing that the two sounds differ in being further forward or back along the roof of the mouth. He recalls hearing the fricative in both sets of words, but now we “polish and smooth our language” and thus cut ourselves off from our ancestors!
- 6 Whereas the above referred to all northern dialects, he now turns to some which are more restricted to Westmorland and the Lake Counties. All northern dialects tend to make long vowels and diphthongs into two syllables: for example, *more, late* become *ma-er, la-et*. But this change varies regionally in its effects.  
Unfortunately Sedgwick here repeats his confusion of sounds and letters. For instance, he criticises Carr’s work on the Craven dialect for spelling *more, sore, pace*

as *maar, saar, paas*, and objects “no doubling of *letters* can make â *guttural*” (my italics), and then reverts to some of his dubious statements about the vowels of English.

Then we have Sedgwick making some interesting statements about Standard English and dialect. He points out that in StE we hear two vowels in *fear, beard*, but not in *seat, meat*. However, northern dialects are more consistent in that the latter are pronounced *se-at, me-at*. He goes on “our northern dialects have become vulgar by refusing to conform to the inconsistent standard of the South of England”.

Without getting involved in the detail of those specific examples, Sedgwick is here making a correct observation. Dialects have indeed come to be regarded as somehow “vulgar” or substandard in relation to Standard English, whereas in fact they are just as genuine developments – and sometimes are more consistent than StE which in some areas has adopted forms from different dialects, and is no more “correct” in any absolute sense.

This section ends with some further statements with which linguists would not disagree. Time produces changes in language; as society changes we have to increase our language. But let us not go on polishing till we rub things down and rejecting items to the point where we cannot understand our ancestors. The most dangerous of the succession of invaders of England is “the schoolmaster and his followers”!

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The penultimate part of the discussion of language and dialect in the *Memorial* concerns a number of words which Sedgwick says have survived from the time of Chaucer.

- A few of these have undergone changes of meaning in StE, but not in Dent: for example *silly*, which means feeble, but in body rather than mind.
- A longer list are now unfamiliar in StE but continue in dialect (without a change of meaning): for instance *lake* (play), *lathe* (barn), *mell* (meddle)
- Other items are survivals in dialect but which have changed phonetically: *thropple* (windpipe: *thrope-boll* in Chaucer) or involve customs not familiar outside the Dales: *rake the fire* (keep it going overnight). One is dubious about some of these items - and also about Sedgwick’s saying they cause him to suspect that “Chaucer had visited our northern Dales”!

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The concluding pages of the book illustrate my own conclusions about Sedgwick’s views about language. Some are perceptive and were to be echoed by later scholars of linguistics. He expresses a wish that words and phrases “now almost obsolete but still lingering among our northern Dales” might be recorded in small tracts. It is probably coincidental, but Sedgwick’s *Memorial* came out in 1868; in 1870 the first clear call came for the founding of an English Dialect Society, and in the next 30 years there was a flurry of activity in new or reprinted “glossaries” and descriptions of dialects.

Of more mixed value is Sedgwick’s somewhat poetical description of the mechanisms by which speech is produced, transmitted and perceived by the human body. However, undoubtedly true is his belief that language is “a great gulf between man and every other

living thing". Linguists have shown that, whereas other species can indeed communicate to varying extents, language in its literally infinite possibilities is uniquely human.

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In the *Supplement to the Memorial* (1870) Sedgwick returns to the "orthography" of the name *Kirthwaite*. He now admits that some old documents have been found with the spelling *Kirkthwaite*. But he still thinks *Kirthwaite* has better historical support. He strongly believes that, in spite of numerous instances of places with *Kir(k)by* as part of the name, "it would violate all the rules by which dialectical changes have been governed" for the *k* to be lost in many other contexts. He says there are exceptions to this rule, but they are very rare. This slightly contradicts what he said (cf. the first page above) which had echoes of the later Neogrammarian hypothesis about phonetic laws *not* having exceptions.

Sedgwick returns to the etymology of Cowgill and Kirthwaite. He now thinks that Danish *Ko* (cow) suggests that *Cogill* is the more historically accurate form, and this with Old Norse *Kyr* (cows) shows that "the two names stand side by side as of kindred stock".

The *Supplement* also has a lengthy section where Sedgwick speculates about the names of old Dent families and their etymology or derivation. This includes his own name (*Sedgwick*), various names with *-thwaite* suggesting Norse settlers, and nicknames like *Harry o' Shoulbred* or *Adam o' th' Parson's* (referring to himself?).

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It seems appropriate to end this paper by referring to Sedgwick's final remarks relating to language. For these illustrate a point that has recurred throughout: that in relation to language a highly intelligent man can come to a mixture of perceptive and fanciful conclusions.

Sedgwick says he has alluded to rules of language. One great rule in the development of language is that of Euphony, by which he means agreeable sound which fitted the original purpose. So "the ancient and vulgar sounds ought not to be forgotten". They belong to the real history of a language and provide a link to our ancestors. Sedgwick says if he were to speculate further on this subject, he might perplex his aged brain!

That supposed "rule" is certainly an old man's speculation. But in the previous paragraph he makes a point about rules of language that all linguists would echo: that language came before the rules. We might question Sedgwick's words about language being made "in conformity with the original faculties of the human mind", but we would certainly agree that true "rules of language" are statements of what has been observed to occur rather than something which teachers tell us to obey.