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New Insights into Early Modern English Standardisation

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Language is elsewhere defined as the arrangement of different symbols following arbitrary conventions with an agreed significance within a community (Chomsky, 1957: 13; Hall, 1968: 158; Lyons, 1981: 3–8; Sapir, 1921: 8; Wardhaugh, 1972: 3). Albeit with some subtle differences, these definitions agree as to the existence of a system of symbols based on haphazard conventions used for communication among the members of a community. The question of *arbitrariness* is of crucial importance as it is intrinsically concerned with the inexistence of a particular logic in the selection of those symbols and conventions (Saussure, 1983: 111), either orthographic, phonological or morpho-syntactic. The English language, as many other European vernacular languages, underwent a process of linguistic standardisation in the early modern period which progressively brought some kind of order to the substantial variation of Middle English, and the coining of this new standard in itself responds to this linguistic property of arbitrariness.

Standardisation is commonly defined as "the reduction of variation in language" (Hope, 2000: 51; see also Rutkowska, 2020), understood as an ongoing process involving four different phases: selection, acceptance, elaboration and codification (Haugen, 1972: 110).[1] In itself, it is not a unitary process, but a group of processes operating on all dialects over time and, in the particular case of English, the existence of linguistic variation triggered "natural processes of linguistic competition which operate[d] independently for each linguistic variable, producing the hybrid features of Standard English" (Hope, 2000: 51–52).[2]

The etiology of this standardisation has been a moot point in the literature, with two different interpretations. The *single ancestor-dialect hypothesis*, using Hope's (2000) own terminology, proposes a unitary source for Standard English. This hypothesis considers that

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the standard originated under the shelter of the late Middle English royal clerks who, working in the central administration, established written forms derived from the Central Midland dialect, with an amalgamation of southern and northern forms (Wright, 2000: 1–4). Even though this Chancery Standard cannot be taken to be a fully standard language in itself, it was safely considered a reference dialect for the written communication throughout the country, preferred over Latin and French, which eventually became a model for the entire kingdom (Fisher, 1996: 39–43; Nevalainen, 2006: 30).[3] The printing press constituted an added asset for language standardisation under this view. When Caxton set up his printing press in the year 1476, there were two writing forms in England: the Chancery Standard, on the one hand, and the writing of private correspondence, on the other, the latter more prone to dialect variation (Salmon, 1999: 29). Caxton's dilemma was of difficult solution since he was aware of the need for linguistic standardisation but, unfortunately, there was then a plethora of variant forms in current use for the foundations of the standard, and the selection of the standard forms was just a desideratum for him and the following generation of printers. The early printers did not contribute much to the process of standardisation, and the spelling of handwritten and printed texts exhibited the same level of (in)consistency until the end of the sixteenth century. It was not until 1650 when we can properly talk about a standard system of spelling in printed documents and, according to this view, "these printers' standards were imposed on manuscripts to be published" (Nevalainen, 2006: 36). This model of spelling was based on the selection of the royal writing offices and printing houses since it was "the most likely to be widely accepted or understood in writing. It is not in the elite literary tradition, but in legal and administrative documents, that the need for uniformity of usage is strongest, because these have to be very precise and not subject to differing interpretations" (Milroy, 2000: 23; see also Rissanen, 1999, 2000). Scientific prose, in turn, also contributed to the development of this written standard (Taavitsainen, 2000). The adopted forms were, to a broad extent, based on Central Midland and southern features (Gramley, 2012: 129).

The *alternative hypothesis*, also labelled the naturalness model (Wright, 2000: 1), rejects the active participation of Samuels's Type IV in the configuration of Standard English (see Samuels [1963] for a detailed account of the four types). This model argues that there is not a convincing explanation neither for the propagation of the Central Midland dialect by the Chancery clerks nor, and more importantly, for the Londoners' adoption of the Midland variety to the detriment of their own dialect (Benskin, 2004; Conde-Silvestre, 2007: 363–376; Wright, 2000: 1). More unconvincing is the influence of the East Midland triangle, agglutinating the cities of Cambridge, Oxford and London, on the configuration of Standard English in the light of their political, economic and social influence in the region (Baugh & Cable, 1951: 192–194; Gramley & Pätzold, 1992: 5). According to Hope (2000), the single ancestor-dialect hypothesis has been in vogue for so many years because it represents a "direct genetic relationship to Standard English" (2000: 50); in itself, it avoids the need to treat each variant as a single entity

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providing a holistic explanation for the phenomenon. Unfortunately, however, neither the linguistic data nor dialect history sufficiently support this claim.

The alternative hypothesis views the standardisation of English as a natural process starting "when language users encounter formal written texts, and become unconsciously sensitive to linguistic variation" (Hope, 2000: 52). Standardisation is then taken as a process according to which users opt for particular linguistic forms in cases of linguistic competition relying on authoritative texts, which may explain the outstanding role of Chancery writing in the propagation of standard forms. The selection of the standard forms is not an arbitrary process as it pursues the use of complex structures "because of their sense of the prestige and difference of formal written language" (Hope, 2000: 53; see also Wright, 2000: 6). There are many instances of this unnatural selection at all language levels. Well-known are the cases of the arbitrary adoption of Latinate spellings (in words such as *castle*, *subtle*, etc.), the avoidance of the double negation or the proliferation of inkhorn terms in the period, to name but a few.[4] In view of all this, Standard English has been conveniently defined by Leith and Graddol as "something of an ideal, an imaginary form of English that is often rhetorically appealed to but never clearly identified" (2007: 84).

This special-themed issue falls within the second interpretation of the standardisation of English and assesses the 'unnatural' adoption of the standard forms in particular cases of linguistic variation and competition. Linguistic competition arises because of the existence of different variables in the system, in most cases with overlapping functions and meaning, and the eventual dominance and elaboration of one form over the other is not based on single occurrences, but on systematic ones, in most cases based on the idea of prestige. This idea of competition is perfectly illustrated in Aronoff's (2019: 41–42) biology metaphor, which argues that animals sharing nutritional requirements cannot coexist in one habitat over time, neither can synonymous linguistic structures co-occur in the same distributional domains of a specific language indefinitely. In the end, with some sporadic exceptions, one must find a different ecological niche, or it will become extinct (also Croft, 2006: 92 and Pacheco-Franco & Calle-Martín, 2020).

The present issue houses a collection of nine studies on the rise of a standard form of English in particular cases of linguistic variation and linguistic competition. The studies delve into the development and standardisation of linguistic features at the different levels of language, from orthography and morphology to lexis, word-formation in particular, in the light of the evidence of text-type, register and/or dialect variation. In the opening article, Jacob Thaisen provides us with the 'unnatural' system of punctuation rendered in the Townsend Family Recipe Book, a mid-seventeenth-century manuscript housed in Wellcome Library, MS Wellcome 774 (fols. 1r–97v) with the hands of three scribes. This handwritten specimen is unique for departing from the dominant practice of the period, which involved the use of punctuation symbols to mark the relationship between sentence constituents to yield syntactic sense (Calle-Martín, 2020: 179–200; Calle-Martín & Esteban-Segura, 2018: 68–87; Salmon,

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1999: 40). Syntactic punctuation substituted rhetorical punctuation throughout the sixteenth century and the bulk of handwritten documents of the period were committed to this system of punctuation. Interestingly enough, Thaisen presents a text conceived with a global discourse-based rationale to aid the private reader in parsing the text. The scribes of the Townsend Family Recipe Book are themselves aware of the medical recipe as a text type and deploy a system of punctuation delimiting the different rhetorical moves of a recipe (Mäkinen, 2011: 162). Even though the text does not offer evidence of standardisation in the sense that scribes should have consistently used the same marks for the expression of the same functions, the manuscript under scrutiny can be considered an attempt towards standardisation insofar as it reflects the hierarchical structure of recipes and facilitates information retrieval when scanning the text for finding important information within the recipe.

Regularisation and standardisation of morphological spelling by early printers is the focus of Hanna Rutkowska's article. She acknowledges that there is no consensus as to the printers' contribution to the process of spelling standardisation before the middle of the sixteenth century prior to the publication of the first grammar and spelling books. Her point of departure is therefore the assumption that early printers were already concerned with the regularisation of the spelling even without the normative guidance from scholars. To corroborate her hypothesis, she analyses morphological variation in the expression of the third person singular indicative present tense inflections taking the early editions of *The Book of Good Maners* as the source of evidence, that is, William Caxton's edition published in 1487, Richard Pynson's two editions from 1494 and 1500, and Wynkyn de Worde's three editions printed in 1498, 1507 and 1529. In the absence of digitally searchable versions of them, the added asset of Rutkowska's study resides, in our judgement, in the compilation of the corpus instances which, using Caxton's version as the base text, required the proofreading and selection of the instances from the facsimiles of the other editions, providing a total of 169 types of verbs with seven different morphological endings. The study reports that morphological spelling is not an invention of seventeenth century orthographers in view of the early printers' regularising tendency. De Worde's first edition, following Caxton's, shows a clear preference for *-eth* with a growing level of consistency in the last editions. Rutkowska confirms the active participation of individual printing houses in the regularisation of spelling, although some of these early trends do not necessarily correlate with the final output of standardisation one century later.

In line with the previous contribution, the article by Moragh Gordon, Tino Oudesluijs and Anita Auer evaluates the supralocalisation processes in Early Modern English (EModE henceforth) urban vernaculars using manuscript evidence from regional centres with high level of literacy, namely Bristol, Coventry and York, as sources of information for the main dialect areas of the South West, West Midlands and North, respectively. Supervised by Anita Auer, the project *Emerging Standards: Urbanisation and the Development of Standard English c. 1400–1700*[5] investigates the role of regional urban centres in the supralocalisation of forms

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over the whole country in the assumption that, with the exception of London as the catalyst of linguistic innovation, little is known about the way and the rate of diffusion of these forms. In this article the authors are concerned with the distribution of the third person indicative present tense inflections in these regional centres considering the replacement of -(V)*th* by -(V)*s* in the singular and the diffusion of zero over -(V)*s*, -(V)*th* and -(V)*en* in the plural. The impact of the study lies, in our opinion, in the data analysed, retrieved from a corpus housing ego-documents and other text types representative of the urban text communities, from ordinances, accounts, civic records to court leet documents, deposition, wills, plays, letters and diaries. Unlike the single ancestor-dialect hypothesis, this study reveals that region becomes an increasingly less important factor in the standardisation of the third-person present tense inflections, while verb type and text type are found to play an outstanding role in the diffusion of the standard form in EModE. The study corroborates that the supralocalisation of singular -(V)*s* and plural zero diffused at different rates in the regions under scrutiny, which can be attributed to text-type differences. Ego-documents adopted supralocal norms earlier in comparison with the more conservative nature of civic records as a text type. As for verb-type variation, auxiliary verbs retained -(V)*th* in the singular well throughout the period, competing for some time with the -(V)*s* variant, while the diffusion of zero in the plural is found to be more advanced with auxiliaries than with lexical verbs.

Jukka Tyrkkö analyses spelling standardisation in EModE medical writing in the light of the differences between handwritten and printed medical books. His hypothesis is that they may tentatively follow different trajectories of spelling standardisation, one under the shelter of the community of practice of London printers and the other free from this constraint. It is a pioneering study in the field since, as the author himself states, it is the first comparison of spelling in contemporary manuscripts and print publications. For the purpose, Tyrkkö relies on *Early Modern English Medical Texts* (Taavitsainen et al., 2010) and *The Málaga Corpus of Early Modern English Scientific Prose* (Calle-Martín et al., 2016–) for the printed and manuscript sources, respectively, which are investigated using three complementary approaches to computational and quantitative analysis: semi-automatic spelling normalisation, lexical density and n-grams based frequency profiling (i.e. word final trigrams). The study confirms that the process of standardisation is more consistent in the particular case of printed material with more room for individual variation in the manuscripts, which are found to be nearly a century behind the level of standardisation of printed texts.

Merja Kytö and Terry Walker delve into the process of morphological standardisation of the possessive determiners *mine/my* and *thine/thy* in EModE, contending that the decline of the N-variants and the rise of the N-less forms make "a case *par excellence* to the study of standardization phenomena in the history of English" (2020: 115). Their study begins with a comprehensive review of previous research on the development of these forms, from the anecdotal observations of scholars before the advent of computers to the corpus-based analyses proposing more accurate descriptions of the issue from chronological, genre, text-type,

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sociolinguistic or multivariate perspectives. In the absence of a speech-related analysis on the topic, Kytö and Walker study the phenomenon taking into account the evidence provided by *A Corpus of English Dialogues 1560–1760*. They assume that speech-related texts are expected to offer fresh data on the decline of *mine/thine* in the last stages of the process of standardisation, on the genres of the corpus in which these forms persisted the longest, as well as on the speaker groups that were the last to use them. The study concludes that the N-variants were obsolete from the 1680s and that they persisted more consistently in combination with French words that began with *h* and with the words *eyes* and *own* if followed by a vowel. Interestingly, the analysis of genre variation sheds light on a marked persistence of the N-forms in texts based on constructed dialogue (Comedy, Fiction and Handbooks) rather than in real speech events (Trials and Depositions). Character gender or status, in turn, does not seem to participate in the choice of a particular form, although *mine/thine* are found to be especially retained in emotional and intimate contexts.

Laura Wright's contribution focuses on the origin and development of the non-native noun suffix *-oon* and how it developed a (now lost) social nuance. Her study is based on instances retrieved mainly from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which entered EModE either via Romance nouns or via non-European languages, the list including both suffixed words mainly from French *-on*, Italian *-one*, Spanish *-ón* (i.e. *buffoon*) and words where *-oon* was not originally a suffix (i.e. *monsoon*). Wright provides us with valuable data on the standardisation and sociolinguistics of non-native *-oon* in EModE. As for the former, the standardised spelling of <-oon> is shown to have a crystallised form early in the seventeenth century if compared with the number of variant forms of the previous century, <-on, -one, -oun, -oune, -owne, -une>, among others. Curiously enough, this suffix became associated with the trading classes from the second half of the eighteenth century, merchants and shopkeepers in particular, who were then considered to be middle-to-lower class speakers. As a result of this connection, *-oon* acquired a social connotation of vulgarity to signal the "qualities of lower-class liveliness […] and brash outward showiness, often for purposes of humour and satire" (Wright, 2020a: 127). The social connotation of *-oon* is not found to have outlasted the nineteenth century, however.

Paula Rodríguez-Puente assesses the role of standardisation in the development of the Romance suffix *-ity* and the native suffix *-ness* from a cross-register perspective in EModE. Even though the topic has been extensively dealt with in the literature, the strength of Rodríguez-Puente's proposal is the interplay between register and suffix variation in the period and, for the purpose, the study relies on the frequency of both suffixes in seventeen different registers distributed along the formal-informal and the speech-writing continua from *A Corpus of English Dialogues 1560-1760*, the *Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Early Modern English* (1500-1710) and the EModE component of the *Corpus of Historical English Law Reports, 1535-1999*. The study shows that, albeit *-ness* was the preferred form by the sixteenth century, *-ity* prevailed in practically all registers towards the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Interestingly enough, the process was not straightforward, as the dominance of *-ity*

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is initially found in the most authoritative and formal writing-based and writing-purpose registers (i.e. statutes and law reports), spreading through written texts (i.e. history, medicine, etc.) towards the late sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries, and eventually reaching the speech-related registers (i.e. diaries, drama, sermons, trial proceedings and witness depositions) towards the mid-seventeenth century. The author poses that this shift is the result of the influence of the highly literate style, which served as the inspiring models for the construction of a linguistic standard in EModE.

Pacheco-Franco and Calle-Martín's article looks into the origin of the suffixes *-our* and *-or* in EModE and their development towards the present-day configuration as British and American English spellings, respectively. Based on the evidence from the *Early English Books Online* database, the study evaluates the phenomenon in combination with the following two types of nouns: the *-our* set, displaying the words spelled with both suffixes in Present day-English; and the *-or* set, those spelled with this univocal spelling in Present-day English. The study contends that the *-our* set has been traditionally rendered with *-our* in British English from a very early date inasmuch as *-or* died out without even challenging *-our* in the course of EModE. American English, on the contrary, adopted the *-or* form with the *-our* set in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, coinciding with the progressive demise of *-our*. The *-or* set, in turn, shows the actual competition between the two suffixes in the period when *-or* gained ground and competed with *-our* for more than half a century until becoming the standard spelling in the 1630s. By the end of EModE, *-our* was no longer an agentive nominal suffix and this loss in its distributional domain entailed its loss of productivity. The *-or* suffix agglutinated the domain of *-our* and was added to classical free bases (Latin and Greek) and to bound bases, becoming the second most productive affix in the derivation of agentive nouns, behind the native form *-er*.

Javier Ruano-García provides a complementary view of EModE standardisation by shedding light on the regional varieties of English which remained outside the 'consensus dialect'. This paper reconsiders the North 'as the other' and its status alongside the emerging standards in the light of Agha's (2003) framework of enregisterment, a rationale which was later reformulated by Beal and Johnstone for the particular case of English (Beal, 2007; 2017; Beal & Cooper, 2015; Johnstone, 2016). For the purpose, the author relies on the evidence of *The Salamanca Corpus* (García-Bermejo Giner et al., 2011–), which includes literary representations of English dialects with instances of dramatic dialogue, broadside ballads and prose works. The study provides a comprehensive repertoire of northern linguistic features salient at the time and the quantitative analysis concludes that the enregistered forms were not evenly distributed across text types, being more often documented in the dramatic recreations of the dialect and ballads. The wider circulation of ballads in the period favoured the dissemination of the northern repertoire of features, thus contributing to othering the northern dialect among southern speakers.

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All in all, these papers give a deeply specialised stance on a diversity of aspects of standardisation in English, from scribal punctuation to spelling and morphological issues, conceived under different rationales and providing new and alternative views on standardisation in EModE, a crucial period in the propagation and stability of a standard form of the language at all levels. We, as editors, are very grateful to all the authors for their contributions and to the anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions and amendments.

NOTES

1 The processes of standardisation were later reformulated by Milroy and Milroy (1985: 18), who proposed to expand this sequence of the steps leading to standardisation to selection, acceptance, diffusion, maintenance, elaboration of function, acquisition of prestige, codification and prescription (see also Rutkowska, 2020).

2 The term *Standard English* is commonly used in sociolinguistics "to denote primarily written, especially printed, usage of educated people" (Leith & Graddol, 2007: 83).

3 The variety in question is that which Samuels (1963) named Type IV or "Chancery Standard" and portrayed as the most recent of four standardising varieties known from the Middle English period. The existence of the four types is strongly questioned in some of the contributions in Wright (2020b).

4 Another case at hand is the development of reciprocals in EModE from the discontinuous forms *each the other* and *one the other* to the fossilised constructions *each other* and *one another* (Calle-Martín, forthcoming).

5 See http://wp.unil.ch/emst for further information about the development and results of the project.

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