Linguistic evaluation of earlier texts

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Assessing non-standard texts from previous centuries of necessity involves examining the notion of ‘standard’ which existed before the present. The modern notion of standard English is an eighteenth-century development which builds on formal usage prior to that. The prescriptivism which arose at this time led to the social marginalisation of dialects and their literature. Works written in dialect or containing dialect can be examined in an attempt to reconstruct vernacular features for different regions at various times. Here the central question is how reliable are the written representations which have been handed down. There are a number of criteria for classifying and evaluating earlier texts. Rendering these explicit helps to prepare the ground for later linguistic analysis.

1. The question of ‘standard’ in previous centuries

The aim of the present volume is to consider the records for varieties of English which lie outside the mainstream of what was later to become standard British English and to consider to what extent such records, incomplete and fragmentary as they may be, are useful in determining the development and form of these varieties. This enterprise begs a number of questions and it is important to clarify these in advance so that the principles lying behind the investigations to be found in this volume are clearly laid out.

Some of the chapters, especially the first two, explicitly refer to non-standard English and consider its grammar and lexis. The very term ‘non-standard’ is contrastive by nature as it implies a comparison with an entity called the ‘standard’ to which the features of the ‘non-standard’ do not belong. But to what extent does it make sense to talk of ‘standard English’ before the eighteenth century? It is true that there was a fifteenth-century Chancery Standard (Fisher 1996: 36-64) but this was a register-specific variety of written English used for court and legal documents and should not be interpreted in the modern sense of standard which is a variety propagated by education, codified in books and favoured by non-regional speakers in a society.

Standard English, in the codified sense, is a development of the eighteenth century (Hickey 2010). There are many reasons why it should have arisen then. First it should be noted that there were precursors to the eighteenth-century
notion of standard. John Hart (d. 1574) in *An orthographie of English* (1569) offered a reformed spelling of English so that ‘the rude countrie Englishman’ can speak the language ‘as the best sort use to speak it’. George Puttenham (d. 1590) in *The arte of English poesie* commented that ‘After a speach is fully fashioned to the common vnderstanding, & accepted by consent of a whole countrey & nation, it is called a language’. He then stated that in his view the prime form of this language was ‘the vsual speach of the Court and that of London and the shires lying about London within lx. myles and not much aboue’. Such comments show that, already by the end of the sixteenth century, the conception was prevalent that English was the language of the entire country of England and that its lead variety derived from the language of the established classes in the capital. About a century later, Christopher Cooper in his *Grammatica linguae anglicaeanae* (1685) stated that he regarded London speech as ‘the best dialect’, the ‘most pure and correct’. These comments are significant as they firmly acknowledge the prestigious status of English in the capital. However, Cooper does not show the later judgmental dismissal of varieties outside of London and appears to have been tolerant of variation, consider his remark that ‘Everyone pronounceth them (words) as himself pleases’.

The crystallisation of ‘standard English’ as a concept in the eighteenth century had at least an intellectual and a social dimension. On an intellectual level one finds authors during the Augustan Age – the early eighteenth century comprising the reigns of Queen Anne (1702-1714) and King George I (1714-1727) – who showed a distinct concern with ‘fixing’ the English language. Linguistically conservative writers, most notably Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), were keen to stem change in English and appealed to language use in the past.[1] The notion of ‘fixing’ English represents a key aspect of the emerging standard, though one which does not correspond to reality, namely immutability. Later in the eighteenth century reconciling recommendations for the supposedly unchanging standard with the recognition that this in itself displayed variation was a difficulty for writers like Thomas Sheridan (1719-1788) and John Walker (1732-1807). Apart from literary authors, there were others for whom the ‘fixing’ of English was a practical concern. The eighteenth century is a period in which a large number of grammars appeared, mostly for practical purposes, i.e. for use in education, often private education. It was also the period in which women wrote many such works (Tieken 2010a) and these grammars do not concern themselves with variation but with imparting knowledge about a unified form of language. The greatest authority among the eighteenth-century grammarians was undoubtedly Robert Lowth (1710-1787) whose *Short introduction to English grammar* (1762), rightfully or wrongfully (Tieken 2010b), became an icon of prescriptivism from the time of its publication.

The social dimension to eighteenth-century notions of standard English concerns the attitudes to language use and the increasing concern of an incipient
middle-class (then termed the ‘middling orders’, Rogers 2002) with the linguistic expression of their social status. This dimension is most clearly visible in the works on pronunciation from this time. As phonology is the aspect of people’s speech which is most readily accessible for social assessment it was a particular concern with writers of the time. The practice of elocution acquired a new meaning, not just the art of successful public speaking and oratory, but the technique of speaking with a non-regional, quasi-standard accent (Smart 1842). A significant market for works on this topic arose in the mid-eighteenth century and authors like Thomas Sheridan were responsible for both stimulating this market, by generating linguistic insecurity, and then supplying the market with works with which to alleviate this very insecurity (Hickey 2010).

The details of these eighteenth-century developments lie beyond the scope of the present chapter but suffice it to say that they are central to the judgmental attitudes towards non-standard speech which arose then and which fed directly into the nineteenth-century Victorian condemnation of regional and local accents. In both fictional and non-fictional literature a change had taken place. While pre-eighteenth century references to and examples of regional and local accents in literature served an illustrative purpose, as of the eighteenth century there was a clear message that these were socially unacceptable to the established classes of English society. The opprobrium attached to non-standard accents was initially felt by those outside England, first and foremost the Irish, but also the Scots, and to a much lesser extent the Americans (Cooley 1992). However, it was quickly extended to the regions of England outside the Home Counties, the north, the south-west, etc.

Indeed the standard became more and more characterised by its non-regional character. The divorcing of preferred public usage from regionality and local identity meant that the emerging standard was an essentially non-regional form of English. Hence favouring this incipient standard in public, educated usage meant that the regional accents were condemned accordingly: ‘a strong provincial accent ... destroys all idea of elegance’ (Roscoe in Mugglestone 2003: 43).

In fact the more the standard became an instrument of social inclusion or exclusion the more it lost its geographical basis in the south-east. By the early nineteenth century the standard was being defined as a form of speech which is characterised by the lack of just this regional basis. Consider the remarks of Benjamin Smart in *Walker Remodelled* (1836) ‘The common standard dialect is that in which all marks of a particular place and residence are lost, and nothing appears to indicate any other habit of intercourse than with the well-bred and well-informed, wherever they be found’. This is not far from what contemporary sociolinguists regard a ‘standard’ to be: ‘an idea in the mind rather than a reality – a set of abstract norms to which actual usage will conform to a greater or lesser extent’ (Milroy and Milroy 1999: 23).
1.1. Standard and non-standard English in linguistic research

The narrative of standard English has many dimensions and one which has direct bearing on the current volume is that modern works on standard English from the eighteenth century onwards implicitly concentrate on developments in non-local forms of English in the south-east (Melchers, this volume). Virtually any work published in Britain with a title along the lines of ‘A history of English’ will have just such an orientation. More inclusive and/or contrastive overviews have titles which explicitly indicate their difference from mainstream works,[2] e.g. Crystal (2004) The Stories of English or Bex and Watts (eds) 1999 Standard English. The Widening Debate, Watts and Trudgill (eds, 2002) Alternative Histories of English.

In the context of the current volume, the label ‘varieties of English’ is meant in a similarly contrastive sense. It refers to forms of English which are historically, geographically and socially outside the domain of mainstream south-east English. In all the chapters the data discussed is written material from the early modern (Cusack ed. 1998) and/or late modern period, approximately from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. The reason for this chronological focus is that this is the period during which both the standard of English in England emerged and during which the overseas varieties of English in both the northern and southern hemispheres arose.

2. Identifying and analysing varieties of English

Within the narrower context of England the question of just what belongs to standard English is central and has hence been addressed by the authors in this volume concerned with varieties within England (Claridge and Kytö, Durkin, Wales, Melchers). Because of the lack of a codified standard before the eighteenth century it would appear more pertinent to talk of careful, formal usage in documents which would be later classified as written in standard English, e.g. scientific or religious texts (Claridge and Kytö). However, many of the features of these formal written texts had disappeared by the eighteenth century at the latest. For instance, Claridge and Kytö show that the oblique third person plural pronoun them was found as a demonstrative in relatively formal usage of the early modern period but later does not occur in textual records of this kind.

Is it then true to maintain that demonstrative them was once standard English but is now no longer so? Perhaps it might be more appropriate to say that certain features of earlier formal usage were not adopted into the codified standard of British English which emerged during the eighteenth century and which was shaped by the strictures of normative grammars which were
published at that time (see above). It may of course be the case that prescriptive usage of the general educated public – and not primarily of the grammarians – led to the demise of structures such as demonstrative *them*.

2.1 Deciding what belongs to the standard

Rational arguments for what elements of early modern usage should have been adopted into the standard are not generally available, in fact the opposite is the case. The arbitrariness of what was to become standard usage can be easily recognised, consider verbs in modern English. The majority of these are regular and show the suffix *-ed* in the past, e.g. *laugh, laughed*. But irregular verbs in English can display up to three distinct forms for the present, preterite and past participle respectively, though many have just two and others only one.

(1) a. *Verb forms in modern standard English*

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<td>past participle</td>
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b. *Verb forms in vernacular varieties of English*

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Today, the non-standardness of the two-form versions of the above verbs results from the syncretism of preterite and past-participle. But as the examples in (1a) show, this is accepted usage for a variety of other verbs. What may well have happened is that *seen* and *done* as preterites became associated with vernacular speech and were quite salient, given their high frequency in English. Hence they came to be excluded from formal usage and did not enter the later standard.

The widespread occurrence of two-form versions of *see* and *done* is attested by their presence in virtually all vernacular varieties of English, both in Britain and overseas, and the same is true of demonstrative *them* mentioned above. This would imply that these features have been present in colloquial forms of English for centuries but were excluded from formal usage in the eighteenth century. However, their existence on a vernacular level would explain why they have continued in non-standard varieties of English throughout the anglophone world.
2.2 What was previously ‘non-standard’

Given that the term ‘standard’ with reference to English is a label which does not appear until the nineteenth century, is it permissible to speak of ‘non-standard’ before this time? This would appear justified because authors writing on matters of language and concerned with condemning usage which they saw as socially unacceptable use labels such as ‘vulgar, ignorant, inaccurate, barbarous, uneducated, shameful, disgraceful’ (see discussion in Hickey 2010). The forms of English which prescriptivists such as Thomas Sheridan and John Walker criticised are what would be termed ‘non-standard’ today. So the concept of ‘non-standard’ usage already existed in the eighteenth century, even though this precise label was not employed.

Usage which was censured in previous centuries was usually connected with choices which speakers could make. Where variants were available more than one possibility existed for a pronunciation, word or syntactic structure. Of the existing variants one was generally regarded as preferred in public, educated usage and the other or others were stigmatised as what would now be called ‘non-standard’. The only real exception to this were cases of archaic language where prescriptive authors, such as John Walker, simply recommended that more modern words be used (Hickey 2010).

2.3 The yardstick for preferred usage

The decisions on what variants of a variable were to be preferred were not always conscious and rarely rational, though authors such as John Walker did attempt, when making recommendations, to apply the notion of ‘analogy’, i.e. regularity and symmetry among similar forms and in paradigms. Well into the eighteenth century a common yardstick of good usage was the language of ‘our best authors’. The works of writers from the Augustan period were regarded as embodying the English language in an elevated form, e.g. Jonathan Swift’s writings which were much admired by Robert Lowth.

The implicit notion of standard in the early eighteenth century involved the idea of a ‘national’ variety of English. This idea of ‘national’ appears already in the early eighteenth century: Richard Johnson talked of his *Grammatical Commentaries* (1706) as ‘being an Apparatus to a new National Grammar’. What is being referred to here is a work which would unify usage throughout the regions of Britain and Ireland. This notion was taken up repeatedly by authors in the eighteenth century, especially those concerned with educational matters, see Thomas Sheridan’s *British Education* (1756).

Within England certain types of record did not participate in the increasingly depersonalised and purely content-oriented nature of public texts. Private correspondence remained rooted in familiar usage so that letters from
regional speakers show an abundance of non-standard features (see the discussion in Claridge and Kytö, this volume). Testimonies such as those found in the depositions of The Old Bailey Corpus (Huber 2009) illustrate regional speech. Furthermore, in the constructed speech of literary drama there are many attestations of regional features (Kytö, Culpeper and Walker 2006).

3. Investigating ‘non-standard’ texts

While the classification as ‘standard’ or ‘non-standard’ is an issue for early modern and late modern texts in England there is a sense in which all texts produced outside England within this time span are, by their very geographical provenance, ‘non-standard’. The only exception to this would appear to be high literary works and those intended explicitly for public consumption in England. This holds for writers as different in their background and authorial personalities as Jonathan Swift and Thomas Sheridan. Swift’s literary compositions and his political commentaries are written in the formal, public style of his time, i.e. in the ‘standard’ English of the early eighteenth century: there are no indications of his Irish background in his written language. The same is true of Sheridan’s prescriptive work on the English language of his time (mid to late eighteenth century). However, both authors were aware of non-standard English in their Irish environments and wrote brief pieces portraying this. Swift composed two short items – *A dialogue in Hyberian style between A and B* and *Irish eloquence* (both probably from the 1730s, see Bliss 1977) – poking fun at the English of planters which showed transfer features from Irish. Sheridan, in his student days, composed a single play – *Captain O’Blunder or The Brave Irishman* (1740/1754) – in which the protagonist’s Irish English contrasts strongly with that of English characters whose language is basically mid eighteenth-century standard English (see further discussion in the chapter on Irish English linguistic stereotypes, this volume).

For the development of standard English the language of Swift’s and Sheridan’s main works have a significance of their own, but it is the minor works of these and many other authors which offer a glimpse of what non-standard English – here vernacular Irish English – may have been like during their lives. The linguistic assessment of such texts is not an easy matter (Schneider 2002: 70-73): to satisfactorily examine ‘non-standard’ language of previous centuries it is necessary to have access to texts in which such language is encoded as reliably as possible. However, it is more often than not the case that ‘non-standard’ texts are typical examples of ‘bad data’ (Nevalainen 1999; Kytö, Culpeper and Walker 2003), data which was never intended to be a source of the language it contains and which is often fragmentary and incomplete. But there are research paths which have produced promising results in this area. In recent years increasing attention has been paid to written
representations of spoken language (Bliss 1979), with corpus collections being made available, e.g. The Old Bailey Corpus mentioned above and The Corpus of English Dialogues (Kytö, Culpeper and Walker 2006).

The heterogeneous and incomplete nature of texts attesting the historical development of non-standard varieties makes it necessary to classify these and discuss their relative value for linguistic analysis in advance of any examination of actual texts.

### 3.1 Fidelity of representation

The central question would appear to revolve around the fidelity of dialect representation. Whatever texts there are for a given variety can only be as reliable for analysis as they are faithful renderings of this variety at the time at which the texts were composed. This of course assumes that it is possible to determine separately what is a ‘faithful rendering’ and what is not. However, there are means of ascertaining this with relative certainty. Cross-textual comparison and double-checking with modern forms of the variety under consideration helps to build up a clearer picture of what shape a variety must have had at a given time. Comparison with present-day varieties can be misleading, however, because when examining historical texts one may be looking at features no longer present in any contemporary variety.

### 3.2 Classification criteria for non-standard texts

In this volume it is the nature of the texts which is the central issue for linguistic analysis. Before discussing actual texts it would appear appropriate to give a general classification of text types and textual parameters which should be considered when analysing historical material for varieties of English.

1) **Vernacularity**

When looking at non-standard writing the degree of vernacularity will tend to be high. The lower this is the more formal the register and hence the more standard the language will be. This parameter, like the others listed here, is scalar rather than binary in nature, i.e. it is a question of ‘more’ or ‘less’. A high level of vernacularity implies a high incidence of non-standard features which are indicated by unexpected spelling and grammar. When this seems to represent features known from later attestations of a variety it can be useful in dating the relative age of a feature.
2) **Text-internal scope**

For dramas which consist entirely of non-standard speech the scope of such language within a text is complete. However, in narrative prose, the scope is usually partial, with only some direct non-standard speech. The language of the omniscient narrator in such instances is always close to the standard. However, an author may unconsciously show low-salience features which are typical of a variety because they are part of his own vernacular.

If the text-internal scope is partial then there may be a deliberate contrast between the standard and the non-standard stretches of text. This type of highlighting is quite common in satirical literature and regional comedy such as Dion Boucicault’s mid-nineteenth century Irish dramas.

2) **Author of text(s)**

An author can be a member of the speech community whose language is contained in a text and hence an insider, e.g. a northern English writer using northern dialect. There may be intermediate cases, e.g. an author born and partially reared in Ireland but active in England as an adult. Laurence Sterne, the author of the burlesque novel *Tristram Shandy*, is an example of such a writer. The status as complete outsider nearly always goes together with a satirical approach (Lawrence 1912), e.g. the Englishman Ben Jonson who wrote *The Irish Masque at Court* in which he satirises Irish speech and manners.

3) **Language of text(s)**

This language can be intrinsic or extrinsic to the author. Again this is a scalar parameter: the degree of distance from an author can be great as in those cases where someone is reporting on speech from a different country, e.g. a traveller from Britain in Canada or Australia in the nineteenth century. The distance is slight where the author is describing/representing the speech of those in his/her own country or geographical region.

Where the language being represented is extrinsic to the author it may well be unreliable. Very often authors are content with vacuous re-spellings, e.g. minnit for minute (Durkin, this volume) or with superficial ‘signals of difference’ which do not necessarily correspond to phonetic reality in the variety being represented or at least does not clearly represent this. For instance, there is almost a tradition of writing the word ‘Irish’ as Oirish in English ‘eye dialect’ (Bowdgre 1971, Macaulay 1991). It is not certain what was intended by authors, such as Rudyard Kipling, who used this spelling. Was this supposed to represent [ɔiɾiʃ] or [ɔiɾiʃ] or [oɾiʃ]?

This example shows that representational practices can arise and become traditions. Another instance would be the use of v-, z-, zh- to indicate initial
fricative voicing in south-western English. This is a stock feature in satirical representations of south-westerners and does not provide any new insight into the nature of their English.

4) Approach to language

Non-standard writings can be classified into two broad types regarding their approach to language. If this is entirely representational then one is dealing largely with 'dialect literature' (Melchers, this volume) which is generally written for speakers of the dialect in question or at least for those who have first-hand knowledge of it. In this sense it is reader-specific.

There may, of course, be instances of ‘naive’ writers who were either not fully acquainted with standard English orthography of their time or, as in the case of the poet John Clare, resisted the pressure to use this, preferring spellings of his own. How accurate these were can only be determined by comparative work such as that done by Durkin (this volume) in his investigation of Clare’s spellings. For this Durkin had recourse to both the Oxford English Dictionary (version 3, being currently compiled) and the Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO) resource, both of which provide a good means of comparing Clare’s practice with more general spelling conventions of the time.

If the language an author uses is construed then one is usually dealing with ‘literary dialect’ (Blake 1981, Ives 1971). Construed language does not generally have complete text-internal scope (see 2 above) but is incidental to the standard language of the entire work in which it occurs. It furthermore gains its dialect profile from the implicit contrast with the standard language of the rest of the work in question. The speech of dialect figures in novels, such as those by George Eliot or Charles Dickens, are instances of this construed language. The audience for such works is also much broader and more diffuse.

5) Approach to content

Construed non-standard language in otherwise standard works is generally illustrative and not infrequently satirical. This is certainly the case if the construed language is typical for a region far from that of the author, e.g. Ireland or Scotland in the case of English writers (Myers ed. 1983). The closer the identification of an author with a region the less his/her representations of its speech are likely to be satirical, e.g. Thomas Hardy who uses south/south-western dialect extensively in his novels, but not in a satirical sense.

6) Chronological perspective

There may well be a distance between the time at which some piece is composed and that which it attempts to represent. This is also a scalar category.
The degree of ‘retrospectiveness’ can vary from author to author. For instance, in his use of supposedly peasant speech from the west of Ireland in his plays John Millington Synge was recalling his encounters with natives of the west of Ireland when composing his plays and portraying what he claimed was their speech. This is a relatively short time span. A larger one would be where an author recollects the language of the region where he/she grew up, especially when this is not where he/she lives anymore. For instance, the Irish playwright Dion Boucicault (1820-1890) grew up in Ireland but as a young man went to England to study and later moved to America and then back to England again. Nonetheless, he successfully used vernacular Irish English in his plays written when he was outside Ireland.

A much longer period of time can be seen where an author writes a historical novel or play. The distance to his/her present can easily be a few centuries if not much more. In such instances, authors use contemporary local dialect if it is needed rather than trying to re-create dialect from the period being portrayed. This can be seen in Shakespeare’s King Lear which takes place sometime in early Britain. For the portrayal of Edgar, Shakespeare avails of initial fricative voicing and contractions showing the dialectal form *ich* [ɪt] ‘I’, features of south/south-western English at Shakespeare’s time, but not obviously at the time which forms the framework for the play: *Chill* [tʃɪl = əi ʍɪ] *not let go, zir, [z = s] without vurther [v = f] ‘cagion.*

3.3 Classification in Schneider (2002)

The above criteria are similar though not identical to those found in literature on non-standard language. Best-known of recent studies in this field is probably Schneider (2002). It is possible to classify the types of texts used in the chapters of this volume using the parameters laid out in Schneider (2002). Thus one can claim that none of the texts are transcripts (Schneider’s category 1: ‘recorded’). Some may be ‘recalled’ (category 2), such as diaries (Siebers, this volume) or travelogues (Dollinger, this volume). Most of these text types were written by outsiders, but some diaries may be by insiders. Schneider’s category 4: ‘observed’ would apply to glossaries or word lists while all the literary documents examined here are in category 5: ‘invented’.

4. Conclusion

The criteria laid out here, and those put forward by other scholars (e.g. Gordon 1998, Maynor 1988, Mesthrie 2005, Preston 1985, Sullivan 1980), provide a basis for proceeding with the linguistic analysis of non-standard texts from
previous centuries. The textual record varies from case to case and the dialect evidence is not spread evenly across different literary genres (Melchers, this volume). Regional literature with dialect characters arose in the early nineteenth century with novels by Maria Edgeworth and Walter Scott. Before that the material (Bartley 1954, Duggan 1969 [1937]) is satirical and linguistically two-dimensional, though there are exceptional texts which provide important insights into the early shape of varieties. Here it is essential to stress the need for intertextual comparison. For instance, northern English is attested in witness depositions, drama and fiction. The specifically northern vocabulary found there is also documented in the glossarial work of John Ray (1674), confirming the regional usage encoded in texts of these types (see Claridge and Kytö).

If the criteria discussed above are applied rigorously and if as many different text types as are available are cross-checked for consistency of representation then the likelihood of reaching firm conclusions increases. Taken together the criteria outlined here provide a methodology for assessing textual records of very different forms of non-standard English and for offering a linguistically reliable analysis of their language.

References


Talbot Press.
Lawrence, W. J. 1912. ‘Irish types in old-time English drama’, *Anglia* 35: 347-56.


Sheridan, Thomas 1754 [1740]. *Captain O’Blunder or The Brave Irishman*.


[Footnotes]

~1 See Swift *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Language* (1712).

~2 Works explicitly critical of the exclusive nature of standard British English can also be found, above all the monograph by Milroy and Milroy (1999).
~3 The first reference to ‘Southern or standard English’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary* dates from 1836.

~4 ‘Retrospective’ would correspond to ‘recalled’ in Schneider’s classification (Schneider 2002: 75). However, in his discussion of this category he refers to non-fictional texts.

[End footnotes]