Dialects in the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn Example

Mark Twain wrote The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, which takes place in St. Petersburg, Missouri, and in various areas along the Mississippi River. There are four dialects spoken in the novel: (1) Missouri Negro; (2) backwoods Southwestern; (3) the "ordinary Pike County"; and (4) four variations of modified "Pike County." Mark Twain used several dialects in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn to distinguish his characters.

Jim’s Strong Dialect

Twain grew up in Florida, Missouri, and this is where he was first exposed to the Missouri negro dialect seen in his novel. Twain's character Jim and other slave characters use this dialect. The Missouri negro dialect has the strongest accent, with the words being truncated and letters dropped. For example, when Huck first finds Jim on Jackson Island, Jim, believing Huck to be a ghost, says, "Doan' hurt me-don't! I hain't ever done no harm to a ghos'. I alwuz liked dead people, en done all I could for 'em. You go en git in de river ag'in whah you b'longs, en doan' do nuffn to Ole Jim, 'at 'uz alwuz yo' fren'," (37). Twain also purposely misspelled many words when dialogue includes the Missouri negro dialect, to further emphasize the sound of the dialogue and to starkly distinguish the dialect.
from others. After Huck fools Jim into thinking he had dreamed of Huck being lost on the river, Jim says, "...My heart wuz mos' broke bekase you wuz los', en I didn't k'yer no mo' what become er me en de raf'. En when I wake up en fine you back agin', all safe en soun', de tears come en I could a got down on my knees en kiss' yo' foot I's so thankful. En all you wuz thinkin 'bout wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie." The Missouri negro dialect display's the education level of slaves and their upbringing. Slaves during the time of the novel had no education, and Twain portrays this by deliberately making severe grammatical errors in the dialogue of slaves and by flipping words and sometimes even dropping some altogether. For instance, when Huck and Tom are talking to one of the Phelps' slaves, a very superstitious one, he says, "Oh, it's de dad-blame' witches, sah, en I wisht I was dead, I do. Dey's awluz at it, sah, en dey do mos' kill me, dey sk'yers me so," (213). In The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain intentionally uses the Missouri negro dialect to portray to readers a historically accurate picture of the South during the time of the novel.

Twain also wrote a backwoods Southwestern dialect into The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. This dialect distinguished characters who were from the Southwest, with slight variations based on the isolation of the area. The Grangerford family and Arkansas townspeople that Huck meets are the main characters that employ this dialect. The Grangerfords were a family that lived on a piece of land Huck stumbles onto after being separated from Jim. They most likely lived in Southern Kentucky, and had a strong southern accent. This dialect consisted of harsher letters being dropped, creating a flowing dialogue. Buck, a young Grangerford, shows the backwoods Southwestern dialect when Huck first comes to their house and they thought he was from a rival family, the Shepherdsons, saying, "Well... if they'd 'a' ben some, I reckon I'd 'a' got one," (88). The backwoods Southwestern dialect is also portrayed by the Arkansas townspeople Huck briefly encounters. These townspeople have a strong southern accent as well, but are also not as educated as the Grangerfords, who were well off. Their dialogue therefore has the same characteristics as the Grangerford's, but Twain also incorporated other elements that allude to the townspeople's education level. The dialogue is slightly harsher than the Grangerford's, and there are more purposely misspelled words to indicate the accent as well as intelligence. For example, one of the men makes a comment about his fellow townsman ,Boggs, saying, "'I wisht old Boggs 'd threaten me, 'cuz then I'd know I warn't gwyne to die for a thousan' year,'" (126). Mark Twain used the backwoods Southwestern dialect to
distinguish characters that came from different region and to add more local color to the novel.

The "ordinary Pike County" dialect is the most common dialect in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Twain used this dialect to show how a majority of the white southern population spoke. A number of characters in the novel, including Huckleberry Finn, Tom Sawyer, and Aunt Polly all speak in the "original Pike County" dialect and represent different aspects of the dialect. Through the use of this dialect, and colloquialisms, improper contractions, and minor grammatical errors in his narration, Twain distinguishes Huckleberry Finn as an uneducated southwestern white young man. Huck uses an incorrect contraction as he addresses the reader in the beginning of the novel and establishes his character saying, "You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer; but that ain't no matter," (1). Tom Sawyer is similar to Huck Finn, but he is more educated so his dialogue is slightly different. Tom Sawyer uses contractions, which were common in the south in the 1800s, but he also references various books that indicate his higher education, "It don't make no difference how foolish it is, it's the right way" and it's the regular way. And there ain't no other way, that ever I heard of, and I've read all the books that gives any information about these things. They always dig out with a case-knife" and not through dirt, mind you; generly it's through solid rock. And it takes them weeks and weeks and weeks, and for ever and ever. Why, look at one of them prisoners in the bottom dungeon of the Castle Deef, in the harbor of Marseilles, that dug himself out that way; how long was he at it, you reckon?" (219). Mark Twain distinguishes Aunt Polly as a southern educated woman through the "ordinary Pike County" dialect. Twain generally writes Aunt Polly's dialogue grammatically correct, with a prominent southern accent seen through her use of words commonly used in the south during the time. When Aunt Polly finally arrives at the Phelps residence, she sets the record straight regarding Tom and Huck's identities saying, "'You mean where's Huck Finn- that's what you mean! I reckon I hain't raised such a scamp as my Tom all these years not to know him when I see him. That would be a pretty howdy-do,'" (260). Twain uses the "ordinary Pike County" dialect to distinguish the typical white southern characters.
The Duke’s Dialect

Additionally, throughout The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, there are modified versions of the "Pike County" dialect. The main users of this dialect are the duke and the dauphin, and Aunt Sally and Uncle Silas Phelps, along with their neighbors. Other usages of this dialect are by the robbers on the Walter Scott and the Bricksville loafers. Twain uses variations of the "Pike County" dialect to identify separate groups that existed amongst the general population of white southerners. Their dialect is similar to the "ordinary Pike County" dialect, but contains a few differences, which Twain shows through their individual dialogue. For example, it becomes obvious that the duke and dauphin are uneducated white men. As they travel around and con people they appear intelligent, but various blunders reveal their character. The most obvious of these is when the king accidentally says 'orgies' instead of 'obsequies,' "...for he respected everybody, he liked everybody, and so it's fitten that his funeral orgies sh'd be public," (151). The duke and dauphin attempt to portray themselves as sophisticated but their dialect distinguishes them as frauds. The Phelps' dialect is very similar to the "ordinary Pike County" dialect, but only slightly different because they are less educated. Aunt Sally displays this dialect when she says, "But here we're a-running on this way, and you hain't told me a word about Sis..." (200). The variations of the "ordinary Pike County" dialect highlight specific differences in the vernacular of the South and distinguish the characters who speak it.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn contain four different dialects. Mark Twain used these dialects to help distinguish characters and add depth to the characters. By including multiple different dialects, Twain also depicts the local color and manipulates the vernacular of the time period to differentiate the characters in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.