Current Research Trends in Late Modern English and Prescriptivism

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Abstract
The last two decades or so have witnessed a huge increase in the number and variety of publications on Late Modern English and late modern attitudes to language prescription and standardisation. My contribution aims to review the relevant literature in this research area.
Keywords: Late Modern English; prescriptivism; normative linguistics.

1. Introduction

When dealing with research on post-medieval English it has become a commonplace to refer to the folk tale of Cinderella. It all started with Manfred Görlach, who in 1988 labelled Early Modern English variation as "the Cinderella of English historical linguistics" (Görlach 1988). The Cinderella image was soon taken up by Charles Jones who defined the 18th and 19th centuries as the "Cinderellas of English historical linguistic studies" (Jones 1989: 279). Jones "was alluding to the comparative neglect of the more recent past in historical studies of English" (Beal, Fitzmaurice, Hodson 2012b: 201); quite interestingly, however, Manfred Görlach, who republished his 1988 essay with a few minor stylistic changes, added a question mark to his own title (Görlach 1990), thus recognizing, and helping to foster, research on Early and Late Modern English. Less than a decade later the same scholar – after having himself contributed to the study of Early Modern English (Görlach 1991) – was ready to ask for more and argued that

whereas EModE is becoming a well-researched field, the investigation of the language after 1700 has been more patchy. The 18th century has, for

various reasons, received more attention than the period between 1800 and 1900. (Görlach 1999: 1)

Things had been changing, though, since at least the early 1990s when the six-volume *Cambridge History of the English Language* started being published: as far as the later history of the language is concerned, Roger Lass and Suzanne Romaine edited the volumes covering the periods 1476-1776 and 1776-1979 respectively (Lass 1999, Romaine 1998). In a way, this major multivolume handbook on the history of English came to be the foundation stone of – or, perhaps more properly, the springboard for – a number of relevant publications that promoted an innovative approach to the description and interpretation of the changes in the structural makeup (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and lexis) and usage (pragmatics, text and discourse analysis, text types, styles and registers, variation, etc.) of the English language, more often than not focusing on its later history.

The present paper, therefore, is meant as a bibliographical survey of research – recently published and currently being undertaken – on Late Modern English and Late Modern English prescriptivism. Its aim is twofold: (a) providing background material for the essays in the present issue of *Textus*, should readers be interested in contextualizing what is described and argued in the different essays; and (b) helping advanced students of English language and literature, as well as researchers approaching Late Modern English for the first time, to select the critical literature that is most relevant to their study or research purposes. Let me stress that this kind of bibliographical information may prove useful, not only to the student and scholar of English historical linguistics, but also to the literary critic who wants to discriminate between linguistic and stylistic variation in Late Modern English texts, focus on the interplay between standard and non-standard language forms and, in more general terms, appreciate the linguistic features of literary texts.

As to my selection criteria, I favoured monographs (manuals for university students included), special issues of academic journals[1], and chapters in volumes on the history of the English

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[1] While a variety of academic journals may publish research on Late Modern

language; only rarely will single papers from journals be referred to because – *pace* Jones – too many of them have been published in the last twenty years or so! Instead, my survey will include some information on conference series and recent research projects on Late Modern English and/or prescriptivism, especially if these projects have freely accessible websites or have resulted in the creation of corpora[2].

2. Research on Late Modern English

I will start my survey by mentioning a few recent manuals that, while covering the full range of the historical development of the English language, give ample space to the Late Modern English period: Mugglestone (2006a), van Kemenade and Los (2006), and Nevalainen and Traugott (2012) are all one-volume handbooks, whereas Bergs and Brinton (2012) is a more ambitious two-volume compilation by an international team of experts. Very recent is Kytö and Pahta (2016). Not focused on Late Modern English as such but developing innovative research lines and providing interesting case-studies are such collections of essays as Tieken-Boon van Ostade, Nevalainen and Caon (2000) or Conde-Silvestre and Hernandez-Campoy (2005), which share a sociolinguistic approach, while Diller and Görlach (2001) and Görlach (2004) deal respectively with genres and text types in the history of the English language.

Introductory handbooks to Late Modern English include Jones (2002), Beal (2004a), and Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2009): in a way, these books complement each other because, apart from sharing the basic information, each deals with some favourite topics more extensively (e.g., pronunciation in Beal 2004a and text-types in Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2009).

English, three journals stand out for studies focusing on issues of codification, standardisation and prescriptivism: *Historiographia Linguistica*, *Language and History*, and the free online journal *Historical Sociolinguistics and Sociohistorical Linguistics*.

[2] Although much more focused and strictly related to this *Textus* issue on Late Modern English prescriptivism, the present survey was built on the model of the collection of bibliographical essays about English linguistics I edited a few years ago (Iamartino 2008), Marina Dossena and Richard Dury being then the authors of the English historical linguistics essay.

Various collections of essays, usually the critical outcome of conferences on Late Modern English, have been published in the last fifteen years: Dossena and Jones (2003); Pérez-Guerra *et al.* (2007); Tieken-Boon van Ostade and van der Wurff (2009); Beal, Fitzmaurice and Hodson (2012a). The scope is widened to include the United States of America in Dossena (2015).

Instead of covering the whole late modern period, published research may focus on a single century: Susan Fitzmaurice (2000), Görlach (2001) and Hickey (2010a) all deal with 18th-century English, whereas Bailey (1996), Görlach (1999), and Kytö, Rydén and Smitterberg (2006) concentrate on the 19th century. To this latter period refer both Mugglestone (2006b) and Vandenbussche and Elspass (2007). For 20th-century English – chronologically very near to us, but nevertheless worth analyzing in a diachronic perspective – see Mair (2006).

Before Late Modern English started arousing a widespread interest among historical linguists, the idiolect of individual writers of the period attracted the attention of both linguists and literary critics: a number of books were published in the 1970s and 1980s on the language of the likes of Austen (Phillips 1970), Wordsworth and Coleridge (Austin 1989), Scott (Tulloch 1980), Dickens (Brook 1970, Sørensen 1985), Thackeray (Phillips 1978), and Hopkins (Milroy 1977 and Ellsberg 1987). More recent books of this type include Chapman (1994) on speech in Victorian fiction, and especially Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2014) on the language of Jane Austen's letters.

Late Modern English studies have greatly benefited from the fairly recent interest in text and discourse as well as historical pragmatics. For example, Late Modern English correspondence has proved to be a rich research field (Jucker and Tavitsainen 2004; Nevalainen and Tanskanen 2004; Dossena and Fitzmaurice 2006; Dossena and Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2008; Sairio 2009), as has historical news discourse (Harris and Lee 1986; Brownlees 2006; Jucker 2009; Bös and Kornexl 2015). Jucker and Taavitsainen (2008) is a collection of essays on speech acts in the history of English, whereas Dossena and Taavitsainen (2006) focuses on domain-specific English from a diachronic viewpoint.

The chronological perspective apart, one can study Late Modern English by analysing its key linguistic issue, i.e. standardisation. Indeed, it was undoubtedly the late 17th and 18th centuries that

witnessed the establishment of standard English as the norm of the upper classes, what they called polite society. The development of standard English is historically described in Wright (2000) and Stein and Tieken-Boon van Ostade (1994). Such books as Holmberg (1964) or Cheshire and Stein (1997) and book chapters by Honey (1988), Finegan (1992), Nevalainen and Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2006), and Jones 2010 also make very interesting reading. Blake's (1981) is still an important volume on non-standard language in English literature. Finally, other works are worth mentioning that, while dealing with the theoretical or present-day issue of language standardisation, may refer back to the late modern period as the golden age of English standardisation: I am thinking of the seminal book by Milroy and Milroy (1985), but also Bex and Watts (1999), Crowley (2003), Kerswill (2007), and Armstrong and Mackenzie (2013). Interestingly, however, late modern English desire for standardisation is included among the language myths discussed (and at least partly exploded) in Watts (2011: 157-182, 209-258).

3. Research on Late Modern English Prescriptivism

Standardisation is, of course, closely connected with linguistic prescription, or prescriptivism. Indeed, the chief aim of prescriptivism in late modern Britain was to establish a linguistic variety – in short, the one spoken and written by the upper classes in the London area – as the standard language. Prescriptivism tried to achieve its aim by attaching a social stigma to other varieties and by criticizing aspects of pronunciation, spelling, morphology or syntax as incorrect or improper.

Research on English prescriptivism was strongly influenced by Leonard (1929; repr. 1962), and only recently a more nuanced picture of the prescriptive tradition has started being drawn by historical linguists (Beal *et al*. 2006: 1-9). Relevant book-length publications include Azad (1989), Beal, Nocera and Sturiale (2008), and Curzan (2014), whereas Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2000 and 2006), Auer and Gonzalez-Diaz (2005), Percy (2009), Beal (2011) and Beal and Iamartino (2016) are a representative sample of essays dealing with this theme.

More works may be listed that touch upon issues of linguistic prescription while dealing with the interplay between norms and usage: Schröder, Busse and Schneider (2012) and Rutten, Vosters

and Vandenbussche (2014) are among the most recent collections of essays in this field. Also very interesting are books that zoom in on language-related late modern social and national identities: Finegan (1980), Smith (1984), Cohen (1996), Sorensen (2000), Pahta *et al.* (2010), Lange, Schaefer and Wolf (2010), and Percy and Davidson (2012).

While all the above-mentioned works deal with the issue of prescriptivism in comprehensive terms, a number of books and articles focus on linguistic prescription as far as Late Modern English pronunciation or grammar or lexis are concerned.

The problem of non-standard vs standard pronunciation in late modern Britain can be summed up with the expression 'talking proper', aptly used as the title of Mugglestone (2003), a must-read for students of Late Modern English pronunciation and its social implications; a much earlier book is Holmberg (1964), a later, comprehensive one is Jones (2006); see also Fitzmaurice (1998). Joan Beal has contributed a number of publications on 18th-century pronouncing dictionaries, possibly the most useful tools to enforce prescriptions for correct pronunciation: her monograph on Thomas Spence's *Grand Repository of the English Language* (Beal 1999) was followed by many relevant articles and book chapters (among others, Beal 2004b, 2009, 2013, 2015), and a co-edited journal issue (Beal and Sturiale 2012). These may be complemented with Hickey (2010b) and Sturiale (2012 and 2014).

The prescriptive attitude towards pronunciation had to try and curb the variations and changes in the English sound system; an impossible task, if we are to believe Samuel Johnson when he wrote in the Preface to his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) that "sounds are too volatile and subtile for legal restraints; to enchain syllables, and to lash the wind, are equally the undertakings of pride, unwilling to measure its desires by its strength" (Kolb and DeMaria 2005: 105). Grammar, instead, was a battlefield where Late Modern English prescriptivism could hope to win, and it did. On the solid foundation of earlier publications (Michael 1970; Vorlat 1975; Sundby, Bjørge and Haugland 1991; Görlach 1998), many scholars have more recently dealt with late modern grammatical norms and grammar writing: among others, Watts (1999), Mitchell (2001), Dalton-Puffer *et al.* (2006), Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2008), Locher (2008), Yanez-Bouza and Rodriguez-Gil (2013), and Hundt (2014). Interestingly,

grammars compiled by women started being published in the 18th century, as Percy (1994) and Cajka (2003) exemplify very well. Extensive research has been carried out on specific areas of Late Modern English grammar, for example prepositions (Yanez-Bouza 2006 and 2014), but especially verb forms: the auxiliary *do* (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 1987), the preterite and past participle forms (Oldireva Gustafsson 2002), the progressive form (Smittenberg 2005), the subjunctive mood (Auer 2009), and verb categories in general (Anderwald 2016). Finally, prescriptivism in the grammar field has also been studied by analyzing the life and works of the most famous 18th-century British grammarians: Robert Lowth (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2011), Joseph Priestley (Straaijer 2011), and Lindley Murray (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 1996 and Fens-de Zeeuw 2011).

When moving from Late Modern English pronunciation and grammar to lexis and lexicography, Samuel Johnson's is the name that comes to mind first. Sometimes described as an arch-prescriptivist, Johnson's changing attitude to language use and to his role as a lexicographer becomes evident when the contents of his *Short Scheme* and *Plan of a Dictionary* are compared with those of his Preface to the *Dictionary* (Kolb and DeMaria 2005). All of this has long been studied: apart from Reddick (1990), Hudson (1998) and Iamartino and DeMaria (2006), see the two interrelated essays by Geoff Barnbrook and Ann McDermott in Lynch and McDermott (2005: 92-112, 113-128); more recent is Wild (2010). For the context of late modern lexicography, Wells (1973) and Gurr (1988) still make very interesting reading; more up-to-date are the relevant sections of Coleman and McDermott (2004), Cowie (2009) and Béjoint (2010). For the lexicography of early and late modern non-standard English, see Gotti (1999) and Coleman (2004-2010). Lexis, rather than lexicography, is the province of Geoffrey Hughes, who wrote two books on the social history of the English vocabulary, each including chapters dealing with the late modern period (Hughes 1988 and 2000). Much more on lexis and semantics may also be found in the above-mentioned surveys of Late Modern English. Let me conclude this section by mentioning a classic study of 18th-century vocabulary, i.e. Tucker (1967), and Marina Dossena's (2012) chapter on Late Modern English lexis in Bergs and Brinton (2012: 887-900).

4. Conferences and Corpora

The fast-growing research on Late Modern English and prescriptivism is one of the reasons behind, and at the same time has taken advantage of, the success of conference series specifically devoted to these research areas. In August 2017 the sixth International Conference on Late Modern English (LMEC 6) will take place at Uppsala University, Sweden, its theme being "Internal and External Factors in Linguistic Stability and Language Change"; this conference series started in Edinburgh (2001) and was later hosted by the universities of Vigo (2004), Leiden (2007), Sheffield (2010), and Bergamo (2013). Moreover, a colloquium on *Histories of Prescriptivism*, held in Sheffield in July 2003, became the starting point of similar colloquia, later held in Ragusa (*Perspectives on Prescriptivism*, 2006), Toronto (*Prescriptivism & Patriotism: Language Norms and Identities from Nationalism to Globalization*, 2009), and Leiden (*Prescription and Tradition in Language*, 2013); the next one, on *Value(s) and Language Prescriptivism*, will be held in Park City (2017).

Of course, other conferences and conference series may welcome research on Late Modern English and prescriptivism: the obvious candidate here is the *International Conference on English Historical Linguistics*, now boasting its 19th meeting (Duisburg-Essen, August 2016); but more focused conference series devote ample space to Late Modern English studies: for example, the conferences on historical news discourse (CHINED), first hosted in Florence in 2004 and next to be held in Sheffield (CHINED VI) in 2017; or, the conferences on historical lexicography and lexicology (ICHLL), which started in Leicester in 2002 while ICHLL-8 recently took place in Bloomington (2016).

It is undeniable that the digitization of manuscripts and printed books has played a very significant role in the development of Late Modern English studies. One has only to think of EEBO - *Early English Books Online* and ECCO - *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, by which scholars may access all the books published in Britain until the year 1800; for the later period, *Google Books*, *Internet Archive* and *Project Gutenberg* are more and more useful. But the web also provides easy (and often free) access to a variety of language corpora[3] – possibly, too many to be listed here – that may be of keen

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[3] For the usefulness of language corpora for the study of Late Modern English, see Beal (2012).

interest to the students of Late Modern English and prescriptivism: the *Corpus of Late Modern English Texts* (CLMET, Leuven), the *Corpus of Late Modern English Prose* (Manchester) and the *Network of Eighteenth-century English Texts* (NEET) are directly relevant to the period; other corpora cover a longer or shorter period than the late modern one, but may nonetheless be very interesting because of their selection of material: ARCHER is *A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers* (Manchester); for those interested in historical news discourse, *The British Newspaper Archive* (The British Library, London) and the *17ᵗʰ-18ᵗʰ-century Burney Collection of Newspapers* provide invaluable first-hand material, possibly to be complemented with the *Zürich English Newspapers Corpus* (ZEN, 1671-1791); very useful for linguistic and sociolinguistic research are *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, now freely available and fully searchable.

To these I will finally add two more electronic resources that are particularly useful for the student of English prescriptivism: the *Eighteenth-Century English Grammars Database* (ECEG, Manchester), and the project *The Codifiers and the English Language*, whose principal investigator is Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade, Leiden University.

5. Concluding Remarks

The above bibliographical survey of (mainly recent) research on Late Modern English and the prescriptive attitude of late modern Britain has – it is hoped – furnished useful bibliographical information. Arguably, it has also provided evidence of marked trends at both linguistic and metalinguistic levels:
(a) during the late modern period the English language grew exponentially in its different uses and for its numberless speakers;
(b) in the same period the speakers' attitudes to the language became particularly vocal, linguistic self-consciousness had never been so relevant before;
(c) the correlation between extra-linguistic factors (social, historical, cultural) and language variation and change had never been so strong and significant;
(d) current research in this area rarely confirms long-held views, and often leads to more nuanced interpretations of available data;

(e) the very quantity and quality of research on Late Modern English and prescriptivism is clear evidence of the current development of historical sociolinguistics as an important branch of language studies.

In short, Late Modern English is no longer the Cinderella of English historical linguistics.

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