

Chapter Three

‘Pack up your blarting’: The Language of the Senses in Black Country Dialect

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Senses and dialect – an introduction

The novelist Anthony Cartwright¹ draws on the deprivation and pollution surrounding Dudley in his 2009 novel *Heartland* set in that town (fictionalised as Cinderheath) in his imaginings of sight in the area:

A bloke from Tipton goes to New York for his holiday, decides to visit Ground Zero, yer know, pay his respects. He’s stonidin lookin at the ruins an this chap comes up to him, big ten-gallon hat, typical Yank, from Texas, like Bush, yer know.

Hey Pardner, this bloke says.

How do, says the bloke from Tipton.

Where the hell you all from?

Me? I’m from Tipton, mate.

Tipton? Tipton? What the hell state’s that in?

Our bloke has a look around him an says, Abaht the same bloody state as this.

The Black Country, though it does not exist in one official county (or state, as the American would have it), is said by Cartwright to be ‘in a state.’ It has suffered the ravages of industrial decline post WW2 and many boroughs now rank among the highest in the UK for social deprivation.² Concomitantly, the local dialect associated with the region has been the butt of many jokes, and ranks low on psychosocial models correlating dialect with prestige and intelligence.³ Even the name of the region and its identity were forged (literally and

¹ Cartwright, A. *Heartland*. Birmingham: Tindall Street Press, 2009

² Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. ‘The English Indices of Deprivation 2019’, September 2019.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/835115/IdD2019_Statistical_Release.pdf.

metaphorically) during the Industrial Revolution, and the region is named for the severe air pollution it suffered. It is therefore an interesting region and language variety to examine, since on the surface it would seem that negative sensory experiences might proliferate there.

Between 2002 and 2006 I carried out fieldwork in the Black Country, interviewing 68 people in the region and recording their dyadic conversations with each other as they discussed the words they used in their everyday life, and words they associated with the region. The conversation revealed that Black Country dialect is in widespread use, despite the stigma a process of standardisation in English has resulted in for dialects across Britain and Ireland. It also revealed that although processes operate on dialect which result in some words and grammatical structures falling from use, in fact the dialect is vital and speakers continue to coin new words to describe their experiences in the world, they borrow new words from other speech communities, and they update words and sayings so that those words and sayings better reflect the changing experiences of life in the region. In this chapter, I examine possible models of how the sensory organs are connected, and look at how dialect speakers and dialect writers use lexis and sayings to encode their own sensory experiences in the Black Country across time, before coming to some conclusions about the future of Black Country dialect and the changing sensory experiences which unfold across the region. I start by examining models of sensory experience since antiquity.

Models of sensory experience

Bodo Winter ⁴reports that traditionally western linguistics divides up the senses into five; these correspond to the so-called Aristotelian senses: touch, taste, hearing, sight and smell. He problematises this:

The five-fold way of carving up the sensory space furthermore does not correspond directly to everything we know from neurophysiology and perceptual psychology. Scientists recognize many subdivisions that do not fall neatly into the categories of sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell [...] For example, researchers recognize that pain is separate from other dimensions of touch: Pain perception is supported by underlying

³ Coupland, Nik and Hywel Bishop. 'Ideologised values for British accents.' *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 11:1, 2007, 74-93.

⁴ Winter, Bodo. *Sensory Linguistics : Language, Perception and Metaphor*. Amsterdam: JohnBenjamins Publishing Company, 2019, 12-13.

brain structures that are separate from regular touch perception [...] Indeed, most researchers think of pain (“nociception”) as a separate sense. Similarly, the so-called “vomeronasal organ” may be involved in constituting another sense that is different from the Aristotelian senses. This organ, partially separated from regular olfaction, is responsible for the perception of pheromones [...] These are but two of many examples which fall through the cracks.

He continues:

Not only are there many different criteria from which to choose, but each criterion itself is fuzzy. For example, what do we consider as a “body organ”? How are we to deal with distributed organs, such as the skin, or sensory systems that span the entire body, such as the internal senses? Do we treat neural tissue as being part of a sense? If so, the distinctions between the senses become even more messy, because the brain is massively interconnected. If we follow the receptor-based criterion, what divisions do we make? Should we treat mechanical perception and temperature perception as two separate senses because they are associated with their own receptors? But then, what about the many different types of mechanical receptors, with some receptors specializing in slow or fast vibrations, others in the perception of sustained touch, and still others in the perception of skin stretching? Shall we assign separate senses to each one of these receptors? These questions show the difficulty of establishing criteria for what constitutes a sense.

Notwithstanding the issues with this system, since we are looking at a dialect that is a variety of a language in the global West, it is not unreasonable to start from the assumption that the five senses system is a well embedded starting point for Black Country speakers and writers examining linguistic encoding of sensory experience., though it would be wise to remember that others are now broadening out sensory models to include up to 23 senses, and to expect the sensory experiences they map to be hard to place in a five senses mode.

This chapter now examines memories of the Black Country as it was and as it is now, by examining sensory encodings, and it does this by prioritising oral and written testimonies about the area and its associated dialect. The Black Country is by no means without a literary tradition, though like all other areas across the British Isles, its regional language variety is viewed on a national level (in exams, in high earning workplaces, in the court system) as

deficient when compared to written and spoken Standard English. There is a rich vein of written and spoken sources charting the dialect of the area which contains words we might term sensory. The account will prioritise smell, as does the rest of this volume, but will also examine dialectal encodings of the other senses, so that a full range of dialect can be examined.

Black Country Dialect– a short history

Dialect writing has been problematic since the rise of a standard language across the English-speaking world. With the rise of print media and the advent of the nation state in the seventeenth century, dialects associated with region began to be downgraded on a national level. Milroy⁵ explains that standardisation can be enforced more effectively at the written level:

[S]tandardisation inhibits linguistic change and variability. Changes in progress tend to be resisted until they have spread so widely that the written and public media have to accept them. Even in the highly standardised areas of English spelling and punctuation, some changes have been slowly accepted in the last thirty years. For example, in textbooks used in English composition classes around 1960, the spelling all right was required, and alright (on the analogy of already) was an ‘error’. [This change] had taken place in some usages before standard written practice accepted [it]. Standardisation inhibits linguistic change, but it does not prevent it totally: there is a constant tension between the forces of language maintenance and the acceptance of change. Thus, to borrow a term from Edward Sapir, standardisation ‘leaks’. In historical interpretation it is necessary to bear in mind this slow acceptance of change into the written language in particular, because even when the written forms are not fully standardised, they are still less variable than speech is. Changes arising in speech communities may thus have been current for long periods before they appeared in written texts.

The Black Country itself was not a cohesive area and was not recognised nationally, so that in contrast with Northumberland and Lancashire, for example, work is not emerging from the

⁵ Milroy, J. Historical description and the ideology of the standard language. In: (ed) Laura Wright, *The Development of Standard English, 1300–1800 Theories, Descriptions, Conflicts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

region labelled as ‘Black Country dialect’ until the late eighteenth century⁶. By the time this does start to happen, the notion of a standard variety taught in universities, schools and mediated through the judiciary, courts and print media is well entrenched. This means that spoken dialect becomes largely the preserve of the working class and any written dialect gathered is sparse indeed. That said, there are literary sources and linguistic sources we can consider when examining language which represents the senses. The next paragraphs will provide a short background to each of these sources.

Wright’s English Dialect Dictionary was published between 1898-1905 by Oxford University Press as an output of the work of the English Dialect Society. It has had a new lease of life in the last few years as Professor Manfred Markus of the University of Innsbruck oversaw its digitisation. It drew heavily on the work of Alexander Ellis who in 1889 had published a survey of English Dialects. It also drew on original data collected from informants by other members of the English Dialect Society (for the purposes of this volume, the collection by Georgina Frederica Jackson in Shropshire (1879) and George Northall’s *Warwickshire Word Book* (1896) are some of the nearest sources). Despite accusations that Wright criticised Ellis but replicated his methods of data collection, the *EDD* produces much of great worth and can be used to investigate the meaning of words across time with some success.

In the 1950s, Harold Orton and Joseph Wright at the University of Leeds rolled out plans for a comprehensive dialect survey of England and the Isle of Man. They sent trained fieldworkers to locations across these two countries, dividing up the area into grids. For the purposes of tracking Black Country dialect, the Survey is not ideal, since it wanted to find pure, rural speech and eschewed the speech of urban residents (viewing the Black Country as urban). Nevertheless, data collected from two speakers living in Himley add to the picture we can paint of dialect in the region across time and the kinds of words that were used to discuss sensory perceptions.

The final source that was constructed deliberately to gather data about the Black Country dialect and its speakers is the *BBC Voices* survey which was conducted between 2005 and 2007.⁷ Under the auspices of the University of Leeds and the BBC, teams of journalists

⁶ Asprey, Esther, in press. ‘Black Country dialect literature and what it can tell us about Black Country dialect,’ in *Dialect Writing and the North of England* edited by Patrick Honeybone and Warren Maguire, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 29-50.

⁷ BBC Voices project, 2013, ‘Where I live’
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blackcountry/voices/intro.shtml>

across the UK gathered variation in Irish, Welsh, Scottish Gaelic and English. My own doctoral fieldwork was a part of this, and interviewed many residents of the Black Country, whose words for the senses I draw on here. The data collection method was unusual in that it sought to flip the interview situation and give power to the speakers of each language variety, who informed the journalists about the language they spoke on an everyday basis. A scanned interview network sheet can be seen in Figure 1.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Figure 1: *Sense Relation Network designed for the Survey of Regional English*

The survey itself drew explicitly on cognitive approaches to language, and Aitchison's idea that people have connections between words which form a lexical web. The Sense Relation Networks which the survey employed drew on this as a way of stimulating conversation with the fieldworkers and journalists interviewing speakers, and as a way of making sure that some power went to those being interviewed because they would have completed paper copies of the networks prior to interview. The team responsible for constructing the networks had realised the wisdom in Aitchison's work and drew on antonyms and lexical relations to form three webs – being, saying and doing, everyday life and people, places and things.

In addition to these linguistic sources which concentrate on the spoken usage of residents of the area, we can examine dialect in writing. For this I will examine poems and novels written across the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, including both published and well-known writers and unpublished amateur writers who contribute to online poetry fora, self-published collections and local newspapers. This is important to ensure that the remains of a non-standard writing community represent what we know about the language of the senses. Middle class writers who never spoke dialect as a first variety or who use dialect as a tool only to give flavour to literature are not as representative of the spoken language culture itself.

Black Country dialect lexis and the senses up close

I now turn to closer analysis of terms recorded in the Black Country area for things which assail the sense of smell, beginning with the term *reasty*.

Reasty has a long history of use, and can be found in the Concise Oxford Dictionary as well as in the English Dialect Dictionary. It was found in general dialectal use across England, from Cumberland to Somerset. In both the OED and EDD its primary meaning was bacon which had been poorly cured and subsequently did not keep well. The EDD explains⁸:

1. Rancid; esp. used of bacon which has become yellow and strong-tasting through bad curing.

Examples in the EDD from Elis's earlier dialect survey of the British Isles produce a Worcestershire speaker who explains: "It's a bad kitchen fur keepin' bacon — it al'ays gwuz raisty — the sailin's low, an' nod much ar in it."

The EDD also lists a noun *reast* meaning bad bacon rind, and an abstract noun *reastiness* to describe the general process. We can also see the negative meaning attached by looking at the other adjectives *reasty* keeps company with:

"It may goa maaldy or reizdy" (Yorkshire)

Dun you call this bacon? It's nasty reasty stuff (Cheshire)

Its other listed meanings include *reasty cropped* for someone who has a sore throat, and bad tempered, as in the citation from West Yorkshire:

"It woddent pay to turn reesty."

It was given by many of the people I interviewed in 2006 as an alternative for dirty in the sense of lacking personal hygiene:

A word I would use is reasty. Reasty reasty REASTY. There's a chap who used to come here used to work at our place we used to call him reasty Roy.

This semantic shift was foreshadowed in the uses we have seen in the English Dialect Dictionary. Since unauthorised slaughter was prohibited in the Slaughter of Animals Act 1933⁹, keeping pigs at home dropped in popularity and curing one's own bacon is now not a regular occurrence in the Black Country. The shift of *reasty* to mean any food that is bad or

⁸ *English Dialect Dictionary online*, 9th February 2019. <http://eddonline-proj.uibk.ac.at/edd/index.jsp>

⁹ Question to the House, 21.12.1933, relating to the Slaughter of Animals Act. <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1933/dec/21/slaughter-of-animals-act-1933>

any person that smells bad has preserved the word in the area. The same informant demonstrated how remembering one word can prime remembering another as he declared:

Another word which I can think of for that now that's just sprung to mind is ronky. I would use that cos I called him ronky Roy all the chaps at work called him reasty Roy.

Ronk is listed in the EDD as a variant of standard *rank* (Black Country dialect often has an <o> sound before nasal consonants because it is a West Midlands dialect, so that *sond*, *hond* and *lond* as well as *bonk* for *bank* are still known in the region). It is listed as occurring from Yorkshire through Cheshire, Derbyshire, Worcestershire, Shropshire and Warwickshire down to Somerset again. Interestingly, the experience of something unpleasant is again linked to excess with a positive referent. The primary meaning of *rank* in the EDD is 'strong, great, formidable.'

My informants from Tipton, who were both 35, gave both the dirty meaning and the meaning 'great' as they discussed the meaning of the word ¹⁰:

EA "What would you say for *dirty*?"

INF 16 "I can't really think of one that is particular to the area"

INF 21 "ronk"

INF 16 "Ronk yeah"

INF 21 "It can mean good as well though(.)I sin a band last night(.)oh(.)ronk band"

The reported variants from the English Dialect Dictionary, the Survey of English Dialects and my own work show clearly that notions of sight, smell, touch, taste and hearing overlap. Bacon which tasted unpleasant also smelled unpleasant and gave rise to words concerning the smell of people. Smells which were unpleasant are also noted as extreme, and extremes can have an intensifying effect, as we see in the case of 'rank' (consider the intensifying use of rank in the

¹⁰ Asprey, Esther. 'Black Country English and Black Country Identity. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Leeds: University of Leeds. 2007.

phrase ‘rank arrogance’). Winter¹¹ also discusses this, remarking that smell and taste in particular overlap and feed into each other, remarking that

[t]he sensory modalities of taste and smell [...] warrant special attention: The folk model distinguishes these two senses, attributing the perception of flavor to the mouth and the tongue, even though flavor in fact arises from the interaction of taste and smell [...]

However, when the terms “taste” and “smell” (and correspondingly “gustatory” and “olfactory”) are used in this book, the Aristotelian model is implied. Distinguishing taste and smell, at least initially, allows us to explore the relation between these two sensory modalities. It is interesting to see the overlap for Black Country speakers which may occur between taste and smell. The next step is to examine visual perception, and it is to this that we now turn.

While the people I interviewed for *BBC Voices* were not asked about verbs for seeing and perceiving, they were asked about adjectives to describe pleasant and unpleasant sights. Their exuberant range of phrases provide use with insight into how regional variation may persist. The keyword ‘unattractive’ garnered a large response which contained a wealth of dialect variation. Informants from Bilston gave ‘god ugly’, showing the use of ‘god’ as an intensifier in the Black Country (it is used as *very* would be in Standard English. Younger informants gave *minging* and *minger*, a clear borrowing from Northern and Scottish English. Its rise in English English is now waning, but it is known by most people in England now, though as the National Dictionary of Scots [NSD] explains, it has its origin again in unpleasant smells. A 1988 citation from literature describes the tell-tale smell of linoleum production in Kirkcaldy:

' ... a body wud caa out — "Neist stop Kirkcaldy" — but ye aye kent it wis Kirkcaldy oniewey on account o the ming frae the lino factories. ... ¹²

The same literary source shows how the company a word keeps can lead to meaning shift:

The saicont ane had a pock o chips, aa reikie an mingin wi vinegar, an whan he had a

¹¹ Winter, Bodo. *Sensory Linguistics : Language, Perception and Metaphor*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2019, 12.

¹²Dictionary of the Scots Language entry for ‘ming’. <https://dsl.ac.uk/entry/snd/sndns2554>.

chip he aye passed the pock tae ae side an tither, for his friens tae get their chips likewise.¹³

By 1994 Irvine Welsh is using the word in his Edinburgh fiction in a more generalised sense to indicate a disgusting house:

Wi aw used tae hing around John Deaf's hoose. It wis really mingin likesay, but that nivir bothered ye sae much in they days.¹⁴

Again the notion of senses at excess is captured in the secondary meaning of minging as very drunk from 2001:

While Ford gives it absolute laldy on some of his best-loved big band numbers on his album, *Swing When You're Mingin'*. He said: "It's usually when Scots are minging drunk that they stick a Sinatra album on and sing along — so I thought it was a great title for my album."¹⁵

Its use for pejoratively rating someone's attractiveness is thus clearly tied to intensifying and negatively evaluating, but the first use of this sense recorded in writing is not given in the NSD, though the OED has:

1985 M. MUNRO *Patter* 46 *Mingin* means stinking but can also be used to describe anything bad: 'We just came hame early cause the weather was mingin.'¹⁶

The NSD gives a citation from 1997 evaluating clothing which shows the move from more general negative evaluation to personal evaluation:

¹³Dictionary of the Scots Language entry for 'ming'. <https://dsl.ac.uk/entry/snd/sndns2554>.

¹⁴Dictionary of the Scots Language entry for 'ming'. <https://dsl.ac.uk/entry/snd/sndns2554>.

¹⁵Dictionary of the Scots Language entry for 'ming'. <https://dsl.ac.uk/entry/snd/sndns2554>.

¹⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary online*, 'minging'. <https://0-www-oed-com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/view/Entry/245656?isAdvanced=false&result=6&rskey=J9sjxp&>

And the moment he came on, I thought Oh NOOOOO!! Because he was wearing the most hideous tie in the whole entire world. It was totally mingin'. It looked like something you'd buy from Oxfam for 50p to wear to a 70s night.¹⁷

In this way we see how an item from far away can come to be localised, and are reminded that dialect may find other ways to remain vital even as older more tightly knit community structures loosen.

‘Like a bulldog chewing a wasp’: is dialect diversity narrowing?

Linguistic diversity around the world is under threat, with Nettle and Romaine¹⁸ reporting:

Over the last 500 years, small languages nearly everywhere have come under intense threat. Speakers of large languages like English and Chinese find it difficult to imagine the prospect of being the last speaker of their language, but the last speakers of probably half the world's languages are alive today. Only two fluent speakers remain of the Warrwa language traditionally spoken in the Derby region of West Kimberley in Western Australia. Only about half a dozen elderly people on the island of Erromango in southern Vanuatu can still speak Ura. Marie Smith Jones is the last person who still speaks Eyak, one of Alaska's 20 some native languages. Only two (Siberian Yup'ik in two villages on St. Lawrence Island, and Central Yup'ik in 17 villages in southwestern Alaska) are spoken by children as the first language of the home. Tefvik Esenc, believed to be the last known speaker of the Ubykh language once spoken in the northwestern Caucasus, died in Turkey in 1992. The disappearance of Ubykh is the final result of a genocide of the Ubykh people, who until 1864 lived along the eastern shore of the Black Sea in the area of Sochi (northwest of Abkhazia). The entire Ubykh population left its homeland when Russia conquered the Muslim northern Caucasus in the 1860s. Tens (and possibly hundreds) of thousands of people were expelled and had to flee to Turkey with heavy loss of life, and the survivors were scattered over Turkey. And Turkey itself is a country that until recently recognized no minorities and prohibited languages such as Kurdish from public use.

¹⁷Dictionary of the Scots Language entry for ‘ming’ <https://dsl.ac.uk/entry/snd/sndns2554>.

¹⁸ Nettle, Daniel, and Suzanne Romaine, *Vanishing Voices: the extinction of the world's languages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Nettle and Romaine are discussing language loss, but this loss of language might just as well be loss of dialect, since the boundaries between dialect and language are not clear to linguists. A clear example of this is the loss of status suffered by Scots after the Union of the Crowns in 1707. What had previously been referred to as *Scottis* was now supplanted gradually among the monarchy and the court, and eventually in the education system, by southern Standard English, and Scots is seen by many today as a dialect rather than a language. Nevertheless the factors that lead to dialect loss parallel those leading to language loss in many ways. Thus, David Britain has commented on dialect attrition across the UK¹⁹:

I [...] make three claims in particular: firstly, that dialect death is inextricably linked to dialect contact — in order to understand how dialect death has changed the dialectological landscape of England, we need to appreciate the linguistic consequences of contact more generally; secondly, and apparently in contrast with some other speech communities, the attrition process has *not* led to a widespread shift toward RP or standard English. I argue, thirdly, that while some dialects are undoubtedly undergoing attrition, new varieties are emerging, driven by both expansion and relocation diffusion, and shaped by contact between local, regional, interregional, and other, including standard, varieties. Although the developments currently affecting English dialects in England are not necessarily particularly new, they are proceeding on an unprecedented spatial scale, a scale that has resulted from some rather wide-ranging social and economic developments that have accelerated contact between speakers of structurally distinct dialects.

Dialect attrition, that is, the loss of distinct words, pronunciations and grammatical structures which mark out dialects as different from each other, is something that concerns speech communities. Dialect speakers I interviewed often worried that younger speakers did not understand the old Black Country words. It was true that industrial dialect words like ‘tundish’ for a funnel were declining, and younger people often used the standard word instead. Speakers in the Black Country, though, showed that they were resilient, and gave other phrases for being unattractive that preserve linguistic richness and encompass new developments, so although more localised dialect terms are indeed being lost, identity seems

¹⁹ Britain, Dave, ‘One foot in the grave? Dialect death, dialect contact, and dialect birth in England.’ *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 196-7, 2009.

to be preserved in speech using sounds and cultural experiences, albeit on a less localised level:

face like the back end of a bus

face like a bulldog chewing a wasp

face like a ripped cinema sate

The examples given by my speakers interviewed in the Noughties are clear in their imagery. The simile of a rear view of a bus is not meant to be flattering, and is clearly meant to offend, or to be used outside its referent's hearing. Similarly, the image of a bulldog with its wrinkly face trying to eat a stinging insect is equally humorous and offensive. The third simile is newer, and clear to all UK cinema goers. Furry cinema seats which have been vandalised often have stuffing bursting out of them. The image created is humorous and relevant to all speakers. In addition, while image of the dog with a wasp is UK wide, the unrounded vowel which makes *wasp* rhyme with *hasp* is peculiar to the Black Country. Buses and cinemas are modern but have made their way into the idiom of the region and beyond.

Linguistic encoding of the senses and emotions

In the BBC Voices study, informants reported words for emotions relating to their feelings. A sense of fright or fear would lead to crying, which many report as blarting. An anonymous poet from Walsall also used this word in a poem concerning a dog and a row with his father about walking past the dog²⁰:

Now me dad wor` avin` non o` it, cus e` knew me e` wus me dad!
The od`e lady nex` dower, ad tode im o` wus a liy`a, un ar` wus bad.
He grabbed me by the earhole, un slung me cross his lap, e` pulled me trousers round
me knees, un gid me but a slap,

²⁰ Bounce, Peter. 'Nex dower's dog.' 2014. Available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/blackcountry/features/2002/12/accents/black_country_stories_and_poems1.shtml. Accessed on 14.1.20.

Now wen od` finished blartin, o` wipid the tears from me eyses,
un O` wus snivellin in the gardin` shed, plottin` the dogs demize,
now o` could`nt use the prop, cus it wus broke, as ya` know,
so o` searched round the gardin` ,lookin fer summat t` throw,

Blarting is a word from Old English *blēotan*, to bleat, cry, and is ultimately related to Standard English *bleat*, The OED gives the following etymology:

1. Of sheep and cattle: to bleat, low, bellow. (See *Eng. Dial. Dict.*)
2. Of a child, etc.: to cry, whimper, howl. Also quasi-*transitive*.

[1824 W. CARR *Horæ Momenta Cravenæ* 59 *Blaat, Blate, To bleat.*]

1896 G. F. NORTHALL *Warwickshire Word-bk.* 30 *Blart*, to cry or holloa vociferously.

1898 *Eng. Dial. Dict.* I. 289/1 He was blartin away for all the world like a babby.

1976 A. HILL *Summer's End* ii. 30 A very young kid..blarting its eyes out.

1976 A. HILL *Summer's End* vi. 88 He went home blarting.

The references the OED gives are all West Midlands, and the citation from Archie Hall's novel *Summer's End*²¹ both places the word as Black Country and gives the restricted sense in which it is used; that is, that children *blart*. Professor Carl Chinn (Clark and Asprey 2013) reminds us that in using this verb we share a usage with Birmingham, remarking that

“My nan would never say ‘crying, you know, if I go to Castle Vale or Shard End the kids understand what I mean if I say pack up your blarting....”

Readers of fiction concerning the Black Country that draws on dialect only for characterisation, rather than for its narration, are often presented with a sensory picture of the region which emphasises hunger, pollution, illness and discomfort. A passage from Christie Murray's novel *A Capful O' Nails*²² is indicative:

²¹ Hill, Archie. *Summer's End*. London: Shepherd Walwyn, 1976.

²² Christie Murray, David. *A capful o' nails*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1896, 6.

We lived opposite the brick kilns, and the air was always heavy with smoke and the sickening smell of burning clay. I do not know if the baking of bricks everywhere creates such a stench as it did there. Perhaps there was some peculiar quality in the clay of that district, but the odour was frightful, and wayfarers passing the brick kilns would run for a hundred yards, pinching their noses with thumb and forefinger. I have known strangers to be absolutely sickened in passing, but we who lived there were accustomed to the abominable air, and paid no heed to it, though I think that it had something to do with our general ill-health and stunted growth.

It is even the case that those whose childhood was spent as dialect speakers recall this pollution and the attendant smells well, but a rendering of these in dialect is rare. Hill (1971: 140)²³ describes Pensnett between the wars:

The back-end of Pensnett wasn't at all good to look at. It was old and musty and there didn't seem any happiness there at all. [...] When I'd once walked this road with Gyp, he said the place was a sheer palace to what it used to be, when it was a nail making centre. I tried to tell Noggie about it like Gyp had told me, but my words didn't have the same colour about them that Gyp's did. Gyp said there used to be a nasty stench round all these houses, like an invisible shawl lapped round. Smell of urine—piss, he called it – and open sewers, smell of sulphur from the iron nail making and a thick menace of smoke from the forge-fires. Black smoke always hiding the sun.

In contrast, many present day poems looking *back* at life within the community spend less time discussing this and more discussing pleasant sensations, as we see in this discussion of drinking beer and eating dinner among Cradley chain makers from local poet Hackett²⁴:

They'd cum from the chain shaps, just up the street,
Jones 'n Lloyds booth bottom and top,
They'd a toil'd frum five afore it wus light,
Straight on till twelve when they'd stop.
Breakfus' time when they'd scoffed t' snap

²³ Hill, Archie. *Summer's End*. London: Sheapher Walwyn, 1976.

²⁴ Hackett, Glenys. 'The Chainmakers.'. In *Cradley then and now*. Cradley, West Midlands: s.n., s.d.

Bout terriers 'n tumblers [racing pigeons] they'd bicker

They're peesen 'n bread was wedging thick

All dipped and drippen wi' licker.

It must be said though that some chroniclers are more reflective and possibly more honest about their sensory experiences in the region. The West Bromwich born poet Madge Gilbey extracts wry humour from her memory of the taste of leftover stew, aware as she was even at the time that the stew was made from meat over a week old²⁵:

A full plert woz put daern in front ov ya

It looked like sumone ad bin sick

Tertus an mate in grey lookin werta

Wth lumps of grase floatin on it.

It ad this one gud thing gooin fer it.

Er cud mek great dumplings could mom.

An so ard ate them an leave all the rest

Ter goo back in the pot it cum from.

²⁵ Gilbey, Madge. *Moowa Poems and Stories from the Black Country Wench*. Oldbury:

Transform Sandwell Printing Services. (s.d.), 19

The appearance and reality of the food is also brought home in her hilarious tale of a young wife in Carter's Green cooking sheep's head broth for the first time, unaware that a butcher will prepare a sheep's head, cutting it in half and removing brains and jaw bone²⁶

Er kept on lookin at it but er day like what er sin. The werta wuz grey and the sheep's yed still 'ad green teeth an naer that woz all er could see in the pon. These green teet shinin in the werta. When Fred cum um er woz sittin cryin ere art aert. It took Fred ergis tew get the story from Joyce. He went tew ave a look in the kitchin. Tekin the lid off the pon he said 'what's this Joyce, day the butcha ask ya if yow wanted it chopped in 'alf? [..]' 'E day tell me, all e said woz cook it fa three tew four hours.' [...] 'Ar bet e day tell ya tew tek the brerns aert neither did 'e?'

'Naer e day'

'Well it dow look like this when mutha cooks it.' Fred said as e started tew loff. That's when aer Joyce lost er tempa., er took the pon off the stove an' opened the kitchen doowa. Daern the gardin 'er went an 'er swung the pon raernd then let all the dinna goo up the gardin wall.

Jon and Michael Raven's first collection of folk songs similarly includes a comic snatch of verse collected from Tettenhall concerning this dish²⁷:

Come all yew blaid's whats married and yew shun hear
A tale of what befell poor Jimmy Vight he died last night
He never died afore. For he ate some ships yed broth
And he did fall stiff stark stone jed under the table.

²⁶ Gilbey, Madge. *Moowa Poems and Stories from the Black Country Wench*. Oldbury: Transform Sandwell Printing Services. (s.d.), 21

²⁷ Raven, Michael and Jon Raven. *Folksongs of the Black Country*. Wolverhampton: Wolverhampton Folk Song Club, 1964.

Again we see that contrary to the narrative of the honest working man making the most of his pennies, and enjoying home cooking of the cheapest cuts of meat and offal, offal dishes were a subject of ridicule, and the disgust occasioned by having to eat them was not confined to those of us who are no longer forced to. The humour in the rhyme is signalled clearly ('he never died afore') and the source of Jimmy Vight's death is said to be the sheep's head broth he has eaten.

Conclusion

Literature, dictionaries, and interviews conducted with first language speakers of Black Country dialect examined in this chapter sometimes contains the lexis identified in dialect surveys by speakers as being lexis typical of the Black Country dialect to represent emotions and senses, but even when the senses and their reactions to stimuli are represented using lexis we might describe as Standard, it is clear that pollution deprivation and poverty as well as hunger and thirst are often topics discussed. Given the industrial heritage of the Black Country and the lack of any regulations concerning pollution, sewerage or working hours during the first stages of the Industrial Revolution, this is perhaps not a surprise.

We can see that the senses of smell and taste are indeed tightly linked and often one feeds into the representation of the other over time. It also seems possible that humour is used across the ages to blot out the memories of having to eat poor and unpalatable food, and that a more sanitised approach to the assault on the sight, smell and taste which living in the Black Country represented is only possible at arm's length or through the distance imposed by time.

Gilbey, moreover, sees change in the region and a return to health and even pleasant sights²⁸:

When I see the playing fields in the morning

With the sun bejewelled grass

I think to myself

What Black Country?

It doesn't make any sense

²⁸ Gilbey, Madge. *Moowa Poems and Stories from the Black Country Wench*. Oldbury:

Transform Sandwell Printing Services. (s.d.), 42

To call it that.

When I see the hedge's multi-coloured leaves

And the birds playing in their branches

I think to myself

How Black Country

The blackness isn't there

It's gone at last.

When I am walking around the garden at dawn

The dew dropping from the flowers

I think to myself

Dead Black Country

Leaving behind greenness

To be enjoyed.

In some respects, the removal of decay and smells from the region is bitterly ironic since the pollution signalled employment as well as danger and illness. The idea that heavy industry and its loss can be mourned even as it leads to lower air pollution and a better quality of health is anathema to some, but captured perfectly by writers like Anthony Cartwright and Archie Hill. It is also clear that even among individual writers and speakers, life in the Black Country is far from pleasant at times even now, and that while they may have a close sensory bond with the place they come from, they are acutely aware of its shortcomings and the problems it still has. Continuing descriptions of unemployment, loss of self esteem, poor self image in the eyes of the UK and a loss of green space and physical beauty in the region abound. For the residents who speak it and write in it, their dialect remains a spoken and written possibility for capturing the illness, bad smells and bad tastes that life in the Black

Country continues to throw up. As Britain argued²⁹, their dialect is changing but it is by no means dead, and in fact has been enriched through contact and enriched by the new experiences speakers in the modern Black Country region have had, taking in the modern comforts of public transport and cinema, and the possibility of refrigerators to prevent mouldy and decaying food. It will be instructive to watch the speech community as they discuss these changes to the place where they live and put down their renderings of sensation on paper.

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²⁹ Britain, Dave, 'One foot in the grave? Dialect death, dialect contact, and dialect birth in England.' *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 196-7, 2009

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