Introduction

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English Historical Linguistics 2006. Volume III: Geo-Historical Variation in English : Selected papers from the fourteenth International Conference on English Historical Linguistics (ICEHL 14), Bergamo, 21–25 August 2006
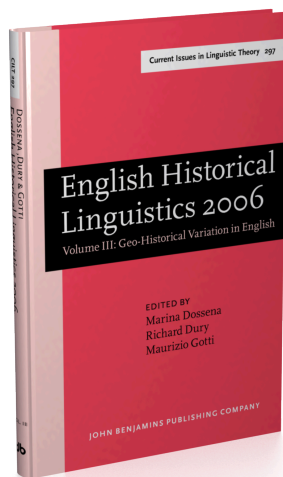**Edited by Marina Dossena, Richard Dury and Maurizio Gotti**
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Introduction

This volume contains selected papers originally presented at the 14th International Conference on English Historical Linguistics (ICEHL) held in Bergamo on 21–25 August 2006. The main topic is geo-historical variation in English – that is, the way in which different geographical varieties have manifested themselves through time, whether in similar or different social contexts, registers and text types. While it could be argued that this is in fact the province of dialectological investigations, we thought it preferable to choose a more general term for our title, as not all contributions deal with dialectology in the traditional sense of the word, but many choose to take innovative perspectives. Going beyond the domain of orthographic variation, the studies presented in this volume also encompass the external factors that influence speakers' perceptions of their own variety, and which may underlie their more or less self-conscious linguistic choices; theoretical investigations of linguistic models; and the increasingly fruitful connections with historical and archaeological studies that may help the identification of converging and diverging trends in languages. The resulting picture is an overall very complex one, in which different perspectives coexist and integrate each other in meaningful ways.

Significantly, this volume includes two contributions deriving from plenary papers (Laing's and Filppula's) – an indication of the new attention that the scholarly community is giving to the concept of variation in itself, i.e., moving beyond the concept of variation as preliminary to change, and – even more traditionally – as a step leading towards standardisation. In fact, an idea of Standard English as the touchstone against which all other varieties are assessed (and actually evaluated) is increasingly seen to be inadequate for the study of the history of English in its entirety, as the continuing usage of local varieties in speech (albeit in far fewer registers of written discourse) cannot be neglected at any point in the history of the language (see for instance Beal 2004 and Dossena 2005 and forthcoming).

The order in which the papers are presented here reflects the thematic and methodological affinities that make this collection homogeneous, while presenting different approaches to the topics under investigation. The very first part deals with medieval scribal practices and traditions, while the second part discusses Northern English uses, and the third and last one focuses on the so-called 'Celtic English', an area of interest that in recent years has grown considerably, and has led to important findings beyond the perhaps too hasty generalisations and simplifications of the past, according to which Celtic languages had had an only negligible influence on the roots of English – see especially Tristram (1999, 2000 and 2003); Filppula, Klemola & Pitkänen (2002); and Filppula, Klemola & Paulasto (2008).

The volume opens with an extensive and in-depth paper by Margaret Laing on the relationship between written documents and the phonological quality of the individual graphemes employed in different cases, and pertaining to different spelling systems. Relying on the work being carried out for the preparation of the *Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English* at the Institute for Historical Dialectology of Edinburgh University, the author shows that Middle English cannot be assumed to equate phonetic transcript tout court, but sound to symbol mapping has to take into account the scribes' individual phonographic profiles, insofar as they can be reconstructed, as such profiles can illustrate both the internal structure of orthographic systems and the relative diachronic and diatopic (in)stability of parts of the sound system.

Scribal practices are also the object of study in Lister M. Matheson's paper, in which late fifteenth-century documents originating in London and in the Essex/Suffolk areas are analysed. The evidence provided by the work of six scribes offers significant material for the study of the genesis, development, and dissemination of 'standard written English', especially starting from professional settings of the manuscript book trade.

In the next contribution, María José Carrillo-Linares and Edurne Garrido-Anes discuss the localisation of manuscripts on the basis of word geography; their argument is that lexical material may help (re)define the localisation of a manuscript, alongside the investigation of phono-graphological features (the familiar methodology used by the *Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English*). The case is made on the basis of various examples, illustrated in detail, though in the awareness that lexical choices are not necessarily dictated by dialect, but may depend on register, text type, whether the text is prose or verse, and even on the scribe's personal preferences. Word geography thus presents itself as a supplementary tool, the utility of which is seen in those cases where other techniques fail to solve ambiguities.

A similar approach is taken by Julia Fernández-Cuesta and Nieves Rodríguez-Ledesma, who focus on orthographic and morpho-syntactic variation, in order to identify specifically Northern traits in Middle English documents. Also in this case the aim is to describe new methods and offer new findings; the analysis is conducted specifically on legal texts, as different genres and text types may follow different patterns in their standardisation process, and some may be shown to have retained geo-historical specificities longer than others.

Northern English is also discussed by Nynke de Haas, whose paper focuses on syntax and outlines possible sources for the so-called 'Northern Subject Rule', i.e., the variation of the present-tense verbal inflection according to the type of subject (pronoun or noun) and (non-)adjacency of the subject to the verb. Through the investigation of the Old English *Lindisfarne Glosses* and several Northern Middle

English texts, the author argues that, rather than language-internal developments, a more likely source for this feature is to be found in processes of language contact between early English and the Cumbrian variety of Brythonic Celtic.

The next contribution, by Mieko Ogura and William S.W. Wang, has a more theoretical approach to the language change phenomena triggered by different structures of social networks. According to the authors, both simulations and historical data show that the weaker the social bias, the greater the effects of different network structures on diffusion processes of change. They also discuss the (un-) likelihood of increase in diffusion time if there is an increase in population size in small-world and scale-free networks.

Finally, as we mentioned above, the book closes with three papers on Celtic Englishes. The first one, by Markku Filppula, challenges the long-held opinion that Celtic languages did not influence English to any considerable extent on account of the socially and politically inferior status of the Celts vis-à-vis their Anglo-Saxon conquerors. In fact, accurate investigations of syntactic and morphological aspects and clues from modern Celtic Englishes suggest that this was not the case, hence the usefulness of looking at English in a broader European context, as the developments occurring in other western languages may shed light on phenomena observed on the other side of the Channel.

The next contribution, by Kevin McCafferty, is a study in nineteenth-century perceptual dialectology, and the impact this had on the standardisation of Irish English in the early works of William Carleton. As this author deliberately wished to 'create' an Irish national literature in English, Scots-derived features of Ulster English and speech forms widespread in (non)standard varieties beyond Ireland were excised, while features of Southern Irish English were retained or even added. This resulted in a levelled, somewhat artificial, peasant dialect that did not reflect actual usage, but only the political and literary agenda of its manufacturer.

The last paper, by Raymond Hickey, focuses on phonological variation and change in Dublin English, linking it to social evaluations of different phonemic realisations. This analysis allows the author to discuss the combination of internal and external factors that may be responsible for the precise manifestation of a change, as this may present exceptions, or varying speed in its diffusion. Focus on the present may thus be helpful to understand the past, as developments may have followed similar lines and have undergone similar constraints at different points in time.

As we can see, in all these papers the language user, whether a medieval scribe, a nineteenth-century novelist, or a present-day commuter on downtown trains, takes centre stage. Linguistic forms occur at a certain point in time and place because a user has chosen to select them. This user-centred approach, however, does not exclude the presence of underlying theoretical models that prove highly

meaningful for the explanation of phenomena that might otherwise be classified as simple deviations from a standard 'norm' or preparatory stages for the emergence of a new 'standard'. If the complexity of language and its broad range of manifestations is to be described in a fairly satisfactory way, a variety of aspects must be taken into consideration simultaneously, and assessed very carefully. In this linguistic geometry, theoretical models define the space in which language use is situated – a space which is defined in turn by three cardinal points: time, place and social milieu, none of which is necessarily more relevant than the others, or indeed less relevant, and therefore in a position to be disregarded.

In this sense, then, geo-historical variation studies can and indeed should include both dialectology *per se* and perceptual dialectology, as the latter reflects the speakers' ideal images of both 'norms' and 'uses' in specific social contexts. Such images are inextricably dependent on the overt or covert prestige attributed to different linguistic choices according to more or less marked gender, age, and class bias on the part of the speaker or indeed of the recipient. Indeed, in many cases speakers have been observed to adapt their linguistic uses to what they thought would be the recipients' evaluations – i.e., lest they should be seen (and judged) as 'provincial, rustic, uneducated, etc'– see for instance the observations in Jones (1995 and 2005).

Necessarily diverse in their approaches, scope and choice of subject, the papers in this volume nevertheless all reflect the application of careful, accurate and in-depth research, and the knowledge of recent advances in theory and methodology, to the ever-fascinating but ever-changing and apparently elusive forms of language at the intersection of time, space, genres and registers. It appears to be a wide, expanding galaxy, equally intriguing in its order and complexity, beyond apparent chaos and randomness. We trust that this volume will lead the reader to further fruitful discussion and reflection.

Bergamo, January 2008   The Editors

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