

## **Special issue: selected papers from the fourth International Conference on Late Modern English**

**Edited by**

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### Introduction: Late Modern English – the state of the art

This issue of *English Language and Linguistics* contains a selection of papers from the fourth conference on Late Modern English,<sup>1</sup> held at the University of Sheffield in May 2010. Twenty-one years previously, when Charles Jones referred to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the ‘Cinderellas of English historical linguistic study’ (1989: 279), such a conference, let alone the fourth in a series of such conferences, would have seemed highly unlikely. Jones was alluding to the comparative neglect of the more recent past in historical studies of English. Up to this point, linguistic scholars had tended to regard the Late Modern period as unworthy of their attention. Morton W. Bloomfield & Leonard Newmark reflect this view in their assertion that ‘after the period of the Great Vowel Shift was over, the changes that were to take place in English phonology were few indeed’ (1963: 293). They also argue that any changes in the language that had occurred between the eighteenth and the mid twentieth centuries were ‘due to matters of style and rhetoric . . . rather than to differences in phonology, grammar or vocabulary’, going on to claim that ‘historical or diachronic linguistics, as such, is traditionally less concerned with such stylistic and rhetorical changes of fashion than with phonological, grammatical and lexical changes’ (1963: 288). This tendency to disregard anything not viewed as structural is very much of its time, but almost thirty years later, Dennis Freeborn was still claiming that ‘the linguistic changes that have taken place from the eighteenth century to the present day are relatively few’ (1992: 180).

Ideological matters aside, earlier scholars tended to see the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as ‘too close for comfort’, as Jones notes here:

There has always been a suggestion . . . especially among those scholars writing in the first half of the twentieth century, that phonological and syntactic change is only properly observable at a great distance and that somehow the eighteenth, and especially the nineteenth centuries, are ‘too close’ chronologically for any meaningful observations concerning language change to be made. (1989: 279)

The Late Modern period was the ‘Cinderella’ of English historical linguistics because scholars could not observe within this period the kind of sweeping structural changes that they were accustomed to studying, changes like the Great Vowel Shift or the

<sup>1</sup> The term ‘Late (or Later) Modern English’ refers to a period stretching roughly from 1700 to 1900, but including part of the twentieth century for some scholars (Beal 2004; Ishizaki, this issue).

introduction of *do*-support. These scholars either thought that no such changes had occurred within this period, or they were confounded by the amount and variability of data surviving from this period; as Beal (2012) puts it, they could not ‘see the wood for the trees’.

The last decade of the twentieth century brought a number of publications which proved harbingers of an upsurge of scholarly interest in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English. Richard W. Bailey (1996) and Manfred Görlach (1999) both published monographs covering nineteenth-century English in general, and Beal (1999) produced a study of eighteenth-century English pronunciation. One reason for this turn towards Late Modern English could be that, as the new millennium approached, scholars felt sufficiently distanced from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to be able to observe the linguistic changes that had occurred in this period. Once the twenty-first century dawned, the nineteenth century was no longer the ‘last’ century, and even the twentieth century could be the subject of historical linguistic study (Mair 2006). Publications from the twenty-first century bear witness to a growing interest in the Late Modern English period as a whole. The first international conference on Late Modern English was organized by Charles Jones in Edinburgh in 2001, and papers from this conference were published in Dossena & Jones (2003). Papers from the following two conferences in this series, held in Vigo (2004) and Leiden (2007), have since been published as Bueno Alonso *et al.* (2007) and Tieken-Boon van Ostade & van der Wurff (2009) respectively. This decade also saw the publication of three monographs dedicated to the Late Modern English period, Beal (2004), Jones (2006) and Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2009), as well as further volumes on eighteenth-century (Görlach 2001; Hickey 2010) and nineteenth-century English (Kytö *et al.* 1996).

However, temporal distance alone is not enough to explain the growth of Late Modern English studies. Developments in linguistics and in technology have enabled researchers to identify meaningful patterns of variation and change where their predecessors had seen chaos. By using the apparent time construct, whereby the language of different age groups recorded at one point in time stands as a proxy for the study of language recorded at different points in ‘real’ time, sociolinguistic studies from the 1960s onwards gave the lie to Leonard Bloomfield’s (1933: 347) assertion that it was impossible to observe linguistic change in progress. Insights gained and methodologies adopted from sociolinguistics have since informed diachronic studies and we have seen the emergence of the subdisciplines of sociohistorical linguistics (Romaine 1982) and historical sociolinguistics (Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2003). Research on the Late Modern period, for which we have access to a rich store of information on the social context of texts studied, has particularly benefited from this approach. In this issue, both Nevala and Percy apply sociological and sociolinguistic theories to the study of historical material. Nevala’s pragmatic study of deictic reference markers in English letters is informed by Social Identity theory, whilst Percy’s account of the metalanguage of anecdotes concerning George III draws on language attitude studies and theories of language ideology to demonstrate how the king’s own linguistic performance and representations of his speech in the press

contributed to his public image as patriotic leader of the nation and man of the people.

Percy's article also touches on the relative status of English and other European languages during the reign of George III. Whilst she demonstrates the significance of the king's decision to use and promote English, she also notes that his children were taught English formally as 'a foundation for learning other languages', that French and German were an important part of the young royals' education as future 'European public figures', and that although Queen Charlotte learned English quickly and well, she continued to use French as a lingua franca throughout her life. In contrast to the present-day ubiquity of English, French was, at that time, still the most important diplomatic and court language in Europe. However, Tieken-Boon van Ostade's article on Late Modern English in a Dutch context provides a window on the rise of English as a major European language. By analysing a series of letters written by eighteenth-century Englishmen to correspondents in the Netherlands, she demonstrates that despite the lack of textbooks and teachers to facilitate the learning of English and the availability of Latin as a lingua franca for the learned, these Dutch scholars had at least a sufficient passive knowledge of English for their correspondents to feel confident in switching to this language as the relationship developed. Tieken argues that the switch from Latin on the part of the British correspondents signals 'the expression of greater positive politeness' and that, whilst 'Latin was the language of scholarship, it seems that English was felt to be more appropriate as a vehicle of friendship between the two men' (this issue: 305). The evidence presented in this article is from a period before Lindley Murray's (1795) *English Grammar* became the first English grammar to be translated into Dutch, thus demonstrating that the market for translations of English novels such as *Clarissa* and the friendships fostered via epistolary exchanges between British and Dutch scholars provided motivation for learning English. As Tieken points out in the conclusion to her article, further research into the acquisition and use of English by speakers of other European languages in this period is likely to bear fruit by providing insights into the very beginning of English as a European lingua franca.

Whilst Percy's and Tieken's studies are both largely qualitative, the articles by Fensde Zeeuw & Straaijer, Ishizaki, Nevala and Hundt *et al.* are based on the quantitative analysis of corpus data. As pointed out by Beal (2012), the corpus revolution has transformed the study of Late Modern English, enabling researchers to find patterns of change amidst what had appeared to earlier scholars as highly complex or even random variation. The sheer amount and variety of texts available in corpora such as ARCHER, the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence* (CEEC) and its extension (CEECE), and the *Penn Parsed Corpus of Modern British English* (PPCMBE), together with the tagging and parsing that make these corpora electronically searchable and the statistical methods that provide measures of significance, have enabled scholars both to identify overall patterns of change and to interrogate individual texts in ways which were simply not possible prior to the digital revolution. In an earlier study David Denison pointed out what he perceived to be a major difference between the kind of

syntactic change that has been observed to occur in earlier periods and that of more recent times:

Since relatively few categorical losses or innovations have occurred in the last two centuries, syntactic change has more often been statistical in nature, with a given construction occurring throughout the period and either becoming more or less common generally or in particular registers. The overall, rather elusive effect can seem more a matter of stylistic than syntactic change. (Denison 1998: 93)

The three articles in this issue by Hundt *et al.*, Ishizaki and Nevala respectively demonstrate that changes in the use of relative markers, phrasal verbs and demonstratives within this period are indeed ‘statistical’ rather than ‘categorical’, but that far from being ‘elusive’, clear trends emerge from the rigorous analysis of sizeable and representative data sets. Hundt *et al.* also demonstrate the advantages of using parsed corpora to extract syntactic information which would be difficult to retrieve from corpora that had simply been tagged: locating the ‘zero’ form of the relative marker and distinguishing relative *that* from instances of the same form with other functions were facilitated by this, as was the investigation of the contribution of relative clauses to the complexity of NPs.

Ishizaki’s article adopts a usage-based, cognitive approach to analysing the development of phrasal verbs with *out* and *away* in Early and Late Modern English. He finds that, whilst both token and type frequencies of phrasal verbs with *out* increased from the mid sixteenth century, those of verbs with *away* did not. He also shows that the development of phrasal verbs with both *away* and *out* can be viewed as instances of grammaticalization and lexicalization, but that *out* has been idiomatized to a greater degree by both processes. Since *away* was lexicalized at an early stage, expressions with *away* would, according to Brinton & Traugott (2005: 96), be likely to resist change because of their semantic content. Without access to corpora, it would have been very difficult to retrieve sufficient tokens of phrasal verbs with *out* and *away* to reveal these contrasting patterns of change, and diachronic differences in the use of these verbs would either not have been noticed or dismissed as unimportant.

Nevala investigates the use of *this/these* and *that/those* as terms of personal reference in letters from the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence* and its extension, with a view to examining the link between the use of these demonstratives and social identification. Nevala distinguishes the different pragmatic functions of the determiners as negatively, positively and neutrally evaluative, finding that the negative and positive forms became more frequent in the eighteenth century. As such, the pronouns were used increasingly as connotative demonstrative determiners and less as neutral indexicals. This is a good example of a change which could not have been detected without access to letter corpora and which might well be viewed as ‘stylistic’. The field of historical pragmatics (see, for example, Jucker & Taavitsainen 2010) brings into the mainstream changes like this, which would have been viewed as marginal by those linguists who dismissed the Late Modern period as one in which nothing of interest occurred.

The article by Fens-de Zeeuw & Straaijer deals with a subject that would certainly have been viewed as marginal by many linguists: orthography. Whilst philologists and historical linguists specializing in earlier periods of English have interrogated the relationship between sounds and spellings in manuscripts and early printed works, the consensus has tended to be that there would be little of interest to be found in texts produced by educated writers once spelling had become standardized. However, non-specialists faced with a sample of eighteenth-century English will immediately remark on the appearance, at what seem to them to be random intervals, of the long *s*. In this article, Fens-de Zeeuw & Straaijer discuss the sudden disappearance of long *s* from printed works in English after 1800 and analyse the variation between the two forms of *s* in letters written by the grammarians Joseph Priestley and Lindley Murray. The corpora used for this study were compiled by the authors, who argue that (pace CEEC and CEECE) there is still a need for ‘readily available diachronic linguistic corpora, created from manuscript’. Both this article and that by Tieken point to the importance of letters as sources of informal usage, which may contrast with that of printed texts in interesting ways. Fens-de Zeeuw & Straaijer find that Priestley, the older of the two grammarians, writing before the demise of long *s* in print, used it mainly in combination with short *s* when the letter was doubled, and thus largely conformed to the rules for the use of these letters set out in printing and spelling manuals. Murray, however, with one exception, dropped long *s* from his letter-writing after 1803, precisely the date when it effectively vanished from printing. The exception provides a fascinating insight into the possible function of long *s* as a stylistic variant. Fens-de Zeeuw & Straaijer suggest that a letter of 1807 in which the long *s* makes its reappearance ‘is of a particularly elevated and religious nature’, pointing to the possibility that this allograph indexed a ‘high’ religious style. Once again, a variable which might have been dismissed as random or superficial is shown to have potential significance in the Late Modern period.

Although the articles collected in this issue do not constitute a representative sample of work in the field of Late Modern English, or even of those presented at the fourth Late Modern English conference, they do highlight certain trends. The importance of electronic corpora for the study of linguistic variation and change in this period cannot be overstated. As Denison pointed out in the quotation above, few of the changes taking place within this period are categorical, so it is only by having access to large amounts of data and the tools with which to annotate and analyse these that we are able to see the patterns that do emerge. On the one hand, the appearance of such corpora in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, along with the change in attitudes whereby, as Traugott (2008) puts it, ‘what was marginal in the 1970s has come to be of central interest’, have created the perfect conditions for research into the Late Modern period just at the point when the new millennium provides conceptual ‘distance’ from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. On the other hand, the Late Modern English period is ‘close’ enough to our own to reveal the beginnings of linguistic trends that are apparent in contemporary English, such as the rise of English as a lingua franca (Tieken) and the ‘divide’ between British and American English evidenced by the contrasting tendencies found between use of *that* and *which* in corpora of British and

American English in Hundt *et al.*'s article. It has been argued elsewhere (Beal 2007) that the study of phonological variation in this period can likewise provide important insights into patterns of variation and change in English today: a case of using the past to explain the present. Beal has also argued (2012) that one consequence of the corpus revolution for Late Modern English studies has been to facilitate studies in syntax and pragmatics at the expense of phonology, since no phonological corpora or databases of Late Modern English have yet been compiled. Nevertheless, the monographs by Beal (1999) and Jones (2006) demonstrate that this too is an area ripe for exploration by scholars. The fifth Late Modern English conference will take place in Bergamo, Italy, in 2013: proof, along with the articles in this special issue, that what was once the 'Cinderella' of English historical linguistics has emerged as an exciting and dynamic field.

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