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Citation

Caon, L. M. D., Gordon, M. S., & Porck, T. (2024). Introduction: unlocking the history of English. In *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory* (pp. 1-7). Amsterdam: John Benjamins. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4249208>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4249208>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Introduction

Unlocking the history of English

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1. Introduction

Widsið maðolade, word-hord onleac,
se þe monna mæst mægþa ofer eorþan,
folca geondferde...

[Widsith spoke, unlocked his word hoard, he who passed
through most nations and peoples across the earth].

(*Widsith*, ll. 1–3, ed. and trans. Bjork 2014)

“Word-hord onleac” is a poetic formula found in a variety of Old English poems, including *Beowulf*, *Andreas*, and the *Meters of Boethius*. Describing a speech act as opening a treasure chest filled with words demonstrates the value of language use in the imagination of the Anglo-Saxon poet. The contributions to this volume *Unlocking the history of English* all focus on aspects of language use throughout the history of English, including efforts to prescribe and regulate language in certain contexts and text types. These contributions, along with those in its companion volume *Keys to the history of English*, were selected from papers delivered at the twenty-first International Conference on English Historical Linguistics (ICEHL-21), held 7–11 June, 2021, in the Dutch town of Leiden, also known as the ‘City of Keys’, owing to its coat of arms with two crossed keys. The contributions in this volume centre around three different themes: pragmatics and prescriptivism, political, legal and medical text types, and the language of late modern letters.

2. Pragmatics and prescriptivism

Historical language use and contemporaneous efforts to describe and prescribe it have played an important role in the socio-linguistic study of the history of English (see, e.g., Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2018). The papers in this section explore various methods that allow for both quantitative and qualitative analyses

of changes in pragmatics over time, often in relation to trends of language advice in such metalinguistic works as grammars, spelling books, and usage guides.

The first paper of this section, by **Claudia Claridge**, explores a phenomenon that has long since been considered stereotypical of British language use: understatement. With the exception of *litotes* in Old English poetry, understatement in the history of English has received relatively little scholarly attention. Claridge focuses on the period between Middle English and Late Modern English and outlines how understatement in the history of English in these periods might be fruitfully studied. After distinguishing between different types of understatement, she discusses the potential and limitations of two possible approaches: a metalinguistic approach, focusing on a set of terms used to describe the phenomenon, such as *litotes*, *meiosis* and *diminution*, and a form-to-function approach, which traces a range of typical instantiations of understatements, such as *to put it mildly* and *not bad*. These methods, along with her tentative conclusions that emphatic understatement is already attested in Middle English, with a later form of restrictive, hedgy understatement becoming more common from 1800 onwards, will no doubt fuel a future discussion or two on understatement.

The next contribution by **Jessica Nowak** and **Stefan Hartmann** explores the rise and fall of capitalization of common nouns from Early Modern English to Late Modern English. Like understatement, sentence-internal capitalization has largely not been studied with the empirical precision of corpus linguistics. Nowak and Hartmann draw on two corpora, *Early English Books Online (EEBO)* and the *Corpus of Late Modern English Texts*, to show that there was a rise in sentence-internal capitalization until c.1750, followed by a steep decline. These findings are brought into conversation with contemporaneous works on grammar through a systematic qualitative study of 58 English grammar and spelling books published between 1550 and 1849. As it turns out, these grammarians did not significantly influence the usage patterns of sentence-internal capitalization; rather, Nowak and Hartmann ascribe a more leading role to printers, who may have wanted to abandon the capitalization of common nouns to speed up the process of typesetting.

Also comparing language prescription and usage, **James Hyett** and **Carol Percy** investigate how eighteenth-century women playwrights used the recently-stigmatized grammatical variant 'you was'. Building on a prior study on 'you was' and 'you were' (Hyett & Percy 2022), the authors present close readings of different works by Frances Sheridan (1724–1766), Elizabeth Griffith (1727–1793), Charlotte Lennox (1730/31?–1804), and Dorothea Ceesia (1738–1790) in order to demonstrate how playwrights utilized the grammatical variant 'you was' on stage, despite of, or perhaps because of, grammarians' proscription against its use. Indicative of negative emotions and dramatic moments, 'you was' gained specific

theatrical functions, such as signaling untruthfulness, anger and loss of control. This study shows how the pragmatic use of linguistic tokens could shift over time and how language prescription could affect actual as well as theatrical usage.

3. Political, legal and medical text types

Within English historical sociolinguistics, the concept of text types plays an important role (see, e.g., Görlach 2004). Texts that share specific forms, functions, and audiences have their own conventions of language use; therefore, in considering linguistic change or historical language use, the specific text type and usage context need to be taken into account. The three papers that make up this section cover political, legal and medical language, respectively.

In the first paper of this section, **Juhani Rudanko** and **Paul Rickman** explore the language of politics and contribute to research on diachronic discourse analysis and pragmatics by discussing manipulative techniques in a single political debate. Their case study of the fallacy *ad socordiam*, further defined as ‘an informal fallacy in the language of politics’, is based on records of a debate between James Madison (1751–1836) and James Jackson (1757–1806) in the United States House of Representatives on June 8, 1789. The records show that Madison’s motion to include a bill of rights in the new Constitution was subtly opposed by Jackson in a speech characterized by the above-mentioned fallacy. As such, Jackson’s argumentation did not explicitly reveal his opposition to Madison’s motion; it relied instead on pretexts meant to conceal Jackson’s covert intentions, i.e., forestalling the project of amendments. The article shows that linguistic analysis of political discourse can benefit from the investigation of covert intentions in the arguments of interlocutors.

Moving from political to legal discourse, the contribution by **Paula Rodríguez-Puente** challenges the assumption that the language of law is conservative and resistant to change, by proposing a diachronic analysis of nominalizations in a selection of British law reports. Through the study of seventeen nominalizing suffixes in the *Corpus of Historical English Law Reports, 1535–1999* and the *Corpus of Contemporary English Legal Decisions, 1950–2021*, the author on the one hand seeks to establish whether nominalizations are “endemic” in legal discourse and on the other explores the development of this linguistic feature over almost five centuries (1535–2021). Like the use of the passive voice, nominalizations contribute to the abstract and impersonal style of legal writing, thus making this specialized language less accessible. Despite the recommendations of the Plain Language Movement for a simplification of legal writing, nominalizations remain a frequent feature of legal discourse, as this study demonstrates. In fact, while earlier studies report that the use

of the passive voice in law reports has significantly decreased from the nineteenth century onwards, the current study shows that nominalizations, especially the ones formed with Roman suffixes, have increased over time, partly to compensate for the diminished use of the passive voice. Although this increase happened slowly, spanning the mid-sixteenth century to the end of the twentieth century, it demonstrates that linguistic changes certainly do affect legal discourse.

In the contribution by **Elisabetta Lonati**, a study on the lexis of medical ethics and moral practice, the focus shifts to medical language. In the last three decades of the eighteenth century, several publications on *moral sense* and *practical ethics* were issued as a response to the need of defining and regulating medical ethics and moral practice. Four of them, written between 1770 and 1803, are relevant for this study: two by John Gregory (1724–1773) and two by Thomas Percival (1740–1804), the physicians who laid the foundations of medical morality. A qualitative analysis of the usage and functions of the words *duty/-ies*, *office/-s*, and *conduct* in the texts and lectures written by Gregory and Percival for physicians, surgeons, apothecaries, students and trainees sheds light on these authors' different purposes. While Gregory's intentions in establishing the fundamental principles, or *moral qualities*, inherent to the medical practice, are rather theoretical, Percival's approach is more practical, as it aims at defining *moral rules of conduct* for physicians in their interaction with patients and other colleagues. Even so, Lonati argues that these works are complementary, as both the behaviour and the performance of physicians rely on inner qualities and principles that are expressed by the lexical items analysed in this study.

4. The language of late modern letters

Because of their closeness to speech, personal letters are a suitable text-type for investigating everyday language in older stages of English, and as such, they have been the object of several historical linguistic studies (see, e.g., Dossena & Tiekens-Boon van Ostade 2008). Moreover, the study of epistolary writing practices over time makes for an interesting field in and of itself. The papers in this section highlight various aspects of Early to Late Modern English letter writing, including diachronic stylistic changes, letter-copying practices, the role of letter-writing manuals, and spelling practices.

The paper by **Tanja Säily**, **Turo Vartiainen**, **Harri Siirtola** and **Terttu Nevalainen** contributes to ongoing studies on the epistolary genre by looking into stylistic changes that took place in letter writing between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. The authors seek evidence for (a) the colloquialization of the epistolary genre in this time span, and (b) gender-specific writing styles dur-

ing the eighteenth century. Using part-of-speech tagged corpora based on the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence* family, the authors are able to determine the diachronic frequency of nouns, personal pronouns and lexical verbs, as well as the distribution of these parts of speech across genre, social rank and relationship between sender and receiver of the letter. They show that the use of nouns in letter writing tends to decrease over the above-mentioned four centuries, whereas the use of lexical verbs and personal pronouns increases, thus confirming a trend towards a more colloquial or involved style of letter writing. As for changes occurring in different social groups, the authors find evidence supporting the claim that letters written by women, members of the upper ranks, as well as letters addressed to socially close recipients tend to become more colloquial, while letters written by men, members of the lower ranks, along with letters addressed to socially more distant recipients are less colloquial and more informational. Yet, while women are seemingly leading the change towards an informal style of letter writing, data for the eighteenth century show a convergence across genders and social ranks, which is likely due to the development of a shared, polite style among educated people.

Tino Oudesluijs's paper explores an understudied topic in the context of Late Modern letter writing, namely the copying practices employed by authors. Letters are an important source for historical sociolinguists, not in the least because they tend to capture informal language use, thus containing less closely monitored language and revealing more vernacular features. At the same time it was common for letter writers to keep fair copies of letters they wrote themselves or received from others. This poses a challenge to the notion that letters tend to contain less consciously monitored language, since copying, by its sheer nature, draws attention to the language on the page. Yet, as Oudesluijs points out, not all copies were created equal and shedding light on these different copying practices can provide valuable insights into the level of formality these copies reflect, as well as how and why authors chose to use linguistic elements differently from the original. By using the copies and corresponding originals of the well-known Mary Hamilton (1756–1816) as a case study, Oudesluijs makes an interesting case for taking into account the types of copying and the motivations behind the creation of the copy to explain linguistic alterations in them.

In the next paper, **Nuria Calvo Cortés**, looks into the influence of late eighteenth-century letter-writing manuals on a small corpus of filled-in petition forms and hand-drafted petitions addressed to the Foundling Hospital between 1759 and 1815. These texts were generally written by mothers, or by others on their behalf, seeking a safe home for their children or submitting a formal request to get them back. As suggested by their labels, hand-drafted petitions allowed writers, whose identity and level of literacy are unknown, to formulate their requests

freely, while the filled-in ones were standardized forms in which petitioners only had to fill in the blanks. The comparison of format and spelling features in both types of petitions with the examples found in two contemporary writing handbooks, i.e., Brown's *The English Letter-Writer* (1790) and Cooke's *The Universal Letter-Writer* (1791) reveals interesting findings. Some formal aspects in the petitions, such as formulas used in introductions and conclusions, are similar to those recommended in the letter-writing manuals, thus suggesting that these handbooks had some influence on both types of petitions. The author argues that petitioners might have learned these features directly from the manuals or indirectly from other people. As for spelling variation, Calvo Cortés finds evidence of the opposite, as she observes a discrepancy between the orthography of the manuals and that of both hand-drafted and filled-in petitions. While the manuals are printed texts and therefore display a fairly regular spelling, the petitions contain several non-standard variants that are typical of eighteenth-century epistolary spelling.

In the last contribution of this section, Sarah van Eyndhoven sheds light on the survival of the feature <quh-> alongside the anglicised equivalent <wh-> in Early Modern Scots. The author carries out a quantitative analysis of these two spelling variants in a corpus consisting of the letters of three politically active Scottish individuals – James Ogilvie Earl of Seafield (1663–1730), George Lockhart of Carnwath (1681?–1731) and Robert Wodrow (1679–1734) – writing at a time in which the unification of the Scottish and English parliaments in 1707 had repercussions on the language as well. Of these three writers, Lockhart is the first to fully adopt the English variant <-wh->, which is found across the board in his correspondence. In contrast, the Older Scots feature <quh-> is still present in the linguistic repertoire of Seafield, though to a lesser degree, and especially of Wodrow, who shows a clear preference for <quh-> upon <wh->. Further investigation into the reasons why this form survives the longest in Seafield and Wodrow's epistolary language reveals that one lexical item in particular, *quhich*, and its abbreviated variant, *q^{ch}*, are used very frequently. Moreover, both writers seem to prefer the abbreviated form of *quhich* and a few other <quh-> words upon their extended forms. This spelling habit leads van Eyndhoven to conclude that the archaic variant <quh-> was retained in the correspondence of these two writers because of their abbreviation practices rather than their conscious attempt to preserve an archaic spelling feature.

5. Conclusion

Each of the papers in this volume contribute to our understanding of the contexts of language use throughout the history of English. It is our hope as editors that some of the findings and methods presented here may serve the reader as keys to word hoards yet to be unlocked.

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