

Introduction

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This Special Issue of the *Nordic Journal of English Studies* is devoted to historical linguistics, and focuses on ‘speech’ from past periods. As the title suggests, we are interested in not only the language of speech-based or, in a wider sense, speech-related texts but also the (re)presentation of speech in other types of historical texts. We are also interested in the role played by genre and sociolinguistic or other factors, such as manuscript or printing features, regarding the frequency and functions of speech phenomena in various contexts. The articles take empirical approaches based on the use of corpora, manuscript material or early imprints. Naturally language theory is also considered, as this is also an important part of current research in English historical linguistics. A further area of interest is language variation and change across time: the articles in this volume study several periods of English, ranging from Old English to Late Modern English. Early Modern English receives particular attention. In what follows, we will briefly introduce the articles included in this Special Issue.

The majority of the studies in the current Special Issue examine a particular genre of speech-related texts. Five articles (Huber, Söderlund, Grund, Leitner, and Rütten) focus on texts relating to authentic speech, i.e., spoken language recorded for posterity in writing, namely witness depositions, trials and sermons. Of the remaining four articles two (Salmi and Moore) turn to constructed speech-related language, one (Claridge) focuses on a ‘written’ genre that provides glimpses at speech-related discourse, and one (Landert) deals with several authentic and constructed speech-related texts.

Huber’s substantial study considers factors influencing the choice of the main relativizers *who/m/se*, *which*, *that* and zero across the period 1720–1913, taking data from the trial records in the Old Bailey Corpus (OBC, see Huber et al. 2012). Huber shows that *who/m/se* increased at the expense of *that*, which declined significantly over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This might reflect the influence of prescriptivism

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favouring forms that could show case and be used to distinguish between animate and non-animate antecedents. However, this potential motivation conflicts with the finding that zero relativizers actually increased across time, a change led by female speakers. Both *that* and zero became increasingly restricted to non-human antecedents while human antecedents increasingly favoured *who*. Huber finds that throughout the period zero was only used in non-subject position, while it was only in subject position that the *wh*-forms increased over time. The latter finding, he suggests, goes against the theory that *wh*-forms entered the relativizer system as genitive or object forms, the less accessible syntactic positions of the Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy. Also in contrast to previous research, male speakers appear to have led the change from above, i.e., the introduction of the *wh*-forms. While this may be due to female speakers in the OBC—in which the higher classes are overwhelmingly represented by male speakers—having little access to the prestige norm, Huber points out that the higher-ranking male speakers, those with access to the norm, use the lowest rate of *wh*-forms compared to other male speakers. Thus Huber questions “earlier assumptions about the development of English RCs [relative clauses] and about the social mechanisms of language change in general”.

Moving back in time to Early Modern English, Söderlund’s article examines the development of *do*-periphrasis in witness depositions across the period 1560–1760. He uses *An Electronic Text Edition of Depositions 1560–1760*, or ETED (Kytö, Grund and Walker 2011). Söderlund’s contribution is a thorough quantitative corpus-based study in which he contrasts the use of *do*-periphrasis (as in, e.g., *he does not know*) and the main verb construction without the auxiliary (as in, e.g., *he knows not*) across time according to sentence type (affirmative, negative etc.). He also takes into account a number of other linguistic and extra-linguistic factors. Söderlund’s work adds to the findings of previous research, and gives insights into usage in the hitherto understudied depositions genre. Depositions facilitate a study of the extra-linguistic factor of region, and Söderlund demonstrates that *do*-periphrasis is less common in the North than in other regions. Interestingly, his results are not in line with previous research as regards the use of the *do*-construction with long rather than short verbs: in depositions *do* is preferred with short, i.e., monosyllabic, verbs.

The remaining three articles based on ‘authentic’ speech-related material focus on aspects of speech presentation. Like Söderlund, Grund also exploits ETED, in this case for an in-depth and illustrative study of speech descriptors (such as “maliciously” in “Pickford maliciously called the sayde ffraunces Robins whore”) in Early Modern English depositions. Grund investigates the form and function of such descriptors, showing how they are used by the deponent or scribe to add significant information about the speech represented in the depositions, and frequently express stance. The study contributes in particular by offering a classification system that fully accounts for the range of speech descriptors found in ETED, namely the categories of evaluation, formulation hedging, clarification, emphasis, and frequency/quantity.

Leitner’s contribution is a study based on Scottish trial records from the first half of the seventeenth century, in which she examines “spoken utterances that were recorded and evaluated as legal evidence for witchcraft”. Her aim is to discover which speech act functions were attributed to earlier utterances of witchcraft suspects by the different trial parties, and to determine what this suggests about the perceived illocutionary force of so-called witches’ words. Leitner finds that the defence and prosecution attributed very different speech act functions to the alleged witches’ utterances to further their respective goals. An utterance might be interpreted by the prosecution as “a fully performative harm-causing curse rather than a threat announcing, but not performing, harm”, whereas the defence might interpret the same utterance as “an expressive curse” merely venting anger or hostility rather than inflicting harm. Leitner observes that not all utterances by alleged witches cited as evidence of witchcraft were seen as fully performative even by the prosecution, which contrasts with research into Early Modern English witchcraft language.

Turning to an earlier period of English, the final article to examine an authentic speech-related genre is that by Rütten. Her corpus of texts is taken from the *Helsinki Corpus* (HC) and the *Dictionary of Old English Corpus* (DOEC). She investigates the subjunctive and imperative moods and their distribution in Old English sermons—texts written to be preached or written down after being preached—in independent clauses. Rütten distinguishes between *direct speech events*, in which the “preacher addresses his audience directly” and *reports of speech events*, which occur within a narrative when a preacher relates for example

“Jesus’ words to his disciples from the Bible” to the audience: hence the distinction is between discourse levels and not modes of speech presentation. She finds that in *direct speech events* the subjunctive is preferred to the imperative mood, which is mostly reserved for direct orders to the audience: subjunctives are primarily used as “markers of general moral obligations and as downtoners of direct requests”. By contrast, the subjunctive is scarcely present in *reports of speech events*, and the imperative mood is used “to report the directive *verbatim* to the congregation and the original interactants are contextualized”. Rütten argues that *reports of speech events* have been side-lined in previous research on directives, and deserve further attention.

Two articles (Salmi and Moore) focus on speech or speech presentation in constructed speech-related texts (i.e. texts invented by an author). Salmi examines conflict interactions in the form of debate verse, focusing on first person active verbs in her analysis in order to determine the semantic domains (cf. Biber et al. 1999) prevalent in her corpus of ten Early Modern English texts. She finds that the semantic domains differ in text attributed to the narrator in contrast to that of the characters; in particular, verbs of existence are used to a high degree by the characters, which is not found in the related genre, printed “real-life” controversies. She highlights both similarities and differences between debate verse and controversies and concludes that differences between the two genres are due to the fact that the debate verse is more personal, as the characters often personify the ideas debated, and there is also an entertainment factor not present in controversies, in which unnecessary face threats are kept to a minimum.

Moore offers a case study of Caxton’s (c. 1483) *Dialogues in French and English*, an early language teaching text, focusing on a constructed dialogue between a buyer and a seller. Her analysis focuses on intrapersonal terms, narrative structure and politeness, for which she finds the text to be particularly suited. In particular, the analysis adds to previous work on politeness, giving further evidence of the use of negative politeness strategies in the late medieval period. Another important aspect of the article in the context of this volume is the evaluation of the relationship of the text to spoken English. Moore concludes that the text is valuable “as a source for marked features of a colloquial style”, but as a whole it does not represent spoken English idiom sufficiently to allow syntactic analysis.

Looking at Old and Middle English history writing, Claridge investigates both speech *and* writing presentation (these being often impossible to distinguish) and how these function in the chronicles examined. She identifies three main functional categories of speech and writing presentation in her material: (i) providing evidence or authority, (ii) evaluating, and (iii) various types of narrative function, namely as a device to advance the plot, to characterize historical figures, to highlight or focus on e.g. an event, or—in contrast to modern history writing—to involve the audience through dramatization or vividness. Also unlike in modern history writing, in Claridge’s material, the voice of common opinion was more valued as evidence. There is also a difference within the material studied by Claridge: the texts most “annalistic” in nature contain the least speech and writing presentation, whereas the texts translated from Latin tend to have the most instances, and exploit speech and writing presentation to provide evidence and authority in particular.

Finally, Landert’s contribution differs from the other contributions in that she looks at *several* speech-related genres (or text types), including both authentic and constructed speech-related texts (and in particular trials and comedy), for which she exploits *A Corpus of English Dialogues 1560–1760* (CED). Like Grund, Landert considers stance. She focuses on *I say* and *I tell (you)*, showing that these are often used in expressing emphasis, clarification and “committing the speaker to the truthfulness of what is said” in trial proceedings, whereas in drama comedy, they are used especially as a booster, or in expressing personal opinions (*I say*) or when advising (*I tell you*). Thus the functions of the two verbs are similar within each text type, but there is a marked difference between the text types due to their different setting, participant roles and activity types, which affect the functions of *I say* and *I tell (you)*.

By collecting together the above contributions, we hope to have highlighted the importance of the study of early speech-related language in its various forms and contexts. The interest in variation studies, historical pragmatics and sociolinguistics as analytical frameworks, and the new electronic resources made available to research community, have propelled scholars not only to look for new answers to old questions but also to pursue novel paths of investigation. The studies in the present volume bear witness to these exciting advances in historical linguistics and point to a bright future for the field in Anglistics.

References

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