

TEACHING THE ART OF POETRY

USING DIALECT IN YOUR POEMS

by Liz Berry

hinny ... glinder ... jinnyspins ... dayclean¹

Choosing to write poems using dialect is like finding a locked box full of treasure. You know there's all sorts of magical things inside, you just have to find the key that will let you in. So put down your notebook, close your laptop, and start listening to the voices around you. For this is the way in, the place where the strongest dialect poetry starts: a voice you can hear.

That's how writing in Black Country dialect started for me - by listening to the voices of the area I'd grown up in. The Black Country dialect has long been mocked as guttural and middle-earthly but to me it's beautiful because the people I love best have spoken it. None of them are poets but to me their language is the stuff of poetry. I started listening more carefully, rooting around in the past. It was like digging up my own Staffordshire Hoard; a field full of spectacular words, sounds and phrases glinting out of the muck.

I was inspired by other poets who'd written using dialect. The brilliant Faber Book of Vernacular Verse edited by Tom Paulin presents a wonderful alternative poetic tradition. It praises the 'springy, irreverent, chanting, often tender and intimate, vernacular voice ... which speaks for an alternative community that is mostly powerless and invisible'. Contemporary poets like Kathleen Jamie, Daljit Nagra and Jen Hadfield continue the tradition in fresh and irresistible ways. Reading their work you're bowled over by the fizz and charm of dialect and how poetry can be a powerful way of protecting and celebrating the spoken language of regions and communities.

So let's unlock the treasure box and begin to make poems that capture that fizz and charm ...

1) Listen. First, you'll need to spend time listening to dialect being spoken. Listen for words and also pronunciation. Chat to family, friends, the women in Greggs, taxi drivers, old ladies at the bus stop, little kids. Listen to recordings online of speakers or musicians who sing in dialect. Listen to recordings on the [Poetry Archive](#) and [You Tube](#) of poets like [Daljit Nagra](#), [Benjamin Zephaniah](#) and [Jackie Kay](#) performing their dialect poems. Go and hear local poets performing. Let your ear pick up the tunes their voices make. You'll be surprised, delighted, sometimes baffled!

2) Dig up your own word hoard. Track down any poems, books, songs or dictionaries containing your dialect and immerse yourself in the language. Local libraries, museums, small presses and local history societies are useful sources. Spend time writing down some of your favourite words and exploring their meaning. Discover any other poets or writers who've written using your dialect and read their work - good, bad and ugly! Even if the poems aren't your cup of tea then you might pick up some interesting words or ways of recording phonetically.

¹ hinny - woman or honey (Geordie); glinder - look with screwed up eyes, as at something very bright (Shetland); jinnyspins - craneflies (Yorkshire); dayclean - dawn (West Indian)

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3) Start small. Write something short first to build your confidence or even slip some words of dialect into a poem you're already writing. [Jen Hadfield's](#) Nigh-No-Place has some fantastic shorter poems which use Shetland dialect. Or choose your favourite dialect word and write something which explores its sound and meaning. Read 'Quoof' by [Paul Muldoon](#) for inspiration. A third way in is to choose a short poem and 'translate' it into dialect.

4) Play. Don't be afraid to make words up, experiment and create your own version of the dialect. Dialect writing isn't just about preserving something precious from the past, it's also about making something new and thrilling. Daljit Nagra's ebullient Punglish poems will get your mind whirling!

5) Remember your reader. Now is the time to think about the nitty-gritty. Are you going to write entirely phonetically to reflect pronunciation or just give a flavour? Will you need a glossary? How will you make the most of dialect without shutting out the general reader? Look to other poets for guidance as to how to make it work best.

6) Speak it. Dialect poetry is fantastic to perform and to listen to. One of the surest ways of hearing whether your dialect poem is working is when you read it aloud to yourself or to others. Do the words sound right? Does it make sense? Has it captured the music of the dialect?

7) Read read read! There are so many fantastic poets who have written using dialect. Here a few names to inspire you: Kathleen Jamie, Katrina Porteous, Daljit Nagra, Jackie Kay, Andrew Philip, Benjamin Zephaniah, David Morley, John Agard, Tony Harrison, Liz Lochhead, Jen Hadfield, Thomas Hardy, Les Murray, Hugh MacDiarmid, James Berry, Seamus Heaney, Robert Burns and, of course, the Patron Saint of Dialect Poetry: Anonymous!

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