

Review of Amador Moreno, Carolina P. 2019. *Orality in Written Texts: Using Historical Corpora to Investigate Irish English (1700–1900)*. London: Routledge. ISBN: 978-1-138-80234-6. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315754321>

Raymond Hickey
University of Duisburg and Essen / Germany

The use of alternative data sources in historical linguistics has become a common procedure in recent years, moving away from literary texts as documentation for language variation and change. The current book is an example of this approach, in this case availing of personal letters for insights into language use in previous centuries, specifically the use of English on the island of Ireland in its different forms, in the north and south of the country. In this respect it is in the company of such volumes as Fitzmaurice (2004), Dossena and Del Lungo Camiciotti (2012), Auer *et al.* (2015), Hickey (2019) on letters and in the wider context of ego-documents (van der Wal and Rutten 2013).

This monograph consists of 203 pages of primary text, divided into seven sections: the first is an introduction (1–35) and the last some concluding remarks (200–203). In between there are five chapters. The first deals with the historical contexts of letters, the second with the nature of orality in such private correspondence while the other three chapters are dedicated to the linguistic analysis of discourse-pragmatic variation, of deixis and of embedded questions in the letters.

The corpus of correspondence, which forms the data base for the author's investigation, is the *Corpus of Irish English Correspondence* (CORIECOR) which she has been compiling with her Irish colleague Kevin McCafferty from the University of Bergen over the past decade (see positioning article, McCafferty and Amador-Moreno 2012).



The introduction provides the context for the book as a whole, reporting on and discussing literature on historical sociolinguistics and the use of ‘bad data’ (fragmentary but relevant data for a topic). The author also provides background information on the study of Irish English and on historical corpora and their applicability when engaging in variationist studies. There is also detailed information on her own corpus and a discussion of the challenges it presents for linguistic analysis.

Chapter two goes into more detail concerning the historical context of letters, who the writers were and who the recipients were and what the motivation for emigration was in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland. In addition, the question of literacy is broached. This is of central concern in the Irish context as the greatest level of literacy was to be found among northern Protestants. Hence this group tends to be over-represented in the CORIECOR corpus and is a factor which must be borne in mind if any generalisations are to be made from the emigrant correspondence to diachronic Irish English in the two centuries covered by the CORIECOR corpus.

The linguistic core of the present book begins with Chapter 3 “The orality of private correspondence. Using emigrant letters for linguistic analysis.” The discussion here is concerned with how reliable written data is for reconstructing what the author calls ‘the voices of the writers’. In particular, the question arises whether all instances of irregular orthography represented an underlying phonetic reality for the letter writer. The use of *the* for *they* is just once instance, discussed by the author. Furthermore, there is the issue of formulaic language. The tendency for this to occur is greatest in letter openings and closings and so does not impinge on the body of a letter, but must be borne in mind, nonetheless.

Chapter 4 launches straight into an analysis of discourse pragmatic markers, first discussing Seamus Heaney’s use of *so* at the beginning of his translation of *Beowulf* but quickly moving to the CORIECOR data where the author investigates how *so* is employed by letter writers. Other markers are treated in further sections of the chapter, e.g. *anyhow/anyway*, *like*, *sure*, the latter two being particularly relevant to the pragmatics of many varieties of English today, not just Irish English. The documentation of findings is meticulous in this chapter with detailed statistics of occurrences in the CORIECOR corpus.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to a detailed consideration of deixis in the letter corpus. This term is understood broadly by the author with forms which have particular usages

in Irish English being given special attention, e.g. *there*. The chapter also considers the occurrences of personal pronouns, both in the letter corpus and in the author's own Irish-Argentine sub-corpus which provided interesting corroborations of findings elsewhere.

Chapter 6 is the third and last of the data investigation chapters and is dedicated to examining the occurrence of embedded inversion in the letters considered. By 'embedded inversion' is meant the use of question word order in verbal complements, e.g. *We wondered was he coming home*. The author considers the occurrence of this word order across many varieties of English and then looks at the evidence presented by her correspondence corpus which shows a definite preference for embedded inversion. She is aware of the fact that such inversion is the rule in the Irish language and many of the correspondents would have been shifters from Irish to English or have spoken a contact variety of the latter deriving from recent language shift. The syntactic and lexical contexts in which this embedded inversion is found are scrutinised in considerable detail and comparisons with other corpora are made. The author also considers whether there are 'privileged points of entry' for non-standard features to become established in a variety, a notion close to the much discussed phenomenon of salience in language which can further the spread of features if low and hinder this when high.

In summary, one can say that this book provides a timely addition to the burgeoning field of private letter analysis for linguistic purposes. It shows clearly what insights into non-standard grammatical and pragmatic features can be gleaned from a close examination of emigrant correspondence. This can serve many purposes including that of confirming the existence of features in vernacular, quasi-oral language of the past, features which are not necessarily evident in other text types.

However, a reader coming to this book without any prior knowledge of Irish English might be forgiven for thinking that the features discussed are the only ones, or at least the most prominent in this correspondence and, by implication, in Irish English. But even the briefest contact with Irish English shows that a large number of non-standard features are to be found in verbal syntax – non-standard verbal concord, tense usage and, above all, aspectual distinctions not found in more standard forms of English (see the detailed treatment in Hickey 2007). Incidentally, these features are also reflected in the language of the CORIECOR corpus. So it would have been of great

benefit if the author had explained at the outset why she chose the particular traits which she dedicated chapters to in her book. True, she has used material from her previous publications (and acknowledges this), but in a book-length study there is room for more discussion or, at the very least, a clear indication of features which exist in the correspondence but which the author decided not to discuss, for whatever reason.

Finally one can say that this book reads well and that the author displays a wide knowledge of the topic and its framework, discussing much relevant literature and many different but comparable investigations to hers. It is well type-set and indexed and should provide both students and scholars researching varieties of English with an important source of information on historical Irish English correspondence.

References

- Auer, Anita, Daniel Schreier, Richard J. Watts eds. 2015. *Letter Writing and Language Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dossena, Marina and Gabriella Del Lungo Camiciotti eds. 2012. *Letter Writing in Late Modern Europe*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Fitzmaurice, Susan 2004. *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English. A Pragmatic Approach*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Hickey, Raymond 2007. *Irish English. History and Present-day Forms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hickey, Raymond ed. 2019. *Keeping in Touch. Familiar Letters Across the English-Speaking World*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- McCafferty, Kevin and Carolina P. Amador-Moreno 2012. A Corpus of Irish English Correspondence (CORIECOR): A tool for studying the history and evolution of Irish English. In Bettina Migge and Máire Ní Chiosáin eds. *New Perspectives on Irish English*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 265–288.
- Van der Wal, Marijke J. and Gijsbert Rutten 2013. *Touching the Past: Studies in the Historical Sociolinguistics of Ego-Documents*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Reviewed by

Raymond Hickey

Universitätsstr.12

D-451141 Essen

Germany

e-mail: raymond.hickey@uni-due.de