

*On Early English Pronunciation – an “early SED”?*

In 1889, the fifth volume of Alexander Ellis’ *On Early English Pronunciation* (Ellis 1889) was published. As indicated in the subtitle, its aim was to establish existing dialectal pronunciations and compare them to “traditional” (West Saxon) ones. However, Ellis’ diligent work allows conclusions on much more than accents.

Ellis primarily used an indirect method to collect information from all over England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland. A comparative specimen, consisting of 15 two- to three-line paragraphs to be translated into the local dialect by (educated) natives, was sent out in early stages of the project. However, the rather long piece proved to be too ambitious, and was later substituted by a short dialect test. A word list was also used, and the information from these indirect sources was supplemented by fieldwork in a manner very similar to that of the SED fieldworkers almost a century later (cf. Ellis 1889: 4–5).

This paper will show how Ellis’ dialect test and comparative specimen can be used to establish regional distributions of such features as relative markers, negation patterns, and personal pronoun forms. When checking maps based on Ellis’ data against those based on the published SED material, the similarities – despite a time difference of almost 70 years – are striking. Moreover, comparing locations targeted by Ellis and later by the SED fieldworkers reveals a certain indebtedness of the latter to the former– it seems highly unlikely that such a huge overlap is coincidental.

So why does Ellis’ work remain largely unused (or even unknown)? Shorrocks (1991: 324) cites later scholars’ negative attitude (particularly those of SED fame like Eugen Dieth and Joseph Wright) towards Ellis’ work as one of the main reasons why many present-day researchers have not even heard of Ellis as a dialectologist. This paper is an attempt at remedying this situation.

Ellis, Alexander J. 1889. *On Early English Pronunciation. Vol. V. Existing dialectal as compared with West Saxon pronunciation*. London: Trübner. (also available online at <http://www.archive.org/details/onearlyenglishpr00elliuft>)