

Review of Smitterberg, Erik. 2021. *Syntactic Change in Late Modern English: Studies on Colloquialization and Densification*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN: 978-1-108-56498-4. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108564984>

Bettelou Los

University of Edinburgh / United Kingdom

The Late Modern English period (LModE, c.1700–c.1900) has long been claimed to offer little scope to the study of historical syntax other than shifts in the frequencies of use of syntactic constructions.

Since relatively few categorical losses or innovations have occurred in the last two centuries, syntactic change has more often been statistical in nature, with a given construction occurring throughout the period and either becoming more or less common generally or in particular registers. The overall, rather elusive effect can seem more a matter of stylistic than syntactic change (Denison 1998: 93).

Smitterberg claims that this alleged lack of innovation and change is at odds with what we know of societal changes taking place in this period: its technological and sociocultural transformations must have produced many more weak network ties (in the sense of Milroy and Milroy 1985: 2–4) than earlier societies, and, if weak ties are assumed to facilitate language change, the picture of linguistic stability claimed for LModE in the literature cannot be correct. The solution to this ‘stability paradox’ is to move away from a conception of English as a unified whole as the object of the investigation and instead focus on the idiolect as the locus of language change. The texts that make up the historical corpora we rely on for our data are well-known for not being representative of the full range of English speakers, skewed as they are towards the “male, literate, and/or high-status speakers” (p. 4), but it is nevertheless possible to investigate idiolects by proxy if we study the evolution of particular genres.

After an introductory chapter discussing the aims and scope of the study, the second chapter, “Sociocultural and linguistic change in Late Modern English,” tackles the two elements of the stability paradox: the increase in weak network ties (resulting from the shift from a mainly rural to a mainly urban society, the fact that social mobility was on the rise, and new modes of travel and communication) and our knowledge to date of linguistic change taking place in this period in lexis, pronunciation, but particularly syntax. This chapter also lays some of the groundwork for changes within genres, in particular earlier work on the development of a distinctive style for academic English with increasing phrasal complexity (‘densification’) which will be the topic of Chapters 7 and 8. Within this register, there is further diversification in the course of LModE, with the development of distinct stylistic conventions for individual disciplines, like medicine and history. The chapter also reports on earlier investigations into oral versus literate styles, and the appearance of speech-based features in the latter (a phenomenon known as ‘colloquialization’) on which Chapters 5 and 6 will build further. The third chapter, “Aspects of language change,” homes in on the notion of idiolects, and idiolectal change, and the limits of what we can retrieve about past idiolects. Much of the chapter is taken up by a survey of the various positions taken in the literature about the locus of change, and what counts as change —innovation and propagation, or only propagation, that is, we assume that a change has taken place only if it starts to spread. Chapter 4 offers a detailed description of the methodology behind the use of historical text corpora; this chapter does not necessarily offer a new perspective to the readers, rather it validates much what users of such corpora know intuitively, as it makes explicit the justifications for using these datasets. There is often a trade-off between the two important requirements that make historical text corpora suitable tools for studying linguistic change: the requirement that they are representative (i.e. an accurate reflection of the language produced by speakers at the time) and the requirement that the sample for each subperiod is comparable (such that any differences between the output of different historical stages reflect change between these periods rather than epiphenomena due to skewed sampling). There is no one way to operationalize representativeness so that the corpus is similar to the total output of a communal variety. Biber (1993) argues that this could best be achieved by a corpus that mainly consists of conversation, while Leech (2007: 80) claims that texts which have the largest reach in terms of readership should have a prominent place. The problem is, of course, as noted by Váradi (2001: 80), that we do not have enough knowledge of our target population to achieve “fully representative sampling” —if we

did, we would not need a representative sample in the first place! Another topic that is explicitly addressed in this chapter is the issue of what, in scenarios of linguistic competition, counts as variants; this concept, originally used for sociolinguistic investigations into phonological change, is much trickier to implement at other levels of linguistic description, and all the more so in the case of historical work, where investigators cannot rely on introspection to arrive at an adequate inventory of potential variants. A text-linguistic approach with normalized frequencies, treating texts or subcorpora rather than individual tokens as an observation may be a safer choice. The chapter ends with a description of the corpora used for this study: the *Corpus of Nineteenth-Century English* (CONCE; Kytö *et al.* 2006) and the *Corpus of Nineteenth-Century Newspaper English* (CNNE),<sup>1</sup> totaling around 1.3 million words. CONCE contains samples from seven genres (parliamentary) debates, drama, fiction, history, (private) letters, science, and trials; for material drawn from CNNE, Smitterberg focused on two time-spans: 1830–1850 and 1875–1895, on the rationale that it is from 1830 that newspapers start to target a wider range of readers than their traditional educated, high-status readership, while the second period falls within the ‘golden age’ of newspapers, after the introduction of the telegraph and the telephone revolutionized news reporting. The next four chapters present the study’s findings with respect to two ongoing changes: colloquialization (*not*-contraction in Chapter 5 and co-ordination by *and* in Chapter 6) and densification (nouns as premodifiers in NPs in Chapter 7 and participle clauses as postmodifiers in NPs in Chapter 8). All these investigations are models of their kind: extensive data collections, carefully analyzed and documented in terms of what factors are considered and why, and what to take away from the results.

Chapters 5 and 6 argue that there is a trend towards colloquialization on the basis of increasing rates of *not*-contraction and of phrasal versus clausal coordination (here called super-phrasal coordination, as many of the non-phrasal conjoins do not represent complete clauses). The coordination findings are more complex in that there are clear genre differences, and within the letters genre, gender differences: in men’s letters, super-phrasal coordination increases, in line with other colloquialization markers, but in women’s letters, this particular feature shows a decrease. Smitterberg points to a solution suggested in Culpeper and Kytö (2010: 174) —women’s letters retain an older method of text-structuring that does not follow printing conventions for sentence division and

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://varieng.helsinki.fi/CoRD/corpora/CNNE/>

punctuation, and uses dashes and super-phrasal *and* instead. Their decrease in super-phrasal *and* over time is due to an increased sense that the sentence rather than the clause should be the basic syntactic unit.

Chapter 7 argues that there is a trend on the basis of increased frequencies of nouns premodifying other nouns, so that we get *telegraph wires* as an alternative to descriptions like *wires that transmit telegraph messages*; *infant son* as an alternative to *our son, who was an infant*; *the police version* as an alternative to *the police's version*; and *ocean life* as an alternative to *oceanic life* or *life in the ocean* (pp. 187–188, 192–193). The varied nature of the longer descriptions —adjectival premodifiers, genitive determiners, and phrasal or clausal postmodifiers— makes tracking the frequencies of the variants virtually impossible, so that a text-linguistic analysis was conducted instead. The results offer a different perspective from previous investigations in that this type of densification is not confined to news and science writing but evident in other genres as well, like drama, fiction and letters, where space is not at a premium. The change, then, is not confined to those genres where it offers a practical advantage, but also incorporates a general shift towards more nouns in the premodifier slot, affecting speech-related writing, and proceeding along the kind of trajectory we might expect for change from below, with women leading the change. This chapter also contains an investigation into what semantic relations can be distinguished between the premodifying noun and the noun head (19 in all; pp. 206–207) and how their frequencies shift over time; unsurprisingly, different genres favor specific types of semantic relations (p. 214). A second investigation focuses on semantic relations with proper names as premodifying nouns.

Chapter 8 focuses on the relative frequencies of participle clauses that function as postmodifiers of nouns. Present-participle clauses often appear to be condensed versions of active relative clauses (*the air passing the windways* vs. *the air that was passing the windways*) while past-participle clauses appear to be condensed versions of passive relative clauses (*a vessel specially built for the purpose* vs. *a vessel that was/has been specially built for the purpose*) (p. 222), so that the frequencies of all four constructions are examined to see whether here, too, we see a trend towards densification. As it is difficult to exclude participle or relative constructions that are not interchangeable from the data, the chapter analyzes participle clauses both from both a variationist and a text-linguistic perspective. The picture that emerges is much more nuanced and much less straightforward than one might expect, and certainly not easily framed in terms of

competing variants. There is support for the hypothesis in that some genres exhibit densification, with restrictive past-participle clauses becoming more frequent than passive restrictive relative clauses in letters, but only because the latter appear to be increasingly avoided. The frequency of restrictive past-participle clauses increases in news (CNNE), by 26 per cent, while that of restrictive present-participle clauses increases by 72 per cent in science —two genres already shown to favor densification in previous research, so that these increases can be argued to be part of the same process, even if they are not matched by a corresponding decrease in the relatives. History and debates, meanwhile, exhibit the opposite trend, of a decrease in past-participle clauses —for debates, this may be due to a shift from indirect to direct speech; for history, it could be the result of its more narrative focus (p. 246), the fact that publications in this discipline tended to be of book-length, and that its readership was less specialized (p. 244). In fiction, non-restrictive present-participle clauses show an increase of 18 per cent. Any scenarios in terms of competing variants are thwarted by the fact that many non-restrictive present-participle clauses are ambiguous between an adnominal and an adverbial reading, and are only equivalent to relative clauses in the former; and also by the phenomenon that prepositional and adjectival phrases postmodifying nouns allow expansion to relative clauses in many cases, too, so that there is, in theory, a larger variant field than just the four constructions examined in this chapter. This probably means that the text-linguistic approach is the safest option here.

The data chapters, then, confirm earlier verdicts of syntactic change in the modern period, like Denison's quoted at the beginning of this review, as a matter of changing frequencies at the level of style rather than true syntactic innovation. The concluding discussion of Chapter 9 gropes towards a solution to the 'stability paradox', which is necessarily speculative. There is stability at the level of the communal language but not at the level of the idiolect, although the changes that emerge at the latter level are subtle rather than drastic. If we see the dissemination of innovations by means of social networks as a social phenomenon of linguistic accommodation, we would not expect truly novel structures to be propagated through that route; novel structures as the product of a single individual that have not diffused to other speakers yet would not be propagated by linguistic accommodation as there are no speakers to accommodate to. The author acknowledges that this line of reasoning —that there is no correlation between social networks and this type of change— leaves unexplained why the rate of truly innovative

change in LModE has slowed down compared to earlier periods. The emergence and dissemination of a standard, and the much higher literacy levels, forcing speakers to acquire an increasingly wide range of usage, may have acted as brakes on innovation.

To conclude, this monograph makes an excellent contribution to the field, is extremely well-written, and a model of research. There are many methodological ‘caveats’ to present any findings in the right perspective: Figure 2.1, charting lexical innovation, suggests a steep rise in the nineteenth century, but Smitherberg reminds us that the coverage of the *Oxford English Dictionary* is known to be poor for the eighteenth and extensive for the nineteenth centuries (p. 25). At all times, there is an awareness of the type of texts which were used to compile his two corpora, and how they might impact the results (e.g. the discussion of the impossibility of separating out opinion pieces from more neutral news articles in CCNE on pp. 122–123, the discussion of editorial interference influencing rates of *not*-contraction on p. 130, or the impact of specific topics —*meat juice*, *coal cart*— on the frequencies of premodifying nouns in trials, on pp. 199–201). The level of detail provided about the specific social, legal and technological conditions that fostered the growth of newspapers and their readerships adds a great deal of interesting information about how various factors conspired to lead to the emergence of newspaper English as a distinct genre, such as the higher levels of literacy in the general population, the relaxation of libel laws, and the abolition of stamp duty which not only lowered newspaper prices but also facilitated the introduction of the rotary press with its continuous rolls of papers, now that there was no longer a requirement for every single sheet to be stamped (pp. 115–118). Newspaper profits became increasingly dependent on advertisement revenue, requiring market research into readerships, which in turn led to a diversification into different styles for different newspapers, responding to the level of education of the readership they were aiming at.

There were only two occasions where I felt more detail could have been provided. The fact that significance testing was given a section of its own in Chapter 4, and the fact that that section offered a critique of traditional significance testing for historical data (as the null hypothesis assumes randomness by default, whereas language is never random), led me to expect more of a discussion of the alternatives to traditional significance testing, such as Bayesian methods, but this was not forthcoming. When logistic regression models are used in the data chapters, the book is surprisingly coy about details —the term ‘glm’ is launched on p. 148 without any explanation of what it stands for (generalized linear

model), or that it is part of an *R* package. The second occasion was the discussion of densification by means of premodifying nouns in Chapter 7; I missed references to Halliday's work about the language of science, where a text first introduces and discusses a (scientific) phenomenon, and then uses increasing compression to refer back to the phenomenon once it has been established, so that the compound the writer ultimately ends up with is a one-off formation specifically constructed for a very local purpose, that is, as a referring expression (Halliday 2001: 185; see also Halliday 2004); the same phenomenon has been noted as a morphological innovation by Kastovsky (2006: 207). A hint of this important function occurs on p. 211, where the example *the land question* seems to me exactly this type of one-off. The author discusses the greater effort required by the readership in terms of being able to identify such combinations, but does not make the connection to it serving as a referring expression in the discourse. In contrast, Chapter 8 has much more of an eye for the discourse functions of, for example, non-restrictive past-participle clauses in narratives, in terms of marking backgrounding in fiction.

#### REFERENCES

- Biber, Douglas. 1993. Representativeness in corpus design. *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 8/4: 243–257.
- Culpeper, Jonathan and Merja Kytö. 2010. *Early Modern English Dialogues: Spoken Interaction as Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Denison, David. 1998. Syntax. In Suzanne Romaine ed. *The Cambridge History of the English Language, Vol. 4: 1776–1997*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 92–329.
- Halliday, M.A.K. 2001. Literacy and linguistics: Relationships between spoken and written language. In Anne Burns and Caroline Coffin eds. *Analyzing English in a Global Context: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, 181–193.
- Halliday, M. A. K. 2004. *The Language of Science*. In Jonathan J. Webster ed. *Collected Works of M.A.K. Halliday: v. 5*. London: Continuum.
- Kastovsky. 2006. Vocabulary. In David Denison and Richard M. Hogg eds. *A History of the English Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 199–270.
- Kytö, Merja, Mats Rydén and Erik Smitterberg. 2006. Introduction: Exploring nineteenth-century English – Past and present perspectives. In Merja Kytö, Mats Rydén and Erik Smitterberg eds. *Nineteenth-Century English: Stability and Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1–16.
- Leech, Geoffrey. 2007. New resources, or just better old ones? The holy grail of representativeness. In Marianne Hundt, Nadja Nesselhauf and Carolin Biewer eds. *Corpus Linguistics and the Web*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 133–149.
- Milroy, James and Lesley Milroy. 1985. Linguistic change, social network and speaker innovation. *Journal of Linguistics* 21/2: 339–384.

Váradi, Tamás. 2001. The linguistic relevance of corpus linguistics. In Paul Rayson, Andrew Wilson, Tony McEnery, Andrew Hardie and Shereen Khoja eds. *Proceedings of the Corpus Linguistics 2001 Conference, Lancaster University (UK), 29 March–2 April 2001*. Special issue of *UCREL Technical Papers* 13: 587–93.

*Reviewed by*

Bettelou Los

School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences

3 Charles Street, EH9 9AD

Edinburgh

United Kingdom

e-mail: [b.los@ed.ac.uk](mailto:b.los@ed.ac.uk)