CHAPTER 1

Approaching change in 18th-century English

Terttu Nevalainen

1.1 Preamble

Unravelling the diffusion of language change lies at the heart of historical linguistics. This challenge has traditionally been pitched at a highly abstract level in social terms:

> To simplify our analysis, we shall assume that the language in process of evolution is that of a strictly monoglot community, perfectly homogeneous in the sense that observable differences represent successive stages of the same usage and not concurrent usages. (Martinet 1964: 164)

By contrast, sociolinguists, who approach language from the perspective of the community, know that change does not take place in social isolation: in reality there are always "concurrent usages". Change implies choice. Changes crucially depend on the choices that language users make in adopting or rejecting a particular new form, function or construction in the first place. The outcome of these choices can be seen in language records of different kinds, in both speech and writing, but we cannot know how homogeneous these records are in social terms without taking into account their producers and production circumstances.

Ideally, both linguistic and social factors would therefore need to be accounted for in studies of the diffusion of language change. However, as is well known, the circumstances are rarely ideal for real-time studies of change, and limited access to data lies partly behind purely linguistic studies of long-term processes of linguistic change. But this does not always mean that long-term changes cannot be observed at a fairly close distance in social terms as well. That is our aim in this volume, where we analyse a variety of linguistic changes in their social contexts in the 18th century.

In past work, overviews of 18th-century English have been provided, for example, by Görlach (2001), Beal (2004) and Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2009). *The Cambridge History of the English Language* splits the century into two, based on external criteria, discussing the language of the period in volumes 3 (1446–1776) and 4 (1776–1997), edited by Roger Lass (1999) and Suzanne Romaine (1998), respectively. There are also collective volumes that approach 18th-century usage

DOI 10.1075/ahs.8.01nev

from various sociolinguistic perspectives, including those of normative grammar (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2008), speakers' social roles (Pahta et al. 2010), and language ideology and change (Hickey 2010).[1]

As appears from this summary account, the ground covered by these volumes varies greatly. For example, Beal's undergraduate textbook (2004) provides an overview of English in its social and regional contexts between 1660 and 1945, with an emphasis on phonological developments. By contrast, the volume edited by Hickey (2010) presents individual research articles that focus on topics such as 18th-century prescriptivism, standardization, politeness, and dialect grammar.

Our book offers yet another perspective on 18th century English by presenting original research based on the same corpus of texts and a shared variationist sociolinguistic framework. One of its aims is to provide empirical and thematic continuity for the processes of change observed in the previous centuries (Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2003). However, reflecting the changing social circumstances, the potential role played by influences such as prescriptivism is also considered in discussions of the empirical findings.

As far as long-term, real-time language changes are concerned, a number of studies analyse 18th-century developments as part of grammatical change from Old or Middle English onwards (e.g., downtoning adverbs, Nevalainen & Rissanen 2002; existential constructions, Martínez-Insua & Pérez-Guerra 2006; patterns of complementation, De Smet 2013; double object constructions, Yáñez-Bouza & Denison 2015, to mention only a few). Although studies on long-term language change may share a quantitative orientation, they are often informed by different grammatical approaches and have different aims.

As linguistic features and constructions vary in their frequency of occurrence, long-term diachronic studies need to take recourse to a variety of complementary but often discontinuous data sources, as is the case with the studies of individual grammatical changes listed above. Studies focusing on Late Modern English can benefit from large multi-genre and single-genre corpora, which enable the study of low-frequency elements in matching data sources. Among such multi-genre corpora, *The Corpus of Late Modern English Texts* (CLMET) includes some 10 million words of 18th-century English distributed over five major genres (Diller, De Smet & Tyrkkö 2011). With its subregisters, *The Old Bailey Corpus* provides some 25 million words from the 1730s to 1800 (Huber 2007; Claridge & Kytö 2014: 34).

1. Running since 2001, the Late Modern English Conference series has produced several thematic volumes of studies on 18th- and 19th-century English (see, e.g., Dossena 2014 and Dossena et al. 2014, and the references therein). This period has been extensively studied for other European languages as well, for example, from the sociolinguistic perspective of *ego*-documents in Elspaß et al. (2007) and Rutten & van der Wal (2014), and comparing prescriptive norms and actual usage in Rutten, Vosters & Vandenbussche (2014).

However, unparallelled resources though they are, large corpora usually come with either minimal metadata or very short text samples from individuals. In both cases, analysing such data requires raising the level of abstraction in sociolinguistic terms.

In this volume we will adopt the long view but base our studies on a single-genre corpus of personal correspondence that covers the time span from 1400 to 1800 and comes with rich metadata on the letters and the letter writers. In this way we hope to minimize discontinuities in our empirical evidence and trace processes of change in as comparable materials as possible, ranging from communities and social groups down to individuals.

Our studies will build on past research on the corpus and extend the work presented in Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg (2003) on Tudor and Stuart English by following up the subsequent histories of some of the linguistic changes investigated in that volume. The earlier phases of these processes have also been analysed in a series of detailed studies by Nurmi (1999), Nevala (2002) and Laitinen (2007). Moreover, we will delve into certain innovative aspects of 18th-century language variation and change, the background for which has been charted by Sairio (2009) and Säily (2014).

Aiming to compare these various processes – and hence looking for possible sociolinguistic generalizations – our analyses will largely follow the sociolinguistic framework outlined in Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg (2003). Besides aggregate findings, particular attention will be paid to individual variation and new methods of analysing changes that are not easily conceivable in terms of linguistic variables.

Section 1.2 outlines the background for the correspondence corpus and the basic sociolinguistic approaches used in our earlier work and further developed in this volume. To provide a backdrop for the linguistic processes studied here, Section 1.3 discusses the time courses of the changes in Late Middle English and Early Modern English that were analysed in Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg (2003) based on the corpus data. Section 1.4 specifies the aims of the present volume and the particular processes studied. The last section gives a brief overview of the materials and methods used in these studies.

1.2 Past work: material and method

In 2003 Helena Raumolin-Brunberg and I published a book on language change in Early Modern English entitled *Historical Sociolinguistics: Language Change in Tudor and Stuart England*.[2] In that monograph we used personal letters to study fourteen changes that were completed or in progress between c. 1410 and 1681. Our

2. A second, expanded edition of this volume came out in 2017, published by Routledge.

corpus, the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence* (CEEC), had been compiled with specifically sociolinguistic research questions in mind. Its original version (CEEC-1998) covered a stretch of 270 years from the first surviving personal letters written in English to those exchanged in the aftermath of the English Civil War, that is, roughly twelve generations.

Our aim was to study the extent to which the methods and models used in modern sociolinguistics could be applied to the past. We wanted to explore the social roots of linguistic features that were widely generalized in the Early Modern English period and later found their way into mainstream modern English dialects as well as Standard English. For that purpose we adopted a variationist sociolinguistic approach and analysed individual letter writers and letter recipients in their social contexts, paying close attention to their biographical data: year of birth, domicile, gender, social status, social and regional mobility, level of education and family circumstances. We also recorded for each letter the correspondents' mutual relations, distinguishing intimates from more distant relationships.

The linguistic changes we examined were either morphological, such as changes in pronoun use, or morphosyntactic, involving syntactic patterns such as negative concord. These changes were approached as linguistic variables, i.e. speaker choices between alternative ways of expressing the same meaning or syntactic function. By applying a variationist approach to our data we were able to ask questions about the highly variable social embedding of processes of language change and about the kinds of people who either promoted or avoided linguistic innovations.

We found that participation in ongoing changes typically correlated with the writers' regional background, and their gender and social status. The changes we studied had variable regional origins and showed different patterns and rates of diffusion. The vast majority of the incoming forms and functions were led by female writers, and those that were led by male writers, such as the disappearance of negative concord, could be related to gendered differences in educational opportunities.

At the methodological level, we also asked questions concerning the ways in which our real-time approach could be related to the apparent-time model that has consolidated its place in modern sociolinguistic studies on language change. To do that, we traced processes of change on two planes simultaneously: in real time and in apparent time. This analysis looked, for example, at the extent to which successive 20-year age cohorts participated in ongoing changes divided into successive 20-year periods. Although it was not possible to analyse all fourteen changes at this level of empirical detail, the results suggest that morphosyntactic changes can propagate both communally and generationally. Importantly, we could also show how some people changed their grammar during their lifetime while others did not.

1.3 Trajectories of change between 1400 and 1680

The study of fourteen different processes of change showed that an extended period would be needed to trace their diffusion across time and space, both geographic and social. Only half a dozen were completed within the 270-year time span studied using the CEEC. This was by no means an unexpected result: some of the processes began later than others, for example, the rise of the prop-word *one* in the late 16th century and the possessive determiner *its* in the 17th century. By contrast, some of those that were completed, such as the replacement of the relative pronoun *the which* by *which*, had already reached its mid-course in the 15th century.

However, an early start did not always guarantee the completion of the process in the study period as changes displayed greatly varying rates of progress. Syntactic processes typically took longer than the arguably less complex processes of morpheme replacement, for example. So the traditional pronoun *ye* was replaced by the object form *you* in the subject function (***ye*** *go* > ***you*** *go*) in the course of the 16th century, whereas in gerund constructions, the direct object (*writing* ***the letter***) had started to gain ground at the expense of the *of*-phrase (*writing* ***of the letter***) in the 15th century, but the process was still under way towards the end of the 17th century.

Most of the linguistic processes analysed in Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg (2003) involved two variant forms. Those with more than two tended to proceed at a slower pace. This is the case, for example, with the noun subjects of the gerund (genitive, *of*-phrase and the common case: *Mary's writing*, *the writing of Mary*, *Mary writing*) and indefinite pronouns with singular human reference (compound forms with *body*, *one* and *man*, and the simple forms *any*, *some*, *none*, *every*, and *each*).

In various ways the linguistic environment emerged as a factor affecting the rate of change even with variables that had only two variant forms. A case in point is the loss of the nasal in first- and second-person possessive determiners (***mine***/***thine*** *enemy* > ***my***/***thy*** *enemy*), which, in linguistic terms, was phonologically determined. The change was first completed in contexts where the determiner preceded a consonant and next where it preceded an initial <h>, with prevocalic contexts taking the longest time to generalize *my* and *thy*. One particular lexeme, *own*, followed the trajectory of the prevocalic instances but at a slower pace still.

In lexically and syntactically conditioned processes, the frequency of a given context would affect the rate of change. High-frequency contexts can be expected to have what Bybee (2010: 24–25) calls a Conserving Effect and resist or delay an ongoing process of change. We traced the change of the third-person singular present-tense indicative suffix from -(*e*)*th* to -(*e*)*s* (*it make****th*** > *it make****s***) and observed that the *-th* form persisted longest with the most frequent verbs such as *have* (*hath*) and *do* (*doth*). Hence the process diffused lexically from verb to verb and

was not completed in these frequent verbs by the end of the 17th century (Ogura & Wang 1996).

The grammaticalization of *do*-support illustrates a syntactically conditioned process of change. The role of frequency may not be easy to account for in this case but it is interesting to observe that as the use of periphrastic *do* was diffusing in affirmative statements in the 16th century it progressed at a proportionally lower rate than in negative statements or questions and imperatives. However, since affirmative statements are the most common sentence type, the text frequency of *do* in this context was higher than in other sentence types (Nurmi 1999: 23–24). Although we may be left wondering whether the overall high frequency of affirmative statements might have had a role to play in the low relative frequency of *do*, it does not explain the demise of periphrasis in this context in the course of the following two centuries.

Modified from Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg (2003: 205), Table 1.1 lists the fourteen changes studied and sums up the stage each of them had reached by the end of the study period, 1680. The possessive determiner *its* was the only one to be introduced in the 17th century; the other changes dated to the 16th century or earlier.

Table 1.1 Stages reached by fourteen processes of change by about 1680.*

Process of change	Stage by 1680 in the CEEC
1. Subject YE → YOU	Completed
2. Possessive determiner MINE/THINE → MY/THY	Completed
3. Possessive determiners HIS, OF IT, THEREOF → ITS	**New and vigorous**
4. Prop-word ONE	New and vigorous
5. Direct object of the gerund	Nearing completion
6. Noun subject of the gerund	Nearing completion
7. 3rd person sg. pres. ind. -(E)TH → -(E)S	**Completed in most linguistic environments**
8. Decline of DO in affirmative statements	**Nearing completion**
9. Rise of DO in negative statements	Mid-range
10. Negative concord → single negation	Completed in most linguistic environments
11. Inversion after clause-initial negators	Completed
12. Relative THE WHICH → WHICH	Completed
13. Relative adverb → prepositional phrase	Mid-range
14. Compound indefinite pronouns with singular human reference	**New and vigorous**

* For a discussion of these stages, see Section 5.1.2, "Periodizing processes of change".

It should be noted that the overview in Table 1.1 does not say anything about the time courses of the fourteen changes in regional or social terms, or indeed at the level of individuals. Various user-related parameters can be shown to differentiate their temporal trajectories a good deal further. Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (2003) specify how the diffusion of a given change can be traced both horizontally in geographic space and vertically in social space, and how these two can mix and blend in a variety of ways over time. It is only when a change comes to completion that such distinctions can no longer be observed in the data.

In the present volume the four processes shown in bold in Table 1.1 will be followed into the 18th century, including the determiner *its*. Four other processes of change will also be discussed: one that was completed for most users by the turn of the 18th century (the 2nd-person singular pronoun *thou*) and one that was only incipient at the time (the progressive aspect), as well as two productive word-formation processes used to derive abstract nouns from adjectives (*-ness* and *-ity*).

1.4 Aims and scope of this volume

In view of the great variety in the time courses of linguistic changes, one of the key topics we address in this volume is the sociolinguistic embedding of long-term processes of change. We are, first of all, interested in the rate at which ongoing changes progressed in the 18th century. While most of the processes discussed in Section 1.3 followed the expected S-shaped pattern of diffusion over time (cf. Nevalainen 2015), the temporal trajectory of periphrastic *do* in affirmative statements made a notable exception to this empirical generalization.

Another question that we are interested in is the extent to which comparable social conditions obtained in the different phases of a long-term process of change. We start with the uniformitarian premise that the present can in principle be used to explain the past, provided that we remain alert to the pitfalls of anachronism (Bergs 2012). As gender differentiation is one of the most robust findings in present-day sociolinguistic studies of language change and is, as noted in 1.2, attested in real-time changes in Early Modern English as well, our hypothesis is that gender differences will also emerge in the 18th century data. Following the same line of reasoning, we will look into the roles played by other factors, such as social stratification and, where available, information on the writer's regional background and age. The extent to which these can be reconstructed naturally depends on the phase of the change: processes that are nearing completion provide less variable data than those in mid-range.

Social change also affects the degree to which comparable social conditions can be reconstructed for long-term processes of linguistic change. In concrete terms, social change has an impact on the primary data as, for example, the rate of full literacy improves over the centuries and later data provide the researcher with access to a wider range of the population than earlier data sources. We discuss various aspects of 18th-century society in Chapter 2, concluding that as a result of the fundamental social, cultural, religious and economic transformations that took place within the long 18th century, this period has closer connections with the centuries to come than those preceding it.

Importantly for linguistic research, the 18th century uniquely differs from earlier times in that it witnessed a rapid rise of normative grammar and increased language awareness. Prescriptivism – and language codification in general – constitutes a source of potential influence to be accounted for, as it could have impacted on changes in progress, especially if these were socially indexed. By way of background, the evolution of 18th-century normative grammar is discussed by Yáñez-Bouza in Chapter 3. The work she surveys suggests an impact of normative precepts on individuals, and proscription on variation in general, but little or no direct influence on ongoing processes of change. Possible exceptions are some rapid changes and those in their final stages (see also Auer & González-Díaz 2005).

To observe how these generalizations – unbroken temporal trajectories, social embedding and varying susceptibility to normative influence – materialized in the course of linguistic changes we will consider changes in their various stages, ranging from incipient to those nearing completion or practically completed. The final stages of three changes will be discussed: the repurposing of the recessive 2nd-person singular pronoun *thou* (Chapter 6), the demise of the 3rd-person singular verbal suffix *-th* in high-frequency verbs (Chapter 7), and the outgoing uses of periphrastic *do* in affirmative statements (Chapter 8). Although the processes we study in these chapters focus on outgoing forms we naturally also account for their mainstream alternatives, the 2nd-person pronoun *you*, verbal *-s* and *do*-less affirmative statements. It is shown that in all these cases the outgoing variants were associated with particular style- and register-related effects.

The outgoing forms we analyse further include the indefinite *man*-compounds and independent forms with singular human reference. Their decline will be related to the simultaneous rise of the compound indefinite pronouns with *one* and *body* (Chapter 9). We will also trace the generalization of the possessive determiner *its*, a process that diffused from a new and vigorous stage to near completion in the course of the 18th century (Chapter 10). Both these variables display several variant forms and involve a reorganization of their respective paradigms from four or more elements to one or two alternatives. The paradigm of singular indefinite pronouns is reduced to two (*-one* and *-body* compounds) and the four-member

class of possessive determiners (*his*, *of it*, *thereof*, *its*) comes to be represented by one prototypical form, *its*, with *of it* remaining as a minor variant. Because of their internal complexity, these two variables offer a good testing ground for the sociolinguistic hypotheses laid out above.

Incipient changes are represented by the diffusion of the progressive aspect in the course of the 18th century (Chapter 11). In its early stages, the progressive offers a window on the social roots of an innovation, which are not always easy to pin down in categorical terms. Moreover, it presents several options for identifying the variants of the relevant linguistic variable, the possible alternative ways of saying the same thing. Although well-established quantitative methods have been used in the past to show how the progressive diffuses over time, such indeterminacies have methodological implications as well. They are not unlike those encountered in the study of periphrastic *do* in affirmative statements in Chapter 8.

We will therefore also address the question of how to quantify change in processes that are not easily defined in terms of linguistic variables. For example, should a pair of productive suffixes that apply to the same types of base forms be automatically analysed as interchangeable linguistic alternatives, i.e. realizations of the same linguistic variable? This analysis is usually adopted with inflectional suffixes such as the 3rd-person singular present-tense indicative verbal endings, the justification being that they carry the same meaning and grammatical function. Similar reasoning is often applied to the derivational suffixes *-ness* and *-ity*, which derive abstract nouns from adjectives. We do not make this assumption but consider these derivational suffixes separately, showing their differential uses and applying innovative quantitative methods to examine their sociolinguistic patterning in the 18th century (Chapter 12). The same techniques are applied in the studies on periphrastic *do* and the progressive aspect.

1.5 Material, methods and syntheses

All our studies make systematic use of the 18th-century *Extension* of the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence* (CEECE), which picks up from where the earlier corpus ends and spans the "long" 18th century from 1680 to 1800. This means that we have the benefit of being able to observe how the same set of people, who represent different social strata, participate in different processes of change. Chapter 4 introduces the letter corpus and its composition in detail. The discussion includes, for example, the coverage of the social categories sampled per period. The letter collections included in the corpus are documented in the Appendix.

We use the same basic periodization in our studies, starting with six generational 20-year periods, but can also combine them into three 40-year periods,

depending on the frequency and stage of diffusion of the linguistic elements investigated. Both periodization and the different quantitative methods we have applied and adopted for the purposes of this volume are the topic of Chapter 5, where we discuss basic methods for estimating frequencies as well as quantitative methods for studying changes lacking a readily definable linguistic variable.

To further evaluate the empirical basis of our findings, we provide a comparison of the text frequencies of the changes we studied using the letter corpus in Chapter 13. Moving on to possible broader generalizations, the information provided by the *Google Books* database on these processes of change is also considered and critically evaluated in that chapter.

The last three chapters provide overviews of our findings. Focusing on variation in individual participation in linguistic change, we were interested in those letter writers who could be singled out as particularly progressive or conservative with respect to ongoing change. Chapter 14 draws together our findings on this aspect of variation in sociolinguistic terms. In Chapter 15 we move on to summarize the principal results of the linguistic changes studied. Finally, Chapter 16 relates our findings to broader sociolinguistic generalizations.