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POSSIBLE ORIGINS OF DIFFERENT USAGES IN PRESENT-DAY SPOKEN AND WRITTEN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

Within the continuum of spoken and written English some variations, e. g. the varying usage of negation and the opposition of pronominal usage, can be explained with reference to the varying characteristics of speech and writing. The origins of these variations, however, cannot be explained along these lines. After rendering some basic concepts, I would like to propose a view which accounts for the given variations with regards to the mentioned period of the history of the Standard English dialect. The paper will show that quite a lot of the variations which nowadays occur along the spoken/written divide equal those features which early grammarians, such as Robert Lowth or Joseph Priestley, discussed referring to good or bad language use. Therefore, I would like to argue that the grammatical structures found in spoken or written Present Day English originate from suggestions for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century norms of English.

1. Introduction

In 1986 Bertil Sundby stated: "Most linguists would agree that the study of historical English may be a help in describing and analyzing current English syntax and style. But scholars have been slow to recognize the linguistic potential of the old grammar-books, which may give clues to grammatical or stylistic problems precisely because of their normative approach…" (1986: 397). Now, 20 years later, his words lend themselves readily to introducing this contribution which touches on similar sources and treats variation in English in the way the quotation describes.

Of course, language variation has always been a major concern of linguists, and whatever their starting point, whatever their approach, whatever their factual conclusions, it seems clear that variation is a fundamental feature of languages. It is just as undisputed that Present Day English differs in many

respects: there is regional variation, there is social variation, and there is – this is essential for my paper – variation between the spoken and the written variety of the generally assumed common core. With respect to variation between the spoken and the written, it is frequently noted that speech draws one way, writing another, i.e. within the scope of my presentation speech prefers other grammatical constructions than writing. A further point which may be discovered is that speakers[1] use the different constructions along the spoken/written divide without giving much thought to it. However, plain reasons for how this came about do not seem to exist. Therefore the focus of this paper is on possible origins of the matter. Also I would like to suggest reasons why some of the grammatical structures found in spoken and written Present Day English originate from normative proposals for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English.

2. Notional preliminaries

So far I have referred to notions and concepts which, in some respects, appear quite distant from one another: variation, speech and writing, prescription, Present Day English and seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English. That these issues are still quite closely related in a number of aspects can be seen in the numerous discussions whose study has helped to shape the present paper, and because of the many concepts, it appears sensible to begin with brief remarks which, I hope, will give orientation amongst my paper's presuppositions.

I will start with a short discussion of spoken and written language. Apparently, they are well-discussed, and, obviously, they relate to the medial distinction. Yet, twenty years ago Koch and Oesterreicher have suggested to go beyond this medial divide, i.e. speech and writing ought to be seen as conceptual genres within a continuum (1986: 17). In this continuum the conceptual poles waver between the naturalness, swiftness, structural simplicity and situatedness of orality and the artificiality, inertia, structural complexity and desituatedness of literacy (cf. Chafe 1994: 42-45; Oesterreicher 2001: 220-221). The concept of such a continuum, of course, proposes that spoken language can be conceptually written, and written language can be conceptually spoken: for instance, although a conference paper is in the spoken medium, it quite clearly exhibits structures which belong to the written mode. And it is this theoretical approach which my contribution is embedded in whenever I refer to the terms speech and writing and other similar notions. A further precondition when talking about examples within the spoken and written cline is that the examples

[1] I will follow a common practice in linguistics: I extend the ordinary sense of "speaker" and refer to both someone who produces sentences in speech and someone who writes sentences.

to be discussed are not mutually exclusive in the strict sense of the expression: speech and writing are inclined to behave in the way they do.

The following comments about the remaining notions may appear disorderly, which is due to the fact that within the scope of this paper they are strongly intertwined with each other, and they all relate to my primary sources: grammars. Therefore, to find out about seventeenth- and eighteenth century English I drew upon grammar books which belong to what is commonly considered the heyday of English grammar writing.[2] In order to compare seventeenth- and eighteenth-century views with contemporary English, I resorted to the present-day authorities of grammatical description, namely the *CGEL* (1985), *LGSWE* (1999) and *CaGEL* (2002). All of them point at variation in one way or another, and it is a truism that, while contemporary grammars adopt descriptive views, the quality of prescriptiveness is frequently ascribed to the bulk of grammars published between 1600 and 1800. Admittedly, it is not wrong to label these grammars as prescriptive. Still, the long line of debate on their prescriptiveness has shown that there commonly exists a one-sided, slightly prejudiced view (cf. Sugg 1964; Sundby 1986 or Watts 2000). This view considers prescriptiveness unfavourable. At the same time we know that the wish or the need to establish a common core of a language ask for the imperative quality of prescription. Without normative comments one aspect of Haugen's matrix of language development, that of codification (1966: 933), is not likely to proceed very far. So, prescription can also be a very valuable approach, especially when it helps to implement standards. And, undoubtedly, whether seventeenth- and eighteenth-century grammarians are described as "early" grammar writers (cf. Funke 1941) or whether they belong to the "classical age of English grammar" (e.g. Sugg 1964: 239), they have consciously and unconsciously contributed to the codification of the English language. Moreover, they have also played a major part in what will be presented hereinafter.

We have just mentioned the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and this is where I would like us to abide for a while. If one looks into grammar books of these centuries, one will find no surprises with regards to what the volumes deal with. Since almost all of them are in line with the predominant tradition of Latin

[2] This period is given this attribute because of the sheer number of grammars. Referring to one of the most influential studies in the field, 272 works were published in the period given (Michael 1970: 2). It goes without saying that within the limits of my work only a very small number of historical grammars could be examined. Their choice was arbitrary. Having said that, the choice was mainly influenced by general findings of the field. One such common point is that the grammars exhibit a great deal of similarity, as can be seen in works such as Michael's.

grammar,[3] they approach their topic in a very similar fashion. Most of them proceed from the smallest units of their concern, i.e. the letters or the sounds, to the largest, i.e. the sentence. I will abstain from listing more characteristics of historical grammar books, although this is a very interesting subject which could be discussed at length. Regardless of how many (stereo)typical characteristics grammars actually possess, it is fascinating to see that quite a few authors broke with tradition and also gave some thought to the language of their contemporaries and commented on observations of language usage. Going back to the subject of language variation, I will introduce and explain some of these observations.

3. Usage observations

An issue which is very frequently treated is that of double or multiple negation, and statements of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century grammarians more often than not resemble one another:[4]

a) "A Negative in English cannot be expressed by two Negatives. Such Expressions therefore as these are Solecisms: I have not got none, for I have got none" (Kirkby 1746: 126).
b) "Two negative Words, such as no, none, never, &c. must not be written in the same simple Sentence, for one of them is superfluous, and generally the two amount to an Affirmative" (Gough 1754: 114).
c) "Two Negatives, or two Adverbs of denying, make an Affirmation in our Language; therefor, we cannot say, I cannot eat none, I cannot dance none, &c, for these make Affirmatives, and signify as much as, I can eat some, &c." (Buchanan 1762: 179).
d) "Two negatives make an affirmative, and therefore ought not to be used in a denying form; as, I can eat no more: not, I cannot eat nor more" (Burn 1766: 77).
e) "Two negatives, in English, destroy one another, or are equivalent to an affirmative" (Murray 1795: 121).

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[3] It is commonplace that up to the centuries mentioned here the study of grammar meant the study of Latin grammar which was one of the three subjects within the *Trivium* of the mediaeval *Artes Liberales*. This holds true for England, but also for the rest of Europe. The Renaissance period could well be described as the age of the awakening interest in vernacular grammar writing and teaching (cf. Hüllen 2002: 215).

[4] Quoting from historical grammars, I have retained original punctuation and orthography. I have also retained all italics used in original works, which are mostly used to mark examples. I have disregarded upper-case letters and other typographical conventions, though. When quoting several historical sources, they are arranged chronologically.

The quotations above clearly show at least two things. Firstly, the grammarians obviously felt comments were necessary because they observed rivalling usages. Secondly, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century grammars do not describe nor give alternatives from which to chose. They state formulaic rules to which readers were expected to obey, because seventeenth- and eighteenth-century grammars were meant "to teach us to express ourselves with propriety in that Language, and to enable us to judge of every phrase and form of construction, whether it be right or not" (Lowth 1763: xiii). Formulaicness, by the way, is another typical trait of the historical grammars. It might be due to the fact that grammars did not only follow traditional schemes, but also institutionalised forms. Here, with formulaicness I closely follow Michael who used "formula" with reference to the definition of the notion grammar (1970: 189). The wording of authors who offer a definition is very uniform, cf.:

a. "Grammar is the Art of Writing, and Speaking well" (Wharton 1654: 1).
b. "Grammar is the Art of Speaking and Writing truly and properly" (Gough 1754: 1).
c. "Grammar is the art of using words properly" (Priestley 1761: 1).
d. "Grammar is the Art of rightly expressing our thoughts by Words" (Lowth 1763: 1).
e. "[Grammar is the] Art of communicating our thoughts by words in the plainest and most intelligible manner" (Fenning 1771: 1).
f. "English Grammar is the art of speaking and writing the English language with propriety" (Murray 1795: 1).

A matter which is not as formulaic is the pronoun choice after forms of the verb *be*, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century grammarians did not use formulae as to which feature triggers pronoun choice. The following shall serve as illustration:

i) "The simple word is the nominatiue case set before a verbe, whom it gouerneth in number and person. But asking, commanding, it, or there demonstratiuely vsed and had, hauing, if vnderstanded, cause the nominatiue to come after his verbe" (Bullokar 1586: 340-341).
ii) "[U]nlesse it be in the Verbe, am, that requireth the like case after it, as is before it" (Jonson 1640: 77).
iii) "The Substantive Verb am, with its Past Time was, has the foregoing State of a Pronoun both before and after it" (Buchanan 1762: 189).
iv) "The Verb to Behas always a Nominative Case after it; as 'it was I, not He, that did it'" (Lowth 1763: 115).

v) "The substantive verb am be admits of a nominative before it and another after it; as, I am he, Thou art she" (Burn 1766: 66).[5]

vi) "Q. What case comes after neuter or passive verbs? A. The nominative case; as, It was , and not he, that did it; I am that liveth, and was dead. Q. Does not the oblique case sometimes come after these verbs? A. It does frequently, but not very grammatically; as, Who is there? It is me" (Fenning 1771: 108).[6]

vii) "The Verb to be is followed in all its Tenses by the Nominative Case; as, it was I who wrote the letter, and not, It was me who wrote the letter" (Ussher 1785: 53).

viii) "When a Pronoun is set alone in Answer to a Question, or follows the present or imperfect Tense of the neuter Verb, it must be put in the nominative Case: as, 'Who did it? I, i.e. I did it; I was he that said so'" (Ash 1786: 68).

ix) "The neuter verbs to be and to become have the nominative case after them …" (Coote 1788: 221).

The quotes above show that here we also find widespread agreement. Yet, the examination of claims by other grammarians gives the impression that, at least, solutions to the problem were not as quickly found as with multiple negation. For instance, Murray, whose general explanation of the matter seems a copy of Lowth's, extends Lowth's prescription and adds: "Perhaps the objective case may also properly follow the word be" (1795: 113). The thought is cautiously worded, as if Murray was not sure whether he should allow for variation. Priestley was not as cautious in a later edition of his *Rudiments of English grammar*. In a rather descriptive mood he remarks: "All our grammarians say, that the nominative cases of pronouns ought to follow the verb substantive as well as precede it; yet many familiar forms of speech, and the example of some of our best writers, would lead us to make a contrary rule; or at least, would leave us at liberty to adopt which we like best" (Priestley 1768: 104). Priestley's observation makes it all clear that the variation between subject and object forms of pronouns after *to be* did exist in spoken and in written English. However, as far as I am aware, Priestley is probably the most prominent of

[5] To this rule Burn added a list of false syntax in which we find examples such as "It is me.", "It were him who received the goods, it wast neither her nor me.", "Tell me if you be him who blabbed that secret." or "Was it me which told that story? it was not me indeed." (Burn 1766: 66).

[6] The abbreviations Q and A stand for "question" and "answer". A number of grammars are arranged in this question-answer-mode. So is Fenning's. To adopt this mode on the one hand imitates the conversational character of school lessons, on the other hand it is once again an indication of the institutionalised genre "grammar books", since this mode is also found in ancient and mediaeval grammars.

authors who are descriptively neutral. But, as we have seen, the decisions of his contemporaries are comparatively imperative.

Examples for pronoun usage in comparative constructions shall finish my exemplary examination of the historical grammars. Usage surely was worthwhile debating, and some authors announced unmistakably:

i. "The comparative Adverbs than and as, have the foregoing State of a Pronoun after them; as, I am heavier than he, i. e. than he is" (Buchanan 1762: 180).

ii. "The comparative adverbs as and than admit of a nominative after them, unless a preposition expressed or understood follow, or the noun or pronoun be governed by an active verb …" (Burn 1766: 78).

iii. "[Than] also couples like cases: as, Thou art older than I; i. e. than I am. Here than couples Thou and I in the nominative case. You think him better than me; i. e. than you think me. Here than couples him and me in the oblique case. Sometimes, however, it governs personal pronouns in the oblique case: as He is younger than her. Here than governs her in the oblique case" (Fenning 1771: 117).

iv. "The Comparative Adverbs than and as, with the Conjunctions and, nor, or, connect like Cases: as, 'She loves him better than me; John is as tall as I …" (Ash 1786: 76).

v. "The noun or pronoun following than or as in comparisons is not affected by either of those conjunctions with regards to case; this depending on the verb that governs or is governed, or on a preposition …" (Coote 1788: 244-245).

The preceding comments prove the regularising tendencies in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century grammars, and it should not come as a surprise, since their authors certainly attempted to promote uniform language use for a number of reasons. Many would have agreed with Lowth who said: "It is not the Language, but the practice, that is in fault" (1763: ix).

To anyone working with contemporary grammars the quotations above might seem to address very familiar issues of English usage. Somehow, what we have found in 17th- and 18th-century works seems to have anticipated the comments above and those which are to follow. Regardless of their different approaches to English grammar, the *CaGEL*, *CGEL* and *LGSWE* are very much in unison with reference to the constructions mentioned in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English, and their findings in the corresponding chapters can be broadly rendered as follows. Double or multiple negation, i.e. the repetition of negative forms which do not cancel each other out but strengthen the negative as in *I did not see nothing*, is found in casual speech (*LGSWE*: 178) or in non-standard language (*CaGEL*: 846-

847; *CGEL*: 799). Copular *be* in subject complement constructions or in cleft sentences can be followed by subject or object forms of pronouns. The oldest of our three contemporary grammars assigns the variation to the registers of formal and informal language (*CGEL*: 336-337). The *LGSWE* finds object case pronouns "predominant after the copula be" (*LGSWE*: 335). However, written genres such as fiction and news prefer subject forms, especially when they are followed by relative clauses (*LGSWE*: 335-336). This obviously is in accordance with the *CaGEL* which claims that subject case pronouns only occur in (very) formal style (*CaGEL*: 459). For pronouns after comparative *as* and *than* one finds almost the same pattern as after copular *be*. It goes without saying that if a verb follows the pronoun, forms in subject case are found. If not, both subject and object case pronouns are used. While the *LGSWE* finds that "[a]ccusative forms are the only ones attested in conversation" and that "[i]n fiction, nominative and accusative forms are fairly evenly divided" (*LGSWE*: 336), the two other grammars describe the alternation with reference to (in)formality (*CaGEL*: 460; *CGEL*: 337). Therefore, disregarding finer subtleties one conclusion is that the constructions favoured by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century grammar are those that are still quite dominant in written contexts, the ones they banned from written usage are those we find in speech (cf. Table 1 hereafter). The latter also gain more and more ground in writing. Presumably, this will also hold true for other question of usage, such as the pronoun choice in co-ordinated noun phrases.

Table 1. Comparison of findings in 17th-/18th-century and contemporary grammars (constructed examples)

17th-/18th-century grammars		Contemporary grammars	
Favoured constructions	Condemned constructions	Spoken/informal usage	Written/formal usage
it is I	*it is me*	*it is me*	*it is I*
she doesn't want any	*she doesn't want none*	*she doesn't want any*	*she doesn't want none*
you're taller than he	*you're taller than him*	*you're taller than him*	*you're taller than he*

4. Reasons

Still, the question is: how come? Naming reasons, such as the authoritative prescription of early grammar writing or (natural) processes of language development does not really convince me. I feel a number of quite decisive factors can only be found outside what linguists typically target. Referring to Smith, who in an entirely different context said that "the analysis of standardisation processes is too important to be left simply to linguists or to philologists, without reference to cultural contexts" (Smith 2000: 137), I would like to suggest that the following aspects have contributed to the points just mentioned.

Admittedly, a lot, if not all, of what will follow lacks empirical evidence. Yet, I believe much of that evidence has vanished during the course of history. We therefore have to make do with recognizable tendencies. In my opinion, decisive reasons are to be found in the historical grammars themselves, in the biographies of their authors, and in the culture and society across time. Let me exemplify these aspects. The grammars are didactic in the fullest sense of the word. Some, e. g. Murray's, were especially commissioned for the use in schools (cf. McKnight 1928: 398-399). Others include chapters to practice what has previously been taught, cf. Gough's chapter called "A Collection of Solecism or false Syntax for the Learner to rectified by the preceding Rules" (1754: 114). Even the typesetting was didactic: "[E]ssential matter, to be learnt verbatim, in large type; amplifications, with which the pupil was expected to be thoroughly familiar but not word perfect, in smaller type. Sometimes, in still smaller type, notes were included for the teacher" (Michael 1987: 320). The reasons immanent to the works are closely related to biographical issues. Indeed, almost 50 per cent of the grammar authors between 1600 and 1800 were teachers (Michael 1970: 4), and it was precisely their grammars which have proved most successful (Cohen 1977: 6). Even so, other authors were authorities in different ways. Lowth, for instance, was a cleric, and even though his grammar was clearly published before he became Bishop of London, it is no surprise that his (and other grammars) have religious and moral features. Particularly morality appears to be dominant, if one considers the grammarians' expressions when talking about and "prohibiting" false usage: seventeenth- and eighteenth-century grammarians favour one construction to another because of its "propriety" (e.g. Murray 1795: 133), or because it is more "graceful", more "solemn" (e.g. Lowth 1763: 141).[7] Besides,

[7] It becomes all the more apparent, if one consults the *OED* in order to find out about the full range of meanings or about obsolete meanings of the named notions. There we learn that "graceful" was, up to the 17th and 18th centuries, also used in the sense of spiritually profitable, virtuous, favourable or conferring grace or honour, while "solemn" could also mean formal, regular, uniform and of great dignity or importance. "Propriety" has not lost too many of its

"[f]or many of them [the grammarians], it is clear grammatical correctness stood next to godliness" (Finegan 1992: 125). In a society much less secular than today's arguments of this kind must have been very imperative, which has well prevailed up to our century.

The strongest issue, which is tightly linked to propriety and proper usage, might be politeness. Klein (1994) has shown that within the context of grammars politeness does not only refer to sensible and correct behaviour. Within this context politeness also relates to appropriateness, comprehensibility and accessibility (Klein 1994: 44). To sum up, I would like to add linguistic efficiency to this triad, and it might be politeness in the sense of these four notions that governs usage greatly, i.e. according to the corresponding contexts speakers use specific constructions which they deem appropriate, comprehensible, accessible and efficient in speech or in writing when conversing with the person opposite.

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connotations, but I feel it is important to stress that it not only refers to appropriateness, suitability and correctness, but also conformity with good manners or polite usage and correctness of behaviour or morals, which is where we have come full circle.

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