

The lower orders in their own 'rite' (England, c. 1750-1835)

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Abstract:

In this course we look at letters of lower-order writers, their background and their schooling. These writers made up the majority of all literate people in England during the Late Modern English period (1700-1900). Most of those we look at were in distress and applied for poor relief from their parish. When examining these little-known sources of data, most of which still exist only in handwritten form, historical sociolinguists are faced with a variety of challenges in both theory and practice.

To prepare for this course:

- a) Read the following article (see below):
Auer, Anita (forthc.) Late Modern English: Standardization. In: Alexander Bergs and Laurel Brinton (eds.) *Historical Linguistics of English: An International Handbook*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- b) Transcribe the letter by Luke Bratt (pdf file) as faithfully as possible.
Consider the following questions:
 - Why did Luke Bratt write the way he did?
 - Why does anybody write the way s/he does?

130. Late Modern English: Standardization [forthc.]

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1. Tracing the history of Standard English (1750-1920)
2. New insights into standardisation processes of the English language
3. Concluding remark

The word “standard” has two main senses according to the *OED*, namely (1) a military or naval ensign and (2) an exemplar of measure or weight. The function of a “standard” in the first sense is to serve as a focal point, which is a recognised marker of authority by, for instance, an army or a nation, while “standard” in the second sense can be described as “an authority *in itself*” (Crowley 2003: 78) to which copies are compared. What both senses of “standard” have in common is that they connote permanence and fixity. According to Joseph (1987: 3), the term “standard” relating to language was first attested in Anthony Ashley Cooper’s (3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, 1671-1713) *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, published in 1711. The language referred to was Greek (Shaftesbury 1790: 115): “It was thus they [the Greek] brought their beautiful and comprehensive language to a just standard, leaving only such variety in the dialects, as rendered their poetry, in particular, so much the more agreeable.” In 1712, Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), in his *Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue*, used “standard” with respect to the English language as follows:

But the English Tongue is not arrived to such a Degree of Perfection, as to make us apprehend any Thoughts of its Decay; and if it were once refined to a certain Standard, perhaps there might be Ways found out to fix it for ever; or at least till we are invaded and made a Conquest by some other State; and even then our best Writings might probably be preserved with Care, and grow into Esteem, and the Authors have a Chance for Immortality (1712: 15).

Both quotations clearly convey that the function of a standard is to serve as an authority and thus to set the benchmark. Moreover, the sense in which “standard” is used in the quotations above does not only connote permanence and fixity, but the concept has been extended to evaluation and comparison. In other words, standard language is referred to as a recognised exemplar with a certain degree of perfection and correctness, which should be fixed forever. As a consequence of this, language varieties which deviate from the recognised standard will necessarily be evaluated as less perfect and can therefore not be communally accepted. According to Milroy and Milroy, standardisation should be viewed as an ideology; thus, the notion that one language variety is better than other forms of the language is “an idea in the mind rather than a reality” (Milroy and Milroy 1991: 19). The development of what has been considered to be the “standard” form of the English language in the period 1750 to 1920 will be the topic of concern in this chapter. The first part (§ 1) will present the traditional view of the history of standard English in the Late Modern English period, and the second part (§ 2) will be concerned with recent approaches to the study of the standardisation processes of the English language, which partly challenge the traditional view of the history of the standard language.

1. Tracing the History of Standard English (1750-1920)

In numerous descriptions of the history of the English language (see for instance Blake 1996, Baugh and Cable 2002, Watts and Trudgill 2002 for accounts of the history of the language; Milroy and Milroy 1991, Stein and Tieken-Boon van Ostade 1994, Wright 2000, Crowley 2003 for specialized texts on standardisation; and Beal 2004 for an account of the Late Modern English period up to 1945), the 18th century is depicted as an age of standardisation and prescriptivism, during which the English language was codified in the form in which we know it today. With respect to Haugen’s four-step concept of standardisation (1966), which entails (1) selection of norm, (2) codification of form, (3) elaboration of function, and (4) acceptance by the speech community, and Milroy and Milroy’s seven-step model (1991: 27), which comprises the additional stages of (5) maintenance, (6) prestige, and (7) prescription, the 18th century can clearly be labelled the codification stage, with the subsequent stages partly overlapping with the latter stage and also covering the rest of the Late Modern English period. For an account of the first stage, i.e. selection of norm, see Chapter 116 on Early Modern English Standardisation.

The written variety of English that had been established by the end of the 18th century was a taught standard “associated with a certain level of education and social position” (Blake 1996: 24). This polite language of educated gentlemen was associated with the political, commercial, and academic centre of London (see Klein 1994, McIntosh 1998, and Watts 2000, 2002 on the “ideal of politeness”); it was clearly distinct from colloquial or ordinary language usage and difficult to acquire by the lower classes due to their lack of education (cf. Görlach 1999: 463). As early 18th-century London English was not a codified standard and the language was prone to change, voices complaining about the neglect and decay of the English language increased. Works by literary authorities such as Daniel Defoe (c. 1660-1731), Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) and Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) reflect their efforts to prevent language from changing and to achieve the perfect English language (see Watts [2000] on the “ideology of prescriptivism”). The state of perfection of the English language which these authorities aspired to recreate existed during the so-called “golden age”, which had begun with the accession to the throne of Queen Elizabeth in 1558. Samuel Johnson in the Preface to his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), for instance, complains about the decay of the English language by stating that it was “neglected, suffered to spread, under the direction of chance, into wild exuberance, resigned to the tyranny of time and fashion, and exposed to the corruptions of ignorance, and caprices of innovation”. The longing for the “golden age” is reflected in Johnson’s explanation regarding his choice of illustrative quotations for the dictionary: “I have studiously endeavoured to collect examples and authorities from the writers before the restoration, whose works I regard as *the wells of English undefiled*, as the pure sources of genuine diction” (Johnson 1773: Preface).

In order to achieve the highest and most ideal form of language, repeated calls were made for a language authority counterpart to the language academies in Italy, the *Accademia della Crusca* (founded in 1582) and France, the *Académie Française* (founded in 1635); recall, for instance, Swift’s *Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (1712) quoted in the first paragraph. It ought to be pointed out here that at the time language was often associated with political as well as social and religious issues. In other words, the use of bad language was considered to be the beginning of other forms of degeneration. The much-desired English academy was never established; instead, the codification of the English language was primarily carried out by well-educated individuals who considered themselves language experts and made it their task to ascertain and fix or “correct” language use. Joseph (1987: 111) refers to

these individuals as “controllers” whose linguistic “control occurs as a byproduct of other language-connected duties, like writing, editing, and teaching”. In fact, according to Michael (1970: 4), 140 out of 222 known authors of 18th-century grammars were known to have been teachers (see also Chapman 2008). In place of an Academy, self-appointed writers produced grammars, dictionaries and pronouncing dictionaries, which were considered as authoritative works on the “correct” use of the English language. While only around 50 grammars were published during the first half of the 18th century, in the second half more than 200 grammar books flooded the market, and this influx of grammatical works continued all through the 19th century (Alston 1965; Michael 1970, 1991).

In order to explain the popularity of, for instance, Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), Robert Lowth’s *Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762) or John Walker’s *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* (1791), the changes in society accompanying the Industrial Revolution (c. 1760-1850) need to be taken into account. With the shift from a land-based to a money-based economy, people who were born into the lower layers of society had the possibility to rise in society. An oft-noted aspect of social mobility is linguistic insecurity, which means that a person who tries to climb the social ladder will be aware of the “standard of correctness” and will therefore aim to adhere to this norm (Labov 2001: 277). Crowley (1991: 73) similarly argues that “it was precisely those who were the marginalised but aspirant who were the most sensitive to the indices of linguistic and social identity in a turbulent culture”. It should be pointed out here that linguistic insecurity and sensitivity do not guarantee success in climbing the social ladder. The fact that grammars and dictionaries were used as guides by social aspirers probably explains the great demand for these books during the Late Modern English period.

A grammarian who was particularly concerned with the emancipation of the lower classes was the political writer and farmer William Cobbett (1763-1835). Cobbett, who himself came from a humble background and was self-educated, wrote a *Grammar of the English Language*, published in 1818. This grammar, which was written in a series of letters addressed to his son James, was “[i]ntended for the Use of Schools and of Young Persons in general; but, more especially for the Use of Soldiers, Sailors, Apprentices, and Plough-boys” (1818: Title-page). Cobbett encouraged people from the labouring classes to learn grammar in order to challenge the belief that incorrect use of language was connected to being unintelligent. While earlier

grammarians, as for instance Lowth, used examples from literary authorities and the Bible to illustrate grammatical mistakes, Cobbett quoted speeches from members of parliament instead.

Apart from the Industrial Revolution, other external factors that contributed to the consolidation of the standard English language, in particular the written standard, were (a) the improvement of technology, for instance printing, as well as tax reductions on newspapers in the first half of the 19th century, which led to an increase in the production of reading material, and (b) the introduction of compulsory elementary schooling in 1870 (1st Education Act).

1.1. Areas of Standardisation

After having provided some general information on the history of standard English between 1750 and 1920, this section will deal with the development of standardisation on various linguistic levels, namely orthography, vocabulary, grammar and syntax, and pronunciation.

1.1.1. Orthography

As regards the standardisation of orthography, it may be argued that a high degree of uniformity can be found in printed texts by 1700. This can be explained by the fact that printers had to adhere to the standard spelling system. Variation did however persist for a longer period of time in private writings. Furthermore, if a closer look is taken at particular spelling examples, it can be observed that even in certain printed genres variation prevailed for much longer periods of time (see for instance Oldireva-Gustafsson [2002] for a study of the grammatical morpheme *-ed* in the preterite and past participle forms of the regular paradigm). In America, after the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the fixing of spelling was achieved not so much through the printing press, but through the publication of *The American Spelling Book* (1783) by Noah Webster (1758-1843). In fact, the 1822 edition contains an advertisement stating that “[t]he sales of the American Spelling Book since its first publication, amount to more than THREE MILLIONS of copies, and they are annually increasing” (1822: Preface). Webster was thus successful in promulgating a spelling system, e.g. <er> in *meter*, <or> in *humor* and *flavour*, and <se> in *defense*, which distinguishes British from American English.

1.1.2. Vocabulary

The publication of monolingual English dictionaries recording English core vocabulary rather than “hard words” only started in the beginning of the 18th century, with *A New English Dictionary* (1702) by John Kersey and Nathan Bailey’s *An Universal Etymological English Dictionary* (1721). The most important dictionary for the standardisation of the English language was, however, that by Samuel Johnson, published in 1755, which was based on language used by the “best writers” (see above). For American English, Webster’s spelling book was succeeded by *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), which not only consolidated “American” spelling but also recorded American words such as *caucus* or *chowder*. Another important landmark in the field of English lexicography is the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), first known as *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (NED), the impetus for the compilation of which was created by Richard Chenevix Trench’s paper “On some deficiencies in our English dictionaries” that he read to the Philological Society in 1857. As the Society considered earlier English dictionaries to be “incomplete and deficient” (*OED online*), the aim of the OED was to record the entire vocabulary of the English language from 1150 AD onwards. In 1879 an agreement between Oxford University Press and the editor James A.H. Murray (1837-1915) was reached, and work on the dictionary commenced. The first part of the dictionary was published in 1884 and the final volume, i.e. the first full edition of the OED, came out in 1928. Since then, new supplements with material from North America, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, South Asia, and the Caribbean, as well as an online version of the dictionary, have been made available (see OED online). It should also be pointed out that in 1873 Walter W. Skeat (1835-1912) founded the English Dialect Society (EDS), which aimed at collecting words that were not considered “standard”. This venture, which was eventually taken over by Joseph Wright, was successfully completed as the *English Dialect Dictionary* (EDD), which appeared in six volumes during the period 1898–1905.

1.1.3. Grammar and Syntax

It has been pointed out earlier that there was an enormous proliferation of English grammars from the middle of the 18th century onwards. These grammars, which were largely based on the Latin

model, aimed at codifying the facts of English grammar, which depending on the grammarian could be based on either usage or perceived norms. At the same time, the grammarians pointed out solecisms that were committed by well-known people such as Dryden, Shakespeare or Ben Jonson. Some of the linguistic features that were condemned are the use of preposition stranding (*The man whom I gave the book to*), double negatives (*I can't talk to nobody*), double periphrastic comparison (*more cheaper*), and *shall* vs. *will* with future time reference (see for instance Leonard 1929, Sundby et al. 1991). It is probably the grammarians' concerns with these solecisms that led to Late Modern English, in particular 18th-century, grammars being labelled normative and prescriptive. Crowley (2003: 11) points out that "it has become a commonplace that the 18th century, in which the discourses of prescriptivism predominated, was superseded by a 19th-century reaction against such discourses". For instance, this reaction has been observed with respect to the subjunctive mood (see Auer 2008: 164-165). While 18th-century grammarians strongly advocated the use of the inflectional subjunctive following a list of certain conjunctions, selected 19th-century grammarians pointed out that it was the meaning of a sentence rather than the conjunction that decides which mood should be used. This can be illustrated by the following comment: "Our earlier grammarians laid it down that 'some conjunctions require the indicative, and some the subjunctive, mood after them;' [...] whether in obedience of them, or from some more remote cause which we have not penetrated" (Foster and Foster 1858: 239). Even though we can observe descriptive notions regarding selected grammar points in the 19th century, prescriptive views were still prevailing on other grammar issues. In fact, one may want to argue that the prescriptive tradition was continued in the form of the usage guide, which was and still is popular in both Britain and America. After all, the works by H.W. Fowler, i.e. *The King's English* (1906) and *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926), also focus on "correct" language as well as linguistic features that should be avoided.

1.1.4. Pronunciation

Attempts to standardise British English pronunciation were made towards the end of the 18th century. While Johnson (1755) only marked word stress in his dictionary, Kenrick (1773), Sheridan (1780) and Walker (1791) included transcriptions in their dictionaries. The standard

pronunciation to appeal to was, according to Sheridan (1780: Preface), the language spoken at the Court (during the reign of Queen Anne [1702-1714]). He notes the following:

From that time the regard formerly paid to pronunciation has been gradually declining; so that now the greatest improprieties in that point are to be found among people of fashion; many pronunciations which thirty or forty years ago were confined to the vulgar, are gradually gaining ground; and if something be not done to stop this growing evil, and fix a general standard at present, the English is likely to become a mere jargon, which everyone may pronounce as he pleases (Sheridan 1780: Preface).

Note that Sheridan (1719-1788), who was Irish himself, added an appendix to the dictionary that listed mistakes made by people from Ireland, Scotland and Wales. He thus did his utmost to prevent them from speaking vulgar English. Similarly, the Scot Walker, whose dictionary is considered to have been the most authoritative work on British pronunciation at the time, provided rules for the Irish and Scottish. Moreover, he pointed out mistakes made by Londoners, in particular by Cockneys. Noah Webster paid attention to American pronunciation in his *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828).

Another important milestone in the standardisation of spoken English may be said to be Alexander Ellis's (1814-1890) *On Early English Pronunciation* (1869), which coined the term *Received Pronunciation* (RP). Not unlike Sheridan, Ellis based his classification of accents on social criteria, which means that he linked the notion of received, i.e. accepted, pronunciation to the educated accent spoken in London, the church, at the court and the bar. Even though Ellis may be regarded as a standardiser of spoken English, he was very much aware of the fact that language was variable and that "[a]ccents exist on a continuum, influenced by variation in style, context, age and gender, as well as by regional variation" (Mugglestone 2007: 261). Only when the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) came into existence was it possible to properly codify RP. This was done by, for instance, Henry Sweet (1845-1912) and Daniel Jones (1881-1967). Jones's *An Outline of English Phonetics*, which was first published in 1918, went through nine

editions. His *English Pronouncing Dictionary* (1917) was revised several times, first by Jones himself and then by phoneticians who succeeded him, as for instance A.C. Gimson (1977).

2. New Insights into Standardisation Processes of the English Language

The rapid development of electronic databases and corpora in recent years has provided researchers in the field of language standardisation with a multitude of material, which allows them to tackle new research questions in a short period of time. For instance, the Chadwyck-Healey database *18th Century Collections Online* and similar sources such as google books and internet archive contain grammars, dictionaries and spelling books from the Late Modern English period that can be viewed online and quickly searched as well as downloaded. These resources enable researchers to (a) compare different editions of a published grammar or dictionary (see for instance Hodson 2008), (b) investigate the publication history of a selected work (see for instance Rodríguez-Gil 2008; Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2008), and (c) trace the influence of individual grammars on other grammatical works, which in turn can reveal plagiarism (see for instance Navest 2008). Electronic corpora such as the *Zürich English Newspaper Corpus* (ZEN), *A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers* (ARCHER), the *Corpus of Late Modern English Prose*, the *Corpus of Late 18th-Century Prose*, the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence Extension* (CEECE), and the *Corpus of 19th-Century English* (CONCE), all of which cover different genres and give us an insight into how language was actually used during the Late Modern English period and whether this usage corresponds with the written standard ascertained in normative grammatical works.

In what follows, I will have a closer look at some research areas within the field of language standardisation which have received increasing attention since resources from the Late Modern English period have become more easily accessible, be they grammars, dictionaries, or letter collections.

2.1. Descriptivism versus Prescriptivism

For a long time, the view has prevailed in general histories of English (see for instance Baugh and Cable 2002; Freeborn 1998), partly through uncritical adoption and thus implied affirmation,

that grammars published during the 18th century subscribed to a doctrine of correctness. The view that grammars codifying the English language were of a prescriptive nature can be ascribed to S.A. Leonard's influential work *The Doctrine of Correctness in English Usage 1700-1800* (1929), the title of which strongly suggests that certain language use must either be right or wrong. The traditional classification into prescriptive and descriptive grammars, with Robert Lowth as a representative of the prescriptive tradition and Joseph Priestley representing the descriptive approach to grammar writing, has recently been challenged by scholars (see for instance Rodríguez-Gil 2003; Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2006; Hodson 2006). In fact, Beal (2004: 90) suggests that grammars that have been labelled prescriptive "would be better described as occupying different points on a prescriptive-descriptive continuum". Increasingly, researchers turn to the original sources and evaluate them within the social and intellectual environment of the grammar writers. Thus, recent studies also depart from the view that the majority of, in particular 18th-century, grammars were aimed at and written by well-educated, conservative, middle-class gentlemen from London, and they instead focus on the "margins" of society in terms of, for instance, the grammarian's geographical location, social and educational background or profession. A project dedicated to the compilation of an *Eighteenth-Century English Grammars* database (ECEG) has recently been commenced by Rodríguez-Gil and Yáñez-Bouza (2009). This database contains biographic information on grammar writers, details on the publication history of individual grammars, and a categorisation of these grammars with respect to their contents and the target audience. It allows researchers in the field to quickly get an insight into whether grammarians were polite London gentlemen or whether they were writing from the "margins". In order to ascertain the descriptiveness or prescriptiveness of a grammar, however, a close look has to be taken at the individual grammars. For instance, Hodson (2006, 2008) states in her work on the scientist and grammarian Joseph Priestley (1733-1804) that it is fundamentally misleading to characterise Priestley and his contemporaries as being either descriptive or prescriptive. Hodson (2006) carefully assessed Priestley's concept of language change and compared it to the attitudes of his contemporaries, concluding that linguistic perfectibility is an essential notion for Priestley's linguistic theories. Moreover, she compared the 1761 edition of Priestley's *Rudiments of English Grammar* to the revised 1768 edition and noted that while the 1761 edition was more pedagogically focused, the 1768 edition revealed that while Priestley's linguistic ideas had become more coherent, he had also come to realize that the task of

bringing order to English language study was much more complex than he had perceived when starting the project. Hodson concludes with a comment on how contemporary linguistics “has been slow to recognise the diversity of thinking about the English language that existed in the 18th century” and further remarks that “the period is better characterised as one within which ideas about language were very much contested and debated” (2006: 80). In other words, the classification of grammars on a prescriptive-descriptive continuum is a difficult venture, which can only be successfully done by a close examination of the original sources and by viewing the results within the contemporary social and intellectual context.

2.2. Precept versus Practice

It is not only of interest to determine on which point selected grammatical works published in the Late Modern English period should be charted on the prescriptive or descriptive end of the continuum, but also, and very importantly, whether the codified rules or language descriptions in the grammars and dictionaries had an effect on actual language use at the time. Due to the heteroglossic nature of many of the Late Modern English grammars, the influence of normative grammars can best be determined by examining selected grammatical features. Research on the effectiveness of “prescriptive” grammars has been approached in two different ways, namely on a micro- and on a macro-level. Studies carried out on a micro-level focus on the use of a selected linguistic feature in the language of an individual and also his/her social network (see, for instance, Tieken-Boon van Ostade 1987, 1991, 1994; Wright 1994; Fitzmaurice 2000, 2003; Sairio 2008). To exemplify this approach, I will take a closer look at Sairio’s 2008 study of the use of preposition stranding and pied-piping by the Bluestocking circle during the period 1738-1778. Sairio compiled a corpus of the correspondence of this circle, which consisted of well-educated members of the middle and upper classes, as for instance poets, scholars and gentry women, to investigate language use in the 18th century. Even though it was not possible to ascertain whether the Bluestockings were reading grammars in their adulthood, Sairio points out that the members of the circle would have definitely been taught the basics of English grammar in their youth. In numerous Late Modern English grammars, the use of preposition stranding, as e.g. “This is an idiom, which our language is strongly inclined to” (Lowth 1762: 127), was criticised (see Yáñez-Bouza 2006, 2008). The stigmatisation of preposition stranding and the

implied advocacy of pied-piping, e.g. *This is an idiom, to which our language is strongly inclined*, is attributed to Dryden (1631-1700) (Beal 2004: 110, Yáñez-Bouza 2006; 2008: 251). Sairio investigated whether the Bluestockings used the stigmatised feature of preposition stranding in their letters or whether they adhered to the grammatical rules and therefore opted for pied-piping instead. The results of a diachronic study of the entire corpus show that preposition stranding was the preferred option with 62% in 1738-1743, but from then onwards, at first a steep and then a steady increase of pied piping can be observed. Sairio attributes the increase of the advocated form of pied-piping in the 1750s to an awareness of “correct” language use amongst the letter writers, which was most likely enhanced by the incrementally increasing publication of grammar books during these years (Sairio 2008: 151). As for the use of the forms in Elizabeth Montagu’s letters in particular, which make up around 78% of the entire corpus, a leap in her use of pied-piping can be observed between 1738-1743 and 1757-1762. Her choice of the advocated form is also clearly reflected in letters addressed to aristocrats in 1757-1762, which suggests that Montagu was consciously trying to avoid preposition stranding while aiming at writing in a polite and elegant style.

Studies carried out on a macro-level differ from micro-level studies in that they investigate language usage across a large population, i.e. based on representative electronic corpora. Moreover, the usage corpus is to be compared to a so-called “precept corpus”, which consists of meta-linguistic comments on the linguistic features under investigation. This approach will be exemplified through a study by Auer and González-Díaz (2005), which investigated the impact of prescriptive forces on the development of the inflectional subjunctive in adverbial clauses (e.g. *if he buy a hat*) and double periphrastic comparison (e.g. *more healthier*) in the Modern English period (1570-1900). In the case of the inflectional subjunctive, the precept corpus consisting of 27 grammars revealed that 18th-century grammarians were aware of the decline of the subjunctive and that some of them, most notably Samuel Johnson (1755) and Joseph Priestley (1761), advocated the revival of the subjunctive as a politeness marker. The investigation of the usage corpus, which was based on the *Helsinki Corpus* for the Early Modern English period and ARCHER for the Late Modern English period, shows that the subjunctive form strongly decreases between 1570 and 1749. This decline is followed by a rise in frequency during the period 1750 and 1849, after which the decline of the subjunctive resumes. The revival of the subjunctive, which lasted 100 years, runs parallel to the period during which grammar books

flooded the market. Auer and González-Díaz (2005) therefore suggest that comments on the subjunctive by grammarians like Johnson and Priestley had an effect on actual language usage. As for the development of the double periphrastic comparative, the investigation of the precept corpus reveals that double forms were stigmatised by grammarians throughout the Late Modern English period. The results of the usage corpus show that double forms occurred in the period 1570-1640 only, in written domains, and there are no instances found after 1640. This indicates that the forms had disappeared before the influx of normative grammars. In the case of double comparatives, prescriptivism can therefore not be considered a triggering but only a reinforcing factor of a process that had started long before.

What these studies demonstrate is that (a) prescriptivism must be treated with caution as an explanation for language change during the standardisation processes, and (b) conducting more studies that compare precept and actual language practice would allow us to determine on a larger scale whether prescriptivism did indeed have an effect on actual language usage.

3. Concluding remark

The increase of electronic corpora since the mid 1960s has provided linguists with a wide range of resources that are instrumental in investigating language variation and change. While some of the corpora, as for instance ARCHER for the Late Modern English period, are based on published materials and thus are representative of language use of the upper and well-educated layers of society, more recently corpora have been compiled that provide an insight into how language was used by the “ordinary” population. The concept of “language history from below”, which refers to (a) language varieties and non-standardised varieties, and (b) texts that are untouched by editors and proofreaders and are therefore representative of the original language below the surface of printed material, has been applied to several Germanic languages (see Elspass 2007). In English, corpora and text collections that allow studies “from below” are for instance the letter collection *Essex Pauper Letters, 1731-1837* (Sokoll 2001), the Maidstone corpus consisting of letters written by the labouring poor in the period 1795 to 1834 (compiled by Tony Fairman), *A Corpus of Late 18th-Century Prose (1761-1790)* (compiled by Linda van Bergen and David Denison) based on letters from the northwest of England, and *A Corpus of 19th-century Scottish Correspondence* (compiled by Marina Dossena and Richard Dury), which

includes private and business letters from both male and female writers. This kind of material gives us an insight into a wide range of different language varieties that existed alongside the “standard” language (see for instance Fairman 2003, 2007; Dossena 2004, 2007; Denison 2007).

All in all, it is safe to say that the merits of the Late Modern English period have been recognised over the last few years and, owing to the increasing availability of text corpora and databases, research covering all aspects of historical linguistic study focusing on this particular period is thriving.

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