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TERTTU NEVALAINEN

Studying language change in its social context

WE KNOW FROM EVERYDAY experience that teenagers do not speak like their parents, let alone like their grandparents. Where people come from, what they do for a living, and the company they keep can all be manifested in the way they speak. Linguistic variability is of major interest to language historians as they study the patterned ways language varies when it is used by individuals, groups of people, and speech communities in different situations for diverse communicative purposes. In due course, this variation can lead to language change. My research focuses on change in the English language, but similar approaches are applied to the study of historical changes in many other languages that have preserved a long textual history.

English historical linguists typically approach change at the level of the language community over an extended period of time and refer to changes that took place in Old, Middle or Early Modern English or, focusing on shorter time periods, for example, in sixteenth-century English. But we can also lower the level of abstraction and focus on individuals and their contemporaries.

Individual variation

Let us begin by considering the language of Sir Thomas More (1478–1535), the lawyer, statesman and humanist scholar whose Latin publications include, for example, *Utopia* (1516). His private use of English can be illustrated by quoting a passage from a letter that he wrote to his daughter Margaret Roper (1505–1544) in 1534 when he was imprisoned in the Tower of London. His family, mentioned in the letter, is portrayed in figure 1. More writes:

I assure you Margaret on my faith, I neuer haue prayde God to bringe me hence nor deliuer me fro death, but referring all thing whole vnto his onely pleasure, as to hym that *seeth* better what is best for me than my selfe *dooth*. *Nor neuer longed I* since I came hether to set my fote in *mine owne howse*, for any desire of or pleasure of my howse, but *gladlie wolde I* sometime somewhat talke with my frendes, and specially my wyfe and you that pertain to my charge. (Thomas More, 1534; Rogers ed. 1947, p. 543; my italics)

The passage will probably not present any major difficulties in understanding the gist of the matter, although it contains spelling alternation and conventions unfamiliar to the modern reader. Elizabeth Rogers, who edited the text, modernized the punctuation but retained the original spelling and grammar. The grammar of the letter may in fact cause the modern reader to pause a few times. For example:

- More inverts his word order after adverbials like *gladly* (*gladlie wolde I*).
- He uses *mine* instead of *my* before *own* (*mine owne howse*).
- He systematically attaches the ending *-(e)th*, and not *-(e)s*, to verbs to mark the third-person singular present indicative (*that seeth*; *my selfe dooth*).
- Finally, More uses multiple negation (*nor neuer longed I*) but omits the auxiliary *do* in this negative clause.



Figure 1. Group portrait of Sir Thomas More and his family, with More at the centre and Margaret Roper the second on the right, late seventeenth century. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

My second passage comes from a letter written in 1545 by Sabine Johnson (1520–1597?), a wool merchant’s wife and More’s near contemporary. She corresponded with her husband John Johnson, who was active in London and Calais at the time. There are no known portraits of either Sabine or her husband, but we do know, for example, what the floor plan of the manor that the Johnsons rented in Glapthorn, Northamptonshire, looked like (see British History Online).

This passage illustrates Sabine Johnson’s writing:

Whan Willyam Lawrens *doyth* com, I well send Haryson, hoye *doyth* mistrust hym to be crafty, wherefore I well *not trust hym noy farther* than Haryson *doyth* geve me counsell. All thynges shal be provyded for harvest, with *the which* the Parson well nout be content, for I thynke if anybodaye wold by *thay* ... he wold sell it, for he *haith* sold the tythe melke allredye, and *hath* made awaye vj or vij tythe calveis. (Sabine Johnson, 1545; Winchester ed. 1953, p. 289; my italics)

Unlike Thomas More, Sabine Johnson had received no formal education and she only learned to write as a young adult. Her spelling and grammar may therefore present more problems for the modern reader. For example, *thay* in “if anybodaye wold by [buy] *thay*” runs together the definite article *the* and *hay*, showing that word-initial [h] dropping featured in her language. But Sabine Johnson also has some of the same features as Thomas More: she, too, uses multiple negation (*not trust hym noy farther*) and the suffix *-th* in the third-person singular present indicative (*doyth*, *haith*). Whereas More fails to use the auxiliary *do* in a negative sentence, Sabine Johnson would appear to overuse it in affirmative contexts, as many as three times in the first sentence of the passage. Finally, her pronoun choices include the relative pronoun *the which* alongside *which*.

Taken together, these observations suggest that English grammar has changed a great deal over the centuries. But for somebody studying either Thomas More or Sabine Johnson, this information would not answer the

question how typical of the general usage of the day their English was. How common was it to use multiple negation or to add the auxiliary *do* to affirmative sentences, for example? Were these features perhaps the writers' idiosyncrasies, or rather stylistic usages in line with private writing but rarely found in official contexts? In other words, what were the linguistic choices available to an individual writing in the 1530s and 1540s? And importantly, how long did they persist in the language?

From individuals to communities

We can find some answers to these questions by studying a wider selection of texts produced by identifiable individuals who represent different social layers and occupations, women and men, southerners and northerners, and people with different levels of education. To facilitate this kind of historical sociolinguistic research, my research team and I designed and compiled a digital corpus of personal letters, the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence* (CEEC). The compilation work was a long-term effort, for which thanks are due to all members of the CEEC team. The original version of the corpus covers the period from 1410 to 1681, and its extension continues it until 1800. In its totality, the corpus comprises c. 11,700 letters written by nearly 1,200 individuals and amounts to c. 5.3 million words.¹

In principle, writers of all literate sections of the social hierarchy were included from each successive twenty-year period covered by the corpus. Their metadata was encoded in a separate letter sender database. At the same time, the continuity of regional coverage was observed by systematically selecting writers from four areas: the North (counties north of Lincolnshire), East Anglia, the City of London, which was the country's principal commercial centre, and the Royal Court at Westminster, the political and administrative capital of the country (figure 2). Including the Court as a separate category makes it possible to examine the effect of overt prestige on language variation and change. It was, after all, the speech of the 'better brought up sort' of London and especially of the

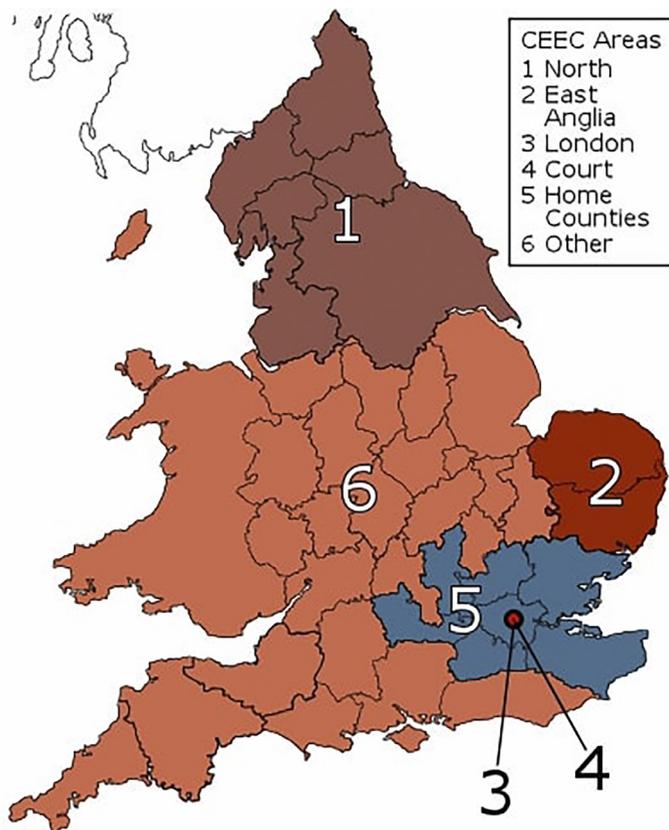


Figure 2. Map of CEEC regions. © CEEC team.

Royal Court that was at the time recommended as a model for young aspiring poets in search of patronage.

However, before moving on, let us pause to ask whose language it is that can be studied by means of corpora such as the CEEC. It is good to bear in mind that the great majority of English people, according to some estimates about 70 percent of the male population in 1600, were semi- or completely illiterate, and that the ability to write was confined to the higher social ranks and professional men. The average rate of female literacy, the ability to both read and write, was much lower than that of men. On the other hand, there was a good deal of regional and social variation in literacy skills. We may assume that the gentry, both men and women, became nearly 100 percent literate throughout the country in the course of the seventeenth century. These factors are naturally reflected in the composition of the correspondence corpus (Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2017, pp. 40–52).

*

Turning to corpus findings, let us consider the trajectories of change of two linguistic features shared by More and Johnson and begin with multiple as opposed to single negation. Thomas More used multiple negation in “*Nor neuer longed I*”, instead of writing, as we would today, “*nor did I ever long*”. And so did Sabine Johnson when she wrote: “I well *not* trust hym *noy* farther”, instead of using the modern mainstream construction “I will *not* trust him *any* further”.

The corpus findings shown in figure 3 suggest that multiple negation was not uncommon in the first half of the sixteenth century at the time when More and Johnson wrote their letters. But as the diagram indicates, its use was socially stratified and declined rapidly among middle- and upper-ranking writers as the century advanced. My data further show that the decline was particularly associated with middle-ranking professional men (Nevalainen 2006). It is noteworthy that the process was

considerably slower not only among lower-ranking men but also among upper-ranking women, who represented the literate members of the nobility and the gentry.

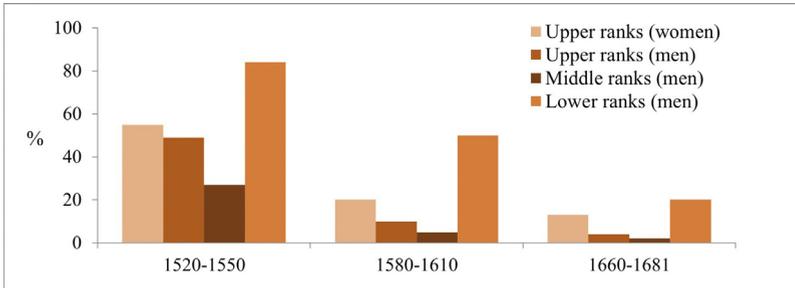


Figure 3. Multiple negation by social status, 1520–1681 (based on Nevalainen 2006, p. 262).

A more complex trajectory is revealed by the auxiliary *do*, which the two correspondents used in some contexts but omitted in some others where it would be expected today. Sabine Johnson was a frequent user of *do* in affirmative statements and wrote, for instance: “Whan Willyam Lawrens *doyth* com, I well send Haryson, hoye *doyth* mistrust hym”. But contrary to our modern expectations, Thomas More did not use *do* in the negative statement: “Nor neuer longed I”.

The history of the auxiliary *do* has attracted a good deal of research over the years. One of the landmarks in the field, Alvar Ellegård’s large quantitative study (1953) showed how the use of *do* gained momentum in the sixteenth century and progressed at different rates in different syntactic environments. The use of unstressed periphrastic *do* also followed the general trend in affirmative statements and was on the increase for the better part of the century. However, it made a U-turn at the end of the sixteenth century and, unlike in negative and interrogative contexts, failed to be generalized as a tense marker in affirmative declaratives. Affirmative *do* proved to be a perfectly good change that never quite took off.

The CEEC data show that the decline of affirmative *do* was particularly rapid in the City of London and at the Royal Court in the early seventeenth century (figure 4). Interestingly, no comparable fall was found in the North or East Anglia, where its frequency of use continued to rise in the first two decades of the seventeenth century, only to drop later, as indicated by figure 4. Placing these findings in their sociolinguistic context, Dr Arja Nurmi has offered an interesting hypothesis as to why *do* might have lost ground in London and at the Royal Court at the beginning of the seventeenth century after the death of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603. The change coincided with the arrival in the capital of the Scottish court of her successor James I, people who at the time spoke a practically *do*-less variety of English. Nurmi argues that this large group of influential people may well have contributed to the sudden drop in the use of *do* and hence impacted the subsequent history of the English language at large (Nurmi 2000, pp. 387–390).

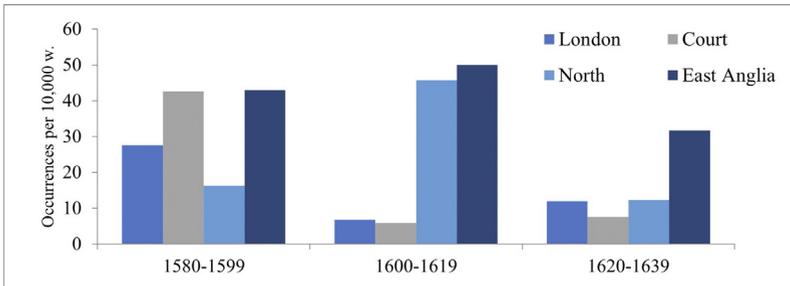


Figure 4. The rise and fall of *do* in affirmative statements by region (based on Nurmi 2000, p. 385).

Social evaluation

Although the two linguistic features that I have discussed were on their way out, they declined slowly in mainstream English usage and never disappeared totally. However, we may assume that their social meaning may not have been the same at the time when Thomas More and Sabine

Johnson wrote their letters and, say, a hundred years later. As the groups of people employing these features had not remained constant in social and regional terms, the social evaluation of these linguistic choices is likely to have shifted accordingly.

Our present-day views of the use and users of these recessive features have shifted even further. While unstressed *do* is not expected to occur in affirmative declaratives in modern mainstream English at all, multiple negation is one of the most socially stigmatized features in English today (e.g., Chambers 2013, pp. 300–304). A modern reader might therefore accept the use of this construction in the language of an uneducated merchant's wife more readily than finding it in the idiom of More, King Henry VIII's first secretary and Lord Chancellor, who had studied at the University of Oxford and in the Inns of Court in London. In Classical Latin two negatives cancelled each other and resulted in a positive reading, which may have contributed to the decline of multiple negation especially among highly educated male professionals. We could support this assessment by the corpus finding that the decline of the construction was slowest among the lower literate social ranks, and probably slower in their speech than in their writing.

But we also need to ask how representative the two writers that I have discussed were of their respective social groups in linguistic terms. In other words, were they perhaps linguistically progressive in that they readily espoused ongoing processes of change – or were they slow in adopting them, preferring outgoing constructions? To answer this question, we developed a computational model to establish which language users promoted and which lagged behind the ongoing changes that spread between the early fifteenth and late seventeenth century (Nevalainen, Raumolin-Brunberg & Mannila 2011). The results of the comparison indicate that More and Johnson were both typical of their contemporaries in that their relative linguistic progressiveness and conservatism varied according to the particular linguistic feature undergoing change.

It turned out that, in most cases, Thomas More preferred single ne-

gation to multiple negation, whereas Sabine Johnson used multiple negation more than her age cohorts. In this respect the linguistic choices reflected the social status and educational differences of the two writers. On the other hand, More was more conservative than his age cohorts in his continued use of verbal *-(e)th* and of the possessive determiners *mine* and *thine*, while Sabine Johnson was progressive in her use of both these features, which had their origins in the northern dialect region of England. Affirmative *do* was excluded from this analysis because its functions were not purely grammatical but seem to have been largely discursal and stylistic at the time (Nurmi 2000, p. 379, 391).

These findings indicate that changes in English progressed through different social channels and that no single social group or regional background can be held responsible for promoting all of them. The language that we now know as Standard English is the product of numerous parallel intersecting processes, most of which we no longer have access to today. But I hope to have shown that we can approach the issue by analysing a large body of authentic material produced by individual language users from different periods and different walks of life.

The present

Although in many respects the past is, as the saying goes, a foreign country, language change continues, and Present-day English varies and changes on a global scale. It may therefore be fitting to conclude this discussion by showing how widely multiple negation and affirmative *do* are used in world Englishes today. *The Electronic World Atlas of Varieties of English* (eWAVE, Kortmann, Lunkenheimer & Ehret 2020) shows that, unlike in Standard English, multiple negation is either pervasive or obligatory in as many as thirty-two of the seventy-seven varieties studied and is particularly common in traditional and high-contact first language varieties and in English-based creoles (figure 5).

By contrast, the use of unstressed *do* as a tense carrier is rare: it is pervasive or obligatory in only two varieties, namely, in Saramaccan, which

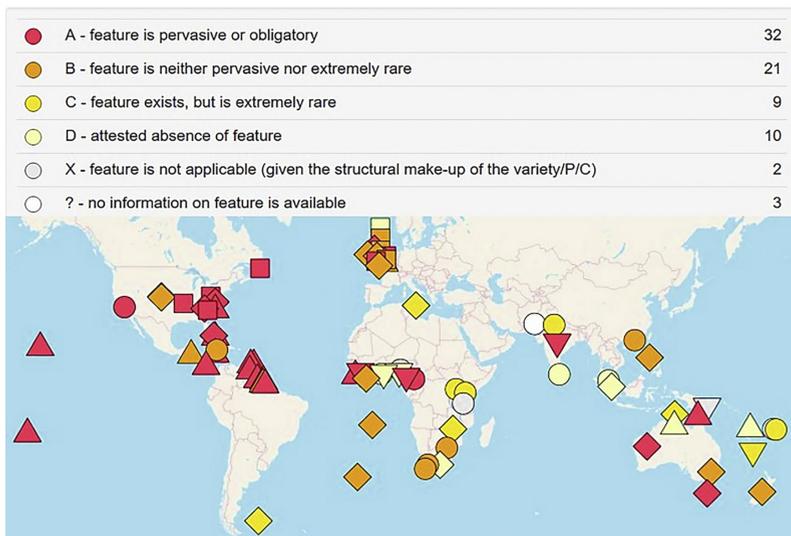


Figure 5. Multiple negation in world Englishes. Typical example: *He won't do no harm*. Symbols: Squares = Traditional L1 varieties, Diamonds = High-contact L1 varieties, Circles = Indigenized L2 varieties, Triangles = English-based Pidgins and Creoles (Source: eWAVE, item 154).

is an English-Portuguese creole, and Cape Flats English, an indigenized L2 variety of South African English (figure 6). If the decline of *do* was indeed set in motion, as has been suggested, by the arrival of the Scottish King James and his Stuart court in London in 1603, we may conclude that political actions can have long-term linguistic consequences. Although this is demonstrably true with cases like the Norman invasion of Britain in 1066, correlation does not necessarily mean causation. Among many other things, the intriguing issue of affirmative periphrastic *do* will therefore have to await further research.

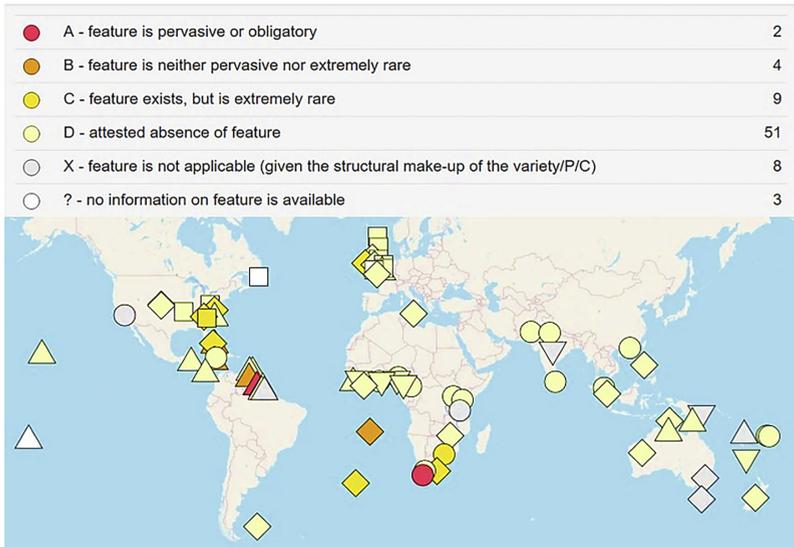


Figure 6. *Do* as an unstressed tense marker in world Englishes. Typical example: *That girl what did smile at me*. Symbols: Squares = Traditional L1 varieties, Diamonds = High-contact L1 varieties, Circles = Indigenized L2 varieties, Triangles = English-based Pidgins and Creoles (Source: eWAVE, item 103).

Föredrag den 5 oktober 2021

Terttu Nevalainen mottog Gad Rausing's pris 2021

N O T E

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