The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn opens with Mark Twain's explanatory, and somewhat self-congratulatory, note on his literary efforts toward reproducing faithfully and objectively the spoken language of the region and era in which the novel is set:

In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit: the Missouri Negro dialect; the extremist form of the backwoods Southwestern dialect; the ordinary 'Pike County' dialect; and four modified varieties of this last.

The attention Twain's note directs toward his use of seven distinct dialects often creates within those preparing to teach the novel a sense of obligation to incorporate into the unit some aspect of language studies, for accessing the dialectal material may pose difficulties for even competent student readers. Developing an appropriate and effective approach to the language of Huckleberry Finn, however, is especially difficult, for the nuances of dialectal differences are complex and sometimes open to multiple interpretations. Accordingly, some teachers simply ignore the language, focusing instead on plot, character, theme, and structure (see Janeczko and Mathews, 1990, for example).

Those who do choose to examine the language of the novel, moreover, may take an oblique approach, presenting Twain's use of dialect from a literary rather than linguistic perspective. For example, Twain's introductory note provides a natural opportunity for a discussion about the expected role of language, specifically dialogue, in a realistic novel. The value of such a discussion is significant to the study of realistic literature in general, but is vital to the study of Huckleberry Finn.

It is imperative that students comprehend that Twain's attention to dialect was not motivated by an effort to establish as universal truths the attitudes, biases, and prejudices revealed in the language of his characters. Rather, students need to understand and accept that Twain's purpose was to record accurately and objectively the spoken language of his
characters as is required in realistic literature and to use the spoken language to reveal the personalities of his characters as is required in dramatic characterization.

While this distinctly literary approach to the study of language in Huckleberry Finn is of indisputable value, the approach does not actually incorporate the study of language, specifically regional and social dialects, into the unit as an essential component of the task of reading the novel. And, unfortunately, teachers who look to published scholarship for assistance with Twain's use of dialect will discover that Twain's introductory note seems to have created a cottage industry for dialectologists (see Boland, 1968; Bryant, 1978; Buxbaum, 1927; Carkeet, 1979; Hoben, 1956; Lowenherz, 1963; McKay, 1974; Pederson, 1966; Rulon, 1967, 1971; Sewell, 1984, 1985; and Tidwell, 1942). These linguistic studies prove to be conflicting and even call into question the accuracy of Twain's own assertions.

Rulon (1971), for example, finds only two dialects represented (p. 219) and suggests that Twain was not "serious when he spoke of four modified varieties of Pike County speech" (p. 221). Carkeet (1979), on the other hand, identifies the speakers of the seven dialects Twain boasts of.

Complicating matters even more is the fact that linguistic geographers have not yet fully mapped out dialect distribution in the area where much of the action supposedly takes place: northeastern and southeastern Missouri, southern Illinois, southwestern Kentucky, and northern Arkansas. Moreover, a scholarly examination of dialect and geography would undoubtedly prove too esoteric and inconclusive for the secondary student. Consequently, teachers tend either to ignore the whole matter of dialect in Huckleberry Finn or, for the sake of satisfying their sense of obligation, deal with the topic by having students construct glossaries of distinct lexical items or particularly noteworthy expressions.

A useful alternative
There is, however, an alternative approach to the study of dialect in Huckleberry Finn. one which will not only assist the student in reading with comprehension the novel's dialectal differences, but one which will also lead the student to note the mechanisms of language change and to appreciate the social differences conveyed by language. This approach entails a close examination of recurring features of dialect appearing in the novel—features that students will encounter while reading and that they must decode or "translate" in order to understand the dialogue. While ignoring dialect study as a body of knowledge to be mastered, this approach attempts to familiarize students with those aspects of dialect that might prove an obstacle to the successful reading of the novel. Furthermore, the approach suggests the inherent possibilities of language study, creates or fosters an awareness of the varieties of language usage, and, perhaps, may even reinforce the conventions of contemporary standard usage identified in a grammar unit taught earlier in the year.

Dialect studies such as those conducted by Rulon and Carkeet can help identify the content for the approach suggested here. For example, Rulon (1971) identifies 12 minor dialect features that occur in Huckleberry Finn (p. 220). Some of these features can easily be converted into exercises that focus on Twain's neologisms or on nonstandard grammatical constructions that may prove a barrier to reading the novel. By learning the processes of word formation and by identifying the syntactic "rule" used in even nonstandard dialects, the student acquires new reading skills.

The exercises that follow are meant to illustrate the possibilities inherent in a language-oriented approach to reading Huckleberry Finn; specific examples are not comprehensive but merely suggest possibilities that teachers may wish to expand. The brief explanations that accompany specific exercises provide technical material that teachers may find useful.

Word formation
As the popularity of "sniglets" and of recent slang demonstrate, students are often attracted to "new" words and expressions. They can learn to identify some of the general processes of word formation by examining Twain's neologisms, thereby becoming more aware of both derivational and inflectional morphology. The following exercises show how various endings can be added to create new words (derivational morphology), or how a limited set of
Inflectional endings can be used to create verbs from nouns.

1. **Formation of adjectives.** One of the ways by which English speakers make new adjectives is by attaching special derivational affixes to a particular part of speech. For example, -y added to a noun produces an adjective. Thus, from hand we get handy: from spot we get spotty. Twain uses this -y affix to create rose-leafy and smoothery. Have the students look for other such creations as they read; then discuss the rule that Twain is apparently following. (Does he always attach -y to a noun, for example?)

2. **Formation of verbs.** Verbs in English have five forms; the uninflected or infinitive form (eat), and four inflected forms: the third person singular present tense (eats), the past tense (ate), the present participle (eating), and the past participle (eaten). Should any part of speech be given these inflections, it can function as a verb. For example, the noun *spade* can be used as a verb when we write "We are spading our garden" or "We spaded our garden." Twain creates new verbs in the following phrases; have students identify which of the five forms appears in each example.

   a. So Jim and me set to maulishing him.
   b. But it wasn’t no time to be sentimentering.
   c. We scroushed down and laid still.

**Word formation and pronunciation**

Other of Rulon’s examples may be used to examine the influence of pronunciation on the formation of words. For instance, an unstressed syllable tends to be “reduced” in English and may lose some of its consonants, or even disappear. Historically, this process has given the language *aboard* from *on board*, *ashore* from *on shore*, and so on. Twain presents the following words: *afire, a-purpose, a-horseback, anear, afront*, and *amigh*. Is Twain consistently using the same process of word formation? What governs his use of the hyphen?

**Grammar**

The language of Huckleberry Finn also provides activities to reinforce grammatical material that frequently poses problems for students. The following exercises focus on the use of past tense forms of irregular verbs, on the use of multiple negatives, and on pronominal apposition:

3. **Past tense and past participle.** English “regular” verbs have identical forms for the past tense and past participle; thus, we write “I walked” and “I have walked.” “Irregular” verbs, such as *eat*, have different forms: “I ate” and “I have eaten.” In the following examples from Huckleberry Finn, Twain’s characters use an inappropriate form: they may have added the “regular” *-ed* to an irregular verb or have used the past participle when the past tense form is required.

   a. There was an inch of new snow on the ground, and I saw somebody’s tracks.
   b. He watched out for me one day in the spring and chased me.
   c. When breakfast was ready we lolled on the grass and ate it smoking hot.
   d. The sun was up so high when I walked that I judged it was after eight o’clock.
   e. I left Miss Watson, Huck, I ran off.

4. **Multiple negatives.** Standard written English does not allow multiple negation, although informal spoken English throughout the U.S. may find multiple negation in use. Have students rewrite the following sentences to conform to standard written English:

   a. I didn’t have no luck.
   b. I wouldn’t want to be nowhere else but here.
   c. I hadn’t no accidents and didn’t see nobody.
   d. I ain’t hungry no more.
   e. You ain’t going to threaten nobody no more.

5. **Pronominal appositives.** In some varieties of spoken English, a noun subject is immediately followed by a pronoun that renames the subject. Such “pronominal appositives” are considered unnecessary in standard written English and should be deleted. Have students delete the unnecessary pronouns in the following sentences from Huckleberry Finn:

   a. The Widow Douglas she took me for her son.
   b. Pap he hadn’t been seen for more than a year.
   c. The door it slammed to.
   d. The widow she cried over me.
   e. Jim he grumbled a little.

**Sociolinguistics**

The previous two exercises may be used by the teacher to initiate a discussion of social dialects and of levels of language usage, or language “styles.” Thus, while students themselves may use multiple
negatives or pronominal appositives in informal speech, they should learn that such language is considered by many to be inappropriate for formal speech and in written English.

While the previous two exercises contain language spoken by Huck Finn, examples may also be taken from other dialects presented by Twain. Carkeet (1979), for example, groups with Huck's speech, or the "ordinary 'Pike County' dialect," the language of Tom, Aunt Polly, Judith Loftus, and others; he identifies the "Arkansas Gossips" with the Southwestern dialect and Jim (and all other Black characters) with the Missouri Negro dialect, representing the "four modified varieties" are the speech of the thieves on the Sir Walter Scott, the king, the Bricksville Loafers, and Aunt Sally and Uncle Silas Phelps, respectively (p. 330).

Sewell (1985) contends that, to some extent, a character's speech indicates not only social position within a community, but also the moral and intellectual position that the character occupies (p. 202). Judge Thatcher's speech, for example, is free of any "nonstandard" characteristics. Dr. Robinson's speech in Chapter 25 closely resembles that of Judge Thatcher, but in Chapter 29, when the doctor's position has been accepted by the townfolk, his language "style" changes to that of his fellow citizens.

By examining such changes in style, students become more aware of their own styles of speech and of how all speakers modify their language to fit a particular occasion. The following exercise focuses on this change in style in the speech of Dr. Robinson:

6. Language style. Have students consider the following passages of Dr. Robinson's speech. What are the differences? Which represents the more formal style? Why does the doctor modify his language?

a. "I was your father's friend, and I'm your friend; and I warn you as a friend, and an honest one that wants to protect you and keep you out of harm and trouble, to turn your backs on that scoundrel and have nothing to do with him, the ignorant tramp, with his idiotic Greek and Hebrew, as he called it." (from Chapter 25)

b. "I don't wish to be too hard on these two men, but I think they're frauds, and they may have complices that we don't know nothing about. If they have, won't the complices get away with that bag of gold Peter Wilks left? It ain't unlikely. If these men ain't frauds, they won't object to sending for that money and letting us keep it will they prove they're all right—ain't that so?" (from Chapter 29)

A similar change in style occurs in the speech of Mary Jane Wilks after Huck tells her the truth about the duke and the king. Have students examine her speech to identify how it changes; discuss how Twain uses a character's speech to signify a moral position.

A final speech sample which teachers may want to examine is the language of Jim. While Black Vernacular English (BVE) has been the subject of considerable discussion and study since the mid 1960s, its use in the American public school system is still a matter of controversy. Of interest here is the fact that Jim's speech exhibits many of the characteristics associated with BVE. Thus, students can observe Jim's speech as a sample of language that follows its own logic and rules of pronunciation and syntax. BVE is not a recent development, but a continuation of a language that can be traced back hundreds of years. By studying Jim's speech, accordingly, students come to have a greater appreciation of the rules underlying BVE.

7. Black Vernacular English. Jim's speech exhibits a number of nonstandard spellings to indicate pronunciation features that distinguish it from other varieties of American English. Unfamiliar words can be made recognizable when the student learns the spelling rule that Twain has adopted. One such rule involves the deletion of certain consonants. Have students consider the following words taken from Jim's speech and then formulate the rule that tells when a consonant is deleted:

a. Compare mawnir (morning), whah (where), heah (here), mo' (more) with stuck, truck, night, na!'. [An r is deleted when it follows a vowel.]

b. Compare fas', las', lun', raf', en' with landed. 'fraid, quiet, wait, [A final consonant is deleted when it is preceded by another consonant.]

Similar exercises could be constructed to have students identify other characteristics of Jim's speech: the substitution of d for the voiced th of English (dry for they), and of f for the voiceless th (mouf for mouth); the deletion of unstressed initial syllables (fraid, 'sturb, 'mongst); and the use of "completive aspect" (she done broke down). Pederson (1966) provides additional features which teachers may choose to examine.
Conclusion
By adopting a language-centered approach to The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, teachers will not only assist students in developing the tools necessary for reading the dialects presented in the novel, but will also foster an appreciation for language and its many social varieties. By scattering these suggested activities throughout the unit of study, teachers will also be able to show how Twain used language to emphasize those social, moral, and intellectual messages that have made Huckleberry Finn so popular for over a century.

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Winners of technical and scientific writing awards
The 1992 winners of the Awards for Excellence in Technical and Scientific Writing have been announced by the Committee on Technical and Scientific Communication of the U.S. National Council of Teachers of English.


