Socio-economic history and language change: Urbanisation in England, 1400-1700

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1. Introduction

In this paper I want to introduce the project *Emerging Standards: Urbanisation and the Development of Standard English, c. 1400-1700*, which has only just been started at Utrecht University. First, I will provide some background information about the project's background and methodology. Second, I will present a brief case study that aims at providing some insight into the approach that will be taken.

Individual accounts of emerging Standard languages in, for instance, Early Modern Europe (cf. Deumert and Vandenbussche, eds., 2003) attach great importance to the role that language policies and authorities with power and prestige play in the standardisation processes (language history "from above"), while more covert factors such as the effects of national and international trade, work migration, and the book trade, have often been marginalised. By using the example of the emergence of Standard English, this project will explore the role of such factors in the origin and spread of a formal written Standard. As this project explores an alternative history of language standardisation in England, the focus that was traditionally on the pre-eminent urban community – London - will be shifted to regional centres. More precisely, urban vernaculars of major regional centres with high levels of literacy and text production (manuscripts as well as printed texts from 1476 onwards) will be systematically investigated over the period 1400-1700 with respect to factors such as time, text type, and migration patterns The study will focus on the vernaculars of York (North), Bristol (Southwest), Coventry (West Midlands), and Norwich (East Anglia), which represent different Middle English dialect areas. A comparison of the results of these longitudinal studies of urban vernaculars is expected to clarify our understanding of the origin and spread of formal written English.

A pre-standard that constituted a linguistic norm for a written supra-regional variety emerged in England in the first half of the fifteenth century. Before the end of the fourteenth century, a standard form of written English did not exist and the language was characterised by local and regional dialects as writing systems, which by the beginning of the sixteenth century had largely disappeared (Benskin 1992: 71). Note that during the Middle English period (1066-1500), five (broad) dialect areas can be identified, namely Northern, East Midland, West Midland, Southern and Kentish.

By 1700 spelling and grammar books had been published that aimed at codifying/fixing and thus standardising the written English language. For a long time there existed a general consensus that what became the written Standard English language developed from the Central Midland dialect, which was propagated by the Chancery clerks (based on Samuels 1963 who analysed the spelling of dialects in manuscripts from the South and Midlands; see also Ekwall 1956, Fisher 1977 and Fisher *et al.* 1984). Note that this view has almost become a truism that is still frequently found in language histories, e.g. "The growth of London and the fact that the court was located nearby encouraged the adoption of the south-eastern dialect as the standard, first in the chancery and then more generally" (Burke 2004: 100). This view, which was based on the fact that the spelling used by Chancery clerks for official documents was more uniform than that found in other written documents, has been convincingly challenged in Benskin 2004. This single-ancestor theory, which can refer to a single dialect, text type, place or point in time, has also been challenged in Wright (ed., 2000a). The traditional account of the development of written Standard English attributes an important role to London in shaping the standard form as this town was the national seat of government and justice (see also Burke's quote above). The eminent position that the language in London had gained by the late sixteenth century, in particular concerning literature, is attested in Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* (1589).

> This part [i.e. language] in our maker or Poet must be heedyly looked vnto, that it be naturall, pure, and the most vsuall of all his countrey: and for the same purpose rather that which is spoken **in the kings Court, or in the good townes and Cities within the land**, then **in the marches and frontiers, or in port townes, where straungers haunt for traffike sake**, or yet in Vniuersities where Scholers vse much peeuish affectation of words out of the primatiue languages, or finally, in any vplandish village or corner of a Realme, where is no resort but of poore rusticall or vnciuill people: neither shall he follow the speach of a craftes man or carter, or other of the inferiour sort, though he be inhabitant or bred in the best town and Citie in this Realme, for such persons do abuse good speaches by strange accents or illshapen soundes, and false ortographie.

He promotes the language of gentlemen of London and of the Royal Court and explicitly warns against other social and regional varieties of English, notably the language of the North, as well as language mixing that took place in port towns and across frontiers (1589: 120). These stigmatised varieties must not be ignored, however, when investigating the

diffusion of a supra-local norm. This project thus takes precisely those varieties and socio-economic factors into consideration that Puttenham warns against.

Metropolis and important regional centres

From medieval times to the seventeenth century, York, Bristol, Coventry, and Norwich constituted the largest communities apart from the pre-eminent urban centre London (cf. Kermode 2000: 442; Trudgill 2010: 53). These communities fulfilled many roles, e.g. administrative and institutional functions, manufacturing and marketing, domestic as well as international trade, which also indicates that literacy rates were significantly higher compared to small towns and rural areas (Palliser 2000). The four towns were economically very vital and therefore also attracted migrants. Bristol (Southwest), Coventry (West Midlands), and Norwich (East Anglia) were particularly important centres for the textile industry, both for manufacturing and processing textiles. The rise of the textile industry in England also entails an expansion of long-distance trade, which was advantageous for towns that had a port or easy access to waterways – as was the case with York (North), Bristol (Southwest), and Norwich (East Anglia). The shift from a land-based to a monetary economy and the growth of towns also had an effect on the social order, namely occupational specialisation and the rise of guilds. Urban vitality as well as regional significance implicated that literacy levels were higher. Greater towns attracted ecclesiastical foundations and in addition had at least one school (Kermode 2000: 445). In fact, between *c.* 1400 and the mid-sixteenth century, in English towns a shift can be observed in the provision of education from ecclesiastical to lay hands. Medieval urban culture and learning was not only mediated and refined in schools but also in children's fraternities and working men's societies (Rosser 2000: 356, 361).

All the different dynamics such as national and international trade, (work) migration, and book trade need to be taken into consideration when describing selected urban vernaculars (cf. Smith 1992; Nevalainen 2000; Wright 2001). The outcome of this investigation will ultimately shed new light on the processes involved in the emergence of the supra-local written form of English.

2. Main research questions and central hypothesis

In order to unravel the complex processes involved in the emergence and development of Standard languages, as illustrated by the case of English, a number of questions need to be answered:

Q1 In what ways and to what extent did historical urban vernaculars – notably York, Bristol, Coventry and Norwich – have an effect on the shaping of written Standard English?

To be able to answer Q1, the following research questions need to be addressed first:

Q2 What internal variation (spelling, morphology, syntax and lexis) do Middle English and Early Modern English written sources from York, Bristol, Coventry and Norwich exhibit? The focus will be on variation with respect to time, text-type and, data permitting, gender and social stratification.

Q3 What patterns in the diffusion of language change can be determined (a) in the selected urban vernaculars and (b) from them into the emerging supra-local norm?

Q4 How can we account for the dissemination of (selected) linguistic features? Both internal (e.g. verbs types) and external factors (i.e. social factors) of language change will be scrutinised.

The central hypothesis is that the rise of the supra-local form of written English is not based on a single dialect, text type, place or point in time (cf. Wright 2000b: 6), but that its development is characterised by a variety of factors, namely language-internal change, dialect contact, and possibly language contact. By determining the role that these factors play in the period 1400-1700 in the selected urban vernaculars, Q1 can be answered.

As for **language-internal change**, a comparison between different stages of a language can help linguists to reconstruct how the language has developed. In this project, the period 1400-1700 will be sub-divided into different stages, which allows for a comparison of Middle English and Early Modern English dialects.

Due to national trade and migration, a variety of **dialects** are brought into **contact** (cf. Trudgill 1986; Kerswill 1994). Economic histories of the respective towns, information on transport infrastructure and patterns of work migration are thus crucial in determining the role of dialect contact. This external information will be correlated with empirical linguistic data. It needs to be pointed out that an approach of this kind, i.e. the close correlation between socio-economic history and English historical linguistics, has not previously been attempted in the field of sociohistorical linguistics, but this method is expected to cast new light on external factors of dialect levelling and language change.

Finally, **language contact** may also transpire to be a decisive factor for language change given that the selected urban environments not only traded goods on a national but also on an international level. Moreover, we know of migrants who came from the continent and settled in English towns. Whether and what kind of influence other languages had on urban vernaculars depends on the intensity of contact as well as the social status of the languages involved (Thomason & Kaufman 1988; Goebl 1996-1997; Winford 2003).

3. Methodology

The approach taken in this project is framed in socio-historical linguistics: it aims to apply sociolinguistic methods (Weinreich, Labov & Herzog 1968; Labov 1972, 1994, 2001; Chambers 1995) to historical data. Salient studies in the field are Romaine (1982) and

Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg (1996, 2003). This area of research is concerned with the transition, diffusion and embedding of changes in society. As the focus is on language variation, the approach is also known as variationist theory. Within the field of sociolinguistics, different research traditions have been established, in which this project follows the line of social dialectology that is strongly associated with William Labov (cf. Dittmar 1997). Thus, the project can be best described as a study in historical urban dialectology. In the field of English, research into urban varieties has hitherto been carried out only with regard to present-day English (for instance Labov for New York City, 1966; Trudgill for Norwich, 1974, 1978; Kerswill & Williams for Milton Keynes, 2000). Current sociolinguistic studies largely focus on spoken language, which is not so straightforward to reconstruct with historical data, as we can only rely on written material (cf. Milroy 1992: 173). This project will therefore be concerned with written language, and variation and change in orthography, morphology, syntax, and lexis.

3.1. The empirical basis

The investigation of the four historical urban vernaculars will be based both on material that (a) is readily available in the form of collections and corpora and (b) will be compiled from archives and record offices in the respective towns, or elsewhere.

The investigations will start with data that can be retrieved from existing corpora and collections:

(a) Late Middle English:
The Helsinki Corpus (ME IV 1420-1500)
The Middle English Grammar Corpus (1100-1500)
Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval English (1350-1500)
The Corpus of Early English Correspondence (1417-1681)
The Corpus of Middle English Medical Texts (1375-1500)
The Middle English Dictionary (1100-1500)

(b) Early Modern English:
The Helsinki Corpus (1500-1710)
The Corpus of Early English Correspondence (1417-1681)
The Corpus of English Dialogues (1560-1760)
Lampeter Corpus of Early Modern English Tracts (1640-1740)
Corpus of the Project "Language and Linguistic Evidence in the 1641 Depositions"
The Old Bailey Corpus (from 1674 onwards)
Early English Books Online (1473-1700)

Texts whose origin is attributed to the towns of York, Bristol, Coventry, and Norwich will be singled out. In addition to readily available texts in existing corpora and collections, it is essential that the project team collect additional material that represents a variety of text types from different stages within the period 1400-1700. The additional collected material will be subdivided into the following macro-genres (taken from Rissanen 2000: 119; compilation principles for *The Helsinki Corpus*):

(i) Statutory texts (documents and laws)
(ii) Religious instruction (sermons, rules, Bible translation)
(iii) Secular instruction (handbooks, educational treatises)
(iv) Expository texts (scientific treatises)
(v) Non-imaginative narration (history, biography, travelogue, letters, diary)
(vi) Imaginative narration (romance, fiction)

This broad categorisation reflects the role that genres play in standardisation processes. For instance, texts used for religious instruction are considered prestigious and are therefore prone to be used as models for language use. Similarly, statutory texts, which are associated with authority and power, loom large in the standardisation processes of languages. More informal, speech-like text types like letters are also important because they are prone to foster linguistic innovation (cf. Elspaß 2003; Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2003; Bergs 2005). In addition to the material already available, each sub-project, will compile a text corpus of approximately 50,000 words, including transcription. It is of great importance that source texts are philologically accurate, which means that we work with authentic material and will not rely on available editions of texts without cross-checking originals for authenticity. The period under investigation encompasses the transition from manuscript to printed book (introduction of printing with movable type in 1476 by William Caxton). For both types of sources textual history will be taken into account, i.e. the role of scribes for manuscripts and the people involved in printing processes as well as printing house styles (cf. Laing 1989; Laing & Williamson 1994; Lass 1997, 2004; Fleischmann 2000; Finkelstein & McCleery 2005; Howsam 2006; Dodd 2011).

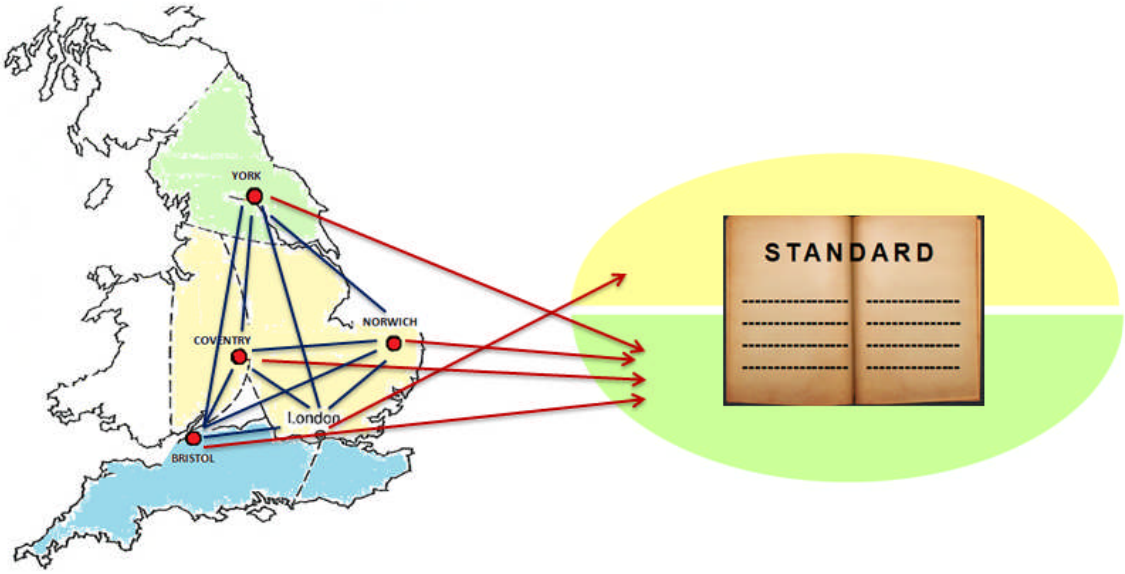
3.2. Approach

The approach taken in all four sub-projects, i.e. the four cities, is to collect textual evidence and provide systematic descriptions of urban vernaculars by investigating the diffusion of selected orthographic, morphological and syntactic variants as well as lexis through a range of text types over a period of 300 years. As the empirical data will be viewed in the context of social and economic history of each of the towns, the reasons for language change and thus the interpretations provided, also in relation to the emerging supra-local norm, will differ.

Familiarisation with the socio-economic history, in particular demographic and migratory factors, of the respective towns is of great importance. The focus will then be on Middle English dialects (Wyld 1921, Mustanoja 1960, Visser 1963), in particular the dialects of the selected cities as well as the supra-local forms (Fisher 1977, 1996; McIntosh & Samuels & Benskin 1986). This knowledge is vital to the collection of the data, which will be stratified according to time, genre and, whenever possible, gender and social class. During the period under investigation, literacy was a prerogative for the gentry and professions (Cressy 1980: 177). In towns, however, the urban elite, merchants, grocers and haberdashers are considered to have had a high level of literacy, notably around 90 per cent (Reay 1998: 41-42).

In order to answer questions 2 (internal variation) and 3 (patterns of language change), linguistic profiles and their diachronic development have to be established for all four towns. The starting point is orthography, for which *The Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval England* (LALME) will be used as a reference point. This work provides orthographic profiles for each text that was used as a basis for the atlas (McIntosh & Samuels & Benskin 1986, Vol. 3). This allows us to ascertain a list of (variant) features that are characteristic of certain geographical areas. Even though these sets of features need to be viewed with caution (cf. Fernández & Rodríguez 2008), in combination with external information they are instrumental in determining the provenance of texts (for problems of provenance, see Milroy 1992: 167-170; Montoya Reyes 2001). Typical examples are *kyrk, kirk* and *kyrke* in texts from York (Northern feature due to Scandinavian influence), *chyrch, chirch, chyrche* in texts from Bristol (Gloucestershire), *cherche, chirch(e), church(e), chyrche, schurch* in texts from Coventry (Warwickshire), and *chyrch, schyrche* in texts from Norwich (Norfolk) (McIntosh & Samuels & Benskin 1986, Vol. 3). Beyond orthography, the sources will also be investigated with respect to other morpho-syntactic features, as for instance those examined by Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg (2003) in their study of Early English correspondence:

(a) replacement of subject *ye* by *you*, (b) *my* and *thy* versus *mine* and *thine*, (c) possessive determiner *its*, (d) prop-word *one*, (e) object of the gerund, (f) noun subject of the gerund, (g) present indicative third-person singular suffix *–s* versus *–th*, (h) periphrastic *do* in affirmative and negative statements, (i) decline of multiple negation, (j) inversion after initial adverbs and negators, (k) relative pronouns *which* and *the which*, (l) prepositional phrase vs. relative adverb, and (m) indefinite pronouns with singular human reference. From an urban vernacular point of view, it is interesting to see how competing forms such as the present indicative third-person singular suffix (*he goes* vs. *he goeth*) are distributed in texts and which text types and speakers adopt the *-s* form first. Explanations for this development, which consider both internal and external factors, will answer Question 4 (explanation for the dissemination of linguistic features). Statistical multivariate analyses will be carried out if the data allow this.



4. Third person singular –s

To illustrate the diffusion of selected linguistic features, I want to present a case study that focuses on the development of the third person singular –s verb inflection (*he goes*) during the period 1400-1700. For this particular variable there exist three main variants in the history of English, which are
a) –th (or –þ), e.g. *he goeth* or *goeþ*
b) –s, e.g. *he goes*
c) uninflected zero form, e.g. *he go*

As regards the development of the *–s* inflection, it first emerged in 10th-century Northumbrian texts, thus the North of the country. In the London area first scattered instances of *–s* are found in the fourteenth century in so-called rime poems. According to an earlier study by Holmqvist (1922), an increase of the *–s* form can be observed at the end of the fifteenth century and after 1600 the form has become the regular ending. Note that in Shakespeare's language (1564-1616), which reflects London English of the time, we can still find the *–th* ending. By 1700 the *–th* forms are only found in biblical, liturgical, and other highly formal contexts. Rhyme in certain texts as well as meta-linguistic comments suggest that *-s* and *–th* was pronounced the same from the early seventeenth century onwards. A study

by Kytö (1993), which focuses on the development of the third person singular *–s* in all kinds of English texts (based on the Helsinki Corpus), reveals the following pattern:

	Verbs	-s	-th	Total
1500-1570	Other	10 (4%)	223	233
	HAVE	5 (3%)	144	149
	DO	0	79	79
1570-1640	Other	86 (24%)	274	360
	HAVE	15 (10%)	129	144
	DO	0	56	56
1640-1710	Other	385 (94%)	23	408
	HAVE	40 (29%)	100	140
	DO	20 (54%)	17	37

Throughout the period under investigation, 1500-1710, the auxiliary verbs *have* and *do* behave differently from other lexical verbs. As the data in the table above show, the Northern *–s* variant was first adopted and increasingly used in lexical verbs, followed by *have* and eventually, i.e. only after 1640, by *do*. At the same time, the –th forms gradually decrease in lexical verbs as well as the modal auxiliaries. As far as genre variation is concerned, the *-s* is first found in private letters, where a steep increase can be observed, followed by trials and sermons; thus all genres that are fairly close to the oral end of an oral-written language continuum.

The data that I will focus on with respect to the *–s* inflection and its variants are depositions from the period 1560-1760, which I retrieved from *An Electronic Text Edition of Depositions 1560-1760* (ETED) and Raine (edn 1861). Depositions may be described as written records of oral statements made by witnesses, plaintiffs or defendants in connection with court cases (criminal and ecclesiastical court records). Typical characteristics of this genre are that (a) it is couched in the precise language of the law, (b) it serves as a record of real speech events (reported speech and direct speech), (c) it records information about the deponent(s) and the narrative(s), which allows us to find out about the social background of a person, and (d) it was recorded in every corner of England and thus provides local dialects and variation across regions. Collections of depositions therefore exist from a range of different places and in particular from urban centres. When investigating the language of depositions, an important aspect that must always be taken into consideration is the role that scribes play in that what we see on paper is the scribe's voice rather than that of the deponent. The way in which the ETED corpus is organised, i.e. it contains head information, allows us, as pointed out above, to find out details about the social background of deponents:

Name of collection: Norwich 1583
Period: 1 (1560-1599)
Decade: 1580-1589
Region: east
Type of court: criminal
Deposition date: 17 June 1583 (C)
Deponent sex: male
Deponent age: unknown

Deponent occupation: draper
Manuscript reference: The National Archives, London. MS KB29/219 mbs, f. 151r
Collection ID: F_1EC_NorwichB
Deposition ID: F_1EC_NorwichB_006

Here is a Norwich deposition example with the *–s* variants highlighted:

ETED deposition example

<f. 55r> <Hand 1> Willm Prentys Servaunt to John ffawsett of Norwch
Skynner abowt thage of xxij yerys sworne & exaied
the Wednesdaye the xviijth of August Ao 1563 **Sayeth**

That about vij wekes nowe last past one Thomas Eton
Skynner being at London at the Shoppwyndowe of the
John ffawsett Sayed that he wold go to Norwch And
then this deponent axed hym yf he wold go to Norwch and
was so lately in pryson there Then Sayed Eton I maye
thank Mr Willm ffarrour of yt lyke A pawnche as he
is and as for Mychell he was never pore mans frynd
but allweys A mortall foe to all poore men & **hath** the
good wyll of no pore man wthin Norwyche Then sayed Mr
ffawsett That is Thow sayest that because he ded set
you from the doble bere naye ^{sayed Eton} as for him he wyll be
as dronken as A beggar & as spackled as A Tode when
Mr Cobb and he mete together at Mr Hed Therfor yf ther
wer no man alyve but Mr Mychell I woold be his
could fynde in my hart to be his hangman / nowe is
Mr Davy Mayor he is somwhat my frynd but yet
he is as fowle A gutt as the rest Norwyche is
the moste cutthrote Cyttye that is in all the world
for yf A pore man owe but vjd he shalbe arrested
for yt And further this deponent **Sayeth** not /
by me Wyllyam prentes

This example from 1563 shows that the *–th* form was still prevailing in both lexical verbs and auxiliary verbs. The verb *say* is clearly part of standard formulae that are found at the beginning and at the end of depositions. I have therefore decided to single out the verb *say* as it differs in its occurrence and development from other lexical verbs. In a comparison of depositions from Norwich, London and York I got the following results (see table below).

		Norwich -s	Norwich -th	London -s	London -th	York -s	York -th
1560-1599	Other	0	33	0	42	-	-
	HAVE	0	10	1	21	-	-
	DO	0	0	0	4	-	-
	SAY	0	82	0	29	-	-
1600-1649	Other	-	-	0	38	0	7
	HAVE	-	-	0	40	0	6
	DO	-	-	0	1	0	0
	SAY	-	-	0	46	0	35
1650-1699	Other	-	-	17	14	8	3
	HAVE	-	-	1	14	0	12
	DO	-	-	0	4	0	4
	SAY	-	-	0	15	0	25
1700-1760	Other	7	7	89	0	-	-
	HAVE	12	0	1	55	-	-
	DO*	0	0	6	25	-	-
	SAY	1	40	0	50	-	-

I want to emphasise here again that the *–s* variant was originally a Northern dialect feature, which made it into the standard language. Note that a dash indicates that I did not have access to depositions from this period (not yet, in any case).

As for Norwich, we can clearly see that the *–th* variant is the preferred variant in all verb types in the first period, i.e. 1560-1599. During the final period, 1700-1760, we clearly see that the *–s* makes up 50% of all lexical verbs. What is surprising is that *have* has only got *–s* endings, i.e. considering the fact that *have* and *do* tend to lag behind lexical verbs. The fact that the verb *say* has a *–th* ending can be explained by the *say* formulae used in depositions, which consistently contain a *–th*. The London data nicely shows that the *–s* ending is used from the period 1650-1699 onwards, first in lexical verbs and then in modal verbs. *Say* only occurred in the traditional formulae. Most unfortunately, I have not (yet) had access to depositions from York from the period 1560-1599. Interestingly enough though, the *–s* variant is not found in York until the period 1650-1699 while the *–th* variant is used throughout. This is a striking finding in that one would expect the *–s* in the North. One explanation may be that scribes from the south wrote the depositions in the north or southern spelling was considered to be more formal (in connection with the Chancery Standard) and was therefore used in this particular context. Interestingly enough, earlier extracts from the York Memorandum Book (from 1376) reveal different language use:

> Item it is ordand þat no man of þe sayd crafte sall putte nor sette no sho to no hors fote apon þe Sonondays to no custume*r*e bot if it so be þat þe same custume*r*e be putt to trauell at þe same day and nedelynge **behoves** for to travell and also to \husbands of þe cuntre *and* to/ straungers þat sodanly comes to hym þe whilk is nedefull and what p*er*son þat **dose** þe contrary he for to pay xl d. in the fourm beforsayd.

This extract from the fourteenth century shows that the *–s* form was indeed the dialect form found in the language then (*-s* is used with lexical verbs and auxiliaries), and it is the form that is used all over England today. While one would have expected the *–s* form to remain in

the Northern dialects throughout, the language of depositions in York tells us a different story. Interestingly, when looking at one of the earliest printed texts in York, namely *Here begynneth a lytell geste of Robyn hode* [...] by anonymous, printed by Hugh Goes in 1509, the language used does not contain any *–s* forms at all but only *–th* forms. In fact, it is clearly the East Midland/Southern dialect that is being used in this printed text.

As a next step, depositions will be compared to other genres and printed material from different urban centres will be compared. Findings with respect to the printed material will be presented during my talk on 13 December.

I am looking forward to seeing you all then,
Anita

Selected relevant references (A full list of references will be provided during the talk on 13 December)**:**

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